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# Literacy and literacy practices: Plurilingual connected migrants and emerging literacy☆

Mari D'Agostino[a], Egle Mocciaro[b,*]

[a] *Scuola di Lingua italiana per Stranieri, University of Palermo, Italy*
[b] *Masaryk University of Brno, Czech Republic*

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ABSTRACT

Recent migration towards Europe is characterized by the massive presence of adults whose educational paths have been interrupted and who are thus developing literacy for the first time in a new language. A literacy test elaborated at the University of Palermo, Italy, showed that, on a sample of 774 migrants, about 30 percent could not read and/or write short words. This test assessed the learners' abilities to read and write, whether in the Roman alphabet or in other writing systems, and whether in Italian or in other languages of learners' repertoires. These learners with emergent literacy mostly came from sub-Saharan Africa, an area characterized by diverse forms of multilingualism, and are representatives of "connected migrants" due to the centrality of digital communication practices in their migration experience; hence, the importance of research on such communication practices. This study examined the multilingual writing on Facebook of 10 migrants in Italy with emergent literacy. Findings demonstrate that these learners engage in multilingual practices which enhance their literacy competence by adopting strategies reflecting the general process of acquisition in naturalistic contexts. However, emerging writing on Facebook does not reflect participants' interlanguage and literacy levels elicited through the test.

## 1. Introduction

Recent migration towards Europe is characterized by the massive presence of young male adults whose education has been interrupted and who thus are developing literacy for the first time in their lives in a new language. Teachers, administrators and other education stakeholders find themselves working with a new population of learners requiring a unique educational approach. Therefore, these education professionals contend with overcoming traditional, dominant literacy practices historically valued in Europe (Reder & Davila, 2005).

Some criticisms can be addressed against such dominant literacy practices: (a) marginalization of migrants' L1s in education; (b) over-reliance on models of children's L1 literacy development in order to inform L2 emergent literacy instruction, materials development and policy; c) non-recognition of forms of literacy other than purely scholastic ones (e.g., disregarding literacy practices

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* Corresponding author at: via M. R. Imbriani 222, 95128, Catania, Italy.

*E-mail addresses:* mari.dagostino@unipa.it (M. D'Agostino), egle.mocciaro@gmail.com (E. Mocciaro).

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necessary to learn the Qur'an); d) non-recognition of spontaneous forms of emerging literacy in languages other than those of the host country (e.g., mother tongues, official languages of the home countries) (cf. García, 2009; Kurvers, 2015; Peyton & Young-Scholten, 2020; UNESCO, 2015, 2016, 2017). Such criticisms suggest that research and teaching should take into account the presence of new contexts in which different forms of literacies are experienced and learned outside of school. Among these contexts we find social media and, in particular, Facebook.

Research on communication through Facebook has developed enormously in the last two decades. Crucial reference works on this topic are the studies of *networked multilingualism* (Androutsopoulos, 2015) and young Africans' digital writings (Deumert & Lexander, 2013; Lüpke, 2015). The present paper reports on the preliminary results of a study on the multilingual digital writing of a sample of ten adult migrants newly arrived in Italy with emergent literacy. These ten participants were recruited in a large-scale survey of the migrant population of Palermo, Italy, in 2017–2018, aimed at gathering data on their language and literacy skills (and thus at filling a conspicuous gap in official information, cf. International Organization for Migration, 2016; REACH-UNICEF, 2017). In order to collect data on literacy, the researchers of the University of Palermo developed a specific test, which was administered in various languages and writing systems. This test revealed that almost 30 percent of the 774 individuals tested, most of them newly arrived, were unable to read and/or write short words in their first language. The ten participants selected for the study reported here were among this 30 percent, that is, they were found to be with pre-emergent or emergent literacy in any language learned prior to their arrival in Italy.

All ten learners had arrived from sub-Saharan Africa, an area characterized by diverse forms of multilingualism. In many communities of this area, "[t]he idea of 'mother tongue' and someone's 'first language' has little relevance (…) speakers use a number of different languages in different contexts, and live in multilingual families and multilingual neighborhoods. Their multilingual skills are part of their cultural lives and social integrity" (Lüpke & Storch, 2013, p. 77; see also Busch, 2017). Growing up in highly multilingual contexts increases people's familiarity with diverse ways of acquiring new language skills, frequently on the basis of very limited input, during different phases of their life and in relation to different experiences:

> In many African situations, languages are added to individuals' repertoires throughout their lives and occupy positions of varying centrality in them depending on a variety of factors. Adults continue to be socialized in languages they have "acquired" before, and in new ones, when they move house, migrate, marry, divorce, retire, and foster children. (Lüpke, 2015, p. 308)

Such fragmentary – and perhaps even "plastic" – modes of acquisition can probably also be seen in what we will observe about learning practices and the use of digital writing by the young people who are part of this study.

Interest in the study of digital communication practices derives from their centrality in the migratory experience of young people defined as "connected migrants" by Diminescu (2008). Through such practices, young migrants "live" simultaneously in Africa, in Italy and in the European countries they wish to reach (typically Germany or France). In this way, the background against which they have made their migration choices – and also their linguistic choices through media such as Facebook – is not only the "here and now" context of where the digital communication occurs, but it includes a variety of social spaces, both in the contexts of departure and arrival. This is well explained by Diminescu (2008) in her epistemological manifesto:

> If it is true that these new patterns of migration can no longer be ascribed to social processes described in classic terms of integration, assimilation and insertion, then we find ourselves faced with a reversal of our perspective. Questions of integration are going to have to be rethought in the specific context of the multiplication of temporary displacements and the participation in a variety of social milieus. (…) The development of new communication practices – from simple 'conversational' methods where communication compensates for absence, to 'connected' modes where the services maintain a form of continuous presence in spite of physical distance – has produced a very important change in migrants' lives. Not only have migratory practices been revolutionized (in particular through the activation of networks, remote organization, and the monitoring of movements); also revolutionized are the way mobility is experienced and implicitly the construction of relational settlement (pp. 570–572).

In what follows, after describing the linguistic repertoires of the ten young migrants in the sample and the tools used to obtain such information, we will report on the results of the analysis of multilingual writing data deriving from their Facebook accounts. The reason we chose Facebook is that it is one of the most common forms of social media used by young African migrants during their migration to Europe and, later, within Europe.[1]

The analysis of the writing samples emerging in this digital context is focused on the following research question: Which strategies do adult L2 learners with emergent literacy use to build up or enhance their written competence on Facebook?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

The participants in the sample were recruited among a larger group of 774 migrants, largely newcomers (having arrived within 1 year at the most), involved in the language and literacy tests administered on the occasion of a large scale survey carried out at the University of Palermo in 2017−2018. As many as 531 individuals out of the 774 were adolescent, young adult and adult migrants (the

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[1] Perhaps second only to WhatsApp, but more easily accessible than WhatsApp: in fact, while Facebook pages are open to friends if not all users, WhatsApp is a private chat and, as a consequence, it is necessary to participate in the interactions in order to observe them. This would be an interesting yet different piece of research.

