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‘Sopranos-Speak:’ Neapolitan Dialect, Mafia Jargon, and Silence. Or, Feeling ‘*All Agita All the Time...*’

The aim of this paper is to show how the use of language in David Chase’s TV series *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) conveys the diminished expectations of its characters in comparison with the canonical Italian American gangsters in the movies, and particularly Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather (Part I and II)* and Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*. My analysis is based on a *corpus* which includes thirty episodes from all the six seasons, though privileging the first three.¹

Studying the declining cultural parable of the days of organized crime explored by David Chase in his HBO creation in the light of Coppola and Scorsese’s achievements in the Gangster genre may help highlight the creativeness and compression of dialogues in *The Sopranos* (O’ Brien 2007, 17).

To do so, I’d like to consider three main semantic fields: “killing, violence, betrayal,” “ethnic slurs,” and “food.”

The idea of comparing *The Sopranos* to *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola (*Part I*, 1972; *Part II*, 1974); and *Goodfellas* (1990) by Martin Scorsese is hardly original as David Chase has never failed to remind the viewers of his debt to these artistic “fathers.”² Starting with the casting, David Chase—born *De Cesare* (Viscusi 2006, 189)—put much emphasis on regional belonging and ethnic descent (Biskind 2007): he picked the best un- and semi-known Italian actors in New York City (half of the actors/actresses were from New Jersey—James Gandolfini is from Newark, as well as David Chase—and the

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other half from NYC, Brooklyn in particular, and some of them (Lorraine Bracco, Frank Vincent, Toni Sirico, Michael Imperioli) had starred in Scorsese's *Goodfellas* and *Casino* as well) and he invited Mob experts to help the writers. The very pilot of the whole saga cannot be more direct about Coppola and Scorsese's legacy. Carmela Soprano (Tony's wife) tells Father Phil about her husband's love for *The Godfather*:

Carmela: Tony watches *Godfather II* all the time.
Father Phil: Tony prefers *II* not *I*...
Carmela: Yeah. He likes where Vito goes back to Sicily.
Father Phil: Where does Tony rank *Goodfellas*? (S1E1)

The conversation is interrupted, but if one were to guess Carmela's possible reply to Father Phil question, Martin Scorsese's own comment on the *Godfather, Part II*, would prove a case in point, reading as if it was David Chase's appreciation of *Goodfellas*:

I prefer *Godfather II* to *Godfather I*. I've always said it's like Morte D'Arthur. My stuff [*Mean Streets, Goodfellas, Casino*] is like some ugly guy on the street corner talking. (Scorsese 1999, 148)

Although *The Sopranos* invites comparison with *Goodfellas* more than with *The Godfather* (Biskind 2007), unlike Scorsese's wise guys, Chase's "stuff" is not even like "some ugly guy on the street corner talking," because the "street corner" is not a synecdoche for New York/Brooklyn in the golden age of the mob, having shrunk to some New Jersey suburban malls.³ Yet, in David Chase's grey New Jersey flatlands, amidst residential suburbs, Newark's post-industrial cityscape, and sanitary landfills, Italian American slang has come to a new life by making the most of both Coppola and Scorsese's teaching.

Along with the "depressed"—because geographically and intellectually "flattened"—setting of New Jersey, "depression" runs throughout the whole series in many forms, as shown by the protagonist, Tony Soprano, a mobster in distress who suffers from panic attacks and is put on Prozac by Dr. Melfi, his psychiatrist. The psychoanalytical turn of Chase's creation—which has been one of its most captivating features—follows the recent tradition of an Italian American gangsters' narrative marked by frustration and mental illness. The prototype of this "epic cycle of lunatics" (Viscusi 2006, 199) is the character of Tommy De Vito—*Goodfellas*—played by Joe Pesci: a tough guy who is not that tough in the end, always ready to kill—or, as we will see, "to waste,"—anyone who questions his pre-eminence.⁴

Mafia Jargon

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, jargon is not only “the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group,” but also “a hybrid language simplified in vocabulary and grammar and used for communication between people of different speech;” therefore, to a certain extent, a jargon can be defined as a parasitical language which enters another one, giving its words new meanings. Mafia jargon’s main purpose has always been to serve as a red herring for the law, FBI’s wiretapping in particular.

No surprise then, the word “Mafia” is mentioned only twice in our *corpus*, as well as “This Thing of Ours” (“La Cosa Nostra”). Tony Soprano’s crew is not as obsessed with wires as the protagonists of *Goodfellas* (and *Casino*) are—how can one forget Scorsese’s manic telephone booths scenes?—but the concern is still strong.

