Immigrant languages in Italy

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1. Objectives

Our objective is to describe the trends and changes in the linguistic space in Italy as a result of contact with the languages that have entered this space through migratory events during the last 30 years. This objective represents the main focus of studies carried out at the Centre of Excellence for Research – Centre for the Study of the Italian Language among non-Italians and Immigrant Languages in Italy of the Siena University for Foreigners. We take a semiotic approach, exploring all signs that cooperate in sense-construction processes. Given that language is viewed in terms of identity, we look at both languages and identities in contact (see De Mauro 1963, 2002, 2007).

In order to fully grasp the current linguistic situation in Italy, we need to understand the context and dynamics in which the “new” languages have come to interact in Italy. It is only after some analysis, albeit concise, of the Italian linguistic situation and its complex dynamics that we can appreciate whether, and if so which and how immigrant languages might be capable of playing a part in the reshaping of the Italian linguistic space, thus helping to strengthen the linguistic pluralism that has always been a key feature of this country.

The social phenomenon of migration has constituted a determining factor in the structuring of the linguistic situation in a distinctive manner in Italy compared to other European countries. This is true of both external and internal migration phenomena as well as immigration. One constant feature in analyses of migration, whether regarding the phenomenon itself, its linguistic consequences, or its political and educational contexts, is a certain inclination on the part of analysts to conceal and refuse to acknowledge its significance and the results of its influence. The aim of this chapter is to explain the reasons for this denial and to link phenomenological and quantitative data with linguistic data, overcoming the embarrassing yet all-too-common tendency to equate ethnic data with linguistic data (De Mauro 2005; Orioles 2006; Extra and Yağmur 2004), in order to shed light on the role of migration in the structuring of the Italian linguistic space.
Processes of both emigration and internal migration have played a decisive role in reducing the plurilingual space made up of dialects and historic minority languages which has always been a major feature in Italy, and in the diffusion of a unitary language spoken by all Italians. Today, however, with some 3,700,000 immigrants in Italy and around 500,000 minors within the education system, and with the increasingly structured progression towards rootedness, socio-demographic data indicates the presence of a critical mass that is bound to have implications on a linguistic level. This chapter aims to examine these implications. As we have mentioned elsewhere (Bagna, Barni and Vedovelli 2007), research with this aim in view must seek to identify the factors that may have a positive influence on the maintenance of immigrant languages, the types and networks of language use, the factors exerting pressure on the local linguistic space and those facilitating change in different directions: the maintenance vs. loss of new languages, the formation of new varieties through contact and the differing degrees of linguistic assimilation.

We will also analyse the language policy interventions put in place by the Italian State as regards the status of immigrant languages. Italy lacks specific legislation to safeguard immigrant languages on a national level, as is also the case on a European level (see Extra and Gorter, this Volume). Article 6 of the Italian Constitution (“The Republic safeguards linguistic minorities”), enacted in 1948, contains a general principle aimed at facilitating freedom of linguistic and cultural expression. It was another 50 years before the Italian State published law n°. 482/1999 (Regulations for the protection of historic linguistic minorities), recognising twelve minority language varieties. This law only recognises minorities that meet the criteria of being linked to a specific territory and being of long-standing, i.e., the so-called “historic minority languages” (Orioles 2007). Since there is no legislation regarding the recognition and safeguarding of immigrant languages, we will analyse the normative and operative choices adopted in the educational world. Schools, forced by everyday reality to confront the linguistic problem of immigration before other institutions, have found the need to respond to this social emergency. We will present both the directions put in place by the Ministry of Education and the operative practices and ways in which the educational world has responded to the arrival of foreign pupils, focusing particularly on the attention paid by the institutions to these languages and how they are received in schools.
2. Emigration and immigration in Italy: linguistic impact

