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# Onward Migration of Families of New Italians to the UK: Children's Perspectives on the Use of Languages

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores language dynamics among families of new Italians in the UK, highlighting how Italian usage is influenced by past language practices in Italy, with elder siblings playing a key role in maintaining Italian among younger family members. Italian is often used alongside other family languages, especially when communicating with parents who are not fluent in English. Many participants continue formal education in Italian, indicating its perceived value. The research underscores the impact of transnational connections, such as trips to Italy and online interactions, on language maintenance. Moving to the UK can also lead to the rediscovery of other family languages, particularly within co-ethnic communities or through individual efforts to improve language skills. Finally, this study offers insights into heritage language maintenance in families with multiple migration experiences, revealing new perspectives and challenges in the field.

## SOMMARIO


Questo studio esplora le dinamiche linguistiche nelle famiglie di nuovi italiani nel Regno Unito, evidenziando come l'uso dell'italiano sia influenzato dalle passate pratiche linguistiche in Italia, con i fratelli maggiori che svolgono un ruolo chiave nel mantenere l'italiano tra i membri più giovani della famiglia. L'italiano viene spesso utilizzato insieme ad altre lingue familiari, specialmente nella comunicazione con genitori non fluenti in inglese. Molti partecipanti proseguono l'istruzione formale in italiano, a dimostrazione del suo valore percepito. La ricerca sottolinea quanto le connessioni transnazionali, come viaggi in Italia e le interazioni online, incidano sul mantenimento linguistico. Il trasferimento nel Regno Unito può anche portare alla riscoperta delle altre lingue familiari, soprattutto all'interno di comunità co-etniche o attraverso sforzi individuali per migliorare le competenze linguistiche. Questo studio offre conclusivamente spunti sul mantenimento delle lingue d'origine nelle famiglie con esperienze migratorie multiple, rivelando nuove prospettive e sfide in tale ambito.

## KEYWORDS

Onward migration; Italian migration; Italian language; language maintenance; transnationalism; heritage languages

## PAROLE CHIAVE

Onward migration; emigrazione italiana; lingua italiana; mantenimento linguistico; transnazionalismo; lingue d'origine

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## Introduction

In the last ten years, a new type of intra-European emigration has become increasingly frequent and visible, known as onward migration. This term refers to the reactivation of intra-European mobility by refugees and economic immigrants who have acquired citizenship in a European Union country.<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of onward migration or secondary migration also includes the migration of new Italian citizens to another European country.<sup>2</sup> Various studies have focused on specific groups, such as Italian-Bangladeshis who moved to the UK,<sup>3</sup> the mobility of Senegalese through France, Spain, and Italy,<sup>4</sup> Italian-Moroccans who migrated to France and Belgium,<sup>5</sup> and Italian-Ghanaians who migrated to the UK.<sup>6</sup> These studies have identified various socioeconomic factors in Italy that contribute to the decision to re-migrate, including social immobility, unemployment, economic crisis, and discrimination. On the other hand, factors attracting people to UK have been identified as family and social ties, a more advanced multicultural society, the perception of a better social welfare system, and better educational and employment opportunities for young people. Existing research indicates that onward migration often involves entire families (or parts of them).<sup>7</sup> This corresponds to the group of 'family movers', identified by Ahrens, Kelly, and Van Liempt,<sup>8</sup> who decide to move in order to improve the future of the second generation. While several studies stress the central role of the children in the project of onward migration, with few exceptions they discuss only parents' perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

In these studies, references to linguistic aspects are sporadic, such as the influential role of the English language in choosing the destination of onward migration. For example, for the Italian-Bangladeshis, English proficiency and the prospect of a British education for their children were significant pull factors in their decision to leave Italy.<sup>10</sup> Onward migration destinations often reflect linguistic and cultural colonial ties to the migrants' original homelands. For instance, Italian-Moroccans commonly re-emigrate to France or Belgium,<sup>11</sup> whereas Italian-Bangladeshis and Italian-Nigerians frequently choose the UK.<sup>12</sup> However, other migratory trajectories counter this trend and reflect personal or family decisions of another kind. This is the case, for example, with Italian-Moroccan and Italian-Tunisian families who choose to move to the UK.<sup>13</sup>

The exploration of onward migration of new Italians from a sociolinguistic perspective is a relatively new but fast-growing field. The limited number of studies available primarily focus on the onward migration of new Italians to the UK and France. These include research on Italian-Bangladeshis in the UK,<sup>14</sup> Italian-Nigerians in the UK,<sup>15</sup> Italian-Tunisians and Italian-Moroccans in the UK,<sup>16</sup> and Italian-Moroccans in France.<sup>17</sup>

This article draws on interviews conducted with children of families who have migrated onward from Italy to the UK. The aim is to analyse the perspective of children on the use of their family heritage languages, including Italian. The article is structured as follows. The following section provides information on the onward migration of new Italians in the UK. The third section focuses on onward migration and its impact on the linguistic repertoires of migrants, while the fourth presents the methodology of the study and the data collected. The results are discussed in the final four sections, with particular reference to the use and maintenance of family heritage languages, including Italian, inside and

outside the family domain, Italian as linguistic capital, and the rediscovery of the other family heritage languages.

