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Performing *extracomunitari*: Mocking migrants in Veneto *barzellette*

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ABSTRACT

In Italy, *barzellette* are short funny stories that speakers perform in various social events with large groups of friends, relatives, or colleagues. In Northern Italy, where a strong anti-immigration platform has been implemented by two influential political parties of the Veneto region, *barzellette* are performed to represent certain immigrant groups, especially the so-called *extracomunitari*. In this article, I examine the performative power of multidialectal language play in race-based humor through an analysis of two such joking events. I show how Veneto speakers perform *barzellette* in their local language, Veneto dialect, to mock immigrant voices, using approaches that purport, not necessarily in a deliberate fashion, to 'contain' or 'conceal' their racist remarks in their local code. In this way, they sharpen an exclusionary divide between an 'us', as insiders, as the local speakers of this language, and a 'them', as outsiders, or the immigrant 'others', who do not share this code. I thus examine issues of covert racist discourse within an 'unmarked' framework in which race and racializing discourses are embedded in social and cultural patterns. (Code-shifting, jokes, *Lega Nord*, migration, race, racialized discourse, Veneto dialect)*

INTRODUCTION

Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was known for using *barzellette*, or 'short funny stories', before, during, and after his political meetings, and even during parliamentary sessions. He was considered gifted at this, even if, from time to time, he produced serious, although 'unintentional', gaffes or slips that the international press picked up (cf. Hill 2001, 2008; Lempert & Silverstein 2012). After a political speech to a national audience in Naples on May 13, 2011, Berlusconi launched into a *barzelletta*[1] about a trip he took in which he met a beautiful blonde woman absorbed in reading a book. Here is how he told this short story to the Italian audience at this political meeting.

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(1)	ORIGINAL VERSION: ITALIAN[2]	ENGLISH TRANSLATION[3]
1	ho viaggiato su un aereo normale	[I] traveled in a normal airplane [i.e. not a government one]
2	dovevo andare fuori Italia	[I] had to go outside Italy
3	salgo sull'aereo e c'è una bellissima ragazza	[I] get in the plane and there is a very beautiful girl
4	Gianni, dovevi vederla	Gianni [addressing the man near him], [you] should have seen her
5	una bellissima ragazza bionda	a very beautiful blonde girl
6	che leggeva intensamente un libro	who was intensely reading a book
7	poltrona libera vicino a lei	[the] seat [was] vacant next to her
8	mi sono fiondato [laughter from audience]	[I] catapulted myself into it [laughter from audience]
9	e ho cercato di cominciare una conversazione	and [I] tried to start a conversation [with her]
10	niente da fare	[there was] no luck at all
11	leggeva	[she] was reading
12	allora a un certo punto proprio anche forte ho detto	so at a certain point I even said loudly
13	'signorina, ma Lei legge con una intensità straordinaria	'Miss, but you read with an extraordinary intensity
14	di che cosa parla questo libro?'	what is the book about?'
15	e lei mi ha guardato e soavemente mi ha detto	and she looked at me and [she] said to me sweetly
16	'parla dell'amore'	'[it] talks about love'
17	'ah'	'ah'
18	'E che cosa le ha insegnato di così importante	'And what did [the book] teach you [that's] so important
19	vista la sua straordinaria attenzione?'	given your extraordinary attention?'
20	'mi ha insegnato due cose fondamentali:	'[it] taught me two fundamental things:
21	che gli amanti sessualmente più potenti sono gli arabi [light laughter from audience]	that the most virile lovers are the Arabs [light laughter from audience]
22	e quelli più sentimentalmente forti	and that the most sentimentally strong
23	quelli più romantici sono i napoletani'	and romantic ones are the Neapolitan [lovers]'
24	e allora io le ho dato la mano e le ho detto:	and at that point I gave her my hand [i.e. to introduce himself] and I told her'
25	'signorina permetta che mi presenti: Mohammed Esposito' [loud laughter from audience]	'Miss, let me introduce myself: Mohammed Esposito' [loud laughter from audience]

At the end of his story, Berlusconi extended his hand to introduce himself to this beautiful blonde woman, and uttered 'Mohammed Esposito'—Esposito being a typical Neapolitan last name. [4]

I use Berlusconi's humor to introduce the role of *barzellette* in political events, and, in particular, to demonstrate the use of migrant otherness. In this segment, the

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unintentional tacit, racialized understanding of sexuality that is associated with the figure of the 'Arab'[5] calls to mind circulating stereotypes of Northern African migrants, especially those from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, who are often represented negatively in the Italian media (Montali, Riva, Frigerio, & Mele 2013). In this *barzelletta*, Berlusconi also pairs Southern Italians and foreign migrants—the latter having become the new 'internal other' in Northern Italy, as I describe later.

This article examines the performative power of multidialectal language play in race-based humor. I explore how short, humorous stories, or *barzellette*, in Northern Italy are at times performed to position certain immigrant groups, especially the so-called *extracomunitari* (a derogatory term used across the Italian peninsula meaning 'immigrants from outside the EU'), and how these stories exploit language variation. More specifically, I show how individuals supporting two conservative political parties (*Liga Veneta* 'Veneto League' and *Veneto Stato* 'Veneto State') perform *barzellette* with frequent shifts from Standard Italian into Veneto dialect as they enact and mock immigrant voices. Multidialectal language play here is not only a resource for expressing 'tacit racism' (Hill 2008), but also for positioning audiences who are its hearers. By mocking migrants in their local dialect, Veneto speakers iconically[6] model the jokes' 'concealment' or 'containment'—as if limiting their jokes' accessibility and potential offensiveness to an imagined audience of Italian-speaking migrants by choosing Veneto dialect over Standard Italian. In his classic work with Hindi-English bilingual speakers, Gumperz (1976) discovered that the direction of a code-shift provides important clues about the intentional illocutionary force of an utterance. In his words, 'what at the societal level are seen as norms of language usage or symbolic affirmations of ethnic boundaries are transformed here and built upon in conversation to affect the interpretation of speakers' intent and determine effectiveness in communication' (Gumperz 1976:39–40). Thus, for Gumperz, code choice between the 'they' code (or the code of the 'threat' language, or, in this case Standard Italian, the language of the Italian State) and the 'we' code (or the code indexing more intimate relationships, in this case Veneto dialect) is an approach that can determine and affect the interpretation of an utterance.

