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ELF communication and intercultural mediation

An interdisciplinary approach

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

Research into the impact of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) on the work of professional translators and interpreters has so far been extremely limited, with few exceptions (e.g. Albl-Mikasa 2017, Taviano 2013). Nevertheless, translation and interpreting are part and parcel of the global world that we inhabit, marked by ever growing migration flows. ELF deeply affects interaction between displaced people and intercultural mediators who facilitate communication in a wide range of contexts, such as hospitals, courts and police stations. This paper aims to address the peculiarities of ELF communication between African asylum seekers and Italian professionals, who are in a position of authority, from an interdisciplinary perspective, combining a translation approach with ELF research. Six mediated interviews of six asylum seekers with a psychologist, carried out in a Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) centre, will be examined. The translanguaging strategies and accommodation practices observed during these encounters testify to the hybrid nature of ELF whereby meaning is constantly negotiated by asylum seekers and Italian professionals as ELF users with different linguacultural backgrounds. However, it will also be shown how ELF communication is affected by power asymmetries and communication dynamics determined by Italian professionals often leading to misunderstandings. The case studies analysed in this paper show that raising awareness of ELF users' linguacultural backgrounds and the social and political dynamics in which ELF encounters are embedded is extremely important to overcome such asymmetries.

Keywords: ELF, intercultural mediator, migrants' rights, asylum seeker, communication failure, accomodation, language policy, translation

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An interdisciplinary approach to ELF

This paper focuses on practices of mediated ELF encounters between African asylum seekers and Italian professionals, which occur through interpreting, translation, and translanguaging. The analysis is carried out by considering an interdisciplinary perspective bringing together a translation approach with ELF studies. Translation, in all its various forms, and practices such as translanguaging and metrolingualism (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015, García and Wei 2014), have become central in the global society we inhabit and are increasingly receiving scholars' attention, as well as changing our perception of the English language(s), as Bernardini and Mair claim (2019). Following on from Jenkins' definition of ELF as a "Multilingua Franca" emphasising "the relationship between English and other languages in respect of the multilingualism of most ELF users and the "multi-competence of the community" (Jenkins, 2015: 59), I argue for a conceptualization of ELF as a translational and hybrid lingua franca in which "translation is intended as an intrinsic

process underlying a fluid relationship between languages" (Taviano, 2018). ELF users' multilingualism and their translanguaging practices are thus particularly relevant to such a notion of ELF.

"Translanguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential", as García argues (2009: 140). Such strategies include, but are not limited to, code-switching (García and Wei 2014), and are intrinsic to an "hybrid language use" (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Alvarez 2001:128) resulting from the fuzzy nature of language boundaries. It is precisely through these strategies that meaning is constructed and negotiated (see Jenkins 2007; Seidlhofer 2007, 2011, Mauranen 2009; Mortensen 2013) during ELF encounters due to the diverse linguacultural backgrounds of its speakers (Cogo and Dewey 2012), as will be further shown. Furthermore, given ELF's role as a tool of intercultural communication and a social practice (Baker 2015), the sociocultural context in which mediated ELF encounters between African asylum seekers and Italian professionals are embedded becomes particularly relevant.

These encounters are unequal because marked by asymmetries between the position of asylum seekers and the authority of Italian professionals, who shape and affect communication dynamics. Hierarchical relationships between Europeans and migrants inevitably determine predominant images of the latter's identities, which are politically and socially constructed as different from the norm (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, Taviano 2019). Migrants, and individuals in general, are and continue to be imagined as being "organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation", as Yildiz reminds us (2016:3) despite the spread of multilingualism because of the implications and persistence of the "monolingual paradigm". As Polezzi rightly argues (forthcoming), translation reminds us that language is always plural and that languages are not isolated and self-contained systems. Lack of attention to questions of language causes "language indifference", which is "what we encounter every time language is assumed to be transparent, neutral, irrelevant" (Polezzi, forthcoming). It is precisely by questioning the role of the monolingual paradigm, thus acknowledging the diverse linguacultural backgrounds of the ELF users involved in these encounters that such asymmetries can be at least partially overcome, as will be further shown (see also Guido 2015, Sperti 2017).

