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# New migration processes and new frontiers for linguistic research

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Recent migrations show unprecedented characteristics in terms of migratory routes, individual profiles of migrants and condition of isolation in arrival contexts. Combining sociolinguistic and linguistic perspectives, the article reconstructs the forms of linguistic contact between local and migrant populations in one of the main gateways to Europe, Palermo (Italy), and the specific conditions of local language acquisition by newcomers. It is argued that notions of (im)mobility and segregation must be included in migration-centred linguistic research.

**Keywords:** new migrants, segregation, poor linguistic immersion, Sicily.

## 1. Palermo

Walking through the streets of the city centre or along the Palermo seafront, where improvised football matches are played every day, anyone will notice the presence of a large number of young Africans. Not only the visual dimension, but the auditory one is revealing. On arrival at voice distance, a few rare *cumpa'*, i.e., a Sicilian word for 'fellow', break the flow of largely unfamiliar sounds. The majority of these sounds comes from sub-Saharan Africa and belongs to languages such as Mandinka, Wolof, Pulaar, Bambara. This concentration of people and languages might induce to overestimate the foreign, and in particular African component in the city.

As of December 31<sup>st</sup> 2019, 25,522 foreign citizens were registered. If we also consider those who have acquired Italian citizenship since 2009 (4,002), the foreign presence almost reaches 30,000, i.e., about 4.5% of the total population of Palermo, a very modest percentage compared to many other Italian cities. Data by

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<sup>1</sup> The article results from close collaboration of the two authors. However, Mari D'Agostino is responsible for sections 1 to 5 and Egle Mocciano for sections 6 to 10.

nationality (derived from municipal registers) are also in stark contrast to the African presence mentioned above. In 2019, the most numerous groups of foreigners are from Asia, especially Bangladesh (5,405) and Sri Lanka (3,428). These are followed by Romanians (3,214, 12.6% of foreigners), Ghanaians (2,586, 10.1%), Filipinos (1,761, 6.9%), Tunisians (1,056, 4.1%), Moroccans (1,026, 4.0%), Chinese (997, 3.9%), Mauritians (867, 3.4%), and then all the other countries, for a total of 130 different nationalities. The vast majority of young people we have mentioned above is not part of this articulated and complex migratory scenario, which has been settled in the city for decades.

The African migrants we are talking about have arrived by sea in recent years and are not included in the data of the Municipal Registry Office. This is not only because of their extreme mobility, but also because of the difficulties in obtaining residence permits following the effects of the “Security Decree”, in 2018<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, since their arrival, they have been included in a reception system with strongly segregating aspects. About 70% was initially placed in Extraordinary Reception Centres, in many cases far from inhabited centres. The rest was divided between Centres for Asylum Seekers, that is, government mega-structures where people wait for months (although the law provides for a maximum of 35 days), and the centres of the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, that is, a network of local authorities and non-governmental associations spread throughout the country. Here, migrants are housed in small structures or flats and are often involved in education and socio-occupational integration. In addition, there is the reception system for unaccompanied foreign minors or MSNA (i.e., minors who have arrived in Europe alone, without reference adults), which is divided into a first-level reception system (with large, and often very problematic, accommodation facilities) and smaller second-level reception facilities. We will refer to this complex and articulated migratory world with the label of “new migrants”. This is not because of the time that has elapsed since their arrival in Europe, but rather of the characteristics of their migratory paths, individual profiles and needs (including linguistic ones).

The article is organised as follows: in Section 2, we briefly discuss the limits of new migratory movements and the need to

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/06/14/19G00063/sg>.

include “(im)mobility” in linguistic research focused on migration; Section 3 addresses a terminological problem concerning the label to be used for migrants moving through illegal routes; Section 4 is dedicated to digital communication that massively involve new migrants; in Section 5, the notion of “migration trajectory” is described, which is to be understood as a complex displacement event affecting personal identities, aspirations and perspectives. Section 6 deals with the multilingual repertoires of new migrants, which however only marginally and rather belatedly include Italian; in Section 7, we provide a snapshot of the interlanguage that migrants can develop in situations of reduced contact and exposure to the language; in Section 8, we discuss the role of written input, from which learners with limited literacy are excluded, and of digital writing, which is very often a locus of informal (and multilingual) literacy; Section 9 shows that low exposure to oral and written input in Italian involves all new migrants and has dramatic effects on their interlanguage development. Some conclusions are drawn in Section 10, together with possible developments of the research.

