

Mediating Migration Crises:

Sicily and the Languages of Despair

Denise Filmer and Federico M. Federici

Università degli Studi di Catania; University College London

dafilmer@unict.it; f.m.federici@ucl.ac.uk

1. Introduction

Pictures and clips of migrants disembarking from all kinds of vessels onto the coasts of Italy have not been uncommon in Italian media since the dissolution of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in 1991. Nor has diplomatic arm wrestling between the Italian Government and the European Union (Campesi, 2011: 5-7). Migrations are a natural part of homo sapiens' biological evolution (Hunter, 2014; Oppenheimer, 2004) and a “diffuse and enduring” phenomenon (Jayawardena, 1995: vii; Nyers, 2013). However, there is a counter perspective: their perception as disruptive *events* prevails at times of socio-political crises (for an insightful discussion, see Bauman & Bordoni, 2014). Nyers (2013: 9), for example, suggests that “the international organizations charged with protecting refugees have consistently been conceived in terms of crisis or emergency management”. Supra-state institutions in Europe have not created a way of responding to migrant¹ arrivals in large numbers, be they driven by economic, social, political, or situational (i.e., following a natural disaster) needs. It is however undeniable that the management of migratory flows becomes an emergency only when there is no forward planning. When there is no plan to organize resources so that existing and arriving populations could occupy and co-exist in the same territories, then levels of despair and conflicts over (limited) resources inflate, as is the case in the context of Sicily considered in this article. On 7 April 2011, the then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi declared a “state of national emergency” due to increased migratory flows following the Arab Spring, which de facto endorsed the media discourse on “migrant emergency” by activating special governmental powers. Even when these measures were revoked, the latent discourse remained: migration flows in Italy have continued to be considered as extraordinary emergencies rather than predictable occurrences based on



historical evidence. Declaring a state of emergency left the situation open to *ad hoc* and often “uncontrolled” actions outside the ordinary legislation (Marchetti, 2014: 58).

Within the broader picture, recent assessments of the European Union’s approach to the increased intensity of the migratory phenomenon are equally damning due to its emergency-based response: “Should the European leaders have assembled sometime before the crisis (after the Syrian war began, for instance) and decided on the most important issues concerning migrant policy, the crisis could have been softened significantly” (Grigonis, 2016: 93). Such conflict-driven migrations can be time-limited: at the end of conflicts, some displaced people return to their land of departure (a prototypical example in Declercq, 2016; for the historical and institutional reasons, see Nyers, 2013). Whilst they are happening, they cannot be perceived as temporary and they demand actions in support of migrants and permanent populations – hence the need for financial resources. Volunteers, NGO officers, institutional interpreters, and a range of other language brokers operate in the context of the migrant arrivals in Sicilian ports, where they deal with what could be considered a cascading crisis (paraphrasing the notion of “cascading disasters” of Pescaroli & Alexander, 2015).

Subdivided into three sections, firstly, this article engages with the political decision to consider migration flows towards Italy as an *emergenza* (a sudden and unpredictable event) as elicited in the Italian migration policies; secondly, it considers the language barriers that meet migrants at their arrival in Italy; thirdly, it looks at evidence emerging from interviews with people involved in language brokering from the three sides of the dialogue: migrants, intercultural mediators, and institutional authorities. The interview data were collected between October 2017 and January 2018 and are framed in contrast to the populist discourse on the migrant emergency propagated by the media and racist parties (Lega and 5 Star Movement, or 5SM), which coloured the 2018 electoral campaign. The much-delayed coalition government formed by the 5SM and Lega, which obtained the largest percentages of votes amongst those who voted on 4 March 2018, immediately initiated an aggressive (and illegal) anti-immigration policy.

Legal framework: immigration policies

To understand the operational context of the interviews with *intercultural mediators* carried out for this project, it is important to locate their activities within the Italian policies for immigration – including linguistic integration – as they were applied until May 2018. Italy



witnessed 150 to 200 changes to its migration policies between 1918 and 2018 (DEMIG, 2015b). Out of these, 9 legislative amendments made between 1990 and 2011 link language competences to processes of integration for migrants (DEMIG, 2015a). The assessment of these policies begins within the legislation on *politiche di accoglienza* (immigration policies) designed to regulate this context.

National immigration policies emerged through slow and convoluted processes (cf. Marchetti, 2014). On 18 January 1967, the Republic of Italy promptly signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights promulgated by the United Nations General Assembly (1966), whose legal principles regulate rights for migrants in accordance with national laws. After its ratification in September 1978, a long period elapsed before the first full national law on immigration included refugees' resettlement: Act 39 of 28 February 1990 (or the "Martelli law"), was promulgated at the beginning of the largest arrivals of migrants into Italy. From its inception, the law on migration created legislative confusion and overlapping by including all typologies of migrants alongside the international category of refugees (Marchetti, 2011; 2014: 53-54). Further clarity arrived following the implementation of European Council's Directives (e.g. 2001/55/EC; ED 2004/83/CE), which distinguished between asylum seekers and refugees and encouraged national governments to do the same.¹ In 2001, the Programma nazionale asilo (PNA, National Asylum Plan) led to a concerted plan underwritten by Italian city councils and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) pertaining to asylum seekers and refugees. This plan was redrafted into Act 189 of 20 July 2002 (the "Bossi-Fini Law") to become the Sistema di protezione per richiedenti di asilo e rifugiati (SPRAR, System for the protection of asylum seekers and refugees), which currently underpins the resourcing and management of the reception centres in which the current study collected its data on migrants and their language brokers. The SPRAR currently uses a 2-year budgeting cycle but its budgeting approach has been extremely fragmented, applying different budgeting rules for 10 years, thus diminishing its effectiveness in planning organized responses, which brought major implications for all its areas of activity, especially at times of intensified migration flows (2011, 2014-2016). The management of the Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti di Asilo (CARA, Reception centres for asylum seekers) pertain to SPRAR's ordinary management, whereas the Centri di Accoglienza Straordinari (CAS, Extraordinary Refuge Centres) were set up in 2014. Their setup emphasised perceived, as well as real needs for additional, hence