**Table 1**
Participant demographics and backgrounds.

| Learner | Age | Country of origin | Languages | Early schooling | Length of residence in Italy | Language courses in Italy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Billy | 18 | Guinea | Pulaar, Wolof, French | 2 years (Q) | 11 months | – |
| Horace | 25 | Nigeria | Esan, Pidgin English | – | 11 months | – |
| Lucky | 24 | Nigeria | Igbo, Pidgin English | – | 11 months | – |
| Malamin | 18 | Gambia | Mandinka, Creole | 3 years | 12 months | 3 months |
| Maurice | 30 | Senegal | Mandinka, French, English | 7 years (Q) | 11 months | 3 months |
| Mohamed | 30 | Mali | Bambara, French | – | 12 months | – |
| Mustapha | 25 | Burkina Faso | Bissa, French | 5 years (Q) | 11 months | 2 months |
| Omer | 23 | Mali | Bambara, French | – | 11 months | 1 months |
| Promise | 26 | Ivory Coast | Bambara, Wolof, French | 2 years (Q) | 11 months | 2 months |
| Yero | 28 | Senegal | Pulaar, Wolof, French | 2 years (Q) | 10 months | – |

Notes. All the participants' names are pseudonyms. The letter Q indicates that the learner only attended Qur'anic school.

oldest being 35) from sub-Saharan Africa who had undertaken migration across the central sub-Saharan route that begins in the Gulf of Guinea, passes through a fundamental fulcrum at Agadez in Niger and arrives in Libya. At the time of the survey, they were housed in hosting centers throughout the city and were waiting to be placed in Italian language courses at the School of Italian Language for Foreigners of the University of Palermo (henceforth, ItaStra).

Participants' personal information and data on their language and literacy skills (age, home country, language repertoire, schooling, length of residence in Italy) were drawn from the sociolinguistic interviews and tests administered at the very beginning of the survey, in June 2017. Interviews were conducted by L2 Italian teachers of ItaStra, in Italian when possible, otherwise in English or French, often with the help of language mediators of the ItaStra staff.[2] Data were recorded in ad hoc sheets and then stored in the ItaStra's learner database. Since they contain sensitive data, both the database and the sheets have restricted access. All participants in the survey signed an informed consent form that was explained orally and eventually translated and read aloud to them by the linguistic mediators in one of the languages of the participants' repertoires.

This large data collection was the starting point for several studies that explored different aspects of migrants' linguistic skills (e.g. phonological memory and L2 morphosyntactic acquisition, cf. Amoruso, 2018; Mocciaro, 2020). For the research presented here, 30 learners were initially selected from the larger group of 531 young migrants, because they met the following requirements: they had recently arrived in Italy, they had not been exposed to Italian before immigration and they had no or only emergent alphabetical skills (in any language and writing system). Furthermore, these learners had pre-registered for language and literacy courses at ItaStra that would start in the subsequent months. This was an important premise for building a relationship of familiarity and trust on the basis of which we could access their Facebook pages. From the initial pool of 30 individuals, we then extracted and analyzed the data of 10 learners who, at different stages, actually participated in the language courses and also explicitly and formally agreed to be involved in the specific research reported here.[3]

Personal data on the ten learners are summarized in Table 1, where they are indicated by pseudonyms and are sorted in alphabetical order.

As Table 1 shows, the 10 research participants are young male adults, aged between 18 and 30 years at the time of the study. They arrived from sub-Saharan Africa (Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal) and speak a number of diverse Niger-Congo languages (African West Atlantic, i.e. Pulaar, Wolof; Mande, i.e. Bambara, Bissa, Mandinka; Benue-Congo, i.e. Esan, Igbo[4]) and post-colonial languages, namely English and/or French (and possibly a contact language, e.g. the Pidgin English of Nigeria). None of them had been exposed to Italian before their arrival in Italy.

Six out of ten participants attended a few years of school in their home countries; five out of six of these participants (i.e., those who had limited access to school-based learning) had attended Qur'anic school only (Q in Table 1).[5]

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[2] The mediators have been involved in all phases of the project, from the administration of the test to the processing of data, for which they have received specific training in the same way as the ItaStra teachers who administered the tests. They contributed as interpreters and cultural mediators and participated in all the survey sessions. For the research reported here, they helped to translate and interpret the productions of the ten participants on Facebook. Many of the language mediators who belong to ItaStra entourage are former unaccompanied foreign minors, who have completed their language training at ItaStra and have then remained close to it and/or co-opted; therefore, they represent a very effective channel to reach the newcomers. Especially mediators from sub-Saharan Africa speak several languages most of which are in our sample.

[3] It is important to underline the lack of spatial stability of recent migration to Italy. Unlike in the past, new migrants undergo frequent forced mobility or territorial relocations. In addition, mobility results from individual migration choices (Italy is often conceived of by migrants as a passage to other places in Central and Northern Europe). This dramatically increases the rate of attrition in the learner samples, thus making longitudinal data collection hard and imposing additional work for constructing data (D'Agostino, In press; Mocciaro, 2020).

[4] A recent and typologically informed overwiev of Niger-Congo languages is in Hyman et al., 2019.

[5] These schools, which are the only educational opportunity for many people in sub-Saharan Africa, promote memorization of the Qur'an in Arabic (a foreign language in some African countries) through oral repetition: "Before starting the actual memorization memorizers are taught Arabic letters and sounds, and how to make 'words' out of them. This learning of 'words', however, is restricted to a phonological form in that they do not learn the meaning" (Saleem, 2018, p. 28). Hence, memorizers can fluently read a text that they do not necessarily understand. None of the five participants who attended the Qur'anic school indicated Arabic among the languages of their repertoire.

The penultimate column of Table 1 indicates the length of residence in Italy at the time of the first interviews. Five out of ten stated they had attended a one- to three-month Italian language course (last column in the Table) in a volunteer-led context in the city immediately after their arrival. During the 10–12 months of their stay in Italy, the ten young research participants lived in hosting centers throughout the city.

### *2.2. Literacy and language tests*

While data in Table 1 derived from participants' self-reporting during the sociolinguistic interviews, information on literacy levels and L2 Italian was elicited through a specific test given in the same session as the interviews, at the beginning of the survey.[6]

The test was conceived of not only as a premise to research activity, but also and foremost as a tool for teachers working at ItaStra to identify learners' literacy and L2 levels on the basis of transparent and shared criteria and in order to place learners in classes. For this purpose, teachers (and other practitioners, namely linguistic mediators) were preliminarily trained to administer the test, to record learners' behaviour and to analyze the results.

The test is divided into two parts: the first part is aimed at measuring literacy skills (in any language or writing system), and the second part is dedicated to L2 Italian (oral and writing) skills.

The decision to create a tool to measure the participants' reading and writing skills stems from the observation (first proposed by Bigelow & Tarone, 2004) that literacy levels cannot be automatically deduced from declared levels of schooling. In fact, in many countries of origin, very low educational standards can hardly guarantee high levels of literacy, especially in rural areas far from major cities (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Hence the need to isolate the variable of literacy by keeping it separate from declared schooling.

The literacy test is focused on reading and writing words and sentences either in Italian or in various languages of the learners' repertoires, both African languages (such as Bambara, Mandinka, Pulaar, Wolof) and school languages (Arabic, English, French, Italian[7]) and in either the Roman alphabet or different writing systems (such as Arabic, Bengali, Chinese). The initial selection of the language and the writing system has always been left to the individual participant, who chose them before beginning the test.

Two sections of increasing complexity are included in the literacy test, and each section is made of eight tasks (four for reading skills, four for writing skills).[8] The first section (*literacy*) measures learners' ability to decode and encode isolated words (and their component elements, i.e., syllables, phonemes). Examples of this are writing one's own name in the system chosen for the test, writing the words corresponding to given images of concrete items certainly known to the learners (e.g., a house), reading words of different complexity (in terms of number and structure of the syllables, which vary depending on the language of the test). The second part (*functional literacy*) tests learners' ability to read and compose sentences that can generate actions or report events; examples of this are reading given sentences, writing sentences based on pictures, reading or producing short texts (e.g. giving instructions, describing daily actions). This second section is given only if the learner has completed more than half of the tasks in the first part.

