Orientation Towards Multilingualism in Class:
A Montessori Experience

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in collaboration with
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Federico Gobbo worked together with Ilaria Adami, Chiara Bonazzoli, and Patrizia Pradella, teachers at the Scuola Montessori Milano, and was delighted with the developments which underscore the theory that children by nature are creative language users.

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To the children who share this fascinating linguistic adventure with us.

1. Languages Are Bridges and Walls

We live in a world where new multilingual challenges arise, unknown to the previous generations. In particular, it is not rare to find families moving for work across European countries thanks to a shared knowledge of English as a second language. Whereas English permits mobility, it is only the national languages of the hosting country or region that allow the family to be really included in the hosting society. In fact, while parents often speak English at work and their mother tongue within the family, children living abroad will be exposed to national languages to an even greater extent than their parents, especially at school. Often parents perceive the Montessori method as a *fil rouge*, a leitmotiv for the formal education of their children regardless of the language(s) in which teaching is conducted making it a facilitating factor for inclusion. For example, a child born in a Dutch family who moved to Milan is exposed at least to Dutch, Italian, and English on an everyday basis, in the family and at school. These parents may not be certain how many years they will live in Milan, or in Italy in general, and therefore the Montessori method becomes a cornerstone of their children's education, since it is found in so many cities around the world, giving the family options for possible future relocations.This de facto multilingualism in the family is a source of richness and it should be taken into account in fostering Maria Montessori's vision of Cosmic Education.[1] Languages are twofold, as they embrace both spiritual and fundamental needs. The Italian linguist Tullio De Mauro while commenting on Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, argued that languages are continuously kept in equilibrium by two opposite forces: the *Geist*, the spiritual need that brings together the speech community, and the commodification, the material need of learning a language for pragmatic purposes.

In Montessori's view languages are a key part of the human potential that emerges while the child grows up, revealing not only the phylogenetic potential (learning languages is an innate capability of the human species) but also, and most importantly, the ontogenesis (the exposure to many languages in early childhood brings the child to a natural state of being multilingual).[2]

Primary school pupils living in urban contexts like Milan, Amsterdam, Berlin, London, or Paris know that there are many languages out there, and also that nobody can master all of them. In other terms, they know that languages are paradoxically bridges and walls at the same time. Bilingual children can feel that their family languages have little value at school, while monolingual children, on the contrary, feel excluded when they listen to those two sisters, for instance, speaking in their own family language in the school courtyard. In other words, languages of migration often work far more as walls than bridges in school contexts; they are not perceived by their speakers as a source of richness, but on the contrary as something with little value in the hosting society. On the other hand,

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children want to communicate effectively with their peers, so there is also a clear perception of language as a bridge between different cultures, especially in classes where a considerable part or even the majority is composed of early bilingual speakers. For non-native speakers, English clearly is the basic linguistic tool that can act as a bridge, since it is taught in most—if not all—primary schools in Europe. However, there are more languages out there worth considering. Our main goal was to make children appreciate the beauty of languages and their diversity as a source of richness. To do so, we decided to prepare two games which emphasize the two roles played by languages, i.e., the bridge (the Europantesque game) and the wall (the Markuskica game).

Anecdotal evidence shows that many children have a natural inclination to build a secret code. This happens at primary school age (six to ten years) when the in-group perception starts to emerge and to consolidate.[3] The first game, called Markuskica, is a game where children are invited to create a secret language that will be theirs only. The aim is to use the potentialities of the linguistic analysis provided by Montessori's *psicogrammatica*[4] and in particular the nine Montessori grammar symbols for sentence analysis. These symbols form a part-of-speech

tagging system, divided into three families: triangles (noun-family), circles (verb-family), and helpers (other shapes). The goal here is to raise metalinguistic awareness through constructing a language from scratch in class: The secret language reinforces the in-group identity of the class members, being a wall for all the others. The first results of this game were described in Gobbo "Learning Linguistics by Doing" (2013).[5]

However, we realized that the Markuskica game was not enough for the children, as they were showing interest in learning the origins of words in foreign languages and the contact between languages across the centuries. We therefore invented a complementary game, which we called Europantesque. While Markuskica focuses on grammar, in Europantesque the focus is on words. In particular, early bilingual children have the opportunity to share part of their linguistic world with their peers. The aim is to emphasize the communicative possibilities by using all linguistic materials we have.

