NARRATIVE MEDICINE AND THE NEW SCENARIOS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING.
LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, TRANSLINGUALISMS AND MIGRATION TRAUMAS

Andreina Sgaglione

The new scenarios of globalization raise new questions related to the massive movements of millions of people across the planet. Such movements, whether forced or spontaneous, place individuals in a constant state of translation, while intercultural communication becomes increasingly important. In these circumstances, teaching in multilingual educational contexts is facing an epochal challenge. Translingualism, through its variations, translanguaging, translingual writing, and the translingual imaginary, offers a new perspective for rethinking current language policies. The consideration of the traumatic experience connected to the dimension of translingualism also helps to highlight the difficulties that can hinder language learning. Preferred working tools, which are reflected upon, include narrative medicine techniques in relation to teaching for translingual learners; linguistic autobiography, understood as a method for narrating one's internal world and as a means for creating a connection between language and emotions; and translingual autobiographies as models that deconstruct monolingual educational paradigms moving towards a decolonization of study methods. The contribution specifically proposes, through perspectives that integrate and intertwine, a reflection on the possible convergences between the field of narrative medicine and that of educational linguistics, with the hope of building more effective and inclusive learning environments.

Keywords
Narrative medicine; Translingualism; Linguistic Autobiographies; Translingual Writings; Migration Trauma.

LA MEDICINA NARRATIVA E I NUOVI SCENARI DI APPRENDIMENTO E INSEGNAMENTO DELLE
LINGUE. AUTOBIOGRAFIE LINGUISTICHE, TRANSLINGUI E TRAUMI DELLE MIGRAZIONI

I nuovi scenari della globalizzazione pongono nuove domande legate agli enormi spostamenti sul pianeta di milioni di persone. Tali movimenti, siano essi forzati o spontanei, pongono gli individui in un costante stato di traduzione, mentre la comunicazione interculturale acquista un'importanza crescente. In queste circostanze, la didattica nei contesti educativi plurilingui è di fronte a una sfida epocale. Il translinguismo attraverso le sue declinazioni, ovvero il translanguaging, le scritture translingui e l'immaginario translingue, offre una nuova prospettiva per ripensare le politiche linguistiche oggi in atto. La considerazione dell'esperienza traumatica connessa alla dimensione del translinguismo, inoltre, aiuta a evidenziare i disagi che possono ostacolare l'apprendimento linguistico. Strumenti privilegiati di lavoro su cui si riflette sono le tecniche di medicina narrativa messe in relazione con la didattica per apprendenti translingui; l'autobiografia linguistica intesa come metodo di racconto del proprio mondo interno e come mezzo per la creazione di un legame tra linguaggio e affettività; le autobiografie translingui come modelli che decostruiscono i paradigmi monolingui educativi nella direzione di una decolonizzazione dei metodi di studio. Il contributo propone, in particolare, attraverso prospettive che si integrano e si intrecciano, una riflessione sulle possibili convergenze fra il campo della medicina narrativa e quello della linguistica educativa, auspicando la costruzione di contesti di studio più efficaci e inclusivi.

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Migration, globalization and linguistic challenges

Italy's geographical position as a border and gateway, balanced between limit and starting point, has always made our country a crossroads of languages and cultures. The Mediterranean bears witness to routes that have intersected and given rise to hybrid languages that cause tensions between different instances: on the one hand, local rooting and on the other, the cultivation of a global self that is unanchored. The Mare Nostrum tells stories of journeys of various kinds, from mythological voyages to commercial, touristic, and religious trips: rich narratives that cross time and resound with echoes of the distant words of those who arrived on and departed from our shores. These great waves of mobility that bring people from different origins into our social and educational contexts remind us that emigration is an essential part of our historical memory and of our individual and collective unconscious.

> Ci sarà un motivo, dopotutto, se in fondo alle nostre gambe abbiamo i piedi: non radici per ancorarci al terreno […] Siamo nomadi: e dal momento in cui l'evoluzione ci ha fatti scendere dagli alberi […] abbiamo dovuto camminare, anzi correre […] Camminiamo da milioni di anni, e per lunghe distanze […] Si spostano persino le piante, che credevamo ingenuamente "radicate", mentre non hanno avuto bisogno di radici, nemmeno loro per milioni di anni (il loro interscambio, anche di sostanze nutritive, comincia con l'aria non con la terra); e si muovono autonomamente, non solo quando trasportate dagli umani, trovando vie originali […] attraverso forme di migrazione intergenerazionale (i semi portati via dal vento o da animali), […] adottando anche complesse strategie di meticciamento e di trasformazione. Migrano addirittura, seppure in modo lentissimo, le cose apparentemente più solide e immobili di tutte, i continenti, attraverso le loro derive senza ritorno. (Allievi 2021, 27-30)

