



Research Study

Italianità as Transcultural Identity in Quebec

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ABSTRACT. The following article is composed as a critical literature review and seeks to explore the identity issues of Italian Canadians and the role language plays by focusing on Italians in the Quebec area. From an interdisciplinary perspective that focuses on both linguistic and intercultural aspects, the Italian identity is seen as one example of the Canadian transcultural mosaic metaphor, because of the preservation of Italian cultural heritage independent of language(s) spoken in Italian-Canadian communities. Especially in Montreal and the City of Quebec, where spoken Italian is increasingly eroded, transcultural awareness becomes the essential characteristic of the concept of *Italianità*, a concept that is replacing linguistic factors in importance. Nevertheless, the Italian language remains one of the main defining factors of *Italianità* in Canada, since being an *Italiano nel mondo* (Italians abroad) is primarily linked to speaking Italian, rather than living in Little Italies or consuming Italian products.

RÉSUMÉ. L'article suivant offre une révision critique des recherches sur les italiens au Canada, partant d'une interdisciplinarité qui reconsidère les études linguistiques et culturelles. Surtout à Montréal (et au Québec), où l'italien parlé est loin de l'italien de la péninsule, la transculturalité est la caractéristique la plus importante d'une « *Italianità* » et ne peut pas être réalisée en parlant français. Le fait de vivre dans les « Little Italies » ou de consumer des produits ou médias italiens contribue aussi à l'identification comme italo-canadien. Voilà un exemple peu conventionnel pour les « *Italiani nel mondo* » qui est explicité dans l'article concentré sur le cas de Québec où l'idée de mosaïque interculturelle favorise une telle réalité.

Keywords: *Italian-Canadians, Quebec, Italianità, migration.*

SPEAK WHAT

Recent case studies, such as Reinke (2011), have explored the language use of Italian immigrants, who typically support the idea of Canadian multiculturalism in Quebec. Their language is often called *Italianese* or *Italese*, a combination of the words "Italian" and *inglese* or *francese*. A mix of standard Italian and several other dialects of Italian, it is characterized as a new *koiné*; its particularities are the result of the linguistic process of erosion, emerging as a result of migration and other varied linguistic contact (Bagola, 2002; Villata, 1990). However, instead of concentrating only on linguistic specificities, the following article is composed as a



critical literature review that explores the identity issues of Italian Canadians and the role language may play, focusing specifically on Italians in Quebec. From an interdisciplinary perspective that combines linguistic and intercultural aspects, the article views the Italian identity as an example of the transcultural mosaic of Quebec, in large part due to the Italian community's preservation of Italian cultural heritage, independent of the language Italian Canadians speak.

Marco Micone's poem "Speak What" (1989), was published in reference to Michèle Lalonde's (1968) epochal *Speak White*, in which she attacks the use of anglicisms and the predominance of the English language. Micone's poem intended to claim the right of (Italian) immigrants in Quebec to learn English. He did not want either Italian or other immigrants in Quebec to be forced to learn French as their first foreign language (as the government intended), although Italian is closer to French than to English. Though not arguing explicitly in favour of English, Micone nevertheless affirmed the need to strengthen integration, whilst advocating for the protection of the Italian heritage: "*nous sommes cent peuples venus de loin pour vous dire que vous n'êtes pas seuls*" (Micone, 1989).

Retaining the right to speak Italian certainly has significance for Italian immigrants in Canada and can be viewed as a clear affirmation of the Canadian idea of multiculturalism. Therefore, research on Italian Canadians, as opposed to Italian immigrants to other countries, such as the United States, should not only focus on their language use, but should also (re)consider their particular social and political context, in order to define what *italianità* means to Italo-Canadians and to demonstrate how *italianità* relates to the concept of *mosaïque culturelle* in Quebec. Hence, this article prefers to speak of *Italo-Canadesi* (Chapter 2), and then seeks to describe the special circumstances of being Italian in Quebec (Chapter 3). Finally, the particularity of Quebec allows the acknowledgment of a special form of *italianità* (Chapter 4), which should motivate further interdisciplinary studies.

