

Article

Between Head and Heart: Mother Tongues/Heritage Languages in the Language Portraits of Immigrants in Naples (Italy)

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Abstract

This study explores how adult immigrants represent and position their mother tongue/heritage language (L1/HL) within their linguistic repertoires, adopting a heteroglossic perspective on bilingualism and situating the analysis within the autobiographical approach to language education. The research was conducted within the G.U.L.P. project in Naples and is based on a corpus of 268 language portraits produced by learners of Italian as a second language, complemented by oral presentations. Data were analyzed through an integrated quantitative and qualitative methodology, focusing on the spatial distribution of languages in the portraits and on the thematic content of the accompanying presentations. The results show that the L1/HL is most frequently positioned in cognitively and affectively salient areas, particularly the head and the heart, reflecting both rational and emotional conceptualizations of language. While no substantial differences emerge across biographical variables, some tendencies can be observed, including a greater association of the heart with female participants and variation across national groups. Overall, the findings highlight the central role of the L1/HL in learners' self-representations and confirm the value of the language portrait as a tool for investigating linguistic repertoires and supporting the recognition of plurilingual identities in education, also with adult immigrants.

Keywords: mother tongue; heritage language; language portrait; autobiographic method; language education; Italian as L2

1. Introduction

The increasingly complex communicative practices characteristic of twenty-first-century global societies have fostered the emergence of a heteroglossic perspective on bilingualism, in contrast to traditional monoglossic approaches (Bakhtin, 1975; Bailey, 2007). Challenging the notion that the use of multiple linguistic codes by a single speaker represents a deviation from an assumed monolingual norm, a holistic understanding of plurilingualism has become more prominent, especially since the 1980s, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing, rather than discouraging, the coexistence of multiple linguistic systems in the same individual (Cummins, 1981; Grosjean, 1985, 1989).

Within this framework, the bilingual/plurilingual subject is conceived as a fully competent speaker-hearer who mobilizes linguistic resources according to communicative needs and contextual demands. Language use is therefore functionally distributed across domains, interlocutors, and purposes, and balanced proficiency across languages is neither expected nor required (Grosjean, 1992).

This holistic perspective has informed several European language policy documents, which emphasize the value of plurilingualism and all learners' linguistic competences,



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including dialects, heritage languages, minority languages, and non-standard varieties (Beacco & Byram, 2007; Coste et al., 2009; Beacco et al., 2016). At the same time, language education research has highlighted the effectiveness of so-called plural approaches (Candelier et al., 2010, 2012), including *éveil aux langues* (Candelier, 2003), intercultural approaches (Byram, 1997), integrated language teaching based on CARAP (Candelier et al., 2012), intercomprehension among related languages (Meissner, 2007; Bonvino et al., 2025) and the recent and widely debated theory of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014). As in Cummins's (1981) theory of Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP), translanguaging posits the existence of a unified linguistic system underlying multilingual practices. However, García's translanguaging framework departs substantially from Cummins's proposal by challenging the discreteness of named languages and by conceptualizing bi-/plurilinguals' linguistic resources as a single, integrated semiotic repertoire rather than as separate linguistic systems. This latter aspect has generated considerable theoretical debate, particularly regarding its implications for the notion of linguistic boundaries and for well-established frameworks such as code-switching research (MacSwan, 2017, 2022; Cummins, 2021).

Despite their different theoretical foundations, all these approaches converge in promoting pedagogical practices aimed at fostering learners' full linguistic repertoires and developing positive orientations toward plurilingualism, in contrast to monolingual ideologies and the dominance of prestige languages. By using the diverse linguistic resources present in the classroom, including dialects, heritage and minority languages, these approaches support the development of metalinguistic awareness and encourage flexible, cross-linguistic meaning-making.

It is worth noting, however, that such reflections found particularly fertile ground in the Italian context following the publication, in 1975, of the *Dieci tesi per l'educazione linguistica democratica* [trans. Ten Theses for Democratic Language Education] by the *Gruppo di Intervento e Studio nel Campo dell'Educazione Linguistica* (GISCEL) [trans. Study and Intervention Group in Educational Linguistics] of the Italian Linguistic Society (SLI).¹ This document, drafted at a time when Italian schools were still characterized by a high degree of regional/local Romance dialect use, already emphasized the need to take each learner's linguistic and cultural background as the starting point for educational action, with a view to the gradual enrichment of their linguistic repertoire.

The Autobiographical Approach and the Language Portrait

The autobiographical approach, particularly within adult education, has gained increasing prominence in the Italian context since the late twentieth century and early 2000s (Knowles et al., 1996; Alberici & Demetrio, 2002). It has proven especially effective in language education, as it allows for the recognition and valorisation of individual linguistic resources while providing a meaningful space for metalinguistic and metacultural reflection. In this sense, it functions both as a (self-)assessment tool and as a descriptive instrument for exploring linguistic knowledge and experiences of intercultural contact developed across formal and informal contexts (Cognigni, 2014, p. 62). Its application has also proven particularly valuable in contexts of vulnerability and migration, where it supports the construction of new personal narratives and contributes to the development of learners' linguistic awareness and self-esteem.

One of the techniques through which the autobiographical approach is operationalized is the language portrait. Initially introduced by Gogolin and Neumann (1991) and Krumm and Jenkins (2001) in studies on language awareness among plurilingual primary school students, the tool gained wider recognition through the work of Busch (2010, 2013, 2018), who applied it across diverse contexts, including schools, psychotherapy settings, and second language education. The language portrait is recommended by the Council of

Europe within the framework of the European Language Portfolio as an effective instrument for learners' self-assessment, including among adult migrants.

Further recognition of its pedagogical value is found in the Toolkit Language Support for Adult Refugees (Council of Europe, 2017), which identifies the “plurilingual portrait” as a technique suitable for reflecting on linguistic repertoires even in contexts of limited literacy in the first language. With reference to the specific target group of refugees and asylum seekers learning second languages, the linguistic portrait activity is described as follows:

It has proved to be a good way of helping them to become aware of the “linguistic capital” they already possess, which enhances their self-esteem, especially in circumstances where they seem to be defined by the languages they don't know rather than the languages they know. When they have produced a language portrait, many refugees are keen to compare their repertoire and experience with those of other refugees—to talk about the languages they know, where they learnt them, and with whom they use them. Language portraits are a good way of getting refugees to talk and think about languages from the perspective of their own experience (Council of Europe, 2017, Tool 16).

As noted by Busch (2017), the language portrait is a graphic and creative tool designed to elicit self-perceived linguistic repertoires and capture the affective dimensions associated with different languages, thereby providing access to the “lived experience of language.” Rather than representing an individual's linguistic repertoire “as it is,” however, it should be understood as “a situational and context-bound production” (Busch, 2018, p. 7). By enabling individuals to represent their linguistic biographies in an embodied and personal way, the language portrait reflects the idea that linguistic experiences are inscribed in a form of “corporeal memory” (Busch, 2012, p. 521).

Language portraits have by now been widely used in research on plurilingualism, particularly with primary and secondary school students across a range of geographical and diverse contexts, although most studies have focused on relatively small samples (among others, Dressler, 2014; Coffey, 2015; Carbonara & Scibetta, 2020). Only a limited number of studies have examined quantitatively substantial datasets. Notable examples include the study by Tabaro Soares et al. (2021), which analysed 570 language portraits produced by primary school pupils in the Netherlands, and the study by Zanasi et al. (2023), which examined 105 silhouettes created by secondary school students in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, Italy.

2. The Study

2.1. The G.U.L.P. Project

This paper presents data collected in the G.U.L.P. project (*Glottodidattica e Uso dei repertori Linguistici Plurali*—Language teaching and the Use of Plural Linguistic Repertoires), carried out within the framework of Italian as a second language (L2) instruction for adult immigrants, offered to the local community by the volunteer organization Scuola di Pace in Naples (south of Italy), in which the author of this contribution has long been involved. The project was launched in November 2022 and is still ongoing (Maffia & Noschese, 2024).

