

# Transnational Italian in Higher Education

*Bridging South America and the Far East  
through the TRANSIT Project*

*edited by*  
Silvia Orioli, Michela Spito



Morlacchi Editore U.P.

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First edition: 2026

ISBN/EAN: 978-88-9392-712-3

DOI: 10.61014/OrioliSpito/TRANSIT



The online digital edition is published in Open Access on [series.morlacchilibri.com](http://series.morlacchilibri.com)  
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Published by Morlacchi Editore

P.zza Morlacchi, 7/9, 06123 Perugia, Italy

[www.morlacchilibri.com](http://www.morlacchilibri.com) | [redazione@morlacchilibri.com](mailto:redazione@morlacchilibri.com)

Print in June 2026 by Logo spa, Borgoricco (PD).

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## Introduction

The volume presented here is the scientific output of TRANSIT (Transnational Italian in Higher Education), a strategic project funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU under the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). As Scientific Coordinator and Associate Professor of Spanish Language and Translation at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, I am honored to present this collection, which serves as a crossroads for two distinct yet complementary socio-cultural environments: the historical multiculturalism of South America and the burgeoning linguistic interest of the Far East.

### *The TRANSIT Project: Objectives and Activities*

The core mission of TRANSIT is to redefine Italian Studies through a transnational lens. Our research targets regions where Italian is a living component of a multicultural repertoire – as in our partnerships with Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia – or where it is a rapidly expanding field of academic inquiry, as in China, South Korea, and Vietnam.

In addition to the University for Foreigners of Perugia, the project consortium includes the University for Foreigners of Siena (lead partner), Roma TRE University, the University of Macerata, the University of Cagliari, and associated partners from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam. The project rests on four pillars:

1. **Supporting Mobility:** Providing financial support for students, researchers, and teachers from South America and East Asia to undertake mobility experiences at the University for Foreigners of Perugia (and vice versa), thereby strengthening relational networks, linguistic proficiency, and knowledge of contemporary Italian language and culture.
2. **Methodological Innovation:** Bridging the “training gap” for instructors abroad through mobility to Italy; updating teaching practices for Italian language and culture; developing new digital teaching tools; integrating green and sustainable themes linked to Italian culture (e.g., food and local products); advancing reflection in gender studies on debates surrounding the Italian language (e.g., binary and non-binary strategies); and promoting intercultural awareness via peer-to-peer activities such as tandem projects.
3. **Scientific Collaboration:** Fostering dialogue between Italian and international scholars in educational linguistics and sociolinguistics, with emphasis on Italian-indigenous language contact and the evolution of “local” Italian varieties. Key activities included research on Spanish varieties in Argentina and Colombia and their interplay with Italian and regional/minority Italian languages spoken by Italian communities there, alongside expanded efforts on East Asia and Chinese communities in Italy.
4. **Institutional Synergy and Cooperation:** Strengthening ties between Italian and foreign scholars and teachers to establish double-degree agreements and mutual learning initiatives, ensuring long-term academic sustainability.

TRANSIT’s operational success is evidenced by extensive mobility exchanges, particularly those managed by the University for Foreigners of Perugia and its partners:

- Universidad del Norte (Colombia): 1 outgoing student, 4 incoming students (the latter selected for this volume based on research conducted during mobility; others focused on enhancing Italian language and cultural competencies).

- Universidad de Mendoza (Argentina): 3 incoming students.
- Hanoi University (Vietnam): 1 outgoing student, 5 incoming students, and 1 outgoing teacher.
- University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam): 1 outgoing student; 4 incoming students, 1 outgoing teacher, and 4 incoming teachers (the latter delivered seminars featured in this volume).

Beyond exchange, the University for Foreigners of Perugia organized a strategic event at both Vietnamese partner universities entitled “*The Value of Italian Language and Culture in the Contemporary World.*” This highlighted Italian’s evolution from intellectual tradition to a symbol of taste, well-being, and social cohesion. Central to this effort were the CELI language certification and the DILS-PG teacher-training programme offered by our CVCL - tools not merely as credentials but as enablers of inclusion in Italy’s welcoming, transformative society. These initiatives sustain intercultural dialogue.

### *A Volume in Two Parts: Colombia and Vietnam*

This collection showcases project outcomes through eight contributions from Colombian and Vietnamese perspectives, including research by students during two-month mobilities at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, where they advanced their Italian competencies.

#### *Part One: The Colombian Students’ Research*

The first four articles, drawn from final theses by students from Colombian partners, embody TRANSIT’s “new research perspectives.” Full mobility funding enabled these scholars to import South American sociolinguistic insights to Perugia, fostering reciprocal knowledge exchange.

These contributions analyze multidimensional Colombia–EU relations, spanning macro-level international agreements to micro-level social integration and peacebuilding:

- The opening study assesses the revitalization of the EU-LAC strategic partnership, positioning modernized trade agreements and the *Global Gateway* as tools for “open strategic autonomy” and sustainable development amid global competition.
- The second explores international volunteering via Joseph Nye’s soft power framework, showing how the European Solidarity Corps advances “solidarity diplomacy” and shared values beyond state-centric ties.
- The third addresses mixed migration flows, probing tensions between the EU’s human rights norms and security-driven “externalization” of borders.
- The final piece examines the Comunes Party’s post-2016 Peace Agreement challenges, highlighting structural barriers and stigmatization in implementing democratic ideals.

Together, they underscore TRANSIT’s role in linguistically grounded research attuned to Europe-South America transnational dynamics.

### *Part Two: The Vietnamese Scholars’ Experience*

The final four articles in this volume stem from seminars by visiting Vietnamese scholars.

- The first adopts a cognitive-linguistic lens to compare spatial conceptualization in Vietnamese and Italian, identifying two reflection modes, three shaping factors in Vietnamese, and culturally embedded models’ influence on cross-linguistic variation and acquisition.
- The second investigates food’s role in Asian diaspora literature for identity, memory, and power, evolving “foodscape” theories to frame culinary narratives of displacement, belonging, and resistance.

- The third compares local communities' identity-building roles in Italy and Vietnam: not just residential spaces but loci of belonging, memory, and norms, nuanced by Italy's *campanilismo* and Vietnam's village traditions.
- The volume closes with pedagogical research from seminars at Perugia, integrating Thích Nhất Hạnh's mindfulness into hybrid higher education. Findings reveal student interest but challenges in sustained engagement and online assessment; recommendations include shorter guided practices, interactive formats, and structured feedback for the hybrid context.

