

# Tracing Language, Culture, and Identity Through Three Generations: The Experiences of a Spanish-Italian Family in the United States

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*Most studies of language maintenance and loss in the United States have concentrated on contact between English and one specific heritage or minority language. The present study examines the experience of a Spanish-Italian immigrant family and the factors they identify as key in shaping their patterns of language use through three generations.*

*The family on which the present analysis is centered is unique: the participants are European, they do not live in a Spanish-speaking community, and because members of the first generation immigrated in the mid 1950's, their views of acculturation are different from those of more recent immigrants. This family's story provides insight into the immigrant experience and highlights the potential role of heritage and ethnic pride as a means of motivating students to pursue the study of foreign languages.*

## INTRODUCTION

Considering the well-documented benefits of first language (L1) maintenance for general language development (Guiberson, Barrett, Jancosek, & Yoshinaga Itano, 2006), the retention of minority languages is an important issue for any society concerned with the emotional, social, and educational well-being of its citizens. Research shows that language attrition can result in frustration, confusion, and isolation (Thomas and Cao, 1999) and affirms that there are important emotional factors at stake (Kouritzin, 2000; Tannenbaum, 2005). The complexity of the relationship between identity and language has also been well-documented (Norton, 1997, 2000, 2006; Norton Peirce, 1995).

This case study focuses on a unique situation of language contact between English and the two heritage languages of one immigrant family: Spanish and Italian. The goal is four-fold: understand the unique story surrounding the establishment of this family in the United States; identify factors that influence their decisions about which language(s) to use and for what functions; analyze the conditions that result in the eventual maintenance and/or loss of Spanish and Italian; and explore participants' sense of ethnicity and personal identification with Spanish, Italian, and English and their respective cultures.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The maintenance of Italian as a heritage language in the United States has not been extensively studied, but in the case of Spanish, the second most widely spoken language in the U.S. (Villa, 2000), the opposite holds true. Numerous investigations have assessed the degree to which Spanish is maintained or lost in geographical contexts ranging from large metropolitan areas to small rural communities. For instance, researchers have examined issues of maintenance and loss in large cities with substantial Hispanic populations such as Miami (Lynch, 2000), Chicago (Potowski, 2004), Los Angeles (Silva-Corvalán, 1994), and New York (Zentella, 1997). Other studies have focused on specific regions like the Lower Río Grande Valley of Texas (Anderson-Mejías, 2005; Mejías, Anderson-Mejías and Carlson, 2003) and the Southwest (Bills, Hernández Chávez, and Hudson, 1995). In their 2003 study, Mejías, Anderson-Mejías, and Carlson updated an attitudinal survey that they had conducted 15 years earlier among Mexican American students at the University of Texas-Pan American; their results were very similar to the initial findings but indicated a slightly less positive attitude toward Spanish among some participants. Nevertheless, the researchers' overall projections for the ongoing maintenance of Spanish in the region were optimistic.

Issues of language contact and maintenance have also been examined in traditionally-monolingual rural communities like West Liberty, Iowa (Wherritt and Gonzalez, 1989) or Northeast Georgia (Smith, 2006) where the presence of Spanish-speakers is less expected. The experience of Spanish speakers in communities characterized by less ethnic and linguistic diversity is distinct from that of those who live in metropolitan areas with large Hispanic populations; for instance, there may be limited access to print resources that serve to reinforce the language in written form or to public services such as medical care in Spanish. Furthermore, though discrimination and other obstacles that hinder integration into the larger community can exist anywhere, they may be more noticeable and present more of a barrier in a small town environment.

The vast majority of these studies support the well-documented loss of minority languages, or at least the absence of stable bilingualism, by the third generation (Fishman, 1991; García, 1997; García, 2003). However, some researchers point to certain U.S. communities, such as the Lower Río Grande Valley of Texas, as exceptions to this general trend (Anderson-Mejías, 2005). In Anderson-Mejías's study (2005), for example, she interviewed fourth and fifth generation immigrants for whom Spanish was still a viable language. Additionally, the maintenance of Spanish among residents of the Lower Río Grande Valley supports the findings of other research that has identified proximity to the Mexican border as a factor associated with the retention of Spanish in the Southwest (Bills, Hernández Chávez, and Hudson, 1995; Mora, Villa, and Dávila, 2005).