## The Onward Migration of New Italians to the United Kingdom

In the last ten years, the number of new Italians leaving Italy has steadily increased. According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT),<sup>18</sup> of 669,000 non-EU citizens naturalized between 2012 and 2017, about 42,000 moved abroad, returning to their country of origin (25%) or migrating to another European country (75%).<sup>19</sup> Between 2012 and 2018, European countries were the destination for 72% of naturalized Italians, and, for some groups, a European country is almost the exclusive choice, as in the case of Bangladeshis, Ghanaians, Moroccans, and Pakistanis.<sup>20</sup> The United Kingdom is the preferred destination for Italians born in Commonwealth countries such as India, Bangladesh, Ghana, and Nigeria.<sup>21</sup> According to the Italian Consulate in London, as of 23 September 2021, there were 446,971 Italians registered with AIRE (L'anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero 'the Registry of Italians resident abroad') in England and Wales. Since 2020, the Italian Consulate in London also provides information on the place of birth. Among the Italians residing in England and Wales, half were born in Italy (221,196), a quarter were born in the UK (108,170), and a quarter were born in a third country (117,605). This last group comprises both immigrants who obtained Italian citizenship through naturalization in Italy and descendants of Italians in other countries who obtained Italian citizenship by descent. Those born in a third country include Brazilians (30.6%), Bangladeshis (11.6%), Pakistanis (7.18%), Argentinians (4%), Indians (6.16%), Ghanaians (5%), South Africans (2.7%), and Nigerians (3%).<sup>22</sup> A quarter of Italians residing in England and Wales have engaged in secondary migration, in one way or another. Since onward migration can be a family project, this means that the children of families who have undertaken onward migration and were born in Italy fall into the larger group of Italians born in Italy. The parents of these families migrated to Italy in the 1990s, when it was easier to obtain legal residency status thanks to a series of amnesties. The first phase of migration, mainly composed of men, was followed by family reunion and a second generation, born in the country of origin, arriving in Italy very young, or born in Italy.<sup>23</sup>

## Onward Migration and Languages

Research on multilingualism and language maintenance in immigrant communities worldwide has mainly focused on the maintenance of the languages of the country of origin in the host country. It has shown that languages from the country of origin may be maintained primarily within the family domain or in interactions within a co-ethnic community, while the language(s) of the host country are used in all other domains. Over time, individuals and communities of migrant origin may undergo a language shift towards the language(s) of the host country.<sup>24</sup> The degree and speed of the shift process will vary according to several factors, including: endogamous/exogamous families, the size and geographical distribution of the community, the idea of a future return to the country of origin, the value assigned to the family language(s), and the link between a language and the identity of a particular group.<sup>25</sup>

Sociolinguistic research on contemporary migrations has highlighted their transnational nature and the importance of examining individual and group trajectories of migrants to identify the effects of these trajectories on linguistic repertoires and migrant identities in destination countries.<sup>26</sup> The country-of-origin perspective is reductive, and does not adequately grasp the complexity of multiple migrations as in the case of onward migration. Intra-European onward migration entails a country of origin (Bangladesh, India, or Ghana), a middle migration country (the first European country), and the destination country (a second European country).

Research on Italian and Italo-Romance dialects in the linguistic repertoire of Italian communities in the United Kingdom after the Second World War is extensive,<sup>27</sup> and includes some studies on the more recent Italian migratory wave.<sup>28</sup> These studies have not focused on the onward migration of new Italians whose linguistic repertoires may be enriched by multiple migration steps. For example, the linguistic repertoire of an Italian-Nigerian family in the UK includes Nigerian languages (Igbo/Yoruba, Nigerian English, Pidgin English), languages acquired in Italy after a stay of many years (Italian and Italo-Romance dialects), and British English. The knowledge and proficiency levels in these languages also vary depending on the generations: for the most part, parents have Italian as a second language, while children born in Italy or arriving at a young age have Italian as their first language or main language. During their stay in Italy, the children of these families may have maintained the languages spoken by their parents or may have been undergoing a language shift towards Italian due to the lack of inter-generational transmission by their parents.<sup>29</sup>

Because intra-European onward migration is a recent phenomenon, there are no comprehensive studies on multilingualism and onward migration. The first studies have focused on the restructuring of the linguistic repertoire of onward migrant families in England<sup>30</sup> and France.<sup>31</sup>

## Methodology

This article examines data primarily sourced from a corpus of interviews with children from newly Italian families who have relocated to England. The data collection took place between September 2020 and June 2023. The participants, 65 individuals, range in age from 18 to 26 years and had moved from Italy within the past nine years. Participant recruitment was conducted through personal contacts and via word of mouth among university students at British universities. All participants moved to the UK with their families or parts thereof, and belong to the following national groups: Italian-Nigerian, Italian-Ghanaian, Italian-Indian, Italian-Bangladeshi, Italian-Sri Lankan, Italian-Tunisian, and Italian-Moroccan.

Each participant was asked to complete a brief questionnaire aimed at gathering information on the languages spoken by them and other family members with various interlocutors and in different communicative contexts. The questionnaire also explored how their linguistic practices have changed in the UK. Following the questionnaire, a sociolinguistic interview was conducted. Responses to the questionnaire served as a basis for the interview to seek clarifications and insights on key points. The interviews, conducted in Italian or English according to participant preference, lasted about 30 minutes and were audio-recorded. Some interviews were held in person, while

others, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were conducted online using the Zoom platform. The meetings focused on the participants' experiences of migrating from Italy to the UK, the use of languages within their families in both countries, attitudes towards these languages, linguistic usage with various interlocutors, and language maintenance. While a set of prepared questions was used to stimulate discussion, the goal was to allow for informal and spontaneous conversations about the experiences and opinions of the participants. The project received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter.