Generally speaking, it is not unusual for code- and style-shifting to be used as a strategy of containment, not only because the target code—Veneto dialect—may be relatively unintelligible (cf. Wirtz 2007) to some Italian overhearers, but also because the shift can iconically model that very inaccessibility, thus framing the event metapragmatically (Silverstein 1993) as unintelligible, tabooed, as something that should be avoided or concealed (Fleming & Lempert 2011). Although unintelligibility can vary, given the different degrees of knowledge of Veneto dialect among speakers in the targeted audience, the very fact of trying to conceal problematic moments of jokes or to overshadow their implications purportedly makes the jokes inaccessible to all but insiders. Thus, multidialectal language in joke-telling plays an important role in positioning audiences in Veneto: by concealing supposedly offensive remarks at particular moments of the joke (usually the

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climax of a short story), the performer emphasizes the divide between insiders, the ones who understand and speak the local code, and outsiders, the ones who do not share the code, such as migrant groups in the present case. As Fleming & Lempert (2011:8) clarify, such thinly disguised forms of speech try to alleviate 'the risk of transgression and fix appropriate, often morally inflected, relations between speaker and the hazardous agent or object', which, in the present case, are jokes mocking migrants. Yet, proscription often ironically enhances the performative strength of tabooed speech acts (Fleming & Lempert 2011), such that the efforts at containment exaggerate the boundaries of inside and outside and heighten the exclusionary politics of this joke-telling. While *barzellette* in the Veneto region can be delivered in Standard Italian, many speakers use their local dialect as a resource for humor, and when they do, not only is the story addressed to audiences who are presumed to 'share' this code, but, when the objects of humor are migrants, such shifts can also enact the latter's exclusion (cf. Dickinson 2007).

Jokes can help reproduce normative structures, as in cases of teasing (see Dundes 1987; Attardo 1994) or ritualized 'joking relations' between kin (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; see also, Handelman & Kapferer 1972), just as they can be used to comment critically on a wider society. Focusing on the interactional and discourse frames and structures of jokes, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists (Sacks 1974; Sherzer 1993, 2002) have considered joke-telling within broader social and cultural contexts, beyond the immediate interaction in which it is told, rather than as an isolated act whose text can be analyzed on its own. This capacity of jokes to comment on the sociocultural surround comes not only from the content of jokes, through the 'what is said',[7] or denotational text, but also through the manner in which jokes are delivered, or their interactional text (for this distinction, see Silverstein 1997; Wortham 2001). The performativity of joke-telling, which includes their capacity to create sociability, sharedness, and a range of other pragmatic acts, has recently begun to receive more scholarly attention. While anthropological research has often addressed humor as embedded in the cultural practices under study (Oring 2008; Raskin 2008), sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have started to explore more systematically the performative qualities of joke-telling rather than, for example, their apparent versus opaque meaning per se—this being one way of theorizing how jokes 'work'. This has resulted in descriptions of diverse pragmatic functions of joke-telling as embedded in various sociocultural contexts such as supporting HIV patients (Black 2012), constructing identity (Bucholtz, Skapoulli, Barnwell, & Lee 2011; Managan 2012), and assessing the 'racial' in US public discourse (Hartigan 2009). Similar to the cases explored in this article, but focusing more on bivalency and speech play in multilingual environments in the Czech Republic, Dickinson (2007) analyzes how bivalent linguistic meaning is a resource for asserting the joke-tellers' narrative authority, since participants can take different and competing alignments during their storytelling. Dickinson's migrants' stories demonstrate that interactions between different ethnic groups serve 'as icons for ethnic and economic power relations' (Dickinson 2007:236).

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In these stories, Czechs emerge as well off and bright, although very attached to money, Ukrainians come across as not very smart, but generous and with good intentions, while Russians are mostly mobsters. In the joking stories analyzed in this article, immigrant groups (in this case typified as 'Arabs') emerge as stereotypically aggressive and violent, sexually potent and desirable, and not very talented at learning the Italian language.

If considered within a 'participation framework' (Goffman 1981), code-shifts to Veneto dialect during joke-telling could possibly be interpreted as socially problematic, especially in cases where joke-tellers mock migrant groups (who can be present as audience members), as in the examples presented in this article. These code-shifts seem to align participants in the interaction with broader visions of who belongs to the Italian nation state (the insiders—Veneto speakers who can share the code) and who does not (the outsiders—the migrant groups) (for insiders/outsiders relationships see also Jaffe, this issue). This multilingual language play in the Veneto region, and in Italy more generally, has analogues elsewhere in Europe, as Frekko's (2011) work, for example, demonstrates. Drawing on Woolard's (1995, 1998a, 1998b) work on bilingualism and code-switching between Catalan and Castilian in Spain, Frekko demonstrates that the use of the state language Castilian in a Catalan radio talk show can be a strategy of containment. While Catalan is supposed to be the language of the talk show, Frekko (2011:83) notes a significant use of Castilian in the interactions between the host and the callers. Thus, although Castilian is not 'proscribed' in Catalonia, she argues that this code is used creatively by certain speakers while 'simultaneously containing it', at their discretion, and creating bonds with only certain speakers who understand the code. As I demonstrate in this article, the interplay between Standard Italian and Veneto dialect during joke-telling presents similar containment issues. Veneto joke-tellers manage to convey problematic remarks while at the same time discursively containing them, superficially disguising them so that only certain speakers (the insiders who understand and speak Veneto dialect) can receive them. By doing so, they exclude other speakers. Thus, on the one hand, by producing these problematic remarks, Veneto joke-tellers heighten discriminatory exclusion; on the other hand, this very act is interactionally coercive since joke-tellers position the immediate listeners as insiders who are presumed to share the local code, and thus the view, of the speaker. Through an analysis of the performative power of multidialectal language play in *barzellette*, this article explores not only how joke-tellers position their audience members but also how they regulate accessibility to their jokes by code-shifting to Veneto dialect.

