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Constraints, suffering, and surfacing repertoires among Gambian migrants in Italy

MARCO SANTELLO

University of Turin, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article explores one underestimated aspect of language in migration settings, namely the experience of not being in full control of circumstances and doing. Recent research has indeed highlighted aspects such as transcendence of boundaries, hinting at a version of multilingualism among migrants that does not feature enough of their experience of constraints. In contrast, other scholars have emphasised structural inequalities often focusing on macro-social pressures that migrants have to navigate. Approaching lived experiences as they emerge while researcher and informant build rapport-in-talk, the study concentrates on a young Gambian in Italy. He speaks of a lack of institutional support and being in a position where certain languages cannot be used, despite concrete help from a local NGO and personal efforts. The data also show suffering beyond language-related constraints and the progressive mutual surfacing of linguistic repertoires in interaction, evidencing more broadly the merits of this type of qualitative study. (Migration, constraints, Gambia, Italy)*

INTRODUCTION

Migration worldwide has been on the rise in recent decades, and of all the routes that have been under public attention, one of the most relevant has been the route that goes from Africa to Europe through Italy. Among those who follow this route there are migrants from Gambia, a small West African state enclosed within Senegal, with a population of fewer than three million.

The official bureau of statistics of Italy (ISTAT 2023) reports that, of the five million foreigners in Italy, as of 1 January 2023, 22,637 are Gambian citizens. The Gambian community is small compared to larger migrant groups such as Romanians and Moroccans in Italy,[1] and this fact has likely contributed to the Gambians' lack of visibility and awareness of their presence among the general public. However, the data provides only a partial picture of the Gambian community because some might not be registered, and others might have become Italian citizens.

This research focuses on a group of Gambian migrants who live in a shelter in a multicultural suburb of Padua, a relatively well-off city in the northeastern Veneto region of Italy. It does so by looking at the presence of constraints (Santello 2022) concerning language and migration, foregrounding the experience of not being in control of circumstances and doing. This is, as I explain below, a side of sociolinguistic theory that latches onto recent suggestions to problematise the connection between multilingual practices and the transcending of constraints, which is still short on empirical exploration.

INTERROGATING LANGUAGE AND MIGRATION BEYOND UNFETTEREDNESS

There is a whole body of studies that focuses on how migrants interact in a new sociolinguistic environment and, in recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to the resourcefulness of migrants in using their repertoire to make meaning. In fact, the study of language and migration has shown (i) multilingual language practices that denote the resourcefulness of migrants, and (ii) structural inequalities that prevent migrants from using their resources freely.

The first group of studies often take an ethnographic approach and tend to highlight aspects such as fluidity and transcendence of boundaries. This is the case of a city market in England where, when customers and sellers do not have much in common in terms of linguistic history, different ways to make meaning, including gesturing, are employed in commercial transactions (Blackledge & Creese 2017). In other settings, practices other than standard norms are brought to the fore, for example, explaining that in non-western multilingual societies communication and negotiation rather than monolingual-like competence are key (Canagarajah & Wurr 2011). In summative accounts of the literature, these types of language use are described as 'locally-occasioned language that is liable in certain circumstances to attract censure informed by dominant monolingual or regulated bilingual (keep-languages-separate) ideologies' (Baynham & Lee 2019:30). They are often described as grassroots practices where boundary transcendence is related to creativity.

The second strand of research has highlighted aspects like injustice (Piller 2016), structural inequalities (Tupas 2015), discrimination (Dovchin 2022), and immobility (De Fina & Mazzaferro 2022). Taking an approach that draws heavily on social sciences at large, these have noted that migrants are subject to processes they can only partly control. For example, Gal (2006) discusses how German speakers in Hungary and Hungarian speakers in Austria can face ridicule when crossing borders, and Lippi-Green (2012) has stressed the negative impact that accent evaluation can have on speakers. Studies have focused on specific settings such as the workplace, where there might be a 'covert expectation to assimilate linguistically in order to be seen as legitimate professionals' (Harrison 2013:198), or politics, where potential candidates may suffer from large unconscious bias against L2 speakers, therefore limiting their likelihood to run for office (Bonotti & Willoughby 2023).

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To be sure, both of these discursive poles have been subject to a good degree of scrutiny and problematisation. Scholars such as Prinsloo (2024) question attributing superior intrinsic value to fluid language practices alone, pointing at both fluid and fixed language practices in society. Drawing on Silverstein (2017), he underscores that, for instance, using a standard variety can be linked to linguistic creativity. May (2022), providing a more general critique of deconstructivism in sociolinguistics, also warns against an excessive focus on individualism and the hybridisation of linguistic practices, arguing that it is important not to underplay the reality that access to standardised varieties plays a role for many language users. By contrast, agency has been identified in how migrants handle top-heavy societal problems that make them victims of injustice. For example, Bucholtz, Casillas, & Lee (2019) have described how young people in California can challenge conditions of injustice linked to their languages of heritage through activism by advocating for the use of Spanish in a commencement speech, thus showing that multilinguals themselves can be involved in change.

In spite of these problematisations there is a tendency in the field to establish a dichotomy whereby language is creative at the micro-level and constrained at a higher level (Blommaert 2005:125). Rather, Gramling (2021) has questioned the tendency to insist on either powerful macro-social forces that affect languages or unbridled language use at the grassroots level. He wishes for greater interdisciplinary insights and a rethinking of multilingualism as a praxis under pressure. Other scholars have pointed toward the need to complement approaches that focus on macro-social workings with less large-scale elements that can also function as constraints (Canagarajah 2022, 2023). In other words, there is room for additional avenues for research looking at constraints from a variety of perspectives, also conceding that developing linguistically does not necessarily mean breaking free from the undesired. One could question, for instance, if behaving multilingually is primarily about going against stiff language practices that speakers do not want to resort to. In this sense scholars are starting to assess more systematically the possibility that there could also be value in multilingual practices that operate within constraints rather than going beyond them (Santello 2022). This could revisit the assumption around transcendence of boundaries as the touchstone of multilingualism, giving an enhanced consideration of what it means to operate linguistically—and possibly creatively—within something given, in line with Deumert's (2018) view that expressivity in everyday life does not have to be thought of as automatically implying disruption.

