

# SPEAKERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS INVISIBLE ANGLICISMS IN ITALIAN

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**ABSTRACT** • This study contributes to the ongoing research on anglicisms, particularly focussing on their ‘invisibility’ in the recipient language, and presents the results of a survey investigating speakers’ perceptions about the use of English loan translations and semantic loans in Italian. Using age as a variable, the informants of the survey were divided into three age groups, – Millennials (30-44), Generation X (45-60) and Boomers (over 60) – in order to establish which indirect borrowings of the sample were considered acceptable or not, whether their ‘Englishness’ was detected, and which choice they would make between an Italian word and an indirect borrowing. The tested items were chosen among words and patterns recognized as English indirect borrowings in the literature, including lexical, morphosyntactic and phraseological patterns. The results of the survey show the acceptance of items such as, for example, *evidenze* (evidence), the use of coordinated prepositions *da e per* (to and from), the multiple interrogative *chi è chi e chi fa cosa* (who’s who and who does what), irrespective of age. In addition, the verb *applicare* (modelled on English *to apply*), frequently used in administrative discourse, is widely perceived as alien to standard Italian. However, the data also confirm that younger speakers are more open to the use of loan translations and semantic loans than older speakers, and are less aware of the influence of English, supporting the trend towards the gradual assimilation of indirect borrowings.

**KEYWORDS** • Italian; indirect borrowings; loan translations; semantic loans.

## 1. The ‘invisibility’ of English borrowings in Italian

In the Italian language, phenomena of lexical innovation are systematically scrutinized by Italian lexicologists and lexicographers (Adamo and Della Valle, 2018, 2019) and often discussed by members of the Italian Academy (Accademia della Crusca), particularly in terms of origin, acceptability and use. While most instances of neological creations are the outcome of endogenous processes, a significant number of new items are imports from exogenous sources, primarily English.<sup>1</sup> As far as form is concerned, direct anglicisms remain ‘recognizably English’ to speakers of the recipient language, while indirect borrowings, i.e. loan translations (also called calques)

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<sup>1</sup> In the collection of neologisms taken from newspapers in the years 2008-2018 and published by Adamo and Della Valle (2018), 20.11% out of 3,505 new words were English borrowings, while 5.82% were calques, mainly from English. The input of anglicisms was twice as high as the number recorded in the previous decade.

and semantic loans may go unnoticed, as they reproduce the source model with domestic elements. This is achieved by either translating it or attaching the new model meaning to an already existing Italian word. As a consequence, their ‘foreignness’ becomes invisible, perhaps even irrelevant, to non-expert speakers. In fact, their Italian ‘domestic disguise’ may raise doubts about their actual provenance – either exogenous or endogenous – prompting linguistic debate among scholars. It is also worth noting that while calques and semantic loans fall under the category of indirect borrowings, they differ in terms of ‘invisibility’. A calque introduces a new lexical item in the inventory of the recipient language, whereas a semantic loan adds a new meaning to an already existing domestic word. This feature makes the phenomenon of semantic loans the least noticeable and most deceptive among all types of borrowings (Pulcini, 2023).

Previous studies have addressed the issue of ‘visibility’ (Pulcini and Fiasco, 2023), adding to the high degree of ‘camouflage’ of indirect borrowings the formal similarity of the source words and their Italian replicas, when they share a Latin base (Bombi, 2020; see also Rodriguez Gonzalez and Knosp, 2019). A useful concept may be that of ‘overt calques’, whereby domestic lexical units coexist in a language with a loanword expressing the same semantic content, such as, for example, *tempo pieno* and *full time* in Italian, which is the linguistic evidence that the English word was the model that motivated the creation of the loan translation (Pulcini and Fiasco, 2023).

Research in translation (Cardinaletti and Garzone, 2005) may uncover instances of exogenous calques, whose origin is in most cases the English language. Tosi (2006) quotes the creation of awkward administrative terms in EU documents that are ‘visually’ modelled on English, such as *paesi terzi* (third countries) at the expense of semantic precision (countries outside the EU). On the other hand, professional translators are generally quite conservative in their lexical choices, as shown by Ondelli and Viale (2010) in a corpus-based study of translated journalistic texts compared to articles originally written in Italian. However, the influence of foreign languages is more visible in texts produced by non-professional translators or in articles written directly in Italian by journalist operating in contact with multilingual sources of information and subject to ‘passive familiarity’ with international expressions (often modelled on English or even falling in the trap of false friends) (Grasso, 2007).

The influence of English extends beyond the lexical level to larger morphosyntactic patterns and phrasal units. Though this phenomenon is not highly productive as a phenomenon, it has been described by several Italian scholars (Berruto, 2017; Carlucci, 2017; Dardano 2020; Pulcini 2020). In his characterization of what he calls neo-standard Italian, Berruto (2017) highlights some new morphosyntactic patterns, among which the use of two coordinated prepositions referring to the same element (‘da e per l’aeroporto’ / ‘from and to the airport’), the use of the ordinal superlative (e.g. ‘the second most important’ is rendered as ‘il secondo più importante’ instead of ‘il secondo per importanza’), and new multiple interrogatives (e.g. ‘Chi fa cosa?’ / ‘Who does what?’). The notion of ‘invisibility’ resurfaces in Berruto’s observation: “The origin of both double interrogative and ordinal superlative has presumably to do with ‘invisible translations’ from English” (Berruto, 2017: 49). These patterns have been tested in the survey presented in this paper.