Traditionally, Italy has always been a country of emigration. During the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, it is estimated that some 14 million Italians left the country. As De Mauro (1963) emphasises, the effect of emigration on the Italian linguistic situation was profound. In the social context of migration, language always acts as a catalyst, shaping forms of identity, and providing a focal point for the reformulation of identities. In the case of Italy, emigration played a fundamental role in the Italianisation of the country. Those emigrating from Italy above all were individuals from the regions and social classes with the highest rates of illiteracy and the most widespread use of dialects. In fact, Italian emigration, by thinning out the numbers of illiterate dialect speakers, made easier the work of the nationwide school system and the promotion of the development of literacy and thus the spread of the national language, Italian, to the detriment of dialect-based language use. Linguistic unification was also promoted by Italy’s internal migration, which, from the 1950s, brought masses of dialect-speakers from southern Italy to the more industrialised regions of the North. All this, together with other factors (De Mauro 1963), led to the diffusion of a unitary Italian language (De Mauro et al. 1993), which, as De Mauro (1977) and, more recently, Orioles (2006) confirm, only followed the trend towards monolingualism that was already deeply-rooted in the Italian society, and especially in its ruling classes. In terms of language policy, the consequences of the rejection of plurilingualism were the imposition of a single language – in accordance with the 19th-century paradigm of one nation/one language and thus the failure, until a decade ago, to recognise even the historic minorities, and the diffusion in schools of a sort of pseudo-purist prescriptivism. Thus, driven by linguistic unification, dialects and other minority languages, whilst still an active part of Italy’s linguistic repertoire, as can be seen from recent statistical enquiries (ISTAT 2007), have gradually seen their range of possible communicative uses dwindling (Vedovelli 2003). This policy has repercussions on the current situation.

In the past 30 years, the Italian society has experienced new conditions, marked by the increasingly large-scale arrival of a population of foreign origin. The latest socio-demographic data on foreign immigration in Italy are those produced by the annual Dossier Caritas, which, over the years, has established its position as the most reliable and careful observatory of immigration patterns in this country. The most recent Dossier (Caritas 2007a) shows that the number of immigrants is now some 3,690,000 peo-
ple, which accounts for over 6.2% of the resident population. The Dossier shows us that there are more than 150 different nationalities represented by immigrants in Italy, the most numerous groups being Romanians, Moroccans, Albanians, Ukrainians, Chinese, Filipinos, Moldavians, Tunisians, Indians and Poles. The composition of the foreign population in Italy has changed repeatedly, due both to diachronic factors (differentiation of groups over time), and synchronic factors (presence of different identities with varying social connotations), often highly dependent on the conditions of the labour market and the geographic configuration of the country. This makes for a varied and complex demographic panorama, and therefore also a complex linguistic panorama. This aspect, however, and its effects on the Italian linguistic space, have been largely ignored in linguistic research, except for a handful of studies. Ever since the early 1980s, warnings were issued (Vedovelli 1981) of the problems arising from the emergence of the new social phenomenon of foreign immigration within the linguistic composition of an Italian society that was still seeking a balance between the unitary Italian language and traditional dialects and historic minority languages within national boundaries. Linguistic analyses focused primarily on Italian as an object of learning for immigrants (Giacalone Ramat 2003), in order to highlight and verify natural language acquisition sequences.

The Population Census (ISTAT 2001) also lacks questions on the languages spoken: foreigners resident in Italy are only asked about their country of birth and their citizenship. Paradoxically, the questionnaire for the 2001 census and the instructions for compilation were translated into 12 languages, including Chinese, Sinhala, Arabic and Polish, neither of which are historic minority languages in Italy, nor are they languages of neighbouring countries. This proves that, albeit vaguely, the presence of speakers of other languages in Italy was perceived, but the choice of languages for which translation was provided was in no way prompted by the self-evident criterion of the corresponding nationalities being represented most strongly in the Italian population at the time.

The various Caritas Dossiers also lack any systematic and constant research into the languages spoken by immigrants. In a report presented in 2001, the first on this topic, a figure was hypothesised, based on the nationalities declared, of the presence of at least 150 languages (Vedovelli and Villarini 2001). The 2007 Dossier simply provides a summary of various non-systematic studies performed on the matter in Italy. None of the other annual Dossier editions make any mention of languages.

Above and beyond the scientific significance of the lack of data on the ways and effects of entry of immigrant languages into the Italian linguistic
space, and the blindness in the interpretation of available data, these failings lead to social and educational fall-out, so that legislation and interventions regarding immigrants and their communicative skills continue to remain non-structural emergency measures. By contrast, a systematic study to identify the distribution and vitality of immigrant languages constitutes a necessary cognitive tool for a policy of linguistic diffusion, and also for the planning of social interventions for immigrants by the institutions responsible for handling contacts. Several sectors come to mind: schools, for a better knowledge of the pupils’ linguistic background and for planning activities aimed at maintaining their L1; or the health service, justice and production systems, for a more effective handling of social communication.

