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Lingua Franca (Italian Pidgin)

1. The language and its speakers

The label "Lingua Franca" (hence LF) is commonly employed to denote any language used as a common or commercial tongue among people of diverse linguistic backgrounds. The glottonym, however, refers more specifically to an Italian pidgin documented in the coastal cities of the Maghreb from the 16th to the early 20th centuries.

During the Middle Ages, the ethnic term "Frank", meaning "Western European", was widely used in the Eastern Mediterranean regions among Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, and ultimately among the Franks. Given the scanty notions of Western European society circulating in the Islamic world, the term *lisān al-faraj* (or *lisān al-ifranj*) "language of the Frank(s)" in Arabic sources may refer to French, Latin, or any other Western European language, and does not imply the existence of a special language, common to all Franks.

The linguistic situation of the Levant was characterised, from the late 11th century on, by multilingualism, the co-existence of several different languages, whose distribution depended on various elements: ethno-religious loyalties, social functions, cultural prestige, political sovereignty, etc. Due to the development of sea trade and to the creation of the Crusader States (1099–1291), French and some Italian dialects (Venetian, Genoese, Tuscan) acquired the *status* of international vehicular languages, in competition with Arabic and Greek.

French was used in the Latin East (the Crusader States and the Kingdom of Cyprus [1192–1489]) for all types of administrative and literary texts, and it was usually spoken by the feudal aristocracy and probably by most Western Europeans who chose to settle overseas. It was also employed as an international diplomatic language in this area.

Merchants and sailors from Italy, Provence and Catalonia would spend weeks, months, or even years in the coastal cities under Latin, Byzantine, or Mamluk control, dwelling in special, semi-autonomous quarters, where various Western European languages, and particularly Italian dialects, could be heard. The indigenous population spoke mainly Arabic, Turkish, and/or Greek, with Greek, Syriac, Hebrew, and Arabic being used as worship languages, depending on the religious affiliation of the speaker. Greek and Arabic were also commonly used as written and spoken languages in the government of the Byzantine Empire and in most of the political entities of the Islamic world.

Contemporary sources suggest that there were many bilingual individuals working in the low ranks of the administration, or as interpreters in harbors, customs offices, and markets. In the Crusader States they

often belonged to the Oriental Christian community. However, bilingualism was not common on either side of the frontier.

Multilingual groups, like ships' crews, merchants' caravans, or large armies, usually favor the development of pidgins or other forms of contact languages. Such languages probably existed in the medieval Near East, but they did not crystallize in any stable linguistic variety and did not leave any record of their existence. Hence, it seems unlikely that the development of the 16th century LF of the Maghreb is connected with the linguistic conditions of the Crusader States, as frequently claimed.

Indeed, many words of Greek, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish origin entered medieval Western European languages through Italian dialects. But this lexical *corpus*, particularly relevant in the areas of commerce and navigation, does not itself constitute a language, nor does it provide evidence of the existence of a Mediterranean trade language. Instead, it points to the spread of Italian dialects, often in reduced and simplified forms, throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, a spread supported by the military and commercial expansion of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, Venetian, Genoese, and Tuscan replaced French as vehicular languages of the Latins living, sailing, or trading in the Near East. But French did not abruptly disappear. On the island of Cyprus, for example, it co-existed for almost two centuries with Venetian (or a Northern Italian variety) even in the same sociolinguistic domains. We find evidence of this in documents of the 15th century Royal Chancery which exhibit an inextricable intermingling of the two languages; however, it is difficult to say whether these texts reflect an actual situation of language mixing or a written bureaucratic convention, and they can hardly be considered instances of LF.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire had significant consequences on the linguistic situation of the Near East. Turkish gained wider diffusion, mainly in the imperial administration and in the army, and Spanish, brought to the East by the Sephardic exiles from 1492 onward, competed with Italian as a vehicular language among merchants of various origins. At the same time, the military conquests of the Ottomans (1453 Constantinople, 1517 Cairo, 1526 Budapest, 1571 Cyprus, 1669 Crete) created an extremely mixed but centralized state, where different ethno-religious and national communities lived side by side, each preserving its language and traditions, and enjoying a certain degree of autonomy in its internal organization.

From the end of the 16th century, Western European merchants, supported by their governments, began the commercial penetration of the Ottoman territories. For various purposes, they resorted to the help of middlemen, individuals who could speak different languages and had direct or indirect access to officers of the central government. Such individuals were not, usually, subjects of the Empire, but of a Western European state, and were referred to as "Levantine". It seems that the European language most commonly employed by Levantines was Italian. Italian was also spoken by the Fanariotes, members of the Greek families residing in the Fanar quarter of Istanbul, who held the office of *tercüman* (interpreter) of the Sublime Porte and were often educated in Italian universities.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to find several official Ottoman documents, from the 16th to the 19th centuries, written or translated into Italian. Some examples include the *berat* (diploma) granted to Queen Elizabeth I on behalf of the English merchants (1583), the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca with the Russians (1774), and the *firman* (license) conceded to Lord Elgin for the acquisition of the Parthenon marbles (1801).