ITALO-CANADESI, NOT ITALIANS IN CANADA

The idea of *Italians in the world* (*Italiani nel mondo*, or *italofòni*, and its derivation, *italofonia*; in *Dizionario*, 2020, p. 17) usually has certain political implications. Italian right-wing and fascist politicians have often used it as propaganda; in 2001, Silvio Berlusconi declared the 8th of August the *giornata della memoria del lavoro italiano all'estero* (*memoration day for the Italian labour abroad*). Occasionally, some politicians have also used the concept to declare that Italy has more than 200 million inhabitants, with 150 of them living abroad. According to this view, Italians are defined by their family origin, with no regard to their citizenship, their linguistic practices, or their relation to Italy. Nevertheless, the use of the Italian language remains a crucial point and is still the condition under which Italian propaganda works. Beyond this narrow field of political influence, other aspects of Italian culture, like Italian names, Italian cuisine, and Italian traditions (or the "Italian work load" mentioned by Berlusconi), contribute to the common concept of *italianità* that defines in-group Italian-Canadians, and ultimately constitutes what



may be called the “*inclusion profonde*” (Karmis, 2011, p. 119), i.e. in order to be an “in group” you have to be totally included in the society.

What about the so-called “Italian-Canadians”, who are estimated to number between 250,000 and 1.6 million? According to these quite arbitrary estimations, Italians form the sixth biggest group of immigrants, after British, French, Irish, German, and Chinese. One shared characteristic of the approximately 300,000 Italians residing in Quebec is trilingualism, because they have the specific close relation to French. All the others prefer more or less (we are stereotyping here) only one of the Canadian languages. While “Italian-Canadians” learn French and English at school, they often speak Italian at home. However, most of them still consider English their mother tongue, and for many, Italian is only the language they use within the family circle. Trilingualism describes the fact that speakers have acquired a similar degree of proficiency in all three languages, varying from high-level competencies (C2) to basic knowledge (B1) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). From 1987 onwards, studies have shown that most immigrants in Quebec have accepted French (and all the regulations of *Loi 101* [Law 101] and the *Charte de la langue française* [Charter of the French Language] of 1977) as their primary language (L1). Hence, Marco Micone’s poem was not a protest against being forced to learn French at school. Most immigrants to Canada from all over the world welcomed the concepts of ethnic *métissage* and the pluralism of culture that preserved their family languages (McAndrew, 2011, p. 307).

The presence of numerous Italian-Canadians in Canada is the result of chain immigration (French: *immigration dépendante*; Hoerder, 2018, p. 429). Most are or descendants of the immigrants who left Italy after the Second World War and stayed in Quebec, especially in Montreal, where they took on blue-collar work. Before 1880, few Italians came to Montreal, which in 1642 was founded. However, the situation changed when Italian immigrants began to join the cheap labour force that constructed the Canadian Pacific Railway; in this way, many Italian immigrants to Montreal escaped the poverty in the newly founded Italian state (Harney, 1984). Some of the Italian men who came to Canada in early times and later especially to Québec as contract workers decided to begin a new life in big cities like Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver. After the Canadian government limited immigration in the 1920s, and while the Italian fascist government supported the foundation of *Casse d’Italia* (associations where Italians came together), from 1940 onwards and during the entire Second World War, Italians were considered enemies of the Canadian state and were even interned as prisoners. However, most of them had already assimilated to Canadian society and no longer intended to return to Italy. They often married Canadians, learned to speak English or French, and intended to become Canadian citizens (Jansen, 1988, p. 28). Starting in 1951, and over the next twenty years, Canada again actively advertised for Italian workers, who came in astonishing numbers and brought their entire families to Canada. Ninety-four percent of all Italians and most Italian women who live in Quebec today came to Canada during this period. From 1970 onwards, due to economic recession, immigration nearly faded away. In 2016, after the slight effects of the so-called brain drain, Canada counted 1,587,970 people of Italian origin, which corresponds to



4.6% of the entire Canadian population. Nowadays, there are 300,000 Italians living in Quebec, which equals 4% of the entire population. According to statistics, in 2016, there were 375,645 speakers of Italian as their mother tongue residing in Canada. Whereas between 1971 and 1991, around 540,000 Canadians said that they spoke Italian as their mother tongue, in 1996, this number had already increased to 694,000 (Reinke, 2011).

