

# THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC EMERGENCY ON THE ECONOMY PRINCIPLE APPLIED TO NIGERIAN MIGRANTS' ELF-MEDIATED ONLINE INTERACTIONS

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**Abstract** – This paper investigates the impact of Covid-19 pandemic emergency on the grammaticalization processes identified in a set of ELF-mediated online interactions produced by a group of Nigerian migrants residing in Southern Italy during the lockdown period in the early months of 2020. Case-study analysis illustrates how such interactions, though propositionally conveyed in writing, in fact come to be perceived with the same analogical immediacy as spoken language. Through such a hybrid mode of discourse, migrants give vent to their concern at finding themselves suddenly caught in a condition of anxiety and even more segregation. Case-study data demonstrate how migrants make a linguaculturally-marked use of novel forms of syllabic notations, acronyms, emojis, and phrasal verbs triggering unusual relexicalization and decategorialization processes which, indeed, challenge what has conventionally been considered as the natural course of language change, governed by the ‘economy principle’ at both structural and functional levels.

**Keywords:** economy principle; grammaticalization processes; ELF-mediated online interaction.

## 1. Research context and rationale

This paper investigates some field data that mark a new turn in the context of an ethnographic research in progress exploring West-African migrants’ discourse modes mediated by non-native/nativized variations of English used as a ‘lingua franca’ (ELF) in situations of intercultural communication in Italy. Until then, ethnographic data, collected via face-to-face conversations, had shown that such discourse modes are often characterized by syntactic and semantic structures derived from the migrants’ typologically-different native languages which come to be subsequently transferred into their ELF variations, thus frequently causing misunderstanding (Guido 2008a, 2018).

The unpredicted shift of focus in this research, illustrated in this paper, was prompted by the recent coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) raging in the early months of 2020 mainly in Italy. Such an emergency, indeed, triggered an unrepressed panic, principally among West-African ‘economic migrants’ (less so among refugees) who longed for returning to their home countries in Africa that, at the onset of the pandemic, were still almost ‘Covid-free’. The ban on leaving Italy (as required by the European laws to contain the spread of the virus) represented, therefore, the prompt for these migrants to give vent to their agony through the use of online communication modes. This paper will illustrate how such modes – involving Whatsapp and e-mail interactions with no audio-visual support, employed by a sample of Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy (in private online correspondence with the author) – have produced new forms of ELF-mediated conversations on the edge between spoken and written discourse. It will be argued here that such a new hybrid online discourse is triggered not only by the migrants’ urge to flee Italy, but also by their need to ‘embody’ their disembodied online presence

which they fear would make them even more ‘socially invisible and unheard’ than they had already been before the Covid-19 emergency.

The online discourse development analyzed in this paper – though based on a still almost small corpus of Nigerian migrants’ online interactions – is therefore assumed to start a process of language change which, on the one hand, follows universal parametric trends in language evolution governed and bound by natural principles of economy (Chomsky 1995). On the other hand, however, such a change is expected to develop out of communicative needs (Weinreich *et al.* 1968) that, in the online interactions under analysis, activate specific context-induced economy parameters governed by the new instant ‘real time’ communication modes. Such modes, indeed, though propositionally conveyed as written language, actually retain the analogical immediacy of spoken face-to-face discourse that come to undermine in many ways what so far has been regarded as the universal language-evolution principle of economy and its related processes. Hence, a reconsideration of the ‘principle of economy’ will be carried out by examining precisely some innovative features of Nigerian migrants’ ELF-mediated online discourse – such as the linguaculturally-marked use of syllabic notations, acronyms, emojis, and phrasal verbs.

More specifically, the four Nigerian migrants representing the case-study subjects of this research have a low level of schooling and a nativized variant of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) that, dislocated from its original context of use, becomes in the host country (Italy) one of the many variations of English as a ‘lingua franca’ (ELF) through which non-native speakers express their own linguacultural distinctiveness. Hence, this NP-ELF variation typically comes to be perceived in Italy as any other non-native ‘defective’ interlanguage variant deviating from Standard English (SE). And yet, in its impact with the new telematic modes of communication imposed by the situation of pandemic emergency, this NP-ELF variation has given rise to new online dialogic forms through which Nigerian migrants convey their distress at feeling caught in a condition of anxiety and even more segregation – that would make it even more difficult for them to assert their own identity values, as well as their socio-cultural instances. Indeed, such values and instances come to be undermined by the strong sense of uneasiness that migrants feel, on the one hand, in defining their own interpersonal pragmatic positioning in interactions (which is notoriously difficult, but with the pandemic emergency it becomes exacerbated by the segregation imposed by the lockdown measures) and, on the other, in realizing a worsening of the already widespread lack of recognition of their presence in the host country as social, cultural, physical and emotional individuals (Kolko, Reid 1998). It is precisely this sense of uneasiness that has been observed as the feeling that would prompt the development of a novel online NP-ELF as an atypical narrative variant in which, though produced through a written mode (according to the phonetic spelling that characterizes NPE orthography), it is used by migrants not only as if it were spoken language in real-time ongoing interaction (Oviatt, Cohen 1991), but it is even perceived as such, with the same analogical immediacy as a spoken utterance. This is due to its almost instant feedback in its peculiar turn-taking structure (Murray 1989), despite the fact that the auditory and vocal dimensions of face-to-face conversation are missing.

## **2. Theoretical background: economy trends in grammaticalization**

The development of such an ‘online NP-ELF’ discourse calls, therefore, for a reassessment of the very process of grammaticalization, assumed to be the result of two competing phonetic tendencies: the former identified in the oral use of language, and the

latter in its morphological written structure. The grammaticalization process is towards an 'ease of articulation' in the oral use of language, producing a signal reduction that justifies the natural cline of categoriality from a major category (noun/verb) to a middle one (preposition/adverb) up to minor categories (clitic/affix). Indeed, such a categoriality cline triggers a process of 'fading', or 'bleaching', that weakens the semantic content (Givón 1973; Heine *et al.* 1991, pp. 215-222), thus producing routinization and idiomatization of expressions which lead to reduction and simplification initially in the oral signal (the actual 'ease of articulation' – Langacker 1977, p. 106 – achieved by means of processes of 'fusion', 'erosion', 'univerbation', and 'compacting') and, subsequently, in the written signal ('ease of optic perception').

## 2.1. Relexicalization processes

Despite this expected grammaticalization process, however, it is here argued that Nigerian migrants' NP-ELF-mediated online discourse frequently runs counter to the typical grammaticalization cline from pragmatic to lexical down to morphosyntactic categories (characterized by a gradual loss of phonetic discreteness and semantic content). In fact, these migrants' interactions are often characterized by features that evolve, instead, towards an economical reduction only in writing. Such a written reduction does not determine semantic loss, as in typical phonetic clines of categoriality, but it rather marks a pragmatic deroutinization and a semantic relexicalization of grammatical items into compactly written lexical clusters (i.e., a cline of lexicality from morphosyntactic, to lexical, up to pragmatic categories). This would represent the lucky and rare achievement of the economy-principle requirement for the maximum communicative advantage and signification (due to relexicalization) via the least effort in production and reception (due to written signal reduction). This relexicalization process is here assumed to aim at fulfilling the Nigerian migrants' need for online analogical immediacy in written communication.

