

VULNERABILITY IN CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS: STRATEGIES OF HYBRIDIZATION, NEGOTIATION AND REFORMULATION IN MEDIATED SPOKEN INTERACTIONS IN MIGRATION CONTEXTS

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Abstract: Vulnerabilities and ‘gatekeeping’ asymmetries often emerge throughout interactions taking place in institutional settings. This is especially true in cross-cultural interactions occurring in migration contexts, which are often characterized by an asymmetrical power distribution between the participants involved, namely Western experts vs. non-Western migrants, challenging a successful meaning negotiation. Starting from the assumption that mediation processes are central in migration contexts, where speakers from different sociolinguistic backgrounds interact in multilingual environments where there is an increasing use of lingua francas such as ELF, the paper will explore those pragmalinguistic processes and behaviours challenging successful meaning negotiation or leading to communication failure in such intercultural and multilingual contexts. A discourse analysis of spoken interactions involving asylum-seekers, language mediators and professionals unveiled participants’ use of strategies of hybridization, negotiation, and reformulation, activated in such cross-cultural mediation encounters, where meaning is negotiated at different levels – linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic – variously and creatively exploited by multilingual speakers. The ultimate aim of the exploration of spoken specialized discourse, related to medical and legal integration, to mediated migration narratives, as well as to cross-cultural representations of traumatic experiences, is to promote intercultural awareness, cultural diversity and plurilingualism, and to raise concern towards current ethical issues connected to identity and displacement in the new multilingual and multicultural European societies.

Keywords: language mediation; intercultural communication; intercultural awareness; migration; hybridization processes; linguistic variation; CEFR; discourse analysis; conversation analysis; mediation strategies.

1. Introduction

The exploration of mediation processes in cross-cultural communication, specifically spontaneous and authentic interactions between asylum-seekers, language mediators and legal advisors, is at the basis of the research fieldwork presented in this paper, whose leading aim is to answer a series of research questions about the linguistic strategies activated on different levels during multilingual and intercultural exchanges.

Particular relevance is given to spoken specialized discourse, related to medical and legal integration, to mediated migration narratives, as well as to cross-cultural representations of traumatic experience. A qualitative analysis was carried out on authentic exchanges and a discourse analytical approach was applied to investigate negotiating processes and mediation failure which brought out vulnerabilities and 'gatekeeping' asymmetries.

More precisely, the focus is here on an ethnographic investigation of mediation processes (Sperti 2017), applied to achieve mutual understanding and negotiate meanings and new concepts, taking into account:

- intercultural pragmatics with reference to cross-cultural linguistic mediation processes in specialized domains;
- the use of English variations in situations of 'unequal encounters' between non-Western participants (i.e., immigrants and asylum-seekers) and Western experts (i.e., legal advisors and mediators);
- the pragmatolinguistic processes of meaning negotiation and hybridization activated by non-native speakers of English in professional settings.

The exploration of English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF) spoken specialized discourse, related to medical and legal integration, to mediated migration narratives, as well as to cross-cultural representations of traumatic experiences, is here intended to shed some light on the new role of the English language in cross-cultural mediation, in terms of ownership and innovation; to promote intercultural awareness, cultural diversity and plurilingualism; and to raise concern towards current ethical issues connected to identity and displacement, especially, in the new multilingual and multicultural European societies.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The role of mediation in migration contexts

Mediation has been defined as a "nomadic notion" (Lenoir 1996) since it acquires different senses in different contexts and plays a central role in a variety of scientific disciplines. From philosophy and psychology to (socio)linguistics and pedagogy, research studies underline that mediation is related to mental functions and the importance of language in the process of mediating psychological aspects with culture as in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning (1962; 1978). On the other hand, Zarate (2003) developed Kramsch's

(1993) notion of “third space” as an “alternative to linguistic and cultural confrontation. In this plural area, difference is pinpointed, negotiated and adapted” (Zarate 2003: 95), thus giving emphasis to the social and cultural nature of mediation.

In Busch (2023), in a time of unprecedented change, intercultural mediation is defined and explored from an interdisciplinary vision, starting from research on conflict resolution in intercultural contexts and moving to translation studies, foreign language teaching and learning, psychology, anthropology and political science:

There have always been many various thoughts on intercultural mediation, including institutionalized mediation: For improving foreign language teaching, empowering migrants and refugees, and, last but not least, containing large-scale crises. Third-party help may be the last resort, which becomes clear time and again in particularly challenging situations (Busch 2023: xxvi).

In other words, in a world that is increasingly global, multicultural and multilingual, mediation is a fundamental part of everyday life. In fact, in today’s complex and superdiverse societies, mediation is required and it occurs everywhere. Mediation is essential in law, diplomacy, politics, advertising, media and many other settings, including professional and educational institutions. In this perspective, mediation may be a form of social practice, aiming at the negotiation of meanings in social interactions between two or more participants who need the intervention of a third party to communicate. North and Piccardo (2016) point out that:

In all contexts, mediation involves bridging and exchange between different elements and spaces. Multifaceted in its nature, the notion of mediation always implies a process. This process can be either social in nature or situate itself at the level of the individual (North and Piccardo 2016: 455).