The case of Spanish appears to be different from those of other minority languages in the United States, a situation that according to Mora, Villa, and Dávila (2006) may reflect changing attitudes toward Spanish in the United States. The fact that goods and services are marketed specifically to the growing Hispanic population highlights the influence of this population in the economic sector, and their high profile roles in pop culture, education, and government focus national attention on the Spanish language. Though Spanish seems to enjoy a status unparalleled by that of other heritage languages, the overall consensus of previous research is that long-term, broad-scale maintenance of Spanish across the United States, apart from that sustained by a regular influx of immigrants, is unlikely.

Research on issues of language maintenance and loss extends beyond the community level and also focuses on the state of heritage languages in the home environment (Antal, 1998; Bills, Hudson, and Hernández Chávez, 2000; Cheng, 2003; Guardado, 2006; Rubino, 2004; Schaberg and Barkhuizen, 1998; Tuominen, 1999; Yamamoto, 2002). Kouritzin (2000) notes that “familial language shift to the majority language is a major, if not the major, contributor to children’s later loss of their heritage language with its attendant social, emotional, educational, and political consequences” (p. 313). She provides a particularly compelling personal account of the challenges she encountered as a Canadian trying to raise her two children exclusively in Japanese, her husband’s native language. In spite of the inability to connect emotionally with her children as she would have liked, frustrations over the limitations of her L2 Japanese, and feelings of guilt both on her part and on the part of her husband, Kouritzin persisted, knowing that abandoning her efforts would irreversibly jeopardize her children’s ability to acquire and maintain Japanese.

Numerous factors appear to affect language maintenance in the home environment. Some research highlights the importance of the mother in heritage language transmission (Cheng, 2003), particularly when in the traditional role of primary care giver. Other studies suggest that children (Thomas and Cao, 1999; Tuominen, 1999) are key players. Tuominen (1999), for instance, explains that “children in some multilingual families . . . can gain control of the home language situation because of the potential monopoly they have over certain kinds of information” (p. 72). In other words, exposure to the majority language at school and play may give these children access to information, cultural norms, and socialization practices with which their parents are less familiar, and consequently, relegates to them a certain degree of authority in establishing the home language. As Thomas and Cao (1999) note, the role reversal that sometimes occurs when immigrant parents must rely on their own children as translators can be a real source of tension in the home, particularly when their native culture norm is a more authoritarian model of childrearing.

There also appears to be a relationship between level of education and language maintenance. In their study of Spanish speakers in the Southwest, Hudson, Hernández Chávez, and Bills (1995) found that “the higher the educational level

of the Spanish origin population in any given county [of the study], the lower the loyalty and retention rates for Spanish are likely to be” (p. 182). In other words, greater educational achievement may be accompanied by a greater degree of assimilation to the majority culture and language. Indeed, the general educational environment, specifically the centrality of English in U.S. public schools, seems to foster a switch to the majority language (García, 1997).

Other key factors include geography and linguistically mixed marriages in which one spouse does not speak the heritage language. As mentioned earlier, maintenance of the Spanish language in the home environment is much more feasible for families who are a part of or live in proximity to a Spanish-speaking community (Alba, Logan, Lutz, & Stults, 2002; Bills, Hernández Chávez, and Hudson, 1995; Mora, Villa, and Dávila, 2005). The four families in Guardado’s (2006) study of language contact in Vancouver perceived the absence of a large Spanish speaking community as a key contributor to language loss among their children. And, though mixed marriages, as defined above, do not necessarily result in language loss, they do present a challenge (Schaberg and Barkhuizen, 1998). In Schaberg and Barkhuizen’s (1998) study of language maintenance in three mixed-marriages, participants voiced concern about alienating the parent who could not speak the heritage language. Certainly, the challenges of carrying out daily interactions in a language unfamiliar to one’s spouse can create tension or feelings of exclusion that ultimately complicate communication to such a degree that family members revert to the language they all share.

