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Engineering a ‘contact zone’ through translanguaging

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This paper presents a pilot project which was set up by the authors of this paper with the association *Razzismo Stop* and uses a translanguaging approach in order to subvert the power dynamics whereby language learners, refugees and migrants are positioned as defective or ineffective communicators of a target language. The project seeks to challenge monolingual and standard language ideologies and to open a space, an engineered ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991) in which the negative, mainstream media discourses of migration can be countered through dialogue and encounter. Through translanguaging we foster creative, communicative practices in which interactants can bring into play their linguistic and cultural repertoires in order to support mutual understanding.

Questo articolo presenta un progetto pilota organizzato dagli autori in collaborazione con l’associazione *Razzismo Stop* che utilizza un approccio *translanguaging* per cercare di ribaltare le dinamiche con i quali rifugiati, migranti e apprendenti di una lingua vengono posizionati come comunicatori inefficaci o inadeguati. Tramite questo progetto si cerca di aprire uno spazio di dialogo e confronto, un ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991), per contrastare i discorsi negativi dei media sulle migrazioni attraverso l’incontro e il dialogo. Attraverso un approccio *translanguaging* i partecipanti utilizzano i loro repertori linguistici e culturali per sostenere la comprensione reciproca.

Keywords: translanguaging; refugees; pedagogy, contact zone

Introduction

This short paper is about a pedagogic, social, political pilot project called English Linguaging Workshops (ELWs) which are run in a small city in the north-east of Italy. ELWs are conversations, dialogue sessions based on the concept of translanguaging whereby participants are encouraged to draw on all the resources in their linguistic repertoires to engage in meaning making. The project was inspired by the language practices of refugees, the work of activist organizations, and the academic literature on plurilingualism, languaging and translanguaging. The aims of the project are to subvert

power dynamics in which language learners, refugees and migrants are positioned as defective or ineffective communicators of a target language, to challenge monolingual and standard language ideologies and to open a space in which the negative, mainstream media discourses of migration can be countered. It seeks to do this by engaging local residents and refugees in translanguaging conversations in which all their linguistic resources are brought into play.

In this short paper the voices of a bilingual teacher/researcher/activist (Author 1) and a plurilingual unemployed teacher/refugee/activist (Author 2) come together to present an account of this ongoing project, that we began 2 years ago. In the first section we briefly review the processes of constructing public discourses that lead to generalized fear of the ‘other’ in Italy. We then present the inspiration for the project and our motivations, and then a brief theoretic rationale for the workshops. We then describe the setting, the participants, some of the pedagogic activities we engage in with extracts from interactions. We close the paper with reflections on the limitations, challenges and implications.

Background

Italy is a country which has, in the last twenty years, has seen a transformation from being a country of emigration to a ‘country of arrival’. It is the first landing point in Europe for thousands of people who have had to leave their homelands (for a range of possible reasons) and survived hazardous journeys through Africa and across the Mediterranean. As in many other European countries in Italy there is a climate of fear of the ‘other’, particularly propagated by politicians and the media (ENAR, 2016). Racism is overt and explicit, often at institutional levels as well as in popular discourse. There are several factors which have led to media representations and people’s perception of a ‘refugee or migration crisis’. First of all the increasing number of ‘arrivals’ in Italy

(over 180,000 people arrived in Italy by sea in 2016¹ and over 4,500 died in the Mediterranean) in the last few years. Many of these ‘arrivals’ are trapped in Italy due to Europe’s unjust and highly problematic ‘Dublin regulation’ which obliges asylum seekers to present their asylum requests in the first European country they arrive in². Finally the Italian state’s dealing with the phenomenon as an emergency rather than a structural phenomenon (Cabot, 2014) has led to .

However in Italy, as in other countries, responses to migration are and have historically been “accompanied by both hospitality and hostility” (Phipps & Kay 2014 p.274). There are many NGOs, associations and activist groups which seek to challenge border policies, the de-humanizing forms of ‘reception’ as well as the negative representations and racist discourses present in the media and in the street. Many organizations run Italian courses for asylum-seekers and refugees or those who obtain forms of international protection – where the teachers are volunteers, interested in getting to know ‘the other’ (Leogrande, 2015; Melting Pot Europa, 2017; Obordo, 2015). These types of language learning sites could be defined as engineered ‘contact zones’, borrowing the term used by Mary Louise Pratt “to refer to social spaces where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today” (1991, p.34). Pratt first used this expression with reference to a specific course she taught on the Americas and their multiple cultural histories. The term has since been used in a range of contexts, also with reference to engineered intercultural encounters, that is sites designed for linguistic

¹ <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079>

² <http://openmigration.org/en/analyses/what-is-the-dublin-regulation/>

and cultural interactions which go beyond the surface level and where power is negotiated.

