



“Tandem”

IO1: INTERACTIVE MAP OF LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES AND SKILLS

Outcomes of the roundtable with stakeholders on
language diversity in Italy



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Introduction:

This document is a summary of a roundtable with stakeholders, held in April/May 2020, on the linguistic diversity in the partner countries of the TANDEM project. For more information about the project, please consult the project's website: www.teachyourlanguage.eu.

Who participates to the roundtable (Short description & Profession)?

Due to the situation in Palermo, as a result of the global epidemic COVID-19, the round-table were held online, through skype or WhatsApp. According to availability, three conversations were held in which 5 people participated. These people were:

1. G. C., tutor for the FAMI project at [ITaStra](#) (Italian language school for foreigners) and distance learning teacher of Italian
2. D. N., former President [of Palermo Council of Cultures](#), a city institution for the political participation of foreign, non-EU, EU and stateless citizens
3. M. J., cultural mediator, teachers at ITaStra, and member of [Associazione Jekafò](#), association for intercultural dialogue
4. A.A., tutor at [Fondazione Exodos](#), an association whose activities include the training and the professional-social reintegration of migrants
5. M. T, founder and coordinator at [Casa Officina](#), an intercultural educative centre

As all participants answered from the personal and professional experience, the answers cannot be taken as an absolute truth but reflect the opinions and experiences, which are always partial.

Round table topics

Main trends: National and Local (or regional) level

In the last three years, one of the most significant change for the presence and characteristics of migrant communities in Palermo, has been the ban for NGOs to rescue people who try to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Libya. This consequently led to a decrease in the number of migrants arriving in this way, and therefor also to a change in the characteristics of newly arrived migrants after the ban. Nevertheless, in the current situation in Palermo, many of the migrants are still connected to the period in which boats could arrive until Palermo and it is mostly them that are being thought of when talking about migrants during the round-table.

According to most of the participants of the roundtable, migrants residing in Palermo come from Sub -Sahara countries, such as Senegal, Ghana, Guinea, Gambia and Ivory Coast. Other large migrant communities are from Tunisian, Bangladesh, Romanian and Chinese background.

G. C., who teaches at an Italian language school for foreigners (ITaStra), is of the opinion that not only the nationalities changed in the last three years, but also the

characteristics. She mentioned that there used to be several but small groups of different nationalities in her classes, having more or less the same level of education (which was low). Nowadays she noticed two types of migrants applying for the courses: those who have been in Palermo for decades and who need the Italian B1 level to gain the Italian citizenship (which is a very high level especially for women starting from scratch) and migrants with a high(er) education level, who therefore do not easily fit into ITaStra courses which are often for very low schooling level.

From the discussion, it emerged that the most spoken language among the above-discussed nationalities, is English followed by Arabic and French (the order depends on who makes the list). English and French are colonial languages, learned at school (implying a basic level of schooling), Arabic can be the official language, or the language migrants who came through Libya learned on their way.

Furthermore, it was found that as many of the migrants come from Sub-Sahara Africa, most spoken African languages are Fula, Wolof (Gambia and Senegal), Pulaar, Jola languages, Mandinka (Gambia), Bambara, Bini (Nigeria), Swahili, Tamil, Fula, Twi (Ghana). Also, Bangla is spoken a lot by the Bangladesh community. Finally, Chinese and Romanian are broadly spoken due to the presence of their communities in Palermo.

With regards to their educational profile, all answers had as a common point that in Palermo there is a great variety of school level, both between and within nationalities, and between first and second generation. Second generation migrants arrive up to university level. Many first-generation migrants completed (or almost completed) high school in their home countries. Some even have a university degree. Many others did not attend school at all.

Despite having completed secondary school in their home county (high school), migrants must start from the first level of secondary school in Italy (scuola media). This is because the Italian educational system is different and they might lack some basic knowledge. Some people from Romania, Poland, Bangladesh have university degrees (some are doctors or teachers) but their degrees are not recognized in Italy. Luckily there are courses at university of Palermo which give value to their studies.