Overall, G.U.L.P. was designed to foster reflection on the principles and benefits of plurilingual and intercultural education, with the ultimate goal of informing pedagogical experimentation in L2 courses. The initial phase of the project comprised two parallel strands. Alongside training sessions for the association's teachers and volunteers on the theory and practice of plural approaches in language education, an ethnographic survey

was conducted to explore the linguistic repertoires of the learners enrolled in the association, using the data collection methods described in Section 2.4.

As highlighted by Carbonara and Scibetta (2020), this preliminary phase serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it raises awareness among both learners and teachers of the actual linguistic plurality of individuals and the communities in which they participate. On the other hand, it provides insights into the emotional and perceptual dimensions associated with the different languages and language varieties that constitute participants' linguistic repertoires.

The subsequent phases of the G.U.L.P. project, focusing on pedagogical experimentation in Italian L2 classrooms, are still in progress and will not be addressed in this article.

2.2. The Objective

Situated within the broader framework of the G.U.L.P. project, this study aims to investigate the positioning of the mother tongue/heritage language within the linguistic repertoires of a sample of immigrants in Naples, while examining its evaluative dimensions, reported uses, functional roles, and affective connotations in self-representation. The main biographical variables (gender, age and country of origin) are also taken into account.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: What "space" does the L1/HL occupy in the linguistic portraits of the G.U.L.P. corpus? Is it possible to identify recurring patterns within a highly heterogeneous group of participants? To what extent do biographical variables shape the positioning of the L1/HL in these portraits?

2.3. Participants

To date, the study has involved 268 learners of Italian as a second language (L2), attending courses offered by Scuola di Pace during the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years. The participant group, consisting of 126 men and 142 women, is highly heterogeneous in terms of biographical and sociolinguistic variables, according to the information collected through an interview form completed at the time of enrolment.

The length of residence in Italy within the sample ranges from one month to over 15 years. The participants, therefore, do not conform to the traditional and more restrictive definition of heritage speakers (Benmamoun et al., 2013, p. 132), as they are generally not second-generation individuals.

Only eight participants can be classified as belonging to Rumbaut's (2004) so-called *decimal generations*: two belong to generation 1.75, having migrated from Sri Lanka before the age of three; four Sri Lankan participants belong to generation 1.5, having arrived in Italy before the age of twelve; and two participants belong to generation 1.25, having migrated from the Philippines and Pakistan at the ages of 13 and 15, respectively. Even these eight participants, however, do not fully correspond to the prototypical profile of heritage speakers. At the time of data collection, all were attending Italian as a L2 course, indicating that they had not yet developed an advanced level of proficiency in the majority language, which is typically regarded as a characteristic of heritage speakers.

Rather than adopting a categorical or essentialist classification of bilingual and heritage speakers, the present study embraces a continuum-based sociolinguistic perspective (Turchetta et al., 2026), which acknowledges the considerable heterogeneity of individual multilingual trajectories. This choice is motivated by the substantial variability observed within the corpus with respect to factors such as length of residence in Italy, language use within the family, the birth and upbringing of children in Italy, the partner's nationality, and other biographical and sociolinguistic variables. Together, these factors may profoundly influence both language dominance (Peal & Lambert, 1962) and patterns of use of the first/heritage and second language.

For this reason, the combined expression *mother tongue/heritage language (L1/HL)* is adopted throughout this article to refer to the first language acquired by the participants in chronological terms. Within this framework, the distinction between migrant and heritage speakers is conceived not as a set of discrete categories but rather as a continuum, reflecting the dynamic, socially situated, and biographically shaped nature of multilingual experience.

With a mean age of 34 (from 13 to 71), the participants represent 45 nationalities (see Table 1 for the ten most represented) and report 37 different L1/HL (the most frequently mentioned are listed in Table 2). Notably, the sample under consideration appears to reflect both the fragmentation in terms of country of origin and the gender distribution characteristic of the foreign population in Naples.²

Table 1. The 12 most represented nationalities in the G.U.L.P. corpus (absolute values and percentages).

Country of Origin	<i>n.</i>	%
Ukraine	40	14.9
Sri Lanka	35	13.1
Pakistan	25	9.3
Bangladesh	15	5.6
Nigeria	15	5.6
Venezuela	12	4.5
Russia	11	4.2
Perù	11	4.2
El Salvador	8	2.9
Dominican Republic	8	2.9
Others *	88	32.8
Tot.	268	100

* The *other* category comprises the remaining 35 nationalities: Colombia (7), Algeria (7), Georgia (6), Cuba (6), India (6), Senegal (5), Morocco (4), Mali (4), Brazil (3), Ghana (3), the Republic of Moldova (3), Nicaragua (3), Argentina (2), Bulgaria (2), China (2), Cameroon (2), Indonesia (2), Malaysia (2), the Philippines (2), Uzbekistan (2), Belarus (1), Côte d'Ivoire (1), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1), Guinea (1), Guinea-Bissau (1), the Gambia (1), Croatia (1), Kyrgyzstan (1), Poland (1), Paraguay (1), the State of Palestine (1), Romania (1), South Sudan (1), Tunisia (1), and Taiwan (1).

Table 2. The 10 most frequently reported L1/HLs in the G.U.L.P. corpus (absolute values and percentages).

L1/HL	<i>n.</i>	%
Spanish	58	21.6
Ukrainian	38	14.2
Sinhala	34	12.7
Urdu	23	8.6
Russian	16	6
Bangla	15	5.6
Arabic	12	4.5
English	10	3.7
Georgian	6	2.2
French	5	1.9
Others *	51	19
Tot.	268	100

* The *other* category comprises the remaining 27 L1s/HLs represented in the corpus: Hindi (4), Fulah (4), Bambara (3), Chinese (3), Igbo (3), Panjabi (3), Portuguese (3), Edo (3), Indonesian (2), Malay (2), Romanian (2), Twi (2), Wolof (2), Bulgarian (2), Bassa (1), Belarusian (1), Dinka (1), Croatian (1), Kannada (1), Kyrgyz (1), Mandinka (1), Moldovan (1), Pashto (1), Polish (1), Soninke (1), Tagalog (1), and Yoruba (1).

Regarding educational attainment in the country of origin, 6 participants are either non-literate or have low levels of literacy, 18 reported having completed primary education, 35 lower secondary education, and 87 upper secondary education. A further 59 participants

reported having attended vocational training programmes (post-secondary, non-tertiary), 50 stated that they had attended university, and, finally, 2 reported holding a postgraduate degree.

The level of linguistic and communicative competence in Italian as L2 is equally variable within the group, as assessed through an initial placement test: from Pre-A1, the most represented level, to B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR—[Council of Europe, 2020](#)) (see Table 3).³

Table 3. Italian L2 proficiency levels in the G.U.L.P. corpus (absolute values and percentages).

Italian as L2 Level	<i>n.</i>	%
Pre-A1	110	41.1
A1	81	30.2
A1+	21	7.8
A2	24	9
B1	25	9.3
B2	7	2.6
Tot.	268	100

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected across the different classes into which the association's courses are organized, during regular Italian L2 lessons, with the support and collaboration of all teachers and volunteers. To gather information on participants' linguistic repertoires and to encourage the full expression of everyone, the language portrait task was combined with an oral presentation.

First, learners were invited to reflect on the languages they had “encountered” over the course of their lives. They were asked to consider how many and which languages (and dialects) had been part of their experience, regardless of their level of proficiency or the skills developed in production and comprehension. Subsequently, gender-neutral human silhouettes were distributed on paper in the classroom, and each participant was asked to place the previously identified languages within the silhouette, using pens, pencils, and colours. Participants were given full freedom both in their use of graphic strategies and in their choice of language(s) for any glottonyms.

