

Article

Language Maintenance and Shift in Onward Migration from Italy: The Case of Cameroonian-Origin Families

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Abstract

This article examines the changing role of Italian among Cameroonian-origin families who experienced onward migration after a prolonged period of residence in Italy. Drawing on qualitative data collected between June 2024 and August 2025 through socio-biographical questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 15 families, the study investigates how Italian is maintained, reduced, or refunctionalised after relocation to Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, or the United States or return to Cameroon. The findings show that Italian played a central role during the period of residence in Italy, functioning as a language of education, employment, institutional participation, and social integration. After onward migration, however, these functions are largely assumed by the dominant language of the new country, especially among children whose schooling and peer relationships develop in French, English, or German. Nevertheless, Italian rarely disappears completely. It persists in more specialised domains, including couple interaction, transnational networks, professional niches, private communication, lexical routines, naming practices, and emotional attachment to the family's life in Italy. The article argues that Italian should not be understood only through the binary opposition between language maintenance and language shift. Rather, onward migration produces a functional reconfiguration of Italian, whereby a former language of integration becomes a biographical, relational, and symbolic resource within multilingual family repertoires.

Keywords: onward migration; Italian; language maintenance and shift; Cameroonian-origin families; multilingual repertoires; functional reconfiguration

1. Introduction

Migration is increasingly characterised by complex and multidirectional trajectories rather than by a single movement from a country of origin to a country of settlement. Many migrants experience successive relocations, giving rise to forms of onward migration in which the first destination represents only one stage within a broader transnational trajectory (De Haas et al., 2020; Della Puppa et al., 2021). These evolving mobility patterns challenge traditional representations of migration as a linear process and raise new questions about the linguistic consequences of repeated migration. From a sociolinguistic perspective, successive migration experiences continuously reshape speakers' linguistic repertoires as they move across different educational, professional and social environments. Consequently, language maintenance and language shift should not be regarded as isolated outcomes of migration but rather as dynamic processes accompanying migrants throughout their mobility trajectories (Fishman, 1991; Berruto, 2012; Pauwels, 2016).



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Cameroonian-origin families constitute a particularly relevant case for investigating these processes. Cameroon is characterised by one of the most complex multilingual ecologies in Africa, where French and English coexist with several hundred indigenous languages and contact varieties such as Pidgin English and Camfranglais (Echu, 2004; Siebetchu, 2019, 2020). Migration to Italy further enriches these multilingual repertoires through the acquisition of Italian, while onward migration to another country introduces new linguistic resources and communicative priorities. These successive mobility experiences provide a particularly suitable context for examining how languages evolve across different stages of migration.

Research on onward migration has expanded considerably in recent years, although it remains a relatively new and still underexplored field of inquiry (Goglia, 2023; Della Puppa, 2018; Villa-Perez, 2022). Recent studies have also begun to investigate the role of Italian in the multilingual repertoires of migrants after they leave Italy. However, existing research has mainly focused on multilingual practices within a single onward destination, comparing groups of people with different origin backgrounds who share a migration trajectory through Italy and, in many cases, Italian citizenship. For example, Goglia's studies examine multilingual practices among Italian-Bangladeshis, Italian-Nigerians, Italian-Moroccans and Italian-Tunisians in the United Kingdom. Whereas previous studies have compared multiple origin groups within a single onward destination, this study examines members of a single origin community across multiple onward destinations. Specifically, it focuses on Cameroonian migrants who share a common migration trajectory through Italy before relocating to Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland or the United States. Many of these participants have also acquired Italian citizenship, a legal status that provides greater freedom of mobility than Cameroonian citizenship and constitutes an important factor in shaping onward migration opportunities. This comparative transnational design makes it possible to assess how destination-specific sociolinguistic environments shape the maintenance, functions and perceived value of Italian within the same migrant community. Particular attention is paid to the changing functions of Italian across successive stages of migration and to the family and sociolinguistic factors that shape these changes. By focusing specifically on Italian, rather than on multilingual repertoires as a whole, the study contributes to current debates on language maintenance and language shift in contexts of repeated mobility while offering new insights into the linguistic consequences of onward migration from Italy.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study draws on three complementary strands of research. First, it adopts a sociolinguistic perspective that conceptualises migration as a dynamic process through which linguistic repertoires are continuously reshaped across successive mobility trajectories. Second, it considers recent studies on onward migration, with particular attention to the role of Italian within multilingual repertoires. Finally, it situates the analysis within the multilingual context of Cameroon, whose linguistic complexity provides an appropriate framework for interpreting the language practices of the families participating in this study.

