# LINGUACULTURAL IDENTITY PATHS IN THE BLOG
## *ME4CHANGE*

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**Abstract** - The debate on migration, identity and power has been thriving over the last decades. It is now a priority not only in the context of current television programmes and talk shows but also across different genres and social media, among which a pivotal role is played by websites and blogs. In the latter, the issues of identity, power, contact and belonging come into play more than in any other domain, pushing us towards 'translanguaging' ethnographies and 'superdiversity' (Blommaert and Rampton 2011), as well as to new forms of discourse which result from a process of complex adaptation (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008). The aim of this paper is to gain some insights into the use of language as a means of identity expression on the part of migrants belonging to different lingua-cultural backgrounds. More specifically, we propose some excerpts taken from the website and blog *Me4Change* as expression of transnational uses of English as a Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer 2003, 2011) at both linguistic and multimodal level. The analysis of case studies taken from the corpus is meant to add new points for discussion to the already-existing literature on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) variations and highlight new features for its creative use, which are beyond any regional and national boundaries. The contribution is also meant to provide additional tools for the interpretation of the discourse of migrants, also in practical terms, by intercultural mediators operating in the field of humanitarian aid and support to migrants and asylum seekers.

**Keywords**: ELF; migration; identity; corpora; creativity.

## 1. Introduction

It goes without saying that the debate on migration, identity and power has become an issue which has to be addressed cautiously and which involves not only political choices but – first and foremost – ethical and socio-cultural dimensions concerning the lives of many people who leave their countries in search for new beginnings. The most recent vicissitudes relating to the action taken by some national countries have not allowed migrants to have their say and keep their own identity and power alive, as their own lives have constantly been put at risk across the sea and their urgent need for better life conditions and asylum has been far more important than any other aspect.

The aim of the present paper is not to conduct a purely linguistic analysis with findings in terms of numbers and figures, but to provide some points for further discussion within the on-going debate on migration, identity and power. Hence, by means of practical examples the present pages are part of a wider project on the perception of the English language as a lingua franca or, better say, a *virtual language* (Seidlhofer 2017) which constantly undergoes a complex adaptation process due to the interaction among people belonging to different linguacultural backgrounds. English as a virtual language represents a repertoire which, as we shall see in the examples provided throughout the present contribution, does not only involve linguistic aspects of communication in ELF but also implies a multispectral approach which takes into consideration its multifaceted nature. In this respect, we want to borrow Canagarajah's perspective on people interacting in English as a contact language who "may find ways to negotiate, alter and oppose political structures, and reconstruct their languages, cultures, identities to their advantage" (Canagarajah 1999, p. 2). Canagarajah's view is going to guide us in the identification and definition of examples for linguacultural paths across the blog *Me4Change*, which constitutes the object of our analysis.

The present paper is structured as follows: in *Section Two*, we provide the theoretical background to the present study, which considers first of all the definition of ELF together with

its implications in both linguistic and cultural terms, by borrowing the Kachruvian definition of the Three Circles of English in order to see the extent to which ELF represents an unprecedented phenomenon which is not only confined to linguistic aspects of language variety (Kachruvian 1985); as regards the analysis of the videos and the scripts, we draw on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2001) definition of image as *semiotic landscape*, which thanks to its spatial relations or grammar of visual images can represent the starting point for a set of meta-functions and can carry out new forms of meanings; Section Two will then move on to a more '(inter-)cultural' definition of ELF interaction which considers Blommaert and Rampton's concept of *superdiversity* (Blommaert, Rampton 2011), which derives from Vertovec's (Vertovec 2007) as well as Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's definition of English as a complex adaptive system which undergoes constant changes and re-formulations due to the exposure of different people in the communicative event (Larsen-Freeman, Cameron 2008). *Section Three* will provide the methodology as well as the different phases which are at the basis of the present study: it will also provide additional information about the data which was considered for the purposes of our brief analysis; *Section Four* will identify and explain the most recurrent features occurring in the study blog and finally, the *Conclusions* section will provide grounds for the need to have an integrated approach to intercultural discourse, which goes beyond any purely linguistic analysis.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. English as a Lingua Franca in multicultural settings

Before moving on to the analysis of our case studies, it is well worth providing a brief overview of the theoretical background with which the present study comes to be intertwined. First of all, it goes without saying that the analysis of language use in migration contexts and, more specifically, in web-mediated forms of discourse presupposes the consideration of the notion of English as a Lingua Franca (henceforth ELF) which has been gaining momentum since the 2000s, when Seidlhofer laid the foundations for the study of ELF since, as she noted, there was

> a marked shortage of linguistic research into what this 'English' actually looks like when it is used in diverse constellations among 'non-native' speakers. And these are, after all, the majority of users of the language both globally as well as in Europe (Seidlhofer 2001, p. 16, *emphasis added*).

