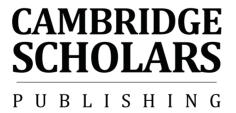# A Sociolinguistic Insight into the Italian Community in the UK:
Workplace Language as an Identity Marker

A Sociolinguistic Insight into the Italian Community in the UK:
Workplace Language as an Identity Marker

By

Siria Guzzo

With a Preface by David Britain

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

Dedicated to my beloved grandparents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF TABLES

AUTHORS' NOTE

The present work is based on research on the Bedford Italian Community which was partly divulgated through various previously published articles. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to CSP for their very kind invitation to publish the work in a new book form and allow the research contained within to become accessible to a wider audience.

The nature of the vast British Italian community means that the study published in this volume represents only the beginning of a journey. Since this research was first carried out in 2004, I have had the opportunity to extend the work on Bedford to embrace observations of the Italian community of Peterborough, especially the 3rd generation, some of whose findings I have tried to integrate into the concluding remarks of the present study.

I hope in the future, however, to be able to go further and deeper into the analysis of the speech community, and look forward to the day when observations on British Italian communities in Bletchley, Loughborough and further northward as far as Scotland can add breadth and depth to the studies I have so far had the great fortune, and privilege to begin.

PREFACE

In the very earliest sociolinguistic studies of American speech communities, for example, Labov's work on Martha's Vineyard (1963) and the Lower East Side of New York (1966/2006), and Shuy, Wolfram and Riley's studies of Detroit (1967), ethnicity was considered to play a very significant role in how variation in English was patterned. In Britain, however, research on ethnic variation in English remained largely unexplored until very recent times, with virtually no work on the structural characteristics of ethnic dialects of British English appearing beyond those of the Caribbean diaspora community.

The beginning of this century has seen a number of studies, however, which have begun to rectify this gap in the literature. First, we can point to Sue Fox's work in Tower Hamlets in East London (e.g. 2003, 2007). She examined, through a very sensitive ethnographic study of members of a youth club, how accent features of local Bangladeshi English were being diffused to the Anglo community via close social network ties. This study was able to shed light, therefore, not just on the characteristics of London Bangladeshi English, but also on the interethnic transmission of linguistic change.

Two large scale surveys of ethnic variation in London English followed (e.g. Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox and Torgersen 2011) which highlighted the scale and extent of the transmission of both phonological and grammatical features from London's more recent migrant communities to the Anglo population, and proposed that a pan-ethnic variety – Multicultural London English – was in the process of focussing. Now, many further studies are emerging of language variation in the English of migrant communities in Britain – for example, Sharma's (e.g. 2011) work on the Indian community of London, Khan's (2007) research on the Caribbean, Pakistani and Anglo communities of Birmingham; Alam's (2007) study of Asian Englishes in Glasgow and Kirkham (2011)'s work on the Pakistani community in Sheffield. Still very much under-researched, however, are the indigenising English varieties of Britain's earlier immigrant communities. There has, for example, been an Italian community in Britain for over seven hundred years (King 1977: 176). Up until the reformation, many financiers, medics, craftspeople and clerics, especially in London, were of Italian descent. By the end of the 19th century there

were over 20,000 Italians in the country. The two decades after World War II were the most significant, however, for Italian migration to the UK. King (1977: 178) shows that in the two decades after 1948 almost 150,000 Italians came to settle in the UK (despite the weather).

For various statistical and institutional reasons, it is hard to gain accurate information about the Italian population today: in the last census of 2011 almost 100, 000 people in England and Wales claimed Italian as their "main language", 125,000 claimed Italian was their ethnic group, but well over 130,000 had been born in Italy. Kyambi (2005a: 51-52) highlights the geographical concentrations of *recent* migrants from Italy, especially in London, but because the census only assesses migrants who have arrived within the 10 years previous to the count, it gives only very poor indications of the present size of longer established migrant communities. There have been, until now, just a couple of brief (macro-) sociolinguistic overviews of the British Italian community (e.g. Linguistic Minorities Project 1985; Cervi 1991), but very few studies specifically examining the structural characteristics of their English.