RACE AND RACIALIZING DISCOURSE IN JOKE-TELLING

Berlusconi's story and the cases under scrutiny in this article reveal how race and racializing discourses are embedded in sociocultural practices, including views

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on the condition of migrants in the nation-state. This is in line with recent research in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. In a special issue devoted to 'complicating race', Alim & Reyes (2011:380) unveil new directions to 'recast the relationship between language and race' since race needs to be studied as part of other social dimensions such as gender, class, sexuality, and so forth (Alim & Reyes 2011; Bucholtz et al. 2011; Chun 2011; Reyes 2011). In her analysis of immigrant narratives in the Italian region of Tuscany, Valentina Pagliai (2011:E96) reminds us that racism is not an individual concern, but rather '[i]t is produced in interaction'. As Pagliai (2011:E97) demonstrates, in Italy, many cases of racializing discourses are 'commonsensical and unmarked', not only due to the strong influence of the mass media and the political parties that makes racism taken for granted, but also because speakers often do not react to such discourses in order to save face. To show disapproval of these jokes, or to try to consider them not funny at all, would be interactionally problematic. Joking discourse in general coerces listeners to just play along and laugh as the preferred response (see Sacks 1974). By not showing disapproval, participants tacitly affirm and hence reproduce racializing discourses in everyday talk. In this sense, Berlusconi's *barzelletta* is tacitly racist: it contains racializing language that is 'unmarked' for the Italian audience to which the joke is addressed (see also Pardo 2013; Koven 2013). Responses to tacit racism vary in practice, of course. While the joking format may in general coerce listeners to play along, in some cases reluctance, resistance, or even avoidance may occur. In her research on the *Lega Nord*'s ('Northern League') register and the Bergamasco dialect,[8] Cavanaugh (2012:92) found that speakers who show a prolocal or prodialect orientation often fall into 'interdiscursive traps', 'which link speakers to undesired stances and thus evaluations of their social, cultural, economic, and political environment'. Because conservative politics in the region politicize dialect preservation, speakers who support dialect revitalization or simply communicate in dialect risk being taken to share the political views of a *leghista*, a follower of the '[Northern] League', with a strong attachment to regional roots, traditions, and language as well as a strong defense of this patrimony against the new immigrant groups who are viewed as a threat (Perrino 2013). Because of this interdiscursivity, dialect avoidance may occur from those who wish to avoid the political associations that often come with dialect use. When jokes are used in a particular political climate without apology, they can become powerful political statements, such as, for instance, the expression of an alliance with anti-immigrant political parties like the *Lega Nord*.

Similar to the cases presented in this article, joking has also been studied as a performative tool for making racist remarks in public and political discourse (Jacobs-Huey 2006; Hill 2008). As Hill (2008:41) argues, while stereotypes and slurs are generally categorized as 'racist' because 'they are made salient by referentialist and performative linguistic ideologies respectively', other types of speech or performances are less discernible, but they are nonetheless part of a 'covert racist discourse'.

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What are the meanings of the covert of covert discourse? While there are different ways of being covert, or contained, I focus on the tacit exclusion of migrant others. During joke-telling performances, joke-tellers position migrants as outsiders, while positioning the immediate audience members as insiders, who share the local code in which the joke is transferred. Thus, containment performs exclusion, by heightening the insider-outsider divide that is created (see also Jaffe, this issue); by excluding migrants, such containment treats them as 'other', which is a way of tacitly, and mostly unintentionally, being racist. Additionally, containment also simultaneously positions the listener as an insider, as someone who allegedly shares the language—which arguably helps make it safe for him or her to play along and accept the joke. While Berlusconi's joke at the outset of this article was entirely in Standard Italian, the second joke, discussed below, features code-shifts into Veneto dialect. Before turning to the analysis of how forms of difference and exclusion are enacted in discourse by Veneto joke-tellers, I first contextualize *barzellette* within Northern Italy's current political climate.

BARZELLETTE, JOKE-TELLERS, AND CODE-SHIFTING IN VENETO

In Italy, *barzellette*[9] are usually told after a meal with friends or relatives, especially in large gatherings. One or two participants considered 'good' *barzellette* tellers secure attention from the surrounding audience and tell the jokes. Such joke-telling events can go on for some time.

The first *barzellette* discussed in the scholarly literature were apparently in the form of a ballad or poem, and their topic was usually about love and amusing romantic situations (Pèrcopo 1893). Today, *barzellette* are mostly of a sexual or political nature and involve such region-based stereotyped figures as Southerners and Northerners with funny stories about Southerners told by Northerners and vice versa. More recently, given the change in Italy's demographics, *barzellette* have started to feature migrants, especially Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, and South Asia. And, under the influence of the fierce anti-immigrant policies of the *Lega Nord* 'Northern League', mocking migrants in *barzellette* has become more common than mocking Southerners; thus, a new internal 'other' has been created in Northern Italy: the *extracomunitari* (see Quassoli 2013). As Giordano writes about this shift in their political discourse,

> partly because there is now minimal internal migration from the south to the north of Italy, the League has in recent years directed its attention away from the southern Italian 'other' to another—according to the League more threatening—other', namely the increasing number of foreign migrants to Italy, or so-called *extracomunitari*. (Giordano 2003:222, emphasis in original; see also Giordano 2004)

'In the past decade, Veneto dialect has become reframed as a political instrument used to defend and revalorize a Veneto identity. Thus, there has been a sustained tendency by Veneto politicians to revitalize Veneto culture, traditions, and dialect (Perrino 2013; see also Jaffe, this issue).

