

Inheriting a language: A Comparative Study on Linguistic Attitude of Albanian Immigrants in Italy

Abstract: *This article sheds light on the linguistic situation of Albanian immigrants in Italy, and the challenges faced by them in their process of integration in terms of their linguistic behaviors and attitudes. Drawing from longitudinal survey data collected from 275 immigrant families in 2019 and 2024, we document significant shifts in linguistic behaviors and attitudes during a period of dynamic new developments in the nature of relations between the two countries. Here we visit some of the critical factors in language maintenance and cultural identity transmission in migrants, including the role of women in linguistic assimilation. The research contributes to our understanding of how historical context, present-day social and political developments, as well as elements such as gender and family dynamics influence language preservation and cultural identity among immigrant communities.*

Keywords: *Linguistic attitude; Language maintenance; Migration studies; Language loyalty.*

1. The linguistic landscape and policies in Italy

Italy's linguistic landscape exhibits a diverse assortment of minority languages, encompassing local dialects (Sardinian, Ladin, Friulian, Franco-Provençal, and Provençal) and foreign languages (Albanian, Greek, Croatian, Slovenian, German, and Romani), whose usage patterns generally align with those of original Roman dialects (De Mauro et al., 1980). Despite this rich diversity, the Italian educational system has historically resisted pluralistic linguistic education, maintaining a nationalist approach that, as noted by Savoia (1985) and Carrozza (1992), resulted in a centralistic, assimilation-oriented framework persisting until the entry into force of Law 482 in 1999 on the protection of historical linguistic minorities.

Italy's post-war educational framework mandated strict state control over school curricula through legislative measures, resulting in a centralized system that promoted cultural homogenization while disregarding the inherent value of linguistic diversity, as Savoia (1985) argues. Despite

the nation's constitutional commitment to pluralism, Carrozza (1992) observes that the state's legal structure paradoxically evolved to foster an environment increasingly hostile to cultural diversity. Until the adoption of Law 482 on "*Tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche*" in December 1999, only local legislation in specific administrative regions tried to preserve and support the minority languages by regulating their use in school and in other social domains.

Law 482 marked a pivotal shift in the Italian education policy by enabling minority language instruction, including Arbëresh, in schools. While this legislation recognized the vital role of educational institutions in cultural preservation and in promoting linguistic diversity, Italo-Albanian dialects had already experienced substantial erosion due to post-war socio-economic changes, mass education that did not have any minority language-protecting measures in place, media influence, and widespread migration both within Italy and internationally.

2. A historical overview of early Albanian migration in Italy and the preservation of Arbëresh

The early streams of Albanian migration into Italy during the Ottoman invasion on Balkans were split into two different waves: One into Southern Italy, which occurred after 1468, following the death of Skanderbeg, and the other one into Northern Italy, specifically Venice, after the fall of Shkodra in 1479. This can be considered as the most significant earlier settlement

However, the existence of Albanian groups in Italy has been documented since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Alfonso I of Aragon granted fiefs to several Albanian commanders in Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily as a reward for their military assistance against the local barons (Altimari, 1986). On the other hand, the presence of Italian families in Albanian cities is documented, as Lucia Nadin (2013: 26) writes:

The presence of various Venetian patrician families in Durrës was confirmed between the thirteenth and fourteenth century, such as the Barbarigo family, the Bolani family, the Priuli family, the Contarini family, the Gradenigo family and the Querini family. The first foothold on the Albanian coast was gradually followed by other centers, even some more inland, onto which the Venetian presence extended: Butrint (opposite Corfu), Bastia, Parga, Spinaritza, the island of Sazan (opposite Vlora), Lezhë, Bar, Shkodër; and this therefore had happened well before the late thirteenth century, when many of these places became the domain of Venice (Fig.1)

