INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN DESIGNING EMPIRICAL RESEARCH. A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPLORING ADOLESCENT AND YOUTH LANGUAGE IN THE POST-PANDEMICA CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the perspective of intersectionality, understood in this contribution as both an epistemological and methodological framework – and therefore as an indispensable critical tool for investigating contemporary complexity – the authors seek to make explicit and further explore the key stages and shared reflections that emerged during the construction of an empirical research design aimed at investigating the language of adolescents and young people in the post-pandemic context; a language increasingly deprived of meaning (Romeo, 2026). Underlying this collaborative work, as both warp and weft, are, on the one hand, the recognition of a widespread form of existential "mortification," particularly with regard to life planning and future aspirations (Romeo, 2024; 2025a), and, on the other hand, the observation of a depressive drift already documented and acknowledged by the scientific community within these two age groups. More specifically, at the intersection of educational sciences and linguistics, the contribution describes the design of a traditional data collection and analysis instrument – a questionnaire – developed on the assumption that the language of research participants was progressively becoming impoverished. This impoverishment was hypothesized to affect both the more structural dimensions of linguistic competence (lexical availability, semantic breadth and depth, informational density, textual coherence and cohesion) and the possibility of using language as an event (Petrosino, 1999), capable of fostering genuine affective-relational emancipation, life-project development, and, consequently, processes of growth and potential identity transformation.

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality; educational linguistics; lalangue as an unprecedented symptom; youth vulnerability; digital ecosystems Intersezionalità; linguistica-educativa; lalangue come sintomo inedito; fragilità giovanile; ecosistemi digitali.

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1. Youth "mortification" and pedagogical interpretive frameworks

As previously stated, the focus of this contribution is the lexical impoverishment observed among adolescents and young people, a topic whose scientific objectivity remains uncertain and whose prominence tends to be cyclical. Linguists and sociologists caution against simplistic interpretations of this phenomenon, emphasizing that it does not herald the demise of language. Rather, it invites reflection on the metamorphic tensions inherent in linguistic evolution and on the vital changes that new experiences and generations imprint upon communicative practices.

Before engaging with such a complex line of reasoning, however, it is necessary to provide an interpretive framework through which to understand the constellation of symptoms and dysfunctional phenomena — or, if one prefers, the individual and collective behaviors — that currently characterize adolescents, young adults, and, unfortunately, an increasing number of children as well.

From the very first phase of the pandemic up to the present day, throughout the six years or so that separate us from the first emergency Prime Ministerial Decree (DPCM) issued in Italy, we have devoted considerable attention to family narratives and to the well-being of adolescents and young people. This commitment has taken the form of intentional and large-scale interventions in schools and local communities — such as the project *Orienteering. Participatory subject-based teaching pathways for career choice*, which enabled us to meet, in the last three years, nearly 6,000 upper-secondary students in the Apulia region and support them in identifying their competencies and personal resources[2]. From these experiences, a sort of "registry" of vulnerabilities emerged, one that, upon closer examination, encompasses both traditional and unprecedented needs that often remain unrecognized or unaddressed.

Indeed, we must remind ourselves that any symptom characterizing childhood, adolescence, or youth (between the ages of 18 and 35), if interpreted through the lens of the *systemic-ecological approach* (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or through a social model of disability (Oliver, 1991), particularly as articulated in the *ICF-CY bio-psycho-social framework (International Classification*

[2] The initiative, coordinated by the University of Bari "Aldo Moro," delivered over 4,425 hours of subject-specific instruction, laboratory activities, and meetings with industry experts, involving nearly 6,000 students. It was part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Mission 4 "Education and Research," Component 1 "Enhancement of Educational Services: From Early Childhood Education to University," Investment 1.6, funded by the European Union through the Next Generation EU programme.

of Functioning, Disability and Health for Children and Youth) (WHO, 2007), cannot be regarded solely as belonging to the individual who manifests it, nor as exclusively biologically determined. Rather, it represents, in a metaphorical and "theatrical" sense, developmental needs that remain unmet within life and learning contexts that are unable to recognize them and channel them toward physical, psychological, and relational well-being.

