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"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES IN ELF NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION
A case study

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Abstract – This article investigates the use of interpersonal discourse markers and comprehension checkers in elicited migrant narratives in English and Italian Lingua Franca with a view to identifying and describing their pragmatic function in the situated exchanges in which they occur. The study was conducted on a small corpus of interviews to asylum seekers living in Southern Italy. The interviews were clearly framed (and fully understood by the participants) as non-institutional encounters (Sarangi, Roberts 2008) and, as such, not subject to the constraints normally applicable to migration narratives produced within the framework of asylum seeking procedures. This resulted in a reduction in the goal-orientedness of the narrative, with a parallel increase, in some cases at least, in interpersonal focus. The analysis of the linguistic resources deployed by the interviewees indicates that they are fully cognizant of the expressive potential of interpersonal discourse markers, which they use to establish rapport with their interlocutor and to create a shared common ground where both parties are construed as being on an equal footing with respect to linguistic, discursive and relational resources.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca; discourse markers in ELF; interpersonal metadiscourse; migrant narratives; identity negotiation.

1. Asylum seekers' narratives in scholarly research

Narratives have long been recognised as an important aspect of asylum seeker and refugee experiences, not least because it is through them that asylum claims can be established (see Blommaert 2001; Maryns, Blommaert 2001; Shumam, Bohmer 2004 for early research into discursive aspects of asylum procedures; for more recent studies see Dhoest 2019; Lehner 2018; Puumala *et al.* 2018; Sorgoni 2019; Zambelli 2017). They have also been shown to be crucial to fostering an understanding of refugee experiences (Appadurai 2019; Sabaté i Dalmau 2018; Sell 2017; Shahar, Lavie-Ajayi 2018; Woolley 2014), including those aspects of such experiences which are difficult or impossible to put into words (Gorashi 2007), and of the trauma they involve (see Guido 2018 for an in-depth analysis). Storytelling has also been extensively used in refugee mental health assessment and treatment (despite some ethical misgivings; De Haene *et al.* 2010), and has been shown

to offer insights into sensemaking practices of displacement experiences (Baynham, De Fina 2005; see Catedral 2018; Slootjes *et al*. 2018 for recent investigations), as well as into migrants' strategies of identity construction (De Fina 2003; see Catedral 2018 for more recent insights; cf. Macías, de la Mata 2013; Macías-Gómez-Estern 2015 for studies combining analyses of identity construction and sensemaking). More recently, the literary value of migrant narratives has also started to be recognised, giving rise to a small but steadily growing body of literature (Guido *et al*. 2017; Mathers 2020; Ni Loingsigh 2020; Palladino, Woolley 2018).

As this (by no means exhaustive) overview suggests, the investigation of migrant narratives has focused on a plethora of aspects, some of which falling *strictu sensu* within the purview of linguistic analysis, but often having further goals. In many cases research has targeted practices and assumptions typically deployed in institutional interpretations of migrant narratives, pointing out their inadequacy and unfairness. For instance, in asylum proceedings it is common practice to use linguistic analysis to ascertain country or region of origin – a practice which does not always take into consideration all the sociolinguistic variables of language use; and asylum seekers' narratives are checked for internal cohesion not only to ascertain the groundedness of the claim, but also to identify inconsistencies which might point to fabrication. A considerable body of research, starting with Blommaert's (2001) seminal study, has denounced the shortcomings of many of these practices, exposing the ideologies of power underlying them, and seeking to redress the balance, an aim pursued, amongst others, by Guido (2004, 2005). An interesting aspect of this strand of research is that alongside studies highlighting the asylum seekers' inability to meet institutional conventions and immigration officers' cultural expectations (a persistent problem; Sorgoni 2019), there are investigations that reverse the perspective, with findings suggesting that asylum seekers have become culturally and institutionally savvy, and capable of engaging in cultural adaptation practices designed to meet institutional demands. As Barsky (2000) has shown, if non-canonical stories risk being dismissed as inconsistent or unconvincing, stories that are too canonical may also be looked at with suspicion because they are "too good to be true".

A common denominator of these studies is the nature of the exchanges examined, which is characterised by a high level of communicative complexity. The factors which contribute to this complexity are many, and include linguistic, cultural and experiential gaps which make it difficult for interactants to find a shared common ground. In the analyses of these exchanges, the focus is typically on the logical-experiential (ideational; Halliday 1994, p. 106) organization of the asylum seeker's original narrative and on the recipient's understanding of it. In this respect, it is often pointed

out that asylum applicants and immigration officers pursue diverging aims; because of this, the cooperative principle can be somewhat impaired on the part of immigration officers; moreover, the gatekeeping role they play places them in a firm position of power, which extends to their ability to impose their own interpretive authority (Briggs 1996). In these interactions, the socio-pragmatic competence of interactants – and in particular the migrants' ability to use the linguistic and discursive resources available to them to successfully convey their intended meaning to an audience with whom they have limited common ground – is also called into play. This is especially important in the case of lingua franca conversations, where no professional cultural mediation is available. As Guido (2018, Chapter 9) has shown, socio-pragmatic competence plays a crucial role in such conversations, in which the use of an apparently "neutral" code may in fact obfuscate the extent of the gaps (cultural, experiential and expressive) between the participants in the interaction. In fact, in many migrants' narratives conducted in English Lingua Franca (Catenaccio 2015) it is possible to detect an awareness of the cultural distance and of the ensuing mediation needs of the audience (real or imagined), as well as clear efforts to bridge it.