Dr Siria Guzzo's examination, in this volume, of the English of Bedford's Italian community, therefore, is extremely timely, both in examining a neglected yet significant migrant population in Great Britain, and in terms of adding to what we know about the ethnic diversity of British English. It also, importantly, provides an important case study of ethnic variation *outside* of the major urban conurbations where multicultural Englishes have been examined thus far.

Guzzo's study, as well as examining a couple of the more generic variables that many studies investigate, considers a number of features which provide an opportunity for the speakers in her study to specifically index their Italian identities – such as the use of /a/ in foreign (often Italian) loan words, such as "pasta", and the Anglicisation of other Italian lexical items – as well as features that examine the extent to which second language features of Italian learners of English have become indigenised amongst second and third generation British Italians, such as a relative lack of inversion in question formation, and third person present tense zero. She also, like few other studies on ethnic variation in British English, takes an intergenerational approach, tracking features from first generation migrants to third generation locals, providing a fascinating insight into how the process of indigenisation, alongside other variable social and linguistic factors, shapes language variation.

Much work is still to be done on the sociolinguistics of this significant and long-standing migrant community (as well as on many other migrant communities) and Guzzo herself has expanded her explorations of British

Italian English in recent work on the community in Peterborough. The work presented here, however, represents an important first step in understanding what happens (socio)linguistically and dialectologically when Italians make Britain their home.

David Britain
(Bern)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I wish to thank for their invaluable help in the production of this work.

First and foremost I would like to express my thanks to the Italian community of Bedford, without whose support this study would not have been possible. Not only did they give me their cooperation, they also accepted me wholeheartedly into their community and offered their sincere friendship. The massive amount of information they put at my disposal is something I treasure, and I consider myself privileged to have received their hospitality and constant help. I thank each and every one of the businesses I was able to record: the Cappuccino Bar, Mrs Maria Chirico and her beautiful family, La Rondine, AB Fruits, Santaniello's pizza house, La Dolce Vita, the hairdressers Tony, Rocco, Vincenzo and Giovanni, and above all my dearest friends Salvatore Garganese and his sister Elisabetta, Cinzia Iacono, Christina Spiniello and her lovely family, Liberato Lionetti and his precious staff.

Moreover, I also felt most privileged to have received the external supervision of Prof Dr David Britain. I am deeply grateful for his constant and thoughtful advice on every aspect of my work, for sharing his incomparable knowledge with me, and for his caring support. To him I owe special thanks for believing in me and my research.

For her work on the history of the Italian community in Britain, on which I have been heavily reliant for the first section of this work, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Terri Colpi. I offer the same deep gratitude to Charles Boberg for his inspiration about the analysis of foreign (a), which was of immense importance to my research and in much of what I have tried to show in Chapter Three.

I am extremely thankful to my family and friends for supporting me throughout these demanding years. Special thanks to Gina Di Muro for her expert advice and friendship. Thanks especially to my brother for his invaluable help which has proved to be crucial with any and all technical problems. I thank my Mum and Dad for being there for me on all occasions. Special thanks go to my Gran and Grandpa for shining down on me from Heaven.

Last but not least, I am eternally grateful to my husband Fabrizio for his priceless psychological support, his patient help, and for tolerating my

INTRODUCTION

Like many other Western societies, Britain is undergoing significant social changes, many of which are caused by migrations and the transnationalisation of social and family life. The migration of peoples and cross-cultural encounters, while sometimes giving rise to a challenging coexistence, nevertheless enhance the contemporary relocation of cultures and languages, resulting in new linguistic outcomes. The construction of hybrid[1] speech communities is a difficult cultural process whose consequences are often ambiguous and heterogeneous. Language plays a major role in the birth of new forms of communication, encouraged by processes of self-construction, self-conscious investigation, and the growth of new social representations. As Candlin and Gotti (2004: 5) observe,

> "Language is approached here as inseparable from a given socio-cultural configuration – not merely consistent with it, but deeply involved in its construction of reality and its representations. From single phrases to generic patterns, linguistic constructs encode a culture-bound world view".

Moreover, as Bell (2001:164) claims,

> "A part of our behaviour is a reflection of the social characteristics of groups we are associated with. However, categories such as ethnicity have fluid boundaries, and people's definition of their own ethnicity may even change in different situations".