## 2. The present study: Age as a variable

The loss of formal salience of English-based calques and semantic loans over time, due to the substitution of the foreign element (English) with a domestic one (Italian), is unquestionable. If we consider borrowings in the political domain in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Italian *comitato* (1790, from French *comité* and English *committee*) and *assenteismo* (1894) (from English *absenteeism*) we can say that Italian native speakers would unhesitatingly recognize these as Italian words, and their remote origin, now invisible, can only be established on historical grounds. By

the same token, we may envisage that the phenomenon of assimilation may well take place in present-day calques and semantic loans, which will gradually lose salience in terms of 'Englishness' in the forthcoming decades.

The present study seeks to investigate this trend by using age as a variable to assess speakers' perceptions across different generations. In sociolinguistics, age has long been an important factor for the observation of language development. Whether the speech of an individual changes throughout their life (a phenomenon known as 'age-grading') or changes are observed at the community level ('generational change') (Evans Wagner, 2012), younger speakers are known to be more innovative in language use, while older speakers are generally more conservative (Eckert, 1998). Accordingly, we hypothesised that different generations of speakers may regard English-induced calques or semantic loans more or less favourably, show varying levels of awareness of the influence of English and/or express preferences towards expressions modelled on English in language use (Bellone and Pulcini, 2024).

### **2.1 Research design and aims**

This mixed-methods study aims to investigate the participants' perception of the use of English loan translations and semantic loans in Italian through the administration of an online questionnaire, which contained a selection of lexical and syntactic patterns, reportedly modelled on English. Using age as the main independent variable, the survey aimed to determine whether different generations have divergent perceptions of the origin of words, of the acceptability of neological creations and overall attitudes – favourable or unfavourable – towards English borrowings in general. More specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which items of the sample are considered acceptable or not acceptable across the three age groups?

RQ2: Which items of the sample are differently perceived by the informants of the different age groups?

### **2.2 Instrument, procedure and data analysis**

The study applied a mixed-methods research approach (Creswell, 2014; Mackey and Gass, 2016) to gain insights into the participants' perceptions and usage of indirect borrowings, or 'invisible anglicisms' in Italian. This approach, which integrates quantitative and qualitative methods, allows for a more nuanced exploration of the attitudes towards anglicisms across the generations<sup>2</sup> considered for this investigation: Millennials, Generation X and Baby Boomers (henceforth GenX and Boomers).<sup>3</sup> Drawing from recent collections of neologisms in Italian

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of generation refers to a cohort of people born within a defined time span, usually lasting approximately 20 years each: the Baby Boomer Generation, often abbreviated as Boomers, born in the post-Second World War period, approximately between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s; Generation X, or Gen X, born between the mid-1960s and late 1970s; the Millennial Generation, commonly referred to as Millennials, born between the early 1980s and the mid-90s (ISTAT Report, 2016; Sandeen, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Although the term Baby Boomer, shortened as boomer, is sometimes used sarcastically, both in English and Italian, to refer to older people who do not approve of younger generations' progressive attitudes and ideas, in this study it is solely used with reference to a specific age group. <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/parole-nuove/boomer/18488>; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/boomer>.

(Adamo and Della Valle 2018, 2019) and relevant studies in this area (Bombi, 2020; Pulcini, 2023), a list of Italian sentences containing selected lexical and morpho-syntactic patterns, reportedly modelled on English, was designed and submitted to three groups of Italian informants for evaluation.

The instrument used to collect data is an online questionnaire written in Italian (see Appendix), created using the Google Forms. The online survey is based on a ‘convenience’ sample of informants, selected for the purpose of collecting exploratory data to identify recurring trends across three age groups, and to shed light on their attitudes and preferences as regards the acceptability of the tested items (Sue and Ritter, 2007; Cohen et al., 2018). Data on gender and education were also collected, though not used as variables in this pilot study.

The questionnaire contained thirteen close-ended questions asking informants to express their opinions on the use of indirect borrowings presented in short but complete sentences, in order to provide a clear usage context (see section 3 below). The questions were specifically focussed on the following features:

Acceptability (Questions 1-6). The informants were asked to evaluate the acceptability in Italian of the following items: *evidenze* (evidence), *buone pratiche* (good practices), *video virale* (viral video), the verb *applicare* (apply for), the coordinated prepositions *da e per* (to and from), and the double interrogative *chi è chi e chi fa cosa* (who’s who and who does what).

Awareness of English influence (Questions 8 and 9). The tested items were *mascolinità tossica* (toxic masculinity), *serie tv* (tv series) and *Dammi il cinque* (Give me five!).

Best-sounding option (Questions 7, 10, 11, 12). These questions asked informants to choose between synonyms, one of which was an Italian equivalent (a translation equivalent not modelled on English) and the other an Italian equivalent (a translation equivalent modelled on English): *annullare/cancellare* (cancel), *sostenere/supportare* (to support), *chiamare al/sul cellulare* (call on the phone), the ordinal superlative *la seconda montagna più alta* (the second highest mountain) and alternative options.

