**The empowering and disempowering role of language in entrepreneurship incubators**

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**Abstract**

This interdisciplinary paper brings together Entrepreneurship Studies and Language-Sensitive Research in International Business by analyzing how language shapes the power relations between entrepreneurial support professionals and participants in entrepreneurship support initiatives. The qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews, conducted in Italy, with twenty incubator professionals from both profit and non-profit programs and with eleven entrepreneurs of a non-migrant and migrant background. Preliminary findings from the analysis show that the expert vocabulary that the incubator professionals use and the lack of ‘translation’ of concepts has an empowering effect on the trainers and a disempowering effect on the future entrepreneurs. It also prevents participants in entrepreneurship incubator programs from getting as much as they could out of the trainings due to both a lack of understanding and of a feeling of exclusion. We conclude by discussing our contribution to Entrepreneurship Studies and to Language-Sensitive Research in IB.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Studies, Language-sensitive IB, incubators, entrepreneurial support, power relations, expert vocabulary, translation of meanings

**INTRODUCTION**

Language is a key factor for entrepreneurs’ success throughout all the stage of their entrepreneurial journeys. The role of language might seem more obvious in activities such as networking, accessing information, pitching, tailoring messages to potential crowdfunders, customers relations, or expansion. However, in this paper we claim that language has an important role also in the context of entrepreneurship support programmes, which often mark the beginning of an entrepreneurial career or important turning points in venture development. This interdisciplinary paper brings together insights from Entrepreneurship Studies and Language-Sensitive Research in International Business to explore the role of language in entrepreneurship support initiatives. More specifically, we focus on how the language used by the professionals working for entrepreneurial support organizations affects the power relations between them and the participants of the support programmes. By so doing, we aim at addressing the power effects of language use as a blind spot in Entrepreneurship Studies and more specifically research on incubators; and to shed light on entrepreneurial support as an unexplored empirical context in Language-Sensitive Research in International Business.

Our qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty incubator professionals from both profit and non-profit programs and with eleven entrepreneurs of a non-migrant and migrant background, which the first author conducted in Italy together with a team of researchers. We draw on two notions from Language-Sensitive Research as a lens for our analysis: the translation of concepts and expert vocabulary. We build on insights on the challenges of translating concepts informed by Translation Studies, and research on the power effects of using expert vocabulary in multilingual contexts.

Initial findings indicate that using concepts and vocabulary from the realm of entrepreneurship in combination with a facilitator and/or enabler attitude allows entrepreneurship support professionals to consciously or unconsciously position themselves as superior to the entrepreneurs who participate in their programmes. Contrary to the majority of studies which address the use of expert vocabulary, the use of a specific entrepreneurial lexicon can be viewed as detrimental in the case of entrepreneurship support programs, as it may lead to lack of access to information and feelings of exclusion. The study thus shows that entrepreneurship support professionals’ conscious or unconscious decisions *not* to translate entrepreneurial concepts and terms in their programmes transforms the entrepreneurial support initiatives into specific arenas of power exercise and micropolitics (Ciuk et al., 2019).

In the following, we provide an overview over the extant literature on language in entrepreneurship and the role of entrepreneurship support, as well as on the power effects of expert vocabulary and the translation of concepts. We then explain the method, before moving on to present our initial findings. We conclude by discussing some key insights and our contribution to Entrepreneurship Studies and Language-Sensitive Research in International Business.

1. **LITERATURE REVIEW**
   1. ***The role of language in entrepreneurship***

The role of language has been discussed from a variety of perspectives in the entrepreneurship literature, even if there is still much potential for additional work (Hecharravia et al., 2023; Welter & Baker, 2021). Our review focuses on two levels of analysis which seem particularly relevant for the topic of our study, the narrative and the ecological-relational level. In the following, we report some key insights from these two bodies of literature that are particularly relevant for our study. First, language can be seen as referred to words and vocabularies. Some studies have found that there is a specific lexicon that is used in entrepreneurial discourse, referred to marketing activities, technology-oriented entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, professional investment, and new venture entrepreneurship (Roundy & Asllani, 2018; 2019). The choice of some words (e.g., prosocial ones that promote acceptance) might become a success factor to acquire resources (e.g., crowdfunding; Pietraszkiewicz, Soppe, & Formanowicz, 2017).

