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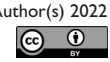
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# The improvised language of solidarity: Linguistic practices in the participatory labour-organizing processes of multi-ethnic migrant workers

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## Abstract

There are considerable language barriers facing the potential collective labour organization of multi-ethnic migrant workers. From the research literature, we know little about linguistic practices that might overcome these barriers. Based on an ethnographic study of the participatory organizing of S.I. Cobas multi-ethnic migrant workers in the Italian logistics sector, we point to three linguistic practices that help overcome language barriers – translation, lingua franca and humour. We theorize these three linguistic practices as constituting an 'improvised language of solidarity'. We argue that an improvised language of solidarity develops from, and can significantly support, participatory organizing.

## Keywords

communities of struggle, ethnography, improvised language of solidarity, language, migrant workers, participatory organizing, S.I. Cobas, solidarity

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## Introduction

There is growing interest in how trade unions can organize an increasingly diverse workforce (Alberti et al., 2013; Connolly et al., 2019; Holgate, 2005). A worldwide rise in international migration (IOM, 2020) is turning receiving countries into diverse societies. This suggests the need for developing multicultural solidaristic practices among trade unions interested in representing migrant workers' multiple needs effectively. The existing academic literature on labour organizing acknowledges that the linguistic and cultural diversity of migrant workers often can push migrant workers into precarious, low-paid job positions. Moreover, this diversity can act as a barrier to the collective organization of these workers (Heyes, 2009; Kaine and Josserand, 2018). This barrier has been sometimes navigated through recruitment strategies led by union officers sharing similar ethnic and cultural identities with migrant workers (Holgate, 2005) or has been overcome through free language classes allowing these (often ethnically homogeneous) groups of workers (Ciupijus et al., 2018) to improve knowledge of the local native language (e.g., Mustchin, 2012). However, most of these studies overlook how precarious multi-ethnic migrant workers and union organizers can overcome linguistic diversity and communicate in participatory, organizing settings (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021; Però, 2020). They also leave unexplored the politics of these organizing practices (Simms and Holgate, 2010), particularly the type of integration – either multicultural or assimilationist – that these organizational practices promote.

This article addresses these research gaps by examining data collected in the Italian context. In the past 40 years, Italy has moved from a country of emigration to one of immigration (Grillo and Pratt, 2002). In 2019, 8.4% of the population consisted of migrant residents. These migrants came from a diverse range of ethnocultural backgrounds[1] (ISTAT, 2020). Such diversity has started to be reflected in the membership of labour organizations. For example, thousands of international multi-ethnic migrant workers have built mutual solidarity and organized for over ten years in the Italian logistics sector (Benvegnù and Cuppini, 2018). As these workers had limited knowledge of the Italian language and they had a range of native languages, a key question to address, then, is: how can migrant workers build bonds and develop industrial initiatives despite language barriers? Specifically, how can communication across heterogeneous groups of migrant workers occur and facilitate participatory organizing?

Adopting an actor-centred approach[2] (Alberti and Però, 2018) and drawing on eight months of multi-site ethnography (Marcus, 1995) with multi-ethnic migrant workers of the Italian logistics sector and members of the social movement union, S.I. Cobas, we consider how these workers overcome significant ethnocultural and linguistic diversity and organize (see multicultural organizing in Però, 2011). We point to three key practices – translations, lingua franca and humour. We conceptualize these practices as constituting an 'improvised language of solidarity', which brings together multiple linguistic and cultural competencies, nourishes communication within and between different language groups[3] and facilitates the overall collective organizing process. Here we adopt Benjamin's (2021[1979]) broad interpretation of language, which sees language as more than just verbal communication. Language includes 'the tendency inherent in the subjects – technology, art, justice, or religion – concerned toward the communication of mental

meaning' (Benjamin, 2021[1979]: 85). Accordingly, although humour and translations may not lead to solidaristic outcomes (e.g., Ciupijus et al., 2018; Collinson, 1988), they can facilitate such outcomes. Theoretically, we argue that the improvised language of solidarity develops from, and can significantly support, participatory organizing (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021) within multi-ethnic communities of struggle (Però, 2020).

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the existing literature on migrant workers' organizing and linguistic practices. Second, we outline the methods adopted. Then, we describe the key features of S.I. Cobas. After that, we examine the language barriers that migrant workers experienced, with special reference to organizing. Subsequently, we outline three practices – translations, lingua franca and humour – which S.I. Cobas migrant workers used to overcome linguistic barriers and gain multiple outcomes. The final sections of the article present the theoretical contribution of our findings to understanding the underpinnings of migrant workers' collective organizing.

## Labour organizing and implications for union–migrant worker relations

Labour organizing has been described as an effective approach to represent migrant workers given its capacity to obtain workplace rights in precarious sectors (Connolly et al., 2019) and, therefore, reach out to the 'unorganizable' (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016). Compared to mobilizing, labour organizing entails worker organizational capacity, self-organization and autonomy rather than a short-term, bureaucratic, transactional relationship between labour organizers and workers (Han, 2014; Holgate et al., 2018). However, when implemented from the top (McAlevey, 2016) or as a depoliticized practice (Simms and Holgate, 2010), labour organizing, either in social movements or community settings, can remain bureaucratic and constrain the bottom-up initiatives of precarious migrant workers (Però, 2020).

That is, labour organizing can also be either bureaucratic or participatory. As Jiang and Korczynski (2021) note, bureaucratic[4] organizing refers to top-down, formal union relations, which can disconnect workers and worker experiences from union decision-making processes and activism. Instead, participatory organizing is a collective, relational form of labour organizing, which involves participative democracy and workers' direct, substantial engagement. Participatory organizing has important implications regarding what labour organizations are for – in relation to migrant workers (Simms and Holgate, 2010). The key question is whether unions act as assimilationist facilitators in the society of arrival or as participatory and multicultural projects. Trade unions as assimilationist facilitators might encourage migrant workers to observe and fit into local societies and rules by imposing extant procedures through bureaucratic organizing. By contrast, unions as multicultural projects would aim to recognize, appreciate and make room for cultural diversity, particularly in the union collective organizing processes.

Specifically, the existing literature on participatory organizing points to worker capacity to effectively associate through communities of struggle (Però, 2020) – multicultural, independent, agile, empowering communities of workers whose solidaristic bonds and reciprocal support are built in the process of creating action-oriented initiatives

collectively. Here, it is acknowledged that along with other precarious conditions, migrant workers may have limited knowledge of the language of the society in which they have relocated (Alberti and Però, 2018; Però, 2020). Nonetheless, how these workers can overcome language barriers and organize in a participatory and multicultural way is underexplored. In particular, we do not know what linguistic practices can inform and enable solidarity in this context.

## Migrant workers' linguistic practices in labour organizing: union-centred and actor-centred perspectives

From our ethnographic study, three practices – translations, lingua franca and humour – emerged as significant in overcoming language barriers. These practices were not identified a priori. A focus on linguistic practices in labour organizing is important because 'language' for many migrant workers constitutes an important 'barrier' to workplace solidarity (Thuesen, 2017) and inclusion within labour organizations (Alberti et al., 2013; Ciupijus et al., 2018; Heyes, 2009; Holgate, 2005; Jiang and Korczynski, 2016; Kaine and Josserand, 2018; Però, 2014, 2020). This barrier hinders communication and understanding between migrant workers and reinforces mutual distrust, lack of interest and tensions (Ogbonna and Harris, 2006; Swann et al., 2004).