M. J., as a migrant himself but now working for a language school that works with newly arrived migrants, explained that one of the reasons why migrants do not attend university in their home countries is that they are expensive. Also, the fact that school is in English (for example in Gambia) or in French (in Senegal and Guinea Bissau) and not in their mother tongues, represents an additional difficulty when they want to go to university.

Difficulties are also faced in finding work opportunities, especially with recognition of previous skills. More than one person affirmed that many migrants want to become

cultural mediators, and some would be perfect for the job, but their secondary school degree is not enough (a university degree is required). M. J. added that some migrants are already professionals (tailors, mechanics) but once in Italy they do not get the chance of work within their professions due to the difficulties of getting their skills and degrees recognized, or due to their living situation. The latter was explained by M. J. by his personal experience. He said that if migrants came through irregular entry points, and they have been placed by the police in certain communities or reception centers, the location of those communities is key for the employment opportunities. For example, in the city are more opportunities than in the countryside. Maybe there, they can work sometimes without a contract on the farms, but this is not what they want neither does these kinds of jobs offer good payment, security or future possibilities.

When living in the city, and going to school, migrants often go into a more practical direction and can become mechanics, electricians, etc. thanks to professional schools, explains A. A. (an educator from an association which trains and reintegrates migrants into society). However, he recognizes that more common jobs (which do not require school) are temporary and often under exploitation conditions (as confirmed by other participants) such as waiters or delivery persons. According to D. N. (former president of a city institution representing all foreign communities) in rare case they are lucky enough to find good jobs at restaurants, pastry shops or bakeries.

In fact, participants agreed on the shortage of jobs opportunities for migrants in Palermo. Besides the jobs mentioned before, the categories mostly cited during the roundtable were caregivers for the elders, maids, gardener. These are low-skilled jobs, and the first two are almost completely covered by migrant women.

Main obstacle according to most of the participants for getting a better job is knowing the Italian language. Another problem which came out is the lack of ongoing trainings for soft skills and Italian language on the job.

From this first part of the discussion it can be concluded that the main trends in Palermo see an increase of nationalities from Sub-Sahara countries, Bangladesh and China. English, French and Arabic continue to be the *linguae francae* among foreign communities, in addition to the national mother tongues. Migrants' educational and professional level is quite variegated with most frequent difficulties being the unfamiliarity with the Italian language and the unrecognition of skills and titles.

Speaking a foreign language – local adults in Palermo

The general opinion - based on participants' personal views - is that most popular foreign languages among locals are English, French, Spanish, German. According to A. A. (Italian and native of Palermo), local adults with more than 50 years old cannot speak English while 70% of under 40 knows it at B1 level. However, the rest of the group expressed many concerns on this topic and is of the opinion that English is not

known at all or known at basic/school level among local adults. However, everybody perceives that those working in the social field have a medium-high level of English and a general more openness to learning new languages because they are in contact with foreign people.

Concerning other foreign languages, according to A. A., 30% of locals with less than 40 years old know French, in addition to English. All participants agreed that some local social workers even learned Arabic or Wolof and for D. N., some local adults also know other African languages (for example Creole) if they have foreign partners. However, the common perception remains that English is the most useful language in Palermo, for any job, but that in certain sectors, e.g. the touristic one, knowing other languages is necessary. Within the social field, beside the English language, French and Arabic are appreciated. English and French are a must for cultural mediators. But if a local knows an African language (e.g. Mandinka) he will have more chances of working in reception centers and understanding migrants' culture.

Everyone considers Italian as essential for migrants and thinks that without it, it is even more difficult to get a job. So even if foreign languages can increase employability, it must be paired with a good level of Italian.

