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The language of prison re-education between agency and responsibility

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Learning about freedom as freedom to make right choices responsibly is the pivotal task of educational intervention (Chionna 2001). As a practitioner of juvenile penitentiary re-education I experiment it, trying to re-educate young offenders in a prison, where the "capability approach" should be invoked (Sen 2011) and, according to the relational ethics paradigm (Muschitiello, 2012), we teach the young the capacity/ability of choice between alternative life experiences, which should be inspired and embodied by the educational authority of the adults.

As agency is a constitutive element of a capability, I wonder: who is the agent? The one who re-educates an inmate? Or the inmate himself? Who should be more efficient and responsible to act in prison? Is it all about specific required competencies that are influenced by the context where penitentiary personnel and inmates act/react reciprocally?

Penitentiary educators should adjust their approach, improving their language-as-dialogue tools first, just because the relationship with inmates is based on a dialogic axis. No exception can be made for cultural and linguistic mediators, who are involved in the treatment of foreign inmates (Brancucci 2018). So, I investigate the agency level of penitentiary educators and cultural/linguistic mediators, working together synergistically and/or autonomously.

They try to respond to different scenarios, recognizing there is no one-size -fits-all approach to managing cases of re-educational emergencies, and assuming that educational interventions recall a daily presence in the context (Bertolini 1993), especially in prison where people 'live' in close proximity (WHO, 2020).

But, how to achieve agency when this proximity fades away, or is temporarily interrupted, even turning into a virtual telematic educational approach? The challenge is to transform the consolidated educational-linguistic-dialogic practices into a new bidirectional way to think, act/react (from prison personnel towards inmates and vice-versa), because of the social distance required by the COVID-19 breakthrough.

Key-words: *language, agency, inmates, juvenile prison, pedagogy.*

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1. Introduction

The concept of agency has recently received systematic attention in various domains. As suggested by Ahearn (2001, 109), "the term agency, variously defined, has become ubiquitous within Anthropology and other disciplines" such as Linguistics, Philosophy, or even Psychology. But, in my opinion, it has not been approached from a pedagogical point view in the same way and with the same effort unless, as educationalists, we refer to agency as one of the most specific skills owned by human beings, whose education is the scientific object under the magnifying glass of Pedagogy, epistemologically speaking.

Welcome to Pedagogy, therefore. But we have to be certain about what meanings can be associated with the terms of agency, not only because all disciplines have their own scientific languages and studies, but also because the topic of agency seems to be a prerogative of only few fields of research. So, agreeing with Alessandro Duranti (2004, 452):

> much more needs to be done to integrate those studies with a more general theory of agency. The institutional separation among the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology in the second part of the twentieth century has certainly contributed to their intellectual separation and the ensuing lack of public debates around common issues. Discourse analysts, linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguistics, and other interdisciplinary researchers have tried to bridge the gap with limited success, due in part to the difficulty of communicating across discipline boundaries and in part to the paucity of clear theoretical statements that could be either adopted or challenged by scholars in other fields.

2. For a pedagogical perspective of agency in prison

This seems to be the case of a pedagogical discourse, which I try to contribute to, starting to find out "how important it is for scholars interested in agency to look closely at language and linguistic forms" (Ahearn 2001, 109), just because the explication of agency can be mirrored better in the linguistic arena, even in the case of interpersonal and relational interactions between the educators and the educated people, which are specially based upon linguistic interactions.

First of all, the prison as privileged locus of investigating the evidence of a sort of educational agency, can be viewed as a particular professional environment like the playground or even the 'battle field' where two main different categories of

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protagonists, the prison educators and the inmates to be re-educated respectively, are both a sort of 'actors', in the 'prisoning game'.

At a first glance, educators belong to the wide category of the so-called *social actors,* who have the duty to manage social problems and needs, in order to solve and to answer them specifically, whilst the inmates usually symbolize the *actors of disturbance* inside the prison, whom social actors look at carefully and professionally to avoid disorders and restore behavioral balance, trying to be agents of someone else's change in a bidirectional way.

Who's who, indeed? Who is an actor, who can be an agent in prison? Generally speaking, according to Lexico.com, powered by Oxford, an agent has a double identity. This word can stand for "a person who acts on behalf of another person or group" and for "a person or thing that takes an active role or produces a specified effect". (https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/agent).

Translating all into a penitentiary professional setting, can an educator play both *a)* the role of an intermediator (e.g. whoever acts following the mandate of the Penitentiary Institution and/or of the Ministry guidelines) and embody *b)* the role of active producer of expected effects and results? Or, on the contrary, can the inmates be *c)* the ones who play a re-action as a consequence of someone else's professional interventions, or even *d)* the ones who are capable to be agents of their own lives?

Trying to avoid any kind of lexical misunderstanding, Laura M. Hearns (2001) suggests that:

> we might begin to answer some of these questions by considering, as Karp (1986) does, what distinguishes an 'actor' from an 'agent'. In Karp's view, an actor refers to a person whose action is rule-governed or rule-oriented, whereas an agent refers to a person engaged in the exercise of the power in the sense of the ability to bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world (Karp 1986, 137). Actor and agent should be considered two different aspects of the same person, according to Karp, or two different perspectives on the actions of any given individual (p. 113).

Incidentally, while considering acting in prison, we have to better define the roles, in order to step closer to the meaning of agency and to shape it as well. On the one hand, the prison is like a stage where people play their own part, given by destiny (e.g. the educators who have followed and answered a sort of 'vocation' for a social and human care profession, or the inmates who have suffered life unfairness based upon multiplied problematic conditions leading to deviancy and delinquency or even to a loss of personal freedom), or that has been deliberately chosen

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(e.g. especially in the case of educators who choose to work inside a juvenile prison in order to help the youth, or for the young inmates who admit they prefer pursuing devious activities and 'choose' criminal dangerous carriers).

In the balance between justice value and criminal counter-value, there is the relational juxtaposition between the role of the Penitentiary System controller and scientific observer, the educator, and the inmates whose personality, attitude, behaviour and existential condition should be observed and evaluated. We know that every educational relationship passes especially through the interpersonal bond between the subjects at stake, arranged not only asymmetrically but also put face to face in their individuality, with their personality and the structures which shape them. Moreover, every educational relationship is based upon the encounter between subjects who are marked by oppositions or synergies, dialogue or refusal, closeness or removal, and by personal stories, personal perceptions and affective dynamics (Cambi 2000).

The aim is to keep alive the continuous tension towards the educability of every human being. According to Orlando Cian (2000), the educability is a prerogative of the man/woman to be educated and who is educable in his/her essential subjectivity. It is the right dimension inside which everybody can achieve their own mission and human project: to become themselves better human beings, as more as they can. It corresponds to an opening act about the possibility to be oriented towards a destination where the freedom to decide comes from the intentionality which, then, has to turn into responsibility (Elia 2012, 51).