Cognisant of these multiple voices and in a bid to go beyond the growing attention on repertoires as unfettered instruments for expression (Otheguy, García, & Reid 2015), this research explores language and migration by looking empirically at constraints among Gambians in Italy. Starting from a view of language practices within a space of action, I operationalise Michel de Certeau's notion of constraints as a lack of control over circumstances and doing (Santello 2022) concerning migrants' experiences by focusing on how these emerge as interviewer and

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interviewee build rapport (Goebel 2021b). Taking a step further from Dovchin's (2022) argument that forms of discrimination persist regardless of the celebration of playfulness of translingual practises, in this study I pay attention to constraints as experienced by migrants, conceiving the possibility that they might function as something more than impediments to unbridled use. In other words, if 'it is apparent that transnational migrants are playfully involved with different types of trans- practices, but it is not at all clear to what extent, how, and why particular local constraints either limit or expand one's translingual practices' (Dovchin 2022:8), I open space for more experiences in a hitherto unexplored context, so that we can glean additional details on constraints among migrants. The focus here is therefore not on structures of power or how state politics influence certain processes such as learning Italian (Del Percio 2018) but zooms into the interactional level to understand how the experience of not being in full control of circumstances and doing is articulated between interviewer and interviewee with reference to language. As mentioned above, this focus expands on de Certeau's (1990) view whereby creativity in everyday life often entails working within a space of action, thanks to tactics which involve having to make do with what is given.

This research took place in a shelter for migrants in Padua, Italy. In the region, there have been instances of anti-immigration behaviour intertwined with language at different levels (Perrino 2015, 2018), but there are also several initiatives aimed at helping migrants in various ways, including linguistically (Helm & Dabre 2018). Padua has been nominated European capital of volunteering and, due also to the presence of a large university, hosts a substantial student population who actively contribute to activities to enhance social cohesion. It is important to note that, at a more general level, immigration has been a politically fraught issue in the country for years, where there have been oscillations between strong anti-immigration positions and various appeals to welcome migrants, particularly those who cross the Mediterranean (Jacquemet 2022).

I was introduced to this group of migrants by the people who work for an NGO I have been volunteering for. My positionality is partly one of an insider, in that I have given my time to the teaching of Italian to newcomers, including refugees from different parts of the world, within the NGO. I have known them since the end of 2021, and I do what they ask according to what is needed and depending on the time I have and where I am physically located. I have done one-to-one tutoring, small-group classes and, less often, helped training younger volunteers. When I taught classes I did so mostly with young men who had just arrived in Italy, and I have met a few times with a Gambian who had asked for one-to-one support. I had never been to the shelter before this research project and I had not met any of the informants, although they might have seen me in a new year's party the NGO organised and that I attended some months before starting the research. When I started the project the NGO workers recommended this specific shelter, explaining that some of these migrants were struggling with Italian and probably had a lot to say, as they had been in Italy for a while. Many of these were Gambians with

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whom I could speak English and Italian. This article focuses on an informant, whom I call Lamin, who has been in Italy for over six years and, after various stints in the south and the centre of Italy, arrived in Padua a few months before I met him. He was doing the dishes when I introduced myself to the group in the shelter's kitchen. It became clear that he was interested in expressing his voice, particularly because he could do so in English. He was on a fixed-term residence permit and had been living at the shelter for six months with others, the large majority from West Africa. He was working on and off for a factory in a nearby town and, in the meantime, was taking some Italian classes from volunteers in the shelter itself.

One aspect that needs to be spelt out has to do with my personal investment of time and energy for migrants, who matter to me personally, which is the same drive that prompts me to conduct this type of research. A second related aspect concerns the way in which Lamin might perceive me and my role. Our common knowledge of English and his being aware that I dedicate my free time to migrants and that I have been a migrant myself have created ground for our exchanges. The fact that we have both been exposed to different cultural settings may also be thought of as something that we have in common. Yet we are different in many important respects, including race, citizen rights, and education. In addition, while as a volunteer I have very limited decision-making, unequal positioning persists. As explained above, I do not work for the NGO but as a volunteer I may be viewed partly as an insider, thus Lamin might not feel in a position to say everything he wishes to say about his current situation. These aspects are bound to impact our exchanges, for instance, in discussing certain topics and to what extent. In the analysis I try to account for such moments, with the understanding that differences remain and that my positionality affects the ways in which things are approached and presented. Nevertheless, I have tried to create rapport with Lamin, intended not as something that pre-exists the fieldwork but as a processual phenomenon (Perrino 2021) and as 'rapport-in-talk' (Goebel 2021a:37). In keeping with an ethnographic method that nurtures the participation of the researcher for the emergence of data about language and migration (De Fina & Tseng 2017) and, conceding that 'the meaning of other lives may remain opaque to the researcher' (Blackledge & Creese 2023:23), I endeavoured to create with Lamin rapport that grew through the interactions. For example, there have been moments where Lamin raised his epistemic authority—intended as the position of authority in terms of knowledge expressed in interaction—in a way that problematises pre-conceived asymmetries between me and him. There are also instances where both of our experiences as migrants are brought to light, thus making it possible for us to talk about difficult circumstances, or where we show alignment. I analysed the interactional data considering elements such as hesitations, repair, code-switching, and paralinguistic elements, drawing on sociolinguistic stance (Lempert 2008; Jaffe 2009a). Stance-taking is conceived in interactional terms, in that a specific way of seeing a stance object emerges as speakers build on each other's turns. In particular, I give consideration to epistemic stance, meaning 'the linguistic expression of the state of the

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speaker's knowledge' (Kiesling 2022:416). I also include the affordances of material ecologies in language exchanges (Canagarajah 2021), where space has 'considerable significance in meaning construction' (Canagarajah 2018:50). Instead of thinking about it as agentive in itself, however, here I consider it in relation to what speakers do. This is also a way to account for the context of the production of these retellings (De Fina & Tseng 2017), mirroring other studies of this type (Santello 2024). The transcription conventions, in line with the Jefferson's transcription system, are provided in the appendix; English is in normal font, Italian is in italics, and Swedish is in small caps.

