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Language and hospitality.

The function of language in shaping a welcoming setting

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“The invitation, the hospitality, the giving of accommodation, they pass through the language or through addressing to the other”, Derrida writes. The paper is inspired by this statement and by reflections related to daily practice with migrants, in institutional and/ or not formal settings. We focus on the actions to be carried out to improve the welcoming practices, in the linguistic field (verbal and non verbal level) and in the social and legal support areas. We think we need an ever greater intertwining and dialogue between the various contexts that the migrant crosses, i.g. schools, information desks, NGO, institutional services.

Keywords: vulnerability, reception, setting, language rights, skills.

*Theseus: Who could ever refuse the friendship of such a man?
First of all, he can always find asylum
in our hospitable house
(Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus)*

1. Introduction

The journey that a school and its teachers prepare to welcome a foreign student is one of the visible forms the same school has to deal with the topic of the ‘other’. It is something usually faced from a technical perspective. [...] It is equally important to acquire the attitude to manage such an ambiguous practice in a non-naive way. When we find ourselves in front of a foreign student, each and every attitude we show is inevitably full of assumptions we can never completely free ourselves from. We must learn to be aware of those assumptions as they profoundly influence the outcome of our practices. (Zoletto 2007: 9)

That is how Danilo Zoletto opens his essay *Foreign in the classroom*. Indeed, those who join a plurilingual and multicultural class, or a class and/or a group setting (be it formal or informal), know that the *Welcome-in* phase is the foundational moment that shapes the entire group evolution. This is a tiered phase as it goes through various levels: the gestures, the way we look at somebody, the tone of voice,

the proximity and the distance, the things we say and how we say them, the space settings. We should keep in mind that if we want to welcome somebody it is not enough to invite that person to sit, administer different sorts of tests, wait until s/he completes them, smile politely and get it done with. On the contrary, we need a definitely more complex process, one related to places and people. And this is a process that crosses language first: as Lévinas reminds us, “the essence of language is friendship and hospitality”. A similar observation was the starting point of a conversation dating back to the mid-90s between Anne Dufourmantelle and the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, transcribed in the brochure *Of hospitality* (1997). Through a series of seminars, the two started a reflection on the foreigner and the language, understood as an ensemble of culture, experiences, values, norms and meanings that permeates it: “Invitation, hospitality, the giving of accommodation, they all pass through language or through addressing the other” (Derrida 1997: 30).

What we intend to focus on in this article is the question of the *through*, or the physical and virtual places where the act of hospitality is built. The reflection proposed is inspired by some observations of the daily welcoming practices used in institutional contexts (i.e., schools) or informal ones (i.e., information desk for migrants). The *through*, the crossing: to be real, the act of hospitality cannot take place only via the teacher/social worker, nor only via the student migrant. Only in the middle can we meet; approaching each other a small step at a time, we can build a relationship. We can maybe also misunderstand each other, but hope to find points of greater proximity: “Tu t’assoiras d’abord un peu loin de moi, comme ça, dans l’herbe. Je te regarderai du coin de l’œil et tu ne diras rien. Le langage est source de malentendus. Mais, chaque jour, tu pourras t’asseoir un peu plus près” [‘You will first sit a little away from me, like that, in the grass I’ll look at you out of the corner of my eye and you will not say anything. Language is a source of misunderstanding. But, every day, you can sit a little closer’], says the fox to the little prince (Saint-Exupéry 1943: 70).

Only in the middle can we build the act of welcoming and hospitality, thinking of it as something that happens not *on a threshold* but *through a threshold*, the threshold of the school, of the

information desk, in our daily relationships. A threshold always at risk of being fragile, which can be entry and exit, reception and rejection.

2. Hostility and hospitality

Once again, Derrida's reflections are of great help here, especially those he conducts starting from the etymology of words. The foreigner is *hostis* in Latin (he was *xenos* for Greek people), he is one who comes from outside, he is usually one who doesn't speak like the others but speaks instead a strange language. In ancient times, the guest was offered precious gifts: today what do we offer to our guests? The foreigner, barely or badly speaking the language, is in danger of being defenceless in the face of the host country laws. S/he is – first and foremost – foreign to the language:

S/he must ask for hospitality in a language that by definition is not her/his, the one imposed by the landlord. [...] The host demands the translation in his own language, and that is the first violence. The question of hospitality begins here: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language in the broadest meaning of the term, in every possible meaning, before accepting the stranger in our home, and indeed as a necessary condition? (Derrida 1997: 40)

Hospitalité, *hostilité*, *hospitalité* are the three French words (two existing words and one neologism) around which a part of Derrida's reasoning revolves: in English, these terms sound like 'hospitality, hostility, hospitality'. So, in *hospitalité/hospitality*, Derrida mixes two Latin words, *hospes* and *hostis*, the guest – in the double meaning of s/he who welcomes and s/he who is hosted – and the enemy: as if to remind us that the welcoming risks having its opposite inside.

