

Embodied Multilingualism: Language Portraits of Filipino Heritage Speakers in Italy

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Received: June 17, 2026

Accepted: July 31, 2026

Published: August 26, 2026

doi:10.5296/ijl.v18i4.24002

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v18i4.24002>

Abstract

This paper examines embodied multilingualism among Filipino heritage speakers in Italy using language portraits and sociolinguistic interviews. Comparing heritage second-generation speakers to first-generation and homeland speakers, it explores how individuals perceive and represent the languages in their repertoires and how these representations may change across generation in a diaspora context. The study draws on data from 40 participants and combines qualitative analysis of visual and verbal data with quantitative coding of language placement on the body silhouette. The findings reveal clear generational differences in embodied language representations. Homeland and first-generation speakers consistently place Tagalog/Filipino in the upper body (head, chest,

arms), reflecting strong emotional ties and identity affiliation with this language. Heritage speakers show more heterogeneous patterns, often positioning Tagalog in lower or peripheral body areas, while Italian occupies the head or chest as the dominant language of cognition and daily life. Statistical analysis indicates that self-perceived competence is the strongest predictor of language placement, outweighing explicit attitudes and self-declared identity. The study highlights the value of language portraits for capturing the lived, affective, and embodied dimensions of multilingual experience in long-established diasporic communities.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Heritage language, Language portrait, Language attitude, Tagalog-Italian bilinguals, Filipino diaspora

1. Introduction

This paper examines the multilingual identities of Filipino heritage speakers in Italy and their relationships with the languages that constitute their linguistic repertoires. Using language portraits and sociolinguistic interviews, it explores speakers' lived experiences of multilingualism and compares them with those of first-generation migrants and homeland speakers.

In the heritage language literature (e.g., Valdés, 2000; Montrul, 2016; Polinsky, 2018), first-generation migrants are generally not considered heritage speakers *sensu stricto*. Rather, they are classified as migrant speakers, whereas heritage speakers are typically defined as second- or later-generation individuals who are raised in a society where the majority language differs from the language transmitted through family and community networks. Heritage speakers typically experience dominant language shift, whereby they are initially exposed to and acquire a heritage language at home, but later become dominant in the majority language of the surrounding society. Consequently, the heritage language often becomes their less proficient language. Consequently, homeland speakers and first-generation migrants are often employed as baseline groups in heritage language research, as their linguistic varieties are assumed to be comparatively less affected by long-term contact with the majority language of the host society.

The analysis of language portraits and oral descriptions, together with data from sociolinguistic interviews (see Section 2.3), sheds light on forms of embodied multilingualism and language attitudes in diaspora contexts. The dominant language shift typically experienced by heritage speakers is likely manifested in their language portraits, and exploring this relationship is the primary aim of the present study.

The employment of the language portrait is particularly welcome to elicit embodied metaphors for language use and emotional attachment. Participants place languages on different body parts to reflect both their affective closeness to each language and its perceived function. Languages associated with intimacy and personal identity are typically positioned on central or upper body parts, while those linked to weaker attachment are placed on peripheral or lower areas (see Section 1.3).

Because the placement of languages within the silhouette is symbolic, examining their position and distribution reveals how languages contribute to identity construction and to the

broader linguistic experiences of heritage speakers. This perspective remains understudied in adult heritage speakers, as sociolinguistic research on this population has largely focused on language maintenance and use, often overlooking lived experiences and emotional attachments (Lynch & Avineri 2021; He 2021). Research on heritage languages has frequently employed the concept of ethnic orientation, defined as a “cluster of thoughts, feelings and behaviours pertaining to a person’s orientation towards their ancestral ethnic group” (Noels 2014: 88; Nagy, Chocieł & Hoffman 2014). Ethnic orientation is typically assessed through responses to structured questionnaires or interview questions. While interviews undoubtedly constitute a powerful tool for exploring speakers’ linguistic biographies and attitudes, this paper argues that language portraits offer a more nuanced and detailed representation of speakers’ thoughts and feelings about their languages. By relying on visual and spatial representations rather than exclusively verbal accounts, language portraits can access forms of metalinguistic knowledge that are often implicit, embodied, and not fully available to conscious reflection. As a result, they provide a unique window into the affective and identity-related dimensions of multilingual experience that may remain only partially articulated in interview data.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1.1 provides an overview of the most salient characteristics of the Filipino community in Italy. Section 1.2 reviews the language portrait method and discusses body-related metaphors in Tagalog, while Section 2 outlines the study’s aims and methods. Section 3 presents the qualitative and quantitative findings, and Section 4 discusses the results and offers concluding remarks.

1.1 The Filipino Community in Italy

In this paper, we focus on people of Filipino origin and their descendants. Italy hosts the largest Filipino population in Europe (156,317 individuals; ANPAL, 2022), with migration beginning in the 1970s and continuing primarily through family reunification. These migration flows were facilitated by bilateral agreements and Catholic institutions (Basa & de la Rosa, 2004). The community is predominantly urban, reflecting employment patterns in domestic and care work. Interestingly, individuals of Filipino origin often command multiple heritage languages alongside one or more majority languages. The Philippines itself is characterized by a high degree of linguistic diversity, with approximately 175 indigenous languages spoken across the archipelago (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2024). The country recognizes two official languages: Filipino, which is based primarily on Tagalog (the larger ethnic group), and English, a legacy of the period of U.S. colonial rule. Filipino functions as a lingua franca that enables communication across ethnolinguistic groups, while English is primarily associated with institutional, economic, and educational domains (McFarland, 2004, 2008). In diaspora contexts, Filipino migrants further expand their linguistic repertoires through the acquisition of the majority language of the host society.

In Italy, for example, Filipino first-generation migrants typically become proficient in Italian, the dominant language of their new sociolinguistic environment. A recent study by Moro and Russo (2025) found that both first- and second-generation Filipinos in Italy display highly multilingual repertoires, drawing on Tagalog, Italian, English, and one or more regional

Philippine languages. Despite the continued use of regional languages among first-generation migrants, however, their intergenerational transmission remains limited. Within parent–child communication, language mixing involving Tagalog, Italian, and English is common, reflecting the multilingual character of everyday family life. For second-generation heritage speakers in Italy, English occupies a particularly complex sociolinguistic position. On the one hand, it may function as a heritage language, acquired within the family through multilingual practices that often involve Taglish, the fluid mixing of Tagalog and English. On the other hand, English is also a globally prestigious language that is reinforced through formal education and widespread exposure in Italian society. By contrast, Tagalog/Filipino and other Philippine regional languages more closely correspond to the prototypical definition of heritage languages, as their transmission occurs primarily within the family domain and is only marginally supported by institutions in the host country. Some families increasingly favor English over Tagalog in language transmission practices. Marie Elsie Or (2025), for example, reports the case of a Filipino family in the Campania region. When asked whether she still teaches Tagalog or Kapampangan to her daughter, a first-generation mother replied: “Not anymore, aunty. They’re already here. But at least she knows English.” This statement illustrates the prestige attached to English and its growing role in family language policies within some Filipino diasporic households.

The Filipino community in Italy is a long-established yet linguistically understudied migrant population (see Mazzaferro 2018; Moro & Russo 2025). This study expands the sociolinguistic research on this community, by examining the lived linguistic experiences of Filipino heritage speakers through language portraits, applying this visual and reflexive method to adult speakers and adopting a comparative approach between first- and second-generation participants to gain a more nuanced understanding of multilingual identities across generations.

1.2 Language Portraits and Metaphors of the Body

1.2.1 The Language Portrait in Multilingualism Research

Recent sociolinguistic research has increasingly moved away from viewing languages as discrete, countable entities, focusing instead on speakers’ subjective and biographical experiences with their repertoires. This perspective foregrounds the concept of *Spracherleben*, understood as the ‘lived linguistic experience’ which links the corporeal and emotional dimensions of language use with attitudes, practices, and social positioning (Zanasi, Platzgummer & Lo Popolo, 2023). From this vantage point, a linguistic repertoire is not a static toolbox of codes but a dynamic trajectory, inseparably bound to migration histories, family ties, and everyday practices. It encompasses not only the resources actively used but also those imagined, desired, or painfully absent, languages that are often experienced in corporeal-emotive terms (Busch, 2012).

To capture this embodied complexity, scholars have increasingly turned to multimodal methods, among which the language portrait has proven especially productive. Originally conceived in educational contexts and later developed into a research method by Busch (2012, 2018), the technique is deceptively simple: participants fill a blank human body silhouette

with the languages of their repertoire, placing them where they are “felt” in the body. However, the resulting artifact acts primarily as a prompt: its meaning emerges only through the participant's narrative interpretation. This multimodal process invites speakers to reflect on their linguistic trajectories outside of linear or chronological accounts, privileging instead affective, sensory, and embodied dimensions (Coffey, 2015). The portrait thus captures not just what speakers know, but how they feel about and relate to their languages, revealing the subjective evaluations and language ideologies that shape their self-representation (Busch, 2018).

Crucially, the body silhouette is not a neutral frame. It encourages participants to make sense of their repertoires through metaphor, creating an interface where lived experience intersects with social discourses (Busch, 2018). While studies have shown recurring patterns, such as the head linked to cognition/education and the heart to intimacy/heritage (Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020), these metaphorical mappings are culturally grounded. As noted by Lakoff and Johnson (1999), the specific meanings attributed to body parts vary significantly across languages and cultures. While some metaphors are widely shared across cultures because they draw on common embodied experiences, such as the association of positive states with “up” and negative states with “down” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), others are language- and culture-specific. For instance, while European traditions often locate emotions in the heart, other systems may distribute affective experiences across the stomach or inner chest (see Section 3.2 for Tagalog body metaphors). This variability underscores the emic nature of the method which privileges speakers’ explanations as the authoritative source (Busch, 2018).