This "staging," or, if one prefers, the sometimes extreme "dramatization" of a *Self conceived as text* (Smorti, 1997), still incomprehensible both to itself and to others, speaks to us of "identified patients" (Bateson, 1972) — that is, children, adolescents, and young people who undoubtedly bear vulnerabilities, yet vulnerabilities that are in fact specific to the family, educational, school, and social systems to which they belong.

In enduring suffering largely on their own, they may be regarded as "patients" in the sense that, through ordinary symptomatic manifestations or more acute crises, they seem to await — though not only at an unconscious level — the intervention of adults who are often distracted or absent, adults capable of restoring that lost emotional, affective, cognitive, and value-based equilibrium, rather than retreating behind the supposedly objective evidence provided exclusively by clinical assessment tools and healthcare instruments (questionnaires, batteries, tests, and the like).

Galimberti expresses this more effectively than we can in his introduction to Karl Jaspers' *The Physician in the Technological Age* (1991):

> *[...] The malaise of an organism is also an inability to be; it is an imbalance of existence, compelled to experience within its own body its impossibility or incapacity to project itself into the world. [...] Whenever existence cannot express itself in the world in the way it "desires," it is forced to hold itself back and turn inward upon itself. What is produced is not so much a "blockage" of libido as an absence of presence in the world. Failing to dare assume an authentic form of existence within that primordial world constituted by the family environment, the anorexic individual refuses to assume her own body and, therefore, does not nourish it, gradually destroying it. [...] The refusal to nourish one's body is the literal, not metaphorical, way of refusing to nourish one's existence in a world that is either uninteresting or unwelcoming; consequently, the body becomes the stage upon which one lives out what cannot be lived out on the stage of the world* (p. 14).

The often violent symptomatology expressed by many of our adolescents — especially from the pandemic onward, which may be seen as a powerful magnifying glass revealing the systemic vulnerabilities of our country and, consequently, as a trigger for the fragilities that particularly characterize developmental age — conceals, as we have argued, both traditional and unprecedented unmet needs. Among the most striking examples is the phenomenon of mass brawls, first observed in Italy from 2020 onwards and which, more recently, seem to have

evolved into genuine forms of urban warfare. It is the responsibility of adults alone to recognize and respond to these needs, adults whom Baldini (1988) aptly described as “intermittent listeners.”

This serves as a reminder that children, adolescents, and young people could certainly do without the symptoms and the pathologies that may be associated with them, but only when all the actors within the systems they inhabit — family, school, and society — develop the resources, tools, and renewed awareness necessary to understand and address conditions of vulnerability in general.

Thus, alongside the traditional developmental needs — such as the need to be *listened* to, the need for *memory and narration*, and the need for *play as a means of learning and interpreting social reality rather than as a form of consumption and competition* — the pandemic brought to light new needs as well. These include the need to *explore the emotional self*, the need for guidance in matters of *sexual orientation and gender identity formation*, and the need for *connection*, particularly in relation to virtual forms of sociality, which may still serve *exploratory and emancipatory* functions (Romeo, 2025b).

If we may borrow the expression, the “masking” symptoms observed in our region and documented by national studies since the very beginning of the pandemic— one such study, conducted *online* in Sardinia during the first months of the health emergency, investigated the health conditions of children aged 4 to 10 and revealed *regressive, oppositional, and adaptive behaviors*, including sudden changes in lifestyle, the need to sleep with parents at night, the emergence of previously absent fears, mood alterations, difficulties falling asleep, agitation and frequent awakenings, as well as irritability and intolerance of rules (Pisano & Cerniglia, 2020) — and subsequently confirmed by international research (Agia, 2022; Minozzi et al., 2021; UNICEF & Gallup, 2021), have portrayed a critically fragile emotional-affective and socio-relational condition among children and adolescents, one that has remained relatively stable over time and is characterized by:

a) compassionate and self-compassionate reactions rather than empathic ones;

b) behaviors suggesting a certain emotional detachment from events;

c) a superficial affectivity toward others and toward the self;

d) a generalized sense of distrust;

e) a tendency toward self-demystification, that is, portraying oneself as extremely vulnerable and incapable of perceiving oneself as resilient despite having faced a *multilevel crisis* (Gjergji, 2021), contrary to the self-enhancing tendency or *self-overestimation* often observed in personal narratives (Gottschall, 2014);

f) an excessive tendency toward self-blame, contrary to the *self-exculpatory nature of narrative (ibid.)*, whereby failures are almost always attributed to external causes, coupled with a difficulty in acknowledging and highlighting one's achievements, however hard-won;

