

English as a Lingua Franca in the Context of Migration: An Italian Perspective¹

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Abstract :

Descriptive research on English as a Lingua Franca has been under way for more than a decade now, to the point where the acronym ELF refers not only to situations in which speakers of different first languages use English as their main communicative medium of choice, but also to a new research paradigm in various disciplines documenting a set of shared and stable features and processes. ELF is, in fact, essentially defined and characterised by its variability, flexibility, and linguistic creativity (Guido & Seidlhofer 2014; Seidlhofer 2011). In this paper, we approach the study of ELF as a socio-cultural, political and pragmatic phenomenon by looking at how it manifests itself linguistically in a specific group of speakers: migrant people who have recently crossed the Mediterranean and are enrolled in the national SPRAR project (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati). The examples of language contacts between ELF and IFL (Italian as a Foreign Language) here discussed will illustrate how linguistic creativity manifests itself in ELF not only in the way “the virtual language of English” (Widdowson 1997: 138–140) is flexibly and creatively adapted and used, but also in the way in which non-English speech can be also integrated into ELF discourse. In the context of multicultural classrooms like those observed in this study, where such factors as integration, tolerance, respect and conflict are at issue every day, the use of ELF becomes more and more controversial. Indeed, it requires a multidisciplinary approach that considers the teaching/learning environment from a variety of perspectives, from the linguistic to the anthropological, from the pedagogical to the sociological ones.

Keywords:

ELF, migration, Italian as a Second Language, translingual

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1. Introduction

An unprecedented vision of language and language contact is currently taking shape across the Mediterranean as a consequence of the mass migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, Southern Italy in particular. It is a vision that fosters the creation and the use of new interdisciplinary narratives that shape, and are also shaped by, the cross-cultural practices adopted within these migrant communities. In line with recent research in social anthropology, we maintain that these “supergroups” - a term used to define deterritorialised and transidiomatic communities of speakers that move within this geo-political scenario (Vertovec 2004; 2007; Blommaert & Rampton 2011) – represent new social and linguistic actors that problematize the relationship between the notions of “linguistic community” and “nation-state”.

On one hand, in Europe, migrant people are constantly referred to as “human tsunami”, “waves”, “boat people”, “floods”, “illegals”, “aliens” (among others, Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017), since the spectacularization and polarization of differences represent the first step in the process of their de-humanization. Indeed, in order to legitimize their rejection, it is necessary for migrants to be transformed into a common evil enemy. On the other hand, we maintain that migrant people are also capable of adapting to new communicative practices in order to narrate their own story, mediate and adapt to the changing paradigms of the world we inhabit (Klimkiewicz 2013)⁴.

From a strictly linguistic point of view, as a “supergroup”, they are the ones who can creatively negotiate place, space and identity through the use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In order to introduce the concept of ELF and its use in the context of contemporary mass migration across the Mediterranean, we will use the following illustrative quotation by Sung-Yul Park and Wee:

Over the past thirty years, research on world Englishes has played a major role inculcating recognition of the creativity and legitimacy of new forms of English that emerged in the post-colonial and globalizing world. One of the more recent contributions to this effort is the research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF; Firth 1996; House 1999; Jenkins 2000; 2007; Seidlhofer 2004; 2011; Canagarajah 1999; 2013 among others). Driven by the insight that speakers for whom English is not their native tongue now outnumber those for whom it is, scholars of ELF

4 This aspect has been further analysed in our forthcoming article *Us and them: The linguistic and visual construction of 'the Other' through Facebook Pages*, in Demata M. et al. (eds.) *Discursive constructions of migrants: verbal and visual images of the "other"*, I-LAND JOURNAL, Identity, Language and Diversity.

have pointed out that English “as a consequence, is being shaped, in its international uses, at least as much by its non native speakers as its native speakers” (Seidlhofer 2004: 211–12). [...] Since ELF research turns its attention further away from the Inner Circle to speakers of the Expanding Circle, giving greater recognition to the English of non-native speakers, it completes in an important way the broader project of world Englishes research, finally extending the work of legitimation to include speakers who have been so far still seen as deficient users of English due to their non-nativeness (Sung-Yul Park & Wee 2011: 360).

