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**Italian identity and heritage language motivation:
Five stories of heritage language learning
in traditional foreign language courses in
Wellington, New Zealand**

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of the requirements for the degree of
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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.

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