Chapter 1

Linguistic Landscape and Language Vitality

MONICA BARNI and CARLA BAGNA

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to reflect on the relationship between linguistic landscape (LL) and language presence and vitality (Extra & Yağmur, 2004; Barni, 2008) in urban spaces. Recent decades have witnessed the arrival of an increasing number of immigrants who have decided to settle in urban spaces, and this has been among the reasons for the emergence of linguistic and cultural diversity within these spaces. To an ever-increasing extent, cities are places where different cultures, languages and identities interact; they are also places where this interaction can be observed (Goffman, 1963; Lefebvre, 1991). In this chapter, our interest lies in examining the impact that different languages can have in different urban territories on the LL, as well as in exploring the factors that can influence its configuration.

Our data and analyses focus on a number of cities in Italy where immigrant communities have settled. Although all the cities analysed are places where immigration is present, they differ among themselves in terms of various factors, including geographical position, size and linguistic space. Our investigation has concentrated on Rome, the capital of Italy, as well as other, smaller, cities that represent other urban realities in which immigrants have chosen to live and work.

Socio-demographic data show that about 4,330,000 immigrants currently reside in Italy (Caritas, 2009), approximately 7.2% of the Italian population. It is obvious that this presence can have an influence on linguistic realities. The immigrant groups that have settled in different areas of Italy have imported their languages to the communities where they reside, at a time when the dynamics of collective and individual variation in language use are changing in form and structure. Italianisation is gradually spreading within the country, but the linguistic situation, which includes dialects and historic minority languages, is still composite and of great complexity. Immigrant communities are adding a new element of plurilingualism to what is already a composite linguistic situation. In this chapter, we define a language as an *immigrant language* when it is used by a community that is not only present in an

area in 'quantitative' terms (i.e. number of foreign residents), but also strong in 'qualitative' terms, and used in social interaction and maintained by its speakers (Bagna *et al.*, 2003; Barni, 2008). This latter aspect brings us back to the need for detailed studies on the types of language use within an area where a group has settled. This is because simply identifying the languages present within a country or area in quantitative terms does not provide us with any information about the relations between the languages observed and their uses in a given place. This, in turn, implies the need to monitor the possible outcomes of linguistic contact, such as language maintenance and loss, and new language variety formation through contact and linguistic assimilation of differing degrees according to the generation in question. For these reasons, we need a multi-level observation built on a theoretical and methodological basis, taking into account the linguistic and extra-linguistic variables that can influence linguistic uses.

In this sense, understanding, documenting and analysing specific areas' LL offers one of the levels of the research: linguistic use in contexts of social communication, defined here as language 'visibility'. This complements language presence, the socio-demographic weight of speakers, and language vitality, the declared uses of languages within familial contexts (Bagna *et al.*, 2007; Barni & Bagna, 2008). The relationship with the local linguistic situation and the possibilities of interaction between the local language and linguistic dynamics coming from outside should also be examined.

The Role of Cities in Language Contact

In our search for a link between LL and language vitality through analysis of language presence, use and visibility, we have chosen urban spaces as our places of observation. Given that urbanisation is one of the most important characteristics of today's world (*State of the World*, 2007), 2008 marked a turning point, in which for the first time the world's population became predominantly urban (Lee, 2007: 6). Furthermore, due to their social, ethnic, religious, economic and, we would also add, linguistic diversity, nowadays there are cities that 'are the world', as Augé (2004: 20) has noted (see also Vertovec, 2007). The most recent research shows that urban contexts provide more interesting and significant sources for the reading and interpretation of linguistic dynamics (Chríost, 2007). Using LL analyses, this fact has already been observed in the more traditional contexts of the coexistence of regional minority languages in a given area (Bourhis & Landry, 2002; Extra & Gorter, 2001, 2008; Williams, 2007). Specifically, it has been shown that the LL is used for the purposes of handling and governing these areas. LLs are also gaining importance in those contexts affected by recent or long-standing immigrant settlement

(Gorter, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2008). Urban spaces are therefore increasing in importance as 'showcases' and, above all, environments where languages weave together and linguistic destinies and expectations are 'played out'. Within the city, or at least some of its neighbourhoods, languages can find or carve out sufficient space to manifest their vitality as well as their visibility (Mondada, 2000).