Since then, ELF has received such a great deal of attention among scholars that it has become possible to consider it as a *de facto* sub-discipline in the field of applied linguistics, with studies ranging from corpus-driven approaches to discourse, to more theoretical and classroom-based investigations. In addition to this, huge sets of data have started to be collected and have been made available to scholars in electronic formats – these corpus projects include VOICE (2011), ELFA (2008) and ACE (2014). The use of large corpora has contributed to the increase in studies on ELF, which have made it possible to identify pragma-linguistic and accommodation strategies as well as creativity patterns in intercultural communicative settings. Notwithstanding this, corpus-driven studies on ELF corpora have focused on the analysis of circumscribed settings (e.g. classroom, academia, Erasmus exchanges), which resulted in the impossibility to generalise findings. In addition to this, the pragmatic aspect of ELF exchanges has to be dealt with cautiously, especially because we find ourselves in a peculiar scenario of interaction, in which people belonging to different linguacultural backgrounds interact and transfer their L1 cognitive schemata to their ELF uses. Indeed, if we consider the three-circle model provided by Kachru, what we are facing through the ELF phenomenon is a change in the

linguistic (and cultural) scenario of English, according to which the number of speakers belonging to the so-called inner circle (including English as a first language) is being overcome by an unprecedented increase in the number of speakers from the outer circle (where English is learnt and taught as a foreign language).

## 2.2. Language as a superdiversity phenomenon

The current migration flows which have become more and more widespread especially in the Mediterranean area have brought about a re-definition of the role of language in its complexity as a phenomenon which is not merely linguistic: several people have come into contact, all of which bringing with them not only a set of linguistic expressions and devices, but also cultural and social expressions which represent an integral part of their lives and which they firmly want to pass on to the newer generations. However, language contact does not only involve the interaction between migrants but also affects communicative exchanges with the native speakers of the hosting country under different modes of communication; hence, the phenomenon of language contact has to be dealt with not only in terms of *diversity* and differentiation of socio-cultural and linguistic traits, but – first and foremost, in Vertovec's terms – as a *superdiversity* phenomenon (Vertovec 2007), in which several factors definitely come into play. As Blommaert and Rampton later explained:

> Over a period of several decades – and often emerging in response to issues predating superdiversity– there has been ongoing revision of fundamental ideas (a) about languages, (b) about language groups and speakers, and (c) about communication. Rather than working with homogeneity, stability and boundedness as the starting assumptions, mobility, mixing, political dynamics and historical embedding are now central concerns in the study of languages, language groups and communication (Blommaert, Rampton 2011, p. 4).

A superdiversity perspective in the study of language variation enables us to consider language as a complex phenomenon and to dismantle already-existing standardised conceptualisations of English as *the* language, the prestige variety beyond which no other variety is worth being considered and studied. A superdiversity approach to language allows us to gradually construct a counter-discourse of tolerance and respect, especially in intercultural contexts in which the relationship between identity, self-affirmation and power is put at serious risk by biased and pre-determined uses of language. On the same vein, the present case studies embrace this concept and makes it a fundamental step towards an analysis of new linguacultural paths in identity creation and promotion on the part of migrant in intercultural contexts of interaction.

## 2.3. Language as 'semiotic' and 'linguistic' landscape

Another important point which inevitably has to be taken into account for the purposes of the present analysis is the consideration of language itself as a 'semiotic landscape' – borrowing Kress and Van Leeuwen's terminology (Kress, Van Leeuwen 1996; 2001). Language does not have to be considered in its purely linguistic sense, but rather as a space that interacts with other extra-linguistic features (e.g. the visual context, colours, intonation, pitch), negotiates and shapes meaning and identity across multimodality. At this proposal and within the theoretical framework adopted for the present study, in their *Preface* to Blommaert's book *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes* (Blommaert 2013), Pennycook *et al*. (*Ivi,* xi-xii) provide some useful considerations related to the notion of linguistic landscape, which

[it] emphasizes that language is not something that exists only in people's heads, in texts written for institutional consumption or in spoken interactions, but rather is part of the physical environment. […] Linguistic landscapes take us into the spatiality of language. […] The idea of complexity, in which non-linear, recursive and emergent forms of meaning making are foregrounded, is crucially important not only for understanding LLs, but also for how we teach and learn second/additional languages, particularly in the super-diversifying, cosmopolitan spaces (*Ibidem*).