## Use of Languages in the Family Domain

As mentioned in the previous sections, all participants moved to the UK with their families (or some members) after a long period of living in Italy, and speak Italian as their first language (L1), while their parents speak Italian as their second language (L2). Once in the UK, families reshape their linguistic repertoires, with English becoming the most prestigious language and Italian being demoted to a heritage language alongside the language(s) of their parents. In this section, I will discuss excerpts from the participants' interviews that illustrate general trends regarding the maintenance and use of languages within the family domain, being aware that different ethnic subgroups and families may behave differently.

Most participants reported continuing to use Italian along with other heritage languages in the family domain. In Excerpt 1, Neha, an Italian-Indian (Punjabi) female participant, who moved with her family five years before the interview, talks about her family's language practices in the United Kingdom.

### *Excerpt 1*

INT: Mi hai detto che a casa parlate ancora italiano?

NEHA: Italiano, allora parlo italiano con mio fratello, e punjabi con i miei genitori.

INT: A tuo fratello, gli viene naturale parlare in italiano?

NEHA: Naturale, sì e quando parlo in punjabi con i miei genitori, sia loro che io, in mezzo alla frase punjabi, c'è sempre una parola in italiano, quindi, sì! *[laughs]*

INT: E quindi diresti che l'italiano viene mantenuto?

NEHA: Sì, sì, sì!

INT: E i tuoi genitori invece? Tra di loro, cosa parlano?

NEHA: Tra di loro, parlano in punjabi!

INT: Principalmente?

NEHA: Sì, sì, sì!

INT: E l'italiano?

NEHA: L'italiano lo parlano occasionalmente, proprio sì ... poco, direi!

Neha's description of language use within her family provides insight into how the family's linguistic repertoire has been restructured in the United Kingdom. She describes a situation where children primarily speak Punjabi for intergenerational communication within the family, while still using Italian among themselves. For Neha's family, Italian in the UK has become a heritage language on a par with Punjabi. However, the parents actively contribute to maintaining Punjabi, following the general trend where the parents and grandparents play a primary role in maintaining the heritage language.<sup>32</sup> Children, depending on how many years they stayed in Italy, contribute to maintaining the Italian language within the family context. It is important

to note that Neha states that in her family, they tend to mix Italian and Punjabi ('quando parlo in punjabi con i miei genitori, sia loro che io, in mezzo alla frase punjabi, c'è sempre una parola in italiano'). Although in the interviews participants talked about languages as autonomous, their actual language practices may entail high degrees of mixing the languages of their linguistic repertoires.<sup>33</sup>

In Excerpt 2, Samira, an Italian-Tunisian female participant who migrated to England with her family ten years before the interview, explains how the use of languages in her family has changed from Italy to the United Kingdom.

*Excerpt 2*

INT: Quali lingue parli con i tuoi genitori, quali lingue parli con i tuoi fratelli?

SAMIRA: Allora quando ero piccola, i miei genitori, specialmente mio padre, voleva che parlassimo solo l'arabo a casa per non farcelo dimenticare, perché sai ci sono altre persone che emigrano, sai dal loro paese e poi non si ricordano la loro lingua. Mio padre voleva che parlassimo solo arabo a casa; e poi lui diceva che con l'italiano non avete problemi perché lo parlate a scuola, con gli amici e cose così. Quindi ... quello non è stato un problema e poi quando siamo venuti in Inghilterra, mio padre non ... mio padre non ha mai studiato inglese quindi non potremmo parlare in inglese con lui, anche ora ... quindi con mia mamma ... ora mischiamo le lingue, l'inglese, l'italiano, l'arabo e il francese insieme. Vengono usate insieme quando parliamo. Con mio padre ora mischiamo arabo e italiano.

In Italy, her family's language policy favoured the use of Tunisian Arabic at home, since Italian was the language the children learned at school and used in other domains. In the United Kingdom, Samira's family continues to use Italian alongside Tunisian Arabic. In this case, maintaining Italian (with Tunisian Arabic) is not just a preference but a necessity to communicate with their parents, especially Samira's father, who still struggles with English ('non potremmo parlare in inglese con lui'). English was not part of her family's linguistic repertoire in Italy, similar to other Maghrebi families. Additionally, Samira's parents did not learn English in preparation for onward migration to the UK. This lack of linguistic preparation prior to migration is not unique to Samira's family: it was also observed in other families participating in the study, even those coming from Commonwealth countries in which a variety of English is spoken. The lack of knowledge of English and some parents' fluency in Italian may contribute to the maintenance of Italian together with the other heritage languages in intra-family communication.

Research on onward migration shows that families did not plan it in advance: it became a possibility after acquiring Italian citizenship when families started struggling in Italy because of unemployment and discrimination.<sup>34</sup> This explains the lack of linguistic preparation among families deciding to move to the United Kingdom. Only a few exceptions in our study reveal an original plan to send children to study abroad or a future onward migration. For example, an Italian-Sinhalese male participant reports he was sent to study at high school with English as medium of instruction in Sri Lanka, in order to be admitted to British universities, while another Italian-Sinhalese female participant reports she was sent to private English lessons in Italy because her parents were planning a new migration to Canada. Research on onward migration shows similar cases in which parents provide children with linguistic skills useful both educationally and professionally on an international scale.

