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## Italian Schools and New Linguistic Minorities: Nationality Vs. Plurilingualism. Which Ways and Methodologies for Mapping these Contexts?

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**Italian Schools and New Linguistic  
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these Contexts?**

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# **Italian Schools and New Linguistic Minorities: Nationality Vs. Plurilingualism. Which Ways and Methodologies for Mapping these Contexts?**

## **Summary**

According to the latest findings of the MIUR (*Ministry of Education, University and Research*), *Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana* 2004-2005 (MIUR, October 2005), 4.2% of the school population in Italy is made up of non-Italian citizens, with no reference to students who have one Italian parent or adopted children. These findings show that schools have become multilingual, not so much or solely because of the proposed linguistic offerings, nor for the linguistic heritage of Italian-speakers, which alternates among dialect, regional Italian and standard Italian, but mostly because of the dimension created by the contacts developed between different linguistic and cultural heritages. The paper aims at emphasizing and showing different ways for mapping the role played and the weight exercised by these “new linguistic minorities” – (defined as such) so-called because they are related to immigrant settlements in the territory and, hence, “immigrant languages” – in redefining the *linguistic landscape* of a school and of a territory.

**Keywords:** Language Contact, Immigrant Languages, School System, Linguistic-Cultural Identity

**JEL Classification:** I, I2, I21

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the new status of immigrant languages and the role they are assuming in the Italian linguistic space and, specifically here, in Italian schools. This is the objective of one of the research projects of the Centro di Eccellenza della Ricerca – *Osservatorio Permanente dell’Italiano Diffuso fra Stranieri e delle Lingue Immigrate in Italia*<sup>1</sup> (Centre of Excellence for Research – *Centre for the Study of the Italian Language among non-Italians and of Non-Italian Languages in Italy*) of the Siena University for Foreigners, which uses traditional methodologies and advanced technologies to first define, and then map the new Italian plurilingualism. Therefore, concepts like “*historic*” *linguistic minorities*, *foreigners/migrants/immigrants*, “*new*” *linguistic minorities*, *immigrant languages* are pertinent in defining the conceptual and operational framework for the geolinguistic mapping of the territory; they serve not only to describe the characteristics of the territory, but more importantly, to suggest measures which target the existing linguistic components. In the final analysis, this means offering a tool capable of illustrating the possible solutions to the institutions actively engaged in improving the initiatives in areas where there is a greater concentration of immigrants and therefore of immigrant languages (education, health care, public offices, transportation, etc.).

The Italian school system is the context in which Italian – and several historic minority languages, depending on the specific dispositions of some regions – and the diffused international languages, English being predominant, are taught. The weight of minority languages in the linguistic dimension of the school is either not considered, or retained to be marginal and, in any case, is excluded from language teaching programmatic choices. Instead, the new minority languages play a specific role in developing the linguistic-cultural identity of a student who moves from one country to another or who is born into a multilingual family in Italy. This role must be necessarily confronted, especially in a context in which the awareness of the rich linguistic heritage of the students should be greatest.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2000, in order to create a network of structures to carry out activities of excellence, the Ministry of Education, University and Research instituted a Centre of Excellence for Research on *Study of the Italian Language among non-Italians and of Non-Italian Languages in Italy* within the thematic area of *Innovative Technologies Applied to Human Sciences*. The Centre has been active since 2001. For information: via Sallustio Bandini, 35 I - 53100 Siena; tel. +39-0577-240371, fax +39-0577-240461; e-mail: [eccellenza@unistrasi.it](mailto:eccellenza@unistrasi.it).

## 2. The linguistic minorities in Italy

Italy is characterised by the presence of so called “historic” linguistic minorities; these linguistic minorities, and their varied numbers of speakers, are diversely safeguarded through legislation. Law 482 of December 15, 1999, prescribes the *Norme in materia di tutela della minoranze linguistiche storiche* (Regulations for the protection of historic linguistic minorities) present on Italy territory and in 2000 Italy signed (but did not ratify) the *European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages* (Dell’Aquila, Iannàcaro, 2004). Law 482/99 contains specific regulations for teaching minority languages in the schools of the twelve recognised linguistic communities. The Italian school system must ensure that the minority languages are taught. Therefore, in addition to the possibility of learning the “traditional” languages offered in Italian schools (English, French, German, Spanish), the rights of the members of recognised linguistic minorities to instruction in their mother tongue is safeguarded<sup>2</sup>.