UNEARTHING CONSTRAINTS WITH LAMIN

When I interviewed Lamin for the first time, he showed up with a notebook filled with Italian language exercises, which he had planned to show me during the interview. We sat on the common room couch where the television was active. Before starting the interview, we switched the television off, but soon after, another guest switched it on again, and it was on until the end of the interview. I asked him to recount his migration experiences and how language came into play. He told me where he was from and what he did in Gambia before migrating. He then went on to talk about the difficult first years in Naples and then in Tuscany before arriving in Padua. After sharing my struggles with him, like having problems in taking a bus when travelling around Taiwan because of my not knowing Mandarin, I ask him about his experiences in Italy without speaking Italian. He had mentioned before that, when living around Naples, he did not have to use Italian because the fruit-picking jobs he had were so basic that they did not require much interaction in Italian. Here in (1) I ask him to tell me about more experiences.

(1) I: Interviewer

1	I:	But for example if you had to ask for information? You didn't? Or did you = or
2		were you able to make yourself understood?
3	Lamin:	Yeah <u>because normally</u> you know (.) from the *cooperativa* you know we go
4		straight to the:: place you know where we normally site for work so
5	I:	Ahah
6	Lamin:	So we don't normall=for me I don't I don't normally go out (.) °very often°
7	I:	Ok so::
8	Lamin:	Sometimes maybe in *Napoli centrale* you know maybe when you want to buy
9		something like African food you can go there you know you can go there you know
10	I:	Ah ok and then you speak English or whatever with fellow Africans?
11	Lamin:	Yeah because so man… there are many Africans you know living around those
12		areas so it's easy for us to communicate with them
13	I:	Ok
14	Lamin:	People from Senegal you know I can communicate with them
15	I:	Can <u>you</u>? In what way?
16	Lamin:	Yeah yeah because we are borders
17	I:	Ok?

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Lamin: Senegal is a francophone country Gambia is a Anglophone country
I: Ahah
Lamin: We speak English Senegal speak French
I: But?
Lamin: But our local language you know are the same
I: Ok but you're talking about Mandinka the = the?
Lamin: Mandinka Senegal some speak Mandinka but their main = main native language local language is Wolof
I: Wolof yeah
Lamin: Wolof yeah so I can speak Wolof very good Wolof
I: Ah ok you didn't mention that before you just men:: Mandinka but you didn't mention Wolof
Lamin: Yeah yeah
I: That's what I was puzzled about
Lamin: Mandinka is my you know that's my tribe language but I speak Wolof too
I: You didn't mention that that's why I'm saying because I know that in Senegal they speak Wolof but I thought like you didn't say he speaks Wolof
Lamin: Yeah I speak Wolof
I: There you go yeah
Lamin: Hundred percent Wolof
I: Oh I see I see that's great yeah
Lamin: So::
I: So actually you speak several languages
Lamin: Yes yes yes I forget to tell you you know I speak Wolof too
I: That allows you to communicate with the people from Senegal
Lamin: Exactly
I: That's amazing that's great did it happened several times with you to meet with Senegal people?
Lamin: Yeah yeah many of them because you know Senegalese they have been here for so long
I: Ahah
Lamin: They have been in Italy for like many many years you know
I: Ahah
Lamin: There are living in Italy you know so there's many Senegalese you know around those areas *Napoli::* even *Toscana* region you know there's a lot of Senegalese living around *Prato Firenz*e
I: Ahah yeah did = did you meet them also when you were in *Toscana*?
Lamin: Yeah yeah yeah yeah I have many Senegalese friends you know

At the beginning of the exchange Lamin conveys that, when he was living in Naples, he did not use Italian much for public transport because his travelling was mostly commuting from where he was staying (the cooperative) to his work site. He speaks about going out (line 6), meaning engaging in activities outside home or work, and when uttering the words "very often" he pauses and lowers the tone of his voice. I perceive a hint of sadness in this retelling. Here the constraint is the type of life he was living which required little interaction with strangers and, consequently, little opportunity to speak Italian.

However, his tone changes when he recalls episodes where he went grocery shopping near Naples central station. He mentions African food, thus bringing in

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Africa as a whole (rather than Gambia) concerning the food he can get. In answer to this, I reinforce this link with Africans by saying "fellow Africans" and asking him to confirm whether he spoke with them in English, leaving some room for other possibilities with my "or whatever" (line 10). He elaborates on this connection with Africa, telling me about his conversations and friendships with people from Senegal. He mentions that it is easy to communicate with them because they are "borders" (line 16), referring to the geographical vicinity of his country and Senegal. Interactionally this is prompted by his mentioning Africa as a place of origin (Schegloff 1997:97) embedded in this telling and my re-launch in asking for more details.

In the following turns, he displays a level of meta-linguistic awareness that allows him to take an epistemic stance toward me (Kiesling 2022), that is, telling me about the linguistic differences between Gambia and Senegal. He first distinguishes them based on English versus French-speaking countries, using the words "anglophone" and "francophone". He then casts these language-based distinctions in opposition with local languages that function as common languages in the interactions he is talking about, namely Wolof and partly Mandinka (cf. Omoniyi 2006). He gives importance particularly to Wolof for communication with Senegalese: because of the specific migrant communities in Italy (lines 43–55), what facilitates communication here is Wolof, which he speaks "hundred percent" (line 37). But he had forgotten to mention Wolof when I asked about the languages he knew at the beginning of our interview, which resonates with an earlier example where the repertoire of a newly arrived Gambian in Sicily turned out to be richer than what he had initially reported (D'Agostino 2022). In Lamin's case Wolof surfaces in this exchange and reveals its significance for this specific migration experience after my asking about constraints and him mentioning instances where he went out, thus partially breaking his isolation. Wolof was not salient at the beginning of the exchange, but it is now, in light of a discussion about its specific affordances, namely the possibility of grocery shopping in African stores around Naples central station and making Senegalese friends. His living situation where he does not need to speak Italian is populated also by instances of interactions with other Africans thanks to his competence in languages other than Italian.