People are not static entities and the language they use in specific situations or contexts cannot be regarded as fixed and never-changing (cf. Duranti and Goodwin 1992). There are norms for different situations and groups, and as a result, a particular style can be used to conform to a context, to create a situation, or to respond to a specific audience type.

---

[1] The term *hybrid* is used here with reference to the convergence of different cultures generated by geographical displacements. In order to avoid the reproduction of ambiguous categories of the past, *hybridity* assumes here a theoretical perspective which denies circumscribing identity in a conservative framework so as to acknowledge the development of new multiple models of cultural blending and representation.

In light of these observations, the situation of Bedford Italians in Britain provides an interesting case study. From the 1950s, and for the following decade, thousands of Italians most of whom originally from Southern Italy, arrived in the town of Bedford, attracted by the offer of employment in the local brick works factory. The London brick industry was in desperate need of labour at the time and the world's largest and most well known brick factory, Marston Valley Bricks Co. was hard pushed to find English labourers willing to work in the brickfield (King and King 1977, Cavallaro 1981, Colpi 1991). Meanwhile, there were Italians in desperate need of work and ready to seize any and all opportunities in order to earn money to support their families.

More than 10,000 Italians settled in Bedford and in the surrounding area from the 1950s onwards and this gave rise to a diaspora community spanning three generations (Kyambi 2005b). According to the 2001 census, 2 in 7 of Bedford's population are of Italian origin, which means that 28% of all Bedfordians belong to the Bedford Italian Community (BIC). In an earlier study, and by means of a questionnaire, it became clear that the BIC was a composite hybrid community, and that there was quite a significant use of the Italian language within it. Their ethnic identity is extremely strong and is perceived as Italian rather than British or English, and although English is the first language of the vast majority of 2nd and 3rd generation BIs, most have at least good passive competence in the Italian spoken by their parents and grandparents (Guzzo 2005, 2007).

In an attempt to gain a more thorough understanding of the linguistic and ethnic identity of the BIC, special attention is paid in this study to the concept of the feeling of 'Italianness' perceived within the community. The language spoken by BIs is also investigated in an attempt to map any changes that have occurred over time and across generations. Another objective of this research is to discover whether the linguistic distinctiveness of this speech community is used to signal ethnic identity in the language used in the workplace in particular.

In order to explore the linguistic mechanisms underlying minority languages, information is provided about the way language is used in a dataset of three workplaces of one of the largest Italian communities in the UK, and per capita, in the world. This study highlights the importance of a sociolinguistic examination of English in service encounters, it applies an audience design approach and uses accommodation theory. It focuses on the relationship between ethnicity and code choice with the aim of drawing attention to the social changes that are taking place in the

representation of new hybrid identities in order to contribute to the understanding of the language of the Italian diaspora. The methodology used is based on participant observation, direct data collection, ethnographic audio recordings, and a descriptive approach based on qualitative and quantitative analysis. As for the social variables, all three generations of Bedford Italians are taken into account in order to examine variation according to age. In addition, in order to research inter- and intra-speaker variation following an "audience design" approach (Bell 1984), the variables of context with regard to the workplace setting are considered, and also whether the interlocutors are Italian or British.

From earlier results it became clear that further investigation of the language of Bedford Italians was needed, and by applying an audience design approach while also examining the use of ethnic-based language in the workplace, new research questions have emerged.

Specifically, the present study tests some hypotheses:

1. Does the specific context under scrutiny, that is the workplace, influence the language of Bedford Italians?
2. Focusing on inter- and intra- speaker variation and investigating L2 features in specific contexts, does the ethnic identity of the interlocutors have an impact on the language used?
3. Does audience design give birth to a special type of English Bedford Italian, which Italians tend to use at work as a form of ESP?
4. Do Italians Anglicise Italian lexical items when speaking to British people, whether they are colleagues or customers? Can we hypothesize the existence of "phonological code-switching" leading Italians to shift in the workplace?