It is worth mentioning a remote example of an exiled medieval poet, Ibn Hamdîs, who was forced by Norman conquerors to leave his native Sicily in 1078, not knowing if he would never return. In his verses, collected in a songbook composed of three hundred and sixty poems[1], he always speaks of the deep bond and strong sense of belonging to his island, but also of the lost time and the torment for a beloved place now prey to hostile invaders (Kumar 2022, 79). Through these distant suggestions, his voice amplifies and manages to evoke themes of pressing relevance such as nostalgia, exodus, fracture, pain, the metaphor of memory and the difficult of searching that mark current trajectories. These movements are transformed into a cartography of sound and remain in the bodies of languages, shaping identities and relationships and raising pillars that have generated models of vital interconnections on which it is urgent to reflect in an appropriate and proactive manner, especially in the current context. Between 2000 and today there has been a massive increase in the number of forced migrants globally, from 20 million to almost 110 million. This staggering development is linked to conditions of persecution, conflict, violation of human rights and it represents a serious disruption of public order that negatively impacts a large portion of humanity (Ricci 2023, 43). The conditions experienced on journeys undertaken towards a new hope and life are often marked by daily violence against women, minors and men on the move at the internal and external borders of the EU. In December 2022 the new Black Book of Pushbacks was published, a volume commissioned by the Left Group in the European Parliament that collects thousands of testimonies on the subject. The path to finding sources of resolution and strategies for overcoming conflict is complex: it is difficult to analyze at the same time the individual level of single journeys and of existential stories and the collective level that involves population

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[1] Islamist Francesca Maria Corrao made an important contribution to the dissemination of Hamdis's work, thanks to the publication of an anthology, *Poeti arabi di Sicilia*, in which she translated the most significant verses of the greatest exponents of the Arab-Sicilian poetic school in the style and voice of some of the greatest contemporary Italian poets.

movements and interactions between different communities (De Micco 2002, 7). Integrating different points of view can contribute to creating a broader picture:

> Se provassimo a leggere le migrazioni internazionali come se fossero migrazioni interne, per esempio, capiremmo cose che altrimenti ci sfuggono. Di fronte all'arrivo di popolazioni straniere, una risposta istintuale frequente è quella del rifiuto, della paura, e dunque ricorriamo a un set di soluzioni standard apparentemente facili: le barriere, i muri – che oltre alla loro fisica materialità, hanno la forma di norme legislative, e l'espressione convincente delle guardie di frontiera, armi alla mano. Se le stesse identiche persone venissero da una regione vicina (o anche lontana) dello stesso Paese, non potremmo ricorrere agli stessi mezzi: per legge, proprio. […] E potremmo misurare gli effetti positivi e negativi nel luogo di partenza e in quello di arrivo; e chiedere ai diretti interessati se sono soddisfatti di essersi spostati (nella maggior parte dei casi, la risposta è sì). Le migrazioni interne […] proprio perché non implicano il varcare un confine, e soprattutto perché non possono essere bloccate (e quindi non possiamo ricorrere come prima risposta all'idea del muro, del respingimento, del rimpatrio, poiché siamo insomma costretti ad accettarle e a subirne le conseguenze), sono ricche di insegnamenti anche per comprendere le migrazioni internazionali, e ci mostrano alcune ragioni profonde di convenienza. (Allievi 2023, 34)

To this must be added the ability to provide concrete answers to the problems of populations in transit and a correct understanding of their needs. The challenges of language learning are in the foreground: ensuring quality, equitable and inclusive education, as stated in Goal 4 of the UN Agenda 2030, is a fundamental need that must be answered and that has been unanimously confirmed:

> Limiting the performance gap between migrant and non-migrant pupils is important. A systematic gap shows the education system is hindering equal opportunities and wasting talent in particular segments of society. Furthermore, this will also trigger issues of social cohesion. One should nevertheless not limit the evaluation of an education system solely to the presence or absence of a performance gap between migrants and non-migrants. A highly socially divided and immobile class-based society with little to no particular attention for inclusion of migrants in the education system, where disfavoured migrants and disfavoured natives alike score poorly, would of course, not be an aspirational model. Furthermore, policy steps to be taken are not always self-evident […] such reforms are complicated as

improving the position of the underprivileged can be accompanied by a loss of privilege of other groups. (Jacobs and Devleeshouwer 2022, 247)

In order not to enter into dynamics of gain and loss with respect to rights that should be guaranteed to all, it is necessary to frame the needs of the publics present in Italian educational contexts, especially migrants. Language presides over a series of mechanisms that are grafted onto the lives of those who are on the move; despite the probable opportunities to suppress the issue, it represents a central point linked to well-being understood in the broadest possible sense.

> Ci si può confrontare per prendere una posizione circa la propria identità, per capire chi si è e chi si può essere in questo mondo globale, dove tutto si può raggiungere in un attimo e dove tutte le lingue possono essere avvicinate (nelle metropoli, in Internet, nei viaggi, nei mass media. […] in un mondo che di nuovo e in maniera intensa e drammatica si riconfronta con gli spostamenti epocali delle popolazioni, dei migranti. Lingue migranti, insieme ai loro parlanti; idiomi che si incontrano, spesso per la prima volta in quantità tanto massiccia nella loro storia; lingue immigrate, insieme ai loro locutori, che le usano nei loro nuovi contesti di vita, che le intendono mantenere vive, e che le vedono sfiorire sulle bocche dei loro figli, e che sono delusi per tale esito e insieme felici di vedere i loro giovani parlare bene le lingue dei nuovi contesti entro i quali hanno costruito la speranza di una vita migliore. Tali processi si collocano entro un mondo che, posto di fronte alla dimensione dei nuovi movimenti migratori, sembra non avere memoria dei precedenti sommovimenti, spostamenti di genti: e tale perdita di memoria caratterizza sia coloro che emigrano, sia gli Stati e le società dove arrivano; si tratta di un mondo che ha perso, o rischia di perdere la memoria delle migrazioni di ieri, illudendosi di avere risolto per sempre, in un quadro di integrazione che in realtà vuole essere assimilazione, le questioni poste dall'immigrazione di ieri, e così non capendo che i conti con questo fenomeno rimangono sempre aperti, sempre da fare, e che la dimenticanza non giova per affrontare le caratteristiche dei nuovi esodi. (Vedovelli 2011, 131-32)

