



International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rbeb20

Speeding up, slowing down. Language, temporality and the constitution of migrant workers as labour force

Alfonso Del Percio

To cite this article: Alfonso Del Percio (2023) Speeding up, slowing down. Language, temporality and the constitution of migrant workers as labour force, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 26:10, 1197-1209, DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2021.1954386](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2021.1954386)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2021.1954386>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 26 Jul 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1458



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)



Speeding up, slowing down. Language, temporality and the constitution of migrant workers as labour force

Alfonso Del Percio

UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article offers an original ethnographic documentation of employability schemes targeting migrants in contemporary Italy. It argues that analysts' current theorisations of time and space compression do not help us understand the multiple temporalities that migrants are subjected to when crossing borders, including those of labour market regimes. This ethnographic account is informed by a scholarship of migration that has extensively documented how the acceleration of movement and access to language, citizenship or work co-exist with experiences of waiting, elongation, withdrawal and delay – processes that complicate our understanding of the temporal regimes migrants are subjected to. Through a thick documentation of the experiences of unemployed migrants, job counsellors and other social actors in employability programmes in Rome, this article argues that both speeding up and slowing down are technologies of temporal management, including time–space compression, elongation and partitioning. These technologies regulate the time and speed of migrants' incorporation into the labour market and allow the performance of processes of differential inclusion.

KEYWORDS

Language; speed; labour; differential inclusion; migration

Introduction

Social analysts argue that speed is a distinctive feature of the current economic moment (Rosa 2009). Harvey (1989), for example, notes that contemporary developments in capitalism have led to the speeding up of capital circulation and social life in general, reducing the significance of space. Castels (1998) notes that what Harvey calls 'time–space compression' is facilitated by advances in communication technologies and increasing flexibilisation of production. Vostal (2016), drawing on Marx's (1967) idea of 'annihilation of time and space', adds that the principles of accumulation and competition, defining features of contemporary capitalism, integrate acceleration as a condition of production. The ability to shorten production cycles, Vostal (2016) clarifies, allows a reduction in turnover times and becomes a competitive advantage determining the rates of profit and accumulation. Drawing on Heidegger's (1993) critique of technology, Massey (1994) explains that 'space–time compression' does not affect production only, but also social relations more generally. Time–space compression contributes to the merger of cultures and communities and shifts ideas of identity and history. The cultural analyst Virilio (1977) concludes that more than being a feature of contemporary capitalism, speed is the primary force shaping civilisation. He describes velocity as the hidden side of wealth and power: a determining factor of societal structures.

CONTACT Alfonso Del Percio  a.percio@ucl.ac.uk

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

This article is part of a larger engagement of applied linguistics with the social theorisation of speed (see other contributions in this issue). It aims to advance scholarly understanding of the ways speed – or as I will argue, different regimes of temporality – intersect with language investments for employment and employability in contemporary Italy. My analysis offers an ethnographic documentation of employability schemes targeting migrants with data that I collected in Italy in 2014–2017. Based on this ethnographic data (Heller, Pietikainen, and Pujolar 2017), including observations of work practices and counselling activities, formal and informal conversations and collected policy documents, I argue that analysts' theorisations of time and space, in its current compression, do not help us to understand the multiple temporalities that migrants are subjected to when crossing borders of all sorts, such as those of labour market regimes. Nor do they allow us to explore how these temporalities are made sense of and reacted to. My account is informed by a migration scholarship that has extensively documented how the acceleration of movement and access to language, citizenship and work co-exist with experiences of waiting, elongation, withdrawal and delay: processes that complicate our understanding of the temporal regimes that migrants are subjected to (Codó and Garrido 2014; Yeung and Flubacher 2016). Through a thick documentation of the experiences of unemployed migrants, job counsellors and other social actors I encountered in employability programmes in Rome, Italy – and especially of their investments, reasoning and speculation around language learning (Duchêne and Daveluy 2015) and access to employment (Flubacher, Coray, and Duchêne 2017) – I argue that both speeding up and slowing down are technologies of temporal management, including time–space compression, elongation and partitioning. These technologies regulate the time and speed, or rhythm and intensity, of migrants into the workforce and allow the performance of what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) have come to call processes of differential inclusion. This is the idea that migrants' movement into the labour market is subjected to varying degrees of subordination, rule, discrimination and segmentation that are mediated by various apparatuses of government and governmentality harbouring a multiplicity of times, temporal practices, intensities and rhythms.

My analysis is structured in three parts: In the first analytical section, I offer an ethnographic account documenting the multiple temporalities underpinning migrants' incorporation into the labour market. I demonstrate how these temporalities lead to clashing understandings of how, when and why to invest in language learning for employment. In sections two and three I present two ways that counsellors guide migrants in their attempts to navigate these temporal regimes –ways that allow them to both invest in and manipulate time to satisfy their need for employment and professional integration. I then argue that time and space do not simply happen to people; rather, people can make sense of and dialectically engage with time and space. People's ability to do so is, of course, framed under specific circumstances. It is specifically this interplay that needs to be investigated.

