

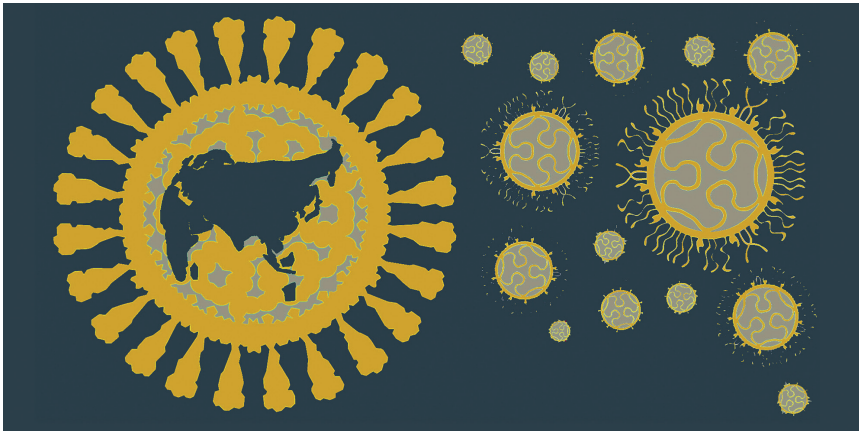
The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives
on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME I – CULTURE, ART, MEDIA



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In copertina | *Cover image*: Reworked Graphic of “Virus Snowflakes”. Courtesy of Edward Hutchinson / MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research.

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9. English as a Lingua Franca and the International Pandemic Discourse: Investigating the BA First-Year Students' Questionnaire Data Gained at Dept. of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome

Marina Morbiducci

Abstract

This article reports on the results of a tailor-made mixed-approach questionnaire (Creswell 2014) inspired by the use of ELF communication occurring between BA first-year students at the Department of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome, and their international friends during the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020-June 2022). The rationale behind the research is to acquire, collect and investigate the dominant feelings aroused and evoked during the lockdown due to COVID-19 restrictions, as expressed in the participants' international exchanges via social media. Starting from the assumption that prolonged periods of isolation and social distancing can create difficult emotional states with a negative impact on mental wellbeing – as well as on learning processes – our goal is to inquire how international students experienced the quarantine and distancing phase sharing their feelings mediated through ELF. As a second step, the focus of our analysis is on the creative use and variation of idioms in ELF written interactions on social media, according to M.-L. Pitzl's frame of ELF seen as a form of language contact and multilingual creativity (Pitzl 2009; 2012) in the TIGs' ("Transient International Groups") condition (Pitzl 2018; 2022). A third vantage point in this study is provided by Kurt Kohn's "MY English" model (2018; 2020; 2022), through which we observe the empowerment of the ELF competence using linguistic-communicative strategies shaping non-native speaker's identity in authentic circumstances of communication, resulting in a non-native repertoire. Finally, the data gained are examined integrating the quantitative analysis with the explorative qualitative research for the

open-ended questions, investigating the participants' dominant feelings in relation to the global pandemic conveyed through their ELF communicative resources.

Keywords: ELF; Pandemic discourse; ISO students survey; Metaphorical discourse; Sentiment analysis.

9.1. Introduction

This contribution draws on a two-year span ethnographic study on ELF and the Pandemic Discourse, research that was started in May 2020 and concluded in July 2022¹.

The results shared in this present paper are primarily related to the 2021-2022 investigation, that is, the second year of the study². They report about the data gained by way of a questionnaire submitted to BA first year students attending the degree course in Oriental Languages and Cultures, at the Department of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome. These students (with a supposedly overall linguistic competence in the range of the B1+/B2- levels according to the CEFR, as entry prerequisite) are enrolled in the diversified Oriental curricula of the degree course, but do have English 1 (Language and Linguistics) as compulsory subject; however, their feedback here documented was provided on a volunteer basis. Since the replies in the two years of the research are almost identical in number (121 replies for the 2021-'22 academic year, and 135 replies for the 2020-'21), we can consider the data collected in the two-year period comparable.

As was described in the abstract, this study is based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis according to Creswell's definition (2014), and the data gained are examined adopting a Mixed Methods procedure which integrates the quantitative analysis with the explorative qualitative research. More specifically, in this study the close-ended questions are

¹ Over the two years, Dr. Valeria Fiasco, Dr. Luca Valleriani (contract professors at the Dept. of Oriental Studies in my parallel course) and Dr. Alexandra Smit (Language Expert at Centro Linguistico – CLA, Sapienza University, Rome) collaborated with me, collecting the data gained from the students who participated in the survey, and I thank them for their commitment and engagement in this research.

² The 2021-22 edition of the questionnaire, titled "English as a Lingua Franca at Sapienza ISO Dept. and the International Pandemic Discourse", is retrievable at the following link: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyYl_OodMuoQe2iWtriTbZmoa3DzC13y2C_sAkXn9_OrmVNw/viewform>.

analysed quantitatively, whilst the data from the open-ended questions are collected so as to create two small corpora apt to investigate the participants' dominant feelings in relation to the global pandemic individual experience and their ELF communicative resources attached to that.