Although Tullio De Mauro had already indicated in the 1970s the importance of multilingualism and the consequent recognition and appreciation of idiomatic diversity, highlighting the complexity of the issue (De Mauro 1975), in Italian educational contexts a certain kind of monolingualism, which is no longer reflected

in reality, has been widely maintained over the years. This approach refers to normative, prestigious models connected to a certain type of language market which, in the Italian context, is substantially limited to English for foreign languages and to standard Italian (Bagna and Casini 2012, 235). In more recent years, also thanks to the sensitivity developed in the process of drafting European reference documents on the topic[2], the focus has shifted to valuing plurilingualism, which is no longer considered a potential obstacle, as an individual and group resource both cognitively and culturally (see Bialystock 2001, Cummins 2005, 2007, Contento 2010, Coppola and Moretti 2018). Rethinking linguistic education from the perspective of plurilingual education means reflecting critically and constructively on the linguistic policies to be implemented, both to redefine pedagogical models and teaching strategies and to equip ourselves with adequate tools capable of welcoming and valuing different cultural and linguistic heritages within a broader and more strategic vision of all the educational contexts of the future.

> Fra Babele e la Pentecoste, fra la paura babelica delle lingue degli altri e la grazia delle lingue come un dono che gli umani hanno a disposizione, occorre scegliere questa seconda opzione. E i bambini, i giovani sono coloro che possono appoggiarsi su una ricchezza plurilinguistica che tale è finché gli adulti, la scuola, le ideologie razziste non vengono a sporcarla, a depauperarla. (Vedovelli 2015, 102)

Some crucial issues are the question of teacher training, the in-depth analysis of the precarious state in which learners find themselves, the activation of the correct phases of reception, not only for the students who fill Italian schools, but

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[2] In addition to the *CEFR Companion Volume* (2020), an important direction, in this regard, came from the 2018 Recommendation of the Council of the European Union concerning key competences for lifelong learning. The recommendation emphasizes the importance of multilingual competence, which includes historical and intercultural skills. In 2022 the importance of multilingual and intercultural education was reinforced with an additional document entitled *The Importance of Plurilingual and Intercultural Education for Democratic Culture.*

also for the groups of adult immigrants who have chosen to invest part of their migratory project in education. In their case, this objective is aimed above all at achieving linguistic competence, understood as an essential prerequisite for the success of the migratory experience and as a means of redemption and social promotion (Troncarelli and La Grassa 2018, 1). As a pre-requisite, the implementation of any action in the educational field must begin with a careful examination of the group profile and needs of those who arrive from other countries, with particular attention given to the numerous critical issues that must be addressed.

Translingualism in Italian L2/LS teaching contexts: new frontiers of inclusion

In order to understand in depth the condition of the learners who come to our educational contexts and to promote an approach to teaching and learning that takes into account their holistic needs, we must refer to the broader dimension of translingualism,

> una pratica di transito e adozione tra i linguaggi, culture e spazi […]. Una forma importante di plurilinguismo multiculturale […]: un punto di vista sul mondo generato dalla coesistenza e dalla tensione tra le lingue. (de Rogatis 2023, 41-42)

Translingualism in its diverse forms, namely translanguaging, translingual writings and the translingual imagination, can offer a new way to understand in a more analytical way the position of those who are in transit between languages. This dimension can contain traumatic nuclei, inasmuch as it is a condition associated with the crossing of physical and interior worlds and connected to situations of deprivation and expropriation closely interrelated with migratory events. The experience of exile, of diaspora, of abandoning one's own land is destabilizing, traumatic and often accompanied by feelings of suffering and psychic fragmentation. It is difficult to shed light on the real conditions experienced by subjects who migrate, especially with respect to internal wounds that are hard to

heal (Moll 2022, 60): the general tendency is to have in mind a deficit model that emphasizes above all the problems and shortcomings of learners (Cefai 2008; Nilsson and Bunar 2016). The answers or rather the non-answers in the educational field more or less implicitly suggest an indistinct promotion of strategies that activate the resilience of individuals. For a long time, resilience has been interpreted as a strictly individual capacity useful for combating stress and promoting determination, perseverance, grit and resistance. The concept referred to a presumed invulnerability that the subject should have acquired with respect to the challenges of life. Although resilience varies according to the physiological and psychological characteristics of individuals and the social processes of which they are a part, recent studies emphasize that it must be framed as an interaction between the person and their environment (Ungar 2012, Master 2014). People who have unwillingly experienced severe trauma and who have had to face wars, violence, and terrible injustices cannot simply be asked to develop forms of adaptation to new situations while we ignore the structural factors that caused the terrible experiences they have lived.

