Chapter 7
Language, Education and European Unification: Perceptions and Reality of Global English in Italy

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On 20 January 2015, the Italian television channel LA7 hosted a debate in which not only the topics discussed but also the guests invited were of an unusually supranational character. It featured, most notably, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French *Front National*, confronting the former Prime Minister of Italy, Massimo D'Alema. Especially in the 1990s, D'Alema was a key figure in engineering the dismantlement of his party, the PCI, and in building a post-communist left in Italy. At approximately 18' of the footage,[1] D'Alema praised the EU for achieving unprecedented peaks in the history of human civilization. He supported his argument with a reference to his own satisfaction in being able to cross the French-German border without having to show a passport, whereas for centuries millions of young men died fighting on that border. Le Pen (who spoke in French, but was simultaneously translated into Italian, with only a few seconds interspersed across the debate when the audience at home could exceptionally hear her voice) conceded that D'Alema's noble sermon (*un prêche*, as she actually called it) certainly struck a chord in some European corners. In a swift feat of rhetorical ability, she conjured up the image of successful multilingual elites who spend weekends abroad, have business, partners, friends, or simply holiday apartments in different European countries and therefore regularly travel across the Rhine. Le Pen, however, claimed to be much more interested in representing the needs and demands of those who do not have, and cannot afford, any of the above.

In its typical TV-style simplicity (which probably gave it a better chance to influence the ordinary public), this debate was a good example of what happens when the left uncritically embraces abstract principles of tolerance and humanism – especially if these principles include Enlightenment values of universal peace and progress, as well as liberal notions of formal equality (or equal opportunities) for

[1] Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6m_dUzacS0.

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competing individuals. Whatever its faults, Marxist materialism had the unquestionable advantage of calling for an unswerving attention to the conditions of life and subsistence of the lower social classes. Neglect of these material conditions, with regard to the lower strata of today's European population, has caused the left to leave huge portions of social and political territory unguarded. It is in this territory that populist conservatives and nationalists such as Le Pen can manoeuvre and have recently attracted mass-scale popular support.

Antonio Gramsci (the founder of D'Alema's defunct party) was acutely aware of this risk. Criticism of abstract notions of universal progress and cosmopolitan civilization was a recurrent theme in his thinking. Rapone (2011) shows that, in Gramsci's early writings, this criticism focused especially on democracy – not on democracy as a set of rights, rules and procedures defining legitimate power but as a political programme of compromise between socialists and liberals, despite the latter's faith in capitalist individualism. The young Gramsci pointed out that the moral principles of the democratic tradition, such as tolerance and cooperation, can easily overshadow the real interests that often make those principles unfeasible. Moreover, their prevalent concern with political ideologies, and their reluctance to see the material factors that create (or erode) popular support for certain ideologies, can paradoxically turn democrats into an utterly intolerant faction. They can become unable to accept even the existence of groups that do not recognize basic, supposedly universal principles. Used to representing their contenders as misinformed, irrational obscurants, democratic movements have often advocated coercive methods in the repression of both internal dissent and international conflicts (as in the extreme case of humanitarian wars).[2]

These critical views also guided Gramsci's rejection of universal languages such as Esperanto (another topic that recurs from his early articles to his prison notes, as shown in Carlucci 2013). His criticism, however, was not restricted to this artificial language, which he saw as a typical product of utopian cosmopolitanism. He warned against any form of linguistic unification which is not 'the historical expression of adequate and necessary conditions': in the absence of these conditions, an international language (English, French or any other candidate for this role) can become 'an element of social stratification and of the fossilization of certain strata' (Q5, §23; PN2, p. 285). And this in spite of the fact that Gramsci strongly encouraged the workers to devote as many resources as possible to the learning of various foreign languages, 'in order to put themselves in contact with other cultural lives' (Q11, §12; SPN, p. 325), and also in spite of the fact that, as we shall see, he did not oppose the prospect of international linguistic unification.

This chapter applies Gramsci's views to the current debates on the expansion of English as a global language (henceforth EGL) and on the significance of this expansion for the future of the EU. Its aim is to illustrate the shortcomings of abstract universalism with reference to a specific domain – that of language policy – and to a chronologically and geographically circumstantiated case study, namely,

[2] Gramsci especially had in mind the situation in Italy and France in the run-up to the First World War, as well as during the war (see Rapone 2011, Chaps. 4 and 5).

Italy in the years immediately preceding the 2008 financial crisis, with its foundation-shaking repercussions on the EU. In pursuing this aim, I do not simply wish to show the enduring relevance of Gramsci's views on language.[3] I will specifically argue that, far from alleviating social inequalities, the spread of English in Italy has perpetuated inequalities due to family background and regional origin.

The chapter has a twofold structure. The section entitled 'Why a Gramscian approach?' summarizes those notions in Gramsci's thought which stand out as particularly promising sources of inspiration for approaching EGL, and the following section ('Why pre-2008 Italy?') clarifies the relevance of the Italian case. The second part of the chapter brings together (Sect. 7.3) and discusses (Sect. 7.4) the available data. In the fourth section, I also identify two possible ways of addressing the problems encountered in Italy, before summing up my arguments in the 'Conclusions'.