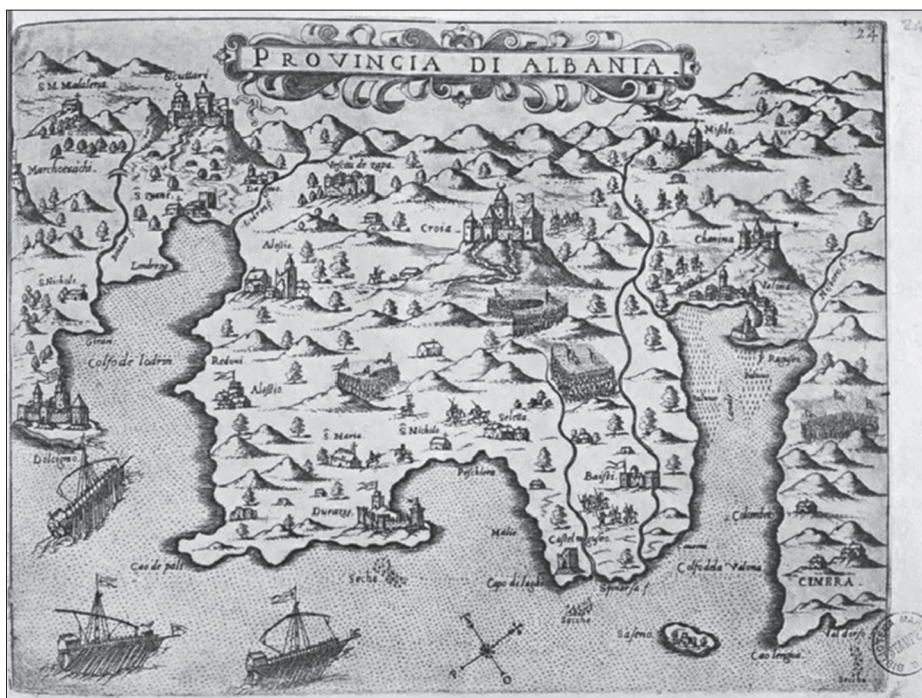


Fig. 1. Giovanni Francesco Camocio, Province of Albania, 1574,
Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Rari V. 592. p. 24.

The Arbëresh settlements in southern Italy, spanning Calabria, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Campania, Abruzzo, and Sicily, demonstrated remarkable cultural resilience compared to their northern counterparts who quickly assimilated. The communities developed into significant centers of Albanian culture (Faraco, 1976; Altimari and Savoia, 1994), establishing important educational institutions such as the Corsini College in S. Benedetto Ullano (1732), later the S. Adriano College in S. Demetrio Corone (1794), and the Greek-Albanian Seminary in Palermo (1734). Their adherence to the Byzantine rite, despite eventual submission to the Catholic Church, served as a mechanism of cultural preservation, as Altimari (1986) argues. This religious identity, maintained through their connection with the Byzantine Patriarchate of Ohrid until the mid-16th century, became a crucial element in resisting complete cultural assimilation, although communities in Molise, Lucania, and Apulia eventually abandoned their traditional religious practices.

As for the present-day situation, according to a survey in the traditional (Arbëresh) Italo-Albanian communities conducted by the scholar Klaus Rother in 1996, as also reported by Gambarara in 1980 and Savoia in 2010, 70% of the inhabitants of the communities speak Arbëresh, while

30% speak Italian or a dialect of it. These surveys have facilitated the calculation of the number of Arbëresh native people residing in historical centers, which ranges from a minimum of 90,000 (Altimari, 1986), to nearly 200,000 when including those who have migrated to industrial or urban areas in the north and south-central parts of the country (see Savoia, Bregasi 2018; 2020).

3. Recent waves of Albanian migration towards Italy

After the fall of the dictatorship regime in Albania, 12 July 1991 signaled the beginning of the big Albanian migration of modern times, where 4553 refugees landed in the port of Brindisi. In 1991, a total of 25,708 Albanian migrants arrived at the ports of Brindisi, Otranto, and Bari (see Devole, 2006). These waves of migration were widely referred to as a biblical exodus due to its notable scale. Its impact resonated deeply within both national and international consciousness and captivated collective imaginations. Extensive television coverage further amplified its impact, with numerous hours dedicated to broadcasting scenes of their arrival. These televised portrayals received significant attention in the public sphere (Savoia, Bregasi 2018; 2020).