“extraordinary” measures by local authorities to deal with the increased migrant flows. Marchetti (2014: 68) early on protested that a change of mindset in the Italian population and more attention from the European Union would be needed to respect the minimum standards of reception (*accoglienza*), be they through the ordinary route of the CARA or the extraordinary route of the CAS, which have added incoherent layers to the reception standards and are even more subject to the volatile budgeting practices of local authorities.

In terms of language policies, the Presidential Decree (DPR) 179 of 14 September 2011, entitled “Regolamento concernente la disciplina dell'accordo di integrazione tra lo straniero e lo Stato” (*Regulation regarding the integration agreement between a foreign person and the State*), lays out the legal principles that regulate language use in relation to migration. Conceiving knowledge of the Italian language as an essential pre-requisite for integration, the DPR 179/2011 sets out the gradual steps required by all non-EU foreign individuals intending to remain in Italy (including refugees, asylum seekers, and work migrants) in order to emancipate themselves from the need for interpreting and translation (or other forms of language brokering) to access the same rights as any permanent resident in Italy. The DPR expounds on how the Italian State enters into a legal contract with non-EU foreign residents willing to integrate into the Republic, termed as the contract of integration (Di Muzio, 2012: 8), which at the time of signing is provided in translation – either in “the language indicated by the [foreign person], or if it is not possible, in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, or Chinese, Albanese, Russian, Filipino [standard Tagalog] according to the preference they indicated”. The DPR foresees the potential allocation (art.2, par.2) of “credits” for their competence in the Italian language, culture, and knowledge of its institutions as part of the pathway to obtain their future permanent VISA in compliance with art. 5 of Act 286 of 25 July 1998, regulating the status of immigrants in Italy. The DPR therefore presupposes a phased emancipation from the reliance on translations, interpreters, and cultural, or linguistic, mediations *which it anticipates* as needed upon arrival in Italy. Non-EU citizens are expected to gain an A2 competence in Italian – according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – as well as “sufficient understanding” of civic life in Italy in relation to health, schooling, social services, employment and taxation (art.2, par.4.b), and the obligation to send *underage* children (hence all children in schooling age) to school (art.2, par.4.c).



Gradual acquisition of the language is intended in the legal framework as intertwined with socio-cultural integration, thus incorporating provision for issues such as education, employment, and health in the routes for legal integration. This is its strength in terms of language policy as well as, possibly, its fatal flaw: by providing a route to a permanent Italian VISA, the agreement also leads non-EU migrants to EU citizenship (which some see as a problem of securitization, see discussion in Guild, 2014). Furthermore, with its focus on long-term, permanent migrants, it could be perceived as irrelevant during the sudden increase of “humanitarian immigrants” (using OECD terminology) experienced in the 6 years following its ratification. The social needs connected to the Integration Agreement may have stayed the same over its first two years in place: Figure 1 shows the significant decrease in long-term immigrant numbers between 2007 and 2012, when “in Italy the sharp rise in humanitarian immigration coincided with a wider picture of overall immigration reduction (21% in total)” (OECD, 2017: 16). The marked change however affected language needs for non-permanent migrants in the already-overstretched system in place for asylum seekers and VISA applicants (with current waiting times of 3 years or more, as detailed by interviewee M4 below), the overall lacunae of the Italian, as well as European, immigration policies emerged in the response to the linguistic emergencies by creating a situation whereby the convoluted system works “because it’s an emergency” (anonymous comment during interviews). In fact, “contrary to the prevailing situation in most of Europe, where asylum seekers are predominantly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq [...] [i]n Italy, for example, most of the applications come from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Nigeria and Gambia, but also from Pakistan” (OECD, 2017:28). The permanent migrants are from countries whose conflicts are less well-known and include economic migrants, which further complicate the Italian scenario of the last 5 years.