The existing body of research on language maintenance and loss has benefited greatly from large-scale investigations that provide a strong statistical basis for documenting trends, making predictions, and evaluating the scope of language change in distinct communities. As Finocchiaro (1995) notes, however, there is also a place for small case studies that “help in lending a human dimension to the concept of LM/LS [language maintenance/language shift] and gaining deeper insights into the process through which the individuals undergoing LM/LS live” (p. 41). As such, the present case study highlights specific experiences, circumstances, and opportunities that shaped the process of language loss for one particular family but that would not be captured in a broader, quantitative analysis.

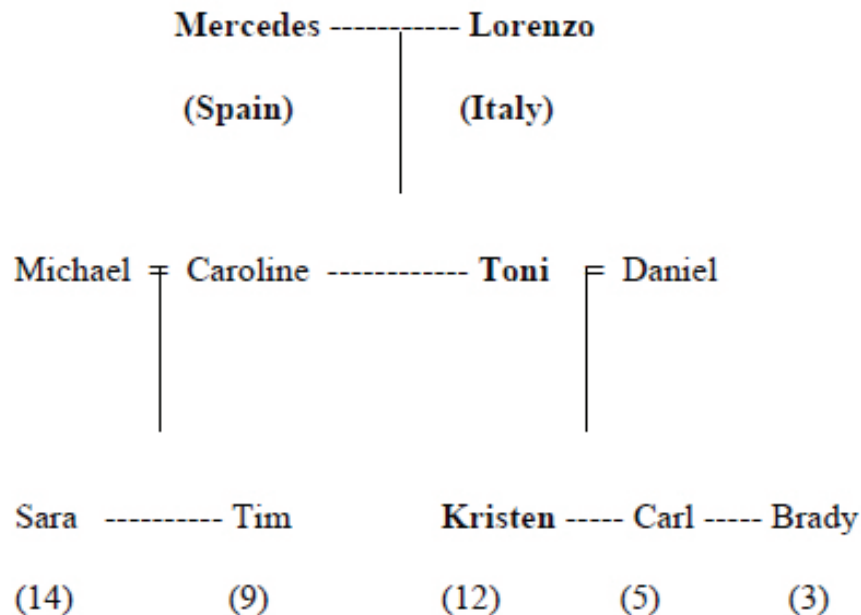
## **PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY**

Participants in this case study were four members of a Spanish-Italian family, referred to by pseudonyms in this analysis. Lorenzo, an Italian immigrant, and his Spanish wife, Mercedes, both approximately eighty years old, moved to the United States in their early thirties. They currently live in close proximity to their daughter, Toni, who is approximately forty years old, her husband, and three children. Toni’s two sons, ages five and three, were too young to participate in this project, but her daughter, Kristen, age twelve, provided a voice for the third generation. Lorenzo

and Mercedes' other daughter, Caroline, is married and has two children but was not able to participate in this study. Thus, this analysis focuses on one particular branch of the family tree (Figure 1).

The data for this analysis come from semi-scripted interviews (Appendix A) that were conducted at the participants' homes and in the language of their choosing. First generation immigrants, Mercedes and Lorenzo, were interviewed together in Spanish, and the second and third generation participants, Toni and Kristen, were interviewed individually in English. Interviews with the adults lasted between 60 and 90 minutes; the session with Kristen was much briefer, approximately 15 minutes.

**Figure 1. Visual Representation of Family Tree**



**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

All data were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively to address the following research questions:

- 1) What is the unique story (personal, historical) surrounding the immigration and establishment of this particular family in the United States?
- 2) What factors influenced their decisions about which language(s) to use and for what functions?
- 3) What conditions resulted in the maintenance and/or loss of Spanish and Italian by subsequent generations?

4) How, if at all, do participants identify with the Spanish, Italian, and English languages and their respective cultures?

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data analysis involved several steps. First, after identifying key events that outline the family's immigrant story, I highlighted the factors that participants themselves had identified as influential when making conscious decisions about their choice of language as well as particular circumstances that affected the second and third generations' patterns of language use. Finally, I compared these findings with those of existing multi-generational studies of Spanish language maintenance and loss. I follow Schüpbach (2008) in using reported data and retrospection to emphasize "perception and sense making" in the experience of one immigrant family rather than to analyze "the factual reconstruction of the [language] shift" itself (p. 92).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The First Generation**

Mercedes immigrated to the United States from Barcelona in 1955 at the age of 31 to join her family in New York City where they had settled 8 years earlier. They spoke Catalan among themselves but used Spanish with guests and visitors. Like many first generation immigrants, Mercedes' employment opportunities were initially restricted by her limited English skills. She worked in a factory until her English improved and later was employed in an accounting office. In 1959 her plans to return to Spain for a brief vacation were disrupted by a strike at the port, and travel by passenger ship, a common means of transportation at the time, became complicated. She arranged transport to Barcelona on an Italian cargo ship.

