



# Power, Mobility and Voice

## Jan Blommaert's Unfinished Business

Edited by  
Karel Arnaut, Ico Maly, David Parkin  
and Massimiliano Spotti

# Power, Mobility and Voice

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*This volume is dedicated to Pika Colpaert,  
Jan Blommaert's spouse, muse and co-worker*



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# 9 Migrants' Communicative Practices in Polycentric Spaces: Anomie, Stability and Change

Anna De Fina and Giuseppe Paternostro

## 9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we analyze communicative practices on social media by young African men who arrived in Sicily as Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers. We present a case study centered on the Facebook walls of two young men from Guinea in order to illustrate these communicative processes. We will show how these youth orient to different linguistic and cultural centers and how their identity and experiences as translocal, mobile, people shape their communicative practices. In particular, applying Durkheim's concept of *anomie* as modified by Blommaert (2018), we will discuss the dynamics between stability and change in how they and their Facebook friends use linguistic and semiotic resources. In our analysis, we rely on several other theoretical proposals made by Jan Blommaert during his prolific career. Indeed, it would be impossible to think of contemporary sociolinguistics without referring to his work. Blommaert laid the basis for much of our understanding of communication in our contemporary, globalized societies. His ideas were and are particularly important for those who, like us, try to understand discourse and communicative practices among migrants.

At this point, a clarification is in order: we use the term 'migrants' to talk about the participants in our study for lack of a better term, as we are fully aware of the limitations of a word that does not capture the differences among people thus qualified.

Before we discuss the central issue of this chapter, which is the dynamics between stability and change in the communicative practices of migrant youth, we will provide background on some of the fundamental elements of the more general approach that Blommaert introduced

in sociolinguistics and that are central to our own theoretical methodological perspective. In particular, we will discuss his theories about globalization, mobility and super-diversity which provide the frame for understanding the specific phenomena that we are observing.

## 9.2 Globalization and Mobility as Pivots of a New Approach to Sociolinguistics

In Jan Blommaert's theorizations about sociolinguistics the concepts of globalization and mobility took center stage. For him, contemporary languages and language practices cannot be understood through the lens of territorially stable communities and of established relations between language varieties, identities and places. He argued against what he called 'sedentary models' (Blommaert, 2018: 95) of language and context and asserted that sociolinguistics must be conceived as 'MOBILE SPEECH, not as static language' (2010: 173). The sociolinguistics of globalization that he championed has been important in throwing light on the interconnectedness of economic, social and cultural phenomena across the world. Taking inspiration from Wallerstein's world-system theory, Blommaert (2010) argued that the world is organized through relations between different economic, social and cultural multi-scalar centers that establish their own rules and orders of indexicality, that

operate within large stratified complexes in which some forms of semiosis are systematically perceived as valuable, others as less valuable and some are not taken into account at all, while all are subject to rules of access and regulations as to circulation. (2010: 35)

Thus, the kind of linguistic competence regarded as desirable or legitimate in a particular space depends on the power structures and language ideologies of that given space and on the scales being considered relevant in particular encounters.

Blommaert, however, rejected simple dichotomies between centers and peripheries and proposed instead the idea of polycentricity, which operates at different levels. In terms of cultural and linguistic phenomena this means that resources move from one space to the other acquiring different meanings and values across different scales (see Blommaert, 2015). In Blommaert's words, polycentricity

stands for the fact that in every environment for social action, multiple sets of norms will be simultaneously present, although they might not be of the same order – they are scaled, stratified, and in that sense never

ideologically neutral even if represented as such (Carr & Lempert, 2016: 3). Polycentricity defines the intrinsic *indeterminacy* of social actions and processes, and their *non-unified character*: social change involves parts of society developing faster than others, creating anachronistic gaps. (2018: 46)

The view of spaces as polycentric also highlights the existence of different orders of indexicality at various scales, even within spaces that may appear unified at a macro level. For example, within the same city or nation, the use and evaluation of linguistic resources will change according to different scales such as those related to levels of formality and intimacy. Thus, Blommaert introduced a dynamic view of the intersections between sociolinguistic subjects, linguistic resources and spaces.

