

# Language contact and expressives in Italian

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In non-standard varieties of Italian spoken by youngsters, a great number of words are borrowed from English. In particular, when the word *fucking* is borrowed into Italian, it maintains its ability to be both an expressive adjective and an expressive degree-modifier. I argue this is a case of *global copying* (Johanson 2002), in which phonological content, semantic-pragmatic meaning and syntactic structure are all together copied from English into Italian (*pace* Kuteva 2017).

In Italian, the use of expressive adjectives, as in (1), and expressive degree-modifiers, as in (2), is somewhat limited in frequency.<sup>1</sup>

(1) la fottuta/ maledetta/benedetta cucina  
the fucked/ damned/ blissed kitchen  
“the fucking/damn/bloody kitchen”

(2) È fottutamente bella.  
is fucking.ADV beautiful  
“It’s fucking beautiful.”

Interestingly, surveying informal communications among Italian university students, it was possible to notice that they borrow the English word *fucking*, as shown by (3) and (4).

(3) Faccio un fucking casino.  
Make.1SG a fucking mess  
“I make a fucking mess.”

(4) Era fucking gigante.  
was fucking gigantic  
“It was fucking gigantic.”

Clearly, *fucking* is used as an expressive adjective in (3), but as an expressive degree-modifier in (4), something which is borrowed from English and is not otherwise attested in Italian where the degree-modifier is morphologically distinct from the adjective. Indeed, Italian *fottutamente* is derived attaching the suffix *-mente* to the adjectival root (cfr. Cuonzo 2019b). Thus, the phonological content of English *fucking* is borrowed into Italian alongside its semantic-pragmatic meaning and its syntax. *Fucking* is at the same time a lexical borrowing and a grammatical replication (Kuteva 2017: 174-179), exemplifying a case of *global copying* (Johanson 2002). The data in (3-4) argues against a rigid division of borrowing on the one hand, and structural replication on the other (*pace* Heine and Kuteva 2005, 2006, Matras and Sakel 2007 and Kuteva 2017) since the grammar and the meaning of *fucking* are copied together with its phonological content.

The use of *fucking* in Italian originated on the web and it is now used also in speech by youngsters, but it still remains confined to very specific socio-linguistic contexts: informal communications among youngsters with (some) knowledge of English. However, the new data that I present provide evidence to support Wiemer and Wälchli’s (2012: 9) intuition that non-standard varieties can be the repository of language contact phenomena that generally go unnoticed in the literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Expressive constructions like *quella cazzo/cavolo di cucina* lit. “that.F cock.M/cabbage.M of kitchen.F” are preferred to convey the same meaning of expressive adjectives (Doliana 2016, Cuonzo 2019a).

In conclusion, the facts in (3-4) show a new case of language contact between English and (non-standard) Italian that was not previously described in the literature, but have also bearing on the theoretical conceptualisation of linguistic transfer more in general.

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