

From “foreigner” to person with a migratory background. A reflection to educate ourselves towards more inclusive language

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Abstract: The migratory phenomenon has profoundly altered Italian society (and beyond), making the concept of the “foreigner” increasingly central. However, today it is no longer sufficient to label someone as a “foreigner” to describe their condition. The language we use to discuss migration is continuously evolving, to move beyond reductive labels and to highlight the complex identities that define individuals. The words we employ not only reflect but also influence our perceptions, shaping social, cultural, and political dynamics. In an increasingly interconnected world, inclusive language is crucial to combating stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. It is not merely a matter of choosing the most appropriate terms, such as “person with a migratory background”, but of adopting communication that promotes respect and inclusion, challenging old narratives and fostering new perspectives. In this way, integration is encouraged as a bidirectional process that enriches both sides: those who welcome and those who are welcomed. Today’s challenge, particularly for education professionals, is to reconsider categories of thought and overcome the barriers that divide us. Only by building a culture that values diversity as a resource can we face the challenges of a plural society, creating a community that celebrates differences and recognizes the importance of every story and identity.

Keywords: in-betweenness; foreigner; migration; background; language.

1. The “foreigner” in mass communication

“Failing to think the *Other*,
one constructs the *Foreigner*”
(Augè 2007, p. 64)



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The experience of migration is intrinsic to the history of humanity, yet it becomes more prominent with the advent of globalisation, a phenomenon that diminishes borders and increases connectivity between peoples, cultures, and economies. Globalisation has accelerated migratory flows, giving rise to mobility dynamics that, while deeply rooted in history, are today assuming an increasingly significant relevance.

In particular, foreign immigration to Italy represents a long-standing phenomenon, with roots going back at least fifty years. However, it is only with the dawn of the new millennium that it has gained substantial importance, transforming the social and cultural context of the country into an increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural

reality (S. Castels & M. J. Miller, 2012; Cesareo, 2015; Strozza, 2021; Caritas Italiana and Fondazione Migrantes, 2024).

The figure of the “foreigner” serves as a lens through which to observe, in an amplified manner, the human condition: it reveals, on one hand, inclusion within a community, and on the other, the limits and contradictions of such belonging. In this context, the “foreigner” is not merely an individual arriving from another country, but a presence that challenges pre-existing identity structures and compels society to confront its vulnerabilities. As Zolberg (1981) states, migrants are an emblematic element, both domestic and international, in the reflection of the state of reception, particularly concerning issues of citizenship, migratory networks, and the management of refugees. Bauman, in his analysis of modern society, which he defines as “liquid”, observes that identities have become increasingly fragile and flexible, much like the boundaries between “us” and “them” (2000). The global society, in constant transformation, faces a growing mobility of people and ideas, undermining fixed and static definitions of identity. From this perspective, the “foreigner” is not merely an “alien” figure, but an agent of transformation, an element that destabilises and renews social and cultural structures.

To analyse the figure of the “foreigner”, it is crucial to begin with an in-depth examination of the etymological meaning of the term “foreigner”, as a thorough reflection requires a shared understanding of the terms in use. As Rorty (1989) emphasises, knowledge of the world is intrinsically mediated by language, which influences its representation and limits its objectivity. From an etymological perspective, the term “foreigner” is defined as:

«[Der. from Latin *extraneus* 'strange, external'; cf. Old French *estrangier*, derived from *estranger* 'foreign']. – 1. a. Of other countries, of other nations: [...] Specifically, referring to a person who, by citizenship, belongs to a foreign state but enjoys the civil rights granted to citizens of the state, subject to reciprocity and in accordance with laws contained in special regulations [...] b. With a hostile connotation, alluding to enemy populations or those otherwise opposed and hated [...]. 2. adj., literary. Alien: to feel foreign in one's homeland, in one's own house» (Treccani, online dictionary).

