

PATTERNS OF METAPHYSICAL DISCOURSE IN WEST-AFRICAN MIGRANTS' ELF-MEDIATED TRAUMA NARRATIVES

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Abstract – This chapter focuses on an ongoing ethnographic research enquiring into West-African migrants' and refugees' trauma narratives mediated by a use of English as a 'lingua franca' (ELF) in Italian contexts of intercultural communication. The six case studies under investigation apply a construct built on models of Cognitive-Experiential Linguistics, Possible-Worlds Semantics and Modal Logic to the discourse analysis of Nigerian migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives. Ethnographic data show that such trauma narratives are prevalently characterized by features from the migrants' typologically-different native languages which come to be transferred into their ELF variations at the levels of: ergative clause structures, modality, idiomatic lexicon, and metaphorical patterns of a metaphysical kind. More specifically, it has been observed that, in such narratives, migrants often employ modal operators in the description of much-desired 'possible worlds' projected into a transcendental dimension triggered by their strong feelings and emotions which transfigure traumatic events and their effects into personifications of supernatural entities taking the animate agentive shapes, in ergative-subject position, of cruel Yoruba deities, or imaginary monsters often generated by a process of hybridization between parallel mythological creatures in both native and host cultures. In the case studies in point – making reference to a wider corpus of ELF-mediated West-African migrants' and refugees' trauma narratives (Guido 2018) – it has been noticed that the Nigerian migrants' degree of psychological resilience to traumatic experiences is determined by their more or less optimistic prospects on the achievement of the much-desired 'possible worlds' which they represent in their minds as a sort of 'utopia', in contrast with the 'dystopian real world' that they have sadly experienced. In particular, the corpus of trauma narratives reveals the frequent occurrence of specific patterns in association with a four-level gradient ranging from possible, unreal, and impossible utopian worlds up to – as a more recent development triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic – a much-too-real dystopian world. Each of these degrees have been defined as trauma narratives of, respectively: 'hope', 'frustration', 'despair', and 'urge of stampede'.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca; metaphysical discourse; migrants' trauma narratives.

1. Modality in migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives

This chapter focuses on an ongoing ethnographic research enquiring into West-African migrants' and refugees' trauma narratives mediated by a use of

English as a ‘lingua franca’ (ELF) in Italian contexts of intercultural communication. In such contexts, the definition of ‘ELF-mediated trauma narrative’ includes also those reports that migrants convey not only through variations of non-native English regarded as a ‘lingua franca’ in cross-cultural interactions, but also through nativized English varieties which, once displaced into ‘foreign’ settings in Italy, come to be regarded by Italian receivers as any other variant of non-native English. Both non-native and nativized English variants, however, are subject to the same processes of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic transfer from their speakers’ native linguacultural uses (Guido 2008, 2018).

The case studies investigated in this chapter apply a construct built on models of Cognitive-Experiential Linguistics (Sweetser 1990), Possible-Worlds Semantics and Modal Logic (Hintikka 1989; Stalnaker 1994) to the discourse analysis of Nigerian migrants’ ELF-mediated trauma narratives (Guido 2008, 2018). It has been observed that, in such narratives, migrants make a frequent use of non-truth-functional modal operators (Guido 2018) in the description of a reality projected into a metaphysical dimension (Guido 2005) triggered by the migrants’ strong feelings and emotions which transfigure events perceived as hostile to human beings into intentional cruel deeds performed by merciless autochthonous deities and mythological monsters that, indeed, represent native folk idioms of distress. The personification of the causes of traumatic events into imaginary metaphysical entities, whose belief is shared by the communities the migrants belong to, has been observed in data collected principally within migrants’ rural slums during harvest periods and in reception camps hosting migrants on their arrival in Italy. More specifically, it has been noticed that violent experiences that they underwent in their home countries, during the migration voyage and, then, also in the host country, are differently reported in their ELF-mediated narratives through ELF as more or less painful, depending on their more or less optimistic prospects on the realization of their longed-for utopian ‘possible worlds’. In particular, the corpus of such data reveal a recurrence of four prevalent discourse patterns in West-African ELF-mediated trauma narratives associated with four degrees of, respectively, possible, unreal, and impossible utopian worlds, and a dystopian real world (Guido 2018). Such degrees can be identified with the migrants’ feelings of:

- a) *Hope* for the realization of a much desired ‘utopian dream’ considered at hand at the conclusion of the migration voyage. Thus, trauma-affected migrants inspired by an ‘intense hope’ for the fulfillment of their longed-for ‘possible world’, report the traumatic experiences they underwent in the past (both remote and more recent past) by making a frequent use of ‘belief reports’ (Lau 1995; Schiffer 1996; Stalnaker 1987), deontic modal verbs and phrases, along with folk proverbs that rationalize such brutal

experiences in terms of 'necessary rites of passage' leading them to a substantial improvement of their life conditions;

