

# Origins of Italian-English Interpreting Services in the United States: Issues of Power Related to Language

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**Abstract:** *At the time of mass migration to the U.S., millions of Italians moved overseas. The movement of such a mass quantity of people caused numerous problems that immigrants had to face in their daily lives. The difficult economic and social situations dealt with were also heightened by having to communicate in a new language. For the most part, immigrants were guaranteed the right to speak their own language in legal settings. But, at the time, professional interpreters of this language combination were nowhere to be found, which is conceivable, given the high number of interpreter-mediated contexts that emerged during that period. This is a phenomenon that cyclically occurs when there is a mass displacement of people crossing boundaries, inevitably leading to skewed power relations in a critical socio-political backdrop. This paper discusses the origins of Italian-English interpreting services in the United States and highlights issues of power in relation to language.*

**Keywords:** interpreting, language, power, political, legal

## 1. Introduction

At the time of mass migration to the U.S., millions of Italians moved overseas. The movement of such a mass quantity of people caused numerous problems that immigrants had to face in their daily lives (Bevilacqua *et al.* 2005, Crispino 1980, Daniels 2002). The difficult economic and social situations dealt with were also heightened by having to communicate in a new language (LaGumina *et al.* 2000). For the most part, immigrants were guaranteed the right to speak their own language in legal settings. But, at the time, professional interpreters of this language combination were few and far between, which is conceivable, given the high number of interpreter-mediated contexts that emerged during that period. This is a phenomenon that cyclically occurs when there is a mass displacement of people crossing boundaries (Antonini *et al.* 2017), inevitably leading to skewed power relations in a critical socio-political backdrop.

This work discusses the early developments of interpreting services of the Italian language in the United States. It examines the dynamics of power relations in the legal and political spheres (§2), then provides a description of the origins and subsequent development of the Italian presence in the United States (§3). The actions of important figures who acted as interpreters, who may be considered the pioneers of this activity in the U.S. are presented (§4) and conclusions drawn (§5).

## 2. Power and Language

Power is one of the most complex concepts in the social and political sciences, partly because there are so many competing definitions, and partly because many key decisions are made behind closed doors, making for confidential settings (Monacelli and Boyd 2016). At the same time, the analysis of power is crucial to our understanding of the contexts in which we work. Examining

the processes and structures of power leads us to develop knowledge of the forces that shape our organizations, institutions, relationships and, as a consequence, our own opportunities and experiences, both as professionals and as analysts (Martin 2016, Monacelli and Boyd 2017).

Exploring the fundamentally oral nature of interpreting, Michael Cronin (2002) calls for a ‘cultural turn’, which would entail explicitly dealing with issues of power since, throughout history: “the role of interpreters has been crucially determined by the prevailing hierarchical constitution of power and their position in it” (Cronin 2002: 387). Cronin highlights the social framework within which interpreters operate that needs to be foregrounded, in an attempt to illuminate the linguistic and cultural boundaries interpreters cross. He cites Anderson (1976) as having anticipated a possible cultural turn through his investigation of the variables of social class, education, gender, age, and situational factors, such as arena of interaction (political, military, academic, religious) and levels of tension, where he also pointed to factors concerning the prestige of groups involved in the mediated communicative event and attitudes towards the languages spoken (Cronin 2002: 391).

Yet, power struggles are not always related to observable behavior and – more realistically – they can be described as unfolding developments of inclusion and exclusion (Wodak 2009). In cases such as these, the power(ful) have access to particular discourse related to ritualistic or procedural language, above all in formal settings such as courtrooms or other legal and law enforcement inquiries, and the power(less) usually appear to be on the receiving end of power(ful) language, which may take the form of interrogations, cross-examinations or investigations. This validation of power leads us to both Bourdieu’s notion of *violence symbolique* (1991) and Gramsci’s notion of *hegemony* (1978). In these approaches to power, the overt and covert techniques, along with power forces, are addressed in language, which can be deconstructed using discourse analysis (Wodak 2009: 36). Unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, a discourse analytical approach to

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the archives of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial in the U.S. (\$4.4) would certainly generate food for thought in this sense. [See Commonwealth of Massachusetts vs. Bartholomeo [sic] Vanzetti and Commonwealth of Massachusetts vs. Nicolo [sic] Sacco in relation to the substitution of pistol barrels in court exhibit pistols (Grippio 2011)]

It is important to point out that the domains of politics and the law are related to the domain of the media, since both journalists and politicians, attorneys and judges mutually depend on each other. Together they wield power in the construction of meaning, creating symbols which the public can access (Ciaglia 2013).