There is a significant number of Italians in the UK and they have a long and complex migration history. However, there is scant literature compared to the Italian diasporas in the US, Australia, Canada and Latin America. Ethnically, Bedford is one of the most highly mixed communities in Britain and is home to over a hundred immigrant languages, in which Italian finds itself alongside Punjabi, Turkish, Polish, Portuguese, Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese. Immigrants from over 50 different countries have settled in Bedford over the past few decades: Polish migrants arrived immediately after World War II, Italians started moving in the 1950s and continued throughout the following decade along with Indians, West Indians and Pakistanis who joined the other minority

groups (Tosi 1984). For all these communities of migrants who have settled in Bedford over the years, the words of Allan Bell hold true:

> "We are not a *tabula rasa*. We bring to the present the shapings of our past, of our relationships, of our environment. Yet we are more than the sum of those things". (Allan Bell, 2001:164)

CHAPTER ONE

ITALIANS AND ITALIAN IN BRITAIN: A HISTORY

1.1 Italians in Bedford, UK

Italian immigration to Bedford began in 1951, and continued until the end of the 1960s. Taking the sociolinguistic situation in Italy in those years into consideration, we can assume that the hundreds of thousands who came spoke one of the southern dialects as their first language, and Italian as their second. According to the 2001 census, two in 7 of Bedford's 150,000 inhabitants are of Italian origin and nowadays Bedford has the largest Italian community in the United Kingdom (Kyambi 2005b).

The literature on Italians in the UK is limited compared to Italian diasporas such as those in the US, Australia, Canada and Latin America. Existing studies describe a group which is "fragmented and heterogeneous with a long and complex migration history to Britain" (Fortier 2000, Palmer 1977, Sponza 1988 as in Zontini 2004), and most of the studies have concentrated on describing the evolution and features of this migration, tracing the formation of the first Italian communities, as in the studies of Colpi (1991), Cavallaro (1981) and King and King (1977).

The main reason why these people came to Britain was obviously not the weather; they migrated to escape abject poverty in most cases and hoped to make a decent living for themselves and their families. As a result, they seized the opportunity to work in British Industry. But migration is never a static process given that extended families, relatives and friends tend to become involved in what could be called a chain reaction. The migrant establishes a connection with the new environment, travelling back and forth between Italy and Britain and often those closest to the migrant also end up moving to the new land. This has been the case for generations of Italians who have emigrated to Britain from the nineteenth century to the present day.

1.2 Historical background of the Italian Community of Bedford

Considering Great Britain as a whole, Italian immigration can be divided into two important phases: 1) a first stage at the turn of the nineteenth century when a large number of men began to arrive in the country and 2) in the years immediately after World War II, when real mass immigration began.

There is one phase involving a large group of writers, artists, and musicians who moved from Italy to settle in the United Kingdom, and another whose starting point is found around the 1820s and 1830s when there is a flux of the poorer peasant population. Of this second group, some were from Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, while others were from the Ciociaria countryside just north of the region of Naples. They were part of a great exodus of people in search of work (Colpi 1991).

They settled in London and Manchester, and formed the famous communities of "Little Italy" in Clerkenwell and Ancoats. On their arrival in Britain, they made a living as organ grinders, playing popular Italian songs on the streets. Before leaving Italy, it was obligatory for the migrants to have a contract with a *padrone* in Britain, and this 'master' would be in complete control of the immigrants regarding their work, food, and accommodation for the first two or three years after arrival. Once that time had passed, however, and their contractual obligations had been served out, they were free to work for themselves. They were able to continue earning money as organ grinders if they wished or they could take up other jobs of their choice (Colpi 1991, King and King 1977).

In addition to street musicians, skilled statuette makers and semi-skilled craftsmen came to London around the 1850s and spread out across the country. Two decades later, in the 1870s, men with more advanced skills, including knife sharpeners and mosaic workers as well as other skilled craftsmen, also migrated to Britain in the hope of having a better life (Colpi 1991).

With the decline of organ-grinding from the 1880s onwards, and the need to find new lines of work, Italians started to move into the catering sector. Continuing to operate as itinerant workers at first, their jobs changed with the seasons and they would sell roasted chestnuts in winter and ice-cream in summer in order to support their families. Some did well for themselves and by selling ice-cream on the streets they were able to make enough money to start their own businesses. Consequently, as more and more family members moved to Bedford to help run these businesses, the population of the Italian community saw its numbers triple. Thanks to

their success, the community became more prosperous and several institutions were established. By the turn of the century the BIC had an Italian school, the Italian Church of St Peter's, the Mazzini Garibaldi Club, and an Italian Hospital (Colpi 1991).

