

# Deviant Bodies

The Representation of Migrants in the Photographs of "La Nazione" Newspaper

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## Abstract

There is by now a vast literature on the representation of migrants in Italian media, with the specific aim to establish if such a representation is prejudiced, and in case, how is that prejudice conveyed. In particular, there is a consensus that much of the media's discourse on migrants in Italy is based on the notion of *social deviancy*, and the implicit *threat* it represents. To demonstrate this, more analytical studies of Italian media take a quantitative approach in which evidently prejudiced and hostile statements about migrants are carefully extracted and counted. What such an approach misses, though, is the fact that the media routinely use several subtle methods to add "implicit meaning" to the way they report about migrants. These methods involve both verbal and visual communication, and apparently neutral ways to generalize negative features. The result is that a clear hostile and prejudiced view of migrants is produced through images and statements that cannot in themselves be labeled prejudiced. In this preliminary study I use Multi-modal Discourse Analysis to classify a set of pictures of migrants taken from *La Nazione* newspaper, based in Florence, to show how the overall representation clearly depicts migrants as being socially deviant, and therefore, menacing.

**Keywords:** migration, representation of migrants, migrants in Italy, Italian media, social deviancy, discourse analysis, multi-modal discourse analysis

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this article is to contribute to the study of the way in which

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1. This preliminary work is based on talk given at ISI Florence on 26 February 2019 as part of the Institute's activities for Black History Month. I thank the audience for all their useful comments and feedback, and especially Angelica Pesarini. I also have to thank the editors of this volume, Francesca Calamita and Nina Peci, as well as the director of ISI Florence, Stefano Baldassarri, for their patience in waiting for this contribution. Naturally, all mistakes and shortcomings are only my responsibility.

migrants are represented in Italian media, through an analysis of the use of images of migrants in some issues of *La Nazione* newspaper, based in Florence. I must immediately point out that this is very much a preliminary, programmatic work, and a much larger empirical investigation is needed in order to reach wider and more solid conclusions. I thought it might be useful, though, to present this research here in this initial state as it focuses on one aspect of anti-migrant discourse, which is not much discussed in the public debate on migration in contemporary Italy. This aspect refers to the apparently neutral, scarcely noticeable use of specific communication methods, both verbal and visual, in order to build a negative representation of migrants, especially those who are not white. As shall be described in more detail below, this representation is transmitted, verbally, through words and phrases that are not offensive in themselves. Crucially, this representation is then reinforced and amplified through a very specific use of pictures of migrants that is far from "journalistic" or "realistic" and only shows them in a limited set of contexts, and doing an even narrower set of activities. Together, the linguistic and visual communication methods paint a very precise picture of the non-white migrant, one that is clearly negative and hostile.

As we shall see, much literature on the topic, as well as the attention of anti-racist organizations, is understandably focused on the more shocking and serious violent speech, which is tragically a common occurrence in political and public discourse on migration in Italy today. This runs the risk, though, of obscuring the fact that a deeply negative and hostile view of migrants is constructed daily by some media, that are otherwise careful to avoid using more violent speech themselves. In practical terms, though, the evidence needed to establish these communicative patterns is necessarily large indeed, and not always easily accessible, so that establishing their bias as a matter of fact is often a challenging enterprise<sup>2</sup>. This

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2. In the case of this research, for instance, back issues of *La Nazione* are not systematically available online, and when they are, they do not necessarily appear in the original context in which they were printed, with accompanying photos and articles. Furthermore, even printed collections of *La Nazione* in public Florentine libraries are often incomplete, with sometimes only the last years being available, or with several issues missing because they were not delivered.

article, then, intends to contribute to a growing literature that analyses the discourse on migration in qualitative, and not only quantitative, terms and that crucially takes into account visual representation.

