

**HOW TO START
ORGANIZE
AND MAINTAIN
AN ITALIAN CONVERSATION CIRCLE
IN YOUR COMMUNITY**

(Paper read at the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association
Conference in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, October 30, 1992.)

PERCHE` ?

Non vi pare strano che in un mondo che oggi si preoccupa di preservare una specie di pesciolino minuscolo che naviga nelle acque fangose del Mississippi non ci sia veramente uno sforzo di considerare anche la preservazione di una lingua introdotta in quello stesso mondo da piu` di 8 milioni di immigrati e che rimane nascosta nei cuori e nelle memorie di tanti figli, nipoti, e pronipoti di quei primi ambasciatori?

The primary reason for an Italian Conversation Circle is to retain Italian/English bilingualism; to talk, read, sing, recite, or just plain listen to this beautiful language in an informal, non-judgmental, relaxed setting; to rediscover, discuss, and rejoice in things Italian and in the Italian American experience while at the same time to learn more about contemporary Italy.

This need has never been met by the formal teaching of Italian. Nor have community outreach programs (do any exist?) been formulated with this goal in mind. Rather the immigrant or second and subsequent generation Italian American has often been placed in the position of apology, denial, or suppression of a tongue first heard at the feet of a parent or grandparent.

There has then resulted the curious anomaly of the blossoming of numerous clubs, lodges, guilds, societies, circles, heritage and civic associations which seek to retain Italian cultural solidarity and tradition and are yet devoid of that fragrance which might perhaps have been the best conduit of remembrance and heritage: la lingua italiana.

Dunque, noi vediamo nella creazione di un Circolo di Conversazione Italiana un ritorno, un rimediare ad una mancanza di tatto e giusta accoglienza nei confronti di un gruppo etnico vulnerabile e numeroso venutoci nei primi vent'anni del '900 statunitense.

PERO` siccome ogni insegnamento che non patisce con lo studente e` sottile arroganza, formuliamo a questo punto che perche` tale impresa sia fruttuosa e duratura bisogna prima di tutto avere un profondo desiderio, e diremmo anche gioia di parlare ed esprimersi in italiano. Questo sia per non dimenticare ed approfondire la propria conoscenza della lingua, sia per vederla parlata e parlata bene quanto possibile da altri che la

ricercano tanto. Senza questo elemento PERSONALE il circolo diventa uno studio freddo, formale, capriccioso e condiscendente della lingua.

COME?

IDENTIFY in your community others who might be interested in sharing your goal with you: that is, not to lose fluency in Italian. We know that speaking is the first skill affected when we do not use or hear a language with some regularity for an extended period of time.

CONSIDER the names of your friends and neighbors, read marriage and engagement announcements, obituaries, and press releases in your local newspaper. Leaf through the telephone directory and church bulletins. If you find, as I did, a predominance of Italian names, then it is very probable that others in your community will be interested in helping you maintain your goal. Note that Italian presence in this country may go beyond name because many felt compelled to change their name soon after their arrival; for example, Zickell for Zicchelli, White for Bianchi, DePatsy for De Pasquale and so forth. Note, also, that an Italian name does not automatically guarantee that there will be an interest in, or some knowledge of, the language. You may even find a residue of antagonism towards the language.

INVITE your own friends and acquaintances that you think might be interested in speaking Italian for coffee or just plain chatting. Stipulate that you would like to keep the conversation in Italian. Set a goal, say for an hour or half an hour, but speak ONLY in Italian.

CHALLENGE yourself and your group to maintain that goal. Keep in mind that the more acquainted you are with that person or persons, and/or the more interesting your topic becomes the more difficult it will be to adhere to your goal. When you feel that you have a core group of interested people and that you yourself are benefiting from this endeavor (for example an opportunity to express yourself in Italian in front of others, a growing knowledge of Italian and Italian American culture through the materials you or another participant might bring,)

APPROACH your local library and see if a space can be given you to carry on your meetings. You may point out that you are

conducting a CULTURAL event of interest to the community, that all are invited, and that there is no fee involved, the only requisite being to speak or try to speak Italian for the duration of the meeting (approximately 2 hours for us). You may mention that conversation circles have been regularly carried out in Shrewsbury (French) and West Boylston (Italian) libraries in Massachusetts.

PLACE an ad under the calendar section of your local newspaper. It is best to go directly to the editor the first time to establish personal contact. Once they understand where you're coming from and what you are trying to achieve, they themselves may offer to do a story or give the Circolo a more visible format.

FIND a slogan to reflect your message, or use ours: IF YOU DON'T USE IT YOU LOSE IT which I have rendered as "La lingua non parlata e` di poca durata" with a variation "La lingua trascurata e` di poca durata" But I have seriously toyed with: BRACCIA APERTE, CUORE APERTO.