One of such instances is represented by the use of *syllabic notations* which, in the NP-ELF variation adopted by the sample of Nigerian migrants, tend to diverge from the conventional ones shared by the international Web community. Syllabic notations activate a process of 'signal simplification' that triggers a special perception strategy consisting in reading some vowels, consonants, and also numbers with their own names, rather than with their sound as phonemes, thus forming novel words and phrases. Once automatized (relexicalized) through use, the full mental-reading process is thus no longer necessary and words and phrases come to be perceived 'analogically' – i.e., by their visual image only, to which the reader automatically attributes a conventional semantic meaning as in rapid speech (Guido 2002)

Also the *acronyms* (or 'word-initials') used within these Nigerian migrants' restricted community tend to deviate from the internationally-shared ones on the Web, but the relexicalization processes that they involve are almost the same. Such processes result from routinization of expressions tending to reduction and simplification of the signal (Langacker 1977), compacting and obliteration of boundaries up to a unique verbal icon, i.e., the acronym. An acronym – e.g., "BTW" meaning (→) "by the way"; "IMO" → "in my opinion" – retains the 'traces' of the lexemes it stands for, and yet, in rapid reading, it conditions readers into abstaining from a propositional cognition of the implied words in favour of a quick analogical perception of the compact signal as a whole – like an ideogram – which, thus, comes to be relexicalized (Guido 2002).

Finally, the *emojis* (small iconic images) similarly to their precursors, the *emoticons* ('emotion icons' made of keyboard characters), mainly featuring a character

expressing a particular emotion, have recently been adapted to be employed in Nigerian users' online interactions, sometimes accompanied by routinized phrases in NPE. In online interactions where human bodies get lost (denied, or kept hidden behind fictitious or – even worse – conventionalized identities) writing needs to represent the human body not only with all its emotions, thoughts, and reactions (Rice, Love 1987), but – in this case dealing with displaced communities of Nigerian migrants – also with their physical and socio-cultural identity. Hence, the Nigerian emojis reintroduce the absent and silent 'African body' into the migrants' NP-ELF-mediated online discourse and, as such, they are perceived by analogic, iconic associations, as well as by indexical reference to their users' states of mind in relation to the situational context.

## 2.2. Decategorialization processes

The reverse decategorialization process has been observed, instead, in the use of phrasal verbs in NPE, which are also employed by the Nigerian subjects of this research. Nigerian Pidgin English (Elugbe, Omamor 1991; Faraclas 1996; Jowitt 1991; Marchese, Schnukal 1982), similarly to the creole variant of Sierra Leone Krio English (Wyse 1989), is characterized by an oral cliticization of the phrasal-verb prepositional components turned into reduced phonetic particles that have subsequently come to be represented also in writing (by means of the typical NPE phonetic orthography) as unique items, resulting from a process of fusion between the lexical verbs and their related prepositions.

The lack of the NPE speakers' recognition of the prepositional (and sometimes adverbial) particles constituting the English phrasal verbs is assumed to be principally due to the lack of 'orientational schemata' in West-African indigenous languages – a cognitive feature that has been transferred into the West-African variations of English and is reflected in the extensive use of the all-purpose preposition 'for' replacing all the other orientational prepositions of movement and position.<sup>1</sup>

The cognitive impediment to recognize the semantic sense of prepositions constituting the English phrasal verbs would prompt a decategorialization of phrasal constructions towards morphological structures that result from the activation of strategies of 'minimal mental effort' (Chomsky 1995, pp. 138-139) via 'minimal morphonemic differentiation' (Langacker 1977). In NP-ELF used in online interaction, such strategies have been observed to function as pragmatic markers iconically reproducing, by means of a reduced speech signal, the sense of perceptual immediacy of an action often prompted, in the case of migrants' interactions under analysis, by situations of distress. In these cases, autochthonous linguistic forms are more likely to be automatically used, and this process would produce decategorialized phrasal verbs resulting from a cliticization of the prepositional particle into a compact and reduced accentual unit which forms a host+suffix construction of an agglutinative type. This decategorialization process may bring to a subsequent tendency towards 'distinctness' resemanticizing the reduced signal into an altogether distinct word through a process of 'reanalysis' (Langacker 1977) which, by activating economy procedures of cognitive 'abduction' (ease of conceptual achievement)

<sup>1</sup> The use of the all-purpose preposition 'for' (*fo*) is believed to be due to the fact that African indigenous languages have not evolved from the Indo-European typological group, but from the more ancient Afro-Asiatic one. Such primordial Proto-Indo-European languages are assumed to have developed in climatic and environmental contexts that were most likely hostile to earliest human beings who, thus, were totally at the mercy of natural elements preventing them from developing orientation in space. Such a lack of 'orientational schemata' is still persistent in some contemporary African languages (DeLancey 1981) which, therefore, do not share the same movement/position conceptualization with the English language which syntactically renders it through the use of prepositions and adverbs.

and 'inferencing' (ease of meaning achievement), redefines the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the derived word (Guido 2008b).

More specifically, this research investigates the decategorialization processes (Hopper, Traugott 1993) that involve a cline from a major category (noun/verb) to middle (adverb/preposition) up to minor categories (clitic/affix) on the assumption that grammatical words, such as phrasal-verb particles, have their origin in lexical words which have become grammaticalized according to economy parameters determining not only meaning generalization and routinization, but also rule change (by reanalysis) and meaning change (by analogy) (Langacker 1977). In this sense, decategorialization has not exclusively evolved according to such parameters aimed at a minimal mental effort in generating and processing language (Chomsky 1995), but rather it is also the outcome of a contact between different typological morphologies of the subjects' L1 (e.g., native African languages, in this case) and their L2 (English). These eventually come to 'collide' in the attempt to give expression to experience through the L2 – in this case meant as 'lingua franca' English (ELF) – according to the native 'iconicity schemata' (Givón 1985), thus inducing an 'L1→L2 transfer' of grammatical structures (Selinker, Lakshmanan 1992).

In Chomsky's (1995) theory, instead, decategorialization is governed by two main cognitive principles of language economy that are assumed to be universal and context-independent since they are automatically generated by the mind without being prompted by any external communicative-contextual factor (Chomsky 1995, pp. 138-139). Such *economy principles* are:

- a. *Derivation* – determining the reduction or deletion of redundant derivational structures by ascribing their semantic meaning to different lexical items – e.g., Verb/[V]/Noun/[N]-to-Affix/[A] 'raising' (Chomsky 1995, pp. 139-140), that is a movement "requiring the shortest, 'least costly' derivation" in Noun or Verb Phrases (Chomsky 1995, p. 145) "thus minimizing [their] length" (Chomsky 1995, p. 130), as in:
  - *Lock down*: [V] lock (synonym: close, shut) + [N] completion inducing a lower or worse condition; low in activity; depressed, dejected → [V] lock + [P (prepositional/adverbial Particle)] down → [V]+[A] = [N] lockdown.
  - *Pick up*: [V] pick + [V] ascend → [V] pick + [P] up → [V]+[A] = [N] pickup (derived Noun retaining the literal sense of both its original components).
- b. *Representation* – determining that symbols cannot be represented at a linguistic level unless they have significance at the level of conceptual, logical representation (i.e., Phonetic Form [PF] as an interface of Logical Form [LF] – Chomsky 1995, pp. 21-22). This entails that the unmarked distribution of words in a clause follows the logical order of the speaker's spatial-temporal perception of a process which, in Accusative languages of a SVO type, like English, is articulated, in the 'active voice', as Agent→Process→Directionality/Position→Goal. According to the representation principle, it is impossible to delete an element of this 'PF chain' if it plays a role at the LF level.<sup>2</sup>

Differently from Chomsky's generative view of decategorialization, other linguists assume that categoriality clines evolve not simply according to decontextualized cognitive principles, but rather according to experiential-pragmatic ones that set specific 'economy parameters' in the various languages aimed at enhancing communication by a

<sup>2</sup> A deleted Verb always leaves its 'trace' [t] in a clause, as in "Mary [t→goes] out"), whereas the syntactic Agreement – between, for instance, the third-person singular Subject and the present-simple Verb – plays no role at the LF level and so it may be eliminated (Chomsky 1995, p. 154), as in: [N:Agent] Mary → [V:Process] goes → [P:Directionality/Position] out.