In migration contexts, the process of mediating meanings and communication is extremely relevant. The observation of real mediation events and of cross-cultural encounters, among refugees or migrants, mediators and Western officials, reveals that participants act to assure intelligibility and mutual understanding, especially when *lingua francas* – very often ELF – are the only way to communicate (Guido 2008; 2012; Sperti 2017). In these contexts, mediation occurs in very delicate situations, and speakers adopt linguistic and paralinguistic strategies, typical of their mother tongue, and cultural meaning which sometimes cannot be translated. Here mediation is applied with the aim of co-constructing meaning and understanding, negotiating attitudes, emotions, and socio-cultural background knowledge through non-native uses and variations. On the other hand, miscommunication and communication breakdowns due to status asymmetries in unequal encounters very often occur, e.g. between a Western expert and a non-Western migrant. Power relations between interlocutors are tightly linked to the practice of mediation in migration

contexts since ‘gatekeeping’ asymmetries among participants are common and hard to avoid. When the expert or the mediator are granted or assume the role of ‘gatekeeper’ (Sarangi and Roberts 1999) they automatically have the power to interpret events and meanings for the other participants undermining the conventional role of the mediator as social agent. As a result, cases of miscommunication may happen which would not be due to a lack of proficiency in the language used, but rather to the lack of accuracy in the illocutionary force of the message because of issues of power distribution, cognitive accessibility and socio-cultural acceptability in the mediation process (Sperti 2017).

Asymmetries and gatekeeping interactions are particularly significant and should be taken into account in the investigation of mediation processes and, as a consequence, in the training of future mediators, who will act not only in migration contexts, but also in academic or professional settings as well as in language education at school.

In this context, the importance that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2020 (henceforth CEFR) attaches to the notion of mediation in language teaching and learning is crucial and is taken into account in the analysis conducted in this study. From this perspective, the relationship between mediation and language variation acquires pedagogical implications for language teaching and for the development of multilingual practises in the language classroom and in professional development programmes.

2.2. Reconceptualizing English, ELF and multilingualism: from authentication to hybridization processes

In the last few years ELF research has experienced a revisiting process aimed to its retheorisation in respect of the essentially multilingual nature of ELF interactions, and empirical evidence of such nature has been provided by recent studies in the field (e.g. Cogo 2009; Guido 2019; Jenkins 2015; Mauranen 2018; Pitzl 2012; 2016; Seidlhofer 2018; Widdowson 2013).

In Seidlhofer (2017) the relationship between ELF and multilingualism is clarified as follows:

ELF is complementary to other manifestations of multilingualism and not at all in conflict with it, mobilizing as it does all the linguistic resources of the interactants. But if it is to serve this complementary function, it is crucial that ELF be dissociated from English as a native language (Seidlhofer 2017: 391).

Research studies in the field of language learning and teaching, of intercultural communication, of ELF and multilingualism, of mediation in migration contexts report about:

1) the transfer into ELF of the speakers’ diverse native pragmatic uses and ELF users’ native linguacultural ‘schemata’, and specific pragmalinguistic purposes affecting cross-cultural accessibility;

2) the co-existence of respective ELF variations, informed by native linguacultural features particularly evident in the exploration of illocutionary intentions and perlocutionary effects;

3) the use of ‘authentication’ and accommodation strategies applied by non-native speakers in spoken interactions. In other words, ELF is seen as ‘language authentication’ (Widdowson 1979), meant as the non-native speakers’ ‘appropriation’ of the English language by unconsciously transferring their own native linguacultural uses into the use of English. This entails that “syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic structures of the different ELF variations are directly dependent on the linguacultural characteristics of the groups of speakers that ‘authenticate’ English” (Guido 2019: 10);

4) creativity in language use and hybridization processes in the attempt to reach mutual intelligibility among ELF speakers.

In this respect, Cogo (2016) highlights the translanguaging nature of ELF interactions:

ELF as a phenomenon, therefore, has always been multilingual – in the sense that the ‘lingua franca’ aspect of the acronym ELF has always been about a contact language perspective and the key role of multilingual resources. However, especially for people outside this research field, the ‘English’ part of the acronym ELF has become more prominent and the lingua franca aspect has been overlooked or even confused with the ‘international’ perspective, reducing ELF to something like ‘just English in international contexts’ (Cogo 2016: 61).

As mentioned above, one recurring feature observed in ELF and multilingual contexts is that speakers creatively apply elements of their first language (L1) in intercultural communication. This confirms the hybrid and plurilingual nature of lingua francas. ‘Hybridization’ is here meant as the process of translation and reformulation of concepts and meanings by means of the exploitation of the speaker’s conceptual, structural, textual and pragmatic resources (Provenzano 2015). This aspect is also underlined in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) where speakers are represented as acting operators:

As the social agent is building on their pluricultural repertoire, they are also engaged in exploiting all available linguistic resources in order to communicate effectively in a multilingual context and/or in a classic mediation situation in which the other people do not share a common language (Council of Europe 2020: 127).

On the other hand, in multilingual and intercultural contexts, the question of background knowledge and ‘schemata’ is closely related to the pragmatolinguistic strategies activated by speakers to convey meanings and to send messages which may not draw from a shared socio-cultural knowledge. In this view, Guido (2022) explains what may happen in cross-cultural communication when asymmetries and vulnerabilities affect the exchange:

Linguacultural and specialized schemata of a non-native speaker participating in an ELF-mediated intercultural interaction interfere with the different schemata of another non-native speaker participating in the same interaction, often causing misunderstanding. This is assumed to induce the interacting ELF-speakers to activate a compensative schema transfer by resorting to L1-chunks of pragmalinguistic routines and specialized registers stored in their minds which should facilitate the ELF-speakers' meaning-attribution process and enable them to interpret concepts and events that are perceived as 'pragmatically marked' because they are inaccessible or unavailable to their native schemata (Guido 2022: 147).