7.1 Why a Gramscian Approach?

Of all the political developments that might shock Gramsci, if he returned to life today, the debate on EGL would probably not cause any particular surprise. True, from his early twentieth-century Italian point of view, issues concerning dialects and national linguistic unification seemed more pressing than questions of international linguistic unification. Some of his writings (especially Notebook 29) deal primarily with the fact that Italian was yet to become a truly national language, regularly used by the majority of the country's population both orally and in writing. Nonetheless, international linguistic unification had received significant attention within the Marxist tradition. In particular, Lenin (1968) wrote at length about linguistic justice and insisted on the advantages of multilingualism. By arguing that '[t]iny Switzerland has not lost anything, but has gained from having not *one single* official language, but three: German, French and Italian' (p. 355), Lenin foresaw some of the claims that those dreading the advent of an English-only Europe have very recently put forward,[4] and his suggestion to make provisions so that 'speeches in different languages' may be delivered 'in the common parliament' (Lenin 1964, p. 21) sounds like a prediction of what happens in Strasbourg today. The language policy issues that emerged in the wake of the Russian revolution, and that remained at the centre of political and scholarly attention during the construction of the USSR, were not entirely dissimilar to the ones that the EU is facing today – except for the fact that it was Russian, not English, to occupy the dominant position. Gramsci,

[3] To a large extent, this has already been done by Peter Ives. Except for Ives (2006, 2009, 2015), however, the existing literature on EGL pays inadequate attention to Gramsci's writings. Even those who use Gramsci in this field (e.g. Phillipson 1992; Sonntag 2003; May 2012) underestimate his deep and far-reaching interest in language. Moreover, the empirical analysis of EGL in a particular time and place is beyond the scope of Ives's mainly theoretical interests, whereas my discussion engages precisely with analytical sociolinguistic data.

[4] For example, Grin (2015) and Lacey (2015) use the Swiss case to make a similar point.

who had studied linguistics at university, was familiar with these and other related debates,[5] as confirmed also by his aforementioned comments on Esperanto (which at the time was quite popular amongst different tendencies within the international working-class movement).

This is not to say that debates about linguistic unification have not evolved since Gramsci's death in 1937. A new wave of sympathy towards linguistic and cultural diversity began to rise, particularly from the 1970s onwards. As a result, many opponents of unification are nowadays in a strong position when they speak against the negative impact that EGL could have on the rights and destinies of Europe's linguistic minorities. The status of majority languages, too, has changed, especially of those which Antoine Meillet (1928) could confidently call 'great languages of culture'. But again, these changes would not look entirely unexpected to Gramsci. As other Marxists before him, he did contemplate the possibility of one language acquiring so much cultural prestige and practical use as to relegate national languages to the role of dialects (Carlucci 2013, pp. 114–115). And he also argued that, when 'a European union' comes into existence, 'the word "nationalism" will have the same archaeological value as "municipalism" has today' (Q6, §78; FS, p. 119). Many Italian linguists and intellectuals currently feel that the prestige of other EU languages is decreasing, and their functions are shrinking, due to the expansion of English. Occasionally, their reactions to linguistic globalization lean towards anachronistic forms of nationalism, including calls for protectionist measures. They seem to pretend that countries such as Italy, France or Germany still enjoy the levels of economic, political and cultural autonomy, and of global prominence, that they enjoyed a century or so ago (Graziosi 2015).

More realistically, critics of EGL have also exposed the imperialistic implications of its spread, denouncing the cultural and economic advantages it creates for English-speaking countries – the USA and the UK above all. There is little doubt that EGL constitutes an asset for those countries. Material benefits are not limited to the possibility of saving on translation and foreign language learning; they also include enhanced employment opportunities for their citizens, in so far as native speakers continue to be preferred to non-native ones in a variety of sectors – including public communication and (of course) English language teaching. Proponents of linguistic unification, however, are quick to argue that with more and more people learning English throughout the world, this unbalanced situation will eventually come to an end. What is now, to a large extent, the language of neoliberal hegemony may be appropriated by subaltern groups around the world and may well help to coordinate their struggles against neoliberalism. From a less radical position, Van Parijs (2011) views linguistic unification as an improvement because it will enable increasingly large sections of the world's population to participate in global civil society and political debate.

Despite its internal nuances and intellectual sophistication, debates on EGL often seem to be hampered by mutually exclusive attachments to either diversity or unification. Both sides have developed complex arguments about the political

[5] For details of this familiarity, see Carlucci (2013).

effects which they expect (one side with fear, the other with hope) from the future triumph of EGL. Yet they are less accurate when it comes to describing how linguistic unification is proceeding at present and often fail to consider relevant evidence of the effects that EGL has already had on our societies. Pennycook (2000, pp. 59–60) grasps this point when he writes that if an argument for diversity or unification is made 'in the abstract, without reference to the actual historical location of the languages and political struggles involved, the political outcomes of such an argument will be unclear'. Moreover, the distribution of the positive and negative effects of EGL is usually analysed according to different speaking communities and nation-states. It is not common to analyse its effects in terms of socioeconomic status across different national and linguistic communities. This leads to various inadequacies, including a scarce appreciation of the fact that, even in English-speaking countries, most benefits go to speakers who command particularly prestigious varieties, often as a result of better education and geographic mobility.[6] And outside of these countries, similarly privileged groups can compensate for their lack of native competence by reaching high levels of confidence in using different languages – including English – in an articulate and culturally prestigious manner. There are also reasons to suspect escalating effects across generations: the likelihood of globalization making young adults with different linguistic backgrounds get together is higher amongst those with higher incomes, levels of education and access to geographic mobility; already in their early childhood years, their children will therefore find themselves in an ideal environment, in which not only are different languages naturally acquired but more importance is attached (and more money destined) to education, linguistic or otherwise.[7]

Thanks to his unbiased views on diversity and unification, as well as his distinctive interest in the class stratification of language, Gramsci produced a whole range of ideas that can advance the debate on EGL. In particular, the following notions (which I have extracted and adapted from previous research on his life and work) can be most helpful to avoid the inadequacies mentioned thus far.

7.1.1 The Folklorist Mentality

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci criticizes the attitude to diversity typically embodied by the folklore scholar 'who is permanently afraid that modernity is going to destroy the object of his study' (Q11, §67; SPN, p. 419). It is worth

[6] See McSmith (2015) for recent findings by the UK's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, showing that British top firms and other 'elite employers' prefer 'well-travelled candidates with the right accent'.