maximization of: (a) ‘efficiency’ via ‘minimal morphonemic differentiation’ (Zwicky 1985) (e.g., ‘want to’→‘wanna’); (b) ‘effectiveness’ via ‘morphosemantic and morphotactic transparency’ (Dressler 1988) (e.g., ‘un^like^li^hood’); and (c) ‘informativeness’ via ‘weakening of semantic content’ – due, for example, to a transformation of concrete meanings into abstract ones (Sweetser 1988; Wierzbicka 1988) (e.g., ‘undergo’, whose semantic sense of Directionality:descent + Process:movement has developed into the abstract meaning of ‘experiencing something unpleasant’) – or due to a ‘conventionalization of polisemy’ (Talmy 1983).<sup>3</sup>

Hopper and Traugott (1993, p. 13) contend that the SE phrasal-verb construction – with its typical rule characterized by the post-positioning of the particle after the noun object of the clause (e.g., ‘he *cleared* the mess *up*’) – does not conform to the natural trend in grammaticalization according to which periphrastic constructions gradually become morphological due to the predictable cline of categoriality reducing a lexical form first into a clitic and then into an affix. This instead already happens, as will be illustrated later on in this paper, in some creole/pidgin varieties of English, such as the Nigerian Pidgin English and the Sierra-Leone Krio, that reduce prepositional verbs into cliticized forms (e.g.: ‘come out’ → ‘komot’). In fact, the SE phrasal-verb construction actually deviates from (a) the ‘economy parameters’, since the post-positioned particle obliges listeners to suspend their clause processing until they finally get to it for a semantic disambiguation of the clause meaning, and (b) the ‘economy principles’, insofar as the ‘renewal’ of the particle meaning by its post-positioned collocation facilitates the restoration of old and anti-economical periphrastic structures.

In applying the natural cline of categoriality to the use of English phrasal verbs in their ELF variations, therefore, the NPE and Krio speakers are expected to activate a process of ‘reanalysis’ meant as a cognitive operation of rule change, creating new economical structures from old periphrastic ones (Langacker 1977; Lightfoot 1991) which, according to Givón (1989), can be modified by external communicative contexts within specific speech communities. Reanalysis, therefore, is here assumed to be generated by the contact between two different ‘iconicity schemata’ (Givón 1985), which are different cognitive conceptualizations of experience determined partly by general universal principles and partly by logical patterns culturally and experientially shared by the speech community a speaker belongs to.

The hypothesis formulated in this study is that reanalysis is not simply triggered by the Logical Form affecting the economy parameters that inform the migrants’ NPE iconicity schemata, but it may be largely prompted by the phonological properties of the phrasal-verbs as they are used by the Nigerian subjects who, in fact, tend to neglect (presumably because they are unaware of) the semantic meanings of the single components of the phrasal verb (verb+particle). This may not be due merely to morphosyntactic complexity, but rather, on the one hand, to the metaphorical meanings of the phrasal-verb particles (e.g.: break *up/down* [completive]; carry *on* [continuative]; come *to* [ingressive]), which are inaccessible to Nigerian subjects, with the consequent loss of semantic sense, pragmatic significance, and phonetic substance. On the other hand, it may also be due to the automatic economy needs for efficiency, effectiveness and informativeness in online communicative contexts.

The following sections of this paper will illustrate the extent to which such adaptations of the economy parameters to the Nigerian migrants’ new turn in their online

<sup>3</sup> An instance of conventionalized polysemy in Standard-English phrasal verbs is represented by ‘get off’, whose possible meanings are: ‘to fall asleep’, ‘to leave a place’, ‘to stop discussing a topic’, ‘to send something by mail’, ‘to be excited’, ‘to start a romantic relationship’, ‘to have no injuries in an accident’, ‘to receive no punishment’.

NP-ELF discourse contribute to the development of innovative forms (on the edge between spoken and written narrative modes) for the immediate online expression of their unheard anxiety and distress at finding themselves caught up inside an unexpected and quite appalling pandemic situation in the host country, with no possibility of stampede towards their safer home country.

### 3. Analysis of the relexicalization processes in the Nigerian migrants' use of syllabic notations, acronyms and emojis

This section will explore how economy parameters, when applied to the online NP-ELF discourse produced by the sample of Nigerian migrants taking part in this case study, do not automatically work in the expected direction of delexicalization, but often in the opposite direction of relexicalization (Mensah 2011), pragmatic strengthening, and increase of informativeness and expressivity. In this sense, the economy of mental effort (simplicity of perception and production) in real-time online communication tends to reproduce the immediacy of oral speech by reducing the written language to be rapidly perceived as speech. This process, therefore, results in 'signal simplicity', or 'simplification', iconically representing the acoustic perception of the first salient syllable (the stem) of a lexical word with the consequent automatic meaning attribution (an iconicity also reproduced gesturally by the deaf-and-dumb language, as well as graphically by traditional shorthand methods). What is interesting to notice in the limited corpus of NP-ELF online interactions under analysis is the fact that the process of relexicalization sometimes involves a change in the meaning of the new lexical item which is culture-specific and may totally or partially diverge from its derived SE source.

#### 3.1. Syllabic notations

An instance of this type is represented by *syllabic notations* which, though based on homophonic sounds (often represented by numbers, as in: "2U2" → "to you too"; "B4" → "before"; "CU" → "see you"), activate relexicalization processes involving a reanalysis of morpheme (not phoneme) boundaries, often leading to univerbation, compacting, fusion and erosion by the Merge economy operation (Chomsky 1995, p. 226). These boundaries are then disambiguated by in-group shared conversational iconicity parameters which, in online communication in general – and in the Nigerian subjects' online NP-ELF interactions – have not evolved over time, but have been constructed by the interacting community. This may explain why they work towards relexicalization, rather than towards delexicalization and grammaticalization. Such in-group parameters in online communication are both cognitive (iconic) and pragmatic (conversational), insofar as they involve processes of 'cognitive abduction' (Andersen 1973, 1989) and 'pragmatic inference' (Grice 1975), leading respectively to cognitive and conversational disambiguation. The in-group pragmatic level of inference is obviously based on the online community's shared knowledge of syllabic notations, and on how they work pragmatically in conversation by keeping a fixed syllabic collocation in their cluster.

More interesting is the process that syllabic notations trigger at a cognitive-abductive level: here the application of the economy principles can be explained by processes of 'derivation' and 'representation', assuming the language-user's activation of mental default functions to bridge omitted (given-for-granted) semantic elements in the propositional linearization (i.e., the process of abduction in projectional derivational/representational economy – Chomsky 1995, pp. 133-134). Thus, in

processing syllabic notations, the Attract Function (signalled by ‘Agr’) between two lexemes leading to Merge (Chomsky 1995, p. 135) is justified by an Attract Function between underlying Phonetic Forms – as in the example of the Noun Phrase “high energy” represented by the syllabic notation: H [PF/hai/] Agr N [PF/en/] Agr R [PF/a:/] Agr G [PF/dji/] → new lexeme “HNRG”. This NP-raising to the new lexeme via syllabic notations is assumed to be at the basis of the reconstruction (relexicalization) processes (Chomsky 1995, p. 133).

The group of four Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy during the lockdown period of the Covid-19 pandemic and taking part in this research as case-study subjects, were prompted to use their own NPE variation while interacting online (via Whatsapp and email) with no audio-visual support. More specifically, they were encouraged to express their feelings and intentions in a written form reproducing the NPE phonetic orthography they would normally use, as well as all the simplification strategies that they would usually adopt in this kind of online exchanges. The suggested topic of such interactions (here defined as ‘chats’) was their sense of discomfort and anguish at their feeling caught up in such an unexpected pandemic situation of total lockdown.