Linked to this, the notion of legitimacy in the political and legal sphere merits clarification. Sociologist Max Weber conceived of legitimacy as a social fact that binds a social order (Weber, 1978: 31). He differentiated between three different types of legitimate authority: legal-rational, charismatic and traditional. The most relevant of these, for an assessment of power within the framework of our analysis, is legal-rational authority. This type of authority presents as being the most stable system, since it is grounded on rationality and logic and therefore is premised on a belief in the formalized and legitimated procedures which bring forth rules and enacts legal proceedings, making it possible to reach decisions (*ibid.*: 279). Basically, even if individuals may not share the norms underpinning authority and social order in a given society, they would indeed believe them to be legitimate because they are embedded in a system of social controls (Wodak 2009: 37). We thus begin to see how a balance of power in the spheres of politics and law may seem to be an illusion. This is the impression we get when examining the period when interpreting services of the Italian language originated in the United States.

### 3. Italians in the United States

Prior to 1880 there was a period when craftsmen, merchants, intellectuals, artists, doctors and musicians emigrated from Italy at regular intervals, instilling in the minds of Americans that Italy was a land of art and culture. This all changed on 14 March 1891 when eleven Italian-Americans in New Orleans, Louisiana, were lynched for their alleged role in the murder of police chief David Hennessy. The lynching took place the day after the trial of nine of the nineteen men indicted in the murder. Six of these defendants had been acquitted, and a mistrial declared for the remaining three because the jury had failed to agree on their verdicts. There was widespread suspicion that an Italian network of criminals had generated the killing of the police chief in a period of rising crime. Believing the jury had been bribed, a mob broke into the jail where the men were being held and killed eleven of them. The mob numbered in the thousands and included some of the city's most prominent citizens. American press coverage of the event was largely congratulatory, and those responsible for the lynching were never charged (Bonanno, 2007).

The incident had serious national repercussions for both countries. Italy cut off diplomatic relations with the United States that, in turn, called for restrictions on immigrations in answer to increased anti-Italian sentiment. We might

speculate that this is when the word 'Mafia' started to emerge in the American lexicon, and a particular stereotype of the Italian-American became established in the collective imagination. In spite of this, railway companies across the United States needed a work force and it was against this backdrop that mass Italian immigration to the U.S. once again began (Daniels 2002).

Initial difficulties that all immigrants had to face after arriving in the United States basically amounted to two, practical ones: they had to find housing and – for those unable to work for railway companies – a job. These problems were compounded by the fact that most had no knowledge of the English language. Within Italian ethnic communities the person who took it upon themselves to resolve these problems was the *padrone*, also called the 'boss' who – in exchange for a fee, called *bossatura* – acted as a social mediator between newly arrived immigrants and civil society. During the 1920s those who took on the role of the *padrone* were the so-called *prominenti* who were ethnic leaders generally working as school teachers, journalists or employees heading different forms of mutual aid societies. For the most part on the margin of the lower middle class, the *prominenti* were not typical, upright citizens, being linked to the mob or organized crime in some way or another. The *padrone* system terminated due to a number of factors, including the mounting charges pressed against them by social workers who aimed to improve the conditions of working immigrants. It was believed that immigrants who better integrate into the new society would favor the passing of laws protecting workers' rights. The *padroni* were ultimately substituted with certified agents whose job it was to recruit workers for the various railway companies (Nelli 1970).

The lives and history of European immigrants during mass migratory waves were neglected by American scholars for the most part, mainly due to the widespread notion of the 'melting pot' in the U.S. society and culture in the 1910s (Pretelli 2011). This subsequently gave way to the Americanization movement in the 1920s supported by the federal government, industries, trade unions and philanthropic organizations that openly fostered English language courses and civics classes for immigrants (King 2000).

Italian-Americans struggled to rid themselves of the stereotypes that once labelled their parents and grandparents, and to claim their active role in building the United States identity. During this period, ethnic revival and a rediscovery of national pride became values that contributed to what came to be known as the American Mosaic (Morrison and Zabusky 1993, Vezzosi 2005). Ultimately it was around the 1970s, through organizations such as the Americans of Italian Descent, the Sons of Italy in America, and the National Italian American Foundation, that widespread anti-defamation campaigns against negative imagery had mounted (Nelli 1983).