## **2. Migration and linguistic research**

The large-scale migrations that have crossed many areas of the world have always constituted a great challenge and a great opportunity for innovation in linguistic research. The description of patterns of acquisition of new languages, changes in the organisation of repertoires, and linguistic forms resulting from contact have been fertile moments for entire sectors of linguistics in the last century. Suffice it to think of the impressive fieldwork carried out between 1935 and 1948 by Einar Ingvald Haugen, who personally experienced migration and drew from that the sap for all his scientific reflection. In recent decades, (also) linguistic research has been focusing its attention on population movements with new characteristics, which require careful exploration.

The first characteristic of the new migratory flows is that they clash in a dramatic and generalised way with migration policies that drastically limit mobility. After so much emphasis on contact, global mobility, being “on the move”, the theme of immobility and

confinement now offers us a new and extremely important analytical perspective. This certainly concerns the new migration processes (those involving the “invaders”, to use a label that describes the way they are often perceived and represented), but it also affected the lives of all of us in unexpected ways during the pandemic period. This experience allows us to take a closer look at the restrictions on movement that characterise the lives of a very significant part of the world’s population. This does not only include restrictions due to the costs of movement but rather what has been called a “mobility regime” (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). The usefulness of such a term lies in emphasising the role of policies, approaches, actions and perceptions in constructing the division between freedom of movement, on one side, and illegality of movement, on the other side. The term “bounded mobility” (Hackl et al. 2016) has a similar orientation in that it emphasises that mobility is regulated, mediated and intrinsically connected to forms of immobility and unequal power relations. An important part of today’s international migrations differs greatly from the past not so much in terms of point of departure and previous social conditions, but first and foremost in terms of the forms of (im)mobility that migrants go through. The relationship between mobility and immobility, immersion and segregation, isolation and (digital) connections are crucial issues for a linguistics that focuses on new migration phenomena.

### 3. Terms, needs and profiles

So far we have used the terms “to migrate”, “migrant”, “migration” etc., that is, continuations of the Latin *migrō*, *migrāre* and *migrātiō*, *migrātiōnis* that have spread in various languages with a more or less similar meaning, that is, ‘change in the space by people and/or animals, especially if at a distance and for long periods’. These terms were introduced in the specialist terminology of the last century as “[a]n umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (IOM 2019: 132).

In recent decades, a number of other terms have come into use that designate the migrant population with reference to legal status, e.g., “clandestine”, “illegal migrant”, “irregular migrant”, “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, etc. In addition to bringing to the fore the way in which borders are crossed, i.e., the regime of control and denial of movement mentioned above, there is a progressive semantic shift in the term “migrant” itself. From a generic and inclusive term designating a set of very different situations, it has become, in the language of politics, in specialist terminology and in the language of the media, a synonym for “economic migrant” as opposed to “refugee” (and other categories identifying statuses recognised by international law). The previous generalist vision was found, for instance, in the UN definition of an international migrant as “any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born, and has acquired some significant social ties to this country” (UN/DESA 1998: 9). This definition was irrespective of the causes, whether voluntary or not, and of the regular or irregular means used to reach the new country and the status conferred on it. The semantic change undergone by the term can be seen in documents produced by various international organisations, among which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (see UNHCR 2016). In this context, the opposition “migrant” vs “refugee”, based on the criterion “choice” vs “need” (to move), is dominant: “Migrants are fundamentally different from refugees and, thus, are treated very differently under international law. Migrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve their lives. Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom” (UNHCR 2013). In this narrow sense, “migrant” indicates one of the subcategories of which the set of people on the move is composed. Specifically, it designates the residual (but quantitatively predominant) category that emerges after the subjects for whom there are forms of administrative and/or legal protection (“unaccompanied foreign minors”, “victims of trafficking”, “asylum seekers”, etc.) have been listed. This set of labels is often used in studies aimed at investigating the social, psychological, linguistic and educational aspects of men, women and children who arrive by sea or land, crossing state borders without having the required visa.

Almost always there is little or no awareness on the part of those who study new forms of migration about the danger and the ineffectiveness of using legal-administrative status to distinguish people who not only come from the same geographical area, but who have had the same migratory experiences, along the travel routes and on arrival. This status is attained only long after arrival and, once attained, it determines important changes in the life of the migrant, allowing access or not to a series of rights and services (relating to work, education, freedom of movement). In the first phase, which in Italy lasts for years, all the people who have just arrived “burning the borders” share spaces of collective life, integration paths, and hopes. It is almost always in that first phase that the descriptive and analytical use of the categories listed above appears most problematic. The construction of research models capable of capturing and explaining these new migratory flows (not only on a linguistic level) passes through the foregrounding of the real-life experiences of those who participate in them, often very distant from the categories of politics and legislation, and from media narratives (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