By focusing on trade unions rather than workers (as argued in Atzeni, 2021; Jiang and Korczynski, 2016), studies of attempts to overcome the language barrier to organizing among multi-ethnic migrant workers have tended to examine linguistic practices that can be seen as bureaucratic and assimilationist rather than participatory and multicultural ones (Ciupijus et al., 2018; Connolly et al., 2019; Heyes, 2009; Holgate, 2005; Martínez Lucio and Perret, 2009; Mustchin, 2012). Yet, top-down practices such as like-recruits-like and free educational training may leave both migrant workers and union officers unsatisfied. For example, migrant workers may not feel represented by union officials with different ethnonational identities (Holgate, 2005), and union officers' hope to increase the union engagement of migrant workers through language courses may be frustrated (Mustchin, 2012). Even translations of union pamphlets, websites and leaflets (Ciupijus et al., 2018; Heyes, 2009; Kaine and Josserand, 2018; Mustchin, 2012) may convey solidarity through a 'language of bureaucracy' only (Lynch and Cruise, 2006: 38). This is the case when translations reflect formalized, standard, impersonal, hierarchically regulated sets of ideas rather than open and contextually negotiated meanings.

However, translations also acknowledge the 'reciprocal relationship' (Benjamin and Arendt, 1968: 74) between languages and, therefore, the role played by the cultural and linguistic skills of the migrant workers themselves as well as those of the labour organizers in overcoming language barriers. In participatory organizing, translations can occur not only 'outside the boardroom' (McAlevey, 2016: 42) but also in a collective, grassroots *improvised* way owing to the speed of action and the limited financial resources that are features of communities of struggle (Però, 2020). Montuori (2003) describes improvisation as the capacity to tolerate unclear and unusual situations (e.g., miscommunication) and use mistakes to creatively generate alternative possibilities 'on the spot' (241). Accordingly, to investigate the improvised language of solidarity that allows multi-ethnic migrant workers to overcome language barriers, we review the literature on

two additional improvised, socially embedded linguistic practices – lingua franca and humour.

Benjamin and Arendt (1968) note that translations may not be totally intelligible or transparent. Communication across different languages may lead actors to undertake an imaginative leap – in the process, creating a renewed, situational and shared language. This shared language can be interpreted as *lingua franca*. By this term, sociolinguistic scholars refer to a type of hybrid, pidgin language featuring shared simple and intermediary inter-linguistic, poly-lingual phrases that draw on different ethnolinguistic backgrounds (Guido, 2018; House, 2003). In the sphere of the organizing processes of participatory organizing, lingua franca as a multi-linguistic, collective production of an emergent, contextual, immediate and simpler way of communicating may support solidarity among diverse migrant workers. Although there are a few workplace studies examining lingua franca (e.g., Zheng and Smith, 2018), emerging particularly among upper-middle-class workers (Wise and Velayutham, 2020), the adoption of lingua franca in labour organizing and migrant workers' struggles remains unexplored.

Moreover, translations and lingua franca might not entirely overcome possible mistakes and misunderstandings linked to linguistic diversity. Humour, in addition, can help to overcome these communication problems by turning them into the comic (Bergson, 2009[1911]) – that is, the shared acknowledgement of ethnolinguistic challenges can cause genuine laughs. In turn, jokes and the resulting mutual sympathy can sustain communication. In Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) view, humour consists of joking behaviours, often involving playing with language. Jokes and banter can reflect linguistic and cultural features of certain societies (e.g., Ciupijus et al., 2018; Davies, 1990), but the fact that humour is contextual (Korczynski, 2011) increases its potential to emerge in situated multicultural settings (Wise and Velayutham, 2020). Research on workplace humour (e.g., Collinson, 1988; Korczynski, 2011) highlights that humour involves a shared understanding (Critchley, 2002) among the people involved, and it strengthens and extends this understanding. However, there are only a small number of studies acknowledging humour in migrant workers' organizing. These studies point to humour's role in mocking union bureaucracy (Ciupijus et al., 2018) and in attracting new members (Contrepois, 2015). Accordingly, there is limited analysis of the role that it can play as an organizing practice itself, perhaps because of its double-edged capacity to subvert and simultaneously maintain the status quo (Korczynski, 2011).

Overall, the study of multi-ethnic migrant workers' informal linguistic practices in participatory organizing has been underexplored. Translations have been largely studied in the formal sphere and, from the labour organizations' viewpoint, lingua franca overlooked, and humour has not been considered in relation to other language practices. The research foci of translations, lingua franca and humour are relevant for advancing scholarship on how language barriers among multi-ethnic migrant workers can be overcome and solidarity built.

In this article, therefore, we first investigate translations as practices emerging in both formal and informal organizing processes. Second, in line with extant studies on lingua franca, we examine if and how it is organically developed as a socially embedded, cosmopolitan practice to navigate linguistic diversity (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018; Wise and Velayutham, 2020). Specifically, we examine if and how lingua franca can

become an organizing practice that helps build solidarity and facilitate communication in migrant workers' struggles. Third, we also study humour as an additional improvised organizing practice. We mainly look at teasing, mocking and bantering[5] (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) among union members as these humour types unfold through peer relations (Korczynski, 2011). We examine how humour can help to cope and recover from tensions and repetitive, tedious behaviours, and the awareness of humour can lead to informal acts of resistance (Korczynski, 2003, 2011; Scott, 1990), reinforcing in-group belonging and challenging oppressive authority. Put differently, we investigate how humour and knowing humour (Korczynski, 2011) – the humour emerging from the shared understanding of, in this case, the frustration deriving from language barriers – can facilitate participatory organizing. Similarly, we investigate how this practice can nourish (rather than fracture, as argued in Collinson, 1988) multicultural 'communities of struggle' (Però, 2020).

## Methods

This article draws on an ethnographic study carried out by the first author mainly between August 2017 and March 2018 as part of a wider research project on migrant workers organizing in the Italian logistics sector. The ethnographic fieldwork was multi-sited (Marcus, 1995): Bologna and Milan were the main sites, but data collection also occurred in Rome, Modena and Prato. The fieldwork included 124 participant observations held during public and private union meetings, picket lines, strikes, demonstrations, help-desks, cafés and social gatherings led by migrant workers, S.I. Cobas union organizers, members and allies. Reflexivity towards the positionality of the first author, as a white, Italian, female researcher, has been a constant part of this study. Because of her appearance and notepad, migrant workers sometimes presumed the first author to be an activist or an unwelcome journalist, and asked for union advice or withdrew accordingly. Yet, over time, most of them came to consider the first author as a 'daughter' or 'sister' because of her gender and age. Moreover, knowledge about her being a migrant in the UK with experience of precarious jobs helped rapport-building with migrant workers and favoured an in-depth understanding of their struggles. As the union did not provide regular language training, the first author volunteered for four months as an Italian language teacher. Classes were free and optional. Power differentials due to potential internalized behaviour expectations were lessened by setting an easy-going environment (e.g., sitting in a circle).