Participants were asked to complete the test individually. For each task, the test includes instructions written in the chosen language and writing system. However, to ensure that the test conditions were homogeneous for all learners (those who could read the instructions and those who could not), the administrators (two per learner) always provided oral instructions, which were facilitated by language mediators. The administrators observed the learners' behaviour during the test and, at the end of the test, checked the writing samples and noted the observations on an analytical rubric. The rubric is articulated in three levels for each task ("not able, partially able, able") and each level is identified based on dedicated descriptors. At the end of the test, the two administrators compared their respective rubrics and, if significant differences emerged, these were discussed by the wider group of administrators.

Based on the test results, three literacy levels were singled out, as described in Table 2.

The same criteria were adopted to assess both early literacy in a home language and late literacy in a migration language (e.g. English, French, which are home languages for many participants, and/or Italian). The distinction between *early* and *late* literacy depends in part on the learners' choices and self-reporting. All learners were asked when and in what contexts (formal or informal) they had learned the chosen language/writing system (this information was reported in the test). Some learners chose a non-Roman alphabet or a non-alphabetical system, others chose the Roman alphabet associated with a language other than Italian (e.g. English or French) and others the Roman alphabet associated with Italian. Of course, choosing a language/writing system pair does not automatically mean that the learner is unable to use other languages and writing systems. The second section of the test on L2 Italian then clarified whether and to what extent users of non-Roman systems or Roman alphabet with a language other than Italian were also able to use the Roman alphabet associated with Italian. If not, users of non-Roman systems were asked to complete the test in the Roman alphabet associated with any other language. On the other hand, learners who immediately chose to take the test with the Roman

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[6] The language and literacy test was being checked for validity at the time it was being administered and is still being checked. For this reason, only some examples will be provided here. The final version of the test and the related analytical rubric will be published online in Autumn 2021 by the Palermo University Press (D'Agostino & Mocciaro, In press).

[7] In many Sub-Saharan African countries, post-colonial languages (e.g. French, English or Portuguese) play an important role in literacy instruction; in some cases, these are the main languages of literacy.

[8] The fair distribution of each section into four reading and four writing tasks might suggest that we consider these skills as homogeneous and necessarily coexisting, so that the presence of reading skills implies that of writing skills and vice versa. The learners in the sample discussed here exhibit consistent reading and writing skills and this allows us not to go into the question of the mutual relationship between the two, which is, in fact, much more complex and not necessarily symmetrical (D'Agostino, 2017).

**Table 2**
Learners' literacy levels.[a]

| Group | Level | Level definition | Details / Descriptors |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | *Pre-emergent literacy* | The participant was not able to perform any of the tasks in section 1, i.e. he was not able to read/write isolated words in any language and writing system | *(not relevant because the learner is not able to perform any of the test tasks)* |
| 2 | *Emergent literacy* | The participant was able to perform some or all the tasks in section 1, but he was not able to perform any of the tasks in section 2 | The learner:<br>a) recognizes individual letters/characters<br>b) spells into separate syllables (with a basic structure in test language, e.g. CV in Italian)<br>c) links two or multiple syllables and/or more complex syllables (e.g. CVC in Italian)<br>d) deciphers individual words<br>e) writes his own name<br>f) writes individual letters/characters<br>g) writes incomplete words<br>h) writes individual words |
| 3 | *Literacy (moderate to high)* | The participant was able to perform some or all the tasks in sections 1 and 2 | a) is fluent in reading of simple to complex sentences and texts<br>b) is fluent in writing of simple to complex sentences or texts |

[a] It should be noted that although in the rest of this work the definition of literacy is much broader and socially-oriented, the test defines "literacy" only as the decoding and coding of alphabetical print.

alphabet associated with Italian (L2 for all of them) were then also asked to complete the test in a different writing system/language. Therefore, by combining the information provided by the learners and the data from the tests, nine possibilities emerged, as described in Table 3.

For the purpose of the classes, information about late literacy becomes relevant when the learner has:

1) Early literacy in a non-Roman writing system (cases 3 and 4 in Table 3): in this case, s/he just needs to learn a new writing system.
2) Late literacy in a non-Roman writing system (case 7, e.g. the Arabic one sometimes learned during migration): also in this case s/he only needs to learn a new system.
3) Pre-emergent or emergent literacy in any writing system (case 9): in this case, s/he needs to learn basic skills of encoding and decoding alphabetic print.

The ten participants were ranked between Groups 1 and 2 of Table 2 for both early and late literacy. This is shown in Table 4, where the (a) to (j) descriptors of literacy already listed in Table 2 are now associated to individual learners.

Nine out of ten learners proved not to have early literacy in any language. The only exception is Maurice, who emerged as having emergent literacy in the Arabic writing system, learned during 7 years of Qur'anic school (cf. Table 1); based on this experience, he developed some reading and writing skills, such as recognizing individual letters, spelling words into separate syllables, deciphering individual words, writing his own name, individual letters and part of words. As for the other learners who attended school in their home countries (Bill, Malamin, Moustapha, Promise and Yero), this experience was so short that it did not affect the reading and writing competence of these learners who, in fact, have been ranked in Group 1 for early literacy.[9] On the other hand, seven out of ten learners developed emergent literacy skills in L2 Italian. In part, such emergent literacy competence correlates with the short language

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[9] We keep separate the notions of *literacy* (i.e. the ability to express linguistic skills in written form) and the notion of *graphism* (i.e. a mechanical ability that implies the precise tracing of the signs of the writing system). After several years of practice, students in Qur'anic schools can develop fine graphism without having simultaneously developed literacy. This happens especially in the more traditional schools where wooden planks are still used to learn to write (whereas more recent models of education require the use of the holy book from the beginning of the process). Learners' fine graphism can prove a confusing element in the initial tests.

**Table 3**
Possible distribution of early and late literacy (based on the test and learners' self-reporting).

| | **Early literacy** | **Late literacy** |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Non-alphabetical system/Non-Roman alphabet + Roman alphabet | |
| 2 | Non-alphabetical system/Non-Roman alphabet | Roman alphabet |
| 3 | Non-alphabetical/Non-Roman alphabet | (different) Non-Roman alphabet |
| 4 | Non-alphabetical system/Non-Roman alphabet | |
| 5 | Roman alphabet | |
| 6 | Roman alphabet | Non-alphabetical system/Non-Roman alphabet |
| 7 | – | Non-alphabetical system/Non-Roman alphabet |
| 8 | – | Roman alphabet |
| 9 | – | – |

**Table 4**
Participants' literacy levels (data from the test).

| Learner | Early literacy (in a native or school language) | descriptors | Late literacy (in Roman or non-Roman alphabet) | descriptors |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Billy | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); writes his own name (e); writes individual letters (f) |
| Horace | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* |
| Lucky | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* |
| Malamin | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); writes his own name (e) |
| Maurice | Group 2 (Arabic) | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); deciphers individual words (c); writes his own name (d); writes individual letters/characters (e); writes incomplete words (f) | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); deciphers individual words (c); writes his own name (e); writes individual letters (f) |
| Mohamed | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); writes his own name (e) |
| Mustapha | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); writes his own name (e); writes individual letters (f) |
| Omer | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); writes his own name (e) |
| Promise | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 2 | He recognizes individual letters/characters (a); spells into separate syllables (b); deciphers individual words (c); writes his own name (e) |
| Yero | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* | Group 1 | *Pre-emergent reading and writing skills* |

courses after arrival in Italy (self-reported by Malamin, Maurice, Mustapha, Omer and Promise).[10] However, two of the seven learners, Bill and Mohamed, had never attended Italian language courses at the time of the test and stated that they had learned the rudiments of reading and writing (in Italian and in French) in informal contexts (with other migrants).

