

*Intercultural communication in institutional-  
bureaucratic settings: Case studies from the SPICES  
Project*

**Gabriella Brigitte Klein**  
[gabriella.klein@tiscali.it](mailto:gabriella.klein@tiscali.it)

Gabriella Brigitte Klein is Professor of Linguistics and Sociolinguistics at the Faculty of Education, Università degli Studi of Perugia, Italy. Her main areas of research are Language Policy (*La politica linguistica del fascismo*, 1986), Urban Sociolinguistics (editor and co-author of *La città nei discorsi e nell'immaginario giovanile. Una ricerca socio-linguistica a Napoli*, 1995), and Conversation Analysis (co-editor and co-author of *In & Out. Procedure conversazionali e strategie comunicative di inclusione e di esclusione*, 2002). She acts also as a trainer in the field of adult education specialising in interpersonal and intercultural communication and is the coordinator of the Grundtvig project SPICES – Social Promotion of Intercultural Communication Expertise and Skills 2005-2007.

**Sandro Caruana**  
[sandro.caruana@um.edu.mt](mailto:sandro.caruana@um.edu.mt)

**Caruana, Sandro** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Arts and Languages in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta. His main areas of research are Second Language Acquisition and Sociolinguistics, with particular emphasis on the teaching and acquisition of Italian in Malta. He is author of the book 'Mezzi di comunicazione e input linguistico. L'acquisizione dell'italiano L2 a Malta' (Milano, Franco Angeli, 2003) and has published a number of articles in both local and international journals.

**Abstract**

The very fact that Europe is becoming increasingly multicultural, and consequently also multilingual, leads to communication problems. 'Foreigners' are considered to be so because they have a different cultural background and because they behave differently, if not strangely, when compared to natives or locals. They are often excluded from the general urban network, forming their own network through associations and neighbourhoods. Language, as well as communication habits and practices, are one of the main resources through which people are included or excluded from a community. In this paper we focus our attention on conversations between individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds in urban institutions and how certain conversation techniques and procedures become conversation strategies through which a person is constructed as being-a-foreigner. These conversations, recorded in Malta and in Italy, were collected during the SPICES (Social Promotion of Intercultural Communication Expertise and Skills) project 224945-CP-1-2005-1-IT-GRUNDTVIG-G11. The data presented is useful to reveal aspects which are taken for granted during conversations and in order to discuss the relevance of intercultural education in today's multicultural society.

## Introduction

A young mother enters a health centre with a young child. She looks visibly confused and clutches a piece of paper. As soon as the doctor addresses her in English, welcoming her and asking her why she has come to the health centre, she unravels the paper and shows it to the doctor who reads: 'My son has stomach pain and has been vomiting for three days.' This note must have been written by an acquaintance of this person, as when the doctor tries to ask some questions in English to the mother she is unable to comprehend and to respond. The doctor examines the young child but clinically cannot make a definite diagnosis. He has no alternative but to refer the child to hospital for observation.

A young man enters the reception of the Italian embassy in a country of which he is not a native. The receptionist can speak English and so can the young man. He enquires about a work permit in Italy, which he has recently applied for. The receptionist makes a quick phone call and tells the young man that his application is being processed but he requires an E111, a form which had to be filled in prior to travel in order to obtain health cover in the European Economic Area or in Switzerland. The young man does not know what an E111 is, and so he asks for help and enquires about what he should do in order to obtain this form. This leads to major problems in the interaction as the young man and the receptionist try to negotiate meaning, on the one hand to explain and on the other to comprehend what is required.

A young – apparently Chinese – woman, stands at a window of an Italian local council of a rather large city in central Italy. She asks, in 'incorrect' but absolutely comprehensible Italian, to be registered as married, stating that she got married yesterday. The public official, an elderly woman, asks her where she has got married. The young woman answers that she got married at home. The public official tries to explain that this is not valid, as marriage in Italy has to follow Italian procedures. The young woman insists, and asks again to have her marital status registered. Eventually she leaves and seems visibly disoriented, as the issue has not been settled. The clerk does not seem to be particularly worried about the fact that the issue has not been resolved.

The first episode described above was referred personally to the authors by the doctor who was directly involved in the case. The second episode was witnessed by one of the authors. Both occurred in Malta in June 2007. The third episode occurred in Italy, some years ago, and was also witnessed by one of the authors. All three represent examples of frequent encounters that occur within European cities. The very fact that Europe is becoming increasingly multicultural, and consequently also multilingual, leads to situations which are similar to those presented in the above narrations. Individuals are considered to be foreigners because they have a different cultural background and they behave differently, if not strangely, when compared to the way 'natives' or 'locals' behave. For example, their communicative behaviour may be incomprehensible, their mannerisms may be different and they may use unusual gestures when seen from the point of view of the natives. Foreigners therefore often are excluded from the general urban network, and this is particularly evident and relevant in institutional settings. Consequently, they often form their own networks through associations and neighbourhoods (e.g., the Turkish neighbourhood in Berlin, the Italian and Chinese neighbourhoods in NYC etc.).