Once they had completed their portraits, each participant presented it orally to the class, preferably in Italian, but without any restrictions on the use of other languages. Depending on their level of proficiency in Italian as an L2, the oral presentations assumed either a narrative/autobiographical character (among more proficient speakers) or a descriptive one (in the case of less proficient participants). All presentations were recorded using a digital voice recorder, following each participant's informed consent for the use of the data for research purposes.

The corpus obtained through the experimental methodology described above currently consists of 268 portraits and an equivalent number of oral productions, amounting to approximately 14 h of recorded speech. The oral productions are still undergoing transcription, for which an adapted version of the CLIPS conventions ([Savy, 2006](#)) has been adopted. All the data collected so far have been organised into a dedicated database, in which the linguistic materials are linked to the corresponding metadata, namely the biographical and sociolinguistic information relating to each learner.

The data analysis was conducted using both a quantitative and a qualitative approach on two complementary levels: the graphic features of the language portraits, and the textual dimension, concerning the content of the oral presentations.

Regarding the former analysis, the linguistic codes represented in each portrait were examined, with particular attention paid to presence, position, and possible graphic salience

(in the sense of [Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006](#)) of the mother tongue/heritage language. Drawing on and adapting the framework proposed by [Carbonara and Scibetta \(2020\)](#), each portrait was also classified according to the overall graphic choice made by the learner. In cases where the portraits displayed ambiguity or unclear markings, the information provided in the oral production was used for clarification.

Quantitative data were analysed using R (version 4.3.3—[R Core Team, 2022](#)), which was employed to perform both descriptive statistics and inferential analyses. Pearson's chi-square tests of independence were conducted to assess whether the distribution of the variable *position* assumed by the L1/HL was associated with a range of biographical and sociolinguistic variables in the corpus. For each chi-square test, Cramer's V was computed to estimate the strength of the association. The assumptions of the chi-square test were checked prior to the analysis and were met for all comparisons.

To assess the independent contribution of multiple categorical predictors (gender, age class, and country of origin) while controlling for their mutual effects, a binary logistic regression analysis was also performed. The dependent variable was the position assigned to the L1/HL in the portraits, recoded as a binary outcome contrasting *central* (head and heart) and *peripheral* (all remaining body locations) positions. The model was estimated using a generalized linear model with a binomial error distribution and a logit link function. Regression coefficients were interpreted as changes in the log-odds of assigning the L1/HL to a central position relative to the reference categories of the predictors.

Statistical significance was assessed using the conventional threshold of $p < 0.05$.

The textual analysis, qualitative and thematic in nature, focused on the observation of the reported subject-reality ([Pavlenko, 2007](#)), that is, the way in which (linguistic) events are experienced by the narrator and the learners' subjective relationship with the various codes in their repertoire. Within each text, narrative or descriptive sequences relating to the L1/HL were identified, with particular attention to the expression of evaluative stances, references to one's own abilities, and the various contexts of use or domains in which this code is still used in Naples.

3. Results

3.1. Overall Data on Linguistic Repertoires

The portraits included in the corpus display, on average, 5.5 languages, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 18 languages reported. Overall, a total of 72 different linguistic codes were mentioned at least once.

As shown in Figure 1, as expected, the most frequently mentioned language is Italian, the learners' second language and the object of study in the context in which the data were collected. It is followed by English, which functions as a lingua franca, is widely known, and often serves as a language of higher education for learners from various Asian (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) and African countries (Nigeria, Gambia). The third most frequently mentioned code is Neapolitan, the local dialect of the participants' area of residence. For issues related to the use and functions of Neapolitan in this corpus, see [Lamberti and Maffia \(2025\)](#). Other colonial and intermediary languages follow (e.g., French, Russian), as well as the most widely spoken languages within the different national groups.

Overall, the data clearly reveal a high degree of heterogeneity and richness in the individual repertoires of the participants.

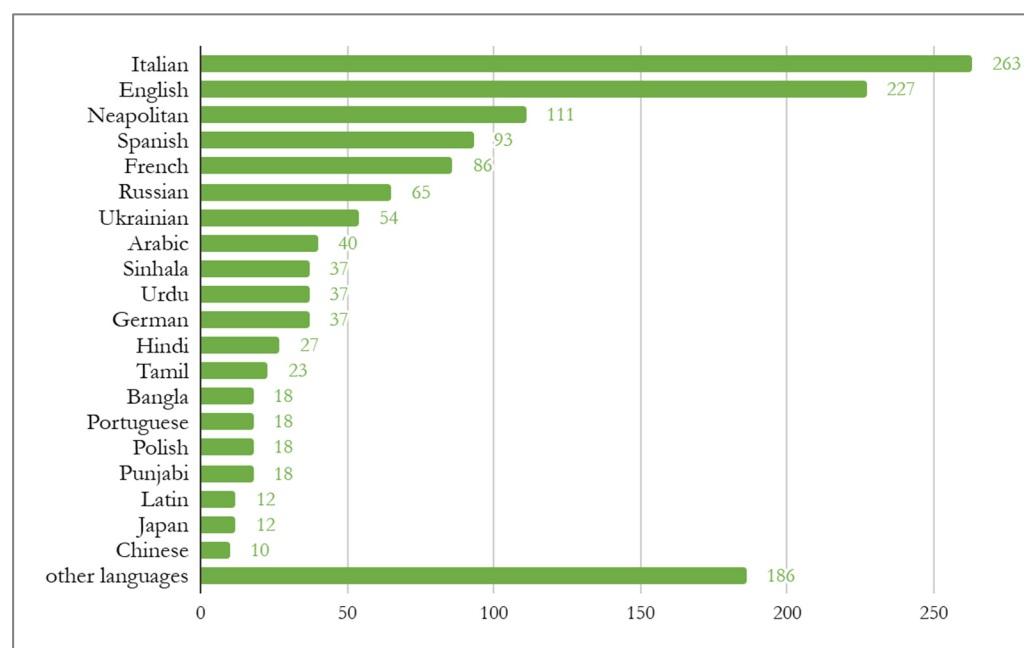


Figure 1. Languages reported in the portraits of the G.U.L.P. corpus (absolute values).

3.2. Position of L1/HL

This section presents both quantitative and qualitative findings concerning the position assigned to the mother tongue/heritage language (L1/HL) within the corpus under consideration. In reporting the quantitative results, a comparison will also be drawn with the positions assigned to the second language (Italian) and to the local dialect (Neapolitan). Figure 2 illustrates the most recurrent positions assigned to the three linguistic codes, while Figure 3 reports their absolute frequencies.

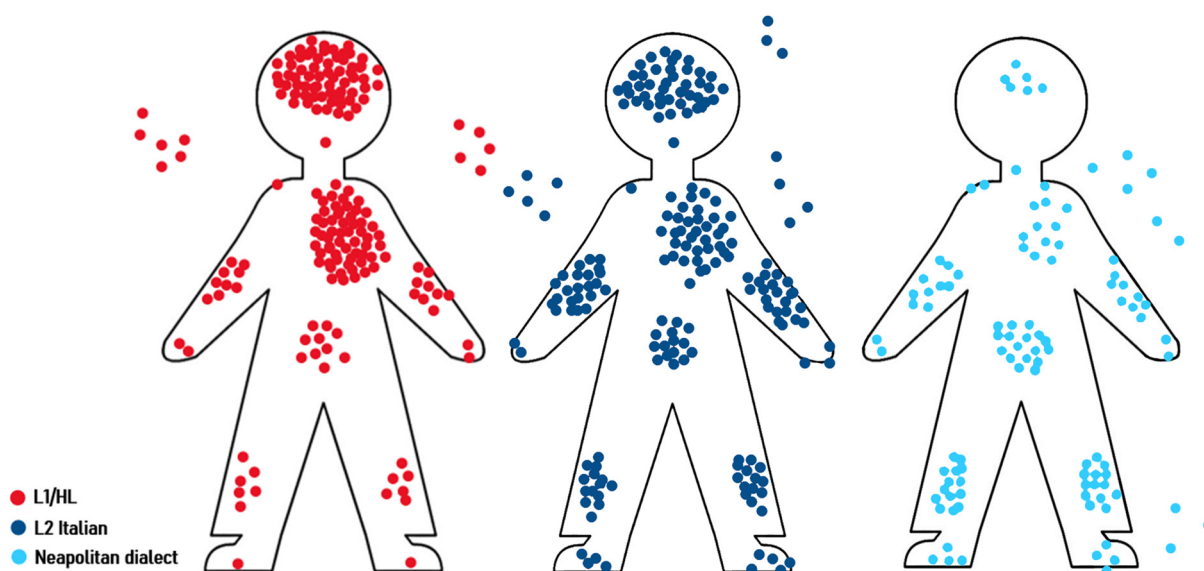


Figure 2. Positions selected in the portraits for L1/HL, Italian, and the Neapolitan dialect in the G.U.L.P. corpus (schematic representation).