> Resilience suggests that an individual can negotiate survival and success in spite of adversity, and in the aftermath of adversity. Of course, some aspects of resilience depend on you, and other aspects depend on your environment. In some situations, resilience may be easy; in others, more difficult. Even more simply, resilience is the ability to successfully adapt in the face of adversity. It does not mean immunity to stress and trauma. It does not mean that stress and trauma will not affect you or leave negative impacts. It means that you have solid defenses to confront it and stand your ground, as best as you can, in the face of what may come. In other words, resilience describes your ability to adapt to adverse circumstances in order to maintain your access and ability to navigate survival resources. (Niconchuk 2020, 258)

From this perspective, resilience is useful for developing a reasonable degree of control over the body's responses to traumatic stresses that come from without. It also helps manage how one relates to others in the environment in which one lives and still maintains a capacity for action in contexts of prolonged uncertainty.

An ecological perspective is emerging in which resilience is understood as a condition of well-being strongly intertwined with a context that provides the support, resources and services necessary to progress in a positive way. This capacity can be greatly enhanced with educational interventions that promote a safe, fair and stimulating learning context in which strong social connections are established (Cefai 2021, 222). The goal is not to expose learners to trauma, but to include trauma-informed practices in teacher training, to create sustainable learning contexts for both students and teachers (Castro Shepers *et al* . 2022). Schools are ideal places to establish the bases on which to build resilience: among the favorable factors is that teachers can establish clear shared objectives based on an agenda that includes solid and reassuring habits, promoting hope and self-esteem in learners (Niconchuk 2020, 258-259). To this end, teachers should have the right tools to decode the complex kaleidoscope linked to the dimension of translingualism which, concomitantly, can also be a prerequisite for creativity and rebirth, as it produces an intermediate zone, generated by contact and hybridization, that the postcolonial essayist Homi Bhabha calls the «Third Space» (Bhabha 1994, 37). This can represent both a physical and symbolic place; it can be embodied in an individual, but it can also be a point of view from which to look at language and life. It can include divergences, but at the same time transcend them in an attempt to hold together differences with the construction of a shared belonging (de Rogatis 2023, 72). The «Third Space» constitutes, in short, an alternative between the poles of assimilation and isolation of diversities and inequalities in migrant communities (ivi, 67-69). In order to interpret from a didactic point of view the interconnected areas, «often translating into each other» (ivi, 4), in which the dimension of translingualism is articulated, it is appropriate to propose some brief reflections that can have useful implications for teaching. The first concerns a well-known and widely diffused theme in the field of applied linguistics studies: *translanguaging*, understood both as a post-constructivist and post-colonial theory/practice of language (Wei 2018) and as a pedagogical approach (García *et al* . 2017). The term *translanguaging* refers to the dynamic use of all the linguistic resources of a bi/plurilingual speaker/learner. There

are numerous experiences in the Italian (Scibetta and Carbonara 2019, Carbonara *et al.* 2020) and international contexts that have brought to the forefront forms of plurilingual teaching through the creation of the so-called *translanguaging classrooms*, or spaces in which students can use all their linguistic repertoires and not only the language or languages officially used for teaching purposes. This approach recognizes and values the idioms and dialects of learners in everyday teaching, by attempting to de-hierarchize languages at school via strategies based on the pedagogy of *translanguaging*. These are inclusive teaching practices that respect the linguistic rights of learners with a migrant background, in a framework of the symbolic and educational legitimization of plurilingualism (Carbonara and Scibetta 2020). A further observation concerns the theme of translingual writings which includes authors who write in at least one language other than their mother tongue (Kellman 2007, 7-9). The repertoire to choice from is wide and bears prodigious and living witness to the scenario of the Italian context: the literature written by immigrants[3] reflects the changes linked to migratory movements which, when viewed against the light, become both the cause and the effect of the stories told (Comberiati 2010, 9). The characteristics of these writings are various, as de Rogatis explains in his detailed analysis:

> nella modernità e nella contemporaneità, il percorso verso la scrittura translingue può avere in sé un grado maggiore o minore di libertà e di necessità, e un grado maggiore o minore di pressione storica, sociale ed etnica. […] La postura adottata dagli scrittori esofoni verso la propria opera si delinea […] nelle loro stesse riflessioni metalinguistiche. Esse si orientano verso tre direzioni qui di seguito elencate, in ordine crescente di importanza. […] La prima direzione metalinguistica è quella delle riflessioni e considerazioni disseminate sulla pratica translingue, via via espresse da questa ampia galassia di scrittori.
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> La seconda direzione metalinguistica è quella del riconoscimento genealogico, che si esprime attraverso lo studio e/o il riferimento costante ad altri autori translingui. È il caso di Coetzee, studioso per la sua intera vita di Beckett (Kellman 2007, 69-82), o di Lahiri, che costruisce la sua *Postfazione* a *In altre parole* dalla prospettiva di Kristof (Lahiri 2016, 163-166). La terza, infine, è quella dell' «autobiografia linguistica» (ivi,156) o dai tratti spiccatamente linguistici. Attraverso di essa, lo scrittore definisce l'intensità traumatica e vitale con cui la pratica translingue ha modellato al tempo stesso la propria vita e la propria poetica. (de Rogatis 2023, 54)

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[3] Although it is not an exhaustive list, for a more in-depth analysis of the issue of the production in Italian by writers of foreign origin see Moll 2015, Sinopoli 2015, and Comberiati and Mengozzi 2023.

