

Relexicalisation and Decategorialisation Processes in Migrants' ELF-Mediated Online Narratives in the Disembodied Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper enquires into the ELF-mediated online communication modes developed by a group of Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. The paper illustrates how such modes, though propositionally conveyed as written language, actually retain the analogical immediacy of spoken discourse through which migrants express their anguish at feeling caught in a situation of distress and even more marginalisation. Case-study data demonstrate that the migrants' linguaculturally-marked use of syllabic notations, acronyms, emojis, and phrasal verbs triggers processes of semantic relexicalisation and morphological decategorialisation that undermine in many ways what so far has been regarded as the universal trends in language evolution governed and bound by natural principles of economy.

Key-words: relexicalisation, decategorialisation, ELF-mediated online communication.

1. Research context

This paper introduces the initial findings of a new development in an ongoing ethnographic research enquiring into West-African migrants' narratives mediated by non-native/nativised variations of English used as a 'lingua franca' (ELF) in Italian contexts of intercultural communication (Guido 2008; 2018). Previous research focused on face-to-face interactions taking place mainly at centers for migrants' assistance. The turning point in this research was caused by the recent coronavirus pandemic emergency (Covid-19), raging since the beginning of 2020, most of all in Italy. This emergency prompted an uncontrolled sense of panic, above all among West-African 'economic migrants' (less so among refugees) who longed

to go back to their home countries in Africa which, at the outset of the pandemic, was still almost immune from the effects of Covid-19. Yet, because of the closure of the borders between the states and the ban on leaving Italy (in order to contain the spread of the lethal virus), these migrants began to give vent to their distress by using online communication modes. This paper will illustrate the extent to which such modes – consisting in exchanges via Whatsapp and e-mail (with no audio-visual support) between a sample of Nigerian migrants, all in their thirties and living and working in Southern Italy (in private online correspondence with the author) – have given rise to novel online dialogic forms of ELF on the edge between spoken and written discourse. The analysis of such dialogic forms – though still based on a rather small corpus of Nigerian migrants' online chats – seems to suggest a process of language change which, on the one hand, follows universal trends in language evolution governed and bound by natural principles of economy (Chomsky 1995) and, on the other, develops out of the new instant online communication modes. Such modes, indeed, though propositionally conveyed as written language, actually retain the analogical immediacy of spoken face-to-face discourse.

More specifically, the four Nigerian migrants representing the case-study subjects of this research have a low level of schooling and speak a nativised variant of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) that, dislocated from its original context of use, becomes in the host country (Italy) one of the many ELF variations through which non-native speakers express their own linguacultural distinctiveness. In its impact with the new telematic modes of communication imposed by the situation of the pandemic emergency, this NP-ELF variation has developed new discourse strategies through which Nigerian migrants convey their distress and even greater marginalisation. It is precisely this sense of uneasiness that was considered to be what would/was likely to prompt the development of a new online NP-ELF. Migrants use this atypical conversational variant (both within and outside their community, mainly in interacting with their institutional contacts in Italy) not only as if it were spoken language in real-time ongoing interaction, but even perceive it as such, with the same analogical immediacy as spoken discourse, despite adopting a written mode according to the phonetic spelling that characterizes NPE orthography.

2. Theoretical grounds

The rise of such an ‘online NP-ELF’ variant calls, therefore, for a reassessment of the very process of grammaticalisation, assumed to be the result of two competing phonetic tendencies: the former identified in the oral use of language, and the latter in its written structure. Grammaticalisation processes are governed by economy principles in the oral use of language, producing a signal reduction that justifies the natural cline of categoriality from a major category (noun/verb) to a middle one (preposition/adverb) up to minor categories (clitic/affix). This triggers processes of ‘fusion’, ‘erosion’, ‘univerbation’, ‘compacting’, and ‘bleaching’ (Sweetser 1988) that weaken semantic content, thus producing routinisation and idiomatisation of expression, leading to reduction and simplification, initially in the oral signal (‘ease of articulation’ – Langacker 1977: 106) and, subsequently, in the written signal (‘ease of optic perception’).

