Citizenship and National Identity: the Role of the Language Spoken at Home

Abstract

Several studies demonstrated that immigrants' knowledge of the host country's language is a key factor for their successful integration. Although robust evidence exists for a number of European countries, among which Germany, the UK, Spain and the Netherlands, and North American countries (e.g. Canada and the US), knowledge gaps persist as regards the role of language in the Italian context. This paper exploits Italy's super-diversity of the immigrant population (more than 195 nationalities) to assess whether and how linguistic barriers affect immigrants' integration. To this end, we use the National Survey on Social Conditions and Integration of Immigrants, which gathers information on immigrants' speaking, reading and comprehension skills of the Italian language. The issue of endogeneity (i.e. unobserved variables correlated with both immigrants' language proficiency) is addressed, leveraging presumably exogenous variation generated by immigrants' age of arrival in the host country and linguistic distance between their native language and Italian.

Introduction and motivation

Several studies demonstrated that immigrants' knowledge of the host country's language is a key factor for their labour market success. Although robust evidence exists for a number of European countries, among which Germany (Dustmann 1994; Dustmann and van Soest 2001, 2002), the UK (Dustman and Fabbri 2003; Miranda and Zhu 2013a, 2013b), Spain (Budra and Swedberg 2012; Di Paolo and Raymond 2012) and the Netherlands (Yao and van Ours 2015), and North American countries, among which Canada (Piqué, 2001; Warman et al. 2015) and the US (Borjas, 1994; Bleakley and Chin 2004, 2010), knowledge gaps persist as regards the role of language knowledge in the labour market and social integration process in Italy (Bednarz, 2017; Gilardoni et al. 2017; Ambrosini, 2011).

Italy represents nonetheless an interesting case study for a number of reasons. First, Italy is characterized by *super-diversity[1]* of the immigrant population: more than 195 different nationalities are represented among the authorized immigrant population living in Italy at the beginning of 2018,[2] speaking languages that exhibit very different levels of proximity to Italian. Second, in comparison with English-speaking countries or countries with a long colonial history, the Italian language is less widely spoken abroad and a majority of immigrants arrives in Italy with little knowledge of the country's official language,[3] causing them initial problems of interaction and potentially future problems of integration, e.g. whenever they must demonstrate a level of proficiency in Italian to obtain a long term residence permit.[4] Third, in 2017 Italy was one of the European Member States with the largest number of asylum applicants.[5] It is therefore important to investigate factors which can affect the pace of immigrants' labour market success and integration in the host country.

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[1] Super-diversity, ' a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced'(Vertovec, 2007).

[2] Data source: I.Stat http://stra-dati.istat.it/# dataset Foreign population residing in Italy, 1.1.2018; login 11.10.2018

[3] No pre-entry language requirements are applied in Italy.

[4] According to the regulation on the Integration Agreement, enforced in 2012, immigrants should acquire knowledge of the Italian language corresponding to level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages issued by the Council of Europe.

Despite the interest of the topic, assessing the causal effect of language skills is fraught with some important identification issues. First, learning a language is an investment in human capital, and depends on an individual's education, efforts and ability. The latter in turn may affect not only language skills but also labour market success generating a problem of endogeneity (i.e. unobserved variables may affect both outcomes). Second, labour market success, and in particular the type of job done by immigrants and their industries of activity (e.g. the *language spoken at work* or the frequency of contacts with Italian customers) may have important feedbacks into her language knowledge (reverse causality). Last but not least, language skills are often self-reported, producing measurement error in the variable of interest and issues of comparability across individuals.

Researchers have made attempts to tackle these issues resorting to Instrumental Variables (IVs) estimation, by leveraging presumably exogenous variation in language skills. Among the latter, common instrumental variables are: age at arrival in the host country, minority concentration in the area where the immigrants live, linguistic distance between the immigrants' mother tongue and that of the host country, *language spoken at home*, number of children, overseas marriage, parental education and the interaction between language spoken during childhood and age at arrival in the host country (see the review in Yao and van Ours, 2015).

Data

The analysis is based on the first National Survey on Social Conditions and Integration of Immigrants residing in Italy, conducted in 2011-2012, which currently represents the most recent official survey conducted in Italy including demo-linguistic profiles of migrant population.[6] The sample is composed of more than 25,000 individuals, out of them: 21,030 are immigrants (17,545 as first generation and 2,834 as second generation) without Italian citizenship; 4,010 are born in Italy (from parents born abroad) and have the Italian citizenship.