Language learning, temporality and differential inclusion

The job centre in Tor Sapienza, one of Rome's poorest peripheries, is overcrowded. I am sitting next to Umberto who is one of three counsellors. He explains that after the summer season is over many workers find themselves unemployed. Sitting next to him allowed me to document interactions between him and the migrants, to understand the logics regulating this brokering activity and to make sense of the strategies he deployed to manage migrants' anxieties and expectations. Umberto is an experienced counsellor. He served under several different political city administrations and is now leading this job centre whose governmental mandate is to promote the professional integration of migrants, especially asylum seekers from Northern and sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. The different job centres in the city are organised in a way that separates migrant job seekers (who are served by the job centre in Tor Sapienza) from so-called Italian job seekers who use the services of job centres located in their own neighbourhoods. Local authorities justify this division by referring to the distinctive guidance and support needed by the migrant workforce, as

described by the national and EU bodies that fund the centres. This division is also a result of the specific labour legislation that migrants are subjected to in Italy, especially the regulations connecting migrants' transient status as citizens and the economy's fluctuating demands for labour.

On that day, between nine and eleven in the morning, we had already talked to five individuals. The routine was always the same. 'Take a seat brother', greeted Umberto. Umberto asked them to grab one of the two seats in front of us and to talk to him about their issues. He typed their personal information in the centre's database. 'How is your Italian?' Umberto mechanically repeated. The centre had recently received some money from a European fund to pay for language lessons for non-European migrant workers. The idea, Umberto explained, was that they would spend the winter months attending these language classes while waiting for spring and summer to bring employment. 'The winter season is difficult for people working in agriculture or construction' he kept repeating when talking to me.

While documenting interactions between Umberto and these individuals, I was continually surprised by the smoothness and speed of this process. Migrants came to ask for a job, but most of them left instead with a leaflet containing the address and time of their first language lesson. Umberto explained that many of them had learned that improving their Italian was the right thing to do. 'It will help them to find a better job', he confirmed. This is also the type of discourse I documented when talking to migrants. 'Yes, Italian is crucial', they kept repeating. They say it allows migrants to raise their levels of employability. To display professionalism. Amadou did not agree. Umberto was rolling a cigarette when the young man approached the desk. 'I need a job'. 'Please help me, I need a job', Amadou insisted. Umberto pointed to the walls outside in the corridors and asked Amadou if he had found something that would suit him. Along with the notion of 'activation' that underpins employability programmes in Europe (not only in Italy, and not just programmes targeting migrants), migrants were required to be actively seeking jobs by checking online job portals or consulting job posts pinned on the job centre's walls. Job counsellors were meant to guide them in this process, but never to look for jobs for them, as they should take responsibility for their personal success (see Del Percio 2018; or Codó 2015 for parallels with what is happening in other European contexts).

'Show me your residence permit', Umberto asked. Amadou found his document among a bunch of papers he had with him. From my seat on the other side of the table, I could see a CV and some copies of professional certificates. Umberto took the documents without asking and studied them while Amadou complained about the long waiting time at the job centre. 'You see', Umberto explained to me without considering Amadou, 'he just turned 18'. Umberto explained that Amadou was from Burkina Faso and arrived in Sicily four years ago where they did not know what to do with him. He was too old to be integrated into generalist secondary education, but not qualified enough to pursue high school or formal vocational training. They sent him from one improvised educational programme to another. According to Umberto, these programmes, which were paid for by the state but provided for by charities and social cooperatives, were useless. Their only goal was to keep young people busy and off the streets. Amadou would have instead needed an educational programme tailored to his specific needs and capacities, explained Umberto. According to him, this would have required psychological support, level-appropriate language classes and structured professional training.

Umberto was visibly uncomfortable and nervously touched his hair. After having looked over Amadou's CV several times, he looked up at him.

Before applying for a real job Amadou, you should start thinking about language and your professional education, something that would give you some real bases and improve your position on the job market and especially help you overcome your situation of permanent instability and precarity. You need a diploma. A certificate.

Education, Umberto insisted, would not pay off in the short run, but in the long term, it would help to change his life. What he had in mind was more than a transitional solution, an occupation to keep

Amadou busy during winter. Amadou, however, kept shaking his head. 'No, no, no'. Each time louder. 'No, no' he replied. 'You are wasting my time' repeated Amadou. 'I don't need education. I already had education. I need to work, quickly, now. I need a job. I speak the language fluently', he argued in Italian. 'I don't need education, I just need to work'. Amadou stood up, took his coat, and left.

What I would like to argue here is that the tensions and clashes between Amadou and Umberto resulted from a differential experiencing of the temporalities that govern the constitution of migrants as a workforce in Italy. I would like to be clear: These differential experiences are not caused by different culturally informed modes of speaking and thinking about and understanding the role of time in migrants' labour market incorporation (see for example Gumperz 1982 for this line of argument). And this is not about clashing ideologies of language and time (Kroskrity 2000). I rather argue that these clashes result from different modes of experiencing and engaging with these temporalities, which in turn are framed by their diverging material needs and the unequal social positionalities that they occupy, including the meanings of these temporalities for the ways that they can engage with and appropriate their futures. Before I provide an account of the strategies that different actors develop to navigate these temporalities, I want to make explicit what these temporalities consist of, how they operate as technologies of power and control (Foucault 1975) and the different logics and rationales that inform them.