Indeed, what type of agency can we talk about in prison education scholarship? Again, in fact: "no matter how agency is defined […] scholars using the term must define it clearly, both for themselves and for their readers. […] By doing this, we might gain a more thorough understanding of the 'complex and ambiguous agency' (MacLeod 1992) that always surrounds us" (Ahearn 2001, 130).

In the absence of a specific pedagogical meaning of agency, Duranti lends us a working definition: "Agency is here understood as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome)" (2004, 453).

Synthetizing approximately this comprehensive definition, from prison educators' perspective, we can say that they should *control* the degree of *responsibility* by which they could *affect* inmates' lives, whose freedom is under negotiation, including the freedom to decide what to do.

Therefore, just because freedom is a pivotal topic that cannot be ignored, the talk about agency applied to a penitentiary context can be legitimated?

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Because, just like it happens in prison, "freedom is understood as the possibility of acting otherwise. This possibility must be maintained as a feature of agency in spite of the fact that there are situations in which human actors might feel (or be judged) unable to act otherwise (Duranti 2004, 454)".

I find myself wondering about it because of the perspective of my professional role as a practitioner of juvenile penitentiary re-education inside a Juvenile Prison, a place where I feel myself an agent, not always an independent one, whose aim is to lead people to learn that freedom to make right choices responsibly is the pivotal task of educational intervention (Chionna 2001), such as the interventions of prison educators and penitentiary operators. Furthermore, we teach young people the capacity/ability of choice between alternative life experiences, which should be inspired and embodied by the educational authority of the adults, that is of us. For sure, an adult agent should be free to act with intention and in a responsible way, most of all. In this case, trying to re-educate young authors of crimes inside a prison, which is the institutional and Italian Constitutional mandate I experiment every working day as an educator, I am quite free to be a direct agent of their behavioral and/or moral change, and to teach them the deep meaning of freedom as well as the anteroom of responsibility.

3. The power of responsibility as human agency device

What about the intentionality degree? Duranti (2004, 453) warns that:

> the first property of agency (degree of control over one's own behavior) is closely related to but not identical with the notion of intentionality, a term that is often evoked in the discussion of agency […] One of the problems in this case is that the attribute of conscious planning as a prerequisite for agency would immediately exclude institutions from the discussion of agency given that, as pointed out by Giddens (1979, 1984), institutions have no consciousness and yet, they do have the power – a power of a kind that is different from the sum of the powers of the individuals involved – to "make a difference", that is to have an effect (on themselves, on other institutions, on individuals, on the environment).

Who has got the power, finally? A penitentiary institution has the pervasive power to decide in behalf of inmates, for instance, and to confine them apart from society to be preserved. Echoing the over-totalizing notion of power argued by Foucault (1975), we may think that an agent's degree of control is equal to a degree of power. Going further, as underlined by Ahearn (2001, 116-117)

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> according to Halperin (1995, 16-17), Foucault's notion of power is not a substance but a relation, a dynamic situation; it produces not only constraints on, but also possibilities for, action. Nevertheless, even if Foucault's formulations do leave room for agency, his focus is more on pervasive discourses than on the actions of particular human beings.

Talking about pervasive discourses inside the penitentiary institutional context, it means that we-adults-educators can teach inmates the agency, anyway. We can be able to do it, pushing on individual professional and pedagogical intentionality, and the awareness about the importance to humanize the prison itself (Buffa 2015), showing humanity to teach and receive back humanity by the young ones who impinge on social humanity dangerously by the commission of any inhuman crime. We, as adults and educators, have the duty to control the human level inside a prison, acting as only humans can, making experience of agency, assuming that:

> at its most basic, agency can be characterized as the capacity to control one's own actions. Non-self-conscious animals have no such control; their behaviour is entirely determined by the stimuli in the environment. Self-conscious entities, on the other hand, since they have the capacity to envision themselves in the future, and hence can imagine the outcome of various possible actions, can be described as agents—or at least potentially so (Gardner 2017, 2).

Therefore, young inmates should learn this lesson and achieve this projecting competence just to be considered agents as good as their institutional educators, who have the law and moral duty to imagine a better life for the youth, and offer them a better future. The prevision capacity which is handled by prison educators comes first, and anticipates the analogue capacity which youth people miss sometimes. So, whoever works at the service of Juvenile Justice, is required and even presupposed to have the competence and the responsibility to be careful listeners to the young authors of crimes, to be empathic and farsighted about their young dreams and life projects, even more so since the adults know better how much difficult can be for young people to project themselves into the future to re-think (Brancucci 2017), because youngsters seem to be affected by a sort of 'projecting sterility' coming from the modern society excessively curved upon the present (Criscenti 2012).

As a consequence, looking from the young perspective of crime authors, who can be quite aware of this lack of projection, they can end to attribute an overestimated power to the professional operators of the penitentiary and re-educational treatment inside a prison: it is especially true for the prison and

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Juvenile Justice educators who, metaphorically armed with paper and pen, are called by the Juvenile Judiciary Court to write down informative reports on what they have observed scientifically about crime young authors' growing personalities and behaviours and to create a rough draft of an Individualized Educational Project (PEI), to realize it even outside the prison. So, the youngsters inside consider their reference point educators and operators, who are capable and powerful enough to influence or direct their destiny, for better or for worse, even pretending to ignore or underestimating that Juvenile Judges have this agency power really, from the beginning to the end of the judiciary process.

As a Juvenile Prison educator, instead, I have a clear idea about my superior objective to re-educate an inmate, trying to lead him to embrace and appreciate values such as honesty, empathy, looking for a job, building up a family, choosing better friendships, taking care of his own psycho-physical health, and so on, but I have to be clear the same way how a younger person is still missing that clearness or awareness. All that stuff to do, obviously, to take the distance from delinquency and criminal disadvantages, an effort which requires the capacity to re-think in a critical way youngsters' actions and lifestyles.

In few words, as prison educators, we aim to and take care of the human development, even of young offenders, in order to let them develop and achieve the agency. The ultimate objective is to start a personal change. The education itself makes sense only if a person's life is open towards change: this opening characterizes the lifelong journey of every man/woman, who creates his/her own existential sense, projecting himself/herself into the future unavoidably and build up himself/herself throughout an evolutional path of growth, development and perfectibility.