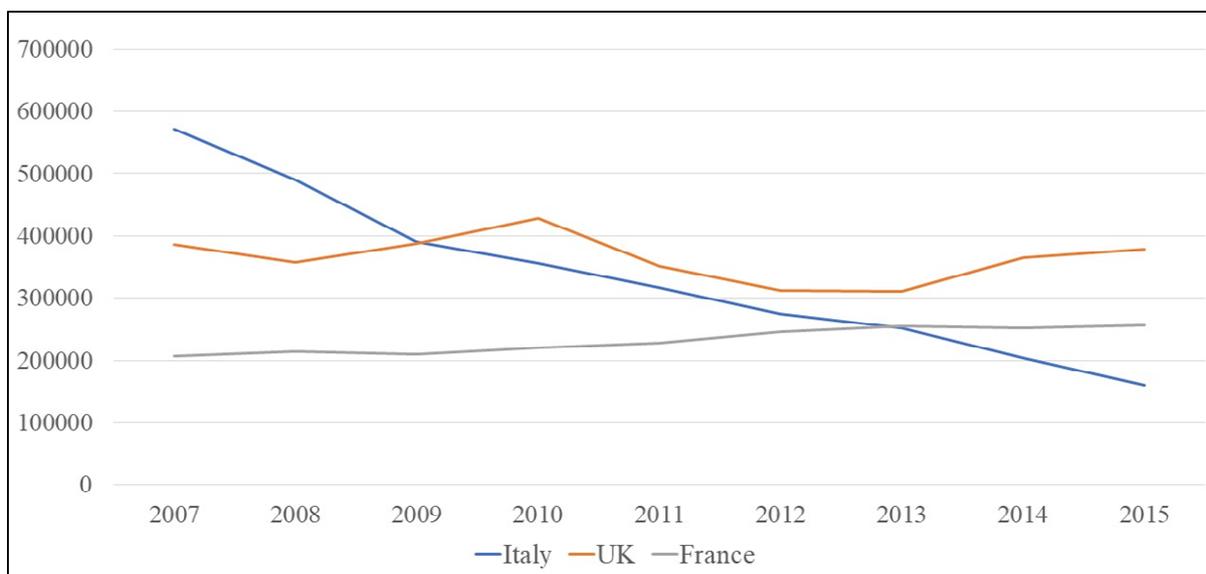


Figure 1. Inflows of permanent immigrants, a comparison of numbers in Italy, UK, and France (OECD, 2017: 17)

Therefore, in that 5-year period the Italian system saw an increase in needs for those legal provisions for integration set out by the DPR 179/2011, as the long-term migrants (who have resided in Italy for over 5 years) begin to access some of these provisions – though the access to provision are not clearly given in any institutional report. Figure 2 shows how requests of asylum seekers grew significantly since the Presidential decree came into force.

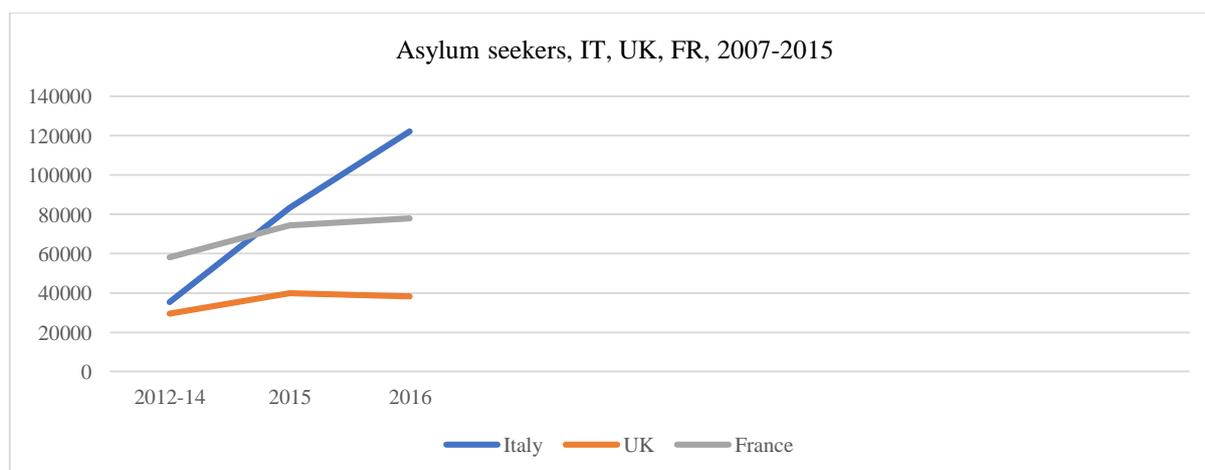


Figure 2. Inflows of asylum seekers, a comparison of numbers in Italy, UK, and France (OECD, 2017, 17)

For this reason, the discussion needs to start at this very juncture in which the policies for linguistic integration converge into the activities of (professional/non-professional, qualified/unqualified) linguists. Since 2009, a legal agreement was reached on the terminology (not necessarily on its semantics), naming these figures *intercultural mediators*.



2. Intercultural Mediators: legal context and training

The DPR179/2011 followed a proposal supported by the Cabinet, Ministero del Lavoro e delle politiche sociali (Work and Social Welfare), Ministero dell'Interno (Interior), and Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca (Education, University, and Research) as well as what was termed the Ministry of Regions and Territorial Cohesion at the time. Recalling Orwellian doublespeak, the ministerial nomenclature gave rise to a very incoherent and fragmented language provision. The following sections show how its intended flexibility led to incongruences at the level of both regional policies and definition of the professional figures that linguistically and culturally support the initial phases of the migrants' process of integration. The statutory mechanisms of DPR179/2001 are disseminated in the dedicated portal entitled *Integrazione Migranti Vivere e lavorare in Italia* (Migrant Integration: Working and living in Italy)³. The portal summarises how the legal framework organizes the professional role of *intercultural mediators*. These figures cover a variety of communicative needs that range from first response to asylum seekers, refugees, and VISA applicants' support.

Language barriers: defining the role, profile, and training of intercultural mediators

Over the last twenty years, the literature on language brokering in Italy has focused on the figures of the cultural mediators, first considering their roles as classroom assistants in multilingual contexts, and then ever more regularly in relation to social integration, health (Coccia, 2004), and legal issues (Albertini and Capitani, 2010; Belpiede, 1999; Casadei and Franceschetti, 2009; Coccia, 2004; Rudvin and Spinzi, 2014 to name a few). Over 8,000 *intercultural mediators*, 70% of whom are women, work as language brokers in medical, institutional, public, legal contexts (Melandri *et al.*, 2014: 5) as well as in CARA and CAS centres, performing tasks ranging from interpreting and translation to social service and advocacy, without necessarily having received specific training for any of these tasks – see discussion of data from the interview (also Cirillo *et al.* 2010).