The following examples represent instances of the use of syllabic notations taken from the migrants’ in-group NP-ELF online chats (reproduced in the NPE phonetic orthography and followed by their rendering into SE), conveying their sense of anxiety:

#### **Chat 1**

**1.a:** a 1 lef Italy, a 1 kom 4 Naija, hie covid go kil os o (*I want [wan] to leave Italy, I want to go to Nigeria, here Covid will kill us!*)

**1.b:** gri. a veks 2, we 4 tear race B4 we go kpeme (*I agree, I’m upset [vexed] too, we should run away before we will die*)

‘Chat 1’ reports the migrants’ mounting feeling of terror at the thought of the lethal consequences of Covid-19, as well as their urge of stampede from Italy. Such an anxiety is rendered through the analogical immediacy of their online NP-ELF narratives characterized by a series of peculiar lexical features. One of them shows a typical use of cardinal numbers in syllabic notations, standing for whole lexical words. In most of these cases, however, the meanings of such words do not correspond to their conventional meanings in SE. For instance, the number “1” stands for the NPE word “wan” → “want”, orthographically rendered according to the NPE phonology. Also the case of “4” → “for”, represents a deviation from SE in that “for” is the typical NPE ‘all-purpose preposition’, in this case standing for the preposition of movement “to” (“a 1 kom 4 Naija”; “we 4 tear race”). The use of “2” → “too” and “B4” → “before” corresponds instead to the conventional SE syllabic notations. In this ‘Chat 1’, furthermore, it is interesting to notice instances of lexical erosion typical of the NPE phonological dimension reproduced in writing to render the immediacy of spoken utterances, as in: “a” → “I”; “kom” → “come” (meaning “to come” as well as “to go”, due to the above-mentioned absence of ‘orientational schemata’ in NPE); “lef” → “leave”; “Naija” → “Nigeria”; and “gri” → “agree”. Finally, in this ‘Chat 1’ it is possible to observe instances of transfer from the migrants’ native languages, such as the compound verb “tear race” → “run”, and “kpeme” → “die”, both preceded by “go”, i.e., the auxiliary pre-verbal marker for the future tense, which in NPE undergoes a grammaticalization process of semantic bleaching, thus losing its lexical sense of ‘physical movement towards a place’ to acquire the metaphorical meaning of ‘cognitive motion towards a future intention’ (Nicolle 2007, p. 48).

The following ‘Chat 2’ reports some new types of syllabic notations, representing a NP-ELF evolution in this analogical strategy of online writing.



### *Chat 2*

**2.a:** hie na ktkt evriwie o 4 lef italy a 4 give wad bh (*here there's confusion [kata kata → scatter] everywhere! To leave Italy I should give lots of money as a bribe [back hand]*)

**2.b:** niafu niafu (*in abundance [nyafu nyafu]*)

**2.c:** Ntoo! 419 (*Good for you! You'll be jailed [according to the article 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code]*)

'Chat 2' is an instance of online written conversation in which it is possible to observe an evolution in the form of syllabic notations. Here, the correspondence between sound and word is no longer so precise as it conventionally is in such cases. This divergence from the convention can be noticed in the case with "ktkt", reproducing in writing the rapidity in pronunciation of the expression "kata kata" – namely, a reduplication of the verb "scatter" here used metaphorically as a noun (preceded by the NPE existential copula "na" → "there is" to convey the sense of 'confusion' perceived by the migrants everywhere ("evriwie"). Reduplication in NPE is a stylistic device transferred from native West-African languages (Anagbogu 1995) often used to highlight the sense of worry and anguish (Guido 2018). This is even more stressed by the typical interjection "o" conveying a sense of disappointment.

Furthermore, in this 'Chat 2', the cardinal number "4" refers to two of its meaning implications: the former "for" ("4") implies a SE subordinate clause of purpose "in order to" ("in order to leave Italy"); the latter "for" ("4") corresponds to the SE deontic modal auxiliary "should" introducing the sense of 'obligation' ("you 4 give wad bh" → "you should give lots of money as a bribe"). The NP term "wad" is a monosyllabic word metaphorically implying the phrase "lots of money", whereas "bh" introduces the acronym for another phrase with metaphorical implications, i.e., "back hand" meaning "bribe". Also the ideophonic expression "nyafu nyafu" (surprisingly close in sound and meaning to the Italian acronym of Latin origin "a ufo" → "in abundance") has metaphorical implications insofar as its reduplicated fricative and nasal sounds, followed by the dark vowel sound of /u/, convey the idea of 'profusion' (a SE word containing the same /f/ and /u/ sounds) associated with the image of a shuffling bunch of banknotes (whose sound, indeed, is rendered by the fricative /f/). With the NP interjection "ntoo", meaning "good for you!", 'subject 2.c' sarcastically stigmatizes the fraudulent intentions of 'subject 2.a' who is planning to make use of bribes to circumvent the ban to leave Italy. Indeed, 'subject 2.c' also reminds '2.a' that he would be liable for the crime of fraud described in article 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code.

The next instance of relexicalization identified in NP-ELF online interactions under analysis regards the use of acronyms, illustrated in the following sub-section.

### **3.2. Acronyms**

The just analyzed 'Chat 2' contains a novel instance of acronym, i.e., "bh" → "back hand" (meaning "bribe") coined by the restricted online community of NPE speakers. An *acronym* entails a process of signal simplification typically resulting from routinization (idiomatization) of expressions (Langacker 1977) (e.g.: "BTW" → "by the way"; "IMO" → "in my opinion"). Normally, this grammaticalization process leads, when developed over time, to a deactivation of the metaphorical potential of the language (Lakoff, Johnson 1980). And yet, if its development is not gradual, but rapid, as it is in NP-ELF-mediated online communication under analysis, then it leads to an enhancement of expressivity, thus serving the dual economy function in pragmatics of improving informativeness for the

receiver, insofar as acronyms retain the ‘traces’ of the lexemes they stand for (Chomsky 1995, p. 135).

At the cognitive/grammatical level of minimalist economy, acronyms can be lexically marked as [+deictic], having a propositional ‘referential’ value. On the other hand, their value is also ‘existential’ and ‘representational’, insofar as they trigger in readers a process of estrangement from the propositional meaning they symbolize, thus reinforcing the new pragmatic meaning they convey. In recent times, however, acronyms are gradually conquering autonomous phonetic forms to the extent that new lexemes (such as “LOL” → “laughing out loudly”) are becoming verbs in themselves with their paradigm (“lolling”, “lollod”) and they are even tensed (“she lolls”), thus showing an incipient phoneticization, which is an expected grammaticalized tendency following relexicalization. Hence, acronyms convey an overt raising of the new reduced form to a verb or noun position, with lexical gaps explained at a Logical-Form level by the Attraction among its parts (i.e., the word-initials) and their reconstitution as the new lexeme (the acronym). In pragmatic terms, this provokes a redefinition of the principles of economy in conversation, insofar as in real-time use of acronyms it is possible to notice a maximization of efficiency and effectiveness via minimal morphosemantic differentiation, paradoxically leading to morphosemantic transparency and pragmatic informativeness due to ‘latent’ (i.e., only mentally perceived) phonetic traces of the underlying proposition the acronym stands for (e.g., ASAP → A [*trace of “as”*] S [*t. “soon”*] A [*t. “as”*] P [*t. “possible”*]).

Examples of novel NP-ELF acronyms in the migrants’ online discourse can be identified in their chats – as in the following instances prompted by the specific hint to the case-study Nigerian subjects to express their immediate feelings and intentions associated with the lockdown imposed by Covid-19 by possibly employing the contracted forms that they would use in online NPE interactions.

### **Chat 3**

3.: cg tdb! kwkw! (*Let’s escape [chop go] till day breaks! Quickly! [kwik kwik!]*)

The NP-ELF acronyms used in this extract from ‘Chat 3’ are quite novel insofar as they reproduce in an analogic way NPE expressions. The acronym “cg” stands for the NPE verb phrase “chop go” → “let’s escape”, followed by another acronym, “tdb” → “till day breaks”, introducing an indication about the timing of such a hurried departure. The sense of urgency is then emphasized by the reduplicated adverb “kwik kwik” → “quickly”, which closes this online utterance – conveying the migrant’s urge of stampede – that looks like almost as a message written in the analogical encrypted mode of a secret code.

