Exploring Linguistic Fluidity in the European Communities of Digital Nomads

Novella Tedesco*, Silvia Bernardini, and Cristiana Cervini

Department of Interpreting and Translation, University of Bologna, Forlì Campus, 47121 Forlì, Italy

ABSTRACT

Europe is experiencing a rise in mobility, also caused by the post COVID-19 spread of digital work, virtual collaboration and gig economy. This contribution offers a sociolinguistic perspective on languaging practices within the emerging digital nomad communities around Europe (digital nomads being remote workers who adopt a lifestyle of constant travelling and cultural exploration). As part of wider research on language fluidity, the study features a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey, ethnography, and insights from the recently published NomadLingo corpus of spoken interactions. Digital nomad language background and needs, linguistic attitudes and behaviours are investigated through survey research. Additionally, data collected through ethnography (i.e., self-ethnography journal, observation, and recordings of naturally occurring conversations) offer deeper insights into sociolinguistic systems and negotiation strategies occurring in digital nomad communication. Results show that English as a Lingua Franca is the main communicative means within digital nomad communities. Nevertheless, its use is creative and accompanied by fluid translingual practices, involving translanguaging and intercomprehension. While pointing to the need for further research on the topic, these outcomes could be applied in language teaching and planning, to foster a diverse, inclusive ecology of languages.

Keywords: Digital nomadism, English as a Lingua Franca, linguistic fluidity, plurilingualism, translanguaging

INTRODUCTION

As part of the FLO project[1], this study adopts a sociolinguistic perspective and a linguistic ethnography approach to explore translingual practices in digital nomad

[1] FLO, the European Fluid Languages Observatory is a funded doctoral project at the University of Bologna (https://www.thenomadlinguist.eu/flo/)

communities, integrating linguistic findings with community life experiences. While previous studies on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and plurilingualism have mainly examined transcultural communication in classrooms, stabilised migrant communities, and business settings (Cogo, 2022), little is known about how these practices emerge in transient, culturally diverse communities such as those formed by digital nomads. This study addresses that gap by investigating how digital nomads negotiate meaning, construct belonging, and position English within their translanguaging repertoires (Blackledge & Creese, 2017).

RELATED LITERATURE

Digital nomads are professionals who work digitally and adopt a lifestyle of constant travelling and expat living (Reichenberger, 2018). Established across and beyond borders, digital nomad identities are nationally unbounded, and so are their communities of reference. Inspired by the concept of 'light communities' (Blommaert & Varis, 2015), we refer to *digital nomad communities* as occasional groups of people interacting online on community networks and gathering around social hubs, co-livings and co-workings in specific locations where they engage in community activities (Thompson, 2019; Woldoff & Lichtfield, 2021). Digital nomads can thus be considered as a privileged group characterised by a high mobility capital (Moret, 2020), but also as embodying the precarious life and work conditions caused by the gig economy (Thompson, 2019). As an evident example of post-globalisation, the emergence of digital nomad communities raises important interrogatives about linguae francae, plurilingualism, and transcultural communication.

Transcultural communication is the process of meaning negotiation and co-construction among speakers with diverse cultural backgrounds (Candelier et al., 2010). To explore this process, we refer to two sets of approaches, namely translanguaging theories – challenging the monolingual assumption while construing communicative resources as holistic and adaptive (García & Wei, 2014) – and plurilingualism, which stresses the dynamic interplay of languages and cultures within the same community (Council of Europe, 2020). Sociolinguistic research has increasingly recognised the need to look beyond institutional settings and to examine processes of cultural negotiation in highly mobile contexts like the one here investigated. Recent work highlights enduring tensions between the discourse of openness that surrounds plurilingualism and the structural dominance of English in transnational communication (Cogo, 2022). These contradictions emerge most clearly in interactional contexts where speakers value flexibility and inclusion but continue to orient to hierarchies of competence and legitimacy (Tedesco, in press). The present study contributes to this debate by exploring how such tensions are voiced and managed in contexts were hypermobility and digitalisation create transcultural spaces of interaction.

METHODS

Our study adopts a loosely defined ethnographic approach and features a mix of methodologies: ranging from online survey to a self-ethnography journal, interviews and recording of naturally-occurring interactions. While responses to the survey were gathered online on a voluntary basis, and respondents were then classified into representative or not of the population under study, the ethnographic observations were carried out at the communities based in Madeira (Portugal) and Canary Islands (Spain) between October 2023 and April 2024.[2] The project methodology has received approval of the Bioethical Committee at the University of Bologna: informed consent and privacy regulations were guaranteed throughout the research process. The present contribution presents a qualitative interpretation of these diverse sets of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION[3]

Table 1 provides first insights into the linguistic background of 24 survey respondents, all European residents.