It appears, however, that regardless of Italy's geographical position as the most frequent landing point for Mediterranean crossings, the role of the intercultural mediator in these contexts has not been carefully considered. Their operational status in relation to existing distinctions between working between languages in oral (interpreters, including sign



interpreters) or written contexts (translators, including subtitlers for hard-of-hearing viewers) fits in with what could equally sit with definitions of community interpreting (Hale, 2007: 34-98) and community translation (Taibi, 2011; Taibi and Ozolins, 2016). Individuals may be working salaried or *pro bono* in order to support the linguistic needs of vulnerable groups and at times those of institutions, such as national health services, that have no serious resourcing to deal with language diversity.

Rather optimistically, ten years ago Morniroli *et al.* (2007: 5) considered migrant flows towards Italy as no longer embedded in notions of emergency but as already “organised and structured” phenomena belonging to the socio-economic composition of Italian society. Unquestionably, services such as intercultural mediation, interpreting and translation are increasingly required across the Italian peninsular due to the shifting demographics and socio-cultural transformations taking place. Nevertheless, it is at once striking and curious that so little international research has focused on the role of interlingual communication at the very locus of the landings and disembarkations. This study begins to address this research lacuna by setting out to gather empirical data from people involved in the triangle of communication (to borrow the expression from Interpreting Studies) between institutions and migrants supported by what the Italian law defines as *intercultural mediators*. Although the definition is not clear, either in European or Italian research into translation and interpreting phenomena, the legal term has grown to become the most common one, and widely accepted at institutional level in Italy following the ratification of the DPR179/2011. Intercultural mediators working in Sicilian ports and reception centres are among the first-line responders to the arrival of vessels (of “hope”, “fortune”, “death” in the journalistic collocations) to Italy. These figures, often professionals, at times members of NGOs, do not have to have a recognized qualification; a 2014 report shows how there is demand and intent to establish a training pathway, but its intents are still in the making (Melandri *et al.*, 2014). This report also offers the most recent figures – possibly collected by the NGO Centro informazione e educazione allo sviluppo (Centre for information and training for development). As of 2009, an institutional working group tasked by the Istituto per lo sviluppo della formazione professionale dei lavoratori (Institute for workers’ development and professional training, a division of the Ministry of Work and Social Policies) defined guidelines for promotion, recognition, common framework of reference for competences, and settled the legal denomination of *intercultural mediator* as the professional definition (Casadei and



Franceschetti, 2009; Melandri *et al.*, 2014). Melandri et al. (2014: 12) report on how the Decree Law 138 of 16 January 2013, ratified the expectations set out by the art.4, c.58-68 of Law 92 of 28 June 2012, which defined the general norms and essential performance indicators to identify and validate both formal and informal training to be employed by the national system to certify professional competence, hence professional profiles. As Law 92/2012 and its actionable Decree 138/2013 led to a reorganization of professional qualifications in Italy in relation to human rights and fairness of treatment, it was within these parameters that the professionalisation and recognition of the *intercultural mediator* was re-designed.

However, as of 2018, we find that each region of Italy has its own webpage dedicated to the different level of services (and quality thereof?) offered by their intercultural mediators. Each region continues to rely on its devolved legislative framework to identify duties, responsibilities, tasks, and criteria for employment of intercultural mediators. From the detailed legislation of the Regional Law of Emilia Romagna no. 5 of 24 March 2004 (for its limitations in use, see Cirillo, Torresi, & Valentini, 2010) via a framework to assess qualification and competences laid out in Regional Law of Lazio no. 321 of 24 April 2008, to the absence of any regional law in Sicily, the landscape remains fragmented. Hard-pressed to deal with migrant arrivals, Sicily has absolutely no legislation regarding the definition and role of the intercultural mediator, let alone what training or qualifications such a figure would require: it relies on an inter-regional agreement; however, it offers a 3-year BA qualification on Linguistic and Intercultural Mediation at the University of Catania-Ragusa.

Currently, it is possible that the 20-region Italian peninsula could see as many as 20 different professional definitions of professional status and legal denominations pertaining to the role of intercultural mediator (see early reflections in Youmbi 2011: 10). One common factor in these terms seems to be in the initial collocation of the notion of *mediator* within educational settings, as figures embedded in primary and secondary schools in Italy for the support and integration of children of resident migrants with potentially limited proficiency in Italian, thus in line with the International Covenant that describes citizen rights applying to displaced people.

Regarding training in Higher Education, a cursory analysis of the 2015 and 2016 figures on BA graduates⁴ of the Italian MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research), shows that there are at least twenty 3-year courses that include “mediazione



interculturale” in their denominations. They are not equally distributed across the peninsula; they are likely to reflect the devolved intentions sets by the law. In Sicily, in addition to the BA offered by the University of Catania-Ragusa, a 500-hour training course delivered by the not-for-profit Mediterranean Centre for Studies and Training “Giorgio La Pira” in Pozzallo is the only regionally-accredited qualification. Although politicians would argue that such a level of devolution is beneficial to enable local Higher Education institutions to provide for the needs of the local communities, these policies lead to extreme fragmentation in provision of training, certification, and life-long learning opportunities for intercultural mediators in Italy. Hence, the auspices set out in the policy defining the profile of *intercultural mediators* call for flexibility in defining their tasks, profiles, and training in relation to regional needs. Such auspices intended to allow local authorities to organize provision based on community needs, in fact prevent the very same local authorities from learning about good practices at regional and national level and to maximize their limited resources. Arguably, such application of the law to training policies for intercultural mediators attests to embedded political disregard towards the wider societal training needs. Training in intercultural mediation ought to engage with the latest societal needs (Kelly, 2017), given that when needs are not met, the sudden obligation for the autochthonous communities to integrate newcomers in fast-paced and uncontrolled processes of internationalisation give rise to multiple concerns, anxiety, and conflicts.

