

Language contact and expressives in Italian

Clara Cuonzo¹

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.²

(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 forthcoming). 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

¹ University of Maryland, College Park

² 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 2019).

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 is characteristic of a specific socio-linguistic context: informal communications among youngsters with (some) knowledge of English. However, similar borrowings of expressive adjectives are attested also in informal, youth varieties of Romanian (Costea, p.c.) and in Spanglish as well. Indeed, 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.

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 generally.

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