

Capish?! A linguistic journey and a final repatriation

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Abstract

This study develops the blended theme of pragmatic particles (such as interjections and exclamatory remarks) as cultural key-words, developing key concepts (Wierzbicka 1997), and their diachronic, diatopic and diamesic usage. The addressed issue is the word /*capish*/, its use within the migrant community of Italian Americans and its global spread. *Capish*, in its different and alternative spellings, is today the name of Hip-Hop artists and their songs worldwide, but also of restaurants and pizza bakeries in South Africa, sandwich bars and street food in the UK, street wear companies in Ontario and brand of jewels in Brazil, to mention only a few of the numerous companies or activities with this name. The article describes the parallel, unbalanced spreading of the signifier and the significant of this migratory lexical item on a global scenario, to its final *reconciliation* after almost a century in Italy. Here, in recent years, while local people still use *capish* as a dialectal expression, some Italians use it as the result of the echo of the Italian-American culture dissemination in the world, mainly influenced by mafia literature, Hollywood filmography and Hip-Hop music.

Keywords: *capish*, linguistic spread, english language, Italian american culture, mafia literature

Part I. The speech form

1. Introduction

The present text does not have the ambition to investigate the influence of the Italian language and culture on the history of America as a whole: its aim is to describe the spread of a key-cultural lexical item element that, due to emigration, from an Italian dialectal expression has become an internationally recognized American English word recorded in dictionaries. The phenomenon under scrutiny challenges the traditional *inner circle* and *outer circle* dynamics, as in this case the borrowing comes from American *inner city* to an *extended periphery* at the outskirts of urban centres and quasi-rural community (Tomei 2015).

The originality of the theme being that the Italian lexical item *capish*, widely used in American Italian speech form, spreads globally through mafia literature, Hollywood filmography and Hip-Hop music, wherefrom it returns back to Italy.

Capish represents the linguistic transcription of the pronunciation of the second-person present-tense form of the Italian verb *capire* (to understand), typical of the southern populations of Italy (Campania, Calabria and Sicily). In these areas, *capisci?*, pronounced with the final vowel silent, is generally used in the form of interjection in order to keep the attention or simply to have a feedback from the interlocutor.

In the last two decades this word, with different spellings, has been recorded in several dictionaries and many other publications. The present research refers to the existing literature, in particular to the

published dictionaries of English and American-English Language.

Further references are made to minor publications (glossaries), web-dictionaries and other online resources.

Only in the last decades Italian American studies have been recognized as an academic discipline. As reported by A.J. Tamburri in his preface to *Reviewing Italian Americana*:

In addition to the increase in publications, the number of graduate students in Italian American studies has increased significantly, bolstering in turn enrolments in English, Comparative Literature, and/or Italian studies seminars that tackle these and other permanent issues. (Tamburri 2011, p.3)

2. Lexicographic survey

With regard to monolingual dictionaries in print, the research takes into consideration ten dictionaries covering a period of more than two decades (1991-2014):

1. *Dictionary of Contemporary American Slang*, (Spears 1991) (CAS)
2. *Dictionaries* by The Dictionary Society of North America, (1995) (SNA)
3. *Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions*, (Spears 2005) (ASCE)
4. *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, (Dalzell and Victor 2006) (SUE)
5. *Dictionary of Modern American Slang and Unconventional English*, (Dalzell 2008) (MASUE)
6. *American Slang Dictionary and Thesaurus*, (Elizabeth 2009) (ASDT)
7. *Dictionary of Modern Slang*, (Ayto and Simpson 2010) (DMS)
8. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, (Stevenson and Waite 2011) (COE)
9. *Common American Phrases in Everyday Contexts*, (Spears 2012) (CAPEC)
10. *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*, (Thorne 2014) (DCS)

From the number of minor online publications, glossaries and web-dictionaries that record /*capish*/ in its various spellings, comparison has been restricted to the following:

1. The Urban Dictionary -online dictionary of English slang – (UD)
2. The Online Slang Dictionary - online dictionary of English slang – (OSD)
3. Wiktionary - online open-content dictionary – (WI)

4. Grammarist - online blog and website – (GR)
5. Yo! Capish? - published glossary/guide – (YC)

The lexicographic entry from the above sources has been analyzed on the basis of:

- spelling
- translation
- linguistic classification
- examples provided.

a. Spelling

Dictionaries:

1. CAS: Capish
2. SNA: Capish – Capeesh
3. ASCE: Capish
4. SUE: Capisce? – Capeesh?
5. MASUE: Capisce -Capeesh
6. ASDT: Capiche? Capisce?/ Capiche! Capisce!
7. DMS: Capisce
8. COE: Capeesh
9. CAPEC: Capeesh
10. DCS: Capeesh? Capeeshee?

Other Sources:

1. UD: Capsice
2. OSD: Capisce – frequently misspelled Capish, Capeesh, Kapish, etc.
3. WI: Capisce – list of alternative forms: capice – capeesh – capiche – capische – capisch – coppish – kapish
4. GR: Capiche – the word occasionally appears in several other spellings, including Capeesh and Capische, but these are far less common than the standard one.
5. YC: Capish?