Ahrens, Kelly, and Van Liempt found that several German-Nigerian and Swedish-Iranian parents had sent their children to British international schools to prepare them for a future onward migration to pursue an international higher education and career.<sup>35</sup> Mapril reported that Portuguese-Bangladeshi families in Portugal sent their children to schools that could provide English curricula and the opportunity to access British universities.<sup>36</sup>

In some families, one parent may be more fluent in Italian or the other heritage language(s) because of different experiences and attitudes. In Excerpt 3, Ajoba, a female Italian-Ghanaian who came to the UK with her family six years prior to the interview, explains that she speaks in Twi (which she also calls ‘ghanese’) with her mother because she is not fluent in Italian, while with her father and her brother she still speaks Italian.

*Excerpt 3*

AJOBA: Parlo italiano con mio padre e con mio fratello maggiore e a volte parlo twi con mia madre [...] perché mia madre non ha imparato l’italiano quando era in Italia e ogni volta parla ghanese con mio padre [...] lei non parla nemmeno inglese, solo ghanese.

In some families of this study, not all members of the family have migrated to the UK. Some participants reported that a parent or a sibling has stayed in Italy. Such a situation contributes to maintaining transnational ties with Italy and a more regular use of the Italian language and/or the other heritage languages. This is the case for Tavish, an Italian-Sinhalese male participant, who migrated with his mother and sister, while his father stayed behind in Italy. The main reason for their onward migration was the education of Tavish and his sister. The family meet regularly both in the UK and in Italy, but while his sister and mother no longer use Italian, he is the most fluent in Italian and still uses it with his father.

*Excerpt 4*

INT: Ci sono stati cambiamenti sull’uso delle lingue in Inghilterra?

TAVISH: Sì drasticamente, tipo mia sorella non ha più usato l’italiano, lo usa poco tipo quando andavamo l’estate, lo usa un po’ con me, ma parliamo più in srilankese a casa mia madre, mia sorella e io. Mia madre se l’è scordato l’italiano, parla più in inglese e sinhalese, ma quando tipo andiamo in Italia si ricorda quando qualcuno gli parla lo capisce però non riesce a rispondere in frasi complete insomma e con papà vabbè lo parlo quotidianamente però l’interazione che avevamo io e mio padre non l’abbiamo, cioè l’abbiamo di meno perché non è che vivo con lui ormai quindi solo quando parliamo tramite tipo WhatsApp, Facetime.

In this case, the transnational nature of Tavish’s family contributes to the maintenance of Italian in the family domain.

## **Use of Languages Outside the Family Domain**

Many participants stated that they continue to use Italian and the other heritage languages even outside the family context, particularly with friends who share the same linguistic repertoire and/or migratory trajectory of onward migration. In Excerpt 5, Samira, an Italian-Tunisian female participant, says that she speaks Italian with other Italian-Tunisians who have migrated from Italy, with whom she can also share Tunisian Arabic and English.



*Excerpt 5*

INT: A parte le persone della tua famiglia parli italiano con altre persone? Hai amici italiani?

SAMIRA: Sì, ho due amiche qui che parlano italiano e anche loro si sono trasferite dall'Italia e allora ho anche questo gruppo di amiche che è italo-tunisino quindi esattamente come me, sono cresciute in Italia e poi si sono trasferite in Inghilterra. Veramente si sono trasferite qui per l'università, quindi si sono trasferite da grandi, ma parlano un misto di tunisino e italiano e inglese.

The domain of friendship, often considered less important than the family domain in the literature on language maintenance, becomes crucial for the maintenance of Italian among the elder children of these families, particularly when Italian is not used at home.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the example also tells us that the maintenance of languages may occur in a mixed mode. Villa-Perez also found that her Moroccan-Italian participants maintain Italian and Moroccan Arabic in a mixed mode.<sup>38</sup> This is in line with Canagarajah's practice-based orientation to heritage language, which may also include mixing languages and which considers the definition of heritage language as dependent on the communicative interaction.<sup>39</sup>

In Excerpt 6, Ekuwa, an Italian-Ghanaian female participant who has been living in the United Kingdom for eight years, explains a situation similar to Samira's. She has friends from the Italian-Ghanaian community who share the same linguistic repertoire, so they mix Italian, English, and Twi in their conversation.

*Excerpt 6*

EKUWA: Ehm ... allora quando sono venuta in Inghilterra parlavo sempre italiano perché l'inglese non lo parlavo bene quando mi sono trasferita, quindi parlavo sempre italiano con i miei amici e ghanese con i miei genitori e parenti come le mie zie, ma dopo poco ho imparato l'inglese ... quindi ora mischio le tre lingue, quando parlo con i miei amici che sono italo-ghanesi che parlano inglese e mischiano le tre lingue.

Ekuwa recalls that the use of Italian and Twi with friends mitigated the culture shock of her early days in the country due to her lack of knowledge of English. Other participants mention this situation of being able to count on Italian speakers when they arrived in the UK. Goglia also found that Italian-Bangladeshi students in a secondary school in East London with a large number of students who have migrated onward from Italy were given the chance to be paired with an Italian-speaking classmate to help them in the first period in the school.<sup>40</sup>

Onward migration to the UK does not signify a complete detachment from Italy: participants also reported making short visits to see friends and partners in Italy. These transnational connections help in maintaining the Italian language and/or the other heritage languages. This is exemplified by Neha, who in Excerpt 7 mentions still having Italian friends and her partner in Italy with whom she continues to speak Italian. With her friends from the Italian-Indian community, she speaks 'italiano e indiano'. By 'indiano' she and the other Italian-Indian participants refer to Punjabi or a mix of Punjabi and Hindi.

*Excerpt 7*

INT: Sei ancora in contatto con amici in Italia?

NEHA: Certo.

INT: Che lingue parli con loro?