In other words, as educators, we have the duty to re-construct better persons to re-enter society sooner or later, just as free persons in a functional way to avoid any other problems, in order to serve the society as better humans, capable to be agents of themselves. As repeatedly suggested by Susan T. Gardner:

> let us suppose that we accept that humans can—at least to some degree—be correctly characterized as agents (and hence held responsible for their actions). Let us further presume that this capacity contrasts with non-human animals, most of whom we presume cannot be so characterized. And finally, let us suppose that this capacity that uniquely constitutes what it is to be human […] must therefore be recognized as supremely important to all agents. If we take these three claims together, then it would seem to follow that, if agency can be nurtured through education, then it is an overarching moral imperative that educational initiatives be undertaken to do just that (2017, 1).

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As a consequence, the imperative aim is to empower more competent human beings in order to let them become the best versions of themselves. And, the imperative as 'social actors' is to be always competent professionals. In this last case, perhaps, in a parallel comparison with the school system as another important institution with educational responsibility and the power of the agency (Urbani 2015), current researches point out that a human development based exclusively upon on the achievement of competencies is inadequate to qualify an educational professionalism effective enough to answer the needs and challenges of contemporary societies. The modern society, instead, requires new significant and strategic components of professional development, referring to influencing the characteristics and the value of any professional action, especially the educational one, which is influenced by the capability of agency (Nussbaum, 2010). In other words, the dimensional component of the freedom of agency (Sen 2000) can be considered as the main principle to activate the capabilities and the qualification of professionalism.

We, especially as adults and prison educators, should invoke the "capability approach" (Sen 2011) to be set up and experimented as re-educational strategy. In fact, all seems to turn around roles, perspectives, efforts and competencies to play the relative part inside a prison, to achieve this result.

Specifically, we refer to the capability approach in its original structure, which involves "concentration on freedoms to achieve in general and the capabilities to function in particular" (Sen 1995). Underlying that the major constituents of the capability approach are functionings and capabilities, we consider that functionings are the "beings and doings" of a person, whereas a person's capability is "the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Capability is thus a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another" (Sen 1992, 32).

Therefore, the importance to achieve this upgrading skill for the global existential well-being of young inmates comes from this turning point, in order to teach them that an agent is a person who is capable to act and to bring a change depending on those objectives to which she attributes such a value. The more reasonable the agency's expected objectives are, the more responsible evaluation is required to the person about her own behaviour. Considering the agency as a constitutive element of a capability, Sen (2011) focuses on the freedom involved in the process itself which influences the way of attaining the goal considered more relevant by the subject himself. In other words, the agency is characterized by the person's self-determination, responsibility and autonomy, and it intertwines with the personal freedom to choose who I want to be and what kind of life I want to live and carry on in the society.

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Again, who is an agent in prison, really? The educator who re-educates an inmate? Or the inmate himself too? This capacity is up to educators and inmates both, provided that a sort of self-consciousness is assumed to be a necessary condition of agency. Recalling George Herbert Mead's depiction of emerging self-consciousness, as described by Gardner (2011, 81):

> Mead describes this emerging self-consciousness as an emerging awareness that there is a correlation between the changing affect (or response) of the other and particular units of one's own behaviour. A young child, in other words, becomes aware of […] actions through the fact that a change in the behaviour, verbal response, and/or attitude of the other sends the message that […] actions are positively or negatively valued by that other.

4. A projecting issue for inmates: a dialogic approach to stimulate critical thinking

Translating this in prison, educators can observe youngsters who don't handle yet this kind of self-consciousness, in a very genuine way, because of their incomplete moral growth, but the same people can be observed being able to show and act exploitable good attitudes, manners, and behaviours in order to obtain positive evaluations by their reference educators, penitentiary operators and even judges at the end, because of their assimilation of the penitentiary sub-culture, based upon a material balance between costs and benefits, to serve and to get from the penitentiary and justice systems respectively. Sometimes they can put on a mask on their poker face, quite pretending to be different if compared to their 'imagos' coming up from their outside life chronicles (generally filled by deviancy, delinquency, school drop-out, violence, drug addiction, poverty, cultural deprivation, etc.), in which they have not experienced the proper standard of social interaction.

Reconnecting all to the pedagogical and relational ethics paradigm (Muschitiello 2012), in a more specific way, the agency includes the effective power of a direct control upon the action, which concerns not only what a subject can act as a single person, but also what he can do as a member of a group, of a family, of a citizenry or a political community. A positive-oriented social interaction, indeed, is a turning point to let develop the self-consciousness about action-reaction, which is so necessary to start a critical thinking revision of the bad lifestyle including penal, criminal or justice issues during adolescence or emerging adulthood (Brancucci 2018).

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Not by chance, we know that “agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act. According to this bare bone definition, all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation” (Ahearn 2001, 112).

Therefore, inside a juvenile prison, social interactions we refer to are among the young inmates and between each youngster and his/her reference educator/operator/social actor, or with all the operators who enter the prison from the outside, following the pedagogical path of an educational relation to start with the inmates, anyway.

The first duty for prison educators, especially, is to manage intentionally how to start and let grow the educational relation nurtured with compassion, comprehension, empathy, significant presence and proximity, and dialogue of course. There cannot be social interaction without dialogue, and no dialogue or confrontation without a language interaction, we presume. Even from a pedagogical perspective, there is no educational relation without any sort of communication, verbal or not, which should be useful and functional to achieve a personal image of self-consciousness. Furthermore, the role acted by the social community we belong to is highly necessary, even in a specific period of our life, because “the community is also constitutive of the individual, in the sense that the self-interpretations which define him are drawn from the interchange which the community carries on” (Taylor 1985, 3).

As Gardner states, an agent is not only the one who “is aware of his/her own actions and that they are potentially subject to self-implicating evaluation” (2017, 2), but also whoever “is able to linguistically dialogue, in actually or in imagination, with real or imagined others, with regard to the “fit” between how the agent herself evaluates what s/he thinks, says, and does, in juxtaposition to the evaluations of others (again, both real and imagined) (Gardner 2017, 2).

Assuming that the confrontation with others can trace the path towards the achievement of critical thinking capacity, we have to warn young people about the unclearness of life objectives, which can be considered as a great obstacle throughout the process of critical and logic thinking acquaintance. As well underlined by Martha Nussbaum (2010), when people do not see clearly the objectives they should pursue, or if they are not capable to reflect in a correct way, then they can be manipulated and influenced too easily. For instance, in the interaction with others, if reason leaves the place to ingenuity and distraction, people can be easily fooled even by the fame or the prestigious/higher position of who they talk and discuss with, or by what is imposed by the peers’ culture.

Let’s stop and think about the subordinate position of young inmates inside a prison: on the one hand, they can feel ‘enslaved’ by the critical thoughts and opinions about them formulated by their reference educators and operators, as a

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kind of acquiescence towards the representatives of the Authority (e.g. police authority, pedagogical authority, judicial authority). On the other hand, they can be tolerant and forced to be obedient towards the peers' culture, especially if we talk about the deviancy counterculture or the penitentiary subculture which they are fulfilled by.