In which language can the foreigner ask a question? Language is understood in a broad sense as the set of culture, values and meanings that inhabit it. If a person shares my way of life or a culture, I can feel s/he is *less stranger* to me even if s/he does not speak my language.

Then, going back to Zoletto's (2007) reflection, the place of reception can be a border or a frontier. But if the border only separates, the frontier separates and connects, it can block and let

pass. Therefore, in this context we are interested in imagining our places as frontier lands, as middle lands, where being in the middle refers both to the relationship, to the ability to find a common point with our interlocutor, and to the language. Stay in the middle of the language and know how to look at it.

Staying in the middle means creating opportunities for socialization, grasping the importance of learning in workshop activities, which is a condition where people can perceive themselves as peer and one can more easily meet each other; it means bringing the pupils to see a theatrical show; it means that teachers can be curious about the words of the other languages. It also means to pay attention to the language of the others when we teach our language as L2, Italian language in our case, especially with languages that have very different structures from Romance or Germanic languages. Having minimum knowledge serves to avoid misunderstandings, as could happen in teaching students from Bangladesh. Therefore it is useful to know that in the Bangla language there are no uppercase or lowercase characters; there is no block characters or italics; you do not use the verb “to have” in the present tense; there are no prepositions but postpositions; there is a greater use of impersonal expressions, and the construction of the sentence varies, as we can see in these sentences:

| (Bangla) | (Italian) | (English) |
|--|---|--|
| Tomar shordi-kashi hoeche | (lit.: Di te raffreddore diventato) Hai preso il raffreddore | (lit.: Of you cold became) You got a cold |
| Tomake aj ektu shushto lagche | (lit.: A te oggi un po' bene si attacca) Oggi sembri stare un po' meglio | (lit.: To you today a little good stick) Today you seem to feel a little better |

Table 1. Examples of Bangla, Italian and English correspondence (Salvaggio 2018: adapted; see also Radice 1994: 110).

Being in this place that we call “in the middle” means as well, for teachers of a second language, to learn how to live with the idea of not having a complete mastery of our own language and therefore keep

this thought constantly in focus, if they want to teach their language in a hospitable way. Moreover, as Gregory Bateson reminds us, it is also important “to welcome doubt, as a normal function of the individual mind, that we must exercise responsibly” (Bateson 1972: 105).

Once again we are encouraged by the reflections of Jacques Derrida who wrote “I have only one language and it is not mine” (Derrida 1997: 64), while referring to the times of structuring his cultural and linguistic identity. Derrida was born in Algeria and there he attended French school; in reference to the French language he considered it at times “*langue maternelle et langue étrangère* [mother tongue and foreign language]”.

Strangers in our own home, foreigners to our mother tongue. And we believe that being able to relearn one’s own language together with the people to whom we teach that language, staying on the frontier, is a great opportunity. Moreover, important scholars and researchers on language, such John Gumperz or Dell Hymes suggest not to undervalue the potentiality of misunderstanding, which offers the chance to reflect about the mechanisms of language and of our mind (Gumperz 1982; Hymes 1986).

By accepting none of us is a complete master of the language and living without drama the idea of not knowing how to always give a correct answer, we can enhance our opportunities in the things in which we are not able to, we can give an answer on a topic that we feel is “our topic”, starting a common research path, starting also from the observation of what happens outside the classroom. We too, as the foreigners, can feel we are *hospes*, guests, in the double meaning of s/he who welcomes and s/he who is welcomed, strangers in our own home, in our own language.

We can use some concrete examples from teaching experiences in adult schools: during an Italian literacy lesson, with irregular verbs as a subject, the teacher explains the present indicative of *essere* ‘to be’ and *stare* ‘to be, to stay’. The verbs belong to two different groups and in Italian they have a similar meaning and a similar use. One of the students asks what the difference is between them. The teacher answers from a grammatical point of view and also refers to the meaning, and the question returns as *What exactly is the difference?* The adverb “exactly” could undermine self-confidence in one’s mastery of teaching.