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Dialect revitalization in Northern Italy, and in Italy more generally, must be understood in relation to the recent politics of migration in Italy (see Colombo 2013). It is connected with the strong and assiduous anti-immigration policies of the *Lega Nord* political party (Richardson & Colombo 2013)[10] and of the more recent separatist party *Veneto Stato* 'Veneto State'. During the 1970s and 1980s, Italy underwent some major demographic changes from being a country of emigrants, having provided Italian migrants around the world—especially to the United States—to becoming a receiver of immigrants, especially from Northern and Western Africa, India, Eastern Europe, Albania, China, and Russia. These flows of immigrants have triggered strong reactions, such as recent discourses about national culture and identity, including the aggressive anti-immigration politics of the *Lega Nord*. This conservative party, which enjoyed a lot of popularity and success until very recently, grew from a 'small movement stressing the ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness of the regions of Northern Italy to a national, mass political party' (Giordano 2004:64).[11] Quite a bit of this popularity, in the Veneto region in particular, has been for its strong, anti-immigration platform, and not just for its opposition to Southern Italy.

These anti-immigration efforts go hand in hand with efforts toward regionalization, including local dialect revitalization. The *Lega Nord* and its various regional subleagues like the *Liga Veneta* 'Venetian League' have been very active in reviving and promoting dialect use (see also Cavanaugh 2004, 2009 for the Bergamasco dialect). The *Lega Nord*'s promotion of dialects and anti-immigration policies work in opposite directions but complement each other: they defend themselves against foreign migrants while simultaneously drawing a boundary around their region and language.

Given the peculiar linguistic landscape of the Italian peninsula, the revalorization of Veneto dialect is better contextualized if one considers it historically. Italy was unified in 1871, before which it was fragmented into many small states, each with different languages that evolved directly from Latin in contact with the local codes (the vernaculars). While the Tuscan 'dialect' benefited from its literary use by famous writers, such as Dante, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Francesco Petrarca, and became what today is referred to as Standard Italian, the other vernacular languages (referred to as *dialetti* 'dialects' by many Italians) have continued to survive until today, thanks to their intensive everyday use (De Mauro 1963), alongside Standard Italian, the national language. While the latter is the language that most speakers communicate with and understand, Italians also make a wide use of the vernaculars, especially at home and on informal occasions such as meetings with friends of the same town or neighborhood and local festivals. In Veneto, older generations have the tendency to use the local dialect more often and with everyone, while younger speakers use it only in family settings and with close friends. This reflects the level of education and the fact that many young speakers often go to other regions to attend university. In these cases, several varieties of Veneto dialect emerge—some that are associated with different areas in the region and others that blend with Standard Italian.[12]

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The *Liga Veneta* has been promoting not only the use of Veneto dialect, but also its recognition as a separate language at the European level. New dictionaries of Veneto dialect have been produced and new forms of media in Veneto have been created, such as Veneto radio programs and Veneto TV shows. Veneto dialect is now taught at the elementary level through the use of books and comics in Veneto for children, as for example a book entitled LEPANTO: *La Gran Bataja* 'LEPANTO: The big battle' featuring the historical battle of Lepanto[13] (Venete 2010). During my fieldwork in Veneto in the summer of 2012, I noticed that at the train station in the Veneto town of *Padova* 'Padua' there were three-sided posters advertising the alcoholic aperitif 'spritz', considered traditional in this region. One side of one poster read: ***Par bevar un*** Spritz ***no ghe vol un privé***, *serve* ***na piassa***,[14] whose corresponding Standard Italian is *per bere uno spritz non ci vuole un posto privato, serve una piazza*, 'to drink a Spritz [one] doesn't need a private place, [one] needs a piazza'. Another side of the same poster reads, *bevitelo* ***anca*** *a casa* where ***anca*** is in Veneto dialect meaning 'drink it at home ***as well***' (for more details on the use of these posters, see Perrino 2013).

These signs, and many others, demonstrate a strong revitalization of the local dialect in the Veneto region, transforming this code into a political emblem of regional group membership. This sense of bounded groupness has emerged in Veneto oral narratives and joke-telling as well, where, strategically, speakers use code-shifts at specific moments of their telling to make specific comments or remarks.

My corpus[15] consists of jokes that I collected both from different age sets and a wide range of events: I looked at *barzellette* told during dinners (which bear some similarities to stand-up comedy formats), during folkloristic events in towns, such as *sagre*, or 'local festivals', and during political speeches or rallies delivered live, on television, and on the internet. At political rallies in Veneto, for instance, many speakers ended up telling *barzellette*. Such joke-telling performances were common in rallies and oratory, both at a regional and even national level, as the anecdotal *barzelletta* at the outset has demonstrated. I pay special attention to the role of dialect use in *barzellette*, as a containment strategy to deliver remarks that might be perceived as offensive by certain speakers, particularly in discursive environments where immigrant groups (especially from Northern and Western Africa, Albania, China, India, and Russia) are represented, and mocked. As I mentioned above, while joking remarks on immigrants might be felt as unmarked (Pagliai 2011) for many Italian speakers today, still it might be problematic to deliver them openly without at least seeming to contain them (perhaps to maintain a supposedly antiracist self-image), especially considering the constant growth of the immigrant population in the peninsula.

Joke-tellers usually take the stage and start telling jokes, while shifting from Standard Italian to Veneto dialect from time to time.[16] These code-shifts often happen in ordinary conversation as well, but jokes in general are a frequent environment for them. For example, while I was conducting fieldwork in Veneto at a state-run hospital (I was the only participant present with the doctors), code-shifting from

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Standard Italian into Veneto dialect was also common among doctors. A doctor I was interviewing once noticed a group of Senegalese migrants in the waiting room just outside his office, switched into Veneto dialect, and said the following to a nurse:

(2) ***varda*** *come* ***che i ze arivai sti*** *qua,* *in* ***sinquanta*** *per* ***far vedare el puteo, ahhhh benon semo*** *a posto* *e* ***i ze tui bei scuretti,*** eh?

'***look*** *how* ***they have arrived—these ones*** *here*—***fifty at a time, just*** *to* ***have their baby seen*** [by the doctor]. ***oh well...*** *and* ***they are beautifully dark,*** eh?'