Mobility as introduced by Blommaert can be seen as defining both resources, in the sense that they can only be understood in relation to flows and interconnections between spaces and people, and communities in the sense that contemporary groupings are often virtually connected across and beyond physical spaces. This centrality of mobility led Blommaert to also stress the concept of repertoires (Blommaert, 2018; Blommaert & Backus, 2011) as a way to recognize the complex interactions between linguistic resources and contexts at different scales. He defined repertoires as

‘indexical biographies’ reflecting the social experiences of people with specific orders of indexicality – exposure, immersion, learning, informal acquisition – and the ways in which such experiences reflect the social order and inscribe individuals into a wide variety of group memberships. (2018: 35)

The focus on repertoires reflects Blommaert’s rejection of a view of languages as closed systems and his attempt to capture the continuously evolving nature of linguistic experiences and competences. As opposed to languages understood as described above, repertoires are reflective of the historical conditions in which people both acquire and use semiotic resources.

### **9.3 Mobility, Super-Diversity and the Study of Migrant and Mobile People**

These ideas have been central to the study of migrant communities and individuals: First, by detaching languages from specific communities and places and by defining them in terms of resources and repertoires,

Blommaert opened the way for us to look at how people who are in situations of mobility evolve both individually and as groups in the use of their resources and adapt their communicative practices in relation to their changing circumstances. Second, by pointing to the dynamics between different centers of power and influence Blommaert invited us to appreciate both the constraints within which these communicative practices happen and the possibilities for change that may open themselves to them.

Later work on mobility and migration has taken up these ideas by underscoring how mobility is not conceivable without thinking of immobility (De Fina & Mazzaferro, 2022; Salazar, 2018). Both constructs are profoundly and inextricably connected. As we have argued (see De Fina & Mazzaferro, 2022), while migrants are usually portrayed as people on the move, they are often physically and socially stuck for long stretches of time. They experience long waits and extended periods of forced inactivity during their trips, but also when they try to settle in a new country (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2020; Schulte, 2021). At a more general level, the mobility of those who leave their places of origin represents a complement to the immobility of the many who stay and either cannot leave or depend on their mobile relatives for their survival. The relations between mobilities and immobilities are dictated by differences in gender, social classes and more in general, by local and global power relations, so that while the movement of some is unimpeded, the movement of others is subject to continuous limitations and constraints. The dynamics between mobilities and immobilities is very relevant to the case of forced migrants who go through long journeys with unprecedented trajectories that bring them in touch with a great variety of places, languages and peoples, leading to unique paths and experiences. As noted by Schapendonk:

Migrants' trajectories are not closed-off corridors but open and process-like phenomena. They are influenced by, among others, the trajectories of other people, objects, capital, rules and information. (2012: 32)

The unpredictability of the trajectories followed by migrants and the chaotic nature of present migration patterns have contributed to the creation of superdiverse societies in which individuals and groups from very different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds come into contact. Blommaert and his colleagues' ideas about superdiversity (Arnaut *et al.*, 2015; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2018; De Fina *et al.*, 2017) resonate with theorizations about the new face of migration in other areas such as anthropology (Glick Schiller, 2010; Vertovec, 2010). Work in this line has proposed that migrants do not form

homogeneous communities like in the past, and do not follow trajectories that can be easily defined in advance. Rather, current literature on migration suggests that many migrants nowadays should be seen more as mobile individuals who construct transnational ties and build knowledge and affective connections through a plurality of networks as they move along their trajectories. Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013: 178–179), for example, talk about ‘mobile commons’ as ‘the shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support and care between migrants when they are on the road and when they arrive somewhere’, and state that such mobile commons crucially involve participation in different communities and ‘an infrastructure of connectivity’, that includes spaces of sociability and the use of digital technologies (2013: 191–192).

