



Citation: Ragazzoni, M. (2026). Written Italian in North American diasporic communities during the Great Emigration (1880–1920). Self-study Italian-English grammar books. *Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione* 13(1): 21-30. doi: 10.36253/rse-19498

Received: December 14, 2025

Accepted: February 5, 2026

Published: June 15, 2026

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Editor: Andrea Mariuzzo, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia.

Written Italian in North American diasporic communities during the Great Emigration (1880–1920). Self-study Italian-English grammar books

L'italiano scritto nelle comunità diasporiche durante la Grande Emigrazione in Nord America (1880–1920). Le grammatiche italiano-inglese 'senza maestro'

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Abstract. This essay falls within the field of study relating to the teaching of Italian and the history of the Italian language in the context of the Italian diaspora to North America during the Great Emigration (1880-1920). Traditional academic perspectives have characterized Italian immigrants arriving in America during the mass migration period as primarily dialect speakers, nonreaders, and illiterate individuals. However, evidence demonstrates that these immigrants were eager to read and had access to a wide range of reading materials. The Italian language served as a significant point of reference for diasporic communities in North America, establishing a sense of identity away from Italy. This study investigates the circulation and consumption of locally printed Italian-language materials and assesses the impact of written language as an Italianizing agent among Italian immigrants. Locally produced grammars designed for the self-study of English through Italian show the active use of Italian within North American diasporic communities from the late Nineteenth to early Twentieth centuries. These materials, intended to assist readers in learning English independently, also contributed to improving immigrants' literacy in Italian, thereby reinforcing their identity and sense of community abroad and preparing them for a possible return to their homeland.

Keywords: Great Emigration, history of Italian language, Italian of emigration, Italian schools abroad, school manuals and textbooks.

Riassunto. Il presente saggio si inserisce nel campo di studi sull'insegnamento dell'italiano e sulla storia della lingua italiana durante la Grande Emigrazione (1880-1920) in Nord America. La letteratura accademica ha a lungo descritto gli immigrati italiani arrivati in America nel periodo della migrazione di massa come prevalentemente dialettofoni e analfabeti. Molti di questi immigrati erano tuttavia desiderosi di leggere e avevano a disposizione un'ampia gamma di testi. La lingua italiana ha costituito un punto di riferimento cruciale per le comunità della diaspora italiana in Nord America, favorendo la costruzione di un'identità collettiva lontano dall'Italia. Questo studio

analizza la diffusione e la fruizione di materiali in italiano prodotti e stampati sul posto e valuta il ruolo di agente italianizzante della lingua scritta. Le grammatiche prodotte e pubblicate in loco, concepite per l'autoapprendimento dell'inglese attraverso l'italiano, testimoniano l'uso attivo della lingua italiana all'interno delle comunità diasporiche nordamericane tra la fine del XIX e l'inizio del XX secolo. Questi materiali, oltre a facilitare l'apprendimento autonomo dell'inglese, hanno contribuito a migliorare la conoscenza della lingua italiana, rinforzando l'identità e il senso di appartenenza comunitaria degli immigrati e preparandoli a un eventuale ritorno in patria.

Parole chiave: Grande Emigrazione, storia della lingua italiana, italiano dell'emigrazione, scuole italiane all'estero, manuali scolastici e libri di testo.

INTRODUCTION

Although previous research has addressed the linguistic history of Italian emigration¹ and the correlation between the action exercised by churches and immigrant communities² in North America³, the actual presence of the Italian language within Italian diasporic communities from 1880 to 1920⁴ has been little examined and remains underexplored. Furthermore, few studies have specifically examined the teaching of Italian and the history of the Italian language in the context of the Italian diaspora to North America during the mass migration period.

General studies explore the Italian of emigration (“italiano dell'emigrazione”) in its diachronic dimension, including the collective volume *Storia linguistica dell'emigrazione italiana* edited by Massimo Vedovelli (Vedovelli 2011) and the monograph *Italoamericano* by Elton Prifti (Prifti 2014). These works trace, from 1880 to 1920, a picture of extreme linguistic conservatism, namely of a dialectal persistence, as both rely on the famous estimates of the unitary Italophony (“italofonia unitaria”) provided by Tullio De Mauro (De Mauro 1983, 43⁵): the emigrants, considered as pure dialect speakers, are thought to have exported and preserved their dialects in the North American settlements⁶. Her-