The present study therefore also investigates the linguistic landscape related to the speech event of the videos on the *Me4change* platform and describes the extent to which other context-related features (e.g. intonation, visual context, orientation of images) concur to the intercultural dimension and identity affirmation of the speakers involved in the communicative act.

## 3. Methodology

The case studies which constitute the core of our analysis of ELF in migration blogs are taken from the blog of the EU-financed *Migrants Empowerment for Change (Me4Change)* project (http://me4change.eu/stories/), which collects the video-stories of young migrant entrepreneurs in an attempt to build their identities within society and help them be successful and self-employed. Hence, social inclusion represents a priority issue and, as stated on the platform itself, the blog becomes "a vital eco-system where young migrants can exploit their opportunities, grow and build business skills to improve as entrepreneurs". The blog contains a section which is denominated *Stories*, in which migrants are asked to implement inspirational journeys in which they provide their own experience as new entrepreneurs who have succeeded in earning a living all over Europe by providing a wide range of services to other people. More specifically, the study corpus is made of the seven oral interviews in the form of videos which constitute the content of the website and which were analysed in search for linguacultural and new hybridised forms of English in which the empowerment potential transpires and allows migrants to give voice to this process of social inclusion. In the light of the theoretical background and considerations exposed earlier in Section Two, the analysis has involved a *linguistic* approach to the transcribed data as well as an analysis of *suprasegmental* traits, such as intonation and pitch and a *multimodal* approach to the images taken from the interview, whether in form of screenshots or images within the website, in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of the context and linguistic landscape in which the interview takes place and see how extra-linguistic elements can also contribute to the creation and construction of identity. This analysis inevitably re-evokes, to some extent, Halliday's theory on *Systemic Functional Grammar*, according to which language involves a semantic, a lexico-grammatical as well as a phonological dimension – in Halliday's words, language is *social semiotic* (*Ibidem*).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Tense and aspect

One of the recurrent patterns in the analysis of the transcribed videos is represented by idiosyncrasies in terms of tense and aspect when it comes to narrating a migrant's past experience and life. Among them, is an interview with Malakeh Jasmati, a Syrian refugee who was a famous TV presenter in her country; due to the civil war she was forced to flee and reach Germany, where she is now a well-established cook and runs a gourmet restaurant in Berlin

called *Levante Gourmet*. As she enters the Me4change project, she decides to tell her story and to encourage people to take action against discrimination.

Malakeh highly privileges the *present* tense, regardless of whether it is a past or a present action: the use of the present tense allows her to perceive her past actions as present, as a present which is not too far from her current experience as a cook in Berlin; the present also enables her to express a sense of continuity between past and present, as well as a sense of identity and belonging. The following excerpts explain this use with some practical examples:

1.    I **decide** with my husband to name this company in this name [*Levante Gourmet*] because its **meaning** Syrian, Lebanese, Jordan and Palestine. We **are cooking** for de events: privete party, ministery, university.

2.    I *came* to here with my husband because we are_not allowed to live in our country, because **we are wanted** there. We *were helping* poor people and this **is not allowed** in Syria now because Asad regime.

As we can see, the present tense appears to be used as a way to connect past and present (as in the case of `I decide with my husband to name this company in this name`); however, as can be seen from the examples suggested above, also the continuous aspect appears to be in line with a certain degree of continuity and commitment on the part of Malakeh, i.e. her intention to welcome all Syrian, Lebanese, Jordan and Palestine people in her gourmet restaurant and to share her cooking experience with special meals for events. An interesting play on tenses is provided by the past-present opposition, which conveys a sense of displacement as well as a means for considering an action, an event or a situation as a 'finished' past, something which will never happen again: the simple past here is in fact used by Malakeh when she mentions her arrival in Germany together with her husband – an event which is undoubtedly unpleasant as they were both escaping civil war in Syria; she then resorts to the present to describe their status as people rejected by their country and finally she uses a present passive form (`we are wanted`) with a preposition of time (i.e. `there`) which again renders a sense of displacement not only in time but also in space.