KEEP IT SIMPLE * KEEP IT OPEN * KEEP IT WELCOMING

CHI?

-- Ma io so gia` parlare italiano, parlo spesso con amici e parenti, ascolto la radio, guardo la t. v. ... --

Nessuno parla una lingua alla perfezione. Tutti sbagliamo di tanto in tanto; alcuni piu` di altri. Quelli venuti recentemente dall'Italia possono trovare in un Circolo l'occasione di conoscere la cultura americana tramite uno scambio di idee ed opinioni che forse non troverebbero altrove. Inoltre puo` lusingare l'idea di essere modello e fonte d'informazione su un'Italia contemporanea e moderna sconosciuta da molti qui in America.

-- Ma quella la` ammazza la lingua, l'ammazza! Se viene quella, io non ci vengo...

Ripetendo quello che abbiamo detto sopra aggiungiamo che tutti parliamo piu` o meno a modo nostro. Se la nostra abitudine non e` di parlare italiano certo sara` difficile ricominciare. Ogni sforzo di parlare deve essere lodato ed apprezzato. Anche se questo parlare e` 'sbagliato'. ci sono diversi modi di correggere. Si preferisce quello piu` dissimulato; per esempio, usando il vocabolo in una maniera giusta quando tocca a noi parlare. Se ci fermiamo ogni volta che sentiamo uno sbaglio, il parlante perde il ritmo, inoltre perde anche la fiducia nel suo parlare ed ecco un'altra voce italiana azzittita!

-- Ma senta, signora, io non sono venuto qua per sentire il calabrese. Non voglio dialetti, voglio imparare l'italiano corretto!

Si parte dal fatto che tutti quelli che parlano dialetto capiscono l'italiano. Possiamo sempre apprezzare la nobile eredita` di molti dialetti che alle volte s'avvicinano di piu` al latino o al greco. S'incoraggia i partecipanti che parlano dialetto a considerarsi bilingui, inglese/dialetto, e ora con l'introduzione dell'italiano formale, di considerarsi trilingui. Spesso succede che i partecipanti riconoscono le voci dialettali non sentite da anni col risultato di scambi interessantissimi per quelli che s'interessano alle lingue. D'altronde bisogna precisare che il Circolo non e` veramente un corso d'italiano bensì` un ambiente accogliente che permette di esprimersi in italiano.

-- Ma io non so parlare bene l'italiano, lo sa? Faccio tantissimi sbagli. Se li faccio io, come mi permetto di correggere gli altri che magari parlano meglio di me?

I partecipanti del Circolo si correggono a vicenda. Non e` mai consigliabile usare una mano ferrea quando si tratta d'incoraggiare a parlare qualcuno. Con cassette, video, e libri si puo` benissimo condurre una sessione del Circolo. Ricordiamo che e` l'occasione di parlare e ascoltare l'italiano che e` importante.

DUNQUE....

ANYONE who is interested in speaking Italian and who feels a need to do so with some regularity and who perhaps recognizes the hidden element of reaffirmation or rediscovery may start or participate in an Italian Conversation Circle.

So far in the Circolo we have had not only participants of Italian descent, but also Irish, Hispanic, Jewish and Arab American, Iranian, German, Estonian, Lebanese, Polish, Albanian... It is a matter of great joy to see so many interested in preserving their Italian sit and share thoughts and conversations with those of Italian origin who were once bilingual. Occupations of Circolo participants have ranged from maintenance to corporate heads. The medium age for the Circolo has been around 60 with a predominance of women over men.

DOVE?

Il Circolo e` nato in una casa privata. Ci siamo poi trasferiti in un locale pubblico per due ragioni:

- 1) Non era sempre facile avere lo spazio personale disponibile con la regolarita` che meritava il Circolo.
- 2) Si correva il rischio di aprirsi solo ad amici e conoscenti. Un circolo ristretto di 'donne che chiacchierano.'

Raccomandiamo, dunque, uno spazio pubblico. Preferibilmente la biblioteca, il municipio, o perfino una chiesa. E ancora, ecco alcune ragioni per questa scelta:

- 1) Possiamo facilmente accettare ed accogliere qualsiasi persona sconosciuta che risponda ad un invito pubblico, sia giornale che radio, tv, internet, bollettini di chiesa.
- 2) Si da` peso e valore all'impresa; cioe`, parlare italiano per la gioia di parlare e cercare di non dimenticare una lingua, e` un'attivita` CULTURALE, benefica e, diremmo anche, necessaria ai nostri tempi qui in America. La lingua italiana non dovrebbe essere ristretta alle aule e corridoi universitari, alla cucina o a gruppetti di vecchietti che si radunano al mall.
- 3) Un locale pubblico puo` facilitare l'uso di apparecchi audio-visivi molto costosi. Inoltre abbiamo a portata di mano atlanti, dizionari, e altri libri di riferimento (quelli pesanti dico) che ci aiutano a chiarire qualche punto in polemica. E non dimentichiamo la copiatrice.