Regarding the research ethics, participation was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw at any point from conversations and interviews and regardless of the attendance to the language classes. Verbal consent was checked in conversation, interview and recorded interview. Participants have been anonymized and personal information concealed to reduce the risk of potential harm. Participant observation was overt, with the researcher's role clarified at any possible occasion.[6] To avoid being associated with union organizers because of sharing a similar ethnic and cultural background, the first author used to physically position herself among migrant workers (e.g., sitting and standing with them during assemblies and collective actions). Detailed notes of participant observations and informal conversations were written on paper. The first author – who

had already been nicknamed 'the journalist' because of her constant writing activity – acknowledged the importance of building rapport and maintaining the union organizing process as a safe, informal space rather than violating it with cameras or voice-recorders. Some notes were written after the collective actions took place and 'on the move' (e.g., in members' cars and/or on public transport), as participant observations of migrant workers' struggles often occurred in the cold and dark. The first author wrote extensive notes on participants' actions, interactions and views, including words or phrases in languages other than Italian. Afterwards, the spelling of these words and phrases was checked with participants.

Several preliminary informal and non-directive conversations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) were important to identify potential participants and widen research themes. To investigate multi-ethnic migrant workers' organization, most of the interviewees were sampled according to participants' migrant status, occupation and union membership. As S.I. Cobas members mainly included male migrant workers, it was not possible to conduct gender-balanced interviews. Key concerns also shaping interviews were the capacity and willingness of migrant workers to conduct a conversation and safety issues. This study included over 75 interviewees (see Table 1; interviewees' demographics available as an online data supplement), lasting on average 50 minutes and involving 56 migrant workers. Not all interviews ($N = 28$) were recorded as participants often felt wary of being recorded. Migrant workers' linguistic diversity and various levels of competence require clarification regarding how communication occurred in the research process. Most of the interviews and conversations were conducted in Italian. Although this choice constrained contact with those participants who did not speak Italian fluently, it allowed the first author to have first-hand experience of the language practices outlined in this article and build rapport and solidarity with S.I. Cobas members. Specifically, when ideas and concepts were difficult to convey, migrant workers and the first author crosschecked mutual understanding through videos, photos and documents (e.g., payrolls and work contracts).

Moreover, mastering multilinguistic and mispronounced words in the data collection process contributed to developing an emic (Harris, 1976) position within the field, as the first author immersed herself into actors' everyday practices, ways of speaking and thinking, and sought to understand these struggles from the viewpoint of migrant workers. Transcriptions and translations of participants' views are presented in this spirit. Aware of the challenge of keeping the original content in the translation and analysis process, we kept keywords and phrases in the original and translated languages. The authors' multi-linguistic expertise in both English and Italian aided their capacity to reach consensus over meaning.

Data analysis was conducted following a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2008) and a theory-building technique (Anteby, 2008) whereby abstract and analytical theories were outlined using individuals' accounts of their unionizing experiences. Interviews were transcribed and analysed in parallel with fieldnotes derived from observations, informal conversations and focus groups. Transcripts, fieldnotes and cultural artefacts were considered several times to thoroughly explore if there were recurrent themes and patterns in interactions. Unexpected topics (e.g., lingua franca) were coded separately and further investigated with participants. As is common in

ethnographic research, the first author reflexively considered key issues emerging during the data collection phase. These practices emerged as significant, and the first author thereafter paid close attention to collecting data on these practices through observation and interview questions. Triangulation (Anteby, 2008) with other data such as observations, and mainstream union officers' accounts when available, was conducted to crosscheck the validity and coherence of the findings.

Themes were worked out (Gioia et al., 2013) as follows: the first author compared incidents (e.g., shared use of Arabic words) and identified first-order, informant-centric codes (e.g., S.I. Cobas language). The constant comparison between the extant literature and first-order codes allowed all authors to identify second-order, theory-centric themes (e.g., lingua franca). In line with the grounded theory guidelines (Glaser and Strauss, 2008), the first author examined reiterating themes and patterns, coded them and searched for differences and similarities. Once the dominant emergent themes were identified (e.g., language and solidarity), we compared them with the relevant existing academic literature, and possible integration to theories were outlined and delimited. After collectively discussing second-order themes and evaluating alternative frameworks (Anteby, 2008) such as 'backstage solidarity processes', the second author identified the broader concept of a language of solidarity. We also conducted additional consultations with the literature (e.g., Benjamin and Arendt, 1968) to refine the articulation of emergent concepts and relationships.

## S.I. Cobas

S.I. Cobas stands for inter-branch union of the committee of the base unions. It was founded in 2010 and, since then, its membership has reached approximately twenty thousand. The union organizes for fair wages and work contracts and basic rights such as breaks and sick leave. These grievances have mainly been pursued in the Italian logistics sector. Here, multinational companies outsource warehouse work to contractors that underpay workers to increase competitiveness (Benvegnù and Cuppini, 2018; Cioce et al., 2022). Accordingly, work is low-paid, contracts are insecure and workers (often migrants) face discriminatory, derogatory treatment – as Haile (Eritrean union shop steward, Milan) sums up:

> We were spending 16 hours at the warehouse to work for only 5 hours. Breaks were not paid, and the salary was meagre. We were earning 400 euros per month. One day, there was not much work. We waited for 4 hours without getting paid. (. . .) Sometimes, we were addressed as 'You, black come here.'

S.I. Cobas is mainly populated by young male multi-ethnic migrant workers who have experienced extreme and precarious working conditions. However, its core union organizers were politicized in the 1980s workers' self-organizing efforts in the Italian automobile industry. The union emerged as a social movement union (Moody, 1997), being militant, relying on a broad network of allies, and featuring high engagement levels. In particular, S.I. Cobas is a grassroots project where actors tended to be critical of mainstream unions, albeit for different reasons. Migrant workers had felt neglected by

mainstream unions when they reached out to them, whereas S.I. Cobas native organizers, who had often sought to operate as 'vanguard' union shop stewards, judged that exercising pressure within mainstream unions was not worth it and organized independently. The latter group, accordingly, self-defines as 'militants' to distinguish their radical views and rank and file practices from the moderate and cooperative-with-management approach embraced by mainstream union officers. Also, S.I. Cobas adopts traditional forms of collective actions such as strikes, picket lines and blockades, and the politics of their struggles link organizing with the ideology of class conflict (Korczynski, 2001). Although some union members held an ideological commitment to class conflict, many migrant workers came to support such organizing practices because of their effectiveness in obtaining concrete results.

S.I. Cobas' collective actions benefit from allies' solidarity, which contributes to making these struggles effective. Allies include other grassroots organizations like social centres, student movements and migrant workers' communities. As S.I. Cobas has scarce institutional recognition and material resources, allies' solidarity helps counterbalance the union's weak bargaining power with engagement and participation (as argued in Turner, 2007), contributing to exercising pressure on employers and public officers. Finally, like the British 'indie unions' (Però, 2020) – labour organizations emerging outside mainstream unions and led or co-led by precarious migrant workers – S.I. Cobas's organizing practices are centred around migrant workers. S.I. Cobas militants do not act as mere representatives for migrant workers (Mešić, 2017) and regard migrant workers as holding a high capacity for self-organization and engagement in decision-making and industrial action. A key element of these collective practices involves the improvised language of solidarity.