[7] On how '[a]ssortative mating' can 'reinforce the traits that bring the couple together', see Economist (2015a). The result, the magazine argues, is that on average the 'elite is producing children who not only get ahead, but deserve to do so', even in countries such as the USA which have always been a bastion of social mobility. See also Economist (2015b).

recalling this point as an antidote to the uncritical praise of linguistic diversity. The extinction of a particular linguistic variety is always a major loss for human culture. But we should not disregard practical reality and historical contingencies, in which what is best for a language is not always best for its speakers. Nor should we lose sight of the difference between languages that disappear without being recorded and described in sufficient detail and languages that leave behind a substantial corpus of texts and metalinguistic information. When the latter is the case, the unique worldview conveyed by the extinct language, through its grammatical, semantic and lexical structures, can to a large extent be recovered – similarly to what happens with other historical evidence of long-gone human habits and behaviours (not of all them worth reviving).

7.1.2 Unification, Diversity and Hegemony

Other notions feature prominently in Gramsci's writings, which can be relevant to current debates on EGL. His life was characterized by a wide range of significant experiences involving linguistic and cultural diversity. He spoke Sardinian (the language of his native island) as well as Italian and commended bilingualism as an asset to children's education (see Carlucci 2013, Chap. 1). His academic interests and political activity further showed him that language is always characterized by geographical, social and stylistic diversity. In this respect, history does not destroy but simply rearranges. Unity does not mean uniformity. A good command of the unitary language does not rule out the possibility of personal styles and usages or of local variation in the way it is used (see esp. Q29, §2; SCW, pp. 180–182).

Recast in today's terms, this means that alarming scenarios of linguistic impoverishment may not be inevitable: EGL does not necessarily imply the disappearance of less widespread languages, which bilingual speakers can continue to use in societies where linguistic rights are respected (see also De Mauro 2014). At the same time, diversity will re-emerge within EGL itself.[8] Indeed, in Gramscian terms, hegemony is different from mere imposition. Economic and political domination play a significant role, but amongst the factors enabling a hegemonic language to spread globally, we should also include its ability to absorb elements from the languages it subordinates. If norms of correct usage are too rigid, members of other speech communities may be put off. Inevitably, this causes the structure of the hegemonic language to change, as the number of its speakers gradually increases (see SCW, pp. 26–31 and SCW, pp. 41–43).

[8] As confirmed by the emergence of the so-called world English*es* and as the history of many successful 'global' languages of the past also suggests (see Adams 2007 and 2013 for Latin).

7.1.3 Passive Revolution

The notions sketched out so far are particularly apt to challenge abstract dogmatism with regard to how linguistic diversity can, and should, be preserved. But the Gramscian box also contains tools for questioning the views of those who seem to take the liberating value of unification for granted. His notion of passive revolution is one of those tools. Passive revolution identifies a way of managing historical change, so that the advantages of the elites are preserved 'alongside real gains for wide sections of the population, but the full potential of progressive aspects of […] historical change for the socially excluded is undermined' (Showstack Sassoon 2001, p. 7). In the *Prison Notebooks*, this notion is used to analyse transformations that failed to alter power inequalities between social classes in a radical way. Gramsci took his examples from history as well as current affairs (from the unification of Italy under the leadership of moderate bourgeois groups to the then-recent introduction of Fordist industrial production).

Today, as our case study will also confirm, we have several indications that EGL is part of a passive revolution. A hesitant, auxiliary knowledge of English (adequate primarily for the needs of consumerism and subordinate employment positions) is spreading widely, while a good command is being monopolized by the cosmopolitan community of well-educated scholars and technocrats and by the transnational, highly mobile elite of executives and top-level professionals. As we shall see, if the expansion of EGL continues to proceed in this way, it may facilitate the integration of economic markets but not the 'intellectual progress of the mass' (Q11, §12; SPN, p. 333) or the 'cultural unification of the human race' (Q11, §17; SPN, p. 445).

7.1.4 Linguistic Insecurity and the Effects of Meritocracy

In the last four centuries, many old forms of power inequality were shattered by the hegemonic expansion of capitalism, while new ones have been created and legitimized. In recent decades, in particular, mounting socioeconomic inequality has not been accepted grudgingly – most people have perceived it as inevitable and ultimately right. Linguistic insecurity appeared to Gramsci as a significant factor in reinforcing this kind of legitimization. Already in the early 1920s, he noted that dialect-speaking workers with a limited command of Italian were always in danger of considering themselves more ignorant and incompetent than they really were. He wrote that workers are always hesitant when they have to express their opinions and often think they should just listen to others' opinions (see Carlucci 2013, pp. 109–110).[9]

[9] This approach to linguistic insecurity is different from the one taken by many of today's sociolinguists (most notably William Labov). Gramsci focuses on the social and political passivity that linguistic insecurity can generate, rather than its strictly linguistic functioning. For an interesting discussion of this and other related notions, largely in keeping with Gramsci's views, see Bourdieu (1991).

In an age that trumpets individualistic notions of talent, aspiration and responsibility, EGL recreates this problem on a new scale. By sending their children to the best (and usually most expensive) educational institutions, as well as ensuring that they spend periods of residence abroad, today's elites are not only perpetuating educational inequalities; they are legitimizing their privileged social position through meritocratic rhetoric. They convince themselves and others that their outstanding language skills are simply the result of talent and hard work, as proved by their certified ability to progress through highly selective schools, universities, internships and so on (Litter 2013). The fact that those who succeed are often members of self-perpetuating groups is thus obscured, and political questions about socioeconomic privilege are effectively undermined.