The last section of the test is dedicated to L2 Italian writing and oral skills. This section includes five tasks. Reading skills in Italian were tested by asking learners to read: a) a short list of isolated Italian words and b) four Italian sentences of increasing length. Writing skills were tested by asking learners to write a) a short list of Italian words (based on a given set of images) and b) two short sentences in Italian through dictation.[11] The fifth task tested oral skills in Italian. It was a narrative task based on a sequence of pictures that the learners were asked to describe. The pictures were specifically produced for the test and represented daily situations, such as reading, meeting a friend, sleeping. Learners' performances (whose duration depended on individual learners) were audio recorded and then transcribed manually according to the orthographic criteria of the target language. The two administrators then annotated the main characteristics of the participants' production in analytical rubrics using a set of descriptors based on the theory of the *basic variety* (Klein & Perdue, 1997).[12] For all the learners in the sample, the L2 test revealed initial levels of L2 oral skills. This is not surprising if we consider the ways that governments segregate migrants from host communities, thus limiting their possibilities to interact with the local population, a phenomenon widely documented in migration studies (cf. inter al. Tintori, Alessandrini, & Natale, 2018; Vertovec, 2007).[13]

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[10] The tests conducted for the survey showed that the attendance of short language courses in Italy (see Table 1) only left little effect on participants' L2 Italian linguistic (written and oral) skills. This can be due to several causes. First, a course which only lasts a few months is probably not enough to affect L2 skills. Second, while learners claim to have been enrolled in a language course, this does not necessarily mean systematic attendance. During the interviews, research participants actually admitted that their attendance was sporadic, although it was not possible to quantify it exactly. This is probably due to the fact that migrants may show a certain reluctance to give information for fear that this could negatively influence local authorities' choices on their stay. Building a *good self-narrative*, which meets the parameters set by the country of arrival, plays a key role in the selection of migrants who will have the right to stay and who will be repatriated (D'Agostino, 2017, in press). Narratives collected for other studies sometimes revealed discomfort with the courses (Mocciaro, 2020; De Fina, Paternostro, & Amoruso, 2020). Migrants who are experiencing formal school classrooms for the first time after migration may find it hard to follow school activities, especially if they are just taking the first steps in developing Italian language skills. Attending courses can be a frustrating experience that many migrants prefer to avoid. It should be also mentioned that initial volunteer-led language courses are often far from being well organized and teachers are not always adequately trained to work with this specific population of learners and, therefore, are not able to provide the necessary linguistic and didactic input.

After the initial language and literacy tests, researchers met with the participants two more times: six months and one year after the first survey. During these new sessions, their alphabetical print literacy skills were checked by administering the literacy section of the test, while L2 Italian oral skills were tested through semi-guided conversations about research participants' lives in the city in the intervening period. Data processing and analysis followed the same criteria used for the first tests. From the sixth month after the first test, all ten participants began to attend one or more language and literacy courses at the university. During this period, as their interlanguage became more complex (albeit with individual differences), they also began to develop writing skills.

### *2.3. Data collection and criteria for analysis*

Data on the digital communication practices of the ten participants were collected throughout 2018. As mentioned, the participants signed a form giving informed consent to the use of their Facebook data and allowed us to access their pages as *friends*.[14] This step was quite simple, because in the meantime a relationship of trust had been established based on their participation in the activities of ItaStra, which began 6 months after the initial tests.

We adopted an ethnographic approach consisting of observing, collecting and analyzing the participants' Facebook interactions in a timespan between the opening of the participants' accounts and 1st January 2019.[15]

All participants' posts and interactions were saved through screenshots of the Facebook personal pages (or *profiles*) and then manually transcribed on an electronic sheet in chronological order (i.e., from the opening of the profile onwards whereas they appear in reverse order on Facebook, i.e., from the newest to the oldest). Each transcription is accompanied by the related screenshot in which it appears, so that the original data can always be checked.

Data organization is based on the approach adopted by Androutsopoulos (2015) in his work on networked multilingualism. In particular, we used his notion of *wall event* as the basic unit of Facebook interaction. Wall events can consist of single posts or multi-authored sequences of user posts:

> They consist of a minimum of one post (the initiative contribution or opener), which can be followed by 'likes' and/or comments posted by 'friends'. (…) Wall events can be initiated by various types of content: a status update by *ego* [*the owner of the page, authors' note*], a post by a 'friend', a media item (e.g. photo, video, music track) that is uploaded or embedded via weblink, or content by a Facebook application, such as a quiz or game. Audience responses come as 'likes' (not discussed here) or posts, which may themselves feature embedded media content. Responsive posts can be dialogically related to the initial post and/or preceding posts within the same event. Wall events vary widely in terms of time-span and total number of posts. (Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 193)

Based on Androutsopoulos' (2015) description, we isolated a set of criteria to classify learners' Facebook communicative practices. The electronic page is organized in different fields according to the communicative event type within the wall event. In particular, we have distinguished the following types of posts:

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[11] To ensure identical conditions for all the participants, the text dictated has been pre-recorded. We are fully aware of the complexity of the context and practices of test administration, but this goes beyond the scope of this work. The reader is referred to D'Agostino & Mocciaro, In press.

[12] This is a theoretical functionalist model originally developed within the *European Science Foundation Project* (Perdue, 1993). The *basic variety* is a simple yet structured initial stage of interlanguage in which utterances contain verbs and are structured according to their valency, but there is no trace of inflection. Nouns and verbs occur in an invariant form (e.g. the infinitive form or the stem), while information about temporality, aspect, person and other possible nominal and verbal categories expressed in individual languages are conveyed by non-inflectional means. Many learners, especially in on-going conditions of low exposure, tend to fossilize at this stage, which is claimed to be effective on the communicative level. However, under adequate conditions of exposure, the acquisition of the target language develops in a series of successive post-basic varieties through which morphosyntax becomes more and more complex. Based on these theoretical assumptions, Italian research has provided descriptions of many aspects of learners' morphosyntax (cf. Giacalone Ramat, 2003). Our descriptors largely derived from such research.

[13] The hosting centers where newcomers are housed immediately on arrival in Italy vary in terms of the living conditions they offer, but on the whole have little connection to local communities (D'Agostino, 2017). Migrants can remain in such contexts of substantial segregation for several years and this limits the quantity and quality of opportunities to receive input and interact in L2 Italian (Mocciaro, 2020).

[14] The Facebook *friendship* was always between individual learners and the Facebook account of ItaStra.

[15] In almost all cases, the Facebook personal accounts we examined were opened after the participants' arrival in Italy. Some of them closed their previous accounts immediately after their arrival in Italy.

a) posts initiating a communicative event (*initiative posts*, henceforth IP)
b) response posts on the participant page (*responsive posts*, henceforth RP)

Both a) and b) can be further classified as:

c) posts with language content (single words or sentences, henceforth LC);
d) posts without language content (multimedia elements, e.g. images, videos, links, etc., henceforth no-LC).

Identifying and operationalizing these types allowed us a preliminary classification of the interactions of the participants according to criteria widely recognized in the reference literature and, above all, to frame emerging writing samples within a coherent system of linguistic and pragmatic practices. In addition, this classification combined with the chronological order of the posts allows us to observe any changes in the ratio of the participants' digital practices, as is reasonable to expect in a longitudinal examination.

After classifying the participants' posts in chronological order and on the basis of criteria a) to d), we have focused on those with language content (i.e., types a + c and b + c), because these posts offer the material (written language samples) needed to verify our research question, namely which strategies the participants use to produce written texts on Facebook.

In order to answer such a question, we first analyzed the linguistic characteristics in the ten participants' posts, in particular the languages selected to produce written texts, the spelling and morphosyntactic accuracy of such texts as well as their lexical and syntactic complexity.[16] The samples written in African languages were translated into English by the professional linguistic mediators of the ItaStra staff.