This semantic root highlights a conceptual and physical distance, a characteristic that has taken on different connotations over the centuries (Malagnini, 2022). For the ancient Greeks, for example, *hostis* did not represent an enemy, but a figure linked to relationships of reciprocity and obligation: «It is a figure with whom I share a relationship that is not one of hostility, but of compensation, in the sense that I am obliged to repay something I have received» (Curi, 2010, p. 59). This perspective, far removed from the “negative” connotation often attributed to the term in today's world, highlights how the meaning of the “foreigner” has evolved over time, often focusing on what separates them from the norm, rather than on their potential. In contemporary imagination, the figure of the “foreigner” is often associated with connotations of threatening otherness, which emphasise cultural and social distance. However, this perception is but one aspect of a more complex condition. The marginalisation of the “foreigner” is, in fact, closely tied to their position in relation to the community. As De Simone (2016) observes, hostility towards the other becomes a tool for defining their role and delineating the boundaries of society, placing them in a liminal position, between the inside and the outside. Thus, the “foreigner” is not merely excluded, but also included in paradoxical ways that make them an indispensable element of the identity process.

Homi K. Bhabha, in his postcolonial reflection, explores the concepts of “liminality” and “in-betweenness”, suggesting that the “foreigner” is never entirely inside or outside, but exists in a state of “in-between”, of constant uncertainty and negotiation (Bhabha, 1994). This state of liminality allows the “other” to challenge the rigidities of identity and introduce a new kind of dynamism into society. The “foreigner’s” liminal position is never static, but continuously transforms through interaction with the dominant culture, in a process of “hybridisation” that leads to the fusion of elements and meanings. The other is not only someone who differs from us, but also someone who contributes, alongside us, to the reconstruction of a new understanding of the world.

Therefore, the ambivalence of the “foreigner’s” figure emerges as one of the most relevant aspects for understanding today’s social dynamics. It destabilises identity certainties, but at the same time offers an opportunity for renewal. As Curi (2010) highlights, «closure responds to the community’s need to preserve itself unaltered to safeguard its identity, while openness responds to the need for renewal» (p. 85). The other, in this sense, is both a threat and a resource: a presence that compels the community to confront its vulnerabilities and continually redefine itself.

In an increasingly global and interconnected society, the dichotomy between exclusion and inclusion, between proximity and distance, proves essential for interpreting the challenges posed by immigration and cultural diversity. The “foreigner”, far from being a marginal figure, represents a structural element, capable of profoundly transforming the social and cultural fabric.

Why, then, should we not question the terms with which we define the other? In an ever more fluid and interconnected world, the risk is that the categories of “foreigner” and “other” remain anchored in outdated definitions, unable to capture the richness and complexity of contemporary identities. The real challenge lies not only in integrating the “foreigner”, but in questioning our own categories of thought, to open spaces for authentic encounters (Fiorucci & Crescenza, 2024), which are not conditioned by fear and estrangement, but guided by the awareness of our global interconnectedness.

2. Not just “foreigners”, but *people with a migratory background*

The previous reflections raise a crucial question for the social sciences, particularly for educational sciences: *how do language and, specifically, the terms used to describe the other, influence perception and relational dynamics?* There is a growing need for a lexical change, especially in those fields driven by the desire to promote intercultural dialogue and inclusion, such as educational and training contexts.

In an increasingly globalised world, where the “foreigner” becomes part of the daily Western experience, their figure transforms: from an unusual element, often stereotyped through images and narratives, it becomes a familiar, everyday presence encountered regularly. However, the frequency of such encounters risks reducing the other to a background entity, an assumed presence. As Colombo (1999) emphasises, «the density of encounters fosters cognitive distance» (p. 106), contributing to a perception of superficiality that hinders a deep understanding of differences.

Terms like “foreigner”, “migrant”, or “non-native”, often used in migration statistics, are inadequate to capture the complexity of the demographic and cultural profiles that make up a society shaped by extensive and prolonged migration phenomena. A significant example is provided by the Glossary on Asylum and Migration

(2016), which defines the “foreigner” as «a person who does not have the citizenship (by birth or acquisition) of a specific state» (p. 150). This terminology, while still widespread, has been progressively replaced, at least at the European institutional level, with expressions such as “person with a migratory background”, understood as

«a person who has: (a) migrated into their present country of residence; and/or (b) previously had a different nationality from their present country of residence; and/or (c) at least one of their parents previously entered their present country of residence as a migrant» (European Commission).