mann Haller, in his section on Italian dialects in the United States in the chapter titled *I dialetti italiani nel mondo*⁷ (Haller 2002), and Sabine Heinemann, in her article for *Studi di grammatica italiana* (Heinemann 2023), both reiterate the notion that Italian was largely absent from emigrants' linguistic competencies. However, as Franco Pierno (Pierno 2021) notes, characterizing emigrants' linguistic repertoire as exclusively dialectophony (“dialettologia”) appears reductive: although the unitary linguistic situation was essentially divided into a codified, mainly written literary Italian on one side, and a spoken use of dialects on the other, the Italian *continuum* was clearly crossed by other linguistic dynamics, both oral and written; moreover, the local development of associations⁸ and schools, together with the circulation of newspapers, books, and language manuals, certainly impacted subsequent generations following the first wave of emigrants who arrived in the United States around 1880. This acquiring and improving of an Italophony in the countries of arrival needs to be investigated more systematically and critically in relation to the associations and schools, and circulation of print material. This study focuses on the latter, providing an overview of how the Italian written language circulated within Italian diasporic communities in North America during the mass migration period, and conducting an analysis on Italian-English grammars specifically conceived for the inhabitants of the colonies. These texts are important for establishing a history of the linguistic

¹ Please see Bertini Malgarini 1994; Haller 2006; Bernini 2010; Prifti 2014; Vedovelli 2011; Vedovelli 2016.

² See, for example, Principe 2002; Sanfilippo 2011; Di Gioacchino 2012; Di Gioacchino 2014; Villani 2014; Di Gioacchino 2015; Di Gioacchino 2016; Villani 2016; Villani 2018; Di Gioacchino 2025.

³ In this study, the terms ‘North America’ and ‘North American’ refer to both Canada and the United States of America. Italian migration to these countries during the period in question is comparable in terms of chronology (from the 1880s onward), national language (English), and modes of emigration. They can therefore be referred to as two aspects of the same migratory process.

⁴ The Great Emigration is commonly dated between 1880 – the year after which the Italian presence began to reach the millions of units in North America – and the years immediately following the US *Immigration Act* (1917) and the First World War, with a conventional ante quem time limit set in 1920 (Pierno 2021, 89).

⁵ The percentage of Italian speakers in 1861 is estimated to be 2.5%.

⁶ In this specific context, the terms ‘settlement’ and ‘colony’ refer to the Italian immigrant communities formed in this period.

⁷ Haller co-authored this chapter along with Carla Marcato, Giovanni Meo Zilio, and Flavia Ursini for the encyclopaedic work on Italian dialects published by UTET (Cortelazzo et al. 2002, 1074–1094).

⁸ As Pierno indicated, both Vedovelli and Prifti overlook the importance of the educational role of various institutions, both in the form of associationism and in the unifying action exercised by the Catholic and Protestant churches. Parishes and associations contributed, in various North American cities, to an effervescent and varied cultural activity in Italian, from Dante readings to shows, whether theatrical or cinematographic, not to mention the production of printed materials, books, and newspapers. The Italian American newspapers of the time provide valuable insights into how many associations were active not only in assisting expatriates, but also in organizing events for the community (see Pierno 2021, 92–93).

and metalinguistic notions of what was being developed around the idea of the Italian language abroad.

THE PRESENCE OF THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE: THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Academic opinion has traditionally suggested that Italian immigrants arriving in America during the mass migration period were predominantly nonreaders. Evidence indicates, however, that these immigrants were quite eager to learn how to read from the earliest years of the Great Emigration⁹. Written Italian was not limited to elite circles but was a consistent feature of the migratory experience, beginning with travel guides specifically created for emigrants and continuing through their settlement in North America¹⁰. The variety of reading materials accessible to Italian immigrants was indeed vast, spanning from Italian-English dictionaries and grammar books to biblical texts and works of classical literature – such as the *Divine Comedy* and *Orlando Furioso*¹¹. Additionally, they had access to Italian American and Italian Canadian newspapers, as well as locally produced works of fiction. This literary production

⁹ Historian Rudolph J. Vecoli noted that «Newspapers, magazines, and books took on an importance they lacked in the old country. Various observers commented that immigrants who had never seen a book became readers in America» (Vecoli 1998, 18).

¹⁰ Travel guides were an extremely widespread textual genre, tailored not only to various destinations but also to the different regional backgrounds of those embarking on a new life. These guides differed in format and style, authored by writers of varying expertise. They offered comprehensive information on geography, climate, society, government, job opportunities, rights, and responsibilities in the host countries, as well as guidelines for behaviour on board transatlantic ships and once settled in the destination country. They facilitated an initial process of Americanization for individuals preparing to venture into the unknown, while also reminding them of their obligations to their homeland, ties with families, maintenance of religious practices, and love for their country of origin. Guides for the United States typically adopted a medium register of Italian, rarely colloquial. It is unlikely that all emigrants could read or fully comprehend the instructions in these guides, yet the literacy and tendency towards Italianization facilitated by common reading should not be excluded. For emigrants – especially those who were more literate and educated – these guides were crafted to strengthen the common level of Italian that they would use on their journey to the new world. Cfr. Haller 2017; Haller 2023, 73–94; Pierno 2021, 97.

