The art of language invention in school
Two language laboratories in a Montessori school in Milan

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Background of the research

In metropolitan areas such as Milan, it is more and more common that pupils have **several home languages** different from Italian. In a school where Italian is the only language of instruction, there is neither apart focus on multilingualism nor occasions to valorize home languages in the class.

The Montessori method encourages the **natural curiosity** towards knowledge of pupils, by preparing activities based on that curiosity. School teachers in the Montessori school in Milan, via Milazzo noticed that approximately at the age 9 pupils start to show an interest towards **language diversity** and in parallel a desire to invent a **secret language** for themselves.

Why inventing languages in class?

Natural languages can be used both as an intercultural **bridge** and as a **wall** for the Others. The Montessori method fosters the idea of 'learning by doing'. So, two language laboratories were prepared in order to have an experience of both aspects. The language laboratories are made during the normal hours in class devoted to the Italian language, one laboratory per school year.

- The first edition was in the school year 2012-3 with the following home languages: Dutch, French, Serbian, Spanish.
- The second edition is running in the past year 2014-5 and in the current year 2015-6, where the home languages are: Flemish, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese.

Theoretical background and objectives

The theoretical background is **interlinguistics** (the study of planned languages) and **language planning** (how natural languages are consciously shaped for maintenance and promotion). Often languages are invented for artistic or fictional purposes (e.g., Star Trek's Klingon and Dothraki of the Games of Thrones), but rarely in class with explicit educational purposes.

Both laboratories aim to raise the level of **metalinguistic awareness** of one's repertoire in relation of the other's. All linguistic level are covered: phonology and in particular graphisation, morphology and syntax, and even pragmatics – what is the purpose of the invented languages?

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The setting of the language laboratories

The laboratories are made in four phases:

1. the researcher in class explains the 'rules of the game', with the help of the teacher. **Pupils start to invent**, under the double supervision of the researcher and the teacher;

2. the **lab proceeds** with the teacher in class, who keeps in contact with the researcher for coordination;

3. the researcher comes back in the class, so to take stock of the **linguistic material produced** so far;

4. **evaluation of the work** done through the year. Presentation of the results is als done to the parents.

The first laboratory, Europantesque

Pupils perform interlinguistic comparison writing in a variant of Europanto, the linguistic *pastiche* made by Diego Marani, an Italian interpreter and writer, working in Brussels. The focus is on the vocabulary, while the structure of the Europantesque is borrowed from Italian, with sometimes influence from English and other languages.

Pupils should put at least three languages in each sentence. Meaning is paradoxical or amusing. In this way, they learn **similarities and differences** among languages.

An example of the original Europanto

Inspector Cabillot ist el echte europaico fonkzionario wie lutte contra der ingiustice y der mal, por der ideal van una Europa unita y democratica in eine world de pax where se sprache eine sola lingua, der Europanto.

Erat una fria morning de Octubre und eine low fog noyabat las benches des park. Algunos laborantes maghrebinos collectabant der litter singing melancolic tunes. Aan el 200th floor des Euro Tower el Chef Inspector General del Service des Bizarre Dingen, Mr. What, frapped sur the tabula y said: "Dit is keine blague! Appel rapid Cabillot!".

from: Cabillot und el mysterio des exotisches pralinas

The novel in Europanto by Marani

Las Adventures Des Inspector Cabillot

Diego Marani

Dedalus, 2012 - 138 pagine

★★★★★

2 Recensioni

G+1 〈 0 〉

Twelve years ago after its first publication Las adventures des In
popular demand.Inspector Cabillot, the first Europanto detective
as a mad cow disease terrorist cell that takes over London and t
Union leader by Finnish nationalists who want to replace Europa
the European Union.These stories take a light-hearted look at th
language created to give Europeans a common tongue. " The lir
broadly the following; take a firm grounding of English and Frenc
and Italian; garnish with a dash of Flemish and Euroslang; pour
and serve when thoroughly pureed." Ben MacIntyre in The Time

A basic linguistic atlas of the word 'street'

The second laboratory, Markuskica

While the laboratory Europantesque focuses on the lexicon, Markuskica starts from the **language structure** – phonology and graphisation, morphosyntax. pupils invent a secret language in the class. The language is **secret and shared between the class members**: that means that productions should be readable by the others.