Empirical applications across diverse contexts, from South Africa (Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020) and Canada (Prasad, 2014) to the UK (Coffey, 2015), illustrate the method's potential to uncover how languages are embodied according to their affective and functional roles. However, a significant gap remains. The method has been employed primarily with children and young learners, reflecting its pedagogical origins (e.g., Stavrakaki & Manoli, 2023). In the Italian context, studies by Maffia and Noschese (2024), Lamberti and Maffia (2025), and Maffia (2026) have applied this methodology to examine linguistic repertoires and the positioning of the Neapolitan dialect within the portraits of first-generation immigrants of various nationalities. However, applications involving adult second generation speakers—and especially those adopting cross-generational comparative designs—remain relatively rare.

Our study addresses this gap by applying language portraits to first- and second-generation Filipino adults in Italy. Anchoring analysis in the body foregrounds emotional and ideological dimensions of heritage language repertoires, particularly for first-generation speakers shaped by Tagalog body-based metaphors. A cross-generational comparison reveals how migration histories and emotional attachments shape embodied representations of multilingualism beyond conventional dichotomies of first versus second language, or heritage versus majority language (García, 2009). Discuss the relevant related literature, but do not feel compelled to include an exhaustive historical account. Assume that the reader is knowledgeable about the basic problem and does not require a complete accounting of its history. A scholarly

description of earlier work in the introduction provides a summary of the most recent directly related work and recognizes the priority of the work of others. Citation of and specific credit to relevant earlier works are signs of scientific and scholarly responsibility and are essential for the growth of a cumulative science. In the description of relevant scholarship, also inform readers whether other aspects of this study have been reported on previously and how the current use of the evidence differs from earlier uses. At the same time, cite and reference only works pertinent to the specific issue and not those that are of only tangential or general significance. When summarizing earlier works, avoid nonessential details; instead, emphasize pertinent findings, relevant methodological issues, and major conclusions. Refer the reader to general surveys or research syntheses of the topic if they are available. Demonstrate the logical continuity between previous and present work. Develop the problem with enough breadth and clarity to make it generally understood by as wide a professional audience as possible (Beck & Sales, 2001). Do not let the goal of brevity lead you to write a statement intelligible only to the specialist.

1.2.2 Metaphors of the Body in Tagalog

As metaphorical mappings are culturally grounded, this section briefly discusses body metaphors in Tagalog. An understanding of Tagalog-specific conceptualizations of the body is essential for interpreting the language portrait task, particularly for homeland speakers and first-generation migrants, for whom Tagalog remains the psycholinguistically dominant language and therefore an important frame of reference. Examining how Tagalog maps positive and negative emotions, values and cognitive processes onto different parts of the body offers valuable insights into the symbolic placement of languages in the portraits and the meanings participants attribute to them. The data come from an audio-recorded interview with Prof. Albert Alejo—a Filipino poet and anthropologist—conducted by Francesca Moro, in collaboration with Michelle Corotan, on October 30, 2024. During the interview, Prof. Alejo reflected on metaphors involving body-part lexemes, moving from the head to the feet and discussing their meanings.

Tagalog body metaphors reveal the mapping of cognitive, emotional, moral, and social meanings onto different parts of the body. Beginning with the head, cognitive processes are primarily associated with the mind and the brain. The term *isip* ‘mind’ represents thought, reasoning, and consciousness, as illustrated in the Philippine Pledge of Allegiance: *Sisikapin kong maging isang tunay na Pilipino sa isip, sa salita, at sa gawa* (‘I will strive to be a true Filipino in mind, in word, and in deed’). Relatedly, *utak* ‘brain’ refers to the physical organ and serves as the basis for metaphors describing intellectual abilities or thinking styles. For example, *kulot ang utak* (‘curly brain’) characterizes a person whose thinking is perceived as excessively complicated or convoluted.

Moving to the chest area, Tagalog conceptualizations of emotion and morality are associated with both the heart and the inner self. The term *puso* ‘heart’ is closely linked to emotional life and moral character. This association is reflected in the line *alab ng puso, sa dibdib mo’y buhay* (‘the fire of your heart within your chest is burning/alive’) from the Philippine national anthem, as well as in expressions such as *maitim ang puso* (‘black-hearted’), which describes

a person with malicious intentions. Alongside *puso*, the concept of *loob*, literally ‘inside’ or ‘interior’, occupies a particularly important place in Filipino thought. Rather than referring to a physical organ, *loob* denotes the inner self or the moral–emotional core of the person (Alejo & Riddle 2018). Expressions such as *utang na loob* (Note 1) (‘debt of the heart’, often translated as ‘debt of gratitude’) and *kagandahan ng loob* (‘beauty of the inner self’, referring to kindness and generosity) highlight its role as a locus of emotions, values, and interpersonal obligations.

Further down the body, the stomach and intestines are associated with endurance, tolerance, and moral depth. Metaphors involving *sikmura* ‘stomach’ conceptualize the gut as a site where difficult emotions and experiences are processed and contained. Thus, *hindi ko masisikmura* (‘I cannot stomach it’) expresses strong aversion, while *matibay ang sikmura* (‘having a strong stomach’) refers to emotional resilience and the capacity to endure hardship. Similarly, *bituka* ‘intestines’ can symbolize a person’s deepest moral nature, often in a negative sense. The expression *halang ang bituka* (‘the intestines are horizontal’) describes someone who is cruel or morally corrupt to the core.

The limbs are associated with strength and agency: the words *bisig* ‘arm’ and *kamay* ‘hand’ give rise to metaphors that highlight strength and trust. The expression *kapit bisig* ‘to hold arms’ evokes solidarity and collective effort. *Kamay*, on the other hand, is central to figurative expressions of trust and authority. The phrase *kanang kamay* ‘right hand’ refers to one’s most trusted person. The word *paa* ‘foot, feet’ appears in several common figurative expressions related to groundedness and stability, such as *tumayo saa sarili mong paa* ‘stand on your own feet, rely on yourself’.

Taken together, Tagalog body metaphors distribute different aspects of human experience across the body. These metaphorical associations provide an important cultural framework for interpreting the symbolic placement of languages in language portraits of homeland and first-generation speakers illustrated in Section 3.

2. Aims and Method

This study examines embodied multilingualism and dynamic repertoires among Filipino heritage speakers in Italy using language portraits and sociolinguistic interviews. Comparing heritage speakers to first-generation and homeland speakers, it explores how individuals perceive and represent the languages in their repertoires and how these representations may change across generation in the Italian diaspora context.

We focus on the language portraits and participants’ accompanying commentaries, supplemented by interview data on language attitudes and self-reported competence. We argue that language portraits are particularly effective for researching heritage speakers, as they elicit less self-conscious and morally constrained responses than direct questioning. By observing how participants include, omit, and position languages on the body, the task reveals attitudes and emotional attachments that may remain implicit and shed light on their perceived linguistic identities.

More specifically, this study addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do heritage speakers, first-generation migrants, and homeland speakers represent their linguistic repertoires in the language portrait task? Specifically, where do they place their languages within the body silhouette, what meanings do they attribute to these placements, and to what extent do these patterns differ across groups?

RQ2: To what extent is the placement of languages within the body silhouette associated with speakers' explicit language attitudes (e.g., perceived emotional importance), self-reported language competence, and expressions of linguistic identity?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to uncover how different groups of Filipino speakers experience and conceptualize their multilingual repertoires, as well as the relationship between embodied language representations, competence, attitudes, and identity.

2.1 Participant Characteristics

Language portraits and interviews were collected from a sample of 17 second generation heritage speakers of Filipino origin living in Naples and surrounding areas. They were either born in Italy or arrived in Italy before the age of 10 (four arrived between the ages of 3 and 4, five between the ages of 8 and 10). They are considered simultaneous or early sequential bilinguals, having acquired Italian during primary socialization. The first-generation (G1) group also comprised 17 participants living in the same areas. These speakers are classified as first-generation migrants because they all arrived in Italy in late adolescence or early adulthood and thus acquired Italian as a second language later in life. The homeland speaker group is smaller than the other two and consists of six participants residing in the Philippines, none of whom had any knowledge of Italian. We tried to match the geographical origin of homeland speakers to those of first generations speakers: three homeland participants come from Laguna province (Luzon island), two come from Mindanao province (Mindanao island) and one from Cebu province (Cebu island). Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics by generation.

Table 1. Participant demographics by generation

Characteristic	Homeland (G0)	First Generation (G1)	Heritage speakers (G2)
Total participants	6	17	17
Gender	3 female, 3 male	11 female, 6 male	10 female, 7 male
Mean age (years)	40.5	44.2	22.3
Age range (years)	25–60	16–70	12–38

2.2 Sampling Procedures

Participants in Italy were selected on the basis of their Filipino background. Participants were recruited in the same area, the city of Napoli and its surroundings through the “friend of a

friend” approach. The sampling strategy was designed to facilitate a cross-generational comparison. The sample includes several parent–child dyads involving first-generation migrants and heritage speakers, as well as other family relationships within the same generation. However, not all participants were related to one another, and the sample also includes individuals with no familial ties to other participants. The sample used for the present study is part of a larger data set collected in the two-year project HELLO Campania-Heritage Languages and Languages of the Others (see Moro & Di Salvo 2026).

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected in April–May 2024 in the Campania region by Gina Russo, Michelle Corotan, and Francesca Moro. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed by Luigi Sausa and Gina Russo using ELAN, and conducted with participants’ informed consent. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Naples Federico II (see Moro & Di Salvo, 2026 for details on data collection procedures). Each session followed a four-phase protocol: ice-breaking (5 min), language portrait task (10 min), oral explanation (10 min), and sociolinguistic interview (30 min).

For the language portrait task, participants received a blank body silhouette (see Figure 1) and were instructed as follows:

Imagine that this silhouette represents your own body. Think of all the languages and dialects that are part of your life, even those you know only a little, and place them on your body (inside or outside) using pens, pencils, and colors.