Second, the use of language in entrepreneurship studies has been analyzed in a relational perspective. The ability to speak either the mainstream language in a country or society (e.g., Jones-Evans, Thompson, & Kwong, 2011; Wei, Jiao, & Growe, 2019) or in targeted international markets (Johnstone et al., 2018) is key to accessing information and knowledge (Adejimola, 2008) and perceiving business opportunities (Jones et al., 2011; Pisani et al., 2017). However, it is important to underline that some studies testify that limited local proficiency in the local language (i.e., linguistic isolation) accompanied by racial discrimination might also push immigrants in self-employment (Mora & Davila, 2005). While these studies point out to the relational nature of language for entrepreneurs, an additional perspective is to identify attitudes and ideologies that influence language ecology. In fact, different languages can be perceived as having different economic values, and therefore different degrees of preferences by potential users, entailing also different power relations (Wang & Hatoss, 2023). Therefore, we should take into account two directions: “linguistic entrepreneurship”, which is an agentive behaviour directed towards learning the dominant language by entrepreneurs who are non-native in that language as; and “decolonizing” entrepreneurship through language, practices and knowledge frameworks (Wood, Dell, & Carroll, 2022).

***1.2 The role of entrepreneurial support for future entrepreneurs***

Entrepreneurial support has been defined as the “provision of valuable resources to entrepreneurs by individuals or organizations, which carry structured activities to facilitate the imminent establishment of a new independent firm, increase survival chances, or promote long-term growth.” (Ratinho et al., 2020, p. 2) These initiatives are gaining increasing scholarly attention as they are seen as tools to nurture entrepreneurial knowledge in individuals, providing them with different services, such as physical space and resources, administrative support, networking, training, and education (Lyons & Zhang, 2018; Bergman & McMullen, 2022). The literature has testified to the variety of public and private organizations that are providing entrepreneurial support, such as business and university pre-incubators, incubators, accelerators, and regional programs (e.g., Bergman & McMullen, 2022; Merguei & Costa, 2022). Entrepreneurial support initiatives intervene at various stages of the entrepreneurial journey: generally, pre-incubators in the conception phase of the business idea; incubators and regional programs in the conception and idea development and pre-seed phase; accelerators in the go-to-market and seed phase (Hausberg & Korreck, 2021).

Several papers have emphasized that entrepreneurial support does not provide the same effect on participants, but depends on some of their characteristics, such as prior entrepreneurship experience (e.g., Lyons & Zhang, 2018), or some of the characteristics of trainers/mentors involved in the program (e.g., Assenova, 2020). In this paper, we are therefore interested in analyzing the context of entrepreneurial support initiatives, by looking at the processes regarding language among the involved participants and professionals. We are particularly attracted to the comparative perspective offered by the involvement of migrant entrepreneurs in such support initiatives.

Both academic and policy literature agrees that entrepreneurial support initiatives specifically focused on migrant entrepreneurs are justified by the more significant restraints and challenges they approach in the host country's business sector (European Commission, 2016; Solano, 2023). Besides the bureaucratic difficulties and entry barriers in the market sector of interest, they are endowed with the liability of foreignness and outsiderness (e.g., Verduijn & Essers, 2013; Gurău et al., 2020), so they might face language barriers, cultural and social differences, and structural inequalities. Entrepreneurship support for migrants come in various forms, thanks to the growing impulse of private and public actors, such as government, macro-environment, entrepreneurship centers and programs, investors and financiers, universities, science parks, civil society and social economy organizations, and social networks outside family and friends (for a review, see Serpente, Martinelli, & Bolzani, 2024). On the one hand, the increasing facilitation of entrepreneurial careers for migrants is linked to their otherwise poor paid labor market outcomes and the tentative to support them in reaching economic integration and decent living standard in the host country (Berntsen et al., 2022). On the other hand, some entrepreneurial support initiatives have been developed to attract talented entrepreneurs with innovative and impactful ideas, potentially benefitting the host country (e.g., De Lange, 2018).

