

The following is an article adapted from a presentation made by Eugene Massamillo at The Charleston Library Society on May 27, 2021 in commemoration of the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death in Ravenna, Italy of Florentine poet, writer and philosopher Dante Alighieri. It was delivered in conjunction with the issuance of Christina Rae Butler's book *Italians in the Lowcountry*, the research and publication of which was sponsored by the Dante Alighieri Society of Charleston.

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### **Dante Alighieri, the Italian Language & Italian Immigration to the U.S.**

I have been asked to introduce Christina Rae Butler and to speak tonight not only as a member of the Italian-American community of Charleston, but also because of my present and past affiliations with Italian companies and projects (including those here in Charleston). Presently, I am the Vice-President of the *Dante Alighieri Society* in Charleston, the former President of Charleston's *Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival* and have acted in the United States as outside General Legal Counsel to *Alitalia Airlines* – the airline of the Republic of Italy - since 1988. As mentioned above, I am Italian-American, with my father's family coming from *Cosenza, Calabria* (the “toe of the boot”) and my mother's family coming from *Anzi, Basilica* (the “arch of the boot”).

Tonight, I would like to briefly discuss two distinct – but related – subjects: (1) Dante Alighieri and the Italian language, and (2) Italian Immigration to the United States – all discussed as lead-ins to Christina's book.

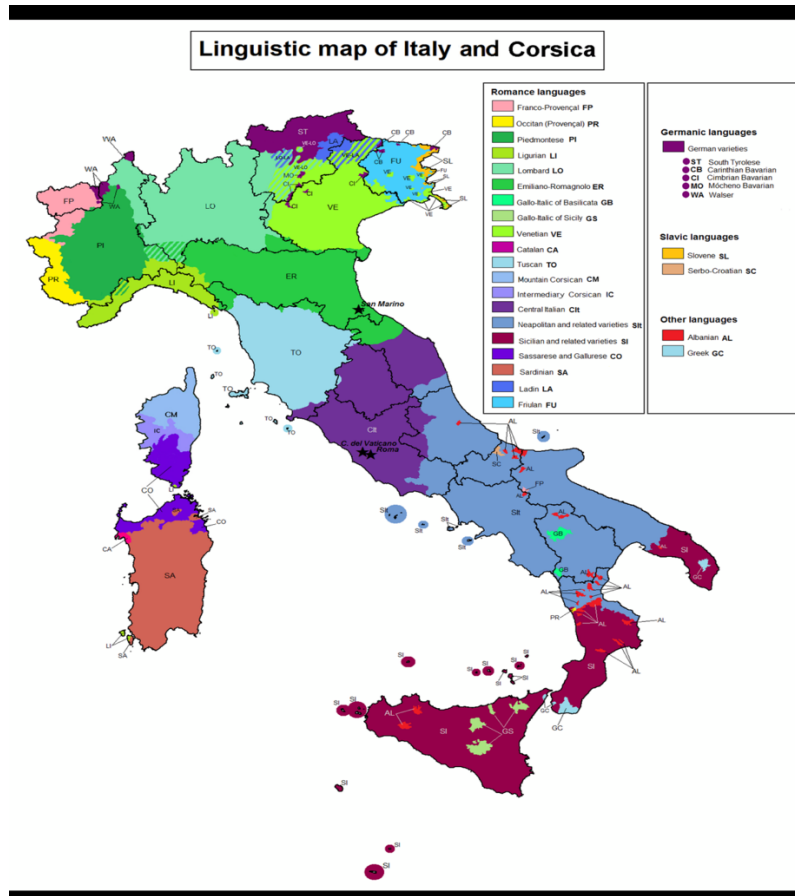
#### **Dante Alighieri & The Italian Language:**

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265 and died in Ravenna in 1321. Undoubtedly, he is most widely known for his *Divine Comedy*, sometimes referred to as the greatest literary work written in the Italian language. The narrative poem is divided into three sections: Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso, and many of us read at least parts of it during our secondary educations. For our purposes here tonight, however, Dante is more importantly known as the *father* of the modern Italian Language.

In this regard, it is widely understood that there are five, principal Romance languages: French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish. In fact, of course, there are *many* so-called Romance languages – so-called because they were derived from *vulgar*, or popular, Latin – which was spoken by the Romans. And of these, Italian is considered to be the language most closely resembling Latin.

The common misconception is that everyone in Italy principally speaks Italian and has done so since the founding of the country. In fact, however, there are at least 34 separate languages spoken in Italy today. Although sometimes referred to as “dialects,” actually, they are truly separate languages – most being derived from vulgar Latin, but not all. That is, they did not derive themselves from Italian but, instead, developed directly from Latin in parallel with the Italian language.

As this color-coded chart shows, the many languages spoken in Italy depends upon where in Italy you are, and whether that part of the country was influenced by other foreign countries or regions.



In the north of Italy, there was significant French and Austrian influence, while in the south, there was considerable Spanish influence. And, of course, many nations laid siege to and occupied Sicily through the centuries, including Greece, Spain, and many countries from what is today considered the Middle East and North Africa.

In Italy today, Italians who speak a dialect cannot necessarily understand an Italian speaking another dialect. For example, Milan is only 31 miles west of Bergamo, but the Milanese cannot understand someone speaking Bergamasque dialect (which actually is closer to Catalan or French). Indeed, a 2015 survey found that less than 46% of Italians speak only or mainly *standard Italian*.

But what is standard Italian, and where did it come from? For that answer, we must go to Dante himself.