Finally, I also need to point out that this work was borne out of the pressing and practical needs of teaching a course on *Diversity in Italy* to American study abroad students at the International Studies Institute, Florence. In the same way in which I try to introduce students to the “everyday diversity” which is part of Italian culture and society, I try to describe to them the underlying, constant negative discourse about migrants and persons of color in Italy. My original goal, therefore, was not so much to analyze in depth the portrayal of migrants in the Italian press, but rather to make visible to my students some well established patterns of discourse with which I was only too familiar. This has turned out to be a daunting task, and the need for good teaching material in English on the topic remains severe, in my opinion. It is my hope that this preliminary work will help some colleagues who want to tackle these urgent issues.

### **Racist and anti-migrant discourse in Italy**

Before proceeding to introduce the topic and goals of this preliminary work, it is necessary to make some distinctions and define clearly its empirical scope and methodology. In the Italian context, anti-migrant and racist public discourse against non-white persons often overlap, so that the two issues – prejudice against migrants and prejudice against people of color – are often treated as being largely the same phenomenon. Consequently, the attention of scholars and NGO organizations that study migration is often focused on cases of violent aggression and explicit racist language. The problem is compounded by an incomplete survey of racist speech and acts in Italy. Monitoring projects such as “Il Barometro dell’odio”, sponsored by Amnesty International Italia, do not offer a comprehensive database and rely on the judgment of volunteers. Furthermore, several monitoring efforts of this type are only active during periods of intense public debate, such as electoral campaigns. Here I assume it is important to keep the two issues separate, and especially to bring other

categories to the study of anti-migrant discourse. In particular, I will follow more recent literature on the topic and use the category of deviancy to describe the specific form of prejudice found in Italian media.

A related problem is that much work on migration is done by sociologists and thus employs mainly quantitative methods. Considering that in Italy we do not have yet a large comprehensive database of racist and hate speech against migrants, quantitative analyses are necessarily applied to relatively small datasets. Apart from this intrinsic limitation, I will argue that in order to describe the communicative patterns studied here quantitative methods are necessary. In this work we are going to use *multi-modal discourse analysis* (Kress 2011), which includes both verbal and visual communication. The crucial advantage of this approach, as we will see, lies in the fact that it successfully captures de-humanizing strategies that are expressed through words and images that do not by themselves convey hostile or racist attitudes towards migrants. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, rely on counting words and statements with explicit negative connotation, and miss the underlying communicative strategy completely<sup>3</sup>.

### **The case study: representation of migrants in *La Nazione* newspaper**

*La Nazione* is the main newspaper of the city of Florence, and it is easily available in the whole Tuscan region, and beyond. As in the case of other local newspapers in Italy, *La Nazione* is easily available in most bars and other establishments and has a readership which is much wider than the number of copies it sells. Its political orientation is center-right and it often comments and reports on migration and especially on social problems connected to migrants. The original idea of this work, indeed, was borne out of the author's familiarity with the tone and perspective of the newspaper's reporting on migrants and the curiosity of finding out

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3. A more comprehensive survey of the literature on the topic and methods is beyond the scope of this preliminary article. The reader is referred to the works in the Bibliography and the references quoted there for a more thorough introduction. For the Italian context, the reader is specifically referred to the essays in Simoni and Lombrado (2022).

the patterns used in this reporting.

The original research plan was to sample articles about migrants and analyze them through the tools of Discourse Analysis (DA, Gee 2010), a qualitative method to study the structures, patterns and methods through which linguistic texts can convey meaning. The photographs accompanying these articles would then be studied in their own terms and in comparison with the results of the DA analysis, to see whether they are indeed instrumental in amplifying the articles' portrayal of migrants. In a survey of the existing research I found that a DA analysis of *La Nazione's* reporting on migrants had already been meticulously done by Eleonora Garosi (2005), confirming this author's working hypothesis. In this preliminary work, then, I will summarize Garosi's results and then proceed to a first analysis and classification of the pictures of migrants published in the newspaper under study.