* 1. ***The power effects of expert vocabulary and the translation of concepts: Insights from Language-Sensitive Research in International Business***

Drawing on Translation Studies, language-sensitive research focusing on power and politics has yielded important insights into translation as an inherently political act (Gaibrois, Lecomte, Boussebaa, & Śliwa, 2023). Translation Studies challenge the simplistic notion of interlingual translation as a neutral act consisting of finding close lexical equivalents, highlighting themodification and transformation that ideas undergo when then are transferred and re-appropriated in new contexts(Ciuk & James, 2015). Instead, they conceptualize interlingual translation as purposeful ‘re-creation of a new text across a linguistic and cultural divide, into a particular context and for a particular audience’ *(*Westney, Piekkari, Koskinen & Tietze, 2022: 5). Processes of interlingual translation therefore provide an important forum for the exercise of power and micropolitics (Ciuk, James, & Śliwa, 2019), as the translators may have specific organizational agendas and political purposes when translating (Piekkari, Tietze & Koskinen, 2020). For instance, translation might be used as management tool to promote managerially desired behaviors in subsidiaries (Ciuk et al., 2019), or reversely, by subsidiary managers to resist control from headquarters (Logemann & Piekkari, 2015), or to reverse corporate language hierarchies by reproducing a colonial relationship (Ristolainen, Outila, & Piekkari, 2023).

Another contribution that language-sensitive research interested in power and politics has recently made is the study of power effects of hybrid language use (Gaibrois et al., 2023), as it can provide possibilities to express voice and facilitate participation in interactions (Gaibrois, 2018; Janssens and Steyaert, 2014). Gaibrois (2018) showed that employees describe ‘using jargon’, which accounts for the use of ‘company language’, ‘project language’, ‘jargon of the professional world’ or ‘terms’ from specific occupations/IT, as communicative resource. Similarly, Logemann and Piekkari (2015) demonstrated that ‘company speak’, or the mix of untranslatable strategy terms in English with local words and expressions, empowered managers to interact and to share practices as well as knowledge. According to Aichhorn & Puck (2017), company speak is crucial for successfully bridging the language gap in the MNC. Tietze, Holden and Barner-Rasmussen (2016) concluded that special languages (occupation-specific language forms) and sociolects (context-specific applications of languages, where specialist discourses mingle with national languages) represent the ‘transnational business communication capital of MNCs’ (p. 312).

1. **METHOD**

***2.1 Research context***

Italy is a country characterized by a relatively recent migration phenomenon compared to other European countries, like France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, or the Netherlands (ISMU, 2020): in 1990, migrants were less than 3% of the population; in 2005, they were 6.8%; and in 2010 they represented 9.8% of the population (UN DESA, 2019a, 2020). Also, Italy can be considered a largely monolingual country, with 97,4% of the population speaking it as a native or foreign language (languageknowledge.eu).

Migrant entrepreneurship is a consolidated phenomenon in Italy (Bolzani, 2021), where the latest data report more than 600,000 firms, representing around 9.6% of the firms in the country (Unioncamere, 2018). Similar to other countries, their businesses generally supply essential activities for urban economies, filling vacancy chains or focusing on low-skilled services (Sepulveda et al., 2011; Kloosterman, 2014; Solano, 2020). However, the number of migrant entrepreneurs in creative, cultural, and high-tech industries is growing (Bolzani, 2021), generating an increasing need for specific startup and growth support. As testified by the literature, there is a variety of entrepreneurial support initiatives across the globe (Ratinho et al., 2020; Bergman & McMullen, 2022), among which support specifically targeted to migrant entrepreneurs (Serpente, Martinelli, & Bolzani, 2024).

*2.2 Sampling*

To answer the research question of this study, we focused on obtaining two sources of data, which could be compared and triangulated. As a first source, we focused on professionals working for entrepreneurial support organizations in Italy, who had or could potentially have experience in serving current or aspiring migrant entrepreneurs. To this extent, we mapped both the organizations offering entrepreneurial support specifically targeting migrant entrepreneurs (hereafter “migrant-specific entrepreneurial support”), and organizations offering services to a wider target across the country (hereafter “generalist entrepreneurial support”). In Italy, there is no official list of migrant-specific entrepreneurial support initiatives. We thus engaged in a careful desk research, involving internet search, contacts from professional networks (e.g., incubators, accelerators, universities, investors, microcredit institutions, policymakers, entrepreneurs). Through this search, we identified 39 initiatives offering different types of entrepreneurial support to aspiring or current migrant entrepreneurs. With respect to generalist entrepreneurial support, we used the list of Italian “Certified Incubators” of the Italian Ministry of the Economic Development[[1]](#footnote-1), which recognize the national excellences in the field of incubation and acceleration of new innovative high-tech companies. Through this search, we identified 42 active generalist entrepreneurial support organizations[[2]](#footnote-2).