2.1. Relexicalisation processes

Differently from this expected grammaticalisation process, it is here argued that Nigerian migrants’ NP-ELF-mediated online communication is often characterised by features that evolve, instead, towards an economical reduction only in writing. Such a written reduction does not determine semantic loss, as in typical phonetic clines of categoriality, but it rather marks a pragmatic deroutinisation and a semantic relexicalisation of grammatical items into compactly written lexical clusters (i.e. a cline of lexicality from morphosyntactic, to lexical, up to pragmatic categories). This would represent the rare achievement of the economy-principle requirement for the maximum communicative signification (due to relexicalisation) via the least effort in production and reception (due to written signal reduction). This relexicalisation process is here assumed to aim at fulfilling the Nigerian migrants’ need for analogical immediacy in online written communication.

One such instance is represented by the use of syllabic notations which, in the NP-ELF variation adopted by the sample of Nigerian migrants, tend to diverge from the conventional ones. Syllabic notations activate a process of ‘signal simplification’ that triggers

a perception strategy consisting in reading letters and numbers with their names, rather than with their sound, thus forming novel words and phrases. Once automatised (relexicalised) through use, the full mental-reading process is thus no longer necessary and words and phrases come to be perceived ‘analogically’ – i.e. by their visual image only, to which the reader automatically attributes a conventional semantic meaning as in rapid speech.

The acronyms (or ‘word-initials’) used within these Nigerian migrants’ restricted community also tend to deviate from the conventional ones. An acronym (e.g. “BTW” “by the way”; “IMO” “in my opinion”) retains the ‘traces’ of the lexemes it stands for, and yet, in rapid reading, it conditions readers into abstaining from a propositional cognition of the implied words in favour of a quick analogical perception of the compact signal as a whole which, thus, comes to be relexicalised.

Finally, emojis (small iconic pictures) – similarly to their precursors, emoticons (‘emotion icons’ made of keyboard characters) – have recently been adapted for use in Nigerian online interactions, sometimes accompanied by routinised phrases in NPE. Hence, the Nigerian emojis reintroduce the absent and silent ‘African body’ into the migrants’ NP-ELF mediated ‘online chats’ and, as such, they are perceived by analogic, iconic associations, as well as by indexical reference to their users’ states of mind in relation to the situational context.

2.2. Decategorialisation processes

The reverse decategorialisation process has been observed, instead, in the use of phrasal verbs in NPE. Nigerian Pidgin English (Faraclas 1996) is characterised by an oral cliticisation of the phrasal-verb prepositional/adverbial components turned into reduced phonetic particles, subsequently represented also in writing (by means of the typical NPE phonetic orthography) as unique items resulting from a process of fusion between the lexical verbs and their related particles.

The lack of the NPE speakers’ recognition of such particles in phrasal verbs is assumed to be principally due to the lack of ‘orientational schemata’ (Talmy 1983) in West-African indigenous languages – a cognitive feature that has been transferred into the

West-African variations of English and is also reflected in the extensive use of the all-purpose preposition ‘for’ replacing all the other orientational prepositions of movement and position (cf. Heine and Reh 1984).

The cognitive impediment to recognising the semantic sense of phrasal-verb particles prompts a decategorialisation process resulting from the activation of strategies of ‘minimal mental effort’ (Chomsky 1995: 138-39) via ‘minimal morphonemic differentiation’ (cf. Langacker 1977; Zwicky 1985). In the migrants’ NP-ELF used in online interaction, such strategies have been observed to reproduce the sense of perceptual immediacy of an action, often prompted by situations of distress. The new forms of the phrasal verbs, therefore, derive from a cliticisation of the prepositional particle into a compact and reduced host+suffix construction. This decategorialisation process may eventually lead to a subsequent tendency towards ‘distinctness’, which resemanticises the reduced signal into an altogether distinct word through a process of ‘reanalysis’ (Langacker 1977).