The prototype is Markuska, a secret language made by the linguist Alessandro Bausani in his early days. He started to extract lexemes from Italian, adding a series of affixes – it is an agglutinative language.

The original poem in Markuska by Bausani

kulkuvni kul odikko
likni vo leţţil
enpakkenţska ñagour
ometr vo cipil

At the window a light is turned off
in the sky a little star.
There is a cry which we do not understand.
A small child died.

The algorithm for the invention of a secret language

- 1. take an Italian word (or from other languages, if you like)
- 2. re-write it following the new phonological rules
- 3. analyse the morphemes (gender, number, tense, etc.)
- 4. if the lexeme is new, go to 5*a*; if it already exists, go to 5*b*.
- 5*a*. add the new lexeme to the dictionary, in proper script and Latinate.
- 5*b*. take the existing lexeme from the dictionary.
- 6. 'recalculate' the other morphemes through the affixes.
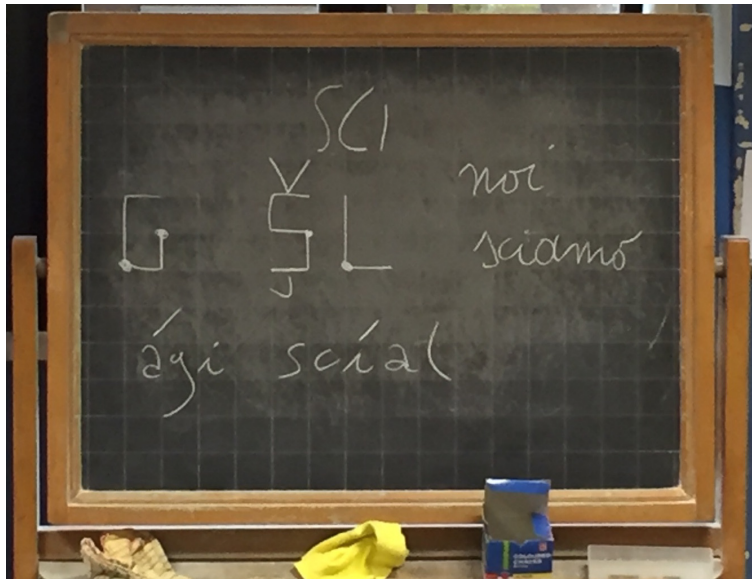- 7. write down the paradigm of the new word.
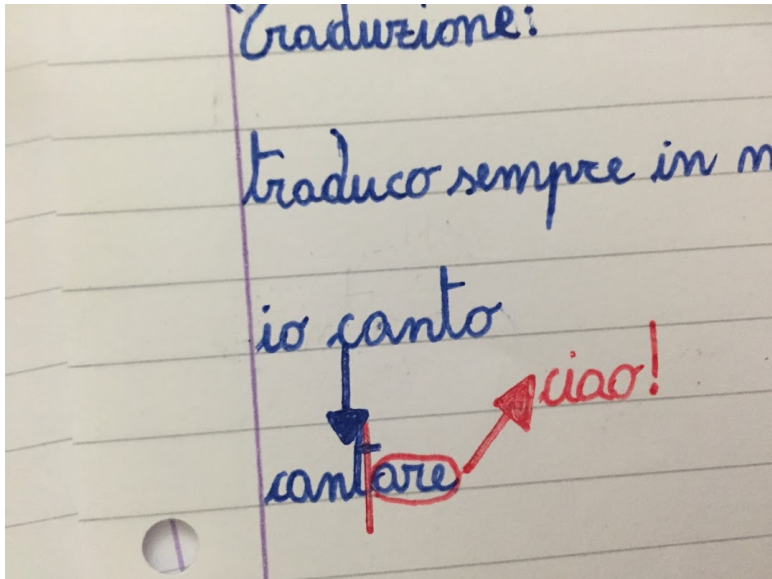
step 2: no double letters (even vowels)