After analyzing the linguistic features of the written samples, we identified the main operations through which participants used and produced the written segments (e.g. selecting, re-using, autonomously creating *pieces* of written language).

The analysis is conducted according to a qualitative approach. Therefore, rather than quantifying the phenomena under analysis, we will provide a descriptive-interpretative report also taking into account the observation of the context in which such phenomena occur. For the sake of space, the phenomena under discussion will be exemplified following the behaviour of two participants only, Mohamed and Yero, selected because their interactions on Facebook show *all* the phenomena and strategies that we have identified to varying degrees in the writing practices of all the migrants in the sample.

## 3. Results

The purpose of this study was to answer the following research question: *Which strategies do emerging literates use to build up or enhance their written competence on Facebook?*

The chronological organization of the posts and the classification into different types brought to light substantial changes in the participants' communicative activity on Facebook from June 2016 to the end of 2018. On the whole, the comparison between the wall events during the first six months after the opening of the profile (between June and July 2016, depending on the learner[17]) and the

**Table 5**
Types of participants' communicative activity on Facebook at the beginning and at the end of the survey (Stage 1: June/July 2016 to December 2016/ Stage 2: January 2017 – second semester 2018).

| Learner | Stage 1 | | | | Stage 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | IP | | RP | | IP | | RP | |
| | LC | No-LC | LC | No-LC | LC | No-LC | LC | No-LC |
| Billy | 1 | 4 | 19 | 13 | 10 | 4 | 26 | 9 |
| Horace | – | 9 | 21 | 16 | 6 | 6 | 23 | 15 |
| Lucky | – | 3 | 6 | 9 | 1 | 3 | 12 | 11 |
| Malamin | – | 7 | 19 | 4 | 12 | 6 | 21 | 8 |
| Maurice | 2 | 9 | 13 | 9 | 5 | 12 | 32 | 7 |
| Mohamed | 3 | 7 | 17 | 4 | 11 | 7 | 28 | 15 |
| Mustapha | – | 1 | 3 | – | – | 8 | 13 | 18 |
| Omer | – | 6 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 12 | 27 | 13 |
| Promise | – | 4 | 4 | 9 | 2 | 9 | 18 | 12 |
| Yero | 4 | 12 | 28 | 5 | 21 | 37 | 43 | 5 |
| *TOT.* | *10* | *62* | *139* | *71* | *70* | *104* | *243* | *113* |
| | *72* | | *210* | | *174* | | *356* | |

Note. IP = initiative post; RP = responsive post; LC = language content; No-LC = no language content.

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[16] Accuracy here refers to the degree of conformity to the norms of the target language, while complexity indicates "the number of linguistic elements and their interrelationships" (Pallotti, 2014, p. 117), e.g. whether learners used only single words and formulaic expressions or also sentences, whether simple clauses or dependent clauses etc.

[17] As mentioned, at this stage none of the participants had yet been involved in the ItaStra's courses. Digital media are at this stage the only context of exposure and practice of writing.

last six months of the survey (second semester 2018) shows intensification (in terms of number of posts per week) and diversification (in terms of types of posts and engagements with others' posts) of communicative activity on Facebook for all research participants. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of this activity in the two phases.

Table 5 shows a general increase in the number of posts with language content in Stage 2. In Stage 1, language content is primarily found in RPs (139/210), often consisting of just one adjective of appreciation (e.g. Eng. *nice*; Fr. *trop* 'too much'). IPs largely consist in photos and videos without any comment (62/72) while showing language content to a lesser extent (10/72 examples). On the other hand, in Stage 2, linguistic contributions become more frequent both as IPs (70/174 examples) and RPs (243/356 examples). This increase could be due to different factors, namely: 1) the language and literacy courses that participants were attending at ItaStra at Stage 2; 2) the systematic exposure to writing samples through social media. It is noteworthy that this emerging autonomy in writing does not only concern Italian – the oral and written language practiced in the ItaStra's classes – but the writing ability itself and, therefore, it is also expressed in the other languages present in the learners' repertoires.

The distribution of posts between Stages 1 and 2 can be exemplified by qualitative analysis of the Facebook activity of Mohamed and Yero, which started immediately after their arrival in Italy, in June and August 2016 respectively. Like the other participants in the sample, Mohamed and Yero have plurilingual competence. Yero's home languages are Pulaar, Wolof and French; Mohamed speaks Bambara and French (cf. Table 1). As we will see, these languages emerge in their Facebook activity, although at different rates and together with fragments of other languages (i.e., English and Italian), which, while apparently missing in the two participants' repertoires, are widely used in Facebook interaction.

In Stage 1, Mohamed and Yero's activity mainly consists of posts shared from other walls (belonging to friends and associations in Italy or in the country of origin). This is shown in (1) and (2), from Mohamed's wall in Stage 1.

(1) Mohamed 1 September 2016 (text contained within a shared image)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *I ♥ Mohamed*<br>محمد[18] | 'I love Mohamed' (The name is replicated in Arabic script) |
| RPs | | |
| Friend 1 | *Très cool*[19] | 'Very cool' |
| Mohamed | *Merci grand fr* | 'Thanks big bro(ther)' |
| Friend 2 | *Très chic* | 'Very chic' |
| Mohamed | *Merci Friend 2 coul* | 'Thanks Friend 2 cool' |

(2) Mohamed, 4 November 2016 (text accompanying a video; both the text and the video are shared from a friend's page)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *Slt Svp écoute bien cette vidéo mes amis* | 'Cheers, please listen to this video carefully, my friends' |

Beside posts shared from other walls, Yero's wall events in Stage 1 also include a handful of autonomous IPs (that is, IPs not shared from other walls) with language content. As (3) shows, IPs produced by Yero are short and stereotyped (in this case, the name of the participant[20] plus an appreciation, *nice*, in a sort of topic-comment organization).

(3) Yero, 20 September 2016, IP (comment accompanying his own picture)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *Yero nice* | |
| RPs | | |
| Friend 1 | *nice* | |
| Yero | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 2 | *tres coul* | 'very cool' |
| Yero | *merci grand fr* | 'thanks big bro(ther)' |
| Friend 3 | *cool* | |
| Yero | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 4 | *nice fr* | 'nice bro(ther)' |
| Yero | *merci mn frère* | 'thanks my brother' |
| Friend 5 | *tres chic* | 'very cool' |
| Yero | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 6 | *cool* | |
| Yero | *nice* | |

These data strongly indicate the systematic use of copy or copy-paste strategies. In most cases, the language content of Yero's short

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[18] Here and elsewhere the presence of small or capital letters reflects research participants' use. Furthermore, for the sake of space we will indicate language alternation only in the two participants' writing and where relevant.

[19] Rather than an English word, *cool* should be considered as a loanword in French (and it is widely used in Italian too), that is, in a language of the repertoires of Mohamed and other participants in the study. This can be reflected in the adaptation of the word to the spelling *coul*, which can be observed in (1) and in numerous other examples below.

[20] We report the pseudonym in the Facebook samples instead of the participant's true name.