Therefore, as it is evident from the title above quoted, the questionnaire revolves around two main focuses. On the one hand, it takes the point of view of an applied linguistics frame of reference, assuming the sociolinguistic dimension of English as a Lingua Franca (from now on referred with the acronym "ELF") as a contact language (Seidlhofer 2011) and often as the only communicative resource available to speakers (Guido 2019; Maurenen 2009; Seidlhofer 2011): from this perspective, the study researches the use of ELF as a shared language chosen among non-native speakers of English, like the students of ISO Dept. and their international interlocutors can be considered. On the other hand, the study investigates the use of ELF when it is adopted specifically to deal with the topic of COVID-19, generating an *ad hoc* pandemic discourse observed in its multifaceted impact, a vantage point that has already paved the way to a considerable amount of research in these last two years (see Garzone 2021; Guido 2020, 2021, 2022; Prazmo and Augustyn 2022, just to quote a few).

9.2. Research Background

It is worth mentioning the study I carried over in the years 2014-'15 dealing with a similar research methodology (Morbiducci 2016). The rationale behind that specific research at that time was to investigate the amount and kind of ELF creativity of our BA 1st year students at ISO when interacting with international friends via internet and social media. We must specify that considering the "fast acceleration" (Maurenen 2009) of ELF, and the "unprecedented" situation of the spread of English worldwide (Seidlhofer 2011) – obviously due to globalization and other communicative technological factors – in recent years the proportion of interaction via social media has increased enormously, and is still growing at a rate which is really difficult to predict with precise figures. In addition to this, the online resources made available for distant or remote contact during the pandemic period have deeply modified the interactional behaviour of our youngest generation of English users; for all these reasons, we will try to circumscribe our analysis to the agentive and discursive resources actually investigated locally by way of the submitted questionnaire.

In truth, the pandemic emergency itself has represented a turning point in the overall didactic system, pedagogical outlook and actual way of investigation in the world of English language learning and teaching (hence the recent coinage of the label “disruptive innovation”). Simultaneously, the pandemic emergence has activated a proliferation of scientific studies in the field of ESL (English Second Language), SLA (Second Language Acquisition), Bilingualism/Multilingualism, EIL (English as an International Language), ELF, Sociolinguistics, Sociopragmatics, Discourse Pragmatics, Intercultural Pragmatics and so on. For all linguists and applied linguists, particularly, the gains and findings of the newly oriented research have represented an incredible jet of energy leading to a form of enthusiastic engagement.

Notably, we can mention the special issue #47 (2020) of the journal “Lingue e Linguaggi”, edited by Massimiliano Demata, Natalia Knoblock, Marianna Lya Zummo, titled *The Languages and Anti-Languages of Health Communication in the Age of Conspiracy Theories, Mis/Disinformation and Hate Speech*, thoroughly focused on the language of “health communication”, where we can actually see how widely the topic of the pandemic discourse has been investigated scientifically in terms of communication, information and also specific “hate speech”. In this issue, we are particularly interested in the contribution provided by Ewelina Prazmo and Rafal Augustyn who, in their article titled *The Racist Pandemic. A Semantico-Pragmatic Study of Anti-Asian Overtones in COVID-19-related Twitter Discourse* (2022, pp. 225-243)³, describe how the very name of “SARS-CoV-2” and “COVID-19” “expose the Asian origin of the virus. These ways of reference – although discouraged by the scientific community – still remain in frequent use in various COVID-19-related discourses” (Prazmo, Augustyn 2022, p. 225): pointing “explicitly” “to the geographical place of origin of the virus”, “[they] are likely to provoke associations and solidify pre-existing stereotypes about Asians as well as strengthen misconceptions about the virus itself” (Ibid.). In this article, the two authors continue developing the concept of solidification of pre-existing stereotypes, while arguing that “[t]he intention of the use of terms such as Chinese virus may be pure-

³ The whole issue #47 2022 of “Lingue e Linguaggi” is extremely rich in contributions from different countries, perspectives and authors, and is fully available in pdf format at: <<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/lingueilinguaggi/issue/view/1891>> whereas the article by Prazmo and Augustyn is retrievable at: <<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/lingueilinguaggi/article/view/25620>>.

ly referential, but they are, nonetheless, marked with accusatory or downright racist overtones" (Ibid.). We would like to specify that the frame of reference offered by this paper is within the Critical Discourse Analysis framework (CDA as postulated by van Dijk in 1993), "as CDA aims specifically to examine the ways in which discourses shape power relations, maintain social stigmas, perpetuate stereotypes and widen inequalities" (Ibid.): "CDA [is used] as a framework for conducting a semantic analysis of expressions such as Asian virus, Chinese virus, Sinovirus or Wuhan virus used on Twitter" (Ibid.). Such sort of "polarized discourse", present in the Prazmo and Augustyn research, was totally absent in the replies of the ISO students' open questions of the questionnaire we submitted, and we are particularly glad to appreciate the non-prejudicial stances showed by our students, as gathered in our survey dealing with the pandemic discourse.

However, the analysis carried over by Prazmo and Augustyn in terms of CDA focused on potential hate speech and polarized discourse also inspired us in the identification and classification of feelings which were visible in the replies collected in our survey. Furthermore, the scientific literature of sentiment analysis which Prazmo and Augustyn quote in their paper was illuminating in amplifying the scope of our investigation. Articles referred in their paper, such as the ones by Al-Afnan (2020) on media bias and ideology, or by Ascher and Noble unmasking hate on Twitter (2019), or even the cognitive semantic analysis Prazmo and Augustyn themselves carried over observing the internet discourse (2020), were all highly inspiring.