- b) *Frustration* at having to undergo difficulties in the host country that drastically reduce the chances for the realization of their much-desired 'possible world'. This may be due to limitations imposed upon individual freedom by the new legal norms that, if infringed, may result in the migrants' repatriation or detention. Such feelings of frustration tend to trigger in the migrants' minds processes of metaphorical embodiment and re-elaboration of their past traumatic experiences which come to be recontextualized within the new distressing events undergone in the host country, thus re-elaborating 'epistemic' representations of possible worlds which become, suddenly and disappointingly, contrary to present facts (Hintikka 1989);
- c) *Despair* at realizing that the chance to fulfill their 'utopian dream' is definitively denied, thus turning the migrants' desired 'possible world' into an 'impossible' one (Zalta 1997) (this may be caused by sudden adverse events that subvert their expectations). West-African migrants' trauma narratives, in cases like these, show evidence of a frequent use of native 'idioms of distress' (Mattingly 1998) rendered into ELF, by which migrants express their sense of hopelessness that 'deontically' compels them to continuously re-experience their past trauma by intensifying its effects in the present, often as a consequence of more recent traumatic experiences undergone in Italy;
- d) *Urge of stampede* from Italy – i.e., the host country that until just before was considered as the 'utopian possible world' to be reached, but that, after the recent coronavirus pandemic emergency (Covid-19), has suddenly become a terrifying fatal dystopia – no longer a 'possible' or an 'impossible world', but a 'real world' turned into a nightmare from which migrants wish to get away immediately. Latest data collected during the first months of 2020 – plagued by such a deadly pandemic, raging at that time most of all in Italy – though belonging to a still very small additional corpus of West-African ELF trauma narratives at the moment under construction, show evidence of a new compelling feeling of anguish mounting in migrants who long for returning to their home country, now even perceived as a reassuring utopia – an 'impossible world' where they are prevented from returning because of the lockdown imposed by the Italian law. This feeling seems to be frequent especially among 'economic migrants' (such as Nigerian ones). It is instead less frequent among refugees who fled from their home countries because of persecutions and civil wars.

It has been observed that these three feelings actually affect the semantic, syntactic and metaphorical patterns of the West-African migrants' ELF-

mediated trauma narratives (Petrovski 1993). Furthermore, in all the cases in which such feelings are involved, a protocol analysis (Ericsson, Simon 1984) on the transcription of such trauma narratives reveals that the tone of these reports is frequently quite assertive, this being principally due to an extensive use of deontic modality of a high value (Halliday 1994, pp. 357-358) that makes reference to the traumatized migrants' compulsive sense of obligation and determination to take action in order to induce a radical change that would start a recovery process – which is triggered by their own condition of distress following the dreadful experiences they went through. West-African trauma narratives, therefore, may be said to represent the migrants' attempts at turning the shocking effects of traumatic events into the cause of possible repairing actions. Such a 'deontic prompt' to take action against adversities shows evidence of how trauma, in West-African narratives, is not simply represented as a personal experience of distress in need of removal through a psychiatric therapy – as is conventional practice in Western Psychiatry. Indeed, conceptualizing and expressing trauma in ways that may diverge from conventional forms of its representation is an option that is excluded from the biomedical definitions found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) issued by the American Psychiatric Association (APA 2013). On the one hand, such definitions represent the scientific terminology that categorize and describe the psychiatric consequences of single-trauma exposure generally identified with the vague expression of 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD). As such, they fail to include the complex trauma syndromes experienced in non-Western environments. On the other hand, the APA definitions were just devised to appropriately describe the impact of traumatic events on Western populations (Summerfield 1999) and, therefore, they have proved inadequate for the typical metaphorical description of traumatic effects in many narratives from non-Western cultures (Peltzer 1998). More specifically, in West-African cultures, traumatic experiences can have many and diverse causes that may range from natural and physical reasons to supernatural and spiritual beliefs up to socio-political motivations. Such trauma causes are often metaphorically represented and expressed by means of the West-African migrants' native 'idioms of distress' (Gibbs, O'Brien 1990) which come to be transferred into their respective ELF variations through which they report their trauma experiences. And yet, such peculiar narrative patterns come to be interpreted by Western psychiatrists with reference to their conventional Western clinical paradigms (Eisenberg 1981; Mattingly 1998). Recognizing this would therefore contribute to the restoration of a culture-specific sense of identity which migrants often experience as disrupted once they find themselves displaced – both socio-culturally and pragmalinguistically – from their own native injured community in the desperate attempt to achieve their

much-desired utopian 'possible world' – which often suddenly reveals itself as another painful dystopian disillusionment.

2. Metaphysical patterns in migrants' trauma narratives of 'hope'

Case Study 1 introduced in this section represents an instance of ELF-mediated trauma narrative of *hope* that takes distressing experiences as an ordeal to be faced in view of the realization of a much-desired 'possible world'. The subject of this case study is a Nigerian young man, speaking his native Yoruba language (belonging to the Niger-Congo group), and Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) as his nativized variety. Yet, NPE is usually perceived in the host country as an ELF variation due to the fact that it is displaced from its native context of use. This migrant had run away from Nigeria after having been involved in a terrorist attack by Boko Haram¹ that killed his mother and, once in Italy, he hoped for a better life. Central feature in this Nigerian migrant's ELF-mediated trauma narrative is Ori, the Yoruba god of individual fate, who affects his metaphysical belief according to which a person's destiny cannot be modified (Ali 1995; Oduwole 1996). To give good reason for his hope for a possible better life, despite the shocking experience he went through, the Nigerian migrant adopts an intricate argumentation by which he tries to bring to bear his Yoruba metaphysical belief on the fact that his mother's tragic destiny was just a fated prompt (reflected in the use of the deontic modal "must") encouraging his search for the longed-for 'possible world' in Italy – meant as the realization of his 'predestined fate' according to Ori's will. The migrant's narrative structure, therefore, is built on an interplay of *Accept-Deny* moves, till achieving a compromise reflected in the *Accommodation* move as he strives to still believe in his metaphysical Yoruba religion, even by relying on popular beliefs reflected in native folk proverbs – despite the memory of the traumatic event induces him to reject such an illogical religion.

The following *Transcript 1* reproduces the migrant's trauma narrative in his nativized Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) – regarded as an ELF variation in Italy – along with its Standard-English version to facilitate understanding. The transcript is tagged with the *Opening*, *Accept-Belief*, *Deny-Belief*, and *Accommodation* moves.

¹ The terrorist group's name 'Boko Haram' refers to the expression that in Hausa means 'Western education is sin'.