### A Discourse Analysis of *La Nazione's* representation of migrants

Garosi's careful analysis shows that in the articles published by *La Nazione*, migrants are clearly associated with a specific set of *topics*, all related to social deviancy, such the following.

Topics related to migrants in *La Nazione* articles<sup>4</sup> (*La Nazione*, 2003, from Garosi 2005)

- Drugs	15.6%
- Illegal immigration	15.1%
- Robberies	11.3%
- Undeclared work	10.8%
- Murder	9.9%
- Illegal selling and counterfeiting	7.0%
- Aggression and street fights	6.6%
- Public drunkenness and disorderly conduct	4.2%

4. See Garosi (2005) for a complete list. Numbers indicate the percentage of articles about the given topic out of all the articles on migration in the sample.

It is important to underline that the articles for each topic are not dry factual reports, but contain several “implicit meanings”, which are not based on fact but are nonetheless introduced into the narrative through several mechanisms. The reader is referred to Garosi’s work for a fuller presentation of these mechanisms. Here I will just mention two of them that are relevant also in the study of images.

The first is the method of *association*: describing a confrontation between migrants and the police as a “Far West scene” (a phrase often used in the titles of articles), clearly transfers all the negative connotations of lawlessness and violence from the Far West to the event being reported, whether such transfer is justified by facts or not. Another powerful mechanism is *implicit generalization*. For example, if an article reports about the arrest of North-African drug dealers with several previous convictions, in journalistic discourse this state of affairs is often summarized through the use of the phrase “per l’ennesima volta” (for the umpteenth time), as in the following hypothetical newspaper title:

“Marocchini arrestati in piazza per l’ennesima volta per spaccio di droghe”

*Moroccans arrested in the public square for the umpteenth time for selling drugs*

The fact that neither the number of people involved nor the number of previous convictions is specified, frees the reader to imagine the quantity of drug-dealers and convictions. Crucially, this is not a precise number, but an amount large enough to cover all the relevant informational context, namely the whole activity of “selling drugs”. Informally, this example is saying that many people sell a lot of drugs, but Moroccans are involved most of the time. This is, naturally, a logically unfounded conclusion, but it is strongly implied by the absence of a specific number of subjects and the presence of a vague quantifying adjective (“ennesima”), which projects the situation in a much larger context.

The reader is referred to Garosi’s work for a fuller analysis and de-

scription of the data. For our present purposes, we will take this study as clear confirmation that the articles of *La Nazione* newspaper make use of a specific linguistic communicative strategy that associates migrants with themes of social deviancy, and does so “silently”, through associations and implications.

### **A preliminary analysis of *La Nazione*'s visual representation of migrants**

In this study I will assume that images must be included in the analysis of how media depict migrants. This is, I think, necessary for several reasons. In the first place, most media include photos in their articles on migrants. Furthermore, images are more memorable as depictions of specific groups than linguistic texts. They can also trigger powerful emotional responses and thus shape public opinion. Finally, the repetition of specific types of images on print and digital media can reinforce social bias against specific groups (Urman et al. 2022).

My goal in this preliminary work was that of establishing a list of analytical features that could be used in categorizing the images I was collecting. In particular, I used the list of features proposed by Urman et al (2022):

Analytical features used in the categorization of images of migrants  
(Urman et al 2022, Table 2)

- Facial visibility
- Individual vs group representations
- Race
- Sex and age
- Religious symbols
- Border crossings
- Working activities
- Protest activities

Of these I did not use the feature “border crossing” (i.e. pictures of migrants crossing a border illegally) as it created a strong overlap with the representation of refugees. Similarly, the feature “religious symbols”

would select a large number of pictures of women wearing a *hijab* (Islamic veil), again shifting the focus away from migrants.