Presumably, one of the reasons behind the choice to use the spelling *capisce* in the web context could probably be referred to the ‘popularity factor’, measured by the number of results on the browsers. However, the high number of results for the research of the form *capisce* are mainly related to the use of the word as third-person present-tense form of the Italian verb *capire*, rather than to the Italian-American discourse marker object of the present research.¹

Curiously, Wiktionary does not provide the entry *capeesh* or the more commonly used *capish* and *kapish*.

Moreover, in order to better define the object of the study, a comparative research on the Internet sources has been conducted. The following table shows the

different results found by the Google browser for all the different alternative forms:

Word	N. of Results
<i>Capisce</i>	10.100.000
<i>Capiche</i>	350.000
<i>Kapish</i>	238.000
<i>Capish</i>	142.000
<i>Capice</i>	216.000
<i>Kapeesh</i>	84.500
<i>Capeesh</i>	76.500
<i>Capische</i>	54.500
<i>Coppish</i>	16.000
<i>Capisch</i>	8.800

Further data were obtained from Google Trend, a digital support that calculates Internet trends on the base of the number of web researches for single or multiple words. The description of Internet trends includes a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of data and it supplies statistical and average figures for the geographical areas of provenience of the research.

The three forms *capish* – *capeesh* – *kapish*, evidenced a clear predominance of certain countries for each of the words. In particular, the majority of research conducted on the web for the word *capish* were made by Swedish users, for *capeesh* by South-Africans and for *kapish* by Indians. While the reason of the first and the second instance may be taken for granted, being the Internet clearly market-oriented, the third seems to be unpredictable.

Capish is a Swedish software solutions company developing tools and processes for the management, evaluation and visualization of data and *Capeesh* is one of Pretoria’s most popular Italian restaurants. Far from being a commercial activity, *Kapish* is a very common name in India and it means ‘God of monkeys’ or ‘God with the face of a monkey’. It is the name of a very important Hindu God: Hanuman.

In conclusion, in order to follow the existent literature and also to avoid confusion with the Italian source of verbal form (i.e. *capisce*), the present text features the form *capish*. Notably, *capish* is used as an umbrella term which includes all the different possible spellings: *capice* – *capeesh* – *capiche* – *capische* – *capisch* – *coppish* – *coppische* – *kapish* – *capiscia*.²

1 Analyzing the first 20 results for the research of *capisce* on Google, 15 are links to Italian websites where the word is used as the third-person form of the verb *capire*. (Accessed on 23.08.14).

2 The Google Trend research on a comparative basis (*capish* – *capeesh* – *kapish* – *kapeesh*) featured the highest rate of interest for the longest period of time for the first word (*capish*).

b. Translation

Dictionaries:

1. CAS: Do you understand?
2. SNA: To understand
3. ASCE: To understand
4. SUE: Do you understand?
5. MASUE: Do you understand?
6. ASDT: Do you understand?/ I understand!
7. DMS: Do you understand? To understand
8. COE: Do you understand?
9. CAPEC: Do you understand?
10. DCS: Do you understand?

Other Sources:

1. UD: Do you understand?
2. OSD: To understand
3. WI: Get it? Understand?
4. GR: Do you understand?
5. YC: Understand?

Considering the homogeneity and the lexical symmetry of the different sources analyzed, translatability and semantic equivalence do not seem to be an issue: all the dictionaries, publications and websites translate *capish* as 'to understand'.

On the other hand, however, the speech form object of the research as further analyzed would require a long periphrases to be defined in terms of pragmatic content and load of meaning as it is deeply connected to specific cultural elements and interactional situations. Extralinguistic issues connected to it are more specifically addressed in the following chapter.

c. Linguistic classification

Dictionaries:

1. CAS: Intransitive verb. Usually a question. From an Italian dialect
2. SNA: no linguistic classification
3. ASCE: Intransitive verb
4. SUE: no linguistic classification
5. MASUE: no linguistic classification
6. ASDT: Interrogative/ Exclamation. Adapted from Italian
7. DMS: Intransitive verb often used interrogatively. From Italian *capisce*, 3rd person present singular of *capire*
8. COE: Exclamation. Origin 1940: from Italian *capisce*, 3rd person present singular of *capire*
9. CAPEC: Question with a veiled intimidating tone. Adapted from Italian
10. DCS: Question. The words are Anglicisations of the Italian *capisci*?

Other Sources:

1. UD: Verb. From Italian *tu capisci*? (infinitive form: *capire*, to understand)
2. OSD: Verb – Transitive
3. WI: Verb. From Neapolitan *capisci*, the 2nd person present-tense form of *capire* (to understand), from Latin *capere* (to grasp, seize)
4. GR: Word usually followed by a question mark. It comes from the Italian *capisci*. No linguistic classification.
5. YC: Commonly used alone after a statement to ensure that the other party understood the message? No linguistic classification.

As summarized above, the literature and the sources taken into consideration give different hypothesis concerning the linguistic classification of *capish*: intransitive verb, question, and exclamation.

As already noted, *capish* represents a verbal form, from the Italian word *capire*, often used as a question, as reported by the majority of the dictionaries, but also as an exclamation (only 1 out of 10).³ A frequent mistake is that of relating the form *capish* to the 3rd rather than to the 2nd person present singular of the verb *capire*. In Italian *capisce* refers to the 3rd person and it translates into English as 'he/she understands' while the 2nd person would be *capisco*.

Data related to the analysis of the use of *capish* in conversational contexts and communicative practices show that it is frequently inserted in the middle of a discourse and at the end of sentences, as an attention-keeping device and a request for feedback and backchannel signals. Within this perspective, it may be categorized as a pragmatic particle of the discourse.