Just to avoid this risk, and let be prevalent the quality of personal thinking, a Socratic method should be suggested as a social practice, in order to teach democracy and spread the concept of respect towards one another among youngsters. If we encourage everybody's active stance, we promote a culture of responsibility also, at the same time, hoping that just when people feel more comfortable with their ideas and more responsible for their ideas, it should be they will pay attention to their actions too, says Nussbaum (2010).

According to her vision, the Socratic method is important for every democratic society and context, especially where we are faced with the presence of people who are of different nationalities and/or ethnical origin, economic status and religion, just right a prison can be in the public imaginary: a place where it is relevant hat everybody has the duty to take the responsibility for their own thinking processes, attitudes and behaviours, and to exchange and share own opinions with the others in an atmosphere based on mutual respect, even in order to solve any divergency pacifically. Therefore, the right critical attitude to show is to consider everybody equal in the discussion of ideas and opinions, because everything might be examined closely by the reasoning, just to facilitate the communication, whether linguistic or not.

In order to become a significant educational communication, an inter-subjective relationship is required, and this has the human development and promotion as main objective. It is up to pedagogy, in fact, to manage the communication process, setting the rules, directing towards the human being to project about and around, because communication is not merely a pure transmission of contents, but it is nurtured with values to be suggested, showed and embodied.

Even inside the re-educational and penitentiary treatment process, the educational communication expresses the ethical dimension of the educator himself, who becomes a witness of values by means of his own life, his own exemplarity. In the eyes of the young inmates, the educator will become a reference professional and human figure only if he is recognized as a person who is capable to communicate something important and relevant, showing himself as an example to follow. For educators, to know the communication mechanisms and dynamics is not enough: a transformation of the behavioural style is necessary because it is quite important what they do and say, while it is more important what

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they are. Each educator is called to be authentic just in order to influence positively the minors and the youngsters they are looking after and taking care of, on whom the educator is morally obliged to transfer his personal congruence and identity coherence (Elia 2012). In other words, to educate in a certain way it is necessary to be in a certain way and to act on humanity. The more able the educator is to communicate the educational human model, the more prone will the inmate be to shape himself as a human product coming from that model.

Anyway, it does not mean that an educator is infallible. He/she should be trustworthy for sure, and easygoing if necessary, and able to be persuasive, just to keep open the communication channel with the inmates. Showing empathy is the password, as adults and professional are required to be, avoiding to be sympathetic, as friends are. As educators, we have to be conscious that:

> through linguistic communication, we display our attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and wishes. Once expressed, this type of information has an impact on others, as well as on us (e.g. we proudly reaffirm our convictions or, conversely, we prove to ourselves that we can embrace new ideas and attitudes) (Duranti 2004, 452).

Therefore, after recognizing that any act of speaking involves some kind of agency, which has an intrinsic expressive power, and after taking for granted that language can be considered as a form of social action, we can consider the socio-cultural implications too, because of our intention to find out any pedagogical implications related to the agency, and to the agency in language in particular, as it can emerge in re-educational discourse, which is influenced by the socio-cultural characteristics permeating a penitentiary context the same way.

Thus, Laura M. Hearn (2001, 111) underlines that “both text and context must be taken into consideration, and they must be understood to be intrinsically interwoven (Duranti and Goodwin 1992)”. The socio-cultural context cannot be ignored, or underestimated, considering the socio-cultural mediation due to the agency itself. According to Hearn (2001, 129): “locating language, culture, and agency in the interstices between people, rather than within individuals themselves, requires a different way of thinking about and studying linguistic and cultural interactions”.

So, what about the avoidable risk of dystopian interpretations? What about the capacity of encoding agency which is connected to socio-cultural inputs and conditioning factors especially in linguistic interactions? About this topical issue, Duranti (2004, 467-468) points out that:

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> the encoding of agency is both an important and a potentially problematic act for speakers. These two qualities are tied to what I would call the *inevitability of agency* for humans. There is inevitability at the existential level (ego-affirming), performative level (act-constituting), and grammatical level (encoding). At each of these three levels, agency is either the goal or the result of a person's being in the world. It is this multi-level inevitability that more than anything else, gives language its claim to power and it is this claim that linguistic anthropologists have been studying for over a century.

But, what happens to the activity of decoding if agency rhymes with irony?

5. The language of re-education: when agency rhymes with irony

Irony, if considered as integration of a sort of penitentiary communication metamodel (Basco and Del Citerna 2009), should be a practical device for prison educators, alongside the daily routine of linguistic interaction, meant to catalyze the action-reaction communication model, based on the awareness that:

> the speaker and the hearer carry out actions when they communicate with each other. More precisely, the speaker carries out communicative actions like ordering, requesting, stating and questioning, to name a few. The hearer, on the other hand, reacts to the speaker's communicative action. For example, she complies, rejects, replies, provides information, withholds information, agrees or disagrees. Every action in the game is mutually related to another action. It is this pair of action and reaction which forms the minimal communicative unit in dialogic language use (Feller 2014, 8).

Following and agreeing with the theory of Dialogic Action Game by Weigand (2000, 2010), and paraphrasing the idea of the game, meant as a dynamic process between both one's own voice (the educator) and the voice of the other (the inmate), it is necessary that educators should use an accurate pedagogical language, just fit and useful enough to go beyond facts, data and the external observation of inmates' behaviour. A particular kind of appropriate and effective language is required, which is able to pave the way towards the unsaid words and speeches, the contradictions, the emotions, the symbols and the feelings, building up a pedagogical setting that takes care of the dialogicality of the human experience, allowing the person-inmate to take back the floor by means of words and language (Di Roberto 2013, 21). Even making recourse to irony, to echo Socrates' teaching.

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Fortunately, as well pointed out by Ivlampie (2014, 123):

> the Socratic pattern in education has been preserved in Pedagogy in what at least one of the […] methods is concerned, namely Maieutics, also known as heuristic conversation or dialogue. Educationalists acknowledge the Socratic roots of this method without insisting too much on the circumstances in which the magister used it. They just mention the fact, moving on immediately to technical information concerning the method construction and its employment in various moments of the lesson.

What kind of lesson should be appropriate in a prison? Firstly, that irony should be considered and applied as a direct and clear strategy by the educator who moves inside a specific situational context, being aware of the efficiency of ironic communication based upon the shared knowledge between the interlocutors, without forgetting what irony is good for. Sometimes, it could remain educators' last resort for maintaining their authority, or even their last tool to deal with rebellious youngsters and to motivate them educationally in order to choose a life change (Ivlampie 2014, 122), pushing on their intrinsic motivation to do it, for instance, or to take a specific course of action (Feller 2008), due to the irony acting like a catalyst, potentially useful also in workplace rhetorical and dialogical interactions. This happens even when there are quite exploitable interactions as verified in prison, wherein the young inmates pretend to be better than they really are (in order to obtain more judicial benefits) and the educators pretend to ignore this aspect (just to mitigate the punitive nature of the penitentiary institution they belong to).