In the next sections we will illustrate what has been realized in class so far. We have observed, after a mere two school years of fieldwork, an increase of metalinguistic awareness in the children, which is addressed also in recent literature as one of the key factors in second and

third language acquisition.[6] The following section will deal with the Markuskica game, with the second section dealing with the Europantesque game.

2. Off the Wall: The Example of Markuska

An invented language can serve the child's spiritual need of supporting the emergence of a peer-based in-group identity: Only the members are allowed to use the language, while externals are to be kept out: Adults or schoolmates who do not belong to the class may not be privy to the language at all. Teachers will be an exception; a potential problem is posed by the parents who normally look through school notebooks and homework and see that something is going on. In case of questions it is important to be able to explain the goals of the Markuskica game. There are two aspects to be considered when inventing a Markuskica language. On the one hand, the secret code should be not too readable, otherwise it could not act as a wall; on the other hand, it should not be too complex, otherwise mastering the language would require too much of an effort. The immediate solution to this need is to invent a secret alphabet for an existing code, allowing the language to be used for encrypted written communication. Sometimes the regular insertion of a syllable or writing words backwards (from right to left, in the case of European languages) is also tried. For example, if we write,

1) *Theba sunba isba shiningba onba theba frozenba lakeba.*
it is quite easy to spot the original sentence: 'The sun is shining on the frozen lake.'

Writing words backwards is a more interesting strategy. Sentence 1 will become:

2) *Abeht abnus absi abgninihs abno abeht abnezorf abekal.*
Obviously, it is easier to decrypt sentence 1 than sentence 2. These are two small examples that show how a certain methodology can be adopted when constructing a language for secret communication.

A fundamental source of inspiration is the special case of Alessandro Bausani's Markuska, a secret language invented in childhood by a man who was to become one of the most important Italian orientalists of the past century. He himself describes the art and craft behind his language code in some pages of a book devoted to secret and universal languages published first in German,[7] then in Italian,[8] while some quotations in English can be read in the comments by Watzlawick.[9] We used the Gedankenexperiment in Gobbo's "Verbigerazione fantastica" (1998) as our first guiding principle.[10]

The method of building a Markuskica, i.e., a secret code inspired by the original Markuska, is as follows: At first, a morphological analysis of the main language shared in the class is performed. Let us suppose this language to be English. The teacher shows on the blackboard the following words: *tireless*, *helpless*, *flavourless*, *skinless*. It is quite evident that -*less* is a suffix that modifies the function of the word to which it is attached. On closer inspection, the modification is different when the suffix is attached to a verb, like in *tireless* and *helpless* (not carrying out the action of the verb) and to a noun, like in *flavourless* and *skinless* (without, free from). Children can decide that two different suffixes will be used, according to the grammatical character of the word they are attached to. Therefore, through the inversion of the morphemes, we obtain the following verbs: *erit* from "tire" and *pleh* from "help". Suppose that children decide, democratically (a simple voting by raising one hand), to create two distinct morphemes for -*less* basing themselves on the original. The suffixes become prefixes (inverting the morphology): so, -*less* will be spelled in two different ways, as *sel*- or *ßel*-, should you have a German bilingual in class. In the case of verbs, *sel*- should be used: Therefore, *helpless* will become *selpleh*. In the case of nouns, the inverted suffix will become *ßel*-, for instance skinless will be *ßelniks*. This small example shows that the degree of secrecy is far higher in building up a Markuskica than simply reading English backwards. We observed that children want their own language to be special, and adding some special letters such as ß is important to raise a flag for supporting the identity of the language itself. In other words, the writing system has its own importance. Moreover, this distinction between *sel*- and *ßel*- presupposes that verbs and nouns behave differently, with a different set of affixes. This reinforces the symbolic analysis and puts interesting links between the grammars of the languages known in class. The language produced is usually agglutinative, i.e., morphemes are juxtaposed and morphemic segmentation