Define meaning (Question 13). This question asked participants to define the word *sfidante* in order to assess whether speakers recognized the adjectival meaning (challenging). At the end of each close-ended question, the respondents were encouraged to reflect on their answers and leave some open comments.

The data gathered from the questionnaire were first analyzed separately and later compared and triangulated with free comments to gain a better understanding of the results. The responses from the close-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive percentages to identify recurring trends. The open comments left by the participants enriched the dataset and were analyzed qualitatively through the use of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This method was useful to identify recurrent themes by coding the responses, grouping and reporting patterns and interpreting the relationships and meanings within the data.

### 2.3 The participants

The questionnaire was completed by 184 native speakers of Italian, divided into three age groups: Millennials (30-44), Gen X (45-60) and Baby Boomers (over 60), with the youngest being 27 years old and the oldest 83. Of these informants, 37% were Millennials, 30% GenX and 33% Boomers. The majority were female (71%). The level of education among respondents was quite high: 72% of all the informants had a university degree (BA, MA or PhD). As regards English competence, the self-reported level was generally high: 98% of Millennials evaluated their English level as acceptable, good or very good (none had ever studied English); among GenX and Boomers, 81% in each group rated their competence at one of these levels (with a small percentage

of Italians who had never studied English, i.e. 5% of GenX and 11% of Boomers). This question was formulated using a five-point Likert scale (Brown, 2011; Cohen et al., 2018) allowing the participants to select an answer from the following set of options: *never studied* (1), *poor* (2), *acceptable* (3), *good* (4), *very good* (5).

### 3. Findings and discussion

In the following sections, the results of the survey have been grouped according to the main focus of the questions posed in the questionnaire. As previously stated in 2.2, some questions addressed the degree of acceptability of lexical items and patterns reportedly derived from English (3.1), with the exception of the verb *applicare*, which – to the best of our knowledge – has never been discussed in academic literature. In section 3.2, questions specifically explore the speakers' awareness of the influence of English in the given sentences. Questions in Section 3.3 ask informants to choose between a translation equivalent not modelled on English and a translation equivalent modelled on English, and in 3.4 informants are asked to identify the meaning of a newly imported semantic loan. Each question is reported in Italian and is accompanied by the English translation. The questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1 (in the original Italian version).

#### 3.1 Acceptability

Question 1. The word *evidenza* is a semantic loan, discussed by the *Accademia della Crusca* and also recorded in the Devoto-Oli dictionary (2024). Used in Italian as a singular word with the uncountable meaning of 'visibility, relevance', *evidenza* has taken on the English meaning of 'proof' and is now used as a count noun, as in the example sentence: "Numerose evidenze sperimentali dimostrano l'efficacia clinica della levodropropizina nel ridurre la tosse" (Eng. tr. "Some experimental evidence demonstrates the clinical efficacy of levodropropyzine in reducing cough"). More than 50% of the participants across the three groups considered the expression *evidenze sperimentali* an acceptable scientific term in Italian. When asked whether they would use it, about a third of the older informants (Boomers) answered negatively (31%) and would rather prefer the Italian equivalent "prova". The percentage of dispreference declined in the younger generations, i.e. 20% in GenX and only 6% in Millennials.

Question 2. A similar trend can be observed in the phrase *buone pratiche*, a loan translation of English administrative term *best practice(s)*, recorded by the Devoto-Oli dictionary (2024), and presented in the example "Questo prestigioso risultato è certamente frutto delle buone pratiche amministrative messe in atto in questi anni nella nostra regione." [Engl. tr. "This prestigious result is certainly the result of good administrative practice implemented in our region"]. About half of the informants across all age groups considered this expression acceptable, though characteristic of bureaucratic language and unnatural in Italian. Many respondents noted in their comments that they encountered the phrase in school and other professional contexts. Among the three given options ("acceptable expression in Italian. I would use it" / "bureaucratic expression not so natural in Italian. I would use it anyway" / "bureaucratic expression that comes from English and sounds bad. I'd rather use 'esperienze positive'"), the last negative option was chosen by 22% of Boomers, 25% of GenX and only 12% of Millennials. This suggests that unfavourable attitudes toward English-sounding expressions are less prevalent among younger generations, as already noted in the previous example.

Question 3. Similarly, the phrase *video virale*, a calque of *viral video*, presented in the sentence "Autobus a tutta velocità diventa video virale su web" [Engl. tr. "Bus at full speed becomes a viral video on the web"] was considered acceptable by a large majority of the

informants. Of the three given options (“acceptable expression in Italian. I would use it” / “a translation from English, acceptable in Italian. I would use it” / “I would not use it. I would prefer ‘un video di rapida diffusione’”) [lit. a fast spreading video], the third unfavourable option was chosen by a larger proportion of Boomers (28%), 20% of GenX and only 8% of Millennials. Yet, some observations are warranted. First, the word *video* is an Italian word (from the root of Latin *vidēre, to see*) which refers, both as a noun and an adjective, to the transmission of images. In Italian, it is also very productive as a combining form (video-). According to the Devoto-Oli dictionary (2024), the word *video* is a clipping of English *videoclip* in the field of music. Thus, the word *video* in isolation does not sound alien to Italian speakers. By contrast, the adjective *virale* is normally used in Italian with reference to infectious diseases, which makes the collocation with *video* somewhat unusual. It is worth noting that this impression was shared by the two older generations – GenX and Boomers – while Millennials appeared to be much more accustomed to this expression. This can be explained by the fact that they are a generation of digital natives and regular internet users.