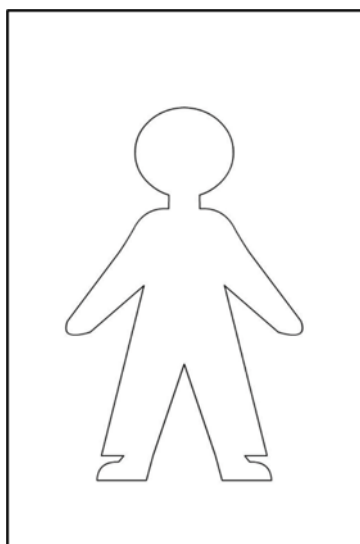


Figure 1. Blank body silhouette

No further guidance was provided regarding how to represent or place languages; these procedures follow the GULP project guidelines (Maffia & Noschese, 2024). Once the portrait was complete, participants were asked to explain their choices through open-ended prompts (e.g., “Why did you place it in that specific part of the body?”). This oral commentary is crucial to the method: as Busch (2018) argues, the portrait’s meaning emerges through participants’ narrative interpretation, not from the visual artifact alone. The sociolinguistic

interview used the HELLO Campania set of questions (see Moro & Di Salvo, 2026), covering socio-biographical information, migration experience, language repertoire, use patterns, and attitudes. Most interviews were conducted in Italian, though some G1 participants used English, Tagalog, or a mixture. Sessions typically lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. All recordings were anonymized and archived in FLAC format. The portraits and interview recordings are available in open access through the Eurac Research CLARIN Centre Repository: (<https://clarin.eurac.edu/repository/xmlui/handle/20.500.12124/89>).

2.4 Data Coding and Analysis

Language portraits were scanned after each session and renamed according to a standardized convention: FI (Filipino) + generation (0, 1 or 2) + gender (F/M) + progressive number (e.g. FI1F03 indicates a first-generation female participant, number 3).

For the quantitative analysis, language placement was coded across five body regions—head, chest/heart, belly/stomach, arms/hands, and legs/feet—following established coding schemes (Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020). We grouped anatomically related regions: arms with hands, and legs with feet because participants frequently colored continuous areas spanning these regions without marking clear boundaries. Attempting finer-grained distinctions (e.g., separating upper arm from forearm, or thigh from calf) would have been arbitrary and potentially distorted participants' intended representations.

Qualitative analysis focused on participants' post-task commentaries, examining the metaphors, the reasons given for specific placements (e.g. emotional attachment, functional use, cognitive dominance); the embodied meanings underlying language placement, as well as the ideological orientations revealed through spatial hierarchies on the body silhouette (see Section 3.1).

Sociolinguistic interview data were analyzed to triangulate and contextualize findings from the language portraits. We examined participants' explicit language attitudes (e.g. ratings of emotional importance), self-reported language competence (very well, well, not so well, definitely not well), and statements about linguistic identity to assess convergence or divergence with the implicit attitudes revealed through portrait placement (see Section 3.2).

3. Results

In the first part of this section (3.1) we focus on the placement of the languages in the silhouette and their interpretation. Previous studies have consistently shown that participants tend to locate languages in ways that reflect their perceived emotional or personal attachment to them (see Section 1.2). In this section, the analysis of the placement of Tagalog (Section 3.1.1), Italian (Section 3.1.2), and regional languages (Section 3.1.3) sheds light on the different attachments and attitudes that first- and second-generation participants have toward these languages. This analysis reveals a clear representation of dominant language shift.

The second part of this section (3.2) examine the factors shaping language placement on the body silhouette, focusing on Tagalog and Italian and assessing the role of self-perceived competence, language attitudes, and self-declared identity.

3.1 Patterns of Language Placement and Their Interpretations

3.1.1 Tagalog

In the portraits produced by homeland (G0, blue bars) and first-generation (G1, orange bars) speakers, Tagalog appears exclusively in the upper part of the body. The vast majority place it in the head or the heart. Fifteen out of seventeen participants follow this pattern; of the four who included the arm, two did so as part of a broader area that also encompassed the chest or head, while only two placed Tagalog exclusively in the arms or hands.

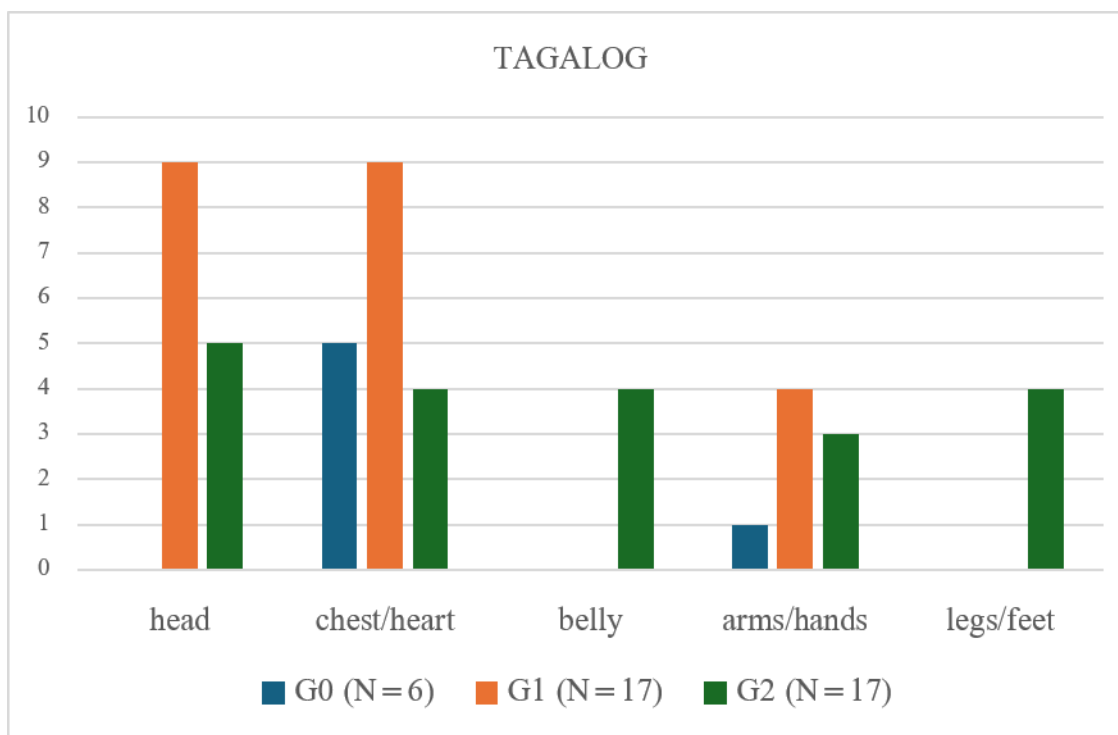


Figure 2. Placement of Tagalog on body parts in homeland (G0), first (G1)- and second (G2) generation heritage speakers

For the majority of G1 speakers, Tagalog is closely tied to intimacy, the inner self, and core identity. The following extract from a first-generation participant illustrates this clearly: he explains that he placed the Filipino flag—symbolizing the Tagalog language—on the heart because his heart, his personality, and his identity are fundamentally Filipino (see Figure 3). Italian, by contrast, is placed on the arms, as it is the language he learned through work and everyday social interactions. As discussed in Section 3.21, in Tagalog the arms and hands symbolically index both personal agency and social relationships. His placement of Italian in this area therefore resonates with culturally grounded metaphors that associate these body parts with action, interaction, and engagement with others. We observe a clear metaphorical representation whereby a language placed in the arms, in this case Italian, occupies a relatively marginal position, as the arms are peripheral parts of the body, in contrast to the heart, which is associated with the self and its essential core and is reserved for Tagalog. At the same time, however, the hands also carry a positive connotation: their association with action and interaction foregrounds the communicative value of Italian and its role in

establishing social and cultural connections. The seemingly contradictory meanings associated with the placement of languages in the arms and hands have also been noted by Peters and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2020: 596) for African languages, whereby languages represented in these body parts may be regarded as “marginal and influential at the same time.”

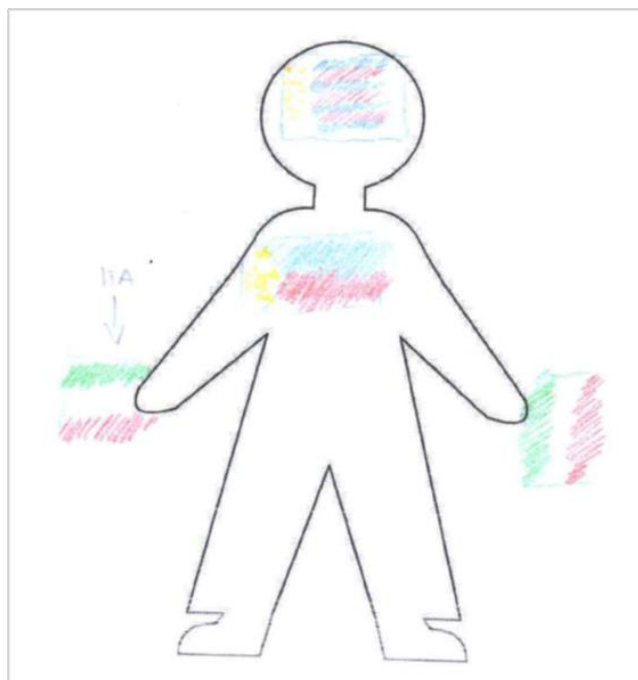


Figure 3. Language portrait of G1 speaker FI1M03

Interviewer: First of all, can you describe why you placed the flags in that way?

FI1M03: So, first of all...I placed the Filipino flag on my heart because I have a Filipino heart. Wherever I go, I carry my culture, my faith, and above all my personality—my upbringing, especially the positive aspects that I can share with others. I am Filipino; I have my culture, and I want to preserve it and also share it with others [...] Yes, the identity of being Filipino.

Interviewer: And the American flag?

FI1M03: All of us were educated with the language—the English language.

Interviewer: So that's why it's on the head?

FI1M03: Yes.

Interviewer: I see the Italian flag on your hands. Why?

FI1M03: Well...I arrived in Italy in [year] as a student in Rome. [...] I worked there [...] I belonged to the kitchen staff. So, to learn the language I would go out, talk to people. I didn't learn in the classroom how to conjugate verbs, but through practice with people.

