

# PROMPTING MIGRANTS' EXPERIENTIAL PROCESSES OF DECONSTRUCTING AND AUTHENTICATING A HOST COMMUNITY'S LITERARY TEXT THROUGH ELF

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**Abstract** – This chapter introduces an ELF-mediated on-going research project aimed at involving communities of migrants and refugees hosted in Southern Italy who are encouraged to access and ‘authenticate’ (Widdowson 1979) the Italian theatrical culture according to their own linguacultural and experiential backgrounds. Such an appropriation is assumed to occur by having migrants improvising on the plays (Checkhov 1953; Johnstone 1981), translating and re-writing them (Slembrouck 1999) into their own ELF variations, thus creating parallel texts to the original ones, and then embodying them on an actual stage (Guido 1999). This study specifically presents a case study on migrants’ appropriation and embodiment of Luigi Pirandello’s play *Six characters in search of an author*, where the original characters’ experiences of displacement and identity loss are filtered, reinterpreted and re-contextualized through the subjects’ different schemata, and then rendered into their own ELF variations at the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and metaphorical levels (Guido 2008). The objective is to make migrants appreciate the original text by re-textualizing it into a new parallel one where their own personal experience of existential displacement and of being uprooted from their own native countries can find an artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Embodied Stylistics; literary translation into ELF; Think-Aloud Technique; ELF-mediated authentication of literary texts.

## 1. Introduction and theoretical background<sup>1</sup>

This chapter reports on an ongoing research project aimed at encouraging communities of migrants and refugees hosted in Southern Italy to access and authenticate a famous Italian play written by Luigi Pirandello, *Six characters in search of an author*, and focused on a sense of bewilderment that it is

<sup>1</sup> Although the authors collaborated in the outline and actual writing of the paper, they individually devoted more time to the following sections: Adele Errico – Sections 1 and 2; Maria Teresa Giampaolo – Sections 3, 4 and 5.

assumed to be shared by such displaced people. The main purpose of this research is to make migrants acquainted with the literary culture of the Italian host community and, at the same time, to encourage their ‘embodiment’ of the text by deconstructing it according to their own experiential background within the context of communication between migrants and specialists in intercultural education dealing with immigration issues. The present contribution is part of an on-going research that, suddenly, came to an abrupt halt because of the hasty lockdown measures taken by most of the European States following the Covid-19 pandemic emergency, which impeded the collection (and the subsequent analysis) of ethnographic data based on fieldwork with groups of migrants and refugees. This explains why the research reported in this chapter cannot at the moment be other than essentially principle-based and programmatic, illustrating the theoretical background to this study and the methodology meant to be used in dealing with migrants. The migrants are expected to be directly involved in the stages of the research and to benefit from the results: they will approach the text improvising on the play (Chekhov 1953; Johnstone 1981), translating and re-writing it (Slembrouck 1999) into their own ELF variations (Guido 2008; Jenkins 2007; Seidlhofer 2011), with the aim of creating a parallel text to the original one, and then embodying it on an actual stage. The choice of the text is justified by the intention to explore the experience of ‘displacement of the self’ and its reinterpretation within alien contexts through the different experiential and socio-cultural schemata of its recipients. The already uprooted and displaced six characters of Pirandello’s “comedy in the making”, lost without their author, can be embodied and reinterpreted through the migrants’ feeling of estrangement. The six characters, in their attempt to give meaning to their own existence, place their hopes of finding an identity in the meeting with the Scriptwriter, in the same way as migrants place their hopes for a new life in a new landing place.

In order to conduct the research, it is important, first of all, to focus on the theoretical background: by analysing the play through the Structuralist and Post-Structuralist perspectives, it is possible to demonstrate that it is not easy to apply Structuralist theories (Chatman 1980; Culler 1975; Genette 1976) to this literary work because of its innovative nature. A Deconstructionist reading appears to be more appropriate.

More specifically, taking as a starting point the Structuralist theories developed by Chatman (1980) and Genette (1976), the selected play will be first explored as a literary text that conveys its meaning through the use of language.

Although the theatrical text differs from the narrative text because of the absence of the narrator (Chatman 1980), an exception is the theatre of Pirandello, which does not exclude a diegetic interference in the mimesis.