However, these dispositions exclude the immigrant languages, which we consider here to be “new” minorities with an entirely new status which has become the object of wide debate.

Immigrant languages in Italy are much more numerous than the languages of the historically present minorities (Vedovelli, Villarini, 2001). Moreover, they are at the centre of a different set of dynamics in terms of vitality, visibility and presence<sup>3</sup>. This elucidation requires that we give the parameters for identifying and defining the immigrant languages: in this sense, the distinction between *the languages of migrants* and *immigrant languages* is helpful (Bagna, Machetti, Vedovelli, 2003). The latter, characterised by the strong social roots and scarce fluctuation of their speakers, can be defined as the main elements which condition the linguistic space in which they are found. To speak of immigrant languages

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<sup>2</sup> To speak of safeguarding linguistic minorities means to enter into the sphere of action and management of European linguistic policies, which have promoted plurilingualism for several years, but which do not seem to realistically respond to the intents expressed in the official documents, nor do they provide the European states with precise dispositions to implement the indications given. In fact, European policy in the linguistic field should influence the choices made in terms of language education and diffusion in the various European states. Nevertheless, while they promote a broad approach to languages and plurilingualism, even the most important documents which the Council of Europe has produced, specifically the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001), the European Commission (2003) and last, but not least, the European Constitution (2004), seem to stop short of a declaration of intent. For a more detailed discussion, see Barni, Machetti (in press).

<sup>3</sup> For the concept of *ethnolinguistic vitality*, see Giles *et al.* (1977); Broeder, Extra (1998); Extra, Yağmur (2004).

brings with it the necessity to continuously monitor the numbers in the immigrant groups, their permanence over time in a given territory, the presence of their children in school, their meeting places, the diffusion of their means of communication, etc. Furthermore, Italy has been involved in migratory flows only in the last few decades and has been the destination of various migratory waves for less than fifty years, which have created a stratification of the different groups. Today, we speak of “historic” immigrant groups (Cape Verdeans, Philippines, Moroccans, Chinese) and of “more recent” groups (Albanians, Romanians, Ukrainians). Verifying their degree of settlement and penetration into the territory serves to define these groups as immigrants as opposed to migrants, and their languages as constituents of the Italian linguistic space. These objectives are in contrast with several questions of a methodological nature: the quantitative analysis of the numeric data supplied by various institutions that periodically survey the immigration phenomenon (Caritas, ISTAT, CNEL) must be shifted to a qualitative analysis in relation to language, a factor which is often indicated as the cause for the failure of immigrants to assimilate/integrate. Yet, at the same time, it is the “arena” for contacts, conflicts and identity reformulation<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, in order to define the status of the immigrant languages, a theoretic and methodological system has been produced within the Centre of Excellence for the purposes of mapping. Determinate areas, retained to be paradigmatic of immigrant distribution throughout Italy, are chosen, not only to trace immigrant languages, but also to enter into the thick of the dynamics at work in the places of contact (schools, meeting centres, volunteer associations, public businesses and offices, homes, etc.). Only in this way has it been possible to go beyond an approach to immigrant languages which merely dwells on the children’s difficulties in learning the Italian language and their scholastic failure and which rarely touches on the question of the source language’s heritage and whether it is maintained or lost subsequent to the migratory experience. In the same way, we go beyond defining immigrants exclusively on the basis of nationality; a practice which leads to the false conviction of “one nationality, one language” (Barni, Bagna, Siebetcheu,

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<sup>4</sup> Each year, the Caritas of Rome publishes a dossier of statistics on the state of immigration in Italy and, periodically, the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT) (*The National Institute of Statistics*) also surveys the condition of immigrants in Italy. We also note the document issued by the Consiglio Nazionale dell’Economia e del Lavoro (CNEL, 2004) (*The National Council on the Economy and Labour*) for the discussion of the territorial indices of immigration in Italy.

2004; De Mauro, in press), thus obliterating, in almost all cases, a linguistic heritage much richer than defined by the passport.