¹¹ Francesco Tocci, owner of the largest Italian bookshop in New York, interviewed in 1906 by the *Domenica del Corriere*, reiterated how «il 70 per cento della vendita è composta di: *Mille e una notte*, *Guerin Meschino*, *Reali di Francia*, *Bertoldo Bertoldino e Cacasenno*, di avventure di briganti e di tutta la collezione romantica straniera tradotta, che viene pubblicata a Milano ed a Firenze, di dove arriva pure la collezione di romanzi di fate di una ventina di titoli diversi. Tutte queste sono opere popolarissime fra gli emigrati italiani agli Stati Uniti. Il restante 10 per cento consiste nella maggior parte di libri di magia e di argomenti vari, comprese poche opere classiche. Di queste, quelle che si vendono di più sono: la *Divina Commedia* e l'*Orlando Furioso*» (Pierno 2021, 99).

was driven by Italian publishers based and operating in North America¹².

For Italian immigrants, reading was essential not only for personal advancement and assimilation into American society but also as an important source of enjoyment. They frequented libraries, bookstalls, and booksellers – any place where they could access books, newspapers, and magazines. The sale of books in bookstalls indicates that books were regarded as necessary items, purchased and consumed similarly to other daily household goods (Periconi 2018, 254¹³). Many Italian readers favoured the legends and oral traditions they brought with them from Italy; these included ‘*storie cavallaresche*’ of their past, ancient tales of love and hardship, stories of court jesters, lives of bandits, accounts of the Italian Unification, and even human interest stories that resonated with their own experiences of emigration (de Luise 2012, 33–5).

There was, in fact, a great increase in book demand in the early 1900s. To meet this need, Italian-language bookstores and publishing houses in Little Italies provided a range of books¹⁴. Some of the larger newspaper printers also served as book publishers, including *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* – one of the earliest and most well-known Italian newspapers published in North America, which sold books in the lobby of its headquarters (de Luise 2012, 36). Bookstores were hubs for written language circulation and centres of community life. Some of them were annexed to banks, making them accessible to immigrants who visited their trusted banks – generally managed by compatriots – for various financial activities¹⁵ (Pierno 2021, 98). They often dispatched books on consignment to cities with other Italian communities (de Luise 2012, 36; Periconi 2018, 253). Many immigrants, often lacking the financial means or inclination to buy books, frequently turned to renting works of classical literature. Renting books allowed them to maximize limited entertainment budgets by accessing cheaply printed volumes, which were read and reread. Most immigrants preferred renting from booksellers or borrowing from libraries rather than purchasing personal copies (Periconi 2018, 254).

Libraries, indeed, were essential in helping immigrants navigate the American way of life. A notable early example of Italian immigrants engaging with reading is the *Italian Free Library* – also known as the

¹² An introductory list of Italian publishers in the U.S. between the 1890s and the 1950s can be found in Marazzi 2002, 34.

¹³ Periconi adds that «books thus functioned as another commodity within the Italian immigrant household» (Periconi 2018, 254).

¹⁴ Drugstores were another point of distribution for Italian books.

¹⁵ To learn more about the connection between banks and Italian language book publishers in America, see Periconi 2018.

Anson Phelps Stokes Italian Free Library – , established in New York City in July 1894. Its collection included 3,780 Italian books and 32 subscriptions to newspapers and magazines, all available in its reading rooms on the main floor¹⁶. Concurrently, Italian immigrants frequently visited public libraries, which provided resources for literacy development as well as educational and social programs¹⁷. Public libraries implemented outreach initiatives such as home library collections and traveling libraries. These programs involved preparing carts with around fifty books and distributing them to charitable organizations, schools, churches, clubs, mining towns, and settlement houses. Traveling libraries were among the few resources available for educating immigrants residing outside the major cities (de Luise 2012, 38–39).