### **Chat 4**

4.: rc go grab os! No dokita go help u hie! (*Witchcraft [remote control] will grab us! No doctor will help you here!*)

In this extract from ‘Chat 4’, the terrifying influence of Covid-19 is perceived as a “witchcraft” acting as a “remote control” (denoted by the novel acronym “rc”) over Nigerian migrants who feel so marginalized to the point that they do not expect any medical doctor (“dokita”) to take care of them in Italy if they get infected with the lethal virus.

**Chat 5**

**5.a:** if covid tink se i fit rc me, IO mnd, so a fit wkwk an a dey safe (*if Covid thinks that he can curse [remote-control] me, I owe an amulet [man-no-die], so I can wander around [waka waka → walk walk] and I'm safe*)

**5.b:** o ac! IYC (*oh, I see! What a childish attitude [the International Year of the Child]*)

The acronym “rc” for “remote control”, metaphorically meaning “witchcraft”, returns also in ‘Chat 5’, but it switches its syntactic category from a noun into a verb following the NPE deontic modal “fit” → “can”, thus implying an image of Covid-19 as an animate agent (a ‘witch’) that has got the power to exert ‘her’ destructive control over ‘subject 5.a’. But ‘subject 5.a’ announces boldly that, against such a jinx, he secretly owes (such a secrecy being emphasized by the acronym “IO” → “I owe”) an amulet, also mysteriously referred to by the acronym “mnd”, seemingly because ‘subject 5.a’ would like to keep concealed the entire spell: “man-no-die”. The amulet – he asserts – would give him the possibility (“fit”) to safely wander everywhere – a sensation of immunity and liberty emphasized by the newly coined syllabic notation “wkwk”, based on the reduplication of the verb “walk walk”.

Such a boldness boasted by ‘subject 5.a’, is ironically acknowledged by subject 5.b’ with a newly coined acronym (“o ac!” → “oh, I see!”), followed by a sarcastic comment on the naivety of what ‘subject 5.b’ has previously stated, using a typical NPE acronym, “IYC”, that mockingly makes a reference to the “International Year of the Child”.

The final instance of relexicalization in the NP-ELF online chats under analysis concerns the use of emojis, as reported in the following sub-section.

**3.3. Emojis**

Pragmatic meaning is also motivated by metaphorical and metonymic processes (i.e., iconicity processes), which are directly linked to expressivity. This is evident in the extensive use of conventionalized *emojis* which – like their precursors, the *emoticons*<sup>4</sup> – show a tendency towards a shared metaphorical iconization of the pragmatic functions of: (a) non-finite verbs in the present-continuous tense, such as: :D (emoticon) and 😄 (corresponding emoji) → “laughing”; ;- ) and 😏 → “winking”; :( and 😭 → “crying”; (b) nouns, such as: the abstract :-| and 😐 → “puzzlement”; the concrete ( )| → “beer”; (c) adjectives, such as: :- ) and 😊 → “happy”; :-( and 😞 → “unhappy”; (d) whole lexical clusters, such as: the clause :X → “my lips are sealed”.

Emojis and emoticons, thus, have both metaphorical and pragmatic functions since they are activated by analogic, iconic associations, and yet they are indexical of the user’s states of mind in relation to an actual communicative situation. That is why emojis and emoticons have been defined as ‘emotional iconic lexicon’ (Sanderson 1997). Moreover, they are generally considered as semantic representations working cross-linguistically (like punctuation forms) insofar as they refer to “image/body schemata” meant as universal gestalts grounded on the physical sources of experience and then mapped onto abstract concepts (Johnson 1987).

In a way, emojis and emoticons mark the existence, in online communication, of a pragmatic link between symbol denotation and its referential indexical meaning, passing

<sup>4</sup> *Emoticons* are simply made of keyboard letters, punctuation marks, and numbers that create small icons often to be read sideways and conveying feelings and emotions. *Emojis* are little cartoon-like images of facial expressions or whole human beings expressing emotional states, or of other living beings or objects.

through a metaphorical phase. Indeed, the metaphorical processes activated in the production and reception of emojis and emoticons are not semantic (i.e., not just truth-conditional), but pragmatic, based on communicative use. And yet, being so, they are not conversational and syntagmatic either, for they are rather analogical, paradigmatic in character.<sup>5</sup> In sum, emojis and emoticons are governed not so much by the logic-propositional dimension of the language, as by the analogic-experiential (iconic) dimension underlying the online real-time virtual communication.

The conventional view of emojis and emoticons, considering them universally shared by the global online communities, is however challenged by the linguaculturally-marked development of novel forms of emojis, such as, for instance, those devised by the Nigerian community – and also employed by the migrants representing the subjects of this study. In this particular part of the case study, the adopted methodology slightly diverged from the spontaneous ‘field research’ implemented so far (though – as previously specified – often topics and modes of online conversations were partially prompted to allow an exploration of the narrative forms that subjects would use in such virtual environment). In fact, in this particular case dealing with emojis, enquiry was carried out by adopting a more controlled ‘laboratory research methodology’. This divergence was mainly due to the fact that specific sets of emojis used by the Nigerian communities were not available on the electronic devices employed by the Nigerian migrants taking part in this case study (e.g., their email platforms and smartphones). Hence, such sets were provided with the hint to migrants to indicate which emojis they would use in their online chats. More specifically, subjects were asked to select emojis portraying characters developed within African contexts by receiving the following ‘prompt’: *“Please, go on with your conversation using some of these Nigerian emojis while you talk about your lockdown experience in Italy”*. Here are some extracts from their chats:

#### Chat 6

6.: a bin patapata 😊 hie but Italy now dey sik sik o, all pipul hie go die soon 😞 (I was completely happy here, but Italy now is extremely sick! All people here will die soon. I feel like crying)


In this ‘Chat 6’, the subject uses two classical emojis – the happy and sad faces – rendered into their African versions, so as to better represent the identity of the participants in the online chat who use exclusively a written mode of interaction. In this way, they ‘embody’ their online presence, giving a physical expression to their emotions in relation to what they say. And in this chat, ‘subject 6’ is giving vent to her concern about the life-threatening future in Italy where the virus is raging, emphasized by the adjective reduplication “sik sik” → “extremely sick”, as well as by the interjection of disappointment “o”. Furthermore, this chat is characterized by the use of the NPE copula for the present tense “dey” → “is”, and of the pre-verbal marker for the future tense “go”, followed by the African version of the sad-face emoji. This subject’s gloomy perspective on the present and future in the host country is seen in contrast with the total happiness that she experienced in the past in Italy, characterized this time by the NPE pre-verbal


<sup>5</sup> And yet, the process of construction of emoticons may sometimes resemble in many ways the syntagmatic process of morphosyntactic productivity, as in the following example: to :- ( → “unhappy” it is possible to add the apostrophe and modify it into :’( for the non-finite verb “crying”. Then, it is possible to go on adding the ‘thought bubbles’ Ooo...\_ ( and produce the causative clause “crying for unhappy thoughts”. It is still possible to add more emantic content, such as \$Ooo...:’( and produce the sentence “crying for unhappy thoughts concerning money problems”, and so on.


marker for the past tense “bin”, and emphasized by the reduplicated adverb “patapata” → “completely”, as well as by the African happy-face emoji.