When Dante lived, most literature on the Italian peninsula actually was written in Latin, but it was only the most educated who were able to read Latin – much the way French was spoken by the upper class in Russia prior to the Russian Revolution. The Russian language, in fact, was spoken only among the common people or, it is said, when the upper class wished to address their servants.

Dante, however, was probably the first to write in vernacular, or standard Italian – which he largely based on the Florentine version of the Tuscan dialect that he spoke. Indeed, important Italian writers who followed Dante then also wrote in Italian (including Leonardo da Vinci and Machiavelli). But how did it become the universal language of Italy? For that, we must turn to another turn of events – the unification of Italy – which occurred more than 500 years after Dante’s death in 1321.

Prior to Unification, there were five principal – and separately governed parts of Italy: Venetia, the Papal States, the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (consisting of Naples and Sicily), and San Marino.

Unification started in 1861 – called the *Risorgimento* (Resurgence) – and was led by Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi. It resulted in the creation of the Kingdom of Italy led by the newly-installed monarch - King Victor Emmanuel II – who had been the King of Sardinia.



*The Victor Emmanuel II National Monument*  
(nicknamed by the Italians as *The Typewriter* for obvious reasons)

Well, we now know that not everyone spoke Italian, however, much less considered themselves “Italian,” thus leading to the following often quoted statement from a famous Piedmontese-Italian statesman:

***“L’Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani!”***

**- Massimo d’Azeglio, 1861**

***Italy has been made. Now it remains to make Italians!***

In order to do that, they needed a common language, and it was agreed that the Tuscan dialect – or, the language of the most famous Italian writer, Dante – was to be chosen as the language of the new Kingdom of Italy.

### **Italian Immigration to the United States:**

To say that the entire population of the Italian peninsula was overjoyed by unification would be incorrect. After all, the people from the northern part of the new country had little to nothing in common with people from places like Sicily. As we have seen, even the languages were different. In fact, tremendous upheaval followed for the next 85 years, *i.e.*, 1861 – 1946, ending, of course, with the period of Benito Mussolini and Italian Fascism (1922 – 1945).

In 1946, following the WW-II, the Republic of Italy was founded and its success – from the depths of defeat and poverty to a vibrant, democratic and wealthy country - remains one of the true miracles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But Fascism and the War made up only one of the awful periods in Italian history. Due largely to the upheaval caused by unification and the extreme poverty that followed (especially in the South), the forty-year period from 1880 – 1920 was cataclysmic. It resulted in the largest *voluntary* emigration period in documented history.

In fact, by the time WW-I had arrived, 16,000,000 Italians – mostly from the South - had left Italy. It is hard to understand the significance of this number without knowing that the entire population of Italy in 1920 was only 37,000,000! In other words, about 1/3 of the population left – most never returning to their homes on the Italian peninsula.

They dispersed all over the world – to close places like France and England, and to faraway places like Australia. For our purposes here tonight, however, the question is: Where did they go in the Western Hemisphere? Principally, they went to four places: the United States, Argentina, Brazil and Canada.

The United States was one of the largest recipients. In fact, more than 4,000,000 Italians came to the U.S. between 1880 – 1920, with more than half of those coming between the years 1900 – 1910. And, then, it basically stopped – almost completely. Why?

There is little doubt that Americans had become disenchanted with the country being increasingly populated with non-English speaking immigrants – especially with Catholics who, it was felt, owed their allegiance not to the U.S. constitution, but to the Pope in Rome.

In 1921 and 1924, the U.S. passed into law a series of Acts known as the “Emergency Quota Acts.” The express purpose of these Acts was designed to curtail the influx of Italians, Poles and other Catholics – especially those from non-English speaking countries. To do this, the Acts first limited future immigration to 3% of the existing population of immigrants from a particular country (1921), and then further limited future immigration to 2% of the existing population in question (1924).

Considering that 4,000,000 Italians already had immigrated to the United States by 1920, simple math would lead to the conclusion that future immigration would be limited to 80,000 Italians per year (*i.e.*, .2% x 4,000,000). But that's not what the Congress had in mind. They wanted even less Italians to arrive.

To accomplish this, instead of choosing 1920 as the baseline, the legislature decided to use 1890 as the baseline. This would mean that future immigration would be limited to 2% of the Italian population in the United States as it existed in 1890. But the Italian population in the U.S. in 1890 was not 4,000,000 but closer to 350,000, and 2% of that number led to future immigration limited to about 7,000 per year.

When compared to the roughly 200,000 per year of Italians immigrating to the U.S. during the first decade of the century, this would lead, and did lead, to a reduction in Italian immigration by more than 95%. Mission accomplished.

So, before we hear from Christina, where are all of these Italians in the United States? Here are the top states where Italians and Italian-Americans are found:

- \* New York
- \* New Jersey
- \* Connecticut
- \* Pennsylvania
- \* California
- \* Massachusetts
- \* Rhode Island

The State with the highest concentration of Italians is Rhode Island with 19%. By contrast, the percentage of Italians in South Carolina is only 2%.

In the Western Hemisphere, the country with the highest percentage of Italians is Argentina with more than 62% of its population claiming some degree of Italian ancestry. In Brazil, the percentage is much lower (about 15%). But owing to the size of the population, Italians in Brazil number more than 32,000,000 – making it the country with the largest Italian population outside of Italy. By contrast, 6% of the U.S. population identifies itself as Italian or Italian -American.

Looking at these numbers, one would assume that wherever Italian immigrants went, they did not go to South Carolina. But, as Christina will tell you, you might be wrong!

Were the Italians who emigrated to the U.S. and South Carolina similar to the ones who came here during The Italian Diaspora of 1880 – 1920?

I now turn it over to Christina Butler to tell you exactly who they were, where they came from and why they came here.