Most Italian-Canadians are not identifiable as Italian by family name or the language(s) they speak. This becomes apparent in representations of Italian-Canadians on the Italian Walk of Fame in Toronto, which is a tribute launched in 2009 to canonize Canadian popular culture artists with Italian origins. The Walk is particularly important because it increases visibility of Canadians of Italian origin in contemporary Canadian society and reveals the importance of identity politics. The celebrities honoured in this way often lack a strong attachment to Italy. Many of the stars no longer bear Italian names or speak Italian, but do have at least one Italian ancestor in their genealogy—Dean Martin, Connie Francis, and Franco Nero, among them. Actors, songwriters, and sportsmen are especially honoured on the Italian Walk of Fame. All of them have family ties to Italy, but most of them are unable to speak Italian, or are at least not known to. The Italian Walk of Fame highlights the economic and social integration of Italian immigrants into Canadian culture, and thus underlines the role of language and cultural heritage (independent of language) in forming the Canadian multicultural identity. These roles are even more important to Quebec's multicultural identity. The existence of ethnocultural communities (Karmis, 2011, p. 123) strengthens the concept of multiculturalism and reflects the plurality of identities. Diversity lies at the heart of Canadian unity—especially in Quebec, where the *québécoisité* (Kolboom & Vormann, 2011) is associated with the notions of a "*société distincte*" (Gagnon, 2011), due to its singular immigration politics. Hence, in order to do justice to this idea, Canadians of Italian origin should not be referred to as "Italians in Canada" but rather as "Italian Canadians" or "*Italo Canadesi*". And as part of this group, they are able to live the "Canadian dream". On the other hand, the *québécoisité* forces all of them to keep their collective and ethnic heritage, and to be aware of their roots, their family stories, and their identity. In the Italian case, cultural identity is no longer associated language itself, which is often not spoken by all community members. Instead of standard Italian as an identifier, other cultural marks establish the in-group.

ITALOFONIA IN QUEBEC

When Italian immigrants in Quebec were confronted with Law 101 (*Loi 101*), they were reluctant to accept that their children had to attend French schools. Instead, even those living in Montreal, where Italian is still the third most spoken language, they preferred English schools. Yet the Law required all immigrants to Quebec to learn and speak French. Only Canadian anglophones were allowed to attend schools in which English was the main language. Protests started in Montreal's St. Léonard borough (Lüsebrink et al., 2018, p. 130) in 1968. Marco Micone, who was born in 1945 in Italy and immigrated to Quebec in 1958, may only have joined the dispute towards its end, but was certainly one of the loudest voices against this law. In his "Speak What," he stood



up against what he perceived as an eventual marginalization of Italians, i. e. he interpreted learning French as a marginalization, and, in doing so, helped to preserve Italian dialects (Reinke, 2011, p. 36). While attending English schools, Italian children learned to speak English during the day and their mother tongue at home without any interference or discouragement in them doing so. Consequently, Italian dialects survived, and the children learned the Italian varieties spoken by their parents. Often, the parents who grew up in Quebec learned French as their second language, whereas now their children preferred to learn English and started to learn French only as a foreign language. In truth, however, Micone was not against learning French per se. It was the dominance of the French-Canadian culture or the “*exception culturelle*” à la Québec he disapproved of. Whereas French president François Mitterrand established the idea of the exceptional French culture that was worth spending billions of Francs on, Micone’s attack was a plea for a more inclusive Canadian society in which immigrants’ cultures were worth being canonized as fundamental in the construction of the Quebec identity. Micone presents the poet Eugenio Montale as an equivalent of the Canadian Émil Nelligan; Micone’s goal is to gain equal rights for those living in Montréal-Nord that still cannot speak out: “*nous y parlons la langue du silence et de l’impuissance*” (Micone, 1989).