The first temporal dimension that we need to consider is the distinct rhythm that frames the reception of refugees in Italy. Most users of Umberto's counselling centre are classified as refugees or asylum seekers. They are subjected to a specific temporal regime regulating their differential access to all sorts of resources (see Vigouroux 2017 for a detailed analysis of the classification of migrants into different categories of workers). The process is legally defined in four phases. The first is the phase of 'prima assistenza' (immediate assistance/aid), which involves rescue activities, medical checks, personal identification and officially lasts a couple of days, but can last several weeks. The second phase is called 'prima accoglienza' (first reception), where migrants prepare their asylum applications and submit them to the authorities. The length of this phase is not defined by the legislator. It is meant to be a transitional and temporary phase, but it usually lasts from several months to a year. The third phase, called 'seconda accoglienza' (second reception), where refugees' asylum request is processed by the governmental authorities can last from 6 to 24 months. The last phase is when migrants are either granted the right to stay or the order to leave. In Italy there are at least three categories of asylum protection (a) political asylum, (b) subsidiary protection or (c) humanitarian protection. Each has different implications for how long and under which conditions migrants can remain in Italy and work. Technically, there is also a fifth phase when they can object to a negative ruling and wait another few years for their case to be reconsidered. These phases relating to residence also regulate access to all sorts of other resources. For example, from phases 1–3, migrants are entitled to housing, basic healthcare and a (very humble) financial contribution to primary needs such as food, clothes, cigarettes, mobile phone sim cards and transport. These services and financial support are provided to migrants by the state through intermediary organisations usually under the umbrella term of NGO. In phase 4, for 6 months, no matter if they have been accorded asylum or were ordered to leave, individuals lose entitlement to all of these benefits. From phase 2, they start to be entitled to language classes and other sorts of training that could facilitate access to work. Working is only permitted from phase 3.

Both the migrants and the social organisations that manage migration (a process that Rose and Miller 1992 have called 'governing at a distance') are interested in speeding up this process. The long waiting time is seen by migrants as a burden to their life projects. Although waiting for a positive outcome comes with some benefits and subsidies, for migrants like Amadou, speeding up this process represents the overcoming a situation of suspension and insecurity, a liminal of waiting, ambiguity and disorientation (Turner 1967). For the social organisations, minimising waiting time ensures a maximum of turnover in reception facilities and the display of efficiency and professionalism (see Del Percio 2021 for an elaboration of this aspect). This is meant to allow organisations to position themselves as a model of reception and integration (especially vis-à-vis its European and

national funders as well as other social organisations) and to continue having access to what Gambletoft-Hansen and Sorensen (2013) call the migration industry – the economy that has emerged around migrants' desire to migrate and governments' struggles to manage their migration.

What made Amadou reject a further training activity was that he had achieved phase 4 of his process. While his asylum application had been accepted and he had been offered a residence and work permit, he was losing his right to free housing and social benefits and was therefore in need of employment. This last period, Umberto explained to me, is paradoxically the most ambiguous and precarious. While migrants finally have certainty about their ability or non-ability to remain in Italy and eventually to move to other European destinations (many migrants do not want to stay in Italy and would rather move to other richer northern European countries as soon as they get asylum), for them a new phase of insecurity starts, which in many cases is more dramatic because it requires self-sufficiency. Education (both language and vocational) represented an additional delay of access to formal employment, adding layers of precarity and insecurity to his already difficult personal situation.

The second temporal dimension is the one imposed by the labour market and its seasonal nature (Flows Decree 16A00667, 2016). We know that for governmental authorities, slowing down and speeding up migrants' reception is not only linked to bureaucracy and the necessity to display efficiency. Since migrants are often employed by seasonal industries such as tourism, construction and agriculture, seasonal demands of labour also affect the way their access to labour is regulated: The four-phase process of reception can be suspended based on the changing demands of the labour market. Labour shortages often lead to ad hoc temporary work permits, mass regularisations or other forms of exceptions that allow bypassing the temporal regimes imposed by national authorities. In the summertime, migrants are not only more likely to get a job, but also more likely to get their governmental restrictions suspended. The summer season is where employers actively address Umberto's counselling team to ask for workers, and it is also the moment where the counselling office is the emptiest, as migrants find work on their own. It is the winter season that poses the most problem. Each year, Umberto's team uses language training opportunities to fill the time until spring. Umberto explained that language training is a technique of upskilling migrants. But what I could see on the ground is that it also allows the delaying of labour market integration and the management of phases of short labour demand. For Amadou, for example, his need for work coincided with the winter season and the phase where the demand for labour was relatively low. But Umberto could not offer him anything other than language training, an offer that conflicted with his need for financial stability.

More than just a bureaucratic procedure linked to asylum-seeking and the identification of migrants' right to stay in Italy, the temporal management of mobility seems to be related to the production and reproduction of labour power as a commodity. While workers' subjection to the fluctuating demands of the labour market is not specific to migrant labour, it seems that migrants' transient status as citizens (e.g. the different phases they have to go through when applying for asylum, the multiple types of asylum protection and their construction as non-citizens), has become a new instrument for the management of labour in Europe, and in Italy in particular. In the past, fluctuating demands for labour were regulated in Europe through intragovernmental agreements (with both other European states and former colonies) that allowed moving a workforce seasonally from one country to another (Flubacher 2014). This seasonal labour model has been replaced by a new migration regime that, under the cover of granting asylum and humanitarian protection, allows governments to have access to a pool of cheap labour. According to seasonal needs, the workforce can either be regularised and put on the labour market or illegalised, deported or – without the protection of any sort of social welfare – made available for informal, invisible and therefore highly exploitative work.