Once again the constraint is being in a situation that involved little interaction. Here it is followed by Lamin expressing epistemic authority, when explaining that in Senegal people speak Wolof, which indexes a change in interactional relations, that is, greater authority for him. I, in turn, raise my own epistemic authority by telling him that I knew that already but that he had forgotten to mention that he speaks Wolof. I also show a positive stance by using a stance marker (line 38) and then following up with clarifications, thus achieving stance interactionally (cf. also Du Bois 2007). He explains that Mandinka is the language of his tribe, stating the importance of Mandinka for him and his people, while Wolof is the "main native" "local language" of Senegalese (lines 24–25). For him, these labels together are

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good descriptors in trying to convey the status of Wolof in Senegal. This labelling is discursively introduced by Lamin, who uses specific terms such as "local" and "native" attributing meaning to them in and for this exchange, with a non-local non-native like me. As I explain below, this dichotomy gives way to alignment toward the end of the excerpt, showing the development of rapport-in-talk.

In the following turn, he again raises his epistemic authority, this time on Senegalese migration to Italy to the extent that he can mention cities where these communities have settled, using the Italian word *Firenze* instead of the English equivalent Florence. He talks specifically about the size of the community and their long-term settlement in the country. The surfacing of Wolof is to be connected to its use with Senegalese, who are brought up here in relation to their presence as a migrant community in Italy. The repertoire, therefore, surfaces here beyond the speakerhood he introduced at the beginning of the interview. We notice an increase in the visibility of parts of the repertoire in this migration context, as recalled by Lamin. While he has difficulties remembering any experiences with Italian because of his scarce use of the language when in Naples, he refers to the multilingualism of West Africa as enabling him to do things and make friends. It is linguistically interwoven with code-switching that marks Lamin and I as people who have gotten to know these cities with their own Italian toponyms. This move helps to re-establish alignment in contrast to the local/non-local division in earlier turns, thus advancing the building of rapport in interaction (Goebel 2021a).

The description of the constraint of living a daily routine that does not lend itself to much interaction with strangers is intertwined with the surfacing of other interactions in African languages as we show epistemic authority and build rapport-in-talk. This part of his repertoire surfaces when he calls to mind his "going out" outside his work commitments and is articulated with awareness of multilingual repertoires and shared knowledge of Italian places between me and him.

This is developed in the excerpt (2), where I ask him to expand on how he communicates with different people.

(2)

1	Lamin:	You know Italy is not like maybe sssss some other part of = some other countries (.)
2		you know like (.) Sweden Finland you know or maybe::: yeah (.) there you
3		know if you cannot speak you know Swedish maybe you know they wi… you
4		know if you ask somebody whether they can speak English you know he will
5		tell you hundred percent I speak English
6	I:	Humhum
7	Lamin:	So those kind of places you know it was but in Italy you know Italian is very
8		very important to speak 'cause (.) without that you know it will be hard for you
9		to communicate with lot lot of people
10	I:	Humhum humhum and I mean do you get a chance to speak with with other
11		Italians or with other people who speak Engli::sh or::? Tell me a bit about that
12		because I'm interested in how you m = here you have lots of Gambian people so
13		you speak your language all the time I guess
14	Lamin:	Yeah yeah

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15	I:	But ehm if you meet other people for example who are not from Gambia ah how
16		do you communicate with them? Do you use…
17	Lamin:	Like blacks or?
18	I:	Not necessarily
19	Lamin:	Or Italians?
20	I:	Or also other migrants anybody
21	Lamin:	Yeah other migrants you know (.) maybe those from Senega::l *Costa d'Avoro*
22		Mali (.) eh:: Burkina Faso (.) and where::: Guinea = Guinea Bissau and Guinea
23		Conakry you know
24	I:	Humhum
25	Lamin:	'Cause those people they can speak my language = Mandinka
26	I:	Ok
27	Lamin:	So:: we can communicate you know but like maybe [name of a housemate] it
28		will be hard for me because [name of a housemate] cannot speak English you
29		know he can speak only French and Italian so:: for [name of a housemate] you
30		know I have to speak only Italian [chuckles] so maybe I'll bro = broke it but
31		sometime he will understand sometime if you don't understand maybe I call
32		someone to come and explain it to you
33	I:	Ahah but with him you have to speak Italian
34	Lamin:	Yeah Italian because he cannot speak English he can speak only French and his
35		native language
36	I:	Ok ok and how ehm is it ok for you speaking Italian with = with people?
37	Lamin:	Yeah because it is the only way I can improve my Italian by:: speaking you
38		know (.) talking with lot of Italian

Here Lamin makes apparent that the situation in Italy when it comes to English is different from other countries, specifically Sweden and Finland, as migrant-receiving countries where one can count on locals' ability to speak English. He is not only cognisant of different European countries where migrants can settle, but also of their different proficiency in English. He focuses on Finland and more so on Sweden, one of the European countries that have hosted the largest number of refugees in recent years. He connects migrants having less difficulty in communication with the locals' ability to interact with migrants in English rather than in Swedish (cf. Salö 2014 for an overview of English in Sweden), thereby attributing to the sociolinguistic environment the power to make things smoother for migrants like him. In establishing this comparison he intends to convey his difficulties in Italy, contrasting different levels of competence in English in Europe. In this discursive move he therefore marks his competence in English as valuable elsewhere but not in Italy. Here English is less valuable because of its local spread and ensuing usefulness (cf. Kubota & McKey 2009).