## Overcoming organizing barriers through the improvised language of solidarity

In the following sections, we first outline the critical language barriers that precarious multi-ethnic migrant workers face when organizing in the logistics sector. We then detail how the three language practices that constitute an improvised language of solidarity played a key role in overcoming these barriers. Finally, we outline the important collective outcomes that these workers achieved from organizing through these language practices.

### *Language barriers*

Around 90% of S.I. Cobas members were multi-ethnic migrant workers, and, being first-generation immigrants, they developed a primarily linguistic upbringing in the society of origin. They came from over 15 different countries spanning from South America, Africa, South Asia to Eastern Europe, and experienced several language barriers further to this highly diverse composition. They usually had very limited knowledge of each other's languages and little time to develop Italian language skills because of their precarious working conditions. Although almost all union shop stewards were

proficient in Italian, many migrant workers communicated only in their native language within their language group. Conversations among multi-ethnic workers were, therefore, difficult to conduct. Bohdan (Ukrainian union shop steward, Rome) noted: 'We are Ukrainians, Eritreans, Nigerians and Romanians. Many of us cannot speak properly, and even when things are explained to those that understand the Italian language better, we might not understand.'

The majority of S.I. Cobas members spoke Arabic. As this language displays high lexical diversity from Italian, a substantial proportion of them struggled to converse in Italian. The rest of the migrant workers could conduct stilted conversations in English or Latin-derived languages like French and Romanian. These workers could be native speakers of these languages or learn them because of former colonial dominations in the place of origin (e.g., Senegalese and Bangladeshi workers). Nonetheless, the migrant workers who felt comfortable speaking Italian could have their understanding made more problematic by local linguistic variations, as a few union militants spoke primarily in a form of Italian heavily influenced by local dialect. Abd (Moroccan union shop steward, Bologna) smilingly recalled that one initial phone call to S.I. Cobas militants was not enough to set a meeting as their poor command of the language sometimes met natives' high variety of local dialects (Coluzzi, 2009): 'The first time I talked to Tony [militant in S.I. Cobas], I did not understand a thing. He talked in Roman vernacular, and I did not understand.'

Before they organized with S.I. Cobas, poor work-time conditions meant that many migrant workers did not have the time and headspace to improve linguistics skills through local or online services, staying at work for ten to sixteen hours per day. Yet, even after their working conditions improved, migrant workers still lacked time to attend language training because new commitments had replaced the time they had earned back with their struggles. They assisted their family with day-to-day activities (e.g., taking children to school, shopping), participated in religious events, and attended union collective actions. To confirm this point further, although the first author arranged free language classes on Sundays in consultation with S.I. Cobas, these were poorly attended, either because of lack of spare time or because of overlapping work shifts. Nonetheless, the sections below show that migrant and native union members developed simple yet effective practices favouring communication within their existing linguistic competence. Translations, lingua franca and humour worked symbiotically as an improvised language of solidarity to overcome language barriers and allowed union members to organize.

## *Translations*

This section shows how translations allowed migrant workers to overcome language barriers, circulate information, and build and strengthen in-group and inter-group solidarity and participation. We analyse formal, informal, interpreted and written translations, and we examine the critical role of grassroots cultural mediators who contributed to bringing together union members' views and engagement.

Formal and informal translations were developed either in a written or in a oral format. Given the union's scarce financial resources and its translators' volunteer status, its members only rarely developed leaflets and official documents written in the major languages

spoken by migrant workers. These documents aimed to promote and clarify the point of general strikes or support campaigns organized beyond workplace issues (e.g., the March for Freedom in Prato against the approval of the Italian Security and Immigration Law). Nonetheless, after being added on social media by migrant workers, the first author noted that they also informally updated their (transnational) network by posting in their native language a summary of their collective actions. Automatic translations on social media facilitated these struggles, as Geelan and Hodder (2017) note. Migrant workers translated S.I. Cobas' messages and documents and shared them on social media, broadcasting and promoting union activities in foreign languages and language groups that the union could not have reached otherwise. As Muhammad (Pakistani shop steward, Bologna) noted, these language groups included work, ethnic, national and religious relations:

> I share what we do on Facebook. I write in Italian, Arabic or I use the translator. Friends from Pakistan, the Mosque or my colleagues and neighbours then call me and want to know what we are doing. Sometimes they also repost or attend our actions.

Muhammad's written informal translations not only helped to disseminate information to other migrant workers and overcome linguistic barriers. They also contributed to building solidarity and participation, either through the mere act of reposting union content on social media or by joining organizing initiatives. Additionally, interpretations occurred during most of the union activities. These translations were conducted by grassroots cultural mediators who explained and clarified information between migrant workers and native speakers. These mediators were either spokespersons chosen by the migrant workers themselves or S.I. Cobas union members who stepped forward as volunteers. There were different grassroots cultural mediators for each language group. This was important as one warehouse could include migrant workers belonging to different groups. These mediators were chosen as a result of their good communicative skills, and they were likely to become union shop stewards. Some of them provided their linguistic competencies beyond their workplace, becoming reference points within their language groups and the union itself. As the example below shows, these grassroots cultural mediators played a critical role through favouring union engagement and supporting mutual understanding between native union members and the migrant workers who did not speak Italian well:

> Bologna. Assembly outside the SDA warehouse. Three union organizers update a hundred workers on the ongoing negotiations with the employers. Four union shop stewards translate to each relevant group (Moroccan, Eritreans, Tunisians, Pakistani). One Moroccan worker takes the megaphone and asks a question in Italian. Union organizers reply and shop stewards translate. Shop stewards help translate workers' and organizers' conversation until the end of the assembly. (PO_24Nov2017)

Here, union shop stewards acting as grassroots cultural mediators provided prompt interpretations that informed migrant workers (Heyes, 2009) while ensuring inter- and intra-group communication and participation of all S.I. Cobas in the union negotiating and organizing process. Specifically, although any translation can lead to a loss of content (Benjamin and Arendt, 1968), these translations often helped migrant workers to develop

a new, situational and shared understanding of labour organizing. Many migrant workers did not have first-hand experiences of workplace struggles and attached their meanings to it, using their interests, language and beliefs. In many migrant workers' views, labour organizing meant a capacity to meet needs that went beyond workplace-based achievements. For example, Muhammad – a Pakistani warehouse worker who had been S.I. Cobas shop steward for over five years – defined union victories in terms of 'resident permit' and 'family reunion'. He joined the union after meeting at work another migrant worker employed as a truck driver in another city. Logistics transport and delivery services across different cities enabled multi-ethnic migrant workers to transfer and spread news and views among one another. The conversation occurred in Arabic, although the migrant workers had different ethnic affiliations:

> Goods arrived from Milan, and we found out. The truck driver, he spoke Arabic, told us about the strike in Milan. He said they gained all rights and a proper work contract. They could pay taxes and get the resident permit. That meant to us that we could finally bring our families here. (Muhammad, Pakistani shop steward, Bologna)