2.1. *Language, Mobility and Language Maintenance*

Migration is increasingly understood as a dynamic and non-linear process in which individuals experience successive movements across different linguistic environments. From this perspective, linguistic repertoires cannot be regarded as stable systems attached to a single territory but rather as flexible and evolving resources that are continuously reshaped through mobility (Blommaert, 2010). Every migration trajectory exposes speakers to new linguistic ecologies, requiring them to renegotiate language practices, communicative prior-

ities and language choices in response to changing social contexts (Kramsch, 2009). Within this framework, language maintenance and language shift should be interpreted as complementary and dynamic processes rather than mutually exclusive outcomes. Fishman (1991) argues that language maintenance depends largely on the intergenerational transmission of a language and on the social domains in which it continues to be used. Similarly, Pauwels (2016) emphasizes that migration frequently leads not to the complete disappearance of a language but to its progressive reorganisation within multilingual repertoires as speakers adapt to new linguistic environments. This perspective is particularly relevant for onward migration. Unlike first migration, onward migration requires migrants to reorganise linguistic resources that have already been reshaped by a previous migration experience. Languages acquired during the first migration therefore enter a new sociolinguistic context where their functions, frequency of use and symbolic value may change substantially.

2.2. Italian in Contexts of Onward Migration

Although research on onward migration has grown considerably over the last decade, sociolinguistic studies have mainly focused on the reconfiguration of multilingual repertoires following repeated migration experiences. Existing research has shown that onward migration often leads to the acquisition of new linguistic resources, the renegotiation of language practices within families, and the emergence of new language hierarchies in response to changing social and institutional contexts (Goglia, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023; Della Puppa, 2018; Villa-Perez, 2022). Within this body of research, Italian has generally been considered as one element of broader multilingual repertoires rather than as the primary object of investigation. Consequently, relatively little is known about what happens to Italian once migrants leave Italy and settle in a third country. While Italian often represents the language of schooling, employment, social participation and everyday interaction during residence in Italy, its role beyond the Italian context remains insufficiently explored (Vedovelli, 2018).

This study starts from the assumption that repeated migration does not simply determine whether Italian is maintained, undergoes processes of attrition, or is ultimately lost. Rather, onward migration may reshape both the use and the functions of Italian according to new linguistic ecologies, family language practices and opportunities for social participation (Schmid, 2011; Schmid & Köpke, 2017). In this study, family language practices are understood as dynamic processes of language management (Spolsky, 2004). From this perspective, and building on Pauwels's (2016) discussion of languages in migration contexts, Italian is analysed not merely in terms of language maintenance or language shift but as a linguistic resource whose functions and value are continuously redefined across successive stages of migration. This perspective allows us to move beyond a binary interpretation of language maintenance and language shift by examining how Italian adapts to changing multilingual environments (Guerini, 2009). The analysis therefore focuses not only on whether Italian continues to be used but also on how its functions evolve within the multilingual repertoires of Cameroonian-origin families after onward migration.