Question 4. The verb *applicare*, a semantic loan from English *apply for* (submit an application) is commonly used in business and administrative jargon. However, it has not been recorded in any dictionary, nor has it been discussed by the Italian Academy. It was presented in the survey in the following sentence: “Buongiorno a tutti, Mi trovo per la prima volta ad applicare per un concorso EPSO per la posizione AST-SC1 ed ho dei dubbi riguardo alle qualifiche richieste nel bando.” [“Good morning, everyone. It is the first time I have applied for an EPSO selection for an AST-SC1 position and I have doubts about the qualifications requested by the call.”]. The data revealed a general hostility toward the use of this verb, particularly among Boomers (84%) but equally remarkable in GenX (78%) and Millennials (76%). The comments made by several respondents included colourful negative evaluations like “horrific, irritating, a bad translation, incomprehensible”, and only a minority of speakers said that they had heard it in the professional context, used it or found it acceptable.

Question 5. The use of coordinated prepositions such as *da e per*, which translate the English patterns *to and from*, was evaluated using the following sentence: “Dopo un periodo di inattività completa, il porto riaprì al traffico commerciale, soprattutto da e per il Marocco.” [“After a period of complete inactivity, the harbour opened again to commercial traffic, especially to and from Morocco.”]. Note that the order of the elements is reversed in the two languages. The informants express a general consensus regarding its acceptability: Boomers (65%), GenX (68%) and Millennials (68%). Negative responses were also relatively evenly distributed across generations. The option “It is from English. I would not use it” was chosen by 16% of Boomers, 20% of GenX and 14% of Millennials, whereas the option “I would not use it” was selected by 19% of Boomers, 12% of GenX and 18% of Millennials. The explicit mention of English influence in one of the options did not seem to increase negative perception, although the significance of this trend cannot be further confirmed.

Question 6. The pattern presented in this question is the double interrogative, featured in the sentence “Chiedo in continuazione a chi lavora con me ed ai miei amici di aiutarmi a collegare i nomi alle facce, a capire chi è chi e chi fa cosa.” [“I keep asking who works with me and my friends to help me link names to faces, to understand who is who and who does what.”]. The three available options were: “They are forms totally acceptable in Italian that I would use” / “They are new forms in Italian that I would use anyway” / “In my opinion, there are people who use them but they are a bit strange and I would not use them”. The first and most positive option (“totally acceptable”) was chosen by 36% of Boomers, 49% of GenX and 62% of Millennials; the second option (“new forms”), which stresses the novelty of these patterns, by 42% of Boomers, 30% of GenX and 30% of Millennials; the third option, which highlights the oddity of these patterns and

a negative attitude towards its use, by 22% of Boomers, 21% of Gen X and 8% of Millennials. Once again, the data reveal that Millennials are more open to accepting linguistic innovations compared to older generations. It is worth pointing out that the response options in this question were deliberately phrased in an explicit manner to elicit clear, unambiguous attitudinal stance from the informants.

Figure 1 summarises the data of the survey that show the proportion of the opinions in favour of the lexical and phrasal patterns presented to native speakers of Italian. Since the informants were aware that the survey was about the influence of English, and some given options mentioned this factor explicitly, comments on the excessive intrusion of this language were occasionally made, but the presence of loan translations and semantic loans generally seemed to be taken as a fact, some criticism was made but no hostility was expressed. The proportion of acceptance was generally higher in Millennials than in GenX and Boomers. A clear distribution can be seen in the data for *evidenza* and *chi è chi e chi fa cosa*. Apart from a greater openness to borrowings from the youngest generation of Italian speakers, the recorded perceptions appeared to be quite homogeneous, except for the phrase *video virale*, which showed a remarkably higher level of acceptance in Millennials' opinions compared to the older generations'.