The relationship between ELF and mediation in migration contexts represents the opportunity to consider a new scenario where languaging and intercultural communication in ELF settings are explored in their semantic, syntactic and pragmatic dimensions. As a result, miscommunication and misinterpretation derived from cultural inaccessibility and conceptual unavailability, determining serious communication breakdowns, may reveal persistent vulnerabilities and 'gatekeeping' asymmetries which deserve special attention. This study attempts to investigate – in detail and from an innovative viewpoint with respect to previous research – linguacultural aspects affecting communication in multilingual migration contexts. The advantages of this analytical approach are manifold, in that it makes it possible to explore issues of identity and displacement involving migrants and refugees in Western countries, thus promoting intercultural awareness and ultimately encouraging cultural diversity and plurilingualism.

3. Research context and rationale: negotiating meaning in gatekeeping conversational exchanges

The initial hypotheses behind this study can be summarized as follows:

a) mediation strategies and lingua-franca variations often occur in migration contexts where migrants as well as their advisors and mediators experience a new socio-cultural form of otherness and diversity, which may radically differ from the peculiarities they are familiar with in their own cultural space (namely social, linguistic, behavioural, religious, lifestyle types of difference). Cross-cultural encounters involving migrants and asylum seekers on the one side and experts and practitioners on the other are therefore intrinsically characterized by a bilateral interactional readjustment because the former are forced to adapt to a new living environment, whereas the latter, representing the host community, very often merely recognize, with very limited action, this new form of diversity;

b) mediation processes in cross-cultural interactions involving English are characterized by processes of authentication of the English lexicon activated by participants to be understood and to co-construct meaning;

c) the analysis of discourse, conversational and pragmalinguistic strategies occurring in this form of intercultural encounters may reveal processes of misunderstandings and ethno-centric reactions to vulnerabilities that deviate from what is commonly accepted.

In other words, the exploration of discourse and mediation strategies in migration contexts, applied by speakers and actualized through a specific use of register, pragmalinguistic cues and conversational dynamics, is particularly interesting because data here represent naturally occurring exchanges taking place to mutually negotiate representations, intentionality and attitudes, by means of a creative use of mediation strategies involving ELF variations, and thus of accommodative practices. In these situations, trained mediators are effectively present and called to take action in delicate processes of inclusion and integration.

On such premises, the previous hypotheses, applied to the specific research context of the present study, generated four main research questions:

- 1) Do specific pragma-linguistic goals and structural features emerge in mediation processes in migration contexts?
- 2) Are the conversational dynamics and the overall encounter affected by 'hybridization' processes in the meaning negotiation among participants?
- 3) Do participants, through the use of their different English variations, adopt any kinds of mutual accommodation strategies and 'authentication' processes to convey their culturally marked knowledge and beliefs?
- 4) Is it possible to identify traces and features of communication breakdowns and mediation failure?

In this perspective, it is crucial to consider the fact that in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) the concept of mediation strategies gains special prominence:

The user/learner's ability to mediate does not only involve being linguistically competent in the relevant language or languages; it also entails using mediation strategies that are appropriate in relation to the conventions, conditions and constraints of the communicative context. Mediation strategies are the techniques employed to clarify meaning and facilitate understanding. As a mediator, the user/learner may need to shuttle between people, between texts, between types of discourse and between languages, varieties or modalities, depending on the mediation context. The strategies here presented are communication strategies, that is, ways of helping people to understand, during the actual process of mediation (Council of Europe 2020: 117).

Mediation strategies, as meant in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) are here recontextualized with the aim of giving evidence of the techniques employed by speakers involved in cross-cultural encounters to clarify meaning and facilitate understanding. Moreover, by analysing authentic data gathered from spoken interactions, pedagogical implications will be drawn out with special reference to multilingual and pluricultural settings.

Hence, the analysis conducted in this article is aimed to the investigation of:

- a) the activation of ‘authentication’ processes and mediation strategies in the construction of meaning and understanding in cross-cultural mediation and in the negotiation of speakers’ attitudes, emotions, and socio-cultural ‘schemata’;
- b) the co-construction of meaning and understanding and the negotiation of speakers’ attitudes, emotions, and socio-cultural ‘schemata’ and mediators’ intercultural communication competence and proper interpretation of participants’ messages;
- c) the influence of existing L1 transfers into ELF variations, taking into account the presence of miscommunication and communication breakdown resulting from status asymmetries during intercultural mediation processes.

In this perspective, especially in mediation contexts involving vulnerable subjects, it is worth underlining that:

Recognizing communication failure can foster mutual understanding and acceptance of differences expressed precisely through the structural pliability of English, making this language a democratic ‘lingua franca’ giving voice to all its speakers’ marked socio-pragmatic uses and specialized stances (Guido 2022: 161).

4. Method and analysis

This study applies a qualitative analysis to the discourse of spontaneous interactions among migrants, mediators and legal advisors in different public centres for assistance and counselling to asylum-seekers and refugees, collected during ethnographic research conducted between 2014 and 2019. The following extracts have been selected from a larger corpus of ELF and Italian Lingua-Franca variations (Sperti 2017) for the dual purpose of investigating strategies of hybridization, negotiation and reformulation of meaning in mediation processes, on the one hand, and vulnerabilities in ‘gatekeeping’ situations, on the other, through the simultaneous action of different levels – linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic.

