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Refugee linguascapes: The role of English in Australia-run detention contexts

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Refugee *linguascapes*:
The role of English in Australia-run detention contexts

by *Arianna Grasso**

Abstract

Drawing upon the framework of Critical Sociolinguistics, this paper aims at understanding the role of English within the Australian mandatory detention system vis-à-vis the material, communicative and symbolic marginalization to which a group of refugees were subjected. On this premise, the research applies a content-analytical ethnographic framework to the purposely built Refugee Interview Corpus (RIC). In particular, the work reflects upon the role of the English language and its perceived contexts of use. Findings have shown that English was viewed by research participants as a bridge language (*lingua franca*); a resistance language (*lingua liberatrix*); an oppression language (*lingua opprimens*); a socio-digital language (*lingua socialis*); and an educational language (*lingua instruens*). While serving multifarious purposes inside detention, English formed continuums of usages in a variety of situational contexts. If on the one hand refugees acquired linguistic agency through English, on the other, the *linguascape* of detention emerged as embedded within broader dynamics of power, subjugation, and violence.

Keywords: Refugee *Linguascape*, Australian mandatory detention policy, English language, Critical sociolinguistics, Digital linguistic ethnography, Refugee interview corpus.

I
Introduction

Over the past decades, migration phenomena have intensified due to dramatic events that have reshaped geopolitical relations among nation-states. In this unstable scenario, Australia has used extreme measures to stop the maritime arrival of people seeking asylum. In particular, the infamous Tampa Affair – in which Australia refused permission for a Norwegian freighter to enter the Australian waters with more than four hundred rescued refugees aboard – marked the beginning of the Australian mandatory detention system.

To prevent an escalation of the crisis, the conservative Prime Minister John Howard introduced the Pacific Solution, which established that asylum seekers intercepted in the Australian waters in search of protection would be arbitrarily detained in offshore processing centres located in Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and other onshore

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facilities scattered across Australia. Even though the policy was largely dismantled in 2008, the succeeding Guillard Government reimplemented the Pacific Solution Mark II, which was reinforced by the Operation Sovereign Borders. The latter consisted in the intensification of naval pushbacks, the removal of permanent protection to recognized refugees, the implementation of a new border agency, the Australian Border Force, and the militarization of the executive branch of the government (Minns *et al.*, 2018, p. 6).

A remarkable number of official reports have concurrently been released by reputable international organizations to document the dramatic situations under which refugees were and are forced to live in the onshore and offshore Australia-run detention centers. Several of these reports have thoroughly documented the damaging impacts of indefinite detention on refugees' mental health in terms of psychiatric disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, resignation syndrome and other severe forms of depression, which have resulted over the years in widespread practices of self-harm and suicidal attempts on Manus and Nauru (Amnesty International, 2015; Doctors Without Borders, 2018; 2020). According to several of these reports, security staff members, local authorities and management operators have often been involved in the enactment of ill-treatment and abusive practices against detainees, such as bullying and intimidation, physical and sexual assaults, rape, coercion and sexual exploitation, arbitrary arrest, and solitary confinements (Moss, 2015; Farrell *et al.*, 2016). Besides human rights abuses, refugees and asylum seekers have also been subjected to "countless daily humiliations that have cumulatively served to dehumanize them and violate their dignity" (Amnesty International, 2015).

However, while the denial of refugees' basic rights as perpetrated by different actors and its physical and psychological effects has been vastly documented, the violation of their linguistic human rights and the strategies through which refugees have countered it has been overlooked by the literature. In view of this research gap, the present paper aims to investigate the linguistic dynamics within the linguistic setting or *linguascape* (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2013) of detention, while placing particular attention on the perceived role that the English language played in this constrained linguistic environment. In other words, drawing upon the framework of Critical Sociolinguistics, this paper aims at understanding how the English language was appropriated within the Australian mandatory detention system vis-à-vis the material, communicative and symbolic marginalization to which a selected group of refugees was subjected. On this premise, the research applies a content-analytical ethnographic approach to the purposely built Refugee Interview Corpus (RIC), which comprises twelve interviews that were conducted online with currently/formerly detained refugees in the English language.

2
Research Context

With regards to the *linguascape* of detention, a situation of segregational multilingualism has been established in the offshore processing centers and onshore

detention facilities, whereby individuals of different linguistic backgrounds have forcibly occupied the detention space. The linguistic and cultural diversity of asylum seekers and refugees has often resulted in the isolation of the detainees who did not share a common language and thus could not overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. In this context, English has also accounted for an exclusive and exclusionary resource since it has been systematically precluded to refugees by the Australian government. As it has been reported, people seeking asylum in the context of the Australian mandatory detention policy have been given little or no support to learn English by the Australian authorities. By way of example, Save the Children and Amnesty International reported that inside the detention facilities, English classes have been offered discontinuously, with low teaching and learning standards, inadequate access to learning materials, and in ill-equipped facilities. Moreover, qualified teaching staff has been scarce, and there has been a high rate of illiteracy and truancy among learners (Amnesty & Refugee Council of Australia, 2018).