3. Case-study analysis: relexicalisation processes

This section will explore how the online NP-ELF employed by the sample of case-study Nigerian migrants does not automatically work in the expected direction of delexicalisation, but often in the opposite direction of relexicalisation (cf. Mensah 2011) and towards an increase in informativeness and expressivity. In this sense, the economy of mental effort (simplicity of perception and production) in real-time online communication tends to reproduce in writing the immediacy of oral speech.

3.1. Syllabic notations

An instance of this type is represented by syllabic notations which, though based on homophonic sounds represented by letters and numbers (e.g. “2U2” “to you too”; “B4” “before”; “CU” “see you”), activate relexicalisation processes involving a reanalysis of morpheme (not phoneme) boundaries often leading to univerbation, compacting, fusion and erosion through Merge economy operations (Chomsky 1995: 226). In online communication, therefore, they

involve processes of ‘cognitive abduction’ and ‘pragmatic inference’ (Andersen 1973) allowing disambiguation.

The group of four Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy during the lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic and taking part in this research as case-study subjects were prompted to use their own NP-ELF variation while interacting online (via Whatsapp and email) with no audio-visual support. More specifically, they were encouraged to express their feelings and intentions in a written form reproducing the NPE phonetic orthography that they would normally use, as well as all the simplification strategies that they would adopt in this kind of online exchanges. The suggested topic of such interactions (here defined as ‘chats’) was their sense of discomfort and anguish at their feeling trapped in Italy during such an unexpected total lockdown.

The following extracts from the migrants’ in-group NP-ELF online chats (followed by their rendering into Standard English) regard the use of syllabic notations to convey their sense of anxiety:

CHAT 1

1a: a 1 lef Italy, a 1 kom 4 Naija, hie covid go kil os o (I want [wan] to leave Italy, I want to go to Nigeria, here Covid will kill us!)

1b: gri. a veks 2, we 4 tear race B4 we go kpeme (I agree, I’m upset [vexed] too, we should run away before we die)

‘Chat 1’ reports the migrants’ mounting feeling of terror at the thought of the lethal consequences of Covid-19, as well as their urge to flee Italy. Anxiety is rendered through the analogical immediacy of NP-ELF syllabic notations, standing for whole lexical words, whose meanings often do not correspond to their conventional ones in Standard English (SE). For instance, number “1” stands for the NPE word “wan” (meaning “want”), orthographically rendered according to the NPE phonology. The case of “4” (“for”) also represents a deviation from SE in that “for” is the typical NPE ‘all-purpose preposition’ in this case standing for the preposition of movement “to” (“a 1 kom 4 Naija”; “we 4 tear race”). The use of “2” (“too”) and “B4” (“before”), instead, are conventional SE syllabic notations. Furthermore, instances of lexical erosion reproduced in writing to render the immediacy of spoken utterances include: “a” (“I”); “kom” (“come”, meaning “come” as well as “go”, due

to the above-mentioned absence of ‘orientational schemata’ in NPE); “lef” (“leave”); “Naija” (“Nigeria”); and “gri” (“agree”). Finally, instances of transfer from the migrants’ native languages are the compound verb “tear race” (“run”), and “kpeme” (“die”), both preceded by “go”, i.e. the auxiliary pre-verbal marker for the future tense, which in NPE undergoes a grammaticalisation process of semantic bleaching, thus losing its lexical sense of ‘physical movement towards a place’ to acquire the metaphorical meaning of ‘cognitive motion towards a future intention’ (cf. Nicolle 2007: 48).

The following ‘Chat 2’ reports a NP-ELF evolution in producing syllabic notations.

CHAT 2

2a: hie na ktkk evriwie o 4 lef italy a 4 give wad bh (here there’s confusion [kata kata → scatter] everywhere! To leave Italy I should give lots of money as a bribe [back hand])

2b: niafu niafu (in abundance [nyafu nyafu])

2c: Ntoo! 419 (Good for you! [sarcastic] You’ll be jailed [according to article 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code])

In this chat, “ktkk” represents a divergence from convention, reproducing in writing the rapidity in pronouncing the expression “kata kata” – a reduplication of the verb “scatter” here metaphorically used as a noun, preceded by the NPE existential copula “na” (“there is”) to convey the sense of ‘confusion’ perceived by the migrants everywhere (“evriwie”). Reduplication in NPE is a stylistic device transferred from native West-African languages (cf. Anagbogu 1995) often used to highlight the sense of worry and anguish (cf. Guido 2018). This is even more deeply stressed by the interjection “o” conveying a sense of disappointment.