Italian was also used as a vehicular language in the Western regions of the Ottoman empire, the frontier provinces of Tripoli, Tunisia, and Algeria, ruled by semi-independent *beyler* (governors). In the 16th cen-

tury, when these provinces entered in the Ottoman orbit, they had already experienced close contacts with Western European soldiers, merchants, and sailors, particularly from Pisa, Genoa, Marseilles, Barcelona, and the Balearic Islands. Moreover, the proximity to Sicily and Malta (where Italian was the official language of the Knights) made the shores of the Maghreb more permeable to Italian influence, while Spanish military expeditions brought about the creation of several *presidios* from Morocco to Algeria. To this we must add the fact that in the 16th century some of the local governors and ship captains were renegades of European (often Italian) origin, like the Sardinian Hasan Agha, *pasha* of Algiers (1535-1543), and the Corsican Osta Murat, *bey* of Tunis (1637-1640). More generally, renegades and slaves from Europe became an important component of the population of the coastal cities that pirates used as harbors; the economy of the Barbary Coast relied mainly on the trade and ransom of slaves. A further contribution to the diffusion of Italian, from the 17th century on might be due to the close relations between the Jewish communities of Tunis, Tripoli, and Algiers, and that of Leghorn, one of the major centers of the Western diaspora. The Jews of Leghorn, called "Gorni", spoke a Tuscan dialect (bagito) replete with Spanish words due to the massive Sephardic immigration to the city. Their commercial activities often involved Northern Africa, where many ultimately chose to settle. These historical conditions explain the spread of Italian along the coasts of the Maghreb.

In the coastal areas of the Maghreb, as in Istanbul, Italian was also used as a diplomatic language, both in international treaties and in official correspondence. It was commonly employed in the French and English consulates, when dealing with the commercial or personal affairs (contracts, acts of sale, procurations, etc.) of two or more parties not sharing the same language. Recent research in the archives of Marseilles and Nantes, and in the Public Record Office of London, has recovered hundreds of documents from Tunis and Tripoli (late 16th to 18th centuries), mostly written in a bureaucratic, substandard variety of Italian, with much evidence of dialectal elements and foreign influences.

The use of Italian in written communication was probably paralleled by its use in oral communication, in the same and possibly also in other linguistic domains. Obviously, knowledge of Italian was far from uniform and depended largely on social, professional, and cultural factors. This wide range of fluency in Italian (in both its written and spoken forms) can be represented as a complex linguistic *continuum*, whose most elementary levels provided the basic input to the creation of LF.

It is, in fact, in this social framework that an Italian pidgin, called by contemporaries "Lingua Franca", developed and took an identifiable shape. It was used at all levels, from communications between European prisoners and their kidnappers and owners, mostly of Turkish and Arabic tongue, to its occasional use by local authorities in their contacts with European diplomats and travellers.

The earliest and most complete description of LF is to be found in Diego de Haedo's *Topographia e historia general de Argel* (1612). The author, who never travelled overseas himself, based his work on the testimony of ransomed slaves, and described the main features of LF. LF, he reports, was used by Moors and Turks to communicate with Christian prisoners, who necessarily adopted this form of speech, and it co-existed in the city of Algiers with Turkish and Arabic, which were also spoken by Christian prisoners and renegades, in other social contexts. LF was a mixture of various "Christian" languages, especially Italian and Spanish, and its phonology and morphology were altered due to interference with its speakers' mother tongues (Turkish and Arabic). The result resembled *bozal* Spanish, i.e. the Spanish spoken by black slaves brought to the Iberian Peninsula. In his book, Haedo offered several samples of LF, which constitute one of the richest documentations of this pidgin. Subsequent to Haedo's account, many other examples of words

and sentences in LF were reported by French, English, German, Spanish, and Italian travellers and diplomats, including Pierre Dan (1637), Laurent d'Arvioux (1665), Johann von Reh binder (1798-1800), Felice Caronni (1805), Elizabeth Broughton (1806-1812), and Filippo Pananti (1817).

Even if records of LF are not scanty, they tend to offer a limited set of situations and expressions. Hence, one is left with the impression that they might not portray a true, stabilized pidgin, but that they merely repeat a stereotyped form of broken Italian, renowned at that time for its literary representation (Cervantes, Molière, Goldoni, etc.). Moreover, even if we are frequently told that LF, like all pidgins, was bi-lateral, i.e., it was used by both sides, we almost never find it in the mouths of Europeans.