3. Study

The study was conducted following a strict process to ensure the project was conducted legally as well as within the rule of the law. Ethical approval was sought and obtained (UCL Project ID Number 6625/001) to protect those interviewees who could be considered vulnerable respondents – as was the case in the definition of ‘vulnerable’ respondents in the UK Data Protection Act 1998 under which the study was carried out. Data were collected with NGOs and institutional officials at Sicilian ports: abiding by data protection requirements these geographical locations are not provided here. Furthermore, access to one CARA (ordinary reception centre), under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Catania and one CAS (run by a consortium) under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Ragusa required high-level authorisation, which took time and effort to be granted. The CARA in Mineo is the



largest reception centre for asylum seekers and VISA applicants in Europe. Due to its size, its isolated location, and the institutional complexity of its management, this CARA is frequently in the news associated to mafia and corruption (Latzka Nadeau, 2018). The centre is over-crowded, currently housing approximately 2,600 asylum seekers, 800 of whom are Nigerian men – a place of critical security as demonstrated by the recent murder (2.1.2018) of a Nigerian woman inside the compound. In 2015, its resident population reached a peak of 3,500 individuals and 3,700 were reported in December 2016. The residents are supported by 380 staff, 30 of whom are intercultural mediators. With a ratio of 1 mediator for every 90 guests, despite the “mediatore interculturale” t-shirts, the presence, role, and even name “mediator” seems unknown to the guests interviewed. Table 1 summarises anonymised details of the participants to the interviews. The semi-structured interviews aimed at collating data regarding the respondents’ experience of communicating via a language broker.

This study adopted face-to-face interviews as it would have not been possible to rely on technologies to survey intercultural mediators operating entirely in Sicily in the specific settings of arrivals and reception centres. As shown in Table 1 a total of 5 intercultural mediators, 4 operators and 5 migrants gave consent for their interviews to be used, anonymised, for the purpose of this study. Interviewing five intercultural mediators represents a significant sample: in fact, the only national survey of *intercultural mediators* to date was conducted in 2014 and sampled 579 respondents to assess practitioners’ perception of the importance of a professional association and the role of qualifications in obtaining it. Only 81 respondents (14% of the surveyed sample) worked in the 8-region geographical category “Mezzogiorno” including Sicily; only 10.7% of the total respondents had experience working in CARAs (Catarci and Fiorucci, 2014: 43-48). Interviewing 5 intercultural mediators specialised in first-point of contact and reception centre represents a significant sample in relation to data currently available. In setting out this small-scale study, the authors expected also follow up the preliminary interviews with further scrutiny of both official and real figures regarding the number of active *intercultural mediators* in Sicily; however, as will be mentioned briefly the conclusions, the political context in Italy worsened considerably after the 2018 elections, leading to a coalition government with an ideological opposition to migration. The new context is likely to affect our planned follow-up studies.



Intercultural mediators (IM)¹	Operators (O)	Migrants (M)
IM1: Tunisian female. Age: 30-40. Role: IM at CARA in Mineo. Languages: AR, FR, EN, IT.	O1. Age: 40-50 Role: Paramedic for Frontex ⁶	M1. Nigerian female. Age: 20-30 Place: CARA Mineo, interview in English
IM2: White Italian female. Age: 30-40 Role: IM for ASR (<i>Regional Health Service</i>) province of Syracuse. Languages: AR, FR, EN, IT.	O2. Age:30-40 Role: Medic and Red Cross volunteer	M2. Moroccan male. Age: 40-50 Place: CARA Mineo, interview in Arabic
IM3: White Italian female. Age: 40-50 Role- self-employed IM. Languages: FR, EN, IT.	O3. Age:30-40 Red Cross Volunteer	M3. Malian male. Age: 20-30, <u>CARA Mineo</u> , interview in Italian
IM4: Eritrean male. Age: 30-40 Role: self-employed IM and interpreter working at CAS, with the police and judiciary in the province of Ragusa. Languages: IT, EN (very little), Tigringa	O4. Role: Prison Psychologist Age:40-50	M4. Gambian male. Age: 30-40 Place: CAS Filitea, interview in English
IM5. Eritrean male. Age: 30-40 Role: IM, employed by UNHCR. Languages: IT, EN, FR, and Tigrigna [permanent resident from refugee background]		M5. Senegalese male. Age: 30-40 Place: CAS Filitea, interview in Italian

Table 1. Participants' profiles.

