An analysis of refugees' use of ICT: languages and limitations

Análisis del uso de TIC por parte de refugiados: lenguas y limitaciones

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Resumen: El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el uso de las TICs entre los refugiados. Para lograr este objetivo, se ha realizado una etnografía a través de cuestionarios y entrevistas a refugiados en Italia. Los resultados de esta investigación muestran la manera en la cual los refugiados usan la televisión y los móviles y como cada dispositivo se relaciona con un diferente uso de la lengua. La peculiar condición de ser refugiado afecta enormemente el uso de las TICs. Esto se debe principalmente a los límites que esta condición implica tanto en el uso de las TICs como en él de las lenguas.

Palabras clave: refugiados; TIC; móvil; lengua; TV.

Abstract: The aim of this work is to analyse the use of ICT among refugees. In order to achieve this aim, we have conducted an ethnography, by collecting questionnaires and administering interviews to refugees living in Italy. The results of this research show the way TV and mobile phones are utilized by refugees and how each device is connected to a different language use. The peculiar condition of being a refugee greatly affects the usage of ICT. This is mainly due to the limitations that this condition implies both on ICT and language use.

Keywords: refugees; ICT; mobile; language; TV.

1. INTRODUCTION

The worldwide diffusion of migration flows and the development of the information and communication technology (ICT) are undoubtedly between the most significant phenomena that characterise the current era (Castell, 1997). Surely, such phenomena are interconnected and influence each other. In order to understand such connection, it is to be highlighted that ICT represents a support for migration, hence the whole migration process is accompanied by the use of these technologies (Borkert, Fisher and Yafi, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016; Wall et al., 2015; Diminescu and Loveluck, 2014; Diminescu, 2008). Moreover, it should be noted that ICT is essential for a specific kind of migration, that is to say, forced migration. In fact, for forced migrants, ICT can be linked to the success of the migration, even to the point that their malfunctioning can affect the migration progress (Gillespie, Osseiran and Cheeseman, 2018; Frouws, Phillips, Hassan and Twigt, 2016). In addition, in the specific case of social media, these can act as a migration diary, where the entire journey is shared with friends and family (Ortiz-Cobo and Bianco, 2018).

Indeed, migrants of the ICT age are different than those of the past. Nowadays, thanks to the development of the communication technologies, people who migrate maintain transnational ties with the community of origin. On the contrary, this was quite hard, or rather impossible, for the 'old' migrants. Migrants are now able to daily contact friends and family living in the home country. In addition, they can easily keep economic ties, for example they can send money from the residence country to their home country (Arocena and Zina, 2011; Moraes Mena, 2008).

Due to the social bond that they maintain with the country of origin, migrants are able to keep alive their cultural heritage (e.g. they keep speaking their mother tongue), developing transnational identities (Blas Arroyo, 2005; Joseph, 2004; Glick Schiller et al., 1995). On the other hand, life in the new country allows them to adopt cultural elements of the host country (e.g. language, traditions, etc.). In other words, they are at the same time connected with the country of origin and the host country.

Within their multilingual transnational interactions, migrants may practice both the mother tongue and the host country language. From one hand, by keeping the contacts with friends and family in the home country, they practice the mother tongue and maintain the identity of origin. On the other hand, by learning and speaking the host country language they are able to install relations with locals and integrate in the new society.

Integration and language are thought to be interconnected. For this reason, language is commonly at the centre of migration policies. That is, in almost all European countries, migrants are required to certify a certain linguistic knowledge –which varies according to the country– in order to be granted the

residency, the citizenship or the entrance in Europe (Pulinx, Van Avermaet and Extramiana, 2014).

Surely, ICT represents a fundamental tool that mediate between the migrant and the contact with the two social contexts. For this reason, ICT also has a role in the practice of the languages spoken - or to be learnt - by the migrant. At this regard, it is to be highlighted that, despite ICT has been considered by some as a detrimental tool for the language practice, such technology has witnessed a rise in its use for language learners' interactions (Thorne, 2010; Thurlow, 2006). Such a rise corroborates the efficacy that the use of these technologies has in language learning and practice. In this regard, some literature highlights ICT efficacy by illustrating the type of technology being applied for the development of each particular language skill, namely grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, pronunciation, listening, speaking, and culture (Levy, 2009).

By another point of view, it has been shown that ICT represents a connection to formal and informal language learning, hence fostering the language learning (Wong et al., 2017). Accordingly, ICT enables "to get physically closer to social contexts of language use, which will ultimately influence the ways that language is used and learnt" (Kukulska-Hulme, 2015:291).

