Language Variation and Urban Space: A Sociolinguistic Study of Immigrants in Naples (Italy)

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Abstract

This study investigates interethnic variation in language behavior among three immigrant groups—Sri Lankans, Ukrainians, and Senegalese—residing in Naples, Italy. Drawing on sociolinguistic and macro-demographic frameworks, it explores the relationship between language practices and external variables such as residential patterns, occupational segregation, and intra-urban mobility. Using data collected through a sociolinguistic questionnaire administered within the *HELLO CAMPANIA!* project, the analysis combines qualitative insights and statistical methods (Chi-square, Cramér's V, and Kruskal-Wallis tests) to assess self-reported language dominance, heritage language maintenance, and Italian language proficiency across a sample of 74 first-generation migrants.

Findings reveal statistically significant correlations between ethnic group and perceived Italian language proficiency, independent of length of residence in Italy. Ukrainians demonstrated the highest self-assessed Italian proficiency and the strongest shift toward the majority language, while Sri Lankans showed the highest rates of heritage language maintenance. These patterns are interpreted in light of different residential and social dynamics: Ukrainians are more spatially and socially mobile, Senegalese maintain strong intra-group networks within economically marginalized districts, and Sri Lankans exhibit high levels of spatial concentration and limited linguistic contact beyond their ethnic community.

The study also highlights the influence of neighborhood typology—standard-speaking affluent areas versus dialect-speaking disadvantaged districts—on language learning trajectories, as well as the impact of job type on daily linguistic exposure. These findings extend previous models of language maintenance and shift (e.g., Chini & Andorno, 2018) by situating them in the underexplored southern Italian urban context, and argue for a more

nuanced understanding of language behavior as shaped by the intersection of spatial, social, and economic dimensions.

Keywords: Heritage language, Variation, Immigrants, Naples, Italian as L2, Language maintenance and shift, Residential segregation, Social network

1. Introduction

1.1 The Research Hypothesis

According to United Nations data (2018), the contemporary world is increasingly marked by the concentration of the global population in urban centers (Moriconi-Ebrard et al., 2024; Véron, 2006). This demographic trend is further shaped by patterns of mobility and international migration, which tend to converge on large urban agglomerations as primary destinations. As a result, cities have become key sites for observing residential, ethnic, and social segregation (Benassi & De Falco, 2025).

Naples, the third most populous city in Italy after Rome and Milan, has also been significantly influenced by immigration over the past fifty years. The city's population has steadily grown, partly due to the arrival of international migrants (De Filippo & Strozza, 2015; De Filippo, 2017; Orientale Caputo, 2017; Russo Krauss, 2005; Petrarca, 2017; Gabrielli et al., 2017; Ammaturo et al., 2010; Benassi et al. 2014). The presence of foreign populations—now a structural feature of the city—has become increasingly complex in terms of geographic origin, social composition, and settlement patterns within the urban landscape (Buonomo et al., 2025).

From a demographic and social perspective, the immigrant population is integrated into a context marked by deep socioeconomic inequalities (Morlicchio, 2018), which— as will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3—are mirrored in the geographic stratification of neighborhoods. This includes a polarization between affluent hilltop districts, middle-to-upper-class areas in the city center, and severely disadvantaged peripheral neighborhoods (e.g., Scampia, Secondigliano; cf. Buonomo et al., 2025). Notably, Ukrainian migrants are disproportionately represented in the more affluent hilltop areas, while Sri Lankans—though present throughout the city—form the largest ethnic group and are more concentrated in the central districts (Buonomo et al., 2025; Benassi et al., 2023; Fraudatario, 2024; Guadagno, 2022, Benassi & De Falco, 2025).

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, newcomers enter a context defined by a dilalic repertoire (Berruto, 1995), where Italian and Neapolitan coexist without rigid functional divisions across communicative domains. The Neapolitan dialect, in particular, remains highly vital in the city (cf. ISTAT, 2017), and is widely spoken—especially in the historic center, which is also a key destination for Sri Lankan and Senegalese immigrants (Buonomo et al., 2025; De Blasi, 2012).