The debate about linguistic dominance came to an end after two important laws had been passed and found their way into the social reality: Law 63 (*Loi 63: Loi pour promouvoir la langue française au Québec* [Law to promote the French language in Quebec]) in 1969, letting parents decide on the school language, and Law 22 (*Loi 22: Loi sur la langue officielle* [the Official Language Act]) in 1974, which established French as the sole official language of Quebec and English as a second language (Stevenson, 2011, p. 252-253). But, as Micone’s poem points out: “*vous parlerons avec notre verbe bâtard et nos accents fêlés du Cambodge et du Salvador du Chili et de la Roumanie de la Molise et du Péloponnèse jusqu’à notre dernier regard*”, it is the immigrant’s accent and identity that still serve as an identifying marker of societal outsiders. It does not really matter if Italians learn English or French; a multicultural society is based on the self-identification of different ethnic groups. Language is only one of the characteristics that contribute to forming in-groups and peer-groups.

In reality, the language of the Italian immigrants was not always homogenous. Even first-generation Italian immigrants to Canada were quite diverse regarding their social background, their regional origin, their intellectual competences, and their motivations. Law 178 (*Loi 178*; 1988), which adjusted the Charter of the French Language for Canada (1977), and the restructuring of the city of Montreal in 2002 helped establish the hegemony of the French language, or the so-called “franco-conformity” (Breton, in Gidengil, 2011, p. 190). The formation of particular group identities (in this case, an Italian community) corresponded to the idea of a cultural mosaic. Assimilation or acculturation would have been considered a “blessing”, or as completing the integrity of the individual (Gagnon & Iacovino, 2011, p. 147). Particularisms, group identities, and cultural traditions are part of the project that found its paradigmatic program in Lévesque’s plan, *Autant de façons d’être Québécois*. The program started in 1981 and decisively nuanced the Canadian idea of nationality (Gagon & Iacovino, 2011, p. 152), in



which French is to be understood as a common denominator between citizens, and the foundation of a society of individuals who actively participate in their diversity; this produces the convergence of collective identities or, symbolically, of the mosaic.

Nowadays, members of the Italian community in Quebec who want to realize their Italian identity linguistically do not acquire the language but instead must learn it. For quite some time, the *Patronato Italo-Canadese di Assistenza agli Immigrati (PICA)* [*Patronage of the Italian-Canadian Assistance to Immigrants*] has been helping, and particularly children have attended its language courses. Recently, the *Società Dante Alighieri* [translation] began their *PLIDA* (*Progetto Lingua Italiana Dante Alighieri* [*The Dante Alighieri Italian Language Project*]) programme, an initiative to reinforce the language competency of native speakers of the second or third generation (Giugni, 2020, p. 84). Our research study conducted in the summer of 2016 provides characteristic examples of the Italian spoken by the immigrants of the second and third generations. The first generation of immigrants contributed to Italianization, which led to bilingualism and diglossia. In Quebec, these first Italian immigrants were required to learn French, yet still used Italian in their family surroundings. The second generation learned Italian only from their parents, relatives, and neighbours; dialectalization is characteristic of second generation Italian, because the parents often speak a non-standard Italian variety, and also because of influence from French or English, which the children learn at school and use in their everyday lives. The result was the emergence of hybrid forms of Italian, such as “*italiano fuori d'Italia*” [Italians abroad]: “Italianese” and “Italese” (Bagola, 2002; Villata, 1990).

Generally, Italian immigrants did not abandon their language, but in comparison to Australia, where Italian had the prestige necessary to be entirely preserved, for example, Italian in Canada did not have the prestige necessary to be entirely preserved (Reinke, 2011, p. 47). Nevertheless, the Canadian situation differs slightly from the one in the United States (Heinemann, 2019). There, Italian is preserved quite well by its immigrants and the following generations (Haller, 1993, p. XIXf). The Italian spoken in the area of Montreal is a mixture of English, French, and spoken Italian (Reinke, 2011). As we can see from the interview example below, the coexistence of diverse culture and language systems in Montreal allows Italian immigrants in Montreal to preserve their language better than in other areas like Toronto (Clivio, 1986) and thus maintain the Italian koiné or Italian dialects and remain trilingual. This ambiguous linguistic and cultural situation contributes to, on the one hand, less assimilation and more linguistic continuity over at least three generations of Italian native speakers; yet, on the other hand, causes some linguistic erosion (Reinke, 2011).