Case Study 1: Transcript 1*Opening (Traumatic-Fact):*

Boko Haram bin kill my mama. One *gbosa*, one explosion big big bin chop my mama body. Piece dem kata-kata na ground. Mama eye dem look my eye dem and say: tear race, my pikin, you must to run run fo beta life.

[Boko Haram killed my mum. A 'gbosa', a huge explosion reduced my mum's body to pieces. Pieces were scattered all over the ground. Mum's eyes looked into my eyes and said: run away, my child, you must run immediately to find a better life.]

Accept-Belief:

Na tru tru no clear se Ori decision fo pipul destiny dem fo no change finish. We say: "Chicken wey run way go still end up inside pot of soup"—so pipul can no be able fo change dem destiny.

[It is truly unclear that Ori's decision about people's destinies should not change totally. We say: "when the chicken runs away, it still will end up inside a pot of soup"—so people should not be able to change their own destiny.]

Deny-Belief:

But we fo tink se no bi good, o, like my mama bad destiny.

[But we should think that it is not good at all, like my mum's bad destiny.]

Accommodation:

But yes, Ori decide destiny fo beta and my mama bin die fo push me fo beta life. Life na difficult fo Italy, o, but we say 'if life dey show you pepper, make pepper soup'.

[But yes, Ori decides destiny for better and my mum died to push me to find a better life. Life is difficult in Italy, but we say: 'if life shows you pepper, make a pepper soup'.]

Noticeably, the Nigerian migrant's trauma narrative of 'hope' is built on two dimensions which determine the counterfactual logic of his metaphysical argumentation since he tries to come to terms with past trauma (conveyed through the typical NPE preverbal past-tense marker "bin"), seeing it as an opportunity of realizing his hope for a longed-for possible world. In this view, the migrant tries to bring together the religious determinism of Ori's divine design for individual fate, and his own individual action aimed at determining by himself his own destiny so as to enhance his life conditions. These two conflicting dimensions are:

- 1) an *indexical dimension of the real world*, according to which the conventional sense (or 'primary intension') of a concept in the real world determines its truth-conditions (Lau 1995) (in the case in point, the terrorist attack meant as a traumatic fact);
- 2) an *iconic dimension of the possible world*, according to which the referent for a concept (or 'secondary intension') deviates from its conventional sense in the real world insofar as its truth-conditions are determined by the sense that the concept acquires within an alternative counterfactual world (Lewis 1973; Zalta 1997) (i.e., the terrorist attack as a prompt for a better life).

In trying to put together such opposite dimensions so as to come to accept his

metaphysical 'Yoruba Ori belief', the Nigerian migrant adopts the following two *possible-world maxims of cooperation*:

- a) *experiential pliability*, involving the adaptation of his narrative to the counterfactual logic of his religious belief;
- b) *suspension of disbelief*, involving a determination to believe in such a counterfactual 'possible world'.

In this way, the migrant builds his trauma narrative on a *hypothetical syllogism*, which is a typical feature of metaphysical discourse (Guido 2005). A syllogism is a logical argument grounded on deductive reasoning aimed at reaching a conclusion based on two propositions assumed to be true. In this case, the two propositions are just 'hypothetical':

- a) *Accept belief*:

People, like the 'chicken' of the proverb, 'cannot' ("can no be able fo") change Ori's destiny;

- b) *Deny belief*:

but Ori's decision "no bi good" (*is not good*), as evident from "my mama bad destiny" (*my mum's bad destiny*);

- c) *Accommodation*:

yet Ori decided for better: in fact, the migrant's mother died to encourage him to find a better life;

hence, it is up to the migrant himself, not to Ori, to change his own destiny by making his 'difficult life' in Italy possibly become a 'better life' (as in the Yoruba proverb about the unpleasant spicy "pepper" turned into a delicious "pepper soup").

The reference to the Yoruba god Ori seen as the source of trauma represents an instance of a feature which is frequent in West-African migrants' narratives in that they are built on a native cause-effect structure which, in native Niger-Congo languages, does not follow the SVO transitive clausal structure typical of Western languages, but the OVS ergative structure (Langacker 1991, p. 336). Such ergative structure, then, comes to be automatically transferred to the ELF variations used by West-African migrants, especially when they report events that affected them physically and emotionally. Indeed, it is precisely such a trauma recall that eventually becomes a trigger inducing migrants to unconsciously resort to their native language which automatically allows the most immediate expression of distress. Hence, in their trauma narratives, West-African migrants frequently make use of clauses characterized by an ergative structure where the cause of action is not, as expected, an animate Subject (S), or Agent (as in the SVO transitive clause structure), but rather it is:

- a) an inanimate Object (O), or Medium (Halliday 1994, p. 163), collocated in a grammatical and logical subject-position within the clause (the typical OVS ergative clause structure) and, thus, represented as the animate source of action and even characterized by conscious volition and autonomous force-dynamic motion;
- b) a ‘supernatural causation’ rendered by inanimate objects collocated in subject position as animate agents personifying autochthonous deities (such as Ori in Case Study 1) that affect people’s lives at their mercy.

Another instance of type b) outlined above is represented in the following Case Study 2, where the subject is a Nigerian young man, speaking a Nigerian ELF variation, who survived a shipwreck in the Mediterranean sea where three of his friends drowned. His dream in Italy was to go to university (he had attended a high school in Nigeria), but he ended up picking tomatoes as an undeclared labourer with no workers’ protection. Here he was also injured in a car accident in which two of his close friends died on their return to their shacks in Southern Italy after a day of hard work during the tomato harvesting season. Yet, despite his friends’ tragic deaths, this migrant’s report represents another instance of the trauma narrative of ‘hope’.