The notion of 'nationality', and consequently even the notion of 'foreigner', are not clear-cut at all in today's society: for example, a person with Turkish nationality may have been brought up in Germany. He/she may even know German better than Turkish. If this person moves back to Turkey at some stage in his/her life, he/she might encounter the same difficulties that a non-native of this country might have to face. Despite not being a 'foreigner', he/she is still an 'adult-in-mobility' (this concept will be further elaborated in section 3) and may be unaware of certain cultural and social aspects of his/her own country of origin. In fact, in some cases, there are individuals who feel 'foreign' both in the country in which they live and in the country from which they originate.

One of the main resources through which people are included or excluded from a community, or from a social network, is language and more specifically communication habits and practices. In this paper we focus our attention on conversations between individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds in public institutions.

### **The inclusion/exclusion of foreigners**

Any foreigner, staying for a long period of time in a country, at a certain point in time needs to interact personally with representatives of the institutions in order to become an active citizen, thereby starting a process of real integration. In European societies, institutions are typically found in the city: the main institutions are in an urban context; laws are discussed and approved in central institutions that are usually located in big cities; people working in these institutions spend most of their time in urban contexts and often originate from there. Such a specific context has, of course, its specific language by means of which it can be identified: the language of bureaucracy. Usually all citizens have difficulties in order to understand written bureaucratic-institutional language and to manage institutional communication with members involved in this context. This occurs especially when one requires information from public officials who carry out the role of frontline service providers. However, since communication is more likely to fail in situations where one's cultural and experiential background differs from that of one's interlocutor, foreigners are particularly vulnerable in this situation. Within bureaucratic-institutional settings, communication with them is more likely to fail when compared to 'normal' circumstances, that is when engaging in so-called 'ordinary' conversations without specific constraining communication patterns. In fact, this also occurs in cases in which they would have lived in the foreign country for a relatively long period of time. This occurs because it is extremely difficult to penetrate a community if one does not possess its language and if one is not completely aware of and familiar with its communication practices (cfr. studies by Chini (2004) and by Vedovelli, Massara & Giacalone Ramat (2004) regarding immigration in Italy; Dal Negro & Guerini (2007) on the dynamics of plurilingualism).

As a consequence of the above, every citizen, but especially foreign citizens, need help to be able to communicate with public officials. It follows that one may ask whether this help is available and if this is the case, from where it may be sought. There are highly specialised institutions such as translation services, lawyers, commercial consultants etc. However, what happens in everyday life, especially in the

case of those individuals who do not possess the knowledge and the economic possibility to access such agencies? This problem is so widespread and complex that in certain countries, so-called 'cultural mediators' are employed in some institutions. These include personnel specialised in mediation and negotiation in everyday bureaucratic-institutional settings, such as schools, local councils, healthcare offices and medical organisations.

Help may also be sought from educational sources through training courses in second or foreign language (L2) education or in intercultural communication (ICC), both for 'adults-in-mobility' and service providers. However, in many different European countries such courses are not readily accessible or are not tailored to tackle this specific kind of language usage and communication practice. In fact, most L2 textbooks do not take into consideration naturally occurring verbal interactions and most dialogues presented in such textbooks are usually artificially constructed for didactic purposes. Furthermore, within such language textbooks, institutional and bureaucratic settings are referred to rarely and dialogues within such contexts are seldom present. Courses on ICC are still not very widespread and ICC skills are often not considered to be fundamental and transversal key competences.

Developing competence in ICC is also relevant in the light of the consideration that whether an individual is included into or excluded from a community or a network may be indeed conversationally managed. Thus a number of conversational strategies are present, including procedures and techniques<sup>1</sup>, through which a foreigner is conversationally constructed as such and therefore excluded – or at least perceived as excluded - from the local community: this situation may be defined as 'conversational construction of the condition of being-a-foreigner / being diverse / being an outsider'. On the other hand, strategies may be present through which those involved in a conversation negotiate a common ground within diversity.

### **Settings and methodology**

In this paper, data will be provided from two geographically different contexts, namely Italy and Malta (where English is normally used if native speakers interact with non-native speakers (Sciriha & Vassallo, 2006; and Caruana, 2007). The cases are taken from the data collected during a European Project named SPICES – Social Promotion of Intercultural Communication Expertise and Skills (224945-CP-1-2005-1-IT-GRUNDTVIG-G11; [www.trainingspices.net](http://www.trainingspices.net)). Within this project some special terminology has been developed. This is necessary as other terminology used in the field (such as 'foreigner', 'immigrant', 'native', 'local') may be ambiguous and culturally-laden: they may cause misunderstandings and may be associated to stereotypes. Two fundamental terms, which we use in this paper, are: '*Adult-in-mobility*' (from now on AM) and '*Adult-professionally-in-contact-with-mobility*' (or simply '*adult-in-contact-with-mobility*' (from now on ACM). AM refers to any individual, eighteen years of age or older, who emigrates from his/her own country of origin and moves to a different geographical, cultural and linguistic context. ACM, on the other hand, refers to any individual who, because of his/her work or profession,

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<sup>1</sup> Terms like (conversational) 'technique', 'procedure' and 'strategy' are used to refer to different aspects of the same conversational object. With 'technique' we mean the speaker's use of a conversational phenomenon; with 'procedure' we mean its realisation in its sequential development; with 'strategy' we mean its realisation to reach a certain communicative goal.

comes into contact with AMs (e.g., educators, trainers, teachers, intercultural mediators, front-line desk officers or counter personnel, doctors, police, military personnel etc.).