3. Research on immigrant languages in Italy

As we have pointed out, research in Italy has been almost entirely lacking in analysing the linguistic implications that emerge from statistical data regarding migratory phenomena, due to the difficulty faced by researchers in importing approaches from other areas such as semiotics into linguistic studies. This, however, makes it possible to handle the complexity of the phenomena involved in linguistic contact, which is also contact between identities, and to understand the implications of the “new-sense territories” that derive from contact. Thus, the question of immigrant languages has remained in the background when compared to the attention paid to the dynamics of immigrants’ acquisition of Italian as a second language.

While De Mauro (1977) already spoke of “new minorities” and Vedovelli (1981, 1989) of “immigrant languages”, in reference to the “non-territorial” and “non-historic” minority languages that had come to be a part of the Italian linguistic space, Italy does not seem ready yet to “acknowledge” or to “deal with” other languages. It therefore comes as no great surprise that research carried out in the period from the early 1980s to the end of the 20th century tended to be restricted to small areas of the country. Indeed, no Italian city has been the subject of any large-scale data collection similar to that carried out in the context of the Multilingual Cities Project (Extra and Yağmur, this Volume), and the micro-surveys on the linguistic repertoires of immigrant adults and minors in Italy have only served to illustrate the reality of specific locations, such as Pavia, Turin, Verona, Bergamo and Palermo (Chini 2004; Massariello Merzagora 2005; D’Agostino 2006; Valentini, in press).
A first step towards a more in-depth and systematic analysis of the complex situation in Italy, and of the dynamics that have developed here, was taken in 2001, when the above-mentioned Centre of Excellence for Research was established, with a view to monitoring the effects of the “new” languages entering Italy. At a 2002 conference on the theme of linguistic ecology (to which the outcomes of linguistic contact are also linked), an explanation was given (Bagna, Machetti and Vedovelli 2003) of the distinction made between the concepts of *migrant language* and *immigrant language*. This distinction is useful in describing the nature and effects of the interaction between the new plurilingualism and the local linguistic repertoire.

*Migrant languages* are defined as languages “passing through”, used by migrant groups who drift around the social territory, non-cohesive and in relatively small numbers. For this reason, these languages are unable to put down roots and to leave traces of their presence in the linguistic contact make-up of the host community, or they succeed in doing so only sporadically. *Immigrant languages*, on the other hand, are those of numerically larger, stable groups, with intentions of putting down roots within a local community. These languages are used systematically by particular immigrant groups and are able to “leave their mark” in the linguistic contact make-up of the host community. Only the latter can hope to become part of the new plurilingualism of the Italian peninsula and, given that they are in a more stable and lasting situation of contact with the other language varieties present in the area, they are in a position to affect its communicative and linguistic make-up.

In light of the above, a language may be defined as *immigrant* because it is spoken by a community that is present in an area in quantitative terms, but that is also strong in qualitative terms. The latter aspect brings us back to the need for detailed studies on the types of use of languages within the area where groups have settled. We need to identify the parameters that enable us to establish whether the languages spoken by groups in a given area have the status of immigrant languages, with a certain degree of manifestation, visibility and recognisability (if not yet recognised), or whether these languages may potentially achieve this status. We also need to verify whether, for reasons which may be extra-linguistic, these languages alter, even superficially or temporarily, the Italian linguistic space. Hence, the logical choice is multi-level research, using a theoretical and methodological approach that takes into account the weight of many variables, in order to monitor the possible outcomes of linguistic contact. Only identifying the languages present within the country in quantitative terms does not provide
information on the relations between the languages observed and their use, which is what the objective of research would be that seeks to obtain syn-
chronic and diachronic results on the “behaviour” of immigrant languages.