Lorenzo, who was working as a sailor with a Swedish shipping line in 1959, decided to vacation in his native Italy and booked passage on the cargo ship to Barcelona. He and Mercedes became very well acquainted during the two-week voyage and were engaged to be married by the time the ship docked. The couple married the following year and established their home in Queens, New York. Finding that his career as a sailor was not conducive to family life, Lorenzo pursued work as a professional painter in order to spend more time at home.

In recounting their story, Lorenzo and Mercedes highlighted several factors that influenced their language use as well as their sense of cultural identity upon establishing their new family in the United States. Their respective abilities to speak English, Italian, and/or Spanish were a key factor that determined which language they used in their home. Lorenzo reported having learned several languages, including English, Spanish, and Swedish, while working as a sailor. Though Mercedes could "defend herself" in Italian, she explained that "since he spoke Spanish better

than I could speak Italian, well, we started out in Spanish and until this very day we speak Spanish at home” (my translation-All quotes from Lorenzo and Mercedes have been translated to English).

Though Spanish is the language of familial communication, both English and Italian also play a role in daily life. Living in the United States necessitates the use of English, and both Lorenzo and Mercedes reported feeling comfortable with their ability to carry out tasks such as shopping, going to the doctor, or writing a letter in English and expressed no concern about interacting with native English-speaking interlocutors. As for Italian, Lorenzo continues to use his native language for communication with his relatives in Italy and regularly watches Italian television programs at his home in the U.S. In terms of cultural identification, Lorenzo and Mercedes’ sense of identity reflects a common attitude among previous generations of immigrants: they reported having assimilated to their new culture and identified themselves without hesitation as Americans. Mercedes made the following observation:

We adjusted to American life because we thought that if you live in a country you have to adjust and embrace the laws and the customs of the country where you’re going to live. In this case it was America. And, now we are American citizens. We are citizens and have lived well and happy with the customs here all this time.

Both Lorenzo and Mercedes implied that other more recent immigrants should adopt their approach and assimilate; in fact, Lorenzo voiced displeasure with the fact that some immigrants do not adapt to North American culture, and Mercedes stated that Spanish should not be used in schools. In short, they believe that residents of the United States should learn and use English.

Though Mercedes and Lorenzo communicated interest in and loyalty to their first cultures, their commitment to acculturation was strong. When asked about specific connections to Spain and Italy, Mercedes mentioned several typical dishes that she and her husband prepare from their respective countries and referred to Lorenzo’s efforts to teach the girls some songs in Italian. However, she also noted that they made the decision not to celebrate Spanish holidays like “Three Kings Day,” opting for the North American tradition of Santa Claus. They lived in the United States and believed that they should adopt American customs.

When asked with what culture they identified most strongly, Lorenzo immediately responded, “American.” Mercedes explained, “We follow the American culture but the culture that we live is the Spanish one, the European, the Italian, the customs. . . in the sense of upbringing. . . ‘manners’ as they say here.” When asked about any differences she had observed in terms of politeness norms between Spain and the United States, Mercedes responded, “Manners are, were, I don’t know now. . . but one’s upbringing was better there. I think it continues to be so in a sense, I think, but I haven’t been in Spain for many years.” She then added that there are some American families that are very polite. Interestingly, the more she

reflected on the comparison, Mercedes seemed to question her own assessment, ultimately attributing the differences she perceived to generational factors rather than purely cultural ones.

In sum, both Mercedes and Lorenzo regularly use English as well as their first languages, but they identified Spanish as the language on which their marriage and home continue to function. In terms of cultural identification, they described themselves primarily as Americans and have assimilated in large degree to North American culture; however, they care deeply about their native cultures and reportedly maintain what they perceive to be European values in terms of politeness and good manners.