In his narrative, both types of native ergative cause-effect structures can be observed:

- a) *an ergative causation*, according to which inanimate objects (the ‘sea’, the ‘ship’, the ‘van’, the ‘road’, the ‘hospital’) become animate subjects and agents in narrative clauses, causing actions;
- b) *a supernatural ergative causation*, which represents the ‘greedy road’ as an animate agent that comes to be personified as Ogun, the cruel Yoruba god of the road, causing accidents to devour the victims’ bodies.

The following transcript shows how this migrant’s trauma narrative is not exactly in Nigerian Pidgin English, but in a variation of Nigerian ELF that reflects his Standard-English education:

Case Study 2: Transcript 2

The sea swallow the boat and three friends when we go to Italy. *A ship* rescue us. I want go to university, but here I only pick pick tomato all day. *This van* take us for our shack after tomato picking all day and *the road* quick crush the van against a lorry and kill two friends, cut them body for eat them. I remember the poet Soyinka say “the road waits, famished”, I learn this in school. He say *Ogun*, the god of road, become road and cause accidents for kill and eat people. But *he can no* kill me, no. My leg break, my arm, but *hospital* make me well because I *must* go to university.

Noticeably, in this narrative, the Nigerian migrant makes a frequent use of a ‘conceptual simple present’ representing as actual some traumatic events that affected him in the past. The use of the simple present, indeed, suggests that

the previous shocking accidents he went through are still experientially actual, vivid, and painful in his mind (Guido 2018). Yet, his strong determination to change his fate despite the adverse destiny is underscored by the use of:

- a) the deontic modal *cannot* (“can no”) that denies Ogun’s divine power to kill him, thus asserting the superiority that the migrant attributes to his own willpower which is stronger than the god’s will;
- b) the deontic modal *must* following the first-person pronoun ‘I’ by which the migrant asserts his determination to pursue his desired ‘possible-world’ objective for a better life in Italy.

3. Metaphysical embodiment of disappointing experiences in migrants’ trauma narratives of ‘frustration’

Case-Study 3, under analysis in this section, introduces an instance of ELF-mediated trauma narratives of *frustration*, occurring at the West-African migrants’ distressing realization that their dream for a better ‘possible world’ has indeed become unreal and very hard to realize. Hence, the new traumatic trials experienced by migrants in the host country exacerbate the effects of past distress undergone in the home country. And yet, in the corpus of collected West-African migrants’ ELF-mediated trauma narratives of *frustration* under analysis (Guido 2018), personifications of distress in ergative subject position are quite rare. This may be so insofar as such a typology of trauma narrative is principally focused on the migrants’ extreme disappointment with actual, practical (legal, institutional, etc.) obstacles on their way towards the fulfillment of their longed-for life goals that they expected to achieve in the host country. Indeed, the only instance of metaphysical personification of trauma symptoms and states of minds found in the corpus is the one reported below in transcript 3 related to Case-Study 3. The subject of this case study is another Nigerian migrant who left his family behind in Nigeria to flee from a severe state of hunger and poverty he suffered at home. He faced the crossing of the desert, the forced labour in the uranium mines in Niger, and torture in a detention camp in Libya before being able to cross the Mediterranean sea on a battered boat to come to Italy where he hoped to make his dream for possible better life conditions come true. Yet, once in Italy, the Committee for Refugees’ Rights decided to reject his asylum application and, therefore, he was risking repatriation because, according to the Italian laws, he was classified as an ‘economic migrant’. In his trauma narrative of ‘frustration’, this Nigerian man, then, expresses his inner anxiety – intensified by a sharp remorse for having abandoned his

family in poverty at home – by projecting it into an external metaphysical dimension where he represents it in the personified likeness of the mighty and vindictive Yoruba god Ẹ̀ṣàngó. This migrant, indeed, came to believe that all his suffering and frustration derive from the fact that he had incurred Ẹ̀ṣàngó's wrath and revenge for having forsaken his homeland, Nigeria, and the sacred bonds of his own family, to egoistically search for self-gratification and personal wealth in a foreign land under the protection of his own guardian god (Chi) – as reported in the following transcript of his Nigerian-ELF trauma narrative:

Case Study 3: Transcript 3

My asylum application no good, no. Committee say so, 'cause I'm Nigerian and here for work, not because war, so I *must* come back for my country 'cause Italy *must* no give no work for me. I vex because Nigeria give no work, no food, I *must* lef (*leave*) my house and my family for find a better life here. The desert no bin stop me. And hard work for the mine there na Niger, no break my back. My Chi bin care for me well well. But when I bin lef my country and my family with no money and no food, Ẹ̀ṣàngó *must* think se (*that*) I shame my people and my land and my Orisha (*Yoruba gods*). He bin don de throw (*he had started throwing*) his thunder for me when jail bin keep me na Libya and split my skin and bone and head, o. But I no die and I bin lef for the sea for come here. But Ẹ̀ṣàngó bin throw thunder and wave them, tall tall, for grasp the boat and kill me. Now he *must* send me back na Nigeria. Yes, o. Ẹ̀ṣàngó get all power. My Chi must fight fight for help me for stay here.