The third temporal dimension pertains to ideas of (language) education, precarity/security and employment. Umberto was convinced that one crucial reason why many migrants remain stuck in situations of precarity and exploitation is their lack of certified education. While language learning

was a means of delaying migrants' integration into employment, it was also a means of escaping the temporal fluctuations of labour market demands. As Umberto explained, migrants' need to work made them reject forms of professional integration such as language learning and vocational education. 'Becoming a worker takes time', Umberto explained. Rushing through the first steps of professional development means neglecting the need to acquire professional skills or to know the language and inevitably leads to a position of underemployment and subordination in the labour market. This was the case for Amadou. Urged by the need to work immediately, according to Umberto, he did not see the importance of a long-term educational project, the development of skills or language learning. He had instead always opted for short educational programmes, accumulating certificates but not developing a fully rounded professional persona. Whether Umberto's belief in the emancipatory nature of what he called serious, long-term education is true or not is not relevant here (whether, for example, this belief is merely a means of keeping alive the idea that there is a successful path of integration for migrants arriving in Italy; or whether it is a mode of making sense of his own role as a job counsellor, a profession that along with Graeber (2018) could be categorised as a 'bullshit job', a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless that even the employee cannot justify its existence). What is relevant is that this discourse had effects on the management of migrants' integration into the job market: It served to justify the need to take 'time' as a factor and therefore impacted the ways that the transition towards employment was managed.

Scholars in applied linguistics have written extensively about the logics of education and certification that underpin the dynamics I was able to document in Umberto's counselling centre. They have pointed to the importance of education and language learning in (advanced) liberal-democratic regimes (Flubacher and Del Percio 2017) where meritocracy and education are seen as conditions for mobility and social inclusion. In these cases, logics of accumulation and quality turn certificates into forms of cultural capital which, under specific circumstances, and for specific people, can act as gatekeeping features giving access to all sorts of resources. Scholars have also noted that investments in education and certification do not guarantee access to inclusion and social comfort (Kraft and Flubacher 2020). Individuals' capacity to become fully emancipated workers depends on the dynamics of the labour market (Kraft 2019a), and the racial, gendered and classed understandings of who counts as a good worker (Flubacher 2020b) including what price should be attached to whose labour and what practices need to be identified as labour at all (Flubacher 2020a; Hassemmer 2019). Scholars have noted that these understandings of (language) education are a condition for access that make individuals responsible for their successes and failures (Del Percio 2017; Lønsmann 2020).

In this section, I have argued that in addition to keeping alive the faith in social mobility, language training also seems to be entangled in complex ways with the temporal dynamics of the Italian labour market. Language training does not only allow migrants to prepare themselves for the linguistic demands of future employers but also allow them to respond to the freezing and unfreezing of the needs of labour of certain industries. In the next section, I document two different attempts to navigate these temporal regimes and their intersection with logics of differential inclusion.

Speeding up language, slowing down work

The first strategy of dealing with these temporalities is investment in rapid and intensive language learning (see Van Hoof, Nyssen, and Kanobana 2020 for similar super-intensive training in Belgium), while at the same time temporalising access to work. Based on what I could observe in Umberto's job counselling centre, this involved three modes of strategising around language and time.

- (1). In cases like Amadou's, where migrants were not in a position (or refused) to engage in a more structured, long term language learning process, counsellors usually advised migrants to register for a super-intensive language class. These types of classes often lasted just a couple of weeks and involved classes all day and homework during the weekends. While observing the

counselling activities of Umberto and his team, I could see that counsellors usually referred to a list of language schools they had compiled in an excel file. Most of these schools were freely accessible for migrants and funded as a part of EU or Italian integration funds. In most cases, counsellors themselves called the selected school to inquire about available spaces and times of classes; this would speed up the process and free migrants from the anxiety of this type of call. Luca, one of Umberto's counsellors, was always very clear about these classes when introducing them to migrants. 'You will not learn a lot. Language learning takes time. Nevertheless, it will make sense for you to attend these classes at this point of your trajectory'. For Luca, the justification of this strategy always followed the same line of reasoning: these language classes would allow him to gain time – time to contact people from certain sectors or companies; time to find the money to finance one internship or another; time to see if something is coming up with employers who have taken people from our counselling centre in the past; time to talk to other counselling centres and see whether they have any positions or internships available; and, time to gather this or that personal documentation.

- (2). If all classes were booked or a migrant had already attended a language class, they could leave Umberto's centre without a place in a language class. In those situations, individuals were put on a waiting list by Angela, another of Umberto's team members, who spent one day a week looking for solutions for those who had not found a place in the language schools they usually worked with. There were also language classes organised by large reception facilities or charity organisations that were less visible to counselling centres, but that usually accepted unemployed migrants. There were also ad hoc language classes by counselling centres or other organisations working with migrants. To manage this transition process, both in terms of waiting for a language class and waiting for jobs, counsellors advise migrants to use language learning apps, which are intended to help them quickly and efficiently acquire vocabulary, syntactic structures or pronunciation. Luca explained that almost all migrants have smartphones that allow them to download and use such apps. Luca had tested some of them at home on the weekend and found them to be basic and not conducive to any forms of proficiency. He noted that at least they keep migrants busy and give them the feeling that they are working on something while waiting. He helped them download the apps on their devices and showed them the basic functions. 'You can do the activities in the metro or when you go to the loo', he advised. 'The important thing is that you do the activities regularly, two or three times a day for half an hour, and then you will see progress'.