### **The Second Generation**

Mercedes' and Lorenzo's decision to make Spanish their home language, a choice made for practical reasons, had a profound effect on the second generation and highlights a mother's role in language maintenance. It is important to note that in this case it is not necessarily the mother's preference or choice, as reported by Cheng (2003), but rather her resources that affect language maintenance. Mercedes expressed a strong desire that her children learn Italian and know about their cultural heritage, but because she was not familiar with the Italian language or culture and her husband was not willing to use Italian with the girls, there was nothing she could do.

In defending his actions and choices, Lorenzo identified an additional factor that affects intergenerational language maintenance: practical restrictions. Lorenzo explained that he did not have time to teach his daughters Italian. Not only was he rarely at home, but when he was home, he was tired: "I went to work at 5:00 in the morning. Sometimes I didn't get home until 7:00 at night. At night . . . I wanted to eat and go to bed." His comments reflect the observation made by Tuominen (1999):

A utilitarian model might then explain why parental language-maintenance behaviors are what they are, and why they are not often successful. After all, parents, whether they are multilingual or not, face incredible demands on their time from their families and their employers. As a result, parents weigh benefits and costs in terms of child-raising and other responsibilities in order to get the greatest benefit for the lowest cost in terms of time and energy (p. 63).

This utilitarian model would suggest that Lorenzo, as the sole breadwinner, necessarily made the responsibility to support his family his top priority; providing for their physical needs depleted his limited supply of time and energy, leaving little reserve for teaching his children Italian or even making the extra effort to communicate with them in his native language.

Mercedes recalls Lorenzo's objections to using Italian with the girls in slightly different terms. She claimed that he felt it was "too much" to teach Italian in addition to English and to use three languages with small children. Learning multiple languages at once is certainly a challenge, even for children whose parents have

researched various models of multilingualism and taken steps to ensure systematic exposure and delineate specific domains for each language. It is not surprising that the idea of initiating family communication in Italian may have seemed daunting or even inappropriate to Lorenzo.

In short, limited access to their father's Italian was, in essence, a result of the priority placed on learning English well. When the girls were young, Mercedes reported speaking Spanish with them at home, noting that Caroline learned English by watching television and was comfortable with both languages by the time she started school. Toni, on the other hand, struggled academically in kindergarten. In fact, school personnel informed Mercedes that Toni did not pay attention in class and that her performance in school was hindered by her limited English. At that point, Mercedes and Lorenzo made a conscious decision to continue communicating in Spanish at home but to use only English when directly addressing Toni.

Situations such as this in which teachers or other school personnel advise parents to use the second language (L2) rather than the L1 at home were quite common in the past (Baker, 1996) and still occur today. Schecter and Bayley (1997) describe the experience of a Mexican couple, who, in their first meeting with their daughter's kindergarten teacher were encouraged "to speak English whenever possible in the home in order not to 'create a conflict' that would cause the child to experience problems in school" (p. 518). Though embracing the suggestion both for the sake of their daughter's education and as an opportunity for her father to develop his English skills, the family eventually found the switch to English to be "disorienting" and reported a sense of losing both the Spanish language and culture at home (p. 518). In contrast, however, Mercedes and Lorenzo did not convey any hesitation, express any resistance, or relay any negative reaction to the consequences of their decision to use English with Toni; even years later, aware of their daughter's limited proficiency and their granddaughter's complete lack of communicative ability in Spanish, they expressed no regrets or concern about their decision.

Though Toni did not mention her circumstances in kindergarten or comment on the switch that her parents claim to have made, she did remember reaching a point at which was unable to respond to her mother in Spanish:

What happened with me as I was growing up too, like my mother would speak to me in Spanish, and I'd start in Spanish and then I'd end up in English, and I still do it to this day when I don't know a word. I'll be like 'Ok, Ma, ¿qué quieres? (what do you want?) um, alright how do you measure this? or whatever or you know because of those words going alright medio, media, media [several attempts to remember the word for 'measure' in Spanish] and they're always correcting me.

Toni's interview as part of this study confirmed her own self evaluation; that is, she has excellent listening comprehension skills, communicates basic information and is able to participate in a simple conversation, but her speech is

characterized by a strong non-native accent, frequent grammatical errors, and a limited vocabulary. Her current proficiency level would not permit her to carry on an in-depth conversation with a native Spanish speaker.