The aim of SPICES is principally to develop scientific instruments and make them available to non-specialists by designing a toolkit by means of which learner-centred and needs-oriented training strategies for L2 acquisition can be developed, together with the acquisition of ICC skills within the framework of lifelong learning, that is a Grundtvig 1.1. training course (Klein et al., 2007). Consequently, intercultural communication trainers, language educators, communication facilitators, intercultural mediators may use the method to create training/learning packs for their trainees to acquire intercultural communication skills and/or a second language (which is used as a 'context' language) in order to communicate more effectively.

The interactions selected and transcribed hereunder are taken from a series of ACM-AM interactions which were part of the SPICES Project. They represent case studies of select phenomena regarding the conversational construction of being-a-foreigner. They are taken from two distant contexts, namely Perugia, in Italy, and Malta, but ultimately lead to some strikingly similar considerations. The institutions in which they have been collected, and to which reference will be made when presenting the extracts, represent typical settings of 'urban life' and the mixed codes and modes of expression encountered are indeed representative of today's multilingual and multicultural society.

The urban contexts of Perugia and Malta, to a different extent, have experienced a number of changes over the past years, as a result of which they have both become increasingly multicultural. Historically, Perugia is the seat of one of the most important language institutions for foreigners in Italy; Malta, because of its geographic location, has always acted as a crossroad in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. Recent social developments in Italy and in the Mediterranean have led to a considerable increase in the number of foreigners who come in contact with natives of the local communities. This has led to a number of changes within the urban settings and this brings about new demands and challenges, which can only be faced if there is the possibility to communicate effectively, thereby overcoming the obstacle represented by different codes and culture.

Data were collected by means of semi-simulated interactions: this implies that the recording took place at a date and at a time which was convenient to all parties involved and was done behind closed doors, that is not in a situation in which the AM would have been waiting for his/her turn after staying in a queue. These semi-simulated interactions were therefore carried out in a situation which was not entirely faithful to the one which may be encountered in real life; but the verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal exchanges that occurred were spontaneous. The researcher was present to carry out the video and audio recordings. These took place in bureaucratic-institutional settings; they involved an AM and an ACM; and the ensuing conversation was based on an authentic request that the AM put to the ACM. Data collected was transcribed and analysed using criteria and procedures from the field of Conversation Analysis.

### Conversational cases

The analyses of the conversations are mainly intended to provide considerations on verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal issues, which are normally taken for granted during interactions and which are largely ignored in studies on conversation between AMs and ACMs. All interactions were both video and audio-recorded thereby allowing us to focus also on proxemics, gesticulation and facial expressions and not solely on verbal and paraverbal elements.

### Code-switching instances

The most obvious and immediate strategy, which is employed in the conversational construction of being-a-foreigner, is the use of code-switching. According to Gumperz (1982), with 'conversational code-switching' we understand a change, within the same conversation, from one language to another without any change regarding the external situation or the participants in the situation. This type of code-switching, therefore, may be characterised by a socio-symbolic meaning or function.

Once an ACM realises that he/she is familiar or has some competence in the language of the AM, he/she may resort to the strategy of including words or phrases in order to facilitate communication. These situations are exemplified in the following interactions within bureaucratic-institutional settings:

Text 1-MT<sup>2</sup>: Interaction university official (ADMF) – university student (STUF): filling in an application

#### Extract 1:

|    |      |   |
|----|------|---|
| 27 | ADMF | okay and which university are you studying at |
| 28 |      | right now                                     |
| 29 | STUF | eh * the foreign university of perugia/       |
| 30 | ADMF | #oh okay okay SOUNDING SURPRISED AND          |
| 31 |      | APPRECIATIVE# <b>per strAnieri/</b>           |

#### Extract 2:

|    |      |   |
|----|------|---|
| 91 | ADMF | [also] ** ehm * and then * at the end of your   |
| 92 |      | course in perugia you will have a transcript of |
| 93 |      | all you've studied/ and a certificate           |
| 94 | STUF | #ahm AFFIRMATIVE#                               |
| 95 | ADMF | of your degree                                  |
| 96 | STUF | alright =                                       |
| 97 | ADMF | = with the <b>laurea</b>                        |
| 98 | STUF | o[kay]  |

<sup>2</sup> MT indicates that the transcript is from the Maltese context. The line numbering in the conversation extracts reflects the original conversational sequence. That is, for example, in extract 1 above, 26 transcribed lines are present in the original transcription prior to the stage presented in this paper, which commences from line number 27. This procedure provides an indication of the stage of the whole conversation in which the instances presented in this paper have been uttered.

