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The socioeconomic role in linguistic and cultural identity preservation – the Albanian case in Italy

Abstract

In this article, author explores the impact of ever changing social and economic environment in the preservation of cultural and linguistic identity, with a focus on Albanian community in Italy. Comparisons between first major migration of Albanians to Italy in the XV century and most recent ones in the XX, are drawn, with a detailed study on the use and preservation of native language as main identity trait. This comparison presented a unique case study as the descendants of Arbëresh (first Albanian major migration) came in close contact, in a very specific set of circumstances, with modern Albanians. Conclusions in this article are substantiated by the survey of 85 immigrant families throughout Italy.

The Albanian language is considered one of the fundamental elements of Albanian identity. It was the foundation for the rise of the national awareness process during Renaissance. But the situation of Albanian language nowadays in Italy among the second-generation immigrants shows us a fragile identity.

Keywords: *Language identity; national identity; immigrants; Albanian language; assimilation.*

1. An historical glance

There are two basic dialect forms of Albanian, Gheg (which is spoken in most of Albania north of the Shkumbin river, as well as in Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, and Macedonia), and Tosk, (which is spoken on the south of the Shkumbin river and into Greece, as well as in traditional Albanian diaspora settlements in Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and Ukraine). The Italo-Albanian (Arb(ë)resh)¹ dialect belongs to the Tosk and retains some features of the ancient language as documented by Meshari of Gjon Buzuku (1555) (cf. Çabej 1976-77, in Altimari e Savoia 1994). Albanian presents many Latin lexical loans, which concern various areas of the vocabulary *qen* “canem”, *gjel* “gallum”, *faqe* “faciem”, *shëroj* “sanare”. It was during the Ottoman invasion that huge parts of the population migrated from the Balkans into southern Italy, starting from the second half of the fifteenth century until the mid-eighteenth century (Villa Badessa). This is how the Italo-Albanian colonies were established in Italy, in the regions of Calabria, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Campania, Abruzzi and Sicily. As observed by De Leo (1981), the socio-economic conditions of the south and particularly of Calabria during the 15th century were severely degraded and impacted by natural disasters, which is why the local barons favored the settlement of Albanian migrant communities in those areas.

From the religious point of view these communities belonged to the Byzantine rite of the Greek language. Later these communities had to submit to the Catholic Church but remained attached to their Byzantine religious identity. This fidelity was

¹Arb(ë)risht is the term used for the denomination of the language in most varieties, while “Arb(ë)resh(ë) is the ethnonym referring to the people see e.g. Lambertz, 1914.

not only religious, as Altimari claims (1986), but it also exhibited itself as a mechanism of resistance towards assimilation and conservation of their own cultural identity. Although the areas of Molise, Lucania and Apulia had to abandon their religion, many kept it. Until the middle of the XVI century these communities maintained their relationship with the Byzantine Patriarchate of Ohrid (North Macedonia), remaining under its jurisdiction. With the Counter-Reformation and with the disciplinary norms brought by the Council of Trento (1546-63) attempts were made to eliminate the last traces of Orthodox jurisdiction, and in 1564 Pio IV submitted these communities to the bishops of the Latin dioceses. It was under Clement XII that the Collegio Corsini of S. Benedetto Ullano was founded (1732), then transferred to the Collegio S. Adriano in S. Demetrio Corone (1794), and the Greek Albanian seminar of Palermo (1734) for the communities of Sicily was created. These colleges played a fundamental role not only in the formation of the clergy but also of the Italo-Albanian intellectuals; among other things, they allowed the preservation of the historical-cultural heritage of the communities, in which – as Altimari says (1986) – a vein of progressive civil and intellectual commitment was formed, attentive to the demands of freedom and democracy in Italian society.

Italo-Albanian communities (cf. Faraco 1976, Gambarara 1980, Altimari e Savoia 1994) reveal an early cultural dynamism and original ethnic self-consciousness. This identity is expressed in the work of various intellectuals, who have made the Italo-Albanian communities privileged centers for Albanian culture since the XVI century. The founding of the Greek-Albanian colleges in Calabria and Sicily during the XVIII century and the solicitation of European culture filtered by the

Napolitan environment created conditions for the militancy of the Arbëreshë intellectuals within the Italian Risorgimento movement (Altimari 1986). It is worth mentioning that all the students of the Collegio S.Adriano participated, alongside Garibaldi, in the battle of Volturno and had an important role during the resurgence of Albania, particularly after the establishment of the Lidhja e Prizrenit (Prizren League) in 1878, where they claimed political and administrative autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The Italo-Albanian writer Girolamo De Rada was the promoter of modern Albanian literature, committed and attentive to European models, which surpass traditional folk, religious and didactic models. *Këngët e Milosaos* (Milosao Songs) represent the first modern work of Albanian literature.