PART ONE  
The Colombian Students' Research

# The Bi-regional Partnership between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean: Trade Policy and Shared Values

## *Introduction*

Bi-regional relations between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean have, over the last two decades, been characterized by a progressive decline or period of stagnation and increasing fragmentation in trade policy, a situation that has weakened the capacity of both regions to consolidate an effective strategic alliance. While the EU maintained a preeminent role as LAC's political and economic partner during the 1990s and early 2000s, its prominence has been reduced by the expansion of China as the main economic partner and the persistent traditional influence of the United States in the region (Suárez & Pasquariello, 2020). This shift is not only due to commercial factors, but also to a profound transformation of the international order, in which power dynamics have been reconfigured to new economic and technological poles.

The recent diagnosis shows that the EU has lost ground in both trade participation and political influence. According to estimates by the European Parliament, the European bloc has steadily decreased its market share in Latin America, especially in trade in goods, where China has come to occupy a dominant position thanks to its investment in raw materials and strategic resources (Grieger, 2023). This context has reduced Europe's economic footprint and

highlighted the urgent need for a more coherent bi-regional policy adapted to global competition. The slow pace in the modernization of trade agreements has contributed to this lag, while other actors consolidate their presence through more flexible treaties and direct financial cooperation.

Despite this scenario, revitalizing the EU-LAC relationship is of strategic importance that goes beyond the economic sphere. During the 1980s and 1990s, the rapprochement between the two regions was favored by a convergence of liberal values: LAC, immersed in processes of democratization and market-oriented economic reforms, adopted principles of democracy and human rights that coincided with the priorities of the EU's newly created Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In addition to being liberal, the region had become a zone of peace, generally respectful of international law and multilateralism (Ruano, 2018). These elements facilitated the European momentum towards political dialogue, economic partnership and development cooperation.

In an international scenario of geopolitical reconfiguration and growing tensions, this basis of political and normative affinity makes the revitalization of the bi-regional link an objective of renewed strategic relevance. The 2023 EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels reaffirmed this vision by reviving political dialogue and adopting a joint declaration aimed at strengthening a modernized strategic partnership. In this framework, the EU announced the mobilization of up to €45 billion in investments for LAC until 2027, through the *Global Gateway* initiative and under the *Team Europe* approach, reflecting its intention to promote a common agenda focused on post-pandemic recovery, food and energy security, climate change, the triple transition, the strengthening of institutional systems and democracies, human rights and multilateralism (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023).

Both regions have converging interests, shared values, and a joint trajectory in political, economic, and cooperation matters that gives them real capabilities to reactivate the relationship on the basis of

open strategic autonomy. This approach would allow the two blocs to avoid falling into bipolar logics, strengthen their decision-making capacity in sensitive areas and, at the same time, promote cooperation with third parties and multilateralism (Ríos & Rodríguez, 2025). Thus, more than a rhetorical aspiration, strengthening the EU-LAC relationship is presented as an opportunity to project a strategic alliance capable of jointly responding to the challenges of today's world.

Despite sharing a historical trajectory, political values and a dense architecture of agreements, the relationship between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean is going through a prolonged phase of relative stagnation. This phenomenon is reflected in the EU's loss of trade weight in the region, the fragmentation of bi-regional institutional frameworks, the weakness of political dialogue and the inability to translate shared values into a coherent strategic agenda.

The central problem of the research lies in the fact that, although the EU has deployed a wide network of trade and association agreements with Latin American countries and subregions, these instruments have not managed to consolidate a true bi-regional strategic alliance. European trade policy has tended to deepen differentiated agreements, indirectly contributing to Latin American regional fragmentation, while the political and cooperation pillars have been subordinated to the logic of economics. In an international context marked by competition between great powers, the ecological transition, the digital transformation and the erosion of multilateralism, this structural weakness limits the ability of both regions to act in a coordinated manner and preserve margins of strategic autonomy.

This research is justified on three main grounds. First, from an academic perspective, it contributes to the analysis of EU-LAC bi-regional relations by integrating approaches to international political economy, regionalism, and normative power studies. The study makes it possible to understand how trade policy can operate not only as an economic instrument, but also as a mechanism for the

projection of values. Secondly, the research has political and strategic relevance, since it addresses a link that is gaining renewed importance in the current geopolitical scenario. Strengthening the EU-LAC relationship is an alternative to bipolar alignment and offers opportunities to diversify alliances, secure strategic supply chains and promote global environmental, social and regulatory standards. Finally, from a practical and public policy dimension, the study is relevant for decision-makers, regional organizations and cooperation actors, by identifying structural limitations and concrete opportunities to reorient the bi-regional agenda towards a more coherent, sustainable and inclusive framework.

### *General Objective*

To analyze trade policy between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean as the axis of a possible revitalization of the bi-regional partnership, assessing its limits, opportunities and potential to promote shared values.

### *Specific Objectives*

- To examine the historical and institutional evolution of relations between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean.
- To characterize the current state of bi-regional trade policy and the main instruments that structure the economic relationship.
- To identify the geopolitical, economic and institutional challenges that condition the development of the association.
- Assess the role of shared values and regulatory convergence in bi-regional trade agreements.

The research adopts a qualitative and descriptive and analytical approach. It is based on the documentary analysis of international agreements, institutional reports, academic literature and public

policy documents. It also uses comparative case studies (Mexico, Chile and Mercosur) to examine the evolution and performance of EU-LAC trade policy.

### *Historical Evolution of the EU-LAC Relationship*

In 1999, the first EU-LAC Summit took place in Rio de Janeiro, at which the establishment of a bi-regional strategic partnership was agreed, thus setting the initial framework for the institutional relationship between the two regions (Gómez de Agüero, Escartí & Chikhi, 2025). The Rio Declaration expressed the political, economic and social commitments that the EU and LAC assumed around shared values such as “representative democracy, the rule of law, good governance, pluralism and social development” (Ruano, 2018, p. 9). From this first meeting, the so-called Rio Process was consolidated, understood as a mechanism for bi-regional dialogue sustained through periodic high-level meetings between both parties (Ruano, 2018).

