

A History of the Sicilian Language

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Sicilian is one of the many Romance Languages that evolved from Latin, the language of the Roman Empire. To say, however, only that Sicilian evolved from Latin unduly simplifies its history and development. I have tried here to relate the complexity as well as a rough timeline of its development, which adds to its richness. Most of the endnote references are Wikipedia articles and not considered primary sources, but they are easy to access with a computer and they do contain many references to primary sources for anyone wanting to research further.

At its largest extent, the Roman Empire spanned from the western end of the Iberian Peninsula to ancient Babylon in the middle-east and from North Africa along the southern boundary of the Mediterranean Sea to the isle of Britannia in north-western Europe. Over this vast area, the people of the Roman courts and the scholars spoke, wrote and read classical Latin, while the commoners spoke simpler versions referred to as Vulgar Latin. Due to the great distances and slow forms of communication, these forms of Vulgar Latin varied across the empire, indeed varied even along the Italian peninsula. As these variations mixed with other locally spoken languages after the many barbarian invasions at the end of the empire, they evolved into the many languages of the lands of the former empire. For Sicilian, the non-Latin influences were present both before and after the Roman Empire.

From prehistoric times, Sicily was invaded by one group after another. Control of the island changed many times even up through the 19th century, and these changes played a dominant role in the development of its people's language. The pre-historic peoples included the Sicanians, Elymians and Sicels. Only the Sicels are known with any certainty to have spoken an Indo-European language likely closely related to that of the Romans. There are also some pre-Indo-European words of an ancient Mediterranean origin that remain in Sicilian. [1] The Greeks were one of the first to arrive with a written language to leave records as well as the language itself for the inhabitants to speak. Their first settlement was at the eastern end of Sicily at Naxos in 735 BC with many more to follow, especially the dominant settlement at Siracusa. [2] The Phoenicians and their colonists from Carthage in North Africa made a settlement near the western end of the island, but they left very little trace of their language, possibly because the Romans did everything possible to destroy Carthage, its Sicilian settlement and all traces of its culture after defeating it in the Punic Wars of 264-146 BC. [3] The Romans thought Greek culture worth saving, copying and adapting for their use. They controlled all of Sicily as a Roman province after the defeat of Carthage in the first Punic War in 241 BC until Rome's fall in the 6th or 7th century AD, depending upon what event you choose to mark its end. The Latin language then left a major imprint on the local language. There was a later Greek influence as well during the Byzantine era after the fall of the western Roman empire until the conquest of Sicily by the Muslims in the mid 900s AD. This was followed by the Normans in the 11th century. The Norman period is normally regarded as 1091 to 1194 AD but culturally it extended to at least 1266 through the important rule of Frederick II and his son Manfred. [4]

The Muslim rulers tolerated the Latin and Greek speaking peoples of Sicily. The Normans went further to not only tolerate but make good use of the Arabic, Latin and Greek speaking inhabitants. While Norman-French is thought to have been the language at the Norman court, their administrators and artisans all spoke one or more of the other three languages. [4] It is during this period that the Sicilian language became more formalized, its basis being the local version of Vulgar Latin [5] but with strong influences of Greek and Arabic. Frederick II encouraged this development including its written form by founding the Sicilian School, often called the Scuola Poetica Siciliana [Sicilian School of Poetry], in 1230. From 1230 until 1266, its members produced more than 300 poems. This poetry was not the epic style of the middle ages but lyric including themes of love. Dante and Petrarch, writing 50 to 100 years later referred to the

influence these Sicilian works had on theirs. Even the development of the Sonnet has been credited to the Sicilian School. [6] These works of the Sicilian School then predate, by nearly 100 years, the use of northern versions of vernacular, derived from Vulgar Latin, as literary works. This is the basis for Joseph Privitera's and others' claim that Sicilian was the first of the Romance languages derived from Vulgar Latin. [7] It is then an interesting question why the northern vernacular of Tuscany, of Dante, became the accepted language of Italy? There are a few reasons but in order to understand them, it is necessary first to understand the development of the territories that eventually made up the Italian nation, especially the southern territories.