In this brief coverage of the Italian presence in the U.S. we can single out two channels of communication that held the power to focus the spotlight on events and to influence the minds of the public: the press and literature, clearly

highlighting the relevance of language in a play for power. It was amidst the enhanced presence of Italians on North American soil that the role of the interpreter of the Italian language emerged. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century interpreters have offered language assistance to newcomers from their arrival on Ellis Island for any legal matters or medical issues, in an effort to strike the power balance between them and host country institutions. Following Cronin's plea for a cultural turn (*ibid.*), it is easy to deduce how much power an interpreter may hold in interpreter-mediated contexts in this period. The following section delves more deeply into this.

### **Pioneers of Italian-English Interpreting in the U.S.**

Italian-English interpreting services in the U.S., as we know of them today, take their roots from the years of mass emigration from the *Bel Paese*. The massive flow of arrivals put the authorities in a position of requiring language assistance, if not only for the safety and well-being of immigrants. The majority of Italians only spoke their local Italian dialect at the time and were not all able to use, what was considered to be, standard Italian.

Those conversant in both languages – although not professional interpreters – stepped in at the service of their fellow citizens. Often these people came from other trades or services. Among the most well known figures that served as interpreters are Mother Francesca Saverio Cabrini, patron saint of the immigrants, along with police officer Joe Petrosino and the man who is still remembered today as one of the most important mayors of the Big Apple, the Italian-American Fiorello La Guardia. We end this section describing the work of interpreters during the Sacco and Vanzetti trial in the U.S, which proved to highly influence the course of events.

### **Mother Francesca Cabrini**

At the time of Italian immigration, the clergy was assisted by women in charge of domestic work, above all in male religious congregations. Therefore, thanks to a request on behalf of the bishop of New York, Monsignor Michael Augustin Corrigan, to the proposal by the bishop of Vicenza, Mons. Scalabrini and to the authorization of Pope Leone XIII, this particular job was bestowed to a nun from Lombardy, Mother Francesca Saverio Cabrini. Although quite young, she had already become well known in Italy for her dynamism in founding the new congregation of the Missionary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

She received the opportunity to rise to the ranks in the U.S., becoming instrumental in seeking out contexts that urgently required attention with respect to restoring immigrants' dignity. Besides legal matters and employment, another area that proved to be a challenging in relation to immigration was matters of health. In terms of legal matters, Mother Cabrini and her sisters would plea for retrials and would turn around sentences in the favor of immigrants who were penalized for not knowing the English language, thus not receiving fair legal representation. They would also visit prisoners who were sentenced to life and organized conferences weekly in Chicago prisons (Scaraffia, 2003: 75).

In terms of health assistance during this period, immigrants' living conditions provoked the onset of all types of illnesses. The Columbus, a hospital built by Italian philanthropists, gave immigrants medical respite. However, the mismanagement of the institute in the hands of non-religious organizations was followed by even worse management by the Scalabrini Fathers. Mother Cabrini had several times refused the offer to manage the hospital, because she felt she was not competent to work in the area of health. She was a teacher, as her fellow sisters were. She had always worked with orphanages and schools and above all she had no experience with running a hospital. However, were the Columbus to close, the Italian immigrants would be the ones to suffer. Therefore, Mother Cabrini rolled up her sleeves and was able to restore the hospital to its full functions. The Columbus not only dispensed health care and assistance, but also moral and spiritual support to Italian immigrants. Physicians mainly spoke English and little Italian, thus the presence of the sisters was propitious, since they offered not only spiritual guidance but language mediation, having learned several of the languages of immigrants in the U.S. Added to this was the economic edge that Mother Cabrini's management of the hospital offered patients from all ethnic backgrounds. Alongside free health care, the practice of also offering paid services allowed the hospital to make use of these funds to add extensions to other institutes already in place and to create new ones (Scaraffia, 2003: 50).

### **Officer Joseph Petrosino**

The adverse social and economic conditions of Italian immigrants in the U.S. between the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, along with the arrival of criminals at large or pending trial, all favored the emergence of racketeers and later led to fully blown organized crime. When the Sicilian Mafia entered the U.S. there already were other ethnic groups of racketeers, such as the Irish and the Jewish, but soon the Italians numerically far outweighed all other groups (Petacco, 1972: 3). This ghettoization was more characteristic of larger cities. Critical issues of law and order that the city of New York experienced during this historical period were – to a large degree – due to the arrival of shady individuals, leading to stepped up law enforcement in that city.