Another first-generation participant, FI1F16, places the Filipino flag on her chest because she feels a strong attachment to Tagalog (Figure 4). In general, many first-generation speakers, as well as all six homeland speakers, locate Tagalog in the heart or chest region. This suggests that Tagalog is experienced not merely as a cognitive resource but also as a language deeply rooted in the emotional and affective spheres. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that languages positioned in the heart region of the human silhouette are often associated with participants' emotions and cultural identity (Coffey, 2015; Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020). Yet, despite this affective positioning of Tagalog, FI1F16 reports using Italian with her daughters, illustrating the gap between emotional attachment to the heritage language and actual intergenerational transmission practices. She explains that she placed Italian on her hands because speaking Italian has helped her improve her living conditions. Her representation thus evokes the metaphorical conceptualization **LANGUAGES ARE HELPING HANDS**, also identified by Peters and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2020: 596), whereby languages are associated with the instrumental support they provide in navigating everyday life and improving one's opportunities.

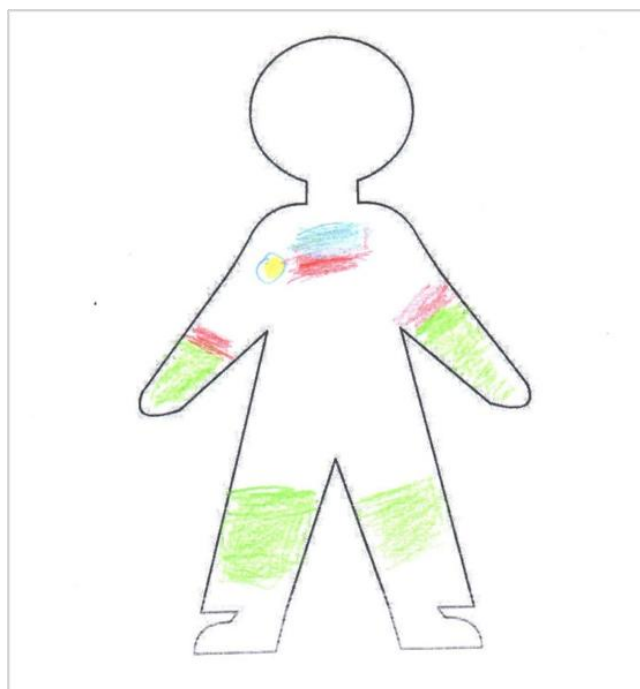


Figure 4. Language portrait of G1 speaker FI1F16

Interviewer: I see that you've placed three different flags [...] The one on the chest is the Philippine flag, right?

FI1F16: Yes, because I was born there and, naturally, I care about it very much, even though I am here. Instead, this Italian one that I put on the hands [...] Because it really gave me not just one hand, but two hands [...] because I lifted myself up a bit, from every point of view.

Interviewer: It helped you change?

FI1F16: Yes, to change a lot. Very much.

Interviewer: And then on the legs I see all the...

FI1F16: The legs—those are Arabic, because I am... I worked in Doha, Qatar.

Another, first generation speaker placed Filipino in the arm (see Figure 5). He explains that he placed Filipino on his right arm because it is the part of his body he relies on for most daily activities. This choice creates a clear metaphor: Filipino is his “strong” language, just as his right arm is physically strong and central to what he does. For this speaker, therefore, placement in the arm does not symbolize a peripheral role in his life or lower proficiency in the language (cf. Dressler, 2014). Rather, the arm symbolizes action and everyday use: just as he relies on his right arm in virtually everything he does, he relies on Filipino as his primary language in his daily life. Interestingly, he places Neapolitan in the head, using it as a metaphor for a way of thinking, in a manner consistent with Tagalog (see Section 1.2.2).

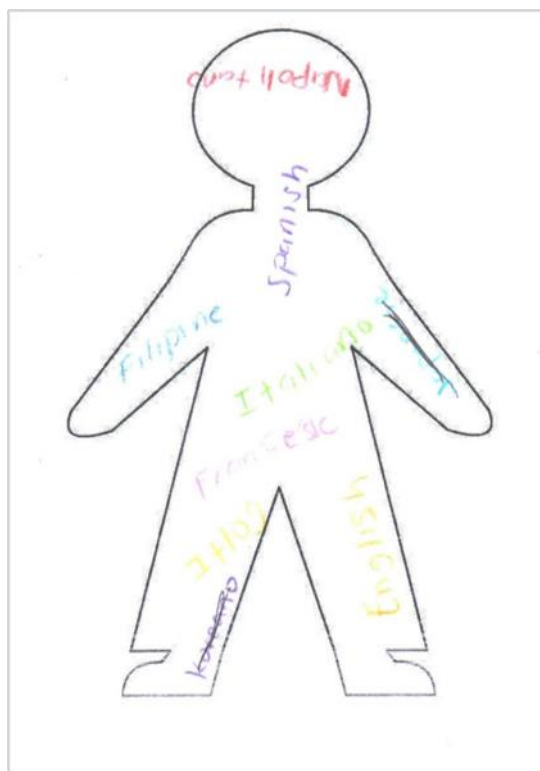


Figure 5. Language portrait of G1 speaker FI1M34

Interviewer: Why [Filipino] in the arm?

FI1M34: But Filipino because...obviously, I am stronger in Filipino. [...] And I always use my right arm for everything.

FI1M34: Then French, Italian... stomach. [...] I like... uhm... food. Neapolitan because...Because it's the head, the brain. And because I like how it works...what's it called... rea- rea... [...] the reasoning of Neapolitans. [...] Okay. English, because

English is obviously a second language in the Philippines, so you can... yes, you speak English, you can sort of... move around the whole world, you understand?

Heritage speakers (G2) display a more varied pattern. While nine participants placed Tagalog in the upper part of the body, a notable number located it on the legs or feet (four participants) and/or on the belly (four participants)—a pattern not found among homeland or first-generation participants. An illustrative case is the portrait of the heritage speaker FI2F12 (see Figure 6), who explained that she placed Tagalog on the legs because it is the language she knows the least. The lower position of Tagalog symbolically indexes its limited role in the speaker's daily life and her reduced sense of competence in it. The bodily hierarchy—from head and chest to legs and feet—thus becomes a metaphorical resource through which participants map degrees of proficiency and emotional proximity. Similar interpretations have been reported in previous language portrait studies: Dressler (2014) and Peters and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2020: 598) likewise associate the placement of languages in the legs and feet with lower levels of proficiency and/or reduced importance of the language in the participant's life.

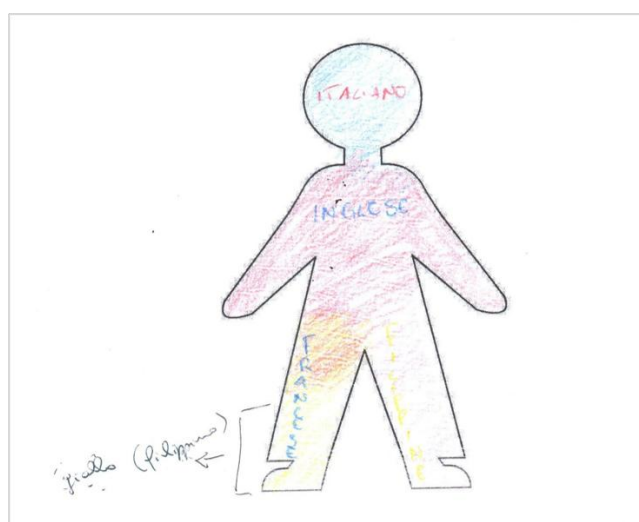


Figure 6. Language portrait of G2 speaker FI2F12

Interviewer: Why did you decide to represent the languages in this way? On yourself?

FI2F12: So...on myself...mainly Italian...uhm... then we have English, French, and Filipino. I colored the upper part in blue, which corresponds to English and, let's say, French, so the languages that I also study at school. Then from the lower part downwards we have... I mean, I colored it in red, which corresponds to Italian, and then there is a small percentage that I colored... let's say in yellow, which corresponds to Filipino, because it's the language I know the least.

Another heritage speaker, FI2F05, explains that she positioned Tagalog on the belly, because it forms part of her life and is closely connected to her upbringing (see Figure 7). As discussed in Section 1.2.2, in Tagalog cultural metaphors the abdomen is conceptualized as the locus of a person's deepest nature, core, and instincts. The placement of Tagalog in this

region can therefore be interpreted in relation to the speaker's early acquisition of the language: Tagalog was acquired in childhood in a natural and largely instinctive way, through everyday interaction rather than formal schooling. However, Tagalog is placed beneath Italian and English because she has less knowledge and familiarity with it. In her account, reduced proficiency in Tagalog is translated into a spatial and metaphorical distancing on the body silhouette, reinforcing the connection between embodied representation and perceived linguistic hierarchy. Here again, we observe a principle of verticality, whereby the relative positioning of languages along the body reflects a perceived hierarchy of proficiency: languages in which the speaker feels more competent occupy higher positions, while those associated with lower levels of competence are placed further down the body.

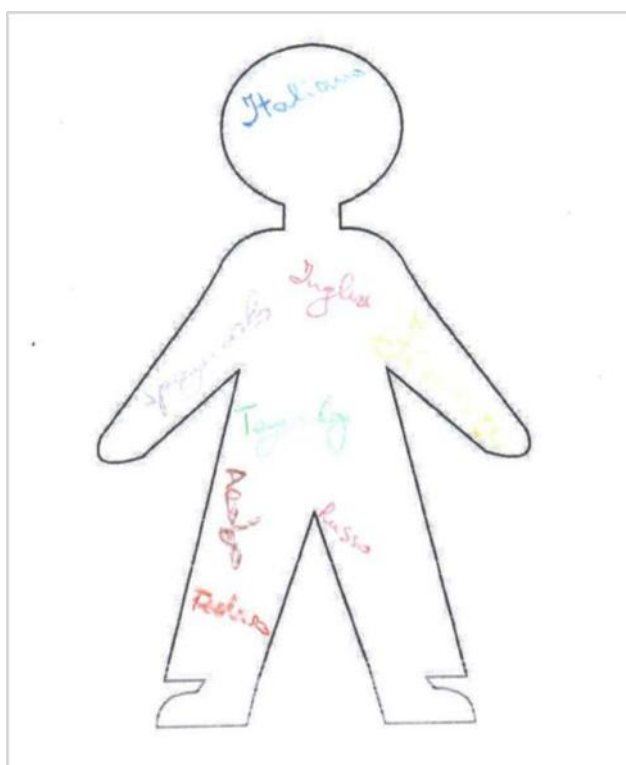


Figure 7. Language portrait of G2 speaker FI2F05

Interviewer: So, I see many language names, right? Could you explain to me why you placed them in that way?