Furthermore, numerous other studies demonstrate other aspects of the usefulness of these technologies in the language learning and practice. For example, evidence has been shown that social media use can be an alternative tool for language practice, promoting the improvement of the writing performance (Wang and Vásquez, 2014). Similarly, the use of mobile-assisted language learning has been proved to enhance the lexical development of the language learners, by involving them into an authentic learning experience (Wong and Looi, 2010).

Definitely, in an era where migration flows are one of the main issues of debate, the analysis of the relation between language practice, ICT and migration represents an occasion to better describe the migration phenomena. For this reason, the research on the role of these technologies in such contexts needs to be deepened. To do so, it must be considered that the diffusion of ICT in migrants' daily life can represent a way to enhance the integration in the new country, as well as the maintaining of the relations with the homeland. Surely, due to the role that languages have both in integrating in the new society and maintaining the ties with the country of origin, the language in which the ICT is used by migrants can give us information on migrants' cultural processes. That said, this article aims to address this objective, by studying the ICT use of adult refugees living in Italy.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to carry out this study, we have conducted an ethnography in Salento, an area of South of Italy. The type of methodology used for this research is usually chosen because it facilitates the approach to the context and subjects of the research in a natural way. This is especially due to the field work, which allows the integration in the context of study and facilitates a deep knowledge of the reality (Álvarez Álvarez, 2008; Goetz and LeCompte, 1998).

The instruments of this research were participant observation, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This qualitative methodology allowed us to get a deep insight on the research subject. More in details, the participant observation period has been carried out for seven months within five Italian language classes, in three centres of Salento attending adult refugee students. The observation served not only to let the researcher integrate in the context of study, but also to approach refugees and establish a trust relationship with them. On the other hand, thanks to questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, it was possible to deepen the knowledge about the research subject and investigate around the use of ICT and its relation with the language practice between adult refugees.

Both the questionnaires and the interviews were thought to last for no more than 20-30 minutes, in order the answers not to be affected by their duration. Besides biographic data, the questionnaires included open and closed questions about the use of ICT such as TV, internet and mobile phones, as well as information about the language in which such technologies are used. Moreover, the questionnaire aimed to investigate the knowledge and use of languages. The protocol of the interview was developed in parallel and based on the questionnaire.

In total, 28 interviews and 27 questionnaires have been conducted. Due to the low competence level in Italian language and the various origins of the students, it has been necessary to use linguas francas for both questionnaires and interviews. More in detail, questionnaires were administered in Italian, English, French and Arabic. On the other hand, interviews sessions were held mainly in Italian, English and French.

The informants were 47 refugees (asylum/protection seekers and asylum/protection holders). Despite the legal status of the informants was deliberately not a subject of discussion with the informants (in order to avoid to discuss stress-triggers), from the data collected during the observation it can be affirmed that most of the informants were asylum/protection seeker.

Of the 47 refugees, 6 were female, while the rest were male. The ratio between the two sexes is due to the difficulty to access female refugees. In fact, most of the female refugees of the group the researcher has had access during the observation were sex-trafficking victims. Such a condition has hindered the

contact with these groups, due to ethical reasons. That is, after noting that this group was not prone to take part in the research, the researcher chose not to interview them in order not to cause harm.

The nationality of the informants is distributed in the following way: Nigeria (11), Gambia (7), Pakistan (6), Senegal (3), Bangladesh (3), Ivory Coast (3), Guinea Bissau (2), Guinea (2), Somalia (2), Syria (2), Egypt (1), Niger (1), Mali (1), Sierra Leone (1), Ghana (1), Mauritania (1).

The level of education of the refugees that took part in the research is varied: 10 have never accessed school and are illiterate, 14 have frequented the primary school, 19 the secondary school, and 4 have studied at the university.

From another point of view, it is interesting to observe the family relations that the informants have in the host country. That is, all of them declare not to have family ties in Italy except one Pakistani man, who came to Italy with his wife and sons.

As for the selection of the informants, different techniques were used: first, interviews were conducted randomly with some students of the language lessons of the observation. Second, in order to reach more informants, the researcher also used the snowball technique to contact in chain with other informants (Valles, 2003).