4. Immigrant languages in Italy: focus on Chinese and Romanian

Questions like *How many immigrant languages are there in Italy, which languages are these, and where do they occur?* presuppose the identifica-
tion of the immigrant languages present within a given area and the aware-
ness that only with adequate tools is it possible to account for the complex-
ity of a phenomenon such as linguistic contact. Only more “refined” multi-
level tools can provide indications regarding the role, use and functions of
what are “potentially” immigrant languages in a given area. These indica-
tions are often the fruit of a complex monitoring mechanism involving
several disciplines, and providing a map that can be read from a range of
perspectives. One of the first criteria that can be used to discuss immigrant
communities is of a statistical-demographic nature. We know how many
nationalities are present in Italy, which are the most numerous communi-
ties, and where in the country they have chosen to live. We also know that,
by overlaying these areas, it is possible to obtain an initial map of linguistic
presence and contact between different immigrant groups and Italian, with
all its varieties and dialects. A second level of analysis involves the study
of language use, with methods such as interviews and questionnaires. The *linguistic landscape* approach offers a more detailed exploration of the
visibility of immigrant languages in a relatively circumscribed area (Bagna,
Barni and Vedovelli 2007; Barni 2006, 2008; Barni and Bagna 2008).

Only by combining the results obtained from the various levels of ob-
servation is it possible to formulate hypotheses regarding the apparent dis-

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— the territory (urban area, rural area, presence and level of concentration of immigrants);
— the specific traits of each group (period of immigration, attitudes towards their own language and culture, etc.);
— the conditions of visibility and vitality of languages spoken by the groups (type of activities performed, percentage of minors in school etc.).

Thus, if we can initially derive the presence of immigrant languages from a statistical/quantitative analysis, their level of linguistic pressure and eligibility as an immigrant language derives from a range of factors. Furthermore, to qualify a language as immigrant in one Italian region or city may prove to be impossible in another area. For this reason we refer to the concept of linguistic pressure of immigrant languages in terms of the sum and weight of the dynamics generated by the presence and contact (in its various forms and manifestations) of immigrant languages with Italian and with other languages in a given area.

It is not possible to provide a list of the immigrant languages found in Italy: this varies according to the area and its characteristics. Indeed, the examples given below regarding Chinese and Romanian show that languages identified as fitting the definition of immigrant more so than others are closely tied to and dependent upon individual cities or provinces, and they may not fit the definition in other areas. The data presented are the fruits of territorial mapping activities performed by the Centre of Excellence. The mapping in turn is the fruit of the choice to combine several complementary approaches, and to use a powerful multi-mode method that could be used in different combinations and in conformity with the aims of research into different dimensions (investigating one or more languages) and levels (semiotic, macro- and micro-linguistic) (Bagna and Barni 2005; Barni and Bagna 2008). By analysing different mappings and the state of vitality and visibility of languages that may be considered immigrant, we can also verify the pressure conditions in the areas where they are spoken.

The decision to a focus on Chinese and Romanian is prompted by the fact that for these two languages the factors mentioned above combine in a range of different ways, giving rise to varied outcomes. Chinese has been present in Italy for quite a while and shows considerable visibility and vitality; Romanian, which has arrived more recently, has its own visibility and vitality mechanisms. Following the same format of analysis we could identify different modes of presence, use and visibility of immigrant lan-
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languages in each area under investigation (regions, provinces, small- or medium-size towns vs. large cities).

4.1. The status of Chinese

Rome (Esquilino)

The Municipio I administrative area in Rome, which includes the Esquilino neighbourhood, is the area with the greatest number of foreigners in the city. In 2004, when the survey was carried out, 25,004 foreigners were living there (11.2% of Rome’s total foreign population). This ratio has remained constant in subsequent years. It is the neighbourhood with the highest percentage of foreigners in relation to the number of residents: 20.4% (22.9% in 2006). In other publications we have dealt in detail with the survey of languages in the neighbourhood (Bagna and Barni 2006; Barni 2006; Bagna 2006), using statistical and demographic analysis and linguistic landscape. Twenty-four visible languages were identified, scattered unevenly across the area, and able to establish different relations with Italian and other languages. In the Esquilino neighbourhood, Chinese is the leading language in terms of dominance (quantitative prevalence of visible, written texts observed in the area) and autonomy, i.e., the capacity to be used in public communication without the use of Italian or other languages. It thus proves to be the language capable of exerting the most pressure on the area. Of the 851 texts observed, including 296 monolingual texts, 197 are entirely in Chinese. It is no mere accident that on the subject of the presence of Chinese, the document entitled Esquilino dei mondi lontani ‘The distant worlds of Esquilino’ (Caritas 2007b) emphasises that the neighbourhood feels “the alienating impact caused by the presence of ideograms […] an indecipherable language that does not facilitate everyday communication”. Such comments confirm the hypothesis that Chinese, a language capable of conserving its autonomy to a greater degree in a neighbourhood with high levels of plurilingualism, exerts pressure, manifested in its visibility and in strong vitality. It is no coincidence that this pressure led to the signing of a protocol between the City of Rome and the Chinese community on 11 May 2007. This document emphasises that the Chinese community must “improve shop signs and fittings, being sure to install signs written in Italian at the top, and in Chinese below”. The City of Rome, on the other hand, must “facilitate the life and integration of the Chinese community by organising courses to enable them to learn Italian
and to become familiar with the requirements of the law, particularly as regards integration, legality and trade; [...] make communication between institutions and foreign communities easier by translating laws and regulations into Chinese”. Provisions of this kind clearly recognise the role of Chinese as the language of a minority community for which agreements are drawn up similar to those established for historic minorities. In the case of Chinese, however, the aims are different: not so much to maintain an ethno-linguistic identity, but rather to regulate and even limit the use of a specific language. This provision confirms the pressure of the Chinese language, which so strongly affects an area that laws are made regulating its use.