Several types of ELF are indeed identifiable nowadays, according to different cultural, political and economic contexts, and to specific status asymmetries between senders and recipients (Iaia 2015). Furthermore, the interdisciplinary study of ELF is intrinsically related to the study of the so called “proper English” (which will be discussed in the next section), the standard language spoken by its native speakers and, especially in the new geopolitical scenario of migration across the Mediterranean, English appears in all its creative power as a “negotiable” language. As it will be shown in the following pages, it may represent a place for change, adaptation and creativity in the context of IFL (Italian as a Foreign Language) classes. Indeed, in line with Canagarajah’s “resistance perspective”, those who use English as a contact language “may find ways to negotiate, alter and oppose political structures, and reconstruct their languages, cultures, identities to their advantage” (1999: 2)⁵.

The following pages will illustrate the research conducted in Southern Italy in 2016 and 2017⁶ involving lesson observations and interviews with Italian L2 teachers working for the NGOs and for the SPRAR project (*Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati*) that manage the migrant crisis in the region. In this paper, we will focus only on six teachers working in the provinces of Bari (two teachers), Taranto (two teachers), and Lecce (two teachers), which cover almost the whole territory of Apulia and give a general but adequate overview of the situation. In the contexts of Italian language classes for Anglophone, Francophone and Arabophone migrants (we specifically selected 24 hours of lesson observation to discuss in this paper), we investigated the use of Italian, ELF and of the students’ native languages, concluding that such multilingual practice should be seen as an opportunity to overcome the limitations of monoglot standardization and monolingualism, in line with what Canagarajah defines as a “translingual practice” (2013).

5 This aspect was extensively discussed in Taronna (2016).

6 This research has been discussed in Carbonara & Taronna (2017) that focused on the pedagogy of contact in the Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) classroom.

2. From “Proper English” to “ELF”⁷

Retracing the main dynamics through which the process of colonization and the most recent globalization trends have led to the hegemony of the English language problematizes the dissemination of the myth of English and the rhetoric of naturalization. Among these is the diffusion of a model based on a culture of monoglot standardization, which Silverstein defines as the constitutive base of a linguistic community that influences the structure of different communities of speakers (1996: 284). Drawing on a purist idea of language, this cultural model exerts its influence within a linguistic community that is linked to the idea that there is a rule that allows an individual to use his/her own language for denotative purposes, by reproducing a natural social and linguistic order (cf. Preisler 1999; Taronna 2016).

More specifically, such standardization is consolidated as a hegemonic process through different phases and methods: it emerges as a process of social codification and reflects the functional usefulness of language as a means of representation or denotation; the social processes that regulate communication and are activated for the purposes of standardization are presented as naturalized when the search for a “common agreement” is activated within the denotative value of the words that becomes shared by an even larger group of people. Finally, the cultural model of monoglot standardization, by imposing itself as a natural process, brings out parallel social phenomena in an exercise of authority that affects the future of language. Among these, the system of public and private education in general and the devices adopted in the linguistic policies of each State constitute a concrete institutional push towards a model of monoglot standardization or flexible plurilinguism.

The rhetoric of standardization in the form of naturalization of the language has consolidated two dichotomous value models: possessing the standard (*possession-of-standard*) gives the individual a high social and cultural status; not having the standard (*lack-of-standard*) becomes a negative indicator of a social and cultural status of the speaker. In both cases, however, pursuing a model based on a standard language becomes unsuccessful when it must be taken into account that the purist idea of language is only an ideological construction historically marked by stories of colonization, diasporas, forced migration, nationalism, abuse and sometimes even fanaticism. In this context, along with Widdowson (2003),

7 This line of argumentation was previously suggested in Taronna (2016).

influential linguists have started to question what standard English is or, more precisely, what “proper English” is:

We can talk about proper English in terms of conformity to encoding convention. But this is not the only answer. We can also think of words being in their proper place with reference to their communicative purpose. Here we are concerned not with the internal relationship of words as encoded forms, but with the external relationship of words with the context of their actual occurrence, and propriety is not now a matter of their correctness of form in a sentence, but of their appropriateness of function in an utterance (Widdowson 2003: 27).