Anna Wierzbicka, in *Cross-Cultural Pragmatic: The Semantics of Human Interaction*, observes that:

There are few aspects of any language which reflect the culture of a given speech community better than its particles. Particles are very often highly idiosyncratic: 'untranslatable' in the sense that no equivalent can be found in other languages. They are ubiquitous and their frequency in ordinary speech is particularly high. Their meaning is crucial to the interaction mediated by speech; they express the speaker's attitude towards addressee or toward the situation spoken about, his assumptions, his intentions, his emotions. If learners of a language failed to master the meaning of its particles, their communicative competence would be drastically impaired. The meanings embodied in particles are often remarkably complex. (Wierzbicka 2003, p.341)

³ For a more detailed description, see further sections and the conversation Gotti-Dellacrose, where *capish* is used in both interrogative and affirmative way.

Furthermore, the use of *capish* could be described as 'peripheral to language and similar to non-linguistic items such as gestures and vocal paralinguistic devices' (Cuenca 2006). Consequently, the item could also be classified as part of that peculiar and extremely controversial word class of interjections.

In the last decade, research on speech has widened and deepened our knowledge concerning the vocal expression of emotions and the prosodic, intonational and acoustic features of face-to-face interaction. Conversely, interjections have been only sparsely analyzed: for this reason they could be defined as 'the universal yet neglected parts of speech' (Ameika 1992, pp.101-118).

Interjections have always shown multiple definitions, intimately connected with the issues of conversational analysis, acquisition, and translation.⁴

As noted by Wierzbicka, interjections represent key elements to the national cultural identity:

The fact that the route back from the explication to the word may be longer and more difficult to travel than it usually is in the case of major lexical classes, should of course be noted, and its implications should be explored. Perhaps we should conclude from it that different types of linguistic signs have different psychological status. After all, an interjection is an equivalent of a full sentence. Perhaps mental act encoded globally in one phonologically tiny word is generally harder to recognize (reconstruct) on a conscious level than an act encoded in a more articulated linguistic expression? Perhaps a global sign such as an interjection is in some sense more 'automatic' than a non-global sign, such as a verb or an adjective?' (Wierzbicka 2003, p. 337)

In addition, if we consider the category of assertive questions as designed to convey assertions rather than seek new information, the case of *capish* seems to be a case 'beyond rhetorical questions'.⁵

These question sequences unfold interactionally in naturally occurring talk, what kinds of answer, if any, they engender, and how these answers display the recipients' understanding of the social actions that these questions are used to perform.' (Koshik 2005, p. 2)

Examples provided

Dictionaries:

1. CAS: The matter is settled. No more talk. Capish?

4 The pioneering study of Isabella Poggi in 1981 on Italian interjection was influenced by the trend in pragmatics and Speech Action Theory. See Poggi I (1981) *Le Interiezioni: studio del linguaggio e analisi della mente*.

5 *Beyond Rhetorical Questions* is the title of a comprehensive volume by Irene Koshik published in 2005 by John Benjamins, where she operates a redefinition of those rhetorical questions used across widely different context to perform a number of related social actions such as accusations, challenges to prior turns and complaints.

Now, if you don't capish, let's get it clear right now.'

2. SNA: no example provided

3. ASCE: as in CAS

4. SUE: Thanks to gangster films and television programs, almost always a blatant affectation with an organized, Sicilian ring to it.

- Mr. Collucci has got my ass dragging with all our troubles with Tat Taylor's Warriors and other serious trouble I can't talk about. Capisce? - *Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck), Death Wish, p.12, 1977*

- In this enterprise you do as I say. Obey me and you'll escape unscathed. Capeesh? - *Jonathan Gash, The Ten Word Game, p.74, 2003*

- As anyone who's seen the mob melodrama knows, loose lips are likely to result in a major loss of blood, capisce? - *The News-Press (Fort Myers, Florida), p.8E, 6th February 2004*

5. MASUE: as in SUE

6. ASDT: no examples provided.

7. DMS: Nobody gets a look at this thing until I'm good and ready. Capisce? (1966)

8. COE: Upstairs is off limits. Capeesh?

9. CAPEC: That's the way it's gonna be, capish?

10. DCS: You dig it? Capeesh? Understand? Did? Didn't they teach you that in Kiev? (*Red Heat, US Film, 1988*)

Other Sources:

1. UD: I can't come and see you tonight, capish?

2. OSD: Joey expects his money by Monday. Capish?

3. We have to finish this work by Monday. Capish?

4. WI: no example provided

5. GR: no example provided

6. YC: Commonly used alone after a statement to ensure that the other party understood the message? No example provided.

While all the explicatory sentences provided by the sources analyzed clearly suggest a peremptory and commanding use of the speech form under scrutiny, the majority of them connect it to the Mafia jargon. As more explicitly stated in the *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, this speech form presents a 'blatant affectation' to the Mafia and its sub-culture. This will be described more accurately in

Part II, which deals with the relationship between culture, identity and speech forms and jargons, highlighting how the object of our research, *capish*, cannot be fully described and understood if not localized within the cultural framework of Italian American studies.

Part II. Linguistic migration

3. Socio-historical background

In addition to the theoretical and descriptive challenges that the translation and the linguistic classification of *capish* imply, the analysis of this word has to be connected with the specific geographical, social and historical contexts.