Mafia jargon covers up illegal business, providing protection against the law, and is thus full of euphemisms when it comes to working positions; consequently Tony Soprano becomes “A waste management consultant” (S1E1), not unlike Henry Hill, the protagonist of *Goodfellas*, who answered his future wife’s question “What do you do?” with “I’m in construction.”

To start with, Mafia jargon in *The Sopranos* cannot help referring to a traditional hierarchy within the organization which includes a “capo” (the Boss, with Tony being “Il capo di tutti i capi”); a “capitano/captain;” “soldier;” “made guy” or “wise guy;” “consigliere” (a trusted family advisor). If *The Sopranos* designates the semantic field of “killing” as “whacking,” “hitting,” “clipping,” a set of jargon words already used in *Goodfellas* (along with “wetting,” “wasting,” “burning,” “popping”), it is worth noting that in *The Godfather* there is only one, subtler, euphemism for the act of killing a man, maybe two: “to make him an offer he can’t refuse” and “to take care of him.” The different jargon expressions used in *The Godfather* on the one hand, and *Goodfellas/The Sopranos* on the other, seem to account for a change in the conception of the act of murder itself; whereas in Vito Corleone’s world it is always brutal but kind of unavoidable, being, so to say, less free and licentious and more a matter of honour, in *The Sopranos* and in *Goodfellas*, it often comes with no apparent reason but heavy drug-addiction, mental disorder, or alcoholism.

The grotesque and bloody mood permeating Scorsese and Chase’s works results in a surreal jargon made up of monosyllabic/onomatopoeic verbs (“whack,” “hit,” “clip,” “wet,” “pop”) which evoke the neurosis of snapping into killing for nothing: for example, when Chris Moltisanti (Tony Soprano’s nephew and would-be heir) opens fire on a pastry waiter who is guilty of not serving him first and ends up nearly “whacked” for a tray full of “sfugliadels,

cannolis and napolis" (S1E8). Another recurrent word in Mafia jargon is the ubiquitous "capisc?," an Italian word marked by truncation which, according to the *Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expression* (Spears, 1989), is "a threatening manner suggesting Italian Mafia," and is common in informal American English. Once again, drawing a parallel between *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather* can be enlightening. In Season Six, with Tony Soprano in a coma, Paulie "Walnuts" hands over some cash to Vito Spatafore and tells him they have to give their cuts to Carmela: "Tony's conscious, do you *capisc*?" (S6E3). In this case, Paulie's use of "capisc" is, in Roman Jakobson's language functions, "conative," since it is action inducing and very close to a direct command.

In *The Godfather* Part II, "capisc" runs throughout the movie ("capisc?," "u capisciu," "hai capit?," "capit?," "u capisciu") and is always uttered by the young Vito Corleone (Robert De Niro) at a very early stage of his life, when he has an honest job at the "Abbandando Grosseria" (*grosseria* being an example of how English words, "grocery," got remoulded into an Italian lexical pattern through a calque). The young Vito Corleone uses "capisc" when he wants to be sure his interlocutor has understood him: we mustn't forget he came to Ellis Island from Corleone in Sicily, a barely articulate child in his mother tongue who got his surname changed from Aldoini into Corleone. The dialectal "capisc" betrays Vito Corleone's need to "push or shove [an idea] into a more familiar place" (DeLillo 1997, 767), thus entailing a "referential" and "emotive," rather than just "conative," language function.

The semantic depletion of Mafia jargon in *The Sopranos* can be likely read as a consequence of the "diminished" quality and credibility of FBI agents (Agent Grasso, Agent Lipari, Agent Harris) who are two steps removed from Joe Petrosino (Cacioppo 2006, 24)—the Head of the NYCPD Italian Squad who was assassinated in Palermo in 1908. No matter how hard Tony and Co. try to avoid being caught by the Feds, no matter how many public telephone booths they use in order to leave no trace behind them, their effort is half as believable as in *The Godfather* and half as engaging as in *Goodfellas*. Two examples of this impoverished verve on both sides (the Feds and the Mob) are given when Agent Grasso (an Italian American whose only fault is to be on the honest side of the fence) enters Tony's house with a warrant, and is insulted by Tony in Italian "Grasso, ti faccio un culo così" (S1E8); or when Agent Harris, after having unsuccessfully chased Tony for six seasons, winds up at Satriale's Pork Store to have a sandwich and is hailed by Chris, a New-Jersey newborn Shakespeare, with "Fucking Sheriff of Nottingham, a kingdom for a mortadell" (S6E2).