2.3. Cameroonian Multilingual Repertoires

Cameroonian-origin migrants represent a particularly valuable case for investigating language maintenance and shift because multilingualism characterises their linguistic biographies long before migration. Cameroon is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa, where French and English coexist with more than 250 indigenous languages as well as contact varieties such as Pidgin English and Camfranglais (Tabi Manga, 2000; Echu, 2004; Anchimbe, 2012; Chumbow, 2013; Siebetcheu, 2016, 2019). As a result, multilingualism is generally experienced as an everyday communicative practice rather

than as an exceptional condition. Migration to Italy adds Italian to these already complex linguistic repertoires without replacing previously acquired languages. Italian therefore becomes part of a multilingual ecology in which different languages fulfil complementary communicative functions depending on family interactions, educational trajectories, professional opportunities and transnational social networks. Following onward migration, these multilingual repertoires undergo a further process of reorganisation as families adapt to new linguistic environments. Rather than simply adding another language to an already complex repertoire, repeated migration reshapes the relative importance and communicative functions of all languages involved. This makes Cameroonian-origin families particularly suitable for exploring how Italian is repositioned within multilingual repertoires across successive migration trajectories.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative sociolinguistic approach to examine the role of Italian within the multilingual repertoires of Cameroonian-origin families following onward migration from Italy. Particular attention is paid to participants’ migration trajectories, language biographies, and everyday language practices, with the aim of understanding how Italian is maintained, transformed, or refunctionalised across successive migration stages. The following sections describe the participants, the data collection procedures, and the analytical approach adopted in the study.

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative sociolinguistic approach to investigate language maintenance and shift among Cameroonian-origin families who experienced onward migration after a prolonged period of residence in Italy. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the geographical dispersion of participants across several countries, qualitative methods were considered the most appropriate for reconstructing migration trajectories, family language practices and the evolving role of Italian across successive stages of mobility. The research combines two complementary instruments. First, participants completed a socio-biographical questionnaire collecting comparable information on migration history, educational background, linguistic repertoires and family composition. This questionnaire provided the contextual framework for the second stage of the research, consisting of semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews designed to explore participants’ language biographies, language practices and perceptions of linguistic change following onward migration. Table 1 provides an overview of the research design.

Table 1. Overview of the research design.

Aspect	Description
Research design	Qualitative sociolinguistic study
Participants	15 Cameroonian-origin families
Data collection	June 2024–August 2025
Instruments	Socio-biographical questionnaire + semi-structured WhatsApp interviews
Interview format	Predominantly individual interviews with one parent
Interview languages	Italian and French (according to participants’ preferences)
Communication mode	WhatsApp voice messages and written exchanges

3.2. Participants

The study involved fifteen Cameroonian-origin families whose migration trajectories extended beyond Italy to a third country or, in two cases, back to Cameroon. Although the dataset also includes two families who returned to Cameroon after residing in Italy, these cases are not examined systematically in the present article, whose focus is on onward migration to third countries. Their linguistic trajectories following return migration will be addressed in a separate study. Overall, the research included eighteen first-generation adults (nine women and nine men), while information concerning their children was collected primarily through parental accounts. At this stage of the project, children were not interviewed directly; their linguistic practices were reconstructed through the narratives of their parents. Direct interviews with second-generation participants are planned as part of a subsequent phase of the research. At the time of the interviews, participants were between 30 and 47 years old and had lived in Italy for periods ranging from approximately 12 to 20 years before onward migration. Following their residence in Italy, families relocated to Belgium (4), Canada (2), France (2), Germany (2), Switzerland (2), and the United States (1), while two families returned to Cameroon. These diverse migration trajectories provided an appropriate basis for investigating how Italian evolves after migrants settle in new sociolinguistic environments. Figure 1 maps the migration trajectories of the families under study, while also reflecting broader patterns of onward migration among Cameroonian-origin families, with the countries represented corresponding to the main secondary destinations identified in Siebetchu (2019).