In these pages, as mentioned in Section 1, we will therefore use the intentionally generic labels of “new migrants” and “new migratory processes” in order to remain far from the misleading categories listed above. The adjective “new” requires us to delve into worlds that have not yet been fully explored, within experiences marked by forms of isolation and confinement that are much more radical than those of other migratory experiences. At the same time, the use of digital connections before, during and after the journey profoundly changes the relationships with otherness, including linguistic diversity. But first of all, it is useful to recognise the presence of strong diversities within these migratory flows, not linked to statuses but to social and geographical characteristics, expectations and desires, and previous experiences of movement. An important element is that new forms of migration are mixed: socially diverse people, often coming from very distant places, with highly diversified linguistic repertoires, and not always with a common bridge language, walk the same route, get on the same boat, hide in the same woods, live in the same camp or in the same *squat*, as the abandoned sheds in Bosnia or Croatia are called. Along the central

Mediterranean route, young sub-Saharan migrants with extraordinarily rich but also highly heterogeneous linguistic heritages live side by side for a period of time that often extends over years. Thus, on the Balkan route, Afghans, Pakistanis, Iraqis, Iranians, Syrians, highly educated multilinguals and non-literates whose repertoire, at least at the start of the journey, is limited to a single language, move together (see D'Agostino 2021a).

#### **4. Connected migrants and (im)mobility**

Most new migrants move within new communication models and tools. This aspect has often been described in terms of “connected migrants”, starting with Diminescu’s (2008) essay under this title. This essay does not define migrants only on the basis of physical and psychic experience, and on their un-rootedness. Over the past few decades we have learnt to think of the migrants as individuals excluded from the political and social order of both the places they have inhabited and those they inhabit (see Abdelmalek Sayad’s 1999 famous image of the “double absence”), and still more as individuals who live “in between”, in a no-man’s land, at the same time within and outside of the conflicts that they continually go through. We should start recognising a new dimension of living: that of being *here and there at the same time*. The use of digital technologies indicates a portability of networks of belonging and the possibility for connected migrants to maintain a sense of co-presence.

Diminescu’s perspective belongs to a research trend that radically overcomes the classic sociological model characterised by integration and assimilation, and looks at movement, participation and connection within a range of social places and contexts of departure and arrival. There is also a complete revision of models of communication, as we are no longer dealing with the familiar model of conversation but with a new one containing forms of continuous presence and leading to important changes in migrants’ lives:

Not only have migratory practices been revolutionized (in particular the activation of networks, remote organization, the monitoring of movements)



but also the way mobility is experienced and implicitly the construction of relational settlement. (Diminescu 2008: 572)

The possession of tools that connect people to other places greatly facilitates the organisation of the journey during the months or years of the “back way” (the term Gambians use for the difficult migration route that, so they hope, leads beyond the Mediterranean Sea) and reconfigures patterns of life upon arrival, particularly through the construction of transnational networks that help sustain movement within Europe. However, at the same time the massive use of digital media expose new migrants to the risk of being intercepted by the control and surveillance regime. Common forms of safeguards to protect digital identities and information on intended routes are, for example, the use of closed WhatsApp and Facebook groups and the use of Facebook with pseudonyms (see Gillespie et al. 2018: 5).

Digital communication crosses the widespread condition of segregation that characterise new migration and that is crucial for understanding its specific nature, including linguistic aspects. Segregation can occur into “connection houses” (i.e., temporary places of gathering and refuge for migrants during the journey), in prisons in Niger and Libya, in Croatian forests, in Bosnian makeshift camps, or in squats. This is followed by subsequent isolation in asylum-seeker hostels in Europe, in limited physical spaces far from inhabited centres. We are dealing with a regime of immobility and a physical separation that has few precedents in modern history and which continues for many months following the boat landings.

## **5. Migratory trajectories**

The pairs “mobility and immobility”, “immersion and segregation”, “isolation and (digital) connections” run through the entire migratory trajectory, which is characterised by the duration and importance of the physical displacement phase, the “Journey”.

One of the issues that most hinders the understanding of new migration dynamics is to look at the journey as a movement between two points without any attention to what happens – geographically, temporally, socially, psychologically, linguistically – in the space in