Views from operators

Interviews from different camps in the official operators, one NGO paramedic, a salaried prison psychologist, and a volunteer medical doctor re-presented a sample of the many professional figures that migrants will encounter soon after disembarking (using ethnographic-style interviews, see Crabtree *et al.* 2012; Rouncefield *et al.* 2013). Cutting across fundamental and immediate needs on board the rescue vessels and upon arrival from the paramedics (O1), medical support (O2; O3), and medium-term support to mental health (O4), the sample gives a sense of the essential role of health-related communication in this context. The sample is lacking, however, opinions from institutional figures (coast guard, police, *carabinieri*, or members of the judiciary registering the migrants). Although officers provided informal and anonymous opinions, high-level authorisation to interview institutional officers was denied. The narratives emerging from respondents O1-O4 let clearly transpire

¹ The study collected detailed data regarding IM's background, education, and profiles. As the sample has so far remained small, we do not provide further details in order to maintain their anonymity.



three points: 1) the system is yet to be optimized to support triaging in more languages; 2) intercultural issues of communication do not interfere with first-aid medical assistance in these extreme circumstances any more than in any multilingual context; 3) the low-level awareness of how central the mediated acts are to communication.

Current communication processes on board rescue ships could be improved with low-tech communication solutions, O1 envisages “a blanket message to all migrants on the ship” on the essential information on how, what, when things are going to happen in multilingual, pre-recorded messages (e.g. O1 suggests using these on the ship tannoy). The implications here are that rescue teams rely heavily on the linguistic competences of the migrants themselves to re-distribute messages – a point described by IM5 as well.

During the interview, O1 was initially oblivious to the fact that s/he had been helped by migrants in her/his communication with one patient. When boarding a new vessel, broken attempts at finding out information become joint, albeit precarious, conversations when other members of the same linguistic and cultural group participate in the meaning-making process to support his activity. These forms of communication taking place in sub-optimal conditions do not consider standard deontological practices of privacy and patient confidentiality, as if the political discourse on migrant emergencies has justified a land of no-law within the jurisdiction of Italian laws, in actions conducted in the presence of officers of the law. When O1 described situations in which s/he relied on non-verbal communication, as s/he did not mention the presence of an official intercultural mediator or interpreter, O1 operated with the help of “crowd sourcing” information from other migrants on the vessel: these are types of operational conditions in which communication is mediated in life-or-death situations.

The interviews with O3 and O4 focused more on medium-term forms of health support. On the issue of linguistic and cultural mediation within his working environment, O4 observes that English is the lingua franca although admits s/he speaks very little and prison guards even less (“they hardly speak Italian, let alone English”). S/he affirms that although the non-European inmates “have the legal right to a mediator who speaks their own language”, this is very often overlooked, and in relation to appointments “non-European immigrants are absolutely the last in the queue. Before they get to speak to [psychologists] it could have been months and months since they last spoke to anyone about their problems. In any language.” Over the course of the interview, the narrative of emergency resurfaced when



O4 excused the institutional lack of preparedness to respect international agreements on the protection of detainees, because:

we are the door between Europe and Africa. There hasn't been the opportunity or the time to prepare ourselves culturally, socially, institutionally, intellectually, and linguistically for the reception of immigrants on this scale.

Clearly the political refrain imposed in 2011 continues to influence perceptions even in educated professionals; the mere conceptualization that immigration is a fact of life, that the geographical position for Italy, and that three decades of arrivals would have equipped any country to deal with the ordinary flows cannot shake the received view that the situation is an emergency whose resolution must be improvised (cf. Marchetti, 2011; Nyers, 2013: 8-10).

Views from the migrants

Interviews included three guests at CARA Mineo on their experiences overcoming linguistic boundaries and two at the CAS. From the interviews it emerged that communication, or effectively linguistic *mediation*, once again is “crowd-sourced” when possible and that the low number of available mediators means that for some residents the intercultural mediators presence is irrelevant as they do not even know they could call on them. Complex, controlled interviewing conditions meant some of the data is self-censored by the very presence of mediators in the collection of data from the interviewees.

With regard to self-sufficiency, M1 gives an insight into the collaboration that takes place within the CARA with regards language, translation and mediation: “Since I arrived here, I have been helping people who do not know Italian. [...] I help refugees here and sometimes I help at other places. They ask me to translate sometimes. I know Arabic, Italian, and French.” This attitude draws on an unsatisfactory personal experience with an intercultural mediator who misrepresented her/him in court during her/his asylum application: “Yes, I stopped the translator many times during the session in court and corrected him by explaining to him what I meant exactly. The translator [sic] should be from the same country and there should be understanding between the person and the translator,” a position reminiscent of the recurring discussion among the IM interviewees regarding building bridges of trust (see Angelelli 2004; Edwards *et al.* 2005). Trust with the institutions processing the application is however very low, as the waiting time is long and language



support may come after initial processing, so in cases like those of M1, who was interviewed after she had been at CARA Mineo for six months, knowledge of English within the CARA was essential. For residents like M1, lack of Italian competence can be overcome with makeshift solutions “No, the social workers don't [speak English] but if I need a doctor I go to the Red Cross they all speak in English. [...] I don't understand Italian.” According to DPR179/2011 for those seeking long-term VISA, there is an expectation to learn Italian; two points are crucial here. After six months in the centre M1 says s/he did not understand Italian, and presumably is not able to speak it, either. Secondly, s/he appears oblivious to the mediation services or indeed what a mediator was. M4 on the other hand has been at CARA Mineo for three years and speaks Italian. In her/his interview, s/he states “I have never needed a mediator. I don't go around asking for help. I try to solve the problem by myself. I don't want to bother anyone,” a position of self-sufficiency that brings rewards as M4 can say “I'm with [the intercultural mediators] too, now. Sometimes I help them.” It appears that maybe the first step of the Integration Agreement starts within the CARA Mineo, which recruits and trains up its own “cultural mediators” in a casual and informal manner, as the patchy legislation allows Sicily to do, or if the situation is only isolated, it shows that the CARA makes use of the informal assistance offered by the guests themselves.

