

## MEDIATING ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA FOR MINORITY AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

AMALIA AMATO, LETIZIA CIRILLO  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA, UNIVERSITÀ DI SIENA

amalia.amato@unibo.it  
letizia.cirillo@unisi.it

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This *dossier* brings together some of the contributions to a panel titled *English as a contact language for minority and vulnerable groups* held during AIA’s (Italian Association of English Studies) 30<sup>th</sup> conference on “Experiment and Innovation: Branching Forwards and Backwards”, which took place on 15-17 September 2022 (<http://www.aiaxxx.unict.it/index.html>). The inspiration for the panel and the ensuing *dossier* is the word “branching” in the conference title, which recalls the branch of a tree being offered to help someone get out of the river and safely reach the bank.

The view which immediately came to our mind was that of English as a lingua franca (ELF) used as a branch, a life jacket: facilitating communication in international and national settings; making international relations and trade possible; helping citizens who do not speak the local language of legal proceedings and social services enjoy their rights; supporting migrants while they integrate in their destination country and reducing their vulnerability.

In line with this idea of a helping hand offered to those who are most in need, the contributions to this *dossier* mainly focus on the use of ELF as an instrument of linguistic and cultural mediation to the benefit of people who are vulnerable in different ways: because they have health conditions and do not speak the local language of the national health service; because they are migrants having to interact with the institutions of their destination country; or because they are seeking asylum.

Vulnerability is therefore the common thread that connects all the contributions to this publication. The concept of vulnerability is difficult to define (Virág 2015) and “lacks common and systematic understanding” (La Spina 2021:188), particularly in terms of legal interpretation and definition of who is vulnerable and who is not. This difficulty depends on the multifactorial, multi-situational, multicultural nature of the notion. Vulnerability is intersectional (La Spina 2021: 191) and has different dimensions or layers (Luna 2009; 2019). It can be a temporary or permanent condition, based on different factors: age, family and educational background, being part of a language and cultural

minority, being in disadvantaged social, economic and/or health conditions. All these factors may be concurrent, creating a multiple vulnerability whose sum is often greater than its parts (Amato and Mack 2022: 9).

Many people may share the same experiences, but the way an event is experienced and perceived also depends on each person's livelihoods needs (e.g. food, shelter, health), social and psychological needs (being informed and aware of what is going on, receiving support, being reassured), and possibly special needs (e.g. in relation to a disability or a trauma suffered). Each person therefore has their own profile, with characteristic traits shaped by their previous experience, socialisation and schooling, and finds himself or herself in a new context in which they will build, consciously or unconsciously, their own life project.

Intrinsic elements of vulnerability include first and foremost psycho-physical factors, e.g. age, physical, intellectual and psychological characteristics, cognitive and social skills and the stage of development reached, which may vary not only according to age but also in relation to health conditions (see Anderson and Gavioli, Radicioni, Urlotti) and possible disabling factors and traumas suffered. Intellectual aspects are closely linked to socialisation and (lack of) schooling, which determine comprehension, conceptualisation and expression, knowledge and mastery of different registers as well as other languages. Previous experiences of social relationships (be those positive and negative) and the ability to establish new ones also fall into this category.

External vulnerability factors, which can be a source of stress and anxiety, include the past experiences of people who, in the case of migrant populations featuring in all contributions to this *dossier*, may have left their friends and family behind to flee life-threatening risks or deprivation (as in Amato and Gallai, and Sperti). Further factors that may aggravate or mitigate vulnerability are culture and environment of origin; negative or positive experiences during an often long, dangerous, and risky journey; being exposed to abuses and violence; finding oneself in alien environments; being categorized as irregular or even illegal migrants; but also positive events like accidentally meeting a person offering help or speaking the same language as one's own.

Another cause of external vulnerability is the political situation and the ensuing migration policies of destination countries. Chase (2016: 1) highlights the role of policies of precariousness in making young migrants vulnerable in the United Kingdom, which is often overlooked to stress individual factors instead. In Italy, the negative attitude towards immigration, which is described by the media as an invasion or an emergency (respectively Catarci 2016: 30 and Filmer and Federici 2018: 1), puts an additional emotional burden on migrants and increases migrants' despair and their exploitation, also by organised crime.