The advertisements of the time indicate that the most requested books were foreign language dictionaries, grammar books, manuals¹⁸, the Bible, and fiction – primarily novels published in Italian. Historical romances were also popular, often released in serialized form and sold in parts. Novels became a primary source of entertainment for both immigrants and the native-born population, providing amusement and offering a way to unwind from everyday pressures (de Luise 2012, 36). The presence of a vibrant book market for readers greedy for popular literature is supported by booksellers' catalogues that were carefully compiled and published annually, starting at least in the 1890s. Amidst this publishing landscape, a thriving local literary production emerged and flourished, featuring serial novels presented in instalments in the newspapers of the diasporic communities, which likely attracted a dedicated readership. Many of these Italian American writers were journalists, but they commonly pursued various other professions, and their texts contributed to a widespread reading practice among the immigrant population¹⁹ (Pierno 2021, 99). Lastly, locally

produced grammars for self-study of English through Italian show the active use of Italian in North American diasporic communities from the late Nineteenth to early Twentieth centuries. These materials, meant to help readers learn English without a teacher, could also improve and reinforce the immigrants' literacy in Italian, thus enabling them to become book readers in America²⁰.

The most widely used and frequented means of disseminating written Italian were newspapers. Daily and weekly newspapers held significant influence in the Italian American colonies – fostering literacy through both individual and communal reading. While often considered as solely linked to isolated political initiatives, the colonial press was, in fact, a very popular instrument of information, not only for its function as a communication bridge with the home country, but also and most importantly for its activism in local communities, from initiatives aimed at strengthening the Italian-American sense of identity to the circulation of quick news. The need for newspapers often arose within diasporic communities, leading to the rapid and widespread development of the ethnic press, coinciding with migratory flows from Italy (Pierno 2012, 66). Both the geographical distribution and the substantial quantity of Italian American newspapers produced during the first wave of immigration are noteworthy. Nancy Carnevale reports that between 1884 and 1920, more than three hundred Italian-language newspapers were published, although many had brief lifespans. Circulation rates remained high throughout this period (Carnevale 2018, 244–5). Most newspapers and magazines relied on Italian printers and regularly advertised sales of book through their own bookstores (Marazzi 2002, 32). In New York City, for example, approximately sixty newspapers circulated from the 1850s to the early Twentieth century (Pierno 2012, 66). Among them was the above-mentioned *II Progresso Italo-Americano*, which began publishing in 1880 (de Luise 2012, 35). The phenomenon of the ethnic press was not limited to large centres – nearly every immigrant community, even in medium or small-sized towns, could boast the publication of its own newspaper²¹ (Pierno 2012, 66). Many Italian immigrants sought to adapt quickly to their new environment, and Italian-language newspapers provided essential reading material during their initial years in America. The Italian press conveyed vital information about American customs while facilitating the gradual learning of Eng-

¹⁶ A catalogue was published in 1896 of the books and periodicals making up the collection. Reverend Antonio Arrighi, a prominent individual in the community and a compelling orator for the Italians, coordinated everything.

¹⁷ In the early 1900s, library usage was predominantly male, with female immigrant adults rarely seen in public libraries during this period. Instead, books were often purchased or borrowed for them, particularly by their children, who were likely already reading.

¹⁸ From Bassetti 1885 and Bassetti 1886a to Arbib-Costa 1909. For more information about Arbib-Costa's *Manuale*, see Trasciatti 2009, 73–94.

¹⁹ Bernardino Ciambelli (Lucca 1862–New York 1931) was a prolific novelist whose works effectively integrated the mystery genre within the backdrop of New York City's slums, earning him a considerable fame. See Durante 2005, 145–182, for an insight into his life and literary contributions; a thorough stylistic and linguistic analysis of the language of Ciambelli's novels can be found in Pierre-Vincent Ruscher's unpublished doctoral thesis (Ruscher 2018), and in Ruscher 2021. Another noteworthy example is Pellegrino Menotti, author of *Misteri di New York* (1903) and *I cavalieri di Trinacria* (1929).

²⁰ Their transformation into book readers in America would, as a byproduct, make them potential customers for the bookshops.

²¹ Marazzi reports that Pietro Russo's catalogue of the Italian American press (Russo 1983) lists 2,344 newspapers and magazines between 1836 and 1980 (Marazzi 2002, 32).

lish (de Luise 2012, 35). Simultaneously, these newspapers comforted immigrants by offering news from their homeland. During the formative years of Italian identity following the Unification, the ethnic press played a pivotal political role by amplifying the ongoing political discourse in Italy. In many cases, newspapers served their communities by addressing the Italian political and social situation while providing greater information about local Italian American life, particularly after the late Nineteenth century (Pierno 2012, 66–7).