NEHA: Allora, ho amici indiani in Italia con cui parlo italiano e indiano, allora un misto di tutto e

ho amici italiani che quando vado in Italia incontro, o qualche volta vengono qui.

INT: Parli italiano con loro?

NEHA: Sì, italiano ... allora ho il mio partner che è indiano che vive in Italia [...] con lui parlo italiano, allora quando ci arrabbiamo usiamo delle esclamazioni in punjabi.

Neha's transnational connections extend beyond friendship; she also has an Italian-Indian partner who still resides in Italy. In the final lines of Excerpt 7, she states that Italian is the primary language they use between them. The proximity to Italy and the fact that the participants have Italian as their main language, along with a strong attachment to Italy, may contribute to the maintenance of transnational ties with Italy rather than the parents' country of origin. Some participants have never been to the country of origin of their parents, or do not have strong links with those countries. Italy is the place where they were born and raised; when asked about their identities, the majority answered that they were Italian, specifying their ethnic background.

*Excerpt 8*

AKOSUA: Io mi definirei come un'afro-italiana, cioè discendenze ghanesi, ma italiana, nel senso che non mi dimentico delle origini, però direi discendenze ghanesi, ma italiana, perché il mio cuore è ancora in Italia.

This strengthening of transnational links with Italy has also been observed among first-generation migrants who have migrated onward. Della Puppa and Sredanovic observe:

today, the Italo-Bangladeshi onward migrants are in another phase of their family and migration cycle: no longer single young men with the duty to contribute to the economy of the family of origin in Bangladesh by sending remittances to parents, but mature fathers with children of school age and, often, without close family ties in the country of origin where, in the meantime, the parents have died – or in turn, have been reunited in Europe – and there are only a few relatives left behind.<sup>41</sup>

Most participants reported using mainly English and Italian on social media. The preference for these languages over other heritage languages on social platforms is due to low literacy levels in these other languages, as the participants predominantly have only oral proficiency in them.

*Excerpt 9*

INT: Quando usi le lingue per Internet, WhatsApp, Facebook, cosa usi?

NEHA: Quando ... oh! Ho ... tutti i miei social sono in inglese o italiano! Però quando devo commentare qualcosa con una persona magari indiana, parlo indiano, ma con le lettere tipo romane ... cioè non l'indiano indiano!

INT: OK! Traslitterate?

NEHA: Sì, traslitterate!

INT: WhatsApp? WhatsApp o messaggi?

NEHA: Messaggi in italiano ... italiano e inglese. Oppure, sempre in indiano ma traslitterato.

It should be noted that heritage languages with different scripts can be used in transliteration using the Latin alphabet, as Neha mentions in comments on her use of Punjabi and/or Hindi (referred to as 'Indian'). Sankaran reports of a similar use of transliterated Tamil in texting by a Swiss-Sri Lankan Tamil who migrated to the UK.<sup>42</sup> This phenomenon can be observed in various contexts, and represents a strategy that allows speakers to interact in writing even when a code is mainly known orally or with only receptive written skills.

## Language Shift towards English

The participants in this study are the elder siblings of their families; this means they arrived in the UK as teenagers, and thus are the most proficient in Italian in the family. In contrast, younger siblings often arrive at a very young age and so have not managed to learn Italian or undergo language shift towards English very early. In Excerpt 10, Achike, an Italian-Nigerian (Igbo) male participant, describes the Italian proficiency of his two younger brothers, providing us with a vignette representing a language shift in progress.

### *Excerpt 10*

INT: Hai detto che sei quello che conosce l'italiano meglio dei tuoi fratelli?

ACHIKE: Se lo stanno dimenticando perché non lo usano più.

INT: Quindi non lo parlano mai a casa?

ACHIKE: Il più piccolo no, anche quando io gli parlo in italiano non capisce, mi chiede di parlare in inglese, il medio lo parla, ma si capisce che non lo usa, ha bisogno di pensare prima di parlare.

In Achike's family, both parents are Igbo and speak Igbo to each other, and in the interview, Achike emphasizes that they no longer speak Italian in the United Kingdom. He is the family member who speaks Italian most fluently. His younger brother has already lost Italian ('non capisce'), while his middle brother struggles when using it ('ha bisogno di pensare prima di parlare'). Achike continues to use Italian and he is even studying it at the university as part of his degree. The children's age of arrival is, in fact, a key factor in maintaining Italian. Younger siblings who arrived in the United Kingdom at a very young age tend to acculturate and shift towards English more quickly and abandon Italian more easily.<sup>43</sup> This is a very important characteristic of onward migration compared to previous Italian migrations. While in the latter, inter-generational transmission was the main factor for the maintenance of Italian and Italo-Romance dialects in the migration context, in the former the elder siblings may act as agents of Italian language maintenance for their younger siblings.<sup>44</sup>

In Excerpt 11, Dogbeda, an Italian-Ghanaian female participant who arrived in the United Kingdom with her family three years before the interview, explains that Italian, Twi, and English are still spoken in the family, but her younger siblings (as in Achike's case) have undergone a language shift towards English and have forgotten Italian.

### *Excerpt 11*

INT: Che bello, volevo domandarti, quindi tu sei italiana, ma di origine ghanese, quindi immagino che parli molte lingue in famiglia. Mi dici che lingue parlate in famiglia?

DOGBEDA: Certo ... allora siccome io sono afro-italiana, non so neanche se questo termine esiste, ma sono afro-italiana perché, come sai sono ghanese, allora in ogni caso ho abbastanza cultura italiana in me e quindi questo, questo significa che a casa parliamo italiano, parliamo il dialetto quindi il dialetto ghanese che si chiama twi, parliamo un po' di inglese, ma i miei fratelli quando sono arrivati in Inghilterra, hanno imparato l'inglese dimenticandosi l'italiano, ma sono io quella che parla tanto italiano e parlo il dialetto ghanese e un po' di inglese.