Similarly, we could notice how the analytical focalization on the Twitter social medium allowed us to identify in clear terms the diversified areas of investigation and classification in the different social media platforms. In other words, the analysis of CDA applied to social media, from that point on (that is, since the massive and impressive production of discourse created by the pandemic emergence), in all probability, will not be any longer generically assumed; on the contrary, it will demand for clear-cut specialized grounds of investigation according to the social medium providing the discursive data.

Within this frame of reference of discourse analysis, we would like to consider also the article published in a previous issue of the same journal above mentioned, namely "Lingue e Linguaggi" #39 (2020), by Maria Grazia Guido, titled *The Influence of Covid-19 Pandemic Emergency on the Economy Principle Applied to Nigerian Migrants' ELF-mediated Online Inter-*

actions (Guido 2020, pp. 179-200), or again, by M. G. Guido, the article *Relexicalisation and Decategorialisation Processes in Migrants' ELF-Mediated Online Narratives in the Disembodied Time of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (Guido 2021, pp. 87-102). In the same line of investigation, we are indebted to Maria Grazia Guido also for her contribution, titled *ELF-Mediated Modal Metaphors of 'Inclusion', 'Exclusion' and 'Seclusion' in an Online Discussion on Covid-19 Fake News: A Case Study in Cross-Cultural Cognitive Linguistics* (2022), article we will refer again in the dedicated section of this paper⁴.

Finally, in our brief survey of the previous literature regarding the study of emotions and metaphorical speech during the pandemic, we would like to mention the article by Giuliana Elena Garzone, titled *Rethinking Metaphors in Covid-19 Communication* (Garzone 2021) where the author claims that "the most conspicuous aspect of COVID-19 communication is the systematic recourse to metaphors, which has been so pervasive and intensive that it has attracted most scholarly attention by anthropologists, sociologists, communication experts, researchers in cultural studies, linguists and discourse analysts" (Garzone 2021, p. 161). With such assumption Garzone reinforces the initial hypothesis underlying the research questions which constituted the backbone and goal of our study.

9.3. The Questionnaire: Research Questions, Rationale and Hypothesis

This study moves from the following research questions:

1. Is English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) an effective means of communication among international university students using social media?
2. In the students' interactional exchanges through social media, is the pandemic discourse active, participative and diffuse?
3. Is any idiomatic or metaphorical speech used in the pandemic discourse? If so, for what purpose and conveying which sort of feelings?

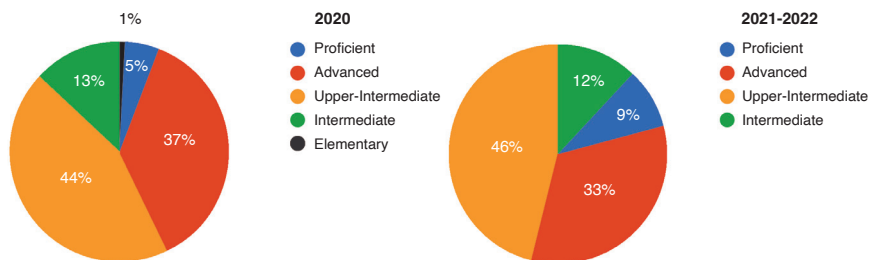
⁴ In this article Maria Grazia Guido proposes the analysis of the pandemic discourse in a cross-cultural Cognitive Linguistics framework, that is, a focalization on the use of English modal verbs in "Covid-triggered experiential metaphors" (Guido 2021, p. 1). Notably, here she analyses the "metaphors conceived by a focus group of multicultural participants in online discussion" (Ibid.). The group was composed of non-native speakers of English, therefore communicating in ELF, and the analysis aimed at investigating the pragmatic use of modals.

To put it in a nutshell, the three research questions above quoted generated the questionnaire titled: *English as a Lingua Franca at Sapienza ISO Dept. and the International Pandemic Discourse, 2021-2022*. It comprises 30 questions, precisely 26 multiple-choice structured questions and 4 open questions, organized in five subsets: demographics (1-6); language competence and use (7-11); use of social media (12-15); type of linguistic use (including idiomatic speech and/or metaphors) (16-24); pandemic discourse (24-30). It collected 121 replies in the 2021-'22 administration; the research methodology was based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis, according to the Mixed Methods procedure (Creswell 2014), and the qualitative analysis regarded three focuses: metaphorical discourse analysis, sentiment analysis and socio-pragmatic impact⁵.

The data gained can be read from diversified vantage points: Demographics; Language learning → didactics, pedagogy; Sociolinguistics → ELF; Psycholinguistics → motivation; Discourse analysis; Metaphorical discourse; Cognitive linguistics; Social media studies.

As a preamble, you can notice that the second subset of questions (#7-#11) regards the degree of linguistic self-confidence and self-perceived competence of the respondents who used ELF in filling the questionnaire. This element was interesting to us since, even comparing the data sets collected in the two academic years, around an average of 45% (44% in 2020 and 46% in 2021-'22) declared that their self-perceived competence and sense of confidence was in the range of a B2 level (upper intermediate, or above – which is in fact the expected exit level at secondary school), as shown in Figure 1 reporting the data of question #7:

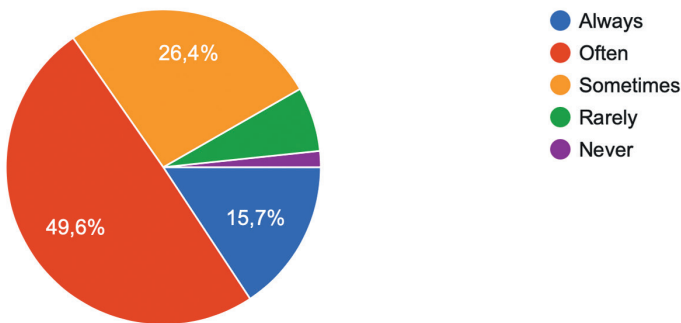
Fig. 1. How would you define your English competence?



