«*In-between spaces*:
le scritture migranti e la scrittura come migrazione»

2

Identity navigation: rethinking languages, literatures and cultures between challenges and misinterpretations

edited by

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Indice

PART I
CONFINE, FRONTIERA E IDENTITÀ

PART II

IDENTITÉ, EXIL ET QUÊTE DE L'ÂME LOCALE

PART III

IDENTITY NAVIGATION:
FRAMEWORKS, DILEMMAS, IMAGERY, AND PERCEPTION

Code-switching and code-mixing
by Italian migrants speaking ESL:
language attitude and "fluid identity"

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Abstract: It is a widely shared understanding across all the language sciences that bilingualism is a resource for communities and speakers, in a number of different ways (Ruiz, 2010).

Following on Portes and Rumbaut (2001) who have researched widely on English-speaking countries, this paper will focus on the case of three Italian families, all belonging to the same region (Sicily, Italy) who emigrated to three English-speaking countries (England, Malta, Australia) for work-related reasons.

Through a sociolinguistic analysis of interviews, emphasis will be placed both on the concept of "language attitude" or the role of English(es) in family members' daily routine, and that of ethnic-cultural identity (Mancini, 2006).

The aim is to explore the representational framework that these three families have on bilingualism and biculturalism and to reach a better understanding of the choices that are at the basis of their educational and identity processes.

Research questions refer also to the use of linguistic phenomena of code-switching and code-mixing. These three Italian families frequently switch between Italian and English, and their language choice is related both to the ease of lexical access and to the rates of adaptation to the new host environments (both for adult members and children).

Results revealed an interesting orientation in the harmonization of the different cultures. In fact, all three families are characterized by a "fluid identity" based on complex acculturation processes (Liebkind, 2001).

Keywords: code-switching, code-mixing, ESL, language attitude.

Introduction

The present paper aims at expanding the linguistic research on the phenomenon of the so-called "brain drain", i.e. compatriots who have high qualifications, who can speak Italian well and have studied English, who often leave their country for the same reasons as the emigrants of 50-100 years ago, although the former have already found a better job, and hope for more opportunities in their career.

This phenomenon is, inevitably, the result of contact between (at least) two languages and two cultures, which implies very complex dynamics that can be defined in terms of "bilingualism" and "biculturalism".

After introducing the main linguistic theories about languages in general and the contact between Italian and English in particular, our case study will be articulated essentially on two levels: theoretical and purely sociolinguistic, in order to identify three phenomena of "linguistic contact":

– code switching;
– lexical interferences (code mixing);
– particular types of such interferences, such as discourse markers.

If bilingualism is defined as the condition for which the simple "presence" of multiple codes is recorded in the expressive repertoire of the speakers, the concept of "interference" (i.e. the set of phenomena that appear in the speech of bilinguals) leads us to question those (conscious and unconscious) norms that regulate the production of utterances by those who have more than one expressive code at their disposal.

In fact, all the examples of deviation from the norms of one or the other language that appear in the productions of bilinguals can be defined as "interference phenomena", and are therefore the result of the contact between the two systems at their disposal. Such deviations are usually classified as phonological, morphological, syntactic or lexical.

Nowadays, linguistics openly recognizes that the phenomena of interference between languagesdepend both on purely linguistic

(hence structural) and on extra-linguistic (non-structural) factors, such as the prestige attributed to one of the languages at disposal, the ease of expression typical of each speaker, the relationship between the bilingual minority and the community in which it is inserted; in essence, all those factors that make up the socio-cultural framework of contact.

In those cases where the contact between languages is due to migratory circumstances, the importance of the context assumes even greater proportions. De Mauro (1986) reports the need to overcome a mechanical vision of the principle of interference (the mere deviation from one norm to another, from one code to another, from one language to another).

In fact, when bilingual or multilingual speakers, within their complex expressive repertoire, search for the possible activations of those linguistic structures necessary for them to understand and be understood, they practise an implementation of functions, through which they do not choose a direction, but transfer, from time to time and according to the requests of the communicative situation, structures and materials from one code to another.

Among the concepts and principles deriving from the development of "linguistic contact" studies, code switching is one of the most interesting.

Hymes (1974, p. 168) defines code-switching as a "common term for alternative use of two or more languages, varieties of a language or even speech styles".

We use the term *code-switching* broadly in this paper to encompass the many kinds of language alternations that have often been subsumed under or discussed in tandem with code-switching, among them borrowing, code-mixing, interference, diglossia, style-shifting, crossing, mock language, bivalency and hybridity.