There are, of course, exceptions to this 'hereditary meritocracy' (Economist 2015a), but they inevitably consist of individual cases. In the hope of being one of the individuals who rise from nothing and get into the elite, we close our eyes to the fact that, even when equal opportunities and meritocracy work to perfection, success for all is impossible:

> While proficiency in English, whether as a first, second, or third language, may provide an advantage for careers and employment in certain sectors of the global economy, the number of available jobs and the number of jobs being created that require significant knowledge of English is very small compared to the numbers of workers seeking jobs worldwide. (Ricento 2015b, p. 37)

With a good dose of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011), merit – the only rightful claim to wealth and power – is presented as something that any hard-working individual can achieve, despite the fact that only a few will really achieve upward social mobility. In reality, especially in Europe, life is becoming more precarious for increasingly large sectors of the population. Again, this creates a widespread feeling of passivity and subordination towards those who succeed, coupled with acceptance of one's own lack of achievement as justly reflecting limited inborn talent. But this acceptance does not make the stressful effects of competition, or the material restraints for 'losers', any less felt. Hit by these effects but reluctant to question something that seems inevitable, more and more people, especially amongst the subaltern classes, turn to backward, largely irrational palliatives such as nationalism, hoping to release the pressure of an unbearably competitive job market by excluding foreigners.[10]

From an updated Gramscian perspective, meritocracy therefore emerges as an ideological pillar of the twenty-first-century neoliberal capitalism. In its real (or 'hereditary') form, meritocracy legitimizes social privilege; in its ideal form, it prevents people from questioning individualistic notions of 'achievement' or 'success'. As with any politically effective ideology, countless people genuinely believe in it and have their lives shaped by it. But only a section of the population, whether by accident of birth or exceptional merit, fully benefits from meritocracy. Within its discourse of pro-activeness and self-improvement, foreign language learning is

[10] According to many commentators, the results of the recent referendum on Britain's EU membership have confirmed this trend. The present chapter, however, was drafted several months before the referendum.

reduced to a matter of motivation, good will, open-mindedness and intellectual curiosity. Usually, those who most firmly believe in – and benefit from – this discourse are people who went to good schools, pay others to clean their homes and clothes, have time for cultural activities and can also afford holidays and voluntary work experience (as opposed to routine work as waiters or the like) in countries whose language they are willing to learn.

7.2 Why Pre-2008 Italy?

Let us now proceed towards our application of Gramscian notions by clarifying our selection of a particular case study. Sonntag (2003), Ricento (2015a) and Tupas (2015) show the uneven nature of the spread of English and highlight the key role of local contexts in determining the impact of EGL. They are notable exceptions to the often unsatisfactory attention to detailed factual evidence. Italy, however, was not included in these critical assessments. Until a few years ago, this exclusion may have been due to a shortage of statistical data (linguistic and socioeconomic), but today this is no longer the case. Such information exists, and we can therefore use it to analyse Italy's educational and linguistic policies.

As we shall see, the most detailed data were collected at the continental, national and local level between 2005 and 2007. This is the main reason why I have decided to focus on this period, for which more information is available. But it is not the only reason. During this time period, Euroscepticism was far less popular than it is today, and Europe had not yet become the epicentre of global economic and political crisis. This enables us to check the empowering effects of foreign language learning at a time when external circumstances were particularly favourable. After the crisis that began with the fall of the subprime market and the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, there has been a decrease in the number of Italian students participating in EU-supported programmes for geographic mobility (Borello and Luise 2011, pp. 60–61), as well as in the number of those completing secondary education and going on to university (ibid., p. 20). This disaffection for the EU, coupled with increased financial difficulties, would probably exert a distorting influence on our assessment of the potential of foreign language learning. For at least one reason, however, it is possible that a better picture would be obtained by using more recent data (if they were available to the same quantitative and qualitative level), especially as far as EGL is concerned: after a steady increase in the provision of foreign languages by Italian schools already in the 1990s (see MIUR 2001, pp. 36–38), between 2003 and 2007, Italian schools and universities were reformed in ways that further increased the number of pupils studying English (Balboni 2009, pp. 104–109).[11]

[11] The proportion of primary school pupils studying English reached 60.94% in 1999–2000. In 2003, English became compulsory for all children from their first year of primary education. In contrast, recent Italian governments have not consistently implemented the official EU policy of support for multilingualism – especially the principle that all Europeans should learn two foreign languages.

7.3 Foreign Language Learning in Italy

7.3.1 Historical Overview

In the second half of the twentieth century, mastery of foreign languages began to be perceived as an important element in the education of Italy's younger generations. Some, however, opposed the new emphasis on being able to communicate in a modern foreign language. Traditionally minded intellectuals maintained that priority should be given to classical languages or – as foreign languages began to be accepted as legitimate cultural and educational objects – to the study of grammar and foreign literary masterpieces. Along with this diffidence, another factor limited the provision of foreign language teaching by Italian schools: in a country where full mastery of Italian had not yet been achieved by the entire population, spreading the national language was seen as the main linguistic task of state-funded education.

This historical background began to have significant repercussions in the late 1960s, as French was losing its supremacy to English as the most widespread foreign language in Italian schools:

> At times parents openly rejected schools that could not guarantee English classes for their children. Improved standards of living in the 1970s, and growing economic success abroad in the 1980s, encouraged many families to provide their children with extra English language tuition, such as evening classes in Italy and study holidays in Britain. Fluency in English was soon perceived not only as an advantage in life but also as a mark of social prestige. Privileged families already sent their children to study abroad, especially to England, which offered good boarding schools. (Tosi 2001, p. 210)

The rapid increase in the appeal of the English language was part of a process of technological innovation and social transformation. This process, however, did not resolve the disparities (such as the north-south divide) which had afflicted the country since its unification in 1861 and which had become even deeper during the 1960s as a consequence of the mainly northern-based economic boom. In essence, the demand for English language learning became a mass phenomenon during the same period when Italy's school system was finding itself in an increasingly difficult situation. On the one hand, the new needs of a growing school population were putting the system under unprecedented pressure; on the other hand, it became evident (especially during the 1980s) that schools were no longer making significant progress in terms of general quality and were especially failing to compensate for the educational disadvantages that still derived from students' socioeconomic backgrounds and regional origin. In the early 1990s, Italy's school system was 'still far from ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens' (Schizzerotto 1994, p. 558). In particular, researchers found that, holding the levels of individual talent and diligence constant, family background remained a source of systematic inequality in student's results. The daughters of entrepreneurs, managers and independent professionals (*liberi professionisti*) living in the northern and central parts of the

country had the highest chances of gaining a university degree, whereas the sons of southern farmhands often struggled to complete compulsory education.