Pretending is the clue word, exactly. As represented by Măda and Săftoiu (2014, 23):

> etymologically, the word *irony* comes from the Greek ἱρώυεία and describes 'the quality of a person to pretend otherwise' […] With this meaning, irony used in common language is not necessarily linked to the rethoric concept of semantic inversion, but it is rather a means of underscoring the reality of a fact by the apparent concealment of the truth.

At least, even prison educators can use and handle irony to mitigate the burden of pain which connotes a penitentiary context intrinsically. But:

> how can an educator employ it without impinging his or her social status and professional mission? How would […] look like as long as his or her professional status should be made up of features such as reliability,

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> objectivity, detachment, equity? All these questions unavoidably converged towards Socrates' personality. In our collective consciousness, he seems to be the educator *par excellence*, who appropriated the lesson of irony and practised it devoutly. Reliability, objectivity, detachment, equity and assertion (in the sense of *dixit*) are the features defining this magister who dedicated himself to his knowledge, from which he borrowed an undisputed authority […] (Ivlampie 2013, 123).

The educator can be an ironist, no exception made inside the penitentiary context, especially a juvenile prison one, where educators can resort to irony, being conscious that their young inmates, usually aged between 14 and 24 years old, can understand irony, due to the development of the right intellectual capacities, such as the hypothetical thought and the formal operative stage of thought which arises throughout the adolescence mental growth. But how should one be ironic?

We mean, for instance, that educators should be self-ironic at first sight, practicing ironic wit on their own selves, just in order to keep and show an integral humanity in the eyes of the inmates, and putting apart any superhero ambition of salvation at any cost. Any proven examples are given below, coming from my direct professional experience.

The case of the 'tired' educator

(1) "Do you know why my face is so tired today? Because I have spent all day reading the reports about your past wrong behaviours. My hair has become whiter, now" – an educator could say to a rebellious inmate, just to express the effort and the professional experienced wisdom to put on the table for helping him constantly.

The case of the 'inquiring' educator

(2) "Can you repeat what happened two days ago when you fought with your roommate, please? Sorry, but your educator's memory is quite overused" – an educator could ask abruptly, joking about his own limits, in order to loosen the defensive position of a conspiratorial inmate who dislikes to be discovered.

So, Socrates' example should be the guideline:

> Socrates did not hesitate to bite himself, to mock at himself: I know that I do not know anything! […] This sublime gesture of feigning ignorance in front of the scholars of his times entails a profound act of humility, of humbleness, of kenosis […] In general, we, humans, […] believe that is suffices to get a

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> graduation diploma and that there is nothing to left to long for afterwards. And our life goes on this state of self-complacency. No apprehension reaches us, not a sign of doubt touches our soul (Ivlampie 2013, 124).

Fortunately, educating youth people in prison is a heartfelt mission, because the interlocutors' souls are in a sort of dialogue based on a sort of mutual and neutral complicity, even going beyond the facts to discuss about. For this reason, irony can be helpful and effective, because:

> The ironist does not use an ironic utterance to reveal a fact, but simulates and creates a kind of complicity with his interlocutor, who recognizes this simulation. This should be based on shared knowledge between the two parties. Ironic commentary can be decoded according to the interlocutor's competence to use shared knowledge and the particular data of the situational context (Măda and Săftoiu 2014, 26).

No exception made for prison, of course. Although prison itself is a harsh place where any lesson must be learned, a prison educator knows better whose aim it is to lead inmates to be rescued and re-integrate in society, or to let them understand the importance of respecting and celebrating a virtuous life. Therefore, "ironic expressions can be used in learning interactions to promote deep learning. Under certain circumstances, it can serve as complexity scaffold in the sense that the learner is prompted into thinking along more complex schemas" (Feller 2014, 7).

And, naturally, that is even by breaking all the previous comforting and addicting schemas. Not paradoxically, the 'comfort zone' for many young inmates to escape from is a sort of 'everything and immediately' model, based on hedonistic pleasure to obtain material things or advantages, such as money or drugs, or even criminal fame, looking for any occasion which generates the adrenaline nurturing their brains and bodies, without considering the worst consequences due to their behaviour. So, they are called to re-think and re-build their young existences according to positive and socially accepted values, as long as they can do it, just before they get lost for good.

The case of the 'rhyming' educator

(3) "Do not waste time being incriminated until you are in time for being liberated".

should be a rhyming motto for prison educators, roughly talking to their inmates. Too rough, maybe? It depends both on the speaker's intention and the hearer's

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susceptibility. Irony could give a smooth taste to the re-educational advice, for instance.

The case of the 'provocateur' educator

(4) "You have enjoyed committing robberies, haven't you?"

it should be a provocative question addressed by an educator to an inmate who is complaining about a guy who has entered the prison for the nth time. As previously reported, the capacity of encoding makes the difference if related to a specific context with its own language and dynamics, for many reasons.

> Firstly, encoding the intended meaning into the surface meaning means extra effort for the speaker just like decoding does for the hearer. In addition, decoding always runs the risk of misinterpretation. There is no guarantee that the hearer will get the irony and hence reinterpret the utterance accordingly. Well, one obvious reason for making the effort might be hedging. The speaker might simply want to mitigate the negativity of the surface meaning (Feller 2014, 10).

Assuming that the imprisoning of a young inmate is a negative moment, obviously, because of the uncertainty which any inmate feels wondering about the time he will spend within the walls, the first interaction with prison educators should sound like:

The case of the 'resigned' educator

(5) "How long will my incarceration last?"
"No way to know it exactly, for now. Be sure, it will last much less than my 'incarceration' as educator. I am in for a life-sentence until my retirement".

This should be the ironic answer of the consulted educator, who can try to alleviate the inmate's anxiety, explaining to him the judicial factors which custodial duration depends on, according to the clarification task assigned to prison educators.

Indeed, as educators, the clarity of their own educational and professional role is essential, along with the effort of preserving the sense of inmates' centeredness. The adult-educator needs to listen to his own consciousness about his role self-confidence and his professional limits, in order to lend as much clarity as he can to the young inmates, avoiding instead the typical adolescent or juvenile state of confusion and uncertainty (Brancucci 2017). Choosing the right words is important, but not enough, even when using irony. The context does the rest:

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> Far from being restricted to a simple ironic comment, expressing the opposite of the literal meaning or voicing a duplicitous type of communication, irony appears a complex phenomenon, in which the assumptions, the focal event, the intentionality, and the strategic choices made by the participants become intertwined with the context (Măda and Săftoiu 2014, 23).