Accommodation strategies and translanguaging practices

ELF users tend to adapt their speech according to intercultural contexts and requirements, as ELF scholars, such as Jenkins (2007), Canagarajah (2007), Seidlhofer (2011) among others, have argued. Meaning is constantly negotiated through a bidirectional process during which speakers and their interlocutors need to ensure they are mutually intelligible. To this end, pragmatic strategies, such as turn-taking and discourse markers, backchannels, simultaneous talk, ELF tags, paralinguistic and prosodic features (pauses, intonation and voice pitch) are only some among several tools which are examined to understand how meaning is constructed in ELF interactions (see Seidlhofer 2001, House 2003, Mauranen 2006, 2009, Cogo and Dewey 2012, among others). In this sense mutual intelligibility is the result of a collaborative co-construction and negotiation of meaning in the here and now of each exchange.

ELF is a dynamic and hybrid tool of communication, which always needs to be contextualized in relation to communication goals and speakers' linguacultural backgrounds. As House (2007) claims, it is more appropriate to refer to ELF users as multilingual speakers of English, rather than as non-native speakers, due to the multilingual resources they possess. Key skills, such as intercultural awareness of culture-specific beliefs and values, interpersonal sensitivity and cognitive flexibility resulting in accommodation strategies and processes of cooperation are in fact recognized as central to

ELF communication (Seidlhofer 2004, 2007). Interestingly enough, these are precisely some of the many skills that cultural and/or intercultural mediators (as they are variously called in Italy) are required to have.

In Italy, the linguists who are involved in interactions with displaced people (from social and economic migrants, to refugees and asylum seekers) are often referred to as mediators. They are Italian or migrant professionals, as well as non-professionals, who interact with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in a wide range of contexts, such as hospitals, courts, police stations and Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) centres hosting unaccompanied minors and women victims of trafficking. However, despite the significance and complexity of mediators' role, which goes well beyond interpreting (see Amato and Garwood 2011, Rudvin and Spinzi 2014, Katan 2015), and the challenges posed by intercultural communication, this is far from being a fully recognized profession with adequate hourly rate. While the definitions and profiles of intercultural mediators versus community interpreting in Italy and other countries, subject to an ongoing scholarly debate (see Pokorn and Mikolič Južnič 2020), are beyond the scope of this article, Inghilleri's understanding of interpreting as a "socially situated activity" (2003) is particularly relevant to ELF mediated communication since the social and cultural backgrounds of mediators and displaced people, as well as the context in which their interaction is embedded, determine subsequent communication dynamics.

Pitzl's conceptualization of the social dimension of ELF in Transient International Groups (TIGs) is thus useful to examine interactions in such contexts. TIGs are groups "comprised of multilingual ELF users who interact for a particular purpose at a particular location for a certain amount of time" (Pitzl 2018:21), as in the case of asylum seekers communicating with Italian professionals in SPRAR centres, on which this paper focuses. During the four interactions reporter here, ELF users tend to make use of their multilingual repertoires and through translanguaging practices they adopt or coin terms and collocations, which are then accepted and/or challenged. Once these terms are accepted and negotiated by members of the TIGs, they can become consolidated. This is what occurs in the encounters examined in this paper where an Italian professional intercultural mediator, translating interviews of six asylum seekers with a psychologist from and into ELF, adopts terms and collocations as appropriated and coined by asylum seekers through negotiation and consolidation processes, typical of TIGs.

I collected the data by observing, recording and transcribing in full six one-hour interviews conducted over a period of six months. All asylum seekers were hosted in a SPRAR centre for unaccompanied minors in Messina, Sicily, where they can remain for a maximum of six months after becoming adults. The interactions were recorded when they were all being interviewed to discuss their future plans. They were informed about my research purposes, and asked to consent to my presence and to the recording of the interviews. The observation of these encounters was followed and complemented by semi-structured interviews with the staff members involved, i.e. the intercultural mediator and the psychologist, to further discuss their communication strategies. I also interviewed the legal advisor and two asylum seekers. While these interviews are not discussed in detail here, they are nevertheless briefly mentioned to further assess asylum seekers' awareness of their legal status and their experience as mediators.