FI2F05: But Italian is on top because it's the main language I speak, basically [...] The second language that came to mind was English. The other two languages I put between the two arms because they are...[...] Spanish and French. These came to mind first because, well, I studied them at school [...] Further down I put Tagalog because, well, I heard it during my childhood. My parents spoke it constantly. So, I can recognize certain words. If I recognize the part of the sentence [topic], I can understand what they are talking about. So, that's why I placed it there.

Interviewer: Ok. So Tagalog is, let's say, below the abdomen, and Russian is on the legs. We're also moving downward in terms of level of familiarity.

FI2F05: Yes, in terms of knowledge, exactly.

Taken together, the portraits reveal a clear generational shift in the embodied meanings attributed to Tagalog. For homeland and first-generation speakers, Tagalog is consistently represented in the upper body invoking metaphors of intimacy, identity, and cognition. These placements align with Tagalog culturally embedded understandings that link the upper body to the inner-self as the seat of feelings, and relational orientation.

However, as the case of one first-generation speaker illustrates, such positive feelings do not necessarily translate into the active use or intergenerational transmission of the language.

In contrast, second-generation heritage speakers mobilize a broader and more heterogeneous set of bodily metaphors. While some reproduce the symbolism of centrality and emotional closeness, others position Tagalog on the belly, legs, or feet, using downward movement on the body to index diminished proficiency, limited use, or weaker affective ties. The placement patterns of Tagalog among heritage speakers is an embodied manifestation of the language shift they experience in life.

3.1.2 Italian

The majority of first-generation speakers (orange bars) place Italian on the arms or hands (8 participants) and on the legs (5 participants), whereas the majority of second-generation speakers (green bars) locate it in the head or chest, as shown in Figure 8.

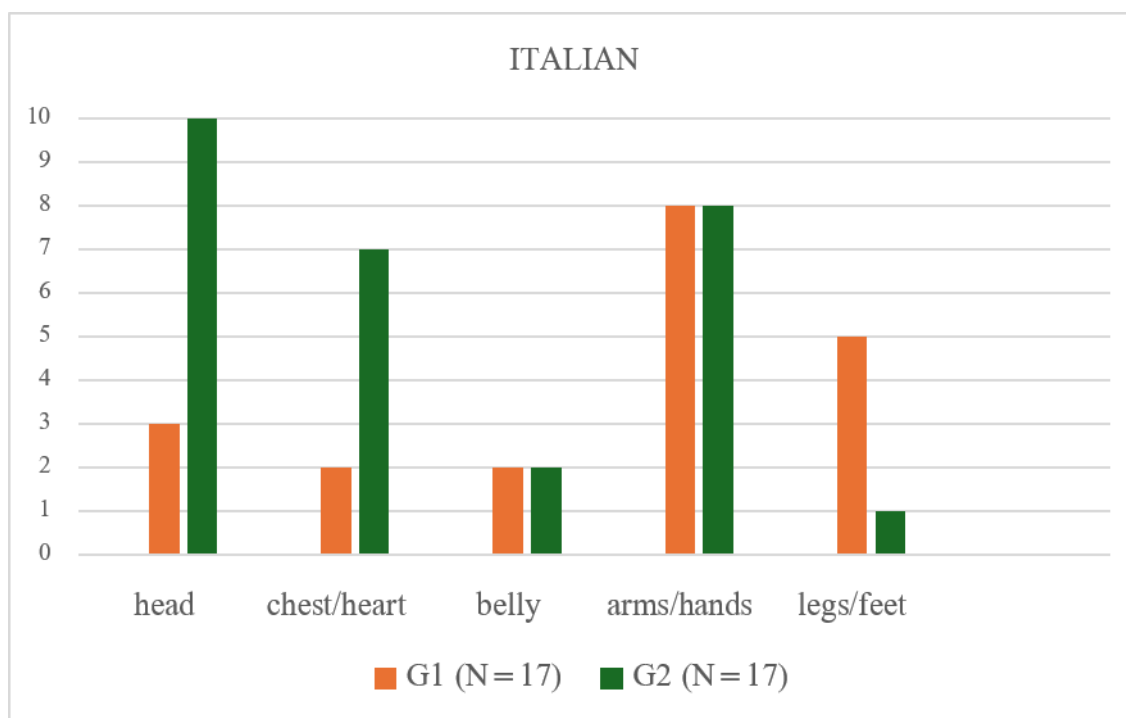


Figure 8. Placement of Italian on body parts in homeland first (G1)- and second (G2) generation heritage speakers

For first-generation speakers, Italian tended to be positioned on the body silhouette in ways

that reflected the symbolic meanings of specific body parts. More generally, these representations evoke the metaphor ITALIAN IS AN INFLUENTIAL LANGUAGE, as Italian is conceptualized in terms of its functional and instrumental value in participants' lives (cf. Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020: 596). Several participants placed Italian on the hands or arms, associating it with work, practice, and the active construction of a new life in Italy. In the previous section, we have seen that FI1M03 explained that he had acquired Italian "through practice" (Fig. 3). Another first-generation, FI1F16, placed Italian flags on her hands, explaining that living in Italy had "given her two hands"—a metaphor expressing the help, support, and opportunities she received (Fig. 4). This choice draws on the metaphor of LANGUAGES ARE HELPING HANDS (Peters and Coetzee-Van Rooy 2020: 596), in which hands and arms index agency, assistance, and the capacity to act.

By contrast, heritage speakers (G2) show a stronger attachment to Italian as a marker of linguistic identity, with fourteen out of seventeen placing it in the head or chest. For example, FI2M29 positioned Italian across the entire upper body, describing it as his most meaningful language because he was born in Italy (Figure 9). His portrait reflects a plurilingual identity in which Italian occupies a dominant position, followed by Filipino and English, which are placed progressively lower on the body to indicate their decreasing relevance and use. The representation in Figure 9 draws on the conceptualization of the head and chest as the bodily locus of cognition, identity, and personal development. In this sense, the prominent placement of Italian in the upper body evokes the metaphor LANGUAGES ARE HOME, FOUNDATION, GROWTH, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY identified by Peters and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2020: 601), highlighting Italian as a central component of the speaker's identity and life experience.

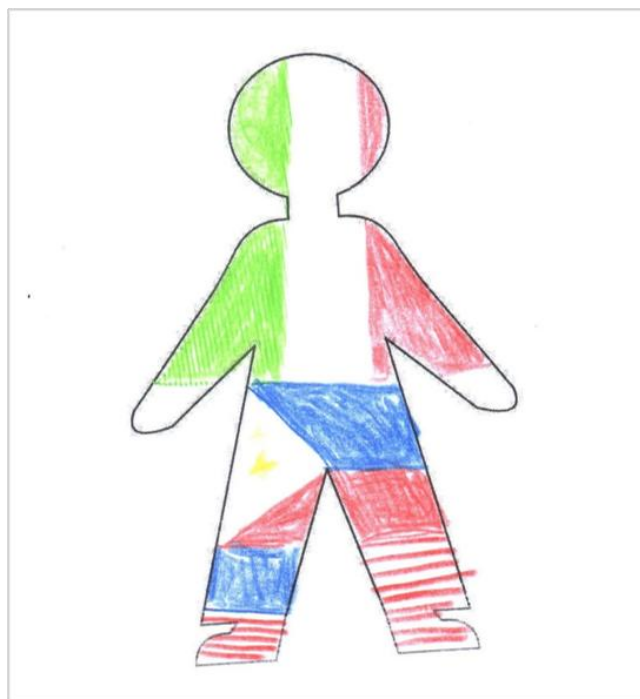


Figure 9. Language portrait of G2 FI2M29

Interviewer: Why did you use these flags, and what meaning do they have?

FI2M29: So, since I was born here in Italy...Obviously, I put Italian as the most meaningful flag for me, because of course it is my mother tongue. Filipino...I didn't use it all because, well, I am Filipino, yes, but I speak it little. I speak it mostly with my parents or with relatives...Whereas English— since my aunt has a shop...uhm... with the tourists I speak English. So yes, I learned English through the English(-speaking tourists).

In another portrait (Figure 10), heritage speaker FI2F32 placed Italian on the head, explaining that she “thinks in Italian” and uses it daily, thus framing it as her primary language of cognition. In embodied-metaphorical terms, the head indexes cognition, habitual thought, and linguistic dominance. Filipino and English are positioned on the arms as functionally supportive but non-identity-defining languages, while Spanish and Neapolitan appear on the lower limbs, indicating weaker competence or relevance.



Figure 10. Language portrait of G2 speaker FI2F32

Interviewer: You have five flags. Can you explain which languages they correspond to and why you placed them in this way?

FI2F32: So. On the head I have Italian, the Italian flag, because I think in Italian, I speak Italian every single day. Filipino on one hand, and on the other hand the British flag, how should I say, because...I mean... because I feel that I speak these two languages differently [...] They are not at the same level, English and Filipino. But ... I only use them. That's why they are between my hands. And at my feet I have Spanish because I neglect it a bit, and Neapolitan a bit on the knee because I use it every now and then.

For first-generation speakers, Italian serves primarily functional purposes, supporting everyday interaction rather than defining identity, and is often placed on the hands as a

metaphor for practical action. By contrast, heritage speakers position Italian in the head or in the chest, marking it as the cognitive and emotional core of their multilingual identity.