In my opinion, as the prison is an unconventional educational institution, it requires as well an unconventional discursive weapon of irony managed by the educators who should have the prerogative to destabilize the deviant vision of the inmates about the illegality fascination they feel. Educating them is equivalent to subverting their misleading perspective about the future, and to make them feel uncomfortable about their freedom deprivation. Otherwise, if prison educators are much too sympathetic, condescending or even compliant towards the inmates, the youngsters might run the risk of 'resting on their laurel's', due to their criminal identity confirmation or unintentional reinforcement which comes from the resonance of the penitentiary context since this is perceived as familiar, or as an upgrade of their criminal careers. In other circumstances, a kind of dysfunctional confirmation of a criminal status, could be due to the influence of the horizontal communication between the inmates, among their peers. While entering a prison, especially for the first time, an inmate tries to look for first communication contacts with others who committed similar crimes, in order to find more comprehension and confidential argumentations. Then, the relational network will become wider, involving many other inmates, and the single inmate will try to find a stable space inside the communication network and to establish his own image in the eyes of the other detention companions (Santoloni 1981).

Even more so, educators should pay attention to their dialogic/ironic approach with inmates. As argued by Măda and Săftoiu (2014, 25):

> attention should be moved from the linguistic analysis to the interactive process involved in ironic communication. Irony can be an effective means to 'disorient' the interlocutor by moving from the serious mode to the joking mode. Ironic effects are generated by hints and alteration of expectations that is specific to a certain situation, at a certain level of conventionalization […].

In most cases, as usual in prison, inmates try to ingratiate themselves with a penitentiary operator/educator, aiming to obtain benefits or positive evaluation, or looking for a more permissive guidance.

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The case of the' worst' educator

(6) "I am sorry for you, guy, but you have been assigned the 'worst' educator of the institute" – a prison educator should say, instead, to underline the moral strength and coherent firmness he will apply to follow an inmate who was hoping to get a preferential treatment.

What about the communication of the inmates, instead, as they address to the penitentiary operators and educators? It depends on the idea about them shaped by the inmates throughout direct and indirect experiences, according to their cognitive schemas too. Thus, the communication ways and contents will be determined by the particular role which is assigned to them by the inmates who, time and again, are looking for help, sympathy and empathy, genuine comprehension and other things, or they are showing opposition, distrust, refusal attitudes and even hostility towards the penitentiary staff, on the contrary (Serra and Fabrizi 1993).

May these controversial feelings be associated to the inmates' ironic language? A particular attempt of irony can be such an instance as the following personal one:

The case of the 'unnamed' educator

(7) "How may I call you? Marco, Mister, Educator or 'Dottore'?"

An inmate asked me this once, according to the difference attributions given to my personal semblance (called by the first name because of appearing too young as a 'friend' or too adult just like any Mister) and to my professional role as his reference point, (just an Educator, impersonally). Or, referring to my graduate cultural level underlying the last word 'Dottore', sarcastically, just like "when addresses are contingently assigned a title or status so as to induce them to act according to whatever cultural expectation is associated with such a title or status, for example being gracious, generous or forgiving […]" (Duranti 2004, 458).

Although irony is widespread in so many common languages, it follows different encoding trajectories, as already said, also in comparison with the local cultural context which the professional interlocutors may belong to. For instance, we have to wonder about irony used by foreign or immigrated inmates, who are not able to handle it smoothly, maybe because they ignore that "in workplace interaction, irony needs to be treated carefully, due to its face threatening act (FTA) potential" (Măda and Săftoiu 2014, 33).

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That happens especially when the users, in this case the inmates, try to question the educators or the cultural and linguistic mediators who take care of them, as the following examples show us, unfortunately. One day, a detained foreign youngster, addressing to his reference cultural and linguistic mediator, told her, using English slang.

The case of the 'professional siblings'

(8) "Where is your bro, today?"
"Who do you refer to?" – she replied.
"I am talking about my educator. You are brother and sister, you know" – he provoked her, in my absence.

Over the following days, while discussing about this weird dialogue, the trustworthy mediator and I reached the conclusion that the inexistent "familiar bound" associated to us was due to the coherent synergic re-educational strategy we had built up in favour of that guy, who disliked to be bothered by both of us, just as she had already done that day, even in my absence, as we had planned to do so in keeping with our strict and efficient professional collaboration. We became a sort of 'a couple of siblings' in the eyes of the young inmate, who tried to complain about our firmness, feeling himself contrite. As Feller (2014, 11) would say in this case:

> In more detail, this means that both speaker and hearer interact with each other against the backdrop of culturally entrenched norms and value systems. For example, in many Western cultures, we find values including individual freedom, altruism and democracy, among others. How the interlocutors construct meaning and interpret utterances is largely dependent on these cultural factors […] In other words, irony triggers the hearer's reaction by creating a tension between the interlocutors' cultural values and the meaning of the ironic utterance.

A similar case of 'familiar misconception or attribution' happened when a Muslim boy said to the Arabic language mediator, a woman with an 'occidental style' appearance, the following critical words, taking advantage of the absence of his educator aside.

The case of the 'Muslim sister'

(9) "You can't understand my position. Are you sure you're my sister?"

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expressing his disappointment after she totally agreed with the severe position of his educator about the boy's misbehaving. With his words, the boy tried to explain his point of view and his expectation about the complicity which should have come by default from a person who was apparently distant from his familiar cultural world, despite belonging to the same religion and native language as his.

One day I was absent from the job venue, while a boy showed a narrow-minded attitude, as determined by his deep and 'quite bigoted' religious belief, maybe. In fact, he was looking for alarmistic attention while he said to the cultural-linguistic mediator:

The case of a 'mystical conversation'

(10) "When I read the Holy Bible several hours each night, alone in the darkness of my room, I can get out of my body and see myself lying in bed from above" – trying to impress or to scare her.
"Oh, I didn't know that you got a magical power" – she replied, just to mitigate that mystical capacity of mental abstraction from the detention state, knowing that it wasn't associated to any organic disease or mental illness.

On a different occasion, the same inmate tried to fool me, asking to be authorized to write to a self-styled priest of his country of origin. Unfortunately for him, I discovered that this man was an impostor, being considered a false prophet in his country, and he was wanted as a dangerous fraudulent man. Therefore, I was obligated to 'turn the tables' on the boy.