IPs is identical in the RPs posted by friends in Yero's wall events. This is surely the case of *nice* in (3), which is found not only in Yero's IP but also in the friends' comments, as well as in previous wall events on Yero's page. Similar observations can be made about the Yero's other IPs at this stage, such as *bn anniversary* 'happy birthday'[21] (23 October 2016), *yero boy forom fouta* 'the young Yero from Fouta' (5 November 2016), both accompanying pictures (in the first case, the picture of a friend, in the second case his own picture) and whose component parts are frequently found in the friends' comments of previous wall events. The same holds true for Mohamed's ICs, at a slightly subsequent stage, such as the 'happy new year' in (4), which repeats (part of) a similar message posted by a friend on Mohamed's wall a few days before (as shown in ex. 5).[22]

(4) Mohamed, 6 January 2017

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IC | *Bonne année* | 'Happy new year' |
| RPs | | |
| Friend 1 | *merci beaucoup* | 'many thanks' |
| Mohamed | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 2 | *grazie fr* | 'thanks bro(ther)' |
| Mohamed | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 4 | *nice fr* | 'nice bro(ther)' |
| Friend 5 | *merci frère* | 'thanks my brother' |
| Mohamed | *merci* | 'thanks' |

(5) Mohamed's friend, 2 January 2017

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IC | *Bonne année à tous mes amis* | 'Happy new year to all my friends' |

In Stage 1, most of Mohamed's and Yero's linguistic activity consisted in short replies (17 and 28 RPs with language content, respectively) to friends' comments, especially in French – a language learned early and deeply rooted in their repertoires – as shown in (1) to (5).

In Stage 2, that is, in the last semester of the survey, linguistic posts become more frequent in both Mohamed's and Yero's wall events. This increase involves both RPs (28 vs. 17 for Mohamed; 43 vs. 28 for Yero) and IPs (3 vs. 11 for Mohamed; 4 vs. 21 for Yero).

The quantitative increase may or may not correspond to an increase in the syntactic complexity of the posts. Some of Yero's IPs and RPs become more complex at the syntactic level in Stage 2, as in (6), containing at least one multi-clause IP in French.

(6) Yero, 7 October 2018 (comment accompanying a collage of his own pictures)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *je salut tous mes amis la vie c'est comme ça je suis fiere de tous le monde* | 'I greet all my friends life is like this I'm proud:FEM of everyone' |
| RPs | | |
| Friend 1 | *on te salue toi aussi frère* | 'I greet you too, brother' |
| Yero | *merci star*[23] | 'thanks, star' |
| Friend 2 | *FRIEND 2 BOROM SISILIA* | 'FRIEND 2 FROM SICILY' |
| Yero | *Boy bamba samahart* | 'My friend, the brave' (Wolof) |
| Friend 2 | *La yalla def déh* | 'May God accept it' (Wolof) |
| Friend 3 | *COURAGE BRO.ON TE SALUT profondément* | 'COME ON, BROTHER. I GREET YOU deeply' |
| Yero | *merci star nakal dagabak* | 'thanks star, how are you?' (Wolof) |
| Friend 4 | *Yé broh* | 'Yes, brother' |
| Yero | *merci bro* | 'thanks, bro(ther)' |
| Friend 5 | *Nice mn bro* | 'Nice my bro(ther)' |
| Yero | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 6 | *Nice fréro* | 'Nice brother' (*fréro* = French *frère*) |
| Yero | *merci monami* | 'thanks my friend' (*monami*= French *mon ami*) |
| Friend 7 | *Tu sei molto bello* | 'You are very handsome' |
| Yero | *grazie amico* | 'thanks friend' |
| Friend 8 | *cool* | |
| Yero | *frèro grazie* | 'brother, thanks' |
| Friend 9 | *cool* | |
| Yero | *adiarama mawdo Friend 9* | 'thanks big Friend 9′ (Pulaar) |
| Friend 10 | *Bellismo il mio frattello* | 'Very handsome, my brother' |
| Yero | *grazie amiko mio come stai* | 'thanks my friend, how are you' |
| Friend 11 | *Machalla c'est très valide* | 'God has willed it (Arabic), it's very valid' |
| Yero | *merci friend 11 tu trè gentil* | 'thanks friend 11, you (are) very kind' (*trè* = French *très*) |
| Friend 12 | *MachAllah* | 'God has willed it' (Arabic) |
| Yero | *merci frère* | 'thanks brother' |

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[21] This is certainly a false cognate based on French *bon anniversaire* 'happy birthday".

[22] The frequently consistent use of accent marks, coupled with the fact that many participants have French as part of their oral repertoire, may point to a speech-to-text strategy. Although persuasive, this hypothesis cannot be verified, as it is not supported by the data or migrants' self-reporting.

Beside the multi-clause IP, the example in (6) also contains a multi-clause RP in Italian, that is, *grazie amico mio come stai* 'thanks, my friend, how are you?', consisting of two formulas of the largest use and widely present in the Facebook interaction in which Yero is involved. On the whole, Yero (similarly to Mohamed and all the participants in the sample) continued to produce short and stereotyped IPs, copy-pasted from other friends' posts or simply copied manually, in whole or in part, from other friends' posts. This is the case of *frèro* in *frèro grazie* in (6), produced in response to Friend 8, which replicates *fréro* in Friend 6 above (*Nice fréro*), although changing the direction of the accent.[24] In addition, the two participants frequently shared friends' posts and related comments, as those reported in (7) and (8), which appeared identically in the walls of two of Mohamed's friends.[25]

(7) Mohamed, 11 August 2018

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | RIP DJ Arafat | 'Rest in peace DJ Arafat' |

(8) Mohamed, 19 September 2018 (text accompanying a video; both the text and the video are shared from a friend's wall)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *Voilà les vrais comédien malien* | 'These are the real Malian comedians' |

Nonetheless, an increase in complexity can be observed at a different level, namely in the range of languages used by participants at different stages of their Facebook activity. This involves all participants, albeit to different degrees; in this sense, Mohamed and Yero are placed at two poles of a continuum, with both participants increasing their multilingual use, but Mohamed producing a smaller number of languages, and Yero drawing on a larger number of languages. Specifically, as shown in (9) below, Mohamed increases his repertoire of languages through the production of short RPs in Italian, mostly formulas and thanks, as *Grazia mille* 'Thank you very much' and *Grazie mio fratello* 'Thanks my brother' in (9) and (10) respectively.

(9) Mohamed, 12 September 2018 (IP posted by a friend on Mohamed's wall)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP Friend 1 | *Bon anniversaire* | 'Happy birthday' |
| RCs | | |
| Mohamed | *merci beaucoup* | 'thank you very much' |
| Friend 2 | *joy anniv* | 'happy birth(day)' |
| Mohamed | *merci mn ami* | 'thanks my friend' |
| Friend 3 | *Auguri* | 'Happy birthday' |
| Mohamed | *Grazia mille* | 'Thank you very much' |

(10) Mohamed, 30 December 2018

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *Bonne année à toutes et à tous mes amis* | 'Happy new year to all my friends' |
| RCs | | |
| Friend 1 | *merci* | 'thanks' |
| Friend 2 | *bonne annee* | 'happy new year' |
| Mohamed | *merci beaucoup* | 'thank you very much' |
| Friend 3 | *buon anno fr* | 'happy new year bro(ther)' |
| Mohamed | *Grazie mio fratello* | 'Thanks my brother' |

In contrast to Mohamed, the wider range of languages selected by Yero includes French (which is part of his basic repertoire, cf. Table 1[26]), fragments of English (e.g. *nice*, already in Stage 1), fragments of Italian and African languages, in particular Pulaar and Wolof. We have already seen Yero's RPs in Italian in (6) and we repeat the relevant lines in (11).

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[23] The word *star* in (6) is a nickname, which occurs frequently in our data.

[24] It should be observed that accents in opposite directions can't be due to copy-paste. Instead this reflects a manual copying strategy, although neglecting the direction of the accent, whose value is not yet recognized.

[25] This lack of complexity is not necessarily related to slow acquisition of language and writing skills by the participants with emerging literacy and could, instead, reflect a communicative style on Facebook. While a preliminary comparison with the Facebook pages of migrants with high levels of print literacy does suggest such a correlation, only a systematic survey will confirm what is currently nothing more than an impression.