Initially, European countries, including Italy, adopted an open and receptive stance towards the influx of immigrants. The main aim was to quickly regulate the presence of the newcomers and determine their status as either 'political refugees' or individuals fleeing economic hardship (Giacomarra, 1993, 1994, 2000). However, local authorities faced challenges in distinguishing between individuals motivated by political reasons and those driven away by economic hardship. The presence of individuals with basic needs, such as food, healthcare, pregnant women, and infants, further complicated the process (Bregasi, 2020).

Previous studies (Savoia, Bregasi 2018, Bregasi 2020) observe that the call to a shared ethnic and cultural identity with the Arbëresh did not translate into concrete displays of solidarity with the Albanian immigrants of the 1990s. This proves that identities formed around origin are continuously reconstructed and transformed over time.

From ISTAT statistics of 2022, Albanians constitute 11.1 % of foreign citizens in Italy, which translates to roughly 396.918 regular Albanian residents. 20.6% reside in Lombardy, 14% in Tuscany and 13.2% in Emilia-Romagna. This number is 13.6% higher than the data of 2020, indicating that many of them have obtained Italian citizenship in the meantime. From ISTAT data we notice that the flow of Albanians coming to Italy has not been interrupted even though its intensity decreased considerably.

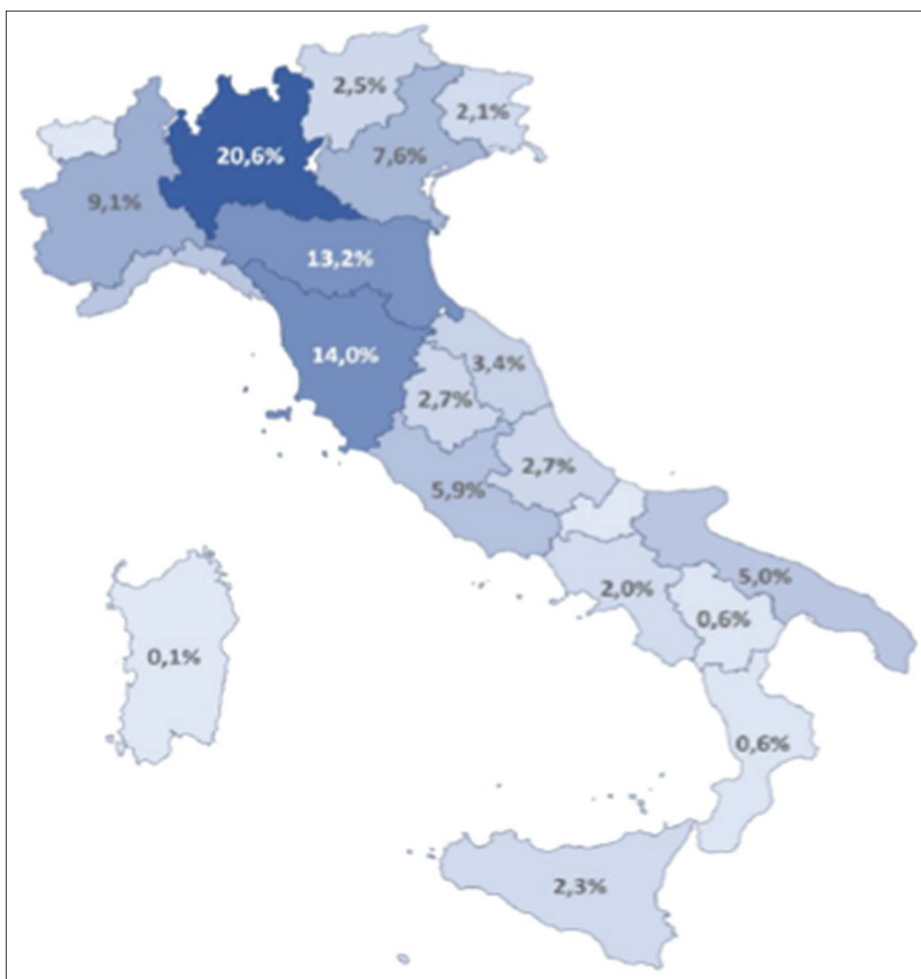


Fig. 2. Distribution of Albanian immigrants by region.