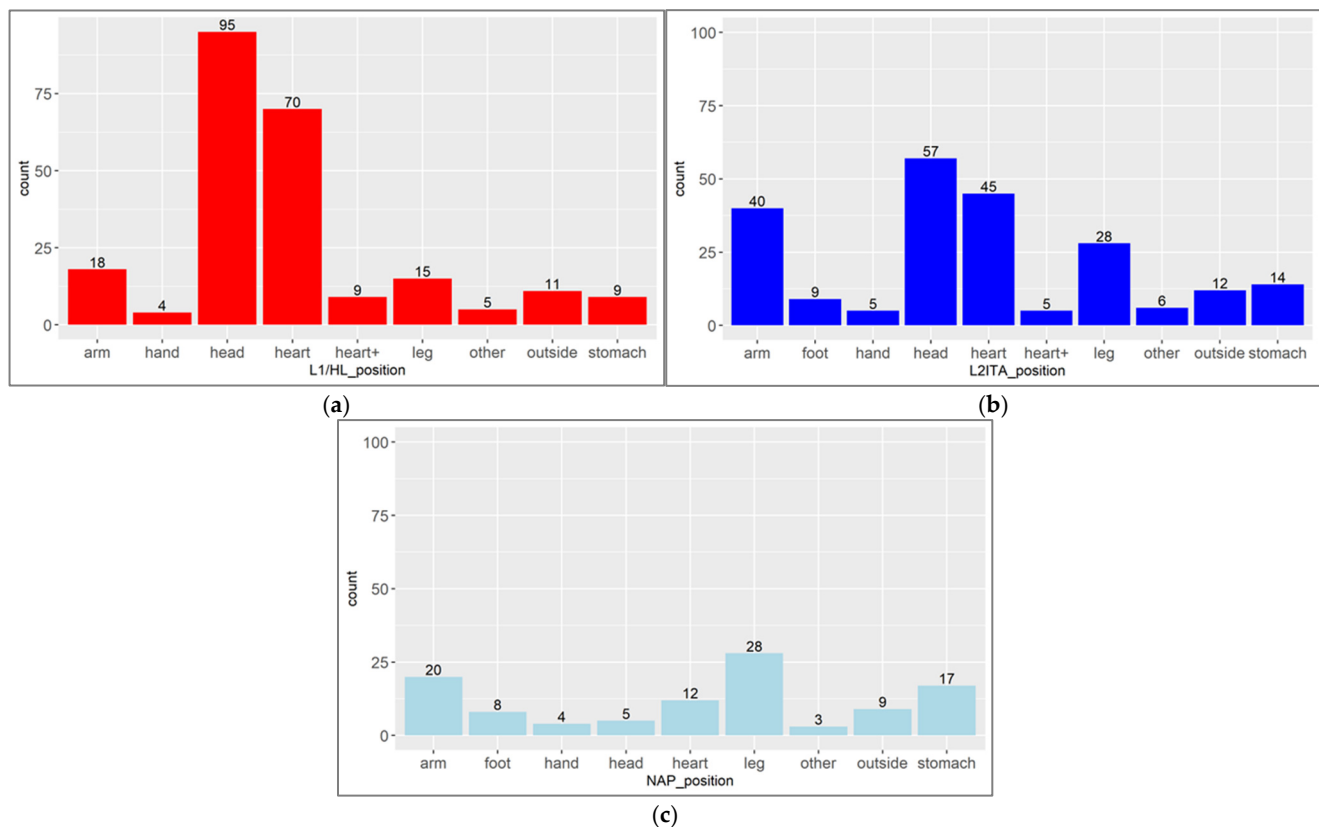


Figure 3. Positions selected in the portraits for L1/HL (a), Italian (b), and the Neapolitan dialect (c) in the G.U.L.P. corpus (absolute frequencies).⁴

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the preferred locations for the L1/HL are the head and the heart, which together account for 73.7% of all occurrences (head: 40.2%; heart(+): 33.5%). The remaining occurrences are distributed across more peripheral body areas, including the arms (7.6%), legs (6.3%), stomach (3.8%), and other positions (8.5%). This overall distribution confirms the recurrence of organizational patterns already described in the literature, such as core-to-periphery and top/bottom configurations (Coffey, 2015; Tabaro Soares et al., 2021; Platzgummer, 2021), in which the L1/HL is consistently assigned to central/upper body locations.

Italian displays a partly overlapping but more heterogeneous distribution. Although it is frequently placed in the head (25.7%) and the heart(+) (22.6%), it is much more frequently assigned than the L1/HL to peripheral body areas such as the arms (18.1%), the legs (12.7%), the stomach (6.3%), and the feet (4.1%). Participants' oral explanations suggest that Italian is often positioned in central body areas because it represents the primary language of everyday communication, the target language of learning, and the language in which they are immersed on a daily basis.

By contrast, the Neapolitan dialect occupies a markedly peripheral position. It is most commonly associated with the limbs (45.2%, legs: 26.4%; arms: 18.8%), whereas central body locations are comparatively uncommon. Nevertheless, some participants locate Neapolitan in the heart (11.3%), particularly when they have a Neapolitan partner or identify strongly with the local football club. Others associate it with the stomach (16%), explicitly referring to Neapolitan cuisine and food culture (see Lamberti & Maffia, 2025).

The predominance of the head and the heart as locations for the L1/HL suggests that participants conceptualize this language primarily in terms of cognition and affect, whereas peripheral body locations are more commonly associated with languages used in everyday communicative practices.

3.2.1. L1/HL in the Head

The qualitative and thematic analysis of the oral productions reveals that the motivations underlying the placement of the L1/HL in the head or the heart may vary. To illustrate this, several examples of portraits from the corpus will be presented below, accompanied by a transcription of a portion of the corresponding presentation given by the speaker.⁵

MT, a 31-year-old Moroccan learner, states that he placed the “drappo,” that is, the Moroccan flag, in the head of his silhouette (Figure 4), providing an almost scientific explanation: the head is the seat of the brain, which in turn is the locus of languages, as reported in (1). It is worth noting that, in MT’s case, Moroccan Arabic is the only language placed within the body using the flag strategy, together with the inscription “I ♥ mama” on the chest.



Figure 4. Language portrait of 247_MT_93_MAR.

- (1) MT: *io fare drappo, la bandiera di Marocco <sp> a la testa perché la testa tutto ci sta le cervello <sp> cervello che prende le lingue*
 MT: I drew the Moroccan flag in the head because everything is in the head—the brain, which takes in languages.

Similarly, DK, a 24-year-old Sri Lankan woman, chooses to use flags to represent the different languages in her portrait and places the Sri Lankan flag in the head (Figure 5). As reported in (2), her choice is linked to the identification of Sinhala as the language of thought and memory.

- (2) DK: *prima bandiera ho scelto <eeh> bandiera in Sri Lanka perché la mia lingua madre <sp> ho disegnato vicino alla testa anche bocca perché mia lingua madre <eeh> perché tutti pensieri <unclear> lingua cingalese a memoria i pensieri tutte le cose*
 DK: The first flag I chose is the Sri Lankan flag, because it is my mother tongue. I drew it near the head and also the mouth because all my thoughts are in Sinhala, my memories, my thoughts, everything.