These texts constitute an «opportunità di ricorrere a forme di scrittura multilingue come risposta catartica a una condizione di fisiologica sofferenza affettiva e identitaria» (Santipolo 2023, 106), but also a precious repertoire within which a translingual imaginary is embedded:

> Esso va visto come uno spazio inclusivo, stratificato ed esteso, dislocato di volta in volta nella relazione dinamica e posizionale che il parlante stabilisce con la propria madrelingua e con le proprie altre lingue attraverso esperienze, pratiche corporee, codici extra-linguistici, universi cognitivi e narrazioni. (de Rogatis 2023, 44)

The perspective that needs to be taken here is that of teaching Italian as a foreign language. Therefore, it should be emphasized that working on texts by translingual writers may lead to a fertile process of identification and create that network of solidarity of experiences within which one may rediscover one's own experience. This is possible largely thanks to the rich metaphorical ideas linked to the positions of those who are constantly in translation, whether by necessity or by choice. The ability to recognize the strangeness and difficulty that arise from continually positioning oneself both inside and outside the boundaries of a new language is refined, while spaces are opened up for rethinking internal conflicts, failures and frustrations with respect to what cannot yet be said or recounted in a different idiom. At the same time, that awareness is perfected which is capable of guiding us towards the recognition of the creative potential that arises in the process of learning a new language and of recovering a different relationship with one's own mother tongue. The space that is created is one in which we must face the gain and the loss, the sense of rootedness and uprootedness, of failure and success, in a back-and-forth between affinity and discontinuity that interrupts the solitude of learning experiences. The perspective that is gained by working on the texts of translingual authors is crucial for teachers because it brings to the fore the issue of skills for managing classes that have become increasingly complex multicultural worlds. The continuous and unstoppable changes in the cultures that we are faced with make the acquisition of teaching and cultural skills a constantly evolving process rather than a

finished product. This process involves not only acquiring a solid knowledge base and specific training that includes linguistic skills, teaching abilities, training in psychology, and familiarity with new technologies (Villarini 2021, 163), but also developing the ability to take on different attitudes towards oneself and others (Waters and Asbil 2013). Recent research highlights the need to incorporate new strategies that help us maneuver more agilely in certain sensitive contexts. One way is to develop a so-called sense of *cultural humility*:

> Building on recent theory stressing multicultural orientation, as well as the development of virtues and dispositions associated with multicultural values, we introduce the construct of cultural humility, defined as having an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused, characterized by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual's cultural background and experience. (Hook *et al.* 2013, 353)

This approach requires a significant change in perspective:

> In a multicultural world where power imbalances exist, cultural humility is a process of openness, self-awareness, being egoless, and incorporating self-reflection and critique after willingly interacting with diverse individuals. The results of achieving cultural humility are mutual empowerment, respect, partnerships, optimal care, and lifelong learning. (Fronda *et al.* 2016, 213)

Texts by translingual authors, even if they do not all have the same intensity, shed light on themes that are often submerged and struggle to surface: dramatic events, traumatic fractures, imaginaries, symbolic worlds (de Rogatis 2023, 15), and aphasias accompanied by multisensorial sounds. This dense chiaroscuro directly introduces teachers to the heart of the matter, involving them critically and encouraging the development of *cultural humility*: it involves an awareness of possible personal prejudices, a different and more productive attitude to listening rather than to presuming or taking for granted, a possibility of identifying with greater clarity what is not apparent. The stories of migration and translingualism thus become a more significant repertoire than others, a resource for understanding our current

situation but also «un modo di raccontarsi e raccontare il mondo per poter sopravvivere ad esso, renderlo umano, abitabile» (ivi, 13). The contribution of these authors emphasizes how the experience of migration is a challenge that engages on multiple fronts an issue connected to others. It is at the intersection of events such as trauma, oppression, racism, poverty, exclusion, just to name a few, that the powerful key to understanding is hidden: «Understanding is only as powerful as the action that follows» (Waters and Asbil 2013, 1). From this perspective, when faced with learners and their needs, it becomes necessary to admit that we do not always have all the answers, but that it is possible to look for them in a humble act of cooperation. Good questions, on the other hand, are already an excellent starting point for identifying unresolved needs, in a dynamic that, through holistic and inclusive methods, overturns the asymmetries of the teacher-student relationship.

> Recognizing that each person brings something different to the proverbial table of life helps us see the value of each person. […] Both people must collaborate and learn from each other for the best outcomes. One holds power in scientific knowledge, the other holds power in personal history and preferences. […] Though individuals can create positive change, communities and groups can also have a profound impact on systems. We cannot individually commit to self-evaluation and fixing power imbalances without advocating within the larger organizations in which we participate. Cultural humility, by definition, is larger than our individual selves-we must advocate for it systemically. (ivi, 2)

Texts by translingual authors can become a megaphone when they bring to the forefront issues such as migratory trauma, hardship, and oppression, just as teachers and learners can become megaphones themselves when they share experiences learned through the filter of diverse, but not dissimilar, points of view. It is an opportunity to get to the root of issues that would otherwise remain buried, engaging with the precious spaces built by languages that encounter each other. It is an antidote to becoming invisible.