Ethnic Slurs

With the last two quotes we have entered the field of “curse words” and frozen borrowings from Italian limited to interjections, greetings, allocutions, and other empty conversational elements which, but for the word “fuck,” are definitely the realm of Italian dialectalism. Tony’s grandparents came from Avellino, near Naples, and this explains why the Italian words and expressions used in *The Sopranos* share a common phonetic pattern which is typical of southern Italian dialects (Neapolitan, Apulian, Lucanian, Calabrian, Sicilian), that is the substitution of a *voiceless consonant* (such as /k/ <“comare”) with a *voiced one*—/g/ > “goomar”—(Cortellazzo 2002, 34, 644), and *truncation*—paisa/cumpà/ stunad’/etc., typical of Neapolitan and Apulian dialects *prope dicti* (Cortellazzo 2002, 644, 680). Despite the unquestionable pleasure that may arise from the analysis of the whole semantic field,⁵ I will focus my attention on some ethnic slurs which interrogate the problem of white racial consciousness as portrayed in the character of Tony Soprano.

“Deeply invested in and in deep denial about his status as a white male subject” (Kocela 2005), Tony’s racial anxiety stems from the “double bind” (D’Acerno 1999, 618–19) of Italian-American identity as divided into good families (those who assimilated into mainstream American culture honestly but too readily) and bad families (those belonging to the criminal world). Tony’s—and his mother’s and uncle’s and crew’s—insults against any possible ethnic group (blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Russians, etc.) are so many, so acrimonious and so inventive that they cannot help expressing a racial anxiety about an uncertain Italian American status as whites. The all too recent and traumatic assimilation of Italian American immigrants into whiteness has left many cultural wounds regarding black/white boundaries.

In *The Godfather, Part I*, the derogatory words used against Italians are mainly “dago-guinea” (together). Whereas “dago” is said to hark back to three different etymologies—“dagger,” “dago” Venetian for “beat,” or “Diego,” a typical Latin name (Shellenbaum 1993, 173, 174)—, “Guinea” was first used in the United States against black slaves, and only by the end of the Nineteenth century it became an anti-Italian slur (Guglielmo 2003, 11). The episodes of *The Sopranos* here considered are full of ethnic slurs but as far as Italian Americans are concerned, instead of “dago” and “guinea,” one can find “wop”—from the Neapolitan “guappo” for “smart guy” (Shellenbaum 1993, 173)—and “medigans,” from both “mericano” and “merdicani,” short for “dog shit” (Gardaphé 2004, 6). “Medigana” is a derogatory reference by Italians to those assimilated too quickly and readily into American culture used by Tony in the very first episode of the whole saga, in his first meeting with Doctor Melfi:

T: Come on, you're Italian, you understand. Guys like me were brought up to think that *medigana* are fucking bowlers [...]

M: 'So [...] you don't consider yourself as white?'

T: 'I don't mean white like Caucasian. I mean a white man, like our friend Doctor Cusamano. How he's Italian but he is a *medigon*. He's what my old man would have called a Wonder Bread Wop. (S1E1)

Another derogatory expression which is revealing of Tony Soprano's—and Livia Soprano's, his overbearing mother—problematic handling of “whiteness” is *tizzoon*, a derogatory word against black people. When Livia Soprano addresses her black nurse from Trinidad as “That tizzoon!” (S1E2) she may not be aware of one of the literary etymologies of the word Italian *tizzoon* (from *tizzzone*, a firebrand, a charred piece of wood which also evokes damnation as in Dante's *Inferno*), but she undoubtedly knows about its association with “dirty” African-American. Interestingly enough, though, by the beginning of the Twentieth Century, *tizzoon* may have been used by recently integrated Italians against newly arrived Italians, as Don DeLillo's *Underworld* seems to suggest:

There was always the neighbourhood and who was leaving and who was moving in, showing up on the fringes. *Tizzoons*. A word Albert wished they wouldn't use. A southern dialect word, a corruption, a slur, an invective, from *tizzo*, he assumed, a firebrand or smoldering coal, and broadened to human dimensions in *tizzzone d'inferno*, scoundrel, villain. [...] they spoke it, ..., these immigrants, or sons of immigrants, the hordes who threaten society's peaceful sleep, who are always showing up and moving in. Tizzoon. (DeLillo 1997, 768)