The goal of including both migrant-specific and generalist entrepreneurial support initiatives was twofold. First, including both groups of initiatives would allow to investigate the perceptions and actual reach-out of generalist entrepreneurial support programs with respect to migrant entrepreneurship. Second, including both groups of initiatives would allow to investigate similarities and differences in support approaches.

Drawing on secondary data available online (entrepreneurial support initiatives’ websites), we gathered key information on each entrepreneurial support initiative, namely the year of establishment, the main goal, the type of sponsorship, the services they offer and the target. Based on the list of these entrepreneurial support organizations, 20 of them were chosen for the data collection phase, so as to maximize diversity in terms of targeted entrepreneurs, sponsorship, geographical location, and types of offered services. The sample includes a total of 20 organizations, of which 6 providing migrant-specific support schemes (30%) and 14 offering mainstream support schemes (70%)[[3]](#footnote-3), covering the entire Italian territory, across a wide range of industries, and offering diversified types of services. Table 2 provides an overview of the entrepreneurial support organizations interviewed. 11 incubators are private (55%), whereas 6 have mixed funding sources (30%) and 3 are totally public (15%). Incubators with mixed funding models are equally distributed between migrant and non-migrant focused. As far as the industry specialisation is concerned, high-tech and social impact are the main specialisations (30% of incubators in each industry). However, while high-tech incubators are all generalist ones, 33% working on social impact do not target specifically migrants. The sample also includes 6 incubators (30%) which have no vertical industry specialisation (4 mainstream, 2 migrant-focused), and 2 which are specialised on biotech and healthcare (10%).

As a second source of information, we inquired the interviewed entrepreneurial support organizations to provide us with contacts to entrepreneurs who were served by their initiatives. We were able to reach out to 11 entrepreneurs, of which five migrant and six Italian entrepreneurs, who were able to provide us with their insights about their experiences with migrant-specific or generalist entrepreneurial support programs. Table 3 provides an overview of the entrepreneurs interviewed.

***2.2 Data collection***

The interviews were carried out following two different interview protocols for entrepreneurial support organizations’ professionals and for entrepreneurs. The one for the professionals aimed at exploring the organization and management of the entrepreneurial support organization and of its programmes, selection criteria, types of activities and services offered to entrepreneurs, relationships with the entrepreneurial ecosystem, measurement of performances, and competences of the professionals working with the organization. The interviewees were managers, heads of business services, and CEOs of the organisation, generally one person per organisation, with the exception of 4 cases. Overall, 24 people were interviewed.

The interview protocol for entrepreneurs covered information about the pattern to become entrepreneurs, why and what support they searched at the entrepreneurial support organization, the perceived barriers for their businesses, the extent to which the entrepreneurial support received was useful and any suggestion to improve that service, and their perceptions about any additional need for support for migrant entrepreneurs.

The interviews were carried out by two Italian academic researchers, one senior and one junior, through videocalls (e.g., Zoom or Google Meet platforms) in April and May 2021, and were recorded and transcribed in Italian language. The interviews with entrepreneurial support professionals lasted on average 70 minutes, and the ones with entrepreneurs 60 minutes. Before the interview, the respondents were asked to fill in a pre-interview survey as well as a privacy form.

