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FROM TRILINGUALISM TO MONOLINGUALISM:

A CASE STUDY OF LANGUAGE SHIFT  
IN A SICILIAN-AUSTRALIAN FAMILY

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses language shift in a Sicilian-Australian family, from the parents' use of three languages: Sicilian, Italian and English, to the children's almost exclusive use of English.

Language shift is here observed and investigated through an ethnographic approach, and a great deal of attention is paid to the role of the researcher in collecting linguistic data. Against those fieldwork methods that rely on only one contact with the informants, this thesis shows how the initial formality of the fieldwork situation was modified and reversed through a long process of contact with the informants. As a result of the friendship and intimacy that developed between researcher and informants, it was possible for the researcher to record a range of interactions in situations at varying levels of formality, and in particular everyday informal interactions among family members.

The linguistic analysis focuses on the mother's speech as recorded in three distinct situations. The main research objective is to examine the changes that take place in her speech with regard to patterns of use of the three languages and type and amount of contact among them. "Contact" in this study refers to the use of more than one language within the same interaction. Other research objectives are to explore the effect of some situational variables on linguistic patterns, and to compare patterns of contact between related languages (Italian and Sicilian) and unrelated ones (Italian or Sicilian, and English).

The results show major changes in the distribution of the three languages and in the patterns of contact: Italian is the language of the most formal situation, and elicits least contact; Sicilian and English are the languages of the more informal and domestic situations, and they occur with higher degrees of contact. Furthermore, contact occurs more

frequently at higher constituent level. These patterns were found in the whole corpus as well as in the speech specifically addressed to the children and to the researcher.

Regarding the other objectives, it was found that the overall situation is the factor that affects linguistic patterns more than single situational factors (e.g., interlocutor's identity, topic or tone). Furthermore, related languages showed higher degrees of mixing than unrelated languages.

The linguistic patterns observed are explained with the different collocation of the three languages in the speaker's repertoire and with the changes that occurred in it as a result of migration. The patterns are indicative of the shift taking place in the family, as English increasingly replaces Sicilian as the domestic language, while Italian is spoken mainly outside the domestic setting.

It is suggested that language shift needs to be seen as the result of various factors at the psychological, social and historical levels. Language attitudes, language functions and the specific socio-economic level of the family are all put forth as factors that contribute to explain the shift. Furthermore, it is maintained that the socio-cultural context also needs to be taken into account, as the sociolinguistic changes that have occurred in both the Italo-Australian and the broader Australian communities are major factors in explaining the shift.

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