**Prato**

Prato is the municipality with the highest proportion of foreigners (23,621 people) amongst its resident population (185,631, data from 30 November 2007). Over 40% of these foreigners are Chinese (10,419). Based on this figure, we can hypothesise that Chinese may account for 44% of the languages spoken by immigrant groups, leading to pressure that can be seen particularly in certain areas of the city. Unlike the situation observed in Esquilino, however, the pressure and presence of the Chinese language in Prato is very wide-ranging: it concerns not only community choices or strategies of a commercial nature, but the handling of communication and public life in general. Compared with Esquilino, the domains of use of Chinese are broader, and the authors/sources of messages in Chinese (or Chinese and Italian) are not only members of the community itself, but also Italian institutions. In other words, the pressure of Chinese is exerted through both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), making it a unique case in Italy due to the intensity/range of this balance. Italian seems to seek out space within Chinese and vice versa, and in a situation such as that in Prato, it effectively becomes “one of the languages”, subject to the dynamics of contact, comparison, choice or rejection by various groups of speakers.

Finally, as with Esquilino, the weight of the other immigrant languages comes into play; whilst they may not be able to exert the same level of pressure as Chinese, they still take part in the dynamics of visibility and contact.
4.2. The status of Romanian

The city and province of Rome

Romanians have been the largest immigrant community in the province of Rome since 2004, and on a national level too, their presence has increased considerably in recent years, to the point that they are now the largest immigrant group in Italy as a whole.

The data collected in Esquilino, both around the neighbourhood and at the market place, show few traces and texts in Romanian. Contained in only 13 of the 851 texts observed, and dominant in just 3, Romanian never appeared autonomously. It thus proves to be a language that relies on Italian or other languages. The group’s preponderantly non-commercial presence and its subsequent lower visibility in terms of text production for public communication would appear to explain the result obtained. Nonetheless, these figures are counter-balanced by the linguistic vitality indexes (as against visibility), gathered in part through questionnaires and interviews with families and school children. Thus, we find a declared vitality, surveyed specifically in the municipalities of Mentana and Monterotondo near Rome for a total population of some 50,000 people, chosen as a new home by families of Romanian origin who have found the most favourable conditions for sedentarisation in this area. In these towns, the visibility of the Romanian language is of secondary importance, and is above all a result of vitality and established presence in the area. Indeed, it took at least 5–6 years of stable presence here before any writing in Romanian was observed within the public space. As from 2005, Monterotondo in particular has shown elements of visibility of the Romanian community, which was completely absent previously and which reinforces Romanian’s role as an immigrant language. The very few traces previously observed had been produced exclusively by public bodies, so that the choice to use Romanian came from above, and not directly from the community itself.

Emerging from this analysis is a type of pressure that appears to be limited to the maintenance of the language of origin within the family. The very fact that Romanian is used in the private domain leads to a broadening of its use in the contexts of public communication, particularly where the authors of texts wish to emphasise links with their country of origin.
Florence

Florence is another city attracting Romanians in particular, who are the fourth largest immigrant group, numbering some 3,000 people (after Chinese, Albanians and Filipinos), and accounting for 8% of foreign residents. The city, however, seems impermeable to the presence of this community. The space of the central area, and particularly Quartiere 1, from San Lorenzo to Santa Croce, is crushed between Italian and English, and the weight of these languages of mass-communication and mass-tourism minimises the visibility of other languages, and thus of immigrant languages. Although Quartiere 1 has the second largest number of Romanian residents, minimal traces of their language were found (5 in all), confirming the findings for Esquilino and the province of Rome.