The CAS visited hosts 75 residents and the situation is not much different. It has 6 cultural mediators who work in shifts round the clock. They cover English, French and Arabic plus non-Italian intercultural mediators cover some African dialects – this information is provided by the accompanying officers who acted as official source of information during the interviews. Consent to being quoted after interview was denied by some of the interviewees. M5 pointed to another form of distrust for a friendly non-Italian intercultural mediator based on speed of acquisition of language skills “What I say to you in Wolof you cannot say all in Italian”. There are those who do not trust the non-Italian intercultural mediators because although they may understand what the migrant is saying, they could have difficulties in conveying that meaning in Italian and may possess limited knowledge of the Italian legal system and procedures to be able to fully understand the implications of what is said. On the other hand, it can be argued that an Italian, non-native speaker of the migrant's own language may misunderstand what is said by the migrant, as in the case of M3, and relay an incorrect message, albeit in perfect Italian to the Italian Judiciary.



Given the range of dialects and rare languages represented in large centres such as the CARA Mineo, the pivoting techniques described by IM5 below – a risk of Chinese whispers – offer a solution entailing collaboration between native speakers and Italian mediators in order to facilitate better understanding and conveying of each communicative event, particularly in situations such as a court of law or during the asylum application process where successful communication is crucial to the outcome.

Views from the intercultural mediators

Operational conditions described by the practitioners vary considerably. The illustrations selected for this article include examples of 1) power asymmetries; 2) low-technology pivoting techniques; 3) cross-cultural concerns regarding advocacy and neutrality. These points can be considered as valid for all participants in the process, according to the data collected; however, only the intercultural mediators have the professional awareness and competences to recognize these phenomena more clearly.

In a remarkable parallelism to the situational contexts described by O1, IM5 reported on difficulties in mediating on rescue vessels that arrive at the port: “I have been thrown off the ship loads of times. They won’t let me on the ship and I was supposed to work with the doctor – it’s protocol but he refuses [...] he thinks he understands the whole world and he can’t even speak English”. There is a reference to a protocol but the prevalence of a discourse on continuous emergency empowers operators to render intercultural mediators subservient in role. Aggrieved professionals working outside the boundaries of professional ethics are common in these settings, thus illustrating issues of asymmetrical power relations between mediator and medics (Katan, 2004: 18).

IM5 also describes common communication processes based on pivoting (or Chinese whispers): “You speak to a group not a person otherwise you can’t get anything done [...] I took one of them, as a point of reference... someone who spoke the language and also spoke English from every ethnic group”. The selected migrants are then used to pivot the message already relayed to them by IM5 “This serves not only to give information but also to receive it”, which becomes a twice-mediated communication. It is beyond the scope to discuss here the inherent dangers of this approach; it is worth drawing a comparison with the equally low-tech approach suggested by O4 mentioned above: initial messages are now highly coded and



as they are being conveyed to groups, they could be delivered in recording, thus employing intercultural mediators for those situations that require detail and urgent attention.

Remarkable differences regarding advocacy and neutrality emerged between Italian and non-Italian IMs. This sample seems to contradict the findings of the 2014 report that highlights how the dual “citizenship” can be acquired by non-Italian IMs and Italian IMs should work towards integrating their linguistic competences with sophisticated mediating skills accepting negotiating, advocating, and neutrality as concepts on an acceptable spectrum of professional conduct. Instead, one of the liveliest points of discussion with the IM interviewees relates to the dichotomy interpreter/mediator – 3 out of 5 IM also served as interpreters, especially in courts. While most of those interviewed said they performed both functions but in different situations, all were very clear that the two roles required different approaches and competences. Furthermore, the dialogues revealed tensions regarding the juxtaposition of non-Italian versus Italian mediators. Non-Italian IM4 sees “the mediator [as] a very important figure [...] because it doesn’t just mean speaking different languages. You also have to be a mediator of people. Because to be a mediator you have to be a listener”, which are designated as subject-specific skills in the proposed survey of the profession (Melandri et al. 2014: 28). Working for the CARA and CAS, Italian IM2 accumulated experience during the peaks of migrant arrivals in 2009-2014, which were constellated by tragic events; she observes differences in the roles: “Often there is a huge difference in knowledge, for instance, between the two parties, especially when the institution is talking to the migrant who does not know the Italian state, the Italian laws, the Italian rules, the Italian culture”, in these situations she emphasises that interpreting the words “is plain useless”. Non-Italian IM1 focuses on experience and qualification as too often some intercultural mediators “do not have the sensitivity to mediate, do not have the neutrality, because we have to be neutral, but in them I do not see all of this neutrality”, a circumstance that IM1 attributes to non-Italian mediators who advocate for migrants rather than mediate. On the same note, from the other end of the spectrum, IM3 sees that having become an intercultural mediator after an experience of the process as a refugee himself enables him to create the empathy that is required to initiate communication and build trust in the migrants for whom he is mediating. Conversely, Italian IM2 see proximity as a risk to migrant integration; and IM3 describes the risks of mediating for migrants of the same country as the relationship of trust can be broken by a perception that IM3 is a traitor as he is a go in-between with the



institutions of the Italian state. A broader sample of interviewees could further support a generalized comparison of the relationship between mediating and interpreting with the concepts of neutrality and trust – the discussion of the latter is beyond the scope of this article but the authors plan to consider the data emerging here against debates about interpreters’ ethics and trust. It is significant to highlight though that enormous difficulties (bureaucratic and institutional barriers) compromised the data collection, from prolonged waiting times for approval for access to the CAS and CARA locations, to answering research questions “off-the-record”. These concepts of trust and neutrality became prominent in the meta-discourse, as the researchers were not trusted or considered themselves neutral and objective to be granted access to larger numbers of respondents and institutional interviewees.