Hence, the coercive linguistic isolation operating inside the detention *linguaspace* has been further sustained through the structural difficulties and the systemic hardships faced by the refugees who were motivated to learn the English language. The material precarity of the learning environment has consequently prevented refugees from establishing a communicative bridge with other detainees as well as with the wider international community – which could potentially include refugee advocates and activists, legal representatives, journalists, and other media actors that could expose the detention regime and give visibility, provide psychological support, and offer legal protection to detainees (Briskman, 2013). The situation has been further aggravated by the abusive and discriminatory behaviors perpetrated against detainees in the camp by a multitude of actors, which has quickly led to the mental and physical decay of English language course attendees.

Nor it has been in the interest of the Australian federal government to pass on English knowledge to asylum seekers and refugees, arguably, to "safeguard against false hopes among detainees" (Morrison, 2013) who wished to be resettled in Australia or other English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand, Canada, or the United States. This neglectful attitude towards the widening of the detainees' linguistic competence might be read not only as an attempt to prevent refugees from envisioning a future in any of the anglophone countries of the Global North but also as a reproduction of wider regimes of exploitation that obliterate the linguistic and non-linguistic agency of refugee subjects. Interestingly enough, these constraining linguistic policies enacted across the Australian detention system stand in open contradiction with those enacted by Australia over the course of its history, which have contributed to forge a hegemonic monolingualism inside the country, with English being the only official language in the face of the 150 Aboriginal languages that are still spoken on its territory by Aboriginal peoples (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

3
Literature Review

From a theoretical perspective, the current work draws upon the field of Critical Sociolinguistics. Critical Sociolinguistics conceptualizes language use as embedded within historical and political processes, which produce social hierarchies that are reflected in the linguistic practices established among individuals and groups of speakers (Singh, 1996; Mesthrie & Deumert, 2009; Canagarajah, 2017). Within this broader framework, the present research can be consistently positioned within the Language and Globalization Social Justice Movement (LG-SJM hereafter), an academic movement that strives for the recognition of linguistic human rights and the promotion of social justice and equality on a local and global level (see also De Varennes, 1996). The LG-SJM proponents assume that "linguistic discrimination serves as a proxy for other forms of discrimination" (Curtin, 2017, p. 551), which can be connected to wider phenomena e.g., racism, classism, nationalism, sexism, etcetera. Therefore, the linguistic practices associated with a particular social and geographical setting should not be investigated in isolation by critical sociolinguists, but always in relation to the wider socio-political, economic, and political dynamics that establish, reinforce, and maintain imbalanced power relationships.

Aligning with the LG-SJM's assumptions, the paper interrogates how refugees' linguistic capital is self-disciplined within the *linguascape* of detention within the broader context of the Australian detention policy. According to Bourdieu, the notion of linguistic capital refers to the accumulation of linguistic competence, which influences the social position of individuals and groups within institutional and sociocultural settings (Bourdieu, 1991). Furthermore, the distribution of linguistic capital is strictly dependent on "the distribution of other forms of capital (economic, cultural capital, etc.), which define the location of an individual within the social space" they inhabit (May, 2012, p. 164). With reference to the current investigation, the juridical subordination of asylum seekers and refugees – allegedly enacted to safeguard the Australian national borders and way of life –, and the consequent socio-political, economic, and cultural de-capitalization (Martín-Rojo, 2010) that follows with the detention practice, is also reflected in the *linguistic* hierarchization of these subjects in the social space of detention.

In Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain (2013)'s terms, social spaces are constructed through the constitution and replication of human practices, which are carried out through bottom-up or top-down actions at a social and institutional level. Social spaces can have a vertical and a horizontal dimension; while the vertical dimension refers to "the construction of hierarchies in the relationships between people and groups within the space" (2013, p. 18), the horizontal dimension points to how human interactions produce changes in the very nature of social spaces over time. In this light, detention is here understood as a social space which is constructed by means of

governmental practices that are superimposed by the Australian authorities but at the same time contested from below by refugees through political, discursive, material, and digital resistance strategies performed through multifarious forms of interaction (Grasso, 2023; Tofighian & Boochani, 2021). As a matter of fact, while interacting, individuals position themselves "as being either inside or outside of spaces, or in the middle or at the edges of them" (Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2013, p. 17). Through these positioning practices, they express their ideological alignment/misalignment with regards to the politics that discipline the social space in which social and other institutional actors operate.

In so doing, individuals and groups also resort to the linguistic repertoires at their disposal. Linguistic repertoires are coherent sets of "variant codes, ways of speaking, and usage patterns" (Jacquemet, 2018, p. 2), which individuals draw on to engage in their communicative projects. Again, the expansion or reduction of a linguistic repertoire depends on several factors, such as "process of socialization, social mobility (or immobility), gender and class interactions, institutional access, colonization (and post-colonization), and global linguistic expansion" (Jacquemet, 2018, p. 3). The latter implies that linguistic repertoires are not acquired in neutral circumstances but developed as the outcome of intersecting processes through which interactants appropriate, use, and reject given semiotic resources. Therefore, by focusing on linguistic repertoires, critical sociolinguists aim to unravel the power asymmetries that underlie the communicative practices enacted among individuals and social groups.

