

Write Your Life

A micro memoir writing project

Talk about family language — expressions, pronunciations, sayings, or phrases everyone in your family used.

In Our Family We Say . . .

Take a word like “dishwasher.” It seems pretty straightforward. Say it. Dishwasher. Two English words put together. Dish + washer. Accent on the first syllable. DISH-washer.

In the case of my Italian-speaking mother-in-law, that pronunciation was out of reach. In Italian, a thoroughly multi-syllabic language, the penultimate (second-to-the-last) syllable is commonly stressed. Take lasagna. Consider spaghetti. Bruschetta. Panini. Espresso. Calzaiuoli. For this reason, my mother-in-law, who spoke broken English, said *dish-WASH-er*. Wait, there’s more. The letter W in Italian is pronounced like the English letter V. So actually she said *deesh-VOSH-air*. A friend of hers, a lovely gentle little man named Piero (Pee-AIR-oh) used to say, when he cleaned house, that he ran the WACK-yoom. In Italy whoever owns a BMW drives as BMVoo.

One of my father-in-law’s go-to expressions in English was “take a look.” He operated a crane. On the construction sites, work would stop when someone had to take a look at a problem. He made take-a-look into a verb. You wanna *take-a-look*. A job not well done was a job where *you non take-a-look nobody*.

These expressions took root in our family. I use them. Both our kids use them. They’re an homage, a remembrance, an expression of love.

When I was learning basic Italian, the stressed syllable could be confusing. I was on a chair lift in Cortina D’Ampezzo (notice the stressed syllables). The man I was talking to complimented me on my Italian. He said he could tell by my accent that I was learning the Italian of Romagna, my wife’s region.

“And where will you ski tomorrow?” he asked.

I said I thought we would be going to Falzarego. I said False-are-EH-go.

He smiled and said, “False-ARE-eh-go.” Third syllable from the end of the word. So there was that to listen for.

I speak fluent broken Italian now. If you make yourself understood, Italians politely overlook the goof. In the case of my in-laws’ fractured English, I’m glad those terms and expressions

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became fossilized, became part of our family language. When I load the deesh-VOSH-air and “send it,” by which my mother-in-law meant “run it,” I feel connected to her. And grateful.