The aim of our research is to understand the roles played by the different factors influencing the visibility of languages in LLs, such as the linguistic situation of the area, the size of the city, the extent of the immigrant communities, their degree of 'rootedness', employment opportunities in the area, migration channels and migration status, community organisations, local public policy towards immigrants, etc. We know, for example, that, far more than in smaller cities, linguistic dynamics in a large city move within two different poles and often lead to opposing outcomes in terms of linguistic contact. On the one hand, we observe a tendency towards a pole of monolingualism, insofar as the city is the centre where the unitary linguistic model is the strongest, for both its permanent inhabitants and the new arrivals, because the dominant language is a necessary and indispensable tool for interaction, as well as a symbol of integration, assimilation and full citizenship (De Mauro, 1963, 1989). On the other hand, however, there is also a tendency towards a plurilingual pole, insofar as big cities are places where there is much contact between groups and where the cohesive forces of collective groups, and hence their linguistic visibility, are least impeded by the social and linguistic closure of historic groups. A big city with a strong multi-ethnic component can therefore be a place where collective and individual identities are enabled to express themselves, since spaces that are more open to creativity, change and relations between social and linguistic groups are also more dynamic (Bagna & Barni, 2006; Barni, 2008).

The Surveys

The research presented here had as its goal the analysis of language visibility and vitality of some of the immigrant languages present in various Italian urban contexts. It is a comparative study that aims to demonstrate how various factors, both linguistic and extra-linguistic, can influence the visibility and vitality of the languages found in these spaces. For our investigation, we selected a number of urban contexts in Italy with a marked presence of immigrant communities. Our research was carried out between 2004 and 2007. As we have suggested elsewhere (Barni, 2008), one of the prime sources for information on the languages spoken by immigrant communities is demographic data regarding country of origin. Statistics document the number of nationalities present in Italy, which are the most numerous immigrant communities, and where in the country

they have chosen to live. This statistical information enables us to hypothesise the presence in these areas of the languages used by the communities in question, which come into contact with the autochthonous linguistic substrate of Italian, its dialects and varieties. A second level of analysis involves the study of language use and vitality, which can be observed using methods such as interviews and questionnaires. The LL approach offers us a more detailed exploration of the visibility of immigrant languages in a relatively circumscribed area (Bagna *et al.*, 2004, 2007; Barni, 2006, 2008; Barni & Bagna, 2008). Based on the above criteria, we have chosen the cities of Arezzo, Ferrara, Florence, Monterotondo, Rome and Prato for our survey.

Data Collected

In this chapter, we focus on the abovementioned Italian cities and analyse their LLs in relation to the patterns of use of the specific languages present there. In particular, we examine the following:

- Chinese in Rome and Prato.
- Romanian in the areas around Rome and Florence.
- Russian and Ukrainian in Ferrara and Arezzo.

Chinese in Rome

The dual role of Rome as a city driving diffusion of standard Italian both within itself and for the whole of Italy, while also at the same time being the elective centre of plurilingual and interlinguistic contact dynamics, makes it a laboratory for the reorganisation of expressive uses, as well as the ultimate communicative space. Indeed, Rome's status as the capital of Italy has played an undeniable role in the process of Italianisation of the peninsula. As early as the mid-19th century, 'Italian was considered, and to a great extent truly was, the language in everyday use' in the city (De Mauro, 1989: xvii). At the same time, Rome has always been a centre attracting foreigners, a place of immigration (De Mauro, 1989) for a highly varied range of reasons with a markedly polycentric ethnicity. Apart from motivations of a religious nature, which make Rome unique in character globally, the factors influencing its choice as a place of residence and the composition of its population by nationality of origin include the job market, which is marked above all by a continuous flow towards a single sector, domestic work (as well as construction and commerce). Consequently, the number of languages present in Rome is very high. Villarini (2001: 65) estimates that there are about 64 different languages used in schools in Rome.