After Diego de Haedo's *Topographia*, the most relevant contribution to our knowledge of LF is the anonymous *Dictionnaire de la langue franque ou petit mauresque*, published in Marseilles in 1830. In addition to the dictionary, the booklet contains a short grammar, eight samples of dialogues, and a glossary of Algerian Arabic terms. The preface explains that the work was intended for use by French soldiers taking part in the conquest of Algeria. We are also told that LF was commonly spoken by the local inhabitants of the cities of the Barbary Coast in their dealings with Europeans, and that it was possible to distinguish between an Algerian and a Tunisian variety, the former more influenced by Spanish, the latter by Italian. The dictionary consisted of approximately 1000 French entries with their LF correspondents, but very often different French entries were matched with the same LF word. The lexical items are mostly of Italian and, less frequently, Spanish and French origin. The proportion of Arabic and Turkish words is considerably low, and they are often filtered through the Romance languages, where they entered as loanwords in the Middle Ages. French graphic system is used, however not without inconsistencies.

In the course of the 19th century, the French colonial expansion modified the sociolinguistic conditions of the Maghreb and indirectly provoked the decline of LF. In this later period, the pidgin used was labelled "sabir" in French sources (probably from the parody of the *mufti* in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* [1670]), and it incorporated many French words. Its functions were gradually reduced, and it yielded ground to various approximations of French, the new prestige language. In Algiers and Tunis, at the beginning of the 20th century, sabir was a more or less pidginized form of French, used mainly for literary purposes.

2. Grammatical structure and vocabulary

Like traditional pidgins, LF arose in a contact situation involving different linguistic groups, who needed to communicate regularly, but for limited purposes. However, in most respects, LF is an atypical pidgin. The vocabulary of LF is drawn primarily from Italian, which functions as the lexifier language, but its grammar is not a crosslanguage compromise of the grammars of the languages in contact, rather, it is based on a considerably reduced and simplified Italian (or Romance) grammar.

What is apparently missing in LF is linguistic input from the many languages its speakers represent. There is surprisingly little Turkish and Arabic, even though Turks and Arabs are usually represented as the primary LF speakers. However, the peculiar conditions of the development of LF and the natural bias of our sources might account for this anomaly. Unlike traditional pidgins, in the case of LF there was a language widely, though not uniformly, known among the groups in contact: Italian. This explains why, contrary to the

most common pattern, the lexifier language was the language of the slaves and not that of the masters, and even individuals at the highest ranks of power spoke LF with European partners. Moreover, the cultural homogeneity of our sources – all European – might account for the misrepresentation of the real situation, which undoubtedly included some forms of negotiation and mutual accommodation of the groups in contact. Finally, LF was probably only one of the various pidgins or pidginized varieties circulating in the coastal cities of the Maghreb. There were European prisoners, renegades, travellers, and diplomats who learnt to speak Turkish and Arabic more or less successfully, and surely not all communication took place in LF. Apparently, no Arabic or Turkish pidgin stabilized in the area, or, if it did, no documents recording it have survived.

Despite linguistic interference with witnesses' native languages and graphical systems, it is possible to identify some general characteristics of LF phonology documented in most texts: fluctuation between /e/ – /i/, /o/ – /u/, /a/ – /e/ in stressed (*valire, piachir, fortizza, journo, favour, limoun*) and unstressed position (*pirò, rigalo, piscaderia, intrar, miscolar, dobitar, mountar, sarar, funtesia*), including word final position (*Levanti, grandi, genti, locou, tempou*), where often -a ending is extended to nouns originally ending in -e or -o (*fedà, febra, judicia, journa, pomma*). Less frequently we find lack of diphthongs (*bono, logo, fora*), loss of vowel in word initial position (*mainar, rabiar, sparmniar, spetar*), addition of final vowels (*papasso, mouchera*), replacement of /p/ with /b/ (*birché, esbagniol, esbinac, nabolitan*), degemination of double consonants (*schiroco, ano, dona, fredo, rico*).

Morphology is the area documented with the most consistency in our sources. Its main features include reduction of the verbal system to only two uninflected forms: past participle for past tense (*mi mirato ieri*), and infinitive for present, future, and imperative (*mi parlar patron; aca morir; pillar e meter en aquel forado!*), occasionally integrated with conjugated forms of the imperative (*guarda per ti!*) and the periphrastic future (*bisogno mi andar*). Also attested is use of the verbs (*e)star* "to be" (*gran vellaco estar, non star usansa*), and *tener* "to have" (*ti tener fantasia, tener bona cabesa*), propensity to drop the copula (*Dio grande, mundo cosi cosi; ancor no tempo de parlar questa cosa*), conversion of -er verb endings to -ir (*piangir, piachir, metir, piovir, poudir, prendir, ridir, rispondir, soridir*). We regularly find the use of one set of pronouns (stressed and unstressed) for direct and indirect objects (*mi estar barbero bono, ti estar teatino, rigalo a mi, far mangiaria con ti*), the use of the preposition *per* to introduce several complements, including direct object (*andar mirar per ellou*) and indirect object (*Dios mandado per mi*). Nouns and adjectives may have -s or -i plural endings (*papasos, cornutos, fortes, schiavi, cani, Francesi*), or they may lack plural endings altogether (*mucho aspero, il Francis, l'Algerino*), and there is often no agreement between nouns and adjectives (*malo gente*). Articles may be lacking (*porque tener aqui tortuga?, estar grande pecado, mundo cosi cosi, buba andar; casa de rei*), but they do appear in several texts, most regularly in the *Dictionnaire* (*mugeros de los moros, tutti li consoli, il Bacha, la mangiaria*).