Following this line of thought, several studies in the field of Migration Studies have pointed to how divergent linguistic repertoires crucially shape the life trajectories of people seeking asylum (Maryns, 2001; Blommaert, 2001). For what concerns the relationship between asylum seekers vis-à-vis institutions, for example, a relevant amount of research has shed light on how the linguistic-communicative resources available to asylum seekers are unevenly distributed compared to those mastered by the administrative bureaucrats of nation-state institutions. Worryingly, this has often resulted in the negative assessment of asylum claims, thus producing dramatic consequences in the life of asylum applicants. Furthermore, although "linguists have tried to address government agencies' (mis)use of language analysis" to determine the outcome of an asylum application (Curtin, 2017, p. 550), such inequalities have become systemically institutionalized in asylum assessment procedures. By way of example, in a study on African asylum seekers in Belgium, Blommaert (2001) maintains that the narratives elicited by asylum seekers were inspected through parameters such as "'truth', 'trustworthiness', 'coherence' and 'consistency'" (2001, p. 445). In other words, Blommaert's work reveals how issues of honesty and credibility come to be unfairly problematized during asylum adjudication processes, revealing a "culture of disbelief that pervades the asylum system in Western liberal democracies" (Sigona, 2014, p. 371).

What these studies point to is the urge for an appropriate contextualization of linguistic practices both within academic and institutional settings, which acknowledges

the multidimensional discrimination perpetrated against displaced individuals. In fact, while being unevenly allocated, linguistic resources reflect deep-rooted ideologies, which calls for a need to reframe the asylum system of Western nation-states on more fair and just principles (Blommaert, 2001).

4
Methodology

During the past decades, as a result of the pervasive presence of the Internet, researchers in the field of Ethnography have started to transfer ethnographic practices to digital settings. Labels such as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), internet ethnography (boyd 2008), network ethnography (Howard, 2002), digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008), netnography (Kozinets, 2010) or cyberethnography (Domínguez *et al.*, 2007) point to a multifaceted trend across a range of related disciplines. While these approaches present theoretical and methodological differences, they all share the adjustment to the new digital environments for the analysis of emerging forms of communication and social relationships online. In other words, ethnographic research addresses digitally mediated communication by employing ethnography at various stages of the research process (Varis, 2015). The Internet has in fact engendered unprecedented opportunities for the study of communicative repertoires and semiotic practices, also thanks to the rapid emerging of social media platforms. Digital ethnography has thus the purpose of examining contextualized communicative practices as occurring in digital settings[1].

With specific reference to the field of linguistics, the approaches that have emerged at the intersection of ethnography and linguistics can be grouped under the umbrella term of Linguistic Ethnography, in which both disciplines are complemented to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of linguistic phenomena online. Broadly speaking, Linguistic Ethnography can be described as an approach "interested in the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities" through digital technologies (Varis & Hou, 2019, p. 230). Ethnographic knowledge hence provides the backdrop to select, analyze and interpret linguistic data, as well as "to illuminate relations between digital texts and their production and reception practices" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 2).

Linguistic ethnographers agree that communicative processes should be investigated by linking the interaction happening at a micro level with the socio-cultural contexts in which the online communication is embedded, that is the macro level (see e.g., Varis, 2015). Taking this forward, scholars have acknowledged how digital infrastructures have compressed the dimensions of time and space, and thus deterritorialized interacting individuals (Blommaert, 2017). In this light, notions such as translocality, transnationalism and transculturalism are central for the investigation of interactional practices influenced by sets of norms that transcend both the local

and the global (see Blommaert, 2010; Gaztambide Fernandez *et al.*, 2020). Applying these theoretical frameworks to such communicative contexts implies that scholars investigate how communicative practices encounter, enmesh, and collide at the intersection of local and global settings. From this perspective, the semiotic choices employed by digital audiences appear on a continuum between micro and macro, heterogeneous and homogeneous, universal and particular.

The interest in connecting the local with the global has frequently gone hand in hand with a concern in unraveling stratified relations of power. A number of scholars in the field of Linguistic Ethnography have critically interrogated "the role of language and interaction in perpetuating and/or potentially challenging social inequalities" (Tusting, 2019, p. 7). The investigation of language ideologies has been key to identifying the dynamics of marginalization, exclusion and hierarchization that have crystallized in imbalanced social relationships. This is particularly reflected in the ways different individuals or groups have different access to symbolic and material resources, including semiotic and communicative resources (Selleck & Barakos, 2019). From this perspective, scholars argue that language and linguistic competence can be examined in terms of assets, which place interactants in positions of privilege.