In the above Text 1-MT, the use of *per stranieri* [for foreigners]<sup>3</sup>, in line 31 of extract 1, is accompanied by paraverbal elements, namely an emphatic tone of voice with slightly rising intonation, of the university official as ACM (ADMF), who therefore sounds rather surprised and appreciative. Furthermore the ACM clearly wishes to give an indication to her interlocutor that she does possess some knowledge of Italian, even from this early stage of the interaction. In extract 2, line 97, the use of the term *laurea* [degree] denotes a desire to be clear and transparent in the use of a term which could be central to this conversation held at a university administration office.

#### **Text 1-IT<sup>4</sup>: Interaction university official (OPF) – university student (SM): first registration**

##### Extract 1<sup>5</sup>:

43 OPF allora per quanto qui s- tu sei al numero uno [qui ]  
 44 SM [sì sì]  
 45 OPF ti sei presentato stai \* **admission** insomma e [stai  
 cercando]  
 46 SM [eh sono come  
 47 ] linee guida [che ]  
 48 OPF [esatto] sono le linee [guida]  
 49 SM [sì ]

##### Extract 2<sup>6</sup>:

82 OPF [ora vedi ] lì ci sono ogni mese ehm diversi livelli  
 83 \*\* di eh corso di lingua **low medium high** o forse sono  
 84 arrivati a cinque non lo so \* e se ti interessa io te lo  
 85 consiglio perché tu parli molto bene l'italiano

##### Extract 3<sup>7</sup>:

47 SM [sì tutti] e due \*\*\* allora perugia \*\* ma non

<sup>3</sup> Items within square brackets [ ] in the text are the English translation of words or phrases quoted from the extracts.

<sup>4</sup> IT indicates that the transcript is from the Italian context.

<sup>5</sup> Translation:

OPF: so, even though here... you are at number 1, here

SM: yes, yes

OPF: you have come you are ... well admission and you are looking for

SM: eh they are like guidelines that...

OPF: exactly they are guidelines

SM: yes.

<sup>6</sup> Translation:

OPF: now see there are every month ehm different levels, of eh language courses low medium high or maybe they get to five I don't know, if it interests you I recommend it to you as you speak Italian very well.

<sup>7</sup> Translation:

SM: yes both of them, so Perugia, but I don't know the zip code.

48 so il **zip code**

Extract 4<sup>8</sup>:

60 OPF alla fine del tuo periodo qui il libretto sarà \*\* tutti  
 61 chiamano libretto verde ma in realtà è un li- è un foglio  
 62 blu comunque insomma ehm sarà il tuo **transcript of records**  
 63 cioè avrà sia i voti dei tuoi esami \* ehm il voto italiano/  
 64 e e sia il voto europeo un giorno o due prima di partire  
 65 tOrni con questo **transcript** da noi \* ti mettiamo il voto  
 66 europeo lo firmiamo lo datiamo ti diamo la **confirmation** hai  
 67 qualcosa da malta per il periodo per l'attestazione del  
 68 periodo ti hanno dato niente/

In the above extracts from the Italian context (Text 1-IT) we notice the use of English for isolated words (in bold) especially by the university official (extracts 1, 2, and 4). The AM student makes use of this strategy only once in extract 3. Curiously enough, in this case, he uses the American-English term *zip code*, despite the fact that the term *postal code*, with which AM is surely familiar (as he is an English-speaking Maltese national), provides a direct translation of its Italian corresponding term: *codice postale*.

A similar instance is present in the following transcript from the Maltese context, where it is the AM (patient, PATF) who code-switches:

#### **Text 2-MT: Interaction doctor (DOCF) – patient (PATF) in a clinic: clinical examination**

20 DO okay \* any serious operations or serious  
 CF  
 21 PA eh eh i don't know how you call it in \*  
 TF  
 22 english \*\* **vésicule**/ \* you say \* **vésicule**  
 23 you know  
 24 DO cysts/  
 CF  
 25 PA no \* its \* you have the liver \* and then  
 TF  
 26 you have the small which keeps the \* **bil** \*  
 27 DO yes \* the gall bladder  
 CF

In fact, as stated above, in Text 2-MT it is the AM (patient) rather than the ACM (doctor) to code-switch to her native French by using the scientific term *vésicule* (line 22: gall bladder). Though the doctor fails to understand, her disposition is positive, as she asks the patient whether her interpretation is correct: *cysts*/ (line 24). Through the

<sup>8</sup> Translation:

OPF: at the end of your period (of studies) here the booklet will be, everybody calls it green booklet, but in reality it is a ... blue sheet in any case well ehm it will be your transcript of records that is it will have your exam marks, the Italian mark and even the European mark one or two days before leaving come back to us with this transcript, we will insert the European mark we will sign it date it we will give you the confirmation do you have anything from Malta for the period (of studies) in order to certify the period (of studies) have they given you anything?

patient's ability of circumlocution (line 25-26: *you have the liver and then you have the small which keeps the bil*) and also through the use of the French term *bil*, which is similar to its equivalent form 'bile' in English, the doctor understands that the organ being referred to is the gall bladder.