During my fieldwork, I developed contacts with several social workers in the reception centres housing migrants who used the services of Umberto's counselling centre. They told me that users engaged with these apps. They would see the migrants hanging around with their smartphones and training vocabulary. Some apps allowed them to acquire profession-specific word lists or phrases or to choose activities linked to their specific language level. Other apps worked bilingually, in Italian and another language. In most cases, they could not select their L1 and had to use another language they were familiar with. My informants in the reception centres confirmed something that we know from language scholarship of mobile technology, but that I was not able to document in the counselling centres: the effects of digital inequalities on the use of this app (Gershon and Gonzales 2021). Many counsellors I met normalised the societal assumption that migrants possess mobile technology, can use this technology and that it allows them to consume different forms of media and therefore to participate in global networks of exchange. In those reception centres, this was not always necessarily the case. Mobile devices were circulated, yes, and people invested in their acquisition and sale, but not all of them were of the same quality and value. Some could download these apps but others could not; so, an individual's ability to use language apps was dependent on the availability of devices and their quality.

(3). In other cases, counsellors worked with prefabricated lists of words or phrases linked to a specific profession that they had found on the web and then printed. This circulation of pieces and bits of prefabricated discourse occurred mainly when migrants had been invited to job interviews and were required to display professionalism. Umberto explained that application letters could be written for migrants to hide their low language proficiency. But during other job interviews, for example, the one that I was able to document in Rome, applicants are on their own, and whether or not they are hired depends on if they can be seen as good workers. At this point in the process, there is no time for migrants to engage in complex and elaborate language learning strategies. Acquisition of the language that allows them to sound professional needs to happen quickly. The lists they are provided with allow them to acquire the pieces and bits of language that counsellors think perform well. The problem with these lists was that once migrants left the counselling centre, Umberto explained, they were left alone. They had to figure out their meanings and strategic deployment on their own. Social workers in reception centres used to support them in navigating these lists (differently from job counsellors who work in job centres and help migrants integrate into the labour market, social workers are employed by reception centres to support migrants with a larger range of activities and issues, such as accessing health care, legal services, leisure programmes, financial support, etc.). We have demonstrated elsewhere that migrants were helped in memorising vocabulary and phrases before job interviews so they could use them at the right time and not sound too mechanical. We know however that these specialised lists compartmentalise linguistic knowledge and provide speakers with a limited amount of communicative resources (Lønsmann and Kraft 2018.). For job applicants, this means that if they eventually managed to produce the pieces and bits of specialised jargon of professional practice, in most cases they were not able to play the social game of job interviews: to be nice and friendly, to sound interested, engaged, motivated and to express confidence and reliability. As scholars have been able to demonstrate in other contexts (Roberts 2010), migrants' inability to enact this specific professional register made them be seen by employers as inauthentic, introverts or as unreliable, showing the limited use of these lists.

The argument I would like to offer here is that while both counsellors and migrants were subjected to the regimes of time imposed by governments' temporal management of migrant reception and the seasonal demands of the labour market, speed was here an intentional practice aimed at helping migrants navigate their situation. In contrast to what social analysts of time have argued so far, in most cases speed is not something that happens to people, but rather something that people choose to invest in (or not) because they feel that this is the best thing to do to pursue their life goals. Of course, this sort of investment occurs within specific logics and constraints, temporal regimes and societal expectations (integrate quickly!) that frame what people can do with time as well as the effects of such actions. For counsellors, for example, investing in these accelerated language learning formats was a means of guiding migrants towards an activity considered to be valued by employers and other actors in the 5-phase asylum-seeking procedure; at the same time, it allowed them to keep migrants busy while trying to identify a job opportunity. The short time frame and rapidity of this educational investment allowed counsellors to manage migrants' anxieties and impatience to become employed. It created consent for language learning, which came with the promise of work, soon. These rapid investments in language learning could also be combined with small job opportunities so that migrants could attend language classes and work at the same time. In the case that work could not be found, rapid language investments could also be combined, with one intense language training following another, or language training could be replaced by language learning apps. Although Amadou's reaction was different, in most cases migrants were willing to engage in these strategies offered by the counselling team. It allowed them to do language learning while still focusing on the job search. The rapid nature of these investments allowed them to frame language learning as less of a burden.

The agentive nature of the time investments documented – workers and counsellors intentional strategising and speculating around time – does not mean that these investments are not linked to or framed by power dynamics of inequality and exclusion, nor does it mean that they are never challenged or contested. Most of the migrants I encountered had struggled for a long time with language learning; they experienced these classes as a form of violence (Tomlinson 2020), an additional burden imposed onto them by racist structures of reception. Language learning was also contested by many individuals I met during my fieldwork. We have already seen that some individuals, like Amadou, refused education as a transitional solution to employment. For those who agreed with investing in rapid language learning, especially those who used the language apps, resistance emerged when the language learning activities were inadequate for pursuing the professional trajectory expected. Resistance also formed when individuals realised that attending the super-intensive classes required too much work after classes and prevented them from investing in the job search. This was the case for Amir, who agreed to participate in language classes organised by a charity close to his reception centre. He had to spend the evening doing exercises and activities suggested by his teacher and to stop doing the online job searches he used to do in the evenings when the computer in his housing centre was available. There was also Layla, who opted for the app solution but realised quickly that these apps did not allow her to reach the language level she needed to become a caregiver. In many of these cases, the individuals disinvested themselves from language learning and attempted to find alternative strategies of labour market incorporation. In the next section, I am going to argue that this investment in rapid language learning was not only contested by migrants, but also by part of the community of social actors and counsellors working with migrants. These actors considered the rapidity of the language investment as a hindrance to migrants' capacity to find non-precarious employment. They therefore developed alternative strategies that they considered more empowering and sustainable and that involved alternative modes of investment in language and time.