When Frederick's illegitimate son Manfred, the last King of Sicily with any cultural as well as blood link to the Norman kings, lost the kingdom and his life to the French invader Charles of Anjou in 1266, the capital was moved from Palermo to Napoli; French became the language of court; and the development of the Napolitano language grew to be the natural language of the populace in the mainland part of the kingdom as the focus of the culture shifted north off the Sicilian island.

There was a period from 1282 commencing with the rebellion of the Sicilian Vespers until 1409, during which time Sicily again was ruled as essentially an independent state but officially part of the Kingdom of Aragon. [8] During this time, the Sicilian language and a sense of a Sicilian nationality were allowed to further develop. Sicilian was the language of the Sicilian Parliament meeting in Palermo.

In 1409, the branch of the Aragonese family ruling Sicily failed to produce an heir causing the rule of Sicily to return directly to Spain. From that time until Unification in 1861, with only few interruptions by rulers from other countries, Sicily was governed by Spanish rulers. This was either from Madrid or more often from Napoli but never from Palermo. Sicilian didn't disappear but at least in the areas near Napoli where the court existed, Napolitano was spoken and written by the commoners and, I believe, also by the barons, etc. who were the closest thing to a middle class.

When Garibaldi invaded Sicily in 1861, the enthusiastic peasants that met him and joined his "Band of a Thousand" – called "Il Mille" in Italian – spoke Sicilian with varying dialects across the island. But those who landed with Garibaldi were mostly all from Piemonte. They likely spoke Piemontese. It is an interesting question how the two groups communicated because those two descendant languages of Vulgar Latin are very different. Perhaps they had some bilinguals in the group. Somehow, they managed to conduct a very efficient war.

Now we can look to possible reasons for the language of Dante to be accepted as Italian rather than the language of Frederick II. One reason cited is that this Sicilian literature of the 13th century was inhibited by the censorship of Frederick. Topics of love had to be limited to courtly love, or better yet, love of God. Political satire was not considered. It is not clear if this was completely Frederick's own preference or in deference to the Papacy which was keeping close watch on his rule and ultimately forced its end. Dante and Petrarch, on the other hand, exercised more freedom in the topics they chose. The political intrigues between Firenze and the Papacy at that time appear to have given cover to their writings. It would have been impossible for Sicilian writers under Frederick to have written the satire of the *Divina Commedia*, which Dante wrote while in exile, naming certain rulers and popes as residents of hell. Their poems of love for Beatrice and Laura were even more expressive and fascinating being unreturned. This freedom of composition made the later works in Tuscan much more interesting for people of the Renaissance to read, increasing their popularity. [6]

Another reason, I believe, is that while the 12th century Kingdom of Sicily was considered a well governed and respected European state, the kingdoms that followed especially after 1409 ruled by Spanish families either from Spain or from Napoli considered the island of Sicily more as a colony. The region around Napoli had developed its own derivative from Vulgar Latin including a written form. Sicilian with no

internationally recognized leader had no prominence. As time passed, the literary achievements of the Sicilian School were nearly forgotten.

Meanwhile, the literary Tuscan language was increasing its hold on the upper peninsula. The influence of the Medici from Firenze through their banking system, “Banco Medici”, and the four Medici popes in addition to the art and humanism of the Renaissance that was born in Tuscany gave great utility to that particular derivative of Vulgar Latin. By the mid-1500s, Tuscan had become the language used by all the courts of the Italian peninsula, save perhaps the one in Napoli. The papal court unofficially adopted a mixture of Tuscan and Roman dialects as their working language even though all official documents continued to be written in Latin. Having an accepted vernacular became more important. Then in 1582-1583, the Accademia della Crusca was established in Firenze, Tuscany, as the first linguistic academy with the aim of defining the Italian language followed by the first Italian dictionary in 1612. [9]

The politics of forming a unified Italian state in the mid 19th century came after some 200 years of the evolution of this lingual environment. The initiative for unification, called in Italian “Il Risorgimento”, came from the north. Its early leaders included Cavour from Torino in Piemonte, Mazzini from Genoa in Liguria. Even Garibaldi was born in Nice, then part of Piemonte. [10,11,12] Even though each of those regions had their own vernacular form of Italian, those forms were much closer to Tuscan than to Sicilian and these men all were literate in the language that emerged from the Accademia della Crusca. They naturally promoted this to be the language of their new state. Of the languages of southern Italy by the 1860s, Napolitano was likely more recognized along the peninsula than Sicilian given its history in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Then, politics was a determining factor in the choice of an official Italian language, the politics of Fredrick II vs. the Papacy, the politics of the many rulers of Sicily after the Normans and finally the politics of forming a united Italy.