between. Research of the last decade has radically changed this approach by looking at the displacement phase as a crucial aspect of the whole experience (Collyer 2010; Collyer and de Haas 2012; Crawley et al. 2016 on Syrians and Afghans). The notion of “migration trajectories” is relevant in this context. These are defined “as open spatio-temporal processes with a strong transformative dimension. They may consist of multiple journeys going in different directions” (Schapendonk et al. 2018: 2). This definition is in opposition to the push-pull model, which sees migration as the mechanical result of moving from A to B based on a decision made in the place of origin and automatically relocates people to the place of arrival (Cresswell 2010). It rather focuses on the complexity of expectations and outcomes, on attempts (that continue even after crossing the Mediterranean, after arriving in Spain, Greece, or in Italy via the Balkan route) to reach a space in which to relocate existence satisfying the hopes of departure, on places of arrival other than those desired. “The journey is a profoundly formative and transformative experience and a ‘lens’ on the newcomers’ social condition” (BenEzer and Zetter 2015: 302). Furthermore, “at the individual level, travel seems to effect the narrowing or expansion of personal boundaries, depending on its nature and the way it interacts with the individual’s culture and personality. On the group level, these journeys may have an effect on the way members of a migrating/fleeing society perceive themselves as a group, including their social identity, and on the ensuing expectations regarding the receiving society and its reception of them” (p. 303). Migrants’ trajectories have a logic of transformation, as prolonged movement in time and space affects personal identities, aspirations and perspectives. Individual decisions and experiences are profoundly linked to, and influenced by, actors that facilitate or hinder migration, be they individuals, social networks, political initiatives, and, first and foremost, by the regime of (im)mobility.

## **6. New migration and new forms of language acquisition**

The isolation experienced by new migrants and the strongly segregating characteristics of their housing context have a striking

correlation in the scarce or null contact with the local population and, therefore, a scarce or null exposure to the local languages, namely (local) Italian and Sicilian. On the other hand, new migrants are exposed to a multifaceted linguistic input from other migrants with whom they travel or share the existential spaces in reception centres. As observed in Section 4, this (multi-)linguistic input includes the wider space of digital communication, which massively involves the new generations of connected migrants and constitutes one of the first and most important contexts of exposure to (written) language in recent migratory dynamics (D'Agostino and Mocciaro 2021).

New migrants' communicative spaces reflect the specificities of their sociolinguistic background. The first relevant aspect is the widespread plurilingualism of sub-Saharan migrants. In many communities of the sub-Saharan area, “[t]he idea of ‘mother tongue’ and someone’s ‘first language’ has little relevance [...]. [S]peakers use a number of different languages in different contexts, and live in multilingual families and multilingual neighborhoods. Their multilingual skills are part of their cultural lives and social integrity” (Lüpke and Storch 2013: 77). This certainly increases the degree of familiarity with diverse ways of acquiring new language skills, not rarely on the basis of very limited input, during different phases of people’s life and in relation to different experiences:

In many African situations, languages are added to individuals’ repertoires throughout their lives and occupy positions of varying centrality in them depending on a variety of factors. Adults continue to be socialized in languages they have “acquired” before, and in new ones, when they move house, migrate, marry, divorce, retire, and foster children. (Lüpke 2015: 308)

These articulated individual repertoires frequently emerge in migrants’ narratives, as in the passage in (1), where a Senegalese learner (A), who has been in Italy for some years at the time of the interview, recounts his repertoire made of eight languages (Pulaar, Wolof, Mandinka, Bambara, Creole, Portuguese, English, French):

(1) Narrative of a Senegalese plurilingual speaker (D'Agostino 2021a: 121)

I learnt Creole with my friends, my schoolmates, and it’s a language that I haven’t used since I’ve been in Italy. They were the friends I played football with. We in

Senegal have a border in Guinea, a border in Mali, I played football in Guinea and came back, in Mali and came back. I played football in a team in Senegal under 16, then in a team in Ivory Coast, even there I learnt a language, there they speak Bambara. I speak it well and I learnt to speak it like this, I am good at speaking languages. [...] When I started to have friends who come to us on holiday, we do something, I don't know how it's called, a game: players from Gambia come, they come to the sport centre where we play football and they come here, they stay three or four days, then they go back. Also people from Guinea ((i.e., Guinea Bissau)), they come to us, they stay two days, one week, so. I started speaking their languages and some of them also started speaking my language. They started speaking Pulaar, they started speaking Mandinka. [...] But before they didn't understand, they couldn't speak Pulaar or Mandinka. They only speak Creole, those from Guinea, they speak Creole, they only study Portuguese.

This unsystematic and fragmentary way of being exposed to and handling different linguistic codes may help to explain the plasticity by which new migrants move through new communicative spaces and practices during migration. This largely involves African languages used as *linguae francae* in the home countries (e.g., Bambara, Mandinka and Wolof), which may serve the same function during the trip, alongside post-colonial languages (especially French and English) and other languages that reflect some aspects of the migration experience. The excerpt in (2) is from a conversation with a Burkinabe migrant, MLG, hosted in a reception centre in Palermo:

(2) Narrative of a plurilingual Burkinabe learner (Mocciaro 2020: 85-86, adapted)

MLG: Here I don't use Bissa because I haven't met anyone speaking Bissa.

INT: But you speak French.

MLG: I always use French and also Italian. [...]