Table 1

Respondents' linguistic background

Respondents regarding themselves as bilinguals	18
Median of the languages spoken by respondents	4 (St.Dev. 1.57)
Respondents who received university education in English	9
… using English in their daily life	16
… using English in their daily work-related activities	17
More common languages studied at school	
English	23
German	10
French	8
Italian	8
Spanish	8

Plurilingualism seems to be a characterising feature of digital nomads, whose linguistic repertoires are rich and complex. Romance languages – likely employed in intercomprehension, as observed through ethnography – are common resources within the

---

[2] These communities were identified as some of the largest in Europe by the Flatio Report 2023 (https://www.flatio.com/blog/flatio-launches-its-first-digital-nomad-report-2023).

[3] The survey results on which the present contribution is based are stored in the online repository AmsActa (DOI 10.6092/unibo/amsacta/7722). The NomadLingo corpus containing transcripts of naturally-occurring conversations was deposited in ILC4CLARIN (http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11752/OPEN-1042).

community. English, however, does not hold a neutral position: its use in speakers' daily lives is pervasive and transcends demographic factors.

Survey results indicating digital nomads' desire to improve their communicative competence are confirmed by the numerous language exchange activities and cultural workshops promoted within the communities. Speakers enjoy learning from each other, as shown in the sample reported in Figure 1.

MADEIRA, October 2023 - Data recorded at a nomad's birthday party	
TRANSCRIPT	**Communicative resources and practices**
F: they say hm in Brazil they say Recife	ELF
M: Recife hm I... Eu fui...	TRNSLG
F: they say Recife, they uh uh aspira ah	TRNSLG
M: hm depende	PT
F: barreirinha I don't know how to say it	TRNSLG
M: depende da: da localidade	PT
F: hm hm no la erre però	IT *INTCOMP*
M: X X X na Europa tambén esiste essa diferencia	PT
M: I can dizer mais forte and I can dizer mais suave	TRNSLG
F: ah ok ok ok	IT
M: Where did you learn Portuguese?	ELF
F: en Brazil in Canada	PT
M: No Canadá?	PT
F: con brasileiros em Canadá	PT
F: Italian nationality; speaks Italian, English, Portuguese and Spanish	**M:** Portuguese nationality; speaks Portuguese and English

Figure 1. Sample of translingual communication in Madeira (2023)

F is an Italian nomad who had lived in Brazil before moving to Madeira and is checking her knowledge of Portuguese pronunciation with M, a Portuguese teacher who works remotely from Madeira. Besides being an example of language socialisation (Duranti et al., 2012) and metatranslinguistic reflection (Candelier et al., 2010), the extract also shows translanguaging and intercomprehension practices.[4] The extract thus shows how nomads

---

[4] In the figure, 'ELF' stands for English as a Lingua Franca (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009), 'TRSLNG' for translanguaging, and 'INTCOMP' for intercomprehension (Ollivier, 2013).

fluidly navigate linguistic resources to co-construct knowledge, and reveals positive attitudes towards plurilingualism, confirmed by survey results. Indeed, 13 respondents report that they prefer speaking languages other than English. However, most of them regard English as the easiest means for communication. Indeed, it is the most used language in all aspects of life, as shown in Figures 2 and 3.
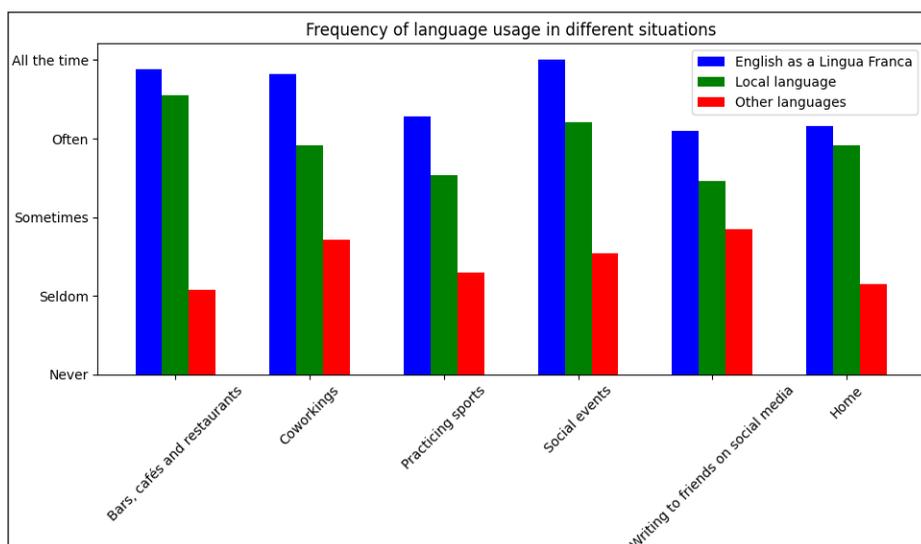