Italian emigration to the USA represents the point of departure of this linguistic journey. This phenomenon has followed irregular patterns depending on the different social and economic situations that have developed in both countries during the last two centuries.

Between 1820 and 1880 there was a progressive growth of the number of immigrants, still the major migratory wave was yet to come: only during the first decade of the twentieth-century (1901-1910) more than two million immigrants arrived to the United States and over four million considering the entire period between 1880 and 1920. The main source of this heavy influx of Italian immigrants was the overpopulated southern Italy, where the extremely difficult economic, social and political situation encouraged local people to leave their country seeking what seemed to be a more democratic and socially progressive society.

The decline which followed (1920-1950) resulted from the effects of different historical events that impacted the US in particular, such as the Great Depression, then World War II and the adoption of restrictive national immigration policies.⁶

Conversely, the growth registered during the period between 1950 and 1980 is to be attributed to more inclusive migratory regulations, in particular the American immigration policy of 1965.⁷

1820: 30	1821-1830: 409
1831-1840: 2.253	1841-1850: 1.870
1851-1860: 9.231	1861-1870: 11.725
1871-1880: 55.759	1881-1890: 307.309
1891-1900: 651.893	1901-1910: 2.045.877
1911-1920: 1.109.524	1921-1930: 455.315
1931-1940: 68.028	1941-1950: 57.661
1951-1960: 185.491	1961-1970: 214.111
1971-1980: 129.368	1981-1990: 67.254
1991-2000: 62.722	2001: 3.377
2002: 2.837	2003: 1.904
2004: 2.495. ⁸	

6 During the 1920s, after a long debate started in the previous century, 'National Origins Quota' laws were implemented: 1921 (President Harding), 1924 (President Coolidge) and the National Origins Act of 1929.

7 This new comprehensive immigration law placed all the different nationalities on an equal basis and eliminated the previous national origins quota system. See Cavaoli 1979, pp.71-100.

8 Data related to Italian immigration to the US as

An important point to be considered here is that if many immigrants arrived to the US during the twentieth century, many also returned home to Italy, although the exact number is unrecorded.

Analyzing the data referring to Italian immigrants who were naturalized between 1995 and 2004, there is a very low and static trend of Italians in the United States (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, table 323, p. 144).

It seems that, for Italians, America is definitely not as attractive as it once was.

In conclusion, while the migration had consistent repercussions on the Italian social and economic system, the Italian presence has not always been predominant when comparing it with migrational flows to America.⁹

Nevertheless, for better or for worse, it is clear that Italy has played a very significant role in shaping and defining the culture of modern United States of America.

Mafia. From question to threat

As already noted, the worldwide spread of the word *capish* has occurred due to several factors and different vehicles. The most privileged channel for its diffusion has certainly been represented by the Mafia and its socio-cultural stereotypes, which have given international exposure to this word through a massive media production.

Capish was often used by many representatives of the Mafia as a closing clause by way of intimidating the interlocutor, as it would result natural in a conversation occurring between Italian native speakers, where one is violently warning the other.

It has to be considered how, during the Prohibition era (the 1920s), while with the 18th Amendment to the Constitution the government of USA banned alcohol, the Italian-American Mafia started to control the expanding market of bootleg liquors. Consequently, during the common practice of extortion and col-

Recorded by Country of Birth and Country of Last Residence: 1820-2004 (Cavaoli, 2008, p.220).

9 According to the National Immigration Service, during the period 1968-2000, Italy was not part of the fifteen leading countries producing the highest number of immigrants. Only Canada and Germany were the traditional countries still part of this category in 2000, while the list recorded China, Mexico, Philippines and India in the first positions. Furthermore, Italy ranked first from 1930 among the foreign born, but dropped to fourth in 1980 and seventh in 1990 and was not listed in 2000. See Luke J. Larsen, 2004. The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2003, Current Population Reports, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004. p. 20-551. See also Census Bureau, Leading Countries of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population: Selected Years, 1850 to 1990, 1999. The World Almanac 2005, p. 629.

lection of money, the use of such expression by mobsters must have been frequent.

Nothing changed after Prohibition Act in 1933, when the Mafia moved into a wider range of criminal activities, from drug smuggling to the opening of numerous companies, restaurants and nightclubs: collecting money was still the main activity of mobsters and *capish* in their daily vocabulary.

The use of the Italian expression *capish* at the end of an American English sentence confers a specific value to the speech-act, which the use of 'do you understand' would not be able to communicate. The origin of the word remarks the sense of belonging to *the Family*¹⁰ and its code of honor.

Surprisingly, despite being directly associated to the language of the Mafia, the word *capish* does not appear in the script of *The Godfather*.¹¹ It however constitutes one of the typical expression actually used by Italian American famous gangsters featured in books and movies, from *Scarface* to *Goodfellas* and *The Sopranos*.¹²

As noted by Bove and Massara:

Between 1972 and 2003 more than 260 films have been produced about the Mafia in North America (an average of nearly nine movies a year). Some of these depictions were Tv series which have quite a large following (The Sopranos); newspapers and magazine articles often exploit what has become an easy convention, reinforcing an image that is unbalanced, unfair and damaging to the collective reputation of the fifth largest ethnic group in North America. (Bove and Massara 2006:23)

The case studies presented here refer to two different contexts and interactional situations: a film and a TV commercial (Fig. 1 and 2).

a) Film: Gotti, 1996 (Fig. 1)

The first is the famous movie for the TV '*Gotti: The Rise and Fall of a Real Mafia Don*', produced in 1996 by Steve Shavan and interpreted by Armand Assante.

