

IMPOSTURE, TRAUMA, AND THE POSITIONALITY OF STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS IN THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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In 2009 we began teaching Italian courses geared toward Spanish-speaking students at California State University, Long Beach. The desire and need to radically rethink the model of language teaching that prevailed at the time, i.e., the communicative approach, had dogged me with respect to our Spanish-speaking students for personal, as well as academic reasons for many years.

On a personal note, I grew up in the City of San Fernando, California, where my father, Franco Donato, had been able to purchase a house with the \$12,000 he had received thanks to the GI Bill, following his service in Italy during the war as a member of the OSS. San Fernando was a lush, agricultural oasis, home to groves of Valencia oranges that retain their juiciness even after months of hanging on the tree. The oldest city in the San Fernando Valley, San Fernando was a colonial contact zone as one of the sites where Spanish Franciscan friars built missions to convert the Gabrielino-Tongva Indian Tribe, the indigenous population in Southern California. San Fernando Rey de España Mission was only a few minutes' walk from where I lived, and I spent many an afternoon on those grounds, enjoying the fountain, the replica of one in Córdoba, and the Church interior, decorated in indigenous designs that contrasted with the ornate Baroque altar with a statue of King Ferdinand III of Aragon (1030-1082). I also stared at the bronze statue of Father Junipero Serra, his arm around an indigenous boy, near the large vats where the Indians made soap from tallow. The mission library offered me my first view of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books from Europe, which is why, perhaps, I was inspired to become an eighteenth-century scholar. It also houses the

precious archives of the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe. The mission grounds, instead, reveal adobe walls, four feet thick, and the largest two-story adobe building in California, the grandest in the California Mission system, a testament to indigenous building techniques. Paintings of the saints and the Virgin hang on the walls of the Mission church and buildings and include a beautiful painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe. This is a site of cultural syncretism, a rare place in the San Fernando Valley, known today more for Valley Girl culture made famous by Frank Zappa, than the missions. Spanish became the language of the region, and immigrants and migrants flowed to the valley, the majority, over time, from Mexico, but when I was growing up there, in the fifties and sixties, significant numbers of Italian Americans moved west from the East Coast and settled in the Valley. If I look at the picture of my first-grade class, one-third of my classmates, about 15, have Italian surnames, while another 20 of them have Hispanic surnames, with the rest a mix of French and German. Italian Americans felt at home in San Fernando, where they established fig farms and expanded on the growth of the olive trees brought from Spain by the Franciscans to make the holy oil, chrism, used in so many church ceremonies, a mixture of olive oil, cinnamon, cassia, calamus, and myrrh.

What does this have to do with learning a language? Eighteenth-century English philosopher, John Locke, located self-identity in memory and self-knowledge. In his work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), he promoted memory and self-knowledge as the foundation upon which learning and self-improvement were predicated. In the State of California, the students who enter the Italian-language classroom are increasingly of Hispanic and indigenous descent. They grew up hearing or speaking Spanish at home; their identities, memories, and self-knowledge are steeped in languages and experiences that should be engaged in the Italian language classroom in ways that differ greatly from the language knowledge and experiences of students from other backgrounds. Engaging with their self-identity, memory, and self-knowledge as Spanish speakers, often with indigenous roots that lie in a complex colonial history of cultural syncretism, post-colonial trauma, and migration history, (not to mention precarious status, since they are often undocumented), we owe our students recognition of who they are when they enter the language classroom. In the same way that we acknowledge the sacred,

indigenous grounds upon which our universities rest every time we speak publicly, should we not also recognise the backgrounds of our students, the sacred grounds upon which their identities rest, especially our Spanish-speaking students, when they come into the Italian language classroom?