### **3. Current situation**

The scenario illustrated and described thus far reveals two types of problems:

- the first is methodological in nature and regards the realisation and diffusion of tools – like those developed within the Centre for Excellence – for initially photographing and, more importantly, for constantly monitoring plurilingualism in the Italian school system and in Italian social speaking habits. This, in turn, means promoting tools for identifying the possible lines of intervention to be followed in a plurilinguistic context, tools which can also be used by non-specialists who, more frequently than not, are those affected, from a variety of standpoints, by the presence of immigrant languages in a given territory;
- the second is legislative in nature and, therefore, executive and applicative, as well, since an institutional commitment clearly in favour of historic linguistic minorities is not matched by an organic plan of initiatives for maintaining the languages of students of foreign extraction, because, as we will see below, the attention is exclusively focused on the teaching and learning of the Italian language.

The situation that we wish to underline here is the role of the new Italian linguistic space which is largely manifest in the school environment. In fact, the individual and collective linguistic heritage, which is articulated in idiolectal, dialectal, standard, and also alloglot varieties should be protected, developed and increased in the school environment. In our opinion, this heritage must be protected not because it is a monument in a state of abandonment, but because – in consideration of the human and economic resources invested in favour of historic minorities – it is a live heritage, although perhaps less dynamic in terms of the changes which have taken place in the school in recent years; at the same time, it must also be considered that the Italian linguistic space is further enriched by it, and this enrichment should be encouraged. When confronted with research on linguistic, sociolinguistic policy, which has always examined historic linguistic minorities, less attention has been given to immigrant languages, the object of typological and acquisition studies, but less frequently treated in their overall role as contact languages, at

least as regards the case in Italy. To date, the frequently referred to immigration map has only considered the nationalities, and although constantly updated, is totally insufficient for providing intervention criteria in a scholastic context.

There are many causes at the root of this situation, however we note at least two factors.

1) *The number of immigrant languages.* In fact, we cannot generalise the presence of immigrant languages which vary, though with stable settlements, from region to region and even from city to city. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the insertion of foreign students in class is on the rise, also by virtue of the number of minors born in Italy and of reunion of family members. Therefore, legislative measures should be aimed at protecting the heritage which identifies a group of people living in Italy, who develop a “contact” Italian (*italiano di contatto* (Vedovelli, 2005), who negotiate or renegotiate, not without gaps, their own linguistic and cultural identity, rather than at protecting languages in danger.<sup>5</sup>

The Italian situation suffers from the inadequate classification of these languages because the error of associating one nationality to one language is still being repeated. For practical and economical purposes, this is the most direct choice, and it is also the greatest source of confusion. Confusion determined by the lack of knowledge of the linguistic situations of the countries of provenance of the foreign immigrants. This leads to another error in the Italian school system: that of not considering linguistic heritage as the real difference in terms of interventions, of choices in inserting students into the class, of maintaining the new languages present in the school, but to only distinguish between who is a European citizen and who is not, between who has two Italian parents and who has only one, between who has a prevalently Italian linguistic heritage and who has a more articulated linguistic heritage. Reducing classification to “European/non European” means refusing the mediation between the different languages which exist in Europe, by believing that having a Castilian or a Catalan linguistic heritage can lead to the same outcome in inserting a student in the Italian school system, while in several Latin American countries Castilian may represent a further discriminating factor. Therefore, the classification or division of students in the schools does not follow neutral criteria, but rather misleading. With regard to this, the results of the research underway at the Centre for Excellence have shown how

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<sup>5</sup> For more details on this topic, also from a semiotic viewpoint, see Vedovelli (2002, 2003a).