This short excerpt, even though it does not contain any explicit jokes, shows that problematic, off-color, and racist remarks all tend to be uttered in Veneto dialect, regardless of whether the focus is on migrants or not. As I mentioned earlier for the Berlusconi joke, these remarks might have passed through as unmarked since there was no reaction from the nurse. In this way, code-shifting into Veneto dialect at particular moments of the conversation, or of the joke, seems to be a strategy for joke-tellers to try to convey these remarks in a veiled or contained way, or tacitly. This also stems from the very nature of dialect use itself: traditionally, dialects are used in family settings where people engage in conversations that are not part of the public domain (see Gal 2002). Thus, the doctor code-shifted into Veneto dialect to create an intimate atmosphere with the nurse, and also to contain his remarks with speakers who do not share the code. Regardless of how receivers of the joke might react, the relevant point is that the code-shift positions receivers as insiders who may be expected to share the views of the speaker. Code-shifting thus becomes a way for speakers to assert their affinity with the audience as they do something that is potentially offensive to migrants who might be present in the audience. Through so doing, however, joke-tellers coerce listeners to align themselves with the joke. By laughing soon after the joke and by showing agreement, listeners reproduce racializing discourse in everyday life.

If code-shifts to Veneto dialect are frequent when speakers make remarks about migrants that could potentially be perceived as socially problematic, one can appreciate what can happen when *barzellette* are centered on this topic. Indeed, when these short, funny stories are focused on migrants, especially in the current Italian political climate described above, something more is happening. There is a sharp ideological contrast constructed between the voice of the local 'we' and the voice of the foreign 'other' who is being mocked (see Gumperz 1976). The *barzelletta* I analyze in the following section is a clear example of this containment strategy.

MOCKING MIGRANTS IN A VENETO *BARZELLETTA*

The professional joke-teller, or *barzellettiere*, Toni Davanzo works for a Veneto Language TV channel and performed the *barzelletta* shown below. He usually

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appears on a program called *Cronache Venete: Una Goccia nel Mare dell'Informazione* 'Veneto chronicles: A drop in the ocean of the news')[17] As their website states:

> è una trasmissione che ha l'ambizione di trattare temi e problemi a sfondo socio-culturale, eventi e manifestazioni varie lungo il territorio del Veneto Orientale, dando, con i propri microfoni, voce al cittadino.
> '[this] is a program that aims to explore themes and problems with a sociocultural background as well as various events and performances on the territory of East Veneto, by giving, through [our] own microphones, the voice to the [Veneto] citizen.'

This program, broadcast in Veneto dialect, is another example of a revitalization project supported by the political parties of *Liga Veneta* and *Veneto Stato* I described earlier. This *barzellette* teller usually recounts one of his short, funny stories at the end of each program, and the space reserved for him is entitled in Veneto dialect, *Vutu saver l'ultima*?, which in Standard Italian is *Vuoi sapere l'ultima?,* meaning 'Would you like to know the latest [news]?'. The viewers of this program are mostly Veneto speakers residing in the region where the channel broadcasts Veneto news and a wide range of shows. One of Toni Davanzo's *barzellette*[18] reads as follows.

(3) A: announcer; T: Toni Davanzo

	Original version: Standard Italian and Veneto dialect	English translation
	A: ... ed ora il sempre atteso appuntamento con il nostro barzellettiere Toni Davanzo! [Music introducing the TV show] ***vuto saver*** l'ultima? [title of the *barzellette* show]	... and now the eagerly awaited appearance of our *barzellette* teller, Toni Davanzo! [Music introducing the TV show] ***do you want to know*** the latest? [title of the *barzellette* show]
1	T: ***El e 'sto*** bambino arabo che va a ***scoea el*** primo giorno	***there is this*** Arab kid who goes to ***school the*** first day [of class]
2	***ea*** maestra *come che lo vede* ***'rivare el ghe dise***	***the*** [female] teacher, *when* [she] *sees him* ***arriving, says to him***
3	"buongiorno ciao ciao come ti chiami?"	"good morning, hello hello what's your name?"
4	*e* ***lu*** "ellohellhellhellu" [imitating the sound of Arabic]	*and* ***he*** [says] "ellohellhellhellu" [imitating the sound of Arabic]
5	"*no no no no no fermo fermo là fermo là*"	*"no no no no no stop stop there stop there"*
6	***a varda el*** registro e vede che nessun bambino	[she] ***looks at the*** gradebook and [she] sees that none of the kids'
7	***se ciama*** *Giovanni*	***names is*** *Giovanni*
8	*e* ***a ghe dise "bon da ti da 'un cuo***- da oggi	*and* ***she tells him "well since you- starting today-*** starting today
9	***ti te si*** *Giovanni*	***you are*** *Giovanni*