Another example for this past-present contraposition is provided by another excerpt taken from the blog: this time the protagonist is Omar Alshafai, an entrepreneur from Syria who now lives in Berlin and through his company he is committed to ensuring that the bureaucratic aspects for refugees, migrants and all people are easily managed. Omar uses the present as he talks about his own experience with the so-called 'red tape', as the following excerpts show:

1.  I **live** in Berlin since three years. So as Syria refugee who **came** alone and with zero knowledge about (.) the system here the law and everything and of course the most difficult part **was** the bureaucrazy jungle

2.  and the bureaucrazy **is** that I had to deal with it. Bureaucrazy from my perspective of course (.) its big issue (.) a very big issue from German perspective not only mine.

The examples provided above here, again, show how the play on tenses can be exploited as a potential in multicultural contexts. In an intercultural and more descriptive perspective on language variation, it is not possible to consider such variations as 'deficit', as they are indeed emerging translingual practices with specific pragmatic aims. Here, the contraposition between past and present is iconic, in that it expresses on the one hand the willingness to leave the past behind by means of a past tense which relegates the action to a past time which hopefully will never come back; on the other, the present despite the past action indicates clearly the

oppression which is caused by a problem which cannot be left behind but which is still present. In this very specific case, the problem which Omar has faced since he came to Germany is bureaucracy or, as he defines it by playing on words, bureaucrazy, which is also the name of his company which simplifies administrative and complex bureaucratical issues for people who find them inaccessible.

### 4.2. Supra-segmental traits

The second stage of our analysis involved the study of supra-segmental traits and, more specifically, intonation and stress when dealing with past and present experience. Also here the findings are rather in line with our previous linguistic data, concerning the past-present contraposition but, most of all, a rising tone of voice appears to be predominantly associated with positive aspects of life in the host country as well as to practical aspects related to the cooking experience. Here follow some excerpts with the highlighted parts meaning that emphasis on some words was put during the interviews:

```
1. We have decided to open our own company because we (.) have (.) (.) our
   own message we want to share the love with the people and we believe
   the food is common language.
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2. Sometime the burocracy here its... e:m and the paper but all of the German
   friends they help us to know everything about the rules here, about
   how we make our Gewerbe, our Red Card here.
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As can be seen in the two excerpts provided above, the **emphasis** appears to be put mainly on verbs and nouns which describe either Malakeh's personal cooking experience or her experience in the host country – the latter is also signaled by the presence of a typically German word, i.e. *Gewerbe*, which means job or commerce. The impossibility or incapability to adequately translate the term *Gewerbe* into English may be a further proof for successful integration and acceptance of the host country.

*Bureaucracy* – as appears from previous examples and in general across the blog - appears to be a recurring issue for migrants and asylum seekers. The suprasegmental traits identified in Malakeh's dialogue are found also in another excerpt by Omar, whose interview actually focuses on bureaucratical issues and how to deal with them:

```
1. Germany expels around 6 billion every year for (.) the bureaucracy.
   Whoever you ask (.) refugees, migrants, German as well (.) they gonna
   say (.) yes (.) I have this problem as well
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2. Year 2015 we met (.) I mean the team and I (.) we all agree that the
   bureaucrazy is the most difficult part and issue and German and we
   should find a solution to help the others because (.) we all went
   through this whole situation
```

In these two excerpts, it is also interesting to notice how the emphasis is put on nouns and adjectives with a negative connotation (e.g. bureaucrazy, problem, difficult), in order to highlight the fact that action has to be taken in this sense to facilitate the whole process of issuing documents.

### *4.3. Multimodal context-related elements in the interviews*

When it comes to integration and identity, also the context of the interview represents a further demonstration not only of identity but also of integration of different cultures. The following three freeze-screens were taken from the interviews in different moments, which indicate an additional co-existence of different cultures. The first freeze screen for Malakeh has been taken right at the beginning of the interview, in an introductory phase:



Figure 1. First freeze frame taken from Malakeh Jazmati's video

The interview begins with a picture of Malakeh Jazmati (Figure 1 above) which might appear too simplistic as a description, but yet represents, together with the two following pictures (Figures 2 and 3), the three different phases of her integration in Germany. As can be seen, Malakeh occupies a central position in the picture and we can also see the blurred background of her kitchen. The way she dressed as well is a symbol of integration between her own culture and how she has to formally be dressed in the kitchen. She is the first symbol of integration as we move on to watch the video. The second freeze frame (Figure 2) introduces us to the next phase in which Malakeh is cooking in her kitchen. Also this picture might seem to be rather traditional, but if we have a look at the kitchen and the context in which she is cooking, we immediately notice the presence of majolicas which are typical of Malakeh's home country Syria.

Figure 2. Second freeze frame taken from Malakeh Jazmati's video

We can say that in the freeze frame above Malakeh is a social actor who, thanks to her identity and her own traditions, successfully puts together the two different traditions to which she belongs: the traditions of her home country and those of her hosting country Germany.

The third and last freeze frame (Figure 3 below) taken from the video highlights how the two cultures have undergone a process of successful integration and co-existence: the cooking utensils and the majolicas.



Figure 3. Third freeze frame taken from Malakeh's video

Also Omar's story includes iconic moments related to the struggle with bureaucracy which is constantly present in his interview. In the first picture, his facial expression already announces his disappointment with rather complex administrative issues in Germany. The background is also very dark, it appears to be obscure – exactly as one would expect for bureaucratic procedures to be in a country which is not yours.



Figure 4. First freeze frame taken from Omar's video

The second and the third pictures seem to confirm the struggle which a migrant or asylum seeker has to go through when s/he first arrives in a foreign country:

Figure 5 and 6. Second and third freeze frames taken from Omar's video

The two freeze frames both depict two distinct moments in the *bureaucrazy* issue: the first picture, in fact, shows Omar and his colleague right in front of one of the most important monuments in Berlin, i.e the *Bundestag*, and they are both staring at it. If we compare the two pictures, we immediately notice that there is a difference in the focus for each of them: in the first picture, the monument symbolising administration is in a focal position, whereas in the second picture the focus is on the two boys who are staring at each other, probably thinking about what action can be taken with respect to bureaucratic issues. The two pictures represent, in symbolic terms, Syria and Germany: on the one side, we find two young boys with their hopes and dreams, trying to build their future in Berlin, which they see as a chimera due to the inaccessibility of administrative procedures; on the other, we find the power of mutual understanding which is represented by the two boys in front of the Bundestag. In addition, identity construction also transpires from the two pictures, as one could say that in the first pictures the identity of the two boys is metaphorically represented as obscure, inaccessible, whereas in the second they seem to be more integrated as also traits do not appear to be blurred any more. The last picture confirms this point of view, as it shows the two boys' legs as they are walking towards the same direction – a metaphor for a common path towards self-affirmation and identity construction.
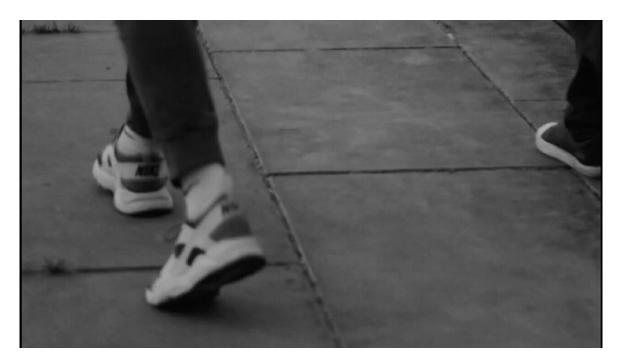
Figure 7. Last freeze frame taken from Omar's video

## 5. Concluding remarks

The object of the present study, as already pointed out earlier in this paper, was to raise awareness on the necessity to share a multi-dimensional approach to the analysis of linguacultural variations, especially in multicultural contexts in which several factors come into play beside the linguistic dimension which, as also emerges from the examples provided throughout the paper, is rather incomplete as an approach. The present paper has demonstrated the extent to which Vertovec's perspective of language as superdiversity can actually be adopted to analyse ELF variations which are now becoming more and more hybridised as a consequence of the interaction of several people belonging to even more diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Such an approach to language contact as a 'superdiverse' phenomenon acquires much more importance for the training of intercultural and linguistic mediators who undoubtedly have to have a clear overview not only of the different linguistic variations that ELF presents and which are highly influenced by the linguacultural background of the speakers, but also of other important signals and multidimensional aspects which might appear as less important but which, as also the case studies analysed here have pointed out, appear to share the same characteristics and are thus worth of further investigation.

The examples provided in this paper are of course not so quantitatively representative as to generalise findings as these pages have only constituted a brief tour d'horizon of some features of ELF which will definitely become the object of further studies also involving other discourse domains and groups of interactants. In this regard, it would be well worth investigating the use of speech acts and gestures on a bigger sample of texts in order to identify common patterns in intercultural domains and whether these are somewhat related to the speaker's L1s.

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