### Repair instances

The general technical name for the processes through which we fix conversational problems (or, in some cases, nonproblems) is repair. [...] When the speaker who produced the trouble source (which is sometimes called the repairable) also produces the initiation or repair, we shall refer to it as self-initiation or self-repair; when some other participant does, we shall call it other-initiation or other-repair. [...] P produces the trouble source and marks it as problematic by breaking off after the first sound of a word. This is the self-initiation. Then P immediately produces what appears to be an alternative expression. This is a self-repair. [...] either type of initiation can result in either type of repair. (Nofsinger, 1991, pp. 124-125)

The following extracts exemplify instances of repair, as defined by Nofsinger (1991) above. When an ACM is dealing with a request of an AM, the former determines the linguistic competence of the AM (very often after only a few utterances) and proceeds to 'adjust' his/her discourse to a suitable 'foreigner talk', as will be discussed in section 5. The ACM, therefore, establishes the degree to which he/she should simplify, elaborate or reformulate, even at a stage in the conversation at which he/she does not possess much information about the AM.

The following example, presented in Text 3-MT, indicates how ACMs may be inclined to provide excessive amounts of information and how their own professional practice leads them to reformulate phrases, even in the absence of feedback from the AM signalling a possible trouble source:

### Text 3-MT: Interaction university official (ADMF) – university student (STUF): filling in an application

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70 ADMF      = ehm but with full time students you have to
71           fill in an application form
72 STUF      #ahem AFFIRMATIVE#
73 ADMF      okay * and you have to present * two passport
74           photos * <little photos>
75 STUF      yeah =
76 ADMF      = okay ehm a certificate of your ** academic **
77           certificates ehm sorry a copy *** of your
78           academic certificates ** you know ehm * when
79           you study you get a list of * subjects you
80           have been studying/
81 STUF      yeah [oh the] with the Exams you mean
82 ADMF      [and then] ** exactly
83 STUF      i done and =
84 ADMF      = it's called a transcript
85 STUF      alright
86 ADMF      okay
87 STUF      #aha AFFIRMATIVE#
88 ADMF      ehm you will get one at the end of your
89           erasmus stay

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90 STUF o[kay]  
 91 ADMF [also] \*\* ehm \* and then \* at the end of  
 92 your course in perugia you will have a  
 93 transcript of all you've studied/ and a  
 94 certificate  
 95 STUF #ahm AFFIRMATIVE#  
 96 ADMF of your degree  
 97 STUF alright =  
 98 ADMF = with the laurea  
 99 STUF o[kay]  
 100 ADMF [on it] \* okay so we will need a copy of that  
 101 \* certified \* so stamped \* and signed \* by \*  
 102 a notary or someone ehm \*\*\* who can do this  
 103 even the university \* [themselves] okay  
 104 STUF # [ahem ] \* ahem  
 105 AFFIRMATIVE# the sector you (...)  
 106 ADMF yes \* something like that =  
 107 STUF = #aha AFFIRMATIVE# =  
 108 ADMF = something like th- \*\* and then we would  
 109 need ehm english translations \* of these \*\*  
 110 STUF right =  
 111 ADMF = because okay we understand italian/ but it's  
 112 eh \*\* official/ \* so we need english them  
 113 translations/ and \* you will have to \* have  
 114 them translated/ \* and even those will have  
 115 to be stamped \*\* and signed

Within everyday communication between speakers sharing the same L1, conversational repair normally occurs when an interlocutor receives negative feedback. In the case of the above conversation, there are a number of instances where repair strategies are used by the ACM in order to emphasise or to repeat what is being stated. It is therefore a contextually-determined strategy which the ACM adopts to make sure that the person in front of her is being given a 'surplus' of information which should help the AM understand better what she is being told. Consequently in lines 73 and 74 *passport photos* are rephrased as *little photos*; in lines 78 and 79 *academic certificates* are reformulated as *list of subjects you have been studying*; and this is followed by a clear, emphatic statement in which the technical term *transcript* is introduced metacommunicatively (line 84: *it's called a transcript*). Also note how the AM uses affirmatives on six occasions (lines 85, 87, 90, 95, 97, 99) before the ACM concludes this part of her explanation and proceeds to another item. Another instance of elaboration is present from lines 108-115 when the ACM repeats the necessity of having documents translated into English. The situation illustrated above is a case in which the ACM adopts a series of repetitions and reformulations even though the AM (through repeated use of the affirmative) seems to have understood clearly what is required of her.