The study of code-switching is a vast field and the use of the term is rather heterogeneous. In the words of Gumperz – one of the pioneers in the field – "conversational code switching can be defined as the juxtaposition, within the same speech exchange, of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59).

Over the last few decades, sociolinguistics has focused on functions of code-switching, mainly studying how identity, cultural and situation-specific beliefs, values and norms, or linguistic ideologies affect speakers' choices and their "language attitude". (Gumperz, J.J., 1982, Gumperz, J.J. & Cook-Gumperz, J., 2005, Lasagabaster, D. & Huguet, A., 2007).

As code-switching is the use of two different languages in one speech exchange by proficient bilinguals, we propose *lexical borrowing or code-mixing* as a category distinct from code-switching, the former being the insertion, into the grammatical frame of a language, of lexical items from another language.

The last theoretical point on which we have researched is the one concerning discourse markers, such as "well", "you know", "so" and so on. According to Matras (1998), they constitute a phenomenon of interference in itself, thanks to the precocity with which they are employed in the linguistic repertoire of the speakers as "automated operations", so the speakers no longer feel the difference between the linguistic choices made for such productive acts.

On a theoretical level, one of the dimensions of bilingualism considered here is that of the *identity* that the two languages involve. Crystal (1997) identifies eight types of identity: physical, psychological, ethnic, national, social, contextual and stylistic, but more generally we will identify two types: an individual, personal identity, and a collective one, shared by a group (ethnic identity), as proposed by Milazzo (2015).

Following on Phinney et al (2001), ethnic identity is that aspect of *acculturation* that focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture. Immigrant groups, as well as individual immigrants, arrive in a new country with differing attitudes towards retaining their culture of origin and/or becoming part of the new society.

Thus, being bilingual inevitably involves being bicultural. This biculturalism can also lead to a mixture of values belonging to both cultures, choosing which one to abandon and which one to assume, giving rise to a sort of third culture, the one that Paulston (2005) calls "bicultural eclecticism", and that Mancini (2006) and Milazzo (2015) have defined "fluid identity".

The hypothesis we want to test is that it is highly probable and even desirable that the use of two languages alternatively activates different linguistic attitudes and different identities, both cultural and personal.

This research will focus on the "linguistic debate", little investigated in Italy, which instead, in our opinion, is pivotal for the integration of immigrants in society and, at the same time, for the maintenance of ethnic-cultural identity. (Liebkind, 2001). Some studies on the psychological aspects of bilingualism (Wilson, 2005) have shown that the majority of bilingual individuals feel better when they switch between their languages. The analysis of their "language attitude" (Lasagabaster, 2007) has shown that the use of the second language makes them feel more audacious, competent, intelligent, and more self-confident.

Method

Our sociolinguistic study does not claim to be representative or exhaustive. As it is a reduced-scale qualitative research, a special instrument has been created, following the model of three other important instruments that are commonly used to assess bilingualism:

– The language experience and proficiency questionnaire (LEAPQ; Marian, Blumenfeld, & Kaushankaya, 2007);
– The language history questionnaire developed by Li et al., which is notable for its ease of use, accessibility, and large sampling. (LHQ 2.0; Li, Sepanski, & Zhao, 2006; Li, Zhang, Tsai, & Puls, 2014)
– The language and social background questionnaire (LSBQ; Luk and Bialistok, 2013)[1].

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[1] References to these questionnaires can be found in Anderson, J, A.E., Mak L., Kevyani C.A., & Bialystock E. (2018). The language and social background questionnaire: assessing degree of bilingualism in a diverse population. *Behavior Research Methods*, 50 (1), 250-263.

The choice of our methodology was dictated by the number of subjects making up our survey, by their spatial distance, and by the information needed. A sample of 13 bilingual subjects was collected with a varied linguistic and communicative competence in English. These are individuals of Italian nationality (Sicilians), members of three families made up of adults, adolescents, and children, with a high level of education among adults (the male figures are two engineers and an architect), who emigrated to three English-speaking countries (Malta, England, Australia) following the brain drain phenomenon. All migrated to their respective countries less than 5 years ago. Except for one of them (male adult), native bilingual, everyone else has learned English as a foreign language at school. The family members living in Australia are: Francesco and Caterina (husband and wife, an architect and a housewife, respectively) and Silvestro, Luisa and Leonardo (all teenagers, attending secondary school).

The family living in England is made up of Giuseppe and Antonella (husband and wife, an engineer and a housewife, respectively) and their two children, Orazio and Lucrezia, both attending primary school.