My interview with the intercultural mediator (IM) focused on her training and professional experience, her views on the role that mediators play and her personal approach as exemplified by the language strategies emerged from the interviews. She has a degree in Education and has attended a training course on intercultural mediation offered by a private institution. She has been working as an intercultural mediator for a couple of years in the SPRAR centre where the asylum seekers are hosted and thus knows them relatively well. IM claims to have specifically modified and adapted her English to communicate with asylum seekers by reducing complex sentences to short and simple ones

and by simplifying syntactical structures as much as possible to make sure that she is properly understood. Such communication strategy aimed at simplifying her English has proved generally effective according to her professional experience. For instance, she avoids using the auxiliary fronting in interrogative clauses since she has observed that asylum seekers as ELF users do not use it and have problems in understanding it and identifying it as such. Interestingly enough, the lack of auxiliary fronting in interrogative clauses is a feature of what Guido defines "Italian-ELF variation" (2015:164) and is rather common among ELF users (see Graddol 2006). In other words, what IM defines as a "simplifying" linguistic strategy that she would adopt to facilitate communication is a syntactical structure that she shares with African asylum seekers as ELF users.

While asylum seekers' knowledge of English inevitably varies according to their educational and cultural background, what is relevant for the present analysis is that IM, and other professionals, are all ELF users exactly like asylum seekers. The communication strategies mentioned above, together with translanguaging practices, are thus relevant since they represent instances of how multilingual repertoires are adopted in intercultural communication. The four extracts of interactions between asylum seekers and the psychologist reported below are used to show and discuss these strategies. Excerpts 1,2,3, and 4 are all taken from dialogues during which the psychologist aimed to assess asylum seekers' awareness of their legal status and rights. It should be noted that all asylum seekers were under the age of eighteen at the time of their arrival or of the interview and were thus particularly sensitive to the authority of their interlocutors. However, professionals, such as the psychologist and the mediator, did their best to pay due attention to the minors' age while relying on their previous experience with this age group.

Excerpt 1 is taken from a dialogue between an asylum seeker (M1), who is nineteen at the time of the interview, and the psychologist (PS). M1 has been granted asylum status and is attending the equivalent of the third year of Italian middle school. His mother tongue is Somali, but he was taught both in Somali and English at school. In this and all the following dialogues English is used as a lingua franca since IM does not speak any of the asylum seekers' native languages, such as Somali and, in other cases, Fulani, Mandinga, or Wolof.

Excerpt 1
PS: Pensi che puoi avere una proroga? [Do you think you can have an extension?] IM: You think about the possibility to have other months? M1: Yes. PS: Dove vuoi andare quando finisce il progetto? [Where would you like to go when the project is over?] IM: You think where you want to go when you leave the project? M1: I think I am going to search work in Milano.

Here IM's choice to translate the Italian *proroga*, meaning "extension", with "the possibility to have other months", focusing on the benefits of a longer stay in the SPRAR centre, is immediately clear to M1 and does not require further negotiation of meaning. IM, in fact, chooses to avoid the legal term and to make its temporal connotation explicit since, according to her previous experience, specialized terminology is more often than not

unclear to her interlocutors. The lack of auxiliary fronting, which IM fails to recognize as a common ELF syntactical structure, contributes nevertheless to create a balanced communication. Paralinguistic features, such as IM's low tone of voice, her reassuring facial expressions and gaze, further testify to her "proactive role" (Todorova 2019). Like interpreters and translators in contexts of social and political injustice (Boeri and Maier, 2010; Baker 2006, 2013), IM is far from being neutral and contributes to make M1 feel at ease. Her activist strategies prove effective as individual instances of her "powerful and visible" role (Angelelli 2004:3). In this sense, in her recent study, Filmer rightly emphasizes "the impossibility of neutrality in intercultural mediation" (2019: 21).

Particularly interesting examples of asylum seekers' translanguaging practices, negotiated and similarly adopted by IM, involve the use of Italian lexical terms, which acquire specific connotations as a result of ELF communication. As IM told me, when interviewed for the first time and asked their age, asylum seekers tend to reply by saying *bambino*, an Italian term meaning 'child', which they use as a synonym of minor. They have learned to use *bambino* with such a connotation in Libya and continue to use it among themselves and when communicating with Italian professional figures. Asylum seekers' translanguaging practices are not, however, limited to the use of Italian terms with uncommon connotations. They also coin unusual collocations, such as *bambino camp*, used by M1 during the interview to refer to the Ahmed SPRAR centre for unaccompanied minors in Messina, and *bambino finito*, literally meaning "ended child", to indicate that they are no longer minors, thus adults.