In this trauma narrative of 'frustration', the Nigerian migrant recognizes the constraints imposed by the Italian law on 'economic migrants' like him, as well as the hardships he underwent in his home country compelling him to leave Nigeria – and, regrettably, his dear ones – to take his chances for a better life in Italy (emphasized in both cases by the deontic use of the modal verb 'must'). But, as soon as he realizes that the fulfilment of his dream is in danger and he is running the risk for repatriation, then he projects his sense of frustration on a metaphysical level, rather than considering practical possibilities for a legal solution to his problem. He assumes (by using 'must' in epistemic modality, this time) that the cause of his failure – despite all the traumatic experiences he went through during his journey to Italy under the protection of his guardian Chi deity – should be ascribed to the powerful Yoruba god Ẹ̀ṣàngó who, by objectifying and embodying his own feelings of guilt for having abandoned his family in serious economic difficulties in Nigeria, enacts a fierce revenge against him. Hence, regardless of all the migrant's struggles against huge difficulties – personified by inanimate objects in animate subject position within ergative clause structures, such as the "desert" and the "mine" – vengeful Ẹ̀ṣàngó first commanded hostile natural elements at his service – the 'thunder' and the 'huge waves' ("wave them, tall tall") – to kill him while crossing the sea on the boat to come to

Italy, and then, once in the host country, the god was putting legal obstacles to the realization of his dream. Hence the feeling of intense frustration that the migrant expresses in his trauma narrative.

4. Metaphysical idioms of distress in migrants' trauma narratives of 'despair'

The two Case Studies 4 and 5 reported in this section regard instances of what are here defined as ELF-mediated trauma narratives of *despair*, characterized by the West-African migrants' agony as they become aware that the 'possible world' that they longed for cannot any longer come true – which, indeed, would affect both their emotional and social conditions. It has been observed in the collected corpus of West-African migrants' ELF-mediated trauma narratives that the more 'despair' prevails, the more migrants resort to their own native 'idioms of distress' (Gibbs, O'Brien 1990) that they unconsciously transfer into their ELF variations. Furthermore, data show evidence that in their ELF-mediated trauma narratives of 'despair', West-African migrants make a frequent use of a high-value deontic modality ('must') revealing their determination to attempt even impossible repair deeds. Such deeds may range from socio-political actions (often characterized by intense feelings of revenge), up to self-destructive feelings which eventually come to be compulsively objectified and projected onto a supernatural level where inner symptoms are perceived as external vengeful metaphysical entities haunting them (Guido 2008, 2018). The persistence – and even recrudescence – of such trauma symptoms is seen reflected in the recurrent use of tense indefiniteness, rendered by the 'conceptual simple present' that conveys the sense that West-African migrants' past traumatic experiences are indeed still vividly actual and perceptible in their minds (Guido 2008, 2018).

The following transcripts 4 and 5 report two Nigerian migrants' trauma narratives of 'despair' that exemplify the process by which agony and affliction resulting from traumatic events come to be voiced through ELF by resorting to native ways of conceptualizing and expressing trauma by means of metaphorical idioms of distress. These are native idioms that need to be interpreted at all their levels – which include socio-political, psycho-physical, and even supernatural-metaphysical dimensions. What is of specific interest in the analysis of the collected data regarding such a trauma-narrative typology is that West-African migrants show a tendency to share such idioms not simply with their native community that, like them, lives displaced in the country of arrival (Italy, in the case in point), but they also sometimes feel the need to communicate their anguish to the host community by activating a sort

of ‘hybridization’ instinctively aimed at incorporating native idioms of distress into parallel ones used to embody trauma in the host community. This may be seen as an unconscious strategy to make their psychic discomfort better understood within the new environment in which they now live.

Such a strategy seems to be reflected in Case Studies 4 and 5 reported below that reproduce the trauma narratives of ‘despair’ by Nigerian migrants who live in the Southern-Italian region of Salento. Indeed, the two migrants activate in their minds processes of appropriation of some idioms of distress typical of the host community which, emblematically, turn trauma symptoms into personifications of local folk-mythological entities. By appropriating them to their trauma experience, these Nigerian migrants actually hybridize such idioms of distress with parallel ones typical of their own native community which, similarly, represent trauma as an embodiment of symptoms turned into supernatural, metaphysical entities possessing the migrants, both physically and mentally. Therefore, in the cases in point, in hybridizing native Nigerian and non-native Southern-Italian idioms of distress, these case-study migrants operate a dislocation of their state of distress into the new socio-cultural contexts they now live in. The unconscious reason for this may be that West-African migrants’ trauma symptoms, to be understood as such within the Western (Italian) community, need to be embodied by resorting to specific idioms of distress typical of the host culture – which are perceived as parallel to equivalent native idioms – rather than adopting conventional and unfamiliar APA biomedical lexicon. This is here interpreted as the migrants’ attempt to share their state of anguish not only with their own native community dislocated in Italy (Kirmayer 1989), but also by involving the Italian host community that may help them towards a possible healing process.

Case-study 4 precisely reports a trauma narrative of this kind. The subject is a Nigerian woman who describes her trauma symptoms by appropriating an idiom of distress typical of the Southern-Italy region of Salento where she resides, hybridizing it with references to some parallel idioms of distress from her country of origin. Specifically, the Salentine idiom she makes her own in expressing her anguish regards a local folk-mythological creature – a poisonous spider named ‘Taranta’ (Tarantula) that, with its toxic bite, causes in women severe seizures and haunting hallucinations.