Multiple layers of vulnerability, as visible in the encounters analysed in the present publication, affect both the transactional and interactional dimensions of communication, i.e. both the attainment of its goals (making a decision, providing a given service) and the interpersonal relationships involved (establishing and maintaining social connections). As illustrated above, vulnerability is individual and situational but also structural. In other words, it has to do with how a given subject is affected, at a local level, by an unequal

distribution of power and resources embedded in political and economic organisations (Carruth *et al.* 2021; Gilodi *et al.* 2022). In this respect, vulnerability goes hand in hand with the asymmetries of knowledge and participation characterizing much of the interactions discussed in this *dossier* (between lay vs expert participants, with uncertain vs certain legal status, who may be sick vs healthy, female vs male, uneducated vs educated, unemployed vs employed, etc.).

Mackenzie (2013: 40) uses the adjective “pathogenic” to define vulnerability “arising from prejudice or abuse in interpersonal relationships and from social domination”. This type of vulnerability can also be found in some of the data presented in this *dossier* (see Anderson and Gavioli) and may even be caused by the persons in charge of mediating language and cultural differences (see Amato and Gallai). Depending on an interpreter or intercultural mediator to communicate, especially in institutional settings, adds indeed another layer of vulnerability, since dependency means that one’s interests and wellbeing are controlled by powerful others (Aronson Fontes 2009).

As mentioned above, the contributions to this *dossier* focus on communication involving the use ELF, which, according to the vast literature on the subject, is not a language or variety per se, but rather a communicative mode employed to establish contact between speakers of different first languages (see, among others, Mauranen 2018; Seidlhofer 2018). The use of English as a vehicular language is especially common in the multilingual, multicultural contexts examined by Amato and Gallai, Sperti, Radicioni, Anderson and Gavioli, and Urlotti. Specifically, these authors look at interactions taking place in Italy between migrants from countries of the outer circle (Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, India) on the one hand and institutional participants (state and police officers, lawyers, doctors, social workers – as well as interpreters and mediators from countries of the expanding circle (essentially Italy) on the other.<sup>1,2</sup>

The varied language repertoires and language competences of the participants add to the complexity of the interactions, where the Englishes spoken show both features that can be subsumed under specific varieties, e.g. Nigerian Pidgin English (see Amato and Gallai and Radicioni), and features constituting a standard of its own for the speakers involved (see Urlotti). ELF is thus a dynamic communication tool that is both a means for and an object of negotiation. On the one hand, it makes room for accommodation strategies (e.g. repetition and explicitation) and cooperation processes (i.e. adaptation and co-construction) whereby the interactants can achieve mutual intelligibility. On the other hand, it is the product of hybridization processes in which speakers draw on the pragma-linguistic routines of their L1s to generate creative language usages in English (see Sperti).

<sup>1</sup> Though migrants from Mali and mediators from Rumania are also involved.

<sup>2</sup> The linguists participating in the interactions discussed in this *dossier* are variously referred to as either interpreters or mediators in the Italian context, depending on their qualifications and training, their role (i.e. agency), and the institutional and professional framework within which they operate (i.e. settings and codes of conduct). For an in-depth discussion see Baraldi and Gavioli (2015), Niemants and Cirillo (2017), Baraldi (2019).

The variety of participants' linguacultural backgrounds, together with the culture-bound references that the communicative situations observed inevitably entail (such as socio-political realia related to Italian institutions, or ethnographic realia related to the daily life of specific communities or groups), confer a distinctive translanguaging character on communication in ELF (see Cogo 2016), making the latter a true "Multilingua Franca" (Jenkins 2015: 73). Such reconceptualization is taken one step further by Taviano (2018), who sees ELF as an inherently translational language, a stance which is evidenced also by the data discussed in the contributions collected here.

The fact that we are dealing with exchanges which are both asymmetric and mediated (see above) amplifies the "let-it-pass" attitude towards the hybrid nature of the English employed. It also explains the frequent use of paraphrasing, approximation, and simplification (see Sperti and Radicioni) on the part of interpreters and mediators, who, based on the communicative goals of the interaction and the related needs of their interlocutors, and away from key notions such as accuracy and fidelity, impartiality and neutrality applied to monologic interpreting settings, may adopt an active coordinating role, determining specific courses of action (see especially Anderson and Gavioli and Urlotti; see also Albl-Mikasa 2022: 73-74).