In all these cases, asylum seekers appropriate Italian terms by making them acquire new meanings and create new collocations through an inherent translation process in which ELF and Italian, more precisely a hybrid form of Italian used as a lingua franca, coexist (see Guido 2015 and Sperti 2017). Crucially, for the purpose of this analysis, IM reported that she adopts the word *bambino* with the ELF specific connotations negotiated with asylum seekers, together with the other collocations, to ensure successful communication. She emphasizes that she adapts and shapes not only her English, but also her Italian during ELF interactions, using this hybrid form of Italian herself whenever necessary. It becomes a two-way process whereby IM and asylum seekers influence each other's language(s) while sharing communication strategies.

In IM's view, this is an inherent part of her job as an intercultural mediator. Furthermore, given the unequal nature of mediated encounters between Italian professionals, who are monolingual or, at best, speakers of an ELF variant and asylum seekers, acknowledging the latter's multilingualism becomes particularly relevant. This involves, for instance, on a pragmatic level, understanding the importance and implications of African speakers' phonetic traits. IM, like other Italian and Nigerian mediators I previously interviewed (Taviano 2019), pays particularly attention to these features and acknowledges that asylum seekers' pronunciation can be influenced by African languages. This is the case of uneducated Nigerians who speak Pidgin English, a spoken lingua franca, whose pronunciation is affected by local languages.

During one of the mediated encounters I observed, when an asylum seeker was asked whether he wanted to stay in Italy, his pronunciation of the verb "to live" was misleading and thus conveyed a desire "to leave". Thanks to IM's awareness of the asylum seeker's phonological patterns, and the negotiation of meaning through a further question and an overall cooperation strategy the ambiguity was clarified. This is a simple and obvious example, which is immediately solved, whereas in other cases negotiation of meaning and information can be much more complex. IM's tendency, for instance, to paraphrase legal terms referring to asylum seekers' status to encourage their knowledge and awareness of their rights can lead instead to a communication breakdown, as will be shown in the next section.

ELF communication breakdowns

When asylum seekers and Italian professionals, such as legal advisors, administrative personnel, and psychologists, mutually engage in the practice of ELF dialogues and interviews mediated by intercultural mediators, they do not share common repertoires of legal knowledge. For this reason, asylum seekers are constantly informed about their legal status and this is achieved through different steps. On arrival, they are identified and divided into groups according to their nationality and the first language they speak. Then, they are provided with information regarding the procedures for asylum applications, the progress of their own applications and their rights. However, there is a marked difference between what recently arrived asylum seekers hear from other asylum seekers about their legal status, which can vary considerably according to individual experiences, nationalities, and reasons for leaving their countries, and the information that psychologists and legal advisors try to convey.

Asylum seekers' awareness is predominant to such an extent that, for instance, they constantly request electronic identity cards and permits, which they define as *plastic*, as the legal advisor explained during our interview. While one of its possible meanings as an English noun is credit or debit card, asylum seekers specifically use it to refer to the electronic format of Italian identity and residency documents. However, *plastic* acquires further individual and social significance for asylum seekers since these documents are issued only when they are granted asylum status. The fact that they repeatedly insist on requesting *plastic* confirms the value that asylum seekers attribute to these documents well beyond the ELF connotations of the term. *Plastic* represent a point of reference for them and are perceived as a marker of identity, whether they have been granted asylum status or not.

The following excerpt from an interview with a minor from Gambia (M2) shows how IM's approach and her tendency to simplify by focusing on a single term can make communication problematic.

Excerpt 2
PS: Conosci gli aspetti legali del tuo status? [Do you know the legal aspects of your status?] IM: About the justice, you know what to do? M2: Just not breaking the laws of the country. IM: Yes, but about the documents, ok? Do you know what to do after? M2: I will just follow the rules. IM: Maybe someone can transfer you? Or you can stay forever? PS: Puoi affittare una casa? [Can you rent a house?] IM: Rent a house. M2: I will be living here, maybe go on holidays. PS: Puoi andare in Gambia con il tuo permesso? [Can you go to Gambia with your permit?] IM: With your permit you can go to Gambia? M2: Is possible. PS: No, it's not possible, international protection is for five years, you cannot move.