A comprehensive framework considered for the present work is offered by Androutsopoulos (2008)'s Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography (DCOE hereafter), defined by the scholar as a *method* of doing Internet-based ethnographic research, which aims at "studying patterns of communication and social relationships accomplished through language in a community or group" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 3). According to Androutsopoulos (2008), who has developed practice-derived guidelines for linguistic ethnographers, a systematic analysis requires a throughgoing observation of the digital field of study, openness of the research practice, the simultaneous use of multiple technologies, the exploration of users' resources, and the following of people's trajectories across the digital space (see also Androutsopoulos & Stær, 2018). While Digital Linguistic Ethnography is interested in exploring the communicative dynamics and the semiotic artefacts happening in digital environments – that is "both products and processes taking place around these products" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 5), establishing a connection between the researcher and Internet users is also of primary importance. Moreover, researchers should opt for a prolonged contact with research participants, the formulation and customization of interview guidelines, the confronting of interviewees with their own material as well as the use of alternative ethnographic techniques (i.e., interviews, focus groups, surveys, questionnaires, etc.). These guidelines are designed to access and incorporate emic perspectives into the work as well as deepen interpretative knowledge by honing researchers' tools and straightening out their assumptions. The interacting members are therefore a valuable resource to grasp the interplay between the text and the digital social context in which the former is situated.

5
Method

5.1. Participants and sampling strategy

The participant group for the current research accounts for a non-representative sample (Zagheni & Weber, 2015), as it is based on a heterogeneous group of interviewees that do not share specific demographic characteristics if not for the subjugating circumstances they have undergone. As shown in detail in Table 1, these include Farhad Bandesh, Imran Mohammad, Mostafa Azimitabar, Thanus Selvarasa, Mardin Arvin, Behrouz Boochani, Erfan Dana, Ellie Shakiba, Murtada Alhusseini, Jaivet Ealom, Lelah Ahmadi, and Ali Kharsa. At the time of the interviews, the participants were between twenty-three and forty years of age. All the respondents were well-educated or were pursuing higher education. When not underaged (i.e., that is the case of Ali Kharsa and Imran Mohammed), they had professional occupations in their countries of origin that concerned different fields, such as arts, psychology, architecture, informatics, journalism, etc. All the interviewed refugees were fluent in English, the language in which the interviews were conducted; and they had been or were incarcerated in Australia-run onshore/offshore detention facilities for shorter or longer periods of time, from a minimum of two years to a maximum of eight years. For some of the respondents, Australia was the desired country of destination already at the time of fleeing their countries of origin, for others it was a coincidental choice to embark on a boat bound for Australia, as they had not planned their journey in advance with little time left for arranging the escape.

5.2. Research Ethics

As the amount of research on forced migration has steeply increased, so have concerns about research ethics in the field of Forced Migration Studies. A conspicuous number of guidelines have been published over the past years to ensure an ethical and sensitive approach to and the protection of research participants at all stages of the research process. The current research abides by the principles enlisted in the following guidelines, which have been contextualized, adapted and integrated in this section, i.e., *Guidelines for Research Integrity*, issued by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR, 2019); the *Guidance Note – Research on Refugees, Asylum seekers & Migrants* (Guidance Note, 2020), issued by the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission; as well as the *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0.* (Franzke *et al.*, 2020), *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), both issued by the Association of Internet Researchers. Most importantly, a Letter of Informed Consent was sent before each interview and countersigned by the participant before the beginning of the online meeting; alternatively, they verbally agreed to the

informed consent at the beginning of each interview. The consent form explained who the researcher was and where she worked, the content and purpose of the research, that the interview would be audio-recorded, transcribed, and used for academic purposes, that the participation was voluntary, that the refugee could withdraw at any given moment, and could participate in the interview anonymously.

TAB. I
Research participants

Name/ Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Place of/ Time in Detention	Place of Relocation	Ethnic/ National Background	Former/ Current Profession
Ali Kharsa	M	23	Christmas Island, Nauru Island – Approx. 2 years	Saskatoon (Canada)	Syrian-Canadian	Student, Rapper, Artist
Behrouz Boochani	M	37	Christmas Island, Manus Island – Approx. 7.5 years	Wellington (New Zealand)	Kurdish-Iranian	Journalist, Writer, Artist and Academic
Ellie Shakiba	F	37	Christmas Island, Nauru Island – Approx. 6 years	Los Angeles (United States)	Iranian	Architect, Designer, TV Producer, Employee
Erfan Dana	M	23	Batam, Riau Islands (Indonesia) – Still living in an IOM-run refugee shelter – Approx. 9 years	Burlington (Canada)	Hazara from Afghanistan	Writer, Poet, Refugee Activist
Farhad Bandesh	M	40	Christmas Island, Manus Island and Park Hotel (Carlton, Melbourne) – Approx. 7.5 years	Melbourne (Australia)	Kurdish-Iranian	Musician, Artist
Jaivet Ealom	M	28	Christmas Island, Manus Island – Approx. 4 years	Toronto (Canada)	Rohingya from Myanmar	Author, University Student, Software Provider
Imran Mohammad	M	26	Christmas Island, Manus Island – Approx. 7 years	Chicago (United States)	Rohingya from Myanmar	Writer, College Student
Lelah Ahmedi	F	37	Christmas Island, Nauru Island – Approx. 5 years	Melbourne (Australia)	Iranian	Psychologist