Variation in the quality of teaching 'across different areas of the country' (Brunello and Checchi 2005, p. 564) persisted during the 1990s. Lack of consistent decision-making by the central government went hand in hand with growing fragmentation at the local level, especially in secondary education. New types of schools and experimental curricula made their appearance, including a new upper secondary school, the *liceo linguistico*, focusing on foreign languages. At the same time, those who needed a better command of the English language – especially the politico-diplomatic and corporate elites, whose children were sometimes already growing up in multilingual families – had the opportunity to be educated in English at international schools and universities located in a number of Italian cities, where this language was used to teach all subjects (see Tosi 1990, pp. 59–60). Under pressure from the EU, this opportunity was partly introduced also in state-funded schools, in the form of content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Initially, this method was part of local experimentation, but later reforms incorporated it into the national curricula (Balboni 2009, Chap. 7). Even today, however, the number of subjects involved and the amount of time devoted to CLIL in state-funded schools remain quite marginal. And similar decisions to use English in state universities still cause the uproar of many academics and public figures.

It was in this historical context that Italians come to associate the 'dream of social mobility' with that of 'making their children fluent [in EGL] quickly and cheaply' (Tosi 2001, p. 211). Indeed, an 'increased number of ordinary families, wishing to imitate the élite', opted for private English tutoring, 'investing in all sorts of language training to help their children improve their English' (ibid.). But despite these efforts, only a minority gained access to effective foreign language learning.

7.3.2 Knowledge of English

In the early 1990s, one out of four lower secondary school leavers polled in a survey admitted that 3 years of compulsory training in a foreign language had led them to develop no skills at all in this field (De Mauro and Boylan 1995, p. 8). Nonetheless, there soon appeared indications that foreign languages were slowly starting to improve amongst Italy's younger generations, mainly through autonomous, extra-curricular learning activities (as confirmed by statistical data discussed in De Mauro 1998, pp. 183–84). And on the whole, a moderate optimism was justified by the fact that, whatever their levels of competence, more Italians were able to use a foreign language than ever before. This trend has continued in more recent years, with the quality and quantity of foreign language learning generally increasing in Italian society, and at last also in state-funded education. The teaching of English has especially expanded since the mid-1990s, and a policy of early start has been implemented whereby foreign language learning begins in primary schools.

Most of the data we have on foreign language learning are, however, based on what people say about their abilities. Their significance as nationwide statistical results is not always matched by their reliability as a source for sociolinguistic enquiry. For instance, quoting figures provided by ISTAT (Italy's Central Statistics Office) in 1997, De Mauro (1998, p. 184) states that the average knowledge of foreign languages amongst the younger generations is four times higher than the one possessed by the over 45s, specifying that '52.2%, 50.9% and 45.4%' of those aged, respectively, '15–17, 18–19, 20–24 have a good [*buona*] or excellent [*ottima*] knowledge' of English. But what does 'good' or 'excellent' knowledge mean here? This kind of evidence needs to be handled with care. Indeed, it is likely to tell us more about what Italians think of their knowledge than the competence they really possess.

As we shall see, researchers are inclined to believe that self-assessment leads to an overestimation of one's abilities.[12] However, at least two comments can be made in defence of surveys. First, the fact that many Italians do not believe they are sufficiently proficient in foreign languages is quite significant in itself: it suggests that they do not feel confident when it comes to using a particular foreign language. This is likely to imply a scarce willingness to take an active part in communication, especially if complex, unplanned forms of oral production are required (see LET it FLY 2007a, p. 79). Second, statistical data on foreign languages become more significant when they refer to a specific sample (for instance, a selected group of people who can reasonably be expected to judge their own skills in realistic terms) and when we compare them with other data focusing on the channels through which a confident command of foreign languages has been acquired. It is especially the second point that I shall develop in the rest of this chapter.

7.3.3 Data Published Between 2006 and 2007

Eurobarometer collected relevant data in November–December 2005 and released them in February 2006. Shortly afterwards, other data were made available by the *LET it FLY* project (*Learning, Education and Training in the Foreign Languages in Italy*, co-funded by the EU and the Italian government). Still in 2006, a joint project on illiteracy and cultural deprivation, involving Tuscany's regional administration and the prestigious *Accademia della Crusca*, provided further information – this time at regional level, their research having been conducted amongst the population of Tuscany alone. The following year, ISTAT also published figures on foreign languages in Italy. All of these data, as I have already noted, were based on self-evaluation of linguistic abilities.

[12] As confirmed by European Commission 2012, Chap. 3. See also Parker (1995, p. 69) for the results of a research project which 'tested 4500 Europeans for "perceived" versus "actual" English-language skills'.

Table 7.1 Knowledge of foreign languages in Italy (based on LET it FLY 2006a)

Ability level	First foreign language (%)	Second foreign language (%)
Very good	7.1	3.3
Good	23.8	18.4
Adequate	19.0	18.6
Inadequate	50.1	59.7

The Tuscan sample provided particularly interesting information. All interviewees shared the following characteristics:

1. They lived in a region where parameters such as literacy rates, number of books read and Internet access were higher than the national average.
2. They belonged to a section of the population where familiarity with foreign languages is typically wider.

Hence, these informants could be expected to evaluate their own skills with reasonable accuracy according to various practical experiences: from communication with foreign peers to reading books in English to understanding American music and videos.

The sample consisted of 337 university students and other 169 youths in their final year of upper secondary school, with 97% of them claiming to know English and 73.7% indicating this language as the foreign language they knew best. As far as ability levels are concerned (i.e. the level of the knowledge that interviewees claimed to have), only 13% of these young adults said they were highly proficient (*esperto*) users of the foreign language they knew best. According to the authors of this research, only such a small section of the sample was definitely able to hold a conversation in a foreign language without difficulty. Most of the remaining students (three out of four) defined their level as either 'good' or 'fairly good' (*discreto*). Despite the characteristics of the sample, the authors regarded self-placement in these two ability levels as unreliable due to possible overestimation in the absence of objective assessment (Dal Carobbo 2007, p. 184).

