

Frontaliers Disaster: An Evening of Swiss-Italian Comedy, Language, and Conversation

Emily Haynes (October 20, 2018)



To celebrate Italian Language Week 2018, the Italian Cultural Institute and the Embassy of Switzerland held a joint event to demonstrate how language can be an opportunity to unify, not divide.

Italian is one of the national languages of Switzerland, but it is only spoken natively by 10% of the population, in the south near the Italian border. Yet the dialect has a very significant cultural significance for the Swiss, and the movie *Frontaliers Disaster* has been hugely popular for this reason. The director and producer, Alberto Meroni, Italian research scholar and lecturer, Laura Lazzari Vosti, and former associate professor of Italian Linguistics at the Sapienza University of Rome, Valeria Della Valle sat down for a panel discussion about the culture, identity, and language of Ticino at the Embassy of Switzerland. Emiliano Bos, the U.S. correspondent for Swiss Public Radio since 2015, moderated the panel.

Frontaliers began as a radio series, which evolved into a YouTube web series. The series became so well liked that the resulting feature film was one of Switzerland's biggest box-office hits of 2017.

The plot follows Roberto Bussenghi, an Italian mechanic who is always late to his job in Switzerland because of his bickering with the Swiss border guard, Loris Bernasconi. Through their daily squabbles, the audience can laugh while learning about the differences in cultural traditions between Italy and Switzerland, two countries that are connected by language and geography, but sometimes seem like two different worlds.

In between panel discussions, the Embassy of Switzerland screened some of their favorite Frontaliers episodes available on YouTube, as well as selected scenes from the feature film.

"In Switzerland, we are square-minded, the rules are the rules. In Italy, there are only exceptions to the rules," director Alberto Meroni joked in Italian, as he felt speaking in Italian would be more appropriate for the theme of the event.

"I can joke about my own culture. My heritage is Italian but my family lives in Switzerland... but I still have the Italian spirit lingering deep down." Meroni uses that spirit to create a "game of mirrors" with the two characters.

"It shows what the Italians think of the Swiss and what the Swiss think of the Italians. It is important for all of us to be able to laugh at ourselves."

The audience did laugh that night, but they also reflected on the division that border patrol creates between Italians and the Swiss. Bussenghi's daily border crossing is a reality for many working Italians, due to the current state of the economy in Italy. About 70,000 cars of commuters cross the border from Italy into Switzerland every day. Not only has this created logistical issues, tensions have been building, as the locals are afraid those who cross the border will take all of the available jobs. People who cross the border are often of a different economic situation than the people in Ticino, which adds more tension.

Frontaliers Disaster has acted as a glue to help Italians and Swiss connect with each other and laugh with other at a kind of comedy that can be enjoyed by all ages. The film does not rely on vulgarity for humor, it is something that grandchildren can watch with their grandparents and both age groups can laugh at the extreme respect for authority and rules by the Swiss. This self-irony "lowers the barriers," according to Meroni.

Laura Lazzari Vosti, one of the panelists, could easily relate to the comedy since it was the context she grew up in. She is half Swiss and half Italian. Her parents fell in love in Lugano, and her father would cross the border like Bussenghi in his Fiat. Many of the gags in the clips highlighted the clashes in her family.

Since the film began as a radio series, many of the jokes have to do with language. The Northern Italian dialect spoken by the Swiss combines words from French and German, or “Swiss-isms” according to the Head of Communications and Public Diplomacy at the Embassy of Switzerland, Andreas Ledergerber. For Meroni and Lazzari Vosti, this dialect is a big part of their identity.

“I thought dialect was losing its importance,” said Lazzari Vosti, “but this is not true.” She shared the story of a young girl who moved to the Ticino region of Switzerland without any previous knowledge of Italian, and picked up the dialect quickly. Because she spoke the dialect, she was seen as an insider, whereas a German-Swiss girl who moved to the region and spoke Italian in a Sicilian dialect was seen as an outsider.

Italian has such a rich, deep tradition as a language, that moderator Emiliano Bos wondered how it would evolve with the Internet and new technologies that allow for different kinds of communication. Panelist Valeria Della Valle revealed that of the 2,000 basic vocabulary words that Italians use, 1,600 were already in use during the time of Dante. Italians speak almost the same language that Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio used. But Italian is still evolving, and this is true of all languages.

“It is still too early to see what kind of changes new media will lead to. Even though the mechanisms imposed by media are much quicker and abbreviated, they are much more expressive,” Della Valle argued. “Those who use it are released from the bonds of grammar, free from the school teacher over their shoulder constantly correcting, which is a good thing. We need time to see how these changes go, but I am optimistic. There are more creative ways now that people can divulge in the Italian language.”

“Nowadays, regional terms from the Swiss-Italian dialect are valorized, when before they were discouraged,” Vostri agreed. “We can be prouder now.”

“The best way to make people think about language is through laughter,” Della Valle continued. “If an actor misuses a word, the audience reacts immediately,” more so than when speaking with someone in real life. If the misuse becomes a joke in a comedy, someone who often makes the same mistake will laugh and remember that it is incorrect for the next time. The mistake will not happen again.

Even the title of the movie is a “game in language,” as Meroni referred to it. “Frontaliers” is not a real word, although it seems like it would be the word for border patrol in a foreign language. The real word in Italian is *frontalieri*. The word “disaster” was not used because it is an American word – it is actually a dialect word.

Food and wine is another point of comparison and contrast in *Frontaliers Disaster*.

“The Ticinese always think they are making and coming up with new, incredible delicacies, but the Italians of course say ‘what is this?’” Meroni’s family owns a restaurant, and “the German Swiss



always loved our version of Italian food,” he joked.

A night of comedy, language, and the opportunity to bring two cultures together made this warm and uplifting event at the Embassy of Switzerland the perfect way to close Italian Language Week.

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