In the following two chats, the Nigerian migrants representing the subjects of this case study were presented with a set of so-called ‘Naija Emoji’<sup>6</sup> – namely, emojis developed to be used in Nigeria and containing short familiar statements in NPE – which they had not yet downloaded and installed on their online devices for text-message use. Subjects were simply asked to choose those Naija emojis that would fit in their online conversations. Here are two instances drawn from their chats:

### Chat 7

  
7.a: a no 1 die hie no! (*What a bad luck! I don't want to die here, no!*)


  
7.b: Covid dey kill pipul only if dem go sin (*Buzz off! Covid kills people only if they sin*)

  
7.c: Covid na virus, in na no god, in no go punish pipul (*Covid is a virus, it's not a god, it will not punish people, I beg your pardon! [you're annoying me!]*)

This extract from ‘Chat 7’ involves three subjects. ‘Subject 7.a’ selects the emoji for the NP interjection “Chai!!!” → “What a bad luck!”, bodily expressing grief and anger at the threat of dying by Covid-19 in Italy, which she wants to avoid (“a no 1 die hie no!”: “1” → “wan” / “want”). To this, ‘subject 7.b’ replies with the choice of a Naija emoji reporting another typical NP interjection, “Waka” → “Buzz off”, accompanied by the image of a man with an annoyed expression reaching his open hand out in a gesture aimed at sending the interlocutor to hell. Such an emoji is followed by the statement that personifies Covid-19 as a kind of vengeful deity killing people who sin. ‘Subject 7.c’ jeers at his interlocutor’s fanatic statement by pointing out that Covid-19 is just a virus, not an implacable god, and accompanies his remark with the choice of a Naija emoji portraying a bothered man expressing his irritation with the NP phrase “abeg!” → “I beg your pardon!”, implying “you’re annoying me!”.

### Chat 8

8.a: we african pipul na kakraka o. no desert, no sea big big, no sun waa no bin stop os, no bin kil os wen we bin kom 4 Italy 🌍 (*We African people are exceptionally strong! Neither the desert, nor the stormy sea, not even the brightest sun stopped us, killed us when we came to Italy. I feel happily proud.*)

  
8.b: if we go stay hie we go die. (*It doesn't make sense! If we stay here, we will die.*)

‘Chat 8’ is another case of use of Naija emojis to convey disagreement. ‘Subject 8.a’ boasts that African people are so “exceptionally strong” (rendered by the NP emphatic ideophonic adjective “kakraka”) to the point that they have defied the deadly risks of the

<sup>6</sup> The set of Naija Emoji used in this study is issued by the app company Oju Africa.

stormy sea, the desert, the brightest sun (stressed by the NP interjection of amazement at the blinding property of the sun, which has become a NP emphatic ideophonic adjective “waa”) in their perilous migration journey towards (rendered through the all-purpose preposition “for” → “4”) Italy.

In replying to such a highly-complacent claim (emphasized by an African laughing-face emoji), ‘subject 8.b’ opts for a Naija emoji reproducing an African woman with her thumbs down and an annoyed facial expression accompanied by the NPE exclamation “e no make sense” → “it doesn’t make sense!”. Her dissent is soon explained: “if we go stay hie we go die” → “if we stay here, we will die”.

So far, this study has analyzed instances of new relaxicalization processes in NP-ELF online narratives. The next section shall illustrate instead instances of decategorialization processes, by specifically focusing on the Nigerian subjects’ use of NPE phrasal verbs in their online interactions dealing with the risks of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy.

#### 4. Analysis of the decategorialization processes in the Nigerian migrants’ use of phrasal verbs

Besides the relexicalization processes explored in section 3, it was observed that the Nigerian subjects, in their online conversation through NP-ELF, also showed a tendency to deviate from the SE preference for phrasal constructions to conform to the NPE decategorialization cline towards morphological constructions of single-unit lexical verbs derived from a cliticization of the phrasal-verb particle in spoken language to form a compact and reduced accentual unit, almost an incipient suffixation typical of some West-African pidgin and creole varieties – such as Nigerian Pidgin English spoken by the subjects of this case study. In the cases of Nigerian Pidgin English and Sierra-Leone Krio, for instance, decategorialization processes, such as: cliticization, univerbation, fusion, erosion – and the consequent semantic bleaching – occurring in phrasal verbs are frequent. Examples of this type are: NPE “komot”, corresponding to the Sierra-Leone Krio “kohmoht”, meaning “come out”; NPE “sidon” and Krio “sidhon” → “sit down”; and NPE “ledon” and Krio “lehdhon” → “lie down”.<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this part of the case study, the methodology adopted blended again an initial more controlled ‘laboratory research methodology’ with a subsequent more spontaneous ‘field research method’. This entailed that, before the beginning of the field-work, the Nigerian migrants representing the research subjects were briefly prompted orally with an indirect request for possibly using, in their online chats on the Covid-induced lockdown in Italy, some specific SE phrasal verbs (neither defined through such grammar terms, nor displayed to them in their written form) – such as, for instance: “come out” (pronounced as /kʌm'aʊt/); “sit down” (/sɪt'daʊn/); lie down (/laɪ'daʊn/) – to see how their meaning would be contextualized in such a topic. The exclusively oral prompt on such phrasal verbs entailed that they would not become immediately aware that these SE verbs are composed of two parts: i.e., the lexical verb and the prepositional/adverbial particle. In fact, their oral pronunciation in SE

<sup>7</sup> As stated before, in these cases, the semantic bleaching of the phrasal-verb particles is justified by the fact that most native African languages, underlying such nativized English variations, have not conceptualized and then turned ‘orientation schemata’ into the syntactic categories of prepositional and adverbial particles – as it is also evident from their use of the all-purpose preposition ‘for’ to express any type of physical and metaphorical ‘movement’ and ‘position’ (Heine, Reh 1984).

did not allow them to discern this orthographic separation as they would sound similar to the cliticized pronunciation in NPE.

This economical trend towards decategorialization in NPE phrasal verbs will be now examined in the next two sub-sections.

#### 4.1. *Cliticization and Univerbation*

*Cliticization* represents a stage of decategorialization reflected in the processes by which the particle in a phrasal verb progressively loses its status as a separate morpheme to become a single accentual unit composed of a lexical verb (without inflectional suffixes) and an unstressed cliticized particle, thus contributing to the economical and efficient conveyance of meaning via minimal morphonemic differentiation (Zwicky 1985). This process is particularly evident in NPE, where the SE inflectional suffixes are absent and the cliticization is easier to achieve. This is due to the fact that the cognitive processing of the phrasal-verb particle is not prompted by the Nigerian speakers' realization of the lexical-verb boundary – that in SE can be marked by inflectional suffixes (i.e., '-s' for the 3<sup>rd</sup>-person singular and '-ed' for the past tense of regular verbs). Furthermore, as introduced in subsection 3.2, some West-African indigenous languages have not developed 'orientational schemata' (as evident from the extensive use of the all-purpose preposition "for") and, as a consequence, such languages do not recognize the semantic contribution of the prepositional/adverbial particles constituting the SE phrasal verbs and marking the movement/position implications metaphorically underlying such verb structures. Hence, such phrasal-verb prepositions and adverbs undergo a process of 'bleaching' which nullifies their conventional semantic and metaphorical contribution to the meaning of phrasal verbs.

In the Nigerian subjects' emotional online chatter focused on the risks of Covid-19 in Italy, the contracted forms of NPE phrasal verbs make their visual and cognitive processing analogically more rapid in reading as if they were aurally perceived while listening to a speech. The following 'Chat 9' represents an instance of this kind:

##### *Chat 9*

**9.a:** a 1 troway evritin an lef Italy kwik o (*I want [wan] to throw away everything and leave Italy quickly!*)

**9.b:** wetin you dey tok? di police dem go spot you an dem go pikap you! (*What are you saying? The police will spot you and will pick you up!*)

Here 'subject 9.a', in claiming that he wants ("a 1" → "a wan/I want") to "troway evritin" → "throw away everything"), introduces a case of *univerbation* – namely, a form of cliticization in which the cline of categoriality is characterized by the development of the phrasal verb into a single verb+clitic accentual unit that, in speech, is often characterized by the stress adapted to the new lexical item usually through a backward movement to the first syllable. In this case, "troway" is the result of a cliticization between the lexical verb "throw" (the SE dental fricative sound of /θ/ does not exist in NPE pronunciation, as it is rendered into the dental sound of /t/) and its adverbial particle "away", whose semantic implication of 'moving something or someone to a distant place or, metaphorically, to a distant time' gets lost.