g) instinct-driven behaviors, heightened corporeality, and a shift from group dynamics to pack-like dynamics;

h) an increase in narrative closure, resulting in the consolidation of an *inner monologue*. This does not correspond to the appropriate and productive reflexivity experienced as a dialogue with oneself in relation to the world (Archer, 2009), but rather to a genuine form of sterile *hyper-reflexivity* — a kind of rumination — that continues to lead many preadolescents and adolescents to imagine unrealizable futures and, in the most severe cases, suicidal scenarios;

i) finally, closely related to the previous symptom, a blockage of life projects and a widespread sense of a foreclosed future, especially during developmental age, when processes of socialization and the exploration of autonomy should be reaching their existential peak.

An aspect that should by no means be underestimated in our reflections concerns the *ego-syntonic* nature that often characterizes the constellation of symptoms just described — symptoms that, as we have seen, sometimes involve the emotional sphere and at other times the bodily dimension of adolescents and young people in distress. Ego-syntony refers to the psychological condition whereby the suffering or discomfort associated with these symptoms is nevertheless experienced as being in harmony with one's personal way of being, to the point that such manifestations may become genuine emotional "fashions," further accelerated by processes of peer emulation.

Naturally, because in most cases young people's emotional reasoning is guided by extra-conscious mechanisms, they do not possess a mature understanding of these symptoms. Consequently, they are often unable to embark independently on a path that might resolve them, or at least alleviate them in part. In this way, mind and body merge into a single experiential reality, accepting the pathological condition as though it were a form of normality — one that increasingly appears to characterize this generation's way of being in the world.

Having established this necessary premise, which provides a framework for the discussion that follows, the symptom on which we wish to focus is language, which, according to our working hypothesis, has undergone a process of impoverishment at the *syntactic*, *semantic*, and *symbolic* levels.

Many observers have noted that adolescents and young adults tend to simplify language to an extreme degree, often avoiding causal constructions or references to the future in their discourse. They also appear to experience difficulty understanding and using words in contexts different from those in which they normally interact with their peer groups. Moreover, they rarely delve deeply into their own life stories, for instance by constructing metaphors capable of giving meaning to their experiences and subsequently shaping them toward a more conscious and attainable personal and professional future.

Drawing on Lacan's reflections (1983) at the end of the twentieth century concerning the relationships among language, the unconscious, and jouissance, one might argue that contemporary youth language bears a strong resemblance to the concept of *lalangue* — that primordial form of language transmitted by the mother to the infant, composed both of playful and affectively charged sound elements and of traces of the mother's own unconscious.

Lalangue is therefore a form of language still devoid of meaning, insofar as it precedes the acquisition of language proper. It recalls ancient experiences in which body and word were first intertwined. Indeed, *lalangue* bears witness to a primordial lexicon of care; it represents our earliest affective belonging.

In the authors' view, contemporary youth language is a "tongue" (lingua) that should be understood today more as an organ of the body than as an apparatus that communicates, conveys meaning, and becomes a tool through which individuals can make their voices heard, legitimize their point of view, express their needs, and outline future plans.

For these reasons, it is a "tongue" that remains concealed, often mumbled, and deprived of the meanings necessary to attribute purpose and direction to one's life project. Yet, precisely by virtue of the *sinthome* rooted in the body that it embodies, it is, as Lacan (2006) would argue, searching for what is needed in order to return to the world and express itself within it.

2. What if the language used to describe the world no longer contributed to constructing it? Reflections on the contemporary linguistic repertoire of young people

The transformation of youth language, a subject of growing attention within educational contexts, has in recent years also become a significant topic of pedagogical debate.

Increasing concern has been expressed regarding the difficulties experienced by younger generations in constructing articulated and complex discourse, narrating their own experiences, and sustaining structured forms of reflection and argumentation. This phenomenon clearly points to profound changes affecting the relationship between experience, identity, and meaning-making.

It is therefore worthwhile to investigate the paradoxical relationship that characterizes the linguistic repertoire of young Italian speakers in the post-pandemic era. On the one hand, there has been an unprecedented acceleration in the adoption of lexical items borrowed *ex abrupto* from English, the world of video games, social media platforms, and popular music. On the other hand, there appears to be a progressive decline in more advanced communicative competencies, particularly with regard to semantic depth, morphosyntactic complexity, and the ability to produce and elaborate coherent texts.