These rather poor results are consistent with the statistical data collected as part of the *LET it FLY* project. As shown in Table 7.1 (from LET it FLY 2006a, p. 31), only 7.1% of the respondents, claiming to know at least one foreign language, considered their knowledge to be 'very good' (*molto buona*):

Again, the authors explained that cross-comparisons with other data gathered during the interviews indicated that self-assessment had led to overestimation. Therefore, to have a more truthful account of Italians' foreign language abilities, one would probably have to slightly lower the figures given in Table 7.1.

The data published by ISTAT a few months later seemed to show a reduction in the number of those who deemed their knowledge of foreign languages inadequate. However, the number of those who placed their knowledge within the two highest levels had not increased. ISTAT figures with specific reference to English are given in Table 7.2 (adapted from ISTAT 2007):

Table 7.2 Knowledge of English in Italy (based on ISTAT 2007)

Ability level	English (%)
Excellent (*ottimo*)	5.7
Good	23.6
Adequate	39.0
Inadequate	31.7

Finally, this survey also revealed the persistence of territorial differences and the existence of occupational disparities. In the north of Italy, more than 46% of the interviewed subjects said that they knew English, whereas in the south and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, the figure did not reach 40%. In the country as a whole, 68% of managers, entrepreneurs and independent professionals said that they knew English, as opposed to only 35% of blue-collar workers who did so.

7.3.4 The Role of School Education and Vocational Training

Younger and better-educated Italians know foreign languages better (LET it FLY 2006c, p. 70). In this respect, our sources confirm that the typical multilingual European is young and well-educated, with a multilingual background in terms of being born in another EU country or having parents from other EU countries than the country of residence, in a managerial position that frequently requires the use of foreign languages and, finally, motivated to learn (Eurobarometer 2006, p. 10). But Italy differs from other EU countries as far as tasks and training in the workplace, or other job-related educational opportunities, are concerned. These do not seem to represent widespread opportunities for learning a foreign language to high levels of proficiency. Few Italians regularly use foreign languages 'for work purposes or through permanent social contact' (LET it FLY 2007b, p. 9), and advanced knowledge is often a 'niche competence' which businesses require more on paper than in practice:

> An elementary use of linguistic knowledge is in reality relatively frequent (since this use, at least occasionally is required in approximately 50% of the companies in the sample surveyed, and 23% of them host foreign workers, with the consequent necessity for a minimal amount of interlinguistic and intercultural encounter). But in the companies what is required, rather generally, is the passive use of a vehicular language, usually English, in order to be able to have access to commercial, productive and technological information. (Ibid., p. 11)

Work-related training (if provided at all)[13] only seems to promote a basic knowledge restricted to the micro-varieties of the language used in a particular sector (see also

[13] In the period considered, secondary school certificate holders and university graduates participating in adult education and training greatly outnumbered participants with lower educational qualifications. Italy also exhibited very low participation rates in on-the-job training, whose availability and quality, moreover, tended to be higher for employees with higher educational qualifications (Gallina 2006).

LET it FLY 2006b, Chap. 3). Moreover, the use of foreign languages at work does not offer enough opportunities for compensating existing gaps (as illustrated by the following figures, from ISTAT 2007): only 0.7% of primary school and 16% of lower secondary school certificate holders use English for work purposes, as opposed to 56.6% of university graduates; only 30% of blue-collar workers use English for work purposes, as opposed to 64% of managers, entrepreneurs and independent professionals; less than 20% of those living in the south or islands (Sicily and Sardinia) use English for work purposes, as opposed to over 30% of those in the north.

Most Europeans perceive schools as the most valuable learning environment (as shown, for instance, by Eurobarometer 2006, p. 21). But the shortcomings of work-related learning opportunities make this perception especially strong in Italy, where people see school education as the best option to learn foreign languages in a culturally rich and confident manner (LET it FLY 2006a, pp. 13–16). There is, indeed, a positive correlation between the levels of education reached and self-evaluation of one's own foreign language skills: 58.3% of subjects with low levels of education claim to know at least one foreign language, against an average of 66.2% for the national population, but 68.9% of these subjects consider their competence inadequate, 'while on the national level the same negative self-evaluation is expressed by a smaller 50.1%' (ibid., p. 55).

It is also interesting to note another way in which these people (including those who did not complete elementary education) differ from the rest of the population. English is by far the most widely known language amongst them. In contrast, amongst university graduates, the range of spoken languages is more varied: 77.4% and 52.7% of them know, respectively, English and French, and 'a significant 15% declare they speak German, and 13.7% that they speak Spanish' (ibid., p. 6).

On the whole, the data published between 2006 and 2007 indicate, first of all, that English is the foreign language which more Italians claim to know, with its role becoming increasingly dominant as the only foreign language widely known by the young generations, especially by their less educated members. Secondly, schools emerge as a particularly important environment for creating a widely shared attitude of confidence in the use of foreign languages. This second finding gives rise to particular concerns, as the limits of Italy's school system (but also of other OECD countries) have repeatedly been highlighted – especially its inability to reduce disparities due to family and socio-geographic background.[14] Several studies stress the influence of family background on the geographic and social mobility of young people and on their educational careers. In particular, 'if the educational system is

[14] In 2007, Italy's educational equality deficit was described as follows: '17% of higher education students' fathers in Italy hold a higher education qualification themselves, while this is only the case for 10% of men in the same age group as students' fathers. The strongest selectivity into higher education is found in Portugal, with a ratio of 3.2. In Austria, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, students are about twice as likely to be in higher education if their fathers hold a university degree as compared with what their proportion in the population would suggest' (OECD 2007, p. 9).

not homogeneous, an educated parent always has some advantage in collecting information about school quality, and can reorient his/her child's choices towards better opportunities' (Checchi 2006, p. 216).