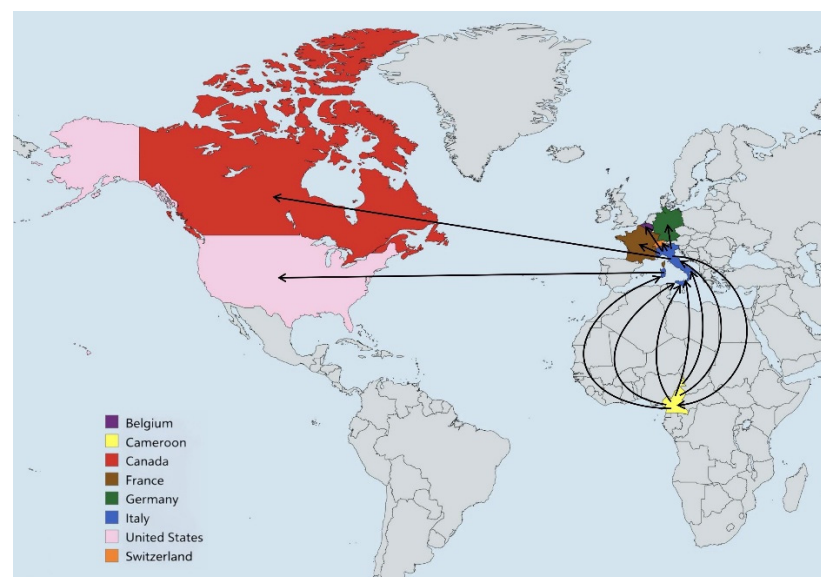


Figure 1. Migration trajectories of the Cameroonian-origin families. The arrows indicate the migration trajectories from Cameroon to Italy and subsequently to the onward migration destinations.

Table 2 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the participant families.

The families can be described along three main analytical dimensions: motivations for migration, the nature of migration trajectories, and generational positioning. Two main profiles emerge with regard to migration motives: families who relocated together to improve future opportunities for their children, and individuals who migrated to join spouses abroad. Migration trajectories can be interpreted through the concepts of *double brain drain* and *counter-brain drain* (Siebetchu, 2019). The sample reflects the broader profile of Cameroonian migration, which is largely composed of highly educated individuals, including university lecturers, engineers, economists, nurses, and medical doctors.

Table 2. Characteristics of participant families.

Family	First Settlement in Italy	Onward Migration	Children
F1	Siena (1999)	Belgium (2017)	3 (all born in Italy)
F2	Bologna (2010)	Belgium (2018)	2 (born in Italy)
F3	Siena (2004)	Belgium (2020)	4 (3 born in Italy)
F4	Siena (2004)	Belgium (2020)	2 (both born in Italy)
F5	Arezzo (2008)	Germany (2013)	2 (both born in Germany)
F6	Siena (2003)	Cameroon (2018)	3 (2 born in Italy)
F7	Siena (2005)	USA (2013)	2 (of whom 1 born in Italy)
F8	Torino (2002)	Canada (2022)	3 (born in Italy)
F9	Siena (2006)	Canada (2019)	3 (born in Canada)
F10	Siena (2002)	Switzerland (2017)	4 (2 born in Italy)
F11	Milan (2001)	France (2014)	3 (1 born in Italy)
F12	Torino (2010)	Germany (2013)	2 (both born in Germany)
F13	Modena (2005)	France (2015)	2 (both born in France)
F14	Firenze (2003)	Switzerland (2018)	2 (both born in Italy)
F15	Milano (2009)	Cameroon (2017)	1 (born in Italy)