According to Genette (1976), there are varying degrees of diegesis, with the narrator either more involved or less involved in the narrative. However, Genette claims that there is no case in which the narrator is completely absent. In *Six characters*, the author loses his authority and becomes a character, so his point of view is only one of the numerous points of view that create the mimesis. Indeed, the story is narrated through the various interpretations that each of the characters provides of the facts. This leads to a psychological conflict among the characters so the real drama is given by the difference of opinions, not the sequence of events (Szondi 1962).

The revolutionary metatextual system of *Six characters* allows the world of fiction to interfere with the surrounding reality and to involve the spectator. The prefix “meta” (Genette 1976) connotes the passage to a secondary level. Therefore, “metadiegesis” is the universe of the second story (just as diegesis designates the universe of the first story). The “metadiegesis” of the *Six characters* belongs to the first of three types proposed by Genette (1976) – namely, the direct causality between the events of the “metadiegesis”, which gives the story an explanatory function. In the drama, the levels of communication overlap, creating a system of transversal communication that relates scene and extrascene, breaking the convention of the so-called “fourth wall”, the separation between the stage and the audience. The impatience of Pirandello against the conventional mechanisms of the nineteenth-century bourgeois theatre results in a new theatre with desecrating and aggressive characters and shattered plots. The traditional dramatic organism is perceived as misleading and its artifices and spectacular effects are rejected in the name of a representation of authentic life. Furthermore, this theatre does not bother at all to hide what happens behind the scenes. Pirandello’s theatre is not afraid to reveal its secrets and to confess to being fiction, that does not claim to be reality. The theatre reveals itself in front of its spectators and its readers making them part of the drama, disintegrating the traditional scene and letting the staging invade even the theatre. This upsetting of the bourgeois theatre structures represents a deconstruction process seen in terms of a tendency to dismantle the structures of the text and of a “general displacement of the system” (Culler 1982, p. 85).

For these reasons, *Six Characters* is particularly appropriate for a Derridean/deconstructive reading.

According to Paul de Man (1979), the main gesture of the deconstructive process is the act of reading: deconstruction starts with the problematic situation present within each reading and with the consequent need to interpret the text. Readers can determine the interpretation of a literary text, that is a stimulus to create new perspectives related, also, to their individual experience.

In Derrida's (1978) view, Deconstruction is not understood as a dismantling of the text from the outside, but as its undermining from within, which would produce alternative readings. The text in itself does not exist: it is necessary first to 'construct' it, and then to 'deconstruct' its meanings. The text is a plural reality that provides the possibility of alternative readings and reinterpretations, to be deconstructed and reconstructed according to what are the needs and experiences of each reader. Deconstruction is the result of the encounter between the written text and the memory, sensations and cultural background of each reader who, while reading, approaches the text, interacting with it to fully himself/herself identify with literary experience.

The result of this mode of reading is called "différance": the reader comes to realize that his/her own differentiation from the language of the literary text, far from taking him/her to the ultimate meaning (meant as the confirmation on his/her own schematic expectations and beliefs), activates as an endless deferment of meaning (Guido 1999).

In De Man's (1979) critique, a text already contains within itself its own means of deconstruction, and thereby the rhetorical markers that characterize it as literary language. This lightening of the weight of textual meaning, advanced by Derrida and De Man, would indeed guarantee a greater expressive freedom.

So, since the author is dead – according to Barthes (Barthes 1977) – the reader must separate a text from its author and free the work from interpretive tyranny. In this research the opportunity for a deconstruction of the text and its rewriting in ELF, is given by the possibility of allowing its accessibility to migrant communities and facilitating its reading in intercultural contexts.

Once established the theoretical context, is it possible to demonstrate how reading the text and interacting with it is an opportunity of "recreating, re-experiencing, through representation, the emotional journey of a poem, which could, or could not, coincide with the actual Author's own journey" (Guido 1999, p. 157).

## 2. Research objectives

As detailed above, this contribution is included in an ongoing research, so the following objectives are those expected.

The approach of the migrants to the text is expected to develop an innovative theoretical and methodological model for a critical analysis (Cook 1994) of the formal and pragmatic structures of the selected text and a creative translation into their own ELF variation – namely, "the creation of new (i.e. non-codified) linguistic forms and expressions in ongoing interaction/discourse or the use of existing forms and expressions in a non-

conventional way” (Pitzl 2012, p. 37). Through the principle of creativity, the original text will be revitalized and will lead to a new, autonomous parallel text.