7.3.5 Constraints on Other Learning Channels

King (1999, p. 24) pointed out that 'the (desirable) introduction of communicative approaches to language learning and teaching has also meant a shift [away] from the library'. This evolution has 'brought with it obstacles relating to access and equal opportunities', causing foreign language learning to retain 'an element of elitism' (ibid.). Especially non-formal ways of learning raise complex questions about how many people have access – for instance – to holidays in English-speaking countries or to the relevant information and communication technology (ICT) and audiovisual material. Undoubtedly, 'the electronic revolution […] has accelerated people's contact with English' (Holborow 1999, p. 58), yet some people, in Europe and elsewhere, still have limited access to the Internet (or to computers in general), as well as to digital or satellite television, DVD players, and other potentially helpful technologies. This is usually due to age. But we should not underestimate the impact of socioeconomic constraints, which can also limit people's access to other learning opportunities. Indeed, lack of time and money are amongst the main reasons given by Europeans for not studying languages: 'Slightly over a third (34%) have problems with fitting language lessons into their schedule […] and 22% refer to the expense of classes' (Eurobarometer 2006, p. 37).

Our Italian data show significant gaps in the access to ICT. The number of families owning relevant technologies is higher in the north of the country than in the south. Moreover, possession of a personal computer and access to the Internet by families where the head of the household is a blue-collar worker are significantly lower in comparison with families where the head of the household is a manager, an entrepreneur or an independent professional. With respect to non-school formal learning, the *LET it FLY* project provides further information, thanks to its detailed survey of the demand for foreign language learning in Italy. In accordance with the general European trend, lack of time is one of the main reasons for not having begun to learn a foreign language yet. Concerning the cost of language lessons, only 1.4% of respondents indicate it as the reason why they have not yet undertaken the study of languages. However, 47.7% of them see affordable fees as a condition to their future enrolment in a foreign language course (LET it FLY 2006a, pp. 45–54).

The presence of English language content is also quite limited in traditional media (with the exception of music – where lyrics, however, are seldom the focus of listeners' attention); in particular, dubbing has historically been the rule in Italian cinemas and television channels. So much so that it is difficult to imagine how the public and the media industry could cope with Van Parijs's proposal (based on experimental evidence from small European countries with comparatively higher standards of English) of a ban on dubbing, to be replaced with subtitles (Van Parijs

2011, pp. 106–115). Incidentally, the material recently discussed by this author vindicates the importance that Gramsci attached to equal linguistic self-esteem for the creation of a 'transnational demos' (as Van Parijs calls it). The author hopes that, thanks to the expansion of this demos, subaltern groups will be able to assert their demands rationally and coherently regardless of national differences. But from our Gramscian point of view, it is also interesting to look at the measures that Van Parijs proposes for implementing his democratic programme: these range from noble but somewhat utopian proposals – such as compensatory payments from English-speaking to non-English-speaking countries within the EU – to crude impositions such as the above-mentioned ban on dubbing.

Finally, the role of international geographic mobility needs to be considered. Schools and universities are increasingly interested in geographic mobility as an instrument to enhance the study of foreign languages. And the EU encourages this interest through specifically designated programmes. Despite these positive notes, however, actual participation is restricted to narrow sectors of Italy's youth. For instance, just over 10% of those polled in the *LET it FLY* project spent periods of study abroad (LET it FLY 2006a, p. 17). Moreover, there are evident risks of 'auto-selection' amongst potential participants according to 'the old logics based on wealth (and on the prohibitive costs of mobility) rather than on the motivation and resources which can be activated in learning' (LET it FLY 2007c, p. 9).[15]

7.4 Discussion

Large portions of the European population perceive the English language as a social 'good' with unquestioned instrumental value, and several governments promote it as such. Apart from the fact that these perceptions and policies create considerable advantages for native speakers of prestigious varieties of English, recent research has shown that, in non-English-speaking countries, mastery of this language is often a factor in reinforcing – rather than reducing – unequal power hierarchies (see also Grin 2005). The Italian data confirm these findings. The social mobility of some individuals is certainly boosted by the fact that they have learnt English, but this reality remains beyond the reach of many, despite being presented as possible for all.

Moreover, recent research also shows that knowledge of other international languages (such as Spanish, Arabic or Chinese), especially when combined with high levels of proficiency in English, is financially more rewarding for individuals than knowledge of English alone. This is indicative of new ways in which global capitalism is raising the level of linguistic competition. As far as individual skills are concerned, this increased competition entails the allocation of resources (better jobs, prestigious higher education, etc.) to those who are proficient in *two* foreign languages. This development may be welcomed from the point of view of personal enrichment and in terms of the global maintenance of linguistic diversity at societal

[15] For more recent (but no less sobering) data, see Van Mol (2014).

level; however, it also sets new challenges to educational systems and policies and, once again, clearly runs the risk of widening the gap between, on the one hand, abstract universal progress and, on the other, practical issues of inequality and exclusion for real individuals.

The EU sets similarly ambitious objectives for the language policies of member states. In order to promote 'democratic citizenship' and eradicate 'prejudice and discrimination', governments should ensure that EU citizens learn more than one foreign language and, above all, that they develop a 'plurilingual competence' in which different languages interrelate and contribute to communication (Council of Europe 2001, pp. 11–14).[16] Again, in the light of what we have seen so far, these objectives largely reflect the linguistic background of the elites, but one wonders how realistic they are for the rest of the population.