Migrants' narratives offer therefore ample scope for linguistic analysis from a variety of methodological perspectives. This article aims to contribute to this already substantial body of literature by focusing on an aspect that has so far received only limited attention, i.e. explicit strategies of interpersonal engagement in asylum seekers' narratives indexically signalled by means of verbs of cognition, more specifically *know* and *understand*.

2. Exploring metatalk in migrants' narratives: Dataset, aim, and methodological approach

2.1. Interpersonal engagement in migrants' lingua franca narratives

In much research on migrants' narratives, interpersonal meaning-making resources have been investigated in terms of their effectiveness in conveying the intended message and as indexical signs of socio-cultural awareness. By contrast, the rapport building function of interpersonal resources has rarely been investigated in its own right. This may be due to different reasons. In many cases, conveying ideational meaning (i.e. reconstructing facts) in the most effective way is the main issue at stake: in asylum seeking interviews, for instance, the point is to get over to the interlocutor the events which led to the decision of leaving one's country, hoping that they are understood as a good enough reason for being granted refugee status. In this kind of interactions, the power imbalance, and the transactional nature of the

conversation, reduce the scope for the deployment of rapport-building interactional resources, especially on the part of the asylum applicants. In so far as asylum hearings are aimed at ascertaining facts which may or may not meet the conditions for granting asylum, the deployment of interactional resources directed at establishing rapport is not envisaged; in fact, it may be felt to be counterproductive in a situation which is typically perceived – given the current political climate – as at least potentially hostile.

Narratives elicited in other, less hostile contexts are presumably not subject to the same type of both institutional and self-imposed constraints, or at least not to the same extent; in theory, they may be expected to allow for a more marked interpersonal component. It is indeed somewhat surprising that interpersonal metadiscourse geared towards rapport building has not been studied more extensively. This may be due to the fact that research conducted on narrative data often rests on an implicit assumption of "spontaneous" monologue, or at least of non-interactional, monologising discursive production, even when the data are obtained by means of interviews. This is, however, a fallacious assumption: migrants' storytelling is bound to be affected both by the perceived aim of the event (even when the purpose is to "give voice" to the asylum seeker or migrant on her/his terms), as well as by the presence of the interviewer, whose role may be more or less prominent, but never neutral, as much as interviewers may aim at invisibility (Slembrouck 2015).

This article seeks to fill a gap in the existing scholarship by investigating selected aspects of interpersonal metatalk in a small corpus of migrant narratives elicited from a group of asylum seekers living in a refugee housing structure in a village in the vicinity of Lecce, a city in the southern Italian region of Apulia. The contextual coordinates of the interviews created the conditions for partly neutralizing the power imbalance which typically affects institutional encounters. Within this context, the interactionally produced narratives of the asylum seekers interviewed offered an unprecedented opportunity to gain insights into rapport building strategies under conditions of reduced power imbalance.

2.2. Aim and rationale

The rationale for the study rests on the acknowledgment – long recognised in constructivist approaches to linguistic investigation, and in particular in conversation analysis – that meaning is essentially an effect of negotiation, which relies on principles of cooperation. This is especially evident in dialogue, where constant adjustments of meaning and perspectives occur, and where meaning is co-constructed by the participants in the communicative event both in relation to the situation itself, and with respect to the

participants' ability (and willingness) to communicate. This general feature of communication has been extensively studied with reference to institutional encounters involving migrants (De Fina 2003, p. 7), where accommodation has been shown to be especially important for successful communication (Guido 2012). More generally, strategies of meaning co-construction and negotiation appear to be particularly prominent in communicative situations where, due to gaps in common ground or unequal access to expressive resources, mutual understanding may be at risk. Lingua franca encounters are a prime example of such communicative situations (Cogo 2009; Firth 1996, 2009; Gallois *et al.* 2005; Howard *et al.* 1991).

This study takes its move from these considerations, and investigates migrant narratives in an interactional perspective with a view to identifying the linguistic strategies whereby interlocutor alignment is explicitly sought, and the relational meanings embedded in and pragmatically conveyed through selected interactional metatalk. While building on well-known principles extensively studied in ELF literature on migration discourse, it aims to add a new dimension to it by highlighting the rapport building function of metadiscursive signalling and the multiple functions it can have in conversation. In particular, the research aims to assess the metapragmatic competence displayed by asylum seekers in relation to the situational coordinates of the communicative event, arguing that conversations occurring under conditions of reduced power asymmetry can offer an opportunity for exploring hitherto little investigated aspects of migrant discourse.

2.3. Materials and method

The study relies on fieldwork carried out in 2018 by a student enrolled in the MA Languages and Cultures for International Communication and Cooperation offered by the University of Milan, Eleonora Malatesta. In April 2018, Eleonora was granted access to an institution located in the Southern Italian area of Salento (near the city of Lecce, in Apulia) which hosts asylum seekers either waiting for their cases to be heard, o awaiting appeal. The facility is run by a charity (not by the government) which provides a friendly environment for the guests and helps them with the asylum application process. Eleonora was able to interview eleven guests and transcribe their interviews, nine of which were in English, with the two remaining ones in Italian. In all cases, the code used qualified as a lingua franca, as the interactions involved either two non-native speakers of the language used (when this was English), or a non-native and a native speaker (in the case of Italian). The interviews were carried out on the premises of the charity. The event took therefore place in an institutional environment (a fact that was underlined by a series of permissions that had to be obtained from the charity before interviews could go ahead), but it was made clear from the beginning

that its purpose was purely academic. Eleonora introduced herself to the interviewees as a young researcher interested in understanding the experiences of asylum seekers and in how they saw themselves and their current position in Italy.