The case of the 'fake prophet'

(11) "Why do you want to contact this man? He is not a priest, really. He pretends to be a predicator or a fake prophet" – I told him.
"Yeah, I know. I followed him, giving sermons around in my country" – he replied, ingenuously.
"And did you trust him? Tell me why, please!" – I pressured him a bit.
"Because he is a miracle worker, predicating the Old Testament" – he answered, boldly.
"Are you serious? The only prophet I remember who was also a miracle worker was Jesus Christ, and no one else!" – it was my ironic utterance to end the talk.

What is the significant point? As argued by Niels Herold (2011, 89):

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> The cultivation of this sense of irony – […] an *ironic pedagogy* – is all the care and the mastery of what we do in preserving a cultural past, […] the same attention we seek to develop […] is the ironic encounter we can have with all the sacred texts, musical, poetic, visual that immerse themselves in a religious ideology which is not our own (and if it is, should be thought of as not quite our own).

Religion, culture, education, language, family habits, sexual orientation, political beliefs and so many other conditioning factors must be considered by prison educators, who are asked also to suspend any kind of personal judgment about the crimes and the lives of the inmates, if they want to be professional. According to Taraschi (2013, 160), a sort of prison kenosis should be invoked in a pedagogical perspective, if the educators aspire to be credited as moulders of new lives, taking care of the inmates' real conditions inside the prisons, especially the institutes for adult inmates, wherein all inmates bring inside all the problems from the outside world. It cannot be possible to re-educate whoever has lived too long without anyone worrying about and looking after his/her psycho-physical weaknesses, intellectual capacities, financial resources, emotional deficiencies, and belonging social environment, without offering a real human care and compassion. No humanity, no agency at all, briefly.

In particular, without specific training, prison educators could not be able to achieve the construction of an inmate's future. For instance, knowing only one foreign language is not enough to re-educate foreign inmates, whilst necessary and capable linguistic and cultural mediators are required, to stay aside the educators themselves. As a consequence, in the case of foreign and/or migrant inmates, good re-educational practices and linguistic repertoires in prison (Benucci and Grosso 2017) should be considered, recognizing the linguistic diversity inside the penitentiary institutions, which requires the knowledge of the linguistic needs and competencies both for the professional activities and interventions, and the inmates unable to communicate otherwise, who run the risk of isolation (Brancucci 2019).

6. The language of re-education: when agency rhymes with emergency and strategy

Sometimes, young offenders and inmates may pay the price of the involuntary preparedness of the human resources inside a prison. In fact, prison operators, educators included, had to comply with all the law normative and socio-cultural changes of the penitentiary context, even without benefitting from steady

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formation to answer the inmates' needs not only from a merely bureaucratic point of view, but also from the humane, relational and communicative perspective, just because humane, relational and communicative codes are changed too.

Furtherly, the communication codes used by penitentiary operators, and even educators, may seem too anchored to a basic normative scale, decided by the Italian legislator. Our vocabulary, our specific jargon as prison educators and penitentiary professional operators, our adult way to narrate facts and ourselves, to explain the judicial and/or the penitentiary system to the young inmates does not seem to have immediate impact on youngsters. They may be required to make an effort to follow our speeches and analytic discourses, without us trimming down formality and formalism of our words. In particular, if this is already true for the Italian boys and girls who are supported by the Juvenile Justice Services, then, it will become even worse especially for the foreign or migrant inmates, who struggle to stay inside our communication codes effectively.

The case of 'guilty by association in Oriental style'

(12) One day, a Chinese boy told me he was in trouble while he was trying to understand why he was considered guilty by association, despite not being the direct author of a particular crime, justifying himself on the base of the law differences between the Italian criminal system and that of his country of origin. For the same cultural reason, even the Chinese mother-tongue cultural and linguistic mediator was unable to catch the deep reasonable meaning of being guilty by association, although there was the evidence of a moral responsibility and involvement of the young fellow. It was difficult also to explain to him the following steps of a judicial process. Therefore, in a very creative way, I started using pictures and drew schemas to illustrate the judiciary process, step by step, from the beginning (the arrest and the entrance in the juvenile prison) to the multiple possible endings provided by the laws (the sentence after a trial, for instance), and the re-educational purposes related to them. As a result, this type of communication, even translated by the cultural mediator, seemed closer to the ideograms of the Chinese language, and to the early capacity of the boy to understand the Italian language.

This is the reason why, as prison educators, we are called to find out, imagine and invent new communication strategies, in order to convey significant messages to clarify for these young offenders the functioning of the penal and penitentiary system where they ended up in voluntarily or involuntarily. Indeed, agency and

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strategy are the emergency. two sides of the same coin, so educators have to face a situation of educational

To paraphrase Măda and Săftoiu (2014, 23), “in an attempt to show how the various contexts affect speaker’s choices and how the presence or the absence of the interlocutor may interfere in interpreting an ironic comment”.

As showed by the previous examples, agency may vary its power even depending on the presence, the absence or the distance of the main interlocutor whom inmates refer to: the prison educator.

Moreover, assuming that agency, as attribute of capability, is situated in relation to the particular professional context we act inside, six different scenarios may come from the combination of three different patterns for re-educational interventions in prison (in presence, in absence, at distance), pivoting around the position of the prison educator (see Table 1).

Table 1. Different patterns for re-educational interventions in prison

IN PRESENCE	Educator’s interventions only Example no. 1, 2, 3,4, 5, 6, 7, 11	Educator’s interventions with the help of cultural-linguistic mediator or viceversa Example 12	Cultural-linguistic mediator’s interventions only Example 9
IN ABSENCE			Cultural-linguistic mediator’s interventions only Example 8, 10
AT DISTANCE	Educator’s interventions only Example 13	Educator’s interventions with the help of cultural-linguistic mediator or viceversa Example 14	

The last pattern is to be further investigated especially after the COVID-19 breakout, which has imposed rigid manner protocols even inside professional contexts, including the respect of the social distance required by health prevention needs. Therefore, the prison educators have first tried to respond to different scenarios, recognizing there is no one-size -fits-all approach to managing cases of re-educational emergencies like that, especially in prison where people ‘live’ in close proximity (WHO 2020), although assuming that educational interventions recall ‘a daily presence in the context’ (Bertolini 1993) which it is not always possible to create in such precarious conditions.

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As for the specific situation that has arisen in the prisons for adults and minors, it should be emphasized that prisons are places of confinement, in which subjects foreign to each other and wholly heterogeneous in terms of language, origin, customs, live in a situation of absolute and constant 'promiscuity', interacting in limited spaces, in close contact with each other, with reduced mobility of movement and little margin of self-determination, also in relation to the needs of daily life related to hygiene and cleanliness. Moreover, it should also be considered that the real and looming danger for prisoners is, in the first place, to be infected by one of the so-called 'new joints' who continue to enter prisons from the state of freedom or other prisons, because they are transferred from one prison to another. What is even riskier is that contagion in prison can be brought in by people who daily, for reasons of their office, have access to the detention facilities: prison police officers, civilian personnel, educators, psychologists, doctors, nurses, workers of contractors, chaplains, lawyers, individual and associated volunteers and so on.

