Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
Italian identity and heritage language motivation: 
Five stories of heritage language learning 
in traditional foreign language courses in 
Wellington, New Zealand

A thesis presented in fulfilment 
of the requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 
In 
Linguistics and Second Language Teaching 
at Massey University, 
Palmerston North, New Zealand

Arianna Berardi-Wiltshire 
2009
Abstract

The study explores the motivational role of the personal constructions of Italian identity (*Italianità*) of five learners of Italian descent studying their heritage language by means of traditional foreign language courses in Wellington, New Zealand. By adopting a social constructivist perspective on both language learning and the motivational processes underlying it, and by applying such concepts as investment (Norton, 2000), ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2009) and language learning as identity reconstruction (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), the study aims to further our understanding of heritage language learning motivation as a socially mediated process (Ushioda, 2003).

Qualitative data was collected through waves of semi-structured interviews from five case-study participants over the course of several months of learning. Responses were used to map the influence that the participants’ constructions of their own *Italianità* exerted on three aspects of their language learning motivation: their reasons for learning the language, the decision to embark on the study of it, and the maintenance of their interest and learning efforts throughout the learning process. Detailed observations of learning sites, classes and materials, and interviews with teachers provided rich contextual data concerning key episodes identified by the students as relating to different aspects of motivation.

The findings suggest that *Italianità* is heavily implicated in the initial stages of motivation, but that its influence is mediated by the learners’ personal constructions of a multitude of internal and external factors, through which they come to personalise and prioritise their own objectives and identity ambitions in ways that guide their motivational arousal, their decision to pursue the language and their creation and visualisation of learning goals. *Italianità* is also found to have an influence on the maintenance and shifts in the participants’ motivational states throughout their learning, supporting a socially mediated view of L2 motivation in which motivational fluctuations are explained as the result of the learners’ own processing of and reaction to elements of their context, including critical events inside and outside the classroom, exchanges with teachers, peers and speakers of Italian, and ongoing developments of opportunities and challenges for the achievement of the personal goals and identity ambitions driving their learning.
Acknowledgements

The long and at times difficult pursuit of this project was only made possible with the help, support and input from a number of people.

I am indebted to the two institutions mentioned in the study and to the teachers, members, administrators and students who assisted me in gaining access to the learner participants and to all of the information needed along the way. I extend my particular gratitude to the five learners whose stories feature in the study for all the time and effort they so generously volunteered, and for their willingness to share their journey with me.

I am grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Martin Paviour-Smith and Prof. Cynthia White for all the professional support, encouragement and constructive criticism during all the stages of the work. Particular thanks go to Prof. White for her ongoing guidance, her precious suggestions, and her unwavering faith in my abilities.

My institution, Massey University provided a doctoral scholarship without which this project would have never come to completion. I also thank my work and study colleagues at the university who offered friendship and moral support throughout the venture. Among these, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to Paul Lyons, for the many hours spent proofreading and for his immensely valuable comments, questions and suggestions, and to Dr. Gillian Skyrme, who, having recently completed her doctorate journey, has been both a mentor and an inspiration.

Finally, I thank my family, especially my husband David and my daughter Elisa for their patience in sharing me for so long and for being my anchor to reality, and to my mother Angela for coming all the way to New Zealand from Italy to offer moral and practical support during the final stages of the project.
Table of contents

1 Chapter One: What we always needed to know about heritage language learners but never dared to ask ................................................................. 1
  1.1 Background to the study ................................................................. 1
  1.2 The problem ................................................................................. 4
  1.3 Purpose of the study ..................................................................... 6
  1.4 Theoretical framework ................................................................. 7
  1.5 Research questions ....................................................................... 9
  1.6 Research design ........................................................................... 10
  1.7 Overview of chapters ................................................................... 11

2 Chapter two: Motivation and identity ................................................. 13
  2.1 Conceptualising motivation and identity ........................................ 13
      2.1.1 Language learning motivation: A cognitive perspective .......... 13
      2.1.2 Motivation as socially mediated ........................................... 15
      2.1.3 The temporal dimension of L2 motivation .......................... 17
  2.2 L2 motivation: An overview of the process .................................. 22
      2.2.1 Stage one: Reasons for doing something............................... 22
      2.2.2 Stage two: Deciding to act .................................................. 23
      2.2.3 Stage three: Persisting ......................................................... 23
      2.2.4 Three key elements of L2 motivation .................................. 23
  2.3 Identity and L2 motivation ............................................................ 28
      2.3.1 Identity and L2 learning: Current perspectives ...................... 28
      2.3.2 Identity (re)construction and negotiation .......................... 29
      2.3.3 Identity and imagination ..................................................... 31
  2.4 Identity vs. self-concept .............................................................. 33
  2.5 Self-concept and motivation ......................................................... 35
  2.6 Summary and conclusion ............................................................. 37

3 Chapter three: Heritage language learning ......................................... 38
  3.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 38
  3.2 On choosing definitions: Heritage language ............................... 38
      3.2.1 Heritage language learner (HLL) ....................................... 39
5.4 Summary and conclusions ................................................................. 102