Figure 5. Language portrait of 86_DK_00_LKA.

A sense of ethnic identity and belonging, together with the bond to the family of origin—of which the Mandinka language is a marker—are the motivations that lead IS, a 24-year-old Gambian participant, to choose the head as the location for his mother tongue (Figure 6, Example 3) and to use for it a different color.



Figure 6. Language portrait of 142_IS_00_GNB.

- (3) IS: *perché io l'ho scritto il mandinka nella mia testa qua <sp> perché sono mandinka, non posso dimenticare questa nome questo lingua <eh> lingua mia mamma lingua di mia papa lingua dei miei genitori*
 IS: I wrote Mandinka here in my head because I am Mandinka, I cannot forget this name, this language, it is my mother's language, my father's language, the language of my parents.

Finally, LS, a 31-year-old woman from the Dominican Republic, places Spanish in the head of a portrait (Figure 7) filled with words in the various languages she knows because, as she states, it is *lo primo con lo que è iniziato la mia vida* [transl. it is the first language with which I started my life].

- (4) YM: *nel mio cuore lingua materna ucraina [...] quando mi arrabbio io sempre uso ucraino ma a marito posso usare qualche parole napoletano <laugh>*
 YM: In my heart is my mother tongue, Ukrainian [...] when I get angry, I always use Ukrainian, but with my husband I sometimes use a few words in Neapolitan

Additional examples of portraits in which the L1/HL is positioned in the heart with a similar motivation are shown in Figure 9: (a) is the portrait of a 36-year-old man from Bangladesh; (b) that of a 43-year-old Salvadoran woman; and (c) is the silhouette of a 54-year-old Polish woman, who associates her L1/HL with the Polish word *przyjaźń* [trans. friendship].

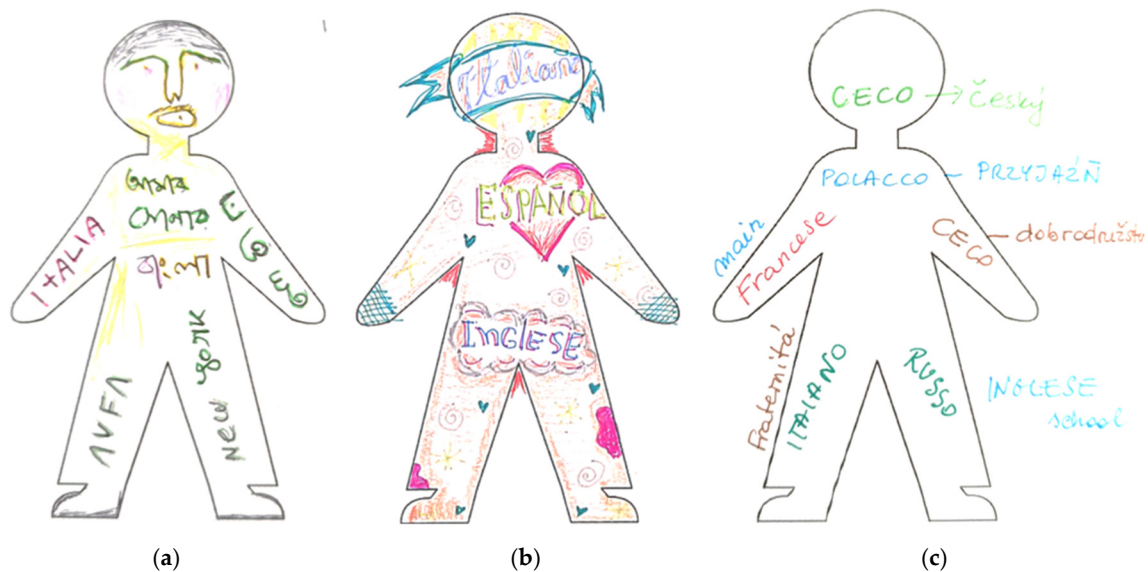


Figure 9. Language portraits of 623_SM_88_BGD (a), 160_JL_81_SLV (b) and 800_KJ_70_POL (c).

In the portrait of BD (Figure 10), a 33-year-old Senegalese man, the mother tongue, Pular, is also placed in the heart. In this case, the speaker expresses a strong sense of identity-based attachment not only with his L1 but also with the other languages of Senegal (Wolof, Serere, Djola, etc.). He repeatedly refers to them as “our languages” and further differentiates them graphically by placing most in the upper part of the body, set apart from the foreign languages associated with Senegal’s colonial past (Example 5).

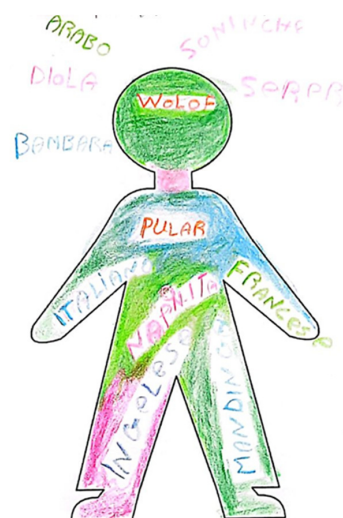


Figure 10. Language portrait of 56_BD_91_SEN.

- (5) BD: *la mia lingua del cuore è pular e gli altri *lingui sono <eeh> nel mio paese sono *wolof e<ee> serer, diola, bambara <eeh> queste nostre lingue che<ee> diciamo è <mh> nostre lingue di<ii> nostre lingue di <mh> <eeh> allora, perché lo s+ i<ii> le lingue sono le lingue senegalesi non è non è lingue stranieri queste*
 BD: The language of my heart is Pular, and the other languages are, in my country, Wolof, Serer, Diola, Bambara [...] these are our languages, what we call our languages [...] because these languages are Senegalese languages, they are not foreign languages.

3.3. L1/HL Position and Biographical Variables

In the following paragraphs, the positioning of the mother tongue is examined in relation to the main biographical variables considered in this study, namely gender, age and country of origin. By analyzing these variables, the study aims to identify recurring patterns as well as divergences in how the mother tongue/heritage language is spatially conceptualized, thus shedding light on the interplay between previous personal/linguistic experience and self-representation.

To investigate whether the positioning of the L1/HL varied according to participants' gender, a Pearson's chi-square test of independence was performed. The analysis revealed no statistically significant association between gender and body location ($\chi^2(8) = 7.62$, $p = 0.47$, Cramer's $V = 0.18$), indicating that male and female participants showed broadly comparable positioning patterns. As illustrated in Figure 11, both groups displayed a clear preference for central body locations, particularly the head and the heart. Female participants, however, more frequently than males positioned the L1/HL in the heart (M: 22.6%; F: 35.4%), whereas male participants showed a slightly greater tendency to select the head (45.3%). Although these descriptive differences did not reach statistical significance, they become more interesting when considered alongside other sociolinguistic variables discussed below.