Narrative medicine, linguistic autobiography and the healing power of stories, between empathy and language learning

The complex and delicate relationship established between the teacher and the migrant learner who has suffered any migratory trauma cannot be pigeonholed into ordinary didactic interactions. Instead, it must take on the characteristics of a more intense bond closer to a relationship of care understood in the broadest sense of the term. The point of view that characterized the role of the teacher as that of a *counselor* and compared the relationship between teacher/student to that of doctor/patient has already been observed in language-teaching studies that follow so-called humanistic-affective approaches, which emerged around the end of the 1960s in non-linguistic fields, since their advocates were doctors, psychologists, pedagogists or scientists who tried to transfer into the field of foreign language learning what had been experienced in more general contexts (Serra Borneto 1998, 42). In particular, in some of the proposed models, the principles and techniques of person-centered psychological therapy were applied (ivi, 63). Today we begin with the assumption that «the affective dimension of language learning is widely accepted as relevant to the learner's success in mastering the target language» (Richards and Rodgers 2014, 314), just as it is established that language teaching, despite its autonomous status, has a vocation to be open to other disciplines, from which it draws content that gets reworked and adapted according to specific needs (Villarini 2021, 19). A glance into the future seems to confirm the trends described above:

> How do we feel the language teaching profession will move ahead in the near, or even more distant, future? […] Some of the responses to these issues may take the form of new approaches and methods; others may lead to a refining or reshaping of existing approaches and methods as the teaching profession responds to the finding of new research and to developments in educational theory and practice. The initiatives for changing programs and pedagogy may come from within the profession – from teachers, administrators, theoreticians, and researchers. Incentives or demands of a

political, social or even fiscal nature may also drive change, as they have in the past. Particular personalities and leaders in the field may also shape the future of language teaching. Change may also be motivated by completely unexpected sources. (Richards and Rodgers 2014, 384)

Among the factors that could produce significant changes, it is worth mentioning:

> *Crossovers from other disciplines.* Encounters with cognitive psychology, psychotherapy, communication science, ethnography, and human engineering have left their imprint on language pedagogy and exemplify the way that such diverse disciplines can influence a field that is always looking for inspiration. (ivi, 385)

These considerations open up to a reflection on the implications that could arise from the emerging field of narrative medicine and from all the debate that has been generated around it, potentially enriching applied linguistics.[4] Here we propose some reflections on the possible convergences of these two areas. Language does not only concern grammar and rules, but «comprende, potenzialmente, tutto ciò che l'individuo può vedere e capire nell'Universo intero e tutto ciò che può anche volere» (Sabatini 2016, 13). Language is embodied and becomes the link between different worlds, reveals thoughts, sounds, and is placed at the crossroads, determining the turning points of life. It implements care when it enables us to name, identify, and recognize or when it frees expressiveness. The theme of care commonly refers to the doctor-patient relationship, the core of narrative medicine studies. Already in 1957, Hungarian psychoanalyst Balint supported the relevance of this relationship in diagnostic and therapeutic terms. Interestingly, according to the scholar, the most frequently prescribed "drug" is the doctor, but its pharmacology—i.e. its toxicity, dosage, and side effects—is not really known.

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[4] Narrative medicine is a field of study that establishes a clinical care methodology based on communication skills. Rita Charon, a physician-internist and professor of *Clinical Medicine* at Columbia University in New York, has provided one of the most well-known and fundamental definitions of narrative medicine recognized internationally (Charon 2006).

Therefore, like a drug, doctors have a double value: they bring benefits, but also toxic side effects (Balint 2014, 3-22). From these reflections, the Balint Groups were born, composed of general practitioners duly trained in the relationship with patients on the basis of listening and intra-professional sharing (Calabrese *et al* . 2023, 11). Here we can risk shifting this particularly effective metaphor from the healthcare field to educational contexts. Often teachers find themselves in the position of being the only available remedy when facing educational emergencies. They are frequently the only more-than-casual point of contact between the host society and the migrant learner (Troncarelli and La Grassa 2018, 1). They are a sort of mobile frontier where there is a lack of sure antidotes to error. Naturally the process of teaching and learning a language is never in any way comparable to a pathology, but the sense of discouragement and inadequacy that often assails teachers with respect to bureaucracy and the thousand other difficulties they face (Deiana *et al.* 2021), associated with the lack of adequate spaces, conditions, and tools, can generate negative side effects that impact everyone involved in the process. Narrative medicine focuses on the fascinating and complex encounter between the doctor and the patient, understood as an exchange between two people who are both custodians of complementary knowledge: one having scientific and experiential skills, the other the story of their life and illness.