Many of these features fit with modern data on spontaneous acquisition of Italian L2 at very elementary levels. However, this does not hold true with the most typical feature of LF: its extensive use of the infinitive. Speakers of Italian L2 tend to over-generalize the 3rd pers. sg. (*io canta*) and not the infinitive (*io cantare*), the latter being common in Italian "foreigner talk". The use of the infinitive is a common and ancient stereotype of "broken Italian": it is documented for the first time in a 14th century poem (*Contrasto della zerbiana*), a humorist dialogue between a woman from Jarba (in Tunisia) and a "Frankish" man, who seduced her daughter. Later, it reappears as a characteristic element of the Spanish *lengua de moros* and *guineo*, the Portuguese *fala de preto*, the Tuscan *canti dei lanzzi*, and the Venetian *grehesco* and *dalmatino*.

This literary convention was popularized in 16th, 17th and 18th centuries theater, and is still alive in the Romance speaking world. The use of the infinitive in these varieties is probably connected with its use in LF, either as input from European "foreigner talk", or as influence on the witnesses' perception and description of the real pidgin.

The syntax of LF shares several features with that of informal spoken registers of Italian and other Romance languages: use of short and often elliptical sentences, emphatic repetitions, preference for parataxis, use of a multifunctional *che* as sentence connector: *si cane dexir dole cabeça, tener febre no poder trabajar, ni saber como curar, a Fe de Dio abusar visuo, trabajar, no parlar que estar malato; estar muy gra(n)de pecado, y grande pecado: responder que dezirme, que cerrar boca, chito, chito, non parlar; Dio grande no pigllar fantasia, Mundo cosi cosi; St. Jean venir, buba andar; Cristiane star furbi, Barodi star morto, i re di Sardinia mandar ti Tripoli, birché tener bona cabeza i procura no pagar rigal.*

Another element of LF connected with its purely oral condition is lexical dilution: some LF words (particularly verbs) have lost their semantic specification and are used with high frequency and with a wide range of meanings. That is why in the *Dictionnaire*, as previously noted, the same LF lexical item is matched with several French words, for example *ablar* corresponds to *avouer, dire, parler, rapporter; mirar* to *apercevoir, découvrir, remarquer, viser, voir; forar* to *arracher, déranger, écarter, emporter, enlever, se lever, ôter, pever, retrancher, soustraire, tirer, trouer*. Moreover, *remercier* = *ablar gratzia, répéter* = *ablar encora, taire* = *non ablar, avouer* = *ablar justo*; or *nuire* = *far male, éclairer* = *far loume, réconcilier* = *far amigo, quereller* = *far baroufa, assiéger* = *far il sedio, dépêcher* = *far presto; brave* = *tenir coragio; sinueux* = *tenir dgiro; timide* = *tenir vergonia*.

The lexicon of LF is mainly of Italian origin (including dialects); Spanish and, later, French contributions are also important, especially in the Spanish and French sources. The Venetian dialect shares with French and Spanish some important phonological features (e.g. degemination of double consonants, voicing of intervocalic plosives, drop of vowels in word final position after /r/, /n/, /l/), so that it is sometimes difficult to attribute the origin of words to one language or the other. There are some Italian-Spanish lexical doublets (*testa* – *cabeza*, *dona* – *muchera*, *parola* – *palabra*, *lavorar* – *trabajar*), and a few words of Romance origin have acquired in LF new meanings or nuances (*fantasia* "pride, disdain, whim", *cunchar* "do, arrange, settle", *forar* "to go away, to pick up, to make a hole").

The Arabic and Turkish lexical component includes words like *rays* "commander of a pirate ship", *mekin* "poor, miserable", *niçarane* "Christian", *effendi* "master, sir", *yatagan* "a kind of sword", *yoldach* "Turkish soldier". There are only a few words of Greek origin (*papas* "priest", *aspro* "kind of coin").

On the whole, words relating to commerce and navigation constitute a minor part of LF lexicon. LF has contributed to the diffusion of Romance loanwords in the Arabic dialects of the Maghreb.

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