In the following turns he reinforces another facet of his awareness of linguistic repertoires across countries, developing what emerged in the previous excerpt around Wolof. In lines 21–23 he enumerates a range of countries that allow for communication in Mandinka, once again explaining to me the use of languages in West Africa, in this case precisely the language of his tribe, mentioned through a code-switched English-Italian sentence. Mandinka is a language that is spoken in

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a number of countries, and this allows for communicating between his tribe and others in West Africa. Considering specifically the Italian context, he distinguishes between speaking with other Africans, which he terms "blacks" and speaking with Italians (lines 17, 19), ascribing easiness to communicating with the former and difficulty to the latter, thus creating a dichotomy which is meta-discursively apparent (Gal 2018). I, in turn, expand the possibility beyond the dichotomy by using the 'general extender' (Kiesling 2009:188) "anybody". Yet, he keeps speaking about his experience with Africans and acknowledges that this easiness is not all-encompassing, particularly when communicating with housemates whose background repertoire does not match his, thus recognising that Italian is also used among Africans. In this case, he describes his tactic as two-fold. On one side, he communicates in Italian or broken Italian, as he appears to say in line 30; on the other, when this does not work, he uses help from others whose Italian is better, showing once again that 'the ability to communicate is not purely an individual accomplishment. 'It is a collaborative accomplishment in situations of local practice' (Canagarajah & Wurr 2011:10). Notably, he does not bemoan that he has to speak Italian with other migrants but even welcomes it as an opportunity for improvement, otherwise lacking in daily life. Interacting with other Africans who do not have Mandinka, Wolof, or English in their repertoire is thus a real constraint for him in that he has no control over it, but it functions as a prompt for him to practise Italian, which he deems essential to his migration success.

This excerpt adds an important layer of signification to what emerged in the previous one. The speaking of English and other African languages is linked to affordances, but having to communicate with other people at the shelter is handled with Italian and help from others if a background language is not an option. The constraint of having to choose Italian for interactions with other people at the shelter is welcomed as a tactic to inhabit another constraint, that of linguistic and social distance from Italians, which impacts his fluency in the language. Local constraints are inhabited through several tactics, which entail having to make do with what one is given, using resources without full control over circumstances and doing.

The enumeration of countries assembled according to language returns in the following shorter excerpt, this time adding English as an additional transnational language.

(3)

1	Lamin:	'Cause Mandinka is wide you know
2	I:	It's spoken in so many PArts right?
3	Lamin:	Mali Burkina Faso:: *Costa d'Avoro*:: Guinea Conakry = Guinea Bissau Senegal
4		Gambia you know they all speak Mandinka you know
5	I:	Mmm got it mmm goo = and then with some others you speak English? For example with
6		people from Nigeria
7	Lamin:	Exactly
8	I:	Or other countries right?
9	Lamin:	Sierra Leone you know
10	I:	That's right yeah (.) that's cool

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Once again he lists the countries where Mandinka is spoken, this time without hesitations and adding that the language "is wide" (line 1). There is an advantage that Mandinka offers Lamin, and he wants to make me aware of it, while also showing that he knows the role of the language in West Africa in reference to specific countries. He also knows that I am fascinated by languages and that I would be interested in these aspects, so he cares to go in detail when talking with me about the role of Mandinka in West Africa. Interactionally therefore this is both a way in which we create rapport as the interview progresses (Goebel 2021a) and a way for him to use his epistemic authority so that more can be understood about his experience with languages. As a matter of fact, the exercise of epistemic authority can well be connected to the rapport we had been building up to this point. As I prompt him to talk about it (line 2) he wants to share a remarkable amount of linguistic details with me. This is a practical list as Eco (2009) would call it, in the sense that it is a finite congruous ensemble of items (countries in this case) that are kept together by a criterion (competence in Mandinka among the people of these countries).

He uses his discourse-pragmatic marker "you know" (line 4) this time perhaps asking more specifically for an acknowledgement of what he is conveying. He receives it in the following lines through a further expansion on my end; I know that in the house there is a Nigerian and that in Padua there are English-speaking Nigerian communities (Goglia 2010), so I mention the use of English with them, to which he assents and adds an additional country, Sierra Leone. English here is brought in by me as an additional language that can function as a way to establish communication in Africa beyond Mandinka. We both contribute to this addition, showing again our cooperation (Schlegoff 1997:97), bringing to the surface that lack of knowledge of Mandinka is compensated by shared competence in English with people from two more African countries. It is a series of alignment moves (Jaffe 2009b) where we build swiftly on each other's turns so that a description of the repertoire can emerge more fully. Here the emphasis on constraints gives way to the affordances provided by different African languages as we compose the whole picture together. As I try to make sense of his knowledge of languages and countries I am struck once again by his international outlook when, toward the end of this interview, in response to my sharing the experience of learning Norwegian, he says the following in (4).

(4)

1	Lamin:	Norwegian I think is similar with ah::: Swedish ah?
2	I:	It is exactly yeah yeah how do you know that?
3	Lamin:	Yeah because:: (.) in the hotel you know I normally you know I = I have some
4		Swedish friends you know
5	I:	Ah::
6	Lamin:	Living in
7	I:	And so they told you about this? About Norweg…

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8 Lamin: Yeah yeah so I can like VAD HETER DU you know?
9 I: WOW that's ama::zing.
10 Lamin: Things like that you know I can
11 I: Wow
12 Lamin: Some little words VAD HENDE:: things like that
13 I: [smiling] That's great I hadn't heard you know these words in a long time
14 Lamin: PRATA SVENSKA FÖRSTÅR DU something like that things like that you know
15 I can
16 I: Ah:: YEAH:: that's great yeah fantastic

In this excerpt it becomes clear that his knowledge of languages goes beyond what is most likely needed in Italy. It stemmed from Lamin's acquaintance with Swedish speakers when he worked in a hotel in Gambia before migrating. His words in what I understood as Norwegian *hva heter du*, but then I realised it was the Swedish *vad heter du*, brought a smile to my face and created a bond between us. His knowledge of "some little words" (line 12) positively affects our exchange because they engender an instantaneous emotional reaction from me (cf. Santello 2017:222–23) and an explicit appreciation towards him because of this aspect of his repertoire.