#### **9.4 Digital Technologies, Anomie and the Dynamics between Change and Stability**

The role of digital technologies in the life of migrants has been the object of increasing interest in migration studies and sociolinguistics. Such focus is apparent in the growth of literature on so called ‘digital diasporas’ (see among others Afeworki, 2018; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014; Heyd & Honkanen, 2015; Leurs, 2015). It is thanks to mobile devices that migrants get in touch with people who can help them reach their destinations or overcome obstacles to their progress, keep contact with their families and friends and gather all kinds of news and information. Digital technologies and social media in particular also provide them with spaces in which they can express themselves and keep their ties with friends and family.

However, for mobile and transnational persons who establish ties with a variety of people in a variety of places, these virtual spaces are also characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy both in terms of interactional norms and in terms of the significance of linguistic and semiotic choices. Such indeterminacy is to some extent, a general phenomenon in social media. Indeed, users of many social media platforms cannot control who will see and respond to their posts, and deal with an indeterminacy of audiences (see Marwick & Boyd, 2010) that is due to context collapse. The latter, understood as ‘the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients’ (Vitak, 2012: 541), makes it more difficult to choose interlocutors and target them.

In the case of youth like the subjects of this study, the indeterminacies of social media contexts are exacerbated by their own circumstances

as mobile, multilingual individuals, as we will discuss when we introduce them. For now, let us just say that being highly multilingual, like most asylum seekers in Italy (see D'Agostino, 2022), they face linguistic indeterminacy in terms of what language to use with their friends and acquaintances. They also deal with a polycentric space with some norms that may be common (for example some of the conventions for communication on Facebook), and other norms (such as topics to be talked about, politeness routines, and moral rules) that may be completely different according to place of origin and culture.

This situation of indeterminacy has been explored by Blommaert through the revisiting of the concept of 'anomie' as proposed by Durkheim in *Sucide* ([1897] 1951: 11). He described anomie as

A situation in which individuals reject available normative orders or cannot draw on them, either by absence of such orders or because access to them is restricted. Anomie stands for 'normlessness'. (2018: 11)

Blommaert explicitly connected this construct with the dynamics of the internet as he believed that digital spaces are particularly prone to constant change and evolution and, therefore, challenge users to construct new rules and normative behaviors. However, he neither saw anomie as negative, or believed that digital environments are simply chaotic. In fact, in his view anomie, which Durkheim regarded as profoundly unsettling, can be seen as positive since

it is also a space where new norms are invited, demanded and manufactured – a creative space in which 'the social', as grounded in the sharedness of sets of norms, is instantly shaped. (2018: 27)

In our view, this discussion about anomie shows Blommaert's acute awareness of fundamental characteristics of communicative processes and resources, thus, the stability of forms and norms is necessary because it ensures recognizability, while signs, formats and interactional norms are subject to continuous change and revolution. In other terms, communication always involves a highly dynamic relationship between stability and change.

What we argue in this chapter is that such a dynamic is particularly present and important in the communications involving migrants and the people they relate to because, especially in digital environments, they are faced with a situation of anomie and indeterminacy dictated by the existence of a plurality of norms regulating the different spaces to which

they orient. In our analysis we will show how these young migrants and members of their communities both follow conventions established in these respective centers and adopt new norms and styles of communication. In particular, we will discuss how they follow implicit rules in the communications with members of their community of origin but introduce elements of novelty mostly in exchanges with their local peers. We will focus on contrasts between regularity and stability in the choice of linguistic resources and interactional routines in the case of Facebook exchanges with friends and members of their families in Africa and of instability and possibility of innovations in the same domains in the case of exchanges with members of the local community.

### **9.5 Methodological Considerations: Participants and Data**

The data that we analyze here are derived from an ethnographic project that started in 2018 and was focused on the language use and identity constructions of Unaccompanied Minor Asylum Seekers who were studying in a language school in Palermo. Unaccompanied Minors are defined by the the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as ‘Those who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so’ (Wikipedia).

The project consisted of classroom observations, observations of workshops and other activities carried out within the school, interviews, ethnographic note taking and documentation about artifacts produced by the students (see De Fina *et al.*, 2020). In 2019, we started a long-term case study, which is still ongoing, of the Facebook walls of two focal participants, two young men from Guinea Conakry whom we will refer to by the pseudonyms of Mohammed and Abdul, in order to analyze digital communication between asylum seekers and their friends. We regard Facebook as a good site to capture communicative practices among these youths and their friends in that this platform is still the most popular social medium in their country. We had become acquainted with both youths through the research project that we were conducting at the school and we obtained permission from them to observe their walls and IRB clearance as well. We could not, however, ask their friends for permission, thus we have anonymized the data. In order to address possible privacy concerns we will also omit details about the dates of the posts and will not include photos or other elements that could help identify participants.