3. RESULTS

The data produced by ethnography refers to the usage of the television, internet and mobile phones. Especially for the last two, the use cannot be differentiated, since these two technologies are interconnected. That is because for the refugees of the research the smartphone often represents the only way to access the internet. Similarly and in parallel, phone calls are also made through the internet. However, in many cases, the smartphone also represents a way to access programs like news and shows that are not accessible through the traditional TV. The following sections expose the usage of TV and internet/mobile phones.

3.1. Use of TV

It is to be highlighted that the relation that refugees have with the TV is emblematic of their refugee condition. That is to say, refugees' life is conditioned by their social and economic situation in the host country due to which, at least in the first period, they are independent from the host association. This has important limitations on their freedom, hence their life habits. Such limitations show also in the use that refugees do of TV. According to the data extracted from the questionnaires, almost all refugees do not have the possibility to access TV contents in a language different than Italian. This is due to the fact that the

organization that hosts them provides only a TV with Italian channels. Out of 27 questionnaires, only in 5 cases the refugee declares to watch TV in another language (commonly, English), other than in Italian. Between the remaining 22, 3 declare not watching TV, while the other 19 watch TV only in Italian language.

The data produced with the interviews confirms the data obtained by the questionnaires: TV is mainly watched in Italian, because the host organizations do not provide with foreign channels. That is probably meant to be a way to accelerate the Italian language learning (by watching mostly Italian channels), hence integration, but it often ends up by limiting the usage of the TV.

When asked if and what they watch in TV, a common answer is represented by Temi's one (names are invented to protect the privacy), who says that

"Usually TV is on because my roommates play with it, but I don't really watch it. I mean, I watch it, but I don't understand what they say. Because I don't speak Italian" (Temi, Nigerian refugee).

The language difference, as well as that of other cultural factors, is between the main reasons not to watch TV. In other words, not only the programs offered in the Italian TV are just in Italian language, but their contents are different from those the refugees are used to watch in their countries. Also, some limitations are due to living with people with other nationalities, as well as being hosted by a host agency. What is exposed by Ahmad gives explanation to all these aspects and resume the influencing factors encountered between the other refugees:

When I eat dinner, I rarely tune TV, otherwise I never tune TV here. Actually I like to watch cricket, football, news, political talk shows… sometimes music. But in Italy I rarely watch television (…) In my home I have dish TV, I can set all dish television channels. In my home I have 48 to 50 news channels, 50 to 60 drama play channels, 60 channels for movies, 30 to 35 sport channels. I have almost 350 to 360 channels because I can fix myself. Here I never fix channels. We are different people living in home, we have different languages, we have different tastes, we have different thinking, how can I fix for myself? …Because I need a device to fix channels. I have no. Even if I had a device, maybe the project will not allow me. …If you ask me honestly I don't like to watch TV more and more. I have lots of tension, tension never gets me alone. (…) I'm not keen to watch TV. I had a time I have 360 channels and I watched but from last 2 years I don't watch. I had a time when I was keen to watch movies, games, music, but now not. (Ahmad, Pakistani refugee).

From the discourse of the refugees interviewed, it clearly appears that the use of TV is conditioned to the situation of being a refugee. First, there is a linguistic limitation. The host agencies usually provide with Italian channels TV. This seems to be a factor that contributes to the lack of interest in watching TV, instead of motivating them to learn the host country language. Second, the limitation of watching TV derives also from sharing a house with people from different countries, cultures and habits. Moreover, since the TV is not personally

owned by the refugee, this limits his/her power on it. This is expressed by the thoughts of Ahmad, who says that probably even if they had the possibility to configure channels, the agency might not let them do it.

Besides, another interesting point appears: the peculiar situation of tensions lived by the refugees, due to the asylum application, does not leave space for recreation activities such as watching TV. Such a condition, added to the linguistic barrier and to not feeling 'at home', influences their wish to watch TV.

The peculiar situation described by our informants define a lack of freedom, regardless of whether it is real or perceived, which surely affects their daily routine, hence, the use of ICT.

3.2. Use of internet and mobile phones

Mobile phones and internet are very common between refugees, their use is habitual and follows the whole migration path (Borkert, Fisher and Yafi, 2018; Ortiz-Cobo and Bianco, 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016; Wall et al., 2015; Diminescu and Loveluck, 2014; Diminescu, 2008).

However, from the data of this research, it is to be highlighted that the use of the internet is mainly based on the smartphone use, while PC is not mentioned. Also, it is to be noted that the ease in handling smartphones makes that even those refugees with very low literacy can benefit from the basic functions that this kind of mobiles offer. That is, according to the data of the questionnaires, almost everybody uses the internet and only 5 people out of 27 declare not using it.