In her trauma narrative transcribed below, this migrant woman reports that in Nigeria she had the misfortune to have her husband and both her sons killed in an ambush. Since the murderer was not identified, then her own native community started blaming her as the actual cause of the death of her family members – in fact, suddenly people became convinced that she was a

witch. Besides, she was also associated with barren women who are not allowed to access the reincarnation cycle. Indeed, all these slanders against this woman were to be taken as social attempts to stigmatize and marginalize her because, after all, she was regarded as worthless – i.e., a social and economic burden with no children that could contribute to the community's prosperity. Thus, eventually, she felt socially compelled to leave Nigeria and undergo a risky sea-voyage to Italy where she ended up being exploited as a farm labourer, working hard harvesting wheat – which exhausted her (in fact, in Nigeria, she did not need to work as she was quite well-to-do). She hated her labour conditions as she did not expect to undergo such a hard work once in Italy. Hence, she started to believe that she was really a witch unintentionally cursing her family members and causing their death, thus deserving her present slave-like conditions of forced labour. Such obsessive thoughts provoked in her a trance-like seizure – fits, convulsions, tremor, and outbursts of restless frantic motions, such as running around, leaping, and twisting and writhing on the ground. These physical reactions to her mental anguish are alike, in many ways, to the self-blame trauma symptoms suffered by socially-marginalized barren women in Guinea Bissau, defined as 'Kiyang-yang', an idiom of distress meaning 'the Shadow' – i.e., worthless, nonexistent women (Einarsdóttir 2004). The Nigerian woman in Case-Study 4 believed that she was cursed by the 'Taranta', the demonic spider whose 'poisonous bite' causes frantic convulsions in peasant women. Indeed, the 'Taranta's Bite' is an idiom of distress for the trauma suffered by socially oppressed and physically exploited and abused female farm workers in Salento, which the migrant woman appropriated to her own traumatic experience, hybridizing it with her native Nigerian idiom of distress of 'Ghost Possession' and its symptoms. She reported that, during such seizures, she was actually possessed by her murdered children's ghosts, as is evident in the transcript 4 from her trauma narrative of 'despair' reported below:

Case Study 4: Transcript 4

In my village, people think se (*that*) my children bin die because I'm witch. Only blame for me, o, no value for me. No children for till land, no new life after death for me. Here they say se (*that*) after hard, hard for harvest work my body shake shake, jump, run, and brain go out my head when see my dead pikin them (*my dead children*), and I speak with a pikin voice (*child's voice*), o, my dead pikin voice them. Here they say se (*that*) Taranta bin bite me and they say se (*that*) only a drum can calm me, but they no know my pain, no, o, they no understand, no, Taranta curse me and bite me because I'm witch.

What is evident in this trauma narrative of 'despair' (reported in a Nigerian variant of English displaced from its native context of occurrence and perceived as an ELF variation in Italy) is the collocation in an ergative subject position within the clause structures of 'abstract notions', such as

“blame”, “value”, “new life”, as well as ‘bodily parts’, such as the woman’s trauma-affected frenzied “body”, and her distressed “brain” obsessed with thought of her murdered children – a “brain” that “sees” her dead children before their ghosts come to possess her whole body and mind, making her “speak” with their voices during the seizure caused by the ‘Taranta’s Bite’.

Case-study 5 introduces another trauma narrative of ‘despair’ by a Nigerian migrant who, in reporting the trauma symptoms that affect him, hybridizes his native idioms of distress with a Southern-Italy idiom that personifies a state of malaise and anguish as a folk-mythological malevolent elfish creature – and that also finds a parallel in an evil pixie-like deity of the West-African Yoruba folklore tradition. The trauma symptoms, metaphorically described by this migrant, correspond to the West-African idiom of distress identified as ‘Brain Fag’ – namely, a mental fatigue resulting from ‘thinking too much’ about traumatic experiences undergone in the past – often correlated to other idioms of distress, such as ‘Worm Creeping’ and ‘Heavy Chest’ (Guido 2008). His present condition of physical fatigue due to his brutalizing undeclared work of picking tomatoes during the harvest season, have triggered in his mind the memory of his past trauma that he experienced in the past as an adolescent in Nigeria, when he was kidnapped by the Boko Haram terrorists who forced him into becoming a ‘child soldier’ and murdering people. Past and present distress, therefore, informs his trauma narrative of ‘despair’ reported in the following transcript 5, where the recollection of his past atrocious deeds that he was obliged to perform still haunts him, generating in him an agony whose excruciating symptoms come to be embodied as living creatures collocated in subject position within the ergative structure of clauses. Such symptoms range from sensations of numbness and tickling in the brain – represented in his narrative as worms creeping under his skin – to unbearable chest tightness when he is half-asleep after his hard day’s work – which he identifies with a personified Southern-Italy idiom of distress, as suggested by his Italian fellow workers, i.e., the ‘Sciacudhi’. This is a folk-mythological pixie roaming in the countryside of the Salento region at night-time, searching for fatigued peasants to spitefully press their chests as they sleep, as well as for horses to inextricably plait their manes. In his trauma narrative, the Nigerian migrant hybridizes this personified idiom of distress from the Italian host place with a parallel Yoruba idiom representing a wicked elfish demon with an assonant name – i.e., the ‘Shugudu’ – at the commands of a wronged person looking for revenge, who orders this dwarfish demon to squat on the breast of his enemy to press his breath out and kill him. Indeed, probably both fantastic creatures share the same etymological origin from some folk divinity common in the Mediterranean basin.

What follows is the transcript of this trauma narrative of ‘despair’ in

Nigerian ELF:

Case Study 5: Transcript 5

My brain think think the murders I done. Worms creep in my brain, and chest, here, is heavy heavy when sleep come after hard hard work. My Italian friends in the tomato field think that Shakudi, like small monkey, sit on my heart the night to choke me. They laugh and say Shakudi make also the plaits of my hair but I cry when I think se (*that*) he *must* be the little pikin (*child*) I bin kill, I cut him throat and he look my eyes and die and he innocent like my little brother. He now *must* kill me, I know. I bin think se (*that*) I bin escape for Italy for find new, better life, so I no think think all this, but here when I finish hard work in the field I dey (*am*) tired tired, o, I come for sleep but the pikin family send Shugudu on my chest, yes, send Shugudu 'cause he *must* crush my heart like a tomato for revenge.