When I outlined the personal reasons that led me to create a program of Italian for Spanish speakers, I wanted to explain how the background of my Hispanic friends and classmates was in many ways a shared background, meaning that I, too, as an Italian American Californian who grew up in a historically and linguistically Hispanic-dominant setting, that I, too, would have appreciated a more welcoming pedagogical gesture from my teaching associates and professors. This wish, and denial of it, would emerge time and time again when I was a teaching assistant in training at UCLA, or when I began teaching at CSULB, strictly applying the communicative approach, and doing to my students exactly what had been done to me and my peers when we were in the Italian language classroom so many years ago. "I'm teaching them Italian, and they answer me in Spanish!", we would grumble in what had become the mantra if you were teaching with the communicative approach in institutions of higher learning in California, many already 'Hispanic Serving', though not yet designated as such. We knew nothing about a student's linguistic and cultural repertoire back then, only 'comprehensible input', which we would repeat over and over again, insisting that the students forget everything about themselves and the languages they already knew as they tried to connect to a language presented coldly through the holding up of pictures and our attempts to establish connections between those words and the pictures, all devoid of historical and cultural meaning. We were asking them to recode the relationship between object and word that they already possessed, affective relationships, and to block the words they knew, words that from Spanish, were often identical or almost identical to the Italian words we were trying to teach them. We asked them to block those words, drop them as Spanish words, and recode them as Italian, instead of demonstrating the relationship between them and the ties Italian and Spanish share as languages. We would watch the Spanish-speaking students as they tried to suppress their natural inclination to establish links with the Spanish words they knew, inevitably blurt out Spanish words, only to be admonished to say the

Italian word, not the Spanish word, by the very louder insistence of the instructor who was committed to diverting them away from Spanish to replace it in their heads with Italian. I once interviewed two of my Spanish-speaking students about how they had addressed the 'problem' of Spanish as they were trying to learn French and Italian through the communicative method in their high schools. They both spoke of being reprimanded when they were found to be sneakily writing down the Spanish equivalent of the French and Italian words they heard spoken. They also talked about going home and translating everything that appeared in French or Italian in their textbooks into Spanish. I refer to this as the secret translation and trans-linguaging practices of Spanish-speaking students in the French and Italian language classroom.

Let me close with a thought that may be uncomfortable to many, but is, I believe, the overlooked arena of DEI, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Italian Diaspora Studies: the Italian language classroom, where hierarchical language-teaching practices persist, and where it is extremely difficult to move the Italian language teaching community from their communicative approach comfort zone. As Italian language instructors, we have been unwilling to rethink what we do, unwilling to understand that the students in our classrooms are human beings whose positionality has everything to do with their ability and desire to learn, especially when it comes to learning language, and in this case, the Italian language. The research on the need to consider the reality of who populates our classrooms and who teaches in them is deep and extends many years back by now, with Claire Kramsch at the forefront of multilingualism and language teaching. In a 2015 article co-authored with Lihua Zhang, "The legitimacy gap: multilingual language teachers in an era of globalization", the topic of imposing monolingual teaching practices on multilingual instructors is explored through the authors' own personal experiences at UC Berkeley. It throws into question the entire language-teaching, language-learning practice, not only from the perspective of students, but from the perspective of instructors as well, instructors who have also suppressed who they are. The trauma of the imposture of language teaching and language learning that we have been expected to adhere to no is longer viable. Why do students want to learn Italian? So they can go to Florence for a month of 'study abroad'? At a time when our existence as a discipline on college campuses has been reduced to that goal in many instances, it is time to

completely rethink what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how it benefits our students. Unfortunately, the title of a recent Netflix movie, *Love and Gelato*, does not bode well in this regard¹.

References

- Kramsch, C. & Zhang, L. 2015 “The Legitimacy Gap: Multilingual Language Teachers in an Era of Globalization”. In: Jessner-Schmid, L. & Kramsch, C. (eds). *The Multilingual Challenge: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton. (87-114). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614512165-006>.

¹ From the Netflix website: *Love & Gelato*, 1h 51m | Teen Movies: <https://www.netflix.com/it-en/title/81278276>. To fulfill her mother's final wish, Lina spends the summer before college in Rome, where she discovers romance, adventure — and a passion for gelato.