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10	in modo *che* ***no ghe sia*** etnie	so *that* ***there are no*** ethnicities [i.e. ethnic differences]
11	*che* ***no ghe sia differense***	[so] *that* ***there are no differences***
12	*che* ***no ghe*** sia e:::::::h differenze fra bambini mmmmmm	[so] *that* ***there are no*** e:::::::h ***differences*** among kids [in the classroom] mmmmmm
13	*Giovanni* ***me racomando***, *Giovanni*"	*Giovanni* ***please*** [your name is] *Giovanni*"
14	***el putel*** *tutto contento va a casa* ***el ghe dise***	***the kid*** [who was] *all happy goes home* ***he says***
15	"mamma ***gha dit*** la maestra	"mom the teacher ***said***
16	che mi da ***un cuo son*** *Giovanni*"	that starting ***today [I] am*** *Giovanni*"
17	"*Giovanni* non è *vero* ***ti te si*** ellohellhellhellu" [imitating the sound of Arabic]	"*Giovanni* it is not *true*, ***you are*** ellohellhellhellu" [imitating the sound of Arabic]
18	***zo on fraco de bote***	[the mother] ***beats*** [the kid] ***heavily***
19	"***te vedara*** stasera quando *che* ***vien*** *casa* ***to papà***"	"[you] ***will see*** tonight when ***your*** *father* ***comes*** *home*"
20	'***riva el*** *papà* ***ea*** *sera*	***the*** *father* ***arrives at*** *night*
21	"*papà* la maestra ***m'ha dit*** che	"*dad*, the teacher ***said to me*** that
22	***mi da 'on cuo son*** *Giovanni*"	***starting today [I] am*** *Giovanni*"
23	"non è *vero* ***ti te si*** ellohellhellhellu" [imitating the sound of Arabic]	"it is not *true* ***you are*** ellohellhellhellu" [imitating the sound of Arabic]
24	***zo 'n altro fraco de bote***	[the father goes] ***beats*** [the kid] ***more heavily***
25	***maria vergine poaretto***	*holy virgin mary* ***poor thing***
26	***ea matina el*** *va a* ***scoea***	***the morning he*** *goes to* ***school***
27	***poaretto el gha*** un viso tutto ***sgionfio***	***poor thing he has a*** completely ***swollen*** face
28	***pien de botte cussi*** [mimicking a swollen face with his hands]	***so fully beaten up*** [mimicking a swollen face with his hands]
29	"*Giovanni*" ***ghe dise*** la maestra	"*Giovanni*" the teacher ***says to him***
30	"*ma* ***cossa zeo success***?"	"*but* ***what happened?***"
31	"***tasi*** maestra ***tasi tasi***	"***shut up*** teacher ***shut up shut up***
32	***en 'n*** giorno ***sol*** *che* ***so*** italiano	***in the one*** day *that* [I] ***have been*** Italian
33	***gho trovà do*** extracomunitari	[I] ***found two*** extracomunitari
34	*che* ***me gha sgionfà de bote sacranon***"[19] [music and laughter from audience]	*who* ***covered me with damned punches***" [music and laughter from audience]

Davanzo's *barzelletta*, performed in Veneto dialect with code-shifts in Standard Italian and bivalent forms (Woolard 1998b),[20] is a story about an 'Arab kid' who went to an Italian school, and when he arrived in class the first day of school the teacher asked him what his name was. At this point, Davanzo imitated the sound of Arabic for the child's name, but it was a purposively invented name, just a random combination of sounds, something that the audience might find amusing. The teacher then abruptly interrupted the child, asked him to use an Italian name instead of his Arabic name, and assigned him the name Giovanni. The teacher wished to do so to avoid any ethnic differences among the kids in the class—all the other children being Italian—perhaps, in an effort to integrate foreigners by erasing any perceptible otherness, or simply because the teacher did not want to have any difficulty pronouncing names among his or her students. At the end of

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this short story, the punchline is this: The child answered the teacher by saying that in just one day of being Italian he ran into two *extracomunitari*[21] who beat him up. Why should this joke be funny for northern Italians? As mentioned earlier, such jokes unveil circulating stereotypes about certain categories of people, immigrants in the present case, especially those coming from Northern Africa. The climax of the joke indirectly indexes (Hill 2008) not only a supposedly aggressive behavior that is stereotypically associated with Northern Africans, but also a generalized sense of their presumed foolishness by committing violence towards each other.

Unlike Berlusconi's *barzelletta* at the outset of this article, delivered entirely in Standard Italian, this *barzelletta* strongly features Veneto dialect, progressing in intensity over the course of the joke-telling. Indeed, while Veneto dialect was present from the start of the *barzelletta* (see lines 1, 2 and 4, for example), Davanzo does not use it in his reported speech at first. When Davanzo directly reports the teacher's speech in lines 3 and 5, for instance, he uses Standard Italian, not Veneto dialect (line 3, *buongiorno ciao ciao come ti chiami?* 'good morning, hello hello what's your name'; line 5, *no no no no no fermo fermo là fermo là* '*no no no no no stop stop there stop there*'). However, in the climax of the story beginning at line 26 (***ea matina el*** *va a* ***scoea*** '***the morning he*** *goes to* ***school***') when the child returns to school and is addressed by the teacher, both the narrator Davanzo and the voice of the teacher speak consistently in Veneto dialect, not Standard Italian. Even the foreign boy now speaks dialect (a sign of his rapid assimilation?), and delivers the punchline in dialect at line 34 (*che* ***me gha sgionfà de bote sacranon*** '*who* ***covered me with damned punches***'). The fact that the boy speaks the local dialect shows how he is brought into the voice of the insider, as he reports on his parents' violent actions against him. In a sense, it is as if he were against his own parents, speaking as a rebaptized Italian person, thus an insider, against his outsider, *extracomunitari*, parents. All of the voices (the teacher's, the child's, the two parents', and the narrator's) increase their shifts to Veneto dialect steadily at every line. This insider/outsider interplay is common in such code-shifts: both the child and the doctor I mentioned in my earlier example code-shift at particular moments of the interaction, creating an intimate space among insiders, and leaving out those outsiders who are supposed not to share the code. In this way, the story as a whole moves from Standard Italian into Veneto dialect: the more the *barzelletta* progresses in its intensity, the more code-shifts in Veneto dialect the teller uses until the final line, line 34, where the storyteller reaches the climax of the *barzelletta* in which he uses a blasphemous expression (*sacranon*), which is derived from ancient French (*sacré nom de Dieu*), insulting the name of God. By code-shifting into Veneto dialect in this *barzelletta*, Davanzo not only positions the listener as complicit and as a participant in the joke (through laughs and applauses), but, at the same time, he excludes the 'other', the migrant groups in this case, who might not be fully fluent in Veneto dialect and thus might not understand the subtleties of the joke.