10 See also the toast between John Gotti and Neal Dellacroce in the next section.

11 The movie, one of the most popular in the history of cinematography, was adapted in 1972 by Francis Ford Coppola from the novel *The Godfather*, written by the Italian American author Mario Gianluigi Puzo in 1969.

12 *Scarface* is one of the first gangster movies: the first version, with the original title *Scarface: The Shame of the Nation* was adapted from the homonymous novel written in 1929. The movie describes the life of the legendary Italian American boss Al Capone and the gang warfare for the control of illegal activities in Chicago. In 1983, the movie was readapted by Brian De Palma with the participation of Al Pacino. A recent novel called *Bordello: A story of Love and Compassion* (Kelleher 2005), set in the Chicago of 1930s, introduces a character called Al (Scarface) Capish, obviously referring to Al Capone.

te. The movie describes the criminal life and the illicit activities of John Joseph Gotti (1940-2002), a ruthless boss of the Gambino family in New York.

The scene (Fig.1) is an extract from the conversation between the underboss Aniello 'Neil' Dellacroce, interpreted by Anthony Quinn and John Gotti (Armand Assante).

In the scene here analyzed, the *Teflon Don*¹³ is not the first person to pronounce the word *capish*. However, having Neapolitan origins,¹⁴ Gotti have used the expression *capish*¹⁵ from early childhood within his family domain, years before his rise to the Mafia organization.

The mobster activities have eventually reinforced the use of the word *capish* as part of the specialized jargon and way of conducting, essential for the affiliation to the group.

b) Commercial: Pepsi Cola, 1999 (Fig. 2)

The second case used for the comparative research on the video segmentation is a TV commercial launched by Pepsi in 1999. The setting is an Italian restaurant in the US, where a young girl and her grandfather enter to order food and drinks. After ordering a Pepsi and receiving a different drink, the girl turns into a little mobster.

The good face of the Little Italy

The social composition of the Italian waves of immigrants in the USA in terms of social origins and economic status was heterogeneous as the different conditions of integration into the American culture and society of the new comers.

Prior to 1820, narratives of Italian missionaries report the presence in America of an Italian élite mainly composed by artists, travelers, professors and other professionals.

Conversely, during the late 19th century and early 20th century, Italians who arrived in the USA were often law-abiding, unskilled workers or illiterate peasants mainly from the south of Italy:¹⁶ there, in par-

13 Due to his ability of escaping and never get arrested, he was renamed the 'Smooth Criminal' or Teflon Don'. Nevertheless, in 1992 an informant of the government, Sammy Gravano, once a mobster, testified against him and Gotti was charged of murder and racketeering, and imprisoned until his death in 2002.

14 Gotti was born in the Bronx but his parents came from San Giuseppe Vesuviano, a peripheral area of Naples.

15 See section I on the Neapolitan pronunciation of the dialectal expression.

16 In 1907-1910 the United States Immigration Commission, in the *Dictionary of Races or People* divided the 'Italian race into two groups. North Italian and South Italian. These two groups differ from each other materially, in language, physique and character, as well as in geographical distribution...all crimes, and especially violent crimes, are several times more numerous

ticular, agriculture was suffering a production crisis due to lack of innovation, the feudal taxation systems and oppressive taxes. One of the few opportunities was to leave Italy and try to obtain better conditions of life in a rapidly growing industrial society. The solution was to follow the American dream, 'la 'Merica'.

As noted by Tamburri, before *The Godfather*, the first examples of stereotyping Italian through communication media are to be dated to the second half of the nineteenth century. It is the case of printed cartoons, such as *The Mascot*, *Judge* and *Life*, depicting Italian immigrants as dehumanized (Tamburri 2011).

With reference to the image of Italians in American movies, this is a practice as old as the movies and reflected also in vignettes and cartoons.

Clear examples from early times are the silent movies *At The Altar* (1909) and *The Avenging Conscious* (1914) of the film director David Wark Griffith, where Italian characters are clearly associated to violent behavior and sexuality.¹⁷

Being *capish* originated in southern Italy, it is worthy to focus on the connections between emigration to the USA and the famous Southern Question or 'Questione Meridionale'. One of the most interesting analysis is provided by Antonio Gramsci, who denounces the lack of action of southern intellectuals, being particularly distant from the rural working class, and consequently representing an obstacle to revolution and social emancipation in those areas, i.e. Campania, Sicily, Calabria.¹⁸

Under this perspective, for many of those who lived in the so-called 'Mezzogiorno' the only solution to the Southern Question was to leave Italy.

As reported by Gardaphe, «the myth of Italian America was founded by immigrants from southern Italy who did not wait for others to answer the southern question for them.» (Gardaphe 2004, p.2). Amongst these, not only poor peasants and unemployed youngsters but also writers, journalists, critics and those who «became the very intellectuals that Gramsci had hoped would lead his country in a revolution» (Gardaphe 2004, p.11).¹⁹

among the South than the North Italians...The secret organizations of the Mafia (Sicilian) and Camorra are institutions of great influence among the people, which take the law into their own hands and which are responsible for much of the crime, flourished throughout southern Italy.' p.81-85.