The analysis presented here, drawing upon variationist sociolinguistics, linguistic pragmatics, and the *Vygotskian* theoretical framework — integrated with empirical evidence from the OECD-PIAAC surveys (2023–2024) — demonstrates that this mismatch should not be interpreted as a simple linguistic decline. Rather, it reflects a functional restructuring of the youth communicative system, with significant implications for both the teaching of Italian and the linguistic education of competent citizens.

In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic played a revealing role. The interruption of face-to-face relationships, the reconfiguration of the temporal and spatial dimensions of everyday life, and the pervasive presence of digital environments brought to light both pre-existing and unprecedented vulnerabilities, widening the gap between what young people experience and their ability to translate those experiences into language.

The condition of contemporary youth thus appears to be marked by a multilayered crisis, affecting social, educational, and emotional dimensions alike, and thereby limiting the capacity to construct meaningful frameworks through which experience can be interpreted and future trajectories envisioned.

Language constitutes the primary object of our observation. For adults, it represents a symbolic resource that enables them to organize experience, attribute meaning, and participate in social processes of knowledge construction. For preadolescents, however, language is also the very mechanism through which these capacities are still being formed. Consequently, the progressive contraction or simplification of language affects not only communication itself but has distinct

implications for the two groups. In adults, it may limit the ability to express and negotiate the complexity of experience; in preadolescents, by contrast, it may influence the very construction of the cognitive and symbolic categories through which they come to understand themselves, others, and the world.

The present contribution therefore seeks to address this issue through the development of an empirical research project focused on the analysis of youth language in the post-pandemic context, with the aim of constructing a research instrument capable of making some of the most significant ongoing changes observable and measurable.

Reflections on youth language tend to oscillate between two equally inadequate interpretive poles: on the one hand, the catastrophist denunciation of linguistic collapse; on the other, the enthusiastic celebration of neo-formative linguistic creativity.

The reality of young people's linguistic repertoire escapes both of these readings. Rather, it emerges as a system in which two opposing forces coexist and interact in constant tension: the quantitative expansion of lexical resources and a paradoxical impoverishment of deeper communicative competencies.

A necessary theoretical premise for our argument is the rigorous distinction between lexicon and communicative competence. The former is a finite, quantifiable inventory, subject to processes of expansion and contraction; the latter is a processual, relational, and contextual capacity — one that Hymes (1972) had already distinguished from *Chomsky's notion of mere competence* by introducing the concept of *communicative competence*: not simply knowing a language, but knowing when, where, how, and with whom to use it in a pragmatically and socially appropriate manner.

The paradox referred to above becomes intelligible within the framework of this distinction. It is possible to possess a quantitatively rich lexicon while at the same time exhibiting a functionally limited communicative repertoire, depending on the domains of use and the registers activated.

The significance of this phenomenon can be fully appreciated when situated within the broader transformations that characterize the condition of contemporary youth. Sociological and pedagogical studies highlight how the transition from youth to adulthood is increasingly marked by uncertainty and by a progressive loss of linearity.

Biographical trajectories, now far removed from the predictable sequences that characterized the past, tend to follow discontinuous and fragmented paths, marked by fluctuating patterns, frequent renegotiations, and considerable suffering.

This condition has been effectively interpreted through Bauman's (2002) concept of *liquid modernity*, which describes a social context in which stable points of reference become increasingly diluted and institutions, although still present, struggle to fulfil an effective orienting function.

In this context, young people are required to exercise high levels of decision-making autonomy without necessarily possessing the tools needed to interpret—or even to simplify—the complexity of the environment in which they operate.

Romeo's contribution, briefly outlined in the first section, further develops this perspective by highlighting how youth vulnerability, far from being reducible to a single dimension, emerges through a multiplicity of factors that influence both identity construction and the capacity for future planning. Within the scenario described above, these difficulties become visible primarily through language.

The difficulty of narrating oneself, explaining one's choices, or articulating one's thoughts reflects a profound crisis experienced by young people in establishing meaningful connections between experience and narrative.

Sociolinguistics offers useful theoretical tools for interpreting changes in youth language beyond purely deficit-based perspectives.