IM's oversimplification of the psychologist's question about the legal aspects of M2's status through the term "justice" is an example of one of her accommodation strategies. It consists of selecting a term and subsequently going through a sort of trial-and-error process. Once IM has ensured that asylum seekers understand it, she continues to use it. In this particular instance, however, her strategy leads to an obvious misunderstanding, despite her following attempts to clarify that the question refers to the asylum seeker's documents and his legal status, reinforced by her use of the ELF tag "ok". M2 repeats his answer to confirm his willingness to abide by the law, rather than addressing the psychologist's question regarding his rights. The mediator then adopts a different strategy by suggesting an exaggerated hypothesis to obtain a relevant answer while the psychologist continues the exchange by asking further questions.

Despite further attempts, IM and the psychologist do not succeed in obtaining the information they require and thus contribute to a communication breakdown. Their efforts to disambiguate their questions prevent mutual intelligibility and although M2 appears willing to cooperate on a pragmatic level, the sequence of questions do not have the desired effect of assessing M2's awareness of his status as an asylum seeker. The psychologist's position of authority inevitably affects this encounter dynamics making the communication unbalanced. This is confirmed by the fact that after M2 fails to provide the answers that PS expects, she chooses to inform him that he cannot leave Italy in English, rather than in Italian, thus overshadowing IM's role as a mediator. It is noteworthy that, as opposed to IM, she uses a grammatically correct standard form of English in her attempt to strengthen the illocutionary force of her utterance.

As the professionals involved in this study confirmed, asylum seekers can change and adapt their stories when they feel under pressure and become aware of what their interlocutors want to hear. In other occasions, they relax if they feel that they can trust their addressee. In this case, despite the fact that M2 knows his interlocutors quite well, thus trusts them and he is not subject to particular stress (as would be the case, for instance, during interviews for asylum applications), his answers show to what extent ELF communication dynamics can be affected by status asymmetries. Guido (2015), for instance, discusses a case, among others, of a mediator who tries to *disambiguate* an asylum seekers' answers in his report. The result is that he distorts the locutionary reference, thus the illocutionary force of the asylum seeker's speech, to make narration consistent with his own interpretation. Similar issues are reported by asylum seekers after their interview with asylum commissions. When they read the commissions' report with the help of IM and the psychologist, in some cases, they complain that it does not correspond to what they have said. However, when asked why they did not tell the commission, they confess that they were so anxious that they did not realize there was a problem at the time.

The following excerpt, taken from an interview with an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone (M4), who was a minor when he arrived in Italy and was eighteen at the time of the interview, shows similarities with the previous case. In the first part of the exchange he is asked about his plans for the future. PS and IM's series of questions and moves aimed to stimulate M4's answers clash with his hesitant and brief replies.

Excerpt n.3

IM: Now you are in a SPRAR for adults and then you have to go out to live independent.

PS: Hai pensato a cosa farai quando uscirai da qui? Stai cercando lavoro, stai cercando casa? [Have you thought about what you are going to do when you leave? Are you looking for a job, for a house?]

IM: Are you thinking what to do you when you go out? When you finish this project?

PS: I tuoi progetti per il futuro? [Your plans for the future?]

IM: Your projects for your life, for your job?

M4: I have experience.

PS: Che tipo di esperienza? [What kind of experience?]

IM: Which kind of experience?

M4: In the kitchen.

PS: Sai in Italia come si cerca lavoro, stai cercando lavoro? [Do you know how to look for a job in Italy, are you looking for a job?]

IM: Do you know how to look for a job? You know what to do for a job?

M4: Really, I don't know how to look for a job.

IM: Ok? Ok? Give the people your curriculum?

M4: Yes.

PS: Sei qui in uno Sprar per adulti per una durata di 6 mesi. Dopo dovrai uscire e vivere una vita autonoma. [You are here in a Sprar for adults for 6 months. Then you will have to go and live an independent life.]

As in the previous exchange, despite IM and the psychologist's paraphrases and repetitive questioning, and IM's use of the ELF tag "ok" to encourage M4's answers, he provides very limited information while revealing his lack of knowledge on how to look for a job. In the second part of the exchange, M4 is asked about his legal status.

Excerpt n.4

PS: Che tipo di protezione hai? [What type of protection do you have?]

IM: What type of protection you have?

M4: I don't remember.