Lamin shows unexpected competence in a less known language, uttering words that I recognise with surprise, as apparent in my elevated pitch in lines 2 and 9; it is an unforeseen match that gives communicative value to a partly-shared truncated repertoire, which surfaces thanks to this exchange and matters to the two of us for this interaction. His meta-linguistic awareness and knowledge of these elements of a Scandinavian language functioned as a thread between us (Holliday 2016). He had already mentioned Sweden in excerpt (2) concerning its being a more favourable environment for English-speaking migrants like him, and also, in another instance, he first told me about his hotel job in Gambia before migrating, which make this excerpt meaningful intertextually as well.

The evoking of distant places where other proficiencies and other languages are common allows for repertoires to be unravelled. It is not only language as a local practice that matters here, but also something distant that surfaces in the space and memories we are sharing. Here our experience with Scandinavian languages becomes a way to mutually align—again in the sociopragmatic acceptation of the term—as well as something that makes our repertoires emerge in interaction.

Nevertheless, in another interview with Lamin, I realised that his international experience and list of countries are not only connected to an interest in language but also his experience of crossing borders and risking his life. While waiting for his rice to be cooked on the stove, we sat in the shelter corridor when I asked him whether he had thought about learning Italian when he migrated. He replied as follows in (5).

(5)

1 Lamin: Ah for us you know that's not our::: you know that's not our main concern you
2 know
3 I: Ahah

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4 Lamin: Our main concern is you know maybe [chuckles] whether I will = whether I will
5 break in Italy or I will die on the road those the:: those are our main concern
6 I: Ahah
7 Lamin: Because it's a very dangerous you know road you know
8 I: Absolutely yeah
9 Lamin: After from Gambia [list of countries including an instance of self-repair][2] have to
10 cross the Mediterranean Sea you know to
11 [someone greets him and then someone else asks him to go check on his rice on the stove]
12 Lamin: So it's a long road you know

Here Lamin brings my attention to the concerns that mattered most to him when he migrated. He clearly speaks in the plural "for us" and "our main concern" marking this journey as a collective one (line 1 and lines 4–5). This characterisation of collectiveness is a discursive device that reports something concrete: the migration route is undertaken by groups of migrants rather than an individual. The enumeration of countries resonates with the previous ones that had to do with the spread of Mandinka (the concrete list from excerpt (3)), but, significantly, he self-repairs to trace the migration trajectory that brought him to cross several countries and then the Mediterranean. What could initially be a list of countries connected via language becomes the succession of countries that he had to cross in order to make his journey to Italy. The point of this list is to represent a long journey, developed country by country, which is also charged with greater emotional value. He stresses the dangerousness of that road saying that arriving safe in Italy is the number one priority and the rest comes after. This is not surprising, as arriving safe has been shown to be something that migrants crossing the Mediterranean communicate first (Jacquemet 2020:137), but this is his own personal story of survival, not only a collective one. In other words, Lamin's view casts the experience of migrating as collective, but he also positions himself as a member of a community of migrants.

It is therefore an instance where Lamin takes charge in a new way. He shifts my attention from language to the risky journey he had to embark on, making me move away from my focus on language to what he wants to communicate. It is an emotional topic. He chuckles and performs self-repetitions; he is someone who could have perished instead of having this exchange with me. I am glad that he mentioned it because it brings attention to something I had not asked about explicitly (his arrival by boat) but assumed had happened. This shift, possible thanks to our rapport, allows this to be conveyed, something which suddenly focuses his recount onto what is salient to him first, and now also for me. Interactionally here I am taking up the role of the receiver, aligning fully by acknowledging what he is saying and agreeing with it; I receive whatever he is giving me in this very moment trying to show respect for something that I can only take in, facing the irreducibility of experience that Rampton, Maybin, & Roberts (2015) refer to.

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A similar shift in focus happens also in excerpt (6), where, after telling him that I am happy that he is sharing his experiences with me and that I hope to make sense of them, he says the following:

(6)

1	Lamin:	It's not easy for lot of immigrants you know (.) lot of immigrants are:: suffering you
2		know:: at the moment you know
3	I:	They are::
4	Lamin:	Some don't even have a place to sleep = like for us you know without
5		[name of the NGO] you know we don't even have a place to sleep
6	I:	Yes
7	Lamin:	You know yeah because
8	I:	You're absolutely right there's plenty of people::
9	Lamin:	Yeah so::
10	I:	You're right you're right
11	Lamin:	Without without their help you know:: we could have been in a serious situation
12		you know
13	I:	[name of the NGO] is great ah?
14	Lamin:	YEAH YEAH YEAH they help lot of people

Here he wants to convey explicitly that immigrants are suffering. The suffering he is evoking has to do with not having a place to sleep (lines 4–5), a situation he had experienced in Tuscany where he had to sleep rough more than once, as he had told me in another instance: intertextuality is at play again. He knows he is better off now because of the NGO and wants me to know that he and his housemates are in a fortunate situation that other immigrants do not experience. They are in that "serious situation" (line 11) that he can avoid thanks to the help of the NGO, which we both explicitly commend at the end of the exchange. Once again, he uses the plural, indicating an experience shared by many (the use of "lot of" in lines 1, 14) and by some (line 4); the suffering is framed as a shared experience of "immigrants" (after the Italian *immigrati*) and so is the help from the NGO although to a different extent. My own participation in this exchange is noteworthy here: we are both involved with the NGO at different levels, and our affirmation stems from our experiences with the NGO and most likely the anticipation of each other's stance toward its work. It is an active act of alignment from my side that both acknowledges the problems faced by migrants in Italy and the help offered by the NGO. We can see in this excerpt, more than in any other, the strengthening of mutual alignment and rapport; I not only listen but also contribute to and reinforce what Lamin is saying and he, in turn, repeats three times "yeah" raising his voice (cf. Goebel 2021a). The concrete constraint of being homeless is here evoked as connected to the past and, at the same time, to the present situation of others.