The family living in Malta is made up of Giuseppe (a native bilingual Maltese/Italian engineer), his wife Valentina (a sports trainer) and their two children, Giulio and Cecilia, both attending primary school.

Each interviewee answered the questions on a questionnaire (Table 1), whose purpose was to provide a sort of individual presentation combined with a general outline of the language skills of each person related to English and Italian. The questionnaire was also composed of open questions, so as to be able to obtain the greatest degree of spontaneity from each answer. The open questions also allowed us to discover information that had not been foreseen, as the interviewees were able to answer in a more personal way, including facts and episodes from their lives.

Table 1. Questionnaire on attitudes towards languages in contact.

I would like to ask you to help me by answering the following questions. This is not a test, so there are no "right" or "wrong" answers. I'm interested in your personal opinion. Please, give your answers sincerely, as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation.

Name: . . . .
Gender: . . . .
Age: . . . .
Nationality: . . . .
Languages spoken: . . . .
Years of residence in Malta/England/Australia: . . . .

1. – Compared to your mother tongue, when you speak English do you think your personality changes? In other words, do you feel like a different person?
2. – When you speak English, what are your moods, emotions, feelings about this language? Why?
3. – When you talk to other people in English, is your behaviour different to when you speak Italian?
4. – Are there any aspects of the English language or typically English behaviours and attitudes that you reproduce when you speak Italian, perhaps with your compatriots?

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

This spontaneity was also requested during the collection of the audio material (second step), which was subsequently transcribed (and which, given the limits of this paper, we will not report here). In fact, the subjects were asked to participate in an interview during the course of an investigation on the brain drain phenomenon and the use of language by Italian emigrants living in English-speaking countries. We conducted the interviews according to a very free line-up, which would transform the interviewer-interviewee situation into a simple dialogue, where those who were registered did not limit themselves to synthetically answering questions, but were allowed to express themselves freely, without constraints.

The interviews were used to investigate the sense of identity that Italian emigrants to English-speaking countries have, and to check if their condition of bilingualism makes them feel different from others.

Here, some examples of these questions are listed:

Table 2. Model of interview.

– What language (s) do you speak at home?
– In which language do you prefer to speak? (at home, at school, at work, for example)
– Do you get confused speaking the two languages? (yes, no, sometimes, often) If so, on what occasions (with parents, friends, teachers)?
– Do you feel you have a (Maltese, English, Australian) speech community identity?[2]
– In what language do you dream?
– Does being bilingual make you feel different?
– In which language do you watch TV programmes?
– In which language do you write / read?

Because of the highly diverse experiences of the families in the three countries, their identification with Italian culture and with the larger society was expected to be quite variable, and the data obtained uphold this.

The information obtained, which we will analyze in the following paragraph, cannot at all be considered representative of all Italians who live in English-speaking countries, speaking English as a second language. However, it is very interesting to notice that the majority of subjects recognized a certain change both in their language attitude and in their sense of identity.

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[2] The concept of the "speech community" is foundational to the understanding of code-switching as an identity-based phenomenon. (Hall, K., & Nilep, C., 2015).

Results

The participants showed readiness and willingness and answered copiously the questions asked. From the analysis of the answers obtained, a certain heterogeneity of information emerged.

However, since the research aimed at investigating if and how the use of English could change personality (in terms of identity, emotional states, attitudes and behaviours), attention was focused exclusively on the effects of the English language on bilingual subjects, both in relation to their personal or inner dimension, and to the interpersonal interactive one.

From the analysed answers, it was found that out of 13 subjects constituting the research sample, 2 of them, wives/mothers who did not integrate in a workplace, denied any change in their way of being and of relating. Moreover, the scientific literature confirms that often, over the years, adult females have typically been seen as carriers of the original culture; in a new society, they are more likely to remain at home and maintain traditional practices. The only diversity they feel is linked to a different experience or "cultural distance".

> *Caterina (Australia, housewife, speaking Italian): Mi sento una persona diversa solo perché non sono un'australiana nata o che ha mai applicato[3] per un lavoro, o con un business a Perth. Il mio vissuto è diverso, la mia cultura è distante, il modo di relazionarmi con gli altri è diverso. Penso che non sia la lingua inglese a farmi sentire diversa, ma tutto quanto elencato precedentemente. La mia personalità non cambia quando parlo inglese![4]*

The remaining 11 subjects, on the contrary, claimed to be aware of changes in their personality, especially regarding attitudes and behav-

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[3] It is a semantic calque, from the English "to apply" (for).