To this subject's claim of 'throwing everything away and quickly leave Italy', 'subject 9.b' replies by trying to bring her interlocutor down to earth by rebuking him ("wetin you dey tok?" → "What are you saying?") and then warning him that the police would certainly spot him and 'pick him up'. This phrasal verb represents here another

instance of cliticization in that it is rendered as “pikap”. In the NPE process of univerbation of the SE phrasal verb “pick up”, the lexical verb ‘pick’ retains a strong semantic and contextual sense that in itself determines the meaning of the clause and thus ignores – and completely nullifies – the contribution of the particle ‘up’, implying a metaphorical upward movement that escaped the Nigerian subjects of the case study. This prepositional particle ‘up’ is then incorporated into the new single-unit compound, as if it were a clitic, absorbed into the derived lexical verb with no third-person and past-simple suffixes in between them.

In this subject’s remark, it is also possible to notice the NPE ‘plural’ marker “dem” (“them”), which replaces the SE plural suffix ‘-s’, in that also the ‘plurality schema’ is differently conceptualized and grammaticalized in the semantics and syntax of NPE. Another instance of cliticization is represented by ‘Chat 10’:

#### **Chat 10**

**10.a:** you tink se a dey craze? (*do you think that I’m crazy?*)

**10.b:** no, a fo like fala you, but di police dem go blokap os, we no fit kros border (*No, I would like to follow you, but the police will block us up, we cannot cross the border*)

**10.a:** a go kibak dem! 🤪 dem wan kibak! (*I’ll kick them back! [I’ll bribe them], they want a bribe!*)

In this extract from ‘Chat 10’, ‘subject 10.a’ rebukes his interlocutor by resentfully asking: “you tink se a dey craze?” (“do you think that I’m crazy?”). In this sharp remark it is possible to identify another case of semantic bleaching which, this time, produces syntactic renewal. This case is represented by “se”, originally deriving from the SE lexical verb “say” which in NPE has lost its semantic sense of ‘using language so as to produce an utterance’ through a process of bleaching, to be renewed into the NPE functional category of ‘complementizer’ – corresponding to SE ‘that’ – turning the whole Head of an embedded clause into a clausal subject, but totally losing its primary semantic sense. This is the same ‘semantic-bleaching process followed by syntactic renewal’ undergone by NPE pre-verbal tense markers – as in the previously observed cases of the future-tense marker “go” and the past-tense marker “bin”.

In her reply, ‘subject 10.b’ expresses her desire to follow ‘subject 10.a’ in his attempt to stealthily flee Italy by using the all-purpose preposition “for” (“fo”), which undergoes a semantic bleaching to be syntactically renewed into a NPE auxiliary marker for the conditional modalization of the indicative mood – corresponding to SE auxiliaries ‘would’/‘should’, but without specifying their respective semantic implications of ‘intention’ and ‘obligation’. With the adversative “but”, however, ‘subject 10.b’ expresses her concerns about the fact that “the police will block us up”, rendered into NPE as “police dem go blokap os”, underlying their impossibility to cross the border expressed by the use of the NPE deontic modal “fit” → “can” in its negative form (“we no fit kros border” → “we cannot cross the border”). Here, the SE phrasal verb “block up” undergoes in NPE a cliticization process through which the semantic contribution of the preposition ‘up’ – in this case metaphorically implying a completive sense – fades away, thus facilitating the univerbation process turning it into the NPE verb “blokap”.

To his interlocutor’s worries, ‘subject 10.b’ brazenly retorts by stating “I’ll kick them back!” → “a go kibak dem!”, a NPE metaphor meaning “I’ll bribe them” (followed by an African winking-face emoji), where the cliticization of the phrasal-verb adverbial particle “back” triggers the dropping of the intermediate /k/ sound and produces a process of ‘erosion’ (to be described in the following sub-section). Such a bold statement is then upgraded by the same ‘subject 10.b’ with another claim arguing that “dem wan kibak!” →



“they [the police] want a bribe!”. In stating this, this subject changes the syntactic category of the cliticized phrasal verb “kebak” into a noun, metaphorically making reference to the “bribe” expected by the police to let migrants flee Italy.

The next sub-section will introduce two further stages of the decategorialization process in NPE use of phrasal verbs.

#### 4.2. Erosion and Fusion

*Erosion* represents another stage of decategorialization in phrasal verbs, identified in the present case study in relation to Nigerian migrants' stressful situations and signaled by a loss of phonological segments – usually consonant phonemes – occurring at verb/clitic boundaries, thus enhancing efficiency by dropping redundant sounds to rapidly communicate a sense of uneasiness and distress. For example, in ‘Chat 11’, ‘subject 11.a’ expresses her sense of being entrapped in the lockdown stifling situation while another family member, namely, her young child, feels at ease with staying at home attending online classes:

##### *Chat 11*

*11.a:* a no fit komot na Naija o, mai pikin de sidon evride de fo online lesson (*I cannot go to Nigeria! My child is sitting down all day because of online lessons*)

*11.b:* online education? pikin dem dey sidon look! (*Online education? Kids look indifferent!*)

*11.a:* no no tis na tru tru online edutainment o. mai pikin de enjoy di lokdon! (*no no, this is truly an online education-entertainment! My child is enjoying the lockdown!*)

In this ‘Chat 11’, tension may be at the source of the reduced speech signal produced by ‘subject 11.a’. In her words it is possible to detect a process of erosion of the boundaries between the lexical verbs and the prepositional/adverbial particles composing the phrasal verbs, which is due to the bleaching phenomenon that is common in NPE phrasal-verb compounds. For ‘subject 11.a’, it is impossible even only to imagine an escape from the stressful lockdown situation in Italy to return to Nigeria (“Naija”), her home country, because she is entrapped in a binding daily routine with her young child having to attend school remotely (an impossibility expressed through the negative form of the NPE deontic modal verb “fit” → “can”, as in “a no fit” → “I cannot”). Therefore, tension, due to this sense of helpless impossibility, seems to be at the source of the reduced speech signal she produces in her use of phrasal verbs, where it is possible to notice a process of erosion making the perception of the message rapid and ‘urgent’. This is the case with the NPE phrasal verb “komot”, standing for “come out”, where the adverbial particle “out” undergoes a semantic bleaching, losing its spatial sense of ‘exclusion’ and becoming cliticized by boundary erosion with the lexical verb “come”. “Come” too, in its turn, loses its semantic sense of ‘movement towards the speaker’s place’ to acquire the opposite sense of ‘movement away from the speaker’s place’, which in SE is expressed by the verb “go” (“a no fit komot na Naija o” → “I cannot go to Nigeria!”). Again, also in this case, this directionality confusion seems to be due to the lack of ‘orientational schemata’ in some African native languages, transferred into the structures of their ELF variation. In addition, in the adverbial particle “out” it is also possible to notice a further process of *fusion*, characterized by an indistinguishable stem/affix boundary caused by the blurring of contiguous vowel phonemes (e.g. /au/ → /o/, i.e. /aut/ → /ot/).

‘Subject 11.a’, then, goes on complaining that her child (“pikin”, from the Portuguese substrate influence on NPE) “de sidon evride de fo online lesson” → “is sitting down all day because of online lessons”. Here, together with the use of the NPE

continuous-aspect auxiliary marker “de”, it is possible to observe in the verb “sidon” another case of boundary erosion between the verb and the prepositional/adverbial particle composing the original SE phrasal verb, “sit down”, followed by the fusion between the two parts – namely, “sit”+down”. Fusion, in this case, causes the bleaching in the sense of the adverb “down” – here semantically redundant (being in association with “sit”, likewise implying a downward movement), and phonetically unrecognizable (“si^don” resulting from the erosion of the unvoiced dental phoneme /t/ in “sit”). The stressful condition, experienced by ‘subject 11.a’, of being obliged to segregation without any hope for escape – not even with the mind – being tied to the daily needs of her child (“fo online lesson” → “because of online lessons”), seems here to have an influence in the activation of decategorialization processes, insofar as she resorts to autochthonous NPE cliticized phrasal verbs to convey her distress more rapidly and in a more emotionally-involving way.