In such a complex social fabric, immigrant groups arriving in Naples tend to settle according to specific spatial patterns. On one hand, there are groups like the Sri Lankans, who are widely dispersed across the city but are particularly concentrated in the dialect-speaking

central areas, such as the Vasto, Sanità, and Vergini neighborhoods. Ukrainian migrants, on the other hand, show the highest levels of concentration in the Italian-speaking districts of Vomero and Arenella, where women are commonly employed as domestic workers and caregivers. Senegalese migrants, meanwhile, are primarily concentrated near the main train station, where the group's main gathering places are also located, including the mosque, ethnic shops, and the headquarters of the Senegalese Association in Naples.

Thus, Sri Lankan, Ukrainian, and Senegalese migrants differ not only in terms of their primary residential neighborhoods but also in the areas of the city where they maintain their social networks, by their kind of jobs and their tendency to exogamy vs. endogamy, as I will discuss in section 2.

Based on these premises, the research questions this study aims to explore are as follows:

1. Do the settlement and social dynamics characterizing different migrant groups influence their respective language behavior?

2. How does the perceived level of Italian language proficiency vary within the Ukrainian group, which—given their settlement areas and intra-urban mobility—appear to be more exposed to the Italian language compared to Sri Lankans and Senegalese?

My hypothesis is that the identified external variables may affect both the intergenerational transmission of the heritage language and the acquisition of the host country's majority language. Secondly, this study seeks to offer an initial reflection on interethnic variation in the two linguistic processes of language maintenance and shift, also in relation to previous models developed for other Italian cities—such as Chini's (2004), to which I will return later. Compared to previous studies (see Section 2.1), this work adopts a comparative perspective across three communities, with the primary aim of investigating whether the three ethnic groups display different rates of heritage language maintenance, and whether these rates may be influenced by the average number of years spent in the city of Naples (Section 3.2). Should heritage language maintenance or language shift toward Italian prove to be independent of length of residence in Italy, other potential factors must be considered. These may include the distinct settlement patterns of the three groups analyzed (see Sections 2.2, 2.3, 2.4), as well as the speakers' ethnic orientation (Nagy 2024; Extra & Yagmur, 2010). The present study therefore sets out, first and foremost, to examine the presence of interethnic variation—a step forward in understanding heritage languages in Naples, a context that remains understudied, particularly from a comparative perspective.

1.2 Previous Studies and Critical Points in Previous Literature

In the body of literature on multilingualism produced in Italy, as discussed elsewhere (Buonomo, Di Salvo & Maffia, 2025), scholarly attention has predominantly focused on the acquisition of Italian as a second language. Although some research—particularly that related to Northern Italian regions—has explored the linguistic repertoires of migrant communities (Chini & Andorno, 2004, 2018), this second perspective remains relatively underdeveloped. In particular, unlike studies conducted in other parts of the world, Italy has not yet produced

comparative analyses of different migrant communities with the aim of identifying both cross-group tendencies and group-specific patterns.

Macro-sociolinguistic research approaches elsewhere have adopted this comparative perspective to highlight variation among communities with diverse backgrounds within the same sociolinguistic context. In Australia, for instance, the issue of intergroup variation has been widely explored since the pioneering work of Clyne and Kipp (2007), followed by numerous contributions (Clyne 2011; Forrest et al., 2020; Forrest & Dandy, 2017; Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2017). In North America, a major contribution in this direction comes from the *Heritage Languages Variation and Change* project, coordinated by Naomi Nagy (2024). While grounded in variationist sociolinguistics, this project carried out a comparative evaluation of multiple ethnic groups settled in the Greater Toronto Area (Nagy, 2024; Nagy & Celata, 2022; Nagy & Gardanidis, 2021). Within this framework, linguistic variables—phonetic (e.g., Griffin & Nagy, 2025; Nagy et al. 2024; Umbal & Nagy, 2021), morphosyntactic (e.g., Di Salvo & Nagy, 2023)—were systematically correlated with external variables such as gender and generation and, more important, on ethnic orientation (Nagy, 2018; Nagy et al. 2014). Many of these studies emphasize the pivotal role of ethnic orientation, which emerged as a powerful explanatory factor for the observed patterns of variation.