3.1.3 Local Languages: Philippine Languages and Neapolitan

This section presents the findings regarding the additional languages that some participants occasionally incorporated into their portraits. We focus our discussion on local Philippine languages such as Ilocano, and on Neapolitan, the local language of Naples which is often labelled a ‘dialect’ and is partially mutually intelligible with Standard Italian. Philippine languages are regional languages of the Philippines and are typically the mother tongues of first-generation speakers, forming their linguistic repertoire prior to migration. In this sense, they may also be considered heritage languages, although their degree of intergenerational transmission tends to be relatively limited in the Italian diaspora (see Section 1.1). Due to the scarcity of token, we do not present a graph here but only a qualitative discussion.

As for Philippine languages, only two first-generation speakers included them in their portraits, despite 22 of the 32 participants reporting competence in a regional Philippine language in addition to Tagalog. A prototypical example of this absence is provided by FI1M03 (Figure 3, Section 3.1.1). Although this participant reported maximum competence in Bisaya (10/10) and a very strong emotional attachment to the language (10/10), Bisaya is not represented anywhere in the silhouette. This discrepancy suggests that the omission of regional languages from the portraits cannot be explained solely by lack of proficiency or affective investment, and may instead reflect broader issues related to the symbolic resources available for representing languages visually.

Notably, the two cases where the regional language is represented involve Ilocano, the most frequently reported regional language among G1 speakers (Moro & Russo, 2025). FI1F02 placed Ilocano near her feet (Figure 11), explaining that she organized languages according to self-perceived competence: Tagalog and English appear near the head, while Italian and Ilocano are positioned lower because she understands but speaks them less fluently. Although exposed to Ilocano through family and friends, she reports limited use and rates her emotional attachment to it as moderate (7/10). Her portrait thus reflects a hierarchy based on proficiency rather than identity, reinforcing the marginal status of regional Philippine languages in the diaspora context. Interestingly, she included the English words *Jesus* in her heart, and *giving* in her hands because, as she explains, “hands are for serving, for giving a hand to someone who needs it,” and *wisdom* is placed in the head because “I believe that we need wisdom to understand what is happening in this world.”

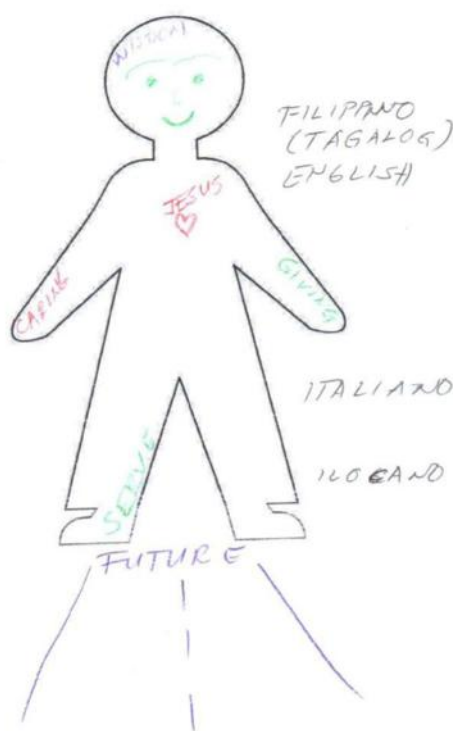


Figure 11. Language portrait of G1 speaker FI1F02

G1 speaker FI1M07 placed Ilocano in his chest/heart area (Figure 12), drawing on a typical Tagalog metaphor that locates the emotional and moral core of a person in the heart or chest. In his words, Ilocano is “the deepest” language he has: it is the one he learned as a child and the one he feels is anchored in his heart. This contrasts with English, Italian and Tagalog languages he learned later and therefore associated with the head, the domain of thinking and rational activity. This is an extract of his interview:

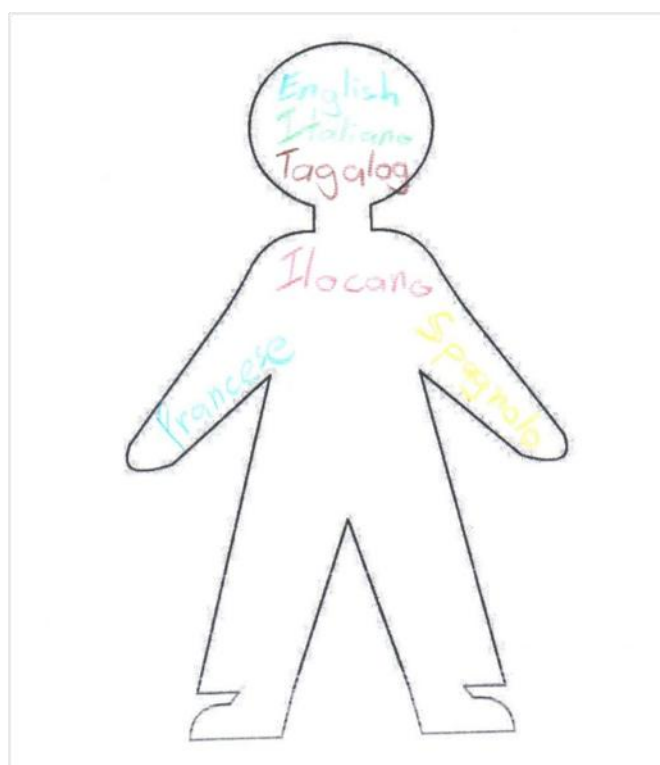


Figure 12. Language portrait of G1 speaker FI1M07

Interviewer: I see that in the head of the little figure you placed English, Italian, and Tagalog. Why are they in the head?

FI1M07: Yes. Because these three are the ones I learned in my country [...]

Interviewer: Okay. Then I see Ilocano in the chest. Why in the chest?

FI1M07: Because this, let's say...This is the language I learned when I was a child [...] this one is the deepest.

No heritage speaker included a Philippines regional language in their portrait, even though some of them reported in the sociolinguistic interview that they knew one in addition to Tagalog. Quite surprisingly, none of the homeland speakers represented a regional language either. This is likely a task effect: the activity was administered by a research assistant who had not been fully trained, so the instructions may not have been entirely clear to the six homeland participants.

As for Neapolitan, only three speakers included it in their portraits: one first-generation participant and two heritage speakers. As discussed in Section 5.1.1, the first-generation participant FI1M34 explained that he included Neapolitan in his portrait (Figure 5) because he likes the Neapolitan way of thinking.

In Section 3.1.2, we saw that one heritage speaker, FI2F32, placed Neapolitan on her leg because she uses it only “every now and then” (see Figure 10). In her portrait the legs or knees are used to represent languages she uses only occasionally or considers least relevant.

Another heritage speaker who included Neapolitan in his silhouette is FI2M28 (see Figure 13). He placed the Neapolitan flag in his heart, next to the Philippines flag.

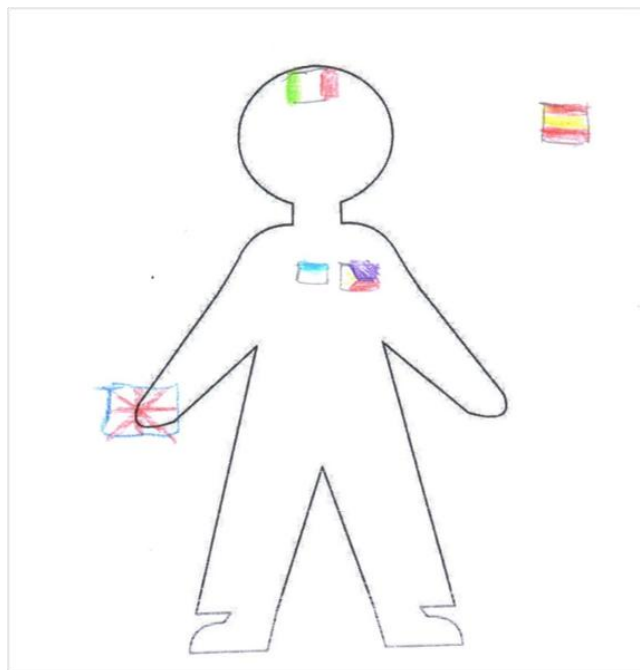


Figure 13. Language portrait of G2 speaker FI2M28

Interviewer: Can you explain which flags they are and why you decided to place them in those specific spots?

FI2M28: Well... uhm... the Italian flag on the head because I think in Italian, basically. The Philippine flag and, let's say, the Neapolitan one in the heart because...they belong to me, to who I am. The English one on the palm of the hand because it's useful for work. And the Spanish one...It's farther away because it's a language that I more or less manage, but...it's distant from me.

For FI2M28, Neapolitan is placed in the chest/heart, reflecting the metaphor of the heart as the inner self and core of identity; thus, he perceives himself as fundamentally Neapolitan.

3.2 Language Placement, Attitudes, Competence, and Identity

In this section, we analyze the factors that influence the positioning of languages on the body silhouette. Specifically, focusing on Tagalog and Italian, we examine whether the placement of a language is driven primarily by speakers' self-perceived competence, by their attitude toward the language, or by their self-declared identity.

To investigate these relationships, we combined the data derived from the visual coding of the language portraits (Language Position) with the data collected through the sociolinguistic interviews (Self-reported Competence, Attitude, and Identity). Associations were explored using cross-tabulations and Pearson's chi-square tests, complemented by Cramer's V as a measure of effect size. Scatterplots are used to visually inspect distributional trends. A

methodological note is warranted here: given the relatively small sample size and the presence of low expected frequencies in some cells of the contingency table, chi-square results should be interpreted with caution. For this reason, we report Cramer's V to assess effect size and rely on converging evidence from visual inspection and qualitative cases..

3.2.1 The Role of Competence

The analysis shows that self-perceived competence is the strongest factor associated with language placement. This relationship is clearly visible in the scatterplot below (see Fig. 14), which illustrates the distribution of Tagalog placement across four levels of self-reported competence (very well, well, not very well, not at all well), where higher levels of self-reported competence correspond systematically to placement in the upper parts of the body (head and/or chest).



