



BRILL

Book Reviews



Joanna Nolan. *The Elusive case of Lingua Franca. Fact and Fiction*. London etc.: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020. Pp. 106. Hardback € 51,99, e-book € 42,79. [to order electronically, see <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783030364557>]

Being interested in pidgins, and also interested in the Mediterranean pidgin named Lingua Franca, I had once ordered a journal issue *Neue Romania* with an article called “Die Belege der Lingua Franca” (Foltys, 1984). I was surprised to see that the author quoted so few language data. Foltys did not add much to the data found in Hugo Schuchardt’s (1909) famous article on the Lingua Franca. LF had supposedly been in wide use for more than five centuries, from the late Middle Ages up to the 20th century, but there are very few quotes of texts.

I was disappointed, and wondered why there was so little attention for the data. Even Schuchardt, normally a source of interesting and original data in his writings, had little material to build on when he wrote his famous 1909 article on LF. Rachel Selbach (2007) wrote about the language as “Nessie”, echoing Schuchardt who had called it a “Seeschlange” (Schuchardt, 1883: 282): many have heard about it, but very few have actually seen it. In fact, its very existence has been doubted by some.

What primary material is there? There is one book about the language printed in 1830 in France (*Dictionnaire de la Langue Franque ou Petit Mauresque*, N.N. 1830), a guide for French speakers who want to use the language, and this book remains the main source of information on the language. Then there are dialogues in the Lingua Franca in theatre plays by Molière among others and other playwrights. Finally, there are some scattered sentences in works of people who were involved in Mediterranean trade and slavery – including by freed slaves themselves. There may be less than a handful of such quotes per century. Yet, despite the relative scarcity of materials, the pidgin gave rise to three generic terms in linguistics: *lingua franca* as a pidgin, *lingua franca* as

a language of wider communication and *sabir* (an alternative name for the pidgin used mostly by French authors) for a pidgin.

Joanna Nolan's title of the book is well-chosen: there are fewer sources for the pidgin than people believe ("elusive"), and there may be more texts in contemporary comical theatre plays, dramas and literary work ("fiction") than in factual accounts ("fact"). The Mediterranean Lingua Franca was allegedly used in trade (but see Selbach, 2018) between the Arabs and Turks and the coastal Romance speakers of the Mediterranean (Spanish, Catalan, Provençal, Italian, Venetian). Sailors and porters spoke it. It was also used as a language of diplomacy in the area. Last but not least, it was also the language spoken by the Barbary slaves in North Africa and their Arab masters: between the 16th century and the middle of the 18th century, hundreds of thousands, maybe even more than one million, people from Europe were abducted from places as far as Scotland and Iceland and subsequently kept as slaves in North Africa (Davis, 2003). There are dozens of accounts in Dutch, English, German, Spanish and Scandinavian languages written by former slaves who had been bought out of slavery, but in those books, there are remarkably few quotes or metalinguistic comments that could shed light on the – indeed – elusive pidgin. Here and there they mention the Lingua Franca, seldom they quote more than a single word.

Cifoletti (1989, 2004, 2011) provided excellent overviews of sources (see also Coutu, 2002), covering dozens of (mostly very brief one-word) quotes. Dakhliia (2008) likewise wrote an outstanding historical account of the language. Operstein wrote a number of exemplary articles about linguistic aspects (2018a, b, c), mostly based on the 1830 source. Despite the quantity of ink used on scholarly writings in the language in Catalan, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish (see Arends, 1998 for an overview), the pidgin remains underdescribed. Yet, it seems to have been a widely used pidgin through half a millennium, and the source of Romance loans in Turkish and Arabic. What does Nolan add to the literature and our knowledge on the language?

The book consists of three chapters, with an introduction. References are given after each chapter, which make them look like articles. The article-like impression is confirmed by the fact that the chapters have separate abstracts and their own sets of keywords.

After the "Introduction to the Lingua Franca" (1–24), she has chapters/articles about "New information on Lingua Franca from the archives" (57–82) and ends with "Conclusions on Lingua Franca and its corpus" (83–104). The book closes with an index (105–106) with some 25 terms.

Nolan was able to find a few more sources for the Lingua Franca, from around the 1880s, in the form of quotes, she added also to our understanding of the use of the language in its historical settings, and she has a sharp and

critical view of the sources. It confirms many earlier observations on language use and spread – even though many enigmas remain. How it is possible that some observers claimed that almost everybody in the Mediterranean ports spoke the pidgin, while other visitors do not mention it at all, but they may write about other languages, or they emphatically say that the language is not in use? (see e.g., Schuchardt, 1909: 441ff).