The study follows a digital ethnographic methodology (Hine 2015). We have conducted interviews with both Mohammed and Abdul about their social and linguistic background and about their use of the platform and we have been observing their walls regularly since 2019 and collecting data through screen shots and ethnographic note taking. Our observations have been focused on the use of linguistic and semiotic resources, the topics discussed and the audience design strategies employed by the youths. The bulk of the data that we analyze here were collected in the period between 2019 and 2020 since it was then that both young men had the most regular communications with their friends at school and also with their relatives on the platform.

As mentioned, both youths come from Guinea Conakry, but Mohammed is originally from Mali. When we started the study in 2018, Mohammed and Abdul had been in Italy for less than one year. They were both studying Italian at the Italian Language school that was also a center of other activities such as theater productions, workshops and community events. In the school they became close friends and made many friends both from Italy and from other countries. They lived in Centri di Accoglienza (reception centers), where they met other asylum seekers. Both youths are multilingual. Mohammed comes from a multilingual family whose members used at least three languages, Pular, Susu and Mandinke. He also speaks Koniaka and Dyula, Italian and French, which he learned in school, and some Arabic which he learned both in Koranic School and in his travels. Abdul speaks Fula, Wolof, French and, like Mohammed, he learned Arabic in Koranic School. In fact, Abdul became literate in Italian but was not literate when he arrived in Italy.

At the moment in which we write both youths are no longer asylum seekers but work and have a regular permit to live in Italy although they have now moved to different cities in Italy.

## 9.6 Polycentricity and Anomie on Facebook

Our observations on Mohammed's and Abdul's walls made it clear that they orient to two main communities: a Guinean community, mostly constituted by friends and family members living in their homeland, and a community constituted by Italians and African friends both from Guinea and from other countries in the continent that they met on the move and in Palermo (which we will refer to as the local community).

These two communities can be identified partly based on participants (for example, people who comment on posts and whoever is tagged) but also thanks to differences in the choice of topics and in the

use of linguistic and semiotic resources. In the case of the communications by Mohammed and Abdul with the community of origin, main topics are African or Guinean affairs, celebrations such as family and friends' birthdays and marriages, shared mourning around deaths in the home country, and shared memories elicited, for example, through the posting of photographs. In the case of local community friends, frequent topics revolve around the School of Italian, its members and activities, activities by other groups or institutions working on migration, current affairs in Italy, particularly as referring to migration policy, celebrations about events such as birthdays and marriages and their own everyday activities.

The concept of polycentricity captures the contradictory nature of the observed communication patterns as we see that both Mohammed and Abdul seem to obey tacit rules about the kinds of topics, linguistic resources and interactional routines that are usual and widely shared in each of these communities. In that sense, there is a certain stability in the ways that they deal with these different centers. Such stability, however, is more prominent in the case of communications with the community of origin. One of the elements indexing such stability is the prevalence of French as a main language in the posts addressed to friends in Africa. Indeed, both Mohammed and Adul choose French when they are making comments on issues pertaining to their country or to African affairs. In a post in which Mohammed shares a link to news about the government of Guinea Conakry becoming the sole owner of the airport in the capital, he premises the link to the article with the following text entirely written in French:

« Pour obtenir une Indépendance Économique, politique, sociale ecc..., nous devons avoir le contrôle totale du pays en récupérant chaque centimètre du territoire national.  
Félicitations au gouvernement  
J'espère que les pays voisins suivront l'exemple. »

Translation:

*In order to obtain an economic, political, social and so forth independence... we need to have total control of the country in recovering every centimeter or the national territory.  
Congratulations to the government  
I hope that the neighboring countries will follow the example.*

Similarly, Abdul posting a photo of himself with a friend from Conakry prefaces the post with the following words:

Je suis fier d'être africain surtout Guinée, je suis l'enfant de [name of father]

*I am proud of being African most of all from Guinea, I am the son of [name of father]*

The choice of French in relation to posts addressed to members of the community of origin, seems to be regularly connected to non-personal topics and official communications. It is to be noted, however, that there is also great freedom in the way French is written in these posts since many words are written as they sound and they can also be abbreviated.