Another example comes from the use of intransitive verbs or verbs of movement and the auxiliary verb *to connect*, or from some multi-meaning word such as *prego* ‘please, you’re welcome’. *Prego* could be used in response to thank you, or when you are at the bar or in a pub it could mean ‘what do you want?’, or when you meet someone it could mean ‘you can pass’, or you can use it when you ask something in a polite way and so on.

3. After welcoming: reception centers

After welcoming, the hospitality passes through the language and addressing others: therefore, also through the gestures, the methods used, and the approach. This is linked to the contexts and subjects of interlocution/mediation that we meet. The person who arrives must ask for hospitality in a language that is not her/his own, and must go through a first mediation tool, such as translation. But it is also possible – for the one who arrives – to meet people and use tools that can help to join different worlds and cultures (mediators, services), and it is possible – for the one who welcomes – to acquire basic skills to put the one who arrives more at ease. As we can see in the next lines, this does not happen often.

In our opinion, these are the first rules of hospitality and welcoming: to make someone feel that we are taking care of her/him, even with small gestures, and make her/him feel that an interaction is being established. Many times, these rules are not followed, especially in institutional settings, and this affects the condition of migrants and their vulnerability. This migrants’ vulnerability is therefore not absolute but relative: it is due to the lack of a *welcoming* context that should be organized to ensure their rights beyond the very language skills and should promote with appropriate tools the importance of learning the language.

Paradoxically, our experiences in supporting and listening to migrants’ stories have shown us that those who have had detention experiences in Italy have actually developed better language skills than those who are in public reception centers. The prison context seems, on the one hand, to promote greater interaction with Italians and, on the other hand, to represent with greater credibility the need to

learn the language. The detention experience creates a sort of symmetry and equality in the relations between people, despite the differences that do exist outside the structure, and therefore it can lead to a greater motivation for interaction.

It is rather common in large reception centers for migrants that the *guests* – as the state bureaucracy defines them, with a term that is certainly not neutral – do not attend language courses, even if they are motivated to do so. Thus, when managers are criticized for the very poor language skills gained by the so-called guests after a long experience of reception, they often justify this by a lack of motivation from the guests.

It is quite clear and it can't be ignored – by the migrants themselves – that the language is an instrument of rooting and emancipation within the new context. Although it is out of date with respect to a debate that aims at the migrant's "empowerment", for this category of (non-)people any kind of contextual reasoning is hence excluded considering the overall reasons that lead to behaviors exceeding the individual perspective and the category.

The large reception centers for migrants (the most relevant Sicilian example is the CARA, *Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo* 'Reception Center for Asylum Seekers' of Mineo, Catania, with an average of over 2000 guests and peaks of over 5000) are typically extremely isolated and most of the time it is very difficult for the subjects to have relations outside the center. After their long and most often risky journey, migrants enter a complex and uncertain bureaucratic path that places them in a transitory and uncertain situation. It is common indeed that identical situations lead to very different ways and times of reception. The Italian reception system, which can't be reduced only to the reception centers but also includes at least the institutions involved, is generally inefficient in the sense that it does not motivate people to acquire useful skills to feel better and adapted to the new context. This context is indeed inevitably experienced as hostile, although it is a very different kind of hostility from that experienced in transit countries such as Niger or Libya.

Even when there is no spatial isolation of the reception centers, the public discourse on migration, which do influence and are themselves influenced by the waves of xenophobic hegemony, profoundly impacts the quality of relationships that the migrants have

in the new context and therefore the quality of reception, understood in a holistic sense. In fact, it is evident that the psychological conditions of newly arrived migrants are progressively deteriorating, both those who are admitted and those who, either expelled from the reception or without papers, are at greater risk of social exclusion.

Furthermore, it has to be said that often the reasons for such *boredom* and discomfort are both contextual and to be found in the disappointment of expectations regarding the migration plan: many people who arrive in Italy want to reach communities, friends or relatives who are in other places in Europe. Often, after having crossed the sea and the desert in precarious and dangerous conditions, these plans happen to be impossible. Then, the strong disappointment obviously has important psychological impacts on subjects and makes the condition of discomfort already described particularly violent and complex.