TAB. I *(continued from previous page)*

Mardin Arvin	M	32	Christmas Island, Manus Island and Park Hotel (Carlton, Melbourne) – Approx 8 years	Melbourne (Australia)	Kurdish-Iranian	Writer, Refugee Activist
Mostafa Azimitabar	M	37	Christmas Island, Manus Island Park Hotel (Carlton, Melbourne) – Approx. 7.5 years	Melbourne (Australia)	Kurdish-Iranian	Musician, Guitar Player, Refugee Activist
Murtada Alhusseini	M	32	Christmas Island, Manus Island – Approx. 2.5 years	Dornbirn (Austria)	Iraqui	Former bodyguard, Social Worker, Red Cross Worker
Thanus Selvarasa	M	31	Christmas Island, Manus Island Park Hotel (Carlton, Melbourne) – Approx. 7.5 years	Melbourne (Australia)	Tamil from Sri Lanka	Artist, IT Technician, Refugee Activist

5.3. The Refugee Interview Corpus

The Refugee Interview Corpus comprises twelve interviews with refugees that were formerly/currently imprisoned in Australia-run offshore/onshore detention centers at the time of the data collection. These include Manus Regional Processing Center, located in Papua New Guinea; Nauru Regional Processing Center, located on Nauru Island; and Sekupang Refugee Shelter, in Batam, Indonesia. These are countries where Australia has externalized the management of the refugee issue, either by contracting out the construction of the Regional Processing Centers and the related provision of facilities for refugees or by funding pre-existent refugee shelters, often run by inter-governmental organizations. The majority of interviews (n=8) concerned refugees that were detained on Manus Island, a detention facility for single men only. A small number of interviews (n=3) were carried out with refugees that were detained on Nauru Island, a detention facility that hosted mostly families, women, and children. These three interviews involved the only two female respondents, Lelah Ahmedi and Ellie Shakiba, together with Ali Kharsa, the latter being imprisoned with his father as a teenager. Only one interview was held with a single-man refugee who was detained in a refugee shelter in Indonesia, Erfan Dana.

While it was relatively easy to come across refugees that were detained on Manus, considering also that the digital infrastructure on the island allowed a more

adequate connection and communication with the outer world, it was considerably hard to intercept refugees that had been detained on Nauru Island at the time of their incarceration, given the high level of isolation of the detention camp. At the time of the interviews, the refugees that had been imprisoned in the Nauru Regional Processing Centre were already released and resettled in third countries (n=3). Furthermore, a few interviews (n=4) were performed with refugees detained in the onshore detention facilities of Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation (MITA) and the Alternative Place of Detention (APOD) of Park Hotel in Carlton (Melbourne). At this stage, these refugees were already digitally active and highly visible on digital media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, etc.) and mainstream media (i.e., newspapers, TV programs, documentaries, etc.).

Although the inclusion of interviewees from Nauru and Indonesia was not originally planned, it became imperative to gain the full picture of how the Australian government has been pushing its borders further out through its securitization policy, while outsourcing the handling of the refugee issue. Interviews were collected between July 2020 and March 2021 and took place entirely online through a variety of digital media platforms such as Skype, Facebook Messenger, Zoom, and WhatsApp. Interviews lasted approximately forty-five to ninety-five minutes and all the respondent agreed to be audio recorded. The interview corpus comprises more than thirteen hours of audio/video recording, which corresponds to an average of sixty-five minutes per interview. Interviews were semi-structured, and an interview guideline was produced to provide an outline for the research. Additional field notes and observations of the digital space were gathered, as well as digital artefacts, including i.e., images, videos, URLS and tweets.

5.4. Interview analysis

As for the data analysis process, once collected, the interviews were automatically transcribed through the Software Trint. The automatic transcription[2] was subsequently followed by a close-reading review of the transcribed text to verify the transcription accuracy. Several rounds of interview-coding were then carried out through the CAQDAS Atlas.ti 9 Mac OS[3]. CAQDAS is the acronym for Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. It is a method concerned with the use of software to assist researchers in qualitative analyses. Specifically, CAQDAS "efficiently stores, organizes, manages, and reconfigures [your] data to enable human analytic reflection" (Saldaña, 2012, p. 28). Coding is one of the main features of Atlas.ti and it is performed by dragging codes onto selected data or directly applying a code to a portion of text. In qualitative inquiry, codes are "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2012, p. 3).

For the present work, codes were applied analogically and once assigned, they were double-checked through software tools such as Object Managers or the Project

Explorer. The quotation level of Atlas.ti was a central feature for the analysis; in that it supported an inductive analytical approach to collected data. As a matter of fact, Atlas.ti allowed the development of the researcher's codebook through a progressive coding procedure, e.g., by assigning multiple codes to the same text excerpt (i.e., multiple or double coding); by coding a smaller section of a text within a larger coded section (i.e., nested or embedded coding); by merging similar codes into a larger code (i.e., umbrella or hierarchical coding) (Saldaña, 2012, p. 31). Coding was further facilitated by a series of additional tools such as memos, hyperlinks, groups, and networks, which were essential for the mapping and sorting of data. Theoretical coding was lastly applied in the final steps of the analytical process, until the interview data reached a saturation point (Fusch *et al.*, 2015).