During the 2000s, meetings held in Madrid (2002), Guadalajara (2004), Vienna (2006), and Lima (2008), expanded the bi-regional agenda and incorporated priorities such as trade, social cohesion, sustainable development, and migration (González, 2020). However, the integration of all LAC countries in the same forum, characterized by “divisions, heterogeneities, and divergences of positions and interests,” limited the progress of political dialogue and reduced its operational effectiveness (González, 2020, p. 1138).

On this institutional and value basis, the relationship between the EU and LAC was progressively structured around three pillars that make up the Association Agreements: trade and investment, political dialogue, and development cooperation. These agreements, different from free trade agreements promoted by other external actors, combine trade chapters with institutionalized mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. The trade pillar is one of the most con-

solidated elements, while policy dialogue has been the most complex implementation area (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022).

The creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), established between 2010 and 2011 and made up of the thirty-three LAC countries, transformed the bi-regional framework by becoming the EU's main interlocutor at regional summits, thus, becoming the main forum for dialogue and cooperation aimed at articulating common positions (Gómez de Agüero, Escartí & Chikhi, 2025). However, its limited institutional framework and the growing diversity and internal polarization of the region prevented this mechanism from resolving the structural problem of the lack of prior consultation among LAC countries, thus reproducing difficulties that were already affecting the Rio Process. CELAC's inability to manage deep divisions—such as regional disagreement over the Venezuelan crisis—even led to the impossibility of holding the summit scheduled for 2017 in San Salvador, highlighting the limits of bi-regional political dialogue and restricting LAC's ability to project a cohesive voice vis-à-vis the EU (Ruano, 2018).

The EU-CELAC Summit held in Brussels in July 2023 reactivated high-level dialogue and political cooperation between the two regions, evidencing a renewed willingness to strengthen the strategic relationship. During the meeting, the EU announced the mobilization of up to €45 billion in investments for LAC until 2027, channeled through the *Global Gateway* initiative, which guides a new investment agenda focused on areas such as digital transformation, green transition and human development (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023, p. 4).

Despite this recent recovery, EU-LAC relations are in a phase of stagnation resulting from an uncertain geopolitical landscape, limited Latin American integration and divergent priorities between the two regions. European diplomatic attention has been absorbed by crises such as the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, while political fragmentation in LAC prevents the articulation of common positions in international negotiations. Although both regions share

values and interests that have facilitated relevant cooperation frameworks and multilateral agreements, the consolidation of the bi-regional agenda requires intensified political dialogue, modernization of the network, a reorientation of cooperation, and the promotion of peace, democracy, and human rights (Ríos & Rodríguez, 2025).

### *Current Diagnosis of EU-LAC Trade Policy*

The current trade policy framework between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean is underpinned by a broad – but heterogeneous – set of agreements that the EU has negotiated with both individual countries and regional blocs. According to Van Klaveren (2023), these relationships are structured around two main pillars:

1. The EU-LAC/CELAC interregional summits, established since 1999.
2. The association and free trade agreements, which have defined the bi-regional economic architecture for the past two decades.

In LAC, the EU has established Association Agreements with Mexico (2000) and Chile (2002) – recently modernized – as well as agreements with other blocs: CARIFORUM (2008), which brings together the countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Dominican Republic; Andean Community (CAN) through Multiparty Agreements (2012 with Colombia and Peru, 2017 with Ecuador); Central America (2012), including Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama; and the EU-Mercosur Agreement, whose negotiation was politically concluded in 2019 but is still pending ratification (Van Klaveren, 2023). This network of instruments reflects a close relationship that encompasses trade, political dialogue and international cooperation dimensions.

Given the economic and strategic weight of the agreements with Mexico, Chile and Mercosur, and considering their recent processes of modernization or political definition, this section will examine

these three cases in greater detail due to their relevance in the current bi-regional scenario.

In the case of Mexico, the Global Agreement – formally called the Economic Partnership, Political Coordination and Cooperation Agreement – signed in 2000 was the EU’s first trade pact with Latin America and also established a framework for political cooperation, something unusual in Mexican agreements with other partners. However, over time it lagged behind more modern regulatory areas, especially in digital trade, data protection, sustainability and agricultural openness. The modernization of the agreement, which began in 2016, faced delays due to factors such as the priority given by Mexico to the Agreement with the United States and Canada (USMCA), the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical reconfiguration derived from the war in Ukraine. Finally, the negotiations concluded on January 17, 2025. The new agreement incorporates the elimination of agricultural barriers, greater liberalization of services, the opening of public procurement at the state level in Mexico, the expansion of geographical indications and new provisions adapted to the challenges of the 21st century, aligning with the institutional framework of an EU more integrated into the Treaty of Lisbon (Baker, Estevadeordal & Talvi, 2025).

As for Chile, the trade relationship with the European Union has undergone a profound update with the entry into force, on 1 February 2025, of the Interim Trade Agreement, which replaces the Association Agreement signed in 2002 and in force since 2005. This modernized agreement is the result of a negotiation process initiated in November 2017 and concluded in December 2022, whose purpose was to broaden and deepen the trade pillar to adapt it to changes in the global geopolitical and economic context (Ministry of Economy, Commerce and Business of Spain, 2025a). The new framework is made up of two legal instruments: the Advanced Framework Agreement (AMA), which includes the political and cooperation pillar, and the trade and investment pillar – subject to ratification by all EU Member States – and the Interim Trade

Agreement (ITA), which covers the parts of the trade and investment pillar under the exclusive competence of the EU. This agreement will expire as soon as the AMA enters into force (European Commission, 2025).

In relation to Mercosur, the agreement with the EU – whose negotiations began in 1999 and reached a political understanding in 2019 – has faced a prolonged stalemate in its ratification. The process was particularly slowed down by tensions arising from the environmental policy of Jair Bolsonaro's government, marked by the increase in deforestation and fires in the Amazon, which led the European Parliament to argue that the agreement could not be ratified in its state (Suárez & Pasquariello, 2020). This concern was shared by Member States with strong agricultural and livestock interests, which expressed doubts about the possible environmental effects and unfair competition that their products could face (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022; Suárez & Pasquariello, 2020). The election of Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2022 allowed negotiations to be reactivated, and in December 2024 the political decision was made to finalize the agreement (Gómez de Agüero, Escartí & Chikhi, 2025). Regarding the economic contents, the agreement grants industrial and service advantages to the EU and improves Mercosur's access to the European market for its agricultural exports, establishing differentiated tariff reduction schedules in recognition of the asymmetries between the two blocs. In addition, it incorporates an advanced TSD chapter, with commitments on labor and environmental matters, and the obligation not to reduce standards to attract foreign investment (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022). Once the legal-technical review and translation have been completed, the text must be submitted for approval by the Council, and subsequently, by the European Parliament (Gómez de Agüero, Escartí & Chikhi, 2025).