It should be further considered that the vision of vulnerability as contextual – nobody is absolutely vulnerable; everyone is vulnerable in a relative sense – can lead to an analysis of our dual reception context. Will a place that is not welcoming for those who do not know the linguistic codes lead to a tension towards language learning – since it is a tool to be integrated and equal in a community that does not welcome you with your differences? Or on the contrary will it lead to a progressive marginalization that will also demotivate language learning? Experiences in the Sicilian context lead us to support the second hypothesis. Having lived and analyzed a context in which often hospitals, public offices, services, do not have adequate tools to break down the linguistic barriers, it is evident how these contexts produce a loss in the motivation to learn. On the contrary, small urban places where caring relationships do exist and where there is more care for this kind of vulnerability are certainly more motivating and have better results.

Furthermore, this is evident for refugees and asylum seekers who have to face legal, territorial or other bureaucratic contexts. The fact that they do not speak the language can lead them to misunderstanding and vulnerability vis-a-vis the laws of the country they are in. They then find themselves in that situation that the sociologists Abdelmalek Sayad and Pierre Bourdieu have well identified as “double absence”: absence from the country of departure

because they have now left, and absence in the country of arrival because foreigners, strangers, without a voice, without a place.

On the one hand this double absence leads to a lack of motivation to conduct activities, for example training activities. This then results in a feeling of having no roots in a reality in which you do not feel welcomed. On the other hand, the double absence leads to the refusal of returning home, despite disappointed expectations, whatever the conditions of departure.

Learning the language is a tool to emancipate oneself within the new context in order to be autonomous and independent and to take root in a place. If I know the language, I become part of the community, but if I feel expelled from it, I will not be motivated to do so.

The matter of the Territorial Commission for the recognition of refugee status has certainly been discussed many times among Italian non-governmental organizations and the policy makers, but little has been done from a linguistic point of view. Asylum seekers are entitled to interview in their own language, but often they have to conduct the interview in the “colonial” language, e.g. English or French.

This can happen for several reasons: often the subjects feel uncomfortable to expose their personal and intimate life story to a translator who is a member of the same community. The choice of the colonial language can also be due to the fact that the migrant believes that it is better to express her/himself in a language more familiar to the members of the commission despite it not being his own. But it is also true that the choice is substantially constrained by the difficulty to find a translator of one’s own language or dialect. The accuracy of the translation and of the memorandum itself is also a central issue which is difficult to investigate since in most of the cases nobody else is present apart from the migrant and the commissioners.

If it is known that the translation is always a sort of *betrayal*, in this case it is double: first, the translators are often not particularly qualified people and have poor language skills and second, the memorandum, as it is a summary of a discussion of a couple of hours in two or three pages necessarily simplifies a lot the story of the person and the events that have happened to her or him. These two elements are very central issues in our experience.

4. To conclude

Until 2016 the examination of the applicant was done collectively by a Territorial Commission composed of 4 members. Today this examination is conducted by only one of the commissioners, who will thus present the memorandum on which the entire committee will express its opinion. It is therefore clear that the person who conducts the interview and is in charge of the memorandum is of exceptional importance, because s/he basically prepares the elements for the collective decision. In this respect, it is very common that migrants, for whom the moment of the commission is a source of high tension, are not in the condition to evaluate the content of the memorandum or to ask for changes before countersigning it. When it happens that migrants have the opportunity to translate the memorandum into their mother tongue with the support of people they trust, they often say that they do not find the translation accurate and that if they would have realized what it was written during the commission they would have asked for changes. It is a pity, however, that this written story will remain with her/him not only in the judgment of the Commission, but also in the subsequent appeal, given that in the light of recent regulatory innovations the jurisdictional levels have been reduced quantitatively but also qualitatively, in the sense that the appeal procedures almost always exclude the questioning of what has already been documented. If the issue of language learning is an underestimated but important issue in assessing the effectiveness, and the quality of the Italian reception system, at least since the so-called *North African emergency* in 2011, a completely different discourse can be made for the second-generation migrants. The children of families now settled in Italy – children of people who have been in Italy for years and are able to reflect on their own future and the one of their family – strongly believe in education and improvement through studies, even more than Italians. This leads to situations in which school results and educational success rates are better among second generation migrants than among Italians with the same family income. It is the case of the first district of Palermo, which includes the so-called historical center. This last example shows that it is possible, within our societies, to build successful paths starting from the achievement of language skills, focusing on interaction among

people, motivating people, which should be the main goals of the school. In other words, it shows that “hospitality passes through language or through addressing the other”, as Derrida wrote.

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