The researcher's long-standing engagement with Cameroonian multilingualism and migration constituted an important resource throughout the research process. Linguistic and cultural familiarity with the Cameroonian context facilitated communication with participants, encouraged the establishment of relationships of trust and enabled interviewees to discuss their linguistic experiences with considerable openness. Familiarity with languages, contact varieties such as Camfranglais and the broader sociolinguistic context also facilitated the interpretation of culturally specific references emerging during the interviews. At the same time, particular attention was devoted to maintaining analytical reflexivity throughout both data collection and interpretation. Interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives and systematically compared across the dataset in order to minimise the influence of prior assumptions and ensure that the analysis remained closely connected to the empirical evidence.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the aims of the study and provided their consent. All names used are pseudonyms, and identifying information has been anonymised.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between June 2024 and August 2025 through a two-stage procedure. First, participants completed a socio-biographical questionnaire designed to collect comparable information on migration trajectories, linguistic repertoires, family composition and children's language practices. The questionnaire subsequently served as the basis for semi-structured follow-up interviews, during which participants were invited to elaborate on the information provided and to reflect more broadly on their migration experiences, language biographies, family language practices, intergenerational language transmission and language use across different social domains. Most interviews were conducted individually with one parent. Besides describing their own linguistic biographies, participants were also invited to discuss the linguistic practices of their children and the language choices adopted within the family. Consequently, information concerning second-generation language use primarily reflects parental perspectives rather than direct interviews with children, which are planned as part of a subsequent stage of the research.

Because participants were living in different countries, data collection was carried out predominantly online through WhatsApp. Participants communicated using both voice messages and written text messages, allowing considerable flexibility in scheduling the interviews and facilitating participation despite geographical distance. This mixed communication format also enabled participants to reflect on their answers and provide additional information over time whenever necessary. The interviews were conducted primarily in Italian and French, according to participants' linguistic preferences and communicative comfort. Participants were free to alternate between languages whenever they considered it appropriate, reflecting the multilingual practices that characterise their everyday lives. For the purposes of publication, all interview excerpts originally produced in Italian or French were translated into English by the author. Since the analysis focuses on participants' reported language practices, language ideologies and sociolinguistic experiences rather than on discourse structure or interactional features, the translations aim to preserve the original semantic content while ensuring accessibility for an international readership.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach. The socio-biographical questionnaires provided a comparative overview of participants' migration trajectories and linguistic repertoires, while the interviews allowed an in-depth exploration of language practices and language attitudes. The analysis involved repeated readings of both written exchanges and transcribed voice messages in order to identify recurring themes emerging across participants' narratives. Particular attention was devoted to patterns relating to language maintenance, language shift, intergenerational transmission, family language practices and, most importantly, the evolving role of Italian following onward migration. The analysis combined a cross-case perspective, aimed at identifying recurrent sociolinguistic patterns across families, with a case-oriented approach that preserved the specificities of individual migration trajectories. This dual perspective made it possible to examine both shared tendencies and the diversity of linguistic experiences characterising onward migration.

4. Results

This section presents the main findings concerning the role of Italian across successive migration stages. The analysis first examines the position of Italian during participants' residence in Italy before exploring how its use evolves following onward migration. Particular attention is paid to the factors shaping language maintenance and shift, as well as to the new communicative, relational, and symbolic functions that Italian assumes within families' multilingual repertoires.

4.1. Italian During Residence in Italy: The Language of Integration

Before examining the effects of onward migration, it is important to consider the role that Italian had acquired during participants' prolonged residence in Italy. All interviewed parents had lived in Italy for periods ranging from approximately twelve to twenty years, during which Italian progressively became an integral part of their multilingual repertoires. Initially acquired after migration, Italian rapidly evolved beyond its instrumental function as a language necessary for everyday communication and became the principal language through which participants pursued higher education, entered the labour market, established social relationships and raised their families. For most participants, Italian represented the language of their adult lives in Italy. It was the language through which they completed university studies, developed professional careers and interacted with institutions, colleagues and friends. Consequently, before onward migration, Italian

occupied a central position within their linguistic repertoires alongside French and, in some cases, English. This prolonged period of residence also meant that many participants experienced important life events in Italian, including marriage, parenthood and the birth of their children.