Learning a foreign language for locals and migrants in Palermo

There are opportunities for local adults to learn a foreign language, though it is mostly paid courses, except if you are a student. For example, at CLA (University Language Centre) you can do a language course for free when you are registered at the university. Furthermore, cultural institutes in Palermo such as Instituto Cervantes, Goethe Institut, Institut français, British Institute offer language courses, though all participants agreed on their relevant costs. To learn English there are many options, also with official recognition (TOEFL, IELTS, etc.) but again, these are quite costly.

Apart from the courses mentioned above, which are often thought by native speakers, participants listed the following courses taught by migrants. Still going on are courses of Wolof, for example at a bar delivered by the Young Senegalese People Association for a very little fee, or at the Senegalese restaurant also for a small fee. Other courses were organized in the past, such as Mandinka at a multicultural restaurant, Swahili in a pub, and Mandinka course at ITaStra (for free). Furthermore, Casa Officina offers Chinese classes which are sometimes given for free thanks to school funds. There are also a few opportunities for learning of Arabic, though less organized. For example, an Arabic teacher for those studying as cultural mediators, or in some schools they teach it. It thus came forward that many of the language courses, especially for lower costs and for the language that are not institutionally represented in Palermo (like French or German), are organized in a non-formal way. For example. N.D. talked about informal courses, such as the Portuguese lessons she delivered at her place with some friends. A. A. said further that the few existing informal courses are often

self-managed, given by one teacher only, with inadequate advertisement and a small participation. Also M. J. named some informal gatherings in pubs or restaurants in the past.

M. J.'s association, Jekafò, would like to organize African languages lessons but he sees an obstacle: in Italy, a traditional approach which is followed in language schools is considered as necessary for learning a language, but for migrants who have learned languages by doing, it is not. For example, he learned Mandinka, Jola, and other dialects, through talking with his friends, thus he cannot correctly write all of them or knows all the language structures and grammar. This oral way of teaching is a limitation for locals willing to learn African language.

D. N. mentioned a second problem related to the small offer of foreign (non-European) languages in Palermo, which relates to the fact that since the regional government does not organize language courses anymore, many second-generation migrants who would like to learn their mother tongue cannot find any opportunity.

In this section of the roundtable, English came forward as the most useful and known language with regards to local adults in Palermo and Italian as the most important one for migrants. Additional foreign languages are spoken and considered as a value for a specific job, by local social workers, cultural mediators and workers in the tourism field. The local opportunities for learning foreign languages in Palermo is possible, yes for a limited number of languages and for a relative high price, though these are the courses that will issue an official certification. A foreign, non-European, language taught through migrants were found to be informal and sporadic.

Digital skills and language learning

G. C., Italian teacher, believes that digital skills have a very important role in language learning: they allow you to become autonomous, to do research. It is important to know how to use an online dictionary or to be aware that online translator do not contextualize the meaning. Digital skills can also help teachers with searching for material, checking occurrence of an expression, etc.

M. J. says that digital skills can help but talking to people is more important. Also, Italian, English or French can be found online but African languages such as Mandinka cannot and must be taught orally and face-to-face. A. A. agrees by saying that simple and well-done apps can function as additional instruments but that interpersonal meetings come first (digital tools can be used individually or in group for practicing afterwards).

Intercultural skills and language learning

According to G. C., language teaching and learning, teaches you also about the culture. For example, it is important to know that pleasantries (small talks) are used in Italian and not in other languages or to be aware that Italian is more direct than the English language. Also, one must be aware that some linguistic structures cannot be used in other languages. Culture models the language we speak, she goes on: our first linguistic-cultural system influences the learning of a new one. Moreover, language teaching makes you realize that people from other nationalities behave in different ways and see the world in a different way.

The whole roundtable approved this link between language and culture. As A. A. pointed out, when teaching a language, your own concepts, expressions and ways of looking at the world must be transferred into another mental structure. Language is related not just to words but also to real life habits. M. J. concluded that when you know a foreign language you will be able to understand another culture and you will have a more open attitude to people.