Like the Italian language classes run by activists, which offer an opportunity for such encounters, the English Linguaging Workshops (ELWs) are a form of ‘engineered contact zone’, deliberately set up to allow participants to engage with each other on a deeper level than the mere service encounter or friendly exchange in the street, to create integrations using bilingual conversations. We also use ELWs as a forum where mainstream media discourses can be addressed through dialogue and encounters. The main difference between the ELWs and the Italian classes, though, is the reversal in terms of power dynamics, for the ‘refugee’ becomes the language and translanguaging expert, while the ‘local’ citizen is the learner.

The inspiration

The idea for the workshops came from a chance encounter between the authors at the *Casa dei Diritti Don Gallo*, an occupied house in Padova, Italy³. It was once an office building and was occupied by activists from the association *Razzismo Stop*, other associations and refugees in December 2013.

³ House of Rights Don Gallo <http://casadeidirittidongallo.altervista.org/>



Figure 1. *Casa dei Diritti don Gallo* (photograph by Mara Scampoli)

The occupation was a response to the lack of institutional solutions for the many recipients of international or humanitarian protection who had arrived in Italy during the war in Libya in 2011 and remained destitute when funding for the so-called *Emergenza Nord Africa* dried up (Benedetelli, 2013). Between 50 and 70 people from various African countries (Cameroon, Ghana, Somalia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Togo, Senegal, Nigeria) lived together in this squat for over three years. The *Casa* is just one of many such informal reception centres in Italy (Medici Senza Frontiere, 2016)

Author 1 often went to Casa Don Gallo with activists from Razzismo Stop, with whom she had collaborated for several years. One of the many things that struck her were the many languages you could hear in the courtyard of the house, the fluidity in the use of languages and the linguistic choices made according to the needs of the situation. As is

well known, multilingualism is the norm in most African countries⁴. A large number of tribal languages were spoken in the house: Ashanti, Twi, Ga, Dagbani (Ghana); Somali (Somalia); Bambara, Dioula (Mali); Mossie, Mòoré, Bissa (Burkina Faso); Kotokoli, Chamba (Togo). Translanguaging was a common practice in the house for communicating with each other, and a mix of English and Italian was the ‘lingua franca’. The activists’ language use was also fluid as during the weekly *assemblee* [assembly/meeting], they would speak in Italian, English and sometimes French about the various issues that emerged (such as electricity being cut off, lack of water, hygienic conditions, new arrivals, bureaucratic problems, protests that were to be organized) to ensure that those with a limited knowledge of Italian could understand. The inhabitants of the *Casa* would use these languages and sometimes translate for each other in their own languages.

At one of these meetings author 2, who was then one of the residents, expressed his frustration about the situation at the house, and the lack of employment opportunities he had found in Padova when in Ghana and Libya he had been a Maths and English teacher. From this conversation came the idea of collaborating on a project that would meet the interests and needs of both.

Having recently attended some workshops on languaging and translanguaging, author 1 had become interested in these conceptualizations of language use, ELWs were an opportunity to explore this from a practical and research point of view, as well as taking action to counter the negative migration discourses through dialogue. Author 2 was

⁴ <http://www.languagesoftheworld.info/geolinguistics/linguistic-diversity-in-africa-and-europe.html>

interested in bringing together people from all walks of life, communicating and interacting with them and also finding opportunities to work as a teacher.

Theoretical framework

When the workshops started the authors had not fully developed a theoretical framework to inform their practice, but as mentioned above, a basic understanding of the concepts from bilingual and plurilingual education, languaging and translanguaging were the inspiration. Since then we have further explored these conceptualizations and have found not only useful pedagogic principles and practices to apply, but also resonance with the views of social justice that translanguaging encompasses and the renewed vision for language education.

The use of language as a verb, *languaging*, presents a view of language not as a static system to be mastered (the structuralist view), but rather as an activity that people engage in, people acting upon one another through language. This view highlights the interactive meaning-making process (Canagarajah, 2007; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) of language use – the type of practice that often occurred at the *Casa*.