17 Other examples mentioned by Tamburri are *The Skyscrapers of New York* (F.A. Dobson, 1905) and *The Black Hand* (Edwin Porter, 1906). See also Tamburri, 2010: *Contested Place: Italian Americans in Cinema and Television*.

18 In 1927 Gramsci wrote *La questione Meridionale* where he described how southern intellectuals were characterized by an embedded aversion to peasants and the working class.

19 Gardaphe refers here in particular to political activists,

Unquestionably, these were days of darkness in the history of Italians in America. The heavy discrimination suffered during the period immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack, when the majority of Italians were considered aliens and accused of disloyalty, is one very sad page in the history of human rights.²⁰

At the same time, Italians and Italian Americans have been also able to write beautiful pages of the history of the US. These were extensively described by many authors, as Anthony Tamburri for example.

In America, the use of *capish* in Mafia-free expressive domains was related to the dialectal background of the writers, composers, and artists.

An interesting case is represented by a famous song of Louis Prima – Italian-American musician, singer, and composer - called *Felicia No Capicia*, that features cliché items of Italian American behaviors.

In all truth, the most important part of the song, constituted by the chorus, could sound slightly ambiguous to non-Italian speakers:

I took Felicia to Las Vegas, here's my story
she spent the weekend eating 'chicken cacciatore'
but when I said 'I'd like to kiss ya'
Felicia... No Capicia
The way she gambled at the tables wasn't funny
you should have seen the way she found to lose my money
but when I said 'I'd like to kiss ya'
Felicia... No Capicia [...]

There is a rise in expectations as the narrative progresses, which result in the chorus *Felicia No Capicia*.

Certainly, Felicia opposes resistance to *something*: what that something meant at the time is overshadowed.

In 1945, long before the prominence of celebrities with Italian American origins and the internationalization of the Italian American *brand*, whereof *capish* is one of the core-products, *Life* published an article titled *New Band Hit*, describing the enthusiastic response of a New York audience to Prima's new *dialect song*. The article features an interview to Fiorello La Guardia, the Italian-American mayor of New York

such as Arturo Giovannitti, Luigi Fraini and Carol Tresca, which became prominent journalists, poets and critics and paved the way for the development of an Italian American literary tradition.

20 See Brandon, 1950 and Di Stasi, 2004. After the *Day of infamy* (December 7, 1941), as defined by President F.D. Roosevelt, US government started the enforcement of the 'Alien and Sedition Acts', four laws approved in 1798, and consequently proceeded to the internment of aliens, the restrictions on their possessions and movements, their evacuation from the 'prohibited zones' and a severe curfew (from 8 pm to 6 am). Failure to comply with any element could, and often did, lead to arrest and detention.

(1934-1945). In this article the mayor had to assure the «wary license commissioner» that *capicia* meant only «to understand» (*Life*, vol. 19, num. 8, 1945).

In 1933, the word *capish* had already appeared in a Broadway musical called *Let'Em Eat Cake*. The musical was the sequel of the awarded *Of Thee I Sing* and, for this reason, it was particularly exposed to the critics and the general audience. The music and the lyrics were composed by George and Ira Gershwin, Americans of Russian and Lithuanian Jewish origins. In the Second Act of *Let'Em Eat Cake* there is a song with the title *No Comprenhez, No Capish, No Versteh*, which represents the lack of political will and interest by the League of Nations. French, Italians and Germans did not pay any attention to the request received: the answer was *No Comprenhez, No Capish, No Versteh – We don't understand a single words you say'* (Gershwin G., Track n.18. Studio Cast Recording, 1987).

Clearly, *capish* is to be translated here as 'to understand', without any intimidating connotation or shadow of a threat.

While the French *comprenez* and the German *versteh* are correctly spelled,²¹ the Italian form presents the combination of *s+h*, which is not present in the Italian language, where the phoneme /ʃ/ is transcribed as *sc* (*capisci, capisce*). As it refers to the first-person plural (we don't understand), the correct form of the verb would be *capiamo*. It can be argued that the dialectal word *capish* had, already in the Thirties, a wide diffusion and it was starting to become part of the American language.

Part III. Linguistic repatriation

6. Popularization of the mafia

As briefly described in the previous section, the 21st century has witnessed the decline of the American-based Mafia, due to great combined efforts in eradicating the sources of its illegal cash-flow, such as gambling, loan-sharking, money-laundering, drug smuggling and constructions. Nevertheless, the American mafia managed to survive, although its activity is today very limited and more assimilated into American society at large.

Outside the US, delinquent celebrities such as Al Capone, Don Corleone and John Gotti have fascinated the public worldwide, becoming part of the popular culture. Mafia's violent crimes, secret rituals and notorious exponents have been extensively described and popu-

larized by several books and movies on the subject.²²

The Godfather's phrases and words have entered not only American English vocabulary but also the international arena of communication and have been used in other movies as vital part of scripted dialogues.²³

The stereotype of the gunman worldwide is often represented by an Italian Mafioso, and *Capish* is most likely part of his *technical* vocabulary.