Furthermore, the cardinal number “4” refers to both its meaning implications: the former “for” (“4”) implies a SE subordinate clause of purpose “in order to” (“in order to leave Italy”); the latter “for” (“4”) corresponds to the SE deontic modal auxiliary “should” introducing a sense of ‘obligation’ (“you 4 give wad bh” – “you should give lots of money as a bribe”). The NP term “wad” is a monosyllabic word metaphorically implying the phrase “lots of money”, whereas “bh” introduces the acronym of “back hand”, metaphorically meaning “bribe”. The ideophonic expression “nyafu

nyafu”, with its reduplicated fricative and nasal sounds, followed by the dark vowel sound /u/, convey the idea of ‘profusion’ (a SE word containing the same sounds) which ‘subject 2b’ seems to associate with the image of a rustling bunch of banknotes. The NP interjection “ntoo”, meaning “good for you!”, is said by ‘subject 2c’ to sarcastically stigmatise the fraudulent intentions of ‘subject 2a’ who is planning to use bribes to get round the ban on leaving Italy. Indeed, ‘subject 2c’ also reminds ‘2a’ that he would run the risk of committing fraud, as described in article 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code.

3.2. Acronyms

‘Chat 2’ contains a novel instance of an acronym, i.e. “bh” (“back hand”, meaning “bribe”) coined by the restricted online community of NP-ELF speakers. An acronym entails a process of signal simplification typically resulting from routinisation (idiomatisation) of expressions (cf. Langacker 1977). Novel NP-ELF acronyms in the migrants’ online chats can be identified in the following extract, prompted by the specific request to the Nigerian subjects to express their immediate feelings and intentions associated with the lockdown imposed by Covid-19 by employing the contracted forms that they would use in online NPE interactions.

CHAT 3

3a: if covid tink se i fit rc me, IO mnd, so a fit wkwk an a dey safe (if Covid thinks that he curses [remote-controls] me, I owe an amulet [man-no-die], so I can wander around [waka waka → walk walk] and I’m safe)

3b: o ac! IYC (oh, I see! What a childish attitude [the International Year of the Child])

The acronym “rc” for “remote control”, metaphorically meaning “witchcraft”, is a verb following the NPE deontic modal “fit” (“can”), thus implying an image of Covid-19 as an animate agent (a witch) endowed with the power of exerting ‘her’ destructive control over ‘subject 3a’. But ‘subject 3a’ announces boldly that, against such a jinx, he secretly owes/owns? – such a secrecy being emphasised by the acronym “IO” (“I owe /I own?”) – an amulet, also mysteriously referred to by the acronym “mnd”, seemingly because he would like

to keep concealed the entire spell “man-no-die”. The amulet – he asserts – would give him the freedom to safely wander everywhere, a sensation of immunity and liberty emphasised by the novel syllabic notation “wkwk”, based on the reduplication of the verb “walk walk”.

Such a boldness boasted by ‘subject 3a’, is ironically acknowledged by ‘subject 3b’ with a newly-coined acronym “o ac!” (“oh, I see!”), followed by a sarcastic comment on the naivety of what ‘subject 3a’ has stated, using a typical NPE acronym, “IYC”, that mockingly makes a reference to the “International Year of the Child”.