In *The Godfather, Part I*, references to ethnic slurs against Italians and blacks come from the “bad” characters (e.g. Conny's husband) and they never enter either Vito Corleone's language or that of his mythic family. In *GoodFellas* references to ethnic slurs are but a few and unimportant, almost denoting an amnesia of the Italian-Americans' past as “non-whites;” an absence which reflects the destruction of the impoverished universe of Scorsese's “lost children.” If, as Christopher Kocela put it, *The Godfather* constructs a cinema of fathers and *GoodFellas* a cinema of sons (Kocela 2005), and if, accordingly, *The Sopranos* is to be seen as a cinema of Coppola's grandchildren, we can argue that the cultural issue of “after whiteness” has overcome the antithetical moment represented by *GoodFellas*, being finally readdressed by David Chase. After *Godfather's* Heaven and *GoodFellas's* Hell, *The Sopranos* lingers, to use Paulie Walnuts' Dantesque quotation, in Purgatory (O' Brien 2007, 19).

Food

Tony's relationship to food is enthusiastic and gargantuan at once (and James Gandolfini's too, if we were to tell from his physical metamorphosis from Season One to Season Six): he conducts much of his business while eating out and he never fails to express his love for it.⁶ The whole Sopranos big family's relationship to food can be evoked through Giovanni Boccaccio's description of the mythical land called Bengodi (Gardaphe 2004, 140). In respect to food, *Goodfellas* does not function as a model, showing no real interest in it, with the only exception of the lovely cameo of Catherine Scorsese (Martin Scorsese's mother) as Tommy De Vito's mother who fixes the whipped-up dish of pasta for the wise guys knocking at her door in the middle of the night (Pugliese 2004, 132).⁷ *The Godfather*, on the other hand, proves a valuable reference: Don Vito cherishes food as a real gift, his hands are always clutching, peeling, coring, chopping, cracking some fruit (oranges, pears, nuts) or vegetable (tomatoes), and he dies in his own "garden," where he grows his own produce. Yet, in *The Godfather* food is displayed but seldom linguistically addressed. If the distance between *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather* can also be explained as the historical outcome of the "assimilation" of second and third generations of Italian Americans, *The Sopranos* definitely longs for Vito Corleone's love for nurturing food. Most of all, Chase's series indulges in food talks and this may be its greatest linguistic contribution to the memory of Italian American traditions, since no such thing existed before. The meticulous use of Italian culinary words attests *The Sopranos'* desire to come full circle to the "mythic" Golden Age of *The Godfather* even while the sarcastic tone in which many of these words are uttered may originate in *GoodFellas*.

A survey of Carmela Soprano's kitchen will include many specialties, among which *goobagool* (capocollo) and *zeppole*; as for the former, Tony's addiction to it is so huge he often passes out at the very sight of it, as for the latter, their culinary relevance as the quintessential Southern Italian sweet is witnessed by Tony Blundetto's (Steve Buscemi) joke about a fat mobster: "Our bodies are 86 percent water. In his last blood test he was 65 percent zeppola" (S5E10). Then, of course, pasta, (with Paulie in Naples looking for "Pasta coi grani," his own New-Jersey version of pasta with parmesan cheese, S2E4), *pastin*,⁸ *manigotti*, *rigatoni*, *pizza*, *calzone*, *pizzaiol*,⁹ *parmigiana*, *lasagne*, *ziti*; in the meat section of the refrigerator, *mortadell*,¹⁰ *gobagool* (capocollo), *salami*, *sazeech* (all associated with Tony's panic attacks since they remind him of the criminal world of his father and of the violence he witnessed as a child); and as for the cheese section, *provolone*, *parmigiano*, *mozzarell*,¹¹ *buffalo mozzarell*,¹² *ricotta*, *pecorino*; to end with coffee and desserts, *espresso* (Paulie's last word

on Starbuck coffee being “this espresso shit,” S1E2), cappuccino, mostaccioli, zabaione, limoncello, sambuca, cannoli, sfugliadel, napolis, and the above mentioned zeppole.

The cultural and linguistic emphasis on food—with all its low-mimetic imagery—can be read as a counterpart for the clash of traditional values represented by contemporary mobsters. What the language of *The Sopranos* conveys so well, thanks to its combination of an up-to-date Mafia jargon and the ancestral flavour of Neapolitan dialect, all delivered in a believable Jersey accent, is the contrast “between feral street violence and collapsing crime family values and the most prosaic suburban concerns” (Stanley, April 2007), among which Sunday’s barbecues with grilled “sazeach” and ziti casseroles.