However, some ideas and concepts were difficult to pin down and convey directly by simply using another word, requiring further explanations and clarifications. Migrant workers checked their understanding, especially with grassroots cultural mediators and union shop stewards. Abd recalled hearing frequently the word 'lotta' (Italian, struggle) without knowing its meaning, and only after he asked for clarifications could he find the equivalent Arabic word 'Malaka':

> To me, it was the first time I heard the word 'lotta' as I did not know what it meant. I asked my friend who understands Italian, and he said, 'Malaka means *lotta*'. Then, I realized my role in front of the workplace, I mean, what you have to do, you have to 'lottare' [to struggle], Malaka, to get your rights recognized. (Abd, Moroccan union shop steward, Bologna)

Translations can thus produce an epiphany (Giordano, 2008). This translation promoted Abd's understanding of his positionality within the struggle and boosted his motivation. He connected with his ongoing unionizing experience by relating to it with his own linguistic and cultural background and associating its meaning to an experience of labour organizing emerging at the *intersection* of his multiple identities, being an Arabic-speaking, male, migrant, warehouse worker. 'Malaka', then, referred to his own way of organizing. This informal translation 'gave birth' to a meaning of its own, as Benjamin and Arendt (1968: 69) argue, when they say, 'even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually be absorbed by its renewal'. It conveyed the idea of making an effort to achieve the desired outcome, particularly picketing and striking outside the warehouse. Overall, translations and grassroots cultural mediators allowed migrant workers to communicate despite having different language expertise, and encouraged solidarity, participation and the production of subjective, multicultural understandings of these struggles. The next section explores lingua franca, the second practice underpinning the development of a shared language of solidarity and one that emerges from migrant workers' capacity to attach their meanings to labour organizing.

## Lingua franca

Here we analyse migrant workers' lingua franca, intended as an immediate, contextual, shared language allowing union members to communicate through ethnocultural diverse and mispronounced words.

Lingua franca unfolded in the broad space of participatory organizing, as the willingness to conduct these struggles brought together native union militants and migrant workers speaking different languages, scattered in various cities and employed in different warehouses. All S.I. Cobas members contributed to creating inter-linguistic phrases, either incorporating or simplifying words. Lingua franca was adopted in conversations on social media and face-to-face settings like assemblies, meetings and collective actions. Nino (native union militant, Milan) noted that the collaborative dimension of organizing contributed to the emergence of lingua franca as S.I. Cobas' struggles extensively relied on the strength of the numbers and migrant workers' participation: 'collective actions depend on worker self-organization. To do so, we need to talk to each other, no matter what words we use or how we speak.'

As the fieldnotes below show, lingua franca encouraged migrant workers sharing concerns, interacting along with different ethnic groups, offering and receiving personal, 'interethnic support' (Thuesen, 2017). Lingua franca was mostly employed in the process of organizing. The Arabic word 'haram' (literally: *forbidden*) was incorporated in everyday conversations by native workers and militants to refer to some actions or ideas that it was not possible to pursue. For instance, Nerio (native union militant, former warehouse worker) stated: '[we] cannot organize an assembly this Sunday. Haram this Sunday. My wife and children need me at home at least this weekend' (PO_17Dec2017). Here, Nerio used this word to emphasize that the idea he wanted to convey was understood. However, the fact that Nerio used the word 'haram' without being a native Arabic speaker had the effect of lightening the atmosphere, as the migrant workers smiled sympathetically to him and asked to schedule the meeting afterwards. Likewise, 'jalla – jalla' (Arabic, *hurry up*!) was used by non-Arabic speakers to go back to important matters after off-topic themes and jokes were raised, and S.I. Cobas members wanted to go back to work peacefully. 'Aywa' (Arabic, *got it*) was understood by non-Arabic speakers and was adopted to signify good news:

> Milan. Union branch, smoking area. Faizal (Moroccan union member): 'We finally agreed on a good severance pay!' Salah (Egyptian union shop steward) replies: 'Aywa! Dinner is on you!' (PO_8Jan2018)

Arabic- and non-Arabic-speaking workers also laughed and commented on employers' responses to their claims with 'walo – walo' (*nothing*, *nothing*) to acknowledge that the union negotiations were not moving forward. Non-Spanish speakers and Peruvian workers adopted similar practices, using even more unrefined Spanish phrases such as 'a la hueva' (figuratively, *half-assed*). An example can be found in the fieldnotes extract below:

> Mairano. Picket line. The union organizer reports that the negotiations stalled. One shop steward says 'walo, walo' and the nearby workers shake their heads. Another worker shouts, 'a la hueva'. Spanish-speaking workers snort. All members discuss when to end the picket line. (PO_13Nov2017)

Migrant workers, whose countries had been victims of British colonialism, would also adopt English words, for instance, addressing S.I. Cobas and trade unions in general as 'labour unions'. Yet, most of lingua franca words were Arabic ones because of the Arabic language's lexical diversity. Migrant workers speaking Latin-derived languages had better chances of being immediately understood by natives, simply by using mispronounced words as these languages share a high level of lexical similarity with the Italian one. Mispronounced words became part of everyday conversations: for instance, the union branch 'sede', turned into 'sedia', namely 'chair' or the word 'coperativa' (contractor) turned into a meaningless word 'comprativa' that sounded in its meaning more linked to buying, rather than sharing. In the moment of pronouncing them, the joke was set. These jokes contributed to making migrant workers feel at ease, regardless of language barriers; as Gaucho (Ecuadorian union shop steward, Milan) noted: 'When strange words come up, we can only smile. It is difficult to speak in another language, so it is okay to make mistakes.'

The acceptance and incorporation of linguistic mistakes allowed Gaucho and other workers to speak freely. As the next section shows, jokes helped to create a relaxed environment and to establish a sense of conviviality and informality. The migrant workers in command of lingua franca displayed being a group member, and the group 'jargon' contributed to strengthening group members' intimacy and trust.

When migrant workers talked in their native languages, they would often use and pronounce Italian words, such as 'busta paga' (payroll) or 'sciopero' (strike). Melania pointed out that native members, therefore, were not concerned with what migrant workers were discussing in foreign languages as the main themes discussed were comprehensible:

> I hear 'busta paga' and know what is going on. There are few militants, so it is good that workers share information. If they argue with each other, we ask what the problem is. They trust our advice because we are there for them. (Melania, native union militant, Bologna)

Participant observations confirmed that migrant workers would seek and accept S.I. Cobas militants' advice, even during heated conversations, because of the bonds established through organizing and the easy-going union environment. Conflicts did not emerge because of the linguistic diversity, and migrant workers were not criticized for speaking in minority ethnic languages. As Melania stated, the ability to interact in a multilinguistic way assisted the flow of labour organizing.

Notably, lingua franca helped to build solidarity among migrant and native union members. Solidarity among all S.I. Cobas members, either foreigner or native speakers, emerged from managing to accept and overcome language barriers together by speaking through lingua franca. When the first author pointed out this aspect to migrant workers, they were often aware of it. Answering her question about communication within S.I. Cobas and its interlinguistic, pidgin texture, Abd observed:

> Yes, we speak mixed Italian. This is going to be the future as Italy is getting enriched by immigrants from all nations. In Italy, there are Africans, Asians, and South Americans, like in the USA. The Italian language will enmesh with other languages; you will see. As S.I. Cobas, we are inventing another language. (Abd, Moroccan union shop steward, Bologna)

Abd made clear migrant workers' awareness of Italy's ongoing transformation into a highly diverse society and the possibility of adopting such practice to overcome language barriers beyond labour organizing. Moreover, the link between linguistic diversity and union engagement shows the broader ethnocultural self-worth and agency that migrant workers developed through these struggles. Yet, communicating through practices like lingua franca and translations was not free from difficulties, and the next section explains how humour contributed to overcoming such difficulties and organizing in a multicultural and participatory way.