[4] I feel different only because I'm not a native Australian, or one who has applied for a job, or who runs a business in Perth. My past is different, my culture is distant, the way I interact with others is different. I don't think it is the English language that makes me feel different, but all those factors I have just listed. My personality doesn't change when I speak English! (My translation)

iours in interpersonal relationships. When they use English, they feel they are different people. This second language activates in them some behaviours exclusively related to the language.

Even when they speak Italian, at home, they make extensive use of discourse markers typical of the English variety of the country in which they live.

> *Giuseppe (England, engineer): When I speak English, for example, I can use the verb "love" without being misunderstood. In Italian there are many words and expressions to refer to it and you have to be careful when using one connotation or another. When I speak English, my mood is that of a free man, free to say that I love chocolate, I love my family, travelling, I love my job… Love is love, just one feeling!!!*

> *Giulio (Malta, school child): "Mela"⁵, when I talk to my classmates I behave as they do, I am one of them, "ok"?.*

Some questions deserve reflection, as the results are interesting.

When asked "In which language do you prefer to speak?" almost half of the participants answered that they prefer English and the other half both languages.

An interesting datum emerges to the question "Do you get confused speaking the two languages?" Almost all the participants answered "yes" (with parents/children, friends, teachers). This feeling of confusion when switching between languages was very common among our participants. Nonetheless, the supposition that speakers would rely on code-switching due to gaps in knowledge has changed. As Myers-Scotton (1997, p. 224) have shown, speakers using code-switching are proficient bilinguals, although they may show more ability in one language than the other.

The question *"Do you feel you have a (Maltese, English, Australian) speech community identity?"* has given rise to different answers: the adult participants said they feel Italian, all the teenagers and children answered "I do not know".

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⁵ Maltese English marker, corresponding to British English "so".

As far as the sense of identity is concerned, children often wonder what it is, as this awareness evolves with age, national experiences and feelings.

Some studies show that the decisive factors for identity formation and psychological adaptation are not national policies, but more local circumstances (for example, dispersal versus high local concentration of a particular group), personal relationships (family, peers), and activity settings such as school and neighbourhood.

The question "Does being bilingual make you feel different?" divided the participants. Often, the language, values and traditions of the family are devalued and the values and culture of the new country are idealized as winning and rewarding.

Antonella (England, housewife): I'm not sure whether being bilingual makes me feel different. I certainly feel a little angry with the English language. Even if I have lived in England for almost 5 years, I feel English is an elusive language, especially when it comes to phrasal verbs and their many prepositions and meanings! English baffles me. It seems easy and then… it isn't!
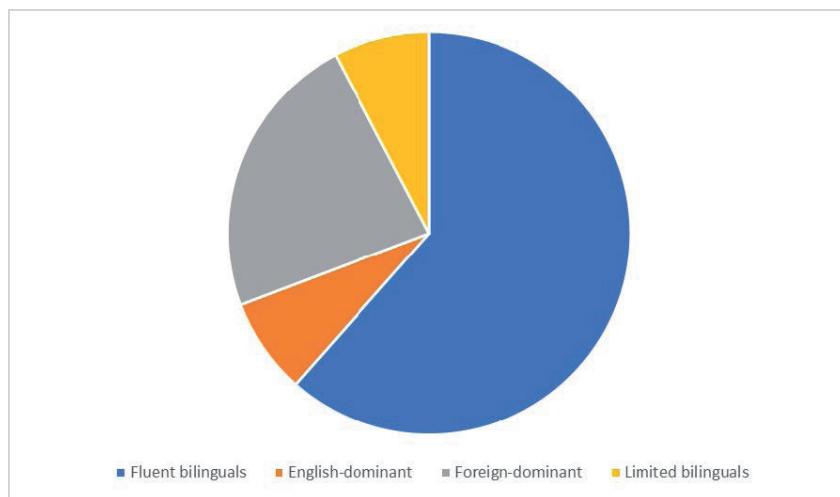
An aspect of the setting that may interact with identity choices is the immigrant policy of the host country, in particular, the extent to which a country supports the process of integration by respecting cultural diversity. The countries in our study differ substantially in their policies toward immigrants.

As Portes and Rumbaut (2001) wrote in relation to the US, our results show similarity, as the two adult members of our survey living in Australia typically combine instrumental learning of English with efforts to maintain their culture and language, such as attending Italian clubs and making friends with Italian migrants. They also seek to pass this heritage to their children. As we know, of all the distinct legacies transmitted across generations, language is arguably the most important, but it is also the most difficult to transmit because of strong opposing forces, such as education. At school, language attitudes are learnt and, therefore, educators play a paramount role in students' formation, to such an extent that attitudes formed under educator influence may be extremely difficult to change. Students who face a situation in which different languages are in contact realise in early

schooling that society, family and school all place importance on the languages spoken in each setting. The students' own assessment, together with the information and the knowledge they gain, will lead to the establishment of their attitudes towards the different languages, the speakers of these languages and to the learning process itself.