Faced with the data from Rome and Florence, a question needs to be formulated: are the “partial” vitality and visibility illustrated sufficient to speak of a form of linguistic pressure (albeit limited and circumscribed) exerted by Romanian in these areas? We believe so, because this is one of the major groups present in the areas observed, and because the group shows the will to maintain their language of origin. This maintenance can be seen through a process of emergence that is slower and perhaps less well-organised than in the case of Chinese. The Romanian community is also caught between the drive towards permanent emigration and plans of return migration, on the one hand encouraging the maintenance of the language of origin, and on the other creating limited levels of pressure in the surrounding linguistic space. This pressure is clearly visible in strategic places, such as bus stations. In both Rome and Florence, the main language heard in these places other than Italian is Romanian.

4.3. Other immigrant languages

The examples of Chinese and Romanian in specific areas of Italy confirm the hypothesis whereby languages that can be defined as having immigrant status show traits that depend on the different contact conditions formed in the area where they have become established. Similar considerations as those observed for Chinese can be applied to Arabic in the Porta Palazzo area of Turin, where North African immigration was the first to arrive and settle. The considerations given for Romanian are also valid for Ukrainian, and in part also for Polish. These languages now all have their own recent or longer history of immigration to Italy. This history, which at times
comes into the public eye following some dramatic news headline, affirms their status as immigrant languages. In part due to their previous linguistic history and paths of emigration, groups from the Balkans appear to encounter more complications in trying to define relations with their language of origin (sometimes immigrant language, other times migrant language) and with Italian. The motivations driving these groups to migration also include conflicts with linguistic implications.

This fact makes it even more imperative to analyse in detail another crucial context for immigrant languages: schools. As we shall see, legislative interventions and provisions made for the children of immigrants have failed to drive schools towards harnessing and valuing the linguistic and cultural repertoire of immigrant pupils. Schools do not know or recognise immigrant languages; they have not developed systematic actions to maintain immigrant languages, and in the same way they at times reject the linguistic heritage of indigenous pupils. More so than other agencies, schools have been involved right from the start in receiving pupils of foreign origin, but they have neglected (and to some extent continue to ignore) the linguistic heritage already available to pupils of foreign origin, both new-arrivals and those born in Italy.

5. Immigrant languages and the educational domain

With the development of increasing and permanent immigration, the Italian educational system, in addition to foreign adults attending literacy courses to learn Italian, saw the arrival of their children. In fact, Italian law n°. 40/98 on immigration guarantees the right and obligation for minors, including the children of illegal immigrants, to enrol in schools. During the year 2006/2007, there were more than 500,000 pupils with non-Italian citizenship attending school, accounting for almost 5.6% of the overall school population (MPI 2007). In the three-year period 2003–2005, the increase on average was 60,000–70,000 pupils per year: in some cases, the number of foreign pupils, especially in primary schools, accounts for more than 40% of total class numbers.

The categories of pupils present depict an educational landscape marked by multiplicity of citizenships: the number of countries of origin (the only data surveyed) of foreign pupils in our schools is calculated to be 191 (MPI 2007). The situation is not the same everywhere. Out of all the schools with at least 20% foreign pupils, 58 include pupils of just one or two nationalities, but another 216 include foreign pupils from over 20 dif-
ferent countries (MPI 2007). However, these data do not provide us with an accurate picture of the situation. The criterion used to identify foreigners within the school context, i.e., the nationality of pupils and their parents, is not adequate to describe a multicultural and multilingual environment (Extra and Gorter, this Volume). Pupils slipping through this net include those who already have the nationality of their adopted country, children of mixed couples, emigrants with Italian citizenship returning from abroad, adopted children, and nomadic children born in Italy who have acquired Italian citizenship. If, instead of the criterion of nationality, the languages spoken in their repertoires of origin were to be used, this would result in a far more accurate picture of the degree of multiculturalism, the numbers would certainly increase, and above all, the other linguistic varieties present in their repertoires of origin would be brought to light alongside the official languages.