⁵ The questionnaire is retrievable at: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfyY1_O0dMuoQe2iWtriTbZmoa3DzC13y2C_sAkXn9_OrmVNw/viewform>.

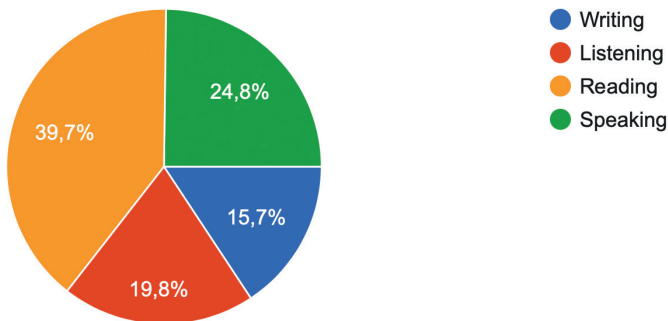
This aspect of self-perceived competence seems also to be re-echoed in question #23 which looks at how comfortable and “at ease” students felt with their level of competence when interacting with their international friends using English (both written and spoken). Here a majority of students (60% in 2020 which increases to 76% in the 2021-’22 academic year) responded that they always, or any way often, felt quite confident, as shown in Figure 2:

Fig. 2. When you chat (both in spoken and written modality) with your international friends using English, do you feel at ease with your language competence?



If we move on to the skills that students feel most confident with, the two data sets are quite similar. Both in 2020 and 2021-2022 reading and speaking dominate, as it is evident in Figure 3, reporting the data of question #11:

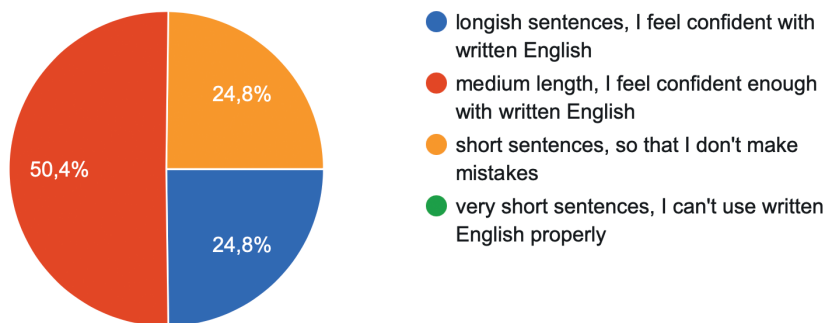
Fig. 3. In English, do you feel most proficient at...?



Finally, when considering the students’ written interactions on social media, we could notice that a higher percentage in the 2021-’22 academic year felt quite confident with “longish sentences” (24,8%)

(the section in blue in the pie) compared to the 8% of the previous data set, as shown in figure 4 reporting the data of question #16:

Fig. 4. When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you prefer long or short sentences?



In addition to this, it was interesting to detect the degree of awareness with which the participants used English in the ELF dimension, as proved in the replies to question #28, where 33,9% of the respondents state they are aware of using English as a Lingua Franca. This stance is fundamental, since one of the aims of the survey was also to verify the sociolinguistic validity of English as a contact language.

9.4. Findings

Once the demographic elements and the results concerning the self-perceived linguistic competence as ELF users are gathered in the survey, we get into the very core of the research, which is twofold: on the one hand, the realisation of the actual use of idiomatic speech and metaphorical discourse in the online and social media interactions between our respondents and their international peers; on the other, the description of their variegated feelings, impressions and perceptions, as emerging through the filter of the sentiment analysis procedure.

The respondents of the 2021-'22 survey presented the following features: at question #8, it is shown how 92,6% use English to communicate with international peers; at question #9, 51,2% state that they use English outside university, that is in their free time; at question #10, 70,2% say they use English with non-native speakers of English; at question #12, 54,5% say that they "always" regularly use social media, and that the most used platform is Instagram (53,7%) (question #13).

At question #15, when asked about the reasons why they use social media, which was an open question, we noticed replies such as:

I can travel with one click or tap, I can also meet new people or new cultures/trends.

Social media is one of the only ways for me to communicate with people from other countries and it makes it easier to expand my knowledge in social and cultural issues that people face around the world.

Because I can share my daily experiences and communicate with other people around the world, gaining more points of views.

It's entertaining. I also use it to communicate with friends met abroad who live on the other side of the earth: it's the only way to keep in touch and I consider it quite important to cultivate the relationship with them.

They connect me with people physically distant and also I can keep up with my interests through social media such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

Share my passions and discover new things that I can't find online in Italian language.

I like using social media because I can learn more about people around the world.

I love using social media platforms because they provide me the opportunity to communicate with my friends from all over the world (for example from Spain and the USA) and to be informed about everything that goes on in the world.

I mainly use social media to express myself.

I like to stay updated.

They help me stay in touch with the people I care about.

They make me happy.