4.1. Methodology and corpus design

The main actions taken during the research study were the following:

- 1) identify the main exchanges containing strategies of hybridization, negotiation and reformulation of meaning;
- 2) look for prosodic parameters (such as pitch and range, intensity, duration of stressed syllables, intonation phrase and pitch contour) as well as paralinguistic and extralinguistic features (such as number and average duration of pauses, speech rate facial expressions, gestures,

- posture, eye movements and gaze, head movements, voice quality) that unveil power asymmetries and ‘gatekeeping’ assets;
- 3) identify, through conversational analysis, participants’ turns and moves and responses by co-participants;
 - 4) investigate mediation through discourse analysis aimed at identifying accommodation strategies and lexical, rhetorical and stylistic choices, such as the use of tense and aspect, deontic vs. epistemic modality, conversational hedging, popularisation and simplification of terminology, and other interactional strategies;
 - 5) verify features of mediation failure and communication breakdown due to asymmetric power distribution when vulnerable groups are involved in intercultural communication.

The combination of Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis made it possible to examine on the one hand the macro-organization of the interaction and its structural features, as well as the strategies employed by the participants, and on the other, turn design, turn-taking and sequence organization.

Besides, the perspective taken here for the analysis of strategies is the one adopted by the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020), where the mediation is presented in these terms:

Language is a tool used to think about a subject and to talk about that thinking in a dynamic co-constructive process. A key component of the development of mediation scales, therefore, is to capture this function. How can the user/learner facilitate access to knowledge and concepts through language? There are two main ways in which this occurs: one is in the context of collaborative work and the other is when someone has the official or unofficial role of facilitator, teacher or trainer. In either context, it is virtually impossible to develop concepts without preparing the ground for it by managing the relational issues concerned (Council of Europe 2020: 108).

For the purpose of investigating this complex communicative dimension, a sample of 11 extracts from the participants’ exchanges was built. As mentioned above, the extracts are part of a larger corpus of authentic interactions recorded in different Italian centres providing legal advice to asylum-seekers during an extended period of ethnographic fieldwork (Sperti 2017). They have been selected as they seemed particularly suitable to answer the research questions at the basis of this study.

Data have been collected, classified and transcribed in order to preserve participants’ and non-participants’ privacy.¹

The participants involved were (i) legal advisors (LA), all Italian native speakers and learners of English with fairly basic linguistic competence; (ii) asylum-seekers and refugees (AS), male and female West African citizens (from

¹ Names, places, cities and towns have been removed and signalled throughout the text by means of asterisks (four * for places, five * for people’s names).

Nigeria, Ghana, Mali and Gambia) with varied linguistic competence of English² and Arabic, as well as ESL speakers (though they consider English as their native language) and therefore very competent. Most ASs also employed Italian as a Lingua Franca (ILF) and possessed a basic knowledge of the Italian language, particularly influenced by the local and regional linguistic features of the Italian variety spoken in the area where they have lived and worked for a varying number of years; (iii) language mediators (IM), Italian speakers and all graduates or postgraduates in foreign languages. Their registered proficiency of English was often academic but, in some cases limited to basic levels of competence.

Before approaching the analysis of the exchanges, it is important to highlight that mediation in institutional settings involving migrants, mediators, professionals and officials, like those under investigation here, does not always imply that relational components are respected. As a result of the ‘power asymmetries’ among the participants involved, a collaborative ‘relational mediation’³ is not easily achieved: dealing with delicate situations, and sometimes disputes, may hinder a positive atmosphere and a facilitated interaction.

4.2. Analysing the data: discourse strategies in mediation processes

In the following extracts, key-features of the analysis are highlighted as follows:

- phonological and paralinguistic correlates (in bold, in capitals and/or underlined in the transcriptions);
- use of modal verbs and marked use of verbal structures (in bold);
- key-textual structures (in bold);
- ELF accommodation strategies and code-mixing (single lexical items in bold and ELF syntactical clusters in double-underlined font);
- Italian lingua-franca expressions (in italics).

In extract (1), the mediator (IM) tries to create a cooperative atmosphere so that the asylum-seeker (AS) feels comfortable and makes a significant contribution to the ‘entextualization’ (Urban 1996) of his experience. Linguistic and paralinguistic processes are activated, as typically happens in ELF and multilingual contexts:

(1)

IM: Can you explain better?

² Some of them are native speakers of Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ewe, Twi (all Niger-Congo languages).

³ “In developing categories for mediation, the Authoring Group used Coste & Cavalli (2015)’s distinction between: Relational Mediation: the process of establishing and managing interpersonal relationships in order to create a positive, collaborative environment (for which six scales were developed), and Cognitive Mediation: the process of facilitating access to knowledge and concepts, particularly when an individual may be unable to access this directly on his/her own, due perhaps to the novelty and unfamiliarity of the concepts and/or to a linguistic or cultural barrier” (Council of Europe 2020: 245).

AS: When people die (.) they **took** their body in the shrine (.) they **leave** the body there (.) and if you accept it (.) you **always** make different kind of things (..)

IM: **What happens** in the shrines? How many times?

AS: A lot of times

IM: And **what happened?**

AS: You (.) if you go there I tell you are afraid (.) you can't stay there

IM: Mmm why?

AS: Because (..) it's not God (.)

IM: It's important for the commission **ok?** [AS: yes, yes] Not for me ok?

AS: Is bad religion (.) I want to live a good life (.) I don't want to kill the people::

IM: **Because they kill** the people?