The Lingua Franca was supposedly used in diplomacy. Italian scholars started to search for LF in the archives of the former French consulate in Tunis, with some limited success (all 1000+ contracts were in French or Italian). Nolan consulted the correspondence of the British consuls in Tunis and Tripoli between 1650 and 1840, again with limited success, and she consulted the Hugo Schuchardt archives, with more success. In the consulate archives, she found mostly letters written in standard languages, but occasionally letters showed deviant spellings (e.g., Spanish spelling in Italian letters) or slight grammatical errors that could mean that the oral language was LF. Personally, I am not convinced by the results, but it was a laudable attempt.

Schuchardt had started collecting materials on the Lingua Franca in the 1880s, and he did that through writing to local magistrates (not only here, but all over the world) asking for information about special languages, here the LF. He received at least 30 letters back, some answering that there was no LF in their town, and others were able to send some phrases. Schuchardt had not used most of the examples in his 1909 article, but Nolan cites these unpublished phrases (not all of them). She wonders why Schuchardt did not use them in his article, but I think the explanation is clear. The total number of letters that he received during his life from his 3,000 correspondence partners exceeds 15,000 (Wolf, 1993), and finding those letters that he had received a quarter of a century earlier was not easy for Schuchardt. His archive fills a large room at the University of Graz, and luckily all his writings and a portion of his letters have been digitalized (<http://schuchardt.uni-graz.at>) – including the letters that Nolan quotes. Schuchardt chose to draw a line after around 1830, the French conquest of Algeria, after which Lingua Franca was increasingly replaced with French.

The book contains no grammatical sketch, except a few one-paragraph characterizations of the language quoted from historical sources. As far as I know, Cifoletti's (2011) grammatical sketch covers a dozen pages, all other structural sketches do not exceed one page. Despite the grammatical simplicity of the language, a longer description is a desideratum. It would be a challenge to the extent that the lexicon is more variable than usual, but still overwhelmingly Romance. Allegedly, the Arabs have not left any quotes or writings in LF (Dakhliya, 2008: 109). Nolan's book is rather a quest for more sources, with little

success, due to their absence, and the fundamental bricks of historiography on the topic, and one can learn a lot there. The amount of material she consulted is impressive, and her comments are generally sound.

I have a few critical points as well. I am not sure if it makes sense to conclude much on the basis of spelling of words. When words are spelled with two consonants in one language and one in the other (e.g., Italian *essere* spelt as *esere*), does not necessarily mean influence from another language, but it could also be less normative writing and imperfect knowledge by second language speakers. Nolan is aware of this, and discusses this possibility as well. I cannot check the transcribed handwritten sources, but I think some of the transcriptions from the archives are not all correct.

Her range of sources used is impressive, but sometimes a little mysterious. She is thoroughly familiar with Italian scholarship on the language, with excellent research done by Cifoletti, Cremona, Mallette, Minervini, Venier and others in the past decades, but why does she refer to Cifoletti, who catalogued an impressive quantity of LF materials from travel accounts and slave reports (newest version 2011), only for an etymological issue?

On a more scholarly level, one can discuss the vexing problem of authenticity. There is a scarcity of texts in documentary sources (slave accounts, diplomatic correspondence, travel accounts), and on the other hand there is relative abundance of literary sources. Nolan seems to look for the most authentic sources, where the literary texts are judged least reliable, and the quotes (perhaps preferably self-quotes) are the most authentic ones, and texts with native language bias are less authentic. I am not sure if that is the right attitude. There are norms for the pidgin, such as the use of infinitives and emphatic pronouns, and the range of variation is higher for a pidgin, spoken only by second-language speakers, than for non-pidginized languages and dialects. The whole gamut of Romance languages known by the speakers will obviously play a role, using both one's own language as well as adjusting to what one perceives to be understood by the conversation partner. But that does not mean that LF is just an L2 version of a Romance tongue. The quest for LF seems to be interpretable as a search for a unified language, the same for all speakers.

In short, this interesting book adds to the documentation of the history of the LF, but it only "scraped the surface" (p. 101) of the language. Perhaps one can add another metaphor about LF. It is an iceberg. We can only observe the small part that is exposed to the air. And what is under water is inaccessible, not because we cannot dive, but just because it was never there. Simply not written down. Let us accept that LF is just not well documented, like many

other pidgins, and make do with the material that is available for this interesting contact language.

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