In sum, the spread of languages through which increasingly large sections of the continent's population may communicate is no guarantee of improvement with respect to the democratization of European society, wider access to political power and a more equal distribution of cultural and economic resources. Crystal (2012), however, authoritatively explains that the intrinsic mechanism of language acquisition is not what prevents new generations from overcoming language inequality. On this ground, Crystal remains fairly optimistic about the future role of EGL:

> If a global language is taught early enough, from the time that children begin their full-time education, and if it is maintained continuously and resourced well, the kind of linguistic competence which emerges in due course is a real and powerful bilingualism, indistinguishable from that found in any speaker who has encountered the language since his birth. These are enormous 'ifs', with costly financial implications, and it is therefore not surprising that this kind of control is currently achieved by only a minority of non-native learners of any language; but the fact that it is achievable (as evidenced repeatedly by speakers from such countries as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands) indicates that there is nothing inevitable about the disadvantage scenario….There is…widespread agreement that, if we want to take the task of language learning seriously, one of the key principles is 'the earlier the better'. And when this task is taken seriously, with reference to the acquisition of a global language, the elitism argument evaporates. (Crystal 2012, pp. 16–17)

These enormous 'ifs' about the viability of bilingualism concern not only the global language but also the future of less widespread languages (be they local or potentially also national ones). Indeed, a related question is 'if' societies can be transformed in such a way as to make the protection of linguistic diversity not only desirable according to moral and scientific principles but also financially viable and more immediately beneficial to the practical needs of everyday life.

A possible answer to these questions may expand on the observation that language inequality is often perpetuated by an uneven allocation of resources or – in the words of a Marxist scholar – that access to EGL simply 'parallels access to the fruits of society' (Holborow 1999, p. 58). Drawing on Gramsci's comments about linguistic transformations as 'an effect not a cause' of socioeconomic transforma-

[16] See also the European Commission's website, where employability is cast into relief as one of the fundamental reasons for learning 'two languages other than [the] mother tongue' (http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/strategic-framework/index_en.htm).

tions (1975, p. 344), we could argue that the full integrating potential of international languages will be realized through the active struggle for a more egalitarian society, if and when the negative effects of passive revolution are removed. Only radical changes in global capitalism can release the full benefits of innovation beyond the realms of economic production and exchange, allowing them to have a positive impact on populations at large – not only on national and transnational elites or on single individuals outside the elites. In the meantime, the EU's language policy of communication with citizens through all the official languages of its member states is arguably the most impartial and inclusive of possible arrangements. All documents of public interest are, as a rule, translated into the national languages. Despite frequent claims to the contrary, this policy does not have unbearable costs (only 0.0085% of the EU's GDP, and less than 1% of its budget, according to Gazzola 2014, p. 232). A shift to English as the only official language would replace translation and interpreting costs within the organization with language learning costs outside the organization, and these externalized costs would be borne 'only by the non-native speakers of the hegemonic language' (Grin 2015, p. 133). Moreover, in addition to favouring English-speaking countries, such a reduction of official languages would be detrimental to EU citizens with low levels of education and income, as well as to the elderly and the socially excluded.

But there is an element of self-satisfied acceptance of the status quo in this approach. The question remains of what governments can do to facilitate a confident interaction between citizens regardless of socioeconomic status, either through widespread 'plurilingualism' or, more realistically, through equal access to English – the language which most Europeans already perceive, study and use as a lingua franca. The process is undeniably underway, supported, albeit unevenly, by a whole series of economic, technological and juridical conditions (including the right for EU citizens to work in all member states, alongside the lifting of internal border controls). And Gramsci himself wrote that, while they cannot implement utopian objectives, language policy interventions can 'speed up the already existing process' (1975, p. 2345). Ultimately, it is through direct interaction – much more than from the current ability to read official documents – that Europeans can reasonably be expected to build a stronger fellow-feeling and push their old enmities further into the past.

In this respect, countries such as Italy may wish to take inspiration from the countries mentioned by Crystal, as well as from Belgium and Lithuania (De Mauro 2014, p. 74–75). Here, purposeful policies have turned English into a widely shared asset for all social classes – even if not a fully liberating instrument in the hands of subaltern groups – without detriment to the native languages. The Italian case, however, helps to clarify that these goals require much more than a generic application of the early start principle to formal education (see also Gazzola's 2014 analysis of the European Commission 2012 data). In the 2007 ISTAT survey, more than 60% of respondents, aged 11–17 and claiming to know English, considered their knowledge to be below good levels (i.e. placed themselves in the lower two ability levels in Table 7.2). Another 15% claimed not to know English. Although the young age of the respondents calls for great care when interpreting these figures, they seem to provide evidence of a widespread lack of linguistic confidence across a cohort of individuals who, in the majority of cases, did encounter English during primary education.

7.5 Conclusions

Applied to a particular historical context, a Gramscian approach to language policy has produced a series of significant results, both on a general and on a more case-specific level. First, it has helped us to highlight certain inadequacies in the current debate on EGL. In particular, it has reminded us of the importance of linguistic confidence in encouraging democratic participation and in ensuring that all citizens feel capable of scrutinizing the decisions of those who 'know better' (from institutional committees to corporate management). This is especially relevant today because of the risks of passivity and frustration engendered by meritocracy. Our Gramscian approach has thus provided a framework for a critical interpretation of the role of foreign languages in Italy – of English, in particular.

We have looked at the sociological characteristics of those who have reached a confident command of foreign languages and at the ways in which this confidence has developed. Although the data analysed refer to the period before Europe entered the current crisis, our findings show a worrying mismatch between the perceived value of foreign languages and their real role in people's lives, especially as far as EGL is concerned. Amongst those whose material conditions of life and work make advanced usage of English quite detached from everyday practices and priorities, this language is often learnt only as much as the development of economic markets requires (e.g. for online shopping and cheap travel). This poses limits to the liberating value of EGL, even when supported by favourable educational policies. But this general point is probably not as worrying as other inferences that can be made based on the evidence discussed in this chapter. In the current phase of economic crisis and cuts to freely accessible education, abstract claims about the possibility and benefits of learning foreign languages, unaccompanied by egalitarian social and educational policies, may increase the risk of individual insecurity. Rather than fostering tolerance and integration, they may further reduce popular support for European unification, opening up the way to nationalist populism.

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