MLG: Where I work, here in Palermo, they speak Italian, more than French.

INT: Yes, sure, but do you speak French with the other guys who speak French?

MLG: Yes, even if I didn't speak well in French. In my country, I used to speak Bissa and Mòoré. Because in my village I didn't study at the French school. But when I arrived here in Italy, I didn't find anyone who spoke my language. I had to use French, that's why I now understand a bit more French than before. I started to understand French here in Italy. [...]

MLG: I can say that I also learnt the Italian language. I can say that I know the name of many things in Italian, more than in French.

The nature of the linguistic competences that develop in contexts of high societal multilingualism and/or varied linguistic contact during

new migrations is captured by Blommaert's (2010: 106) notion of "truncated repertoires". These are "truncated complexes of resources often derived from a variety of languages, and with considerable differences in the level of development of particular resources. Parts of these multilingual repertoires will be fairly well developed, while others exist only at a very basic level". In terms of Jørgensen (2008), these repertoires are *polylingual* (rather than *multilingual* in the more traditional sense), that is, made up of fragments of different languages which coexist and overlap in the communicative practices.

Of course, the frequency, formal complexity and communicative effectiveness of these *pieces of competence* are a measure of the intensity of the communicative exchanges in which they originated. In the new migratory contexts, Italian develops in a situation of general fragmentariness. It appears quite late compared to other languages in migrants' repertoires, including those acquired while travelling, and typically results from low quantitative and qualitative input in the reception centres (and, later, at work), where learners are exposed to highly simplified versions of Italian. Furthermore, the emergence of Italian may also result from exposure to its use as a lingua franca by other migrants, rather than as an effect of interaction with local speakers. While this may enrich migrants' linguistic "mosaic" with new pieces that can be used in basic communication (cf. "the name of many things in Italian" in 2), they rarely manage to develop a sufficiently rich competence in Italian to allow them effective communicative exchanges in the place of arrival.

The process of acquisition in contexts of reduced language contact has not yet received the attention it deserves. In what follows, some examples of the output of such a process, that is, the interlanguages of some migrants, will be shown and commented upon. Our aim is not so much to provide a full description of their language skills – which needs dedicated research – as to try to extract clues about the process involved and its characteristics.

## **7. Acquisition under reduced contact: a snapshot**

A picture of the language migrants may develop in situations of non-immersion is in (3). M is a 27-year-old Gambian with self-reported

L1 Mandinka, in Italy since about five years, during which he has developed very little competence in L2 Italian. After arriving in Italy, M attended a few hours of an Italian language course in the reception centre in a mountain area, several kilometres away from the city, where he lived in a condition of extreme segregation.

(3) Interview with a Gambian migrant (Archive of Narratives of ItaStra, University of Palermo)<sup>3</sup>

INT1	e non hai   sei mai andato a scuola?
M2	no però a quello:: tempo c'è:: mmh:: presona che fatto la escula, però non è:: loro no capiseh:: un'altra lingua, solo italiano così mmh:: la mia (xxx) detto loro basta [...]
M3	quello così io non posto imparare bene mmh: scritto, non posto imparare scritto di italiano. [...]
INT4	quanti mesi di scuola hai fatto al RECEPTION CENTRE?
M5	no:: là solo:: una mesi [...]
INT6	senti e poi cosa facevi tutto il resto della giornata?
M7	questi giornata mmh non c'è: niente che fare là solo:: perché quel tempo io/: quando non/: iscula io vai lavoro una (xxx)
INT8	vai al lavoro e che lavoro facevi?
M9	io ho fatto la+ lavoro in campagna c'è/: un giorno io vai a lavoro negozio [...]
M10	così prendere cartuna sistema la/: giubuta cosa/: io ho fatto questo/: di negozio [...]
INT11	hai lavorato a piana degli albanesi e poi sei venuto a palermo?
M12	palermo/: palermo qua non è abita qua/: io vien+ qua due giorno tre giorno vai/: io sono abita là a calaveria mmh: [...]
MED13	Calabria
[INT1 <sup>4</sup>	and have you never been to school?
M2	no but at that:: time there is:: mmh:: person who made the school, but it's not:: they no understand:: another language, only Italian so mmh:: my (xxx) told them enough [At that time there

<sup>3</sup> The following table shows the transcription conventions we have adopted:

abcd+	interrupted word	/:	pause
(xxx)	unintelligible segment	*abcd*	different language
abc   efg	self-correction	((abcd))	external comment
;, ::, :::	lengthening	mmh:	disfluency mark

<sup>4</sup> Translations preserve the fragmentary character of M's speech. When it is not possible to grasp the global sense, an interpretive adaptation has been attempted in square brackets. The same has been done for the transcriptions in Section 9.