Toni's recollection of struggling to respond in Spanish appears to contradict Mercedes and Lorenzo's claim that, once she started kindergarten, they spoke to her in English; that is, it raises a factual issue about the language of communication that was actually used between Toni and her parents. It is important to point out, first, that Spanish continued to be the primary language of the home and that English was reportedly limited to communication with Toni and, second, that this practice was probably not maintained with perfect consistency. It is also likely that Toni's failed attempts to communicate in Spanish figure more prominently in her memory than her successful interactions in English. In other words, regardless of the fact that it may not be possible to determine the consistency with which Toni's parents used English with her, it seems clear that their conscious effort successfully addressed the concerns raised by school personnel but negatively affected her communicative ability in Spanish.

In terms of culture, Toni's ties reflect her parents' sense of identification. She stated, "I consider [myself] an American, but I will never let go of the Spanish/Italian heritage that I have from my parents." She reported stronger connections to her Spanish than to her Italian background and attributed those sentiments to her linguistic abilities in the two languages.

Toni identified the opportunity to travel both to Spain and Italy as a second source of cultural ties. Both Lorenzo and Mercedes felt that it was important for their children to be acquainted with both sides of their extended family and gave each daughter the choice between a trip to Spain or to Italy as a high school graduation gift. Caroline chose Spain and stayed in Barcelona for several months with her aunt. Toni opted for Italy, and Lorenzo accompanied her. A few years later Caroline went to Italy, and Toni visited Barcelona with her mother.

Toni mentioned several details that imply the subtle ways in which these two distinct experiences affected her cultural identity. Her affective reaction to Spain was very positive: she was able to communicate at a basic level in Spanish and her visit was spent with family members of her own age with whom she enjoyed Barcelona's exciting nightlife. In contrast, memories of her trip to Italy included a sense of being somewhat stranded in a very small village and entertaining her pre-adolescent Italian cousins. Toni described Spain as "beautiful", but quickly added, "I mean, not that Italy is not, but I have to say. . . . I never went to Rome, so I've only really been in where my father grew up." In short, non-linguistic factors such as Toni's age, interests as well as the geographical locations in which she spent the majority of her time shaped her impression of both countries and, together with her ability to communicate with family in both places, influenced her sense of cultural identity.

Though Mercedes and Lorenzo have maintained contact with extended family in Europe even with the children of the third generation, a fact about what Mercedes is particularly proud, Toni reported not having time for email or phone correspondence. Nevertheless, the sentiment she associates with family ties remains strong: “But I think it’s just sad, really, and I’m part of that where we don’t keep in contact, but if one of my cousins calls up or second cousins and says ‘Hey Toni, we’re coming up’, there’s a door open. The door will always be open.”

Toni’s experience affirms the finding of previous research that “the second generation [may be] justifiably perceived as the crucial link in terms of a language’s chance of survival over time” (Tannenbaum and Berkovich, 2005, p. 291). The Italian language was not effectively transmitted to her, though she does maintain the ability to communicate at a basic level in Spanish. Her heritage cultures have not been passed on in any specific ways in the sense of traditions or regular, personal communication with relatives in the home countries. Toni is, however, aware of her roots and reports feelings of cultural pride that logically seem to stem more from sentiment and respect for her parents than from any concrete knowledge of history, cultural practices, or experiences with daily life in Spain and Italy.

### **The Third Generation**

Sentimental identification with the family’s Italian and Spanish roots remains strong in the third generation though Kristen, Toni’s daughter, cannot speak either heritage language and knows very little about her grandparents’ homelands. Toni identified two factors to explain her daughter’s lack of proficiency in Spanish: a linguistically-mixed marriage (i.e. Toni’s husband is not a Spanish speaker), and her switch to exclusive English in their home after observing that Kristen was speaking “broken English” and “not pronouncing [it] correctly.”

Kristen does know some isolated vocabulary in both Italian and Spanish. For instance, though her grandfather never spoke Italian with her, she referred to him as “nonno” (grandfather) throughout the interview. She also reported limited listening comprehension skills in Spanish: “I can’t understand the words but I kind of understand what they’re talking about, like if they would say, “nena” [“girl” or “doll”, female term of endearment] that would be me, so then I would kind of understand it.” Kristen expressed interest in studying Spanish in middle school when taking a language class would be an option, and her mother was equally enthusiastic about the opportunity.