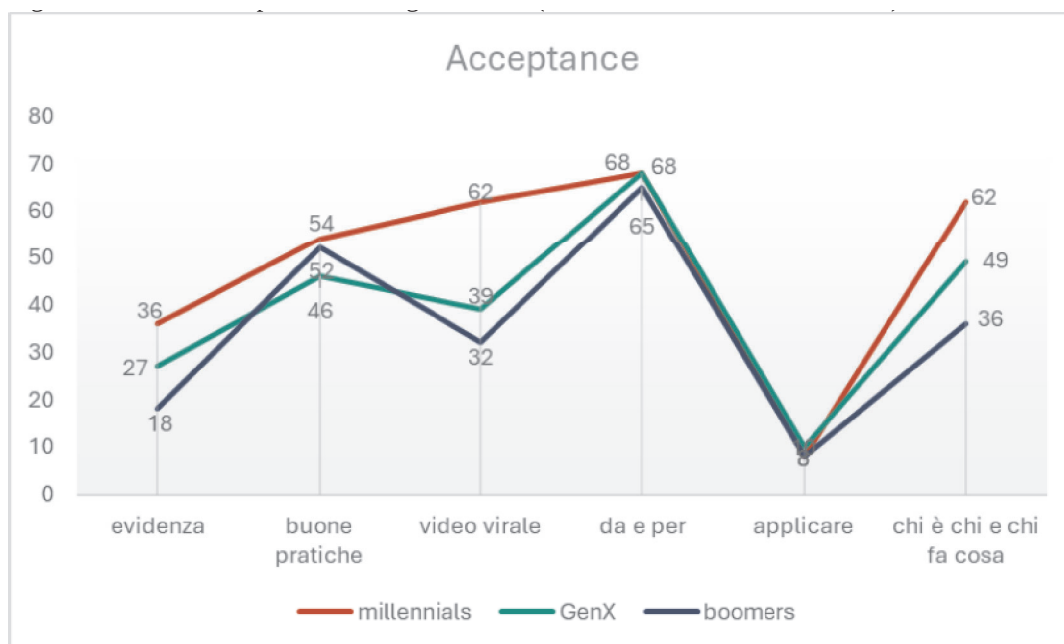


Figure 1. Trend in acceptance across generations (Millennials, GenX and Boomers).

### 3.2 Awareness of English influence

Whereas in the previous set of questions some options referred to the possible influence of the English language on the lexical and phrasal patterns under investigation, two questions specifically addressed this factor. In the following sentence (question 8) informants were asked to detect any indirect borrowings: “Concordo con chi dice che oggi esiste ancora nelle serie tv italiane un tipo di mascolinità tossica” [Engl. tr. “I agree with those who say that today tv series still contain a form of toxic masculinity.”] The given options were: “None” / “only one” / “more than one”. In the comments, they had to list the items that they identified. Surprisingly, the large majority of all age groups, i.e., 63% of Boomers, 62% of GenX and 56% of Millennials, declared that they had

spotted no English-sounding expressions. A considerable portion of respondents identified at least one, namely 32% of Boomers, 25% of GenX and 40% of Millennials. Very few informants spotted more than one. The items most frequently mentioned were, first, *mascolinità tossica*, followed by *serie tv*.

In fact, *serie tv* is indeed recognized by scholars as a loan translation from English *series*, and it is also recorded by the Devoto Oli dictionary (2024). By contrast, purely on the basis of ‘native speaker’ intuition, *toxic masculinity* may well appear to be an Italian expression. However, the new meaning of the adjective *tossico* (toxic) has a role in attracting the attention, especially of younger speakers. As previously noted for the adjective *virale* (viral), the core meaning of *tossico* (toxic) refers to medical and scientific contexts, but in its figurative meaning it means ‘risky, dangerous, harmful’ when referring to a relationship. This latter meaning is likely to be encountered in youth speech, in debates and discourses about gender stereotypes of macho culture, which nowadays are fought against in the name of the free expression of one’s own individuality (Cicillini and Pulcini, 2024). Thus, the phrase *mascolinità tossica* – the belief that men should be tough, unemotional, aggressive, dominant, or homophobic – is associated with a cultural trend that is strongly opposed in particular by Anglo-American artists and celebrities. This may explain why a consistent share of the informants (especially 40% of the Millennials) indicate it as an English borrowing. We may infer that this perception may be motivated by cultural reasons rather than linguistic features.

A similar question was posed with reference to the exclamation *Give me Five!*, presented in the text of an Italian television advert (question 9): “Sostenere la ricerca è facile, come dare un cinque!” [“To support research is easy, like giving a high five”]. This expression originated in American jazz culture, first, and later spreading through sport (baseball) and was imported in Italy through sport, television and music. The accompanying gesture – extending five fingers for a celebratory slap – expresses friendship and empathy, and it can be added, is not a typical Italian gesture. The majority of the respondents recognized the Anglo-American origin of this phrase: 64% of Boomers, 66% of GenX and 52% of Millennials. However, it is equally surprising that 36% of Boomers and 34% of GenX informants and 46% of Millennials selected the option “No, I can’t see any expression derived from English”. We may thus hypothesise that if this is the trend, the expression “Dammi un cinque” is quickly losing its ‘Englishness’ and is being assimilated into the Italian language and culture.

### 3.3 Best-sounding option

This group of questions asked the informants to express their preference between an Italian verb and a syntactic calque from English. In question 7, respondents had to choose between the pattern “chiamare al cellulare” (lit. call ‘to’ the phone) and “chiamare sul cellulare” (call on the phone), the first being the right form in standard Italian.<sup>4</sup> The question was presented to the informants as a gap-filling choice: “A dare l’allarme è stata la ragazza, che ha \_\_\_\_\_ un amico comune, il quale a sua volta ha avvertito il 118.” [“To raise the alarm was a girl, who \_\_\_\_\_ a common friend, who in turn notified the emergency number”]. The results show strong consensus among all age groups in favour of the Italian-sounding option (*chiamare al cellulare*): 79% of

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<sup>4</sup> This pattern is discussed by the Academy in a dedicated rubric. <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/chiamare-sul-o-al-cellulare/206>.