The narratives were elicited by means of semi-structured interviews conducted at specifically appointed times. This meant that during data collection the asylum seekers were aware that they were producing a discursive performance which would be recorded and later studied; they knew the researcher's goals, and – all of them having in lived in Italy for some time – were familiar with the cultural and experiential distance between them and their interviewer. They were also aware that the interview was unrelated to their asylum application. However, all of them had been engaged in application-oriented narratives before. Indeed, they might even have been briefed (when preparing for asylum interviews with the relevant authorities) about what to say and how to say it. It is obviously impossible to know their orientation in the interview. It is clear from the transcripts, however, that some of the interviewees were very experienced storytellers, in some cases with an obvious flair for telling an engaging story, while others appear to have been more naïve in their approach.

The dataset comprises eleven short interviews of various length, ranging from 700 to 4,000 words each, for a total of about 22,000 words. Nine of the interviews were in lingua franca English (approximately 14,000 words) and two in lingua franca Italian (8,000 words).

The participants were 11 migrants, all of them males, with variable times of permanence in Italy. None of them were recent arrivals; as mentioned above, they were all guests of a charity which provides support (including legal aid) for asylum seekers. Table 1 below provides an overview of the interviewees' age and country of origin, as well as of the language of the interview and the total number of words recorded.

Name	Age	Country	Language of interview	Number of words
Al.	32	Ghana	English	1,465
As.	26	Nigeria	English	2,189
D.	28	Nigeria	English	3,018
G.	21	Nigeria	English	838
J.	20	Nigeria	Italian	3,165
K.	24	Nigeria	English	650
Mo.	32	Senegal	Italian	4,834
Mu.	27	Gambia	English	870
P.	23	Nigeria	English	1,725
S.	26	Nigeria	English	2,737
W.	25	Nigeria	English	707

Table 1
Dataset details.

The interviewer was a female student (24 years of age); she was not involved in any way with the charity, nor had she had any contacts with the asylum seekers prior to the interviews.

The methodological approach adopted for the analysis is mainly qualitative but relies on corpus linguistics (using WordSmith Tools; Scott 2016) for the identification of recurrent lexical and phraseological units flagging overt strategies of interpersonal engagement. Following Cogo and House (2018), metadiscursive features are interpreted as indexical signs pointing to sites of engagement where co-construction of meaning may be at issue for linguistic, cultural or experiential reasons. The contention here is that besides offering insights into the way in which difficulties can be overcome on the ideational plane, the analysis of metatalk can also shed light on the speakers' positioning in respect of the nature of the difficulty identified, and on their awareness of the reasons why such difficulty may have arisen. The focus of the study is therefore on the conversational dynamics of situated meaning making, which are explored in their multiple facets by means of qualitative analysis carried out at the interface of conversation analysis and discourse analysis (Wooffit 2005).

Before moving on to the analysis, it is important to point out some limitations of the corpus, which will be further discussed in the conclusions. The first one concerns corpus size. Because the corpus is very small, one has to be wary of drawing generalising conclusions: this is not a corpus driven study, and corpus linguistics methods are used in the service of qualitative analysis. The second has to do with corpus composition. Interviews vary greatly in length, which heightens the risk of having a skewed dataset reflecting individual idiosyncrasies. This was indeed the case, with one particularly discourse marker rich interview providing most of the examples of usage. However, the lemma identified as significant did appear in all

interviews, though not with the same frequency. Despite these limitations, the uses of metatalk identified in the analysis suggest that the analysis of aspects of interpersonal engagement hitherto left in background is worth pursuing and may yield unexpected results. Because of the characteristics of the corpus, however, caution must be used when interpreting results, and this should be considered as a pilot study preliminary to more extensive investigation.

3. Sites of interpersonal engagement in migrants' narratives: The role(s) of metatalk

As highlighted in the previous sections, studies of migrants' narratives have shown that interpersonal, socio-pragmatic competences play a role whenever communication failures occur or are perceived to be likely to occur. In many cases, strategies of meaning negotiation and discursive accommodation take place without the speakers' perceived misalignment being explicitly signaled through metadiscourse: a speaker may decide to reword a concept, or to provide additional background information, even without the interlocutor verbally manifesting a lack of understanding. By the same token, there is no need for speakers to openly inquire about their interlocutor's comprehension for them to decide that a supplement of information is required. Adjustments and negotiations are the bread-and-butter of communication, and do not necessarily require signaling. When signaling does occur, however, the possible misalignment (which can be of various origins and nature) is foregrounded, as is the interlocutors' intention to overcome it. Linguistically flagging the cognitive acts of understanding can therefore indexically signal potential loci of engagement in which interpersonal resources are deployed in ways that openly invoke cooperation. This study takes its moves from this hypothesis: do migrants' narratives explicitly refer to mutual (lack of) understanding, or to (lack of) shared common knowledge in an interpersonally oriented way? If so, how salient are these references? And what role do they play in the complex negotiations taking place in lingua franca interactions in migration contexts?