2. The Position of Arbëresh in Italian society

Data regarding the consistency of Albanian use in the Arbëresh communities are derivable only through partial and *ad hoc* investigations. The survey in the Italo-Albanian communities conducted by the scholar Klaus Rother in 1996, which was also reported by Gambarara in 1980, gives these results: 70% of the inhabitants of the communities speak Arbëresh, while 30% are italo- or dialectophone. Based on these surveys it has been possible to calculate that Arbëresh native people residing in historical centers amount to at least 90,000 (Altimari, 1986); this number rises to an approximate figure of 200,000 if we take into consideration Arbëresh who emigrated in industrial or urban areas in the north and south-central parts of the country.

It is important to note that Italo-Albanian dialects have undergone the same processes that have affected different

traditional linguistic and cultural minorities in Italy. These are related to the transformations that affected farming society and the subsistence economy at the base of the socio-cultural conditions in many areas of South Italy, particularly during the post-war years, which saw mass education without mechanisms to protect minority languages; increased mass-media influence; and internal migration processes as well as external migrations (to USA, Brazil, Germany), as outlined by Bolognari (1989). However, if we compare the status of the Arbëresh communities with that of the Arvanit communities in Greece, we see that the former have maintained their linguistic and cultural identity in a more general and more evident manner than the Arvanitas communities. In fact, Arvanitas have undergone a stronger process of assimilation also by virtue of religious identification, while the Arbëresh communities have had greater motivation for perseverance, also by virtue of their different religious and cultural identity connected with the preservation of the Byzantine rite and the institution of two Eparchies, that of Lungro (1919) and that of Piana (1937).

Starting from the 50s of the 20th century, a series of important initiatives took place, including the foundation of different associations, journal publications and conferences. The contact between Albanian and Italian Universities has intensified, with student and professor exchanges. Among the magazines it is worth mentioning *Shejzat* (University of Rome), and later, during the 60s, *Zjarri*, *Katundi Ynë*, *Zëri i Arbëreshvet*, The Institute of International Center of Albanian Studies “Rosolino Petrotta”, The Institute of Albanian Language and Literature of Palermo, etc. The cultural role of these initiatives and that of the universities has been central to the recent history of the Arbëresh culture.

The Italian linguistic situation is characterized by the presence of non-standard varieties that include roman local dialects, including Sardinian, Ladin, Friulian, Franco-Provençal and the Provençal dialects, and foreign varieties such as ancient Albanian, Greek, Croatian, Slovenian, German and Romani. The state of use of the minority languages normally coincides with those of the original roman dialects (De Mauro *et al.* 1980, Salvi 1975, Telmon 1992), with which they generally share socio-stylistic status. However, generally in large areas of the country new linguistic conditions emerge, characterized by bilingualism and diglossia. In light of this situation, Italian school has been reluctant to admit a pluralistic approach of linguistic education. It has expressed the old but vital stereo-cultural type of link between the language and the nation, adopting dominant cultural attitudes intolerant to the presence of diversified linguistic and cultural conditions (Sobrero 1974). Moreover, in the legal framework prevailing since the post-war period, the school programs are considered to be matters of specific governmental competence, regulated by legislative interventions. As a result, a centralistic order emerged, oriented towards assimilation and cultural uniformity, which was unable to interpret the value of freedom implicit in linguistic differentiation. On the contrary, the legal framework of the state, even if it is based on pluralistic constitutional principles, have gradually produced an indifferent and intolerant legislative direction towards cultural pluralism (Carrozza 1992). Until to the adoption of the law 482 on 'Tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche' in December 1999, only local legislation in particular administrative regions tried to preserve and enhance the minority languages by regulating their use in school and in other social domains.

According to the pioneering investigations of Gangales in the sixties and seventies of the XX century the Arbëresh communities of central Calabria present a highly compromised linguistic situation. The fundamental cause for this situation is the abandonment of the communication in Arbëresh by the family nuclei, in contexts where Arbëresh families, for centuries, have been demoralized, frustrated, invaded by extraneous cultural elements and contaminating linguistic forms. It is understandable that in many areas of the Arbëresh archipelago many families didn't know how to get out of a situation created by these alienating entities, except for committing a cultural hara-kiri, a genocide (Gangale, 1976: 27). The next data elaborated in Bolognari (1986), show that this situation, at least in many Italo-Albanian centers, has gradually changed. The social and economic transformations that have affected Italy in the last decades have brought forth a very different attitude toward non-standard languages and a re-evaluation of their value as an element of identity.

Evolved economy mechanisms and a labor market no longer strictly complementary to school learning, are combined with the emergence of social expectations and “emancipated” behaviours. As a consequence, the typical expectations of the middle class became less decisive, which is commonly seen in the schooling and in the mastery of Italian as a tool for inclusion in the tertiary sector. The linguistic-cultural assimilation to the dominant “facies” was in fact the price to be paid and the symbol of progress. Increased economic well-being may have played a role in making the assimilation process to the semiotic mechanisms of the hegemonic culture less dramatically impelling. Giacomarra (1993: 95) attributes the resistance to social homologation to the organization capacity of Italo-

Albanian communities: We believe that the answer that the Albanian minority has given, consciously or not, to the challenge of growing communications and the homologating function they perform, is to be traced precisely in those organizational instruments they have been able to acquire. Communities that have not succeeded, and do not yet try, are destined to dissolve.