Figure 14. Simple Scatter of Tagalog Position by Tagalog Self Competence

This visual trend is confirmed by the cross-tabulation of Tagalog position by Tagalog self-reported competence. The chi-square test indicates a statistically significant association between competence and bodily location (Pearson's $\chi^2 = 38.299$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$, $N = 34$). The strength of this association is further supported by a high Cramer's V value ($V = .613$), indicating a robust relationship between perceived competence and language placement.

Participants who reported speaking Tagalog “well” or “very well” almost exclusively placed the language in the head and/or chest area (22 out of 27 cases). By contrast, participants who reported lower levels of competence (“not very well” or “not at all”) tended to locate Tagalog

in lower or more peripheral body regions, such as the belly, legs, or feet. A prototypical illustration of this pattern is provided by FI1F18, a first-generation speaker who reports knowing Tagalog “very well” and places it in her head. By contrast, a second generation heritage speakers, FI2F24, reports speaking Tagalog not very well and places it in the legs.

A parallel analysis was conducted for Italian to assess whether self-perceived competence similarly predicts bodily placement. The results reveal a statistically significant association between Italian placement and self-reported competence (Pearson’s $\chi^2 = 23.120$, $df = 9$, $p = .006$, $N = 32$). The effect size, measured by Cramer’s V ($V = .491$), indicates a moderate-to-strong relationship, although weaker than the one observed for Tagalog. The scatterplot confirms this pattern (see Figure 15): higher levels of perceived competence in Italian are systematically associated with placement in the upper body (head and/or chest), whereas lower competence corresponds more frequently to lower or peripheral locations.

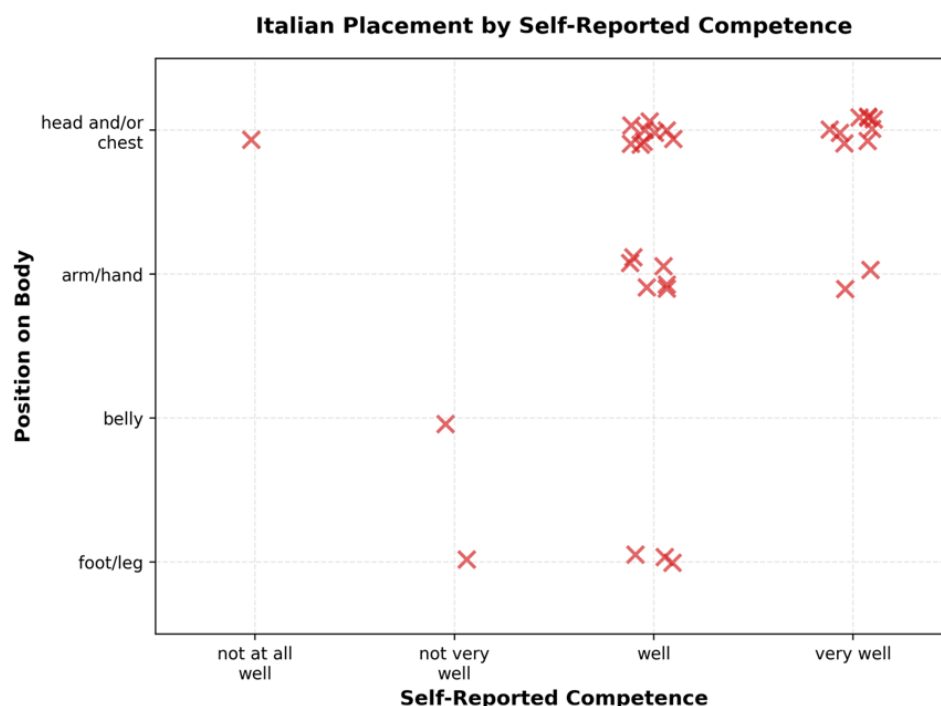


Figure 15. Simple Scatter of Italian Position by Italian Self-Reported Competence

Taken together, these findings indicate that, for both Tagalog and Italian, perceived mastery is a key factor shaping embodied language representation, with upper-body placement indexing languages speakers feel they command more fluently.

A prototypical illustration of this pattern for Italian is provided by FI2F24, a second-generation heritage speaker who reports knowing Italian “very well” with a very positive attitude and places it in the head and/or chest. By contrast, she reports knowing Tagalog only “not very well”, also with a very positive attitude, but places it on the foot/leg. This case clearly demonstrates that competence rather than attitude alone determines placement: both languages receive the same positive emotional evaluation, yet their positions on the body differ markedly according to perceived competence. Italian, as the language of

high competence, occupies the cognitive center, while Tagalog, despite positive affect, is positioned peripherally.

However, not all cases conform perfectly to the competence-placement pattern. FI2M04, a second-generation heritage speaker, reports knowing both Tagalog and Italian “well” and holds very positive attitudes toward both languages. Despite this equivalence in reported competence and attitude, FI2M04 places Italian in the head and/or chest while positioning Tagalog in the belly. This differential placement suggests that, when competence levels are comparable, Italian’s role as the dominant language of daily use, rather than emotional attachment alone, determines its upper-body positioning for heritage speakers. The functional asymmetry between a heritage language and a majority language thus becomes visible even when proficiency is reported as equivalent.

3.2.2 The Role of Attitude and Identity

We also examined the relationship between language placement and language attitudes, measured on a 10-point scale based on responses to the question: “On a scale from 1 to 10, how emotionally important is language X for you?”. As shown in the scatterplot below (see Figure 16), more positively evaluated languages tend to be located in the upper body; however, this pattern is noticeably less regular than the one observed for competence.

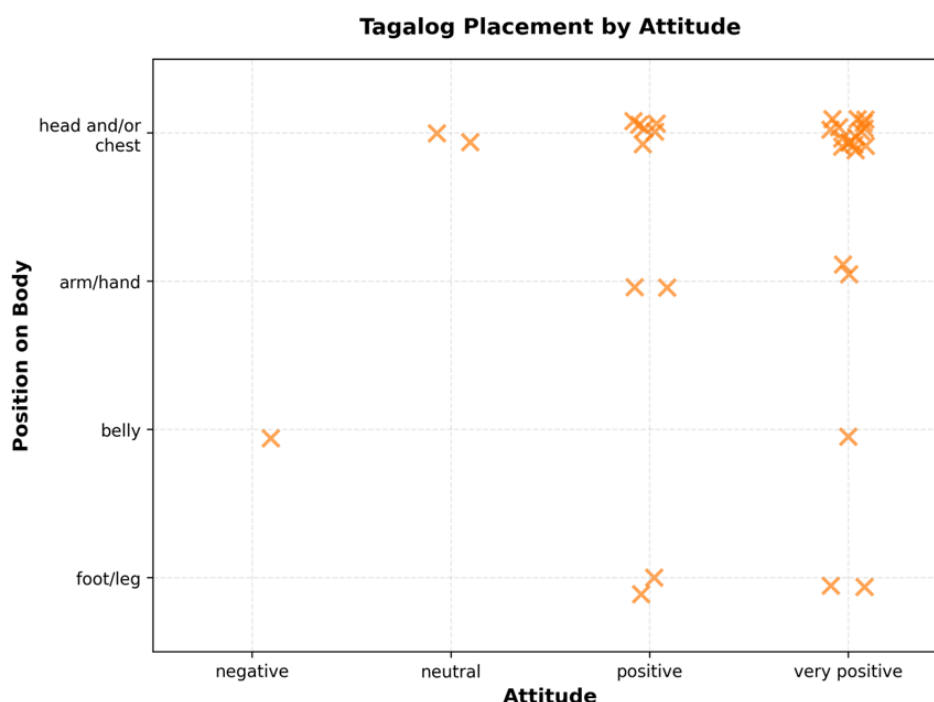


Figure 16. Simple Scatter of Tagalog Position by Tagalog Attitude

The chi-square test indicates a statistically significant (but weaker) association between Tagalog attitude and placement (Pearson’s $\chi^2 = 19.051$, $df = 9$, $p = .025$, $N = 34$), with a moderate effect size (Cramer’s $V = .432$). Attitude thus patterns with placement less regularly than competence. This is illustrated by the case of FI1F20, a first-generation speaker who

reports a positive attitude toward Italian (8/10) and a neutral attitude toward Tagalog (5/10). Despite this difference in emotional evaluation, she places Tagalog in her head and Italian on her arm/hand.

In contrast to Tagalog, no statistically significant association emerges between Italian placement and language attitude (Pearson's $\chi^2 = 5.128$, $df = 6$, $p = .528$, $N = 34$). The effect size is small (Cramer's $V = .275$), suggesting that affective evaluation does not play a substantial role in shaping the embodied positioning of Italian. Although most participants report very positive attitudes toward Italian, the scatterplot below shows considerable dispersion across body positions, indicating the absence of a systematic relationship (see Figure 17).