As previously mentioned, Italian research has mainly prioritized the study of L2 Italian acquisition. The only sociolinguistically informed and comparative study remains the one coordinated by Chini (2004) and its subsequent longitudinal expansion (Chini & Andorno, 2018). Based on questionnaire data, including responses from children, these works investigated both the shift toward Italian and the concurrent retention of heritage languages across several ethnic groups. The authors represented the observed variation through the following implicational scale:

(1) *Tendency toward L1 maintenance:* Moroccans/North Africans > Chinese/Asians > Latin Americans > Central-Eastern Europeans (Albanians > Romanians) (Chini, 2004, p. 320)

Within this scale, Eastern European migrants are portrayed as the most inclined to acquire Italian and simultaneously cease intergenerational transmission of their heritage languages. By contrast, Asian and North African communities show a stronger tendency toward L1 maintenance. However, the underlying causes of this variation remain unexplored even in the 2018 follow-up study.

Given the specific characteristics of the region studied—an economically prosperous and linguistically Italian-dominant area (ISTAT 2017) —it is legitimate to question the generalizability of such a model to other Italian contexts. What happens, for instance, in a city like Naples, where the local dialect is more vital and the socio-economic conditions are comparatively less favorable (see §2.1)?

In Southern Italy, as at the national level, research has mainly focused on the acquisition of Italian, usually by specific learner groups defined by ethnicity, such as Sri Lankans (Maffia and Maffia, 2017) Senegalese (Maffia, 2023), Romanians (De Meo & Budenau, 2023), or

Ukrainian women (Della Putta, 2021; Sacco et al., 2020; Mattiello & Della Putta, 2017), or by geographical area of settlement, as in the case of Salerno (Maturi & Vitolo, 2017). A different orientation is found in studies with a partial sociolinguistic focus, such as the one on Sinhalese migrants in Naples (Maffia, 2020) and the more recent work on Filipinos in Campania (Moro & Russo, 2024). The former offers a descriptive analysis of linguistic repertoires, while the latter investigates intergenerational transmission of both Filipino and regional heritage languages, focusing on family language policies.

All these studies present a fragmented landscape—often detailed but limited to a single group (defined by ethnicity, ethnicity and gender, as in the case of Ukrainian women, or settlement area). As such, they do not allow for the identification of shared patterns within a single migratory context, nor do they enable meaningful comparisons with other national or international realities. In the case of Naples specifically, no studies to date have examined language maintenance and shift across multiple migrant groups. Moreover, there is a noticeable lack of sociolinguistically driven investigations that could capture the complexity of a metropolitan area which, over the past four decades, has experienced continuous and significant immigration flows. The present study represents a first step in that direction.

1.3 Aims and Scope

In light of the critical issues identified in the existing literature—namely, the scarcity of comparative sociolinguistic studies within the Italian context and the lack of analyses that encompass multiple migrant groups within the same urban setting, especially in southern Italy—this study seeks to address an important gap by exploring patterns of interethnic variation with respect to both heritage language maintenance and language shift toward Italian in Naples.

By focusing on this specific metropolitan area—characterized by complex sociolinguistic dynamics, the vitality of Neapolitan as a local vernacular, and less favorable socio-economic conditions compared to northern Italian cities—this research aims to uncover both shared and group-specific tendencies regarding language maintenance and shift, with particular attention to their different length of residence and residential pattern (see Section 2).

In doing so, this research constitutes a first step toward developing a sociolinguistically informed model for analyzing migration-related language practices in Southern Italy, with implications for both theoretical and applied perspectives on multilingualism and integration.

2. Case Study

2.1 Naples as City of Immigration

Naples is one of the southern Italian cities most deeply marked by social inequality, a precarious and unstable labor market, and, above all, widespread urban poverty and social marginalization, which tend to be concentrated in specific areas of the urban core (Strozza et al., 2016; Morlicchio et al., 2004). At the same time, the city is experiencing a steadily growing presence of foreign nationals (Buonomo et al., 2025). This migrant presence is spatially distributed across differentiated neighborhoods, largely based on ethnic group, with

consequences for the urban landscape that have thus far been described primarily from a demographic perspective (Buonomo et al, 2025). These studies suggest that Naples constitutes an extremely complex urban environment, in which various immigrant groups form distinct clusters with differing concentrations (Dedalus, 2023; Buonomo et al. 2025).

Groups such as Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, and Senegalese are notably overrepresented in the city's most disadvantaged areas—such as the Sanità and Vergini neighborhoods, as well as the streets surrounding the central railway station (cf. Dedalus, 2023; Buonomo et al. 2025).