As for her sense of cultural identification, Kristen’s twelve-year-old perspective is very concrete. For example, she spoke with great excitement about possibly inheriting her grandmother’s photo albums from Spain and expressed interest in learning more about her grandmother’s life: “that would be a big thing if I would know how to speak Spanish and know a lot about her.”

Like her mother and her immigrant grandparents, Kristen identified herself unequivocally as an American, though she expressed definite interest in her ethnic background. Also like her mother, Kristen's connection to her Spanish heritage is much stronger than ties to her Italian roots. She offered the following explanation:

I guess because maybe the language because, I guess, I think it's only my nonno who knows, my grandfather, who knows Italian. My mom, my aya (a term of endearment meaning grandmother), and my aunt they all speak Spanish and they talk about, they don't talk about Spain, but they watch the Spanish channel. I kind of pick up the language and like they don't mention Italy a lot.

Aside from the fact that Lorenzo is the only Italian speaker in the immediate family and that he is more reserved than Mercedes, it is logical for Kristen to identify strongly with the other females in her family. Interestingly, Kristen's personal identification with her Spanish heritage is so strong that she misunderstands the balance between the two nationalities in her own ethnic makeup. Kristen stated, "I look like, people would think I'm an Italian cuz of the color [of my skin]. It's more tan. But then I say, 'No, I'm really Spanish and I'm a little Italian, too, but mostly Spanish cuz of my mom, passed down from my mom.'" Kristen's more extensive exposure to Spanish has not only resulted in a greater awareness and understanding of her Spanish background, from the perspective of a twelve-year-old, it has even crowded out some of her "Italian genes".

To summarize, though Lorenzo and Mercedes successfully passed along one of their two heritage languages to daughter Toni, albeit with a considerable reduction in proficiency, this transmission did not extend to their granddaughter Kristen. The functional value of Spanish in this family is inseparably tied to Lorenzo and Mercedes and, barring any active attempts on the part of other immediate family members at reviving it, the language will not outlive the first generation. They have maintained their Spanish and Italian identities through ethnic pride and family ties rather than particular traditions or cultural practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

This small scale investigation exposes the co-existence of reported attitudes or beliefs that may seem contradictory to those who have not lived a similar experience; that is, this immigrant family reported no regrets about assimilating to American culture or transitioning to English over the course of three generations. Faced with the need to carry out daily tasks in English and the challenge of maintaining two heritage languages, they made very "practical" decisions about which language to use in what circumstances. Simply put, Mercedes' limited Italian left the newlyweds no alternative but to communicate in Spanish and when familial communication conducted exclusively in Spanish appeared to jeopardize their child's educational experience, they opted to speak English with her.

In describing their personal experiences and identifying factors that affected their language choice, these participants echoed the findings of previous research on language loss. They make reference to the priority of learning English for functional and educational purposes (Schecter and Bayley, 1997), the impact of mixed marriages (Schaberg and Barkhuizen, 1998), the challenge of practical restrictions such as job demands and limited time (Tuominen, 1999), and the influence of the mother in the transmission of a heritage language (Cheng, 2003).

Conspicuously absent from this family's account of their linguistic history, specifically the loss of Italian by the second generation and of Spanish by the third, is evidence of the emotional aspects of language loss. In his research on seven immigrant families in Australia, Tannenbaum (2005) observed that "whatever the pattern of language maintenance, decisions in this regard usually rest on a strong emotional basis" (p. 248). He adds that "language emerges as much more than a technical communication device. It functions as a symbol of individuals' intimate relationships with their families in the past and in the present, with people in the home country, with the new family they build as adults, with friends, and with themselves" (p. 248). The severing of relational and sentimental ties that often accompany language loss can produce feelings of disconnect, frustration, and even guilt over one's inability to communicate with family members.

In the case of Lorenzo and Mercedes, it is possible that time has softened their affective ties to the Spanish and Italian languages; however, their comments about the importance of "becoming American" and their verbalized frustration with more recent immigrants who do not learn English or adapt to "American" ways do not provide evidence of any past or present emotional struggle. Rather, these participants seem to reflect the prevailing attitude of an earlier era in which immigrants demonstrated their patriotism by learning English and restricting heritage languages to private domains. This outlook provides a striking contrast with more current views about immigration; that is, greater appreciation of diversity and heightened sensitivity to issues of multiculturalism often curtail the expectation that immigrants must assimilate completely to the target culture.