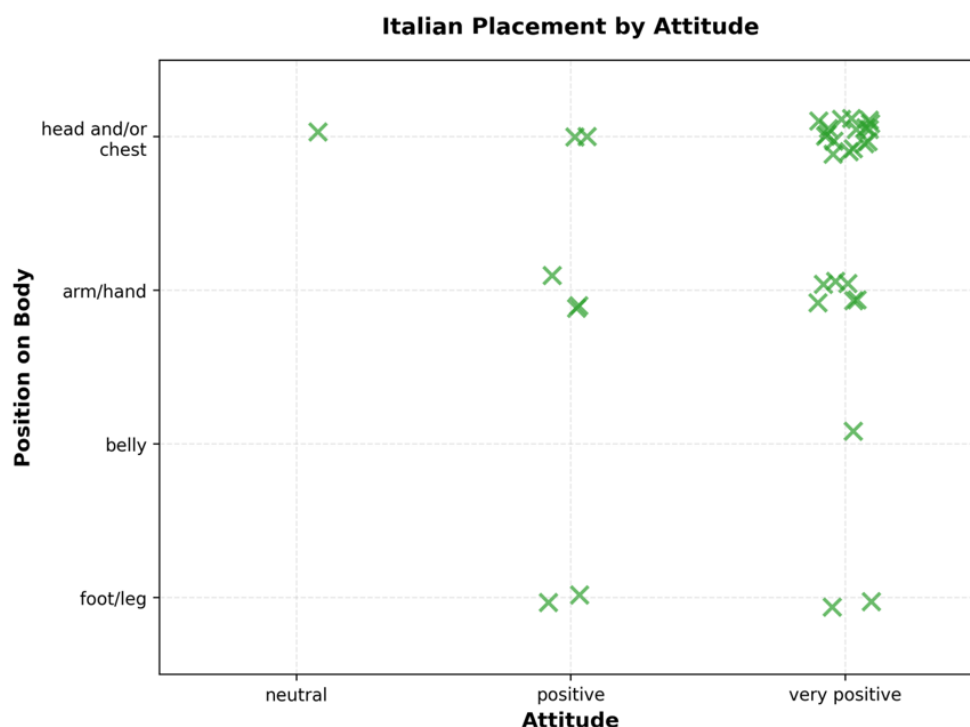


Figure 17. Simple Scatter of Italian Position by Italian Attitude

This result suggests that, unlike Tagalog, Italian placement is less sensitive to affective evaluation and is more consistently driven by competence and everyday functional use. FI2M27 further illustrates this pattern: despite his very positive attitude toward Italian and limited competence in Tagalog, both languages occupy the upper body. This suggests that attitude alone does not determine placement; rather, the complementary roles of the two languages, Italian anchored by high competence and daily use, Tagalog by heritage significance, shape their embodied representation.

Finally, we tested for an association between self-reported linguistic identity (Filipino, Italian, or both) and language placement. The analysis revealed no systematic association between identity categories and placement. Participants' declared identity does not predict where they position Tagalog or Italian on the body. This null result is theoretically meaningful: it suggests that, while identity labels operate as abstract categories, the language portrait task

captures a more embodied and experiential dimension of multilingualism. Rather than placing languages to symbolically match an identity label, participants appear to map their embodied linguistic experience especially agreeing with perceived competence and everyday use.

4. Discussion

The aim of this paper is to investigate the embodied multilingualism of Filipino speakers living in Italy and their personal relationships with the languages in their repertoires. Specifically, we examine how first- and second-generation heritage speakers represent their linguistic repertoires through the language portrait task, and what these representations reveal about their multilingual experiences, language preferences and language dominance.

In terms of both language presence and placement, the results show that most portraits contain at least three languages—Tagalog/Filipino, Italian, and English. This configuration is consistent with the typical linguistic constellation found in the Filipino diaspora in Italy. (Moro & Russo 2025). As discussed in Section 1.1, Italian functions as the majority language, Tagalog as the language of origin or heritage language, and English occupies an intermediate position, being both a heritage language and a socially dominant language with high prestige. In some cases, additional languages, such as French, Spanish, or Arabic, are also included, as are regional languages such as Ilocano and Neapolitan. These configurations reflect the diverse linguistic trajectories and experiences of the participants.

In terms of placement, we find that the expected metaphors associating the upper body with positive values and the lower body with less positive ones (Lakoff and Johnson (1999). A frequent pattern found is that of placing the languages on silhouettes in accordance to the participants' perceived attachment to the language. Namely, participants placed the languages they felt closer to on the upper parts of the body (head and/or chest), evoking the metaphor **LANGUAGES ARE HOME, FOUNDATION, GROWTH, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY** identified by Peters and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2020: 601) and they placed the languages they felt not so close to on the lower or peripheral parts (arms or legs). These conceptualizations in our data are consistent with patterns identified in previous language portrait research. Participants often draw on the distinction between center and periphery, placing languages in more central or peripheral parts of the body to reflect the perceived centrality or marginality of the language(s) in their life (Coffey, 2015: 505–506; Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020: 604).

An interesting difference emerges when heritage speakers are compared to first-generation speakers. First-generation speakers tend to place Tagalog in the upper part of the body. The vast majority place it in the head or heart because Tagalog is closely tied to intimacy, the *loob* (inner self), and core identity. This placement is in line with universal orientational metaphors typical of Tagalog. Thus, the bodily hierarchy—from the head and chest to the legs and feet—becomes a metaphorical resource through which participants express degrees of emotional proximity. However, this emotional proximity does not always result in active language transmission and use with children. By contrast, the pattern is partially reversed among heritage speakers. While many still place Tagalog in central positions, most locate Italian in the head or chest, identifying it as the most meaningful language in their repertoire.

Another noteworthy result concerns the operationalization of the feeling of proximity or closeness. Participants frequently draw on the distinction between center and periphery, placing languages in more central or peripheral parts of the body to represent their perceived closeness to those languages. Our findings suggest that closeness is strongly associated with self-perceived linguistic competence. Languages positioned higher on the body are typically those that speakers identify as their primary languages or speak with greater fluency, whereas lower or more peripheral placements symbolically index reduced proficiency and less frequent use. For both Tagalog and Italian, higher self-reported competence is systematically linked to placement in the head or chest, a pattern confirmed by statistical analyses showing a robust association for Tagalog and a moderate-to-strong one for Italian. By contrast, language attitude displays a weaker and less consistent relationship with placement, and self-declared linguistic identity does not predict positioning.

Another recurrent pattern concerns the association of the arms and feet with the functional and instrumental value of languages. In Tagalog, hands are closely linked to action, agency, and work, making them a powerful embodied metaphor for practical language use. For first-generation speakers, Italian typically plays a primarily functional rather than identity-defining role: it enables everyday communication and social interaction but does not occupy the cognitive or emotional core of the self. Its placement on the hands thus reflects the metaphor of language as a tool. This metaphorical conceptualization of “languages as helping hands” is reported also for African languages by Peters & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2020: 596). For some second-generation participants, Filipino/Tagalog and English assume a comparable instrumental role. These languages are described as being “used” rather than as central components of identity. In one case, this instrumental meaning is extended to the feet, with a participant explaining that English was placed there because it allows one to move—literally to walk—anywhere in the world.

As for local Philippine languages, they appear to be rarely included in the portraits. This may partly be due to speakers’ uncertainty about how to represent them, but it may also point to an ongoing shift. As already reported by Moro and Russo (2025), regional Philippine languages tend to diminish in use within the Italian diaspora context. With regard to Neapolitan, it likewise remains relatively underrepresented in the portraits. Notably, when it is included, it is attributed not only an instrumental function but also an identitarian and cognitive role. By contrast, in the data collected by Lamberti and Maffia (2025) from 257 first-generation immigrants in Naples, Neapolitan appears in just under half of the portraits (108). This discrepancy may be explained by differences in the sociolinguistic profiles of the participants. In Lamberti and Maffia’s study, the most represented nationalities were Ukrainian, Sri Lankan, Nigerian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani, and many participants were employed in work sectors—such as construction, agriculture, and other manual or informal occupations—where dialect use is widespread. By comparison, Filipino speakers, who are predominantly employed in the care sector and retail, may have more limited exposure to Neapolitan, which could account for its lower representation in their portraits.

Overall, embodied language representations primarily reflect perceived mastery and everyday language use rather than explicit attitudes or identity labels as stated in the sociolinguistic

interviews. This finding highlights the importance of this methodology for investigating the multilingual identities of heritage speakers and their personal relationships with the languages in their repertoires.

There are some limitations to this study and issues that warrant further investigation. First, the sample of homeland speakers is very small, limiting the generalizability of the comparisons across groups. Collecting additional data in the Philippines would provide a more robust baseline and contribute to a better understanding of how homeland speakers represent, perceive, and relate to their linguistic repertoires. Second, the portraits of all groups exhibit considerable heterogeneity, both in terms of the number of languages represented and in the ways these languages are depicted. Some participants chose to represent languages through national flags (Figs. 3, 4, 9, 10, and 13), while others used language labels (Figs. 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12). As Billig (1995) argues, flags contribute to the naturalization of the equation nation = language = flag, providing readily available symbolic resources for representing national languages, but not necessarily regional or minority languages. The absence of Philippine regional languages in the portraits may be partly due to uncertainty about how to represent them in the absence of a corresponding flag. A direction for future research would be a semiotic analysis of the representational resources employed in the portraits, examining not only the placement of languages within the body silhouette but also the colors, symbols, and other visual signs used to represent them. The third issue concerns the implications of the language chosen for the oral autobiographies (Pavlenko, 2007). Using Italian for these tasks may have affected the outcome, especially that of first-generation migrants for whom Italian is a second language. This could have impacted the quality and richness of the information communicated and the emotional intensity of the narratives.

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Note

Note 1. *Utang na loob* is a core element of Filipino culture, referring to a form of reciprocity that arises when one receives significant help, often in times of need, and incurs a lasting

moral obligation to reciprocate. This debt can never be fully repaid, and ignoring it is morally unacceptable, though its fulfillment remains personal and voluntary. Returning the favor too quickly may be seen as diminishing the relational bond rather than honoring it (see Roncaglia 2003 for Filipinos in Italy).

Acknowledgments

This research was financially supported by the “HELLO Campania” PRIN PNRR 2022 Project (P2022WJ8YF) funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MUR) as a Research Project of Significant National Interest in line with the objectives outlined in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. We wish to thank all the participants who took part in the study for their time and for sharing their thoughts, feeling and emotions and their stories with us. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the CLARIN K-Centre for Heritage Languages in Europe (<https://k-centreherlan.unior.it/>), which serves as a hub for scholars working on heritage languages across Europe.

Authors' contributions

The contribution of each author is as follows. Conceptualization: F.M., G.R., and L.S.; Data collection: G.R., F.M. (interview with Albert Alejo), and Michelle Corotan; Transcription: L.S., G.R., and Michelle Corotan; Data analysis: F.M., G.R., and L.S. The writing of the article was divided as follows: F.M. wrote Sections 1.1, 1.2.2, 2, and 3.1; L.S. wrote Sections 1.2.1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 3.2. Section 4 was co-authored by F.M. and L.S. Finalization and draft revision: F.M.

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