Other ethnic groups, such as Filipinos and Ukrainians, by contrast, are overrepresented in more affluent neighborhoods, including Chiaia, Vomero, and Arenella. This divergent spatial distribution is of particular interest from a sociolinguistic perspective, as it reveals a clear polarization: on one side, there are groups residing in areas of Naples characterized by a high vitality of the Neapolitan dialect (e.g., Vergini, Sanità, Vasto), and on the other, groups concentrated in predominantly Italian-speaking neighborhoods (Chiaia, Vomero, Arenella; cf. De Blasi, 2012).

Equally significant from a linguistic standpoint is intra-urban mobility, often driven by employment-related factors. In this respect, the three ethnic groups considered in this study—Sri Lankans, Senegalese, and Ukrainians—exhibit notable differences. Sri Lankans predominantly work in the city center, and even those employed in other districts tend to gravitate toward the same central area. As shown by Guadagno (2022), most Sri Lankan-run businesses, restaurants, and churches offering mass in Sinhala are concentrated in the historic center. This clustering facilitates a form of communal self-sufficiency, allowing members of the group to access essential services within their own community and thus significantly limiting interaction with the broader Neapolitan society to the workplace alone.

Senegalese migrants, mainly concentrated in neighborhoods near the central train station, display high levels of occupational mobility due to their widespread employment in street vending. However, the community's main points of reference—such as the mosque, shops, and community association—remain located in their residential area. This overlap between residential and social life contributes to the formation of a relatively closed ethnic network, as confirmed by the testimonies collected.

Ukrainians, like Sri Lankans, often work in the same neighborhoods in which they reside. Nonetheless, the presence of community associations and gathering spaces in other districts—such as weekend schools—encourages greater intra-urban mobility among Ukrainian migrants.

2.2 The Sri Lankan Community

The Sri Lankan community is the largest foreign group in the city of Naples, comprising 14,621 individuals. Sri Lankan migration to the Neapolitan area began in the 1990s, facilitated in part by Catholic associations that supported initial arrivals. The early migrant contingents were composed primarily of women employed in the domestic sector. Through the mechanism of migration chains, these initial nuclei were gradually joined by subsequent

arrivals. Over time, what had initially been a predominantly female, labor-driven migration evolved into a more stable, family-based migration pattern (Dedalus, 2023). Data from 2022 confirm this trend, indicating both a balanced gender distribution within the community (52% women and 48% men) and the growth of a second generation, which now constitutes nearly one-quarter of the Sri Lankan population in Naples.

2.3 The Ukrainian Community

The second largest foreign ethnic group in Naples is the Ukrainian community, which, according to data collected prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022, comprised 7,053 individuals. This figure does not account for refugees and refers solely to labor migration and, to a lesser extent, family reunifications that occurred before the war. As of January 2022, 82% of the Ukrainian community in Naples was composed of women. It is likely that this female predominance has increased further following the conflict, as the majority of recent arrivals have been women accompanied by children.

Ukrainian women in Naples are predominantly employed as caregivers and domestic workers. Compared to the other groups included in this study, Ukrainians display a higher tendency toward exogamy (Dedalus, 2023) and a greater propensity to acquire Italian citizenship. On this point, data from the SCIC project (Buonomo et al., 2025) indicate that 10% of Ukrainians residing in Naples have acquired Italian citizenship, while only 2% have opted to retain dual citizenship with their country of origin.

2.4 The Senegalese Community

The Senegalese presence in Naples dates back to the late 1980s and is primarily linked to labor-related migration. This is reflected in the gender composition of the group, which consists overwhelmingly of working-age men. Senegalese migration has predominantly involved adult men who leave their families behind in their country of origin, resulting in a limited presence of family units in Naples.

The Senegalese population in the city, comprising 1.174 individuals, is largely concentrated in the neighborhoods surrounding the central train station, where migrants tend to live in groups with fellow nationals. This area also hosts the main mosque, which serves as an important center of religious and social life for the Muslim community. Additionally, the headquarters of the Senegalese Association in Naples (*Senaso*) is located in Piazza Garibaldi. This organization provides various forms of support to migrants, including legal and healthcare assistance, help with job searches, Italian language courses, and language certification services.