The term ‘translanguaging’ was conceived in an educational context: bilingual educator Cen Williams and colleagues coined the term to describe and highlight the pedagogical usefulness of patterns of language use in Welsh secondary schools (Williams 1996). The concept has been adopted and further expanded on by other scholars, most notably by Ofelia Garcia (2009), in the context of bilingual education and schools in the US, more specifically in the state of New York through the CUNY-NYSIEB project (Celic & Seltzer, 2011). It is also encompassed in plurilingual teaching and research practices in other contexts (see for example Dooly, 2009; Dooly & Moore, 2017).

According to Otheguy, García and Reid (2015), translanguaging is “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state languages)” (p. 281). Translanguaging is also a philosophical stance which can transform subject positionalities, it disrupts the hegemony of named languages and is also about building a better and more just world, a more equitable society (García & Lin, 2016). Garcia’s approach is grounded in advocacy work for fairer and more just instruction and assessment of bilingual students, particularly in schools, but also the adult migrant learner (García, 2017). The ELW context in which we seek to apply some of the principles of translanguaging pedagogy is somewhat different from the school context. Here it is not bilingual children who are encouraged to translanguage, but rather groups of adults, some bi- or plurilingual, others not, nor are they generally from ‘minority’ groups, but rather from the local community. But as the many publications show, translanguaging strategies can be adapted to different types of students and contexts. What we do in this paper is describe how we have used some of these pedagogic strategies in the context of the ELWs with adult students.

The setting: a translingual space

Much attention is paid in the translanguaging literature to the physical characteristics of the ‘contact zone’ or ‘translanguaging space’ in particular the linguistic landscape of schools, the languages that are visible in ‘signs’ and how this reflects power relations at play (Celic & Seltzer, 2011; Garcia & Wei 2014)). The ELWs are held on the premises of ADL, a base union, where the association *Razzismo Stop* is based. The visual and linguistic landscape of this setting is immediately striking: large photomontages with representations of local, national and transnational mass demonstrations where signs “are conceptualised as a form of political activism indexing contestation and dissent in

situations of social and ideological conflict” (Rubdy 2015, p. 3). This linguistic landscape indexes the ideological beliefs in which the ELWs are grounded.



Figure 2. The setting (author’s photograph)

As can be seen in the image above, the space is not a classroom, there are no desks or whiteboard/blackboard. There is a space in which chairs can be arranged and we have chosen to arrange them in a circular format, which is non-hierarchical and aims to make participants feel comfortable enough to speak.

The participants

ELWs are not a traditional language course with a beginning and an end, but rather weekly encounters led by the two authors. There are some participants who have been coming regularly over the last two years, some who come and go. A money box where people can leave their voluntary contributions is left on one of the desks in the room.

The participants come from a range of backgrounds, for a variety of reasons and with diverse linguistic repertoires. The participants include students, both Italian and international, often friends of the association or its activists, members of the ADL trade

union, pensioners and professionals who are keen to practice or learn a few words of English and engage with the issues discussed. Anna for example, is an English teacher who teaches in a middle school and comes to the workshops because she is interested in migration issues. Her English is excellent, but she says she is attending the ELWs “because they are a good opportunity to learn something new about people who come from different part of the world and practise English at the same time” (personal communication). Isabella is a journalist who works for the local paper and comes to practice and improve her English but also enjoys the opportunity of meeting people from different cultures and walks of life. She has written a couple of articles for the paper on the ELWs which, contrary to most stories in the local press in Italy, offer a positive slant on migration, and furthermore these have brought new participants to the group.

The workshops: using translanguaging strategies

During the ELWs a range of translanguaging strategies are used as we adapt to the participants who come to the workshops with their very diverse linguistic repertoires .

Interlingual translanguaging

Interlingual translanguaging is the “movement (and mediating, and interpreting) between one societally recognised language and another” (Simpson 2016, p.15). This is the main strategy used as we engage in collaborative dialogues where the starting point is usually English but Italian, Veneto dialect, the odd word of French and other languages are brought into play as every week we embark on a serendipitous journey. A topic is usually decided upon prior to the session and as we start the discussion the group collaboratively support meaning making by asking questions, requesting repetition and summaries and providing oral translations for one another. Often we have encounters with a special ‘guest’ who does not usually make a pre-prepared speech, but perhaps says a few words

about themselves at the beginning of the session or begins to tell a story. As they speak participants stop them and ask questions, participants translate for one another when not everybody understands. Special guests have included Okey⁵, a Nigerian resident at *Casa Don Gallo* who talked about Biafra, Ali who talked about his journey from Ghana to Italy, through Niger, Libya and then Lampedusa; Quinti, an Ecuadorian student who was in Padova studying for his MA and talked about indigenous rights; Amin, a Syrian student who talked about his work as an activist for women's rights in Syria and the complex situation under the Assad regime; Helen, an American Fulbright scholar researching multicultural education in Italian schools.