Dogbeda refers to Twi, the heritage language of her family, as 'dialetto ghanese', probably because it is a variety of Akan, the most widespread Ghanaian language, or reflecting the sociolinguistic hierarchy between Ghanaian English and Ghanaian languages in Ghana,

where Twi is considered a local language of low social status. Dogbeda's statement also shows her awareness of perceived similarities between the Ghanaian and Italian linguistic repertoires, in which Italian is considered a high language while Italo-Romance dialects are considered low. A similar attitude has been observed in other immigrant communities in Italy; for example, Igbo-Nigerians refer to their mother tongue Igbo as a 'dialect' even though Igbo is one of the major official languages of Nigeria and is spoken by millions of people.<sup>45</sup>

## Italian as Linguistic Capital

The maintenance of Italian among the children of these families is also linked to the fact that in the United Kingdom, Italian is studied as a foreign language and can be useful for their future career prospects. Both parents and children are aware of this. Most of the participants have obtained official Italian language certifications, such as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and A-level in Italian. According to the participants, there are various motivations for choosing to acquire recognized Italian language qualifications. One is the opportunity to study and reinforce a language they fear losing and feel insecure about, especially regarding grammar and formal registers. Then, there is the desire to obtain a formal qualification that recognizes their language proficiency in both British and international work contexts. Often mentioned is the chance to score highly on an exam that seems easy because they already have a native-like command of Italian. This score, along with other A-level grades, counts as a university admission requirement and for selection into a prestigious university. Thus, the A-level exam in Italian is perceived as a sort of bonus that compensates for potential difficulties in other subjects. Unlike the other heritage languages, maintaining Italian can have a practical outcome, as its knowledge can be useful for future employment in the United Kingdom, Italy, and other European countries. In Excerpt 12, Kwashi, an Italian-Ghanaian female participant, who moved to the United Kingdom eight years before the interview, explains that she took the Italian exam at school without any formal teaching.

### *Excerpt 12*

INT: Mi dici se hai fatto gli esami GCSE e A-Level di italiano?

KWASHI: Praticamente, quando mi sono trasferita qua col GCSE non offrivano il corso di italiano però, visto che sono italiana, mi hanno detto che se volevo potevo farmi gli esami di italiano e quindi non ho studiato, non ho avuto niente, semplicemente mi hanno dato la data dell'esame e io me lo sono fatto, e per A-level ho visto che appunto la mia scuola non aveva il corso e ho semplicemente di nuovo fatto l'esame.

INT: Te l'hanno proposto o hai deciso tu?

KWASHI: Me l'hanno proposto sinceramente, hanno detto che era la possibilità di avere una qualificazione in più e io ho accettato ovviamente.

Frequently, as in Kwashi's experience, while schools might not offer Italian language courses, they do encourage students with Italian-speaking backgrounds to sit for these exams. In such instances, schools facilitate the examination by coordinating with an external examiner, yet the students must independently prepare for it. GCSE and A-levels in the other heritage languages of these families may be available too, for example in Bengali, Arabic, Tamil, and Punjabi, but none of the participants mentioned

opting to take these exams. One explanation for this is that, contrary to Italian, the other heritage languages are often learnt from parents without any formal teaching and literacy. The majority of participants stress they can speak these languages, but lack literacy.

In some exceptions, these languages were also partially studied formally in Italy. This is the case, for example, of Italian-Moroccan and Italian-Tunisian participants who learned Arabic in courses organized by the local mosque, or Italian-Indian (Punjabi) participants who attended Punjabi courses at the gurudwara, a Sikh place of worship.

In Excerpt 13, Samira, an Italo-Tunisian female participant born in Tunisia and who emigrated to Italy with her family at a very young age, explained that she grew up speaking Tunisian Arabic in Tunisia and once she arrived in Italy, her mother, an Arabic teacher, took on the task of teaching it to her and her siblings. Like other participants, Samira also attended additional Arabic courses outside the official school.

*Excerpt 13*

SAMIRA: Sono cresciuta parlando arabo. Quindi l'italiano era un po' come una seconda lingua, anche se in seguito ho sentito che non lo era più ma diventava la mia prima lingua perché mi sentivo più a mio agio parlandolo, scrivendolo e leggendo tutto così ... Ma sì, sono cresciuta con l'arabo come mia prima lingua e poi mia madre mi ha aiutato a migliorarlo ancora di più quando ci siamo trasferiti in Italia e era insegnante di arabo in Tunisia. Quindi, mi dava lezioni praticamente ogni fine settimana quando ero in Italia e andavamo persino alle scuole di arabo in Italia per migliorare la scrittura e la lettura e ora so scrivere e leggere l'arabo.

In the case of Samira, the maintenance of Arabic was favoured by her family's language policy, but also by the availability of Arabic language courses. The Tunisian and Moroccan communities in Italy are very large, and the children of Tunisian and Moroccan families have many opportunities to learn or practise Arabic in mosques, associations, and community groups. Furthermore, the connection between the Arabic language and Islam also contributes to its maintenance.<sup>46</sup>

A number of participants have included Italian in their university studies either in a degree in modern languages or in a combined honours degree with another subject. Indeed, Italian, unlike other languages spoken by these families, offers the possibility of being studied both in language modules and in cultural modules such as literature, film studies, and linguistics. This is the case for Inamul, an Italian-Bangladeshi male participant, who arrived in the UK nine years before the interview, and who chose to study Italian as part of a degree in modern languages.