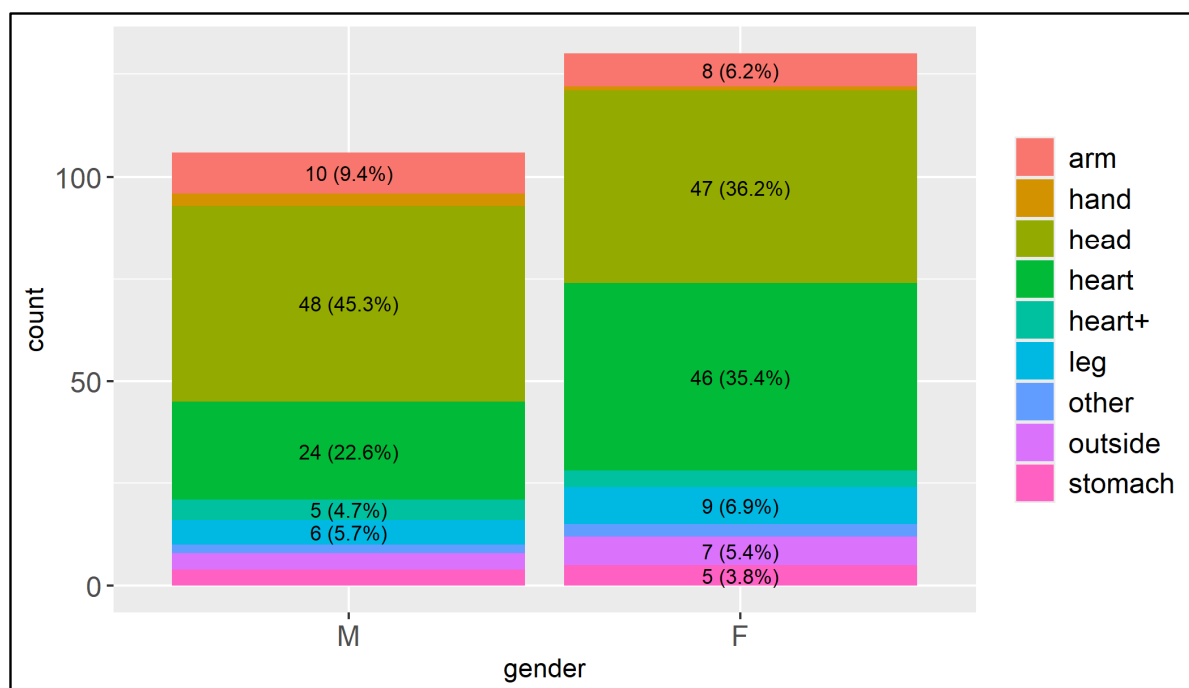


Figure 11. Positions selected in the portraits for L1/HL by participants' gender (absolute values > 5 and percentages).

When the same data are analysed by age group, no clear trends or statistically significant differences emerge across the categories ($\chi^2(32) = 41.71$, $p = 0.12$, Cramer's $V = 0.21$). Nevertheless, some descriptive differences can be observed in Figure 12. In particular, placements in the arms, legs, and stomach become less frequent among the older participants (40–51 years and >50 years), whereas the head remains the predominant location across all age groups, with the exception of participants aged 31–40 years.

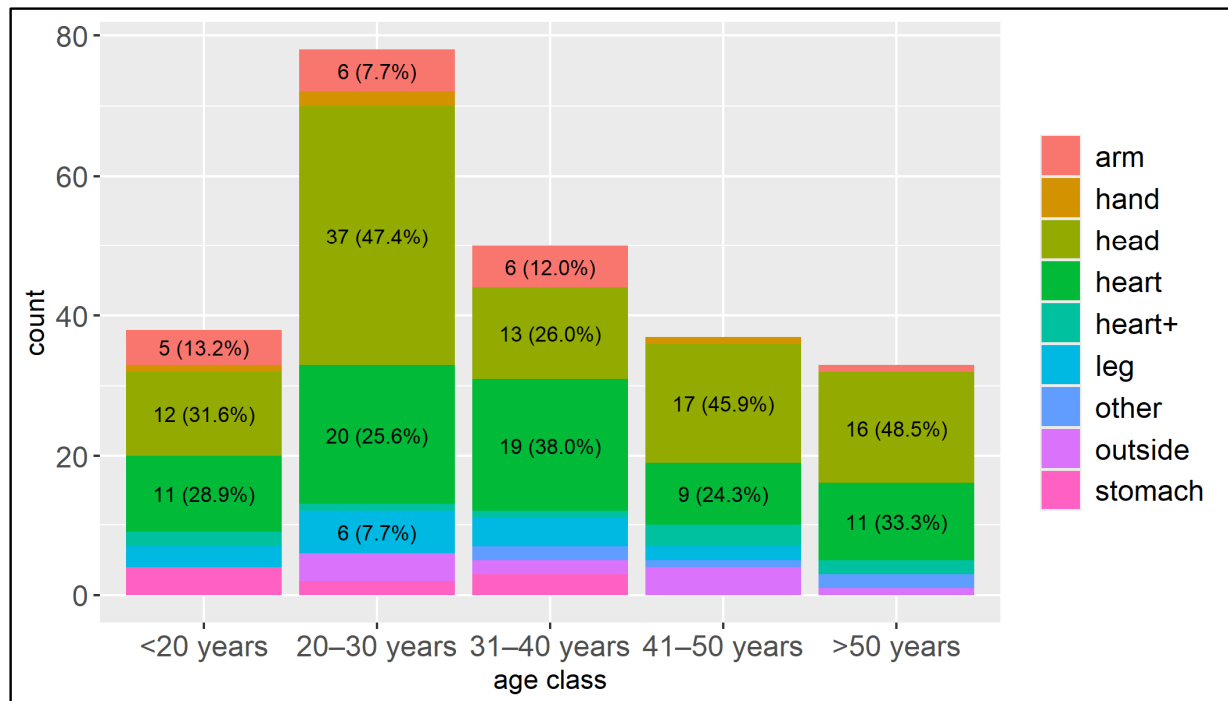


Figure 12. Positions selected in the portraits for L1/HL by participants' age (absolute values > 5 and percentages).

Figure 13 presents the distribution of L1/HL positions across the ten most represented national groups in the G.U.L.P. corpus. Overall, no statistically significant association emerged between country of origin and the positioning of the L1/HL ($\chi^2(80) = 99.60$, $p = 0.07$, Cramer's $V = 0.23$), although the effect size suggests a small-to-moderate association. Descriptively, different configurations can nevertheless be observed across the groups. Some participants tend to favor central or upper-body locations for the L1/HL (e.g., El Salvador [SLV] and Peru [PER]), whereas others also place it in the limbs (e.g., Pakistan [PAK]) or outside the silhouette (e.g., Bangladesh [BGD]). However, the relatively small number of participants within most national groups prevents the identification of robust group-specific patterns. Further research based on larger samples would be needed to explore whether these differences reflect culturally specific symbolic meanings associated with particular body parts.

Nonetheless, a closer inspection of the two largest national groups in the corpus suggests some potentially interesting differences. Whereas Sri Lankan (LKA) participants most frequently locate the L1/HL in the head (50.0%), with several additional placements in the arms (17.6%), Ukrainian (UKR) participants tend to place it in the heart (45.5%). Although these patterns should be interpreted with caution, they may point to different ways of conceptualizing the symbolic role of the first/heritage language within the plurilingual repertoire.

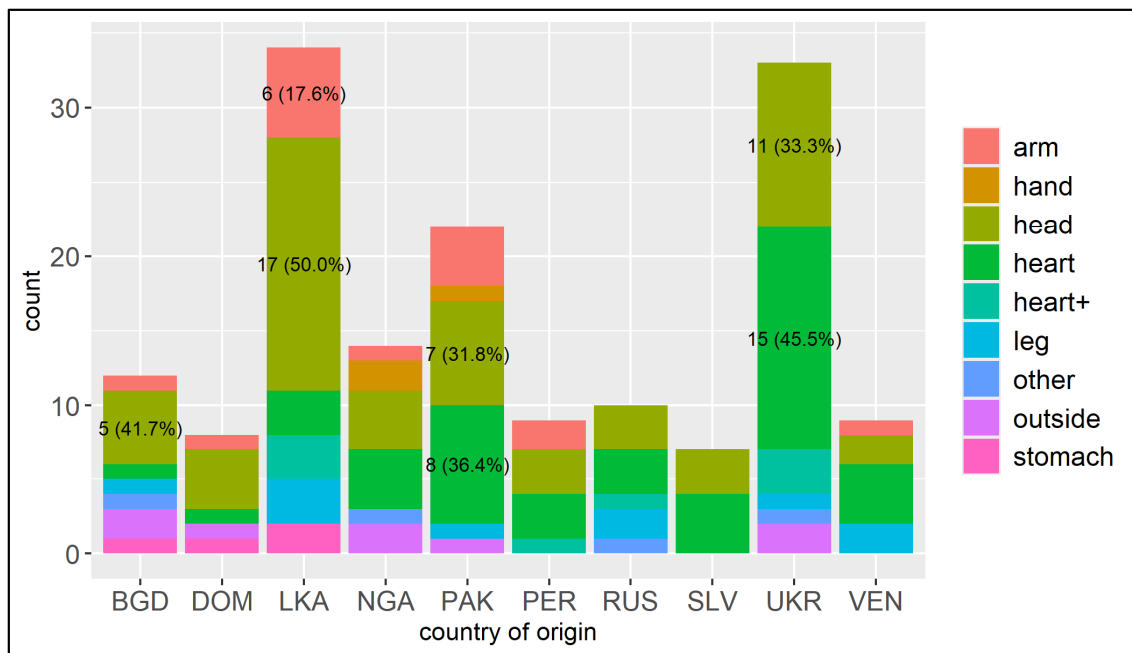


Figure 13. Positions selected in the portraits for L1/HL by participants' country of origin (absolute values > 5 and percentages—first ten countries).