3.3. Emojis

Emojis can be defined as ‘emotional iconic lexicon’ insofar as they are activated by analogic, iconic associations, and yet they are indexical of the user’s states of mind in relation to an actual communicative situation. The conventional view of emojis, considered as universal “image/body schemata” grounded on the physical/emotional sources of experience (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980), is however challenged by novel linguaculturally marked forms of emojis (such as those devised by the Nigerian community – and also employed by the migrants representing the subjects of this study). In focusing on the use of emojis in this case study, the adopted methodology slightly diverged from the ‘field research’ implemented until then (though – as previously specified – often topics and modes of online conversations were partially prompted to allow an exploration of the linguistic forms that subjects would use in such virtual environments). In fact, a more controlled ‘laboratory research methodology’ was adopted insofar as specific sets of emojis used by the Nigerian communities were not available on the email platforms and smartphones employed by the Nigerian subjects¹. Hence, such sets were provided to them with the request to select and ‘embody’ those emojis portraying characters developed within African contexts by receiving the following ‘prompt’: “Please, go on with

¹ Indeed, these African subjects were obliged to adopt the conventional emojis normally available on Western e-platforms, reproducing the physical traits of white Western people in whom they could not recognise themselves.

your chats possibly using some of these Nigerian emojis while you talk about your lockdown period in Italy”.

In the following extract, the Nigerian migrants were presented with a set of so-called ‘Naija Emoji’² – namely, emojis developed to be used in Nigeria and containing short familiar statements in NPE – which they had not yet downloaded and installed on their online devices for text-message use. Subjects were simply asked to choose those Naija emojis that would fit in their online chats.



4a: a no ɪ die hie no o 🤔 (What bad luck! I don’t want to die here, no [I feel like crying])



4b: Covid dey kill pipul only if dem sin (Buzz off! Covid kills people only if they sin)



4c: Covid na virus, in na no god, in no go punish pipul (Covid is a virus, it’s not a god, it will not punish people, I beg your pardon! [you’re annoying me!])

Here, ‘subject 4a’ selects the emoji for the NPE interjection “Chai!!!” (“What bad luck!”), bodily expressing grief and anger at the threat of dying by Covid-19 in Italy (“a no ɪ die hie no!”: “ɪ” meaning “wan”/“want”), followed by the NPE interjection of disappointment “o” and by the African crying-face emoji embodying her online presence.

To this, ‘subject 4b’ replies with the choice of a Naija emoji reporting another typical NPE interjection, “Waka” (“Buzz off”), accompanied by the image of an annoyed-looking man rebuffing the interlocutor. This is followed by a statement that personifies Covid-19 as a vengeful deity killing people who sin, followed by the NPE copula for the present tense “dey” (“is”).

² The set of Naija Emoji used in this study is issued by the app company Oju Africa.

‘Subject 4c’ jeers at his interlocutor’s fanatical statement by pointing out that Covid-19 is just a virus, not an implacable god that will punish people (marked by the pre-verbal auxiliary “go” for the future tense), and accompanies his remark with the choice of a Naija emoji of a man expressing his irritation with the NPE phrase “abeg!” (“I beg your pardon!”, implying “you’re annoying me!”).

So far, this study has analysed instances of relaxicalisation processes in NP-ELF online chats. The next section will illustrate examples of decategorialisation processes, by specifically focusing on the Nigerian subjects’ use of NPE phrasal verbs in their online chats dealing with the risks of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy.

4. Case-study analysis: decategorialisation processes

Besides the relexicalisation processes explored in section 3, it was observed that the Nigerian subjects, in their online chats, also showed a tendency to conform to the NPE decategorialisation cline towards a cliticisation of phrasal-verb prepositional/adverbial particles, typical of some West-African pidgin and creole varieties lacking in orientational schemata – such as the NPE spoken by the subjects of this case study. In NPE, decategorialisation processes in phrasal verbs are frequent – e.g. “komot” (“come out”); “sidon” (“sit down”); “ledon” (“lie down”). In this part of the case study, the methodology adopted again fused an initial more controlled ‘laboratory research methodology’ with a subsequent, more spontaneous ‘field research method’. This meant that before starting the field-work on their online chats on the pandemic-induced lockdown in Italy, Nigerian migrants were invited to use some specific SE phrasal verbs (neither defined through such grammar terms, nor displayed to them in their written form) – such as, for instance: “come out” (pronounced as /kʌm’aʊt/); “sit down” (/sɪt’dʌʊn/); lie down (/laɪ’dʌʊn/) – to see how their meaning would be contextualised in such a topic. This exclusively oral prompt to use phrasal verbs meant that subjects would not become immediately aware that these SE verbs are composed of a ‘lexical verb’ and a ‘prepositional/adverbial particle’, insofar as their oral pronunciation in SE did not allow them to discern this orthographic separation as they would sound similar to the cliticised pronunciation in NPE³.