French is still the main language of communication in informal and more personal exchanges, however, translanguaging is also found in those contexts. Translanguaging in those cases involves not only the introduction of words or parts of words of African languages or other named languages such as English, but also the use of acronyms and abbreviations and the introduction of a variety of visual elements: from gifs to emojis. Examples of this communicative style can be seen also in posts in which Mohammed and Abdul are tagged. See the following instance in which a friend of Mohammed tags him and four friends. The friend tagging Mohammed posts a photo of another friend with a text saying:

(1)

[Name of friend] is 🍰eating le gâteau d'anniversaire with Mohammed and 4 others

Joyeux anniversaire à toi Bro mon officier

Translation ((French and elements other than English in italics))

[Name of person] is 🍰eating the *birthday cake* with Mohammed and 4 others

*Happy anniversary to you Bro my captain*

The post receives 22 comments each of which in turn receives a response by the person having the birthday.

Due to space limitations, I report only some of these comments:

- |     |                  |  |
|-----|------------------|--|
| 1.  | Post 1           | HBO BRO  |
| 2.  |                  | 1 person likes this, 2 people love this  |
| 3.  | Reply to Post 1: | Merci bro<br><i>Thank you bro</i>  |
| 4.  | Post 2:          | Ja<br>Yes  |
| 5.  |                  | 1 person likes this, 2 people love this  |
| 6.  | Reply to Post 2  | Merci<br><i>Thank you</i>  |
| 7.  | Reply to Post 2  | Merci beaucoup mon frère de sang<br><i>Thank you my blood brother</i>                        |
| 8.  |                  | 1 person loves this  |
| 9.  | Reply to reply   | De rien wantan<br><i>Not at all friend</i>   |
| 10. | Post 3           | Joyeux anniversaire<br><i>Happy anniversary</i>  |
| 11. |                  | One person likes this, 2 persons love this   |
| 12. | Reply to Post 3  | Merci<br><i>Thank you</i>  |
| 13. | Post 4           | HBD  |
| 14. | Reply to post 4  | Merci<br><i>Thank you</i>  |
| 15. | Post 5           | Joyeux anniversaire 🍰🍰🍰 à mon petit 🍷🍷🍷<br><i>Happy anniversary 🍰🍰🍰 to my little one 🍷🍷🍷</i> |

This post's multilingual and multi semiotic nature is evident in the title with bits of French, an emoji representing a cake and bits of English, and the responses. Most responses are in French, but also see 'De rien wantan' (line 9) where wantan is Susu for 'friend' but 'de rien' is French for 'not at all'. In these replies we also notice the presence of abbreviations (for example, BRO for brother, lines 1 and 3) and acronyms (HBD for happy birthday, lines 1 and 13). Visual elements such

as gifs and emojis are also of course common here. Both the choice of French and the use of a more markedly multilingual repertoire in informal posts seem to reflect regularity and stability. Indeed, what emerged from the data and from the interviews that we did with Mohammed in particular, is an idea of languages and of linguistic and semiotic resources as strongly associated with communicative value, both in the African and in the Italian context. When asked what language he used with other African friends in Italy Mohammed responded that they used a mixed variety made up of Italian and words taken from different African languages. He also explained multilingualism in his home as follows in one of the interviews:

- M:** non abbiamo una lingua. Tutte queste lingue va benissimo per noi. Anche se ci sono persone che non parlano benissimo questa lingua possono parlare questa lingua. Per esempio due persone che parlano Fula possono dire *anadi* (greeting in Susu). Queste lingue dipendono dal luogo. Per esempio per giocare a calcio si usa Susu. Anche per fare le cose un pochino brutte si usa Susu. Tutte le persone che abitano a Conakry capiscono almeno 5 o 10% di questa lingua
- M:** *We do not have a language. All these languages are ok for us. Even if there are people who do not speak this language very well, they can speak it. For example, two people who speak Fula can say anadi (greeting in Susu). These languages depend on the place. For example, to play soccer Susu is used. Also to do things that are a bit ugly Susu is used. All the people who live in Conakry understand at least 5 or 10% of this language.*

