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# Exclusionary intimacies: Racialized language in Veneto, Northern Italy

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## ABSTRACT

While Italy has been a country of emigrants, since the 1970s, it has become a receiver of migrants. These recent, reverse direction migratory flows have triggered strong reactions, such as nativist discourses about national culture and identity and the aggressive anti-immigration politics of the *Lega Nord* ('Northern League'). This article examines how racialized language in the Northern Italian region of Veneto is at times performed in ways that totally or partially exclude certain migrant groups, while at the same time creating intimate spaces of inclusion for Italians. By codeswitching from Standard Italian to Venetan, speech participants address audiences who are presumed to "share" this code, but when the topics of their conversations are migrants, such shifts can also enact exclusionary stances vis-a-vis the latter. This article demonstrates that familiar analytic dichotomies such as exclusion/inclusion and insider/outsider are inadequate, and it proposes more processual and gradient approaches to participation.

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## 1. Introduction

"How many pages would it take to list the names of the 25,500 persons who perished at the borders of the EU? How long would it take to find out those names? To call them aloud? To look everyone in the eye, or to see everyone's picture? . . . To learn and say something about their religious practices, bustling villages, cities in ruins, tastes, fears, aspirations, mistakes, tortures, and journeys [. . .]?" (Albahari, 2015a: 203)

With these and other moving questions, anthropologist Maurizio Albahari starts the last section of his book, *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World's Deadliest Border* (Albahari, 2015a), in which he tells the tragic stories of migrants as they negotiate Italy and Europe's often contradictory political stances on their existence. In the first nine months of 2015, more than 487,000 migrants arrived on Europe's Mediterranean shores, twice the number for all of 2014.<sup>1</sup> As Albahari reminds us, since 2000, more than 25,000 migrants have lost their lives by attempting to reach Italy and the rest of Europe by boat, most of them dying in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea (Albahari, 2015a). The unofficial figures of these deaths are uncertain and could be multiplied, since many bodies have been lost and cannot be officially counted. Migrants usually rely on

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<sup>1</sup> These figures have been increasing at a very fast pace since 2014, the number of migrants landing in Europe through the Mediterranean Sea being now well over 200,000 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>, last accessed 06/04/2016).

human traffickers, while a large group of “bystanders,” such as fishermen and coast guards, take an indifferent stance and turn their back on sinking ships, arguing that it is not their responsibility to rescue people at sea. While Albahari examines the situation of migrants through their storytelling and through a close examination of the European laws of the Mediterranean Sea (Albahari, 2015a, 2015b), in this article I turn to Italy, one of the key entry points for migrants and refugees to Europe and one of the most important host countries for them, and I try to shed light on these crimes of peace by looking at Northern Italian discursive practices about and around migrants.

In May 2012, I was in the Northern Italian town of Padova (‘Padua’), in the Veneto region, and as I walked toward the main downtown square, called Piazza Cavour, and passed the department store called *Rinascente*,<sup>2</sup> I was surprised not to find any Senegalese migrants, as I used to see during my previous field trips in that town. During annual visits for at least the past decade, I saw Senegalese street sellers lined up outside *Rinascente*, sellers who are often called by the widely used, pejorative phrase “*vu cumprà*” (literally ‘[you] want to buy’) (Ricchio, 1997, 1999, 2000; Scidà, 1994; Carter, 1997; Kouma, 2010).<sup>3</sup> More generally, they are part of a larger class of migrants, the so-called *extracomunitari*, another derogatory term used to refer to migrants in Italy who come from outside the European Union.<sup>4</sup> I used to see Senegalese street sellers displaying their wares on big white sheets outside department stores or in large squares in the downtown area. The goods were usually counterfeit brands (Pang, 2008; Nakassis, 2012) and included imitation Italian design-brand leather bags, belts, wallets, and sunglasses by Armani, Fendi, Versace, Gucci, and Dolce & Gabbana, as well as illegally copied CDs and DVDs (Scidà, 1994; Ricchio, 1997, 1999, 2001). When the Italian police would approach them, the street sellers, who always worked in groups, would quickly wrap everything up and walk away, only to return later. In the Northern Italian cities I visited, the police never seemed to aggressively go after them, except in some rare cases. They would approach the street sellers slowly and deliberately from a distance, allowing the Senegalese migrants to pack up and flee, which often meant stepping into a nearby café or restaurant so that they could no longer be indicted for “selling” anything. When the police would depart, however, the Senegalese would lay down their sheets and would sell their products again. It was a slow cat-and-mouse game with no serious consequences, as many Senegalese migrants mentioned to me during the many street interviews I managed to conduct with them (see, Briggs, 1986; Sixsmith et al., 2003).<sup>5</sup> Yet, during my last trips to the Veneto region, the majority of Senegalese and other African street sellers had mostly disappeared.