- was a person teaching at school who did not understand other languages, only Italian; so (xxx) told them I couldn't attend classes] [...]
- M3 that, so I can't learn written Italian.
- INT13 how many months of school did you do at RECEPTION CENTRE?
- M14 no:: there only:: one month
- INT15 one month [...]
- M7 these days mmh there is nothing to do:: because then I/: when not/: school I going to work [These days, there was nothing to do, because when I was not at school I went to work]
- INT22 you go to work and what job did you do?
- M23 I did wo+ work in the countryside, there is/: one day I go to work shop [...] [I worked in the countryside, sometimes in a shop]
- M24 so take packs, fix the /: jacket, what /: I did this, of shop. [So, taking boxes, arranging jackets, things like that; I've done this in the shop].
- INT25 you worked in \*piana degli albanesi\*, and then came to palermo?
- M26 palermo. palermo here, I do not live here, I come here two days, three days you go, I'm there in [calaveria] [Palermo, I do not live here, I come two or three days per week; I'm there, in Calabria]
- MED29 Calabria']

The experience recounted by M is paradigmatic of that of many others, who have little relationship with the local context, therefore little possibility to practise a new language and to use reality as a learning environment. This means that the process of acquiring the local language(s) is very slow and, even a long time after arrival, migrants' comprehension and production skills are very limited.

This emerges clearly if we consider M's Italian morphosyntax. Let's take a look, in particular, at the verbal system, which is an excellent diagnostic to identify the stage of acquisition. In terms of Klein and Perdue (1997), M's interlanguage lies at the very transition between what they call *basic variety* (which is still prevalent) and the early *post-basic variety* (which is only emergent). This means that the forms of the verb largely convey bare lexical meaning whereas they remain unanalysed at the morphological level, i.e., they do not indicate person, number and tense, hence they do not agree with the subject as in the target language (e.g., M7 *io vai:2SG lavoro* 'I go work')<sup>5</sup>. These basic forms just begin to alternate with

<sup>5</sup> While in some interlanguages basic forms involve morpheme omission (e.g., English: *he speak-Ø*), in L2 Italian, verbal forms generally do not omit suffixes and

past participles, which introduce the first (aspectual) opposition in the verbal system, that between perfective (past) vs non-perfective (past) (e.g., M2 *fatto* ‘done’, *detto* ‘said’). Basic forms also coexist with some forms of auxiliaries, which also express 1<sup>st</sup> person agreement (e.g., M9 *io ho.1SG fatto* ‘I have done’), and with some overgeneralised forms of the copula (e.g., M12 *non è.3SG abita.3SG qua* ‘(lit.: it is not lives here) I do not live here’). These characteristics are indicators of a very initial level of interlanguage, which is generally quickly overcome by those learners who, on the other hand, are immersed in the target language (because they are included in society in terms of work and/or education). Furthermore, during the interview, not only did M show a morphosyntax very far from the target language, but he also exhibited extremely weak skills in terms of comprehension (as he did not decode simple questions and often required translation in Mandinka by the mediator, MED) and communicative autonomy and effectiveness (as he used English extensively and his utterances are often difficult to understand).

## 8. The other side of exposure: written input

In the case of M and many others, the situation of reduced contact and low linguistic immersion is exacerbated by the widespread lack of literacy or, at any rate, limited reading and writing skills on arrival, in any language of the repertoire<sup>6</sup>. This is a rather common phenomenon in the context of new migrations, which nevertheless still receives little attention in the relevant literature. Here we will consider the lack of literacy skills only in the fairly evident terms of further reducing the input to which migrants may be exposed<sup>7</sup>.

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are an overgeneralised form of the present or an infinitive (Banfi and Bernini 2003, to whom the reader is referred to for the description of the verb in L2 Italian).

<sup>6</sup> A survey conducted in Palermo in 2017-2018, revealed 30% of none or limited literacy among the local migrant population (D’Agostino 2021a, 2021b).

<sup>7</sup> There is consensus that adult learners with limited literacy acquire additional languages more slowly compared with educated adults, but there are divided views on the role of literacy. Slow acquisition, in fact, might depend on limited literacy or other factors related to literacy, e.g., low exposure to the target language or low or no access to written texts (Tarone and Bigelow 2005; Tarone et al. 2009; Vainikka and Young-Scholten 2007; Vainikka et al. 2017 inter al.).