In order to contain rampant lawbreaking, the police force hired new agents from the ranks of Jewish and Irish immigrant families in New York. A change in this nationalistic streak came in 1883 when a young agent named Joe Petrosino was hired. During those years there were about half a million Italian immigrants living in the city of New York and, even if they made for only 4% of the urban population, it was estimated that 46% of all homicides were committed by them. Since Irish police officers were not sufficiently able to contrast criminal activity because they did not know the Italian language, in 1905 a special squad called the Italian Branch was instated. This investigating unit, led by Joe Petrosino, was made up of 5 officers of Italian descent, far too few for the over five hundred thousand people of Italian descent in the city of New York (Petacco 1972). The efficiency of their work led to the addition of thirty more Italian-American agents to the



Branch, which later changed its name to the Italian Legion. Knowledge of the Italian language and of different dialects, specifically southern Italian dialects, allowed them to make well over 2,500 arrests and causing 500 to be deported. The Italian Legion brought to light a complex, organized network of criminal activity known as the *Mano Nera* that originated in Sicily (Petacco, 1972: 6-10). Though strictly not interpreters, these officers indeed practiced a form of language mediation that served to favor contact with criminals of Italian origin.

### Mayor Fiorello La Guardia

Fiorello LaGuardia was the son of an Italian father and a Jewish mother from Austria-Hungary. After working as a clerk at the American consulate in Budapest (1903) and a consular agent for emigration at the Port of Fiume [now Rijeka, Croatia] (1903-1906), he returned to New York to study law at night school. From 1907 to 1910 he worked as an interpreter at Ellis Island while studying law. He was certified to work with the following languages: Italian, German, Yiddish and Croatian (Jeffers 2002: 31-33). After getting his degree, La Guardia left Ellis Island to become a lawyer and eventually entered politics as a progressive Republican. He served as United States Congressman from 1917 to 1919 and again from 1923 to 1933. He was also a popular three term mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1946.

La Guardia (1948) wrote of his experience as an interpreter when he worked on Ellis Island, specifically describing the unyielding consequences of translation on immigrants. He explains how an unsuitable or misleading translation was the cause for defining immigrants' health as afflicted by mental illness. In these cases, immigrants were immediately deported. According to La Guardia, more than half of all deportations came about because the resident physicians at Ellis Island could not fully comprehend immigrants' behavioral patterns, their mental or emotional state, nor their responses to questions posed (*ibid.*: 65).

Scholars describe immigration history as largely focused on eugenics, the restriction of immigrants by race and ethnicity, distinguishing disability as a crucial factor in the shaping of the 'undesirable immigrant' that came to be known as 'defectives' (Baynton 2016). Disabled individuals were not the only ones to be excluded; particular races and nationalities were also 'branded' as undesirable based on their susceptibility to mental, moral, and physical defects. Italians were one of these.

However, La Guardia nurtured suspicions that misconstrued translations were at the basis of labelling a number of immigrants from western and southern Europe as mentally unstable. Even the Italian St. Raphael Society, the main Catholic organization assisting Italian immigrants in the United States, between 1890 and 1923, accused physicians at Ellis Island of having taken issues relating to language or culture, for signs of mental illness. The eminent physician, Antonio Stella, also accused doctors working at Ellis Island and supported the theory whereby all health issues that Italian immigrants were described as suffering from nothing more than consequences deriving from the type of life they

lead in the U.S., rather than to their innate biological inferiority. He fostered the belief that Italian immigrants, similar to slaves entering the country, were victims of the contexts in which they worked such as mines or steel mills, where their health was the tradeoff for prosperity in the New World (LaGumina *et al.* 2000).

Even the Public Health Service recognized that all translations were, to some degree, faulty in that particular shades of meaning often hid important information from surfacing, which meant the difference between being diagnosed as suffering from mental illness or receiving a clean bill of health (see US Public Health Service, 1918: 16).

### 4. Concluding Remarks

During mass migratory flows to the U.S. it is indeed telling that initial aid in the form of language mediation came from social services offered by the clergy, followed by the institution of law enforcement and, last but not least, by a future politician. This denotes the changes effected with respect to a balance of power, tipping the scales in favor of newly immigrated Italians to the U.S.

The limits of this study concern its scope. Although history provides us with the backbone to this paper, it would be of interest in future to involve professional Italian-English interpreters in the U.S. today in a qualitative study in order to be able actually read between those historical lines, even diachronically, in order to get a better understanding of the developments of language and power in this sense. We must recall that in the famous Sacco and Vanzetti trial, critical communication difficulties arose because the defendants spoke two, different dialects and because of intentional manipulation by a pro-prosecution interpreter, Ms. Angelina De Falco (Jarman 2012: 179). This combination of circumstances may have contributed to the guilty verdict handed down by the jury (Carnevale 2009: 86). With the adoption of a wider scope, it would certainly be possible to fully comprehend the power that the Italian language holds today in the United States, through the lens of how interpreting services have developed in time.

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