The *Municipio I* administrative area in the centre of Rome, which includes the Esquilino neighbourhood, is the area with the greatest

number of foreigners (25,004, 11.16% of Rome's total foreign population in 2004, with the ratio remaining constant in subsequent years) as well as the highest percentage of foreigners – 20.4% (22.9% in 2006) – relative to the total number of residents. In other publications, we have focused in detail on a survey of languages in the Esquilino neighbourhood (Bagna & Barni, 2006; Barni, 2006) using statistical and demographic analysis and linguistic landscaping. Twenty-four (visible) languages were identified, scattered unevenly across the area and establishing a variety of relations with Italian and other languages. It was found that the most visible language is Chinese, even though it is not the language of the most numerous immigrant communities, which are from Bangladesh, the Philippines and Romania (Municipality of Rome, 2004, 2005; Caritas, 2005, 2006, 2007a). In the Esquilino neighbourhood, Chinese is the leading language both in terms of dominance (quantitative prevalence of texts observed in the area) and autonomy, i.e. the capacity to be used in the LL without the use of Italian or other languages (Barni, 2006; Bagna *et al.*, 2007). During our survey in the Esquilino neighbourhood, we found 851 LL items in languages other than Italian (in total 24 languages were found), of which 483 contained Chinese in mono- and plurilingual texts (see Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2). Of the 296 monolingual texts found, 197 were in Chinese only

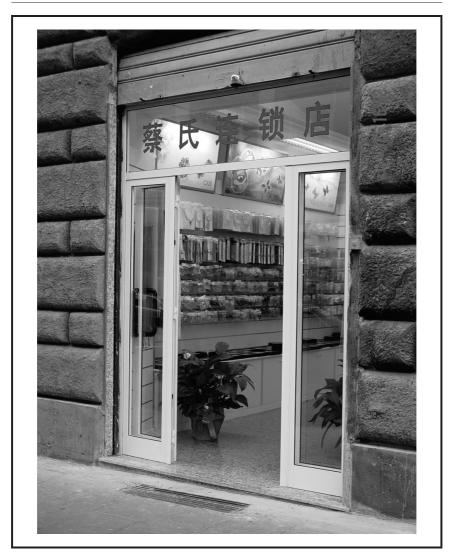**Figure 1.1** Chinese language in the Esquilino LL

Figure 1.2 Chinese language in the Esquilino LL

with no other languages present. This shows that there is no firm link between the linguistic visibility of a language and the numeric consistency of the ethnic group speaking it. This presence of Chinese is also felt by residents. In a document entitled *Esquilino dei mondi lontani* [*The Distant Worlds of Esquilino*] (Caritas, 2007b: 54), which analyses the processes of urbanisation of the Esquilino neighbourhood from 1970 onwards, it is emphasised that the neighbourhood now feels 'the alienating impact

caused by the presence of ideograms [...], an indecipherable language that does not facilitate everyday communication'. Such a statement shows that Chinese is, in this case, a language capable of conserving its autonomy more than other foreign languages are, as is manifested by its visibility in the LL of a neighbourhood characterised by a high level of plurilingualism. It is also worth noting that in Esquilino there were hardly any texts in Chinese produced by Italian institutions, so-called *top-down* texts (Ben-Raphael *et al.*, 2006). Almost all Chinese texts observed were produced by individual Chinese people (e.g. shop owners). It is thus no coincidence that the strong visibility of Chinese is such that it has led to the signing of an agreement between the City of Rome and the Chinese community (11 May 2007). This document emphasised that the Chinese community must 'improve shop signs and fittings, being sure to install signs written in Italian at the top, and in Chinese below'. The same document states that the City of Rome, on the other hand, must 'facilitate the life and integration of the Chinese community by organizing courses to enable them to learn Italian and to understand the requirements of the law, particularly with regards to integration, legality and trade; [... and] make communication between institutions and foreign communities easier by translating laws and regulations into Chinese'. As a result of this agreement, in the three months following May 2007, monolingual Chinese signs became bilingual Chinese-Italian signs. Provisions of this kind clearly recognise the role of Chinese as the language of a minority community for which agreements similar to those established for the defence of historic minorities in Italy (Iannàccaro & Dell'Aquila, 2004) can be drawn up. In the case of Chinese, however, the aims are somewhat different: not so much to maintain an ethno-linguistic identity as to regulate and even limit the use of a specific language. This provision provides us with an element of confirmation as to the visibility of the Chinese language, which has affected an area so strongly that laws have been made regarding its use.