Labov (1972; 2001) demonstrated that linguistic variation is never random; rather, it responds to specific social dynamics linked to variables such as social class, gender, age, and membership in particular communities of practice.

From this perspective, youth language varieties do not simply represent deviations from a linguistic norm. Instead, they perform important identity-building and cohesive functions within peer groups.

This interpretation is further supported by Gumperz's (1982) contribution. Through his notion of the *speech community*, he highlights how linguistic repertoires are collectively constructed and continuously shaped by transformations occurring within the social context.

Within post-pandemic youth communities, the reduction of opportunities for face-to-face interaction and the increased engagement with digital environments such as *echo chambers*, where dissenting voices are excluded or attacked (Romeo & Rodriquez, 2026), may have contributed to a contraction of shared linguistic repertoires, limiting exposure to diverse registers and more complex linguistic models.

From an empirical perspective, research has documented a progressive simplification of lexical and syntactic structures in youth speech.

Recent data indicate that young people possess an active vocabulary that is significantly more limited than that of previous generations, with a consequent

reduction in their ability to distinguish semantic nuances and to construct well-structured arguments (Coveri, Benucci, & Diadori, 1998; D'Achille, 2019).

Constructivist theories have highlighted the fundamental role of narrative in the processes through which reality is constructed.

Bruner (1991) identifies *narrative thinking* as a specific cognitive mode through which individuals organize experience into temporally and causally structured forms.

Likewise, Ricoeur (1983, 1985) emphasizes that personal identity is deeply connected to the ability to tell one's own story, integrating discontinuous events into a coherent narrative framework.

From this perspective, the impoverishment of linguistic resources does not merely reduce expressive possibilities; it may also weaken the individual's capacity to organize experience narratively and to build a coherent sense of self over time.

The ability to narrate therefore presupposes the capacity to establish relationships between events, attribute meaning to experiences, and project one's lived experience into a future-oriented and social dimension.

When this capacity weakens, a rupture emerges between experience and meaning-making.

Experiences fail to find expression through adequate linguistic forms; emotions become difficult to name and communicate; and thoughts struggle to organize themselves into complex discursive structures.

The result is an impediment to the construction of narrative continuity, with significant implications for the formation and development of personal identity.

A relevant theoretical contribution to understanding the relationship between linguistic impoverishment and cognitive development comes from Vygotsky (1934, 1962), whose sociocultural theory assigns language a structural role in the formation of thought. Language is the mediating tool through which thought itself is organized and elaborated.

Consequently, the contraction of the linguistic repertoire, beyond being a clear sign of communicative crisis, points to a much deeper difficulty in the very construction of higher cognitive functions.

His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proves particularly fruitful in the analysis of the post-pandemic context. The ZPD designates the distance between what an individual can accomplish independently and what he or she can achieve with the guidance of more competent others.

The reduction of face-to-face interactions during and after the pandemic has effectively limited young people's access to the kinds of dialogic exchanges that constitute a necessary condition for the expansion of their linguistic and reflective capacities (Vygotsky, 1978).

A form of linguistic impoverishment that simultaneously affects vocabulary, syntax, and the use of logical connectives implies a deterioration in the ability to perform the various functions associated with language use: from organizing messages into coherent texts, to representing experience, to managing interpersonal relationships. The consequences therefore extend far beyond the realm of communication itself.

Within the contemporary context, marked by experiences of discontinuity and by a reduction in opportunities for shared narrative practices, there is a growing tendency toward more immediate and less structured linguistic forms, closely tied to emotional experience.

This phenomenon may be interpreted as a difficulty in accessing the symbolic register, that is, the capacity to transform experience into articulated representation.

In dialogue with Frankl's *existential perspective* (1946) and Archer's *theory of reflexivity* (2007), these dynamics closely connect the crisis of language to a crisis of meaning.

When language is no longer able to sustain the construction of meaning, reflexive thought becomes isolated and fails to translate into action, thereby compromising the possibility of developing a sustainable life project.

Linguistic pragmatics provides a further level of analysis for understanding the transformations currently taking place in youth communication.

Grice (1975), through his theory of the *Cooperative Principle*, argues that communicative exchanges rely on a system of implicit maxims—those of quantity, quality, relation, and manner — which speakers share in order to convey meanings that go beyond the literal level of the text.