Overall, fifty-four codes were developed and used to tag the interview data. However, for the present paper, only the interview excerpts tagged with codes that were strictly related to the research questions and the topic of the current research were selected. These comprised *English Language as a Bridge Language, English Language as Competence, English Language as a Learning process, English Language as a Liberation Language, English Language as an Oppression Language, English Language as Self-Teaching, English Language as a Social Language*. Once these excerpts were closely analyzed, four theoretical macro-codes were elaborated to further categorize the data, that is *English as a lingua franca, English as a lingua liberatrix, English as a lingua opprimens, English as a lingua socialis*, and *English as a lingua instruens*, which will be discussed in the next section.

5
Discussion

As it was unfeasible to carry out sociolinguistic fieldwork in the onshore/offshore detention centers considered for the current investigation, the analysis relies on the metalinguistic reflexivity of the interviewees, i.e., their ability to critically reflect on their own linguistic practices and repertoires (e.g., Coupland & Jaworski, 2004). Findings have shown that English, as perceived by the interviewees, served multifarious purposes inside detention, while forming dialectical continuums of usages in a variety of situational contexts. More specifically, English was viewed by research participants as a bridge language (*lingua franca*[4]), a resistance language (*lingua liberatrix*), an oppression language (*lingua opprimens*), a socio-digital language (*lingua socialis*), and an educational language (*lingua instruens*).

The excerpts shown below exemplify how English appears to be used as a bridge language (*lingua franca*) and a socio-digital language (*lingua socialis*) by refugees, serving a transnational function, by enabling linguistic and relational patterns that transcend geographical locations; a transcultural function, while dissolving social and cultural boundaries traditionally associated with nation-states; and transcontextual function, since English comes to be used across different situational contexts. For

example, Farhad Bandesh, a Kurdish songwriter, explains how he has chosen English as the language of his artistic work to communicate his message to the wider public (excerpt 1). Similarly, Moz Azimitabar affirms that English is key to his resistance and poetic movement, and to connect with his community of support (excerpt 3). Erfan Dana further argues that he receives encouragement from every part of the world on social media where he connects with different actors that stand in support of the refugee cause (excerpt 2). Overall, when used as a *lingua franca* and/or *lingua socialis*, the English language appears to have a solidarity-building function that fosters interpersonal relationships and transmediation communicative processes (Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017), which, on the one hand, allow the circulation of linguistic practices from digital to non-digital contexts and vice versa and, on the other, enable refugees to contrast the regime of spatial immobility and deterritorialization to which they are subjected in detention.

(1)   «Maybe [the reason why] I have chosen English for my song is to send a message to many people who are here» (Farhad Bandesh, songwriter and poet)

(2)   «Now every [Facebook] post I make, every time I receive a lot of encouragement from every part of the world and now I am very connected with my fellow human beings with journalists, with writers, community organizers, with media outlets, with, with newspapers everywhere in Australia, in Canada, in America, in Europe» (Erfan Dana, refugee advocate)

(3)   «English is a key for my movement and for my movement, for my speaking. If I didn't know how to speak English, then I wouldn't know these wonderful people who are fighting for us» (Moz Azimitabar, songwriter, and poet)

From the interviews, it also emerged how English was further employed as a resistance language as well as an oppression language (*lingua liberatrix/lingua opprimens*) in the detention space. With reference to the former, Behrouz Boochani interestingly states that English has been for him the language of freedom, that is a liberating language (excerpt 5). As an Iranian-Kurdish, he was forced to learn Farsi and grew up in an education system that was based on the Farsi language and suppressed his mother tongue Kurdish.

From the interviewee's account, it emerges once again how contemporary nation-states (i.e., Iran in this specific case) enforce linguistic ethno-national hegemonic practices by prescribing monolingual and monocultural policies, which have the effect of publicly legitimizing a majority language group while marginalizing a minority one (see e.g., May, 2017; Duchêne, 2020). However, in non-anglophone contexts, English may account for a language resource that disrupts the so-called "integration-through-national-language" order, according to which language competence in the institutionalized language enables the cultural assimilation of an individual into the national community (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011). In fact, through their linguistic counter-practices carried out in an internationally widespread language such as English, Behrouz Boochani alongside the refugee community share their struggle

for the recognition of their (linguistic) human rights at a global level, while raising visibility on the dehumanizing practices enacted by the institutional actors operating outside and inside the detention regime.

The latter is relevant also in excerpt 4 below, where Imran Mohammad claims that his community of belonging, the Rohingya, was in a very vulnerable position inside the detention space. Given that they were unable to speak English, they were not aware of their basic human rights, which made them "scared and silent". From this excerpt, it is evident how the lack of (access to) language resources and linguistic competence in the English language may bring to the complete silencing of refugees and their consequent invisibilization within the local and global linguistic market in place. Their linguistic isolation hence prevented them from establishing transnational networks of support, challenging institutional language hierarchies, and enacting meaningful practices of linguistic reterritorialization that were functional to their self-legitimation (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2017).