4. In lieu of conclusions

Just 14 interviews show how much scope (and need) there is for empirical research to study the forms of language brokering embedded in immigration policies. A few examples suffice to illustrate how media and political reporting hides and misrepresents the complexity of communication in these situations. However, the same journalistic narratives in turn permeate the discourse of those institutional officers, who need language mediation in Sicilian ports and yet are not prepared to see that other systems of communication could simplify their operations. There is an acceptance of both the emergency as being such and that there is a system to deal with it, whereas in terms of language policies in support of multilingual communication, the processes in place reflect the impossible neutrality of oral translation – be it interpreting or intercultural mediation – and confirm the dangers of any implicit or explicit preference towards forms of advocacy in favour of one over the other sides of the “interpreting triangle”.

The term *emergenza* (emergency) dictated by political reasons in 2011 lingered in the Italian press. Defined already as a paradoxical misappropriation (Federici 2016) and a swinging pendulum between system and emergency (Campesi, 2011; Marchetti, 2014), the increase in 2014-2015 did indeed bring Italian rescue and support services to the brink of collapse, but we have to refrain from implicitly labelling and hence discarding it as unpredictable (implied in the definition of emergency). After experiencing decades of this phenomenon, this definition shows a lacuna in the application of the existing legislation and



in setting out local policies the provisions that would enable these large-scale operations to be further managed with regard to well-being of all parties involved (from Italian institutional figures to the migrants). Even though the misnomer is older than the Italian context (Nyers, 2013), language policies in support of immigration policies in Italy should be emancipated in their implementation from the concept of ‘Emergency’. It is not an emergency to organize linguistic support for asylum seekers who are in reception centres for as long as 3 years (see M3): it is a human right in protection of language minorities, as they are when arriving in Italy (Mowbray, 2017) and a first step for better integration, as demanded by the legislative framework. By adopting the term ‘emergency’ or “humanitarian emergency” (see a discussion of an early use after the Arab spring in Campesi, 2011) to describe an unresolved and prolonged issue, Italian institutions are deflecting responsibility for their lack of planning and of comprehensive *politiche di accoglienza* (immigration policies) in relation to language policies.

Three considerations emerge: 1) low-budget and low-resource technological resources are not considered; 2) a review of the *actual implementation* of language policies concerning immigration is overdue; 3) the process of implementing professional quality standards and recognition of prior training could help to consolidate the salaries of practitioners and users – this is also the remit of institutional activities such as those discussed in Marchetti 2014. There is an urgent need for a cultural change regarding the conceptualization of the situation as an emergency without which the faulty communication and faulty processes cannot be assessed free of political bias.

With its high principles of local flexibility, the current legislative framework supports the development of too many regional policies that do not enable to develop suitable and comparable systems to optimize training, qualifications, people, resources at regional or cross-regional level. When resources are limited or dependent on time (e.g. qualification through training), this area of action ought to be considered for their optimization avoiding duplication of tasks and systems that are not compatible. Following the recent, in-depth revision of the academic and professional provision to train and accredit intercultural mediators, actionable policies to standardize the profession should have been implemented in the last 4 years – from the 2014 report enough time has elapsed to train an entire cohort of BA graduates (Melandri *et al.*, 2014). It is regrettable to see that the national discourse in 2018 has gone towards a sensationalisation of immigration issues, rather than towards a



renewed effort to find solutions, especially as permanent migrant numbers are declining. In this sense, for Italy the emergency, which is not one, will continue, and the cascading crises will not be addressed without a political willingness to engage with linguistic policies as they do not only support integration but also enable migrants stuck in Italy to move on with their lives, which they did not necessarily foresee being in Italy. One would have hoped that despite the sensational, slogan-based electoral campaign of 2018, the coalition government that will manage Italy in the coming years will include a process of optimization of resources and implementation of language policies concerning immigration, as integration of non-EU and EU permanent immigrant in Italy would represent a social, cultural, and economic resource. However, the first aggressive approach to new arrivals of rescue boats with migrants in June 2018 does not bode well for an improvement in the situation – nor for the democratic institutions in Italy, as the government has forced a decision against both international and maritime law. In its first week in power, the government closed Sicilian (and then all Italian) ports to rescue boats (11 June 2018) and entered political and semantic squabbles over immigration with both France and the EU. The Lega-5SM coalition government will create further turmoil in an already complex and confused context. This article intended to represent the preliminary findings of an ongoing study of the situation regarding interpreting and translation for migrants, however, the most recent events suggest that even this research is bound to be affected by the right-leaning coalition government.

Endnotes

¹ No term surrounding migration is ever neutral; some terms have very specific legal meanings (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, permanent residents, etc). For expediency, we opted to use the term ‘migrant’ to cover all categories of people landing on the coasts and at the ports of Italy after having moved from their place of origin, and immigration for legally specific policies dealing with people movement in the Italian juridical system.

² Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof. Council Directive 2004/83/EC of 29 April 2004 on minimum standards for



the qualification and status of third country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted.

³ See <http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/chi-siamo/Pagine/Chi-siamo.aspx>. [Accessed 27 February 2018.]

⁴ Source: *Portale dei dati dell'istruzione superiore* (HE Data portal), <http://ustat.miur.it>. [Accessed 27 February 2018.]



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