As a starting point for the exploration of this topic, wordlists were extracted for the two subcorpora (in English and Italian as lingua franca respectively) and checked for occurrences of verbs of understanding and cognition. This preliminary exploration indicated that the lemma *understand* was indeed featured with remarkable frequency in the ELF subcorpus, ranking 37th in the wordlist (the fourth lexical verb to appear) with a normalized frequency of 0.46 per hundred words. In the Italian subcorpus, the lemma *capito* ('understood') ranked 13th, with a normalized frequency of 1.29. The number of occurrences found for *capito* suggests an overuse likely

to be part of an individual speaker's idiolect. This proved to be indeed the case; with reference to *understand*, on the other hand, its frequency was accompanied by an even more robust presence of *know* (rank 23, normalized frequency of 0.67 per hundred words, the first lexical verb in the wordlist), another potential candidate (and indeed a better one) for the investigation of references to shared background and meaning negotiation in the corpus. Both *understand* and *know* are verbs of cognition often used in discourse marker function for interpersonal engagement purposes. In particular, *know* has been studied extensively its multiple discourse marker functions, though most often in native speaker usage (Östman 1981; Schiffrin 1987). It is to be noted that these lemmas were not selected on the basis of their relative frequencies, but rather on the ground of their potential significance as indexical signs of sites of meaning negotiation; as a result, the analysis below makes little reliance on quantitative methods, focusing instead on qualitative aspects.

The figure below shows selected concordances of *understand* and *know* from the ELF corpus:

in desert from Nigeria to Niger. You	**know?**	There is a difference between
in Nigeria, they two hundred euro. You	**know?**	And they would be due as
and another one. Boko Haram, you	**know?**	Terrorism group called
I don't know if you	**know**	Ghana, do you know Ghana?
don't know if you know Ghana, do you	**know**	Ghana? Mhm..
was belong to one of two societies, you	**understand?**	So when he get ((…)) they
five children, two boys three girls, you	**understand?**	So he has only two boys.
So my mother was a Catholic, you	**understand?**	So my father was
was:: wueden, wueden work do you	**know**	what is wueden work?
that is why I decided to leave. You	**understand?**	So my mother was a

Figure 1
Selected concordances for *know* and *understand*.

As can be seen from this limited sample, both verbs are consistently used for interpersonal engagement. In all the examples but one, they occur in formulaic question forms (*you+verb+?*) directly addressing the interlocutor and aimed at what can be provisionally defined as comprehension checking or confirmation. In actual fact, *you know* is not always used in question form in the corpus, but this usage is common, reflecting what appears to be a widespread (and fairly predictable, in light of the findings of previous research on migrants' narratives) pragmatic intent.

In the next sections, the discursive functions of English *you know[?]* and *you understand?* will be investigated with a view to identifying with greater precisions their situated meaning(s) in interaction; the analysis will then move on to the Italian expression *capito?* ('understood'), whose role in

the migrants' narratives will be compared to that of the corresponding English expression *you understand?*.

3.1. Pragmatic functions of 'you know'

The expression '*you know*' is very frequent in English, where it functions as a poli-functional discourse marker. Early studies by Östman (1981) and Schiffrin (1987) investigated the pragmatics of *you know* in naturally occurring native speaker data, showing its multiple uses and meanings. Östman (1981, p. 5) refers to pragmatic devices such as *you know* as linguistic items that "'implicitly anchor' the utterance in which they function to the speaker's attitudes towards aspects of the ongoing interaction". Devices such as *you know* are linguistically overt, but pragmatically implicit. That is, while they convey the speaker's positioning in respect of the utterance (similarly to attitudinal adverbials), their meaning is not semantically inscribed, but rather contextually determined, and "they have to be interpreted as conveying the external-world speaker's attitudes" (Östman 1981, p. 6).

An interesting feature of *you know* is that it tends to occur in narrative parts of conversations in which the speaker "steps out of his propositional frame, and metacommunicates his attituded and feelings" (Östman 1981, p. 10). Östman identifies several functions carried out by *you know*, including attention-getting and pleading for cooperation. A further function identified by Schiffrin (1987, pp. 267-ff.) is that of marking transitions in information states which are relevant for participation framework. Moreover, *you know* has also been shown to be used as a rapport building strategy to switch from an attitude of Deference to one of Camaraderie along the politeness continuum (Östman 1981, p. 19).

Both Östman and Schiffrin insist on both the situatedness and social conventionality of the pragmatics of *you know*. Östman also points out that similar pragmatic devices occur in other (European) languages, where they appear to cover analogous functions, often relying on the same lexical resources (i.e., forms of the verb 'to know').

With reference to the present study (and to studies of lingua franca interactions in general), the complex nature of discourse markers such as *you know* may be expected to pose problems to non-native speakers. As we have seen, the use of these devices requires advanced socio-pragmatic competence, an ability to distinguish among (and use appropriately) their multiple functions, and an awareness of the language specificity of a specific device *vis-à-vis* similar expressions present in the speaker's native language whose features may be "carried over" into foreign language or lingua franca usage.

These intriguing aspects have not failed to be noticed by scholars of

ELF. Two studies (House 2009; Müller 2005) have specifically addressed the use of *you know* in ELF interactions. In her in-depth analysis, Müller (2005), who refers to the discourse marker *you know* as "one of the most versatile and notoriously difficult to describe" (Müller 2005, p. 147), distinguishes between discourse marker and non-discourse marker functions, stating that *you know* only functions as a discourse marker when it is syntactically optional (Müller 2005, p. 157). Müller's account of *you know* identifies both textual and interpersonal usage. At the textual level, "it marks the speaker's search for lexical expressions and/or the content of what s/he is going to say next" (Müller 2005, p. 188), or to suggest that "a word, phrase, or clause lacks exactness and thus is only an approximation to what the speaker had in mind" (Müller 2005, p. 188). The same function is also found to be salient by House (2009), whose data show that the expressions is mostly used to signal difficulty in finding "the right word" and to invoke collaboration. This leads House to conclude that, in her corpus at least, *you know* is eminently speaker oriented, and is used to create salient coherence relations and to help the speaker when s/he is having difficulties in planning the utterance. In addition, *you know* has been shown to be used to introduce explanations and, on occasion, quotations (Müller 2005).