AS: Yeah (.) I told you that

It is interesting to notice that IM's moves in (1) consist in a number of eliciting questions, which would not be expected from a mediator. The IM herself justifies her behaviour (i.e. *It's important for the commission ok? Not for me ok?*) and reveals her real intentions, disregarding the effects that a series of direct questions on personal experiences may have on the AS.

In the CEFR the concept of 'cognitive mediation' is also introduced as the process of facilitating communication and the understanding of concepts, particularly when the speaker may be unable to access them on his /her own. However, as underlined in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020):

[i]t is virtually impossible to undertake cognitive mediation without taking account of the relational issues concerned. Real communication requires a holistic integration of both aspects (Council of Europe 2020: 245).

In this perspective, the example (2) is useful to recognize, in real ELF communicative exchanges, mediation strategies used "to explain a new concept" (Council of Europe 2020: 118).

In the following passage the legal advisor (LA) is mediating her message to introduce a new concept, namely the rejection of a court appeal, to the AS. As suggested by the CEFR (*ibid.*), key-concepts may be recognizable by "linking to previous knowledge" in the mediation process:

(2)

LA: Ah (.) so (.) **I explain** tha that the situa::tion is difficult (.) because (.) you asked asylu::m (.) the::n commission decide for a negative answer (..) and the:::n you make an appeal but the appeal (..) ehh have a negative answer (.) and °so they give you this paper where is write° (.) that you have ten days from this date

AS: To give the contract

LA: No to give the contract (.) to write something to change this situation (.) **because** if after ten days (.) you have not (..) other reason (.) they have to

give you an expulsion (..) **this is the normal procedure** in our system (..) a new asylum request (.) **but if** you (.) say the same information (.) then ehm last time (.) they give again you a negative answer (.) and they don't give you the possibility to meet commission again (.) so =

The LA, acting as mediator, has to establish links to previous information (i.e. the previous court appeal); in the meanwhile she introduces, by means of cohesive devices (e.g. *so, I explain, because, this is, but if you*), new pieces of knowledge by giving examples, by referring to something the migrant already knows, or by helping him activate previous experience (e.g. *write something to change this situation*).

At the same time, introducing a new concept may involve “adapting language”: the mediator often adapts, especially in ELF interactions, her use of language, style and register in order to facilitate the co-construction of the message. She often uses synonyms, simplifications, or paraphrasing, popularizing technical terminology, as in exchange (3):

(3)

LA: The situation is **more complicate** than (..) mmm because your appeal is **expired** is **finish** and the judge decide **to give not** any kind of (..) protection so now police in **** wait to have some answer from the **judge** (.) from the **tribunal** (.) but (.) if they control (.) < they can watch that your appeal is finish > and that you have **not** (..) **a good result** so (..) what you can do now (..) [...] ok (.) now ehm ***** write for you this declaration and so we prepare it and you can give to the police (.) ok?

AS: This lawyer never tell me anything bah (..) tss (..) I called him every day (.) he never tell me anything

LA: Mmm

AS: I don't know they **rejected my appeal** (..) hhh

The LA activates here discourse and mediation strategies on a lexical level to be understood and avoid misinterpretation of legal concepts by the AS (e.g. *expired/finish; protection; judge/tribunal; a good result; declaration; police*).

In other cases, explaining a new concept, as a mediation practice, means “breaking down complicated information”: in migration contexts it is particularly common to mediate a concept or some technical information by means of a series of steps or points to effectively convey the message. For example, in the following passage, lack of linguistic proficiency prevents the AS from understanding a text. The intervention of a mediator is required:

(4)

AS: I want to **help me to read** all this

IM: You want to read?

AS: Read

IM: Ah to read

AS: You **explain**

IM: Ah ok (.) ok (.) this is **police station** (.) your name and place and date of birth (.) your citizenship (.) sex (.) if you are male or female (.) ehm place and date of relax of the (.) the document (.) expiring (..) date (.) in two weeks it will be expired (.) reason of your permit to stay (.) so *richiesta asilo* (.) asylum request and when you arrived here in Italy (.) and your fiscal code (.) tax code (.) here in Italy and in Europe everyone has got a =

AS: Code

The IM employs mediation strategies and hybridization processes to bridge the conceptual and linguistic gaps that do not allow the AS to fully understand his personal legal situation and the documentation received by the local police office, by presenting a series of steps and giving a whole representation of the informative structure (i.e. *police station; if you are male or female; *relax [sic] of the document; reason of your permit to stay; fiscal code/tax code*).

Other important mediation strategies are used by speakers: “to simplify a text” (Council of Europe 2020: 121). In migration contexts, where lingua francas are very frequently the only way to understand each other, it is common to mediate a dense text which may be a serious obstacle to understanding. One way to do so is by including details, examples, and background information in the source (spoken or written) text, to explain concepts more explicitly.

In migration contexts, this is particularly common when mediators have to convey a message from the official or the advisor to the asylum-seeker or the refugee, especially in legal or other technical terms. In extract (5), the mediator simplifies a technical text, and consequently specialized discourse and knowledge, for the AS:

(5)

IM: **When** the commission give you a permit to stay for humanitarian reason they gave you **because** you say that you come from **** **so** you:: explain some problem in your country in **** (.) **no?**

AS: Mmm

IM: **So** every year when you have to renove this kind of permit to stay (.) police **must** ask to the commission if they are agree to **renew** (.) **if you change** your nationality (.) **and you say** ‘I come from **** not from ****’ (.) what you said to the commission is false (.) is false all your personal story **so** they cannot give not more a permit to stay (.) **so I think it’s better** to remain with the same document [*AS:* ok] and with the same nationality (.) is better for you

AS: Ok but (.) the problem is that in *questura* (.) he asked about the the passport of of my [country] **** but in **** embassy they don’t do passport

IM: No (.) we can write a **declaration where we say** that (.) “I I had some problem in my country and for that reason (.) I cannot have any contact with the embassy of **** in Italy (.) and so I need to renove this kind of passport for refugee” (.) **ok?**

IM carries out the task of mediating technical concepts to the AS and acts on the information structure and the presentation of topics by means of cohesive devices (e.g. *when the commission [...] they gave you because; if you change [...] so they cannot; we can write a declaration where we say*).

