

## Sicilian Americans Have Something to Say, in Sicilian



Every Wednesday night, a small group of students gather for their language course at the Italian Charities of America Inc. in Flushing, Queens. Ironically, the students are not interested in learning Italian, but a separate language that arrived during the wave of

Italian immigration to New York City. These students are the children and grandchildren of Sicilian immigrants.

“We only write the phrases on the board in Sicilian, not in Italian, so that is what stays in our memories after class,” says Salvatore Cottone, teacher of the Sicilian language class. On the chalkboard, Cottone has written, “Dumani Marialena sinni va cu zitu.” If he were to compare it to Italian, it would say “Marialena andrà con il suo ragazzo.” It would not help the students to observe the ways that one language relates to the other; they are completely separate in form, construction, and syntax.

Sicilian and Italian are both audibly and visibly diverse. To note a few examples, Sicilian uses different vowel sounds, relying on a long “u” rather than the “o” as in “trenu” (train) and “libbru” (book) instead of “treno” and “libro.” There is no future tense verb conjugation; instead, context words such as tomorrow, “dumani,” and later, “doppu,” are used to indicate that the action will take place in the future. The cadence and pronunciation of Sicilian also demonstrate obvious differences from the standard Italian. Scholars have found that Sicilian was the first written language in Italy after Latin. Declared by UNESCO as the first romance language of Europe, Sicilian contains a unique vocabulary of over 250,000 words. Since Italian Unification in 1870, however, when Tuscan became the national language, Sicilian has become less prominent in the southern regions of Italy and Sicily.