Chinese in Prato

Prato is the Italian municipality with the highest number of foreigners (25,489 people) among its resident population (186,608, data from 31 May 2009, Municipality of Prato). Of these foreigners, 40.64% are Chinese (10,361). The Chinese community began settling in Prato around 1990 and developed businesses in the fields of textile and leather production. In our survey, carried out in 2006, we collected 200 LL items in languages other than Italian in the city centre (Lufrano, 2007). We found 12 languages visible in the LL. As in Rome, Chinese is the most visible language in the urban linguistic makeup (128 LL items contain Chinese; in 39 cases the texts are in 'Chinese only'), but unlike the situation

observed in Esquilino, the visibility of the Chinese language is determined not only by individual choices or strategies of a commercial nature, but also by the way communication and public life more generally is handled. Compared to Esquilino, the domains of use of Chinese are broader by far, and the authors/sources of messages in Chinese (or Chinese and Italian) are not only members of the community itself, but also Italian institutions (see Figure 1.3). In other words, the visibility of Chinese is exerted through both *bottom-up* and *top-down* mechanisms, making it a unique case in Italy due to the intensity and range of this balance. The force of Chinese also has a correspondence in its vitality, as it continues to be the language used within Chinese families, despite their long-term residence in Italy (see Ceccagno, 2003, 2004). Italian seems to seek out space within Chinese and vice versa. We may thus affirm that Chinese in Prato is also felt to be an immigrant language by Italian institutions, and is therefore also used top-down.

Figure 1.3 Multilingual top-down sign in Prato

These data describe the situation as it stood before 2009. On 3 August 2009, an article of the *Regulations for Commerce, Retail Activity in Set Premises* (Part VI, article 37, paragraph 3, Municipality of Prato) came into force, which rules: 'Signs or writing inside or outside of shop windows should be accompanied by the equivalent translation in Italian when in a foreign language. Exception is made for signs in foreign languages that have by now entered into common Italian usage'. In the city, 140 signs considered in breach of this regulation as they were written in only one language were discovered and blacked out, and their owners were fined (see Figure 1.4).

Naturally, the first to be affected were Chinese businesses. This ruling extended the social conflict deriving from the global economic crisis to the linguistic level: foreign entrepreneurs, especially the Chinese, are blamed for the problems facing the economy of Prato. The autonomous use of a foreign language is perceived as a distinguishing and isolating factor, and the delicate linguistic equilibrium created over the years is today compromised. It should also be underlined that the formulation of the Prato ruling aims primarily at hitting languages that are immediately perceived as foreign, including those that use writing systems other than the Roman alphabet. It will be interesting to see how this ruling will be applied to less exotic languages like English or French, as well as to analyse the criteria according to which it will be decided which are the

Figure 1.4 Shop sign blacked out in Prato

words entered into 'common Italian usage'. Prato, which has stood as an example for the type of policy chosen with regard to immigrant groups and their languages and is a central pole for Chinese communities in Europe, is thus becoming a place in which groups' linguistic choices become the subject of social clashes and rulings adopted in the name of public order.

Romanian in Rome and the Province of Rome

Immigrants from Romania have been the largest community in the province of Rome since 2004; on a national level, too, their presence has increased considerably in recent years, to the point where they are now the largest immigrant group in Italy as a whole (Caritas, 2009). The data indicate that more than 15% (around 100,000) of the Romanians in Italy (625,278) live in the province of Rome (Caritas, 2008: 297).