The importance of Italian is particularly evident in relation to the younger generation. Although children's linguistic biographies differed considerably according to their age at migration and country of birth, many experienced their earliest processes of socialisation in Italy. Some were born and educated in Italy before relocating abroad, whereas others migrated at a very young age or were born after their parents had already moved to a third country. These different trajectories resulted in considerable variation in children's competence in Italian and, consequently, in the role that the language would subsequently play after onward migration. Overall, the findings indicate that, prior to onward migration, Italian functioned primarily as the language of integration for parents. Rather than replacing participants' pre-existing linguistic resources, it became an additional language associated with education, employment, institutional participation and everyday social life. This central position provides the necessary point of departure for understanding the profound reconfiguration of linguistic repertoires that occurred after families relocated to new sociolinguistic environments. This situation is clearly illustrated by participants' narratives. Many parents reported using Italian with their children. Even when Italian was not the exclusive language spoken at home, as it alternated with French, the interviewed parents consistently recognised that Italian was the language their children knew best. This was largely because the children had been born in Italy and had attended Italian schools, making Italian their primary language of socialisation and education. André, whose children were born in Siena, explains that before the family relocated to Switzerland, his children spoke Italian like native speakers:

ANDRÉ: In Italy, we had decided to speak French at home. However, our children, who spoke Italian better than we did because they were born in Italy and attended Italian schools, often replied to us in Italian.

A similar pattern emerges in Étienne's account. While living in Bologna, he and his wife had already started preparing their children for their future relocation to Belgium by speaking French at home. Nevertheless, Italian remained the children's preferred language:

ÉTIENNE: Our children understood French, but they preferred to answer in Italian. Italian came naturally to them.

These accounts highlight an interesting intergenerational contrast. For the parents, Italian represented the language of integration. It had been learned as an additional language in preparation for migration to Italy, where proficiency at the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was generally required for admission to university studies (Siebetchu, 2021). During their years in Italy, Italian functioned primarily as the language of higher education, employment and social participation. For their children, however, Italian was not experienced as a foreign language. Having acquired it from early childhood through schooling and everyday interaction, it became one of the children's primary languages of socialisation and an integral component of their linguistic repertoire. In several cases, parents even acknowledged that their children displayed greater fluency and more native-like pronunciation than they themselves did.

4.2. Italian After Onward Migration: Losing Its Central Role

Following onward migration, participants' linguistic repertoires underwent substantial reorganisation. Although Italian had occupied a central position during their years in Italy, its role changed significantly after relocation to a new country. Across the interviews, participants consistently described a gradual shift towards the dominant language

of the new sociolinguistic environment, particularly in relation to their children's everyday communication, schooling and peer interactions.

The most evident changes concern the younger generation. Children who had previously acquired Italian in Italy, or who had been exposed to it during early childhood, progressively adopted the language of the new country of residence as their primary means of communication. French became dominant among families living in Belgium, France and Cameroon, while English and German assumed the same role in anglophone and German-speaking contexts. Italian consequently lost much of its communicative centrality within children's everyday lives.

This process is clearly illustrated by participants' narratives. Angèle, now living in Belgium with her family, explains

ANGELE: Here, we use French with the children, because it is the language of school. In Italy, we already used French at home, assuming they would learn Italian outside. When we moved, we initially thought of keeping Italian at home, but we changed our mind because we wanted the children to adapt quickly. As a result, they have almost completely lost Italian.

A similar process emerges from the experience of a family who relocated to Canada:

RAOUL: Before moving to Canada, it was Italian. Now, after about a year, it is French.

A comparable linguistic trajectory can be observed in Switzerland. As Étienne's family settled in Zurich, German gradually became the dominant language of family interaction. Although French continued to be used at home, Italian progressively lost its previous central role.

ÉTIENNE: German has become the dominant language at home, although we still use French. Italian is no longer used very much. We experienced many difficulties learning German, but our children acquired it much more easily and much faster than we did.

These narratives consistently show that language shift occurs relatively rapidly when schooling, peer interaction and everyday communication become organised around the dominant language of the new country. Rather than reflecting an active rejection of Italian, this process appears to result from changing communicative needs and from children's progressive integration into new educational and social environments.