However, it needs to be highlighted that, despite TV being mainly watched in Italian, a very different situation appears from the use of mobile phones and the internet. Between the 22 refugees that use the internet, almost all do it in a language different than Italian. That is to say, 7 people use it exclusively in English, while the other 5 only in Italian. The 10 people remaining use it both in Italian and in other languages (lingua franca or mother tongues).

Differently from TV, the mobile phone is a personal device. Also, mobile phones allow their usage in different languages. These reasons explain the different language use of this device compared with the TV.

From the data produced by ethnography, it is to be noted that mobile phones are mainly a way to keep contact with friends and family in the country of origin. According to the literature, such device represents the main way to maintain transnational ties (Arocena and Zina, 2011; Moraes Mena, 2008; Glick Schiller et al., 1995). On the other hand, social ties with locals are scarce, hence rare are the conversations in Italian language that refugees have on the phone. At this respect, one of our informants, Babu, says:

> "no, I don't have Italian friends. I speak Italian but only short sentences or messages with mediators. Sometimes they call me if they have to give money, when there is a problem in house…" (Babu, Gambian refugee).

For these reasons, refugees seem to use this device mainly in their mother tongues and official country language. Besides, as previously exposed, mobile phones are used for watching programs that are not available on TV. It is the case of programs offered by their country of origin and very commonly, refugees describe their use like Mohammad, who says "Mostly I watch news, cricket or political talk shows on mobile" (Mohammad, Pakistani refugee).

On the other hand, when we ask our informants about the use of this device in Italian language, the totality of the refugees give answers like Amadou, who tells:

> "I don't really use it in Italian. Usually I call my family or I chat with my friends. I speak my language. I use Italian when I don't understand a word. I use Translate" (Amadou, Gambian refugee).

In this respect, refugees use mobile phones in Italian to respond to survival needs which unconsciously lead them to language acquisition. In fact, by looking for the meaning of a word to face an immediate need, they expand their vocabulary in an informal way (Wong et al., 2017). In accordance with the literature, the use of this device supports language learning, by improving the abilities of one in a language (Wong and Looi, 2010; Levy, 2009).

4. CONCLUSION

Between the uses of ICT, peculiar is the one that forced migrants do, since such technologies are linked to their whole journey. ICT can represent a diary of the various steps of the migration and also provide support for its success (Gillespie, Osseiran and Cheeseman, 2018; Ortiz-Cobo and Bianco, 2018; Frouws, Phillips, Hassan and Twigt, 2016).

However, ICT can offer numerous benefits, such as providing support in learning a language (Levy, 2009). Language learning is a compulsory task for migrants who reside in Europe (Pulinx, Van Avermaet and Extramiana, 2014). For this reason, the relation migrants-ICT-languages represents an interesting field of research, especially in the case of forced migration.

According to the data of this research, refugees use ICT in different languages depending on the type of ICT. This is mainly due to owning personally a device or having to share it with other refugees, as well as to the limitations derived from the refugee's condition.

In the case of TV, the language choice is limited as it is restricted to Italian language. That is, as stated by the refugees of this research, the host agencies provide only TVs with Italian channels. However the limitations of its use refers not only to the language aspect, but also more in general to having to share it with people with other origins, hence cultural habits.

Furthermore, the peculiar situation of being a refugee influences the TV usage. This refers to a perceived lack of freedom, because of depending from the

host agency. In addition, the stressful situation lived affects the refugee's life till the point that he/she loses the interest in using this technology.

Different is the case of mobile phones and the internet. For being a personal device, mobile phones offer more freedom, and, for this reason, refugees can use it in various languages, where their mother tongue is surely the favoured one. This device is mainly used to contact friends and family in the country of origin or get information. Mobile phones and the internet represent a way to maintain transnational ties, and only rarely are used in the local language, Italian. That is because the ties with locals are scarce and mainly restricted to the host agency employees. The phone contact with these represent mainly the only one that refugees have in Italian language. However, Italian language is linked to an educational use of the internet and mobile phones. In fact, the use of the internet for translating from the mother tongue into Italian is very common, and hence contributes to having a better knowledge of this language.

In sum, it is clear that the refugee's condition reflects on the use of ICT. While the use of technologies are widely diffused between refugees, the whole situation implies different uses according to the type of technology. Similarly, the peculiar situation of being a refugee influences the possibility to choose the language to use with a device or another.

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