In an era of widespread illiteracy, a particularly important factor of literacy came from community reading. The linguistic socializing role of the ethnic press is undeniable; for many emigrants, reading the local newspaper – either individually or collectively – represented a meaningful connection to the language of a national community they notionally belonged to. Initially, this experience was elitist, as many Italians lacked access to the press and often identified solely with their regional backgrounds, unaware of a broader notion of Italianness that some others believed in. In urban contexts, literacy was gradually supported by various secular and religious initiatives, helping to build local communities around a shared language. The colonial newspaper emerged as a central force in this endeavour, serving as a vital means of written communication that addressed a basic need for expression among emigrants (Pierno 2012, 67, 70–1).

Lastly, lay associations²² such as the Dante Alighieri Society²³ and its local branches contributed to the

literacy of diasporic communities by recommending and acquiring books, with some collections funded by the Italian government. They would finance the creation of lending libraries for passenger ships transporting Italian immigrants to America. The books provided were typically of a more advanced reading level, including classics, reference books, primers of elementary education, and patriotic literature about Italy and its unification.

The practice of frequenting libraries, purchasing books of various kinds, accessing Italian-language newspapers, participating in community reading, and the contribution of ethnic associations, show that the consumption of written works in Italian was not insignificant, and such consumption had profound effects as an Italianizing agent of Italian immigrants²⁴. A major factor to consider is that at least until the outbreak of the First World War, the strong propensity to return to their homeland pushed many immigrants to become disinterested in learning the English language: America represented the land of opportunities where one could temporarily go to earn enough money to use upon returning home. In this phase, the decision to settle permanently overseas was decidedly a minority choice, so much so that the rate of acquiring American citizenship was low, and the resistance to assimilation in the host society was strong. In fact, between 1880 and 1950, 50% of migrants returned to their homeland from the United States, while between 1910 and 1920 the figure reached 63%; however, it decreased to 20% after the approval of anti-immigration laws in the 1920s (Pretelli 2011, 42). In Canada, no return migration figures are available before 1905; between 1905 and 1940, only 16% of migrants returned to Italy from Canada²⁵ (Jansen 1987, 13). From the immigrants' perspective, acquiring and improving Italian could mean not only reinforcing their identity and feeling part of a community away from home, but also preparing themselves for the life back in their motherland.

²² In 1910, New York City was home to approximately 2,000 mutual aid societies, which often catered exclusively to Italian immigrants from the same hometowns – sometimes they were branches of associations in Italy. These societies were named after their places of origin, saints, or prominent Italian figures such as Christopher Columbus and Giuseppe Garibaldi. John Andreozzi (Andreozzi 1989) estimated that from the 1830s to the turn of the Twenty-first century, around 20,000 Italian ethnic organizations were established across the United States. The largest of these was the *Order Sons of Italy in America*, founded in 1905, with branches located throughout North America (Pretelli 2011, 56). In Canada, the *Fratellanza Italiana* in Montreal and the *Umberto Primo Italian Benevolent Society* in Toronto were founded «well before the turn of the century to protect their members from the consequences of industrial accidents, or to provide Christian burial. With the advent of social insurance and government regulation, the societies took on more political and social importance. Across the country, from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario to Trail, British Columbia, wherever there were groups of Italians, there were such societies. Like the first Italian parishes, their organizations cut across the lines of campanilismo (regionalism) that otherwise divided the colonies. Paradoxically, not just assimilation to Canadian ways but also an increase of Italian national feeling occurred among the immigrants. Lumped together as Italians by English and French Canadians and drawn together by mutual need and taste, immigrants overcame some, if not all, of the crippling effects of traditional Italian localism» (Harney 1982, 12).

²³ For further information about the activity of the *Società Dante Alighieri* in the United States and its impact on the diffusion of the Italian language during the Great Emigration, see Choate 2008, 101–128.

²⁴ Spoken Italian was also present in Italian diasporic communities in North America. Carnevale reports that: «Italian could be heard on the radio in the form of songs as well as dramas and comedic skits. Opera, whether through the radio or records, was another source of Italian language entertainment. Enrico Caruso was appreciated by immigrant Italian labourers as much as by American highbrow opera aficionados. Italian-language dramas and Sicilian puppet (“pupi”) theatre were staples of the Italian American stage. These were performed in standard Italian» (Carnevale 2018, 243).

²⁵ This «widespread pattern of return migration marking the early stage of the movement produced its own network of information, and thus contributed to making Canada better known to other Italian villagers contemplating emigration» (Ramirez 1989, 7).

SELF-STUDY ITALIAN-ENGLISH GRAMMAR BOOKS

Among the books designed within and conceived for Italian diasporic communities in North America between the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries are self-study Italian-English grammars. These manuals were published in the main city of arrival of the great Italian migration to North America, New York City²⁶.