As for interactional functions, *you know* is consistently used – in native as well as ELF interactions – to involve the hearer. Müller paraphrases the two most frequent interpersonal usages as "you can imagine the scene" and "you can see the implication" (Müller 2005, p. 189), adding that "it serves to express two types of appeal" – for understanding despite a deficit in the expression of meaning, and "to accept and acknowledge the speaker's opinion" (Müller 2005, p. 189).

The studies of *you know* discussed above provide detailed accounts of the functions of the expression in all its forms, i.e. both when it is pronounced with a falling intonation (*you know*…) and with a rising one (*you know?*). The intonation is, of course, a cue to the pragmatic intention encoded. In the corpus analysed, as we shall see, the greatest majority of the occurrences displays a rising intonation, indicated in the transcription by a question mark. This suggests that the range of functions used by the asylum seekers is functionally limited to a reduced selection of pragmatic meanings.

3.2. Uses of 'you know' *in the corpus*

The occurrences of *you know* in the corpus under investigation suggest that the versatility of the expression is knowingly used by some of the speakers for both interactional and textual purposes. Consider, for instance, excerpt 1 below. One of the asylum seekers is telling the interviewer why he left Nigeria. He is describing the reasons why Nigeria "is not safe", and to get his point across he mentions Boko Haram. The passage following the mention of

Boko Haram features several instances of the lemma *know*, used in both its discourse marker function and as a verb of cognition, with multiple pragmatic meanings being activated in the short space of a few seconds' talk.

Excerpt 1
281 D: I told my story
282 and that, the place is hell, is hell.
283 Even as I'm speaking to in:: eh::
284 if you check news Nigeria it's not safe for now.
285 NIGERIA IS NOT SAFE (.) FOR NOW.
286 Sometimes because they, what to call (.) Boko Haram and another one.
287 Boko Haram, **you know**?
288 Terrorism group called (.)
289 **you don't know** @@@
290 you don't check news.
291 That's what to call (..) terrorism group,
292 **you know** that's Al Qaida,
293 **you know** Al Qaida, as ISIS,
294 that's Boko Haram
295 E: Ah, ok

The first instance of *you know*, at line 287, is a comprehension checker/ appeal to shared knowledge. The speaker appeals to the interlocutor to acknowledge her familiarity with the terrorist group. Common ground is both invoked and questioned: it conveys the idea that it is reasonable to expect that the interlocutor knows Boko Haram, but also – at the same time – a suspicion that this might not be the case. Something in the interlocutor's demeanor must have confirmed the speaker's suspicion, as he comments, "you don't know" (line 289). In this line, *know* is used in its core semantic meaning of verb of cognition, with the utterance conveying both a state of affairs (the interlocutor's ignorance) and the speaker's positioning towards it ("I suspected you might not know and my suspicion is confirmed"). The two occurrences of *you know* that follow have the function, respectively, to invoke – again – common ground (line 292), this time by making reference to something that the speaker is reasonably certain will be understood, and to introduce an explanation (line 293). The passage closes with the interviewer signaling that she understands.

In excerpt 2 below, interpersonal usages of *you know* combine with the use of another interactional discourse marker, *I mean*. *You know* and *I mean* share many similarities in uses and functions. In their discussion of both, Fox Tree and Schrock (2002, p. 727) state, following Jucker and Smith (1998) and Schiffrin (1987) respectively, that "*you know*'s basic meaning is "to invite addressee inferences", and *I mean*'s "to forewarn upcoming adjustments". Fox Tree and Schrock go on to argue that "*you know* encourages listeners to focus more on their own thoughts, and that *I mean*

encourages listeners to focus more on speakers' thoughts" (2002, p. 744), often introducing explanations or elaborations of a previous statement or implicitly conveyed idea.

Excerpt 2
379 D: [Mh:: so that was why I have stopped,
380 **I mean**,
381 that has been so difficult for me in general,
382 even I:: I tought when I arrived here
383 I think it's over,
384 maybe the sufference it's over,
385 I came, **I mean**, get a good job, **you know**,
386 start my life, maybe,
387 probably:: establish myself here,
388 but, five years now I'm still looking for documents
389 and suffering,
390 even there wasn't tha::t crossing problems,
391 they have document, **you know**,
392 they check my record,
393 I have no::
394 I have no:: bad record (.) on me
395 so:: it's been tough
396 I'm suffering a lot since I came here,
397 yes, I have been suffering,
398 especially (.) for this document issue, suffered a lot,
399 those have been there will:: **you know**,
400 looking to the matter
401 and see how they can help me.

In this excerpt, the speaker repeatedly engages interpersonally with the interlocutor, shifting from initial reliance on *I mean*, which he uses to introduce his own thoughts (but with a hint that his thoughts, expectations and even reactions are somewhat "normal"), to *you know*, which invokes alignment and refers to shared common ground. Line 385 is especially significant in this respect: the speaker expected that arriving in Italy would put an end to his suffering, which he translates in the chance of beginning a new, stable life. This desire for stability is encoded in the expression "get a good job", which is bracketed between the speaker-oriented discourse marker *I mean* and the interlocutor-oriented *you know*. The two discourse markers effectively construct a bridge between the speaker's desires and objectives and the listener's invoked acceptance of their legitimacy. Their joint deployment strengthens an idea of commonality of aspirations which goes beyond the difference in background and life experiences of interlocutors who might otherwise be worlds apart.