Extract 1: Accoglienza

The extract below comes from a session when we were talking about a project that author 2 had been involved in, a 'social investigation' in which he and other refugees were interviewing Italians about the Casa don Gallo. Emma, one of the participants asks about people's reactions

(click here to listen: <https://clyp.it/bx1j402m>)

P1 And when you do the interviews do the people know the existence of er Casa don Gallo

A2 A lot of people yeah a lot of people know

P1 young er or old young ones or old ones

A2 well the young ones the young ones most of them are students and some of them outside know about Casa Don Gallo they hear about it but they don't know what is Casa...

P1. ok

A2 But the Padovani old ones they know about Casa Don Gallo .. they have their opinions

P1 ah they know

A2 at they say

A2 yeah yeah

A1 What is their opinion?

⁵ Pseudonyms have been used

A2 lots of them have some people say it's a *casa abbandonati* [abandoned house] then you know almost all they are bad

P2 a bad idea

A2 idea talk against

P1 ah

P2 ah

A2 and there are people too who have a different idea altogether, talking of er ... like er *accoglienza* [reception] talking about er there are people who talk about er *accoglienza* [reception] and people who talk about er like (...) *integrazione* [integration] er there are people who er have their own ideas who say .. so not everybody ... talks about er no no
A1 er *degrado* [degradation] like the video he he

A2 *degrado* yes is er a word I don't know what it means in Italian but I have to learn what it means

P1 he he

A2 the word *degrado*

A1 I think it's er the mayor's favourite word it's Bitonci

P1 yeah Bitonci

A1 in Abano they're talking about *degrado* as well though

A2 Bitonci *si* he talks about *degrado* before

Author 2 responds to a question on what people say about *Casa Don Gallo*. He uses the Italian term (*casa abandonati* – meaning abandoned house) and then introduces other Italian words such as *accoglienza* (reception), *integrazione* – which are words used in Italian migration discourses. *Accoglienza* is used both as regards the institutional management of asylum seekers, and like the English word 'reception', offers “an important dimension to work on migration and intercultural language studies” (Phipps & Kay, 2014, p.276) and can have both a positive and negative connotation. Author 2's expressive tone as he pronounces the word reflects the positive associations of the verb *accogliere* which can mean to welcome, and it is a term which is used by networks of activist associations in the area who support asylum seekers (see figure 4).



Figure 3. The positive connotation of *accoglienza* – as meaning Welcome, as often depicted on banners of activist groups (author’s photograph)

The selection of these Italian words from author 2’s linguistic repertoire at this point in the interaction is linked to the context in which they are being used – in the Italian context this is the language used to talk about migration, hence the relevance of the Italian terms. The choice of using these terms in Italian could be interpreted as a lexical gap if we were to adopt the ‘traditional’ bilingualism paradigm that assumes separate languages. The English equivalent of these words were not part of author 2’s English-language life experience in Ghana, they are words that are used in Italian migration settings for, as Simpson writes, our repertoires are represented by “a range of linguistic-semiotic resources acquired over the course of one’s life trajectory through membership of or participation in various communities of practice” (p.21). But from a translanguaging

perspective the dialogue was about migration context in Italy and the meaning and enactment of *accoglienza* and *integrazione* in Italy are of relevance, hence using these terms is the natural and most immediate choice. At the end of the extract above author 1(A1) introduces the term *degrado*, another term often used in migration discourses, but with an unequivocally negative connotation. It is a word that Author 2 says he has heard, but is unsure of the meaning, and the interaction continues with a discussion of the meaning of the word and how it is used by politicians and the media.

In this extract we thus see how translanguaging can deepen understanding of all participants engaging in the interaction of the socio-political issues being discussed and also their metalinguistic awareness, as the meaning of words and how they are used and interpreted are discussed.

Intersemiotic translanguaging

Intersemiotic translanguaging (Baynham et al 2015: 19), that is shifting between modes, whether offline and online modes, oral and written and/or visual language with a view to further enhance understanding is also a common translanguaging strategy. In the photo below, we see Okey, one of the guest speakers, using visual language and a ‘traditional’ tool as he draws a map of the region of Biafra to support his explanation of the current situation in Nigeria.



Figure 4. Okey engages in intersemiotic translanguaging (author's photograph)

Many participants are equipped with mobile phones and these are often called into play during the workshops as some of the participants might search for the translation of specific terms using online dictionaries. They also use their phones to search for further information on topics that are raised during the sessions, and share this with the group, much in the same way as people now do when interacting outside of educational contexts.