As illustrated in the following transcript (Text 4-MT), instances similar to the one described above may also occur in ACM-AM interactions when the ACM has enough evidence of an adequate linguistic competence of the AM:

**Text 4-MT: Interaction teacher (TCHF) – student (STUM): in a language school**

247 TCHF just to help you out because our brochure is  
 248 in English  
 249 STUM that's not [a problem/]  
 250 TCHF [but this is just to help you out  
 251 eh you know if there's something that you  
 252 don't really understand even though there are  
 253 beautiful pictures i'm sure you'll understand  
 254 \* your English seems to be of a good level  
 255 STUM hope so LAUGHS =  
 256 TCHF = yes you you seem to be doing really good \* so  
 257 \* eh you can have a look at it

This interaction occurs in an English language school and the ACM – a teacher of English – has already had ample evidence that the AM – a German student – does indeed comprehend English very well, as the ACM herself affirms in line 254. Yet, note how in line 247, while presenting the school brochure to the AM, the ACM emphasises the phrase *just to help you out*, which she repeats in line 250, despite being reassured by the AM who in line 3 states: *that's not a problem*.

In such cases, the very fact that ACMs are so ready to repeat, simplify, elaborate and reformulate even in conversational situations where repair instances are not necessary, shows that these strategies form part of what is considered to be 'normal' speech when addressing an AM, thereby constituting aspects of what we define as the conversational construction of the condition of being-a-foreigner. In the following transcript from an Italian conversation this emerges even more clearly:

**Text 2-IT<sup>9</sup>: Interaction public official (OPF) - citizen (CITM) at a local council: asking information of how to get an identity card**

1 CITM buonasera  
 2 OPF buonasera  
 3 CITM signora mi serviva hm far la carta di identità che devo fare/  
 4 OPF lei ha la residenza nel comune di perugia/  
 5 CITM sì

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<sup>9</sup> Translation:

CITM: good evening

OPF: good evening

CITM: madam I require hm the identity card that I must do

OPF: do you reside in the locality of Perugia?

CITM: yes

OPF: therefore you must bring along... your permit of stay or your sojourn card together with your passport

CITM: mh I need time to have

OPF: after the registration of personal details you will need about one month... about one month the policeman has to come to verify your residence status...after which he will provide us with an answer...and we will immediately write it down in the registry... just after this you will be able to apply for your identity card

CITM: ok thanks

OPF: don't mention it.

6 OPF quindi deve produrre \* il permesso di soggiorno o la carta di  
 7 soggiorno insieme al suo passaporto  
 8 CITM (mh) \* mi ci vuole del tempo per avere/ =  
 9 OPF = dopo l'iscrizione anagrafica le occorrerà circa un mese  
 10 (em-) // un mese circa deve venire il vigile a verificare la  
 11 sua residenza \* dopodiché ci porta la risposta \* e  
 12 immediatamente la trascriviamo all'anagrafe \* poco dopo può  
 13 fare la carta di identità  
 14 CITM va bene grazie =  
 15 OPF = prego

The clerk asks for the AMs permit of stay: *quindi deve produrre \* il permesso di soggiorno o la carta di soggiorno* (lines 6-7: [so you must bring along... your permit of stay or your sojourn card]), taking for granted that the man, who has dark brown skin, is an AM (line 6: *quindi* [so]), without asking whether he might be an Italian citizen or have Italian citizenship. This assumption leads the clerk to foresee a trouble source: she assumes that the interlocutor will not understand the expression *iscrizione anagrafica* (line 9: [registration of personal details]), therefore operating a repair through reformulation which leads to an over-abundance of information: *deve venire il vigile a verificare la sua residenza \* dopodiché ci porta la risposta \* e immediatamente la trascriviamo all'anagrafe* (lines 10-12: [the policeman has to come to verify your residence status...after which he will provide us with an answer...and we will immediately write it down in the registry]).

### Paraverbal and non-verbal elements

Paraverbal and non-verbal elements in ACM-AM interactions in bureaucratic-institutional settings play a fundamental role. In a number of cases recorded as part of the data collection of the SPICES Project, the AMs filled in forms and ACMs followed the procedure closely. The latter often read out the statements in the form and pointed to the line in the form which the AM was required to fill in.

Paraverbal elements included slowing down the speed of the conversation, whenever the ACM became aware that the content of the conversation could be especially technical or particularly important. Frequent changes in emphasis and in volume were also registered. In several cases we noticed that ACMs would raise the volume of their voice whenever they thought or perceived that an AM did not comprehend what was being said. This, however, does not always lead to better comprehension, as AMs may feel intimidated or even humiliated in such instances.

Non-verbal elements are also central within such conversations, and are seemingly much more emphatic than they normally are when speakers who share the same L1 interact. For example, in Text 3-MT, presented above, the ACM moves her thumb and index finger close to one another when she refers to passport photos (lines 73 & 74), and actually mimes the action of 'stamping' on two separate occasions by punching her clenched fist on her table when she utters the words in line 101 and 115. These instances exemplify how, during ACM-AM conversation, parts of the conversation may be simulated by the ACM who gesticulates in order to illustrate his/her words more clearly.