Overall, the bi-regional trade policy between the EU and LAC is developed in a context marked by asymmetries, heterogeneity and internal divisions in the Latin American region, as pointed out by various authors. From the European perspective, there is also a mis-

trust regarding the possibility of agreeing common positions with so many Latin American countries at the same time, due to the absence of effective regional coordination mechanisms in LAC. As a result, the EU has chosen to negotiate agreements differentiated by country or subregional groupings, which in practice contributes to reinforcing the existing divisions on the continent, despite the European discourse of support for Latin American integration (González, 2020).

### *Geopolitical and Commercial Challenges*

Since the mid-1990s, the EU's market share in trade with LAC has fallen significantly, from 24.8% in 1990 to 13.7% in 2011 (Grieger, 2023, p. 4). This decline is due to a combination of geopolitical transformations, as well as the effects of the 2008 financial crisis. Among the factors that explain this change are: 1) the rise of emerging markets, in particular China, and its growing role as a new player in the region to the detriment of traditional partners; 2) the creation in 2011 of the Pacific Alliance, made up of Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, with a marked interest in linking to Asian markets; 3) the growing relevance of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which includes Chile, Mexico and Peru, and which Costa Rica, Ecuador and Uruguay have requested to join between 2021 and 2022; (4) the enlargements of the EU, which, by increasing their diversity, highlighted the low level of commitment of the new Member States to LAC; 5) ideological fragmentation in Latin America and its regional organizations, weakening subregional integration and stability; 6) the economic crises in the European Union; 7) a decade of low economic growth in LAC, with consequences such as increased poverty, weak domestic demand, and a lower capacity to attract foreign direct investment (Grieger, 2023).

### *Opportunities for the Bi-regional Association*

Despite the tensions and fragmentation that characterize trade policy between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean, the current scenario offers favorable conditions for revitalizing the bi-regional partnership through renewed instruments and a shared vision of sustainable development. The opportunities are concentrated in four interconnected areas: the modernization of trade agreements, the ratification of the EU-Mercosur agreement, the implementation of the *Global Gateway* investment agenda, and the strengthening of Latin American interregional trade.

First, the modernization of the agreements with Mexico and Chile constitutes a strategic opportunity to adapt cooperation frameworks to contemporary challenges. In the case of Mexico, the update of the Global Agreement provides that 99% of the products exchanged will be free of tariffs, benefiting both the agricultural and industrial sectors through tariff reductions and greater customs facilitation (Spanish Ministry of Economy, Trade and Enterprise, 2025b). The agreement incorporates advances in rules of origin and regulatory recognition in the automotive sector, as well as outstanding results in services – including financial, postal, telecommunications, transport and environmental services. In terms of investment, Mexico adopts the European approach through the acceptance of the *Investment Court System* (ICS). Likewise, the chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development establishes binding commitments on environmental protection, the fight against climate change and labor rights, in addition to integrating specific clauses to combat corruption in the public and private sectors (Ministry of Economy, Commerce and Business of Spain, 2025b). Beyond these advances, the relationship with Mexico offers additional opportunities: for the EU, the country is not only a dynamic market, but also a strategic platform to access the North American economic space through the USMCA. The new agreement also creates favorable conditions to attract European investment in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, renewable energies and higher value-added activities,

in a context in which both actors seek to diversify their alliances in the face of a more protectionist global environment. Likewise, the consolidated business relations between Mexico and European partners such as Spain, Germany and France offer a solid basis for deepening industrial and technological cooperation, reinforcing the strategic dimension of the bi-regional partnership (Baker, Estevadeordal & Talvi, 2025). In the case of Chile, the modernized agreement introduces substantive improvements over the previous framework, including the liberalization of 99.9% of EU exports to Chile, the protection of 216 European geographical indications and greater access to clean raw materials and fuels such as lithium, copper and hydrogen (Ministry of Economy, Commerce and Business of Spain, 2025a). The agreement also facilitates the provision of services by European companies, ensures equal treatment for investors from both sides and increases opportunities for participation in public procurement. In addition, it incorporates chapters dedicated to SMEs, trade and sustainable development, trade and gender, as well as sustainable food systems. It also broadens political dialogue and integrates provisions on democratic principles, human rights, and the rule of law, along with a renewed emphasis on science, technology, research, and innovation (Ministry of Economy, Commerce and Business of Spain, 2025a).

Second, the understanding in principle between the EU and Mercosur – still pending ratification – incorporates a set of trade concessions that would redefine the bi-regional economic framework. The EU would gain advantages in the industrial and service sectors, as well as in certain agricultural products, while Mercosur would improve its access to the European market for its agricultural exports. The text establishes differentiated tariff reduction schedules to reflect the asymmetries between the two partners: Mercosur would liberalize 91% of imports from the EU within 10 years, with longer periods for sensitive sectors such as the automotive, chemical and pharmaceutical sectors; for its part, the EU would eliminate tariffs on 92% in 10 years and on 95% in 15 years. In the agricultural field – historically conflictive – Mercosur would abolish tariffs on

95% of European agri-food imports, while the EU would do so with 82%, maintaining quotas for the most sensitive products and broad recognition of geographical indications (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022, p. 282). In addition, the sustainability impact assessment presented by the European Commission estimates that the entry into force of the instrument could increase GDP by 0.1% in the EU and 0.3% in Mercosur by 2032, as a result of the reduction of tariff and non-tariff barriers (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022, p. 283). If finally ratified, the trade pillar would become the EU's broadest agreement in terms of population covered and would generate tariff gains estimated at more than €4 billion, also reinforcing Europe's geopolitical position in LAC through an almost complete network of trade agreements in the region (Grieger, 2023, p. 32).