Boomers, 80% of GenX and 80% of Millennials – and an unfavourable one towards the English-sounding option: 21% of Boomers, 20% of GenX and 20% of Millennials.

In question 10, the choice was between the Italian verb *annullare* and the semantic loan *cancellare*, presented in the following pairs of sentences: A) Mi hanno cancellato il volo e nemmeno me lo hanno comunicato. B) Mi hanno annullato il volo e nemmeno me lo hanno comunicato. “[‘They cancelled my flight and did not even notify me’.] The data show that the three given options (“annullato” / “cancellato” / “both are acceptable”) are equally distributed in the answers of Boomers and GenX. The first neutral choice (annullato) was selected by 27% of Boomers and 32% of GenX; the English-sounding option (cancellare) was chosen by 36% of both Boomers and GenX; both options were selected by 37% of Boomers and 32% of GenX. By contrast, the choice made by Millennials was radically different: the preference for the English loan *cancellare* was indicated by 68%, the Italian option *annullare* only by 6%, both options by 26%. This means that the verb *cancellare* in combination with the noun *volo* (flight) is by far the best-sounding option for the younger generation of Italian speakers.

In question 11, the choice was between the Italian verb *sostenere* and the semantic loan *supportare*, presented in the following pair of sentences: A) Desidero ringraziare tutti coloro che mi hanno supportato in questi anni con i loro consigli e contributi attivi. B) Desidero ringraziare tutti coloro che mi hanno sostenuto in questi anni con i loro consigli e contributi attivi.” [‘I wish to thank all those who supported me in these years with their advice and active contributions.’]

The Italian verb *sostenere* would be the best choice, not only for the technical meaning of providing physical support, but also for the figurative extension of ‘providing help’, ‘encouraging’, ‘endorsing’. The verb *supportare*, which also exists in Italian, is more similar to English *support* and is in fact recorded by the Devoto Oli dictionary (2024) as an English semantic calque. The verb *supportare* is supposed to be formally and semantically linked to the anglicism *supporter* (of a sports team). Looking at the data, the majority of Boomers seem to prefer the more Italian-sounding verb *sostenere* (55%) or both options (32%), but much less the English-sounding *supportare* (13%). GenX and Millennials show a similar trend: for GenX, the Italian choice was made by 34%, the English-sounding one by 21% and both by 45%; for Millennials, the Italian option was chosen by 20%, the English-sounding option by 28%, and both options by 52%. This trend confirms that younger speakers have a higher preference for the English-sounding *supportare*, although it is not exclusive, since the indication of both options was also quite high. It is important to say, however, that both verbs in Italian derive from Latin and are equally acceptable. We may hypothesize that older speakers perceived the formal resemblance between *supportare* and *support* and preferred to opt for the more conservative choice *sostenere*.

The last question involving a choice (question 12) regards the use of the ordinal superlative as expressed in “la seconda montagna più alta del mondo” [the second highest mountain in the world], a morphosyntactic pattern reportedly from English already discussed in the literature (Berruto 2017; Pulcini, 2024). The three options to choose from were: A) Il K2 è la seconda montagna più alta del mondo B) Il K2 è la seconda montagna del mondo in altezza C) Il K2 è la seconda tra le montagne più alte del mondo” [A) K2 is the second highest mountain in the world B) K2 is the second mountain in the world in height C) K2 is the second among the highest mountains in the world]. Option A contained the pattern featuring an ordinal superlative, a structure that is generally considered alien to Italian and modelled on English. None of the informants seemed to note any syntactic peculiarities in the given options, and their choices were guided by a general perception of linguistic acceptability. Option A, containing the ordinal superlative, was actually chosen by 38% of Boomers, 29% of GenX and 22% of Millennials. Option B (without the ordinal superlative) was the one chosen by the majority of Millennials (58%), followed by GenX (39%) and Boomers (27%).

### 3.4 Define meaning

The last question (Question 13) asked informants to indicate the meaning of the word *sfidante*.<sup>5</sup> As a noun, this term normally denotes the opponent in a competition or a match. As an adjective, it means ‘demanding and intriguing’ with reference to a project or an objective (or a choice). It should be noted that the Devoto-Oli dictionary (2024) records the adjectival use without any reference to English. Instead, the Italian Academy discusses its growing use in business discourse and also mentions the perceptible connection to the English word *challenging*. The three options of the survey were: “The challengers in a sports or political competition” / “demanding and intriguing” / “both definitions are correct”. The favourable opinion toward both meanings was widely accepted by the younger generation: 34% chose the first option (in sport), 24% opted for the adjectival use (demanding and intriguing), 40% selected both. Conversely, the first option (in sport) was chosen by a larger proportion of Boomers (74%) and 59% of GenX; the option ‘both’ was chosen by 21% of Boomers and 28% of GenX and the new English-sounding meaning (challenging) was selected only by 5% of Boomers and 13% of GenX. Given that this newer use of *sfidante* reflects the competitive mindset of the business world, a less favourable perception among older generations is to be expected.