After Sicily joined the united Kingdom of Italy, the Sicilian language started to feel the influence of the official Italian language. Sicilian picked up some Italian words and constructions. This was a natural evolution as Italian speaking officials came to visit or work in Sicily and Sicilians went north to visit or work. This experience up to the end of World War II was not especially good for the Sicilians, but that is the topic for another study. Even with the antagonism between Sicilians and northern Italians erupting into armed rebellion in a few places, some language evolution took place. The Fascists pressed to make Italian the official and fully accepted language of the entire country including Sicily by declaring it illegal to speak Sicilian and forcing the change of some place names, for example, changing the Sicilian name Girgenti (from Norman times) to the Italianized version Agrigento of its Latin name. [13] This dominance of Italian was later accomplished with much less rancor by improved education after World War II and the introduction of television, both of which use only Italian. Tullio De Mauro, an Italian linguist asserted that in 1861 only 2.5% of the total Italian population could speak the standard Italian, but by 1951 this percentage had risen to 87%. It was, however, estimated that 63.5% spoke their native variant when possible. This latter number may not have changed much in the last 70 years. Here are just a few more related statistics. The percentage of literates in Italy rose from 25% in 1861 to 61% in 1911 and 78% in 1951. [9] One contributing factor to these numbers in addition to better education was the large number of Italians emigrating to other countries referred to as the Italian Diaspora. From 1861 to 1915, 29.45 million Italians left. [14] More specifically for Sicily, 1.126 million emigrated between 1901 and 1915, 32% of its population in 1901. [15,16] Since a large percentage of those leaving were poorly educated, their leaving increased the percentage of literates.

Sicilians, who emigrated to other countries, carried the Sicilian language with them and it is spoken by them and their descendants to varying degrees. [1] In many cases, this Sicilian spoken by these émigrés was frozen at the time they left Sicily with respect to the Sicilian spoken in Sicily and did not evolve along with

the language spoken in its homeland. There are cases of second generation Sicilian-Americans, taught to communicate in Sicilian by their grandparents, who traveled back to the village from where they grandparents emigrated years earlier and found that some of their Sicilian words were only understandable to an older generation in Sicily. Those words, such as “bunaca” for jacket or “muntanni” for thermal underwear had been displaced by other words as Sicilian evolved in its own way. [17] In some cases, that evolution picked up words or constructions from Italian which had become the language taught in school and used on television after many of these émigrés had already left.

The émigrés’ Sicilian did evolve but tended to be affected instead by their local language, be it English, Spanish, etc. Privitera, in his book, gives the example that Sicilians in America called a loaf of bread “un loffu di pani”. [7] I am not familiar with that example, but I remember a discussion with my father and grandparents while I was studying Italian in high school in which the word for “floor” came up. They said the word they used for floor was “floro”. This adoption of names in the local language along with appropriate Sicilianization was especially necessary given the large number of new devices that were invented and became commonplace in the years after so many Sicilians emigrated to other countries: cars, trucks, airplanes, telephones, etc.

The adoption of the Tuscan as the accepted language of the united Italy has meant the subordination of all the other various dialects or languages of the several regions of Italy, not just Sicilian. There is no question that Italy needed, still needs, several elements unifying its people into one country after more than a thousand years of being many independent kingdoms or republics. One could question whether one united Italy was better than separate republics, better for its people, but once the step was taken to unify, language was an important aspect of that unification. What then of Sicilian? It is still spoken in Sicily among family members and neighborhood friends. More important for us, it remains a special part of the cultural heritage of Sicily – important to understand its history, that it did not develop from Italian but actually before Italian; important to remember that Dante’s *Divina Commedia* was not the first literary work written in a language derived from Vulgar Latin; and that there were several factors that determined which descendent language of Vulgar Latin became Italian – all a heritage to be passed on to our heirs, the next generation of Sicilian descendants.

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