[26] It should be stressed that both Mohamed and Yero had a French language background and this language is widely used in their interaction on Facebook. This also applies to the other French-speaking participants. On the other hand, French is not present in the Facebook activity of the two non-French-speaking participants, i.e., Horace and Lucky, who mainly use English and interact with other English-writing friends (i.e., Nigerian friends). However, the presence of French or English in the participants' linguistic background does not produce noticeable differences in their Facebook activity, in terms of the strategies adopted.

(11) Yero's wall, 7 October 2018 (comments to Yero's IC; cf. ex. 6)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Friend 6 | *Nice fréro* | 'Nice brother' (*fréro* = Fr. *frère*) |
| Yero | *merci monami* | 'thanks my friend' (*monami*= Fr. *mon ami*) |
| Friend 7 | *Tu sei molto bello* | 'You are very handsome' |
| Yero | *grazie amico* | 'thanks friend' (Italian) |
| Friend 8 | *cool* | |
| Yero | *frèro grazie* | 'brother, thanks' (Italian) |
| Friend 9 | *cool* | |
| Yero | *adiarama mawdo Friend 9* | 'thanks big Friend 9' (Pulaar) |
| Friend 10 | *Bellismo il mio frattello* | 'Very handsome, my brother' (Italian) |
| Yero | *grazie amiko mio come stai* | 'thanks my friend, how are you' (Italian) |

The interaction in (11) shows that Yero uses Italian to react to (non-Italian) friends' comments in Italian. As in the case of Mohamed, we mainly observe formulas (thanks, how are you?). This also applies to *frèro grazie* 'brother, thanks', where *frèro* could be an adaptation of the French base *frèr-* to Italian morphology, i.e., the masculine singular ending *-o* (*fratell-o*).[27] However, this is not Yero's autonomous morphological creation but a replication of Friend 6's post (*Nice fréro*), as already observed while commenting on example (6).

Example (6) also showed Yero's use of Pulaar and Wolof. We repeat the relevant lines in (12) to (14), representing a monolingual (Pulaar) post, a bilingual (English / Wolof) post and a plurilingual (French / English / Wolof) post.

(12) Yero's wall, 7 October 2018, monolingual RC (Pulaar)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Friend 9 | *cool* | | |
| Yero | *adiarama* | *mawdo* | *Friend 9* |
| | thanks | brother | Friend 9 |
| | 'thanks so much, brother Friend 9′ | | |

(13) Yero's wall, 7 October 2018, bilingual RC (English / Wolof)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Friend 2 | *FRIEND 2 BOROM SISILIA* | | |
| Yero | *boy* | *bamba* | *samahart* |
| | boy | the brave | my friend |
| | 'my brave friend' | | |

(14) Yero's wall, 7 October 2018, plurilingual RC (French / English / Wolof)

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Friend 3 | *COURAGE BRO.ON TE SALUT profondément* | | | |
| Yero | *merci* | *star* | *nakal* | *dagabak* |
| | thanks | star | how are you | are you fine |
| | 'thanks star, how are you?' | | | |

Other examples of Yero's plurilingual posts are in (15), which contains segments in French and Wolof.

(15) Yero, 25 November 2018, bilingual RC (French / Wolof) (comment to a picture posted by a friend on Yero's wall)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| IC Friend 1 | *Esprit tranquille #Friend 1* | | |
| | 'Peaceful mood.' | | |
| Yero | *frère* | *yagui* | *bag* |
| | brother | you're | handsome |
| | 'brother, you're handsome' | | |

Data discussed so far show that, in the case of these two emerging writers, their written production involves several languages at the same time, both languages belonging to Mohamed and Yero's repertoires and those frequently used in Facebook interaction (English and Italian). As we will discuss, this could be an effect of exposure to multilingual written input, which is a prominent feature of the interaction on Facebook by peers.

The emerging character of Yero's writing practices is shown by the lack of full control in handling the fragments of language. Yero frequently exhibits not stable spelling of the words he selects, e.g. the Wolof words *samahart* = *samaharit* in (13) and

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[27] This process of Italian/French blending could be facilitated by the genetic proximity of the two Romance languages. However, this hypothesis needs more support.

*dagabak* = *dangabah* in (14). To be sure, the lack of complete control is far from unique for plurilingual digital writing by L2 learners with emerging literacy. What is relevant in this case is that Facebook has been, for all the research participants, the unique context in which their writing activity was carried out before the courses of the university. On Facebook, research participants' writing emerged without any formal instruction (contrary to the most frequent way writing develops worldwide), that is, through mere interaction with other writers, in a way that is similar to the naturalistic acquisition of the oral language (and that continues well beyond participants' inclusion in courses).

Another aspect of the emerging character of the research participants' writing is the lack of full mastery of conventionalized divergent spelling, e.g. abbreviations, elimination of vowels etc. used as a rule in digital media interaction by young African migrants (Deumert & Lexander, 2013). Conventionalized divergent spelling occurs in emerging writers' posts, but it is limited to a handful of forms, largely French and English abbreviations. We have already met some of these forms in the examples discussed so far, e.g. *fr*=*frére* 'brother' (in 1 and 2) and the English corresponding form *bro* (in 6), *mn*=*mon* 'my' (in 2 and 9), *slt*=*salut* 'cheers', *svp*=*s'il vous plaît* 'please'. Another frequent English abbreviation is *tk* = *thanks*, in (16).

(16) Yero, 12 October 2017 (friends' comments to Yero's wordless picture)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IC Friend 1 | *nice frèrot*<br>'nice little brother' | |
| Yero | *tk*<br>thanks | *bro*<br>brother |

No example of divergent spelling in an African language can be found in the writing samples of the participants in the sample.[28] On the other hand, divergent spelling in Italian emerges especially in Stage 2, limited however to highly frequent forms such as *fra* = *fratello* 'brother' (sometimes *frat*) and *bl* = *bello* 'beautiful', as in (17) and (18).

(17) Yero, 8 September 2018 (comments to a Yero's wordless picture)

| | |
|---|---|
| Friend 1 | *Sei bello*<br>'You're handsome' |
| Yero | *Grazie mille fra*<br>'Thanks bro(ther)' |

(18) Yero, 28 Novembre 2018 (Yero's comment to his selfie posted as an IP)

| | |
|---|---|
| IP | *Bl*<br>'Beautiful' |

Rather than reflecting an autonomous and creative (re)use of written language, these shortened forms seem to have been transferred as a whole from the imitation and repetition of language fragments in the written input and are in fact limited to the most commonly-used forms. This is consistent with what we have observed about the re-use, including copy-paste of friends' posts (or fragments of posts) by the participants in the sample.

## 4. Discussion

Yero's writing samples illustrate a characteristic of the literacy process on Facebook that is in fact common to all the emergent plurilingual writers in the sample, namely that this process is played out simultaneously in several languages. This could be a consequence of these new writers' exposure to that *bricolage* of languages that appears to be a prominent feature of Facebook interaction by peers at all stages of learning to write, as the examples discussed so far have suggested. This multilingual input is the source from which learners draw language examples and develop re-use and written production strategies.

We can identify four main operations through which the ten participants practice emergent writing:

A) Copy-pasting from other posts. We have observed this operation in the practice of sharing the friends' multimedia posts also replicating their language content (cf. ex 2).
B) Interpretation in the context of occurrence (rather than decoding) of expressions often used by peers, e.g. formulas such as 'happy birthday' or 'happy New Year'. This can be seen in Mohamed's IP in (4), *bonne année*, a segment that appears several

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[28] This is not exclusive to the digital writings of migrants with emerging literacy. Deumert and Lexander (2013) noted a differentiated use of divergent spelling in spontaneous digital writing, where the very high use of divergent spelling in English and French contrasts with the standard spelling of African languages (generally underrepresented in digital writing). According to the two scholars, the predominance of one language in public life encourages the subversion of norms, while marginalization requires respect for them.

times in the immediately preceding days on Mohamed's wall, alone or within longer segments (such as the one reported in 5 and then re-used in 10 by Mohamed). Mohamed correctly interprets the function of this formula and in fact re-uses it for his own IP.