## *Humour*

This section investigates the role played by humour, particularly knowing humour, in addressing language barriers and organizing. We argue that teasing and mockery relieved union members from tensions caused by miscommunication and related tedious, repetitive behaviours (of the sort observed by Collinson, 1988; Fine, 1988). Also, we acknowledge that this practice facilitated informal acts of resistance, turning migrant workers' language barriers and diversity into a tactic of organizing.

Teasing and mockery occurred frequently and were often used to make a benevolent joke about somebody or a particular situation. In both cases, humour often evolved around language issues, and both migrant workers and natives performed it. As noted in the previous section, migrant workers used to mildly tease each other for the way they mispronounced Italian words, often incorporating these jokes as an embedded feature of their lingua franca repertoire. Yet sometimes lingua franca was not enough to overcome the language barrier, particularly during heated situations like union assemblies where future actions were collectively discussed. Native members and migrant workers acknowledged these language barriers and tolerated those repetitive conversations. For instance, Antonio felt that he was unlearning Italian and was tired of repeating the same concepts, but he also acknowledged the difficulty of the migrant workers' position:

> I forget the Italian language. I frequently talk with infinitive forms of the verbs. They say they have understood, but they misinterpret my words, and I ask myself how it is possible. This is the biggest challenge. I talk to Senegalese, Moroccan, Eritreans, and you see if they got it by the way they look at you. I must reduce my point strictly to the simplest words I can find. I know I would have many difficulties learning Arabic. I would probably understand nothing. (Antonio, Southern Italian union shop steward, Bologna)

This linguistic challenge amplified during assemblies and larger meetings. Migrant workers could repeat questions and ask for clarifications many times, making assemblies last over three hours, which was experienced as boring. For instance, during an assembly of all the union shop stewards in Bologna and its province, the atmosphere remained tense for a long time given the serious matters discussed – a three-week struggle which was not leading to the expected results. The fact that upset migrant workers were repeating the same points and problems made the situation first boring and frustrating but later humorous as they started mocking each other:

> Some migrant workers did not catch up with the overall discussion and ask the same questions that the majority dealt with before. Union shop stewards randomly give answers to them. After receiving some polite answers, one migrant worker asks again why the strike is not occurring the day immediately afterwards. One of his colleagues says, 'it's a national demonstration! Stop talking!' The upset migrant worker laughs. Everybody laughs. (PO_11Oct2017)

In line with Bergson's (2009[1911]) insights on humour, laughs here emerged because repetitive behaviours interfered with actors' expectations of the contextual, acceptable, communication flow (see also Korczynski, 2011). Providing an answer to fellow migrant workers did not lead to a laugh in itself, but the number of times that the same actions had been enacted provoked the laughter. Humour then saved union members from hostility and mistrust formed by the language barrier, repetitions and the difficult issues discussed during the assembly. The following fieldwork notes show that humour worked in the same way if native workers and union militants were the targets of the joke, as all union members could adopt lingua franca and repeat distorted words to make sure that their point was understood. In this case, one native union militant spoke lingua franca and mispronounced words over the phone, while migrant workers emphasized the absurdity of the conversation:

> Nerio on the phone: 'No, they [*the employers*] cannot do it. No, tell them it's *Haram*. You–to call–to call–the other union shop stewards. To t-a-l-k t-o-g-e-t-h-e-r!' One migrant worker enters the room where Nerio is speaking on the phone. He looks at the rest of the workers in the corridor and asks: 'what is he saying?' Everybody laughs. (PO_22Nov2017)

Nerio, native union militant, did not aim to be humorous. By pointing at Nerio's absurd language, the migrant worker teased Nerio while building a playful moment for him and the rest of the migrant workers who witnessed the phone call. This playfulness helped Nerio to wind down, but it also nourished trust and understanding with migrant workers and eased language expectations. Language jokes often extended to cultural beliefs, particularly when migrant workers from different ethnic groups had strong relationships and addressed each other as *brothers*. The basic assumption was that the ability to speak the Italian language was often praised as an open-minded, multicultural attitude, whereas an 'inability', specifically when migrant workers had lived in Italy for many years already, pointed to narrow-minded behaviours. This assumption was extended to justify jokes about ethnocultural differences. For example, some migrant workers referred to linguistics issues to play around being a 'modern' Muslim against a 'backward' one. Rather than spending time only with their own particular ethnic or religious community, a 'modern Muslim' would engage more with locals, improve linguistic skills and adjust to local ideas and practices. Yet, as many migrant workers were not 'proficient' in the Italian language, they teased each other for hours on mistakes and beliefs, engendering conviviality and reinforcing friendship, as this playful banter between Sakho and Salah (Senegalese and Egyptian union shop stewards) on a picket line in Milan illustrates:

*Sakho:* 'You are not a modern Muslim! You are obsolete! I am Modern'.
*Salah:* '(laugh) How so?'

*Sakho:* 'you do not speak Italian, brother!'
*Salah:* 'you do not speak Italian either. You speak French and pretend to speak Italian!' Everybody laughs. (PO_30Oct2017)

Sakho teased Salah regarding his religious beliefs by drawing on his language 'incompetence'. The joke was made as they both did not speak Italian fluently. This 'call and response' (Wise and Velayutham, 2020: 912) sequence showed reciprocity in the interaction (Kehily and Nayak, 1997) and how they individually navigated the language barriers, either relying on a particular language and religious network or speaking a Latin-derived language and hoping to be equally understood. This type of banter often occurred during long-lasting picket lines. Migrant workers got bored waiting for employers' responses and made language-related jokes to kill time.[7] The shared acceptance and understanding of the reciprocal and somewhat clumsy attempts to navigate linguistic diversity with the concrete means available to all union members often led to smiles of complicity, displaying the union members' awareness of their humorous way to communicate. Critically, this practice also encouraged indirect and direct acts of resistance. The following example shows how teasing nourished new and existing solidarity bonds among individuals belonging to different language groups while perhaps frustrating the employer:

Bologna, union negotiation. 8 pm. Alan [native union militant] asked me why I first author was not teaching Italian properly as Muhammad seemed to have worsened. All laughed. Muhammad admits and explains he has not come to class recently. The employer comes closer to buy a coffee. The other union shop stewards stress Muhammad makes his point clear, nonetheless. We laugh again. The employer quietly walks away. (PO_23Feb2018)

Like in the previous example, the joke involved migrant workers' linguistic issues, it produced reciprocal acceptance and deepened members' in-group solidarity. By being humorous around Muhammad's limited linguistic 'competence', Alan emphasized his important contribution as a union shop steward. He diverted the butt of the joke, blaming the first author, an outsider, for Muhammad's linguistic issues. Yet, this example of teasing made union members and sympathetic actors feel part of the community. Muhammad felt appreciated, and, by taking the joke, the first author received acceptance and inclusion. In line with Collinson's (1988) study of working-class masculinity and humour, not only was the first author's ability to tolerate the joke tested but her position, too. However, the joke did not fracture this particular gender-diverse group. The joke was not directed to a 'weak member', as the first author's presence could have been somehow intimidating, being a woman but also a white, native researcher volunteering as a teacher. Also, humour here was used to directly mock the employer, when the other migrant workers made sure he heard that Muhammad was capable of representing their interests despite language barriers. The employer probably did not find the joke humorous at all, given that he was still dealing with the union negotiations that had been temporarily paused.