KR:	Ti senti italiano?	
GM:	Un poco / ma non / non posso dire eh / veramente italiano.	veramente → really
KR:	Ma ///	
GM:	Anche che / pensiamo sempre in termini di di essere italiani / sai // anche che \ sono nato qui // spesso da \ anche i miei figli di volte eh // sai / quando qualche xx ci domanda // loro rispondono / siamo / sai / italiani / ci devo fare ricordare che // sai / sei nato / qui / in Canada / sei / d'origine / molto lontano italiano / [...]	anche che → quonique in termini di in terms of sai → you know ci devo fare ricordare → devo fare loro ricordare d'origine → di origine

Example 1: Excerpt from Interviews by Kirsten Reinke (KR; Reinke 2011), Interferes with English (blue), French (red) and the spoken Italian (green)

GM:	ma // canadian / slash italian / you know / mah primo canadese // allora // questo è importante a ricordare / no io // non sono \ non c'ho troppo // exposed // in inglese sai / a parte dei miei genitori // e dei genitori di Nella // non c'ho troppo da fare / in // eh / la cultura / sai / veramente // italiana / anche a casa / non parliamo / sai / italiano.	canadian, slash italian, you know importante a ricordare → il est important de rappeler exposed non c'ho troppo (da fare) → non ho troppo a che fare a parte dei → a parte i
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Example 2: Excerpt from Interviews by Kirsten Reinke (KR; Reinke, 2011), Interferes with English (blue), French (red) and the spoken Italian (green)

The interviewed person (GM) is male, 50 years old, was born in Montreal two years after the emigration of his parents to Canada, and married a Quebecer with Italian origins. In spite of an overall competence in oral Italian, we notice lexical and syntactic influences from English and French (e.g., “exposed”, “in termini di”, “a parte dei”, “anche che”), consistent use of spoken



language forms, such as the personal pronoun “*ci*” (*ci devo fare ricordare*), and quite extended use of the discourse marker *sai* [you know].

Moreover, what does his answer tell us? GM considers himself “*lontano italiano*” [of a very far Italian heritage] or “*canadese*” because he does not speak Italian at home. Hence, language cannot be decisive for the identification of Canadian Italians. Their *italianità* is hidden elsewhere. As today, “*L’italiano è parlato in forme più o meno standard tra i membri della comunità locale di origine italiana*” [Italian is spoken in more or less standard forms by the members of the local communities of Italian origin] (Maugeri, 2016, p. 83), the rift between the younger generations of Italian immigrants and older native Italians is not a simple question of linguistics. There is, especially among the younger ones, even slight criticism and polemic against Italy and its social and economic politics (Troilo, 2011, p. 16) and no glorification of either past or present Italy and its society is observed. Belonging to the Italian culture has its origins in other religious, ethnic, and historical traditions.

ITALIANITÀ À LA QUEBEC

The integration of Italian immigrants in Quebec is frequent in literature and art. Authors like Micone were the founding fathers of intercultural literature. Italians participated in the so-called *écriture migrante* [migrant writing] and transcultural literature, which produced novels, poems, and drama that also contributed to other forms of cultural life, as we can see in the numerous circus projects in the city of Montreal (Circus School, Circus Festival, Cirque du Soleil, Cirque Éloize etc.). In this context, *italianità* is one of several ingredients of the Québec mosaic.

Recent studies argue that the concept of *italianità* implies certain values, like the importance of family ties (Reinke, 2011, p. 27). Many Italian immigrants settled in boroughs such as *Piccola Italia* in East- and North-Montreal (figure 1), which has had a huge impact on the architecture of these boroughs. Italian churches were built, and the clergy became an important figure in a society that, until the late 1960s, was dominated by the Catholic Church. As Italian immigrants did not share the anti-Catholic sentiment of the *Révolution tranquille* [the Quiet Revolution], the priests retained their influence in the Italian community.