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In (3) above, immediately in line 4, the child pronounces his name by uttering nonsensical sounds to make his name resemble Arabic, but it is gibberish instead, which is received by the audience as hilarious, given their laughter. These nonsensical sounds resembling Arabic recall Berlusconi's *barzelletta* with which I opened this article: Italians seem to have solutions for Arabic names to assign when they need to refer to them in joke-telling or in other social situations.[22] Analogous to cases of mock Spanish described by Hill (2001, 2008), Davanzo mocks the typical Arabic sound in a nonsensical fashion instead of uttering a meaningful name for the child. This imitation of Arabic sounds is recurrent throughout the *barzelletta* and it is thus another means by which the storyteller is tacitly racist. Similarly, at line 17 and line 23 first the mother of the child and then his father reprimand him when he says that he has an Italian name, Giovanni, and they both repeat these Arab mocking sounds to remind him of his Arabic name instead. The presence of these nonsensical Arabic sounds coupled with code-shifts into Veneto dialect reinforces the boundaries between those who are insiders—and can share the code—and those who are outsiders—that is, immigrants, who not only cannot share the code of Veneto dialect, but who cannot even speak Italian correctly. Davanzo's use of different voices may be compared with Chun's (2004) case of the comedian Margaret Cho who, through the revoicings of her mother during her on-stage performances, manages to mock Asians in different ways, including producing stereotypical Chinese accents and nonsensical syllabic sequences (see also Vigouroux, this issue). It is through these different voices that the storyteller Davanzo is able to deliver his jokes without seeming the main responsible agent, as he redistributes responsibility by including the audience members as tacit, and thus complicit, participants (see Sacks 1974; Hill & Irvine 1993). The listeners are positioned as if they shared the same code and, by extension, as if they shared the same view on the humor that is being performed. In a sense, through his telling, Davanzo is able to convey his remarks without taking responsibility for them since the attribution of these remarks is diffused and shared not only among these various voices that he performs, but also by having the listeners participate by laughing and sharing the same code.

This *barzelletta* contains other similar moments in lines 10, 11, and 12 when the teller, after naming the child with the Italian name Giovanni, says that it would be good to do so 'so that there are no ethnicities [i.e. ethnic differences], so that there are no differences, so that there are no differences among kids [in the classroom]' (*in modo che* ***no ghe sia*** *etnie,* *che* ***no ghe sia differense****,* *che* ***no ghe*** *sia e:::::::h differenze fra bambini*). Since the classroom is supposedly composed of all Italian children and an Arab one, the teacher decides to name the new child with an Italian name to miraculously erase all ethnic differences. The final lines of the *barzelletta* reach the climax of the joke when the teller puts a blasphemous expression in the mouth of the child himself at line 34 (*che* ***me gha sgionfà de bote sacranon*** '*who* ***covered me with damned punches***'). And, through so doing, the joke-teller not only contains his racist remarks by switching into Veneto, but by using

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dialect and by putting it in the mouth of the immigrant child, he also creates a stronger, and disconcertingly bonding, effect on the audience who shares this code. By laughing loudly, the audience becomes complicit with the storyteller. First, the storyteller assigns problematic remarks to the mouth of three different voices (the child's, his mother's, and his father's); then he starts using code-shifts more steadily till the climax that is delivered almost entirely in Veneto dialect. This crescendo-like effect of the *barzelletta* creates a hilarious and almost absurd, although certainly disturbing, effect. By sharing the code, the storyteller creates a bond with the listening audience who thus becomes complicit in excluding some of his listeners—here the migrant groups—who do not share Veneto dialect.

CONCLUSIONS

What is the significance of mocking migrants in Veneto dialect at this historical and political moment in Northern Italy? Given the conditions of dialect politicization in Veneto, mocking migrants in dialect would likely mean, ideologically speaking, more than what the usual shifts into dialect would typically mean. In general, shifting from Standard Italian into Veneto dialect is a distinctive way to iconically model indexical containment. It is containment in the sense that the problematic indexical associations of one's speech—such as sexual and sexist remarks, off-color and racist remarks—are supposedly mitigated by the framing of that speech in a local, in-group code—in dialect, in aligning with being a Veneto speaker. The problematic speech is discursively set apart as 'not public' (even if, in reality, it may be easily understood by all those co-present). The metaphoric containment of the strong indexicality of utterances like the ones discussed above puts these utterances 'off-record', at the same time that it sharpens the contrast between Veneto speakers and immigrants. By code-shifting into Veneto dialect, Davanzo positions the audience members as complicit and as participants in the joke, and thus he creates a strong bond with them. At the same time, Davanzo performs an exclusion of the 'other', the migrant groups in this case, and therefore puts clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

At this historical moment in Veneto, given the strength of conservative, anti-immigrant politics and the link between dialect revitalization and this politics, this divide may be acquiring a new significance. The sharp divide projected is that between the 'we' of dialect users—that is to say, insiders, 'locals', speakers of the local dialect, who have deep roots in their regional history that predate the Italian nation-state—and the foreign migrant 'others', outsiders, who have been targets of anti-immigrant policy and prejudice. Within this participation framework, the divide between the insider 'we' and the outsider 'they' seems to mirror an image of who is considered an Italian citizen and who is not. In a sense, this image adds different scales to Gumperz's (1976) notion of a 'we' versus a 'they' code, by showing how the code-shift in the immediate interaction is iconic of the 'we'/'they' in Veneto, and in Northern Italy more generally. Mocking migrants in

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Veneto dialect thus sharpens the ideological boundary between 'us' and 'them', serving as one more defense against people constructed as neither Italian, nor citizens.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

::::	syllable lengthening
-	syllable cut-off
.	stopping fall in tone
,	continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
( )	speaking softly
[ ]	transcriber's comments

NOTES

*My deepest thanks go to the many speakers in the Veneto region who agreed to be video- and audio-recorded for this project. This article was first presented as a conference paper at a double panel entitled 'Heteroglossia, performance, power, and participation', organized by Alexandra Jaffe, Michèle Koven, Cécile Vigouroux, and myself at the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco in November 2012. I wish to thank Alexandra Jaffe, Gregory Kohler, Michèle Koven, Michael Lempert, and Cécile Vigouroux for their comments and insights on previous versions of this article. I also thank an anonymous reviewer for her or his astute remarks and criticism. I am the only one responsible for any remaining mistakes and infelicities.

[1]In Italian, *barzelletta* is the singular, while *barzellette* is the plural.

[2]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk3N9MhXTvI; accessed August 24, 2014.

[3]In this article, all translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

[4]While it is beyond the scope of this article, Berlusconi's joke also revolves around his contested sexual life with young women.