These factors contribute to reinforcing the community's strong ties to this specific area of the city—although this residential zone does not always coincide with the migrants' workplaces, as Senegalese individuals are primarily employed in street vending, which takes place in various parts of Naples.

3. Method

3.1 Methodology for Data Collection

The dataset underlying this study was compiled through the administration of a sociolinguistic questionnaire developed by the author in collaboration with Francesca Moro, within the framework of the PRIN PNRR project *HELLO CAMPANIA!*. The questionnaire, approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Naples Federico II, consists of open-ended questions designed to investigate the speaker's biography and, in the case of first-generation migrants, their migration trajectory. It also explores social life in Naples (e.g., type of neighborhood, inter- and intra-ethnic relationships, participation in community events), the speaker's relationship with the languages in their repertoire, and their linguistic habits, with particular attention to language use across specific communicative domains.

Administered orally, the questionnaire also served as a tool for documenting the spontaneous speech of the participants involved in the project.

3.2 Participants

The analysis involved three groups of participants differing in ethnic background, for a total of 74 first-generation speakers.

The Sri Lankan group consisted of 30 participants (15 men and 15 women), with an average age of 33.3 years (ranging from 17 to 58) and an average length of residence in Italy of 10.3 years. The majority of Sri Lankan respondents held a medium-to-high level of education, with 27 individuals having completed their studies prior to arriving in Italy.

The Ukrainian group comprised 28 participants (19 women and 9 men), with an average age of 43.7 years and an average length of residence in Italy of 14.7 years. This group also showed a high level of educational attainment: six participants had completed university degrees and eleven had finished secondary school.

Finally, the Senegalese group included 16 participants (7 women and 9 men), with an average age of 36.8 years and an average duration of residence in Italy of 7.8 years. Compared to the other groups, this group had a lower overall level of education: ten individuals had completed secondary school, two held university degrees, and two had attended a Qur'anic school.

3.3 Methodology

To test the hypotheses outlined in Section 4, a statistical approach was adopted in order to examine the relationship between speakers' ethnic background (Sri Lankan, Senegalese, and Ukrainian) and two key variables: (a) the maintenance of the heritage language and (b) the perceived level of proficiency in Italian. The latter was assessed according to the classification grid established in the *HELLO CAMPANIA!* questionnaire, which includes four categories: *well/very well* (score 4), *so-so* (score 1), *a little* (score 2), and *none* (score 1).

In addition, these independent variables were correlated with the language each speaker identified as dominant, determined by the question: "In which language do you feel you express yourself best?".

From a methodological perspective, different correlation tests were applied to account for the nature of the variables. For the association between categorical variables (e.g., Country – Dominant Language), the Chi-square test and Cramér's V were used. For ordinal variables—specifically, levels of proficiency in Italian and in the heritage language—the Kruskal-Wallis H test was employed. The Kruskal-Wallis H test was selected due to the ordinal nature of the variables measuring self-assessed proficiency levels, allowing for a non-parametric comparison across the three ethnic groups without assuming normal distribution.

4. Results

The Chi-square test revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between country of origin and self-reported dominant language ($p = 0.0024$). Specifically, participants tended to identify as their dominant language the one acquired first, which, in these cases, corresponds to Sinhala, Wolof/Peul, and Ukrainian/Russian—i.e., the majority languages of their respective countries of origin. However, while this pattern is nearly absolute among Sri Lankan participants (all but one reported Sinhala as their dominant language), Ukrainian respondents showed greater openness to local Neapolitan varieties, including both Italian and Neapolitan. A similar openness to Neapolitan was also observed among Senegalese participants, as illustrated in Figure 1.
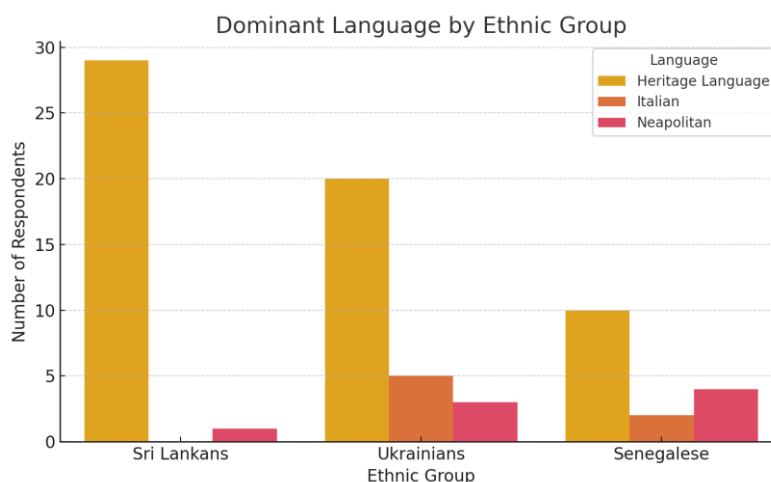