More broadly, humour had a twofold role: it helped to overcome the language barriers and build solidarity, and it contributed to frustrating employers and police officers, generating creative 'acts of informal resistance' (Scott, 1990). 'Knowing humour'

(Korczynski, 2011: 1434) meant actors' *understanding of* the linguistics issues and the related jokes and *using it* as an informal tactic of resistance to regain agency, display pride, combativeness and pursue their interests. As the fieldwork extract below shows, this practice could also turn into a concrete, direct, organizing tactic when migrant workers aware of not speaking well spontaneously volunteered to deal with police officers, to gain some more time for union militants and shop stewards to brainstorm and decide what to do:

> Bologna. Picket line. Two police vans park down the road. Police officers now outnumber the migrant workers. The police commander asks to talk to the union representative. One migrant worker quickly looks at union militants and shop stewards and smiling says: 'I go'. He keeps repeating 'ain't no rights' to the police officers, while the rest of the union members discuss the next move. (PO_04Nov2017)

In sum, by facilitating the expression of sympathy and understanding, the building of social cohesiveness and the strengthening of union members' relations, humour complemented translations and lingua franca and reinforced the overall improvised language of solidarity.

## *Outcomes*

We now review the outcomes of the collective actions of S.I. Cobas multi-ethnic migrant workers that their improvised language of solidarity helped to achieve. We examine material and subjective gains and reflect on this process's significance regarding migrant workers' organizational capacity.

Material gains included formal work contracts, basic rights like breaks, seniority levels, on-the-job injuries, and annual and sick leave. Critically, major multinational companies signed an agreement that compels employers to rehire workers when contractors change – an achievement that can change the unregulated nature of the Italian logistics sector (Benvegnù and Cuppini, 2018). At the subjective level, multi-ethnic migrant workers increased their sense of agency. The union became the space where they could talk, be heard and address issues experienced at work and beyond; as Muhammad noted: 'If anything happens to my family or me, I go and ask S.I. Cobas members. They help me with it' (Muhammad, Pakistani union shop steward, Bologna).

Yet, along with receiving support from the union, workers themselves played a significant role in building their struggles as translations, lingua franca and humour favoured migrant workers' participation within decision-making processes:

> Bologna, union branch. Union militants and shop stewards outline the details of the picket line ahead. Lucy notices that the workflow is higher during her work shift starting at 5 am and suggests rearranging the plan. She repeats herself as a few Arab-speaking workers did not understand. Asma (female Moroccan union shop steward) translates and explains Lucy's argument for all, emphasizing the words '5 am'. One migrant worker asks: 'Is there a party at 5 am?' Everybody laughs. As the picket line would be much more effective, the plan changes accordingly. (PO_12Dec2017)

Lucy (female Romanian union member) provided critical information in the collective organizing process. She displayed attention to the details of the labour process, and this type of scrutiny and coming forward contributed to making S.I. Cobas's action effective. All union members came to a shared decision by navigating linguistic diversity through such improvised language of solidarity. Migrant workers' organizational capacity also stood out when they developed unpredictable acts of resistance (as noted above) and work stoppages – walk-outs that they self-organized to immediately respond to employers breaching agreements or managements' bad practices. Overall, adopting these linguistic practices in contentious, precarious and highly diverse contexts allowed multi-ethnic migrant workers to build solidarity and support promptly while often organizing successfully.

## Discussion

The increase in worldwide international migration (IOM, 2020) suggests the need for developing effective and multicultural practices within labour organizations. Although there is agreement on participatory organizing as a key approach to effectively building collective actions and solidarity among precarious migrant workers (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021), the extant literature offers limited insights regarding how linguistic barriers can be addressed in the context of multi-ethnic communities of struggle (Però, 2020). This article addressed this gap by examining three improvised, grassroots practices that help overcome these barriers among multi-ethnic migrant workers organizing in the Italian logistics sector. It explored how the 'linguistic' (broadly defined; Benjamin, 2021[1979]) practices of translations, lingua franca and humour can facilitate the solidaristic and participatory processes through which migrant workers organize effectively despite ethnocultural diversity. Each practice, on its own, does not allow multi-ethnic migrant workers to overcome linguistic barriers entirely, but, when combined together, these practices can help to meet their immediate communication needs, to develop a shared understanding and to recover from mistakes and tensions.

In particular, we showed how linguistic practices, rather than being designed and executed from organizers to promote worker activism (e.g., Han, 2014), can collectively develop from and support participatory organizing (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021). We noted that union members collectively produced interpreted and written translations in both improvised and formal settings. Contrary to the union-led translations of bureaucratic organizing, translations were not a matter of union militants only and their dominant language. Migrant workers used their foreign language and word-of-mouth channels (both digital and non-mediated ones) to understand and promote organizing activities. Those workers who acted as grassroots cultural mediators enriched union actions and representations with diverse meanings and interests, whereas improvised, contextually negotiated translations allowed migrant workers to frame organizing experiences in their own terms and increase their union engagement.

Moreover, whereas translations increased the shared knowledge of foreign and native words (e.g., *Haram; Sciopero*), lingua franca reduced the need for translating such words. Borrowing the term from sociolinguistic studies (Guido, 2018; House, 2003), we considered lingua franca as a contextual and simplified language. That is, by informally

adopting and sharing native, foreign, mispronounced words and 'new' (Benjamin and Arendt, 1968) meanings (e.g., *Malaka*), S.I. Cobas members integrated ethnocultural diversity in participatory organizing. Here, lingua franca encouraged an improvised and socially embedded form of communication among different language groups. Moreover, it fostered and supported participation among the multi-ethnic migrant and *native* workers who mastered it.

Humour developed in parallel and helped deal with the cracks and slippages of the other practices, turning them creatively into opportunities for expressing sympathy and support. By teasing and mocking each other with gentle humour (e.g., *what is he saying?*), union members recovered from mispronunciation, linguistic mistakes, tensions and repetitive behaviours resulting from language barriers. Simultaneously, the collective awareness of these linguistic issues could be incorporated in their organizing efforts, thus creatively extending the union's tactical repertoire. Notably, we noticed that humour could not only turn into informal and direct acts of resistance but also help build a sense of community and reinforce solidarity.