At the same time, it is also very common to adopt a different mediation strategy: i.e. reducing the text. In the CEFR, this scale is described as the ability to convey the message(s) in its essential elements. In migration contexts, this strategy is very much exploited, and participants often express the same information in fewer words by eliminating redundancies or digressions and excluding irrelevant information. Moreover, the IM's use of the inclusive "we" and of persuasive language (e.g., *so I think it's better to*) confirm the conversational dynamics characterizing cross-cultural encounters where meaning and sense are mediated through different, and often asymmetric, linguacultural perspectives. Mediators often try to stress important points, to draw conclusions and to obtain a prompt response from their interlocutors, as in example (6):

(6)

*IM: No (.) is for all the person the same so (..) you **must** e::h wait these three month and then you **can** renew for six months (.) till commission **will** call you again (.) you **must** explain why you asked again asylum (.) and then they **can** decide for a different decision (.) to give you the refugee status or humanitarian protection or sussidiarian protection or <give you no any permit > (.) **ok?** It's the same (..) of last time (.) **ok?***

AS: Ok

*IM: They start again (.) because there are new reason to write ok? (.) **So** now I **think** e::h we resolve this problem (.) *no?* **This is the most important problem** because document in Italy is (..) now I **think** you can ask to obtain a *licenza* (..) eh? *Licenza* is a specific authorization to work (.) to sell something inside the street (.) near the sea (.) ok? **So** to obtain this *licenza* you can go:: ehm in a **specific office**.*

The IM exploits negotiation strategies to convince the AS to produce the required documents to obtain a residence permit in Italy. She employs lexical and textual strategies to avoid formality and technicalities, and to facilitate understanding, such as: *they can decide for a different decision; this is the most important problem because document in Italy is...; so to obtain this licenza you can go:: ehm in a specific office*. Modal verbs (i.e. *must; can; will*), especially those used in epistemic modality, stress her interpretation of facts and events and the likelihood of something happening.

Instead, in (7) the focus is on legal issues related to the court appeal, and the mediation process generates from the AS's need for help and the LA's codifying of legal events. The turns between LA and AS are particularly interesting: LA variously reformulates her questions in order to obtain a certain reply from the AS who, instead, focuses his attention on other aspects.

In the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) this process is identified with the activity of mediating communication: the speaker acting as a mediator facilitates communication in delicate situations by establishing possible areas of concession between participants and mediating a shift in viewpoint, to move closer to an agreement, like in (7) where the AS, who is evidently confused, needs help and assistance:

(7)

AS: In *questura* finish (.) but now **they say** to find one lawyer (.) I call my lawyer in **** and my lawyer said I **should reappeal** (.) he said I **should reappeal** so that if I **can reappeal** they **will** give me back my document

LA: Mmm (.) but have you some paper about your reappeal?

AS: Mmm? What? I want to reappeal (.) the lawyer said I **should** come and e::h call the lawyer in ***

LA: OK (.) **so** I want to know this (.) **have you speak** with the commission or not?

AS: Commission?

LA: Commission is an organ who decide about your asylum request (..) then make you (..) a lot of question about the reason why you decide to left your country ehm =

AS: Yes (..) before (.) before

LA: **Have you spoke** with them?

AS: Yes I spoke (.) I spoke with them (.) the time before.

The LA, acting as mediator, tries to prepare the ground before delivering news on delicate legal issues by outlining the essential points that need resolving (e.g. *but have you some paper about your reappeal?; so I want to know this*).

In cross-cultural interactions like the ones taken into consideration here, socio-cultural ‘schemata’ play a crucial role (Carrell and Eisterhold 1988; Guido 2022) and in migration contexts asylum-seeking representations inevitably emerge when refugees and asylum-seekers reconstruct and review their past experiences with their advisors for institutional purposes. In the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) this process relates to the mediation of concepts where the active orientation of interlocutors and the use of contributions to move the discussion forward in a productive way serve an important function.

Extract (8) is a passage from a typical mediation process where the IM assists the LA in preparing the AS’s reconstruction and ‘entextualization’ of his personal experience for the Commission which is in charge of assessing his asylum request. In other words, the IM and the LA intervene in the process whereby the AS’s oral discourse is first decontextualized from its original linguacultural and textual setting, and then recontextualized into a new framework. In the attempt to make concepts accessible, Western socio-cultural ‘schemata’ and stereotypes easily emerge throughout the exchange:

(8)

AS: My own story (..)

IM: Yes (.) in this situation your own story (.) **ok?** (..) **try** to th[t]ink (..) **ok?** (.) **are you AGREE?**

AS: (..) **Ehm** no (..) I **want to ask** a question (..) >so I **have to** say a new story <

LA: (..) **NO** a new story (..) you **must sta::rt again** from this story [AS: yeah] **no?** **But you** (.) **we have to** say 'Now the situation is more **DANgerous** for me (.) because from the day (.) si[ai]nce the day that I arrived in Italy till now there are some new problem like **RELIGION problem** between [AS: Christians and Muslims] Christian and Muslim and because in my zone the situation is **complicate** (.) because my **FAMILY** call me to **advise** me to not come because (..)