Although return migration falls beyond the scope of the present study, a similar tendency can also be observed among the two families who returned to Cameroon. Gabriel, who relocated after many years of residence in Italy, describes a comparable process:

GABRIEL: My children now mainly speak French because it is the language used at school here in Cameroon. Before, they spoke Italian. They also know a little Nguemba through their grandparents. But Italian is important for us because of the emotional connection we have with it.

While the limited number of return-migration cases does not allow for systematic comparison, Gabriel's account suggests that similar processes may also occur among families returning to the country of origin. This issue, however, falls beyond the scope of the present study and deserves dedicated investigation in future research.

Taken together, these findings indicate that onward migration progressively displaces Italian from its former position as the dominant language of family and social life. The language loses its central communicative role as new educational, institutional and social environments reshape everyday linguistic practices.

4.3. Italian Beyond Integration: New Communicative and Symbolic Functions

Despite losing its central role in everyday communication, Italian rarely disappears completely from participants' multilingual repertoires. Rather than functioning primarily as the language of education, employment and social integration, it progressively acquires

new communicative, relational and symbolic functions that reflect participants' previous experiences in Italy and their continuing transnational connections.

For many participants, Italian remains the preferred language between spouses who spent many years together in Italy. In these cases, the language no longer serves primarily for children's socialisation but functions instead as a shared language associated with the couple's common migration history and everyday interaction. In this regard, Sylvie, who now lives in Belgium, observes

SYLVIE: Having lived in Italy for twenty years before moving here, my husband and I still speak Italian together very often.

Another recurrent function concerns the strategic use of Italian as an in-group language in multilingual settings. Participants reported deliberately using Italian when interacting in the presence of people who could not understand it.

ANGELE: We sometimes use Italian when we are with people who do not understand it, so that we can speak more freely.

DESIREE: We use Italian to say certain things discreetly, so that others cannot understand us.

Rather than facilitating integration into the surrounding society, Italian here assumes a new pragmatic function, becoming a resource for managing privacy, solidarity and interpersonal relationships within multilingual environments.

Italian also survives through everyday symbolic practices. Several participants reported continuing to use isolated lexical items and culturally meaningful expressions acquired during their years in Italy.

SYLVIE: We still use some Italian words, like *pasta*, *piadina*, *passeggiata* or *carta igienica*. Even my shopping list is partly in Italian.

Sylvie also explains that she continues to call her daughter by the Italian form of her name, *Maria*, rather than by the English form, *Mary*. Although apparently minor, this naming practice illustrates how Italian persists not only through spoken interaction but also through affective and symbolic practices embedded in everyday family life. In this respect, Italian becomes part of the family's shared biography rather than simply a language of communication.

Italian further retains an important role within transnational social and professional networks. Several participants continue to use Italian when communicating with relatives, friends, former colleagues and institutional contacts established during their years in Italy. Marta, now living in the United States, explains that she still speaks Italian whenever she phones her parents.

MARTA: When I call my parents, who still live in Italy, I naturally speak Italian with them.

In some cases, Italian also remains professionally relevant whenever occupational activities involve Italian-speaking interlocutors.

MARTA: In the past, here in the USA, I have used Italian with some Italian patients at work.

JESSICA: I worked with an Italian employer in Germany, and he always insisted on speaking Italian with me, even when I replied in German. I also taught some Italian classes.

These examples demonstrate that, although Italian is no longer the dominant language of everyday interaction, it continues to function as a valuable communicative resource within multilingual repertoires. Its significance lies less in its frequency of use than in the specific interpersonal, professional and symbolic domains in which it remains embedded.

5. Discussion

The present study set out to investigate the role of Italian following onward migration among Cameroonian-origin families who had previously spent a substantial part of

their adult lives in Italy. The findings show that successive migration introduces an additional level of linguistic complexity: Italian is neither simply maintained nor completely abandoned but progressively repositioned within multilingual family repertoires. The traditional dichotomy between language maintenance and language shift only partially captures this process. During residence in Italy, Italian primarily functioned as the language of education, employment, institutional participation and social integration. After onward migration, these functions are largely assumed by the dominant language of the new country, especially in relation to children's schooling and peer interaction. However, Italian does not disappear. It is reassigned to more specific interpersonal, symbolic, professional and transnational domains. This suggests that maintenance and shift may coexist within a broader process of functional reconfiguration, whereby a language loses some functions while acquiring others.