Slowing down language, speeding up work

Job centres are not the only actors in Italy guiding migrants in their access to employment. These gatekeeping activities are also taken up by charities, cooperatives and social organisations of all sorts. In summer 2015, I was introduced to two social workers, Fiona and Gianni, from a cooperative that had historically worked with migrants in prisons, providing different types of services including legal advice, education and adequate healthcare. Like every other Italian 'migration industry' organisation (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Soerensen 2013), the existence of the cooperative was guaranteed based on the availability of financial resources for social projects targeting migrant integration. This cooperative, referred to here as *Libertà e Giustizia Sociale* (Freedom and Social Justice), worked with unemployed migrants, but decided to invest in an opposite strategy: to facilitate migrants' quick integration into employment while creating the circumstances for a more long-term and sustained linguistic acquisition.

Libertà e Giustizia Sociale had been accorded a piece of land from Rome's municipality and developed an agricultural project to grow fruits and vegetables. The cooperative also managed to share a big kitchen with another social project (this one worked with people with disabilities) and was able to produce bread and pastries. Both the vegetables and the bread were sold in local farmer's markets and in a small shop they had built. Migrants were able to work in the fields, in the kitchen, in the shop or markets and, at the same time, to invest in long term vocational education and language learning. Individuals were trained and guided by vocational trainers and attended language classes twice a week in the afternoon as part of their paid time. This investment in slowing down language learning and immediate professional integration was intentional. It emerged out of a critique of capitalism and hegemonic modes of managing labour market integration. Both Fiona and Gianni had worked in the past for counselling centres but had decided to leave to pursue alternative strategies of labour market integration. The strategy they had in mind was one that takes individuals' needs,

trajectories and demands as a starting point for all interventions. Their objective was to challenge migrants' exposure to the dynamics of the labour market and to give them time to evolve linguistically and personally.

Migrant workers enjoyed participation in this cooperative. They felt protected by a mode of managing their integration into the labour market that gave them time to evolve and that did not ask for certificates, instead of valuing their existing capability to do work. I kept hearing this over and over when talking to them. Whether or not their positioning strategies vis-à-vis my questions were a repetition of the register produced by representatives of the cooperative's mission and values is not relevant here. What counts is that this was the type of discourse that regulated their integration process. People had to be given the time they needed to become accustomed to the Italian language and to acquire a professional diploma, while at the same time having the security of a stable and well-remunerated job. That does not mean that temporality and rhythm were absent from their work situations. However, the rhythm and intensity imposed on them by this alternative model of professional integration allowed them to focus on both work and language learning and to do this in a way that avoided exposure to the precarity and exploitation that migrants usually experience in Rome. I have discussed elsewhere (Del Percio 2018) how this project, while allowing to mitigate the power of time, came with other problems, such as the invisibilisation of migrants and their work to sell products in market environments structured around racialised regimes of value and consumption. In this contribution, I mention four additional aspects of the role of time in the making of migrant labour as a commodity.

The first aspect is linked to what this project meant to Fiona and Gianni, who acted as facilitators of this alternative path of professional integration. For Fiona and Gianni, creating the conditions for this project meant additional work and more time pressure. The project they had designed was not compatible with the financial needs of the cooperative, which had to sustain expenses and salaries that could not be covered by the gains of the agricultural project they had put in place. For the first 2–3 years, the business had more losses than gains; they could pay expenses, rent, production costs and decent salaries for the workers involved, but it was not enough to pay language teachers and social workers. These additional costs had to be covered through additional work, which required them to work on multiple projects at the same time. In other words, while this project allowed the avoidance of oppressive temporal regimes for migrants, it raised the pace of work for social workers who had to cope with the multiplication of jobs, less time at home and the blurring of work and non-work. It also had to rely on the time investment of a series of voluntary helpers, such as Fiona's mother and father, Gianni's girlfriend and many other people. While the recurrent overwork in the so-called NGO sector is often seen by their managers as outweighed by the presumed satisfaction of doing 'valuable' work, critiques of contemporary labour (Jaffe 2021) have argued that this desire for pleasure at work has become a very fertile terrain for labour exploitation (also see Codó 2013 on this).