*Excerpt 14*

INT: Studi italiano?

INAMUL: Studio lingue, studio italiano e tedesco, quindi in realtà la maggior parte delle mie lezioni sono in italiano e in queste lezioni cerco di parlare il più possibile in italiano, perché ovviamente si è deteriorato abbastanza da quando avevo sedici anni, ma sto cercando di usarlo, così posso migliorarlo dal mio livello attuale.

## Rediscovery of the Parents' Heritage Languages

As we have seen in the previous sections, in most cases parents continue to use the languages of their country of origin to communicate among themselves or with their children, who, however, have only a passive knowledge of these languages that they

have learned by listening to their parents. In Italy, in many cases, parents have not actively engaged in transmitting their languages to their children, because they were favouring the use of Italian in anticipation of a life in that country.

In the following excerpt, Effia, an Italian-Ghanaian female participant who arrived in the UK with her mother and siblings four years prior to the interview, explains that her move from Italy also meant that she was able to join a larger co-ethnic community. She defines the area where her family used to live in the periphery of Italy as ‘molto bianca’ to stress the low level of multiculturalism.

*Excerpt 15*

INT: Usavate il twi anche con altre persone?

EFFIA: No diciamo che io abitavo in questa zona molto bianca, cioè non avevamo parenti vicino, non era come qua in Inghilterra, i miei non uscivano mai con altri ghanesi, parlavano solo loro a casa.

INT: E in Inghilterra usi il twi?

EFFIA: Quando ho deciso di fare lingue all'università ho visto proprio l'importanza di parlare la lingua dei miei genitori e comunque è, penso è una cosa meravigliosa parlare più di una lingua quindi mi sono messa lì ogni giorno tipo mamma da adesso fino a non so quando finché non lo parlo proprio tu mi parli solo in twi e visto che comunque i miei zii anche loro sono ghanesi avevo più possibilità di parlarlo, in Italia andavamo in una chiesa cattolica noi, però qua andiamo in una chiesa ghanese quindi praticamente quando predica il prete c'è sia la versione in twi che quella in inglese.

For many participants, the move to the UK also means a move from a small town in the Italian periphery to a larger city or a more multicultural area in the UK. Effia also stressed that in Italy her family attended the local Catholic church because the Ghanaian church, which could have offered an opportunity to hear or practise Twi, was too far away. Isolation in the European country and the opportunity to join a larger co-ethnic community in the UK are mentioned as factors contributing to the decision to migrate onward.<sup>47</sup> In terms of language use, Effia's isolation in Italy meant that she did not have the chance to speak Twi outside the family domain. In the UK, not only does Effia have more people around her with whom she can speak Twi, but she has also decided to improve her knowledge of Twi by asking her mother to speak only Twi. Effia's experience is echoed in Excerpt 16, where Inamul, an Italian-Bangladeshi male participant, provides his experience of rediscovering the Bengali language.

*Excerpt 16*

INT: Come stai usando le lingue all'interno della famiglia ora?

INAMUL: Ora, con mia madre e anche con i miei genitori, parlo bengalese. Cerco di parlare quasi esclusivamente in questa lingua perché l'anno scorso ho frequentato un corso di bengalese.

Inamul stated that he speaks Bengali with his parents not just out of necessity, as in other cases, but as a personal choice. During his year abroad, he was able to choose a Bengali course at the host university and, once he returned, he chose to speak exclusively in Bengali with his parents to practise the language.

Relocating to the UK may have positive consequences for the maintenance of parents' languages. Onward migration often involves a move from the Italian periphery to major British cities where large co-ethnic communities already exist. For example, consider the case of Italian-Indians who move to cities like Birmingham and

Leicester, where there is a large community of British-Indians; or Italo-Bangladeshis, who move in large numbers to east London, where they find a substantial British-Bangladeshi community. Several participants report using their parents' languages outside the family domain with friends and relatives, or rediscovering their parents' languages and cultures in the UK.

This is the case for the Afro-Italian participants in this study (Italian-Nigerians and Italian-Ghanaians), who in England can refer to a large Afro-Caribbean community and report feeling less discriminated against than in Italy. An interesting case is that of Nigerian Pidgin English, which is part of the linguistic repertoire of Italian-Nigerian families: it is usually spoken by Nigerians with limited education who do not know Nigerian English, or by educated Nigerians in informal contexts alongside African languages and Nigerian English.<sup>48</sup> Some Nigerian participants state they have learned a bit of Nigerian English at home, as is the case with Igbo and Yoruba, but have only passive competence. In England, these participants say they have been able to rediscover the pidgin, which is used, for example, among university students with Afro-Caribbean background as an expression of their identity. Oluchi, an Italian-Nigerian (Igbo) male participant, says he began speaking Nigerian pidgin with other Nigerians at university.

*Excerpt 17*

INT: In Italia, quando eri piccolo hai imparato l'igbo e il Pidgin English?

OLUCHI: Sì, ma la cosa interessante è il discorso che, cioè non ho mai parlato sia l'igbo che il Pidgin English, la prima volta che ho dovuto parlare il Pidgin English era tra amici nigeriani all'università e quando vado in Nigeria, è sempre stato un esercizio diciamo d'ascolto cioè la pratica è arrivata solo quando sono venuto in Inghilterra perché comunque come sai benissimo in Inghilterra c'è una grande popolazione di nigeriani.