## Discussion

The concept of 'conversation' underlying this paper refers to naturally occurring interactions regardless of whether it concerns ordinary, everyday conversations or institutional talk (Nofsinger, 1991, pp. 105-107). "Conversation is clearly the prototypical kind of language usage, the form in which we are all first exposed to language – the matrix for language acquisition" (Levinson, 1983, p. 284). Conversation is a primary form of interaction in which the members of a society follow a number of rules and conversational sequences which are highly structured (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1978; Schenkein, 1978). Therefore, the type of verbal interaction we consider as relevant in our case is the institutional talk within the 'relational pair' (Sacks, 1992, p. 326) AM-ACM, which in traditional terms would refer respectively to the 'foreigner' and the 'native'. As seen in the extracts presented in the previous of this paper, conversations between AM-ACM are different from conversations that occur between individuals who share a common cultural upbringing. This leads to instances where certain issues, which are often taken for granted in ordinary everyday conversations, could be the source of 'trouble': this situation, which is evident in both the Italian and Maltese contexts examined in this paper, can be attenuated if both ACMs and AMs are made aware of the complex nature of communication. That is why the SPICES Project (Klein et al, 2007) is specifically aimed at providing skills and educational tools which can help AMs and ACMs gain familiarity with the dynamics of conversation and the cultural facets that underlie interactions between two or more individuals.

Ferguson (1971), through the notion of 'foreigner talk', had already outlined different linguistic features used by natives when addressing foreigners. Initially this term was used to refer to ungrammatical speech; however, as stated by Ellis (1994, p. 288), over the course of time, 'foreigner talk' has been used as a general term referring to various features of modified speech that 'natives' use when addressing 'non-natives', including paraverbal and non-verbal features. Wooldridge (2001) provides a comprehensive overview of research on foreigner talk and focuses also on reasons why native speakers resort to this strategy:

Research suggests that some of the speech simplification strategies used in foreigner talk do aid in non-native speakers' comprehension. Such strategies include: (1) basic and syntactically neutral vocabulary; (2) simple syntactic pattern of short sentences with present tense, indicative, verbs and the reduction of reduced sounds; (3) a slower rate of delivery; (4) concretizations; (5) gesticulations and simulating the event as it is described; and (6) repetition. (Wooldridge 2001, p. 630)

Therefore, foreigner talk is not only a matter of language, such as lexical choice and morphosyntactic formulation, but also a matter of discourse construction and conversationally managed interaction. This is evident in the case studies presented in this paper in which a number of characteristics associated with foreigner talk emerge. It follows that AM-ACM interactions are conditioned by a number of expectations, preconceptions and even prejudices which are only reinforced or denied once the interaction unfolds.

In the case studies represented in the previous section, the general presupposition of all ACMs is that AMs do not possess their same linguistic competence of the

context language. Thus, the isolated use of terms in the AM's first language is a type of conversational code-switching through which one constructs the condition of being-a-foreigner. However, even someone who feels that he/she is in the condition of being-a-foreigner may construct him/herself as such. Therefore, we may distinguish between a conversational self-construction and a conversational other-construction of being-a-foreigner. In the cases presented above, the other-construction is more frequent. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that this conversational strategy is not necessarily considered as negative: sometimes, the conversational other-construction of being-a-foreigner is used as a means to facilitate communication and, possibly, to create a situation in which the AM can feel more comfortable. It is therefore a strategy which one may use in order to 'disentangle' the interaction thereby rendering it less complex.

Another major feature which determines the conversational construction of being-a-foreigner regards the manner in which ACMs address AMs: the notion of foreigner talk referred to above is central in this respect, as ACMs are often inclined to reformulate, simplify or elaborate concepts in order to facilitate communication. These strategies at times may be conducive to resolve a trouble source and are thus also present when repair is necessary in a conversation. Within bureaucratic-institutional settings such repair instances are frequent and are often related to the technical or specific nature of the requests which are formulated in these contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Various discourse techniques and procedures within a conversation can serve the purpose of categorisation of social traits, thereby including or excluding participants (Klein & Paoletti, 2002). Within institutional and bureaucratic settings these traits can be particularly crucial and, despite being so subtle, they may determine the course of an interaction independently of the intentions of the participants. This occurs because, when an individual requires information from an institution, he/she has to face an official with whom he/she is not familiar and who may be working under pressure. Furthermore, the client may be unsure of the information required, which forms he/she ought to fill in or which procedures he/she is expected to follow. In these settings the knowledge of a common language is often seen as indispensable. However, even in the presence of a common language, there is the risk of misinterpretations and, at times, the complex nature of bureaucratic procedures may cause difficulties. Of course, the absence of a common verbal code renders communication even more problematic, more so when the interaction occurs between an ACM official and an AM client who may have different cultural backgrounds.

Within bureaucratic-institutional settings, as revealed by the SPICES Project, situations similar to those presented in the introductory paragraphs of this paper are very likely to occur. The very nature of such conversations, their intensity and dynamism, makes it problematic to classify the different phenomena that emerge. Due to the complexity of the settings, in this paper we based our reflections on some case studies and generalisation of our results and considerations require further investigation.