Another element of regularity and stability in the posts that are mainly addressed to or originate in the African community is the presence of certain well-established interactional routines and genres. For example, as we saw in the birthday post (Example 1), users who receive birthday wishes or other kinds of wishes are expected to respond individually to each well-wisher by thanking them, or by acknowledging their message. This is not the case among Italian users of FB who tend to send a general acknowledgment after they have received all the well wishes. Another regularity can be seen in the genres of posts. It is common for Mohammed and Abdul and members of their community of origins to post brief texts representing words of wisdom or philosophical reflections on life which are usually met with numerous and warm responses. We have

named this genre 'aphorisms'. An example of an aphorism published by Mohammed is reproduced below:

J'appris que rien dans la vie ne vaut de la peine si on ne prend pas de risque.

(Seul les vrais le comprendront)

*I have learned that nothing in life is worthwhile if one does not take risks (only real people will understand this)*

Both Mohammed and Abdul use these interactional routines and genres in all contexts, thus introducing unexpected patterns in the exchanges with peers in Italy, where these interactional patterns are not generally used. Indeed, while we can observe regularities in the communicative practices that mainly take place within the community of origin, anomie, that is a state of uncertainty in terms of rules of the game, seems to underlie many of the communicative practices that involve the local community. Such a community is much less homogeneous than the community of origin in terms of linguistic repertoires and established communicative routines because of the variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds of its members. In addition, the possibility of convergence of different audiences due to context collapse also seems higher in those circumstances. As a result, there is a great level of indeterminacy, in terms of which linguistic resources are adequate and which communicative rules should be followed. Such indeterminacy, or anomie, is particularly evident when it comes to language choice and use, as shown by the emergence of metalinguistic evaluations by participants in interaction. Let us look at one example. In a post in which Mohammed publishes a photograph of himself next to a smiling woman, he adds the following text in Italian, which we can characterize as an aphorism:

(2)

Non devo essere più forte dell'altro, devo essere più forte di me ogni giorno grazie all'altro

*I must not be stronger than the other person, I must be stronger than myself every day thanks to the other person.*

This is a popular post that receives 262 likes, 61 comments and 5 shares and, therefore, it can be hypothesized that it was read by members of the two different communities.

We will focus on a few comments for our analysis:

1. Comment 1 Bravo! Sempre forte e dritto per la tua strada 🇮🇹  
*Bravo! Always strong and straight on your way*
2. Reply to 1: Grazie 🇫🇷  
*Thanks*
3. Comment 2 Well spoken my dear
4. Comment 3 Tout le monde aura une taille et sera beau to ou  
tard 😂😂😂  
*Everyone will be a good size and will be beautiful sooner  
or later*
5. Reply to comment 3 😂
6. Reply to comment 3 j'étais déjà beau!  
*I was already beautiful!*
7. Comment 4 top
8. Comment 5 tu veu dire que tu ai oublier français nespà?  
*Do you mean that you have forgotten French isn't it?*
9. Reply to 5 😂

The post is originally written in Italian and receives comments in Italian, English, French and also (omitted here) in African languages, which shows the presence of a wide audience belonging to different communities and also a wide acceptance of the fact that different languages can be used in the comments. Indeed, Mohammed seems to adjust his language choice to the preference of each interlocutor (see lines 2 and 6). But we also see in comment 5, line 8 an indirect and perhaps joking reproach to Mohammed for his use of Italian instead of French, which indicates the existence of diverging expectations about language choice by some of the participants. Mohammed's response is a joking, one as he replies with a laughing emoji and so he downplays the seriousness of the comment. These comments on language use, however, reflect the fact that some of Mohammed and Abdul's friends are not expecting a specific language choice on his part or are not familiar with the language chosen and therefore confirm the negotiability of interactional rules in these contexts. However, we also see in many of these exchanges that engaging with indeterminacy may also lead to change and experimentation by participants. One aspect of such experimentation is the willingness by members of the local community to engage with languages, like French, that are not in their repertoire. For example, in response to a post by Mohammed on African politics which elicited mostly comments in French, one friend

from Africa, whom we will call James, who lives in Sicily and who typically chooses English or Italian for his own posts, writes:

(3)

Io non ho capito bene quello che stai dicendo mi sembra interessante, non parlo bene Francese ma qualcosa lo capito. Bravo  
*I did not understand very well what you are saying seems interesting, I do not speak French well but I have understood something. Bravo!*

Notice that James writes in an Italian orthography which is non-standard (for example, 'lo capito' instead of 'l'ho capito' or 'qualchecosa' instead of 'qualche cosa'), which may indicate both their lack of familiarity with Italian and a shared acceptance of the importance of communication over linguistic purity. This is also clear in James's engagement with French, the dominant language in the exchanges posted in response to Mohammed. Mohammed's answer is also interesting in this regard as he replies:

Grazie, poi ti faccio il traduco  
*Thanks, later I will write a translation*

Again, Mohammed adapts to James' language choice even when he is still not that confident in Italian as can be seen from the expression 'ti faccio il traduco' in which the word 'traduco' is used as a noun but it is actually the first person of the verb to translate (*tradurre*) in Italian.

Engagement with languages that are not in the usual repertoires of specific speakers is thus another sign of change in the communications among members of the local community. Indeed, one of the innovative elements of the interactions among Mohammed, Abdul and their friends is the extreme flexibility in the choice of and use of languages and the willingness to engage in digital exchanges with whatever means are available in the linguistic and semiotic repertoire. This flexibility often results in what we could call 'symbolic' language choices, that is the selection of certain languages that in the context of the great multilingual variety found in these exchanges, acquire a specific indexical value. Italian, for example, is often selected by members of the community of friends who migrated to Italy or are temporarily residing there irrespective of their competence in the language, in order to index their own belonging to or embracing of that community in the face of context collapse.

For example, in the following example Abdul (who is studying to become a tailor) shares a post by a friend showing him in a series of photos

in which he is walking with a girl during a fashion show. They are both dressed formally as he is wearing a tuxedo and she is wearing a long white dress. The original post has a text in Italian in which his friend writes:

(4)

‘Io, Abdul signore nacqui!  
Grande artista, grande stilista, grande uomo!’  
*‘I, Abdul, was born a gentleman!*  
*Great artist, great stylist, great man!’*

The post receives 103 likes and 40 comments. The comments are written in French, Swahili, Portuguese, Fula, Italian and there are also many visuals such as gifs and emojis. What is interesting here is that those who choose Italian are often African youths who select it to address Abdul in their comments. See a few examples below:

1. Comment 1 Bellissimo complimenti 🙌👏  
*Very beautiful, congratulations*
2. Comment 2 💕
3. Comment 3 wonna samakala  
non è uno scherzo
- Comment 4 Il nostro modello
4. Comment 5 Tesoro! 🥰👀  
*Treasure!*
5. Comment 6 Super!
6. Comment 6 Auguri!  
*Congratulations*
7. Comment 7 😎
8. Comment 8 Bellissimo, ma che ci facevi vestito così elegante?  
*Very handsome, but what were you doing so elegantly dressed?*
9. Reply to 8 😏
- (a few comments omitted)
10. Comment 9 Nice, Abdul! 🙌👏👏
11. Reply to 9 Grazie bello compare! 😊😊  
*Thank you handsome buddy*
- (a few comments omitted)
12. Comment 10 Compareeeee! 🙌  
*Buddyyyyy*

We have not reported all comments for reasons of space, but the ones transcribed above give an idea of the variety of semiotic and linguistic resources used. As we see in terms of languages in this example we find comments in Italian (lines 1, 4, 6, 8, 12), in Fula (line 3) in English (line 10). What is notable here is that most of the comments in Italian (except for line 6) were produced by African friends of Abdul or by Abdul himself. It is also interesting and notable that Abdul in line 11 uses the expression 'compare', which is the Sicilian equivalent of the Italian word 'compadre', literally meaning 'godfather' but used as an affectionate term in informal conversation in Sicily. The expression is then taken up later on in line 12 by another young African. As we can see, the choice of Italian here does not seem random but rather symbolic of the user's intention to stress their belonging to the same community, a community formed around the school of Italian and including many friends from Italy.