However, law 482 regarding the protection of minority languages includes the teaching of Arbëresh in compulsory education as a crucial point. In fact, the school is a natural context of learning, as far as it incorporates the behaviors and symbolic devices, such as language, belonging to the culture of the social group. By orienting towards the local variety, the school has the opportunity to reflect the concepts of freedom and tolerance that are innovators for our institutions. On the contrary, the use of the Albanian standard would reproduce the stratification of values, the patterns of diglossia and the linguistic asymmetries corresponding to the relations of power within the national society that, as we saw earlier, law 482 and the resolution of the European Parliament intend to overcome. In fact, the total adherence to the spelling and grammatical/lexical norms of standard Albanian, for example in some Italo-Albanian newspapers (such as *Rilindja Arbëreshe*), acquires a clear ideological value.

In some cases there emerges in the intellectual middle-class communities of minority language a sort of linguistic conservatism. This attitude is based on a romantic and substantially rhetorical conception of language that tends to characterize non-standard variety as an irrecoverable norm. This attitude can have the effect of legitimizing the abandonment of the non-standard variety, replaced by the use of Italian with

children. As mentioned, the tools and models of analysis defined by theoretical linguistics show the ideological character of such a position. In fact, every linguistic variety is a system whose rules and structures fulfill principles of the faculty of language. Moreover, the relationship that binds a language to the socio-cultural conditions of the community that uses it is guided by a natural evolutionary capability. In this perspective, the teaching of Arbëresh and the attitude of the school should enhance the conditions and vitality of the Arbëresh as a living and effective spoken language, one that is used like other languages within a social group (Famiglietti, 1979).

3. Second Albanian migration

On 12 July 1991, 4553 Albanians landed in the port of Brindisi. The rusted Albanian ships that appeared on the frightened banks of Puglia were proofs of the scheme, with a profoundly mythological nature, based on a bipolar logic: hell on one side and paradise on the other (Devole, 2015: 31).

Thus began the new Albanian migration to Italy. During 1991 at the ports of Brindisi, Otranto, and Bari 25,708 Albanians arrived, which became known on the international stage as a biblical exodus: the way it was done captured the collective national and international imagination, and in all Italian homes, through TV which aired hours and hours of shows depicting scenes of their arrival, those scenes were received with huge attention.

According to Giacomarra, 2000, the initial stand of the European countries, including Italy, was open and receptive: their first goal was to regulate the presence of the new immigrants in the shortest time and to decide about the status of being a “political refugee” or an escapee from economic misery.

But it was difficult for local authorities to distinguish between political and economic motivations, faced with hungry people in need of health care, pregnant women and babies.

Without getting too deeply into history, we will focus on the meeting of the Arbëresh with their “brothers coming from across the sea”. Many Albanian emigrants hoped to find accommodation among the Albanian communities of Puglia, Calabria, Sicily. And perhaps it is the first time for these communities to have the honor of being in the media spotlight. The mayors of many Italo-Albanian countries met at Reggio Calabria with the willingness to help the brothers who came from the sea. But after a slight sign of recovery, in March 1991, the great exodus began again, with 22,188 Albanian refugees present in Italy. Thousands of Albanians were wandering the streets of Brindisi in search of food. Schools that were turned into accommodation centers soon became sources of health and hygienic problems. In fact, this was the signal that the attitude of the authorities was changing: from the offer of welcome and help, Italians switched to the need to control new arrivals. Italian authorities decided to distribute Albanian refugees in different regions, far from each other.

The first question that arises is why so few Albanians remained in Calabria, Puglia and Sicily? According to Giacomarra, 2000, in order to understand the overall attitude of Arbëresh towards newcomers, we need to look at sociological reasons and also at the psychology of the Arbëresh population of these areas. The press declarations of the mayor of Lungro in July 1990 are very significant: “Is it possible that a country of five thousand souls, with more than 30% of unemployed people, to offer itself as a place of refuge? Of course, those refugees are almost our blood, but we have no facilities to welcome them, we

do not have any future to offer to them. We do not have a penny.” He continues the interview with other significant observations, declaring “Let us not make any illusions. Personally, I could host one of these emigrants in my home. But only for a while. Certainly, I could not promise them jobs, because that means that I would take them away from my people”.

What was not fulfilled on the economic or political level could perhaps happen in the common cultural heritage, in the continuous reference to the motherland, but even here things were not as we would have expected. The few experiences of cohabitation between ancient Arbëresh and new Albanians did not provide any hope. Soon, conflicts would arise between emigrants and locals employed in similar fields of work. These experiences somehow confirmed or justified the difficulties in accepting the newcomer, who presented himself with all the features of the “other”, from whom one should keep more distance rather than show solidarity. On the other hand, the difficulties of this “other” became more acute: in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, he would not be able to become acceptable with his behavior and his way of living. This is where the failure of integration of Albanian emigrants throughout our country in that period, begins. Integration attempts have succeeded in the northern regions, though there were differences in language and culture; they have substantially failed (except for a few rare cases) in the areas of Southern Italy, where the contrary was expected to happen.