Figure 1. Self-reported dominant language per ethnic group

Cramér's V test did not reveal any significant correlation between the presence of co-nationals in the neighborhood of residence and the self-reported dominant language. However, this correlation can only be partially assessed, as the sample did not include Sri Lankan participants residing outside of ethnically concentrated areas. In fact, all Sri Lankan informants in the study live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of co-nationals (Benassi & Strozza, 2025), are engaged in endogamous marriages, and report limited social interactions beyond their own ethnic group. Future research aiming to assess the potential significance of these variables will require alternative sampling strategies to capture a more

diverse range of residential and social contexts.

By contrast, correlations were observed between the independent variables and levels of Italian language proficiency, though not with heritage language proficiency, as all participants reported maintaining a strong command of their language of origin.

With regard to perceived competence in Italian, responses were converted into a numerical scale ranging from 1 ("none") to 4 ("well/very well"), and the Kruskal-Wallis test was subsequently applied. The results indicate that country of origin is a statistically significant variable affecting Italian language proficiency ($p = 0.00020$).

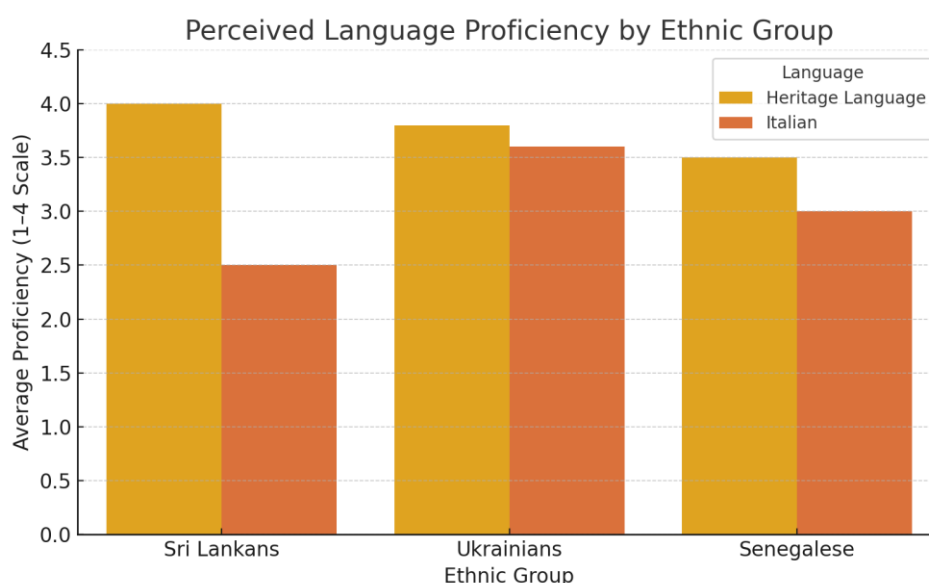The chart below compares perceived proficiency in both the heritage language and Italian:

Figure 2. Perceived Competence per ethnic group

These findings are particularly noteworthy given that they appear to be entirely independent of the average number of years spent in Italy, which is higher among Ukrainian and Sri Lankan participants compared to their Senegalese counterparts. Therefore, the hypothesis regarding a potential influence of length of residence on self-perceived competence in Italian is not supported by the data. While further research is undoubtedly required to assess the degree of alignment between speakers' self-assessments and their actual linguistic abilities, this preliminary result invites us to emphasize the need to identify additional factors that may contribute to interethnic variation. Such variation is, at the very least, evident in relation to the self-evaluations analyzed in this study.