3.3. 'You understand?' *and* 'capito?'

Another verb of cognition which appeared with remarkable frequency in the ELF corpus is *understand*, matched by *capito* – the past participle form of the Italian verb *capire* (*to understand*), in the Italian subcorpus. In both subcorpora, the two expressions are clearly used as discourse markers.

Differently from *you know*, *you mean* and the like, *you understand?* does not seem to have received much attention in the literature on English discourse markers. This may be due to the fact that its metapragmatic meaning is closely linked to its core meaning, its function being basically that of carrying out a comprehension check (though with varying illocutionary force, depending on context of occurrence: think, for instance of the use of *[do] you understand?* in the context of a lesson or lecture, and of the same expression used by a mother when scolding a child: in the first case, the comprehension check requires a cognitive response; in the second, it demands formal assent and a perlocutionary uptake).

Italian *capito?*, by contrast, has attracted considerable attention in the literature on Italian discourse markers. *Capito?* belongs to an extremely productive category of deverbal discourse markers (Bazzanella 1990; Manili 1986, 1990). Like the English *you know* and *you mean*, *capito?* is poli-functional, its pragmatic meaning depending on contextual factors. In fact, the functions of Italian *capito?* would seem to overlap, at least in part, with those of English *you know*. Indirect (and admittedly partial) confirmation of this can be found in a study of Spanish *¿me entiendes?* (which is formally and functionally close to Italian *capito?*), which is conventionally translated by the paper author with English *you know* (Chodorowska 1997, p. 356, note 1). The researcher does indicate that other translations are also possible, but her preferred choice suggests that the "politeness function" of *¿me entiendes?* (and, by implication, of Italian *capito?*) may be best conveyed, pragmatically speaking, by *you know.*

In the corpus under examination, *you understand?* is used in different contexts for different purposes. In excerpt 3 below, it works mainly as a comprehension (or rather confirmation) check and as an attention-getting device whereby the speaker monitors the interlocutor's comprehension and engagement. In turn, the addressee shows her cooperation by providing frequent backchanneling, her phatic responses serving the purpose of displaying her involvement:

Excerpt 3
02 S: Yes, of course. Eh:: in the beginning (..) I:: work (.) in my country,
03 **you understand?**
04 My work "carrossiere"(..) painting ca[r,
05 E: [Ah (.) ok ok

06 S: you know?
07 S: So there is my friend,
08 we always wo::k together with my friend,
09 so:: one day (.) his brother is staying i::n California, in America,
10 that's my friend brother,
11 he's staying in California, in America,
12 so:: (.) the brother used to send moto from America (.) to Nigeri[a,
13 E: [Mh::
14 S: some accident moto,
15 **you understand?**
16 So I used to repair the (..) car,
17 E: Ok, yeah.
18 S: **You understand me**?
19 E: Yes.
20 S: So:: (.) later (..) the brother call him,
21 that (.) the guy that we are working with ((...))
22 say there is no problem,
23 say there is a lot work in their side,
24 say there is nobody can (.) do the work there,
25 say maybe that they have interest to (..) work there,
26 I say:
27 << Yes, I'm interested>>,
28 **you understand**?

In this part of the narrative, *you understand* is used to monitor understanding of the propositional meaning. As the story progresses, however, the speaker finds himself in the position of having to convey aspects of his experience which require that the interlocutor understand the underlying motives which made him accept the offer of a job:

Excerpt 4
29 S: So:: (.) later on (.) he asked me (.)
30 which time did I would be free to come,
31 I say:
32 <<Which time do you want me to come?>>
33 so:: just tell me
34 said I need more money
35 and I no have much money,
36 **you understand?**
37 My family (.) we do no have much money,
38 **you understand?**
39 Those through good to:: (.) make it,
40 **you understand**?
41 So later (.) he asked me (..)
42 I needed money so that (..)
43 so that maybe they used to for (.) transport,
44 so there is no problem,

In this part of the narrative, the use of *you understand* does not trigger addressee backchanneling, but rather prompts further elaboration on the part of the narrator. This suggests that the speaker is aware that a supplement of information is likely to be required, *you understand?* functioning more as a plea for understanding of unspoken meanings than as a simple comprehension check.

Still different is the use of *you understand?* in excerpt 5. In this passage, the narrator is explaining the reasons why he decided to leave. The explanation is far from clear, and requires that the interlocutor have access to considerable knowledge of the socio-cultural reality of the speaker's country.

Excerpt 5
43 K: There's many work there,
44 so just that (.) the:: the matter was having
45 so my (.) parents, it was so very difficult to me.
46 To stay (..)
47 so I could no live like that,
48 I will lose my life,
49 that is why I decided to leave.
50 **You understand?**
51 So my mother was a Catholic, (..)
52 **you understand?**
53 so my father, just the he's not a christians,
54 I don't even know how I will say it
55 so he was belong to one of two societies,
56 **you understand?**
57 so when he get ((...)) they was trying to put me inside the:: (.) the society,
58 I said: <<No>> ((...))
59 because my father have a:: five childre,
60 E: [Ah
61 K: [five children, two boys three girls,
62 **you understand?**
63 So he has only two boys.
64 so that what I don't even know ((...))
65 ((...))
66 still no (.) we just left (.) the:: place
67 so that is just the thing that make me to came to Italy,