The predecessor of these grammars is the 1885 self-published *Manuale per imparare gli elementi e la retta pronunzia della lingua inglese senza maestro. Per uso principalmente degli emigranti italiani* by Augusto Bassetti²⁷. This 31-page primer differs from previous imported English grammars for Italian speakers and is similar to self-study Italian-English conversation manuals specifically aimed at Italian emigrants published in Italy during this period²⁸. Italian words are presented alongside both standard and phonetic spellings of their English equivalents to facilitate English language acquisition and comprehension among immigrants. The phrase «senza maestro» emerged as a prominent feature in advertising materials, covers, and title pages of U.S.-authored English-language grammar books for Italians published over the subsequent two decades. This phrase served as a significant selling point for Italian immigrants, many of whom worked during the day and were unable to attend formal language classes. James Periconi observes that Italian immigrants, requiring only a little

Italian to benefit from Bassetti's manual, could enhance their proficiency in the correct writing of Italian and thereby reinforce their Italian identity, while simultaneously learning to write English as it is written and speak English as it is spoken (Periconi 2021, 93–94). In 1886, Bassetti published the 34-page *Secondo libro del manuale per imparare la lingua Inglese senza maestro. Contenente storiette amene ed il segretario spedito*²⁹. This more advanced manual opens with a page of «observations on the pronunciation and use of this book» and contains two short stories³⁰ and model letters³¹.

Bassetti paved the way for the following four self-study Italian-English grammars:

Zanolini 1890 = Zanolini, Francesco. 1890. *Ultima grammatica Italiana-Inglese teorico-pratica con la relativa traduzione e pronuncia. Metodo perfezionato per facilmente imparare la lingua inglese senza maestro*. New York: Zanolini.

De Gaudenzi 1896 = De Gaudenzi, Angelo. 1896. *Nuovissima Grammatica Accelerata Italiana-Inglese e guida pratica dell'italiano in America. Corso completo per imparare a scrivere, parlare e comprendere la lingua inglese in breve tempo senza maestro*. New York: De Gaudenzi.

Ciocia 1905 = Ciocia, Vincenzo. 1905. *La più grande e completa grammatica italiana-inglese. Con la pronunzia figurata data al modo italiano*. New York: n.p.

Pecorini 1911 = Pecorini, Alberto. 1911. *Grammatica-enciclopedia italiana-inglese per gli italiani degli Stati Uniti*. New York: Nicoletti Bros. Press.

²⁶ The settlement patterns of Italian immigrants were influenced by communication routes. Almost all Italians arrived in the United States through Ellis Island, with Boston and Philadelphia serving as secondary ports of entry. Consequently, 75% of the over two million Italians who emigrated in the first decade of the Twentieth century settled mainly in the northeastern states, particularly New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New Jersey (Pretelli 2011, 42–45). During this time, Canada was not a primary destination for Italian immigrants. Many Italians who entered Canada did so after passing through U.S. ports, especially New York, Boston, and Portland (Maine) (Harney 1982, 5). In 1911, over two-thirds of the Italian-origin population was concentrated in Montreal and Toronto. The first wave of Italian immigration to Canada was largely temporary and seasonal, driven by significant railroad and canal construction projects, as well as the natural resources industries. These early immigrants were often recruited directly from the major metropolitan areas in the United States (Ramirez 1989, 6; 9–11). Self-study Italian-English grammar books likely crossed the border several times, brought to Canada by seasonal workers, as Gabriele Erasmi suggested in reference to De Gaudenzi's grammar (Erasmi 1988, 48).

²⁷ Little biographical information about Augusto Bassetti is available. Please see Periconi 2021, 90–91, for a brief biography of Augusto Bassetti.

²⁸ See Haller 2023 for a description and comparison of the structure, content, and glottodidactic method of Italian-English conversation manuals 'without a teacher' published in Italy during this period. Since the beginning of the Great Emigration, in fact, pocket-sized manuals for learning a foreign language autonomously were published in Italy, especially for the United States. These manuals were targeted towards emigrants with varying levels of education and linguistic competence.

The existence of these practical materials presupposes the existence of enough buyers who can read and write. The intended users were individuals seeking to learn English in their spare time or requiring immediate reference for specific situations. Developed for eminently practical purposes and for at-home use, these self-study Italian-English grammar books facilitated rapid English acquisition while extensively illustrating the Italian language. The Italian employed is the standard language of literary tradition. The English presented is standard Anglo-American colloquial English. Through-

²⁹ Bassetti also published a short Italian-English/English-Italian dictionary (Bassetti 1886b), and two fictional works (Bassetti 1887; Bassetti 1889).

³⁰ The two «storiette amene», *Il Re e il contadino* and *Il lupo e la volpe*, each span approximately four pages. Each line is presented in Italian, English, and figurative pronunciation.