In this Nigerian man's narrative of 'despair', the figurative representations of the symptoms of post-traumatic disorders come to be hybridized with the idioms of distress belonging to both the native Yoruba culture and the host Southern-Italy peasant culture (where he presently works), personified as the fantastic figure of the wicked mythological dwarf named Sciacuddhi/Shugudu. The typical Nigerian-English emphatic verb and adjective reduplications ("think think", "heavy heavy", "hard hard", "tired tired") stresses the obsessive recurrence of the same unbearable thoughts about the past crimes that he was obliged to commit as a child soldier. This atrocious memory is so vivid in the present that in his narrative this migrant often shifts from the reference to the past (marked by the Nigerian-ELF pre-verbal past-tense particle "bin") to a 'conceptual simple present' that renders his past traumatic experience still painfully actual in his mind. This state of distress seems to occur especially when this migrant feels extremely tired and dejected at the end of a hard day's work in the tomato fields in Italy and he would only like to sleep. The metaphorical image of the 'worms creeping in his brain' in ergative subject position in the clause represents an objectified personification of the typical trauma symptom of numbness in his head. Likewise, the sensation of chest-tightness is a characteristic symptom of trauma-induced anxiety overwhelming the sufferer when he falls asleep – which, in this migrant's narrative, comes to be personified as the nightmarish evil creature of the Sciacuddhi, or Shugudu, crouching upon his chest to press his breath – and life – out of him. This Nigerian man assumes (as conveyed by the epistemic modal verb "must") that this demonic creature is the ghost of a little child that he was forced to brutally slaughter in order to obey the commands of the Boko Haram soldiers who kept him prisoner ("he *must* be [*epistemic deduction*] the little pikin I bin kill"). This migrant actually believed that the murdered child's ghost was indeed sent by his family under the shape of Sciacuddhi/Shugudu as he was obliged to get revenge and kill

him (conveyed by the deontic use of the modal “must” – “He now *must* kill me”) by pressing his breath out of his body and crushing his heart while asleep (“cause he *must* crush my heart”) – metaphorically associating his heart with a ‘crushed tomato’ (an image drawn from his present work experience). Hence, far from finding his longed-for possible utopian world in Italy where he would have liked to start a new and more serene life, this Nigerian migrant met, precisely in the host country, the most traumatic of his nightmares.

5. Metaphysical representations of the Covid-19 pandemic in migrants’ trauma narratives of ‘urge of stampede’

The last Case Study 6 reported in this section represents a recent development of the ‘modal gradient’ identified in the corpus of West-African migrants’ and refugees’ trauma narratives collected so far (Guido 2008, 2018), setting the conditions for the realization of the migrants’ longed-for utopian new life in the host country (Italy). As illustrated so far, such conditions have been projected onto a series of imaginary, metaphysical dimensions ranging from ‘possible’, to ‘ureal’, up to ‘impossible’ worlds which respectively inform the typologies of trauma narratives of ‘hope’, ‘frustration’ and ‘despair’.

With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic emergency (Covid-19) in Italy during the first months of 2020, this host country – that up to that time migrants regarded as the dreamt-for ‘utopian possible world’ where they could start a new life – all of a sudden came to be perceived as a deadly and ‘even too real dystopian world’, triggering in migrants an urge to hastily escape from it. Latest data collected at the beginning of 2020 in Italy during the period of raging pandemic (though at the moment still constituting a very limited additional corpus of West-African ELF trauma narratives) reveal a trend towards an urgency of stampede increasingly experienced by ‘economic migrants’ (less so by refugees). These migrants who left their West-African home countries to move to Italy in search of better life conditions, suddenly started longing for a hasty return to their home countries in Africa, still almost immune from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, such a novel increasing agony in West-African migrants, suddenly yearning for going back to their home country, compels them to perceive the place from which they had previously fled as a sort of safe, almost Covid-free utopia – indeed, an ‘impossible world’ where they are not allowed to return because of the border closure imposed by the European laws in order to contain the pandemic.

The following transcript 6 reproduces a Nigerian woman’s trauma

narrative representing such an ‘urge for stampede’ in metaphysical terms (the only one referring to supernatural causes among the very few trauma reports of this fourth type collected so far). This Nigerian woman in Case Study 6, is a building cleaner who, before the pandemic outbreak, was very satisfied with her steady job in Italy, but now she feels in danger in the host country plagued by the Covid-19 pandemic. She starts viewing Nigeria like a utopian ‘blessed land’ populated by healthy people who honour the mighty Yoruba god Ọbalúayé “Lord of the Earth” and are, in return, protected by him from any kind of epidemics. She believes that the blame for the pandemic in the Western World and in Asia rests with the scientists’ out-of-control ambition to challenge and overcome the power of the almighty god who, in his wrath, has cast the pandemic curse on the offenders for revenge. Western scientists, however, still persist in their aim to defeat epidemic and pestilence but, in doing so, rather than showing gratitude to Ọbalúayé for his warning, they go on defying him. Hence, in his fury, Ọbalúayé has unleashed the Covid-19 plague to infect Western and Asian sinful humankind, and if African people keep on staying in these doomed places, they will be all the same blamed and punished by this vengeful god. That is why African migrants (in this woman’s opinion) are frightened and long for returning immediately to their safe home countries. This is the transcript of this ELF-mediated trauma narrative:

Case Study 6: Transcript 6

This job is good, yes, give money for honest life, yes. But I *must* come for Nigeria quick now, I no want stay here now, no o. I bin happy here but Italy now na (*is*) sick, sick, o. All Europe go die soon. All people here go die soon, yes. Why? ‘cause Ọbalúayé, our great god, now na mad o mad, angry for white men and for Chinese men, ‘cause they think se they better pass him (*that they are better than him*). They think se (*that*) their science can heal sick people and win Ọbalúayé power for kill people when he curse them. They *must* thank the god for tell people when they make wrong thing and punish them with Covid. Only he can order virus for kill people for their sin, only he can heal people, no medicine, no science can heal Covid. And if we African people stay here, he go (*will*) punish us ‘cause he think se we love Italy for in sin dem (*its sins*) and he go punish me, kill me like Italian people. Nigeria na safe place, we respect our land and our gods and they bless us and give health for our people. So I *must* come for Nigeria quick quick, but the law say se we *must* no lef (*leave*) Italy. Fear now grab me, yes, I no want die here, no. We African people dey (*are*) strong strong people o. No desert, no big sea, no sun bin no stop us, no kill us when we come for Italy. But if we stay here we go (*will*) die, o.