Overall, the dialogue interpreters and mediators analysed, regardless of whether they may be involved in triadic or dyadic exchanges (see Anderson and Gavioli, Radicioni, Urlotti), are confronted with highly variable and unpredictable situations whose variability and unpredictability is further increased by the use of ELF. As suggested by Amato and Gallai, Radicioni, and Sperti, coping with these situations requires specialised training not just in interpreting skills and intercultural communication, but also in the specific interactional and discursive dynamics characterizing communication that involves a language that is constantly negotiated, and people characterized by multiple vulnerabilities. In his discussion about vulnerability, interpreting and ethics Yuan (2024: 27) states that

[i]n the context of interpreting for vulnerable populations, various forms and shades of vulnerabilities intertwine, rendering such communicative events particularly rich in complex and multifaceted human embodiments of vulnerabilities, needs, dependency, and moral obligation of care.

Coming to the contents of individual contributions, Amato and Gallai investigate refugee status determination (RSD) hearings in Italy with the aim of gaining a better understanding of interpreting in the asylum context. Drawing on a mixed dataset, they discuss some key features of interpreter-mediated hearings involving the use of English as a Lingua Franca. The analysis shows the effect of interpreting on the unfolding interview in terms of participants' meaning negotiation as well as officers' communicative strategies. It also shows that interpreters may take on a variety of roles, which sometimes contrast with codes of conduct and, above all, entail ambiguities whose resolution may require clarifications regarding the purposes of the interaction. The authors conclude that interpreters should receive specialised training on the interactional

mechanisms, the interviewing techniques, and the procedural aspects of such a complex communicative event.

Sperti analyses ELF exchanges taking place at Italian centres providing legal advice to asylum seekers and involving asylum seekers and refugees from West African countries, Italian legal advisors, and intercultural mediators. Moving from a hybrid discourse- and conversation-analytical approach, the author highlights the role of accommodation processes in multilingual, multicultural communication involving minority and vulnerable groups and the use of ELF, discussing examples of lexical and morphological hybridization, simplification, and reformulation. Further, the author suggests bringing the investigation of mediation in migratory contexts into the language classroom, to promote intercultural awareness and attention to ethical issues concerning the identity and the displacement of vulnerable groups of people, as well as to enhance the role of learners as social agents.

Radicioni's article examines the use of English as a Lingua Franca in interpreter-mediated encounters taking place at one of Italian NGO Emergency's outpatient clinics in a migration-intensive area in Southern Italy. The analysis of interviews with cultural mediators, field notes taken during an observational visit and official documentation suggests that ELF may have a bearing on the mediators' workload, requiring them to resort to coping strategies and face trust-related issues. The author also observes that mediators employed in humanitarian settings in Italy tend to build communities of practice based on learning by doing and learning from peers. While such communities are vital for the attainment of their respective organisations' humanitarian goals, specific training in mediation and interpreting in a *lingua franca* for vulnerable groups would be much needed to enable mediators to meet the needs of the people to whom they provide guidance and assistance more effectively.

Anderson and Gavioli discuss how doctor's conversational contributions can favour or hinder language mediation during pregnancy check-ups at a maternity clinic. Data is drawn from a large corpus of mediated medical interactions put together by AIM (Centro Interuniversitario di Analisi dell'Interazione e della Mediazione – Inter-university Centre for the Analysis of Interaction and Mediation, <http://www.aim.unimore.it/site/home.html>). Recognising that interpreter-clinician collaboration is not easy, and adopting a conversation analytical approach, the authors focus on question-answer sequences and on the clinician's uptake of patient's contributions to highlight facilitative versus hampering conversational practices by clinicians which can positively or negatively affect the work of mediators, regardless of the latter's level of experience in the profession.

Urlotti's work focuses on medical consultations involving medical staff, intercultural mediators, and migrant patients speaking little or no Italian which are part of a large corpus of mediated interaction put together by AIM (see above). The author highlights the impact of ELF in these contexts where mediator and patient may have their own *standards* of English or may show high discrepancy in ELF competence. This may make it more difficult to reach intersubjectivity, defined as shared understanding between primary participants. Mediators may therefore produce multi-part renditions and repetitions (both self-

and other-), which make messages more digestible for migrant patients, ultimately achieving intersubjectivity and thus a positive outcome of the visit.

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