³¹ The section is titled «il segretario spedito» (22 pages). This type of publications (called «segretari», that is, letter-writers) had a long history in Italy, appearing both as standalone publications and as a standard feature in U.S.-issued Italian grammars (Trasciatti 2009; Haller 2023, 90).

out the volumes, the authors always provided Italian-style figurative pronunciation – a phonetic transcription of English words and phrases using Italian sounds – , as pronunciation was viewed as the primary challenge in learning English (Haller 2023, 77, 82). The concise and simplified grammar lessons assume a foundational knowledge of Italian. Vocabulary receives particular emphasis, organized into semantic categories and concrete situations, occupying nearly half of the books and presented through a comparative approach with Italian and English equivalents side by side. The teaching method is therefore inductive and contrastive, reflecting the behaviorist principles adopted in normative anti-dialect grammar instruction in Italy during that period (Haller 2023, 76-77). Additionally, the books served as a secretary, providing templates for business, formal, and private letters, written adhering to contemporary formalities and reflecting once again both the emigrant experience (their life and social customs) and the now-obsolete epistolary style. Historical information about the United States, warnings typical of guides for emigrants, and, most importantly, guidance on acquiring American citizenship are provided, further underscoring their practical utility. Lastly, the absence of written exercises (with the exception of Pecorini's grammar, which incorporates translation exercises within the grammatical section) underscores their perceived superfluity and confirms the pedagogical emphasis on oral language acquisition.

Zanolini 1890 is the earliest grammar of this type³². The 1901 edition³³ comprises 303 pages organized into six sections. Its grammar section, spanning 64 pages and 13 lessons, emphasizes pronunciation and the traditional parts of speech (articles, nouns, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions). The English words are accompanied by the figurative pronunciation in parentheses. A comprehensive «conversation and pronunciation manual» of 136 pages follows, presenting Italian sentences and words in a left column, English versions in the center, and figurative pronunciation on the right. The initial chapters of this section address useful sentences for everyday scenarios («at the depot», «baggage office», etc.), while subsequent chapters provide thematic word lists («public offices and officials», «crimes», «penalties», «time and its divisions», etc.).

³² Even though the author's name is not on the cover or title page, it appears on the verso of the title page: «Copyright 1890, 1898, and 1901 by Francesco Zanolini» (Zanolini 1901, 2). The 1901 edition is the fourth edition («Quarta edizione», Zanolini 1901, 2). James Periconi reports that «Zanolini developed his own grammar, and that his bookstore (Libreria Economica Italiana) was on Spring Street in Manhattan», see Periconi 2025.

³³ The first edition of this text came out in 1890; the 1901 edition is the oldest text that I could access.

The «Segretario Italiano-Inglese» (translated as «Italian-English Letter-Writer» in the book) begins the manual's second part on page 209. The workman's formulary (22 pages) features letters in Italian with parallel English text. The fourth section, structured similarly, contains 18 pages of «commercial letters», followed by eight pages of «Commercial forms», including model notes and bills. The final 46 pages are devoted to «love letters», exclusively from a man to a woman.

De Gaudenzi 1896 underwent numerous editions and reprints reflecting its popularity³⁴. Its content was regularly updated to address emerging practical needs. The 1916 edition³⁵ contains 400 pages divided into 13 parts. The accelerated grammar part, comprising 10 sections over 47 pages, addresses the traditional parts of speech (article, noun, adjective, pronoun, verb, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions) and question formation. Although explicit pronunciation rules are absent, words, expressions, and phrases are presented in tripartite tables (English, figurative pronunciation, Italian). «Small occasional dialogues» spanning 65 pages follow, with Italian sentences and words in a left column and English versions with figurative pronunciation below each line on the right. The sections of this conversation manual provide useful sentences for daily situations («in the street», «forwarding of the baggage on the arrival», «looking for work», etc.). The subsequent 13-page section outlines the process for obtaining American citizenship. Its introduction, written entirely in Italian, offers helpful information, while the central section presents typical questions posed by judges and possible answers in a table format (with Italian sentences on the left and the English equivalents with the figurative pronunciation below each line on the right). This resource enabled Italian immigrants to comprehend contemporary legal requirements for citizenship and to prepare for the citizenship examination in English. The manual also includes 32 pages of «modern commercial letters» and 32 pages of «letters for contractors and laborers», all with parallel Italian and English text. A 12-page part on «commercial forms» provides illustrations of checks, notes, and receipts with parallel text. The «love letters» section (36 pages) introduces not only form letters from a man to a woman but also appropriate responses, representing an innovation compared to Zanolini's grammar. This part of the book concludes with illustrations of wedding announcements, invitations, regrets for dinner invitations, and christening announcements. The

³⁴ Editions and reprints: 1900, 1905, 1912, 1914, 1944, 1963, 1969, 1972, 1975.