> Di fatto sebbene la lingua italiana non consideri tale distinzione, [...] due saperi sono ben identificati da due termini inglesi atti a definire la malattia: *illness* e *disease* […] la *illness*, intesa come il vissuto soggettivo della malattia, l'insieme delle sensazioni fisiche, pensieri, emozioni e il malessere associati all'esperienza di essere malati, e la *disease*, ovvero la descrizione biologica, organica e clinica della patologia. Se ad esempio dovessimo descrivere l'influenza, come *illness* considereremmo la spossatezza, la sensazione di avere le "ossa rotte", il naso tappato e così via; come *disease*, invece, si potrebbe contemplare una temperatura corporea superiore o uguale a 37, 5-38 gradi, l'ostruzione delle vie respiratorie e la produzione di muchi e catarri. L'incontro tra medico e paziente, quindi, è caratterizzato dal tentativo di mediare tra due linguaggi: la *illness* del paziente e la *disease* del medico. Se vale il principio di complementarietà tra i due saperi in medicina, allora il medico nella sua relazione con il paziente è tenuto a un difficile ma prezioso intervento di traduzione del linguaggio del

paziente da *illness* a *disease*, al fine di codificare le informazioni portate dal paziente e trasformarle in importanti dati da considerare per formulare ipotesi diagnostiche (Calabrese *et al.* 2022,31-32)

Continuing analogically, the teacher-learner relationship also uniquely characterizes the dynamics that are embedded into the act of teaching. Both participate in the creation of a bond that is realized in an educational agreement, shaped by osmosis-like exchanges from which unique, unrepeatable experiences derive. Teachers bring all their knowledge, the teaching experience from their professional life; learners bring into play their subjective experience, their individual and family history, the languages they know, the signs of their experience of migration left in their body and mind, the expectations, and the fears and desires that arise from the investment of their resources in a language course. Here too the teacher is called upon to perform a task of translation and integration between elements of diverse natures, between *disease* and *illness*, to continue with the terms of this bold metaphor. On the one hand, there is the comprehensive analysis of some objective elements that form the identikit of the learner, such as the initial assessment, the level of linguistic/communicative competence, or the typological distance of the student's mother tongue. On the other hand, there is the consideration of the effects of the subjective experience of the learner. It is clear that the use of mediation is mandatory: it would be fallacious to give weight to only one dimension to the detriment of the other. Another key concept of narrative medicine, useful for the purposes of this examination, concerns the dichotomy between *evidence-based medicine* (EBM) and *narrative-based medicine* (NBM). In short, EBM suggests that clinical decisions are made on the basis of reliable data and employed by doctors in a clinical setting: this is a medicine based on evidence or proof of efficacy. In this scenario

il soggetto curato non partecipa attivamente al processo terapeutico, ma è percepito semplicemente come destinatario di cure basate su prove di efficacia e di alta qualità. Da qui deriva una concezione di malattia intesa come *disease*. (ivi, 17)

NBM, with its progressive openness to other humanistic disciplines (narratology, psychology, sociology, anthropology) essential to listen empathetically to the patient, proposes a reversal: the centrality of the person is fundamental to guaranteeing the quality of care, to completing and enriching traditional medical treatments. The standard methods are accompanied by the therapeutic use of patient narratives, alongside those of their family and of the professionals involved in their care:

> la persona malata viene considerata non più solo come oggetto di cura, ma come attivo protagonista del suo percorso terapeutico e riabilitativo, con la sua storia, le sue risorse e le sue capacità. Non a caso lo sviluppo del movimento della medicina narrativa compare sull'onda della contestazione del fatto che, in seguito allo sviluppo di tecnologie sempre più sofisticate, la capacità di ascolto dei medici sia passata in secondo piano. (ivi, 18-19)

Once again, the parallel with education emerges in a suggestive way: those who have teaching experience can easily recognize here a turning point that has characterized theoretical studies in language teaching. Once the main focus was the language to be learned and the role that L1 could have in determining success or failure in learning. Just think of the grammatical translation method in which linguistic deficiencies were perceived precisely as pathologies to be cured. Today at the center of the learning process is the learner with their differences (Diadori 2015, 2-29). I do not intend to diminish in any way the importance and indeed the necessity of making didactic decisions on the basis of the greater or lesser effectiveness of the different options that empirical research offers,[5] but at the same time, it must be noted that the interpretative horizons have profoundly changed. What impact can the considerations made so far for narrative medicine have on a sector such as that of teaching Italian to migrant learners, which is particularly in need of exploring new points of view? The importance of narrativizing a student's

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[5] A line of studies that emerged in the Anglo-Saxon context called *Evidence Based Education* proposes an approach with links to the medical field. It has subsequently been applied in different domains of the social sciences. The aim is to encourage the collection and dissemination of reliable knowledge about the effectiveness of different teaching methods that can help teachers, educators, and politicians make informed decisions (Vivanet 2014).

learning journeys as relational experiences is gradually being recognized. The cognitive and therapeutic value of stories in the duality of production and interpretation, but also the possibilities that derive from the exchange of roles in a class group, allow the self to know itself, heal itself, and transform itself also through narrative (Calabrese *et al* . 2022, 25). Methodologies range from semi-structured narrative interviews to the reflective diary, up to the use of autobiography, one of the fundamental tools of intervention:

> È stato d'altronde già osservato che la Svolta narrativa è stata essenzialmente una Svolta autobiografica (Calabrese 2018) e sull'autobiografia da decenni si concentrano studi che impegnano diverse discipline, dalla pedagogia alla psicoterapia fino alle neuroscienze; si contano numerose iniziative, fino alla nascita della Libera Università dell'autobiografia di Anghiari e del Centro nazionale di studi autobiografici, entrambi animati da Duccio Demetrio (Perotti 2021). Il racconto di sé, come narrazione retrospettiva ma anche progettuale, si riconosce come pratica dal forte valore identitario; pratica riparativa e costruttiva, vera «cura di sé» (Demetrio 1996), nel duplice campo semantico della «cura» (cure/care), curare e prendersi cura. È un tema percorso da decenni, ma oggi al centro di vere trasformazioni disciplinari. (Villani 2023, 292)

Autobiographical approaches in applied linguistics have become increasingly significant and widespread, thanks to the cultural and linguistic diversification in contemporary societies characterized by intense and heterogeneous processes of migration. Autobiographical narratives allow us to highlight the inner worlds of speakers not investigated by experimental methodologies and to explore the processes of language acquisition, linguistic attrition and language loss (Thüne and Luppi 2022, 1). For translingual learners, linguistic autobiography becomes a means to explicitly consider the elements that can favor or hinder the process of approaching another linguistic universe through new modes of conceptual elaboration, favoring a deeper awareness of their own needs. Another powerful tool that could be borrowed from narrative medicine is the use of the so-called "parallel chart", which was created by R. Charon in 1993 and used in her clinical practice with the following indications:

> Every day, you write in the hospital chart about each of your patients. You know exactly what to write there and the form in which to write it. You write about your patient's current complaints, the results of the physical exam, laboratory findings, opinions of consultants, and the plan. If your patient dying of prostate cancer reminds you of your grandfather, who died of that disease last summer, and each time you go into the patient's room, you weep for your grandfather, you cannot write that in the hospital chart. We will not let you. And yet it has to be written somewhere. You write it in the Parallel Chart. (Charon 2006, 155-156).

The parallel chart becomes a sort of free port where you can freely recount your experience of the care relationship. The inclusion of an imaginative, fantastic element forms the basis of a process that gives rise to an immense creativity that allows you to free yourself from the labyrinthine constraints dictated by the contexts and roles in play. This is exactly what is needed when working in educational contexts with people who come from distant places and who bring with them written and oral linguistic heritages together with worlds that are not immediately translatable. Sometimes the students' difficulties mirror the inevitably limited ability of teachers to perceive all the nuances of the universes present in their classes. The profiles that emerge are extraordinarily diverse: nomads, poets, defectors, artists, artisans, farmers, merchants, and religious people come together with an outsize variety of words, pronunciations, expressions, foods, clothes, and objects that cause a fascinating sense of vertigo. We must not forget that the task of forming and reforming one's identity in this globalized world belongs both to students and to teachers. The position of educational structures strongly rooted in a Western vision of culture is often far from the hybrid and holistic idea of language seen as an element of post-traumatic expressivity. This situation leads us to reflect on how much all of this has been received and actuated in terms of new teaching methods. The debate is open especially at an international level and there has been no shortage of strongly critical voices:

> In light of the global and local developments both in the society at large and in our professional community, it is only legitimate to ask whether the teaching of EIL as a

profession has been sensitive to these developments and has come out with a sensible response that is commensurate with the challenges and opportunities. My reading of the prevailing situation leads me to answer the question with a resounding "no." What I see is a profession that continues to get entangled in terminological knots and one that easily gets distracted by superficial solutions instead of confronting the underlying causes that call for a radical re-conceptualization. It seems to me that, in order for our profession to meet the challenges of globalism in a deeply meaningful way, what is required is no less than an epistemic break from its dependency on the current West-oriented, Center-based knowledge systems that carry an indelible colonial coloration. (Kumaravadivelu 2012, 13-14)

In teaching practices, introducing a written narration of learners' stories with the addition of imaginative elements helps fill the gaps of a poor initial knowledge, but it also helps move towards liberating ourselves from traditional teaching methods. The hypotheses that are formulated in the process can serve to make room for new truths that emerge, but also to take on the point of view of others and develop a different sense of responsibility and empathy. One should hope that further research will deepen the impact of these approaches on a large scale and develop specific methodologies for teacher training in intercultural contexts.

In the wake of what has been explored so far, that is, a possible convergence between narrative and didactic medicine, we can conclude with the story from Cristina Cattaneo, a pathologist who has been working for years to give a name to some of the many migrants swallowed by the Mediterranean. In her account, there is one extraordinary narrative there is one outstanding narrative about a fourteen-year-old African boy who had sewn his excellent school report card written in Arabic and French into the inside pocket of his jacket, before losing his life together with others (Cattaneo 2018). Once again, we can evoke as a final image, that of the doctor and the teacher standing side by side: both would have been necessary, sooner or later, to cure and to save.

I close these reflections with the hope that, on the basis of mutual enrichment, we can strengthen these two seemingly distant areas of study by working together. In this way, from perspectives that mesh and coalesce, we may begin to build

inclusive and humane educational communities that are increasingly ready to face current and future challenges in a solid and supportive manner.

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