Figure 2 shows the data collected for some of the questions implying the choice between an Italian word and a semantic loan or a more English-sounding option. Percentages indicate that there is convergence across the three generations in the limited acceptance of the English calque *chiamare sul cellulare*. As for *cancellare*, this verb was chosen by just over a third of Boomers and GenX, whereas Millennials displayed a significant preference for this verb when used with the word “volo” (*cancellare un volo*). For *supportare* and *sfidante*, the data indicated a divergence across age groups: older generations had a more conservative attitude, while Millennials exhibited a more open stance.

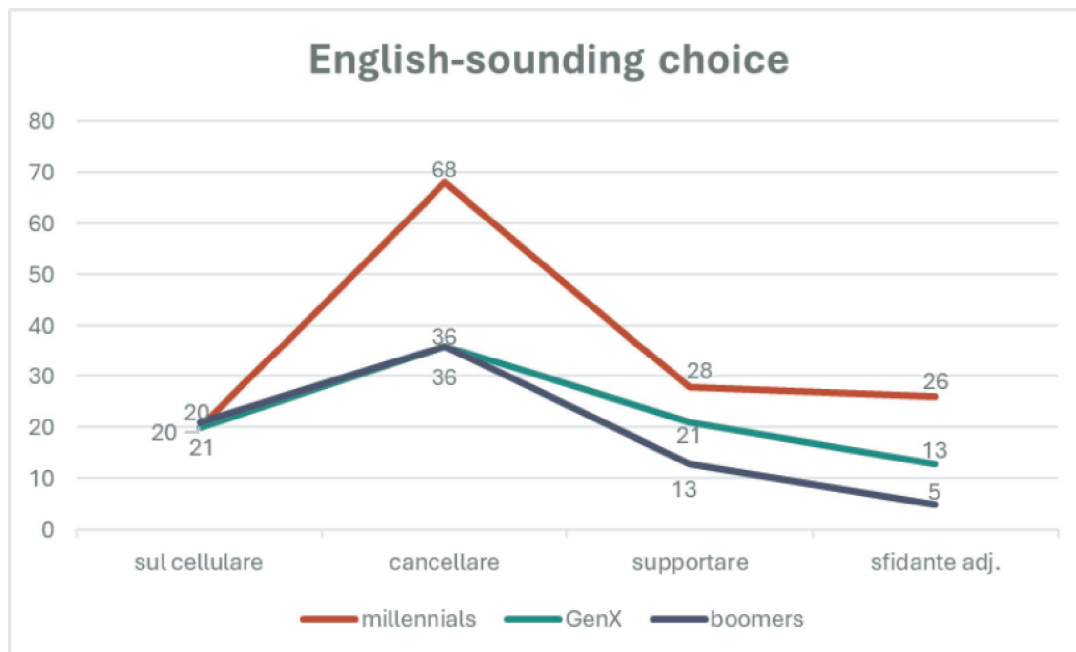


Figure 2. English-sounding choices across generations

<sup>5</sup> <https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/una-questione-sfidante/843>.

#### 4. Final remarks

The sociolinguistic variable of age is an interesting dimension in linguistic research, especially in the area of lexical innovation. The underlying assumption – confirmed by studies on youth speech – is that younger speakers are more inclined to use neologisms than older speakers and often they are themselves the creators and the spreaders of new expressions. In this small-scale study on the ‘invisibility’ of English-induced indirect borrowings, age proved to be a useful factor in testing the degree of acceptability of certain lexical and morpho-syntactic patterns that were reported as English indirect borrowings in previous studies. It is worth noting that no other factors such as social class, gender or education were taken into consideration, as age was chosen as the only independent variable. However, the fact that the majority of the informants had a relatively high level of education and proficiency in English (ranging from acceptable to very good) cannot be disregarded. In fact, this enabled them to comment on the influence of English on certain expressions and to identify the specific fields in which some of the items under investigation are generally used, for example, the scientific domain for *evidenza* (evidence) and the field of business and administration for *buone pratiche* (best practices). Judging from the participants’ comments, English-sounding expressions were rarely criticized, with the exception of the verb *applicare* (to apply) which received negative reactions regarding its acceptability across all age groups. Another pattern rejected by the majority was *chiamare sul telefono* (call on the phone), which sounds incorrect and awkward to native Italian speakers. The use of the ordinal superlative (*la seconda montagna più alta*/ the second highest mountain) passed completely unnoticed as an English-sounding pattern. As a general trend, the data confirm that the proportion of acceptance of the lexical items tested in the survey was generally higher among Millennials than in GenX and boomers. Likewise, unfavourable attitudes toward the English-sounding expressions declined in younger generations.

Some age-related differences are worth highlighting. The phrase *video virale* (viral video) was considered acceptable by a large majority of Millennials, more so than by the older age groups. The reason was attributed to the greater use of web genres and social media by younger generations. Another example was the verb *cancellare* (cancel) in the context of air travel, which appeared to be the most popular choice for Millennials. We may predict that this pattern will become increasingly assimilated into Italian and eventually replace alternative options entirely.