I used the remaining features to organize the images into different categories. While I have looked at some 80 pictures in total, all published in the last 10 years, the goal of this preliminary survey was to see whether a categorization like the one adopted here could be fruitfully applied to my sample. The few photos discussed here were retrieved from *La Nazione's* website, but also appeared in the printed version of the newspaper. As we shall see, this preliminary survey does indeed show that the images under study fall into the categories discussed above and, more significantly, that they do paint an overall negative picture of migrants. The next step of the research will then be to create a more balanced sample and label all the pictures in it.

### **Group versus individual representation**

The first thing that strikes the observer, when we focus our attention on patterns in the way migrants are shown in the photographs of *La Nazione* newspaper, is the strong tendency to show migrants in crowded *groups*. Indeed, this is the only way African migrants are shown when trying to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe: a large group of human bodies where individuals are barely discernible. These pictures cancel migrants' individuality in different ways but in our preliminary hypothesis the most common is that of showing migrants on boats from a distance, or even from above, as shown in Picture 1, a famous shot taken by Massimo Sestini.

Other photos in this by now well-established genre choose to focus on those cases in which migrants are leaning off the boats and/or cover the entire surface of their means of navigation. In this case it seems difficult to describe the persons on the boat as a group, in that they more closely resemble a *mass*, an undefined amalgamation of non-completely-human bodies in which no individuality can possibly be discerned.

In another common pattern, photos focus on just a part of the mass of migrant bodies, thus implying an even larger mass beyond the photograph's borders. Exactly as in the case of the "umpteenth crime" case dis-

cussed above, this implied mass is undefined, but large enough to spread over any contextual ground. This makes the mass of bodies even less human, and therefore more threatening.

If these type of images were the inevitable result of the special context of photographing migrants while attempting the Mediterranean crossing, one could expect pictures of migrants taken *after* they have been rescued to



**Top:** Picture 1: *La Nazione*, 20 June 2019

**Bottom:** Picture 2: *La Nazione*, 7 September 2015 (but the photo “di repertorio”, a stock photo, is dated 2 July 2014)

show a more individual representation, but this is the opposite of what we find. Migrants on rescue boats are again shown as a group, from a distance, only this time covered in blankets or heat sheets that turn them into *things*.

### Working activities

Moving on to the representation of migrants in urban contexts in



Top: Picture 3: *La Nazione*, 2 May 2021 (Foto di repertorio)

Bottom: Picture 4: *La Nazione*, 18 October 2021

Italy, another striking feature of the photos surveyed here is that they almost completely fail to show migrants engaged in any kind of work. This is particularly amazing in the case of the Senegalese community, for example, since a high number of Senegalese men work as non-uniformed security guards in many shops and bars in Tuscany. Indeed, in my informal preliminary survey, I could not find a single picture of a Senegalese man working as a security guard. The situation is slightly better in the case of the very large Chinese community in Tuscany, with some pictures showing Chinese migrants in front of their shops or workshops, but even in this case it is surprising how many photographs show Chinese people walking the street, even when the news being reported concerns the economic activities of the Chinese community.

In the photographs under study, migrants simply do not work: they spend their time on the streets, looking at their smartphones. Instead of working, they *loiter*. The connection with social deviancy, as discussed by Garosi above, is in this case very clear, and sometimes made explicit. Picture 5 shows a “posteggiatore abusivo”, that is, a person that asks for some coins after having pointed you to a free slot in a parking lot. The presence of a group of African migrants doing this in the parking lot of the main hospital in the city was reported several times in *La Nazione*, with the language needed to emphasize the danger posed by this criminal activity (“Nothing stops them!”, “Turn of the screw against illegal parking attendants!”, “The police arrive, they flee”).

The picture chosen to illustrate the threat posed by unofficial parking attendants is practically identical to all the other pictures that show migrants in an urban context in Italy: they show people not working, loitering around, often looking at their smartphones. It is therefore significant to note that Picture 5 is a stock photo: it does not represent – to the best of my knowledge – one member of the parking “gang.” In a sense, though, all pictures of migrants in urban context show social deviancy, so any picture of an African man will do.

