

FAMIGLIA SICILIANA WORKSHOP 30 AUGUST 2009

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The Sicilian Language

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I am unqualified to speak to you about the Sicilian language. My parents were both born in Catania, but I was brought up here speaking Italian at home rather than Sicilian. Occasionally they might say a few words to each other in Sicilian, and occasionally I would hear them speak in Sicilian with friends, but generally at home we spoke the national language and not Sicilian. That is not really surprising given the times. My parents grew up during the period when unification and a single national identity was paramount. Maintaining regional differences were not thought as important then, at least by a national government trying to have a population see itself primarily as Italian rather than Sicilian, Calabrian, Venetian, et cetera. My parents also lived for about 18 years in Abyssinia amongst an Italian community made up of Italians who had come from different parts of Italy. When my parents migrated from there to Melbourne they were again part of a mixed community of Italians from different parts of Italy needing to communicate with each other in a common Italian language rather than their different regional languages or dialects. I mention this to let you know that I am not an expert, and also to explain how language becomes diluted and is ultimately lost. I can recall my parents speaking in Sicilian from time to time and I can follow Sicilian when I hear it spoken or when I read it. But, my grasp of Sicilian is nowhere what I would like it to be and I very much feel the loss.

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Sicilian is a rich language full of special sounds, history and music. We talk of Sicilian as a dialect, but it has a strong claim to be “the oldest romance language, older than Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, or any other Latin spinoff.”¹ Dr Privitera, a trained romance language linguist-philologist, who as a university professor had taught French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese at New York University and St Louis University, recently wrote:

“Why has this fact been ignored these many centuries? Simply because, once Italian became established as Italy’s official language, any other form of speech in the country was dropped to dialect status. And language scholars, the Italians, and the Sicilians themselves, accepted this designation. Yet, it is a recorded fact that the first writings in the vernacular were in Sicilian at the Court of Frederick II (1192-1250), where he formed what is known as the Sicilian School of Poetry. It is there that the sonnet was invented, the poetic form so widely used a century later by Dante, Petrarch and their contemporaries.”²

There is a rich, deep and old literature in Sicilian dating long before Dante’s Divine Comedy. Before Garibaldi’s thousand took Sicily from its Spanish Bourbon rulers to join the resurging Italian nation, there was little reason for those in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to prefer the Tuscan based version of Italian to their own rich language found in books, poetry, music, jokes and every day speech. Dante himself considered Sicilian to be the first and dominant language for poetry in the 13th century.³ The process of

¹ J.F. Privitera, *Sicilian: The Oldest Romance Language* (Legas, 2004), 14; Gaetano Cipolla, *Siciliana: Studies on the Sicilian Ethos* (Legas 2005), 99-120.

² Privitera, op cit, 14.

³ Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, cited in Cipolla, op cit, 100; and see fn 1 at 118.

Tuscanization of official written documents had occurred by 1543 but until the fifteenth century Sicilian had been the language in which official documents were written.⁴

The rich literature of Sicily is not something to put behind a glass case to be enjoyed only by dusty scholars. It is a vibrant language that lives through historical records and is still used today in Sicily for people to communicate with each other. The special sounds and pronunciations of Sicilian have a special role in the island's history and imagination. On Easter Monday 1282 the Sicilians rose in rebellion against their then French rulers in what is known in history books, poems, songs, opera and common knowledge as "the Sicilian Vespers".⁵ The popular accounts of the event recount the general slaughter of the French who at times were recognisable by their inability to say "ceci" with a Sicilian accent (the French pronounced the "c" as "sh").

Deeply embedded in the language is the history of the island and its people. Like any language, Sicilian contains the traces of its past with words having clear and direct links to things long forgotten. The Sicilian "accattari" (meaning "to buy") is a legacy of old Provençal introduced by the Normans between 1060 and 1189. The old Provençal word "acatar" and its modern French "acheter" is very different from the Italian "comprare".⁶

Unlike Latin, Sicilian is not a dead language. People speak it actively today and use it as a modern means for literature, poetry, song and everyday speech. Great and significant works have been written, sung or said in Sicilian and can best be enjoyed in the original. Andrea Camilleri, the creator

⁴ Cipolla, op cit, 107

⁵ See S. Runciman, *The Sicilian Vespers* (Canto, 1995).

⁶ J.F. Privitera, op cit 61.

of Inspector Montalbano, writes much of his texts today in Sicilian and, at times, in a Sicilian developed in writing particularly by him.⁷

What little I know of Sicilian allows me to see how its development has produced a language that is rich in nuance, sound and meaning. It can be delicate or brutally strong. It can convey irony as well as straightforward facts.⁸ Luigi Pirandello said of his fellow Sicilians (as we might say is also revealed by their language):

“A different way of life, different blood, different nature, different customs, different needs, different sensibilities, different feelings. It is all there.”⁹

And we should add, all best seen there in its original.

There are now many people dedicated to preserving the Sicilian language throughout the world. Some are found in Sicily some elsewhere. In New York, for example, there is “Arba Sicula”, an international organisation that promotes the language and culture of Sicily. It has a website, a biannual newsletter called “Sicilia Parra” and publishes many books of various kinds. I mention it not to publicise it in particular, but because it is an example amongst many of a group of people keeping alive the richness of the language of Sicilians through poems, books, magazines, films, speech and travel tours. We too here should seek to establish a resource centre to promote and expand knowledge and appreciation of Sicilian. We should begin by creating a repository where Sicilian works of any kind (poetry, literature, songs, newspapers and other works) can be collected and preserved. We should try to record the particular Sicilian spoken in this country with its many inter-Sicilian regional variations overlaid by the particular influence of Tuscan Italian and Australian English. We should

⁷ Andrea Camilleri, *La Tripla Vita di Michele Sparacino* (Rizzoli, 2009), p 71.

⁸ Privitera, op cit, 66-70.

⁹ Privitera, op cit, 70.

record our parents and friends speaking in their native language however modified by the context and circumstances which may have changed their speech in this country.

We should also work out ways of extending knowledge of Sicilian to a broader population. It would be wonderful to see courses on Sicilian being conducted. Some courses could be of the Sicilian language itself; others could look at the remnants of historical traces in the language; another could be the expression of Sicilian in conjunction with food and cooking. The possibility of such courses are as wide and varied as modern Sicily is today. Study tours could be established to promote travel to Sicily not just to see the splendid sights of Taormina, the Valley of the Temples or the remnants of Greek or Roman ruins, but also to hear the living vibrant language of a modern people as they have moulded and adapted our language over time.

I would urge that we start by creating the repository of which I have spoken. A single place where we can begin to house the vast amount of material that already exists: books, publications, films, music and so on. There are many existing Italian language and cultural groups, including the Italian Historical Society at CoAsIt, who we could approach to assist us in that task. I am confident we will not be disappointed. May I perhaps begin that task by giving to today's organisers a copy of a dictionary of Italian and Sicilian as a symbol: *Vocabolario Siciliano-Italiano* published in 2004 by Gruppo Editoriale Brancato.