The so-called *conversational implicatures* refer to what is communicated without being explicitly stated, and their interpretation presupposes the development of sophisticated pragmatic competence.

Digital communication, characterized by immediacy and by the widespread use of abbreviated forms, *emojis*, and multimodal codes, places these maxims under considerable structural pressure.

The reduced length of messages and the growing preference for formats characterized by a high degree of contextual ambiguity tend to shift the

communicative burden toward the implicit and the visual, thereby limiting the exercise of explicit linguistic competencies.

Recent studies have documented that prolonged use of social media platforms is associated with a decline in lexical richness — measured in terms of the number of unique words employed — as well as in argumentative complexity (Cecchini, 2024; Toth *et al*., 2026).

In light of these considerations, the transformations affecting youth communication should not be interpreted merely as a phenomenon of deterioration. Rather, they are better understood as a form of functional adaptation to specific contexts of use, which nonetheless carries the risk of compromising proficiency in more elaborated linguistic registers.

Digital technologies do not impoverish language per se; rather, they foster a specialization of linguistic competencies, potentially leaving underdeveloped those formal and reflective registers that are essential for the construction of complex thought (Crystal, 2020).

In light of the theoretical framework outlined above, the design of a questionnaire aimed at investigating the current and increasingly impoverished linguistic repertoire of young people, from an intersectional perspective, assumes strategic importance.

3. An intersectional approach to survey questionnaire design

The questionnaire under discussion is conceived as an intersectional instrument through which the complex dimensions of language can be made observable, translating theoretical constructs into empirical indicators that can be systematically analyzed.

As previously argued, language, when understood as a dysfunctional symptom among young people, may, much like other symptoms they express, be related to a specific form of *disability affecting the individual*, such as the emotional disability that today characterizes thousands of preadolescents and adolescents.

According to Arfini (*op. cit*., p. 87), the concept of disability is intrinsically an intersectional concept, insofar as it is no longer understood as the result of differences between bodies. Rather, it concerns the interaction—more or less constrained—between the individual and the barriers that arise between the person and the environment in which they live and act.

The language-related disability that we seek to investigate in this contribution should therefore be understood not as an individual or bodily condition — or as a personal tragedy — but rather as the outcome of broader vulnerabilities that transcend the individual while nonetheless giving rise to this form of disadvantage. If we think of food and a culinary recipe, we might say that intersectionality becomes visible when different ingredients are combined to create something new, something that does not exist in nature in that specific form.

The selected ingredients ultimately interact with one another in complex ways, becoming inseparable and often indistinguishable within the final product.

The proposed tool is therefore the result of shared reasoning among educators, linguists, and media education experts who interacted, proposing epistemological "ingredients" specific to their disciplines, with the aim of answering the original question and thus reviving those processes of agency and youth citizenship that are currently ingrained.

The questionnaire focuses on several dimensions of undeniable relevance to the analysis of youth language.

First, attention is directed to the *syntactic dimension* of discourse, observing the presence or absence of complex articulations and logical connectives.

A key question designed to explore this dimension using a *5-point Likert scale* (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always) is, among others: *When you explain the reasons for an internal change or a difficult decision you've made, do you use the following verbs: a) the subjunctive (if you studied, if you had studied, I hope you were fine)? b) the indicative (if I study, if I apply myself, I know you're fine)?*

This is because linguists have observed the decline of the subjunctive as a verb tense of possibility and subjectivity in favor of an overextension of the indicative, with a consequent flattening of reality on the objective plane and certainty.

Second, the *semantic dimension* is investigated, with particular reference to lexical variety and the ability to distinguish shades of meaning.

A further aspect concerns the *symbolic-emotional dimension*, that is, the ability to use metaphors and images to express one's experience.

Finally, the *digital dimension* is considered, which is playing an increasingly important role in contemporary youth communication.

A question proposed to explore the persistence of terms related to the pandemic period in real life is, among others: *Do you use expressions like 'triggerare', 'gostare', 'mutarsi', 'laggare', or 'crashato' in everyday life?*

In this regard, Cortelazzo (2022) identifies a completely new characteristic in the history of Italian youth vocabulary: for the first time, the neologisms typical of young people's speech are no longer generated from within the Italian linguistic system itself, but are imported directly from English, without mediation or morphological adaptation. Paradigmatic examples include terms such as *cringe*, *crush*, *POV*, *trend*, and *vibe*, which have become fully integrated into everyday usage without undergoing any process of nativization.