GITE OLTRE SEDE * CASA APERTA

- 1) A Boston per cenare con l'addetto culturale del Consolato e assistere ad una funzione musicale della Dante Alighieri.
- 2) A Portland, Maine per ascoltare il loro Concerto Nella Piazza.
- 3) Alla Clark University di Worcester per l'Italian Cultural Day Celebration a cura degli studenti della Clark Italian Society.

The practice of **CASA APERTA** was begun soon after the Circolo moved to the public library. It gives Circolo members an opportunity to open up their own

home to others interested in Italian language and culture and to structure the session in their own way. A dinner or lunch is usually served followed by some cultural activity and conversation. CASA APERTA is usually not advertised through the newspaper, but through the monthly newsletter and/or by special invitation. Needless to say attendance at CASA APERTA is usually much higher than CIRCOLO, as some participants bring spouses, friends, and relatives. Casa Aperta is held once or twice a year. Any Circolo member may host one.

QUANDO?

This depends on YOUR available time. The Circolo di Conversazione Italiana di West Boylston meets twice a month, the second and fourth Saturdays, from 10 to 12. We have recently added coffee and baked goodies to our meetings thanks to the kitchen facility offered by the Library.

QUANTI?

Since the creation of the Circolo (1986) there have been some 200 participants, some have come and gone after a few meetings, others have stayed longer, and some have been with us for many years. The average attendance has been around 10. Do not be surprised or discouraged if only 2 or 3 come, especially at the beginning. Keep in mind that YOUR goal is to speak Italian and that you are inviting others to share YOUR goal. Nor should you be overwhelmed if over 20 come. Note, however, that when you have more than 10 it is difficult to keep a focused conversation, although strategies can be developed (divide into groups, for instance) to accommodate a larger group. Allow for some free for all talk, but try to keep it **IN ITALIANO**. We often focus on some written text or activity suggested by one of the participants inviting comments and observations during pauses. It is easier in this way to return together to a central point. Be prepared, however, with your own materials, but accept any material others might bring.

ENCOURAGE all to speak, even if only a few sentences.

REMEMBER you are dealing with adults who often have a busy schedule and who do not necessarily want, or can afford the time, to study the language in a traditional way. Although some have achieved great fluency with self-taught methods others attempt to speak only after many years of silence.

QUANTO?

Your only expenses are your mailings: one newsletter a month from September through May, one every two months, or one per term depending on the Circolo's financial resources. A home word processor is of enormous help! Photo copying expenses are generally picked up by the member presenting the material or the members present. A yearly fund raiser YARD SALE is held to cover the mailings. Participants contribute with their treasures, baking, and presence.

GIU` LE MURA!

(ADVOCACY)

BRING awareness to academic and other institutions of Italian America.

SUGGEST to teachers of Italian at the high school and university levels to invite and include the Italian American community in student social and academic activities; perhaps even attend one or two classes.

INTRODUCE literature written by Italian Americans.

HIGHLIGHT history and accomplishments of Italian Americans.

Update - Aggiornamento

Oggi, Ottobre 25, 2008, abbiamo dato i soldi riservati per snail mail alla biblioteca Beaman Memorial library. Non abbiamo piu` bisogno di soldi grazie alla generosita` della biblioteca per lo spazio che ci offrono per i nostri raduni, agli annunci gratis che permettono i giornali per pubblicita` per gli enti comunitari non lucro, e all'internet.

Today, the 25th of October, 2008, we gave our cash reserved for snail mail to the Beaman Memorial Library. We have no further need of money thanks to the generosity of the space offered us

by the Library, free advertisement in local newspapers for non profits, and the internet.

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**Celebrating Diversity in Commemoration of Martin Luther King Day
January 15, 1990, Atwood Hall, Clark University, Worcester, Mass.**

Italian Language Dramatization

Actors: Mariano (8 yrs old), Alicia (11 yrs old), Isabel, Paolo, Laura (H.S. student)

First Narrator: We would like to entitle our presentation **FRAGMENTS**, excerpts and vignettes which we hope will illustrate how a whole community, indeed a whole **country**, can be hurt through a lack of that generous, inclusive, open spirit espoused by Dr. Martin Luther King. Our first excerpt is from a letter recently sent to a local Board of Trustees:

Second Narrator: Board of Trustees, West Boylston Elementary Schools Trust, Crescent Street, West Boylston.