The language recreated in *The Sopranos* mirrors a cultural trajectory that includes both *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*. Unlike *GoodFellas* which—for various reasons—did almost away with Italian linguistic heritage, and nearly wrote off the whole semantic field of “food” from its narrative, *The Sopranos* gets back to a wider canvas of Italian American culture where *The Godfather* still functions as a model, albeit a “larger than life” one.

Caught in-between *The Godfather, Part I* and *II*, and *GoodFellas*, that is in-between the end of greatness and the beginning of uneasiness, Tony Soprano and all his crew, cannot help being “all *agita* all the time,” to quote Uncle Junior’s famous words, which designate a feeling of “acidità,” heart burn, indigestion, resulting in or adding to a general state of anxiety (“agitazione”). By taking Scorsese’s uneasiness and placing it right in the middle of the kitchen, David Chase has updated and enlivened the Gangster genre both culturally and linguistically.

Notes

1. From Season 1, Episode 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 11; Season 2, Episode 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13; Season 3, Episode 1, 3, 4, 5, 7; Season 4, Episode 1, 9; Season 5, Episode 3, 10; Season 6, Episode 2, 4.

2. As for *Goodfellas*, Chris (Tony’s nephew and potential heir) and his pals refer to Scorsese as “Marty” and go crazy when they spy him going into a gala movie premiere. As for *The Godfather*, a running joke that never fails to amuse Tony is Silvio Dante’s (Tony’s *consigliere*) impersonation of Al Pacino, in *The Godfather, Part III*—“Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in.”

3. To frame our socio-linguistic analysis, we need to make another preliminary remark about *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*: whereas Coppola’s portrayal of three generations of the Corleone family is a tragic epic, with no comic relief (more similar to *Once Upon a Time in America*—

Sergio Leone, 1984—than to any of Scorsese's gangster-movies), *Goodfellas* is neither epic nor tragic, but rather grotesque, starring the most exhilarating Italian American actor ever, Joe Pesci. As a TV series, *The Sopranos* shares some of Coppola's epic length, but its tragicomic mood unquestionably echoes Scorsese's gangster movies.

4. The teenager bar boy Spider (played by Michael Imperioli, the future Chris Moltisanti in *The Sopranos*) is one of the victim of Tommy De Vito's savageness. Interestingly enough, Henry Hill's wife is played by a young Lorraine Bracco, the same actress playing Tony's Doctor Jennifer Melfi.

5. Starting with interjections, greetings, directives, and allocutions calqued from Italian we can find "statte buono," "minchia-minch," "maronn," "a managia—managg," "a basta," "stat e zee," "salut," "buonasera," "aspett," "andiam," "piacere," "buon'aneme." Then, curse words and insults: "rattuso," "strunz," "cornuto," "coglioni," "bizzuoca," "citrul," "faccia bruta" (or "such a bruta"), "googotz" (<cucuzza, for squash or zucchini, a no brainy but lovely person), "stunade" (lame brain), "jamoke" (stupid, half wit), "chooch" (<ciuccio, donkey, stupid), "finook" (<finocchio, a derogatory term for homosexual or gay) used by Carmela in her "Thorn Bird" half affair with Father Phil, "...with all the priests in the world, I had to meet the one who is not a finook" (S1E6), "Gotz/u gazz" (The Stugots is the name of Tony's yacht), "vaffancul" used by Tony in his first talk with Dr. Melfi, to give voice to his bias against shrinks with a disheartening: "dysfunction here and dysfunction there, and dysfunction vaffancul" (S1E1).

6. Tony's love for food also expresses his power, specifically his sexual power. In his study of Calabrian food in Italian American culture, Anna L. Chairetakis wrote that "food is inscribed with gender and sexual symbolism," and salami and circle of bread "are metaphors for male and female sexual parts." Anna L. Chairetakis, "Tears of Blood. The Calabrian Villanella and Immigrant Epiphanies," in *Studies in Italian American Folklore*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice (Logan: Utah University Press, 1993), 13–20.

7. For Catherine Scorsese's pasta sauce recipe, read Catherine Scorsese and Georgia Downward, *Italianamerican: The Scorsese Family Cookbook* (New York: Random House, 1996).

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