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Montessori grammar symbols, a first comparison between the languages already present in the children's repertoire was made: apart from Italian Dutch, Serbian, and Spanish were the first languages of some of the children, while all of them studied English as a second language. The main parts of speech were developed in an intense two hours in class. The teachers proposed a set of affixes in order to produce the lexicon via agglutination, much like the example of Esperanto—for example for the names of professions derived from a main element connected with the profession itself, as in these examples:

Esperanto	English	Italian
jˆurnal-o ! jˆurnal-ist-o	journal ! journalist	giornal-e ! giornal-ist-a
dent-o ! dent-ist-o	tooth ! dent-ist	dent-e ! dent-ist-a
ˆgarden-o ! ˆgarden-ist-o	garden ! garden-er	giardin-o ! giardin-ier-e

And this how Araik was born. Details of this language project will be never revealed, being a secret language. It is interesting to note that children produced some texts on their own afterwards, expanding the lexicon of Araik, also in their free time, at home with friends (according to personal reports by some parents). The students used it to create and exchange private messages and one of them even tried to write short poems and stories. Although Araik was in effective use for a few months only, we observed that the metalinguistic awareness of the children had grown considerably thanks to Araik.

The children immediately loved Esperanto for its regularity and for its inner message of connecting people in a bid to facilitate communication—see Gobbo (2008) in Boers et al.[11] From this contact with the language, pupils wanted to exploit all the linguistic means available in class, in an effort to enhance avenues of communication. This led to the definition of a new game which was tried the year after. We called it Europantesque.

3. BRIDGE PASSAGES: THE EXAMPLE OF EUROPANTO

Europanto is a linguistic game set up by a professional translator at the European Union, Diego Marani. In the 1990s, it received attention from linguists and language activists as well.[12] Marani started writing light and humorous pieces in Europanto for newspapers and magazines published in multilingual cities like *Le Temps* (Geneva) and *Le Soir illustré* (Brussels). He even wrote a series of detective stories called *Las Adventures des inspector Cabillot*. How Europanto was created? Marani explains:

> I insist to say that Europanto is not a proper language, but only a game [. . .] it is a mixture of words taken from different languages or invented so to be immediately understandable by most people. In order to make Europanto everything is accepted, from the names of football players to automotive trademarks, from the menus of restaurants to ads. The principle of Europanto is to put together everything useful to communicate, without any regard to grammar.[13]

is kept transparent. The rules are fixed and exceptions are only allowed at the express request of one of the class members. It is important that the final language should be usable without too much effort.

An Italian-based Markuskica was created in the Scuola Montessori Milano during the school year 2012–2013 by the nine-year-olds, as they got interested in languages and linguistics, i.e., how languages function and behave. They were studying the basics of the great civilizations of the past, in particular the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Sumerian societies. Children discovered that the need to communicate arose from practical needs, such as the recording of food reserves or the gains derived from the sale of goods. Therefore, these civilizations started to record their languages, in contrast to surrounding populations. At that time, the capability to write was considered something magical and exoteric. In fact, it was available only to powerful people like clerks. In order to understand this magical aura, the students considered the possibility of developing a secret language of their own, and to this end a workshop was organized by some of the authors of this paper, and later described in detail in Gobbo's "Learning Linguistics by Doing".

In order to have a language ready for use, it is necessary to give it structure. In other words, it is important to consider the various parts of speech and give them suitable forms. Starting from Italian grammar analysed with the

We observed that Europanto is the ideal complementary language invention of Markuska. The only grammar rule we set up was hybridism: Each sentence should contain at least three different languages; in other words it should be multilingual. In order to give the reader an impression of this linguistic game, let us quote from the series De Europanto Bricopolitik called *De Pinokkium*, published just before 2000:

> Franza zal die novo seculo und seine inconsistente "grandeur" celebrare mit eine nova wooden tower next des Eiffeltower. Belgica tambien, por sich place dignemente aan der self level des Franza, must celebrare de Jubilaeus des Universale Exposizie van Bruxel des 1958 mit eine appropriate evenemento. Op esto end, necessite te bilde eine novo, impressionante monumento, next del Atomium, die zal expresse der profundo animo des todagse Belgica, eine symbol van de moderne jaaros. So, de Europantico Instituto van Bricopolitik suggeste de bilde eine gigantesque wooden Pinokkio van 200 metros alto die zal placed esse in der park des Exposizions. [A rough translation in English: 'France will celebrate the new century and its inconsistent grandeur with a new wooden tower next to the Eiffel tower. Belgium too, in order to place itself worthily at the same level of France, will celebrate the Jubilee of the World Exposition of Brussels of 1958 with an appropriate event. For this reason, it is necessary to build a new, impressive monument, next to the Atomium, that should express the deep soul of contemporary Belgium, a symbol of the modern years. So, the Europantico Instituto van Bricopolitik suggests building a gigantic wooden 200 meter tall Pinocchio that should be placed in the park of the Expositions.']

A year on the children were ready for this new challenge. Of course, the goal was not to build such a complex and rich text as the one presented above, but only some simple phrases, such as:

> La groto is pom-verda
> The cave is green-as-an-apple

In this sample sentence, the article is in Italian, the noun in Esperanto, the verb in English and the adjective again in Esperanto. In other cases, two more alphabets were used, for instance when Russian words were included (see illustration on this page).

An interesting side effect was that children got interested in how to use a bilingual and multilingual dictionary without any pressure. We prepared a set of them, so they could consult them, following the rule of any Montessori material. When these word plays were applied to the study of Italian grammar, the collocation of the words in the phrase in comparison with Germanic languages, for example, became much clearer than before. They learnt that some expressions just do not have an exact equivalent in Italian; in other words, they started to understand that each language is a vehicle and that each may offer a different way of looking at the world out there. Hypotheses and discussions arose, very nice and enriching. Early bilinguals brought the languages of their repertoire with a positive and open attitude, and everybody discovered that there are interesting contacts between the dictionaries of contemporary European languages. At this point, we followed this interest and traced the root of some key words on the diachronic axis. For example, it was interesting to note that the Latin word *stratum* is *street* in English, *straat* in Dutch, *Straße* in German, and *strada* in Italian. A simple linguistic atlas of this word in different languages was built in class, so that children realized how the Roman Empire has deeply influenced the history of Europe and in particular its languages. Other words were 'wall', 'coffee', and 'tea', which present interesting linguistic atlases in the European continent.

In our view, these kinds of games embody one of the most interesting aspects of Cosmic Education. With Markuskica and Europantesque, past and present history, geography, language, and grammar have merged, giving rise to a exciting and rewarding multilingual and multicultural experience, where children learn by doing and playing.

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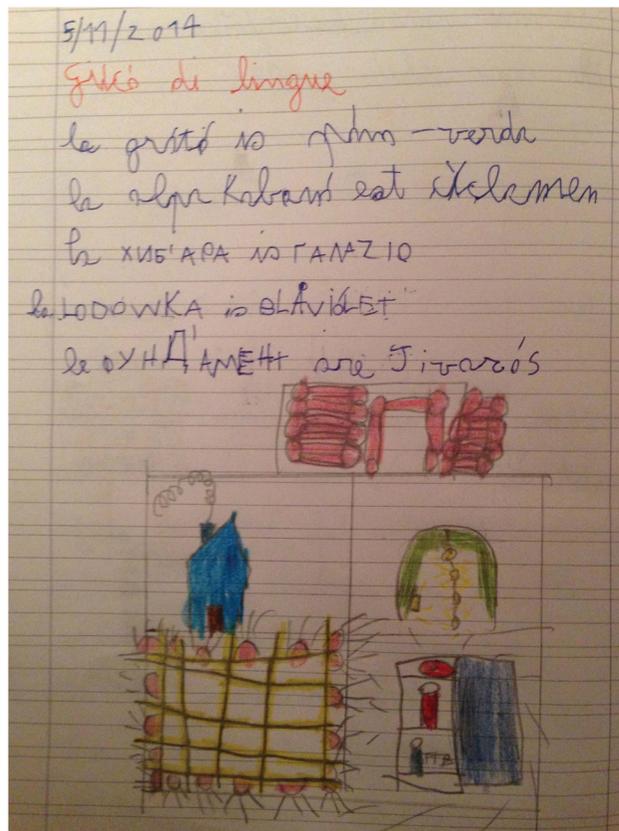
NOTES

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