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**Table 1 – Overview of the interviewed entrepreneurial support organizations**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Organi-zation \*** | **Geographical area** | **Fund-ing model** | **Industry** | **Founda-tion year** | **Number of employees (FTE)** | **Respondent’s role** | **Gender** | **Nationality** | **Length of the interview** |
| MIG#1 | Southern, Northern Italy | Public | Social impact | 2003 | 0-5 | Manager | F | Italian | 49 min |
| MIG#2 | Northern Italy | Mixed | Social impact, Cultural/creative | 2019 | 0-5 | General manager | M | Italian | 72 min |
| MIG#3 | Southern Italy | Private | Social impact, Cultural/creative | 2011 | 10-20 | Project Manager | M | Italian | 96 min |
| MIG#4 | Northern Italy | Mixed | General | 2019 | 10-20 | Project Manager | F | Italian | 73 min |
| MIG#5 | Northern Italy | Mixed | General | 2018 | 0-5 | Head of European projects | M, F | Italian | 95 min |
| MIG#6 | Central Italy | Public | Social impact, Cultural/creative | 1991 | 5-10 | European projects manager | M | Italian | 55 min |
| GEN#1 | Southern Italy | Private | High Tech | 2014 | 5-10 | Head of training | M | Italian | 60 min |
| GEN#2 | Northern Italy | Private | Social impact | 2011 | 5-10 | Consultants | F, F | Italian | 87 min |
| GEN#3 | Southern Italy | Private | General | 2016 | 0-5 | Manager | M | Italian | 40 min |
| GEN#4 | Northern Italy | Mixed | General | 2010 | 0-5 | Head of Incubation & Open Innovation | F | Italian | 60 min |
| GEN#5 | Northern, Central and Southern Italy | Private | High Tech | 2003 | 10-20 | Founder, President, Chief Technology Officer | M | Italian | 42 min |
| GEN#6 | Northern Italy | Private | High Tech | 2020 | 0-5 | Investment management unit consultant | M | Italian | 62 min |
| GEN#7 | Northern Italy | Private | Biotech/healthcare, Other | 2015 | 5-10 | Project Manager | M, F | Italian | 115 min |
| GEN#8 | Northern Italy and Islands | Private | General | 2005 | 0-5 | Open Innovation Projects - Senior Manager | F | Italian | 60 min |
| GEN#9 | Northern Italy | Mixed | High Tech | 1999 | 10-20 | Director | F | Italian | 64 min |
| GEN#10 | Northern Italy | Public | High Tech, Biotech/healthcare, Public sector, cultural/creative | 2006 | 0-5 | Business development manager | M | Italian | 62 min |
| GEN#11 | Central Italy | Mixed | Biotech/healthcare, Cultural/creative, Other | 1991 | 30-50 | Director | M | Italian | 67 min |
| GEN#12 | Central Italy | Private | General | 2013 | 5-10 | Head of Acceleration program | M, F | Italian | 107 min |
| GEN#13 | Northern Italy | Private | Social impact | 2015 | 0-5 | Startup Program Coordinator | F | Italian | 100 min |
| GEN#14 | Northern Italy | Private | High Tech, Sport | 2016 | 0-5 | CEO | M | Italian | 52 min |

\* To ensure anonymity, the names of the organizations are not disclosed in this work, but replaced with a code. Migrant-specific entrepreneurial support initiatives are named with a code starting with “MIG”, whereas generalist ones are coded started with “GEN”.

**Table 2 – Overview of the interviewed entrepreneurs**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Entrepreneur\*** | **Age range** | **Education background** | **Gender** | **Country of origin** | **Length of the interview** |
| IENT#1 | 20-30 | Engineering | F | Italy | 48 min |
| IENT#2 | 40-50 | Accounting | M | Italy | 59 min |
| IENT#3 | 30-40 | Physics | M | Italy | 83 min |
| IENT#4 | 40-50 | Economics | M | Italy | 32 min |
| IENT#5 | 20-30 | Architecture | M | Italy | 65 min |
| IENT#6 | 30-40 | Philosophy | F | Italy | 66 min |
| MENT#1 | 30-40 | Biomedical Engineering | M | Tunisia | 93 min |
| MENT#2 | 30-40 | Management | M | Sweden | 65 min |
| MENT#3 | 30-40 | Humanistics | F | Syria | 42 min |
| MENT#4 | 50-60 | Commerce | M | Senegal | 62 min |
| MENT#5 | 40-50 | Diplomacy | M | Ivory Coast | 51 min |

\* To ensure anonymity, the names of the entrepreneurs are not disclosed in this work, but replaced with a code. Migrant entrepreneurs are named with a code starting with “MENT”, whereas Italian ones are coded started with “IENT”.