Figure 1: *Piccola Italia Montréal* (Photo: Maria Lieber)

Additionally, Italian immigrants have been important economically, and have developed their own migration industry (marketing, products, restaurants etc.), mass media, and commercials. These eventually became relevant to the entire Quebec society. An interesting example is the work of Danny Antonucci. In 1987, he produced a three-minute short film of Lupo the Butcher (Lupo the butcher, Canada 1987, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVIB9JnGfiM>), an Italian immigrant who has certain difficulties adapting to his new home country. The character of Lupo became popular, making an appearance in commercials and on MTV. Lupo was eventually identified as the son of Italian immigrants. His origin as a part of his identity, which fits the image of Italians working in the food sector, is, however, of no importance for the spectators who want to be entertained.

Another important production is the Canadian sitcom *Ciao bella*, which aired during 2004-5 on CBC (*Ciao bella*, Canada 2004-5). The main protagonist is a girl, Elena, of Italo-Canadian background, who is faced with the difficulty of balancing life in a modern Canadian society with the traditional values of her family. In this case, even the title references one of the most prominent Italian sayings, as well as one of the most popular Italian songs ("*Bella ciao*"). The audience, who must surely be familiar with the typical characteristics of Italian immigrants, are confronted with stereotypical identity markers: the characters' names (e.g., "Elena") and their traditional customs and behaviour, especially their Catholic religion and patriotism.

Italo-Canadians can often be recognized as Italians by their family names and certain traditions (particularly in the food trade), but at the same time, they participate in the inter- and transcultural way of living so typical of Canada. It can therefore be said that, on the one hand, they embrace the hybridity of the Canadian society, and continue their own traditions, especially in Italian boroughs/neighbourhoods such as the Little Italies or *Petites Italies* in Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, Ottawa, and Calgary, or in the Italian communities in Ontario (Vaughan:



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100,000 inhabitants, King: 10,000 inhabitants—which means total population with a large majority of Italians). When it comes to the behaviour and the presence of Italians no difference can be found between the French- and English-speaking regions in Canada. In the 1970s and 1980s mass media, radio and TV, such as *Teleitalia* or *Teletatino*, were of huge importance for the Italian community. Before that, there had been newspapers and journals in Italian or reporting about Italy. Some notable examples are *Il cittadino Canadese*, founded in 1941 in Montreal, and *Il Corriere italiano*, also published in Montreal and founded by Alfredo Gagliardi in 1950. Canadian cinema too offered glimpses into the life of Italian-Canadians by producing films such as *Café Italia* (Tana, 1975), *Dimanche d'Amérique* (Carle, 1961), *Mambo italiano* (Gaudreault, 2003) or *Ho fatto il mio coraggio* (Principalli, 2010). Apart from that, the Italian Canadian community is represented by several famous celebrities like Linda Evangelista, Sergio Marchionne, Michael Bubl , or Lara Fabian. Hence, italianit  is an ensemble of different social and cultural factors.

Italian immigrants have become part of the Canadian multicultural society without abandoning their own heritage and language—an idea which fits well with Canada's pluricultural model. Originally established in the early 2000s, this idea is still present today, which can be most notably observed in the statement by the Canadian prime minister Jean Chr tien:

Canada has become a post-national, multicultural society. It contains the globe within its borders, and Canadians have learned that their two international languages and their diversity are a comparative advantage and a source of continuing creativity and innovation. Canadians are by virtue of history and necessity, open to the world. (Moss 2011, p.38)

This article has shown that the Italian community in Canada has integrated successfully by demonstrating the willingness to learn the language of the host society and, at the same time, keep on living the Italian lifestyle. This has undoubtedly contributed to the preservation, over generations, of the Italian cultural heritage. Hence, what makes the Italian community distinctive might not necessarily be their language use, but their way of living—a phenomenon that resembles the integration of other immigrant groups in Canada. As the poem by Micone puts it: "*parlez-nous d'autres choses des enfants que nous aurons ensemble du jardin que nous leur ferons*" [translation] (Micone, 1989).

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