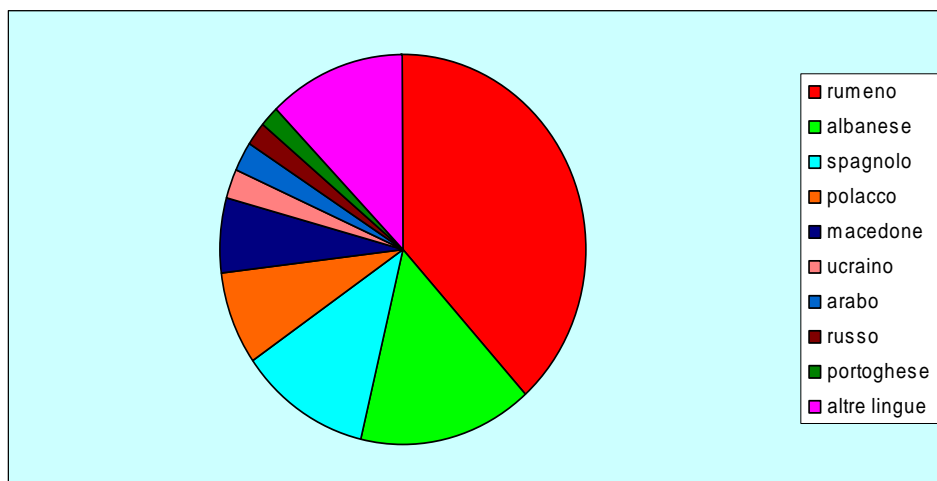


the Italian school is plurilinguistic, also through the expectations that the students have in terms of languages (Bagna, Barni, 2005a).

With regard to the same, we present some of the data collected in the course of three surveys carried out in two cities in the province of Rome (Monterotondo and Mentana, with populations of 35,000 and 18,000, respectively) in 2004. Information relative to the plurilinguistic dimension of the Italian school resulted from the responses to 1384 questionnaires administrated within the school system (884 in the primary schools, 370 in I level secondary schools, 130 in the II level secondary schools) and which were completed by Italian and foreign students (1152 respondents of Italian origin, 232 respondents of foreign origin or with at least one parent of foreign origin). Additionally, 140 taped interviews and 10 hours of video involving foreign adults and children were collected. In particular, the statements made by the respondents on their own language, the extent of linguistic use within the family (*I usually talk to my mother in; I usually talk to my father n; I usually talk to my brothers/sisters in*), the answers to the questions *The language that I like the most is* and *The language I would like to speak is* point to the weight that the linguistic repertoires and the students' imaginary linguistic expectations and representations carry.

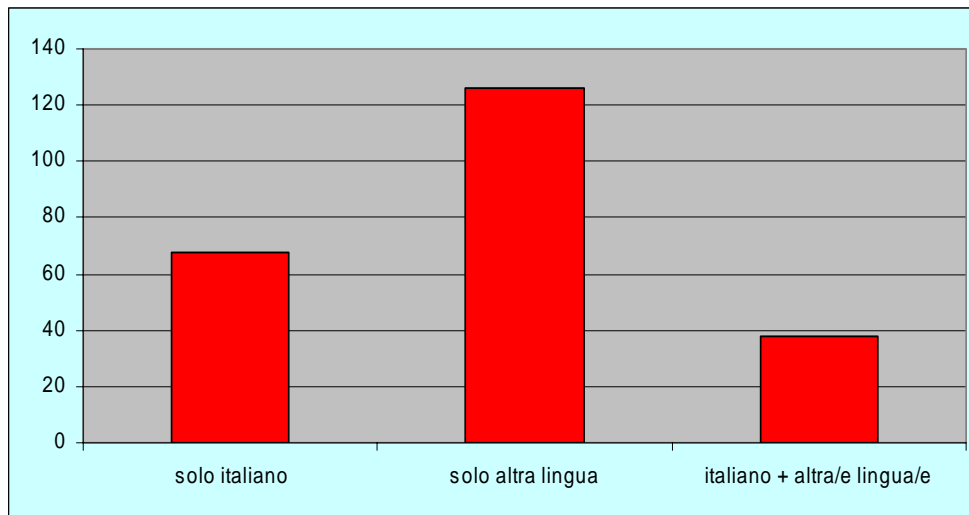
Languages present. The most represented immigrant language in the schools of these two cities is Rumanian (38.41%), followed by Albanian (15.24%), Spanish (11.59%), Polish (7.93%) and Macedonian (6.1%). The first five languages are spoken by 77.43% of the entire foreign school population. The remaining 32.67% is divided amongst 19 other languages.

Fig. 1 - Languages present



In addition to the analysis of the languages present, data was collected on the linguistic uses, not limited to a single code, but widened to embrace several codes in contact with each other. In fact, each respondent was given the possibility to indicate more than one language as theirs. The panorama which emerges from this information is varied with statements ranging from monolingualism to trilingualism.

Fig. 2 – From monolingualism to trilingualism in Monterotondo and Mentana schools



It is particularly significant that the majority of the children aware of their plurilingual linguistic knowledge are in primary school, an index of linguistic wealth: the knowledge of more than one language is not perceived as the presence of two competing systems; to the contrary, it is seen as the simultaneous presence of two or more languages in which the choice of the language to be used is determined by the communicative situation at hand (as demonstrated by the analysis of the linguistic uses in the family).