For some participants, onward migration does not offer the possibility of joining a large co-ethnic community. Italo-Tunisians and Italo-Moroccans in the UK do not join large co-ethnic communities as other groups do. The network of Tunisians and Moroccans can be very limited, but it is still possible for participants to have friends with similar linguistic and migratory experiences. In Excerpt 18, Zara, an Italian-Moroccan female participant who arrived in the UK two years before the interview and was living in London, explained that her linguistic repertoire has expanded to include English and French in communicative contexts outside the home as well as Arabic. However, since she encounters speakers of different varieties of Arabic, she has to adjust her Moroccan variety to speakers who speak 'arabo arabo', a variety she perceives as more prestigious than Moroccan Arabic.

*Excerpt 18*

ZARA: In Italia, per essere onesta, non ho mai parlato inglese o francese. In Italia ho sempre usato l'italiano o il marocchino con i miei genitori e gli amici perché la maggior parte dei miei amici erano marocchini come me, quindi parlavamo in marocchino. Comunque il marocchino è un dialetto derivato dall'arabo, quindi quando sono venuta qui e ho incontrato persone di tutte le nazionalità poteva capitare che parlassi in francese con qualcuno o in inglese con britannici al lavoro ad esempio ... oppure incontravo italiani e parlavo italiano tornando alle mie radici. Parlo anche arabo ma per me è ancora un po' complicato perché come ti dicevo il marocchino è un dialetto dell'arabo ... quindi faccio ancora fatica a capire ad esempio gli egiziani che parlano arabo arabo.

Zara's case is an interesting example of how different linguistic resources are mobilized and reused. She uses both her original languages, Italian and Moroccan Arabic, to socialize with interlocutors outside the family context. The variety of Arabic she speaks represents linguistic capital because it is a variety of an international lingua franca. This is different from other families who migrate from other countries and have regional languages as their mother tongues. For instance, Italian-Nigerians consider Italian and English linguistic capital for their children's future, while they regard Nigerian languages only as heritage languages.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Sociolinguistics has only just begun to study how families of new Italians migrating to other European countries reshape their linguistic repertoires. New Italians exhibit a more complex and dynamic linguistic repertoire than traditional Italian migrants (from both the old and new waves of Italian emigration). The same can be said about their migratory experiences, which may involve several countries and multiple mobilities. The research presented in this article aimed to discuss whether and how the family heritage languages, including Italian, are maintained in the linguistic repertoire of families of new Italians who have migrated to the UK. The data present the perspective of children in these families, a subject still scarcely explored even in migration studies.

Our results have shown that in the UK, Italian and the other heritage languages are still used in the family domain, although the degree of use depends on individual speakers, family language policies, and knowledge of English. In some cases, the use of Italian and/or the other heritage languages as a vehicular language is a necessity, as the parents have not yet learned to communicate in English or struggle to do so, or did not learn Italian when they were in Italy.

Participants in this study are often the eldest children, who spent a longer time in Italy and thus are the most proficient in Italian since this was their main language at the time of onward migration to the UK. They report their younger siblings undergoing a language shift towards English, as they were very young when they migrated to the UK. In some families, the elder children take on the primary role in maintaining Italian, helping their younger siblings not to forget it and slowing the language shift. This differs from results presented in the literature on Italian communities abroad, which has identified parents and grandparents as the main agents for language maintenance. Parents, especially in endogamous families, speak the language(s) of their country of origin among themselves and with their children. The inter-generational transmission of the parents' languages depends on the ethnic group they belong to and on family language policy choices they adopted when they were living in Italy and in the UK.

In the friendship domain, too, there is an opportunity to maintain Italian and the other heritage languages: many participants have Italian friends in their social networks who are also onward migrants from Italy; some maintain transnational ties with friends and relatives in Italy, speaking Italian with them through online communications or when visiting Italy. In some cases, a family member (for example, a parent) remains living in Italy, so the connection with Italy and the Italian language persists.



Using Italian represents an advantage, since it is a skill highly sought after in the English and European job markets: many participants have chosen to take official Italian exams to obtain recognized qualifications, thus demonstrating their language proficiency and improving their formal written skills. In some cases, formal exams are also offered for the other heritage languages of the participants, but a lower literacy level in these languages does not encourage choosing these exams. Nevertheless, some participants stated that they are re-discovering and improving their knowledge of the family heritage languages other than Italian, either because they join a larger co-ethnic community or because of a renewed interest in their cultural roots.

The study of onward migration from Italy to UK has proved an ideal case study for examining multilingualism in the context of migration and understanding how complex linguistic repertoires may be restructured after a long period of residence in Italy. The phenomenon of onward migration of new Italian citizens is having interesting consequences for the status of the Italian language in the UK too. Initially, the typical idea of a student choosing to study Italian, corresponding to the stereotype of the middle-class white English person, had been replaced by the presence of various English students of Italian descent. In the last decade, the new Italians who choose to study Italian represent a new type of student who is Italian and has a more complex linguistic and ethnic background. This is also having implications for the teaching of Italian in schools and universities. The Society of Italian Studies in the UK and Ireland (SIS) and colleagues in the departments where Italian is taught have long been engaged in the process of decolonizing the curriculum. British schoolteachers are also increasingly aware of the presence of European students who have arrived through onward migration, and the potential opportunities for teaching offered by these students' linguistic and educational backgrounds. Lastly, I would like to highlight how children of families who have migrated through onward migration from Italy are unwitting ambassadors of the Italian language and of a more contemporary and multicultural image of Italy abroad.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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