***2.3 Analytical Approach***

Because the interviews were collected within a larger research project, we analyzed them in light of our specific research questions, to understand (1) how do professionals and entrepreneurs participating in entrepreneurial support initiatives address the role of language used, specifically expert vocabulary and the translation of concepts; and (2) how do entrepreneurial support professionals position themselves and the participants, and vice versa? The first author engaged in first-order coding of the interview transcripts, generating descriptive accounts in the form of quotations, excerpts, and memos for each category (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The two researchers then discussed this coding systems to define relevant, common categories according to their own disciplinary-driven points of view. At present, the findings of the paper are based on such first-order coding categories, which are related to selected interview quotes[[4]](#footnote-4). In the next steps, the two authors will meet for intensive sessions of data analysis and theory building and engage in axial coding, to search for patterns of convergence and divergence across the accounts of entrepreneurial support professionals and entrepreneurs, thus finding relationships among concepts to summarize them into a limited number of conceptual themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

1. **Initial findings**

A first theme emerging from our analysis is about the approach used by entrepreneurship support professionals in the relationship with assisted entrepreneurs. Support professionals emphasised the importance of active listening and communication with entrepreneurs, because they reported that they do a “*job which is a human one: it’s not a job for an analyst, it’s a job where you have to get people*” (GEN #12). Looking at the contents and approaches to relationships, our data highlighted three levels of communication: (1) technical communication, strictly related to business contents, delivered through a professional relationship focusing on how to proceed and succeed with the business idea; (2) business-related communication, related to solving business-related hurdles through a personal, emotionally-driven relationship, in which incubation professionals take a role which seems close to the one of an educator; (3) personal-related communication, which is described by incubation professionals as a sympathetic yet detached relationship, aiming at the understanding of entrepreneurs’ personal and cultural background. These three different levels and approaches in communication are very much idiosyncratic with respect to the entrepreneur and the incubation professional, but might be influenced also by the incubator’s organizational values, culture, and policies.

Particularly with regards to technical communication, interviews with migrant and native entrepreneurs allowed the research team to identify a certain mismatch between the entrepreneurs’ expectations and their actual experiences with regards to the competences and skills that incubation professionals should possess to successfully interact with different entrepreneurs. First, there is an expectation that incubators provide entrepreneurs with technical insights and supply them with appropriate contents and services – having a “fit” with the development stage of the entrepreneurial idea or the entrepreneur’s competences. Both Italian and migrant novice entrepreneurs pointed out that it sometimes took them a long time to understand the entrepreneurship “technical” language – i.e., terms such as minimum viable product, business plan, scalability, etc. As an example, IENT#5, with a background in architecture, explained “*We had a strong clash with the incubator… we didn’t have the same vision, there was nothing to share. They wanted to impose us some business models à-la Amazon or Airbnb! On the other hand, we didn’t have the capacity to express what we wanted to do (…) only thanks the support of an external consultant we were finally able to identify our idea under the label of social enterprise*”. This indicates that from the entrepreneurs’ perspective, incubation professionals did not put enough efforts into “translating” concepts and using accessible vocabulary. In this case, the use of specific concepts and expert vocabulary can be interpreted as having a disempowering effect on the entrepreneurs, and therefore an empowering effects on the incubation professionals. As an opposite quote reported by another entrepreneur, the entrepreneurial support professionals were helpful “*not only from a professional point of view, but also from a human side, as they listened to my needs, and sit together with me to explain and make the documents, to understand and make the accounts*…” (MENT#4).

In the case of migrant entrepreneurs, this effect is accentuated by various factors. First, migrants mentioned their lack of knowledge of the business context, which is also tied to more general aspects of contractual arrangements, organization of public and private services for business, bureaucratic duties, tax paying deadlines and documents. Second, migrants touched upon topics linked to their wider integration patterns into the host society, either regarding latent or open racial discrimination – for instance the feeling of “*being the only Black around in the city for this business*” (MENT#4), or “*being asked at the end of each business meeting about my origins*” (MENT#1); or to their status – for instance the struggles of mobility limits faced by refugee entrepreneurs. These interviews therefore confirm that migrants, and most specifically newcomers or people maintaining non-permanent legal status in the country, have less knowledge of the context and of the culture, and less autonomy to freely “move” in the local (and international) entrepreneurial ecosystem. This is to some extent confirmed by migrant-specific incubators who added that experience per se is not sufficient to cover migrants’ needs: the combination of experience, background, hands-on learning, continuous education, in conjunction with the interaction with peers and local stakeholders and networking activities, is reported to be effective in providing optimal support. Incubators in this sense might help in establishing the first contacts and create a network that could represent an asset for personal and business relationships.