What we can conclude from this evocation of the facts is that neither the reference to the common cultural and ethnic identity, nor the utopian perspective that would have been reasonable to expect from the minority cultures, produced concrete results on

the grounds of solidarity. The frustrating experience of Albanians of Lungro, who ended up in a refugee camp in Gaeta after being removed from the Albanian country, as well as many individual experiences recorded in the Arbëresh centers of Sicily and Calabria, suggests that common culture is not sufficient to provide foundation for a real brotherhood.

For Durkheim, the fundamental dimension of a society was clear, sharing the same “collective consciousness”, or the same culture. But this conscience is not given once and for all, and it is not applicable for every land and every season; instead, it is strictly linked to the state of social division of labor. Durkheim’s “mechanical solidarity” was still based on common values and behavioral models, depending somehow on blood relation, pre-existing cultural universes; on the contrary, however, “organic solidarity” is the kind of integration developed in modern societies by virtue of the interdependence between individuals and different communities, which comes out by the division of the social labor. So the common culture is not enough, intended as a fetish to be preserved, but the inclusion in the world of work can ensure increasingly painless and real integration processes.

4. Identity and society

“Identity is, of course, a key element of subjective reality and, like every subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes.” (Berger, Luckmann, 1991: 194). As such, the ethnic identity that binds people on the basis of their origin is not defined once and for all, but it is constructed, modified or even reshaped by time. The Arbëresh identity, built for five centuries in Italy, cannot have a lot in common with Albanian identity, as both groups have

developed a different vision of the world. Today, a sort of “academic mess” surrounds the concept of identity. One of the most confusing and analytically problematic approaches has been the ‘soft’ constructivist version, which postulates that identity is multiple, fluid and always changing, which raises questions about its operability and usefulness as a research construct (Vathi, 2015: 38). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) went further ‘attacking’ the developmental approach in establishing the term and blaming Erikson (1968) for starting the saga of confusing terms that made identity an ambiguous analytical concept (Vathi, 2015). Under the various types of collective identities the ethnic identity has been differentiated from other social identities relating to a shared culture and a common origin, even if it is not a flat and uniform process across groups (Barth 1969, Jenkins 1997, Vathi 2015).

4.1. Albanians and Albanian language today in Italy

What is the identity of Albanians today in Italy? What are the factors and actors that influence the ethnic identity? If it is true that the language is one of the fundamental components of a community’s identity, then this applies doubly to Albania, where the language played a decisive role in building the national awareness during the Renaissance (*Rilindja*) (Devole, 2006: 176). In fact, the Albanian National Renaissance is the largest cultural and patriotic project of Albanians that distinguished Albanians from the Ottoman Empire, a project led by intellectuals, most of whom operated abroad. Language and folk culture were the foundation of this uprising national awareness process (Morgan 2002, Malcolm 2002, Vathi 2015). ‘Albanianness’ was based on the link to Albania in terms of ‘blood’, language and culture, but not on religion, especially

when the latter was associated with the Ottoman Empire (Morgan 2002). Albanian nationalism is based on several important myths: of historical and geographical origin, of ethnic homogeneity and cultural purity, of permanent national struggle, and of indifference to religion (Vathi, 2015: 43). During fifty years of communism various cultural models of other communist countries – from Russia to China – were imposed. This new culture was proclaimed as the only culture and the bearer of all truths, selecting some cultural elements from the past and excluding some others, like religion for example. One of the institutions that remained was the family. Nevertheless, the long period of isolation and the ensuing collapse of communism caused a major identity crisis, which was especially evident during the 1990's (Vathi, 2015: 44). With the collapse of communism, a new myth was created, the myth of the West, which appeared as the promised land the Albanians were expecting, the land where everyone lived in freedom and democracy. But with the first real contact with the west (Italy and Greece) Albanians faced another “Albanian” myth created for them exclusively by the media, which held the main role in the discrimination of immigrants. Albanians saw themselves through the media as dirty, ignorant, prostitutes, thieves, or simply declared stupid. The process of devaluation or identity concealment began (Vehbiu, Devole, 1996).