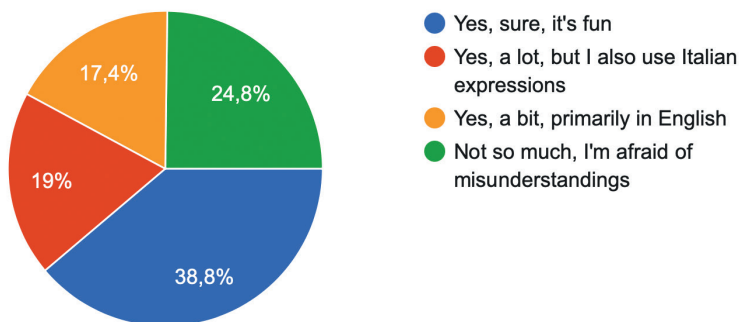
Etc.

[...]

As we can see, the replies are all positive and seem to be highly appreciative of the communicative potentialities inherent in the use of social media, in addition to this we notice the expression of feelings

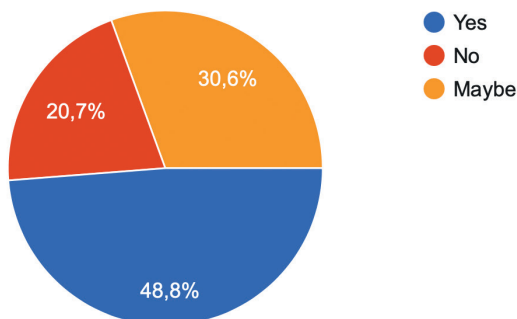
of self-satisfaction, self-fulfilment, mutual involvement and genuine engagement in peer communication. Then, when it comes to the favourite length of the sentences in social media exchanges, as we saw earlier at question #16, 50,4% of the respondents feel more comfortable with “medium-length” sentences, such option shows a good degree of self-confidence, and also provides the ground for longish expressions where also the metaphorical discourse can take place. As a matter of fact, at question #17 which recites: “When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you ever use metaphors and/or idioms?”, the replies were as following in Figure 5:

Fig. 5. When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you ever use metaphors and/or idioms?



Here we notice that 38,8% of the respondents replied that it is “fun” to use metaphors and idioms in their chatting, and they also add that their interlocutors adopt metaphorical or idiomatic speech, too, as shown in question #18, reported in Figure 6:

Fig. 6. When you chat in written modality with your international friends, do you ever notice if THEY use metaphors and/or idioms?



Moving on, in question #19, the respondents provide examples of the metaphors and/or idioms used, they seem to belong to a stock repertoire, ready-made and available, which they feel comfortable and confident using. Here follows a short selection of the cases reported:

“It’s a piece of cake” “the pot calling the kettle black” “the elephant in the room”.

Call it a day, Beat around the bush, Get out of hand, Pull someone’s leg, Pull yourself together.

The most common that I get is “break a leg”.

Raining cats and dogs.

We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.

Call it a day, break a leg, hang in there, break the ice, don’t cry over spilt milk, ignorance is bliss, it’s a piece of cake, on thin ice, the elephant in the room.

If the shoe fits, wear it.

Piece of cake, get out of hand, long story short, pull yourself together, spill some tea, etc.

No pain, no gain.

I often use “it hit me like a truck”, “to sweat buckets”, etc.

Expressions like “that is clown behaviour”, “pop off” or other young people slang are very common.

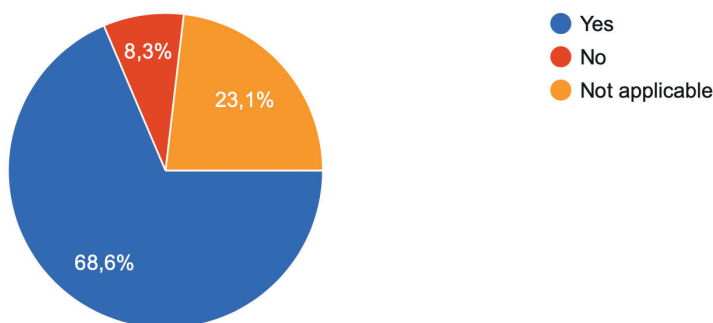
Eg. It was not a friend but an American relative of mine: she used “to kick the bucket” and therefore we discussed about idioms.

[...]

From this short and partial selection at a glance we notice that the “standard idioms” are possessed and used by the majority of the respondents, even with a good degree of confidence; what is interesting, though, is that the last three examples reported seem to introduce also the possibility of more creative forms of idiomatic speech, playing on similes and metaphors, like in “it hit me like a truck”, “sweat buckets”, “clown behaviour”. At the same time, in the last example quoted, we realise that the respondent is also ex-

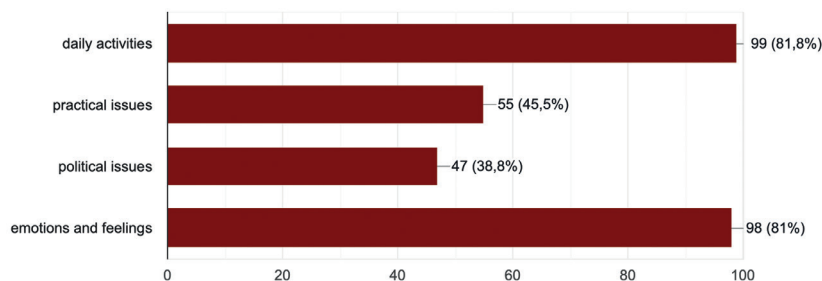
pressing awareness of the metalinguistic topic for discussion: “[A]n American relative of mine: she used “to kick the bucket” and therefore *we discussed about idioms*” (italics mine). Analysing question #21, it is also striking the fact that the majority of respondents express their awareness of the “culturally connotated” aspect of the idiomatic expressions used, as shown in Figure 7, where 68,6% of the respondents think they are such:

Fig. 7. In your opinion, are the idiomatic expressions you use ‘culturally connotated’?