IM: You **must** describe the new problem

In this exchange the legal advisor, with the help of the mediator, assists the migrant by means of several strategies which range from eliciting moves (e.g. *try to th[t]ink; are you agree[sic]?*) to dynamic verbal forms (e.g. *you must* vs. *we have to*), all aimed to introduce issues and support collaborative problem solving in the interaction.

Mediation strategies are also used in dealing with socio-cultural vulnerabilities, especially when it comes to gendered representations of traumatic experiences. Excerpt (9) is an example of a mediation process where the two participants in the interaction, i.e. an Italian intercultural mediator and a Nigerian trafficking victim, differently deal with trauma narratives and representations through ELF:

(9)

AS: (..) I left my village because of **circumcision** (..) **you know** (.) a female when is twelve (.) ten **must** (..) **circumcision** (.) **understand?** (..) and there a **female** (.) one (..) my friend don't want to do and after she died (.) **understand?** [*she cries*]

IM: Ok (..) ok (.) **don't worry** (..)

AS: **So** I **meet** a friend to L**** (.) she **told** me that she **can** help me

IM: It was two thousand (..) and?

AS: Eh (.) I go two thousand and (..) nine

IM: 2009 (.) **so** (.) **circumcision** (..) **eh** (.) it's a problem (..)

AS: Yes (.) because my friend died and she didn't (..) I was afraid

IM: Ok (.) and then in 2009 **eh** (..) you were 20 (..) **so** (.) **they** still continue to do **circumcision** at that age

AS: Yes (..) some they did it in 17 (..) depends (.) **mmm** (..)

IM: **Ok** (..) **so** (.) in L**** **what happened?**

AS: **What happened** in L**** (.) I found my friend was doing prostitution in the streets (..) **so** I met a woman in a shop where I used to buy food to eat

IM: A woman?

AS: Yes (.) a woman where I **used to** buy food to eat [IM: **Ah** ok] **so** she (..) when I was buying food she **explained** that she give me a job to do (.) **so** I **said** ok (..) **so** she **prepared** everyth[t]ing and **brought** me to France

The IM struggles to find a way to mediate and suggest a solution to the migrant who is experiencing distress and discomfort. The exchange is particularly challenging for many reasons: IM's and AS's space and time references seem different, as confirmed by the verb forms used by the AS (ranging from past to present tense in the narrative of the same event), as well as the turn-taking and move sequence between the two participants which signal a conversational mismatch in terms of intentionality and accessibility of the message conveyed from both sides. The AS's first turn ends with the conative *understand?* whereas the IM replies by means of a comforting expression (*ok, don't worry*). Further on, the IM reopens the exchange with the eliciting move *so in L**** what happened?* in the attempt to recollect space and time elements and details from the woman's previous experience. However, in spite of the IM's supporting attitude, the AS's narrative is continuously interrupted by pauses and hesitations (as in the turn starting with the clefting *What happened in L*****).

As already observed, mediation processes may be affected by 'schema'-biased attitudes which emerge in inclusive integration practices, often affecting migrants' daily experiences in the host country. In exchange (10) both the mediator and the advisor reveal their cultural 'schemata' in interpreting the asylum-seeker's statements:

(10)

IM: Did you work when you were in ****?

AS: = me?

IM: = **hhh** yes ***** you (.) you (..) informatic engineer?

AS: no no I (.) *auto* (.) wash (.) *autolavasc*

IM: = *autolavaggio* [AS: yes] *wash car*

AS: = yes

LA: ok and what (.) *che è successo in ****?* something?

IM: ***** did something happen in ****? You have been in **** for one year (.) you worked and lived there (.) nothing else?

AS: When I was in **** (.) no money I **have to** work to have money to (.) **to come on**

IM: **ah** ok you had to work ok (.) *doveva lavorare per mantenersi*

LA: *e perché te ne sei andato?*

AS: but this question is [IM: = **eh** ***** answer] (.) there was war it's not a place to stay

LA: why?

AS: because there was >*fight battles*< they (.) they (.) you have to stay in close places

IM: **ah** ok they (.) *sequestravano le persone*

AS: yes

IM: =so were you afraid to stay in ****?

AS: yes yes I **have** fear it's not a place to stay

In (10) both the LA and the IM employ strategies of meaning negotiation in the attempt to reconstruct the AS's recent experience in Africa before fleeing and landing on Italian shores. Features of code-switching and code-mixing emerge in the co-construction of meaning, both used as key-strategies in ELF interactions (Jenkins 2007; Mauranen and Ranta 2009), even if AS's replies to the Italian officials seem uncertain and non-convincing as also shown both by his disfluencies and his interlocutors' backchannels.

In extract (11) vulnerabilities are represented by intercultural divergences in migrants' perception and interpretation of bureaucratic and medical procedures. The passage is particularly interesting for its phonopragmatic dimension. (11) is a controversial cross-cultural encounter between a Ghanaian asylum-seeker (AS) and his Italian legal advisor (LA) about his serious physical condition, with the assistance of a language mediator (IM).