This linguistic transition represents a fundamental shift, especially for those working in education. Poulain (2008) highlights how the various variables describing this population segment - such as country of origin or year of immigration - play a central role in statistical analysis. These elements allow for the drawing of demographic profiles and the identification of significant trends and patterns in migratory flows, facilitating an understanding of their social, economic, and cultural implications. However, despite the importance of these factors, it is essential to underline that statistical analysis alone is not sufficient to fully comprehend the complexities and challenges of migration, and it is necessary to integrate this data with a broader approach that also considers cultural, identity, and relational aspects. In particular, the evolution of language and the narrative of such phenomena can directly influence public perceptions, helping to reduce stereotypes and prejudices and promoting a richer intercultural dialogue.

In this context, inclusive language is not merely a tool for communication, but assumes a crucial role as a vehicle for social transformation. It becomes a pedagogical intervention that stimulates critical reflection on pre-existing social and cultural categories, fostering the emergence of new modes of understanding and interaction. Adopting language that recognises and values the plurality of migratory experiences, highlighting their complexity and interconnectedness, is an essential step towards guiding society towards a greater awareness of global dynamics. Such an approach not only facilitates a more equitable and respectful representation of individuals, but also contributes to challenging exclusionary logics).

3. A “challenge” for education professionals

According to Tabboni (2006), individuals tend to identify more deeply with their own culture, group, or tradition, whether it be ethnic, national, class-based, or related to a specific social group. The author states that:

«Humans identify weakly with humanity in general, while strongly identifying with a culture, group, or tradition, whether ethnic, national, class-based, or otherwise. [...] Beyond their own culture lie the others, whose encounter provokes strong emotions, and whose processing results in a mixture of disdain and admiration» (Tabboni, 2006, p. 16).

This passage highlights the complexity and sensitivity of intercultural relations, which are not limited to a simple encounter of differences but involve deep emotional and cognitive processes that can generate both curiosity and fear toward the other

(Portera, 2024; 2020). Therefore, in an increasingly interconnected and pluralistic social context, where the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills is essential to addressing contemporary educational challenges, it is crucial to reflect on the training of educators, orienting it not only toward the transmission of technical knowledge but also toward preparing them to manage the complexities of intercultural dynamics (Portera, 2023; Fiorucci, 2020). The preparation of education professionals must include the importance of navigating the complex cultural dynamics that characterise contemporary societies. In this scenario, linguistic competence is not merely a means of communication but becomes a powerful tool for managing cultural differences. Attention to the use of inclusive and respectful language is fundamental, as it can directly impact the way others are perceived, stimulating intercultural exchange, promoting inclusion, and helping to reduce stereotypes and prejudices (Cotesta, 2001; Martin & Nakayama, 2015). Educators, therefore, must develop a critical and reflective awareness of their professional language and the communicative practices adopted in the various contexts in which they operate, as well as in the management of relational dynamics, both individual and group-based. Conscious reflection on how words, expressions, and categorisations influence relational dynamics is a crucial step toward an effective inclusion process (Poulain, 2008). Indeed, adopting a more careful and inclusive language not only helps reduce prejudice but can also act as a catalyst for empathy, mutual understanding, recognition, and personal reflection on one's own biases and beliefs (De Simone, 2016). Moreover, training should focus on developing a pedagogical approach that values cultural diversity as a resource. Culture is not a homogeneous and static entity but a fluid and evolving context, where:

«“Living together” somewhere means nonetheless recognising the other in their difference [...] Each one sees themselves in the other, and everyone sees through the other. This principle of reciprocity, which permeates society [...] implies conflict in relationships of proximity» (De Simone, 2016, p. 68).

Recognising the other in their differences is essential in a plural society such as ours. In this process, reciprocity in social relationships inevitably implies conflict, but also opportunities for mutual enrichment and exchange. This also encourages reflection on the very concept of “person”, which is particularly meaningful from a pedagogical perspective, as it places the individual at the centre, recognising their value precisely as a person. Where

«being a person transcends the single individual bound by time and space: it is a multiple and multiform presence, and a shared human destiny. The concept of person is complex and systemic, as it sees both individuality and the tension toward universal belonging to the human species as co-present” (Pavone, 2004, p. 19).

This dynamic and relational understanding of the person invites us to rethink our relationship with the other, particularly with the “foreigner”, not as an alien or marginal figure, but as an essential part of our human community.