Third, the *Global Gateway* strategy provides a significant basis for deepening the bi-regional partnership between the EU and LAC through a broad set of investments aimed at digital transformation, green transition and human development. The EU will mobilize up to €45 billion by 2027 to support initiatives covering inclusive and secure connectivity, the 4.0 digitalization of production processes, the strengthening of agile and connected states through training in digital skills, and the development of smart and ethical digital regulation (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023, p. 4). In the climate and energy field, opportunities are opening up in the electrification of transport, the production of green hydrogen and the expansion of renewable energies. These areas, together with mechanisms such as debt-for-climate action swaps, make it possible to articulate joint projects that contribute to sustainable development, economic modernization, and institutional strengthening in the region (Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2023).

Finally, the deepening of intraregional trade is a necessary condition for LAC to achieve economic development. Although historically the share of this exchange was around 20% of total exports, since 2008 it has decreased to around 14% in 2021, despite being the main destination for Latin American manufactures, SME exports and a sig-

nificant proportion of services (Inoue, 2023, p. 30). Its weakening limits productive diversification, industrialization and insertion in value chains, crucial factors to overcome the persistent reprimarization of the export basket and the low incorporation of technology. Hence, strengthening it is essential to scale up technologically, increase regional value added, and reduce external vulnerability, especially in a context of geopolitical tensions, deterioration of the multilateral system, and high concentration of exports in raw materials (Inoue, 2023). This diagnosis is reinforced by the evidence that between 70% and 80% of Latin American medium and high-tech manufacturing is directed to the region itself (Rosales, 2020, p. 27). For this reason, any serious effort at reindustrialization must prioritize access to an expanded and better articulated market, which also favors SMEs as it is the space where they find fewer barriers and greater opportunities for insertion. From this perspective, the consolidation of trade agreements between LAC and the EU could contribute to a more integrated and equitable regional market, diversifying the export base and its suppliers (Rosales, 2020). In turn, bi-regional agreements not only eliminate tariffs, but also build common regulatory frameworks based on shared values such as sustainable development, human rights and the rule of law. For the EU, this network of agreements reduces its dependence on China and Russia by securing strategic raw materials for the green transition; for LAC, it opens a third market of large scale and sophistication that allows diversifying its international insertion and participating in value chains with greater technological content. By moving towards interoperability and regulatory convergence between the multiple EU-LAC agreements, an integrated economic area of more than 1,100 million people could be configured, with a GDP comparable to that of the United States. This would increase bi-regional trade by up to 70% and intra-LAC trade by up to 38% (Baker, Estevadeordal & Talvi, 2025, p. 2).

In this context, the IV CELAC-EU Summit, which was held in Santa Marta (Colombia) in November 2025, constitutes a strategic opportunity to translate political dialogue into tangible results.

This high-level meeting, which brought together the heads of state and government of both regions, consolidated a 2025-2027 cooperation roadmap focused on the triple energy, digital and environmental transition, as well as health self-sufficiency, sustainable agriculture, food security and gender equity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, 2025).

### *European Union Values in Question*

Trade agreements are a central instrument of the European Union's external action, as they not only facilitate economic exchange and the removal of barriers, but also function as mechanisms for projecting its fundamental values – including “democracy, human rights, environmental protection and social rights” – in its relations with third countries (Menéndez, Alzina, & Martín, 2024, p. 60). In this sense, the EU's trade policy is based, at least at the declarative level, on the essential values established in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.

The bi-regional relationship shows that, although the association agreements incorporate a political and a cooperation pillar, in many cases their development has been limited due to the clear commercial priority of the parties. In the modernization processes with Mexico, Chile and Mercosur, the core remains the liberalization of trade and investment and the assurance of reciprocal access to markets. However, the centrality of this dimension often leads to a predominantly economic reading of the agreements, which does not allow us to appreciate their potential scope in the face of the new challenges faced by both regions in a scenario marked by the need to expand the margins of autonomy, preserve spaces for multilateral regulation in the face of geopolitical competition from China and the United States, and to respond to an environmental crisis that requires more sustainable models of development (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022).

In this framework, the agreements are also spaces for regulatory convergence, the promotion of productive transformation and the reconstruction of the social contract, opening up new policy spaces in some areas through cooperation, including industrial development and ecological transition. In this regard, it is relevant to consider that the EU is in an internal process of strategic redefinition – accelerated by the European Green Deal and the energy crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine – that incorporates environmental, industrial and foreign policy objectives, strengthening its regulatory power and its ability to set global standards, although these rules may be perceived by Latin American partners as new forms of green or technological protectionism. given the existing asymmetries (Bonilla & Sanahuja, 2022).

### *Conclusion*

The partnership between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean is at a decisive juncture to consolidate itself as a strategic alliance capable of responding to the challenges of the twenty-first century. Far from being limited to a trade relationship, the bi-regional link can become a comprehensive framework that articulates shared values with converging geopolitical and economic interests. The reactivation of political dialogue, the modernization of key agreements, the possible ratification of the EU-Mercosur Agreement and the *Global Gateway* investment agenda offer a window of opportunity to transform the relationship into a long-range structural project.

However, realizing this potential requires overcoming persistent obstacles, such as Latin American fragmentation, the limited institutionalization of bi-regional dialogue, and the prevalence of a predominantly economistic vision of the agreements. To this end, cooperation must be oriented towards three strategic objectives: strengthening political dialogue as the basis of a coherent agenda; promoting intraregional integration and trade in LAC as a basis for more robust insertion; and moving towards regulatory convergence

that allows for the configuration of a bi-regional economic space with greater global regulatory capacity.

If both regions manage to articulate a common agenda based on open strategic autonomy, they will be able to diversify alliances, reduce dependencies, promote productive transformation, and consolidate a sustainable partnership model. In this sense, the EU-LAC relationship can not only be revitalized but also projected as a global strategic alliance with the capacity to have an impact on international governance and contribute to the construction of a fairer order.

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## **Challenges in Collective Political Reincorporation: The Comunes Political Party in the Post-Peace Agreement Context**

### *Introduction*

The armed group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) began dialogue with the Colombian Government in 2012, culminating in the signing of the Final Peace Agreement (Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera, AFP) in 2016. One of the key elements of the AFP was the political reincorporation, outlined in Point Two “Participación política: Apertura democrática para construir la paz”. Which proposes the consolidation of peace through democratic inclusion of new political parties or movements through certain interventions: A new Sistema Integral de Seguridad para el Ejercicio de la Política, adjustments to the requirements for maintaining legal status, an eight-year transitional regime to strengthen, through funding and dissemination, political parties and movements that entered the system for the first time, finally the reform of the electoral regime and organization was contemplated, as well as the promotion of a democratic and participatory political culture.