The analysis of self-reported language use across home and school/work contexts revealed a clear preference for Italian in the latter domain—an outcome that aligns with the initial hypotheses. In contrast, when examining the language most frequently used at home, Cramér's V test revealed a statistically strong correlation with country of origin. Specifically,

73.9% of Ukrainian and 73.3% of Sri Lankan respondents reported using only their heritage language (HL) in the domestic sphere. Among Senegalese participants, however, the use of Wolof or Peul was significantly less common. This group tended to favor either the majority language of the host country (Italian) or French.

A summary of the reported language practices across the three groups is presented in the following figure:
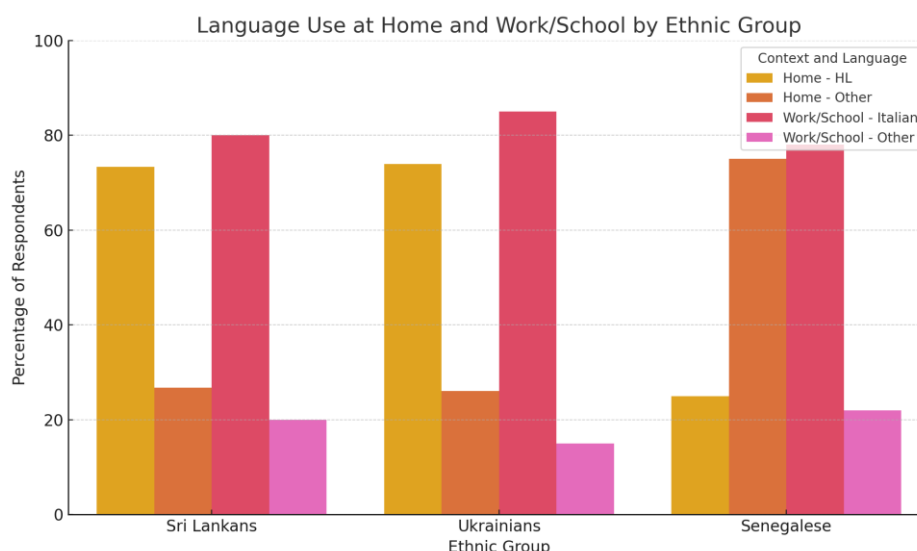

Figure 3. Self-reported uses at home and at work/school

5. Discussion

The analysis revealed statistically significant correlations between country of origin and self-reported linguistic behavior with respect to a minimum set of variables included in the *HELLO CAMPANIA!* project. These preliminary results support the initial hypothesis concerning the existence of distinct perceived linguistic behaviors among the three ethnic groups investigated. This finding confirms the pattern of interethnic variation previously identified by Chini and Andorno (2018) in their study conducted in Pavia and Turin. However, that earlier study focused primarily on the tendency toward language shift to Italian versus the rate of heritage language maintenance, without attempting to interpret these differences through the lens of the cultural, social, or economic motivations that might drive divergent behaviors across ethnic groups.

In the present study, it has been possible—albeit only partially—to relate such variation to the different modes of social and spatial aggregation among the ethnic groups residing in Naples. The analysis confirmed variation by ethnic group and revealed that, in Naples as well, Ukrainians are the group most inclined toward Italian, reporting higher levels of proficiency than their Sri Lankan counterparts. Sri Lankan participants, in contrast, showed the highest rates of heritage language retention, thereby reaffirming their relatively low position on the implicational scale for Italian language shift, as previously observed by Chini and Andorno

(2018).

Internal variation within the three groups could not be investigated, as the socio-biographical parameters analyzed were largely uniform within each group—particularly among the Sri Lankan participants. This group was composed almost exclusively of migrants residing in the same neighborhoods, living in monoethnic families, and maintaining friendships exclusively within their own ethnic community.

Despite these limitations, the present contribution demonstrates—through a statistically grounded approach—that the varying degrees of Italian language acquisition are significantly correlated with ethnic group membership and, importantly, are independent of the average length of residence in Italy. This raises the question of why, for instance, Senegalese participants report greater use of Italian than Sri Lankans. One plausible explanation may lie in the nature of employment: Senegalese migrants are primarily engaged in street vending, which involves frequent contact with Italian-speaking customers. In contrast, Sri Lankans are predominantly employed as live-in caregivers and domestic workers, a context that offers more limited exposure to both Italian and Neapolitan. Furthermore, both Senegalese migrants and Sri Lankans are overrepresented in dialect-speaking neighborhoods, but the former are more frequently employed in roles that require interaction outside of tight-knit ethnic networks, potentially increasing their exposure to Italian. From the perspective of employment, both Ukrainians and Sri Lankans are largely concentrated in the caregiving sector. However, among the Ukrainians, caregiving is a gendered occupation: while women are typically employed as domestic workers or caregivers, many men work in construction, often for Italian (rather than Ukrainian) companies.

