



Assimilation? Not So Fast

Domenico Maceri contrasts our perceptions of different generations of immigrants to the U.S.

The prospective student wanted to learn Italian to discover his roots. In the parents' efforts to Americanize, the family had insisted on speaking English and the Italian language had vanished.

The gentleman was now retired and after a successful career wanted to "correct" his parents' mistake of not teaching him Italian.

It's easy to understand why immigrants of the past insisted on learning English as fast as possible and Americanize. There was a great deal of discrimination against those who were different.

An acquaintance of mine who began dating an American woman more than fifty years ago was shot by the girl's father for the mere fact the young man was Italian. His language and nationality were not good enough for his daughter.

In the 1920s, 50 percent of the special education students in New York City were of Italian extraction. Apparently, kids were given tests in English and since they did not know the language, they "failed" and were labeled retarded.

Discrimination was based on ignorance. Race and ethnicity were easy targets.

Americans have learned a lot about their ancestors and now view them as heroes. There is little discrimination toward legal immigrants these days.

Yet, the negative feelings that used to exist toward immigrants of the past are now directed toward undocumented workers.

The ideas are the same. Newcomers

don't know the common language, will not integrate, and most of all they committed a crime by entering the country illegally.

People these days justify their animosity toward undocumented workers through the "loophole" of the illegal act.

Of course, it's difficult to separate the illegal presence of the undocumented workers from the illegal act committed by the companies which hired them. Yet, we all know that in agriculture, the service industry, and construction, much of the labor force is made up by people without proper documents.

The animosity toward undocumented workers is also fueled by the comparison with immigrants of the past who are now viewed with nostalgic eyes.

When we look at immigrants of the past with modern eyes, they appear hard working, eager to learn English, and longing to become Americans.

But the comparison between immigrants of the past and those today is skewed by time.

We can celebrate America as a land of immigrants when people are no longer immigrants. It's only after a few generations have gone by that we can recognize the contributions immigrants have made. While they are in the process of making their contributions we do not value nor appreciate them because they're not part of us.

So we expect that they assimilate as soon as possible without realizing that asking them to give up their language and their culture will eventually be viewed as a mistake.

We have not learned much from the experience with the immigrants of the past. Yes, it is important to integrate but it is indeed possible to become Americans and retain the language and culture brought in by immigrants.

But the fear that the multitude of languages will dilute the character of America is strong. So we pass laws declaring English the official language to make sure immigrants get the message.

But immigrants don't need anyone telling them that they have to learn English to improve their lot.

They understand very well that their own language represents a culture and political system which forced them to leave their countries. The new country means opportunity even if it will involve the loss of the original language and culture, and even if it means initial rejection. That's the price immigrants, documented or not, have to pay.

But after a generation or two the negative feelings people now have towards today's undocumented immigrants will change. Ultimately, today's undocumented workers will be seen with the same heroic eyes we now view immigrants of the past. **II**

Domenico Maceri (dmaceri@gmail.com), PhD, UC Santa Barbara, teaches foreign languages at Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, CA. He is a regular contributor to *Language Magazine*.