Technology also serves as a container, organizer and means of communication for the ELWs. Short weekly summaries are posted on the Facebook page with links to articles in different languages on issues that were discussed, songs or films that were mentioned or events organized by *Razzismo Stop* in collaboration with other associations. In this way we also address the intended outcomes of advancing social and political change by strengthening the network of solidarity and activism.

Strategies of collaborative reading, translation and raising metalinguistic awareness

Multilingual collaborative work is a common strategy in translanguaging classrooms (Cenoz & ..) The extract comes from a session which took as its starting point a text in English about the closure of *Casa Don Gallo*. The participants have a photocopy and are reading it in English together with author 2, stopping to discuss some of the issues, to ask questions, and discuss the meaning of the words and their translations into Italian. In the extract, there is a discussion of several possible Italian interpretations of the word ‘unscrupulously’ which had been used in the text to describe those organizations and individuals who unscrupulously use asylum seekers to make money for themselves and do not provide the services (accommodation, language courses, training programmes) they are supposed to.

Extract 2: Unscrupulously

(Click here to listen: <https://clyp.it/user/rl5tzo01>)

A2 what is unscrupulously

A1 unscrupulously *senza scrupoli* [without scruples] without any consideration of the other people

(background chat)

P2 *cinico* [cynical]

P1 *cinico si* [cynical yes]

A1 cynically, *si*, [yes]

P1 cynic

A1 if somebody is unscrupulous they are cynical

A2 cynical?

A1 it's even worse it's not .. the idea of exploiting *è peggio senza scrupoli è peggio di cinico* [it's worse without scruples is worse than cynical]

P3: *Senza scrupoli* [without scruples]

P1 eh yeas *ma* [but] in Eng in Italian I don't know er if there are er word er words [...]

A2 *non è ingiustamente?* [isn't it unfairly]

A2 *ingiusto?* [unfair]

P1 No

A1 no it's wrong because if you have no scruples then you have no conscience you don't feel bad about doing something

P1 *incosciente* [thoughtless]

A1 you do it

P4 without moral doubts

A2 without no? Without?

P4 moral doubts

A2 doubts ok ok without moral dou doubt è *dubbio*? [doubt?]

P1 Ah doubt *Dubbio si* [Doubt yes]

P5 *amorale* (...) *disinvolto* (...) e sì .. *una persona che è unscrupolous è amorale, spregiudicato*

A2 *spregiudicato*

The number of participants contributing to this collaborative interpretation and the intense discussion about the meaning of the word ‘unscrupulously’ highlights the value of translation as a strategy in translanguaging for engaging participants in discussion and also raising cross-linguistic metalinguistic awareness. Like the first extract in this paper, it also shows the potential for using translanguaging conversations in an ‘engineered contact zone’ where there are both refugees and ‘locals’ to discuss social inequalities and injustices.

Challenges and limitations

We had hoped at the beginning of the project to involve a greater number of refugees in the project as ‘teachers’ or as participants wanting to add English to their linguistic repertoires, but the majority of participants are not refugees, but long-term residents of the city of Padova.

Research has shown that though the transformation of urban centres through increased migration in recent years may have led to an increase in cultural contact, this remains in many cases superficial contact, ‘tolerance’ rather than engagement in dialogue. We feel that the ELWs allow us to go beyond this mere contact, as participants engage with some of the issues related to migration and gradually feel comfortable enough to ask author 2 and the many guests questions that go beyond superficial exchange. The ELWs allow participants to get to know each other better and perhaps on more of an equal footing than in language classes organized *for* refugees. However many of the participants are curious, open-minded people who choose to come

because they are interested in migration-related issues so is there a sense that we are ‘preaching to the converted’ rather than engaging with ‘otherness’ by which we mean those who stand firmly against migration and the welcoming of refugees.

We do not make claims of newness in this pedagogic practice, for we are sure this type of activity is widespread. Taking the time to reflect on our activity and to link it to emerging theories of translanguaging practices and pedagogy is, however, a luxury that most activists and refugees do not have the time for. We hope that putting to paper some of our reflections and practices may arouse the curiosity and desire in those who can afford to take the time to read this so they may embark on and/or share similar intercultural, pedagogic and/or research experiences. As Garcia and Wei conclude their volume, “Translanguaging enables us to imagine new ways of being and languaging so that we can begin to act differently upon the world” (2014, p.138).

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