And yet still today, although the presence of foreign/immigrant pupils is now a constant feature, it is difficult to get out of the attitude of astonishment at the news of emergency interventions, both in socio-political terms and in terms of educational operations. The speed of change in Italian schools is often cited as a justification: going from 50,000 foreign/immigrant pupils in the year 1995/1996 to 430,000 in 2005/2006. However, both the relevant institutions and the educational world had already prepared procedures and responses in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but these were then either forgotten or remained limited to the location and period of their initial use.

One of the first institutional documents published in Italy on the education of foreign/immigrant pupils dates back to 1989: CM 30189, a memorandum of the Ministry of Education at the time, dealing with the “Inclusion of foreign pupils in compulsory schooling: promotion and coordination of initiatives for exercising the right to study”. This is a highly innovative document, containing in germinal form the elements needed to set out an educational operation based on respect for individual rights in terms of multilingualism and multiculturalism. It both identifies the criteria around which to shape interventions, following the principles and values of the Italian Constitution and of relevant European legislation, and highlights the weak points in the educational system for the development of policies on diversity.

The first significant point to note is that the memorandum recognises the presence of foreign/immigrant pupils and their languages in the classroom as a constant feature, destined to increase in quantity. The text does not feature expressions such as “emergency”, “teaching emergency”, or
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“problem”, typical of more recent legislative texts, but promotes structural intervention in the various stages of schooling. The central importance of the language issue is recognised, both from the point of view of learning Italian, a prerequisite for integration and social cohesion, and of maintaining the language of origin, as an instrument for the formation of identity (Vedovelli 2003). Respect for differences is elicited, in order to consolidate community living through reciprocal familiarity with languages and cultures on the part of both Italians and non-Italians. The necessity of training teachers in suitable skills is pointed out, recognising the need for specific training courses of L2 teachers, who should also be aware of the languages and cultures of their pupils.

In 1990, subsequent to the newly-enacted immigration law (L.39/1990), in a new ministerial memorandum (CM 205/90), the topic of “harnessing the language and culture of origin” is raised again. In this context, a concept that would enjoy great favour in the educational world in the years to come is introduced for the first time: intercultural education, considered as a structural condition of a multicultural society. A desire is expressed for the creation of intercultural education projects, valid for both Italian and foreign pupils at the same time, which give the educational task the “specific characteristic of mediation between the different cultures brought into the classroom by the pupils: not a mediation that limits the different cultural contributions, but one which constantly animates productive comparison between different models”. As we can see, it is the cultural aspect that prevails. From then on, in ministerial legislation and documents on the presence of foreign/immigrant pupils in schools, the vague practice of intercultural education has been considered the most effective educational tool for promoting respect and peaceful community life, given that it implies reciprocal knowledge and understanding (Vedovelli 2003). In these same intercultural perspectives, languages are often pushed to the margins, thus contributing to the perceived contrast between “language” and “culture”, as if language were simply a communicative tool, and not, as a semiotic system, a cultural form as well (De Saussure 1967, 2005; De Mauro 2002; Wright 2007). This lack of interest in languages has been prevalent both in theoretical studies and in practical applications. Furthermore, the focus is solely on the acquisition of Italian as a second language.

In contrast, the pronouncement of the National Council for Public Education, dated 15/6/1993, The protection of language minorities, contains a clear statement of the need to defend and preserve “national language minorities”, i.e., historic ones, which are traditionally part of the country’s linguistic repertoire, because “a language is much more that a set of
sounds, letters, words and grammar: a language contains the collective memory of a community”. Furthermore, the same text recognises the “new languages” brought by immigrants as minority languages, even if, since they are rather “remote from us”, it is less important to study and understand them than the historic minority languages. Nonetheless, the document attributes the status of “minority” to immigrant languages. But nothing was done even to find out which languages these might be.

In legislation issued in the following years, the importance of intercultural education is again stressed, and there is continued reference to the presence of foreign/immigrant pupils in schools as a “problem”, still referred to as an “educational emergency”. A document issued by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, entitled *Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign pupils* (March 2006) refers to the extreme rapidity with which schools have found themselves dealing with the arrival of foreign pupils, and to the lack of homogeneity in the presence of this phenomenon nationwide, which has driven schools to adopt differentiated responses. Particular emphasis is placed again on the fact that the acquisition of Italian as a second language must be central to the learning experience. Languages of origin are defined as an important resource for cognitive and emotional development, but in order to harness this resource a vague operative plan is proposed, assuming “a polycentric viewpoint involving both the families and public and private social agencies present in the area”. Thus the maintenance of the languages of origin is delegated to people outside the school environment. The handling of changes brought about by this new presence and the elaboration and diffusion of reception protocols and best practices seem to boil down to programmes for learning Italian. Thus, we witness a more ethnocentric view, less designed to harness language diversity in schools.