[5]Although it is beyond the scope of this article to fully analyze the tacit racism here (Hill 2008), this *barzelletta* contains stereotypical remarks about migrants, especially 'Arabs'. Northern Africans are often present in Italian news about violence against Italian women.

[6]Veneto speakers model this concealment iconically in the sense that the shift from a widely intelligible code (Standard Italian) to one with a more restricted distribution (Veneto dialect) models—is iconic of—the shift from something open to something concealed.

[7]In terms of the content of the jokes, even when these short stories seem to be apparent, their laughable power is felt to be derived from their hidden, equivocal sense, but not from other external resources that are part of the surround. Whether it is lexical, phonological, or deep structure ambiguity, the channel for fully appreciating a joke is when the incongruity of a joke is finally resolved (Pepicello & Wisberg 1983).

[8]The local dialect of Bergamo, a town in the northern region of *Lombardia* 'Lombardy'.

[9]In Italian, there are at least three terms that could be glossed with the English term 'joke': *scherzo* is the general term for joke, including the sense of 'prank' or 'trick'; *barzelletta*, as mentioned earlier, is a short, funny story performed by *barzellette* tellers or ordinary speakers in order to make the audience laugh; *battuta* is a short joking and unexpected response on some conversational topic, which is very common throughout the Italian peninsula. This article focuses on *barzellette* only.

[10]The political party *Lega Nord*, also called *Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania* (Northern League for the Independence of Padania' presently is composed of fifteen subsections in the following regions (in alphabetical order): Abruzzo (*Lega Nord Abruzzo*), Emilia-Romagna (which has two

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subsections: *Lega Nord Emilia* and *Lega Nord Romagna*), Friuli Venezia Giulia (*Lega Nord Friuli Venezia Giulia*, with minor subsections), Liguria (*Lega Nord Liguria*), Lombardia (*Lega Nord Lombardia*), Marche (*Lega Nord March*), Piemonte (*Lega Nord Piemont*, in local dialect), Sardegna (*Lega Nord Sardinia*), Toscana (*Lega Nord Toscana*), Trentino Alto-Adige Sud Tirolo (which has two subsections: *Lega Nord Trentino* and *Lega Nord Sud Tirol Alto Adige*), Umbria (*Lega Nord Umbria*), Valle D'Aosta (*Lega Nord Valle D'Aosta*), and Veneto (*Liga Veneta*). (See http://www.leganord.org/ilmovimento/manifesti.asp; accessed September 2010).

[11]Having been a strong promoter for a secessionist Northern Italy (the North, the imaginary *Padania*, separated from the Center-South), today the *Lega Nord* supports an anti-globalization Federal State for Italy, an initiative that has been well received throughout Northern Italy (Giordano 2003, 2004; Spektorowski 2003; Cento Bull 2009; Woods 2009). This phenomenon is not unique to Italy, since similar political parties promoting federalism, or even a more radical separatism, exist in other European states. In opposition to policies of European integration and in particular to new waves of foreign migration into Europe, a number of conservative, nationalistic political parties have emerged throughout the European continent, such as the 'Danish People's Party' (*Dansk Folkeparti*, *DF*), the Finnish 'True Finns' (*Perussuomalaiset*), the French 'National Front' (*Front National*), the 'Swiss People's Party' (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, *SVP*), and many others.

[12]Veneto dialect is spoken by three million and 400 thousand people in Italy alone, without counting many other millions of Veneto speakers spread out around the world and who still use it as their mother tongue (Belloni 2009). Linguists usually subdivide Veneto dialect into four subgroups: *dialetto trevigiano-feltrino-bellunese* 'dialect of Treviso, Feltre, and Belluno' or *dialetto Veneto centro-settentrionale* 'dialect of the center-north of the Veneto region'; *dialetto veneziano-lagunare* 'dialect of Venice and surroundings' from the town of Chioggia to the town of Caorle or *dialetto del Veneto orientale* 'dialect of the east of the Veneto region'; *dialetto padovano-vicentino-polesano* 'dialect of Padova, Vicenza, and Polesine' or *dialetto del veneto centro-meridionale* 'dialect of the center-south of the Veneto region'; *dialetto veronese* 'dialect of Verona' or *dialetto del Veneto occidentale* 'dialect of the West of the Veneto region' (Belloni 2009:24). This article explores the dialects of the first group (Treviso) and of the third group (Padova).

[13]The Battle of Lepanto (1571) is historically remembered because the Holy League (a coalition of Catholic states) defeated the Ottoman Empire in five hours of fighting. It was a decisive battle for the Mediterranean Sea who was protected from the Ottoman invasion (Crowley 2008).

[14]See the appendix for transcription conventions. In all of the transcriptions in this article, I use bold and italics for Veneto dialect, underlined italics for bivalent forms (Woolard 1998b), and regular font for Standard Italian.

[15]The data used in this article were collected during fieldwork that I conducted in Northern Italy between 2003 and 2013. In this article, I use both pseudonyms and real names (only for speakers who agreed to have their name published).

[16]While the extensive literature on code-switching (e.g. Heller 1988; Berruto 1997; Alvarez-Càccamo 1998, 1999; Auer 1998; Cavanaugh 2006; De Fina 2006) would invite an analysis focused on the nature of the switches themselves (such as the differences between cases of code-switching and code-mixing, and so forth), this article uses this notion to disclose the moments of the switches themselves rather than their typology.

[17]http://www.piavetv.net/cronache-venete/; accessed September 2013.

[18]While the analysis of my corpus data includes thirteen of Davanzo's *barzellette* and many jokes performed by ordinary speakers and improvised joke-tellers, I opted to use one of Davanzo's *barzellette* in its entirety rather than using different excerpts of others that follow a similar pattern of increased use of Veneto dialect over the course of the joke.

[19]The Veneto dialect term *sacranon* literally means 'sacred name of God' and derives from ancient French, *sacré nom de Dieu*.

[20]It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the code-switching patterns of the storyteller.

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[21]*Extracomunitari* is a derogatory term to talk about migrants from outside Europe, as mentioned earlier.

[22]I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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