Our interviews with incubation professionals disclosed two roles that incubators can undertake towards the entrepreneurs: as “facilitators”, as “enablers”, or both. These two roles however take different meanings for generalist and migrant-specific incubators. Generalist incubators define themselves as facilitators when they intermediate between entrepreneurs and the actors of the ecosystem (e.g., connecting them), while they are enablers when they provide (aspiring) entrepreneurs with a set of tools, skills and competences that are necessary during the entire business life. Migrant-specific incubators, instead, defined themselves as facilitators in the sense that they connect migrants with other actors, also outside the narrow business domain, thus easing their integration in society; they are enablers because the services they offer focus on creating and strengthening entrepreneurial skills and competences useful throughout the entire life. It seems therefore that migrant-specific incubators perceive their scope as transcending the boundaries of entrepreneurship-business domains, thus touching upon a more “welfare” and “employment” dimension of their support.

1. **Discussion**

This interdisciplinary paper has set out to investigate how language shapes the power relations between entrepreneurial support professionals and participants in entrepreneurship support initiatives. Based on semi-structured interviews, conducted in Italy, with twenty incubator professionals from both profit and non-profit programs and with eleven entrepreneurs of a non-migrant and migrant background, the qualitative study shows that the expert vocabulary that the incubator professionals use and the lack of ‘translation’ of concepts has an empowering effect on the trainers and a dispowering effect on the future entrepreneurs. Drawing on Translation Studies, this behaviour can be interpreted as a ’foreignization’ approach, which consists of strategies such as using foreign words and deliberately emphasizing the different, in contrast to ‘domestication’, or employing familiar terminology and explications of context (Venuti 1995; 2013; cited in Westney et al., 2022). At the same time, the incubation professionals view themselves as facilitators and/or enablers, both notions that express a form of superiority in the form of benevolence. Using concepts and vocabulary from the realm of entrepreneurship in combination with a facilitator and/or enabler attitude thus allows incubation professionals to consciously or unconsciously position themselves as superior to the entrepreneurs who participate in their programmes.

This was accentuated in the case of migrant entrepreneurs, who face additional challenges. Migrant entrepreneurs confirmed that intercultural differences, the motivations and expectations of establishing a business abroad, and the personal background (i.e., education, conditions in the home country) should be understood by incubation professionals to provide better support. In addition, they suggested to introduce some introductory courses or practical activities to understand the local culture, aiming to facilitate wider integration in the host society.

The first contribution of our paper lies in bringing together insights from Entrepreneurship Studies and Language-Sensitive Research in International Business, to analyze the power effects of language use in entrepreneurship support programmes from an interdisciplinary perspective. Our contribution to Language-Sensitive Research in International Business is twofold. First, the contribution to the stream of research that is informed by Translation Studies lies in addressing the effects of a *lack* of translating concepts into other contexts, while the majority of studies has focused on actual acts of translation. The study of a Finland-based MNC that introduced employee empowerment as an organization practice in its Russian subsidiaries by Outila, Piekkari and Mihailova (2020) provides an interesting example of the effects of such a translation void. In the absence of a concept for empowerment and an accompanying meaning system, the research participants resorted to proverbs as a means to address the lack of any equivalent term or meaning system; in doing so, they began to make sense of empowerment and render it locally meaningful. Our study contributes to this line of inquiry by examining the empowering and disempowering effects of *not* translating concepts from the field of entrepreneurship in incubator training programs. We therefore define the trainers who deliver those trainings as translator agents (Outila et al., 2020; Westney et al., 2022), whose conscious or unconscious decisions *not* to translate entrepreneurial concepts and terms in their trainings transforms the incubator training programs into specific arenas of power exercise and micropolitics (Ciuk et al., 2019). Second, we contribute to research on the use of professional/functional (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov & Mäkelä, 2014) or technical languages (Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze, 2014). Remarkably, most studies have interpreted the use of such language forms in a positive light. Research only to a limited extent has addressed negative effects of these forms of language on power relations in multilingual organizations. As an example, some employees in Gaibrois’ (2018) study of hybrid language use described the mixing languages as potentially excluding others. Our paper takes into account this stream of research by addressing the empowering and disempowering effects of using jargon and specialist vocabulary from the field of entrepreneurship for trainers and participants in incubator training programs.

