

My Story:
The Impact of Language and Culture on a Person's Sense of Identity
By
Donato Petronella

Good morning! Today I would like to tell you a few stories taken from my formative experiences. I am old enough to enjoy telling stories; and I hope that listening to my stories will be enjoyable for you. I am telling them to you, however, in order to compare my experience with that of one of my graduate school classmates, Paul, so that we can explore anecdotally the impact of language and culture on a person's sense of identity. I chose Paul for the comparison because, like me, he had grandparents who came to America from Italy; but his experience was different from mine.

So then, let's begin with the story of my name. My father's name was "Donato" and, in his family, "Donato" was a very common name. His friends, though, called him "Dan." Later, when my father became a bank manager, clients who did not know him personally assumed that his name was "Daniel" and, because of that, documents were created that had his name incorrect. In order to protect me from this type of problem, my father named me "Daniel," but within the family I was always known as "Donatuccio" (the diminutive form of Donato). This name, "Donato" holds great significance for me with respect to my sense of identity. It connects me to the Italian roots of my family. In America, I am known as "Daniel," but when I am in Italy, or in Italian class, I want to be called "Donato" as much as possible in order to free up and express my sense of Italian identity... I think to myself, "Yes! I am Donato!"

In the family, we always ate Italian food, and for important feasts there were special dishes – pastiera (rice pie) for Easter, baccalà (dried cod) for Christmas Eve, etc. As much as possible, we maintained Italian values and customs. For us, the family itself was valued more than anything else, and was the focal point of our life. When my parents got married, for example, my father brought his two unmarried sisters, Maria and Gilda, to live with us. Their parents had already died, and my father was the oldest male. He therefore felt responsible for protecting his sisters even though they were mature and had jobs. Similarly, when I didn't want to visit my great aunt, Zi'Zeppa, because, she was too old and severe for me, my father made me visit her, saying, "You have to have respect!"

All my relatives lived in the neighborhood. I grew up with my cousins as though they were my sisters and brothers. In addition, we always continued the connection with our Italian relatives, many of whom visited us, especially Zia Clara (Aunt Clara) and Padre Donato (Father Donato). They both visited us many times. From this connection that continues even today, I learned that there is no separation between the family in Italy and the family in America. We are all one family with an Italian identity.

When I was young, I heard the Italian language spoken every day. In fact, my parents spoke Italian to each other. Unfortunately, they did not teach us children to speak the Italian language. I studied it formally for the first time when I was in college. I studied it because it was important to me to strengthen my connection with the Italian relatives, to honor my ancestors, and to deepen my Italian roots.

Right after college, I went to Italy and lived with Zia Clara in Rome for nine months. Today I think of Rome as my second home.

I never met my paternal grandparents, Fedele and Edvige, because they both died young; but I got to know them through the stories that my father and my aunts would tell – how they came from a small town in the Apulia region, called Panni in the province of Foggia, for example, and how they settled in Providence, RI, because there was a community of people from Panni living there.

As for my maternal grandparents, I knew them well because they lived next door to us and I spent many hours in their home. My grandmother, Elide, was from Rome. My grandfather, Salvatore, was from Carinola in the province of Caserta. They were married in 1912. Then they came to America. Both of my grandparents contributed a great deal to the formation of my personality and sense of identity.

My grandfather taught me to appreciate the music of Italy. He always played Italian opera records, and I would listen to them with him. I remember the first time that I heard the aria “Ridi Pagliaccio.” I was struck by its power, even if I did not understand the words. In addition, my grandfather taught me the importance of family rituals for promoting the formation of a sense of inclusion and identity. I will never forget the Christmas – I was perhaps thirteen years old – when my grandfather invited me to join the men and poured me my first glass of cognac.

My grandmother was a proud, determined and strong woman. For me, she modeled how language impacts on one’s sense of identity. She wanted to speak only Italian, even if the Italian she spoke was Americanized – ho “pusciato” she would say instead of “spinto” (pushed), or she would speak about il “roggo” instead of

“tappeto” (rug). She would speak in Italian and we grandchildren would reply, usually, in English. Every week, at her insistence, Sunday dinner was an event in which all the aunts, uncles and cousins would gather and be together at her house. My grandmother loved to play cards with her grandchildren. From her, I learned to play Italian card games, scopa and briscola in particular. For my grandmother, the family was everything.

We lived in the Italian neighborhood of Providence called Federal Hill. Today Federal Hill is changing. Many of the residents are not Italian; and Piazza De Pasquale, the main square on Federal Hill is full of expensive restaurants with outdoor seating. In the 1950's, however, when I was a boy, Federal Hill was truly an Italian community. I was permeated with the sense of being Italian. Almost all our neighbors were Italian immigrants or children or grandchildren of Italian immigrants. And every Thursday, Piazza De Pasquale was filled with stands where you could buy vegetables, fruit, meat, cheese, live chickens, small appliances and other things. It resembled the outdoor markets that you still see today in Italy.

Holy Ghost Church where my parents were married was a center of social life in the neighborhood. My father was always a member of the Pannese Society that organized religious festivals and fund raising events for the church. I learned a great deal about Panni from my father and the members of the Pannese Society. Years later, I went to Panni for the first time. When I met the relatives who still live in that little mountaintop village, watched the children playing among the ruins of the castle and walk along the narrow and steep streets, the stories I had heard came

alive. It was a very emotional experience for me. I felt the spirit of my grandparents moving within me.

In those days, I took for granted that my way of life was universal. I thought that everyone lived like me. Therefore, I did not understand how it was possible for someone with an Italian name not to be familiar with Italian things that, for me, were a part of daily life. But I was mistaken!

My friend Paul did not have the same environment and formative experiences as me. His grandfather was a stonemason in Italy, and when he emigrated to America, he went to New Orleans to work on the construction of churches. My grandparents chose to settle in Providence because of the Italian community they found there. Paul's grandfather chose to settle in New Orleans because of the work opportunity there. But there was not an Italian community to sustain the Italian language, values and customs. As a result, Paul's family quickly lost its sense of Italian identity. When Paul and I were together for graduate school, I would talk to him about Italian things (usually about some special dish or sweet, pastiera, for example) but he had no knowledge about such things.

It is understandable. Without the support of language and culture – of the family and community – traditional ways of doing things are lost and a person's sense of identity changes. Naturally, my sense of Italian identity is stronger than Paul's. I had the environment necessary for such an identity to develop. Paul did not,