“Proper English” therefore refers to a form of English taken as a model of correctness and appropriateness for the successful outcome of communication. However, the expression is also used in a broader sense to designate both a group of speakers and a set of linguistic practices that are considered correct, standard and central. From this point of view, it becomes clear why the promoters of this model are, for example, against the use of ELF, and criticize the use of a simplified, culturally neutral form of English that would generate a series of problems, as it reduces vocabulary and creates frequent phonetic and semantic deviations, thus leading to lexical and grammatical ambiguity.

For these reasons, every linguistic variety born in time as an alternative to the standard English model has been defined in terms of broken English, globish, or English with an accent. These expressions used to underline that the new varieties of English spoken in the world can alter and corrupt the purest variety of English that belonged to the so-called natives by right. As a result, albeit dismissive, these labels bring to the centre of the linguistic debate another implication deriving from the diffusion of the myth of the English language and of the rhetoric of naturalization: the re-reading of the concept of nativeness and the category of native speaker. Traditionally, the ideology that underlies the nativeness model reproduces a series of myths according to which the variety of English - but not only - spoken by a native is a model of preferable and desirable correctness. This common opinion has inevitably triggered a dichotomous classification of linguistic identification that opposes the native vs. the non-native and has spread the idea, devoid of scientific foundation, that moving away from the centre or from the historical and authentic origin of the native language, the quality of the language is even poorer.

On this issue, a linguistic debate developed around the positions of Quirk (1990) and Kachru (1985): the former became a promoter of a standard English

model and criticised the excessive emphasis of Kachru's approach to diversity as a symptomatic trace of a liberation language (liberation linguistics). Moreover, whilst Quirk conceived of social mobility as a bastion only for those who decided to learn a standard English version, to Kachru this option constituted a choice in strong antithesis with the sociolinguistic realities and with the desire for mobility of individuals. These two positions have been synthetically defined, respectively, in terms of monocentricity in the former case, and of polycentricity in the latter. The overcoming of these dichotomies takes place, in the same years, thanks to the contribution of Bourdieu (1991) and his idea of legitimate speaker that would replace, at least apparently, a more discriminating and ambiguous terminology such as that of native or non-native speaker or mother tongue. For Bourdieu, legitimacy derives from the symbolic power attributed to the forms of capital and is the result of a disregard of power and a view that individuals are given time and space to talk. In the light of the composite contemporary geo-linguistic scenario characterized by the constant evolution of the linguistic models that speakers can use, it would be of little use to speak of "proper English" today or to replicate a hierarchy of English defined as more or less valid, given the heterogeneity of its domains. Having become aware of the dynamics that have led to the diffusion of English at an international level, one might perhaps agree with Rajagopalan (2004: 11) when he affirms provocatively that "English has no native speakers" sanctioning, in some way, the transfer of ownership of English from his (former) native speakers to new speakers.

Indeed, from international business to the Internet and from science to music, English is the new *lingua franca*. Indeed, it has become commonplace to identify the rise of English as a world language characterising both human and virtual interactions. Crucially, since the emergence of the Internet has reinforced an interconnectedness between people across the globe, English has become the most dominant language in online communication and an important means for wider communication among users belonging to different first languages and cultures (among others, Bruthiaux 2003; Pennycook 2007). Along with Seidlhofer's definition of ELF as "a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages" (Seidlhofer et al 2006: 3), Jenkins offers an extended definition that involves communication in English between participants who have different "linguacultures" (2007: 164), whether they are categorised as native speakers, second language users, or foreign language users.