It is worth mentioning here that Albanians, alongside Romanians, have remained one of the two main foreign nationalities in Italian schools for several years. In the first half of 2022, 58.9% of the Albanian population in Italy was employed, which represents a positive trend compared to the first six months of 2021, with an increase of 6.6%. The predominant profile among Albanian employees is that of skilled manual workers, primarily employed in the industrial and construction sectors.

4. Evolving patterns of language use

Immigrants are well aware that their employment is dependent on their knowledge of the local language (Italian). According to the data

we gathered from a corpus of 275 Albanian immigrants in Italy, 85 of which were interviewed in 2019 (Bregasi, 2020) and 190 in 2024, to the question “Which language do you use at home?” 42% answered that they use Albanian and Italian, 43% Albanian, and 14.5% Italian. Of the total of 146 women and 121 men interviewed, we got the result of 58% of women and 50% of men using Italian with their children, not excluding the use of Albanian at home. And to the question “What language do you use in public with your children?”, the aggregated answers for both surveys were Italian and Albanian for 51% of women, and 44% of men. As it can be noticed by the charts below, the number of women who choose to use Italian with their children is higher than that of men.

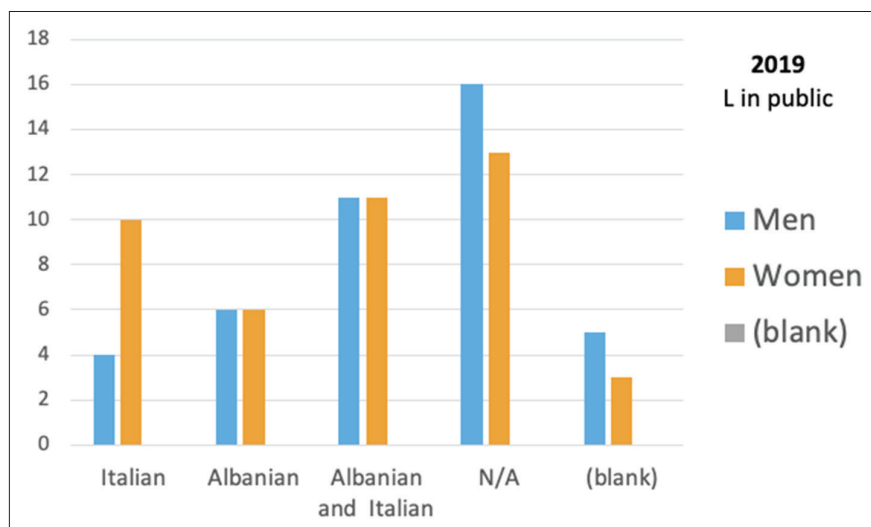


Chart 1. Use of Albanian in Public

Contrary to Fishman’s theory that language discrimination often strengthens in-group linguistic identity (Fishman, 1996), Albanian immigrants in Italy frequently abandoned their native language as a first step toward integration, despite language being their primary distinguishing cultural characteristic. This challenges the assumption of a straightforward relationship between language and ethnic identity, suggesting that pragmatic integration pressures can override the tendency to preserve linguistic heritage even when it serves as the main marker of cultural distinctiveness.

During the first years of Albanian emigration to Italy, racial discrimination played a detrimental role in the erosion of Albanian language (Devole and Vehbiu, 1996; Devole 2006). This is noticed with the use of the Albanian language with children, especially at an early age.