Against this background, it may seem a contradiction that new migrants very often frequent other virtual places of writing, i.e., social media. These are the connected migrants referred to in Section 4. In contexts of social marginalisation and non-immersion in the language, social media such as Facebook become a fundamental context for naturalistic exposure to language. This involves not only competent writers but also those who are new to writing, who find here the chance to activate an informal literacy process, through practices of imitation, reinterpretation and reuse of pieces of written language which, in the subjects' perception, convey meaning (D'Agostino and Mocciaro 2021). This literacy process is played out simultaneously in several languages, as a consequence of exposure to that mixture of languages that appears to be a prominent feature of Facebook interaction. Consider the example in (4):

(4) Plurilingual post (**French/English/Wolof** (D'Agostino and Mocciaro 2021))

Writer 1	COURAGE BRO.ON TE SALUT	profondement
Writer 2 <b>merci</b>	<i>star</i>	<u><i>nakal</i></u> <u><i>dagabak</i></u>
	thanks	<i>star</i> how are you                      are you fine
	'Courage, bro(ther), I greet you deeply.'	
	'Thanks <i>star</i> , how are you?'	

In terms of language selection, interaction on Facebook reproduces and multiplies the *polylingual* dimension that characterises new migrants' communicative exchanges. However, also in this case, Italian appears rarely and late in the production of new writers, as the network of digital relationships reflects their lack of contact with the local population. For new migrants, Facebook seems to be the place to connect a past and a present life inhabited by compatriots, other migrants met in the various stages of the Journey, including Sicily.

## 9. Acquisition under reduced contact: a second snapshot

The speaker portrayed in the second snapshot is AO, a 24-year-old Nigerian, with a twelve-year educational background. He was literate in English, but his oral repertoire also included pidgin English and Esan, the latter described as a mother tongue. Being literate, AO had

in principle full access to the written input, in any context including the digital ones. This contrasts with the situation of the Gambian migrant M depicted in Sections 7 and 8. On the other hand, AO's migratory experience as well as the living conditions in Palermo are consistent with those reported about M. When we first met him, AO had been housed in a reception centre in Palermo, but with very little connection to the city context. After arrival, he had only attended a two-month Italian language course in a volunteer-led context and did not go on to attend any other classes later. After a few months, he started working in a city market, but carrying out tasks not involving rich communicative exchanges with native speakers (i.e., loading and unloading goods). We met AO five times in a timespan of 13 months, during which his living conditions remained unchanged and, therefore, his exposure to the language. The excerpt in (5) is from the last interview, administered after 25 months from his arrival in Palermo:

(5) Interview with a Nigerian migrant (unpublished data for Mocciaro 2020)

- INT1           ok e che cosa hai fatto qui a Palermo? raccontami  
 AO2           qua a Palermo scendi e là di Trapani [...]  
 INT3           ok ok e cosa hai fatto? sei andato a scuola hai lavorato?  
 AO4           arrivato RECEPTION CENTRE  
 AO5           scuola:/ sentro VOLUNTEER-LED CENTRE  
 AO6           centro VOLUNTEER-LED CENTRE mmh: due mesi sì mmh:  
 INT7           e perché non hai continuato ad andare a scuola?  
 INT8           perché solo due mesi?  
 AO9           mmh:: bab+ | papa mio chiamo mmh: mama mio chiama mi  
 AO10          mmh: male la soldi soldi soldi la ospitale solo io de+ lavoro [...]  
 INT11         ho capito ho capito quindi stai lavorando [...]  
 AO12         mercato mmh: vedura mmh: frutta [...]  
 INT13         ah /: ho capito e da qua+ da quanto tempo? /: da quando?  
 INT14         quanto a lungo hai lavorato lì?  
 AO15         io no capisci  
 INT16         \*how long have you been working\*  
 AO17         ok mmh: prima io lavorare /: io prima io lavorare mmh:  
 AO18         supermarcheto mmh: mo+ Moreale sì ora io lavorare sì
- INT1           ok and what did you do here in Palermo? tell me  
 AO2           here in Palermo arrived and there from Trapani [I arrived here in  
 Palermo from Trapani] [...]  
 INT3           ok ok what did you do? did you go to school, did you work?

AO4	arrived RECEPTION CENTRE [arrived in RECEPTION CENTRE]
AO5	school/: centre VOLUNTEER-LED CENTRE [I attended school in VOLUNTEER-LED CENTRE]
AO6	VOLUNTEER-LED CENTRE mmh: two months yes mmh:
INT7	and why did you not continue going to school?
INT8	why only two months?
AO9	mmh::: dad+   my dad calls mmh: my mum calls me [because of my dad, my mum called me]
AO10	mmh: bad the money money money of the hospital just I mu(st) work [Dad was ill, they needed money for the hospital, I had to work]
INT11	I understand I understand so you are working [...]
AO12	market mmh: vegetable mmh: fruit [...]
INT13	ah /: I see and how long? /: since when?
INT14	how long have you worked there?
AO15	I do not understand
INT16	*how long have you been working*
AO17	first I work /: first I work mmh: [At first I worked]
AO18	supermarket mmh: mo+ Moreale yes now I work yes]

After more than two years in Palermo, AO's interlanguage exhibits the same forms as in the first conversation, namely mainly basic forms (e.g., AO2 *scendi* 'you come down', AO17 *lavorare* 'to work', both referred to the 1<sup>st</sup> person), occasional past participles (AO9 *arrivato* 'arrived') and several utterances where the verb is just lacking. Neither copula nor auxiliary forms can be observed at this stage. On the whole, his comprehension skills remain weak and the interviewer repeatedly has to reformulate her questions.