³⁵ The first edition of this text came out in 1896; the 1916 edition is the oldest text that I could access.

vocabulary section (80 pages) is organized thematically («travelling», «commerce», «the workingman», etc.) and is presented in tripartite tables (Italian, English, figurative pronunciation). Additional sections address «cardinal numbers» (5 pages) and «weights and measures in Italy and the United States» (4 pages). Particularly valuable for immigrants are the 19 pages on «nomenclature» and illustrations of tools for various trades (such as mechanic, barber, electrician, etc.). The manual also contains a 9-page summary of United States history and a 37-page practical guide for Italians in America, detailing, for each state, its area, climate, agriculture, industry, trade, population, main cities, and railroads.

Ciocia 1905 consists of 352 pages divided into seven parts. The «practical Italian-English grammar» part (64 pages) opens with the alphabet and pronunciation rules and includes 16 lessons. A 77-page «manual of conversation and pronunciation» follows, structured around specific situations («on the Steamship», «Baggage's office», «at the Depot», etc.), with sentences presented in the usual tripartite table (Italian, English, figurative pronunciation). The same structure is used in the subsequent «vocabulary with the figurative pronunciation provided in the Italian manner» part (152 pages), which is subdivided into thematic categories (numbers, «Festivities», arts and crafts, etc.). The «Italian-English letter-writer» provides letters in Italian with parallel English text, comprising of 28 work letters («Workman's Formulary»), 19 business letters («commercial letters»), and 12 love letters. The manual concludes with 5 pages on the process of obtaining American citizenship.

Pecorini 1911 is a 446-page grammar organized into six parts and an appendix. In the preface, the author notes that the work was intended primarily for the middle class of Italian workers in the United States, who, despite having only elementary education in Italy, possessed sufficient knowledge of Italian to benefit from a practical grammar. The «compendium of Italian-English grammar» comprises 10 lessons over 117 pages, utilizing the standard tripartite table (English, figurative pronunciation, Italian). The second part (33 pages) provides information in both Italian and English on naturalization law and the history of the United States, as well as questions and answers for citizenship. A «practical guide for Italians in the United States» (85 pages) follows, primarily in Italian with some bilingual sections. The manual also includes 58 pages of «examples of common and useful Italian and English letters», presented in parallel text. The next part features «dialogues and common sayings», with English in the left column and Italian equivalents on the right, followed by additional dialogues categorized by topic («In the fields», «The Railway»,

«Music», etc.), with accompanying illustrations. The final two parts are dictionaries: a 46-page «dizionario English-Italian» arranged alphabetically, and a 28-page «Italian-English dictionary with figurative pronunciation» employing the tripartite table format. An appendix (12 pages) concludes the manual, furnishing information regarding schools and hospitals in New York City, as well as Italian newspapers in the United States.

CONCLUSION

The Italian language served as a significant point of reference for North American diasporic communities in establishing a sense of identity away from Italy. The development of local associations and schools, along with the circulation of newspapers, books, and language manuals, influenced the generations following the initial wave of emigrants who arrived around 1880. This study examined the circulation and consumption of locally printed Italian-language materials and the impact of written language as an Italianizing agent among Italian immigrants. Written Italian remained a constant presence for emigrants, from the onset of their migration to their settlement in North America. For them, acquiring and improving Italian not only reinforced their identity and sense of community abroad but also prepared them for potential return to their homeland. This dual objective was often addressed through self-study Italian-English grammar books specifically designed within and conceived for immigrant communities. Bassetti himself, as cited by Periconi, noted as early as 1885 that these materials were useful to immigrants in perfecting their Italian: by reading his book, anyone who knows how to read and write a little Italian can learn by himself to write English as it is written and speak it as it is spoken; furthermore, he can improve his Italian writing skills («ognuno, che sa leggere e scrivere un poco l'italiano, può imparare da se stesso, a scrivere l'inglese come si scrive, e parlarlo come si parla; oltreccìò può perfezionarsi nella retta scrittura dell'italiano»; Periconi 2021, 92). These books demonstrate how the national language became embedded within emigrant communities from the earliest stages of the Italian presence in North America, thus challenging the stereotype of emigrants as exclusively dialect-speaking. Further analysis of such materials, designed for and used by these communities, will serve to definitively demonstrate how the Italian language circulated within Italian communities in the United States and Canada, and its prominence in the emigrants' linguistic repertoire.

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