The political reincorporation of an armed group is not always present in peace agreements, however in the Colombian case it was a priority, which is also particular, since they opted for a collective reincorporation, structural rather than assistance-oriented (Zam-

brano, 2019). Today, nearly ten years after the AFP, there remains interest in identifying the challenges faced by the Party in this process, in relation to external and internal factors.

The general objective of this article is to identify the challenges faced by the Comunes Party in its transition toward collective political reincorporation following the Peace Agreement, based on the analysis of the statements of its militants and their contrast with theoretical references. Specifically, it seeks to: analyze these statements in relation to the reincorporation process, compare them with theoretical approaches to the transformation of rebel groups into political parties and situate the analysis within broader academic literature on the transition from rebel groups to political parties (Lyons, 2005; De Zeeuw, 2007; McMullin, 2013; Dudouet, et al., 2016; Marshall & Ishiyama, 2016).

The article structures the analysis based on two criteria -internal and external- derived from the review of academic literature on the transition from rebel groups to political parties, as can be seen in Figure 1. The criteria are two: external and internal, the former refers to the incidence of external factors or those that are not under the absolute decision of the organization, the latter seeks to analyze the organization and decisions taken at the Party level.

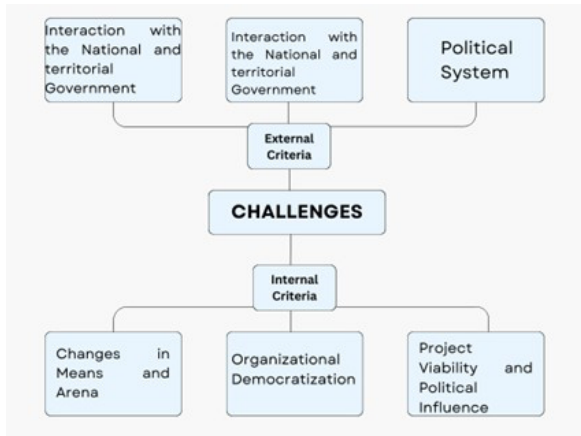


Figure 1 *Criteria and categories to identify the challenges faced by the Comunes Party in its collective political reincorporation within the framework of the post-Peace Agreement*

At the same time, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with five individuals who fulfilled two conditions: having been part of the FARC-EP and being a militant of the Comunes Party. The selection responded to a purposive sampling strategy intended to analyze the criteria from different positions, identities and trajectories, therefore it does not constitute a statistically representative sample. All participants took part voluntarily and gave informed consent.

The contributions of the following participants are presented: “Livia”, a 44-year-old woman, former member of the FARC-EP, signatory of the AFP, UNP agent and militant of the Comunes Party; “Fabio”, a 60-year-old man, former commander of two FARC-EP fronts, signatory of the AFP and member of the national leadership of the Comunes Party; “Lucas Urueta”, a 61-year-old man, former commander of a FARC-EP front, Representative for Atlántico in the Colombian Chamber of Representatives from the Comunes Party and signatory of the AFP; “Gloria”, a 38-year-old woman, militant and member of the departmental leadership of the Comunes Party, signatory of the AFP and UNP agent; and “Francelli”, a 51-year-old woman, signatory of the AFP, member of the national leadership of the Comunes Party, member of the specialized subdirectorate of the UNP, participant in a collective project of women signatories in Antioquia.

The interviews were conducted deductively, with questions based on the established theoretical criteria and were subsequently analyzed using a categorical matrix. In a second phase, the empirical findings were contrasted with the internal and external criteria to identify the main challenges faced by the Comunes Party in its process of collective political reincorporation within the post-Peace Agreement context.

### *Theoretical Framework*

In this article, the term “rebel group” is used to refer to the FARC-EP, due to the wide variety of terms in the literature, whose lines of distinction are often diffuse. In addition, the theoretical approaches analyzed address the transition from rebel groups to political parties, this term is widely accepted in the academic literature and avoids engaging with specific categories. It is not intended to disregard that the FARC-EP self-defined as a Political-Revolutionary Organization (FARC-EP, 2007). The definition proposed by De Zeeuw (2007) is adopted, which establishes:

A non-state organization with clear political objectives that challenges the authority of a government and its legitimate monopoly of violence, and that uses armed force to reform, overthrow or secede from an existing state regime, or to control a specific geographical area. (p.4)

After signing the AFP (2016), the militants of the FARC-EP committed to an uncommon method in the country, whose objective was to strengthen their capacities to actively participate in peacebuilding and in the social dynamics of their contexts, creating support networks and strategies to confront possible risks (DNP, 2018). Unlike DDR models (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration), which are individualistic and seek to dismantle former structures and hierarchies (Sundh and Schjørlie, 2006; United Nations, 2006, cited in Zambrano, 2019), collective reincorporation uses these structures as a mechanism to achieve a sustainable and comprehensive process. Thus, through shared history and organization, the signatories can engage in Colombia's political dynamics (Jaramillo, 2023).

Lyons (2005), in *Demilitarizing Politics: Elections on the Uncertain Road to Peace*, argues that transforming militarized organizations into effective political parties is key to the demilitarization of politics. This transformation encourages actors to comply with democratic electoral rules and reduces the possibilities of a return to war, guiding the organization through rational calculations that

weight benefits and disadvantages within institutional frameworks, in contrast to the logic of armed struggle.

The transformation of rebel groups into political parties is neither linear nor does it have a predetermined formula for success; it involves a chain of changes without a specific sequence (Dudouet et al., 2016). However, studies have been conducted that seek to identify patterns that differentiate the success or failure of the political reincorporation of non-state armed groups.

There are also studies that analyze whether the long-term inclusion of former rebel groups in the political system impacts durable peace, using legislative electoral data (Marshall & Ishiyama, 2016). The authors show that what is key is not the number of seats obtained, but sustained inclusion in governance. Thus, a distinction is made between long-term inclusion —real participation in political and governmental processes— and short-term inclusion, which only ensures presence at negotiation tables without guaranteeing continuity.