C) Repetition of forms and short phrases, e.g. adjectives of appreciation such as *nice* or formulas such as *merci* which occur throughout the examples discussed so far. This re-use can eventually produce overgeneralization of frequent forms to contexts where they are not normally used, e.g. *merci* overused instead of the 'like' response, very frequent in Yero activity (cf. 6).

D) (Eventually) experimentation with autonomous writing, e.g. single words never written before.

We interpret these strategies as a continuum of progressive autonomy in the use of written forms. In particular, operations such as copy-paste and repetition of frequent forms provide raw written language material (*written chunks*) that language learners progressively re-work on their own. The four operations closely resemble those widely documented in the functionalist and emergentist approaches for oral second language acquisition in naturalistic contexts (cf. e.g. Bybee, 2008), namely a) repetition and imitation, b) inference of meaning from context, c) overgeneralization of frequent forms to fulfill specific functions and d) creative construction.

The continuum of writing strategies just sketched (operations A to D) contributes to explaining why these language learners' emergent writing on Facebook does not reflect the writing skills that they displayed on the University literacy tests.

A clear example of such asymmetry is provided by Mohamed's IP in (2), repeated here as (19):

(19) Mohamed, 4 November 2016

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| IP | *Slt Svp écoute bien cette vidéo mes amis* | 'Cheers, please listen to this video carefully, my friends' |

The IP in (19) was posted in November 2016, that is, five months after the Facebook account was opened. Mohamed's literacy skills were tested only 7 months later, in June 2017. The test revealed pre-emergent literacy competence in Bambara and an emergent level of literacy in Italian and French (cf. Table 4), acquired late, that is, after the arrival in Italy in non-formal contexts (with other migrants according to the participant's self-reporting). This literacy level is incompatible with the complex text in (19), which contains morphological endings, conventionalized divergent spelling (*Slt* 'salut', *Svp* 's'il vous plaît'), and target accent marks. It is reasonable to suppose (and has in fact been verified) that this text appeared as such in posts from Mohamed's other friends. In other words, Mohamed implemented strategy A) (copy/pasting from other posts) listed in the previous section.

This analysis is confirmed by the presence of other, even more complex IPs, often with political content and accompanying shared videos. In all cases, it was always possible to trace the source from which the texts were copied. This is the case in (20):

(20) Mohamed, 16 January 2017

| | |
|---|---|
| IP | *Général Moussa Traoré La Patrie ou la mort*<br>'General Moussa Traoré: Homeland or death' |

This also involves posts in Italian. The example in (21) contains linguistic features that are incompatible with Mohamed's L2 Italian oral and written competence at this stage.

(21) Mohamed, 28 May 2018

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| IP | *L'* | *orgoglio* | *del* | *Mali* |
| | DET:M.SG | pride:M.SG | of.the:M.SG | Mali |
| | 'The pride of Mali' | | | |

At the morphosyntactic level, inconsistency relates to nominal inflection. The post contains the definite article *l'* 'the', correctly agreeing in terms of gender and number with the masculine singular noun *orgoglio* 'pride', and the *articulated* preposition *del* 'of the', in which *di* 'of' is combined with *il* 'the'. However, ItaStra oral testing showed that Mohamed's interlanguage remained at the basic variety stage until the end of the survey. This is shown in the transcription in (22) derived from the last semi-guided interview in June 2018.

(22) Mohamed, June 2018, excerpt of transcription of the last oral task

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| no | *capisci* | *italiano* | *no* | *posse* | *lavoro* |
| NEG | understand:2.SG | Italian | NEG | can:Ø | work |
| *sensa* | *capisce* | *lingua* | | *italiana* | |
| without | understand:3.SG | language:F.SG | | Italian:F.SG | |
| 'if I do not understand Italian I can't work – without understanding the Italian language' | | | | | |

The example in (22) shows that Mohamed, at the end of the survey, had not yet developed the category of definiteness and the definite article is lacking in the noun phrases *Italian* and *lingua italiana* (target forms: *l'italiano* and *la lingua italiana*). We can conclude that the sentence in (20) is an example of strategy A), that is, the result of a copy-pasting activity, rather than an example of Mohamed's interlanguage.

In other words, Facebook may not reflect learners' (linguistic and writing) competence. Rather, for some learners (and at certain stages of writing acquisition), it represents a locus of immersion in the written language, in which learners imitate and re-use the linguistic fragments to which they are exposed.

As observed above, the early forms of writing that emerge on Facebook are the result of practices of imitation and, then, contextual reinterpretation and re-use of pieces of language which, in the perception of the subject, convey meanings: that is, they are not decoded piece-by-piece, but rather taken up and re-used for their overall semantic and pragmatic value. This is precisely the same process used by learners who acquire a second language naturalistically.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of digital writing practices carried out on the Facebook pages of a group of adult migrants, recently arrived in Italy from various countries of sub-Saharan Africa, sheds new light on emergent writing practices of language learners with little experience in producing their own writing prior to migration.

In Italy, newly arrived migrants typically are provided few opportunities to interact with the local community and, hence, little quantitative and qualitative exposure to the target language. Facebook becomes a relevant context for naturalistic exposure to the target and other languages. In this context, they manage, imitate and produce samples of written language focusing on meanings and functions rather than on forms, as might be the case in more formal learning contexts.

The main finding of the analysis is that the new writers show emerging multilingual writing that is learned and practiced through copy-paste, imitation and re-use of the fragments of the input to which they are exposed and, finally, through autonomous experimentation, that is, in a way fully consistent with the naturalistic acquisition of oral language. Their writing on Facebook does not reflect the written and oral skills elicited by means of tests of L2 Italian. Rather, it reflects learning strategies generally ignored in formal acquisition contexts; this could be a useful indication for teachers and professionals working with adult language learners with emergent literacy.[29]

While these findings directly answer the research question that guided the analysis, other aspects of the writing practices of young African migrants on Facebook deserve further investigation in the near future. An example of this is the role of multilingual input provided by the network of *friends*, regardless of their prior experiences writing in an L2, or in any language. This exploration will be one of the next steps in our research.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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[29] Recently a large amount of research on bilingual students has been carried out in didactic contexts. This has shown the strategic opportunities in writing offered by the departure from pedagogical models that ignore forms of linguistic mixing and consider the written text as essentially monolingual and normative. In particular, it is useful to look at multilingual practices in both written and spoken language as translanguaging practices, defined as "the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoires as an integrated system" (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401). Velasco and García (2014); see also Michael-Luna & Canagarajah, 2007) noted that a context that favours translanguaging facilitates learning practices for bilingual students: "In emergent bilinguals, TL [*translanguaging, authors' note*] can function as a self-regulatory mechanism that expedites the process of language learning" (p. 12). In this perspective, free writing practices on social media could be seen as a place of evaluation, exposure, learning and using different forms of multilingual *code meshing*. The written output of our participants with emergent literacy should be seen in relation to the development of multilingual literacy practices of other young Africans with whom they are constantly connected.

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**Mari D'Agostino** is Full Professor of Italian linguistics at the University of Palermo (Italy). She directs the School of Italian language for Foreigners at the same University. Her present research interests are in sociolinguistcs of present-day Italian and sociolinguistics of migration.

**Egle Mocciaro** is Assistant Professor of Italian linguistics at the Masaryk University of Brno (Czech Republic). She obtained her PhD in Linguistics at the University of Palermo (Italy), where she taught Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition from 2009 to 2019. Her present research interests include Italian linguistics and L2 Italian spoken by migrants.