Clara (female, 41, Florence) recalls: When he [my son] was going to school when he was little, he was coming back home crying. He was saying, ‘They call me *Albanese*. I don’t know why they insult me!’ Because at home we tell him that we are *Shqiptarë*². I had to explain to my son that *Albanese* is the translation of *Shqiptar* in Italian. Just like the *Italiani* are called

²Shqiptarë is the Albanian translation for ‘Albanians’.

in the USA, so the Albanians are called *Albanesi* in Italy. It was then he realized what was happening. Because listening to the TV and others speaking, he had thought that *Albanese* meant criminal! (Vathi, 2015: 153)

But what does the situation of Albanians look like nowadays in Italy? From ISTAT statistics, 01/01/2017, there are 5 million foreign citizens in Italy, mainly located in the center and in the north of the country, Albanians make up 9.3% of them, which translates to roughly 464,000 regular Albanian residents. ISTAT data of 2012 show that in Italy there were 380,000 Albanians; the Italian language was spoken in the 37.2% of the families, 65.9% with friends and 91.8% at work. Albanians have the lowest percentage, 8%, attending Italian language courses in comparison with other ethnic groups, while 46.4% of them claim to have known Italian well enough to understand it when they arrived in Italy. From ISTAT data we notice that the flow of Albanians coming to Italy has not been interrupted even though it continued with much smaller intensity.

From the data we have gathered from a corpus of eighty-five Albanian emigrants in Italy, 43 women and 42 men, from 8 to 64 years, in a three-month period (June- August 2018), to the question “Do you intend to go back to Albania?” 60% respond with “No.” 55% of them are women (chart 1).

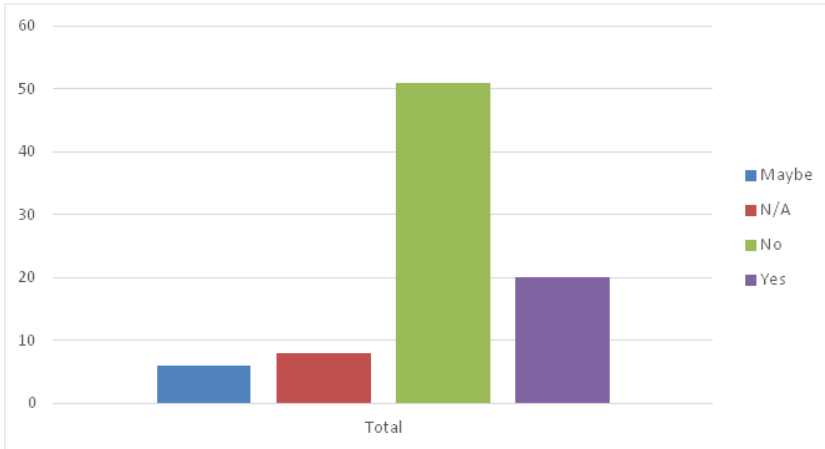


Chart 1.

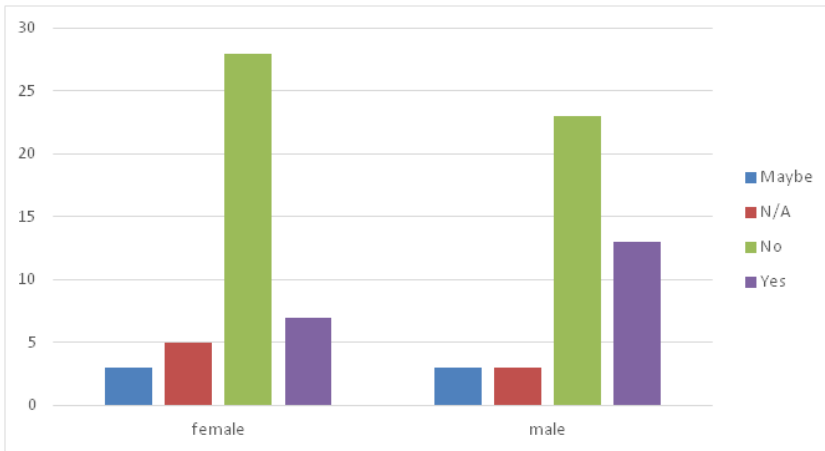


Chart 2.

Based on the years of residency we have the following results:

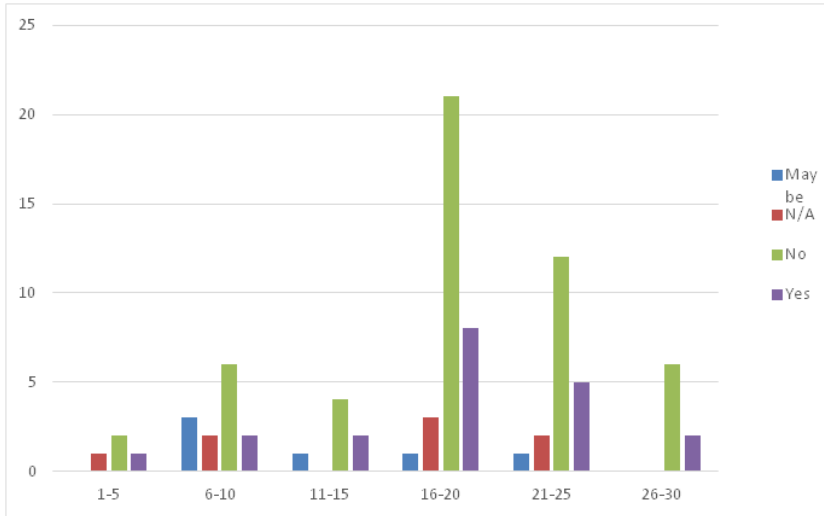


Chart 3.