The occurrences of *you understand?* featured in the excerpt may at first sight appear to function as comprehension checks, and in part they do. However, they also serve other purposes of an interpersonal nature. The first instance of *you understand* (line 50), for instance, asks for confirmation not so much of the understanding of the propositional content conveyed, as of the underlying motives whereby the speaker feared for his life. In this, it is similar to the use found in excerpt 4. However, the speaker is not equally successful in providing further explanations. Despite attempting to elaborate on his

message, adding more details, he fails to successfully convey his intended meaning, the cultural and experiential gaps proving too large to be bridged. The speaker seems to be aware of this; in the following lines, he has recourse to *you understand?* three more times, each with increasing frustration at the difficulty of conveying the message. This frustration is voiced twice, at lines 54 (*I don't even know how I will say it*) and 64 (*so that what I don't even know)*¸ which are examples of discourse reflexivity (Mauranen 2010) testifying to the speaker's awareness of the inadequacy of his linguistic and discursive resources. The addressee's only attempt at backchanneling occurs at a point (line 60) when the propositional meaning of the utterance (the number of brothers and sisters) is at stake, but her focus on this aspect seems to suggest that the more complex point implied escapes her, to the extent that the speaker concludes his turn by giving up trying to explain. After a pondering pause, he cuts his story short (line 66 and 67) saying that "*we just left (.) the:: place so that is just the thing that make me to came to Italy"*, where *just* (repeated twice within a short number of words) conveys a sense of inevitability which suggests that no further explanation is necessary, or indeed possible.

In the Italian subcorpus, attention monitoring and comprehension checking are entrusted to the discourse marker *capito?*, which works much in the same way as *you understand?* in excerpts 4 and 5 above. This can be seen in excerpt 6 below, where the speaker is telling how he travelled from his village to Tripoli, from where he would later sail to Italy. In the first part of the story, *capito?* is used primarily to monitor that the receiver is following the steps of the story:

332 M: eh:: noi abbiamo separati, **capito**?
We became separated, you understand?
333 Quando noi abbiamo separati
When we became separated
334 io ho fatto una settimana per (.) per (.)
I spent a week to
335 non è arrivato a Bahe, ma tra Bahe è arrivato uno piccolo paese,
I did not arrive in Bahe, but before Bahe I arrived in a small village
336 quello che sono (.) rimangono, **capito?**
Those who are there stay there, you understand?
337 E quindi altre persone sono andato,
And so other people went
338 quando noi aveva di qua,
when there was no work here
339 ho lavorato anche di là (.)
I also worked there
340 ho lavorato:: ho lavorato così aveva i soldi
I worked so I would have money.
341 E purtroppo non puoi tornare dietro, **capito**?

And unfortunately you cannot go back, you understand?
342 Devo prendere la mia responsabilità di venire a:: (.) Tripoli,
I had to take my chance and go to Tripoli
343 ho pagata la macchina per venire a Tripoli, **capito**?
I paid for a car to take me to Tripoli, you understand?
344 Quando sono arrivo a Tripoli,
When I arrived in Tripoli
345 noi abbiamo arrivato Tripoli la notte, **capito**?
We arrived in Tripoli in the middle of the night, you understand?
346 E: In macchina?
By car?
347 M: Si,con la macchina (.) Quando noi abbiamo Tripoli,
yes, with the car. When we arrived in Tripoli
348 ma tra Murzu, Tripoli abbiamo fatto quattro giorno
but betweem Murzu, Tripoli we had four days
349 però (.) la strada, noi non ha prendo la strada direttamente,
but we did not take a direct route
350 per esempio quando, quando come si per esempio, Tripoli sta a Bari,
for instance, as if, for instance, Tripoli is like Bari
351 qualcuno va (.) ti prende qua, da qua a Brindisi.
somebody goes, takes you from here to Brindisi
352 Quando lui arriva a Brindisi,
When he arrives in Bridisi
353 lui rimangono di là
he stays there
354 e lui deve avere un contact da Brindisi a:: a chi:: come si chiami, altro paese.
and he has a contact from Brindisi to the other city
355 Si fanno così, **capito**?
It works like that, you understand?
356 Si si, piano piano, ogni paese c'è i persone che ti portano l'altro paese.
Little by little, in every village there is someone who takes you to the next
357 E: Ok
358 M: **Capito**? E quando noi aveva arrivato a Tripoli la notte,
You understand? And after we arrived in Tripoli at night
359 noi abbiamo arrivato Araz che è una grande:: una grande partita che tanti africano,
we arrived in Araz which is a big a big departure place where there are many Africans
360 quando noi arrivato di là (.) eh:: la macchina,
when we arrived there, the car
361 la proprietà di macchina ha detto:
the car owner said
362 "scendi dalla macchina"
"get out of the car"

The occurrences of *capito?* are fairly evenly spaced out throughout the story, but become more frequent when the speaker comes to a turning point in his narrative (lines 341-345, where he mentions the impossibility to go back and describes the momentous decision to go ahead with his journey). Recourse to

capito? seems thus to intensify as a result of the speakers' desire to have his motives acknowledged. In the lines that follow this turning point, as the speaker reverts to the narration of the events, interpersonal engagement devices are used more sparsely, and with a clearer intention of checking comprehension of the line of events. In this case as well, the interlocutor understands the pragmatic intention of the speakers and responds with appropriate backchanneling. It is to be noted that the speaker's awareness of possible comprehension failures is testified not only by his constant recourse to comprehension checks, but also by his choice to explain the instalment structure of his journey using examples that refer to the addressee's experiential background (the cities of Bari and Brindisi being both located in the Apulia region where the interview took place). The iterated use of interpersonal discourse markers and the display of an understanding of the need to adjust his narrative to make it comprehensible to the addressee confirm the speaker's awareness of the socio-pragmatic competences required to tell a complicated story, as well as his ability to deploy them successfully.

4. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this study, albeit subject to the limitations described at the end of Section 2, has shown that interpersonal metadiscourse plays an important role in migrant narratives. While these narratives have long been shown to display an awareness of the need to find ways to mediate one's experience so that it can be understood by an audience with a different sociocultural and experiential background, interpersonal discourse markers explicitly engaging the interlocutor in the storytelling have received limited attention.

The study has shown that some of the asylum speakers interviewed were able to convey a variety of interpersonal meanings through the use of discourse markers such as *you know[?]* and *you understand?*, the latter matched by Italian *capito?* in one of the interviews conducted in Italian.

These discourse markers are used for the relatively straightforward functions of comprehension checking/monitoring and attention getting (*you understand?*), but also for more sophisticated purposes, including pleading for understanding (again cued by *you understand?*), often based on the invocation of a shared common ground (*you know?)*. On those occasions when the asylum seekers realize that the sociocultural and experiential gap is too wide, the invocation of alignment may be followed by explanations or elaborations aimed at reducing the sociocultural and experiential distance. The speakers whose stories have been investigated in this article, however,

are not always successful in their efforts. When communication failures occur, interpersonal discourse markers can take on the additional meaning of indirectly conveying frustration at the inability to get the message across. In these cases, the speakers engage in limited but significant episodes of discourse reflexivity (i.e., they explicitly declare that they are unable to explain). However, their "loss for words" does not appear to refer to propositional meaning, but rather to more implicit and hard-to-get-to areas of experience. Thus, the use of interpersonal discourse markers is not confined to checking understanding of the facts represented, but extends to forms of rapport-building, "interactional monitoring" typical of ELF (Cogo 2009; House 2009; Lichtkoppler 2007; Mauranen 2012; Pitzl 2005), whose relevance in the context of migrant narrative research is therefore confirmed.

Also confirmed is the presence in these narratives of "negotiation strategies" (Cogo, Dewey 2012, p. 120) referred not simply to "local", situated meaning but more generally to experiential "otherness". Monitoring is used to negotiate meaning and solve problems of understanding, until a shared understanding of the migrants' experience is achieved (Cogo, House 2018). This understanding is not limited to its factual dimension but extends to assumptions, desires and expectations.

Communication effectiveness and interpersonal engagement remain a priority in migrant narratives in lingua franca. But these are not the only goals pursued in interaction. The construction and display of identity is another key objective, and while migrants' narratives convey a story of 'otherness', they also contribute to constructing a sense of belonging. The expert use of discourse markers plays a role in this construction. The ability to use poli-functional expressions such as the one discussed indicates that the speaker possesses a level of linguistic proficiency which covers also the most "native-like" aspects of social interaction. Although "native-like" proficiency is a concept hardly applicable to ELF, confident usage of socio-pragmatic norms is generally interpreted as a sign of "belonging" to a recognizable social group. Extensive use of discourse markers such as *you know*, *you understand?* and *capito?* might therefore signal an implicit claim to language competence and, therefore, membership of the same social group to which the interlocutor belongs. With reference to Italian, Giuliano and Russo (2014) have shown that migrants use interpersonal discourse (including *capito?*) to foreground their integration in Italian society. A similar aim may also be pursued by asylum seekers in their storytelling, though the "belonging" may be not so much to a speech community as to an international, albeit deterritorialized (Jaquemet 2000; Rampton 1998), community of proficient speakers whose linguistic skills are part of a social capital that can be spent to improve one's condition.

Finally, one last word must be said about the contextual coordinates

and participation framework of the interviews through which the data were collected. I mentioned at the outset that the lack of institutional goal-orientation of the interviews, and the identity and social position of the interviewer, could be expected to affect the discursive framing of the narratives, relaxing the institutional constraints usually applied to asylum seekers' narratives. The analysis suggests that this was the case. Of the multiple functions of the discourse markers investigated, that of creating a form of what Östman (1981, p. 19) calls "Camaraderie" (in contrast to the Deference likely to dominate institutional encounters) was probably among the most interesting. The findings suggest that asylum seekers may well possess a broader range of expressive resources than those they rely on when telling their stories in institutional settings. The fact that such settings only allow a limited range of expressive options is not a problem in itself – in fact, constraints on allowable contributions apply to participants in all types of communication encounters. The problem is that those stories too often become the only stories available, and that they are routinely interpreted via cultural schemata which are alien to the speakers themselves.

In light of this, Guido's call for a radical shift in the very conceptualisation of communication practices in migrant contexts becomes even more urgent. Her reformulation of Grice's cooperative maxims for the purpose of granting mutual accessibility in migration encounters assume that

> all the participants in the ELF mediated communicative interactions in migration contexts should try to achieve a cooperative accommodation of their different discourse parameters by overtly disclosing their own 'ideational' (world-schematic) and 'interpersonal' (pragmatic) identities […]. This is expected to foster the establishment and maintenance of social relationships despite the participants' different native linguacultural background. (Guido 2018, p. 204)

Such overt disclosure is only possible if the pretextual conditions (Maryns, Blommaert 2001) are created that may enable a fairer access to and deployment of discursive resources – an eminently political goal which it is also the task of the researcher to contribute to achieving.

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