Finally, in relation to the expression of personal feelings and emotions, we can show Figure 8, which reports about the replies to question #26:

Fig. 8. When communicating with your international friends about Covid-19 restrictions, did you mention...



As we can notice, the reference to “emotions and feelings” raised by the COVID-19 restrictions occupy the second highest rate of replies, that is 81%. We consider this aspect very interesting, it somehow confirms our research hypothesis, and therefore it necessitates further comments which will be done in the following specific section.

9.5. Analysis of the Data Gained against a Metaphorical Discourse Backdrop

We mentioned earlier the study carried on by Garzone (2021) regarding metaphorical discourse during the pandemic period, and also the range of feelings perceived by interviewed participants involved in M. G. Guido's study *ELF-Mediated Modal Metaphors of 'Inclusion', 'Exclusion' and 'Seclusion' in an Online Discussion on Covid-19 Fake News: A Case Study in Cross-Cultural Cognitive Linguistics*. The latter presents "a case study in cross-cultural Cognitive Linguistics focused on the variable use of English modal verbs conveying new Covid-triggered experiential metaphors conceived by a focus group of multicultural participants in online discussion" (Guido 2021, p. 1). Here the group was composed of Italians, Greeks and migrants from Nigeria, Morocco and Yemen, therefore the language used was ELF, and their communication took place "in a computer-mediated dimension of a virtual university classroom" (Ibid.). As Guido clearly explains, her case study intended "to determine whether the group's pragmatic use of modals introducing novel metaphors actually diverged from habitual high/low-context schemata related to the multicultural participants' different native sociolinguistic communities" (Ibid.). According to Guido, the "[s]chema divergence was assumed to be prompted by the particular 'emotion-raising' topic chosen for the case study – namely, the probable fake news on the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they were conveyed by three journalistic texts submitted for discussion" (Ibid.). Guido continues specifying that "the case study explored the new cognitive metaphors of 'inclusion', 'exclusion', and 'seclusion' developed by the participants in relation to their social and psychological involvement with the topic" (Ibid.), therefore investigating the degree of creativity in these newly-forged expressions. Guido's study showed how such kind of inventive metaphorical discourse encompassed "the positive and negative consequences of pandemic, including the obligation to stay at home and communicate exclusively online, with the related issues of gender and ethnic discrimination, or rather empowerment" (Ibid.). Guido makes us notice that "the more the participants were emotionally involved in such a topic, the more markedly their specific ELF variations emerged in the discussion" (Ibid.). According to Guido, "these ELF variations allowed the conveyance of the new metaphors for the expression of the participants'

unprecedented experience of forced lockdown and online communication through the so-called ‘metaverse’ replacing reality” (Ibid.). This interesting study confirms the validity of an exploration of feelings, conveyed by brand new metaphors in ELF, produced by non-native speakers interacting online.

Similarly, Garzone’s research, investigating metaphorical discourse, showed how “the most conspicuous aspect of COVID-19 communication is the systematic recourse to metaphors, which has been so pervasive and intensive that it has attracted most scholarly attention by anthropologists, sociologists, communication experts, researchers in cultural studies, linguists and discourse analysts, and has also been an object of public debate” (Garzone 2021, p. 161). According to Garzone, metaphor is central in disseminating knowledge to the general public in the literature on popularization (for this purpose Garzone quotes studies such as Calsamiglia, van Dijk 2004, pp. 376-377; Garzone 2020, pp. 151-218). Metaphor is here assumed as “a matter of crossdomain mappings in conceptual structure which are expressed in language” (Steen et al. 2010, p. 21, quot. by Garzone, Ibid.). In the frame of reference of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Garzone claims that not only are metaphors “cognitively organized” (Ibid.), but also that they possess “more strategic functions” in highlighting or viceversa obfuscating aspects of the source and/or target domain in the framing process, “to reflect and activate different ways of understanding and reasoning about things” (Semino et al 2018, quot. by Garzone 2021, p. 161). “[T]he linguistic framing of an abstract concept through recourse to metaphorical expressions” (Ibid.) is therefore quite justified in discourses “on such sensitive issues as illness and disease, not only because of the popularizing function it serves, but more aptly on account of the framing effect it may have on the way people perceive and think about certain health problems” (Garzone 2021, pp. 161-162). Garzone continues, “[a]fter Sontag, various other studies have explored the use of metaphors in talking or writing about cancer (Hommerberg et al. 2020; Semino et al. 2015; Semino et al. 2018), with a special propensity to rely on ‘martial’ metaphors (Reisfield, Wilson 2004), a propensity that has been noticed and considered critically not only by linguists and discourse analysts, but also by doctors (Miller 2010; Reisfield, Wilson 2004) and psychologists (Hauser, Schwarz 2015; 2020)” (quot. in Garzone 2021, p. 162). Then, in this same study, Garzone reports about a corpus-based study carried