When they do not loiter around, migrants engage in an even more deviant and threatening activity: they sit down in public places. It is sadly

a well-known feature of the public debate on migrants in Italy that many citizens and local administrators have taken steps to remove benches from parks and other public areas in order to prevent exactly this kind of activity, which is clearly perceived by some as wrong and threatening. In this case, though, it is simply not possible to call sitting on a bench "illegal"; therefore a whole array of verbal expressions is used to convey nega-



**Top:** Picture 5: *La Nazione*, 13 January 2020, (stock photo)  
**Bottom:** Picture 6: *La Nazione*, 1 November 2016

tive connotations, the most common being the word *bivacco*, “improvised camp-site”. It clearly conveys the message that this activity, though legal, is not *appropriate*, and that migrants are abusing their access to public spaces. Visually, the deviancy of this behavior is underlined by – again – showing migrants in groups, obscuring individual features and showing them from a distance, as in Picture 6, used to illustrate a *bivacco*.

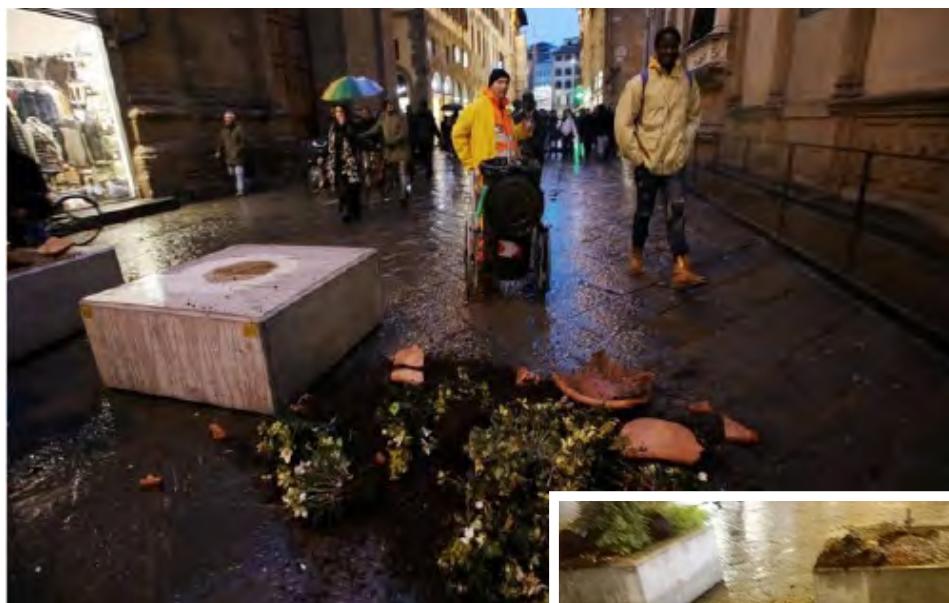
Exactly as in the case of the picture of the illegal parking assistants, which is actually a stock photo, the deviancy of sitting on benches is underlined by the fact that photos like Picture 6 are interchangeable with those of real pushers selling drugs in public parks.

### **Violent protest**

Images do not necessarily describe static representations; they can convey actions and dynamic sequences of events quite effectively. In the photos we examined, this is clearly visible in the only activity migrants are shown to be engaged in: violent protest. As discussed above, violent collective protests, especially when they are not officially organized, are a marker of social deviancy, and are often associated with migrants.

Many articles I surveyed do indeed make this connection, as made clear by the negative qualifiers employed. Thus, any confrontation by migrants with the police is “tense”, and in the worst case leads to “a Far West scene” or “total chaos”. If the police are not involved, migrants do not protest; instead they “march” through the city and “invade it”. The violent chaos of migrants’ protests is also clearly conveyed through photos. Contrary to the strategy of not clearly showing migrants’ faces and facial expressions (as it would individualize and humanize them), photos of protests involving migrants show clearly enraged facial expressions, and take care to include people lifting things or agitating their arms, as in Picture 7.