This article explores three key interrelated aspects in which discursive struggles over migration emerge in Veneto: 1) new exclusionary restrictions on *extracomunitari* in towns like Padova that have coincided with the revitalization of local Italian “dialects,” or languages; 2) the way these exclusionary restrictions and language revitalization initiatives have been intensely influenced by the strong anti-immigrant politics of the political party called *Lega Nord*, the ‘Northern League’ (Cavanaugh, 2012; Perrino, 2013, 2015); and 3) how practices of exclusion, inclusion, and various blends of the two, play out in discursive interaction about and around migrants or migratory issues in Northern Italy, and how such racialized stances can be enacted for various pragmatic ends. In terms of complaints and racialized jokes made about foreign migrants in Italy, some of the questions this article will engage with are: How do people discursively position self and others as different kinds of participants in these events? How do these self-other positionings change over the course of a single interaction? And how are they discursively negotiated by actors who seek to overcome them? Before answering these questions through an analysis of three examples from my data, I describe the main theoretical framework on which this article is based, the anti-immigrant political context that has dominated the Northern Italian landscape in recent years and some of the language revitalization initiatives that have coincided with this nativism in the Veneto region.

## 2. Racialized stances on migration

In recent years, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have focused their attention on various discursive practices in which racialized language dynamics emerge both in offline domains (Dick and Wirtz, 2011; Reyes, 2011; Perrino, 2015; Rosa,

<sup>2</sup> The Italian chain store called *Rinascente* is similar to Macy’s in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> The derogatory phrase *vu cumprà* (‘[you] want to buy’) refers to the stigmatized way Senegalese, and other African, migrants ask potential Italian customers if they wish to buy their merchandise. For Italians, this widely-circulating derogatory phrase indexes African migrants’ presupposed incapability to fully pronounce Italian vowels such as the ones contained in the second person singular conjugated form of the verb *volere* (‘to want’), that is “*vuoi*” (‘[you] want’), which, becomes “*vu*” in this phrase. Similarly, “*cumprà*” is a truncated form of the Italian infinitive verb “*comprare*” (‘to buy’), which, following these circulating ideologies in Italy, African migrants might not be able to fully pronounce. Furthermore, “*vu cumprà*” indexes the fact that African street sellers often address potential Italian customers using the informal “*tu*” (‘informal you’) instead of the polite form of address “*Lei*” (‘formal you’), which would be the norm in Italian conversations between speech participants who do not know each other. Thus, besides being stereotypically seen as incapable to learn the standard code (Standard Italian), African migrants are also portrayed as “rude” and “impolite” since, following this ideology, they don’t know how, or they don’t opt, to use the polite address form required in these social situations. Hence, the phrase “*vu cumprà*” is still widely used to indicate street sellers from African origin (Scidà, 1994; Ricchio, 1997, 1999; 2000; Carter, 1997; Kouma, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The Italian term *extracomunitario* (masculine, singular) was first used in Italy in the 1980s to indicate the legal status of migrants in Italy, as people who are not citizens of the European Union (once called *Comunità Europea*, ‘European Community’, hence *extra-comunitario*, ‘from outside the European Community’). However, more recently, it has been used derogatorily to indicate undocumented migrants in Italy. While its negative connotations are today evident, this term is still commonly used to indicate migrants coming from developing countries, especially from Africa, South Asia, Eastern Europe, and, more recently, the Middle East.

<sup>5</sup> Methodologically, while I mainly conducted in-depths interviews with many of my informants, I turned to street interviews with Senegalese, and other, undocumented migrants for privacy issues and for other concerns these migrants had about the interview process more generally (Briggs, 1986; Sixsmith et al., 2003).

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