The data collected in the Esquilino neighbourhood show few traces of Romanian and few texts in it. The language is contained in only 13 of the 851 texts observed, and dominant in just 3 texts. It never appeared autonomously. Therefore, this proves that Romanian is a language that relies on Italian or other languages. The majority of texts in which Romanian is visible are of a *top-down* type, produced by the Romanian community or other immigrant communities. The texts are posters of a 'political' nature, aimed at inviting immigrant groups to participate in meetings and demonstrations asking for their rights to be recognised. The group's preponderantly 'non-commercial' vocation, and consequent lower visibility in terms of text production for public communication, would appear to explain the results obtained. Nonetheless, these figures are counterbalanced by the linguistic vitality indexes (as against visibility), gathered in part using questionnaires and interviews with families and schoolchildren (Bagna & Barni, 2005). Thus, we found a strong declared vitality, surveyed specifically in the municipalities of Mentana and Monterotondo near Rome, chosen as a new home by families of Romanian origin, who have found this area to have the most favourable conditions for settling (for a total population of some 50,000 people). In these towns, the visibility of the Romanian language is of secondary importance, and is above all a result of a process of vitality and established presence in the area. Indeed, it took at least 5–6 years' stable presence of the Romanian community here before any writing in Romanian was to be observed within the social communication space. As of 2005, Monterotondo in particular has shown elements of visibility of the Romanian community, previously completely absent, which reinforce the role of Romanian as an immigrant language. The very few traces previously observed were top-down, produced exclusively by public bodies (see Figure 1.5), so that the choice to use Romanian came from

Figure 1.5 Top-down sign in Romanian in Monterotondo

above. Here, the maintenance of the language of origin within the family (surveys with questionnaires and interviews) and the stable presence of the Romanian community have led to a broadening of its use in contexts of public communication.

Romanian in Florence

Florence is another city that is particularly attractive to immigrants from Romania, who are the fourth largest immigrant community in the city. With some 3000 people (following immigrants from China, Albania and the Philippines), they account for 8% of foreign residents. The city (370,323 inhabitants), however, seems impermeable to the presence of this community. Our LL survey was conducted in 2006–2007 in Quartiere 1, a neighbourhood in the city centre, stretching from San Lorenzo and Santa Croce. It is one of the most touristed areas of Florence. The neighbourhood was chosen because it (and Quartiere 5) has the largest presence of immigrant groups (around 25% of immigrants in Florence, Municipality of Florence, 2007). Although Quartiere 1 has the second greatest number of Romanian residents, minimal traces of their language were found. The data found in Florence regarding the Romanian language are similar to those from Esquilino and the province of Rome. Out of a total of 114 LL

items in languages other than Italian, Romanian was visible in only five (Fortuni, 2007; Massaro, 2007). The space of the central area, and particularly Quartiere 1, is caught between Italian and English, and the weight of these languages of mass communication and mass tourism minimises the visibility of other languages, and thus of immigrant languages.

In the case of the city of Florence, where Romanian is maintained in use in family and intracommunity situations, other contextual factors would seem to contribute to its low level of visibility, such as, for example, the presence of tourist languages in the LL. Out of 114 LL items found, English is present in fully 64 items (Fortuni, 2007).

Russian and Ukrainian in Arezzo and Ferrara

The analysis of these two languages leads our research into immigrant groups in Italy to assume a gender perspective. Russia and Ukraine are the two countries from which we see the greatest imbalance between the sexes, with a marked prevalence of women immigrants. Added to this is the fact that these women are prevalently employed in the home-help field, with living conditions that often involve staying at the assisted person's home. This means that, unlike other groups, the dynamics of maintenance of their language of origin have to find a space outside the domestic environment, since this *is* the work place. For this reason, the vitality of these languages is strictly reserved for time spent outside the house (e.g. in public parks or shopping) and it generates visibility that is defined by the women themselves as they move about the city (Censis, forthcoming).