The help provided to the migrants has to do also explicitly with language, as is clear in the following longer exchange where I ask him to tell me what he thinks would help him to improve his Italian.

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(7)

1	Lamin:	Like right now you know:: we normally have you know *classe* every Thursday
2		tomorrow we have Italian *classe*
3	I:	Aha
4	Lamin:	You know with one eh:: with one woman from I don't know where she is from
5		he = she is also a voluntary [name of NGO] here
6	I:	Ok
7	Lamin:	So she will be here tomorrow you know for Italian *classe*
8	I:	Humhum yeah yeah yeah sure is this [name of another volunteer] *o* no?
9	Lamin:	[name of the volunteer]
10	I:	[name of volunteer] I don't know [name of volunteer] ah [name of volunteer]
11		ah yeah maybe *ah no no* that's not what I'm talking about (.) ok I don't know
12		[name of volunteer]
13	Lamin:	So every week you know I normally have once in a week Italian class so it
14		helping me = it is helping me a lot yeah because as you can see all this
15		[he shows me his notebook filled with Italian language exercises and I start browsing it]
16	I:	Is this your notebook? Ah that's cool
17	Lamin:	Like the *verbi* you know *irregulare* verbs like *io gioco tu giochi lui gioca*
18		something like that <*cucinare*> <*potere*> <*dovere*> *dovere* so things like that
19		you know I have a lot of:: notes here
20		[Keeps turning pages]
21	I:	*Ciao* [to another person]
22	Lamin:	It's a lot (3.0) it's a lot
23		[I look attentively at the notebook]
24	I:	That's cool
25	Lamin:	Mmm (3.0) I'm learning gradually you know
26	I:	Absolutely but (3.0) that's great
27	Lamin:	Yeah because I even want to go to school but at the moment there's no space
28	I:	There's no space for school? What do you mean?
29	Lamin:	Ah:: because I've been calling them you know for me to do maybe the *A*
30		*due* = *eh A uno* exam
31	I:	For *italiano*?
32	Lamin:	Yeah *Italiano*
33	I:	Ahah
34	Lamin:	But they don't respond
35	I:	Ok
36	Lamin:	So maybe there's no space you know
37	I:	There's no space?
38	Lamin:	Yeah but in the future I'd love to do it
39	I:	That'd be nice

In this excerpt, it is notable that improving Italian is characterised as an activity linked to taking Italian classes. Lamin specifically mentions a non-Italian volunteer who goes to the shelter for classes every Thursday. I, in turn, try to establish a link by suggesting who this volunteer might be, thus placing myself more explicitly as an insider among the volunteers of the NGO. He suddenly remembers the name, making me ponder whether I know her. He may know that, as part of my volunteering, I teach Italian to newly arrived migrants and thus wants to reinforce with me that he finds classes useful. These classes are

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mentioned through code-switching, matching their content (Italian language) and evoking the word *classe* in context (they are possibly being called *classe* when the classes are on).

The fragment is also important because it allows Lamin to show his notebook, which he had brought along when the interview started. The use of this object is significant; it shows that "a lot" (line 22) of work is being done. Not only can he flex verbs and name infinitives, but he also knows grammatical terms in Italian like *irregulare*, a morphologically Italian adjective that here keeps the sound /jʊ/, which comes from the English equivalent 'irregular'. His attempts to work on his Italian are significant and the results are visible. This is in line with the fact that he is aware of his good competence in written Italian, which he had mentioned to me in previous exchanges when he said that he was fine reading Italian in comparison to other migrants whose oral/aural skills do not match their proficiency in written Italian. This ability is displayed here thanks to his notebook, which is 'capable of communicating meaning' (Canagarajah 2021:3) because of its use by Lamin.

However, his commitment to language learning is confronted with the constraints he experiences, which he reports in the following turns. The lack of available space for the local Italian language courses that prepare for the A1 exams is detrimental to his development as a speaker. He is unsure whether spaces are available; he tried calling them, but nobody replied. Lamin clearly understands the progression that is meant to happen (in lines 29–30, he self-repairs from A2 to A1) and shows a willingness to do so (line 38). He is relatively highly educated in Gambia, having finished high school and continued studying afterwards, so he knows the value of education, and learning for him is also explicitly linked to class instruction. But he says that at the moment he does not have the opportunity to make progress through structured education outside the shelter. Lack of availability in language schools for migrants in Italy has been shown to happen elsewhere (Del Percio 2023). Here one can touch the experience of constraints from a personal perspective: Lamin does not see any alternative other than relying exclusively on a one-hour-a-week class run by a volunteer for his language instruction. He also knows I am an educator and value language learning, so he assumes I will be struck by the educational deprivation he recounts. He is right; I indignantly elevate my pitch when asking for clarification (line 28), a specific interactional stance which is evaluative and emotional at the same time (Jaffe 2009c).

In this final excerpt, therefore, he makes apparent how the help from a volunteer and his commitment to studying Italian are visible. Nonetheless, there is a constraint, a lack of control over circumstances, that he experiences: people from the local school where Italian is taught and exams are sat have not responded to his phone calls. His situation of being a migrant who, after over six years in Italy, has problems conversing in Italian is linked to concrete constraints. The help from the NGO is appreciated (his self-repair from A2 to A1 also denotes awareness

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that he is not at a zero-level) and is a way to inhabit the constraints, but for now the lack of responsiveness from the local school is a problem for him, although he remains hopeful for the future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By expanding Michel de Certeau's view of constraints as important aspects of language, this work counterbalances the weight placed on unfetteredness, which is becoming common in contemporary sociolinguistic research on migrants. It is therefore cognisant of studies that have indicated a general overemphasis in sociolinguistics on translingual practices as playful (Dovchin 2022), resistant (Gramling 2021), and fluid (Prinsloo 2024), but takes a step further giving more centrality to constraints, looking at their implication for multilingualism as experienced by migrants and told in interaction.