During the 1900s, Italians migrated northwards and westwards from London, either settling in urban centres or smaller towns. In 1905, however, with the passage of the Aliens Act, the British government had to deal with very large waves of migration from Italy and, as a result, had to introduce important regulation. From that time onwards, the prospective migrant would have to make sure they had a job and accommodation in the United Kingdom before immigration could take place. Through strong connections, many were able to secure jobs and housing and entire families left their Italian villages. As a result of this chain migration, many towns came to have their own distinctive Italian communities in the UK.

Life in the two main Italian colonies of Clerkenwell and Ancoats had already taken on the appearance of a "Little Italy" when a third Italian colony was established in Soho, London. It thrived primarily thanks to the success of the catering trade. This was a new colony and was distinct from that of Clerkenwell. The Italians of Soho came mainly from Lombardy and Piedmont in the North of Italy, and found employment in the hotels, clubs and restaurants in the West End. Working in the more sophisticated environment "up West", they were often better paid. (Colpi 1991).

Many Italians began to really prosper as a result of their hard work. They had seized their opportunities, and substantial profits had been made. Many of them returned to Italy as rich men and women, and in so doing they set an example for their fellow townspeople to follow.

Unfortunately, with the outbreak of World War I, many 1st generation Italians left Britain and went back to Italy in order to join the army and to fight for their homeland. Since Italy and Great Britain were allies, however, many second generation Italians stayed behind and joined the British Armed Forces. When World War I finally ended, and having fought bravely for Britain, many of these brave soldiers returned as heroes. British Italians now had stability and economic prosperity. They had gained increasing respectability over the years, and a place in society. In the two decades after the war, a new golden era began for them.

Unfortunately, when World War II broke out, that golden era of stability and prosperity came to an abrupt end. With the rise of fascism, there was an attempt by the Italian government to regain control over the Italian communities that had spread throughout the world (Colpi 1991). The fascists attempted to tempt them back with an alluring range of activities including trips back to Italy. British Italians were happy to take

part in these schemes and many did indeed return to their homeland. In 1940 however, Mussolini declared war on Britain and the Allies. This declaration caused attitudes to change and resulted in nationwide anti-Italian riots and demonstrations in the UK. Italian shops and cafés were targeted, looted and burned down. Italian families were assaulted by angry mobs and the integration and respectability built up over the years was no more. At government level, Churchill's governmental policy was ruthless, and the entire Italian male population was arrested. The consequences were tremendous: the Italian community was torn apart as a result and many businesses were forced to close. Male internment resulted in women and children being left unsupported and destitute, and many of them were forced to move away. For the Italians in Britain, this was a period of great hardship and distress.

Following the war, in the early 1950s, a second, crucial phase of Italian immigration to Great Britain began. Unlike the previous wave, this was real mass immigration and mainly consisted of workers recruited in bulk. After World War II, Great Britain had set out to rebuild its economy, and many sectors were in desperate need of new labour (Guzzo 2007). A major inter-governmental initiative had led to an agreement between the British Ministry of Labour and the Italian Government, and a bulk recruitment scheme offering jobs to a large number of Italian men and women had been set up in various industries where shortages had arisen. The first scheme brought over 2,000 young Italian women to work in the Lancashire cotton mills. Other Italians were offered coal mining jobs in Lancashire, Yorkshire and Derbyshire. Foundry workers were taken on at the same time in the Midlands, and tin-plate workers in Swansea (Colpi 1991).

The most significant flow of these migrants, however, arrived in the summer of 1951. The Italians among them were allocated to Bedfordshire brick factories, and in particular to the world's largest, Marston Valley Bricks Co., which had been faced with a grave shortage of English labourers.