While many of the friends originally from Africa seem eager to engage with Italian, it is also notable that Italians are ready to experiment with languages that are not usually in their repertoire. For example, an Italian friend of Abdul whom we will call Arianna, tags him in a photograph in which an African girl wearing a beautiful dress is shown accompanied by the text:

(5)

Quando me lo cucirai? 🙏🙏🙏  
*When will you sew it for me?*

To which Abdul responds with the following comment

quando avrò la macchina!  
*When I will have the sewing machine!*  
 Arianna then replies  
 Prestooooo Inshallah!  
*Sooooon Hopefully!*

Arianna's use of the Arabic term 'Inshallah' together with the Italian 'presto' seems to index her joking affiliation with Abdul who is a speaker of Arabic.

Another element of change, which starts surfacing in the posts that Mohammed and Abdul publish starting in 2020, is their own experimentation with Sicilian, which is added to the linguistic resources that they use to communicate with their friends in the local community. It

is important to note that Sicilian is not a dialect of Italian but rather an entirely different language with little or no intelligibility with Italian. The use of Sicilian by these youths is particularly notable since in the early interviews that we conducted with them they both declared that they did not speak it or understand it. Abdul told us that Italian is his favorite language because it is the language in which he became literate. With time, we noticed that both of them were publishing more posts in Italian, but also that they were starting to introduce Sicilian and to receive comments in Sicilian. Thus, we hypothesize that Sicilian starts indexing an affective connection to their friends in the local community. Let us look at one example:

(6) Mohammed publishes a selfie of himself with Abdul and two other friends standing in a park and smiling with the following text

Picchiotti 😊 😊

The post receives 137 likes and 31 comments. Notice that Mohammed is experimenting with Sicilian since the correct spelling for the word ‘picchiotti’ (meaning boys) is ‘picciotti’. His post, as usual, receives comments in French, English, Italian and visuals of different sorts, but some of his friends also respond in Sicilian. See for example the following comments in Sicilian

6.1 Beddi picciotti

*Beautiful boys*

6.2 I picchiotti più simpatici di Palermo

*The most pleasant boys in Palermo*

Both comments are produced by Italian friends. While the friend who makes comment 6.1 writes ‘picciotti’ with the correct spelling, the friend who produces 6.2 converges with Mohammed’s spelling probably as a sign of alignment.

## 9.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have discussed regularities and innovation in the communicative practices of two young migrants to Italy, focusing on the contrasts between Facebook exchanges with members of the community of origins and exchanges with the local community of friends. We noted that language choice and some interactional patterns seem regulated

by implicit rules in the community of origin since it is composed by members who have a more homogeneous background. Conversely, we observed the emergence of negotiations over language choice but also experimentation with linguistic resources in the exchanges addressed to or originating in the local community. We attributed both phenomena to the state of anomie that characterizes the communicative practices of the latter community, which being composed by people with very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, has to build their own rules anew. In particular, we noted that metalinguistic comments about language choice reveal divergent expectations on which language is adequate for the context. At the same time, we also discussed how uncertainties about the various interactants' language preference and competence led to great flexibility on the part of many interlocutors. For example, Mohammed and Abdul often adapt to the language preference of their interlocutors and also tend to experiment with languages, like Sicilian, which are not in their usual repertoire. Similarly, members of the local community also engage with languages that they are not very familiar with. All of this leads to exchanges in which there is greater linguistic and semiotic variety than in interactions with the community of origin. The analysis provides support for Blommaert's hypothesis that a state of anomie characterizes many digital contexts, but also that such a construct should not be seen as denoting a situation that is necessarily negative in that the uncertainty about interactional rules can in fact lead to change and evolution.

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