For the FARC-EP, Zambrano (2019) identifies strategic, organizational and operational changes necessary to consolidate itself as a party. Other studies focus exclusively on internal reasons to assess the transformation into a political party (Rettberg & Moreno, 2023), highlighting shortcomings in electoral strategies, alliances, legislative skills and leadership renewal. In line with those who examine internal fractures, Salas (2020) emphasizes the influence of external and internal factors in the fragmentation of the party, such as opposition to the AFP, the plebiscite and low electoral support.

Michels (1915) in *Political Parties* argues that the modern party is politically combative, placing emphasis on context as a determining factor, in line with what was proposed by Dudouet et al. (2016) who highlight that the first steps toward a successful transformation are changes in the means and in the arena of political struggle, abandoning armed action and operating within the legal framework.

This theoretical framework makes it possible to approach political reincorporation as a non-linear process influenced by external

and internal criteria. Therefore, the criteria and each one of the categories developed by the authors around the theories on the transition from rebel groups to political parties are analyzed.

### *Internal Criteria*

Those that are part of the decisions of the party organization; there is an infinite number of criteria through which a political party may be evaluated, however in this case those of greatest relevance to the process of transition from rebel group to political party were selected.

*Change in Means and Arena:* this refers, first to the shift from the use of a military apparatus to carry out political activities, and second to the change of arena in which these activities are conducted, the battlefield is no longer the site of struggle, instead political action takes place within the established legal framework (Dudouet, et al. 2016.; Zambrano, 2019).

With respect to the context in which organizations operate, Zald and McCarthy (1987) argue that they exist within a changing environment and must adapt through modifications in their objectives and internal organization. The decision to move from a context that may generate incentives in which they have experience, such as war, to a new one such as electoral competition, as mentioned by Shugart (1992), is part of internal decisions and rational calculations about possibilities and limitations.

This criterion constitutes a crucial step in the process of political reincorporation of a rebel group, although the literature indicates similarities between rebel groups and political parties (Michels, 1915; Lyons, 2005), De Zeeuw (2007) points out that the transformation may appear inevitable and with a clear direction in connection with organizational change, but in practice it is not so simple, and may generate adversities.

When considering each rebel group as an organization with distinct objectives and purposes, the change in means and arena may vary according to its characteristics. In the Colombian case, the

AFP (2016) signed between the FARC-EP and the Colombian State establishes the proscription of violence as a method of political action, with the objective of moving toward a scenario in which democracy prevails with full guarantees for political participation.

*Organizational Democratization*: the criterion of organizational democratization is defined by Dudouet et al. (2016) as the transformation of the political culture of an armed group, from a command-and-control approach to one adapted to a pluralist political reality, it is understood in two directions: the shift from vertical leadership consistent with the military structure, to participatory decision-making within the party, and openness to new ideas and leadership renewal that allow for the political participation of militants.

As it is an internal criterion, its development will depend on the party; nevertheless, a common feature among rebel groups undergoing reincorporation is their hierarchical organization with dominant leaders, generating what De Zeeuw (2007) refers to as the old habit of authoritarian decision-making, more pronounced when the organization has been engaged in armed conflict for a long time. This “stagnation” in leadership may hinder the party’s consolidation in the new context, since, as Lyons (2005) mentions, a good military leader is not necessarily a good electoral leader, given that the competencies required are different.

In the Colombian case, the FARC-EP, today the Comunes Political Party, have been the subject of studies on their internal organization. Salas (2020) analyzes the fragmentation of the Comunes Party, identifying internal causes such as ideological disagreements—reflected even in the choice of the new name—and the rejection of the emergence of new leaderships, evidenced in the fact that almost ten years after the signing of the AFP, it maintains the same president (Rodrigo Londoño, “Timochenko”).

*Project Viability and Political Influence*: it refers to the degree of sustainability in the face of the group’s organizational and strategic changes (Dudouet, et al. 2016). That is, how the political project as a rebel group transforms in the process of reincorporation as a party,

including the political agenda that was defended through arms and within an arena of struggle, and which must now be transformed into the institutional framework of democracy.

Dudouet, et al. (2016) define political influence as the capacity to participate effectively in decision-making process at the national or local level, in line with what is proposed by Marshall and Ishiyama (2016) concerning the distinction between long-term and short-term inclusion, the former being real inclusion in the governance process.

For the Comunes Party, the seats granted by the AFP (2016) made it possible to obtain representation in Congress during two legislative terms. Although the electoral dimension is not the only measure of viability and political influence, its performance in this context constitutes a relevant indicator. Lyons (2005) points out that many militarized organizations have a potential electorate, but it is uncertain to what extent this support will be maintained in times of peace. Therefore, future electoral results will be key to assessing their viability and political influence.

### *External Criteria*

This section addresses the criteria that do not depend exclusively on the party, but rather on different contextual factors within which the process of political reincorporation and political activity takes place.

*Interaction with the National and territorial Government:* in political reincorporation, long-term interventions and state policies are important, therefore each state institution plays a role in the implementation of the AFP (2016), including the national government, which is renewed every four years. Marshall and Ishiyama (2016) point out that the long-term inclusion of former rebel groups in the political system has an impact on durable peace, through governance decisions that allow the party to participate in the formulation of public actions.

Although ideally the AFP (2016) would be included in the plan of each government, Salas (2020) explains that the fragmentation

of the party was influenced by the rise of an opposition government under the slogan “ni trizas ni risas”, hindering the fulfillment of the guarantees of the Peace Agreement and showing the decisive role of the government in political reincorporation.

At present, the government is held by a left-wing coalition, which might initially suggest a “green light”; however, Rettberg and Moreno (2023) highlight the explicit rejection of Comunes due to its exclusion from the coalition, attributed to its “reputation” and the implications of possible alliances. They also argue that the Party’s limited expertise in adapting to the informal institutions of Congress hinders its ability to build alliances.

The interaction as a party with entities at the national level such as the government is crucial for advancing political agendas under governance interventions.

*Political Culture and Social Legitimacy:* according to Parsons (1951), political culture refers to the subjective feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize individual and collective political orientations within a political system, which grant legitimacy to a political actor.

In the case of rebel groups that become political parties, De Zeeuw (2007) argues that their transformation does not take place in an institutional or political vacuum; rather, it is influenced by the national political context, including political culture. McMullin (2013) warns that labeling former combatants as dangerous actors may negatively affect their social and political reincorporation.