Picture 7 puts in the foreground a large African man, wielding a stick, clearly enraged. The picture is taken at an angle, which underlines the abnormal nature of the event being photographed. By implication, it is clear that the man has used, or is about to use, his stick against somebody.



**Top:** Picture 7: *La Nazione*, 6 March 2018  
**Bottom:** Picture 8, *La Nazione*, 6 March 2018, and  
Picture 9, *La Nazione*, 6 March 2018

In reality, though, this picture refers to the largely peaceful protests by the Senegalese community on the occasion of the cold-blooded murder of Idy Diene, a street vendor (the “illegal” qualifier was not used in this case), on 5 March 2018. The murder profoundly shocked the city and the Senegalese community, that had suffered another lethal aggression seven years before, in which a far-right extremist had shot several Senegalese men in a public square, killing two and wounding three. Several spontaneous protests occurred the same day, involving many non-Senegalese, as well as many Senegalese men and women, who were understandably upset. Despite the protesters’ legitimate rage, nobody was hurt or attacked, and damage to property was minimal. The following day, though, local media reported about “the invasion” of the city center, and “the moments of panic” experienced by passers-by. Indeed, a statement by the city’s mayor the day of the murder had authorized such a view of the events, saying the “violent protest” was unacceptable and announcing that the “violent people” responsible for it would be “consigned to justice”.

In this memorable case the problem of establishing a connection between the migrants’ protests and violence was clear: the only serious damage suffered by the city consisted of two large flower pots. The local media’s visual communication, though, took care to underline the completely violent, and therefore unacceptable, nature of that destruction.

All pictures of the famous flower-pots put the “victims” in the foreground, where they occupy a large part of the picture. There are no people close to the “remains” of the flower pots, and in some cases people are not shown at all, making it difficult to evaluate the actual size of the destroyed objects. The flower pots were located right in the historic city center, and the shards and soil spread on the ground clearly communicate a scene of disorder and uncleanliness. The implication is clear: someone strong and furious committed this act of public violence, for no other reason than to litter and soil “beautiful Florence”. Indeed, Picture 9 could be changed with several other pictures of the same type (shards of broken objects, soil, litter) used to convey the urban *degrado* (disrepair, neglect) usually associated with the presence of migrants.

Pictures 8 and 9 are the only ones discussed in this preliminary work that are not generic in nature, that is to say, they could not be used to describe migrants in general, as opposed to most of the photographs I surveyed. I thought it was useful, though, to include them in this discussion, as a really blatant case of constructing the “migrants’ protest = violent protest” equivalence out of very thin evidence – as shown by (at least part of) the public’s reaction, which mocked the “victimization” of the flower pots.

### Facial visibility and facial expressions

As pointed out several times so far, in many pictures I surveyed migrants do not have faces, and therefore do not have facial expressions. This in turn makes them not fully human, since human beings are expected to convey their emotions through their faces. Vice versa, it makes it impossible to ascertain the migrants’ emotional state, which in turn makes them threatening. One way in which migrants’ facial expressions are not shown is by photographing them from a distance. Another one is even



Picture 10: *La Nazione*, 11 September 2015

more striking in its brutal visual content: migrants are photographed from the back.

This type of visual representation is rather common in the photos I surveyed, and seems to be the preferred method to portray smaller groups, including families with children. The reason why this type of photos is completely unexpected on the pages of a newspaper is their evident contradiction of the basic principle of photographic journalism, namely being *informative*. We expect pictures of people to tell us something about them. Some close-up pictures of migrants' and refugees' faces have won awards and become famous, but here we have a case where journalistic principles seem to renege themselves: what is the picture of the back of a person supposed to tell me?