(4)   «So there were times when we didn't have access to interpreters. So with my community, my community was very vulnerable because, you know, they don't speak English and they had no idea about the basic human rights. And, you know, they were afraid, they were scared, and they were just silent» (Imran Mohammad, International Relations student)

(5)   «I could write more. Definitely much, much more. And also English for me is the language of freedom. Because as a Kurdish who was forced to learn Farsi and I grew up with a system with the education system that I had to write and learn and read and study only through Farsi. Not Kurdish» (Behrouz Boochani, journalist and writer)

(6)   «...other inmate[s] won't have any problems with the guard being mocked at them the guard being laughing at them the guards being talking on the back of them because they don't have a good command of the language, but if you know and understand English you actually kind of it is hurtful how they are mocking you, how they're making fun of you because you understand them» (Jaivet Ealom, International Relations student)

(7)   «English even empowered me to communicate with some of those people who left those comments to me. Plus, if you have communication skills and you know English, you will be able sometimes even to convince the person who disagrees and hates you» (Ellie Shakiba, architect)

In contexts of human rights violations such as the Australia-run onshore/offshore detention facilities, English was also perceived as a *lingua opprimens*, that is an oppressive language through which undesired subjectivities were not only physically disposed of but also morally degraded (see Hodge, 2015). In this regard, Jaivet Ealom argues that English accounted for the mock language of detention, for instance, when the Australian officers ridiculed and bullied refugees (excerpt 6). In this specific instance, not having a good command of the language somehow protected detainees from feeling further discriminated; whereas having a good proficiency in English implied realizing «how they are mocking you, how they're making fun of you because

you understand them». However, in some other circumstances, English empowered refugees who were subjected to and yet attempted to countervail verbal forms of discrimination, up to the point that, through their communicative skills in English, they were capable «to convince the person who disagrees and hates you» (excerpt 7), i.e., by dismantling preexisting xenophobic prejudices associated with asylum seekers and refugees. On the whole, the usage of English in the *linguascape* of detention seems to enhance "self-capitalization acts" (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2018) since it leads to linguistic possibilities of contestation as well as the regaining of visibility, political capital, and sense of agency by refugees (Muller Mirza & Dos Santos Mamed, 2019).

Lastly, English was perceived by refugees as an educational language (*lingua instruens*) in detention, that is a self-emancipatory language that was learned through semi-formal and informal educational settings, e.g., through self-study, courses offered by non-governmental organizations and humanitarian associations inside detention, by universities, etc. While engaging in the self-study of English, refugees strive to fill the educational divide created by the unequal distribution of and lack of access to educational resources between citizens and non-citizens of the Australian nation-state (see e.g., McIntyre & Abrams, 2020).

(8)　«So when I was back in 2015, when I was in South part of Indonesia in Manado, I began studying English and practicing. And when they sent me to detention center for three years, I spent all the years studying and writing and I read a lot of books. So I think reading helped me and still helps me a lot to write in English and to communicate» (Erfan Dana, advocate)

(9)　«I started writing, I started, you know, learning and at some point, you know, I was comfortable with the language…So I use my social media platform to improve my English, to improve my writing» (Imran Mohammad, International Relations student)

(10)　«Ah at first it was just self-study maybe the first three or four years I just did self-study and then when I got refugee [status] I was I had to right to do some courses at Nauru…There was a host organization that supported refugee, to do English class at the university. So yeah, I could do that» (Lelah Ahmedi, psychologist)

For example, Erfan Dana tells his experiences from within an Indonesian detention facility where the self-study of English helped him to learn how to communicate and how he increased his language knowledge by reading several books in English (excerpt 8). Similarly, in excerpt 9, Imran Mohammad, a formerly illiterate refugee, argues that he enhanced his literacy skills by using English on the social media platforms until he felt "comfortable with the language". Lelah Ahmedi, in excerpt 10, further adds that she studied English first by herself and then through the university courses that were offered to detainees on the Island of Nauru. These excerpts shed light on the importance attributed by refugees to the acquisition of English language competence also in connection with the various communicative settings in which they engaged from within the detention space, i.e., literary, digital, educational domains, among others. Facing the lack of formal and institutional learning pathways, refugees ultimately

perceived the self-study of English as a vehicle for their educational aspirations and consequently, through English, they actively pursued their education rights in the constrained space of detention.

6
Conclusions

Drawing upon the framework of Critical Sociolinguistics, the present paper has attempted to shed light on the role of English within the Australian mandatory detention system vis-à-vis the material, communicative and symbolic marginalization to which a group of refugees were subjected. As it was unfeasible to carry out sociolinguistic fieldwork in the onshore/offshore detention centers considered for the current investigation, the analysis has relied on the metalinguistic reflexivity of the interviewees, i.e., their ability to critically reflect on their own linguistic practices and repertoires (e.g., Coupland and Jaworski, 2004). On this premise, the research applied a content-analytical ethnographic framework to the purposely built Refugee Interview Corpus (RIC), which comprised twelve interviews conducted through digital media platforms with formerly detained refugees. Findings have shown that English, as perceived by the interviewees, served multifarious purposes inside detention, while forming dialectical continuums of usages in a variety of situational contexts. More specifically, English was viewed by research participants as a bridge language (*lingua franca*); a resistance language (*lingua liberatrix*); an oppression language (*lingua opprimens*); a socio-digital language (*lingua socialis*); and an educational language (*lingua instruens*).