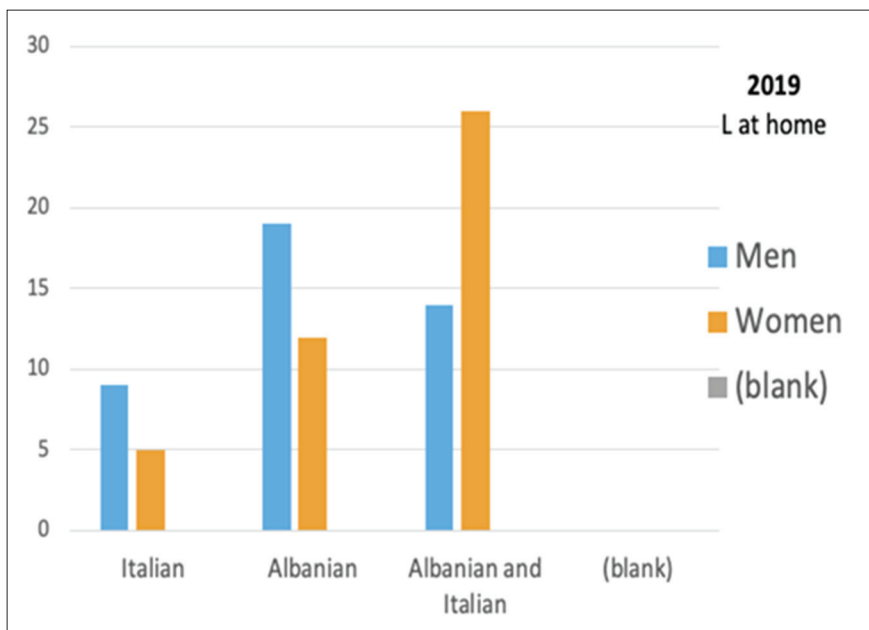


Chart 2. Use of Albanian at Home

In our interviews during 2018 - 2019, many parents declared that their kids use Italian when they talk to their relatives or to Albanian friends, even when they speak Albanian very well. Our statistics reported above, in fact, show a high degree of alternation from the language of origin: a foreign language, related to a diglossia determined by the content of the conversation, predominates, whereas the use of the language of origin appears reduced in the new environment (see Bregasi, 2020).

Although the time separating our two surveys is relatively short (5-6 years), we were prompted to repeat the same questions as in 2019 by our interest in observing the possibility of a change in the trends of use of Albanian at a time when the nature of the relations between Albania and Italy is undergoing a period of dynamic new developments.

Some of these developments can be seen in the evolving nature of the economic relations between the two countries. While growth can be observed in many sectors of the economy, such as industry and closely interrelated trade (both import and export), with a lot of the imports into the country consisting of industrial materials and parts that are processed in Albania due to cheaper labor and then shipped back to Italy once they are ready for the market, (Observatory of Economic Complexity) industry seems to no longer have the absolute upper hand, due to the major challenge posed on it by tourism, where official statistics point to the fact that the

number of Italian tourists visiting Albania has almost doubled as compared to the pre-pandemic period. For illustration, the number of Italian tourists entering Albanian territory during the period of January-August 2019 was 346.758, whereas for the same period of 2023 it was 658,566, (INSTAT) and the growing trend continued at the same unwavering pace throughout 2024.

This seems largely a result of the change of rhetoric about Albania in the Italian media and public sphere, including politics. “Albania, una terra da scoprire” - a land to discover - has become a common theme in newspaper and magazine articles as well as the news, and the social media has joined in the chorus with a lot of tourists posting about their favorable experiences and expressing their satisfaction with Albanian’s hospitality, its beauties and, above all, its very welcoming attitude towards them. Contributing to this are the 5,767 active Italian companies operating in Albania (MIA), as well as the over 20 thousand Italian residents who have obtained residence permits to live and study in Albania (Albanian Ministry of Interior). It is clear that the collective image of Albanians in Italy is changing, which, in turn, is also affecting the way Albanians in Italy see themselves, as evidenced in the charts below:

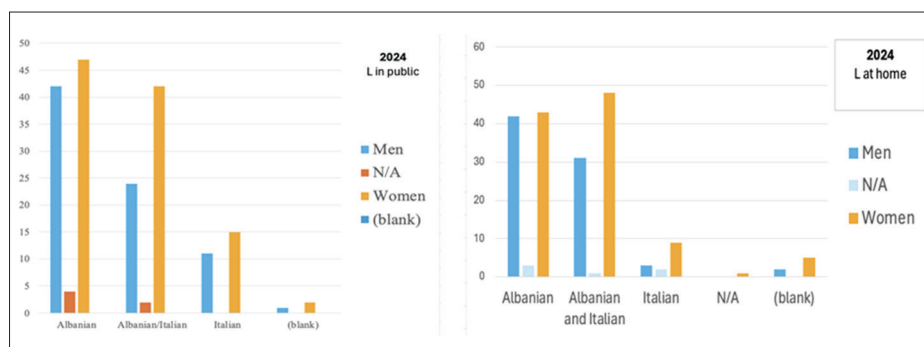


Chart 3, Chart 4. Use of Albanian in Public and at Home, 2024.

As we can see here, while the percentage of men is quite the same, there is a marked difference in the percentage of women who declared that they use Italian in public, 11.6% in 2019 and 7.8% in 2024.

In our surveys, to the question “Would you mind if your children did not learn to speak Albanian?”, 30% of women and 9.5% of men in 2019 and 11.4% of women and 5.5% of men in 2024 answered with “No”.

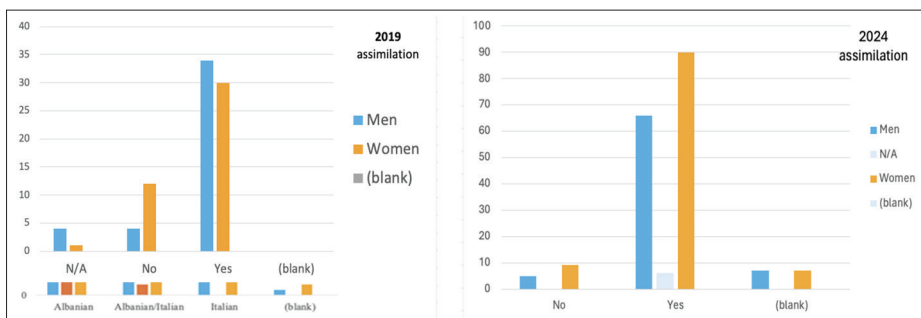


Chart 5, Chart 6. Assimilation, 2019, 2024.

5.1 The role of women in the process of assimilation

Within immigrant communities, mothers traditionally serve as the primary agents of intergenerational language transmission and cultural preservation (Fishman, 1991; Park & Sarkar, 2007). Our study of Albanian immigrants in Italy reveals a complex dynamic where mothers, despite their pivotal role, demonstrate a stronger tendency toward linguistic and cultural assimilation compared to their male counterparts. This pattern aligns with Labov's (1973) seminal work on sociolinguistic variation, which identified a phenomenon of "linguistic insecurity" particularly prevalent among women from middle and lower socioeconomic classes. According to Labov's findings, these women exhibit heightened sensitivity to prestigious language variants and demonstrate more frequent stylistic adjustments in their speech patterns, often resulting in hypercorrection even during middle age.

The case of Albanian immigrant mothers in Italy presents a particularly interesting example of this phenomenon, as their assimilation tendencies appear to be affected by historical and cultural factors. During the communist regime in Albania, Italian culture maintained a position of significant prestige (Vehbiu & Devole, 1996), potentially predisposing Albanian immigrants toward more rapid linguistic and cultural adaptation. Our research indicated that this inclination toward assimilation transcends educational boundaries - a finding that challenges traditional assumptions about the relationship between education level and cultural retention (Norton, 2013). Surprisingly, mothers with doctoral degrees showed higher rates of acceptance toward assimilation, suggesting that formal education does not necessarily correlate with stronger maintenance of heritage language and culture.

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of social integration theory (Berry, 2005) and gender roles in immigration contexts (Pavlenko, 2001). The accelerated assimilation process observed among Albanian

mothers, regardless of their educational background, appears to be intrinsically linked to their dual function within the family unit: as primary caregivers responsible for children's education and as key facilitators of the family's integration into the host society. This dual role often places women at the forefront of cross-cultural interactions, potentially accelerating their own assimilation process while simultaneously influencing the linguistic and cultural trajectories of their children (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009).