The second aspect is the question of access. While the project takes the needs and situation of the working individual as a starting point for their guidance towards employment and language learning and gives people time to evolve, what I observed on the ground is that it also tends to reproduce old patterns of inequality that are not so different from other contexts where other, more visibly oppressive regimes of linguistic and professional integration are at work. Who has access to this space of professional integration? And what are the rationales underpinning the inclusion of people in this project? To be included, a person had to be a migrant, but not just any migrant. The project wanted to promote non-EU migrants, not necessarily refugees, but anyone who arrived in Italy and did not manage to get into a position of comfort. A migrant needed to be without entitlement to any other professional integration programmes and without their own social network. They had to have already come into contact somehow with the cooperative. They had to have experience in either agricultural work, baking or another profession linked to that specific project. They had to be reliable, 'a worker', as Fiona used to say. In order words, the selection criteria included social and political situations, work experience, availability, motivation and trust, all features that, as

language scholars have noted, are moralised and ideologically loaded and anchored in ideas of personhood (who counts as a good person, worth being supported?). They are therefore based on longer histories of modernity, coloniality and capitalism (Flubacher, 2020). The point is not to say that any of the individuals who had been involved in this selection had intentionally excluded one person or another, but rather that choices and gatekeeping practices are always framed by understandings of persons and society and that individuals struggle to get rid of the problematic histories underpinning these understandings.

Third, these moralised framings of persons, workers and time became particularly clear once the project was launched and individuals started to feel comfortable in what one of the social workers used to call *la bolla*, or 'the bubble'. As Gianni used to say, everybody involves their own sense of time. We can learn to deal with it or manage it but we cannot get rid of it. During my fieldwork, I observed the emergence of a discourse of laziness and lack of proactivity. Some of the workers involved were accused of not showing enough effort and engagement. Others were said to take breaks that were too long or to skip the language classes they had been assigned. Still others were seen to show up too late to work and language learning. Gianni explained that he was aware of these workers personal circumstances and the difficulties they were confronted with, but for the business to function, he needed to see more commitment. He was not sure whether the project and its idea of giving people the time they need to develop had prevented people from fully engaging with their own personal development.

The last aspect was that this project took for granted the idea that for migrants to become good citizens they needed to turn themselves into workers and speakers of the prescribed local language – Italian. At no point were these ideas questioned by the migrants, the social workers or the teachers. Work and language were taken for granted as things that people aspire to be and to have. We know, however, that the imperative to speak and work is not a natural given, but is instead a liberal democratic principle around which the nation-state and capitalism have been built, and which has contributed to legitimising the stratification of society (Yeung and Flubacher 2016). Heller and McElhinny (2018), for example, have shown extensively how inequality is organised around the idea that humans speak, and that therefore those who are not speaking, or not speaking well enough, must be in one way or another less human, and therefore not legitimated to occupy positions of value and prestige or to participate in what we have come to call civil society. Work is another of these concepts around which inequality, and what counts as human, is organised (Duchêne, Moyer, and Roberts 2013). Liberal democracies are governed around the idea that people work because it is part of their nature (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Since the outset of human history, humans have either hunted or gathered. Not engaging in work is a sign of what Foucault (1975) calls the abnormal, being less human. This idea is so much anchored in Italian society that it has become the main principle around which Italian democracy is organised (also see Garrido 2020 for a discussion of work as rehabilitation for outcast populations). Article 1 of the Italian constitution says *L'Italia e una Repubblica democratica fondata sul lavoro* (Italy is a democratic republic founded/based on work). Being a citizen means being a worker. This has recently been interpreted as meaning that work and access to work is a citizen's right, but in Italian history, this has also meant that not working places you perhaps not outside, but at least at the margins of the democratic republic and represents a threat to its constitution. All this to say that while *Liberta e Giustizia Sociale's* project was a means of navigating around the temporalities and intensities (including the uncertainties that different time experiences represent) that regulate migrants' incorporation into the labour market in Italy, this project was informed by the liberal democratic frame, which constrains and enables forms of differential inclusion that turn migrant labour power into a commodity. For sure, the cooperative's project allowed the mitigation of time pressure and individuals' exposure to the effects of such temporality, but it did not reject the oppressive principles obliging people to integrate into language (the one of the country of reception) and work to be seen as human.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have documented the strategising and reasoning about language training performed by several job counsellors and other actors of the Italian migration industry when supporting migrants' integration in the local labour market. I argued that both speeding up and slowing down language training pertains to a complex governmental apparatus that manipulates time to *do* differential inclusion and at the same time to allow migrants to strategically navigate these apparatuses. While these differential modes of investing in language training serve the economy's need to freeze and unfreeze migrant labour (i.e. to make migrant labour available for exploitation only exactly when this labour is needed), both strategies also allow migrants to cope with and navigate the intensities and temporal dynamics of the labour market and to a certain extent to act upon and respond to them. I have also shown that not just the speeding up of language acquisition but also the slowing down of this process comes at a certain cost for migrants and their helpers and that instead of assuming that speed is necessarily bad and slowing down is good (or vice versa), a politicisation of time requires us to ask the empirical question of who can benefit – how and under what conditions – from what types of investments in time. Finally, I argue that the ethnographic analysis offered in this contribution has implications for the way we as language scholars conceptualise the value of language for employability. While language training has traditionally been seen by language scholars and actors on the ground as a resource promoting migrants' access to employment, in this paper I demonstrated that it is not just language and labour themselves but also how they intersect with the construction and negotiation of temporalities that becomes crucial in understanding how migrant workers come to be constituted as a labour force. For migrants, becoming a worker does not only involve investing in language learning but also being able to do it at the right time and with the right intensity. Temporality then, including people's capacity to act upon and respond to different temporalities and intensities, is a powerful vector of in/equality and in/exclusion that needs to be further explored to advance our theorisation of the social and linguistic constitutions of workers and contribute to larger social understandings of capitalism and its intersection with language, mobility, and workers' conditions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Alfonso Del Percio is Associate Professor at UCL Institute of Education. His ethnographic research deals with language, migration, and labor, especially their articulation with capitalism and processes of social stratification, inequality, and oppression.