Using a linguistic anthropological approach to language and migration, here constraints emerge in interaction as linked to a lack of institutional support and NOT being in a situation where Italian can be practiced in daily life so that it can be improved, or where English can be used more extensively to support communicative needs when necessary. There is also a sense whereby lack of control over circumstances and doing is connected to being stuck, for example, waiting for language classes. We can see a keen awareness of concrete conditions that have to do with language and that impinge on migration, as in again Lamin's not being in a position to resort to English when speaking in Italian is not going well, or in the dearth of opportunity to practice Italian, which is, nevertheless, not all-encompassing, in that it is mitigated by classes provided by volunteers at the shelter. These emerge thanks to rapport-in-talk, intended as rapport that grows through interactions, as in instances where alignment is achieved or epistemic authority is taken up by the informant rather than the researcher, for example when Lamin does things such as informing the researcher about West African languages and African migration to Italy.

In these data two additional elements rose: suffering and surfacing repertoires. The former was brought in and upscaled by illuminating it as a collective experience of migrants and shifting the attention away from a focus on language. The latter was brought about as a progressive mutual emergence of linguistic resources, at times indeed interwoven with instances of epistemic authority. In addition, the language-related constraints he mentioned happening in his shelter are even welcomed as a chance to improve his Italian and inhabited through tactics that rely also on help from others. It is an aspect that stands out in the tactics that he puts in place when faced with constraints, such as asking someone to be an interpreter in the shelter, which resonates with recent theoretical advancement that emphasises the collective aspect of multilingual practices as 'distributed practice in meaning-making and communicative outcomes' (Canagarajah 2023:11). Along similar lines the experiences of vulnerability that are brought to light are also others'

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experiences: the route from Gambia to Italy and the homelessness of others point to the permanence of "a serious situation" for those who are not there to tell their lived experience, while also shedding light on the actual support from a local NGO.

One aspect that is worth considering is that the repertoire that enables Lamin to communicate with other migrants, notably western Africans, is not only a source of affordances (social activities and links, mutual help) but is also told in association with him not being able to communicate with others (Italians, for instance). There is a willingness to communicate, but there are also constraints (a non-Italian-speaking environment and lack of educational opportunities) that he faces. A range of communicative practices, including code-switching and handling material objects, are used while experiences emerge as the interviewer and interviewee interact. In all this I acknowledge that my own personal history and positionality have impacted not only the interactions but also their presentation, as they progressively become part of narrative knowledging (Canagarajah 2021). One can see the value in doing this type of qualitative study of constraints so that their type and nature can become apparent as rapport-in-talk develops.

These points are meant to provide insights into language among migrants in Italy, casting light on Gambians through the experiences of one young man who cares about having his voice heard. They also offer a different angle from which language and migration can be approached in sociolinguistics, one that places constraints as a central object of inquiry. As suggested elsewhere (Santello 2022), a large body of studies appears to assume that for something to be valuable from a migrants' perspective it needs to be oppositional to what is given; but such an assumption might run the risk of underestimating not only the value of standardised forms that scholars like Prinsloo (2024) have highlighted, but also the fact that creativity in everyday linguistic practises can occur within a space of action where constraints are not overcome through multilingualism. Constraints become part and parcel of the practises that migrants are involved in to live their life in more than one language. In this case 'fully acknowledging ongoing, often deeply entrenched, local constraints' (Dovchin 2022:9) means also considering that they can be and sometimes are implicated in the very same multilingualism that one might view in opposition to them, so not to offset constraints but to operate within them. This is, for example, the case of having to speak Italian with another migrant at the shelter because of lack of common background languages, which is recounted as having the effect of providing room for language use which is otherwise lacking. Not all constraints are lived as dramatic predicaments. In fact, they might be part of a milieu that fosters the employment of skills that migrants wish to use, and talking about them may reveal migrants' creativity.

The thematisation of constraints does not overshadow the potential of the multilingualism of migrants but rather highlights it in relation to concrete circumstances and doing. Edwards (2022), with his vehement disapproval of postmodernism in sociolinguistics, calls for greater attention to evidentiary support when dealing with new terminology, heatedly opposing recent innovations such as posthumanist

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applied linguistics. Here it is not so much a matter of taking sides in an academic debate 'as an end in and of itself' (Catedral & Djuraeva 2023:18), or contrasting terminological boundlessness, but rather of considering what best accounts for the concrete space of action migrants find themselves in. Michel de Certeau highlighted that the act of speaking could not be dissociated from circumstances, and Erickson (2004), in turn, emphasised that we would do well to consider constraints upon social action when studying talk in its situatedness. Once again, we deal with what sociolinguistics does best: exploring meaning-making while striving to account for context and people's lived experiences. I hope this work will spur more empirical research on language and migration that expands on what constraints entail for multilingual individuals and communities.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

plain text	English
italics	Italian
SMALL CAPS	Swedish
ALL CAPS	louder speech
underlined	stress through amplitude or pitch
(.)	short pause
(3.0)	longer pause
[ ]	paralinguistic elements and parts that have been anonymised
::	phonemic lengthening
°	soft tone or lower volume
?	rising intonation
=	latch
< >	slower talk

NOTES

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[1]Romanians and Moroccans are the two largest communities in Italy. They are also the largest in Veneto, where 1,210 Gambians reside.

[2]This list has been omitted because it contains sensitive information.

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Address for correspondence:
Marco Santello
Department of Humanities
University of Turin, Palazzo Nuovo
Via Sant'Ottavio 20
10124, Turin, Italy
marco.santello@unito.it