The person is

«a presence oriented toward the world and others, without limits, intertwined with them in a perspective of universality. Other people do not limit them; rather, they enable them to be and develop. They exist only in relation to others, only knowing themselves through others, finding themselves only in others. The first experience of the person is the experience of the second person: the 'you', and thus the 'we' comes before the 'I', or at least accompanies it» (Mounier, 2004, p. 60).

In this context, the figure of the “foreigner” is no longer a marginal or temporary element, but a person who, as such, is a central subject in contemporary society. It is not a presence to be eliminated or assimilated, but one that must, on the contrary, be recognised and accepted as an integral part of a society in continuous evolution. The challenge for educators, therefore, does not lie in attempting to resolve differences but in knowing how to value them, allowing oneself to be interrogated by them.

4. Conclusions

We find ourselves today immersed in a historical period where proximity to the “foreigner” has become an increasingly concrete reality, both within educational contexts and beyond. It has become a driving force for change, leading to continuous shifts in the identity and relational configurations of contemporary societies. The growing variety of social groups could, in theory, foster the integration of diverse values, beliefs, and traditions, contributing to the construction of a more pluralistic and inclusive society. However, this process of integration is far from linear, as it requires a profound transformation of the social, cultural, and political structures that currently govern our interactions (Bauman, 2000). Confronting diversity involves the need to constantly renegotiate identity, belonging, and the rules of coexistence.

In this context, the presence of difference, embodied by the figure of the “foreigner”, assumes a central role. As Burgazzoli (1998) points out, the “foreigner” represents «the one who forces society to redefine itself incessantly» (p. 70). The very existence of the “foreigner” implies an alteration of the status quo, a destabilisation that is not necessarily negative, but one that encourages society to confront its own identity and to constantly revise its cultural, political, and social practices. The introduction of difference thus becomes a motor for change, an opportunity to reflect on how the boundaries between “us” and “them” are defined, and to question the implications of coexistence between different cultures. This is no longer merely the result of reception policies but a constitutive condition of social reality (Hall, 1997; Zoletto, 2024).

However, the question that arises is: *in a society now configured as a heterogeneous and multicultural mosaic, is it still useful to speak of the “foreigner” (even in education)?* This question raises crucial reflections on the evolution of the concepts of belonging and otherness. *If society is made up of multiple cultures that intersect and merge into a single, complex reality, does the very notion of “foreigner” risk becoming anachronistic, if not misleading?*

Faced with this growing interconnection between cultures, the concept of “foreigner” may lose its validity as a separating and dichotomous identification. The real challenge, then, lies elsewhere. As Colombo (1999) asserts, those who are “foreigners”, people with a migratory background, «have gained spaces for expression, opportunities for intervention, places of power that allow them to advance alternative discourses, to tell the story differently, or to tell other stories» (p. 195). This change in narrative and visibility is not only a matter of access to institutions or the media, but

concerns the possibility of redefining the power and discourse structures that, historically, have excluded certain voices. Only through a deconstruction of the discourse on the “Other” will it be possible to dismantle the ideological cages that have forced us to see in the “Other” only what is lacking in “us”. Authentic emancipation, in fact, consists of recognising that otherness is not a concept that defines us in opposition but an essential component of our very identity.

«The urgent task is above all to help the individual perceive themselves as a multiple identity, while also helping them perceive others as equally multiple identities. Only this game of mutual recognitions, in oneself and in others, can bring out new ideas of community and citizenship (at all levels: from the local to the global)» (Bocchi & Ceruti, 2004, p. 12).

In other words, the “foreigner” is no longer to be conceived as a separate entity, but as an integral part of an increasingly connected and shared world. Their presence offers us opportunities for growth, in terms of language, identity, and beyond.

Considering these reflections, the educational challenge today is to promote a vision of otherness not as a threat, but as an opportunity for mutual enrichment. Our ability to evolve as a society depends on our willingness to overcome the barriers that separate us, to build together a new form of citizenship where diversity is never a hindrance but a resource (Banks, 2015). Only in this way, through the valorisation of differences and the promotion of an inclusive vision - further supported by a language increasingly capable of valuing the other, regardless of their migratory background - will it be possible to face the challenges of globalisation, building a community that is not a monolith, but a collection of voices and experiences intertwining to shape a reality that is increasingly pluralistic, fraternal, and human.

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