The language insecurity in women and frequent changes of their norms can be noticed also in the charts above in the 'Yes' answer to the question "Would you mind if your children did not learn to speak Albanian?", from 70% of 2019 to over 88% of 2024. The changes in the image of the country of origin affected the way women value their own culture, as well as their feelings and prejudices about their own language.

6. Language maintenance

In contemporary multicultural societies, language maintenance within immigrant communities takes place in a complex ideological and socioeconomic framework. This framework is highly affected by globalization (Blommaert, 2010). Linguistic assimilation often leads to changes in ethnic identities, and at the same time it creates marginalization of immigrant languages and cultures. As Anderson (1983) argues in his seminal work on imagined communities, language plays a crucial role in constructing and maintaining national and ethnic identities. Its preservation is thus particularly significant for immigrant communities.

Fishman's (1991) work on Reversing Language Shift (RLS) provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding the challenges faced by immigrant communities in maintaining their mother tongue. He emphasizes that intergenerational language transmission within families is critical for language maintenance, but this transmission is challenged by societal pressures and practical difficulties.

The case of Albanian immigrants in Italy illustrates these dynamics. The restricted domains for Albanian language use, mainly limited to domestic settings and interactions with other Albanians, which may be infrequent, exemplify what Fishman (1972) terms "domain constriction" - where minority languages become increasingly confined to fewer contexts. This limitation, combined with socioeconomic pressures, as well as discrimination, accelerates linguistic assimilation, particularly among second-generation immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

The phenomenon of children acting as "translators" for their parents, as observed in Albanian families, reflects what Bourdieu (1991) describes as linguistic capital redistribution within immigrant families. This reversal of

roles can significantly impact family dynamics. As Norton (2013) argues, language learning and use are inextricably linked to power relations and construction of identity, thus making the choice of language use within immigrant families a complex negotiation of identity and social positioning.

The passive transmission of Albanian through home communication results in what Valdés (2001) describes as “heritage language competence” - a limited, often dialectal form of language proficiency. This situation is further complicated by what Fishman (1966) identified as the three-generation pattern of language shift, where the first generation is monolingual in the heritage language, the second generation is bilingual, and the third generation becomes monolingual in the dominant language.

The role of extended family members, particularly grandparents, in language maintenance aligns with what Fishman (2001) terms “core value theory,” where language preservation is linked to cultural continuity. However, as Gal (1979) notes, the economic and social pressures of the host society often override these cultural considerations, leading to accelerated language shift even in cases where strong family networks exist.

This complex interplay of factors demonstrates what Woolard (1998) describes as the tension between linguistic ideology and practical necessity in immigrant communities, where the symbolic value of maintaining the language of origin often conflicts with the immediate needs of social and economic integration.

7. Cultural identity transmission in migrants

The intergenerational transmission of Albanian cultural identity exhibits complex dynamics shaped by multiple factors. Based on Vathi's (2015) research, parents' approaches range from active cultural preservation to deliberate identity suppression (often due to discrimination experiences), with some seeking a middle ground of symbolic identification through select customs and family values. This transmission process aligns with broader theoretical debates between primordialist views of ethnicity as innate and instrumentalist perspectives emphasizing identity as a strategic choice. The malleability of ethnic identity is further highlighted by Nagel's assertion that individuals select and modify their ethnic identification based on social context, utility, and audience perception, while contemporary access to Albanian media and social networks provides new avenues for second-generation immigrants to connect with their heritage culture, illustrating how technological developments can influence identity maintenance in diaspora communities.

We observed the case of Endri, an Albanian who, in 2019, at the age of 32 was attending an Italian university in Tirana. Having spent most of his life up to that point in Italy, in 2019 he stated that he no longer identified

exclusively as Albanian or Italian.