As reported in Section 2.4, a binary logistic regression analysis was performed to assess the joint contribution of the three variables to the likelihood of assigning the L1/HL to a central body position. For this analysis, the original variable *position* was recoded into a binary outcome contrasting *central* locations (head and heart) with *peripheral* locations (all remaining body parts). Age class, gender, and country of origin were entered simultaneously as categorical predictors, allowing the effect of each variable to be evaluated while controlling for the others.

The regression analysis largely confirmed the descriptive patterns emerging from the chi-square analyses, while revealing that some effects became more apparent once the predictors were considered jointly. Gender did not significantly predict the probability of assigning the L1/HL to a central position ($p = 0.42$), confirming the absence of gender differences observed in the bivariate analyses. By contrast, participants older than 50 years were significantly more likely than those in the reference age group to assign the L1/HL to a central location ($\beta = 1.49$, $SE = 0.68$, $z = 2.19$, $p = 0.028$). This finding suggests that, after controlling for gender and country of origin, older participants showed a stronger tendency to conceptualize the L1/HL in cognitively and affectively salient body locations.

Country of origin also contributed to the model. In particular, participants from Bangladesh were significantly less likely than those from the reference country to assign the L1/HL to a central body position ($\beta = -1.69$, $SE = 0.69$, $z = -2.46$, $p = 0.014$), whereas the coefficient for participants from Nigeria approached significance ($\beta = -1.12$, $SE = 0.63$, $z = -1.78$, $p = 0.075$). No significant effects emerged for the remaining age groups or countries (all $p > 0.05$). Overall, these findings indicate that, although the distribution of L1/HL positions appears broadly similar across the sample, age and, to a lesser extent, country of origin account for meaningful variation in the likelihood of assigning the language to a central rather than a peripheral body location.

L1/HL Position and Generation: Evidence from a Single Case

Figure 14 presents a unique case within the G.U.L.P. corpus: the linguistic portraits of a Sri Lankan woman (aged 41) and her 15-year-old daughter, who has been living in

Italy for seven years and was also attending Italian L2 courses at the time of data collection. The presence of these two portraits from the same family allows for a direct comparison between first and second generation represented repertoires.

In the mother's portrait (a), characterized by a clear graphic separation between languages, the mother tongue occupies a salient position in the head; glottonyms are provided both in Italian and in Sinhala. She reports using Sinhala primarily at home and identifies it as the language through which she expresses anger, occasionally even in interactions with Italians (Example 6).

By contrast, the daughter places Sinhala in the arm, includes Neapolitan in her portrait (unlike her mother), and positions a language that is particularly popular among younger generations, Korean, in the head. In her oral production (Example 7), she reports a mixed use of languages, and her portrait, although organized in color-coded sections, shows languages crossing different areas of the body, with rainbow-colored inscriptions.

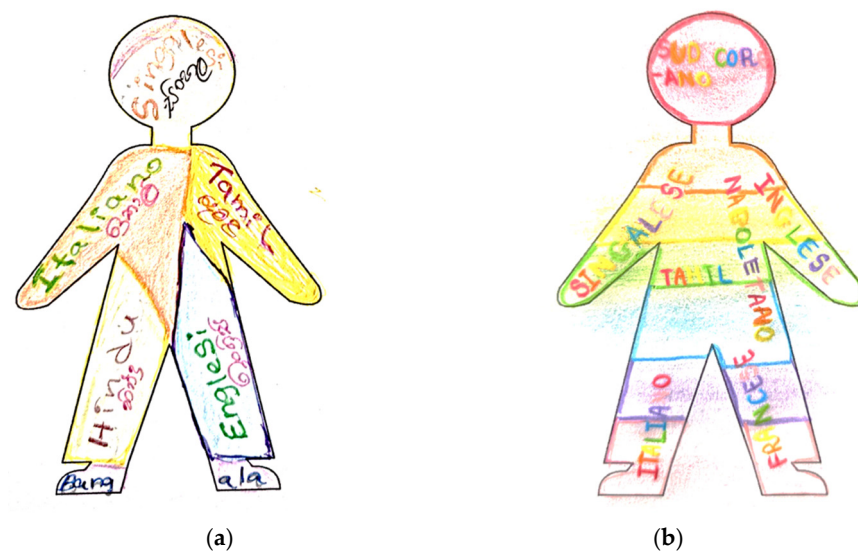


Figure 14. Language portraits of 658_SP_83_LKA (a) and 655_CS_09_LKA (b).

- (6) SP: *Io molto piace singalese e italiano <sp> casa mia molto usare singalese anche poco italiano [...] io arrabbio parlare singalese <sp> una persona italiano toccato me <sp> io urlato singalese*
 SP: I really like Sinhala and Italian. At home I mostly use Sinhala, and also a little Italian [...] when I get angry, I speak Sinhala, if an Italian person bothers me, I shout in Sinhala
- (7) CS: *Io lo so sette lingue [...] a casa singalese.*
 Int: *Quando conti, quale lingua usi?*
 CS: *Singalese e italiano*
 Int: *e quando sogni?*
 CS: *Sogni tutte e due italiano e singalese <sp> mischio*
 CS: I know seven languages [...] at home, Sinhala.
 Int: When you count, which language do you use?
 CS: Sinhala and Italian.
 Int: And when you dream?
 CS: I dream in both, Italian and Sinhala. I mix them.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigated the positioning of the mother tongue/heritage language (L1/HL) within the linguistic repertoires of adult immigrants attending Italian L2 courses in Naples, with particular attention to its evaluative, functional, and affective dimensions, as well as to the role of selected biographical variables. Specifically, it addressed the following research questions: What “space” does the L1/HL occupy in the linguistic portraits of the G.U.L.P. corpus? Is it possible to identify recurring patterns within a highly heterogeneous group of participants? To what extent do biographical variables shape the positioning of the L1/HL in these portraits?

To answer these questions, a corpus of 268 language portraits, complemented by an equal number of oral presentations, was collected in the context of a voluntary association and analysed through an integrated quantitative and qualitative approach. The graphical features of the portraits were examined alongside participants’ oral explanations, while statistical analyses were employed to assess the significance of the observed distributional patterns and the contribution of different biographical variables to the positioning of the L1/HL.

Overall, the findings reveal a remarkable degree of consistency across participants. Regardless of their linguistic and biographical backgrounds, the L1/HL is predominantly associated with the head and the heart, suggesting that it occupies a cognitively and affectively central place in participants’ self-representations. This dual tendency reflects two complementary conceptualizations of language: a cognitive dimension, associated with memory, thought, and linguistic competence, and an affective dimension, linked to emotions, identity, family relationships, and personal history. In this respect, the present findings confirm the organizational patterns previously described in studies on language portraits conducted with school-aged learners (Tabaro Soares et al., 2021; Platzgummer, 2021; Zanasi et al., 2023) and teacher candidates (Coffey, 2015), while extending them to a population that has so far received comparatively little attention, namely adult migrants learning Italian as a second language.

