

Onward migration and heritage languages: the case of 'new Italians' in the UK

In the last ten years, a new type of intra-European emigration has become increasingly frequent and visible, known as onward migration. This term refers to the reactivation of intra-European mobility by refugees and economic immigrants who have acquired citizenship in a European Union country. Onward migration in Europe has been studied extensively in the field of Migration Studies and Sociology (Toma and Castagnone, 2015; Ahrens et al., 2016; Montagna et al., 2021).

While onward migration's socio-economic factors have been well-studied, its effects on linguistic repertoires and language maintenance remain under-researched (cf. Goglia, 2021, 2022; 2024; Villa-Perez, 2021; 2022). This paper aims to examine how families of "new Italians," who relocated to the UK after an extended period in Italy, use their heritage languages (Italian and other family languages), thus adding sociolinguistic insights to the study of onward migration already established in the Sociology of Migration.

This paper presents data primarily sourced from a corpus of interviews with children of new Italian families in the UK. The participants, 65 individuals, range in age from 18 to 26 years and had moved from Italy within the past nine years. All participants moved to the UK with their families or parts thereof and belong to the following national groups: Italian-Nigerian, Italian-Ghanaian, Italian-Indian, Italian-Bangladeshi, Italian-Sri Lankan, Italian-Tunisian, and Italian-Moroccan.

Our findings show that parents, especially in endogamous families, speak the language(s) of their country of origin among themselves and with their children. The intergenerational transmission of parental languages depends on the ethnic group they belong to and on family language policy choices. Families who undertake onward migration often join larger co-ethnic communities, which may lead the children to continue using the family language(s) outside the family domain as well. The new life in the UK can also mean a rediscovery of family culture and languages.

Italian is still used for family communication, although the degree of usage depends on individual speakers, family language policies, and English proficiency. In some cases, Italian is maintained out of necessity because the parents have not yet learned or only partially know English, so both Italian and other family languages continue to be used within the family.

The participants in this study are often the older children and have spent more time in Italy, making them the most fluent in Italian, as it was their main language at the time of onward migration to England. In some families, these older children act as key agents in maintaining Italian, helping younger siblings not to forget it. This differs from the literature on migrant communities abroad in which parents and grandparents are the main agents for language maintenance.

In friendship circles, there is also an opportunity to maintain Italian: many participants have Italian friends within their social networks who have also emigrated from Italy with their families; some participants maintain transnational ties with friends and relatives in Italy, with whom they speak Italian, either through online communication or when they visit Italy.

Italian and in some cases the other heritage languages may also be formally studied in England, but Italian is perceived as a highly valued skill in the English and European job markets: many participants have chosen to take official Italian exams to obtain recognised qualifications, thus demonstrating their language skills and improving their formal written usage. None of the participants choose to take formal education and certificates in the other family heritage languages if available.

These insights underscore the complex and varied role of language in the lives of onward migrants and their families, revealing new dynamics of language maintenance and use in multiple migration.

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