Finally, when considering intra-urban mobility, the greater orientation toward Italian observed among Ukrainians—and especially among Senegalese—can be interpreted in light of their higher mobility within the city for work-related reasons (with Senegalese showing the highest levels of mobility).

While this explanation may account for the variation in Italian proficiency, it does not fully explain the greater tendency among Sri Lankans to maintain their heritage language compared to Senegalese and Ukrainian migrants. This behavior may instead be linked to residential concentration and forms of social life: the strong maintenance of the heritage language among Sri Lankan migrants can be explained by their tendency to remain within areas of the city that host dense concentrations of co-nationals. It is precisely within these areas that key ethnic infrastructures are located, including commercial establishments, community associations, and places of worship. This residential condition—also shared by the Senegalese community, which is predominantly concentrated in the area surrounding the central railway station—appears to have a lesser impact within this group, for reasons that remain to be fully explored.

Although the current study is partial and must be expanded to examine additional aspects of the linguistic behavior of the three groups, the findings already begin to reveal the influence of external variables—particularly residential patterns within the urban landscape—on language practices.

Finally, it is well know that, according with Blommaert (2013, p. 3):

"Physical space is also social, cultural and political space: a space that offers, enables, triggers, invites, prescribes, proscribes, polices or enforces certain patterns of social behaviour: a space that is never no-man's-land, but always somebody's space; a historical space, therefore, full of codes, expectations, norms and traditions; and a space of power controlled by, as well as controlling, people".

If we were to extend the considerations developed in the study of multicultural linguistic landscapes to the present case, it would be reasonable to suggest that the ways in which migrants inhabit specific social and linguistic spaces may influence their linguistic behavior—particularly their acquisition of the majority language in the host country. This acquisition appears more likely in affluent neighborhoods, where linguistic practices tend to align more closely with Italian. Conversely, residing in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas—where sub-standard varieties are more prevalent and often stigmatized by migrants themselves (Maturi & Vitolo, 2016)—may hinder linguistic integration.

In the specific case of Sri Lankan, Ukrainian, and Senegalese migration to Naples, the physical space of settlement may account for the greater exposure to Italian among Eastern European migrants and to dialectal varieties among the other two groups, with potential effects on their metalinguistic awareness and self-assessed language proficiency. Additionally, occupational segregation—particularly the concentration of Ukrainian women and Sri Lankans (regardless of gender) in domestic and caregiving roles—may also play a significant role. On the one hand, individuals employed in sectors involving greater interaction with the local population (e.g., Ukrainian construction workers or Senegalese street vendors) tend to report greater use of Italian. On the other hand, those with more limited and repetitive forms of interaction—due to both residential and occupational constraints—may experience forms of linguistic isolation, with reduced exposure to diverse and varied linguistic input.

Interestingly, the Senegalese group shows a greater tendency toward Italian language use, even though they have spent less time in Italy on average. This challenges the assumption that length of residence alone serves as a decisive sociolinguistic predictor. Compared to the implicational scale in (1) developed by Chini, some differences emerge that must, however, be interpreted with great caution, as the groups included in the present study differ from those considered in her research. Notably, the Senegalese—who do not fall under the category of North African migrants—were not part of Chini's original sample. Nevertheless, the general trend toward Italian among Eastern Europeans and the stronger heritage language retention among Sri Lankans are confirmed. While further research involving additional ethnic groups is necessary to assess the broader applicability of the northern Italian model to the Neapolitan context, these findings suggest that intra-urban residential dynamics may play a critical role in shaping the specific sociolinguistic configurations observed in Naples.

These findings suggest that language acquisition and maintenance are not merely individual or cultural phenomena, but are deeply shaped by structural factors such as housing policies and employment opportunities. As such, urban planning and educational policies aimed at reducing residential segregation and promoting inclusive social spaces could play a pivotal

role in fostering linguistic integration while supporting multilingual repertoires.

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