As a result of this mass immigration throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, almost entire populations of southern Italian villages moved to Bedfordshire. One of the largest Italian communities was founded in the town of Bedford itself, along with similar communities in Peterborough, Bletchley, Loughborough, and Nottingham. The migrants to these towns originated from a great many villages along the length and breadth of Italy, but predominantly they came from the poorer southern regions of Campania, Apulia, Calabria and Sicily. This ongoing transferral of workers continued steadily over the years, and many new immigrants were

still making their way to Britain at the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s. Although many migrants belonging to this wave returned home within a few decades, Bedford today maintains a large southern Italian community which is still striking in its size, traditions, way of life, and governmental institutions (Guzzo 2007).

1.2.1 The social and cultural background of Italians in Britain

Immigration in the 1950s contributed to the establishment of different types of community. As they had in the past, many migrants arrived not only in Bedford, but also in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Manchester (Colpi 1991). Recruitment schemes requiring a work permit that had to be issued before entering the UK were initiated and strong connections with relatives and friends were of fundamental importance once again. The new wave of migrants came to the UK thanks to those who were already living and working there.

However, a change was taking place in the overall makeup of the British Italian community. In towns where "old" communities already existed, "new" communities were established. When this was the case, there was very little interaction between the two groups of Italians and to this day, fourth and fifth generation Italians whose ancestors arrived with the first wave of immigrants from the north of the country, claim to have very little in common with those who came from the south of Italy with the second wave in the 1950s. One explanation for this is that fourth and fifth generation Anglo-Italians tend to be well-educated and very successful and they are also well-integrated into the British system. The "new" immigrants, on the other hand, are from much poorer origins, did not have a proper education in most cases, and as a result, they are less sophisticated. The "old" areas of traditional occupation, primarily in catering, were taken over by the "new" immigrants who were culturally less refined than the previous generations of Italian settlers. What had been a chain-based migration up until that time was irreversibly changing into source village migration, dividing the history of the Italians in Great Britain into two culturally different flows (Colpi 1991).

As already mentioned, from 1951 to the end of the 1960s, thousands of Italian men arrived in groups to work in the Bedfordshire brickyards. But since the work was heavy, and it was not easy for those who had never worked in an industrial environment to adapt, many did not last long and were forced to go back to Italy. Thousands stayed, however, and made Bedford one of the largest and most important Italian communities in Britain. Nowadays, as many as 28% of Bedfordians are of Italian origin.

1.2.2 The social and territorial distribution of Bedford Italians

During the early 1950s, the first Italian colony of Bedford settled in the areas around Alexandra Road and Midland Road (see map below). Italian immigrants and their families found lodgings in the hostels around the brickfields and lived there for the first few years after their arrival. By 1958, more than half of the 5,000 Italians in the area were still living in conditions of poverty and in multiple occupation of those houses (Colpi 1991). By the late 1950s, however, the hard-working Bedford Italians had saved enough money to begin buying their own property, especially in the areas of Queens Park and Castle Road where the terraced houses were situated. By continuing to work tirelessly and never wasting their hard-earned money, they began to settle and finally prosper.

From a social perspective, throughout the 1960s the number of Italian community institutions grew significantly. Of particular note was the foundation of three new ethnic Italian churches, among which is the church of Santa Francesca Cabrini in Bedford. All three churches were established by the religious organisation of the Scalabrini Fathers. These churches have been central to the life of BI Italians as the focus of activity in the "new" communities, especially with regard to important milestones such as births, christenings, weddings and funerals. A large number of clubs and social events has developed around these churches, and made them the most important centre for Italian communities in Britain (Colpi 1991).

Traditionally, the role of family has always been much more important in people's social lives in Italy than it has in the UK. This tends to be even more the case in the south of Italy than in the north, and is still truer for a small village community than in a large metropolitan area. The same family traditions and values have also been cited when explaining the success of Italians in the catering trade. It is believed that the ability shown in running successful ethnic restaurants, coffee shops and ice-cream bars is thanks to family cohesion. Italian families in Bedford are bound together by kinship networks, and their community represents a sort of extended family. Ceremonies such as christenings, confirmations, engagements, marriages and funerals are important milestones in which extended Italian family networks gather together. Special occasions are not only considered important at a personal level, but they also signal the unity, wealth and loyalty of the community as a whole.

As in most villages in southern Italy, Patron Saints' Days and the traditional processions held on those days are also seen as extremely important events for the community. In 1964, St Peter's Italian Church in London was founded, and just a year later so too was the Church of Santa