Following the translation into ELF the play is meant to be staged by groups of migrants as research subjects with the help of theatre and acting experts. This study will specifically focus on the subjects' processes of embodied interpretation (Guido 2013) of Pirandello's play.

This process achieves a physical and emotional identification of the subjects with the dramatic language: the subjects as acting interpreters are expected to react to the texts according to their own schemata – which are the cognitive-experiential, cultural and physical patterns stored in the interpreters' minds (Rumelhart 1977, 1980) interacting with the linguistic structure of the plays. The objective is to explore the interpreters' processes of authentication of the plays (Widdowson 1992). The analysis, therefore, will be carried out on the interpreters' embodiment (Johnson 1987) of the plays, of their 'conversational moves' (Burton 1980), and of the rhythm of the characters' language that influences the rhythm of the acting interpreters' breathing, thus activating their experiential and emotional memory with reference to the sense of displacement.

### 3. Method

The comprehension of events occurs in different ways across cultures, because every culture conceptualises and then verbalises events according to its own cultural schemata. When the verbalisation is needed in a foreign language, in this case in ELF, an individual involved in intercultural communication often conceptualizes events according to modalities typical of his/her L1 and verbalises those concepts in the L2 (ELF), often transferring elements of the conceptualisation in L1 to the verbalisation in L2/ELF (Giampaolo 2014). This represents for the L2/ELF speaker another step in his/her oral production and requires more attention in the linguistic stages because of the lack of automation in the oral production processes by the NNS (Levelt 1989). Furthermore, the aspects of reality conceptualised in the speaker's L1 and verbalised in his/her L2/ELF variation promote the transfer of elements to the L2 not only at the conceptual level, but also at the syntactic and lexical levels. It is important to underline that the data collection (and the subsequent analysis) of this research was suddenly interrupted because of the lockdown measures following the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. Migrants are expected to be directly involved in this ethnographic study focused on the interpretation of a Pirandello's play. The emotional elements which arise while reading some extracts of the literary work are expected to recall to their minds their experience of uprooting from their land. Emotion will be an

essential element in the achievement of linguistic and interpretative production. Strong feelings that well up in the readers' mind could prompt in them the use of ELF forms to be analysed in the course of qualitative case studies, as such feelings are expected to lower the control on the formal correctness of utterances, encouraging the formation of creative neologisms in the use of ELF variations.

To enquire into the 'top-down' processes activated in the migrants' minds while 'deconstructing' (Culler 1982) the original text and re-textualising it into a parallel text, the Think-Aloud Technique in verbal report will be adopted (Ericsson, Simon 1984; Giampaolo 2014; van Someren *et al.* 1994) in order to encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and emotions through ELF in relation to the text under exploration. During the activities of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading to be proposed to migrants, the Think Aloud Technique is planned to be used for data collection – meant as verbal reports in which linguistic and content forms of ELF can be identified. This method, indeed, would allow an exploration of the thought-processes involved while migrants read, deconstruct and, in doing so, appropriate and authenticate the Italian text to their own experiential schemata (Guido 1999). The main reason for using verbal-report protocols is that it has been demonstrated how verbal reports, well prompted and then interpreted, are an effective source of information for the analysis of cognitive processes (Ericsson, Simon 1984; Pressley, Afflerbach 1995). Furthermore, it will be possible to identify the features of the ELF variety used by each migrant and analyse the language structures and the cultural constructs that influence the development of their ELF variations. Indeed, such variations develop from a process of "language authentication" (Widdowson 1979), which consists in transferring the cultural and experiential schemata as well as the syntactic and pragmatic structures of the speakers' native languages to the 'lingua franca' that they use (Guido, Seidlhofer 2014). The Think-Aloud Technique is planned in this study to record the migrants' responses to the reading of Pirandello's play and, thus, to have access to their cognitive processes of emotional interpretation and authentication of the text. For this reason, they will be given all the time they need to complete their textual deconstruction and subsequent experiential and emotional authentication.

#### 4. Data collection

Data collection will be divided into three stages: The first is a pre-reading stage, involving a brain-storming task useful to focus on the migrants' feelings of displacement. The second is a while-reading stage, involving the recording of the migrants' accounts of their own displacing experiences, expressed in their own ELF variations, compared to those undergone by the

characters of the play. The third stage regards a post-reading deconstructive task aimed at creating parallel texts to be performed by the migrants themselves on an actual stage.

