

What Therefore [historical forces of emigration] Hath Joined Together, let not [Italian nationals 100 years later] Put Asunder

Anthony Julian Tamburri (January 25, 2015)



As someone who has been teaching a foreign language (Italian) since 1972, I am delighted to see the NYC school system will add or expand 40 dual-language programs: Spanish, Japanese, Hebrew, Chinese, French and Haitian-Creole. I am also intrigued, however, that of the six “official” languages of the city of New York, according to the 2008 mayoral edict (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Italian, and French Creole), Italian is not one of the language programs, whereas two non-“official” languages are, Hebrew and Japanese. In 2011, Gov. Cuomo ordered a similar mandate that included Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Russian, French, and French Creole.



Leaving aside for now the argument that might surround the difference in the six languages, I do wonder why Italian is skipped over by New York city, especially since it is one of six “official” / “mandated” languages, on both the city and state level, in which documents and websites are to be translated and interpreters provided.

As for Italian, it goes without saying how Italy has contributed to the world of art, commerce, and culture since the Middle Ages, as it continues to do so today. One example is that more than 60% of the world’s art is Italian in origin. A second example with regard to commerce reminds us of the Florentine, Venetian, and Genovese banks, the origins of what we know today as the modern day banking system. A third still, is the influence Italian literature has had on non-Italian world figures: the sonnet, the short story, and the post-classical epic. Finally, on a more local level, of the approximately 8 percent of New Yorkers who are of Italian ancestry, approximately 18 percent speak Italian. Combine this with the new global immigration that includes a higher percentage of Italians here in the New York metropolitan area, it would make as much sense to include Italian as it does to include, for instance, Hebrew and Japanese.

So, why shouldn’t we in the “Italian” (read, Italian and Italian/American) community join forces and fight for what only seems to be the most logical of processes? Well, most recently, I heard that a group of Italian nationals who live here in NYC have taken it upon themselves to attempt to have a bi-lingual program created in a public school that their children might attend. At first blush, I was momentarily delighted. But on quick reflection, I found this, too, rather intriguing: that a group of Italian nationals who live and work in NYC would go about such a campaign on their own; that they would not try to involve some of the Italian/American associations, first and foremost AATI, the American Association of Teachers of Italian, the national professional association of teachers of Italian. Or, equally important, why not approach the NYC local organization IACE, the Italian American Committee on Education, which serves circa 40,000 students of Italian throughout the Tri-state area?

Such a desire to go it alone on the part of these Italian nationals raises a number of issues. Why would Italian nationals not involve Italian Americans who would also very much want to see bi-lingual programs for their children? What advantage do they see by going alone, by ignoring the assistance they might receive from Italian Americans? How is it possible that they cannot see the advantages of partnering with the Italian/American community?

These are fundamental questions that cannot be answered in this venue. But one surely must wonder at such a desire for separation on the part of Italian nationals. This is not the first time that such a discripen has manifested itself. We have, furthermore, seen such cleavage and bifurcation on other occasions in the past that have dealt, in some cases, with other campaigns or other issues of recognizing “Italian” (here read, only, Italian and NOT Italian/American) intellectual and academic talent in the United States. Why such a distinction? Why such sundering when, instead, acceptance and unification would serve the great good of the Italian (now, read, here once more Italian and Italian/American) community in the United States?

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