The very nature of ACM-AM conversations in bureaucratic-institutional settings is subject to a series of conditions. First of all, one must consider that in certain

situations an ACM may be working under pressure and therefore may not be in a situation in which he/she can dedicate an unlimited amount of time in order to satisfy an AM's request. Secondly, if the ACM-AM share a common verbal code, communication may occur effectively even though the risk of miscommunication and misinterpretation can never be ignored. Thirdly, the presence of an adequately qualified interpreter, or of a cultural mediator, may indeed facilitate the interaction without, nevertheless, resolving the complex issue of integration and active citizenship. Finally, intercultural awareness and expertise from the side of both ACM and AM can be an essential component for successful communication. ACMs must gain awareness of the fact that certain communicative strategies can be the result of repeated and taken-for-granted practices. This occurs especially in administrative-bureaucratic institutions which are set in large cities in which ACM-AM interactions are very much conditioned by run-of-the-mill procedures.

Even the visual impact of the AM, particularly his/her physical characteristics, may condition the interaction, especially during its initial stages. In certain situations, a person who in the eyes of the ACM possesses clearly 'foreign' features is immediately considered to be a person who does not possess a native-like linguistic competence. These considerations do not arise when the AM is not physically different to individuals who form part of the ACMs social network, unless the AM immediately manifests a limited linguistic competence.

In both contexts examined, Perugia and Malta, we have seen that bureaucratic-institutional settings do indeed represent an interesting snapshot of intercultural encounters. Conversation with AMs is inevitably conditioned by a set of thoughts, feelings and actions which are determined by the very nature of the interactants involved in such situations. ACMs will normally regulate their intervention according to the way they are used to constructing conversationally the AM. Deconstruction will only occur as the conversation proceeds and depends largely on whether both ACM and AM have the skills in order to negotiate and to understand one another reciprocally.

It must be pointed out that the data presented in this paper are all characterised by a positive predisposition of all participants. This, of course, may not necessarily be the case in real-life interactions in institutional-bureaucratic settings. However, the very fact that in the extracts provided above it is the positive predisposition of both the AMs and ACMs that leads to a degree of successful communication, proves how important it is to create a setting in which both sides feel at ease in order to avoid communication breakdown.

In the light of the above, it is also necessary to highlight the fact that in both contexts under study, the recent influx of AMs requires a number of measures within the educational sphere. Schools in Italy over the past years have become increasingly multicultural and multilingual (Favaro & Demetrio, 2004; and Favaro & Fumagalli, 2004), and the situation in Malta is also, albeit more gradually, undergoing a similar process so that the need to address diversity in the classroom is becoming extremely pressing (Bartolo, Mol Lous & Hofsäss, 2007). Many teachers are therefore effectively ACMs, and one must question whether they are prepared to face the implications that this role carries, an issue already under study in Sercu (2005) and in Caruana (in preparation). Furthermore, within the school network even students

themselves are ACMs, and this consideration should suffice to indicate the central role that intercultural education ought to have within schooling systems.

Developing or enhancing one's skills in ICC may not necessarily or solely depend on attending courses offering formal training. These skills may also be acquired through non-formal and informal learning instances, for example at institutional workplaces and during ordinary everyday interactions. As described in the SPICES Guidelines (Klein et al. 2007), one possible learning strategy regards developing a personal attitude to self- and other-observation. In an intercultural encounter, in order to learn how to observe others and oneself, it is crucial to focus on certain communication practices displayed either by ACMs or by AMs, just as occurred when analysing the data presented in this paper. This may also be done by using the observation grid in Box 1, and by indicating whether attitudes, reactions and behaviour of ACMs and AMs is favourable, unfavourable or neutral.

**Box 1: Observation grid for evaluating AM and ACM behaviour**

(From the SPICES Guidelines, Klein et al. 2007, p. 153)

| <b>Observation patterns</b>    | <b>ACM</b> | <b>AM</b> |
|--------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| attitude towards the other     |            |           |
| showing willingness to listen  |            |           |
| showing willingness to explain |            |           |
| patience                       |            |           |
| friendliness                   |            |           |
| verbal communication           |            |           |
| paraverbal communication       |            |           |
| nonverbal communication        |            |           |
| visual communication           |            |           |
| opening the conversation       |            |           |
| closing the conversation       |            |           |
| setting                        |            |           |

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## Appendix: Conventions used in transcripts

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| (xxx)            | utterance that cannot be heard clearly (within brackets)  |
| (...)            | utterance which cannot be understood  |
| xxx-             | incomplete word   |
| <b>xxxx</b>      | words uttered in a different language than the current one  |
| * - ** - ***     | short – medium – long pause   |
| xxxxxx =         | no pause in turn taking   |
| = xxxxxxxxxxxx   |   |
| [xxxxxx]         | overlapping utterances  |
| //               | re-planning of sentence/discourse structure   |
| xxxxxxx <u>x</u> | sound lengthening (letter underlined)   |
| xxXxx            | sound emphasised (capital letter)   |
| /                | rising intonation   |
| <xxxxxxx>        | speech with remarkable lower volume   |
| #COMM xxx xxx#   | COMMENT regarding the situation or the speech production itself   |
| F / M            | at the end of the speaker's identification code: female (woman) / male (man); e.g. OPF stands for a female official |