This perspective contributes to sociolinguistic approaches to mobility by showing that onward migration does not merely add new languages to already complex repertoires. It also transforms the hierarchy and value of the languages previously acquired. Languages that were central in one migration stage may become peripheral in the next, while continuing to carry biographical, emotional and relational meanings. In this sense, onward migration should be understood not only as geographical mobility but also as a process of linguistic reorganisation. The findings also shed light on family language practices. Although Family Language Policy is not the primary focus of this article, parents' narratives show that language choices are continuously adapted to changing educational and social contexts. Decisions about whether to use Italian, French, English or German with children are shaped less by stable linguistic ideologies than by pragmatic concerns related to schooling, integration and future opportunities. Family language practices therefore emerge as flexible responses to mobility rather than fixed policies.

Finally, the study suggests that Italian should not be viewed only as a language of integration for migrants in Italy. In the families examined here, Italian becomes a language of biography: it remains linked to adulthood, university studies, work, friendships, parenthood and memories of life in Italy. Even when its everyday use decreases, it continues to mediate emotional attachment, family history and transnational belonging. Taken together, these findings invite a broader reconsideration of language trajectories in contexts of onward migration. Rather than asking only whether a language is maintained or lost, future research should also examine how its communicative, social and symbolic functions evolve across successive stages of mobility. From this perspective, functional reconfiguration offers a useful lens for understanding how migration reshapes not only language use but also the meanings that multilingual speakers attribute to the languages acquired throughout their lives.

Although digital communication tools such as WhatsApp, video calls and social media may facilitate the maintenance of Italian through transnational interactions, this dimension was not a specific focus of the present study and therefore deserves dedicated investigation in future research.

6. Conclusions

This article has examined the role of Italian among Cameroonian-origin families who experienced onward migration after a prolonged period of residence in Italy. By focusing on successive migration trajectories rather than on settlement in a single destination country, the study has shown that the linguistic consequences of mobility extend beyond the acquisition or loss of individual languages. The findings demonstrate that Italian cannot be adequately understood through the traditional dichotomy between language maintenance and language shift. Although its role as the principal language of education, employment

and social integration progressively declines after onward migration, Italian rarely disappears from participants' multilingual repertoires. Instead, it acquires new communicative, relational and symbolic functions linked to family interaction, transnational relationships, professional networks and personal biographies.

The notion of functional reconfiguration proposed in this article offers a way of understanding these changes. Rather than conceptualising languages as either maintained or abandoned, this perspective highlights how their social value and communicative functions are continuously reshaped across successive migration stages. Italian thus evolves from a language primarily associated with integration into one that also embodies memories, emotional attachment and shared migration experiences. Although based on a relatively small qualitative sample, this study contributes to current debates on multilingualism and onward migration by showing that language trajectories are dynamic and extend across multiple migration contexts. Future research should broaden the empirical basis of these findings by including a larger number of families, directly involving second-generation participants, and comparing onward and return migration through a common analytical framework.

Overall, the study suggests that understanding language in contexts of onward migration requires moving beyond the question of whether a language is maintained or lost. Equal attention should be paid to how languages acquire new meanings and functions as migrants continue their trajectories across different linguistic and social environments.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were not required for this study, as it involved non-interventional sociolinguistic research with adult participants and did not involve medical procedures, health-related data, or experimentation.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed oral consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Before data collection, participants were informed about the aims of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, the use of the data for research purposes, and the measures adopted to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. All names used in the article are pseudonyms, and identifying information has been anonymised.

Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations concerning the participants.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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