The method of the Think-Aloud Technique (Cohen, Hosenfeld 1981; Ericsson, Simon 1984; Pressley, Afflerbach 1995; van Someren *et al.* 1994) adopted to collect the research data allows for a recognition of the migrants' cognitive and emotional processes activated while reading some selected extracts of Pirandello's play, in particular those parts in which they may feel more involved in the characters' parallel feelings. Then, migrants will be asked to report on real situations in which they may have experienced similar displacing feelings. The recording and videotaping of their accounts will then allow an identification of the linguistic and nonlinguistic strategies in ELF used to convey their own feeling of estrangement and sorrow when analysing the characters' feelings. The research subjects will be selected among non-native speakers of English using ELF variations in situations of intercultural communication to be identified among migrants assisted at local centres for legal and health counseling, as well as among migrants who work as actors at a local theatre. Similarly to other qualitative methods of data collection, the Think Aloud Technique seeks rich data from a small sample of subjects. To collect the research data, each migrant will be scheduled for an individual session of recording in a quiet setting to facilitate his/her 'thinking aloud'. The subjects involved will be instructed to give voice to their thoughts and feelings as they approach for the first time the selected texts – with interactions with the researcher kept to a minimum to avoid interferences with their interpretation. With the permission of the migrants, the Think Aloud sessions will be videotaped and later transcribed to produce verbal protocols. The coded transcriptions can be used to evaluate a wide range of language and content features expressed through ELF, as well as they can be used as parallel texts to be actually performed on the stage, letting migrants express their inner feelings to an audience in the host country who will be made aware of the migrants' sad experiences of uprootedness, so close to those parallel ones expressed by the characters of a play written by a well-known Italian author.

#### **4.1. Pre-reading**

As a first pre-reading task, migrants can be made acquainted with the plot of the play, followed by a number of 'brainstorming questions' aimed at enabling them to make top-down connections between the characters' displacing experiences and their own parallel ones. At this stage, the experiential background of the subjects plays a central role (Guido 2004): being emotionally involved in reporting their sad migration experiences, the

subjects are expected not to care about the ‘correctness’ of the English they use as an L2, but rather they would predictably use their own ELF variations – namely, the English language appropriated to the formal, pragmatic, metaphorical, and even formulaic features that they unconsciously transfer from their own L1s. Lyons (1968) defined formulaic sentences as expressions that speakers learn as not analysable wholes, which are used in particular occasions, whereas Ellis (1985) asserts that creative speaking appeals to the rules of the speaker’s L2, producing new utterances. Hence, the emotional element is expected to have a strong impact on the migrants’ oral production (Giampaolo 2013), because the feelings evoked in their minds can increase their ELF creativity.

#### **4.2. While-reading**

The migrants and refugees to be selected as the sample of research subjects are expected to be a heterogeneous group of people, coming from different places and with different personal backgrounds and social status in their own countries. They will be asked to read some extracts from Pirandello’s play where the sense of displacement, uprooting and sorrow prevails. The migrants as interpreters are initially expected to become acquainted with the language and the content of the play by making their own schemata prevail over the text (Guido 2018). In the previous brainstorming stage, the migrants would be given the possibility of recalling their own feelings of estrangement and sorrow related to the experience of fleeing their own countries and now, at this while-reading stage, they are encouraged to employ a top-down deconstructive approach (Rumelhart 1977) as a means to cope with the sense of estrangement that the language and the situations of the play initially trigger in them as they start reading it. As Guido (2018, p. 225) states, “the interpreters’ top-down cognitive processes make the new information achieved from the poetic text interact with their own schemata which ‘normalize’ the poetic-verse structures that, by their very nature, ‘diverge’ from everyday linguistic structures.”

Pirandello’s text was slightly adapted and simplified in its translation into English to be more accessible to migrants. What follows is a couple of selected extracts from *Six characters in search of an author* with their English translations:

*Extract 1:* [...] Soltanto per sapere, signore, se veramente lei com’è adesso, si vede...come vede per esempio, a distanza di tempo quel che lei era una volta, con tutte le illusioni che allora si faceva; con tutte le cose, dentro e intorno a lei, come allora le parevano – ed erano, erano realmente per lei! – Ebbene, signore, ripensando a quelle illusioni che adesso lei non si fa più, a tutte quelle cose che ora non le «sembrano» un tempo; non si sente mancare, non dico



queste tavole di palcoscenico, ma il terreno, il terreno, il terreno sotto i piedi, argomentando che ugualmente «questo» come lei ora si sente, tutta la sua realtà d'oggi così com'è, è destinata a parerle illusione domani?