Moreover, those who state that they know only one language, whether it be Italian or another language, still live in a plurilinguistic reality: those who state that their language is the language of origin are not extraneous to Italian, but certainly possess it as a developing language.

At the end of all of the questionnaires, two items were also added (*The language I like the most is* and *The language I would like to speak is*) with the aim of eliciting the respondent's positive attitudes towards their own or other languages. In the case of the language they like most, the respondents were called upon to indicate an immediate

preference for a language which they may, or may not have already mastered. Instead, in indicating the language they would like to speak (desire), they had to respond to a more intentional desire, even oriented towards learning that language in the future.

The preferred linguistic panorama is vast: the respondents' answers range from the languages closest to their own experience to those most distant.

As regards the desired language, the respondents prevalently tend towards English, the learning of which is seen as a pressing need in the school, but also outside of it. The influence of the school environment is evident: English, Spanish, French and Italian together account for 70% of the desired languages of the respondents. Still, we note that several immigrant languages emerge significantly in this category: Chinese, Rumanian, Arabian, Russian.

However, as pointed out through questionnaires and video recorded interviews, the confrontation between natives and non natives, between Italian teachers and students of foreign origin, even in territories of proven settlement by groups of immigrants, has shown that "L1 is therefore perceived as a private heritage, not excluded from the dynamics of concealment; [...] The distance perceived by the Italian speakers between themselves and the languages which enter the schools, not through the curricula, but through the languages spoken by foreign students, and the effort to bridge this gap still seem too great. On the other hand, with adults, mediation seems to become obsolete as soon as competency in Italian makes it easy to interact in the expanded social dimensions of work, school, daily life" (Bagna, Pallassini, in press).

2) The second obstacle is represented by the *inadequate knowledge of the main characteristics of the languages* of the students of foreign origin in the school, with the consequence of believing that the development of the knowledge of the Italian language is threatened by the structures (unknown to the teachers) of the language of origin, without understanding the role of the contact systems in the process of definition, the progress with Italian, the weight of maintaining the language of origin. And then, when faced with scholastic achievement numbers in which students of foreign origin are frequently in a disadvantaged position, once again attention is placed only on the lack of adequate competency in Italian, without a more general reflection geared toward the student and the procedures followed for his/her insertion into the education system (MIUR, 2005a). However, this attention has not led to the promotion of adequate legislative initiative in

terms of the characteristics of the Italian situation. While several pertinent projects do exist, the teaching of Italian L2 in the educational system is mostly dependent on available funds, on the assignment of teachers of foreign languages or other subjects. In the best of cases, the teaching of Italian L2 is assigned to an organised network of literacy teachers and experts in Italian L2 (for example, in the schools of Florence) or to linguistic-cultural mediators. In this case, the scenario is extremely variegated, using adequate choices – at times even pioneering – where there have been large flows of foreigners. However, there continue to persist other situations in which the initiatives are entrusted to the willingness of the teachers<sup>6</sup>.

The attention given to the Italian language has not been flanked by an equally strong promotion of the immigrant languages which have entered the school system: intercultural activities are preferred and they are frequently only perfunctorily accompanied by activities centred on confrontation and contact between the languages, as well.

And so, to date, the choices are first and foremost those for an intercultural education, not always coupled with a plurilinguistic education, both for the reasons we have tried to explain here, and because in a scholastic context the term “plurilingualism” is often exclusively associated with the languages (European) for which teaching is guaranteed (English, French, German, Spanish). The insertion of a language like Arabian or Chinese is branded as a danger for the entire school. On the other hand, plurilingualism is instead a constant condition, here to stay and is not of indifferent importance. With regard to the same, we mention European projects like that coordinated by the University of Tilburg in which the issue of the definition and vitality of immigrant languages has also been the object of investigations in six European cities (Hamburg, Göteborg, The Hague, Lyon, Madrid, Brussels - Extra & Yağmur, 2004) and these investigations, extended to several contexts and in Italy as well, may lay the groundwork for the implementation of measures aimed at greater awareness of the current linguistic heritage of children of Italian and foreign origin.