"Dear Board Members:

I was delighted to hear that the board of trustees is considering supporting the introduction of foreign languages at the elementary school level. As you may know, it has long been my belief that it is precisely at this period of time that a foreign language should be introduced. The purpose of this letter is to ask that **Italian** be included among the languages offered. Consider the following points: 1) The demographic configuration of our Town changed earlier in this century with the arrival of many Italian immigrants to build our reservoir. Whereas their work was welcomed and accepted, their language was not. As a result we have here in our Town, a substantial Italian-American presence with little or no language representation in our school system.....**

First Narrator: Our second excerpt is the introduction to a proposal currently in the writing:

Second Narrator: Proposal towards the creation of an Italian American Studies Institute: Inspired by the upcoming Quincentenary of Columbus' indelible voyage and encouraged by this University's steadfast commitment to the linkage of language, literature and culture, we hereby propose to enhance, indeed enrich, once more our horizons by the creation of an American Area Studies which we have to date not seen within an academic institutional setting.

Enrichment implies wealth, and no wealth is more precious to a nation than that which is embraced, nurtured, and cherished by the peoples which comprise and help create that nation. Yet, through a lack of clear and open vision, wealth has at times been perceived as impoverishment, diversity as subversity, variety as anxiety. Nowhere is this more evident than in the initial bubbling introduction and subsequent truncation of treasured languages brought in by immigrants to the United States of America. Painfully reminiscent of an earlier violence, the immigrant languages, now shy and unwelcome, were corralled into ethnic reservations to be preserved in the limited intimacy of the family, stifled and ossified into stereotype "pizza," "Mafia," "Tarantella, bella, bella.....

First Narrator: Life Magazine 1911:

A pound of spaghet' and a red-a bandan'
A stilet' and a corduroy suit;
Add garlic wat make for him strongs da mus'
And a talent for black-a da boot!*

Between 1880 and 1914, *The Century Magazine*:

The steerage passengers of Naples "show a distressing frequency of low foreheads, open mouths, weak chins, poor features, skew faces, small or knobby crains, and backless heads. ... Such people lack the power to take rational care of themselves...."

The Saturday Evening Post: We recommend immigrant restriction as the only way to prevent the rise of a "hybrid race of good for nothing mongrels." In 1919 a respected author and historian in an "objective" study of Italian labor concludes: "Our opinion is that generally the amount of work done per Italian laborer per day is not equal to the amount of work done per laborer per day by our other white laborers or by Negroes..."

Second Narrator (loudly interrupting): Wait a second! Wait a second! 1911, 1910, 1888... Those things happened **AGES** ago. All our immigrants had a bit of a rough time at the beginning, didn't they?!

First Narrator: Yes, yes, but the wound has not quite healed. It's still bleeding! The following scene happened just a few months ago at the West Boylston Italian Conversation Circle:

Circolo Reenactment

Three people sitting around a small table to the side of the stage.

Isabel: Buongiorno, Benvenuti. Now remember, let's try to speak **only** in Italian. If some words come out in dialect, that's O.K.; if some words come out in English, that's O.K. too. Let's see if we can remember some of that hidden, forgotten vocabulary. After all, our motto is "If you don't use it, you lose it (La lingua non parlata e` di poca durata!).... But I see we have some new members. Presentiamoci! Let's introduce ourselves in Italian O.K.? Mi chiamo Isabel sono di West Boylston, e Lei?"

(go around until we come to Laura)

Laura: Mi chiamo.... (starts crying, bends head, uses tissue.)

Participants look embarrassed, whisper to each other in Italian and English.

Laura: Please bear with me. I was not allowed to speak Italian at home as a child. Mi chiamo Laura (whisper, then louder) **Mi chiamo Laura**, sono di Holden.

All: Benvenuta Laura!

First Narrator: So you see, we too have a dream. That some day Italian will be seen as part of our **American** heritage, that it will be taught more and more in our schools. That children -- all children --- will have an opportunity to learn this beautiful language. Only by reclaiming our heritage can we begin to address what a recent New York Times letter to the editor claims is the **real** tragedy of our country: The loss of the many languages that immigrants brought with them leaving the citizens of the United States among the linguistically most illiterate in the educated world."***

Second Narrator: Venite bambini, let's do the giro tondo, first in English and then in Italian, va bene?

We all hold hands and do Ring-around-the-Rosy in English and Italian.

We all take a bow.

* This and all other magazine entries are taken from WOP: A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States by Salvatore LaGumina (Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco, 1973.)

** In October 1991 The West Boylston Public School System did include Italian as part of its formal after school language program.

*** Quoted from Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, S.J. letter to the New York Times August 21, 1986.

N. B. First excerpt was cut out of actual presentation because we were over our 7-minute allowance.