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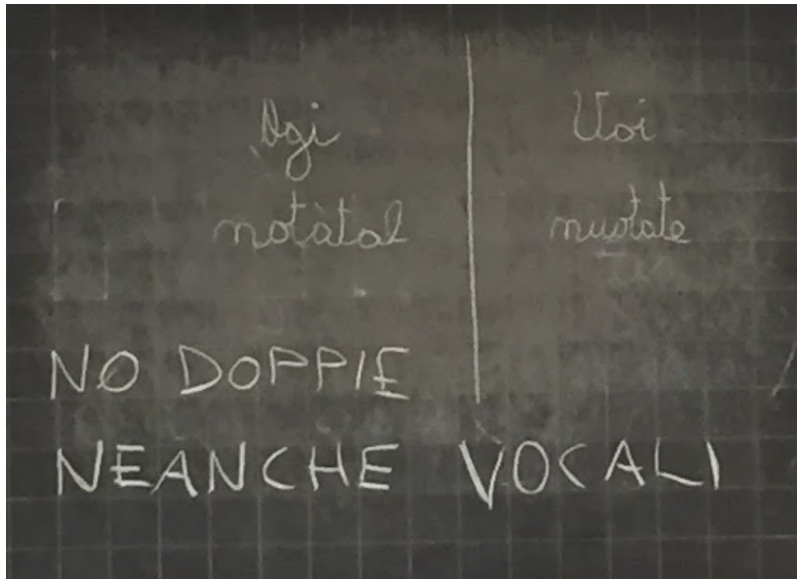
step 3: morphological analysis
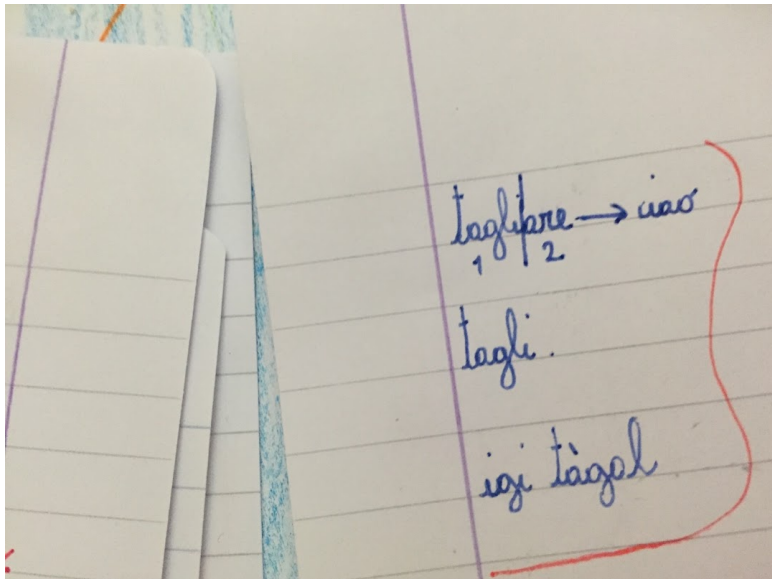
step 5*a*: adding 'to ski'

step 6: good bye, infinitive!

step 7: paradigms of 'dragon' and 'cat'

drago = dlăgom

draghi = dlăgomi

draghena = dlăgam

draghene = dlăgami

gatto = gatom

gatta = gatam

gatti = gatomi

gatte = gatami

A Christmas gift from the researcher...

...and the answers by the pupils!

An example of secret message

An example of text in Gatlòik…

Vílastlokam di Nátalaom[1]
di S.M.

Ni Nátalaom ig ásal óno vóstam ka dóni ğóiam
Ti ig valalom sáltala ni tástam!

Lagalòmi splándanomi álmalomi lokantòni
ági ásal totòmi mólto kontantòmi

Ni póstlomi ágolomi ígi asalómi sikolómi!

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[1]Note the error here! It should be 'Nátalo'

…and its non-poetic translation in English

A nursery rhyme for Christmas
by F.G.

Christmas is the feast so joyful
Your head will jump away!

Shining gifts, trees full of lights,
we are all very happy

Our greetings are safe and solid like walls

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Thanks for your kind attention

Questions? Comments?

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