He is currently married to an Italian woman, is the father of two girls and has returned to live in Italy. He now describes his childhood challenges as follows:

It is difficult for a person to live in 'Albania', to open the door to the house and find himself in a different country, with a different language, customs, and culture, and spend 8-10 hours a day in this country and then return home, open the door to return to 'Albania'. This continuous daily routine created in me a mental confusion with consequent insecurity on how to behave, how to think, and how to understand the world around me.

He said that with time he learned to adopt the best facets of both cultures, trying to bring Italy into his home, because his parents struggled. This forced cultural integration allowed him to gain a greater awareness of cultural differences and to appreciate what each culture has to offer. However, his efforts proved insufficient in fully reconciling the disparities between these cultures, language being one the main ones:

I can never tell in which language my dreams or thoughts are created or formed; for me it is as if it were the exact same language. I don't think in Italian or Albanian but in a new language: 'mine'. After many years of confusion and loneliness, I am aware that I am both Italian and Albanian. This cultural duality is part of my identity, creating, in my opinion, a new ethnicity, a perfect union that fits a new individual.

As Fishman (1999: 450) explained the issue of the globalization of the 21st century: The global and the specific are now more commonly found together, as partial (rather than exclusive) identities, because they each contribute to different social, emotional and cognitive needs that are co-present in the same individuals and societies and that are felt to require and to benefit from different languages in order to give them appropriate expression.

A strong and positive multilingual and multicultural identity contributes to creating positive attitudes toward self and others. When multilingualism is perceived as a set of options, it might offer solutions in various situations, context, especially in the era of globalization. Albanians moving back to their country of origin for short periods of time or permanently for work, studies, or other reasons, are a confirmation of that. When facing adversity in their country of migration, such as it was the case with the economic crisis in Greece (Wimmer, 2008; Vathi, 2015) over the last decade, Albania and their linguistic and cultural awareness offered to many of them a

way out and allowed them a quick reintegration into a society where the economic pressures were at the time less severe.

As such, the advantages of bilingualism and multiculturalism are multifold, and seem to be the most compatible version of integration that leaves room for the different and sometimes conflicting aspects of migrants' identities

Conclusion

The evolution of Albanian migration and language maintenance in Italy presents a complex interplay between cultural preservation and pragmatic adaptation. Our longitudinal research reveals significant shifts in language use patterns and cultural identity transmission among Albanian immigrants, particularly influenced by changing socio-economic contexts and public perceptions. The marked improvement in Albania's image within Italian media and society between 2019 and 2024, coupled with strengthening economic ties and tourism, has notably impacted immigrants' attitudes toward their heritage language and culture.

The gendered dimension of language maintenance emerges as particularly significant, with mothers showing greater sensitivity to societal pressures and prestige factors in their linguistic choices. However, recent data indicates a shift in this trend, with fewer women expressing indifference to their children's Albanian language acquisition in 2024 compared to 2019, suggesting that improved cultural standing can influence heritage language valorization.

Our findings challenge traditional assumptions about the relationship between education and cultural retention, while also highlighting the emergence of hybrid identities among second-generation immigrants, as illustrated by cases like Endri's. These complex identities demonstrate how globalization and transnational mobility are reshaping traditional concepts of cultural and linguistic integration. The study ultimately suggests that successful integration need not necessitate complete linguistic and cultural assimilation; rather, bilingualism and multiculturalism can offer strategic advantages in an increasingly interconnected world, providing flexibility and resilience in the face of changing economic and social circumstances.

The research contributes to our understanding of how immigrant communities negotiate their cultural and linguistic heritage within host societies, while pointing to the dynamic nature of identity formation in contemporary migration contexts. These insights have important implications for both immigration policy and educational approaches in multicultural societies.

Having observed the complexity of immigrants' identities and the depth of the linguistics issues they encounter, we conclude that a strong

and positive multilingual and multicultural identity contributes in creating positive attitudes toward self and others. Multilingualism offers opportunities and solutions in various situations, contexts, especially in the globalization era.

Language policies oriented towards this approach can facilitate the integration of immigrants and enable them to contribute to the enrichment of their societies.

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