PS: Anche in italiano. Casi… [Even in Italian…Cases…]

IM: How do you call it?

PS: Quanti anni è? [How many years is it valid for?]

IM: How many years?

M4: Two years.

PS: Come si chiama? [What's its name?]

M4: Casi speciali. [Special cases]

PS: OK, due anni, casi speciali. Quando questa protezione che dura due anni finisce cosa devi fare? [Ok, two years, special cases. When this protection which last for two years ends, what do you need to do?]

IM: What do you do after the end of the protection?

M4: Renew it.

SA: Come la puoi rinnovare? [How can you renew it?]

IM: How do you do it?

M4: Really I don't know, maybe I need a lawyer.

M4 first replies that he does not remember what his legal status is and contradicts himself immediately after by referring to the so-called two-year humanitarian protection, also known as "special cases". He does so, however, only after the psychologist suggests the Italian term, and its duration. While these shared linguistic strategies, including code-mixing in this case, appear to be useful, M4 admits again to his lack of knowledge. His uncertainty about his rights becomes even more evident through his mistaken belief that he might need to contact a lawyer.

This exchange, like the previous one, shows that ELF communication between professionals and asylum seekers regarding their rights is unsuccessful despite shared translanguaging practices and the legal information they are constantly provided with. Indeed, it could be argued that asylum seekers do not relate to such information because ELF communication dynamics are determined by Italian professionals whose efforts and commitment to mutual intelligibility do not prove to be sufficient. IM and the other professionals attribute such communication failures to asylum seekers' refusal of the legal information they receive due to changes in Italian migration policy and procedures, determined by succeeding

governments. For instance, before the 2018 decree by the former Italian Home Minister Salvini, unaccompanied minors were automatically granted humanitarian protection, while they now have to apply for it with the risk of a possible denial.

It goes without saying that asylum seekers may have difficulties in understanding such changes and that this might confuse them, at least to a certain extent. However, the dialogues I have observed reveal a more complex interaction affected not only by asylum seekers' arguably limited knowledge of their rights, but also, and perhaps even more so, by communication dynamics established by Italian professionals, despite IM's emphatic attitude and her commitment to mutual intelligibility. Key issues such as power imbalances remain to be fully addressed to avoid communication breakdowns, both at the level of individual actions and strategies, and within a wider social and political context.

Addressing power asymmetries

One first possible answer might lie in training courses addressed to all professionals (from legal aids to psychologists) interacting with asylum seekers to make them aware of the impact that ELF users' linguacultural diversity has on mutual intelligibility and on the overall communication dynamics. This would mean calling into question predominant hierarchical relationships whereby asylum seekers' speeches and narratives are judged on the basis of monolingual Western standards and narrative models, as previously argued. It is precisely by making Italian professionals operating in these settings aware that ELF is far from being neutral and equally accessible to everyone that these dynamics can be subverted, thus, for instance, avoiding language practices, such as simplifying strategies, particularly if they prove unhelpful.

Recognizing asylum seekers' multilingual skillset as a resource by offering them interpreting and translation training and subsequent job opportunities, more than it is currently done, could represent a further option. It goes without saying that such a choice would go against the current legislative framework, which encourages the fragmentation of academic and professional training while systematically failing to recognize intercultural mediators' professional role on a national level (see Amato and Garwood 2011, Katan 2015, Filmer and Federici 2018, among others). The situation is particularly alarming in Sicily due to the lack of a regional law regarding intercultural mediators and the fragmented training context, despite the region's prominent geographical position. According to Filmer and Federici (2018), the development of too many policies regulating mediators' tasks and profiles according to regional requirements becomes counterproductive since it prevents local authorities from optimizing training, qualifications and resources. The lack of professional recognition, coupled with extremely low funding, is a clear indication of the limited attention devoted to intercultural communication leading to the violation of a human right: "it is not an emergency to organize linguistic support for asylum seekers who are in reception centres as long as three years, it is a human right in protection of language minorities [...] and a first step for better integration, as demanded by the legislative framework." (Filmer and Federici, 2018: 248-249). Filmer's recent study provides further evidence of the disregard for intercultural mediation by Italian authorities, local institutions and politicians, and she rightly claims that the "current immigration policy is likely to bring even more instability to the 'interpreter's habitus' (Inghilleri 2005) within the already uncertain and fluid sphere of cultural mediation" (Filmer 2019:22).