As a consequence of this policy, many of the experiments performed at school show a degree of teacher responsibility, but unfortunately in most cases they have remained tied to a specific situation, restricted to single classes, and therefore destined to leave no lasting trace. The insistence in recent documents on intercultural education has contributed to simplifying and marginalising the complex linguistic question of languages in contact. As Vedovelli emphasises (2006), the linguistic perspective, always kept at the margins of demographic and sociological analyses, as well as anthropological and pedagogic ones which ought to be more sensitive to it, seems almost to constitute an intrusive guest whose role and relevance are not truly recognised. And yet nobody fails to declare or recognise the central nature of language in social integration, the urgency of solving the difficul-
ties presented for immigrants in learning the new language, or the need for systematically planned and diffused language-teaching operations. The echoes of 19th-century thinking are still evident in the way in which the presence of immigrants is recorded: very little is known about their languages in Italy.

6. Conclusions

The plurilingualism of immigrant languages is by now a concrete fact, but it is still scarcely studied or considered, especially as a form of linguistic heritage to be taken into account for any interventions regarding citizens of foreign origin in the social, educational and employment spheres. We should begin by identifying immigrant languages as the languages of those groups that have modified and enriched the places where they live, due to their capacity to settle in an area and to carry out a migratory plan. The recognition of these people as speakers of languages other than Italian or Italian dialects, with their own language repertoires and with their own needs for maintenance of their language of origin and of contact with Italian (and not just to learn Italian) is an increasingly felt necessity. Hopefully, research on immigrant languages, based on increasingly large population samples of foreign origin, will make its results visible, in order to facilitate effective interventions for the “new” Italian plurilingualism. It still seems difficult to speak of immigrant languages as “new” minority languages, although that is what some of them have become, but this is partly due to the awkward handling of the question of minorities, both in Italy and elsewhere.

The current situation is burdened by a lack of systematic analysis of migratory phenomena from a linguistic viewpoint, and unfortunately this has consequences for linguistic and educational policies. This can be seen in the inability of public institutions to recognise and manage the richness and complexity derived from the presence of numerous languages. Initiatives in this direction are often delegated and handled autonomously by individual institutions or voluntary associations. In everyday practice, this manner of hiding the other languages and protecting Italian can even result in racist and segregationist attitudes that consider linguistic richness as something to be suppressed by schools and by civil society, for fear of immigrants getting better opportunities in the future than Italian pupils. Our conclusions stand in contrast to those of the study by Baker and Eversley (2000) on London, which highlighted the close link between the pres-
ence of many languages in the British capital and their being a genuine form of social and economic capital. We also refer to the recent report on the effects for the European economy of the lack of language skills on the part of business operators (CILT 2007). The study reaches the conclusion that small European businesses would have a huge potential for increasing their exports if they would invest more in languages and would define coherent languages strategies. Indeed, it is those companies capable of improving their language skills that are best able to exploit the commercial opportunities offered by the EU market which, with a population of almost half a billion, is the most important in the world. As regards languages, the report confirms the importance of English as an international business language, but emphasises that, in order to successfully construct solid commercial relations, a range of other languages are necessary, not only European languages, but also languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Arabic and Russian, all of them being languages of immigrants in Italy.

There is an attitude of closure in Italy towards immigrant languages, just as there tends to be a lack of propensity towards plurilingualism. In 2007, the nationalistic approach of defending Italy’s linguistic identity led to the initial approval in the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Republic of an Article that is set to modify the text of the Constitution. The Article reads: “Italian is the official language of the Republic, in respect of the guarantees provided by the Constitution and by constitutional legislation”. This acknowledgement was not even included in the earlier Constitution of the Republic, written in a historic context in which the recognition of the language of the newly-formed republic might perhaps have made more sense. We believe that the approval of this Article at this time is a sign of the desire to reaffirm the identity of the state with its language, exorcising the fear of diversity as the state feels threatened by the presence of others and their languages.
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