This situation was revealed in the course of our qualitative interviews where questions addressed to children were commonly responded to in English. Children use both the Internet and mobile devices in English and often speak English with parents, as well as with friends and teachers.

All things considered, our sample can be categorized into four mutually exclusive categories (Table 3).

Fluent bilinguals (Silvestro, Luisa, Leonardo, Giuseppe, Giulio, Giuseppe, Orazio and Lucrezia) are defined as respondents who know English very well and who are competent in Italian too. In addition, achieving fluent bilingualism is a demanding feat and can be associated with higher educational achievement and more ambitious plans for the future. The only English-dominant child (Cecilia) has fluency in English but much weaker knowledge of Italian, probably because of her

very young age at the time of emigrating; <u>Foreign-dominant</u> members (Francesco, Valentina, Antonella) are in the opposite situation – they speak Italian well, but are less fluent in English. Finally, <u>Limited bilinguals</u> is the category of those who have lost fluency in their home language (Italian), but have not yet acquired full command of English (this is the case of Caterina, housewife now living in Australia).

In addition, the analysis of interviews shows that the family living in Australia code-mix Italian and English very often, much more than the two other families who migrated to England and Malta.

The 13 bilingual subjects considered have the opportunity to alternate the languages they speak, using the L1 with relatives or to keep in touch with the country of origin, thus preserving their values and culture. Last but not least, all the three families return to Sicily at least once a year.

Discussion

The literature on acculturation has clearly shown that language alternation, ranging from single words to longer chunks, has been recognized since at least the mid-twentieth century as an aspect of human language whose importance should be further investigated.

As Berruto (1998, p. 16) claims, in a bilingual context, codeswitching and codemixing are always present, whether to a greater or a lesser extent, and as "language is a resource" (Ruiz, R., 2010), bilingualism can be considered as an added value when it comes to obtaining a job abroad. It also helps to promote tolerance and to equip citizens for participation in public life, and strengthens social cohesion and solidarity, while at the same time mitigating the spread of xenophobia and parochialism among present and future generations.

Everything taken into consideration, this study results in the same argument as Cogo's (2009) study: code-switching is an intrinsic element of ESL, and the ESL speakers use code-switching as a pragmatic strategy drawing skilfully and creatively from the linguistic repertoires at hand. Although we agree with Cogo that speakers use code-switching skilfully in ESL interaction, our findings imply that the speakers sometimes resort to code-switching due to linguistic deficiency, i.e. as

strategies to enhance the listeners' comprehension, as an extra tool for communication that gives the opportunity to express greater nuances, to signal solidarity with a group and to reach greater efficiency in conversation.

Some migrants in our survey, those living in Australia, are the most bicultural, that is, they have retained their culture of origin while adapting to the new culture. With reference to identity, the equivalent concept is having an integrated or "fluid" identity, which probably contributes to their psychological well-being.

As Erri De Luca (2011, p. 23) writes: "La lingua è l'ultima proprietà di chi parte per sempre"[6].

This is probably the main reason why these ESL speakers resort to the two languages (Italian and English) in a most creative way to fulfil different discourse functions, to apply certain communication strategies, and to communicate their bilingual identity. They even signal their culture in two distinct ways. They use emblematic switches first for a range of purposes, that is for exclamations, pause fillers, function words or discourse markers in general, to implicitly give a linguistic emblem of their culture, and secondly in order to explicitly refer to concepts associated with Italian culture and humour. (Jenkins J. et al., 2011, p. 296).

Bilingual speakers' language control, therefore, is *dynamic* and fluctuates according to contexts (Micheli, 2001). Their language attitude is instrumental and integrative at the same time, that is, speakers have the motivation to learn their second language for useful and utilitarian purposes, and, on the other hand, they desire to identify with their second culture or language group.

The sensation of feeling powerful and resourceful can be traced back to the intrinsic richness of those who can master more than one language, who can communicate with people of different cultures, who have a greater open-mindedness thanks to their speaking skills, whose identity is fluid and whose language attitude leads to a sort of third culture, or "bicultural eclecticism", which is probably the best acculturation outcome.

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[6] Language is the last ownership of those who leave for good. (My translation).

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