The icon of the Italian gunman in cinematography has been reinforced also by the contribution of the *Spaghetti Westerns*. There is a sort of continuity between the Spaghetti Western *pistoleros* and the Italian-American mobsters, which is not created by the choice of the setting and the historical context (the fictional cowboy country location vs. New York in the Thirties). It is enhanced by the perception of *something* typical Italian: the flavour, the passion and the music, that have inspired the label given to the genre. The direction, of Sergio Leone, blends with the music of Ennio Morricone²⁴ and the participation of Italian actors as Franco Nero.²⁵

In some parts of the world, the name Franco Nero, more than the character he interpreted, has become a symbol of cruel violence and an icon for gunmen. In Jamaica, for instance, his name is well-known in the ghettos, where the expression *gwaan laik Franca Nero* is an equivalent for 'to behave in an arrogant and aggressive way', but at the same time the similitude denotes a brave and determined person.

22 The public exposure started in particular after 1970, when the RICO Act (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) convinced many high-rank bosses to break the rules and codes of the Mafia, particularly the 'omertà', testifying against the criminal organization and unveiling its most dangerous secrets. See the case of Sammy Gravano testifying against John Gotti, convicted in 1992 where he died in 2002.

23 A parallel research could be conducted on the popular use of expressions derived by Italo-American filmography and gangster literature. The clearest example is the extension of meaning of the largely used 'I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse' or 'go to the mattresses' from *The Godfather*. Regarding the latter, it has to be noted that the explanation of this expression constitutes one of the central scene of the movie *You Got Mail*, where *The Godfather* is described by Tom Hanks as 'the Bible of all Bibles'. *You Got Mail* was directed and produced by Nora Ephron, which recently died in New York at the age of 71. It is not surprising to know that she was married for more than 20 years to crime-reporter and writer Nicholas Pileggi, the author of *Wiseguy: Life in a Mafia Family* (1986), the book which was adapted by Martin Scorsese for the film *Goodfellas* (1990).

24 The most famous *Spaghetti Westerns* were directed by Sergio Leone and scored by Ennio Morricone: the *Dollars Trilogy - A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966).

25 In 1966, Franco Nero interpreted *Django*, a movie that became very popular at international level. The first version of *Django* was directed by Sergio Corbucci in 1966. Further versions were: *Django Strikes Again* (Corbucci, 1987) and *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012).

21 Notably, *comprenez* is the second-person plural (present indicative or imperative) of the French word *comprendre* and *versteh* is the imperative singular of *verstehen*. Both verbs mean 'to understand'.

With reference to the musical context, the *Gangsta Rap* and the *Mafioso Rap* are subgenres of Hip-Hop, often directly associated with crime organizations and mobsters based in the USA. Predictably, considering the recent spread of Hip-Hop music in the world, there has been a proliferation of songs containing the word *capish* (see for example the song called *Capish?* by “Santo Trafficante”, a rapper with a massive tattoo of the Sopranos logo on his forearm) or artists with this name, in its different possible spellings (from *capeesh* in Pennsylvania to *capish* in Poland).

There are Hip-Hop street-wear shops all over the world called *capish*, or using this word as part of taglines (for example the *Capish!Hip-Hop Store* at the Niagara Falls in Ontario, Canada).

7. Back to the original meaning: Capish going global

The spread of gangsters' language through the media described in the previous sections has provided new spaces for the re-contextualization and the repositioning in terms of collocational meaning of specific words and expressions.

The case of *capish* and its linguistic journey provide evidence of how the globalization process has been heavily impacting also communication and language, especially juvenile jargon.

This section addresses the issue of the current re-adaptation of *capish* and its use outside the U.S. in terms of interactional question, devoid of any intimidating action.

The following examples illustrate how, on a global perspective, this speech form seems to be related to Italy at large, as a *brand*, where Mafia is perceived more as a folkloristic caricature and cliché of popular culture, and its violent and criminal connotation is removed from the implied significance.

a. The glossary *'Yo Capish!'*, published in 2002 has been described as “A humorous, educational and sentimental guide to Italian Americana” and as “a dictionary to interpret the pungent hyperbolic clichés and mysteries of Italian American culture” (Caridi 2002).

b. The culinary tradition is one of the most exported and exalted products of Italian culture. A cookbook published in 2011 is called *'Yo! You Capeesh'* (Cozard 2011), though not having apparent connections with Italian cuisine and gastronomy.

c. *Capish*, in its different spellings, is also the name of several Italian Sandwich Bars and Street Food (from Eilat, in Israel to the City of London), Restaurants and Pizzerias (from the *'cucina povera'* in Stamford, Connecticut to the exclusive menu of Pretoria, South Africa).

d. The advertisement of an Italian pizzeria and re-

staurant in New York, *Pizza Vito*, uses *Capish?* as final, ultimate slogan and distinctive sign of Italianess.

e. There is a jewelry boutique in Brazil selling fashion jewelry that combines raw materials from native resources (mainly seeds and stones) and sophisticated manufacturing. Behind the choice of calling the company *Capish Bijoux* there might be the fact that this word immediately evokes the idea of the ‘Made in Italy’ and its quality, particularly prized in Brazil.

f. Other important products of the brand *Made in Italy* are certainly fashion and jewels: similarly to the case of the cookbook (see example b), in San Juan, Puerto Rico, there is a beauty shop called *Capish Style* that does not present any element directly connected to *Italian styles* and products.