References

- Castells, M. 1998. *End of Millennium, The Information Age*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Codó, E. 2013. "Trade Unions and NGOs Under Neoliberalism." In *Language, Migration and Social Inequalities*, edited by A. Duchêne, M. Moyer, and C. Roberts, 25–55. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Codó, E. 2015. "Langue et Insertion Professionnelle de Migrants Africains à Barcelone." *Anthropologie & Sociétés* 39 (3): 153–172.
- Codó, E., and M. R. Garrido. 2014. "Shifting Discourses of Migrant Incorporation at a Time of Crisis." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 11 (4): 389–408.
- Del Percio, A. 2017. "Engineering Commodifiable Workers." *Language Policy*, 1–21. doi:10.1007/s10993-017-9436-4.
- Del Percio, A. 2018. "Language, Communication, and the Politics of Hope." *Language & Société* 165: 95–116.
- Duchêne, A., and M. Daveluy. 2015. "Spéculations Langagières." *Anthropologie & Sociétés* 39 (3): 39–33.
- Duchêne, A., M. Moyer, and C. Roberts. 2013. *Language, Migration, and Social Inequality*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Flubacher, Mi-Cha. 2014. *Integration Durch Sprache - die Sprache der Integration*. Wien: Vienna University Press. (V&R Unipress).

- Flubacher, M. 2020a. "Desire and Confusion." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 264: 241–261.
- Flubacher, M. 2020b. "Selling the Self." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 70 (1): 30–45.
- Flubacher, M., R. Coray, and A. Duchêne. 2017. *Language Investment and Employability*. London: Palgrave Pivot.
- Flubacher, M., and A. Del Percio. 2017. *Language, Education and Neoliberalism*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Foucault, M. 1975. *Surveiller et Punir*. Paris: Gallimar.
- Gammeltoft-Hansen, T., and N. Sorensen. 2013. *The Migration Industry and the Commercialization*. London: Routledge.
- Garrido, M. 2020. *Community, Solidarity and Multilingualism in a Transnational Social Movement: A Critical Sociolinguistic Ethnography of Emmaus*. London: Routledge.
- Gershon, I., and A. Gonzales. 2021. "You got a Hole in Your Belly and a Phone in Your Hand." *New Media and Society* 23 (4): 853–871.
- Graeber, D. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs*. Simon & Schuster.
- Gumperz, J. 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Harvey, D. 1989. *The Condition of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hassemer, J. 2019. "The Value of Volunteering." *International Journal of Multilingualism* 17: 46–61.
- Heidegger, M. 1993. "The Question Concerning Technology." In *Heidegger, Martin, Basic Writings: Second Edition, Revised and Expanded*, edited by David Farrell Krell, 307–342. New York: Harper Collins.
- Heller, M., and B. McElhinny. 2018. *Language, Capitalism and Colonialism*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- Heller, M., S. Pietikainen, and J. Pujolar. 2017. *Critical Sociolinguistic Research Methods*. London: Routledge.
- Jaffe, S. 2021. *Work Won't Love you Back*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Kraft, K. 2019a. *Language Policies and Linguistic Competence*. Language Policy.
- Kraft, K., and M. Flubacher. 2020. "The Promise of Language." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 264: 1–23.
- Kroskrity, P., ed. 2000. *Regimes of Language*. Santa Fe: American Research Press.
- Lønsmann, D. 2020. "Language, Employability, and Positioning in a Danish Integration Programme." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 264: 49–71. 22 p.
- Lønsmann, D., and K. Kraft. 2018. "Language in Blue-Collar Workplaces." In *The Routledge Handbook of Language in the Workplace*, edited by Bernadette Vine, 138–149. New York: Routledge. (Handbooks in Applied Linguistics series).
- Marx, K., and F. Engels. 1967. *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin.
- Massey, D. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. New York: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mezzadra, S., and N. Neilson. 2013. *Border as Method*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Repubblica Italiana. 2016. *Decreto Flussi*. Accessed July 20, 2021. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/02/02/16A00667/sg>.
- Roberts, C. 2010. "Language, Migration and the Gatekeepers." *Language Issues* 2 (21): 4–18.
- Rosa, H. 2009. "Social Acceleration." In *High-speed Society*, edited by H. Rosa and W. Scheuerman, 77–114. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Rose, N., and P. Miller. 1992. "Political Power Beyond the State." *The British Journal of Sociology* 43 (2): 173–205.
- Tomlinson, J. 2020. *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*. London: Sage.
- Turner, V. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Van Hoof, S., S. Nyssen, and S. Kanobana. 2020. "If They Could, They Would put Them on a Drip with Dutch." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 264: 73–94.
- Vigouroux, C. 2017. "Rethinking (un)Skilled Migrants." In *The Routledge Handbook on Language and Migration*, edited by S. Canagarajah, 312–329. New York: Routledge.
- Virilio, P. 1977. *Speed and Politics*. London: MIT Press.
- Vostal, F. 2016. *Accelerating Academia: The Changing Structure of Academic Time*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yeung, S., and M. Flubacher. 2016. "Discourses of Integration." *Multilingua* 35 (6): 599–616.