³ Although such an oral prompt may appear to interfere with the migrants’

This economical trend towards decategorialisation in NPE phrasal verbs is examined in the next two sub-sections.

4.1. Cliticisation and univerbation

Cliticisation represents a decategorialisation process by which the phrasal-verb particle loses its status as a separate morpheme to become a single accentual unit with the lexical verb, thus contributing to the economical and efficient conveyance of meaning via minimal morphonemic differentiation (Zwicky 1985). This process is particularly evident in NPE, where phrasal-verb prepositions and adverbs undergo a process of ‘bleaching’ which nullifies their ‘orientational’ semantic and metaphorical contribution to the meaning of phrasal verbs.

In the Nigerian subjects’ emotional online chats, such contracted forms of NPE phrasal verbs make their visual and cognitive processing analogically faster to read, as if they were perceived in listening to a speech. The following ‘Chat 5’ represents an instance of this kind:

CHAT 5

5a: a ɪ troway evritin an lef Italy kwik o (I want [wan] to throw everything away and leave Italy quickly!)

5b: wetin you dey tok? di police dem go spot you an dem go pikap you! (What are you saying? The police will spot you and will pick you up!)

Here, ‘subject 5a’, in claiming that he wants (“a ɪ” – “a wan/I want”) to “troway evritin”, introduces a case of univerbation – namely, a form of cliticisation in which the cline of categoriality is characterised by the development of the phrasal verb into a single verb+clitic accentual unit. Here, “troway” is the result of a cliticisation between the lexical verb “throw” and its adverbial particle “away”, whose semantic implication of ‘moving something/someone to a distant place or, metaphorically, to a distant time’ gets lost.

spontaneous use of language, actually it allows a specific focus on the characteristics of language use which are of interest in this study, and which would have been quite difficult to identify in the spontaneous flow of online written interactions considering the limits in data collection imposed by the lockdown circumstances.

‘Subject 5b’ replies by trying to bring her interlocutor down to earth by rebuking him (“wetin you dey tok?” “What are you saying?”) and then warning him that the police would certainly spot him and ‘pick him up’ – another phrasal verb cliticised into “pikap”. In this NPE process of univerbation, the lexical verb ‘pick’ retains its meaning, whereas the semantic contribution of the particle ‘up’ is ignored by the Nigerian subjects.

Here, it is also possible to notice the NPE ‘plural’ marker “dem” (“them”), which replaces the SE plural suffix ‘-s’ in that the ‘plurality schema’ is also differently conceptualised and grammaticalised in NPE.

4.2. Erosion and fusion

Erosion represents another stage of decategorialisation in phrasal verbs, signalled by a loss of phonological segments occurring at verb/clitic boundaries, thus enhancing efficiency by dropping redundant sounds to rapidly communicate a sense of uneasiness and distress.

CHAT 6

6a: a no fit komot fo no ples, a no fit see my friend dem, a don de lokdon all time all time, a don de sidon, ledon evri de o. a bin tink se a fo die hie! a dey uerot 😞 (I cannot go to any place, I cannot see my friends, I’ve been locked-down during the whole period of time, I’ve been sitting down, lying down every day! I thought that I should die here! I’m worn out [I’m exhausted/tired of it?])

6b: you dey craz! You fo tandap an dance sing chop laf! So you go survive! 😂 (You are crazy! You should stand up and dance, sing, eat, laugh! So you’ll survive! [Be happy!])