6 Chapter Six: Marianne ................................................................. 104
  6.1 Meet Marianne: The true Wellington-Italian ............................. 104
  6.2 The story of an Island Bay family ............................................ 105
  6.3 The last Italian standing: Marianne’s initial motivation ............ 107
  6.4 “A very bad start”: The ‘Beginners’ One’ course .................... 112
  6.5 March-June 2006: Making the most of the less-than-perfect ...... 114
  6.6 The Italian escape: The gap between classroom and reality ...... 118
  6.7 July-September 2006: The ‘motivational auto-pilot’ ................. 120
  6.8 One down, many to go: The year that was and those to come ... 122
  6.9 Italianità and heritage language motivation ............................ 125
  6.10 Postscript .............................................................................. 131

7 Chapter Seven: Francesco .............................................................. 133
  7.1 Meet Francesco: The not-so-Italian Italian ............................... 133
  7.2 Growing up as an Italian outsider in Wellington .................... 134
  7.3 Nonna’s village in Italy: The seed of motivation ...................... 136
  7.4 A smooth start: The beginners’ course .................................... 138
  7.5 The pre-intermediate course: First challenges ......................... 141
  7.6 Highs and lows: Demotivation and motivational self-regulation .. 145
  7.7 Old goals, new goals ............................................................... 149
  7.8 Pat yourself on the back for that: Self-evaluation .................... 155
  7.9 Italianità and heritage language motivation ............................ 157
  7.10 Postscript .............................................................................. 162

8 Chapter Eight: Esther ............................................................... 164
  8.1 Meet Esther: The born-again Italian ....................................... 164
  8.2 “A long way back”: A family’s forgotten Italianità ................ 165
  8.3 A hand from destiny: Motivation arousal .............................. 166
  8.4 Putting your mind to it: Goal setting and launching of action .... 169
  8.5 Gliding, stumbling and gritting your teeth ............................ 172
  8.6 The new Esther: Aiming higher and higher ......................... 177
  8.7 Esther tomorrow: No time to rest ....................................... 185
  8.8 Italianità and heritage language motivation .......................... 187
8.9 Postscript........................................................................................................................................191

9 Chapter Nine: Livia............................................................................................................................192
  9.1 Meet Livia: The picture-perfect Italian.........................................................................................192
  9.2 Livia’s background: Life in the Wood .........................................................................................193
  9.3 “The only chance I’ve got”: Initial motivation and year one .................................................195
  9.4 Year two: The motivational slippery slope ..............................................................................198
  9.5 Year 3: The good, the bad, the grammar .................................................................................203
  9.6 The last year: Light at the end of the tunnel ............................................................................205
  9.7 The end of an era: Regrets and resolutions .............................................................................210
  9.8 Livia’s Italianità: Motivational friend or foe? .........................................................................211
  9.9 Postscript.......................................................................................................................................218

10 Chapter Ten: Giulia............................................................................................................................220
  10.1 Meet Giulia: An Italian in exile .................................................................................................220
  10.2 Meatballs, accordions and dancing WOGs ............................................................................222
  10.3 Experiencing the real homeland: Motivation arousal .............................................................224
  10.4 What’s in an A grade? Smooth but doubtful beginnings .....................................................229
  10.5 Inches from giving up: Opposing influences and the ghost of failure ..................................234
  10.6 Tre mesi all'alba: Emotional healing and motivation rebound ...........................................243
  10.7 Looking back, but not in anger: Reflections and resolutions ............................................247
  10.8 Italian Heritage vs. learning context: Opposing forces .......................................................248
  10.9 Postscript.....................................................................................................................................253

11 Chapter Eleven: Discussion................................................................................................................255
  11.1 Introduction...................................................................................................................................255
  11.2 Italianità and reasons for learning Italian ................................................................................255
  11.3 Italianità and deciding to study Italian....................................................................................257
    11.3.1 Italianità and initial goals .....................................................................................................259
    11.3.2 Identity reconstruction .........................................................................................................262
    11.3.3 Complex goals, complex identities ....................................................................................264
  11.4 Italianità and sustaining motivation .........................................................................................265
  11.5 Italianità and demotivation ........................................................................................................265
    11.5.1 Course Objectives ................................................................................................................266
    11.5.2 Fluency .....................................................................................................................................268
11.5.3 Teachers and Italianità ................................................................. 269
11.5.4 Peers and Italianità ................................................................. 270

11.6 Positive motivational changes .................................................... 271
11.6.1 Contacts with speakers ............................................................ 271
11.6.2 Changing identities, changing motivations .................................. 273
11.6.3 Italianità, motivational support and motivational self-regulation .... 275

11.7 Summary ..................................................................................... 276

12 Chapter Twelve: Conclusions ........................................................ 278
12.1 Final thoughts on research questions ............................................ 278
12.1.1 Research question one .............................................................. 278
12.1.2 Research question two ............................................................. 278
12.1.3 Research question three ........................................................... 279

12.2 Implications for theory .............................................................. 280
12.2.1 Motivation ............................................................................. 280
12.2.2 Heritage language learning ...................................................... 282

12.3 Implications for teaching practice ................................................. 283
12.4 Implications for heritage language learners .................................... 285
12.5 Methodological implications ......................................................... 286
12.6 Strengths and limitations of the study ........................................... 287
12.7 A final word .............................................................................. 289

Appendix 1: Notes on data presentation ............................................. 291
Data sources ..................................................................................... 291
Names .............................................................................................. 291
Expressing the participants’ voices ..................................................... 291

Appendix 2: Data collection schedule with reference codes ................. 292
Participants’ data ............................................................................. 292
Teacher’s data ................................................................................. 293
Other interview data ....................................................................... 293
Observation data ............................................................................ 294
Other data ....................................................................................... 294