The migrant population in Italy is highly and increasingly diversified in terms of countries of origin, demographic profiles, skills, educational background and length of stay. This high complexity makes it difficult to understand the linguistic barriers that distinct migrant targets face in accessing the labour market. According to the survey, 70 out of 100 immigrants had no knowledge of Italian language when they arrived in Italy. Immigrants with lacking language skills are mainly from Bangladesh, China, Philippine and Sri Lanka, while immigrants with a certain level of fluency in Italian language are from two European countries, Albania and Moldavia, and one African country, Tunisia.

The relationship between the immigrants' mother tongue and Italian language is examined using two indicators, the *language spoken at home*, as a linguistic indicator reflecting the private sphere of immigrants[7]. Italian is the language spoken at home by 36 percent of immigrants living in Italy.

However, the share of immigrants speaking the *Italian language at home* is not negligible for some communities: this is the case for 62 percent of immigrants claiming Portuguese as their mother tongue, around 50% of immigrants claiming Spanish or Polish as their mother tongue, and 42 percent of immigrants claiming Ukrainian as their mother tongue. On the other hand, the *power of* attraction (Termote, 2008) of the Italian language appears to be weaker among Arabic and Chinese communities: only 20 percent of immigrants with Arabic as mother tongue speaks the Italian language at home; this figure drops to 7% in the case of citizens from the Republic of China. Italian is the most common language spoken at work for 93 percent of immigrants claiming Ukrainian as their mother tongue and 51 percent of immigrants with Chinese mother tongue. These figures show that the *power of attraction* (Termote, 2008) of Italian language in a public environment is markedly greater than that observed in the private sphere.

Empirical strategy

Our empirical strategy can be described by means of two equations. The first equation is the language skills equation:

$$L_{ij} = \alpha_o + \alpha_1 Z_{ij} + \alpha_2 X_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

(1)

where L_{ij} is the self-reported level of language proficiency of individual *i* of *mother tongue j*, separately available for writing, reading and speaking skills,[8] Z_{ij} is a vector of instrumental variables, and X_{ij} a vector of individual characteristics ε_{ij} is an error term.

The second equation is the outcome equation. The outcome variables are: 1) indicators of labour market integration, namely individual employment status; 2) an indicator of social integration, namely a dichotomous variable to capture the use of the *Italian language at home*. The outcome equation reads as follows:

$$E_{ij} = \beta_o + \beta_1 L_{ij} + \beta_2 X_{ij} + u_{ij}$$

(2)

where E_{ij} is the labour or social integration outcome to be analyzed, and u_{ij} an error term. Endogeneity of language knowledge may originate from individual characteristics that are not observed by the researcher, such as the level of ambition, the level of innate ability, intentions about return migration, which are simultaneously correlated with both language skills and labour market outcomes, generating a correlation between the two equations' error terms.

The proposed solution to this endogeneity issue is to leverage variation in the language skill's equation generated by presumably exogenous variables (Z_{ij}), i.e. variables that are uncorrelated with u and are excluded from the labour outcome equation. Following the previous literature, we propose the following instrumental variables, and/or their interaction: - immigrants' age at arrival in Italy; - school age children as family's members.

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[8] Other proxies of language proficiency are available in the survey, such as difficulties in understanding a telephone conversation in Italian, speaking in Italian at the phone, understanding the medical doctor's prescriptions, understanding a conversation in a public office, etc., which will be use in the empirical analysis.

In the vector of variables which may affect linguistic integration and/or labour market outcomes (X_{ij}), we will include: individual gender, age, level of education, macro-region of residence, and further relevant socio-demographic controls used in the related literature.

Expected results

Proficiency in Italian language is expected to be one of the main factors likely to shape the immigrants' labour market and social integration outcomes. However its relative influence can vary according to individual characteristics and social contexts: targets of migrants may perform differently under similar conditions (i.e. heterogeneous effects).

Despite the heterogeneous composition of migrant population and difficulties in the definition of a generic experience, linguistic barrier is likely to weakly impact on the integration pathways of newcomers when they arrived at younger ages, in particular at ages below the compulsory schooling age. The proposed identification strategy draws from Bleakley and Chin (2004 and 2010), which use as instruments for knowledge of English, the age at arrival and a dummy for being born in a non-English speaking country.[9]

Findings of the analysis aim to address policy measures to tackle immigrant linguistic disadvantage in the labour market and limit their risk of economic and social exclusion. The negative impact might be increased by restricted employment opportunities of some deprived and depressed areas more exposed to economic fluctuations. By contrast, the regional distribution of some migrant communities might favour their overall involvement in the labour market.

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[9] Yao and van Ours (2015) provide a review of studied that have used a similar identification strategy.

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