In most regions of Italy, all 'new joint' subjects, to date, are subjected to a pre-triage and clinical anamnestic triage, followed by the implementation of the rhino-mouth-throat swab that excludes its positivity at Coronavirus Covid-19 and a period of 'quarantine', and therefore are admitted to the common compounds only after the negative outcome.

An operational challenge has been to transform the consolidated educational-linguistic-dialogic practices 'in presence' into a new bidirectional way to think, act/react 'at distance' (from prison personnel towards inmates and vice-versa). Thus, how is one to achieve agency when this proximity fades away, or is temporarily interrupted, even turning into a virtual telematic educational approach?

The case of 'educational' video-calls

(13) For instance, this is the case of making 'educationally' effective video-calls with inmates who are in a solitary two-week long sanitary precautional isolation, according to specific health security protocol to avoid covid-19 spread inside penitentiary contexts. Sometimes, making video-calls or remote educational dialogues or interviews, as educators and inmates in different rooms or even different floors of the prison building, and communicating to each other by means of tablets, seems so frustrating or alienating on the both sides.

Verbal communication can be disturbed or invalidated by speed transmission interferences or environmental interferences, or overwhelmed by the surrounding

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noises inside the prison itself, or because of the volume malfunction of the electronic device. Verbal communication can be difficult also because of the absence of a cultural-linguistic mediator, when prison educators need to solve emergencies, or if they do not have enough time to complete their preliminary interventions, or because of the vernacular language spoken by a foreign inmate.

The case of 'vernacular' language

(14) Sometimes, this could be the case of Arabic speaking mediators who try to talk with Arabic speaking inmates, migrated from several different Arabophone countries, who use their vernacular idioms, quite different from standard Arabic, all inscribed in the triangulation between the mediator, the inmate and the prison educator who tries to follow this linguistic triangulation from his Occidental perspective and linguistic code.

As underlined by Mercadante (2008), the first dramaturgical try which an actor and an interpreter, such as a foreign inmate and a cultural-linguistic mediator are respectively, is the tragicomedy of the language: nobody is able to trace the boundaries of a common linguistic code and, most of all, to find a useful enough code for the mutual comprehension. Moreover, as it often happens, the dialects of the different regions of origin of inmates are mixed up both with the dialects spoken on the arrival region of the welcoming country and with the jargon they have heard and learned inside the penitentiary context.

Moreover, assuming that whenever in a communications system the non-verbal modes acquire, for various reasons, more importance than verbal ones, errors, confusions and mutual misunderstandings tend to increase: we hypothesize that in an environment such as a prison, misunderstandings and misinterpretations will be made more complex and frequent by prejudices and stereotypes concerning deviance, crime and psychological characteristics of those belonging to a particular subculture or those who have committed a certain type of crime. The misattributes of intentions, attitudes, personality traits may occur both in horizontal communications between inmates as well as in vertical communications between inmates and prison police officers, executive staff, social worker, psychologist, educator, etc. It is precisely the rather frequent possibility of errors, of various kinds, that determines the greater number of members of a given subculture or those ambiguities and interpretative difficulties of non-verbal communication with respect to the verbal one. Our hypothesis is that a belief, a prejudice, or an

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erroneous stereotype about personality, attitudes, intentions and the abilities of an individual with whom you interact 'at distance', are more difficult to change from a re-educational point of view if the prevailing mode of communication in the interaction is non-verbal. In this case, the behaviors of the interlocutor are often arbitrarily interpreted in tune with their image and with the characteristics and interactions attributed to them, so that an incorrect can easily find false confirmations. These misinterpretation errors will affect the response behaviour to the received communication and, through the systemic effects, the subsequent communication will be made problematic, and in some cases, it may even become pathological. This kind of problem plays an important role in the prison environment, as in this place verbal communication encounters various obstacles and difficulties and non-verbal forms of communication come for the inmate privileged channel of expression of needs, feelings and attitudes (Serra, Fabrizi 1993).

As for the conversations via virtual devices during Covid-19 pandemic period, for isolation needs and purposes, even the emotional communication channels are difficult to be encoded. Facial expressions are covered themselves by the protecting masks, so facial-emotional feedbacks are altered or misunderstood. All the feelings and emotions may pass through the eyes, although even the eye contact is mediated by the screens of the technological devices, and appears less natural. The same goes for hand gestures and communication, since gesticulating is a typical and recurring communication scheme for Italians, even if educators' hands should be covered by gloves to avoid contact with office furniture surfaces to avoid any risk of infection: the appearance is that of a 'surgeon', and certainly not that of a penitentiary staff operator. Jokes aside, it is undeniable that any kind of health emergency situation like this could be used, as juvenile prison educators did during the pandemic lockdown hype, in order to teach and explain sanitary rules about prevention and safety, showing the inmates directly how to keep good manners and healthy lifestyle specially during the promiscuous forced cohabitation in prison. Anyway, educational interventions 'at safety distance' using virtual technology channels have been a creative attempt to avoid letting the inmates alone with their anxiety and doubts about their health, waiting for the swab results. It has not been easy to comfort and support the young suffering for the forced isolation and for the 'time expansion', and as a consequence, needing somebody to share hope with, without a chance to receive any hug or a comforting hand.

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7. Conclusion

One more time, both the ordinary re-educational experience in a penitentiary context and the need to face a situation of re-educational emergency strategically, due to the Covid-19 breakout, taught us briefly that, as prison educators, we are called to find out, imagine and invent new communication strategies: not only in order to convey significant messages to clarify in the eyes of inmates the functioning of the penal and penitentiary system, but also just because agency and responsibility are the two sides of the same coin: this is especially true when educators have the deontological and moral duty to serve and place the ideals of justice and repentance above all, without compromising the efficiency and impact of any sort of communication.

From a practical point of view, as educators and pedagogists, we should agree all about the concept of human agency as methodological attitude and purpose and, in particular, about irony to be considered as a valid enough tool for a good agent. In this last case,

> it should also be obvious that irony, in all its complexity, requires a look beyond the verbal level. Instead, different levels of communication and language use should be integrated with a view to arriving at a better understanding of ironic functions. Linguistics should team up with neighbouring disciplines like psychology, philosophy and neuroscience, among others, to gain new insights in this regard. Combined future research will certainly shed more light on these issues (Feller 2014, 21).

We hope, therefore, that pedagogy itself will be accredited next to the other disciplines in this kind of discussion about agency and irony, maybe assuming prison re-education as a specific starting point of a necessary educational linguistic evolution.

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