This trauma narrative of ‘urge of stampede’ is emblematic of the fact that a past distressing state which the migrants seemed to have overcome with the achievement of a stable and peaceful condition in a ‘utopian’ host country, all

of a sudden comes to be reactivated in their minds by the advent of other traumatic conditions that totally subvert their perception of the ‘much-desired possible world’. In fact, once become ‘actual’, such a world has turned into a ‘dreadful real world’ triggering in migrants an urge for a hurried escape back to their safe, and now ‘longed-for’ home country.

The Nigerian woman’s emotional involvement in her narrative becomes particularly evident when she shifts from a more detached first-person-plural narrative to the use of the first-person-singular pronoun making reference to her own state of distress (“And if *we African people* stay here, he [Ọbalúayé] go punish *us* ‘cause he think se *we* love Italy for in sin dem and he go punish *me*, kill *me*”). The migrant woman’s emotional involvement in what she says can be likewise identified, on the one hand, in her sudden shifts from the use of a diatopic Nigerian variation of English to her pragmalectal variety of Nigerian Pidgin English, which emerges in her narration every time she is overwhelmed by anguish (“‘cause they think se they better pass him” – “because they think that they are better than him”), and, on the other, in her use of adjective reduplication, a typical feature of her native African language transferred into Nigerian Pidgin English (“sick sick”; “mad mad”; “quick quick”; “strong strong”). Furthermore, similarly to the other subjects of the previously examined case studies, this Nigerian migrant makes a frequent use of the deontic modal “must” to emphasize her sense of urge to return home (“I *must* come for Nigeria quick now”; “So I *must* come for Nigeria quick quick”), as well as the reverence that Western and Asian people should owe to the almighty god (“They *must* thank the god for tell people when they make wrong thing and punish them with Covid”), and also the obligations and limits imposed upon people’s movements by the Italian laws in the critical period of ‘lockdown’ (“but the law say se we *must* no move out Italy”). Another typical feature of the migrant’s Nigerian English variation used in her narrative is the frequent occurrence of ergative subjects in the clausal structures transferred from her native Yoruba language. In the case in point, ergative subjects are represented by abstract entities (i.e., “science”, “medicine”, “law”, “fear”) and inanimate natural elements (“desert”, “big sea”, “sun”) that come to be personified as animate entities that turn out to be hostile to human beings. As animate entities, they are collocated in force-dynamic logical and syntactic subject position within the clause structures (Langacker 1991). Eventually, in this specific trauma narrative, even the quite aggressive virus causing the pandemic (i.e., “Covid”) has come to be personified into the metaphysical entity of the vengeful Yoruba god Ọbalúayé who has unleashed the plague against Western and Asian people because – differently from African people – they have dared to defy his absolute power of life or death over humankind.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter, ethnographic data have shown that Nigerian migrants' trauma narratives are prevalently characterized by features from their typologically-different native languages which come to be transferred into their ELF variations at the levels of: ergative clause structures, modality, idiomatic lexicon, and metaphorical patterns of a metaphysical kind. More specifically, the six case studies under analysis have revealed that the migrants that constitute the subjects of enquiry often employ modal operators in the description of much-desired 'possible worlds' projected into a transcendental dimension. It has been observed that every obstacle to the achievement of the migrants' longed-for goals triggers in their minds intense emotions that turn traumatic events and their effects into personifications of supernatural entities taking the animate agentive shapes – in ergative-subject position – of cruel Yoruba deities, or imaginary monsters, often generated by a process of hybridization between parallel mythological creatures in both native and host cultures. Indeed, in all these cases, such personifications of the causes of traumatic events experienced by West-African migrants represent culture-specific 'idioms of distress' that significantly diverge from the Western clinical categories classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* issued by the American Psychiatric Association (APA 2013) – which, in fact, are almost inadequate for the analysis and report of the effects of traumatic events on non-Western populations (Guido 2008; Peltzer 1998). In the case studies in point, illustrated in the present chapter and making reference to a wider corpus of ELF-mediated West-African migrants' and refugees' trauma narratives (Guido 2018), it has been observed that the degree of psychological resilience to traumatic experiences is determined by the migrants' more or less optimistic prospects on the achievement of the much-desired 'possible worlds', which they represent in their minds as a sort of 'utopia', in contrast with the 'dystopian real world' that they have sadly experienced. In particular, the corpus of trauma narratives reveals the frequent occurrence of specific patterns in association with a four-level gradient ranging from possible, unreal, and impossible utopian worlds, up to – as a more recent development triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic – a much-too-real dystopian world. Each of these degrees have been defined as trauma narratives of, respectively, 'hope', 'frustration', 'despair', and 'urge of stampede'.

In the light of such non-Western divergences from the conventional clinical ways of categorizing trauma effects and symptoms in the Western world, it seems necessary to foster the development of hybrid ELF registers which could accommodate in their narrative structures different culture-

specific categorizations of traumatic experiences which could be subsequently employed in specialized intercultural communication within migration contexts (e.g., in the field of ‘transcultural psychiatry’).

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