From a pragmatic perspective, ELF research has developed exponentially in recent years, and the initial emphasis on systematic and recurrent features has been replaced by a focus of ELF's flexibility and fluidity, which has translated into

more contributions on pragmatic criteria, conventions, and devices. What is worth mentioning in this context is a brief introduction to some of the most relevant discourse strategies which contribute to theorizing ELF talk as a joint achievement of the interlocutors, who successfully engage in their interactional and interpretive work in order to sustain the appearance of normality. Strategies such as repetition and self-repetition, paraphrasing and reformulation, monitoring and self-monitoring, repair initiation and self-repair, are used as proactive measures which allow speakers to negotiate their meanings and routinely support each other, and to resolve a communication problem afterwards. As it will be shown in the following pages, by resorting to their own strategic pragmatic competence, ELF participants in the migration context appear to adopt a “let-it-pass” principle, that is, in Firth’s terms “an interpretive procedure that makes their interactional styles robust and consensual by accommodating anomalous usage and ambiguous linguistic behavior” (1996: 247).

Central to ELF research is the assumption that the use of English on an international level is characterized by the fact that its speakers come from backgrounds where English is not the native language, and it is instrumentally used to facilitate communication rather than as a symbol of cultural affiliation (Sung-Yul Park & Wee 2011: 361). We point out that, in the migration context of Southern Italy, ELF is also used to create and maintain a form of intimacy among Italian teachers and their learners in multicultural classes. The use of a common contact language has proven necessary for the establishment of trust.

3. ELF in the classroom

During the semi-structured interviews conducted as preliminary part of this research project (Carbonara & Taronna 2017), the Italian L2 teachers⁸ were asked to meditate on their own teaching practices and their use of ELF in the classroom. The answers were influenced by such factors as the degree of involvement in their students’ individual stories; their metalinguistic awareness (the majority of the teachers interviewed possesses a certificate for teaching Italian as L2 and/or a university degree in Foreign Languages or Political Science); personal motivation. In this context, the teaching-learning practice is indeed influenced by the specific environment in which the participant in the communicative situation find themselves: the location and size of the classrooms (usually, old buildings with no technological equipment), the variable number and age of students in class

⁸ The teachers interviewed are Italian women; they speak at least one European language (English and/or French); in one case, the teacher also speaks Arabic.

(aged between 18 and 50), the critical situation of students in terms of post-traumatic syndromes and their political/social status⁹.

As emerged during the interviews, autobiography becomes crucial in such contexts since self-translation is both linguistically and metaphorically necessary: students translate their experiences constantly from their mother tongues into ELF or Italian, and teachers constantly translate from Italian into ELF. All the teachers state that the presence of a lingua franca is necessary for either achieving the objective of the lesson, i.e. the explanation of a word or a grammar rule, or creating a positive welcoming environment for the students. Such an atmosphere is also achieved by appreciating the presence of other languages in class. The use of the students' native languages by the teacher, for example, is considered a crucial element for the construction of a positive environment (Cogo 2009). One of the teachers reports as follows the use of an inter-language that she shares with her students:

“How far?” and “Abi?”, which respectively mean “How are you?” and “Ok?/Isn't it?/Right?” in Nigerian pidgin, are used among us all to interact with each other. It's fun and it makes us feel a team because we don't use these expressions outside the classroom with other people¹⁰.

The use of a “private” language used in the intimate context of the class, only among the participants in the communicative situation, cooperates in the creation of trust, which appears as a condition *sine qua non* in all interviews. Indeed, the peculiarity of such a teaching environment strengthens the teachers' development of a stronger sense of awareness of their role as mediators and educators. The creation of trust is based on the establishment of a relationship with the students, who are made to consider the teachers as people they can count on. A teacher working with unaccompanied minors reports: “It must not be a sterile learning process, I make it cultural, personal, emotional. I take the autobiographical aspect in great consideration to create a welcoming environment in my class. They see in me the female figure they have left behind”.

9 The students come from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Senegal, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Ghana, Mali and Northern Africa, and they can be divided into three major groups: Anglophones, Francophones and Arabophones. It is important to point out that the learners in this context are referred to as “beneficiaries” because they are the recipients of a governmental project (SPRAR) including the language course as part of a set of initiatives created to support integration.