in a UK-based website for people with cancer where the “recourse to conceptual metaphors involving WAR as a source domain is most frequent, followed by JOURNEY metaphors” (Ibid.). Garzone concludes that WAR metaphors have also characterised the Covid-19 communication, generating the negative effects of feelings of disempowerment and acquiescence to fatal events, which cannot be fought nor won. This is the reason why, Garzone reports, in April 2020 an initiative was started by some linguists (including Paula Pérez-Sobrino, Inés Olza, Elena Semino and Veronica Koller at Lancaster University), in order to promote non-war-related language on COVID-19 discourse (Ibid.). The recourse to war imagery can lead to anxiety, panic and aggression, and foster fatalism (Garzone 2020, p. 163), also inducing to a sense of “loss of control” (Levenson 2020; Serhan 2020, quot. by Garzone 2020, p. 163). Alternative metaphors “recommended for COVID-19 communication [...] are FOOTBALL GAME, TANKER and GREEN SHOOT [...] [and] MONSTER, STORM and TSUNAMI” (ibid.). Finally, “[i]n her 2021 study Semino proposes FIRE as the most suitable replacement metaphor, and at the same time recommends the use of a diversified range of other metaphors relating to various domains, instead of the military ones” (Garzone 2021, p. 164).

Against this scientific background, let’s now consider more in detail the data collected from the survey conducted at our ISO Dept., with students whose interactional exchanges via social media were investigated. As we saw, in question #17 the students confirm that they use metaphors and idioms to interact with their peers, and also that these latter ones, too, adopt metaphorical discourse in their dialogue with them. Almost 40% of the local respondents consider it “fun”, and enjoy using this colourful, imaginative, highly connotative and non-referential kind of discourse, constituting a form of creativity and linguistic vividness particularly appropriate to the age and type of higher education they are pursuing (with a curriculum in Oriental languages). In addition to this aspect, we must add that the respondents are fully aware of the cultural connotations of the idiomatic and metaphorical expressions used by their interlocutors.

As for the range of feelings manifested in the survey, in reply to question #27, as first communicated during the Health Emergency pre-conference held on June 9, 2022, we decided to split them in the two diverging areas of positive and negative feelings, as shown in Figure 9:

Fig. 9. When you communicated with your international friends about the lockdown, how did you describe your own experience?

Negative	Positive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I describe it as a sad and lonely experience • It was hard for me dealing with the pandemic • I described it as the expression of my boring and sorrowful existence • I described it as a very hard moment • I mostly described it as stressful and tiring • It was confused even to me and in my own language • During the lockdown I felt more sad and depressed. Time would never have passed without the help of my family and friends. • I couldn't stand it any more! I wanna breath the fresh air, but I just can't... • Bad. Very bad. • Exhausting • I was honestly terrified, i felt like i was getting bombarded with horrible news every day and i was feeling overwhelmed • I felt free but also sad, my house seemed like a cage to me • Sad, boring, scary, worrying • I described our political situation, the numbers of infected people and the way we dealt with the lockdown in Italy and I compared them with my Korean friend in English • I wrote to them that I didn't like this situation and that I hoped it would change as soon as possible, mostly because my parents couldn't work due to the restrictions. • I described it as one of the worst experiences of my entire life, I felt very bad about living my everyday life with such restrictions and strict rules • As if I lost a year of my life • I felt depressed and taken down for almost the whole time the pandemic lasted. I didn't feel like doing anything and I just wanted to rest in my bed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfortable, I did what i like at home • I was bored and a bit anxious, but it mostly helped me organising my life in a more efficient way • I enjoy being alone *a lot*, and social interactions have always made me anxious, so the lockdown, at least for me, was kind of a break from everyday's stress • I didn't feel so bad personally, i used the moment to study • I was pretty stressed about it, but in the end I started working out and baking, so I tried to had a good time in a bad situation in the end • It wasn't really a problem for me staying inside since It was almost what I used to do in "normal" situation • We also compared the different ways in which our countries were dealing with the situation and shared our opinions about it • Talk to other people and learn about their experience it makes you feel less alone • As a bad but also stimulating experience • My experience wasn't too bad, I have a dog, so during the Pandemic I could walk my dog daily and get some fresh air. • I described my experience as both overwhelming and relaxing. It was overwhelming to be always at home but also relaxing since I could enjoy more time with my family. • It felt good having someone that even though they were living far away, still could understand the situation and being there for each other. • I mostly played game or chatted with my friends and I felt in my ease at home. I met really nice people! Still today I'm happy, in a certain way, that the covid-19 gave us those opportunities but even so bad things...

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was really stressed and sometimes anxious • Overall a terribly monotonous experience, obviously restrictive and both physically and mentally tiring. • I mainly engaged with a few friends that I met in a videogame I started playing during quarantine. Can't really recall the whole conversations but pretty sure I complained a lot about how the Italian government dealt with containment measures. Also getting my bachelor's during quarantine has been a pain. • I describe my own experience as negative, frustrating and stressful • Time felt strange, as if days were dilated to eternity, but at the end of the week they all just mushed together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not that bad, I used The time doing something good for me and also for my mental and physical health. All the day was totally full of activities: studying, reading, training, watching tv series, calling friends etc. • I felt curious to know about the situation in other countries • We could actually write each other more often than we did before and we create a new bond between us. • The language Is very important, so we discussed about the bad situation of Covid. But language helped us to communicate and support each other • I talked about my personal situation but also I noticed that many of my feelings were shared by other people, such as worries. • I often shared lyrics of song about the lockdown.
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As you can see, the polarization of feelings (represented by the two fields in the slide: blue = negative feelings; orange = positive feelings) is in accordance with the most used classification in the literature of sentiment analysis⁶; however, there is much more to classify in addition to the mere tripartition of positive/negative/neutral, which is usually adopted in the analysis of textual discourse. We could resort to “advanced” analysis, that is “beyond polarity” classification, and identify a wider range of feelings, stills analysable in the negative/positive spectrum, but with more nuances in the progression from one pole to the other. For instance, we can find a difference in the negative ranking between “exhausting” and “inconvenient”; similarly, there is a different degree of “gravity” and also different kind of feeling between the two pairs “sad and depressed”