Bellone (2022) adds a further observation: between 2018 and 2022, there was a significant decline in the creation of new words and expressions belonging to the innovative and ephemeral slang layer. Young people increasingly consume the vocabulary produced by digital platforms, global entertainment content, and genre-specific music and media (such as rap, trap, and gaming content), yet they generate fewer lexical innovations independently than in previous periods. Historically, Italian youth language has been characterized by a lively capacity for lexical innovation; today, however, the creation of new words is giving way to lexical importation.

This process intertwines with a further dynamic: youth language has lost much of the variation — both diastratic (socially based) and diatopic (regionally based) — that once characterized it, increasingly converging toward standardized forms shaped by models disseminated through social networks.

Dialect, which for generations served as a powerful source of linguistic creativity among young people, is now largely absent from the youth repertoire, having been replaced by an anglicized, supralocal digital *koiné*.

The language of online gaming constitutes one of the most productive lexical reservoirs in this regard. Terms such as *grindare*, *farmare*, *spawnare*, *snitchare*, *aggare*, *bannare*, and *trashare* have spread well beyond gaming communities and have entered everyday speech through the mediation of platforms such as Twitch, YouTube, and Discord (Francalanci, 2022).

Generation Z's structural anglophilia (Bellone, 2024) profoundly reshapes expressive patterns, moving well beyond the category of simple linguistic borrowing. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Discord, with their communicative grammar based on concise captions, performative comments, and semantically compressed hashtags, constitute a linguistic ecosystem in which English words, once merely "hosted" by the Italian language, have become intrinsic components of speakers' communicative code.

This difficulty is not perceived as such by young people themselves — which makes it even more insidious from a pedagogical perspective. Possessing a communicative code that functions effectively within one's reference community does not foster

awareness of the need to expand one's linguistic repertoire toward more formal and elaborated registers.

The phatic function of language, which once required considerable lexical and syntactic elaboration, is now increasingly fulfilled by standardized iconographic sequences operating at an a-propositional and sub-propositional level of communication.

The pandemic acted as a powerful accelerator of pre-existing trends, amplifying their effects and embedding their consequences in ways that are difficult to reverse in the short term.

School closures, the suspension of face-to-face social interactions, periods of domestic confinement, and the widespread adoption of distance learning (DAD) radically shifted young people's communicative experiences into the digital sphere, depriving them of those contextualized language-learning environments — the village square, the school corridor, the playground, the sports hall — which traditionally constitute privileged spaces for the acquisition of native informal registers.

Youth digital communication therefore displays distinctive pragmatic features: it is *concise* (with *brevitas* imposed by character limitations), *multimodal* (integrating text, images, and sound), *hyper-fast* (occurring in real time, with response times measured in seconds), and *high-context* (presupposing a shared body of in-group cultural references).

Yet an intersectional reading of the phenomenon compels us to recognize language as an identity marker. Beyond its merely referential function, youth language is invested with a powerful role in the construction of identity and social belonging.

As Labov (1972) observed, linguistic codes function as markers of group membership. Using *cringe* instead of embarrassing, *skippare* instead of to skip/omit, or *toxic* instead of toxic in its Italian equivalent, does not necessarily indicate laziness or ignorance; rather, it constitutes an act of identity affiliation with one's generational peer group.

As noted at the outset of this contribution, symptoms — including the impoverished language that is the focus of our investigation — ultimately reveal needs that have not yet been met. It is striking to observe how the impoverishment of deep communicative competence coincides with the period of greatest connectivity in human history.

Paradoxically, constant connectivity produces a form of communicative loneliness: people are always in contact, yet increasingly less connected in any meaningful depth. The analysis proposed here ultimately allows us to interpret changes in

youth language as a significant indicator of the broader transformations affecting contemporary subjectivity.

In conclusion, the questionnaire proposed in the Appendix and intended for subsequent administration — emerging from the convergence of sociolinguistics, linguistic pragmatics, functional linguistics, and educational research — constitutes a valuable methodological and theoretical resource for attempting to recover and strengthen that youth “tongue” (lingua) which today appears to function more as an organ of the body than as an instrument serving the construction of an autonomous life project (Romeo, 2026).

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