In this regard, it is highly significant that the only other case in which human beings are routinely photographed from the back is that of photos showing the police dealing with the suspected authors of a crime. Of course also in this context, it is often the case that the suspects are non-white migrants.

### Race and age

It is a largely unsurprising result of this preliminary survey that looking for news about "migrants" or "immigrants" in the pages of *La Nazione* mostly results in articles about African people (both North-African and Sub-Saharan). Asian migrants are found under the label "Chinese" or "Philippines", whereas other migrant communities, such as the large one from Perù, are not frequently present in the newspaper's photographs. Again unsurprisingly, most migrants in the photos of *La Nazione* are male and relatively young.

### Conclusions and future prospects

The most important conclusion of this preliminary stage of the research is that the analytical categories proposed in the literature on the visual representation of migrants, and summarized in the table above, can indeed be fruitfully applied to our case study. It is also sufficiently

clear that the overall representation of migrants that emerges is highly coherent, and cannot be described in terms of separate negative stereotypes and generalizations. So, for instance, the visual representation of young, male migrants systematically shows them unemployed, even if the issue of “migrants stealing our jobs” figures prominently in the public debate on migration. Sadly, it is also clear that this overall representation is a negative one. This is of course unsurprising, but our survey seems to indicate that this negative view conveys a subtle and deep de-humanization of migrants and especially migrant bodies. Closely analyzing scores of photos has left me with the strong impression that they are trying to send a clear message: *these people are deviant, their bodies themselves are deviant*. Again, such a message, if confirmed, would fit in a larger discourse on migration that has been prevalent in Italy for many years now.

I would nonetheless like to finish this preliminary work on a more optimistic note. In 2020 *La Nazione* launched a new web site on the issues of “Diversity, Inclusion and Cohesion”. The site is called *Luce* (light) and the editors claim that it is a new “editorial project, innovative and colorful”, that will look at current events to understand “a fluid society”. The website (<http://luce.lanazione.it>) is colorful indeed, and the focus is clearly on positive, uplifting stories. An analysis of this very interesting website is beyond the scope of this short work, but it is worth pointing out that my subjective impression is that of a rather image-centric site, with the type of news that might appeal to the generation who grew up on the hearts of Instagram, rather than the bitter fights of Facebook. More relevant for our research, the website also features photos of migrants that do not follow the features discussed above.

On this site, the topic of migration is still visualized through the categories that we examined above (and especially the use of crowded groups of people as a kind of image of migration itself), but there is clearly a conscious effort to depict migrants in a different light. Picture 12 shows a smiling African man engaged in active work, and the image within the image shows a diverse group of people looking straight at the viewer. The name of their association is displayed on a sign, and the overall impres-



**Top:** Picture 11: *La Nazione*, 10 October 2019

**Bottom:** Picture 12: Luce, 26 May 2021

sion is one of active engagement and inclusion. You can see the faces of the people in the picture and read their facial expression. You feel you can talk to these people. Whether this will be the main (or one of the main) ways to look at migrants in the future remains of course to be seen.

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## About the author

Federico Damonte earned his Masters degree in English (1998) and then his Ph.D in Linguistics (2004) at the University of Padua. His linguistic research focuses on language variation, dialectology and comparative syntax. He has done original research on European and African languages, and published extensively on these issues in academic refereed journals. He was a visiting scholar at the University of Leiden and led his own two-year Marie Curie-funded project at the University of Cambridge. He has taught extensively at several Italian and European Universities, including the University of Padua, Bologna, Cambridge and Frankfurt.

In his later research he focuses on the relationship between language variation and identity in Italy. After relocating to Florence 10 years ago he started working at American Study Abroad Programs (ISI Florence, Accademia Europea di Firenze, and CET), where he teaches courses related to Intercultural-Communication, and the relationship between identity and culture in Italy. He also designed the course "Diversity in Italy" which he teaches at ISI Florence. He was part of the founding team of ISI Florence journal "Beyond", devoted to International Education.