Figure 2. Frequency of language usage across daily situations (professional, social, leisure) among survey participants
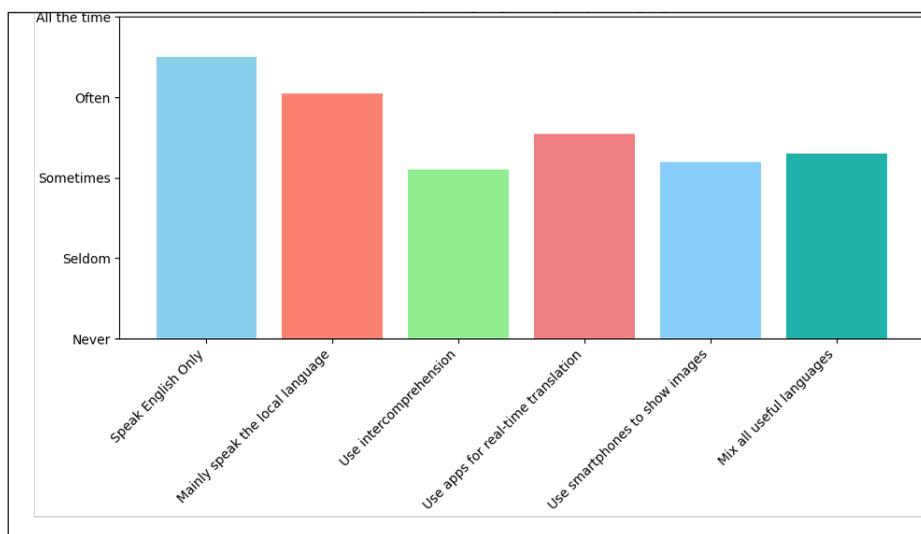

Figure 3. Frequency of communicative practices employed by survey respondents

Notice however that English is enriched by translanguaging practices (like mixing languages and using intercomprehension strategies). Moreover, Figure 2 indicates a trend towards employing resources other than ELF in contexts characterised by greater privacy and informality, which has been noticed also in recorded interactions, where the context (coworking vs. private house vs. public space like a restaurant) seems to affect the amount of translanguaging strategies employed by speakers (Tedesco et al., 2025). Survey data partially mirror such a trend, showing a gap between self-perceived practices (tendency to use mostly English) and positive attitudes towards plurilingualism. Together, these data seem to suggest that monolingual ideologies and educational practices (García & Flores, 2012) still affect – though at an unconscious level – the way speakers deploy their resources.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on the European context, our study shows that digital nomads build communities through processes of transcultural communication. Unsurprisingly, given the globalised nature of the phenomenon, English is the most popular means for communication, but the diversity of resources enriching its use challenges monolingual ideologies.

This contribution highlights the need for further sociolinguistic research on digital nomadism to better understand *languaging* processes and transcultural communication in action, issues that are ever more central for applied linguistics and language policy-making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Blackledge, A., & Creese, A. (2017). Translanguaging in mobility. In S. Canagarajah (Ed.) *The Routledge handbook of migration and language* (pp. 31-46). Routledge.

Blommaert, J., & Varis, P. (2015). Culture as accent: The cultural logic of light communities. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies, 139*, 1-20.

Candelier, M., Camilleri Grima, A., Castellotti, V., de Pietro, J. F., Lörincz, I., Meissner, F. J., Molinié, M., Noguerol, A., & Schröder-Sura, A. (2010). *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures*. European Centre for Modern Languages.

Cogo, A. (2022). *ELF and multilingualism: Rethinking English in mobility*. Routledge.

Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Council of Europe Publishing.

Duranti, A., Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. B. (2012). *The handbook of language socialization*. Wiley-Blackwell.

García, O., & Flores, N. (2012). Multilingual pedagogies. In M. Martin-Jones, A. Blackledge & A. Creese (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of multilingualism* (pp. 232-246). Routledge.

García, O., & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mauranen, A., & Ranta, E. (Eds.). (2009). *English as a lingua franca: Studies and findings*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Moret, J. (2020). Mobility capital: Somali migrants' trajectories of (im) mobilities and the negotiation of social inequalities across borders. *Geoforum*, *116*, 235-242. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.12.002

Ollivier, C. (2013). Tensions épistémologiques en intercompréhension [Epistemological tensions in mutual understanding]. *Recherches en didactique des langues et des cultures. Les cahiers de l'Acedle, 10*,10-1. https://doi.org/10.4000/rdlc.1485

Reichenberger, I. (2018). Digital nomads – A quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure. *Annals of Leisure Research, 21*(3), 364-380. https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2017.1358098.

Tedesco, N. (in press.). Nomad English. (Ed. by Aiello, J., Iaia, P.) *ELF Communication Today: Acceptability and Accessibility in Focus.* Routledge.

Tedesco, N., Bernardini, S., & Cervini, C. (2025). *CL2025 Conference.* Birmingham Aston University.

Thompson, B. Y. (2019). The digital nomad lifestyle: (Remote) work-leisure balance, privilege, and constructed community. *International Journal of Leisure, 2*(1), 27-49. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-018-00030-y

Woldoff, R. A., & Litchfield, R. C. (2021). Paradise paradox: Constructing a digital nomad community. In *Digital nomads: In search of meaningful work in the new economy* (pp. 75-112). Oxford Academic.