*Translation 1:* [...] But only in order to know if you, as you really are now, see yourself as you once were with all the illusions that were yours then, with all the things both inside and outside of you as they seemed to you – as they were then indeed for you. Well, sir, if you think all of those illusions that mean nothing to you now, of all those things which don't even exist anymore, don't you feel that – I won't say these boards – but the very earth under your feet is sinking away from you when you reflect that in the same way this you as you feel it today – all this present reality of yours – is destined to seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow?

*Extract 2:* [...] quando in qualcuno dei nostri atti, per un caso sciaguratissimo, restiamo all'improvviso come agganciati e sospesi: ci accorgiamo, voglio dire, di non esser tutti in quell'atto (situazione reale), e che dunque un'atroce ingiustizia sarebbe giudicarci da quelli solo, tenerci agganciati e sospesi, alla gogna (derisi, disprezzati), per un'intera esistenza, come se questa fosse assommata tutta in quell'atto.

*Translation 2:* We perceive this when, tragically perhaps, in something we do, we are as it were, suspended, caught up in the air on a kind of hook. Then we perceive that all of us are not in that act (real situation), and that it would be an atrocious injustice to judge us by that action alone [...], as if all our existence were summed up in that deed.

### 4.3. Post reading

After reading these and other selected extracts from Pirandello's play, migrants will be prompted to activate bottom-up processes of recollection of events belonging to their own experience and to compare them with the parallel experiences undergone by the characters in the play. This is expected to trigger in migrants the creation of parallel texts to be performed on an actual stage. To prompt such processes, the investigators conducting the field research may ask, for instance:

- How would you stage your personal experience of displacement?
- Would you please try to embody and improvise on this character?
- Do you think that the upsetting situations in which these characters are involved are similar to situations that you have experienced?
- Would you write a short play on your personal experience and then perform it on stage?

Furthermore, reading the text aloud would allow the discovery of linguistic patterns that would trigger in the readers an emotional involvement in the interpretation of the characters' words. This would entail that the resulting

interpretations are the outcome of as many deconstructive processes as there are readers to interpret the text.

## 5. Conclusion

The deconstructive reading of *Six characters in search of an author* allows the adaptation of the selected text to the migratory contexts and an experiential involvement of the subjects in the interpretation of Pirandello's play. In deconstructing and authenticating the text while interpreting it, the reader is assumed to become the protagonist of the act of reading and, therefore, the migrants who read Pirandello have the opportunity to relate the events narrated in the play to their own personal experiences, eventually expressing them through ELF during the 'think-aloud' phase. Indeed, the ethnographic fieldwork – expected to take place immediately after the end of the lockdown imposed by the pandemic emergency, and based on data collected by means of the Think Aloud Technique – will also allow researchers to enquire into the migrants' ELF variations affected by their own cultural and personal backgrounds. Data, therefore, may be used to explore many linguistic aspects at the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and metaphorical levels. It cannot be denied that the emotional aspects will be here at the basis of many ELF forms, because the recalling of the migrants' experience of feeling uprooted from their own countries to escape war and poverty will play a major role in their interpretations of the play. The investigation into the influence of the migrants' experiential backgrounds on the use of their ELF variations will also be useful in identifying the cognitive and emotional processes that they activate while 'authenticating' (Widdowson 1979) the play by interpreting it through their own experiential schemata and cultural constructs (Iaia 2015).

Moreover, the focus on oral production in ELF that investigates the creative language used by migrants in order to express their feelings could be useful also in classrooms that include migrant students. An awareness of ELF creativity could in fact allow teachers to better understand these students while they express their feelings, as well as to help students from the host country to understand how migrants perceive their experience of being uprooted. Research on oral performances in L2 in "task-based contexts" (Skehan 2003; Skehan, Foster 1997, 2001) have explored creativity in non-native speakers' use of communicative skills (Giampaolo 2014). In this sense, the interpretation of a play may prompt migrants to express their impressions and relevant feelings, allowing the researcher to explore their creative use of ELF.

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