Overall, symbiotically combining translations, lingua franca and humour, multi-ethnic migrant workers and union militants developed an improvised language of solidarity to overcome linguistic barriers and meet and sustain worker communication needs and collective organization. This, in turn, nurtured a sense of multicultural inclusion within the union. It implicitly positioned the union as an open institution that accepted and valued cultural and linguistic diversity rather than as a formalized institution that promoted conformity. Multi-ethnic migrant workers as union members bonded with each other by developing a shared, contextual understanding of their working and organizing experiences. Using these practices also meant building sympathetic relationships, being part of the community, fostering its cohesiveness, and helping migrant workers communicate. In this way, an improvised language of solidarity sustained worker participation and allowed the achievement of material and subjective gains such as better conditions at work, a renewed sense of agency and self-worth.

We theorize the intertwining and symbiosis of these three participatory and multicultural practices – translations, lingua franca and humour – as constituting an overall improvised language of solidarity. Montuori (2003: 245) points to the ongoing and contextual nature of improvisation interpreted as a creative, playful process that *dances* between constraints and new possibilities. This emphasis on situational and relational creativity sits well with critical philosophical interpretations of language (Benjamin, 2021[1979]; Benjamin and Arendt, 1968) that describe all forms of human language as profoundly connected, imaginative and socially embedded.

The concept of the improvised language of solidarity aids understanding of the key processes in how the agency of migrant workers can inform participatory organizing (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021) and forge the strong solidaristic and action-oriented bonds that sustain multi-ethnic communities of struggles (Però, 2020). Specifically, these linguistic practices are participatory because they emerge from the active engagement of migrant workers in overcoming linguistic barriers, communicating and organizing collectively. These practices also sustain participatory organizing, given the community-building processes, reciprocal support and effective collective initiatives resulting from embracing such practices.

Theoretically, the concept of the improvised language of solidarity first extends research on the participatory organization of precarious migrant workers (Alberti and Però, 2018; Alberti et al., 2013; Jiang and Korczynski, 2016, 2021; Però, 2014, 2020). Our concept is important because it can be contrasted with studies that can be seen as examining hierarchical and bureaucratic organizing practices and tend to overlook worker organizational capacity (e.g., Connolly et al., 2019). That is, rather than focusing on what labour organizations, leaders or grassroots leaders can do to encourage worker engagement from the top (e.g., Han, 2014; McAlevey, 2016), this concept highlights alternative grassroots initiatives that multi-ethnic migrant workers and union organizers can collectively develop to overcome language barriers.

Second, the concept develops research on what labour organizing is for (Simms and Holgate, 2010), with special reference to precarious migrant workers. Contrary to studies that perhaps implicitly consider the assimilation of – often culturally and ethnically homogeneous – migrant workers within the society of arrival as labour organizing objectives (e.g., Heyes, 2009; Mustchin, 2012), this concept illustrates multiculturalism (as noted in Però, 2011, 2020) as a key purpose for participatory organizing (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021). This is because the embracing of ethnocultural diversity within labour organizations can significantly encourage multi-ethnic migrant worker participation and self-organization.

Third, as organizing practices reflect labour organizing purposes (Simms and Holgate, 2010), the concept of the improvised language of solidarity adds to research on collective worker initiatives aimed at addressing ethnocultural diversity (Alberti et al., 2013; Jiang and Korczynski, 2021; Però, 2020). It helps to complement union-centred studies of top-down linguistic practices (e.g., Ciupijus et al., 2018; Connolly et al., 2019; Heyes, 2009) and extends actor-centred research (Alberti and Però, 2018; Atzeni, 2021; Jiang and Korczynski, 2016, 2021) to include the study of participatory, multicultural ones. Notably, these practices further reveal the possibility of multiple sources and directions in the development of effective labour solidarity.

## Conclusion

In reviewing the literature on the organization of precarious migrant workers, participatory organizing (Jiang and Korczynski, 2021) emerged as an effective approach to building solidarity and collective actions. Nonetheless, this article noted a gap regarding the study of the practices that allow migrant workers to overcome language barriers within multi-ethnic communities of struggles (Però, 2020). To address this gap, we examined how S.I. Cobas migrant workers and native members collectively developed and connected three key grassroots and contextually negotiated practices – translations, lingua franca and humour – to overcome language barriers.

We showed that effective participatory organizing efforts could be built despite ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity and limited knowledge of the local language (in our case Italian) through these three intertwined practices conceptualized as an improvised language of solidarity. Theoretically, this concept points to the agency, situational creativity and playfulness (Benjamin and Arendt, 1968; Montuori, 2003) of the actors involved in labour organizing processes (Alberti and Però, 2018).

Although the conceptualization of an improvised language of solidarity relies on the particular case of S.I. Cobas workers, we think that similar languages of solidarity can emerge among other subordinate multi-ethnic groups organizing elsewhere. Specifically, we acknowledge that two main elements can facilitate the emergence of these bottom-up, collective practices. First, the workers developing these practices are precarious, first-generation, multi-ethnic migrant workers – who, because of their unfamiliarity with the local language and their ethnocultural heterogeneity, cannot easily understand and interact cross-culturally with each other at work and in organizing activities. Second, the chances to develop these practices also increase when multi-ethnic migrant workers work side-by-side and actively participate in direct and horizontal forms of collective actions that entail physical proximity as well as communication among all union members.

We believe that the concept of the improvised language of solidarity can be relevant to both practitioners and academics. An understanding of the language of solidarity may help unions to break through the language barriers to organizing multi-ethnic migrant workers. More fundamentally, the concept calls on trade unions to reflect on the nature of their activities and to consider whether these activities de facto entail bureaucratic and assimilationist approaches. Likewise, the study of the improvised language of solidarity is relevant to academics interested in the advantages and limitations of the labour organizing approach. In particular, this concept expands research on the organization of migrant workers through participatory organizing projects (Alberti and Però, 2018; Alberti et al., 2013; Jiang and Korczynski, 2021; Però, 2020), showing worker organizational capacity in overcoming language barriers.

Moreover, this concept broadens research on the politics of organizing (Simms and Holgate, 2010) and the type of integration being promoted within labour organizations. That is, it helps to understand the possibilities of trade unions as multicultural projects rather than as assimilationist facilitators in the society of arrival. Finally, this concept allows us to complement union-centred studies (e.g., Ciupijus et al., 2018; Connolly et al., 2019; Mustchin, 2012) on labour solidarity and to gain greater understandings centred on migrant workers.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1 The largest national groups include Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans, Chinese and Ukrainians, with an important growth in the numbers of Nigerians, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Egyptians (ISTAT, 2019).
2 This is a framework that focuses on migrant workers as actors embedded within a particular context and dealing with intersected experiences of inequality that include and transcend class (Alberti and Però, 2018).
3 By language groups, we refer to groups of migrant workers speaking variations of the same language (e.g., Arabic) but sharing distinct ethnic and national backgrounds (e.g., Senegalese Muslim, Pakistani backgrounds).
4 We understand that there are nuances in the analysis of bureaucracy (e.g., Monteiro and Adler, 2022) apart from Richard Hyman's work, adopted by Jiang and Korczynski (2021).
5 Ackroyd and Thompson (1999:111) describe mockery as 'from irony, through sarcasm and distortion to insult'. Teasing entails mockery and lampoonery. Bantering instead involves the 'sharp exchanges of wit' (Korczynski, 2011: 1432).
6 Participants' names and details were not recorded if consent was not given because of miscommunication or delicate circumstances.
7 On the link between boredom and humour, see also Collinson (1988).

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