⁶ In particular, we have in mind VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) which is a lexicon and rule-based sentiment analysis tool specifically attuned to sentiments expressed in social media. The literature on the VADER procedure applied to the analysis of Twitters and other types of social media texts is rapidly growing, and this is attracting the interest of applied linguists (in addition to the marketing professionals who first adopted the tool). Regarding the application of VADER to linguistic analysis of Twitters, it is interesting to mention two studies, one by Elbagir, S., Yang, J., (2019), *Twitter Sentiment Analysis Using Natural Language Toolkit and VADER Sentiment*, in *Proceedings of the International MultiConference of Engineers and Computer Scientists, 2019 IMECS 2019*, March 13-15, 2019, Hong Kong; the other one by Liu, S. e Liu, J. (2021) *Public attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines on English-language Twitter: A sentiment analysis*, in “Vaccine”, 39, pp. 5499–5505.

and “frustrating and stressful”. In conclusion, the quantity of replies we got from the questionnaire is worth being further investigated to allow for a more precise and detailed categorization of feelings. Certainly it is interesting to note how emotional states which range in progression from anger→ sadness→ fear→ anxiety→ perplexity // to // resilience→ acceptance→ surprise and so on, are discernible in the replies. From a pedagogical and didactic point of view, the comments in the “orange” side would deserve further exploitation, since the agents/respondents who provided them are the ones who best reacted to the negative emergency, showing personal and emotional resources, and these could exactly become a spendable antidote also for their peers, in a sort of cooperative learning environment, the situation which can exist in a class group (even online), or even in TIGs (according to M.-L. Pitzl’s acquisition of the term⁷). The person who reacted to the pandemic negativity baking cakes or making music, socializing more and with a different degree of passion – compared to the other who exclusively experienced loneliness or stress, passive recipient of harshness – can represent an example to follow, even for other emergencies or hard moments in the future.

Let me reiterate that we can describe the interactions occurring between speakers/internet users of our local Italian community at university and their international interlocutors as TIGs (Pitzl 2018), since their contact is evidently impermanent and transient, taking place in the virtual space of social media communication. However, these users still represent a “community” connecting through ELF (Morbiducci 2021), giving also way to their specific repertoire, in this case the expression of the range of feelings and emotions perceived during the lockdown period. For the analysis of these communicative exchanges we advocate Kurt Kohn’s vision, as expressed in his ground-breaking article *MY English: A Social Constructivist Perspective on ELF* (2018) where he convincingly postulates the possibility of the creation of an ELF repertoire based on the users’ communicative potential powers, capable of shaping language according to their dominant feelings, needs and intentions. It is in such virtual space that language conforms and adapts to the speakers’ urgencies and demands, as Kohn develops further in his articulate pedagogical view (Kohn 2020; 2022).

⁷ By the term TIGs (Transient International Groups), we refer to communities of learners who – differently from “communities of practice” – constitute a group only for a short period of time, since they are in “transition” as international users of the ELF variant in their shared learning experiences. For a deeper description see Pitzl (2018).

9.6. Conclusion

In sum, we can conclude that the research started during the pandemic period had the twofold purpose: – reacting in a constructive way to the hardship caused by social isolation and deviance from the normal course of events, even at university level, due to the COVID-19 emergency; – collecting brand new material to investigate the linguistic, discursive and interactional behaviour of our students at BA first year, on social media, using the ELF frame of reference also investigating their ELF creativity in metaphorical discourse. These two goals, in the end – we dare say – met the challenge. The quantity and quality of the replies gathered in the survey prove that the respondents reacted with a vivid sense of cooperation and awareness in a critical period. Through the data collected in the questionnaires we could find that: – ELF appears to be a very useful form of English as contact language to communicate among native and non-native speakers; – the use of social media for the linguistic production of informal written discourse is impressively functional; – the use of ELF on social media outnumbers the use of English in all other circumstances, including academic settings; – the resorting to metaphorical and idiomatic speech is considered functional, user-friendly and culturally loaded by the respondents; – the affective connotation of metaphorical and idiomatic speech is considered relevant in the expression and construction of the pandemic discourse.

The data so far collected provide also profitable ground for further research, particularly: – in the qualitative analysis level, to create the occasion for a deeper and more detailed classification in the Sentiment analysis protocol, to investigate better all the range, ranking and intensity of individual feelings, far beyond the polarization divide; – in Critical Discourse Analysis, to analyse more in depth polarized discourse, identifying the presence of hate speech and exploiting more the hybridity of social media linguistic forms; – in Sociopragmatics, to pursue a further investigation in the verbal forms presented in order to discern a sense of inclusion, exclusion, and/or seclusion, *après* M. G. Guido's previous research and model of analysis. Finally, in the field of Cognitive Linguistics, an investigation like the one we carried on in this study could also lead to an expansion of the research in the area of Metaphorical Discourse, whereas in the field of ELF it could encourage researchers towards an advancement in the realm of language creativity, according to the directions already envisaged by ELF authorities such as M.-L. Pitzl and K. Kohn.

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