Also our contribution to Entrepreneurship Studies is twofold. First, we contribute to the study of the role of language in entrepreneurial support programmes, and of expert vocabulary more specifically. Previous research has shown that there is a specific lexicon used in entrepreneurship to discuss marketing activities, technology-oriented entrepreneurship, digital entrepreneurship, professional investment, and new venture development (Roundy & Asllani, 2018; 2019). Our paper contributes to showing the effects that the use of this specific lexicon has on the power relations between entrepreneurial support professionals and entrepreneurs. In that sense, the choice of some words does not become a success factor that helps entrepreneurs to acquire resources, as in the case of crowdfunding (Pietraszkiewicz, Soppe, & Formanowicz, 2017). Rather, it becomes an empowering resource for incubators professionals, with a disempowering effect on the entrepreneurs who participate in their entrepreneurial support programmes. Our study also contributes to a more fine-grained conceptualization of language in entrepreneurship. By stating that the ability to speak either the mainstream language in a country or society (e.g., Jones-Evans, Thompson, & Kwong, 2011; Wei, Jiao, & Growe, 2019) or in targeted international markets (Johnstone et al., 2018) is key to accessing information and knowledge (Adejimola, 2008) and perceiving business opportunities (Jones et al., 2011; Pisani et al., 2017), previous research implicitly seems to equate language with the notion of national, regional or local languages. Our study shows, however, that mastering professional/functional (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov & Mäkelä, 2014) or technical language (Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze, 2014) also plays a significant role for entrepreneurs’ success, particularly in their starting stage. By drawing attention to the empowering and disempowering effects of expert vocabulary, our study thus also contributes to “decolonizing” entrepreneurship through language, practices and knowledge frameworks (Wood, Dell, & Carroll, 2022).

Second, we make a contribution to investigating entrepreneurship support programmes as an arena of power and micropolitics. Our study has shown that the expert vocabulary that the support professionals use and the lack of ‘translation’ of concepts has an empowering effect on these same professionals and a disempowering effect on the assisted entrepreneurs in general. In the case of the migrants specifically, not all generalist Italian entrepreneurial support organizations that we have interviewed would be well positioned to offer services that fully support cultural, ethnic, and national diversity and inclusion. At the same time, through our discussions with entrepreneurial support professionals, some have questioned whether taking care of these aspects falls within their mission – or rather belongs to the mission of public agencies which should foster equality of opportunities for all. We reason that, avoiding taking responsibilities on these issues, entrepreneurial support organizations are prone to generating opportunities which are available only to selected categories of entrepreneurs – depending, for instance, on their social class (e.g., more educated, more cosmopolitan migrants, more endowed with financial resources that allow them to experiment start-up and failure). We believe that there is space to drive more in-depth reflections about these latent or more explicit dimensions of “privilege” and “power” in the domain of entrepreneurial support services, and more widely, in entrepreneurial ecosystems. Besides reflection and acknowledgment of potential biases determined by existing social categorizations (among which not only culture and ethnicity, but also gender, disability, socio economic status, age, sexual orientation), there is space to reason on actionable practices for inclusion that try to engage entrepreneurs in the participative co-development of entrepreneurial support spaces and activities, so that all their different voices have the chance of being listened and answered.

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1. Certified incubators were introduced by the decree (DL) 179/2012(art. 25, par. 5) and are defined in detail by the Ministerial Decree of 22 December 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Data downloaded by InfoCamere (the Italian Chamber of Commerce system) on 8th Februray 2021. One incubator was not included in the study because it was in the process of liquidation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Following the European Commission (2016), we define *support scheme* any activity or service helping beneficiaries become entrepreneurs. *Targeted support scheme* relates to any activity or service targeted specifically at migrants, which aims to help them become entrepreneurs. *Mainstream support scheme* is any activity or service to support entrepreneurship without focusing on a specific target group. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All excerpts of interviews and secondary data will be in English; translations from Italian are ours. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)