(11)

LA: **If I say you this is only to help you** (.) <only to help you> listen me (.) **we have big experience** with foreign **person** and we **know** (.) is very hard to live without an accommodation (..) after some days you are no clean (..) after some days you have not a place to sleep [AS: this is the reason I'm telling you] you **can decide** [AS: no I'm **not deciding** you're deciding] no you **decide** no:: YOU (.) **this is our system** (.) is not beautiful (.) **but** is this (.) **so** inside this system you **must** accept [AS: no no **they decide**] something for yourself not for us <for yourself> and [AS: no no no] then you **can** obtain some help [AS: no no no]

IM: In this moment all we **can** do is this [AS: **Ahh** thank you thank you]

LA: We **cannot** make other **because** you don't give us the possibility to help you

IM: If you **want** come back come back ok **think** about it

AS: No (..) auntie no no (..) you **know** (..) >don't make it that you don't **know** you **know**< [LA: **But** is only to obtain a certificate]

[...]

IM: *Vabbe'* (.) we are here

LA: If you **need** some help (.) you **can** come back

Extract (11) is an example of what may happen in mediation processes where interlocutors do not share the same cooperative plan in the conversation they take part into. The LA's first long move is interrupted by the AS's repeated overlapping moves which signal a strong feeling of distress. The situation is asymmetric and the Italian officials assume the role of 'gatekeepers' (e.g. *this is our system; inside this system you must accept*): the legal advisor adopts different mediation strategies (ranging from reformulations to hedging – such as *only to*

help you; you can decide something for yourself not for us; if you need some help) while the mediator relies on closing moves (e.g. In this moment all we can do is this; vabbe' (.) we are here).

5. Research findings: vulnerabilities or opportunities?

The analysis of the extracts in 4 brought into focus participants' strategies of hybridization, negotiation and reformulation.

The investigation of participants' turns revealed how they adjust their contributions drawing on a range of interactional strategies, such as:

- overlapping speech;
- hedging and phatic tokens;
- first utterances and responding utterances;
- preferred/dispreferred cues.

The discourse analysis of the extracts confirmed the role of accommodation processes in multilingual and multicultural contexts and the use of ELF lexical variations, such as:

- novel lexical and morphological hybridizations;
- popularization and reformulation processes;
- morphological and lexical simplification strategies.

The collaborative nature of ELF negotiation strategies to achieve mutual understanding affects syntactic and stylistic features, especially in terms of:

- deontic modality conveying commissive and directive intentionality;
- epistemic modality, communicating logical conclusion, possibility, and expectations;
- pragmalinguistic use of different verbal aspects and tenses;
- use of tags and imperatives;
- code-switching and code-mixing.

ELF users employ linguistic and paralinguistic strategies typical of their mother tongue and cultural meaning which sometimes cannot be translated or mediated. In these cases, mediation is used with the aim of co-constructing meaning and understanding. In these contexts, the interactants become aware that they need to activate processes of mutual understanding and accommodation of their linguistic expressions and their different socio-semiotic and experiential schemata.

The analysis of data showed how socio-cultural and power asymmetries as well as ethno-centric behaviours are mediated in cross-cultural professional contexts where values and perspectives may considerably differ. Yet, those which may be rightly identified as challenges and vulnerabilities in migration contexts,

namely health concerns, protection needs, traumatic experiences, represent the key to reconsider the opportunities created by migratory flows in Europe for revisiting the role of mediation in relation to actions and policies aimed at the inclusion of migrants.

6. Concluding remarks and implications

The initial hypotheses of the study were largely confirmed by the results of the data analysis and the research questions found an answer, even though the data emerging from authentic encounters in migration contexts are very complex and can be studied from different perspectives.

Conversational dynamics and mediation processes are inevitably affected by processes of meaning negotiation, and features of an emerging “hybrid ELF mode” of cross-cultural specialized communication (Guido 2015) have been detected in the community of practice taken into consideration.

The analysis confirmed that participants inevitably adopt mutual accommodation strategies and ‘authentication’ processes to convey their culturally marked knowledge and beliefs. Features of communication breakdowns and mediation failure are recognizable, especially when power asymmetries and the distribution of roles clearly emerge.

To conclude, the intercultural perspective applied to the investigation of mediation processes in migration contexts is conducive to promoting intercultural awareness and attention to ethical issues connected to the identity and the displacement of vulnerable groups of people.

Seen from this perspective, introducing a reflective and analytical approach to the study of mediation strategies, by means of the analysis of real exchanges in professional mediation contexts, may be particularly useful, especially in multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Today’s language learners may become aware of the role and functions of mediation in transcultural communication where mediation skills are highly recommended, as well as of the use of multilingual repertoires along with English variations.

In this respect, postgraduate students and future intercultural mediators need an increased awareness of the pragma-linguistic aspects and complex processes underlying discourse and mediation strategies as well as power distribution and issues of accessibility in cross-cultural interactions. Moreover, the new descriptor scales for mediation in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020) emphasize the focus on teaching actions aimed at bringing real-world language use into the classroom. Mediation is seen as a tool for enhancing the role of learners as social agents. This requires considerable investments by the European governments and the EU institutions, and above all a shift in perspective in intercultural competences, a training mechanism based on a plural, dynamic conception of cultural and social identities which involve the teaching of languages and other subjects, in order to develop an intercultural education based on the awareness of cultural diversity and of the huge benefits one can obtain from the contact with any kind of otherness.

In other words, the experience of cross-cultural interactions inevitably entails reconceptualising one's understanding of language, culture and intercultural competence. As Baker (2011) pointed out:

Intercultural awareness is a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication (Baker 2011: 202).

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