10 Giusi Aglieri (February 2017).

As we observed during the lessons, after each teacher previously “prepared” the students to welcome guests in their class environment, code-mixing (by students) and code-switching (by teachers) are widely present, and they represent the result of the constant self-translation that each actor performs. Here are some illustrative examples of the different kinds of communicative situations observable in class, which acknowledge the fact that students were aware of being seen and had received a detailed explanation of the nature of our non-invasive presence:

Teacher: “ <i>Questo è il verbo ‘venire’, to come, right? Allora, X scrivilo alla lavagna, come here!</i> ”	code-switching	The teacher switches from Italian into English to motivate the student and she considers English an anchor or a bridge
Anglophone student: “What does it mean ‘ <i>apprendista</i> ’? Teacher: “It means ‘learner.’”	generalisation/simplification	The teacher opts for a lexical generalization/simplification to translate the specific term “ <i>apprendista</i> ”, in the attempt to provide the student with an easy-to-understand definition
Anglophone student: “ <i>Frequento una straniera scuola/Mio fratello è di 43 anni.</i> ”	first-language interference	The student’s background knowledge of English interferes with his accuracy in Italian
“Y, go to school tomorrow?” ... “ <i>Di-re, Y, non ti preoccupare!</i> ”	foreigner talk	It is used by teachers in the very first stages of the teaching practice, and it concerns both Italian and English sentences

Mitigation, which refers to a set of meta-pragmatic strategies by which people try to make their saying/doing more effective (Caffi 1999: 882), is expressed in linguistic patterns such as: elliptic clauses, cut-off words, self-repetitions, pauses and modal expressions. Simplified phrasal structures are fundamental and, in some cases, also conscious mistakes are considered an option. This goes hand in hand with a lower and reassuring tone of voice and specific gestures in order to create a relaxed relationship between the teacher and the learner. ELF is mainly used to: give commands, check the phatic function, assure that communication is working and that contact is maintained among the participants in the communicative situation, and to create intimacy. Indeed, some of the most common ELF expressions used in class are: “try”, “try again”, “read”, “understand?”, “don’t understand”, “have I been clear?”, “what’s the meaning of... in English?”, “in Italian, the meaning of this is...”, “in Italian, we say/do...”. Other kinds of mitigation strategies are also present¹¹:

11 Within the study of discourse, mitigation is broadly defined as a weakening or downgrading of interactional parameters, which affects the allocation and redistribution of rights and obligations (Caffi 1999), as a way to “ease the anticipated unwelcome effect” (Fraser 1980) or as a “reduction of vulnerability” (Martinovski 2000).

Token agreements	Teacher: clear now? Student: oh, yeah
Use of hedges	I guess; It seems
Requests for clarification	What?; The meaning of...?; Clear now?
Use of prefacing positive remarks towards the addressee	<i>Molto bene!; Bravo!</i>
Suggestions	<i>Ripeti ora</i> , once more
Expression of regret	I'm sorry, <i>scusa</i> , but I don't understand some words
Repair	1) Teacher: <i>Non preoccuparti</i> . No problem. <i>È difficile...mille novecento ottanta</i> , (repeating slower) <i>mille novecento ottanta. Ripeti ora</i> . Once more; 2) Teacher: Your birthdate. Day, month and year. Ok? Student: Oh yeah, <i>si</i> . I'm sorry. <i>Capito</i> ; 3) Student: I'm sorry, don't know the meaning of <i>badante</i> . Teacher: <i>Nessun problema</i> . <i>Badante</i> is the person who cares somebody, an older person usually. Clear now? Student: Oh, yeah.

For the purposes of this research, mitigation is considered as a cognitive, linguistic and social phenomenon. Indeed, consciously used as a pedagogical strategy, it may determine a new teaching/learning approach based on the importance of values such as understanding and sharing. The constant act of self-translation can be seen as a possibility to explore multilingualism and hybridity, a way to give voice to plural autobiographies (cf. Mauranen, 2007; Cordingley 2013). Furthermore, we have observed that the way teachers reflect on their teaching practice is essential in the process of rethinking of new pedagogies. In the context of multicultural classrooms, like those observed in this study, where factors like integration, tolerance, respect and conflict are at issue every day, the use of ELF is also controversial. On one hand, it provides teachers with the chance to avoid communication gaps and allows students to express themselves when their knowledge of Italian is still weak; on the other hand, as reported by some of the teachers during the interview-phase, it may continue to foster a form of discrimination against those students who are illiterate or lacking in English competence (Kreutel, 2007).