As we can notice in the above statistics (chart 3), in the first group 1-5 years of residency, we have the lowest percentage of the answer “no” 45 %, while in the other groups this percentage is between 57%- 60%.

The fundamental conclusion from these results is that Albanians still do not see Albania as a viable country, while a new emigration process has begun towards other developed countries like Germany and the United Kingdom. This unstable situation of a part of Albanian emigrants in Italy and Greece has some scientific interest in regard to identity preservation, specifically the Albanian identity they will carry with them.

From personal experience as a cultural mediator in primary and secondary schools in Livorno to help Albanian children who migrated from Greece to Italy in the process of integration, the only way to communicate with them was Albanian, even if it

was a passive language for most of them. After four months of work, for 2-4 hours a week, with a 6 year-old named Noemi (who was born in Greece), it was easier to communicate in Italian than in Albanian. Her sister Ester, 10 years-old, and who had better grasp of Albanian language, experienced a less difficult learning process. Noemi's school integration was slower and more problematic than her sister's. These sisters who used to talk in Greek with each other began, after 7-8 months of stay in Italy, to communicate frequently in Italian.

Emigrants are well aware that their employment is dependent on their knowledge of the local language (Italian). To the question "Which language do you use at home?", 16% of immigrants declared Italian, 45 % Albanian and Italian, and 36% responded Albanian (chart 4).

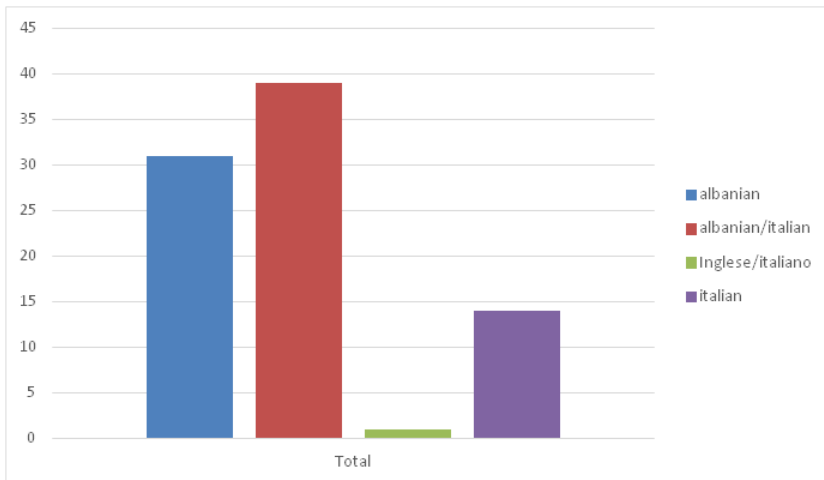


Chart 4.

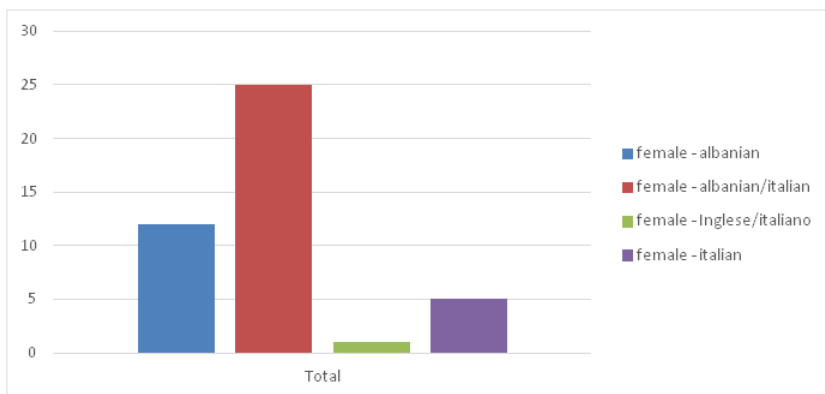


Chart 5.

Considering that Albanian is a passive language for the second generation we have totaled the number of individuals who have responded with ‘Albanian/Italian’ and ‘Italian’. This way we get the result of 72% of women and 52% of men using Italian with their kids, not excluding the occasional use of Albanian at home.

The Albanian language was the first identity element that emigrants sacrificed in order to integrate into the new society. Albanian emigrants, far more than the others, know that the moment of communication is very similar to that of showing the passport (Devole, 2005: 178). The Albanian language appears as the main factor of ‘recognition’ for Albanians, while there are no other ‘racial’ characteristics or other cultural differences (Devole, 2005, Colombo 2009, Vathi 2015).

During the first years of Albanian emigration to Italy, racial discrimination has played an extraordinary role in the erosion of Albanian language. This is noticed with the use of the Albanian language with children, especially at the early age.