The inferential analyses indicate that gender, age, and country of origin account for only limited variation in the symbolic positioning of the L1/HL. Logistic regression nevertheless revealed that participants over the age of fifty were significantly more likely to assign their L1/HL to central body locations than younger participants. Although this finding requires further investigation, it may be associated with the longer migration trajectories and greater social stability characterizing the older participants in the corpus. While the present study does not directly assess acculturation strategies, the observed pattern is compatible with Berry’s (1997) model of integration, according to which maintenance of the mother tongue coexists with active participation in the host society. In other words, the central symbolic role attributed to the L1/HL does not appear to diminish with prolonged residence in Italy but rather coexists with the acquisition and everyday use of the majority language, namely Italian.

At the same time, the considerable variability observed across individual portraits suggests that the symbolic representation of the L1/HL cannot be reduced to a single explanatory model. Although no statistically significant gender differences emerged, female participants showed a descriptive tendency to associate the L1/HL more frequently with the heart. To the best of the author’s knowledge, gender has rarely been considered as an explanatory variable in previous research on language portraits, making this a potentially promising avenue for future investigation. Likewise, differences across national groups, although not statistically robust in the present dataset, suggest that culturally specific conceptions of the body may influence the symbolic meanings attributed to particular body locations.

This hypothesis is further supported by the comparison between the two largest national groups represented in the corpus. Sri Lankan participants, who are generally younger (mean age: males 28.8; females 27.9), more gender-balanced, and include the few second- and decimal-generation participants, predominantly place the L1/HL in the head and, to a lesser extent, in the arms. By contrast, Ukrainian participants—mostly women, older on average (males 33.5; females 42.9), and marked by the experience of forced migration following the outbreak of the war—show a much stronger preference for the heart (while positioning Russian in more peripheral positions; see [Di Salvo et al., 2026](#)). Although these differences should be interpreted with caution, they suggest that migration history, cultural background, and recent life experiences may interact in shaping the symbolic representation of languages. The intergenerational case study presented in Section L1/HL Position and Generation: Evidence from a Single Case further illustrates how language portraits can capture processes of language maintenance, shift, and identity negotiation across generations within the same family.

Beyond its empirical findings, the study contributes to the existing literature in at least three respects. First, it presents one of the largest mixed-method investigations of language portraits conducted with adult migrants, combining visual and oral data with quantitative statistical analyses. Second, it adopts a continuum-based sociolinguistic perspective on the notion of heritage language, moving beyond rigid distinctions between first-generation migrants, heritage speakers, and second-generation bilinguals ([Turchetta et al., 2026](#)). Finally, unlike previous studies, it focuses specifically on the symbolic positioning of the L1/HL, demonstrating that language portraits are particularly effective not only in documenting the overall composition of multilingual repertoires but also in revealing the cognitive, emotional, and identity-related meanings attached to individual languages.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The participants were recruited within a single educational context and therefore cannot be considered statistically representative of the migrant population living in Naples or Italy more generally. Furthermore, several national groups are represented by relatively small numbers of participants, limiting the possibility of drawing robust culture-specific comparisons. Other dimensions of language portraits, such as colour choice and graphic salience, which have proved particularly informative in previous studies (e.g., [Tabaro Soares et al., 2021](#)), were beyond the scope of the present analysis and deserve dedicated investigation. Future research involving larger samples, as well as longitudinal designs, would make it possible to assess the stability of the patterns identified here and to explore more systematically the interaction between linguistic biographies, migration trajectories, and embodied representations of language.

Despite these limitations, the considerable heterogeneity of the corpus in terms of linguistic background, age, gender, country of origin, and migration history gives the findings broader analytical relevance. Rather than supporting statistical generalization, the study identifies recurring tendencies that are likely to characterize multilingual adult learners beyond the specific educational setting investigated here.

More broadly, the study contributes to the growing body of research adopting a heteroglossic perspective on plurilingualism by providing empirical evidence of how adult migrants represent their embodied linguistic repertoires. It confirms the value of the language portrait as an effective instrument for eliciting learners' "lived experience of language" ([Busch, 2017](#)) and as a powerful resource within autobiographical and plural approaches to language education. By making learners' linguistic capital visible and available for reflection, language portraits foster metalinguistic awareness, support identity negotiation, and challenge monolingual ideologies, particularly in contexts of migration and social vulnerability.

Finally, the findings highlight the enduring symbolic centrality of the mother tongue/heritage language throughout the migration experience. Far from being displaced by the acquisition of the second language, the L1/HL continues to constitute a fundamental cognitive, emotional, and identity resource. Acknowledging this persistent bond is essential for developing educational practices that support a balanced and non-conflictual restructuring of learners' linguistic repertoires in migratory settings.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The author explains that at the time the G.U.L.P. project was conducted, their home institution (University of Naples L'Orientale) had not yet established an ethics committee. Therefore, formal ethical approval from the university could not be obtained. The project was carried out in collaboration with the Scuola di Pace association, a volunteer-based organization that does not typically engage in academic research and is thus unfamiliar with the formal ethical procedures and documentation required in university contexts. Consequently, no formal written certification from the Scuola di Pace association could be provided. It should be noted that data collection could not have taken place without a prior assessment of the project's scientific value and ethical soundness. In other words, the very fact that data collection was carried out implies that the project had undergone some form of ethical review and approval before implementation. In addition, the author has provided two supporting documents. The first is the conference proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of the Italian Association of Applied Linguistics, which records the launch date of the G.U.L.P. project. The second is a funding request submitted by a trainee involved in the project (Ms. Marika Lamberti) to the Scuola di Pace association, intended to support her participation in the aforementioned congress, where she presented the preliminary findings of the G.U.L.P. project. This funding request explicitly mentions the G.U.L.P. project and its related activities. Given that the author's institution had not yet established an ethics committee at the time of the research, that the collaborating organization is a non-academic volunteer-based association, and that data collection has already been carried out, the author has received an ethics exemption from the journal.

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author on request.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The document is available at this address: <https://giscel.it/dieci-tesi-per-leducazione-linguistica-democratica/> (accessed on 10 July 2026).
- ² According to ISTAT data, at the beginning of 2024, approximately 58,000 foreign citizens were estimated to be legally residing in the municipality of Naples, accounting for more than 6% of the total population. Unlike what is observed in other urban centers in Italy, the foreign community in Naples appears to be fairly fragmented in terms of countries of origin: the most represented nationalities are Sri Lankan (25.5%), Ukrainian (13.3%), Chinese (7.5%), and Pakistani (6.3%). These communities also differ with respect to gender composition: while women are clearly predominant in the Ukrainian community (80.1%), they account for less than 10% of the Pakistani community, whereas the other two groups appear relatively balanced (women represent 48.2% of

the Sri Lankan community and 48.3% of the Chinese community). Further information can be found at the following address: <https://www.tuttitalia.it/campania/59-napoli/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri-2024/> (accessed on 10 July 2026).

- 3 The placement test used to assess participants' Italian L2 proficiency was developed internally by the Scuola di Pace association through a collaborative process involving its most experienced volunteers (including the author of this paper). The test, which is routinely used for class placement, has undergone several years of discussion, refinement, and validation. In its current version, it assesses the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) based on the LASLLIAM and CEFR descriptors.
- 4 In Figure 3a,b, the label *heart+* refers to all cases in which the L1/HL was positioned in the heart as well as in one or more additional locations within the silhouette. In the analyses presented in this section, occurrences labelled *heart* and *heart+* are considered jointly.
- 5 In the transcripts, the participant's speech is introduced by her/his initials, while the interviewer's turns, where present, are introduced by 'Int'. In accordance with CLIPS standards (Savy, 2006), <sp> stands for 'short pause', <laugh> indicates the presence of laughter, prolongations and hesitations are also indicated inside <>, <unclear> stands for non-comprehensible sounds, + signals an interruption of a word. A simplified English translation of the 'non-standard' utterances in Italian as L2 of the learners is also provided.

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