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<sup>6</sup> Among the most widespread initiatives aimed at training teachers in handling plurilinguistic classes, we note the pilot project of the General Personnel Administration of MIUR, conducted by the Regional Administrations in collaboration with 21 Italian universities, entitled *Azione italiano L2: lingua di contatto, lingua di culture*. (Italian L2 Action: language for contact, language for culture).

#### 4. Perspectives

At this point, it seems necessary to suggest several choices or measures for improving the integration of the students of foreign origin into the school system. When confronted with data that speak of an approximately 4.2% percent incidence over the entire scholastic population of non Italian students (MIUR, 2005a), the Italian situation is rich in inhomogeneous situations: in several cities over 10% of the primary school age children is of foreign origin. Furthermore, the data are subject to significant fluctuation, not only year to year, but also in the course of the same school year. Therefore, what actions must be promoted? We suggest at least four:

- emphasis on the linguistic heritage of the students, i.e. measures aimed at promoting the awareness of the linguistic-cultural heritage of origin;
- use of tools for surveying this heritage (questionnaires, interview outlines, geo-linguistic maps), i.e. use of organised, homogenous survey models to guarantee the creation of true maps showing the presence of the immigrant languages inside and outside of the school.

For this purpose, the three models developed at the Centre of Excellence respond to the organisational needs of the school. A first identification like that offered by the *Toscane favelle (Tuscan Idioms)* model, a homogenous collection of self-assessments and self-declarations made by the students themselves, as in the *Monterotondo-Mentana* model, and finally a punctual geolinguistic mapping, as anticipated by the *Esquilino* model, permit a “territorial” view of the data on the immigrant languages which have a fall-out effect on the linguistic structures operating in the territory (Bagna, Barni, 2005b; Bagna, Barni, in press)<sup>7</sup>;

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<sup>7</sup> Today, three tools have been used to fine-tune a structured surveying system which may serve as a model to be applied in various contexts:

- the *Toscane favelle (Tuscan Idioms)* model, aimed at creating maps of the immigrant languages in a territory through the use of demo-statistical data. These maps can provide local institutions with useful information in promoting language policy in favour of immigrant communities who are currently present in the territory (Bagna, Barni, Siebetecheu, 2004);
- the *Monterotondo-Mentana* model, based on questionnaires, audio and video recordings, is aimed at verifying the vitality of the linguistic heritage (Extra, Yağmur, 2004) in the area being surveyed, where Italian, dialects and immigrant languages are used in social interaction (Bagna, Barni, 2005a; Bagna, Pallassini, in press);
- the *Esquilino* model, a systematic mapping of the linguistic landscape of a territory (Landry, Bourhis, 1997), is aimed at creating digital maps of the distribution of the immigrant languages through the testimony given by social communication texts (signs, graffiti, posters, public notices, advertisements etc.) written in immigrant languages. In order to carry out this type of study, digital cameras and palm computers with GPS systems, GIS (ArcMap–ArcView - ESRI<sup>®</sup>) and MapGeoLing 1.0 software are used. This procedure makes it

- emphasis on the linguistic preferences and choices of the students, to broaden the interest for languages and cultures other than those promoted within the school and to favour greater openness towards the linguistic varieties present in class;
- linguistic-cultural mediation to reinforce the linguistic-cultural identities in contact, through a dialogue which constantly involves all teachers (not only Italian teachers), students, families, etc.

## **5. Conclusions**

Even where research and investigation have shown a concentration of several immigrant languages in a specific area, there are no legal dispositions which protect and maintain the original language of immigrant children and young people. All of the attention is on Italian L2, i.e. the linguistic heritage to be “conquered” as opposed to the existing linguistic heritage.

Can we then speak of plurilingualism in the school? Yes, thanks to the immigrant languages, even if specific measures need to be taken.

The Council of Europe promotes plurilingualism, but the choices of linguistic policy and of the Italian educational system do not even seem to take into consideration the idea of a public awareness campaign in relation to the European languages.

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possible to rapidly survey an entire area and to obtain geolinguistic maps which can be queried on the basis of various criteria: languages, text types and genres, domains etc. (Bagna, Barni, 2005b; Bagna, Barni, in press).

The three models are complementary and can be implemented with the addition of other data gathered through audio and video recordings of the oral interaction between Italians and foreigners and between foreigners speaking the same or different languages; they are used to identify: language use in spontaneous communication, the methods and contexts of the use of Italian and of other languages, the shift from one code to another.

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