The influence of English as the language of international communication, music, entertainment and social life is bound to remain unchallenged for many decades, and Anglo-American culture will continue to shape the perception of ‘Englishness’ even in expressions that are linguistically neutral or the result of endogenous creations – as may be the case of *mascolinità tossica* (toxic masculinity). Conversely, other patterns may become completely assimilated in the cultural fabric of Italian society and will become more and more invisible. One such example is the exclamation *Dammi un cinque* (Give me five!), which has become so widespread and popular in Italian informal communication, especially among teenagers and young adults, that it may gradually lose its cultural connotation. This is supported by the fact that almost half of Millennials do not perceive any ‘Englishness’ in the phrase, a trend that clearly points in this direction.

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## APPENDIX

1) Nella frase “Numerose evidenze sperimentali dimostrano l’efficacia clinica della levodropropizina nel ridurre la tosse “come giudichi l’espressione **evidenze sperimentali**?”

È un’espressione del tutto accettabile nella lingua italiana. La userei.

È un’espressione tipica del linguaggio scientifico ma accettabile. La userei.

Non la userei. Preferirei utilizzare il termine “prove” al posto di “evidenze”.

2) Nella frase “Questo prestigioso risultato è certamente frutto delle **buone pratiche** amministrative messe in atto in questi anni nella nostra regione.” come giudichi l’espressione buone pratiche?

È un’espressione burocratica che arriva dall’inglese e che suona malissimo in italiano. Userei “esperienze positive”.

È un’espressione burocratica non proprio naturale in italiano. Comunque la userei.

È un’espressione del tutto accettabile nella lingua italiana. La userei.

3) Nella frase “Autobus a tutta velocità diventa video virale su web” come giudichi l’espressione **video virale**?

È un’espressione del tutto accettabile nella lingua italiana. La userei.

È una traduzione dall’inglese, accettabile in italiano. La userei.

Non la userei. Preferirei “un video di rapida diffusione”.

4) Nella frase “Buongiorno a tutti, Mi trovo per la prima volta ad **applicare** per un concorso EPSO per la posizione AST-SC1 ed ho dei dubbi riguardo alle qualifiche richieste nel bando.” come giudichi l’espressione applicare per?

È una forma del tutto accettabile nella lingua italiana. La userei.

È una traduzione dall’inglese ma accettabile. La userei.

Non la userei. Preferirei utilizzare la forma “fare domanda per” al posto di “applicare per”.

5) Nella frase “Dopo un periodo di inattività completa, il porto riaprì al traffico commerciale, soprattutto **da e per** il Marocco.” come giudichi l’espressione da e per?

È una forma del tutto accettabile nella lingua italiana. La userei.

È una traduzione dall’inglese accettabile in italiano. La userei.

Non la userei. Sarebbe meglio utilizzare “le rotte di andata e ritorno per il Marocco” al posto di “da e per il Marocco”.

6) Nella frase “Chiedo in continuazione a chi lavora con me ed ai miei amici di aiutarmi a collegare i nomi alle facce, a capire **chi è chi e chi fa cosa**.” come giudichi le forme chi è chi e chi fa cosa?

Secondo me, c’è chi le usa ma sono un po’ strane e non le userei. 4 - 8%

Sono forme del tutto accettabili nella lingua italiana e che io userei. 31 - 62%

Sono forme nuove nell’italiano di oggi che io comunque userei. 15 - 30%

7) Nella frase seguente, quale espressione ti sembra migliore o utilizzeresti tu stesso?

“A dare l’allarme è stata la ragazza, che ha \_\_\_\_\_ un amico comune, il quale a sua volta ha avvertito il 118.”

chiamato **al** cellulare

chiamato **sul** cellulare

- 
- 8) Nelle frasi seguenti ritieni che ci siano espressioni derivate dalla lingua inglese?  
"Concordo con chi dice che oggi esiste ancora nelle serie tv italiane un tipo di mascolinità tossica"  
No, non noto alcuna espressione derivante dall'inglese  
Sì, almeno una  
Sì, più di una
- 9) Nelle frasi seguenti ritieni che ci siano espressioni derivate dalla lingua inglese?  
"Sostenere la ricerca è facile, come dare un cinque!"  
No, non rilevo alcuna espressione derivante dall'inglese  
Sì, ne noto una  
Sì, più di una
- 10) Quale delle due frasi useresti con maggiore naturalezza?  
A) Mi hanno **cancellato** il volo e nemmeno me lo hanno comunicato.  
B) Mi hanno **annullato** il volo e nemmeno me lo hanno comunicato.
- 11) Quale delle due frasi useresti con maggiore naturalezza?  
A) Desidero ringraziare tutti coloro che mi hanno supportato in questi anni con i loro consigli e contributi attivi.  
B) Desidero ringraziare tutti coloro che mi hanno sostenuto in questi anni con i loro consigli e contributi attivi."
- 12) Quale tra queste tre frasi è meno naturale delle altre nell'italiano che tu parli?  
A) Il K2 è la seconda montagna più alta del mondo  
B) Il K2 è la seconda montagna del mondo in altezza  
C) Il K2 è la seconda tra le montagne più alte del mondo"
- 13) Secondo te, la parola **sfidante** in italiano significa:  
Che o chi sfida in una competizione sportiva o politica  
Impegnativo e stimolante  
Entrambe le definizioni fornite sono giuste