Our LL surveys were carried out in the city centres of Ferrara in 2006–2007 (Mingozzi, 2007) and Arezzo in 2006–2007 (Tellini, 2007). Arezzo and Ferrara are cities in the centre of Italy, where most of the Ukrainian and Russian immigrants have only recently arrived and work as home helps (Municipality of Arezzo, 2008; Municipality of Ferrara, 2009). In Arezzo (98,788 inhabitants), the proportion of Russians and Ukrainians (218 out of 10,246 foreigners, data from 31 December 2008, Municipality of Arezzo) is far lower than in Ferrara (134,464 inhabitants), where the largest immigrant group (alongside Romanians) is that from Ukraine (1,239 out of 8,121 foreigners, data from 31 December 2008, Municipality of Ferrara). In both cases, as has been mentioned, these groups show a prevalently female component (57% in Arezzo, 79% in Ferrara). Consequently, Ferrara has become a showcase of female presence with strong linguistic vitality. In Ferrara and Arezzo, we recorded a dense network of interactions in specific locations within the city. At times it is a monolingual use, and at times it is mixed with Italian and the dialects spoken by the elderly people with whom the immigrants work.

In Arezzo, one of the places with the greatest concentration of immigrant languages is Piazza Guido Monaco, a square in the city centre. Russian and Ukrainian are commonly spoken there, as well the other languages of the main immigrant groups – Romanian, Albanian, Polish, Arabic, Hindi and Chinese. Since the late 1990s, the square, which is large, round in shape and very central, has been divided into several different areas. Each area is occupied by a specific national group. Dominican women occupy some areas, together with eastern European women – Romanians, Poles, Ukrainians, Moldovans and Russians – and Dominican youths, while a quarter of the square has become a meeting place for North African communities, particularly Moroccans and Algerians. On the other side of the street, near a shopping centre and a youth support office, is the place where young Albanians usually meet. In Ferrara, the same role is played by the public gardens in Viale Cavour, in the city centre. In both cities, outdoor spaces become the spaces of maximum vitality, expressed as interaction within the immigrant communities.

The LL data collected in Ferrara and Arezzo have shown that while the use of Ukrainian and Russian is immediately noticeable in the city, and especially in the places where the communities live and socialise, their visibility in the LL remains tied to certain basic services and domains. It is limited to institutional spaces: hospitals, employment centres, offices of voluntary associations, etc. (Mingozzi, 2007). Furthermore, unlike the situation with Chinese, it is far more common in Ferrara to find bilingual texts (Italian-Ukrainian, Italian-Russian) publicising facts and events such as local elections, people seeking work, parties, etc., thus making the message available to more people, including Italians.

Conclusions

The objective of this chapter has been to analyse the relationship between LL and language presence and vitality in specific urban areas in Italy. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997: 34), 'the linguistic landscape may be the most visible marker of the linguistic vitality of the various ethnolinguistic groups living within a particular administrative or territorial enclave'. The various data collected and analysed have confirmed our hypotheses that there is no direct relationship between the presence of a language in an area, its vitality and its visibility. As we have seen, this relationship depends on numerous linguistic, extra-linguistic and contextual factors.

We will only venture here to state that languages that are more visible have a greater potential for vitality and therefore a greater probability of being maintained in an immigration context, since in addition to their use in private and familial contexts, they are also used in public.

However, this connection is not determined by a causal link, rather it is constructed through a range of differentiated factors. Indeed, the conditions that enable languages to become visible in a given area are not due exclusively to positive attitudes towards the use of these languages. There are various conditions for the possibility of a relationship between the visibility of languages within a territory and their potential (and actual) vitality, and they depend on factors including the characteristics of the area in which people settle and the length of time that they stay, as well as the attitude of speakers towards their own language. The linguistic policy choices of the host country and of specific cities within a nation also play a role: in the case of Italy, there are no policies globally aimed at the recognition of immigrant languages, but isolated actions motivated by specific political agendas. The recent array of laws aimed at guaranteeing Italian citizens' safety (Law n. 94, 15 July 2009, in force from 8 August 2009) has as its primary aim the fight against illegal immigration through increasingly restrictive measures (e.g. arrest). In the wake of this law, individual city mayors can adopt different rulings in the name of safety and 'decency'. The rulings adopted in Rome and Prato show that the fight against diversity has widened to include everything that evokes linguistic and cultural diversity. Linguistic diversity, maintenance and visibility are currently the subject of bitter political clashes in a country where the presence of immigrant groups is now a vital structural element for social and economic growth (Caritas, 2009).

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