4. Conclusion

The assumption at the basis of a standard linguistic model, discussed in section two, used to underlie a claim of superiority and purity, since the use of a standard or “native” language was considered the ultimate unifying emblem of the idea of a solid nation-state and cultural identity. As a consequence, the culture of monoglot standardization loomed out as hegemonic and dominant over all those linguistic situations that broke standard norms, such as the communities of

ELF speakers that deal with the controversial concept of “integration”. But, as the data confirm, the main research questions presented in this paper were answered positively and ELF in migration contexts can definitively be considered and experienced in terms of a “translingual practice” (Canagarajah 2013; Taronna 2016).

Although there is still the tendency to avoid the use of ELF entirely when proficiency grows and standards are achieved in Italian L2 classes, we observed that the creation of a multilingual environment produces solid positive effects on the students, both linguistically and psychologically. Indeed, with the help of the teachers’ pedagogical strategies, based on a profound awareness of the complex context in which they operate, students can incorporate their multilingual and multicultural autobiographical experiences into their learning practices and eventually become conscious translingual individuals (Jacquemet 2005).

Also, as researchers working in this field, we have learned to acknowledge the importance of cultivating an inter- and multidisciplinary perspective (cf. Carbonara & Taronna 2017). Indeed, the use of ELF in the context of migration cannot be understood theoretically without a deeper immersion in the specific communicative situations. Awareness of the socio-cultural as well as of the emotional environment in which IFL teachers operate is fundamental for the development of a good research practice, as well as it is necessary for a significant teaching/learning practice. Developing reflexivity, that is criticality and awareness, is crucial for language teachers (Aull Davies 2010; Byrd Clark & Dervin 2014) because “language educators worldwide are being called upon to produce effective human capital” (Byrd Clark & Dervin 2014: 129). Indeed, for a critical pedagogy to be implemented, it is necessary for teachers to embrace this attitude (Zamboni 2014). A constant questioning of the teaching/learning practice may allow teachers to monitor their feelings, emotions, fears, anxieties and it may also permit students to establish a more significant relationship with the external environment, which is achieved also through the use of ELF.

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Język angielski jako język kontaktowy w kontekście migracji: perspektywa włoska

Streszczenie:

Niejsze studium przedstawia socjo-kulturowe praktyki zastosowania języka angielskiego jako języka kontaktowego na przykładzie specyficznej grupy kontaktowej: migrantów, którzy przepłynęli Morze Śródziemne i zarejestrowani zostali w programie SPRAR (Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati), w ramach którego pobierają naukę języka włoskiego. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań (obserwacji zajęć i wywiadów z nauczycielami) na temat przenikania się języków: włoskiego, angielskiego i języków używanych przez uchodźców, z punktu widzenia kreatywności, elastyczności i przeskakiwania z kodu na kod w toku lekcji na początkowym etapie kursu językowego. Zaobserwowano formy językowe, które, choć błędne z punktu widzenia poprawności, stosowane są w konkretnych celach. Zilustrowano przykłady użycia hybryd języka angielskiego w sytuacji pedagogicznej, jako języka kontaktowego w trans-języcznej grupie, a także w narracjach osobistych, lub w odniesieniu do jego funkcji pragmatycznych: umacniania kontaktów i integracji grupy, okazywania zaufania, tolerancji i szacunku. Badanie przekracza granice dyscyplinarne, ponieważ integruje perspektywy spojrzenia lingwistycznego, antropologicznego, pedagogicznego i społecznego na zachowania językowe, aby dokładniej określić rolę i funkcję języka angielskiego w nowej sytuacji komunikacyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe:

ELF, migracja, język włoski jako obcy, trans-języczność