Merita (Rovigo, 48 years-old): I used to leave my kids asleep in the morning and sometimes I found them asleep when I got back from work. I did not have time to teach them Albanian. My kids have grown up in the nursery by the nuns, until 18 P.M. I am sorry they do not speak Albanian, but at least they understand it. My brother-in-law's children speak Albanian fluently. They have their grandparents at home.

It is clear that Albanians in Italy are oriented towards linguistic assimilation, even though they do not like to accept it openly. In our interviews, many parents declared that their kids use Italian when they talk to their relatives or to Albanian friends, even when they speak Albanian very well. Our statistics show a high degree of alternation from the language of origin: a foreign language, related to a diglosia determined by the content of the conversation, predominates, where the language of origin appears reduced in the new environment.

In a multicultural environment dominated by the ideology of Western countries and the socio-economic values of globalization, the assimilation policies are directed at the eradication or modification of ethnic identity as much as the underestimation or isolation of a culture that is conditioned by the use of a nonstandard variety.

So, even the functionality of the language makes Italian the most convenient tool to use. If we had to put at the first place the functional aspect of communication, we must admit that the Albanian language is worth less for Albanian immigrants in their everyday life, especially for those who do not have contact with their compatriots (Devole, 2006: 182).

Discrimination; the desire to integrate as soon as possible into the new society and without consequences for children; and limited hours that Albanian parents spend with children,

especially when there are mothers who are working long hours, are all important factors that have influenced the decline of Albanian in second-generation immigrants. Another important factor is that when immigrants came to Italy, their Italian was basic, and many of them started to learn it through their children. The case of Noemi and Ester is even more specific because their parents do not speak Italian at all. The lack of a good linguistic level has resulted, according to Vathi (2015), in creating a barrier between children and parents. Parents, not being able to assist children at school, have lost their authority as educators in their children's view. Adding to all of these factors is the fact that if the communication in a family is done in basic language (Italian in this case), the communication will be limited and may create another barrier between children and parents.

The Albanian language in immigrant families usually is passively transmitted from communication at home, which implies that Albanian language of immigrant children will be dialectical and generally limited to simple communication. Another important factor that has influences the decline of the Albanian language is that during the first years of immigration Albanians had very limited contact with family members in Albania, except for families that had grandparents at home who used Albanian with their grandchildren, thereby maintaining a continuity of the language. The role of grandparents in preserving the language is well known in the literature, although in a mixed family we interviewed, which has lived for 19 years with grandparents from Albania, the children (17 and 19 year-old boys) do not speak Albanian. They identify themselves as Italians, like their father, and their Albanian might be very passive.

Wimmer (2008) notes that academic discourse on the conceptualization of ethnicity has evolved around two dichotomous terms: ‘primordialism’, based on the assumption that ethnic membership is acquired through birth and thus represents a ‘given’ characteristic of the social world; and ‘instrumentalism’, which claims that individuals choose between various identities according to self-interest (Vathi, 2015: 38). Nagel (1994: 155) claims that ‘the chosen ethnic identity is determined by the individual’s perception of its meaning to different audiences, its salience in different social contexts, and its utility in different settings’. There are also a number of other factors, such as socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors that influence individuals to re-shape their ethnic identity, which makes ethnic identity unstable over time.

In the question we addressed to immigrants if they would be sorry if they were assimilated, 75% of them answered with ‘Yes’, 19 % answered with ‘No’ and 7% did not respond (chart 6, 7).

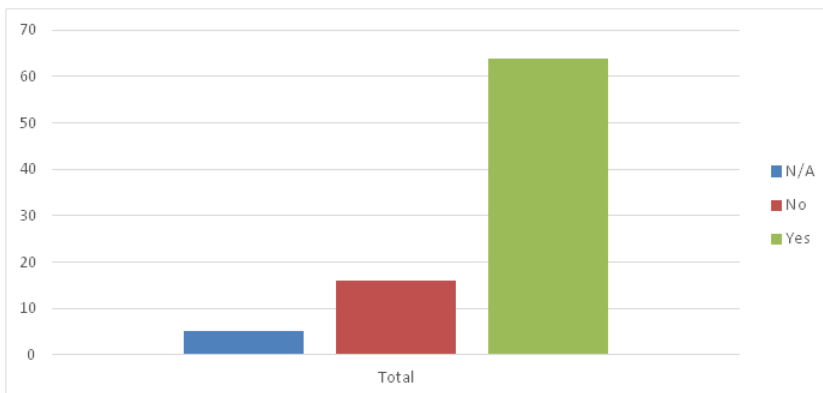


Chart 6.