When used as a *lingua franca* and/or *lingua socialis*, the English language appeared to have a solidarity-building function that fostered interpersonal relationships and transmediation communicative processes. As a matter of fact, on the one hand, the English language allowed the circulation of linguistic practices from digital to non-digital contexts and vice versa (Chouliaraki & Musarò, 2017) and, on the other, it enabled refugees to contrast the regime of spatial immobility and deterritorialization to which they were subjected in detention. Furthermore, when employed as a *lingua liberatrix*, the usage of English in the *linguascape* of detention enhanced "self-capitalization acts" (Sabaté-Dalmau, 2018) since it led to linguistic possibilities of contestation of discriminatory linguistic practices (*lingua opprimens*) as well as the regaining of visibility, political capital, and sense of agency by refugees (Muller Mirza & Dos Santos Mamed, 2019). Lastly, while facing the lack of formal and institutional learning pathways, refugees ultimately perceived the self-study of English as a vehicle for their educational aspirations and consequently, through English, they actively pursued their education rights in the constrained space of detention (*lingua istruens*).

All things considered, this research propounds to critically investigate the English language both "in terms of new forms of power, control and destruction – and in its complexity – in terms of new forms of resistance, change, appropriation and identity"

(Pennycook, 2007, p. 5). As a matter of fact, within the *linguascape* of detention, English acts as a carrier of hegemonic ideologies, e.g., when considering the verbal discrimination conducted against refugees by English speaking detention authorities, as well as a matrix of counter-practices, e.g., when taking into account that English was instrumental in the acquisition of linguistic, educational, and political human rights by detainees. To put it in another way, even though refugees acquired linguistic agency and to some extent became emancipated linguistic subjects inside detention, it is also true that such linguistic acquisitional processes remained embedded within broader dynamics of power, subjugation, and violence enacted by a multitude of institutional and non-institutional actors. The present work argues that linguistic and counter-linguistic practices are to be understood as shaped in a dialectic way through competing macro- and micro- dynamics of power, which heighten and release discursive tensions between top-down institutional practices and bottom-up social counteractions (Fairclough, 2001).

Further research is needed to investigate both the linguistic practices established, maintained, and contested in the understudied *linguascape* of detention *and* the ideologies embedded in the linguistic policies enacted by the Australian government vis-à-vis the arbitrary imprisonment of asylum seekers and refugees. It is in fact fundamental to recognize that, in the context of the Australian border policy (as much as in other restrictive contexts), linguistic and non-linguistic resources come to be unevenly allocated as they are regimented by nation-state institutions which discipline migration phenomena on the basis of deep-rooted ethno-nationalistic ideologies. What seems crucial is an appropriate contextualization of refugees' communicative practices, which acknowledges the tangible (i.e., material) and intangible (i.e., political, symbolic) effects of these containment policies on the linguistic competence and semiotic repertoires of displaced groups and individuals and examines them as a direct consequence of the multidimensional forms of obliteration to which these subjects are perpetually exposed. Adopting such a critical academic approach is in fact indispensable to reflect upon, rethink, and rediscuss *refugee linguascapes* from a social-justice oriented perspective. The ultimate aim of the present research paper is in fact to offer a multileveled lens through which refugee *linguascapes* can be investigated, while invoking the redistribution of resources, recognition of dignity, and authentic representation of refugees' subjectivities across different settings and contexts (Fraser, 1998).

Notes

1. Digital Ethnography builds upon the so-called traditional or "pre-digital ethnography", a discipline rooted in linguistic anthropology and interested in the systematic description of socio-cultural phenomena from the perspective of group members (Varis, 2015, p. 56; see Hymes, 1974; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Geertz, 1973 for further discussion on the origins of ethnography of communication). Ethnographic approaches traditionally shy away from universalistic generalizations and aim at developing a contextualized and situated understanding of the object of study.

2. Given that the current study focuses on the *content* of the interviews rather than on the speech patterns of the interviewees, the selected excerpts do not include conversational features.

3. Caqdas started to become available in the 1980s and ever since it has been employed in broad-reaching sectors, such as human and social sciences, bibliographic management, corporate governance, and economics. It was in the 1990s that software packages were specifically developed to simplify qualitative research approaches, including targeted techniques for data retrieving, coding, and metadata organization (Silver & Bulloch).

4. This label stems from the extensive research that has been conducted on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), which is defined by Barbara Seidlhofer as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice and often the only option" (2011, p. 7; for a more comprehensive discussion on ELF see also Jenkins, 2007, 2000).

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