It is in such an unbalanced context, clearly pursued and maintained by political networks and lobbies, that I believe it is paramount to recognize the value of asylum seekers interested in becoming professional mediators as an asset. It is precisely to discuss their familiarity with translation practices that I decided to interview two asylum seekers with mediation experience: one from Gambia (M2) and the other from Ghana (M3). A speaker of Mandinga, Fulani, Wolof, ELF, and, more recently Italian, M2 has acted as a mediator,

encouraged by IM, whenever requested in the SPRAR centre hosting him, as it often occurs in refugee emergency contexts (Todorova 2019). This was a particularly challenging experience for him through a three-step process whereby he translated from Fulani into ELF, which was then translated into Italian by IM. It was also an opportunity to put into practice his multilingual skills and familiarity with translation strategies that he tends to adopt in everyday communication. For instance, when talking with Senegalese asylum seekers to Gambia, who tend to code-mix Wolof with French, if he said "bul worry" (don't worry) in Wolof and realized that his/her interlocutor was not a Wolof speaker, he immediately translated it into English, thus showing to possess those interpersonal sensitivity and cognitive flexibility that the role of mediators requires. Like M2, M3 is also familiar with translanguaging and translation practices. He has been speaking Twi and ELF since childhood, he also speaks basic Arabic and, after studying Italian for over a year and obtaining the middle school diploma, he is now fluent in Italian. M3 has occasionally acted as a mediator from Twi into ELF in SPRAR centres and together with M2 has taken part in a project funded by the Messina Port Authority, *WelcoMe/AccogliMe*, which offers English-speaking and French-speaking asylum seekers the opportunity to welcome cruise ship tourists.

Asylum seekers cannot automatically ensure successful communication simply because they share common experiences, and/or linguacultural backgrounds with other displaced people, given also the variety of languages they speak. Nevertheless, as Vigo's study shows (2015), there are remarkable differences in terms of power asymmetries and metacognitive frames adopted by non-Italian mediators compared to their Italian colleagues and this often leads to a higher percentage of efficiency in intercultural communication. What non-Italian mediators like M2 and M3 can bring to ELF communication is their awareness as multilinguals that the powerful biological metaphors of *mother tongue* and *native speaker* are culturally constructed (Polezzi, forthcoming) and thus irrelevant, or better detrimental, to successful communication. As previously argued, asylum seekers' entitlement to receive information about their rights and legal status in their native language or in a language they understand is a human right. Although recognizing such a right is far from being on the current political agenda in Italy, it is through single, albeit politically significant, pilot projects whereby asylum seekers are given training opportunities, for instance within the same reception centre where they are hosted, as I have shown elsewhere (Taviano 2019), that the current system can start to change through a bottom-up process.

Conclusions

I hope I have managed to show the fluid and hybrid nature of ELF as negotiated in mediated encounters, together with the complexity of the communication dynamics determined by Italian professionals in a position of authority. Misunderstanding and communication breakdowns examined in this paper are the result of language indifference on the part of Italian professionals who assume that they can convey legal information to asylum seekers through a supposedly neutral tool of communication without sufficiently taking into account ELF users' linguacultural diversity. Inghilleri (2017), among others, believes that the limited language and translation resources available to displaced people confirm that quality translation provision is far from being considered a key aspect of human rights. This is why activist strategies, such as those shown here, together with others (see Olohan and Davitti 2015, Taronna 2015), are particularly relevant for the radical challenges that they oppose to widespread practices aiming to maintain the status quo. Documenting and analysing these strategies and experiments, as well as identifying and proposing new initiatives and actions, is the responsibility of researchers and scholars interested in giving their contribution to radical social and political change, as I argue elsewhere (Taviano forthcoming).

The need for further sustained and detailed study of the implications of language indifference in ELF mediated communication, as in all other cases, cannot go unnoticed. It

is precisely by recognizing the importance of language diversity, multilingualism and translation practices that the interconnections between mediated ELF communication and displaced people's rights can start to be addressed. Raising awareness of the implications of language indifference is thus vital to put language(s), ELF communication and intercultural mediation at the centre, rather than at the margins, of migration policies and legislation to limit or put an end to cases of inequality and injustice and safeguard migrants, refugees and asylum seekers' rights.

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