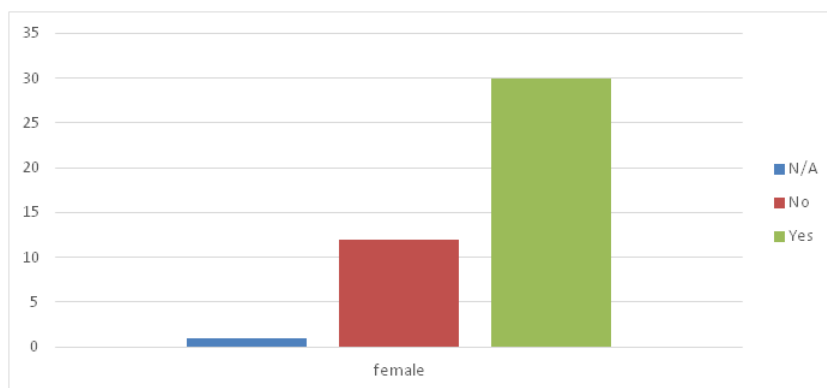


Chart 7.

As we can see in the chart above, women accept assimilation more easily than men. In sociolinguistics this is a recognized behavior of women of the middle and lower classes as a phenomenon called ‘linguistic insecurity’ that is studied by Labov. Labov (1972: 132, 134): Frequent stylistic changes of variants displayed by low and mid classes, oversensitivity towards stereotypical characteristics they show their unmitigated perception of their speech, they all bring about language insecurity...high level of language insecurity in these speakers leads towards frequent changes of their norms during formal contacts, even in their middle age they seek to use prestigious variants of language... This pushes women of low and mid class towards “hypercorrections” in using prestigious variants.

In the case of Albanian immigrant mothers, we do not notice any difference based on their level of education; the percentage of mothers with a PhD who answered that they do not regret being assimilated was higher than those who answered with ‘Yes’. This makes us think that assimilation is a faster process for women regardless of the level of education. This can be

attributed to their role as child educator, and as an effective tool for rapid integration into local society. Italian culture has always been seen as a prestige culture in Albania during communism, a fact which might affect the acceleration of the assimilation process, too.

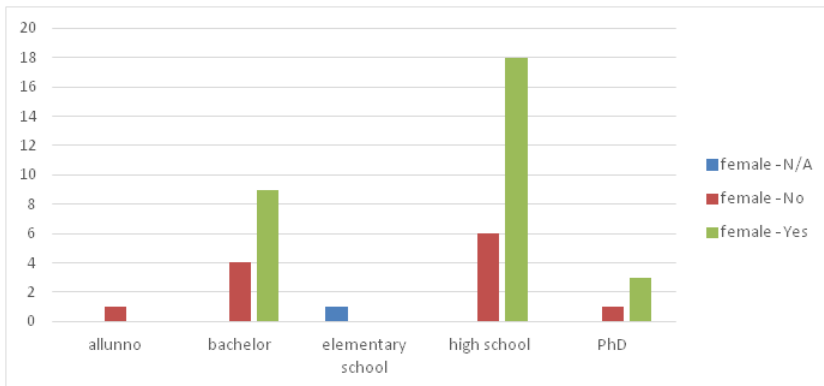


Chart 8.

According to Vathi (2015: 151, 152) intergenerational transmission of Albanian identity and culture has taken place according to three main trends: first, but only in a few cases, children report parents actively encouraging them to learn about the history of Albania and about customs and wedding traditions; second, there are cases of parents consciously deciding not to transmit their ethnic identity to children, because they were experiencing identity contraction, harsh discrimination, or as a way to fully assimilate into the host society; third, there are Albanian migrants who expect their children to maintain a symbolic identification as Albanian, preserving some customs and respect for traditions and institutions, especially the family.

Nowadays, when social networks and Albanian media are more followed by Albanian families, there is a greater opportunity for the second-generation to become familiar with their parents' identity. An observation of the Facebook pages of the second-generation Albanians we have interviewed did not reveal any posts in the Albanian language.

Endri, 32 years-old, from Pisa, who has returned to Tirana for studies, where he learned the academic Albanian, says that now he cannot classify himself either as Albanian or as Italian anymore.

Conclusion

What can be deduced from the evocation of Arbëresh history in Italy, the difference between them and Arvanitas in Greece, is that the call to a common ethnic and cultural identity did not bring anything on the concrete ground of solidarity with the Albanian immigrants of '90s. As Luckman and Berger claim, the identity that binds people on the basis of their origin is not defined once and for all, but is rebuilt, reshaped and reformed with time. The Arbëresh identity, built for five centuries in Italy, cannot have so much in common with the Albanian ethnic identity, as both groups have developed a different vision of the world and of life.

The Albanian language is considered one of the fundamental elements of Albanian identity. It was the foundation for the rise of national awareness during the Renaissance. But the situation of the Albanian language nowadays in Italy among the second-generation immigrants shows us a fragile identity.

Facing strong racial discrimination at the beginning of the 1990s – thanks to the 'Albanian' media myth – individuals began the process of devaluation or concealment of identity

among immigrants, which brought the Albanian language into a fast-track assimilation process.

The fact that Albanian migration has not been interrupted suggests an economic, social and political instability in the country, which among emigrants renders Albania as a country that is not desirable for living, even in the future. This is another important factor that helps the linguistic assimilation process and the transformation of the identity.

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