Current translational equivalents feature *capish* as “do you understand?” as described by the comparative analysis of a promotional videoclip and an interview (Fig. 3 and 4) where the word *capish* is used with this connotation.

a) Promotional Videoclip: Korean teacher of English language, 2014 (Fig. 3)

b) Interview from the documentary *Youths of Shasha*, Ethiopia 2013 (Fig. 4)

Only a few decades after the spread of Mafia literature and filmography, people around the world have started using the speech form *capish* removing the expansion of meaning related to the criminal jargon and the threatening tone.

8. Conclusions

The findings of the research highlights how a dialectal verbal utterance has spread from the south of Italy (mainly Campania, Calabria and Sicily), through the sub-urban minority group of Italian American migrants, to the rest of the world. This journey, starting from southern Italy, has been documented, showing how the word *capish* has undergone a process of pragmatic rebalancing between signifier and significant enabled by its current usage in the world and in Italy in particular. In such instances, in spoken forms and interactions, *capish* is uttered in a clear, sometimes heavily marked, American English accent, not as dialectal speech form typical of the southern part of Italy, but rather as the result of the eco of the Italo-American culture dissemination throughout the world.

A conclusive example is represented by the invasion on the national fashion market of T-shirts saying *Keep Calm, I'm Italian, Capish?*. These are on display in many Italian shops and on the Internet, sold to tou-

rists as souvenirs from Italy and mainly to locals as a marker of identity.

This speech form, eventually, following a very long and intricate itinerary, has been recently re-imported into Italy after a process of foreignization and it is now used as a glocal element of the language.

In conclusion, the present research has shown the frequency and the usage of the lexical item either as a borrowing, calque, adaptation, shift and extension of meaning.

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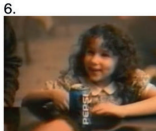
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Phase	Visual Frame	Kinesic Action	Sound Track/Effect	Voice
1.		Aniello Dellacroce (A.Quinn) scolds John Gotti (A.Assante). When speaking, he is very close to the interlocutor.	No Music while Dellacroce speaks.	Dellacroce speaks using long pauses and strong stresses. His voice is raucous and very low: <i>'You never brake the rules'</i>
2.		Dellacroce keeps a continuous eye-contact with Gotti. The Climax is reached when Dellacroce pronounces the word <i>Capish?</i>	Predominant role of music: as soon as the word <i>Capish</i> is pronounced, a musical theme starts. The theme is based on the Sicilian pastorale, composed by Mark Isham for <i>Gotti</i> soundtrack.	Dellacroce asks: <i>Capish?</i> After a very long pause, Gotti answers with a brittle and croaky voice: <i>Capish!</i>
3.		Dellacroce gets two glasses and a bottle of whiskey and proposes a toast to Gotti	The music continues and it perfectly matches with the script and the emotional load of the dialogue	With a tone entailing the sealing of a promise Dellacroce says: <i>'Alla Famiglia! And the Rules that hold us together!'</i> Gotti repeats using long and emphatic pauses

Visual Frame	Kinesic Action	Sound Track/Effect	Voice
1. 	The little girl kindly ask a Pepsi cola to the bartender	No Music. Noises typical of an Italian Restaurant	The voice is that of a well-educated girl: <i>'A Pepsi, please'</i>
2. 	She receives the cola and starts drinking	No Music. In the background, noises typical of an Italian Restaurant	With a gentle baby voice: <i>'Thank you'</i>
3. 	She realizes that the drink is not what she had asked for and she suddenly changes her attitude	Music has a predominant role: here it starts an unknown composition similar to <i>The Immigrant</i> , one of the main themes of Godfather's soundtrack (Rota 1972).	The voice unlikely changes becoming husky and low. As for the case of the music, the voice clearly refers to Marlon Brando's in <i>The Godfather</i> : <i>'Hey, come here. I want you listen very carefully...'</i>
4. 	She explains that what she wanted was a Pepsi, gesticulating, moving her hands, intimidating the bartender and drawing the attention of the (Italian) customers of the restaurant	The music continues	With <i>The Godfather's</i> voice: <i>'...and now you're insulting me and my entire Family offering me this, this...whatever this. But we are civilized persons...'</i>
5. 	She unites her fingertips moving the forearm towards the face (typical Italian gesture)	The music continues	With <i>The Godfather's</i> voice: <i>'Capish?'</i>
6. 	She eventually succeeds in obtaining her Pepsi and her innocent look is magically retrieved	The music stops. Restaurant noises in the background.	Her girlie voice is restored. She thanks the bartender with a nice <i>'Thank you'</i> (After the first sip she says <i>'Grazie'</i>)

Visual Frame	Kinesic Action	Sound Track/Effect	Voice
	<p>The teacher is explaining the origin, the pronunciation and the meaning of <i>capish</i>. She uses gestures and relies on paralinguistics in an inquisitive form (no threat)</p>	<p>No music.</p>	<p>She speaks clearly and slowly, continually repeating the word <i>capish</i> and its translations Very high pitch Strong Asiatic accent <i>'Capish? Do you understand?'</i></p>

Visual Frame	Kinesic Action	Sound Track/Effect	Voice
	<p>The interviewee is sitting on a chair answering general questions (hobbies and interests), drinking a fruit juice. Limited use of gestures and paralinguistics</p>	<p>No music Voices in the background</p>	<p>Her voice is calm and balanced. While explaining the reasons behind her interest in music she says: <i>'My father gave me the inspiration, capish?'</i></p>

G