Language teachers and practitioners in the field of second language education and foreign language pedagogy who have dedicated their professional lives to promoting multilingualism may lament this loss of two languages and cultures and find it difficult to understand this family's perspective. Though learners like Kristen would not be candidates for heritage language courses, their circumstances provide second language teachers with a unique opportunity. Extending the philosophy of heritage language teaching, educators may be able to reach "post-heritage" learners who have no heritage language skills but who have maintained pride in their background, curiosity about their ethnic origin, interest in their ancestors' experiences, or, perhaps in some cases, a desire to visit "the old country".

Tapping into a student's background may be a way to spark greater interest in learning a second language and studying other cultures. Some language teachers take time to highlight the academic, vocational, personal, and humanistic benefits

of learning another language, and many students recognize the practical value of being proficient in languages such as Spanish, Chinese, or Arabic in the 21st century. For other students, tapping into their pride, sentiment, or curiosity and giving them the opportunity to study a language that has personal value to them or their families may be key. Of course, it is unrealistic to presume that schools could offer courses in the vast number of languages that may be requested by students, and it is true that for some students a discussion of heritage may touch on uncomfortable issues or personal circumstances and feel like an invasion of privacy. Nevertheless, even on the scale of a small, one-time project, giving students the opportunity to explore a language that, for whatever reason, is of interest to them could prove to be motivating and stimulating. Simple assignments could be based on a variety of tasks: students select a language of their choosing, perhaps one spoken by their ancestors, and could opt to interview a native speaker of that language about pragmatic strategies (how one gives an invitation, expresses gratitude, greets others, etc.), research certain key vocabulary, listen to a recording of that language on the Internet, learn to pronounce sounds particular to that language that do not exist in English, practice writing letters in a non-Roman alphabet, etc. A creative, hands-on opportunity to investigate how a particular language works could motivate students to look at language learning in general from a fresh perspective.

Though Lorenzo and Mercedes did not successfully transmit Spanish and Italian to their children and grandchildren, they did preserve a sense of ethnic pride. Their granddaughter Kristen may never reach the level of proficiency that might have been hers had she grown up immersed in a heritage language at home, but perhaps her excitement about the opportunity to learn Spanish in middle school will spark further exploration of her Spanish and Italian roots and additional study, and eventually transform her emotional bonds to the past into linguistic connections.

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## **APPENDIX A (ENGLISH VERSION)**

### **First generation**

What brought you and your family to the United States? (when did you come? where did you settle?)

What was it like being a new immigrant in this country? (benefits, challenges, etc.)

How did you decide what language(s) to speak in your home?

How important was it to maintain the Spanish and Italian cultures/languages in your family? (How did you maintain the Spanish and Italian languages and cultures?)

What role did English play in your home and family?

With what culture(s) do you identify more strongly now, Spanish, Italian or American? Why?

What languages do you feel most comfortable with now? When/for what purposes do you use them?

What kind of contacts, with any, do you maintain with Spain/Italy?

Are there aspects of your first language/culture that you want to pass on to your children and grandchildren? Explain.

### **Second generation**

What was it like growing up in an immigrant family?

What do you remember about your family's use of Spanish, Italian, and English when you were growing up?

Did your friends' families speak more than one language? Explain.

Looking back, do you see the influence of Spanish and/or Italian culture in your childhood? If so, how? If not, why not?

Did your parents talk about life in the "Old Country"? If so, in what regard?

With what culture(s) do you identify more strongly now: Spanish, Italian or American? Why?

What languages do you feel most comfortable with now? When/for what purposes do you use them?

What kind of contacts, with any, do you maintain with Spain/Italy?

Are there aspects of your heritage language(s) and culture(s) that you want to pass on to your children? Explain.

### **Third generation**

What do you know about your Spanish heritage? Italian heritage? Are you interested in your Spanish and Italian heritage? Why or why not?

Is the Spanish and/or Italian language part of your daily life? Explain.

With what culture(s) do you identify more strongly: Spanish, Italian, or American? Why?

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