## 10. Discussion and conclusion

The linguistic productions of the two learners examined in 7 to 9 show a very reduced morphosyntactic development. This certainly concerns the characteristics of the verb we have examined. However, even a quick glance at the transcriptions allows us to argue, at least preliminarily, that the phenomenon encompasses the entire interlingual system, as well as communicative efficiency as a whole.

This scant development clearly indicates the lack of opportunities for linguistic contact with the local population and, hence, the reduced exposure to the local language(s). In the segregated condition in

which they live, the linguistic exchanges of the two learners take place mainly in the languages they share with other migrants and much more rarely, instead, they involve Italian (eventually that used by other migrants as *lingua franca*). Since they are not included, for various reasons, in the local educational system, the only opportunities for linguistic exchange in Italian (or in Sicilian, the other local language which we have not discussed here) would be those offered by the workplaces. However, these places do not seem to fulfil this function, neither in the inland countryside, where M works side by side with other migrants of various origins, nor in the city market stalls where AO works. Nor does it seem, from the data at our disposal, that the potentiality of decoding the written language (or digital writing) results in an effective increase of input in Italian for AO, since his linguistic production does not appear to be more developed or richer than that of M. The linguistic skills of the two migrants develop (possibly enriched by new contributions from other languages different from the local ones) within the space of immobility and segregation in which they are forced.

Through which theoretical construct can we describe the result of this fragmentary acquisition, as well as the process itself? The notion of fossilisation does not seem useful for this purpose, first of all because we are not dealing with isolated phenomena, no matter how widespread in interlanguages, but with a *global* arrest in the development of the system<sup>8</sup>. In addition, regardless of the scope of the phenomenon, fossilisation occurs by definition under specific conditions, that is, rich exposure to input, adequate motivation to learn, and plentiful opportunity to communicate in the target language (Han 2004: 175; see also Selinker and Lamendella 1979: 373).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Han (2004, 2013) has insisted on the need to restrict the scope of fossilisation to individual phenomena and to keep the notion distinct from that of (asymptotic) ultimate attainment. This is consistent with original formulation by Selinker (1972: 215), who however also recognised *fossilised competences* resulting from a learners' communication strategy (p. 217), which "dictates to them [...] that they know enough of the TL in order to communicate. And they stop learning". Several expanded versions of the notion, discussed in Han (2004), are based on this broad definition. But see also Selinker (2014: 227).

<sup>9</sup> This is the case with long-standing immigrants who are well integrated into the world of work, who may become extremely fluent and have a rich and complex vocabulary, but often exhibit little more than a basic morphosyntactic system.

Apparently, we are dealing here with a different, if not opposite, situation. The interlanguages we have described are examples of an interrupted or blocked process, which reflects the context in which acquisition takes place. In this context, learners receive too occasional linguistic input for them to develop linguistic means that are, if not morphosyntactically complex, at least communicatively effective. In other words, we are dealing with the acquisition of a language that is only to a limited extent present in the linguistic space inhabited by migrants. Paraphrasing Blommaert (2010), we could experimentally call these forms of acquisition “truncated acquisition”, a provisional label that we want to use here only as a research indication<sup>10</sup>. Truncated acquisition is acquisition seen from the perspective of the communicative spaces available in contexts of (im)mobility and segregation. An acquisition that is undoubtedly imperfect and fragmentary if we observe, as we have done, its products (i.e., Italian interlanguages). But other components of the context in which the acquisition process takes place should also be taken into consideration, first of all the linguistically composite – *polylingual* – character of the migrants’ communicative space, the one described in the first sections of this work. In this context, the acquired fragments of local languages flow into and to some degree mix with the other partial competences in the learners’ repertoire. The position Italian occupies in these complex competences, i.e., the functional spaces it takes up and the way it interacts with other languages (if it does), is in our view the task of future research on interlingual development in contexts of immobility and segregation.

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<sup>10</sup> Han (2012: 476) incidentally used “truncated learning” in the sense of incomplete learning, but we use the adjective in the stricter sense proposed by Blommaert.

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