To her feeling of frustration, ‘subject 11.b’ replies by criticizing the limits of online education adopted in Italian schools during the lockdown period (“online education? pikin dem dey sidon look!” → “online education? Kids look indifferent!”). In this statement it is possible to observe the change in grammatical category of two verbs, respectively converted into an adjective and a noun – namely: the cliticized phrasal verb “sidon” turned into a metaphorical adjective literally meaning “indifferent” (implying “apathetically sitting down”), and the lexical verb “look” turned into a noun meaning “appearance”.

This criticism to online education is immediately refuted by ‘subject 11.a’, who argues that far from being boring, leaving young students indifferent, online school education is defined by the clipping of the words ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’, producing the novel compound word “edutainment” for humorous effects (“na tru tru online edutainment o” → “is truly an online education-entertainment!”). The reduplication of the adverb “tru” (“truly”) emphasizes her child’s high degree of appreciation of the online classes – and, indeed, ‘subject 11.a’ immediately afterwards remarks that her child “is enjoying the lockdown!” → “mai pikin de enjoy di lokdon!”. The use of the NPE continuous-aspect auxiliary marker “de” underscores her child’s constant positive reception of the online teaching during the period of lockdown – which exasperates his mother (i.e., ‘subject 11.a’), forced to stay indoors with him (and in Italy as well). Here, also the noun “lokdon” (“lockdown”), follows the same processed of erosion and fusion of the phrasal verbs examined so far. In the next ‘Chat 12’, however, this same noun undergoes a change of grammatical category because it comes to be used as a cliticized phrasal verb.

### **Chat 12**

**12.a:** a don de lokdon all time all time, a don de ledon evri de o. a bin tink se a fo die hie! A dey uerot 😞 (*I’ve been locked-down during the whole period of time, I’ve been lying down every day! I thought that I should die here! I’m worn out [I’m so sad]*)

**12.b:** you dey craz! You fo tandap an dance sing chop laf! So you go survive! (*You are crazy! You should stand up and dance, sing, eat, laugh! So you’ll survive! [Be happy!]*)

In this chat, ‘subject 12.a’ gives vent to her state of deep depression at having been segregated during the whole period of lockdown (emphasized by the reduplicated phrase “all time all time”) to survive the Covid-19 pandemic. In her complaint, she unconsciously abridges her statement, so as to be visually perceived and understood more quickly, by cutting unnecessary words (e.g., “I’ve been indoors during the period of the lockdown”) and turning instead the noun “lockdown” into the syntactic category of verb “to

lockdown". Hence the claim "a don de lokdon" → "I've been locked-down", with the phrasal verb "lokdon" (cliticized by verb+particle fusion and boundary erosion) preceded by the NPE pre-verbal perfect and continuous aspect markers "don" and "de". Soon afterwards, 'subject 12.a' uses another NPE phrasal verb (likewise cliticized by means of the decategorialization processes of fusion and erosion) – namely: "ledon" → "lie down". Also this verb is preceded by the same pre-verbal perfect and continuous aspect markers "don" and "de" to emphasize the unbearable sense of deadliness inducing her to lie down in bed all the time and every day. Indeed, she thought that she should end up dying in Italy ("a bin tink se a fo die hie!" → "I thought that I should die here!" – an utterance where "for" ["fo"] is used as a modal auxiliary for the conditional modalization of the indicative mood). This complaint by 'subject 12.a' ends with newly-coined NP-ELF cliticized phrasal verb, derived from the SE "wear out" which, in this case, should have been inflected in the past participle ("I'm worn out", that is: "I'm feeling very tired and depressed"). And yet, 'subject 12.a' uses the infinitive form of the verb ("uerot" → "wear out") though it follows the copula "a dey" → "I am". A reason may be that she uses this cliticized form of the phrasal verb in phonological analogy with the Italian expression "mi sono rotto" ("I'm sick of it"), whose metaphorical-meaning implication is close to the condition of being "worn out". Also in this case, therefore, the context, marked by stressful experiential situations, seems to have an influence in decategorialization processes.

This defeated state of mind disclosed by 'subject 12.a' is challenged by 'subject 12.b' who immediately reproaches his interlocutor by the typical NPE exclamation "you dey craz!" → "You are crazy!". In fact, he promptly provides her with the antidote to lockdown-induced depression – namely, the following optimistic recommendation: "You fo tandap an dance sing chop laf! So you go survive!" → "You should stand up and dance, sing, eat, laugh! So you'll survive!". Also in this statement it is possible to observe another SE phrasal verb undergoing cliticization by fusion and erosion – i.e., the NPE "tandap" ("stand up"), where erosion has occurred in the initial consonant sound "s", whereas the lexical verb "stand" and the adverbial particle "up" are brought together by a simple process of univerbation.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has examined the online communication strategies activated by a small sample of Nigerian migrants living in Southern Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. Case-study analysis has shown that, differently from Lightfoot (1991) who asserts that decategorialization parameters are exclusively set by cognitive and context-independent economy principles, pragmatic contexts do influence grammaticalization processes. More precisely, in this case, case-study data show that the more stressful the topic was, the more the Nigerian subjects tended to activate:

- (a) relexicalization processes aimed at the immediacy of visual perception and cognitive-emotional processing of the written signal in order to underscore their feelings of anguish and fear, and
- (b) decategorialization processes – such as cliticization univerbation, fusion, erosion and bleaching – in the use of phrasal verbs, so as to achieve brevity, efficiency and informativeness in the online conveyance of urgent messages.

Furthermore, it is evident from data analysis that the Nigerian migrants did not recognize the conventional metaphorical meanings inherent in the English phrasal-verb prepositional

and adverbial particles. This paper, indeed, has argued that in NP-ELF online communication, relexicalization and decategorialization occur only in written words, reduced to minimal compacted forms which, though they have become routinized and idiomatized, yet, precisely for this reason, increase their informativeness and organize cognition towards a new resemanticization (or ‘renewal’). Once semantic renewal occurs, the new lexical form may itself be subject to grammaticalization, routinization and then decategorialization. Early grammaticalization is said to have been strongly motivated also by metaphorical processes (Bybee, Pagliuca 1985, p. 75), together with communicative strategies. This might explain why the economy processes guiding the initial developmental phase of NP-ELF online communication are also mainly grounded on metaphorical, analogical communication strategies, rather than on metonymic, propositional interaction procedures, thus promoting immediacy of sensorial perception in real-time interactions as in oral speech, even when subjects are engaged in online written communication.

This study has, however, a restricted external validity due to its sample limitation, insofar as data are not corroborated by quantity and frequency effects. Future research, therefore, will have to confirm statistically how far the results can be generalized. For example, in the case of relexicalization processes activated by groups of ‘non-western’ speakers of English as a lingua franca (like the NP-ELF speakers of this case study) – who develop culture-specific syllabic notations, acronyms and emojis that diverge from the ‘western’ conventionalized ones – it would be interesting to apply an updated version of the VADER tool (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) for the Sentiment Analysis of feelings and emotions expressed by such groups in social media with reference to specific situations (Oyewusi *et al.* 2020). Likewise, a sentiment-analysis approach could also be usefully applied to explore the possible correlation between highly-emotional situations and the decategorialization processes in the phrasal verbs occurring in the different ELF variations used in social media by groups of non-native – and, crucially, “non-western” – speakers of English as a lingua franca, so as to observe the extent to which such processes are differently realized with reference to different linguacultural and situational variables.

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