In this chat, ‘subject 6a’ gives vent to her state of deep depression at having been segregated during the whole period of lockdown (emphasised by the reduplicated phrase “all time all time”). In complaining about her impossibility to go to places or see friends, ‘subject 6a’ first uses the negative form of the NPE deontic modal verb “a no fit” (“I cannot”). Then, she employs another cliticised phrasal verb, “komot” (“come out”), where the adverbial particle “out” undergoes a further process of fusion, characterised by an indistinguishable stem/affix boundary caused by the blurring of contiguous vowel phonemes (/aut/ /ot/), as well as by a process

of semantic bleaching, losing its spatial sense of ‘exclusion’ and becoming cliticised by boundary erosion with the lexical verb “come”. “Come” too loses its semantic sense of ‘movement towards the speaker’s place’ to acquire the opposite sense of ‘movement away from the speaker’s place’, in SE expressed by the verb “go”.

Furthermore, ‘subject 6a’ uses another phrasal verb, “lokdon” (‘lock down’), cliticised by verb+particle fusion and boundary erosion preceded by the NPE pre-verbal perfect and continuous aspect markers “don” and “de”. Soon afterwards, she uses two more cliticised NPE phrasal verbs: “sidon” and “ledon”, representing two more cases of boundary fusion and erosion between the verb and the prepositional/adverbial particle composing the original SE phrasal verbs, “sit down” and “lie down”. Fusion, in both cases, causes semantic bleaching in the adverb “down”, being semantically redundant (because in association with “sit” and “lie”, likewise implying a downward movement), and phonetically unrecognisable. These verbs, too, are preceded by the same pre-verbal perfect and continuous aspect markers “don” and “de” to emphasise the unbearable sense of deadliness inducing her to sit down and lie down in bed all the time and every day. Indeed, she thought that she was doomed to end up dying in Italy (“a bin tink se a fo die hie!”), an utterance where “fo” (‘for’) is used as the modal auxiliary “should”. This complaint ends with a newly-coined NP-ELF cliticised phrasal verb, derived from the SE “wear out”, which should have been inflected in the past participle (“I’m worn out”, that is: “I’m tired and depressed”). And yet, ‘subject 6a’ uses the infinitive of the verb “uerot” (‘wear out’) though it follows the copula “a dey” (‘I am’). A reason may be that she uses this cliticised form of the phrasal verb in phonological analogy with the Italian expression “mi sono rotto” (‘I’m sick of it’), whose metaphorical meaning is close to the condition of being “worn out”. Also in this case, therefore, the context, marked by stressful experiential situations, seems to have an influence on decategorialisation processes.

This defeated state of mind disclosed by ‘subject 6a’ is challenged by ‘subject 6b’ who reproaches his interlocutor by the NPE exclamation “you dey craz!” (‘You are crazy!’). In fact, he promptly provides her with the antidote to her lockdown-induced depression through the optimistic recommendation: “You fo tandap an dance sing chop laf! So you go survive!” (‘You should stand up and dance,

sing, eat, laugh! So you'll survive!") followed by an African happy-face emoji. Here another SE phrasal verb undergoes cliticisation by fusion and erosion, i.e. the NPE verb "tandap" ("stand up"), where erosion has occurred in the initial consonant sound /s/, whereas the lexical verb "stand" and the adverbial particle "up" are brought together by a simple process of univerbation.

5. Conclusions

This paper has examined the online communication strategies used by a small sample of Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy during the pandemic emergency. Analysis has shown that NP-ELF online interactions are grounded on analogic communication strategies, rather than on propositional ones, promoting a real-time immediacy of sensorial perception as in oral speech, even though the subjects were engaged in online written communication. It has been observed that pragmatic contexts influence grammaticalisation processes since the more stressful the topic was, the more the Nigerian subjects activated such processes.

The validity of this study is, however, restricted due to its sample limitation, insofar as the data are not corroborated by quantity and frequency effects. Future research, therefore, may confirm statistically how far its results can be generalised. In the case of relexicalisation processes activated by groups of ELF speakers (like the NP-ELF speakers of this case study), a Sentiment Analysis may be carried out on the feelings and emotions expressed online by such groups in social media with reference to specific situations. Likewise, a sentiment-analysis approach could be applied to explore possible correlations between highly emotional situations and the decategorialisation processes occurring in the different ELF variations used online by groups of ELF speakers, so as to observe the extent to which such processes vary with reference to different linguistic and situational variables.

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