The tactics and strategies employed during and after the conflict influence the popular support they receive (Dudouet et al., 2016). For the FARC-EP, today the Comunes Party, Salas (2020) identifies moments in which their image has been influenced by internal and external factors, such as the vote for the “No” in the peace plebiscite, influenced by campaigns opposed to the AFP, the resignation from his congressional seat by Iván Márquez and his return to arms, as well as the creation of the Segunda Marquetalia.

The most recent report of the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia (2025) reports 481 killings of signatories of the AFP (2016) from its signing until 2025, indicating alerts in connection with security guarantees, without detaching this situation from the existing political culture surrounding individuals in the process of reincorporation.

*Political System:* Easton (1965) defines the political system as the set of interactions, institutions, and processes through which power is exercised. In relation to the inclusion of former rebel groups, Marshall and Ishiyama (2016) argue that their long-term participation promotes durable peace. Similarly, Sisk and Reynolds (1999) emphasize that electoral systems —rules and procedures that translate votes into seats or executives— are fundamental for elections to support democratization and conflict management. However, other studies do not find a clear relationship between the political system and reincorporation (Manning and Smith, 2016; Söderberg and Hatz, 2016). In this case, the political system is recognized as an influential criterion, due to the FARC-EP's political-ideological characteristics.

Concerning inclusion in the political system, the AFP (2016), in its second point, “Political Participation: Democratic Opening to Build Peace,” sets out actions such as reforming the requirements for the legal recognition of parties, creating a system for obtaining rights based on electoral performance, and establishing an eight-year transitional regime to support parties emerging after the AFP, with the purpose of facilitating access to the political system by removing institutional obstacles.

At present, this is particularly relevant considering that, in the Alerta Temprana 013-2025 issued by the Defensoría del Pueblo (2025) for the 2025–2026 electoral processes, the Comunes Party faces a challenging scenario for the 2026 elections, lacking special funding and having to exceed the 3% threshold to maintain its legal recognition, raising questions about whether the guarantees granted by the AFP have been sufficient to ensure inclusion in the political system.

*Contrast Analysis by Categories and Findings**Internal Criteria*

*Change in the means and the arena:* The Party faces challenges about the changes in the strategies used when engaging in politics, actions delimited to achieve political objectives, recruitment of militants, alliances, and campaigns around a political agenda. As the interviewee *Fabio* expresses: “the armed logic makes politics be exercised differently, an organization of the political bases was carried out, acting in territories where there was a state vacuum. Before we were the enforcement force for the people, that changes ‘here.’” (Fabio, 2025)

In the armed phase, political participation was exercised in territories where the FARC-EP fulfilled the role of an absent State, granting greater social and community impact. Trejos (2023) states that “the extralegal norms of the FARC-EP regulated civilian life in the territories where the State did not operate or did so precariously” (p. 177). In coherence, De Zeeuw (2007) highlights that the creation of new electoral strategies and forming alliances with civil society groups are fundamental in the transition to a political party.

Although some literature suggests that the strategies between both organizations are similar and that only the context changes (Michels, 1915; Lyons, 2005), the interviews show that the organizational legacy of the FARC-EP explains part of the challenges the Party faces in redefining its means of action in a non-armed political arena. The political objectives —recruit militants and consolidate bases— remain, but the political strategies used in the armed context are not viable within the legal and democratic framework. If the intention is to maintain presence in the political system, strategies must be redefined, leveraging the collective nature that it seeks to preserve.

*Organizational Democratization:* for the interviewees, decision-making in the armed phase was carried out collectively, whereas at present organizational fragmentation is perceived. *Livia* points out:

“It was easier when we were in arms, there was a greater sense of unity. Decisions were made collectively. As a Party we are not united [...]” (Livia, 2025)

Jaramillo (2023) explains that in collective reincorporation, social worlds—ideas, dynamics, activities or communications— influence interaction with the political, social and economic system, but integration into a society with fractures can foster individualities and transformations in the concept of collectivity. This fragmentation is also noted by Zambrano (2015) and Salas (2020), when analyzing internal tensions in their transition to a political party.

In contrast with Dudouet, et al. (2016) and De Zeeuw (2007), who conceive the transition as the shift from non-democratic practices to democratic practices, in the case of the FARC-EP the collective character allowed the construction of a shared concept of democratic practices. However, when confronting the Colombian political, economic and social system as a Party, individualities and new issues have emerged that were previously subordinated to the collective political project.

With respect to leadership renewal Lucas states: “Another challenge is the mistrust toward new leaderships because there are comrades who believe that the legacy of having been in the war, when new people arrive they will displace them. [...]” (Lucas, 2025) Salas (2020) links this tension to the presence of Rodrigo Londoño as president of the Party since its emergence. De Zeeuw (2007) points out that this “old habit of authoritarian decision-making” can generate organizational stagnation, while Lyons (2007) warns that the qualities required to lead in armed struggle and in electoral politics do not always coincide.

The situation becomes more complex when considering collective reincorporation, which does not dismantle previous social structures, but rather uses them to participate collectively in the dynamics of the social, economic and political system of Colombia (Jaramillo, 2023). Although strong and consolidated leaderships are a positive aspect in political parties, the absolute refusal to re-

consider leadership renewal may have unintended consequences within the Party, such as the lack of mobilization of new militants.

In relation to the mistrust toward openness to new militancies, although it is a common phenomenon in this type of processes, the organization must find ways to overcome it, using to its advantage the collective character of reincorporation, including new militants in those social structures that are intended to be maintained and simultaneously cultivating potential leaderships. If political objectives are to be met, the recruitment of militants is essential in the political strategies to be used.

Organizational fragmentation can be identified as a consequence of the clash between the logic of collective reincorporation and the dynamics of the Colombian system, generating individualities and resistance to openness, limiting leadership renewal.

*Political Viability and Influence:* the interviewees acknowledge actions aimed at positioning the political project in the territory, although concrete strategies are not specified. *Fabio* points out: “There are shortcomings with respect to future projection, there has been a lack of integration, there must be adjustments in the organizational culture, and in the projection of the leaders.” (Fabio, 2025)

The lack of strategic clarity is related to the difficulty of changing political strategies in a new means and arena: previous forms of territorial influence cannot be used in this context. At the same time, organizational fragmentation and the limited openness to new militancies hinder the establishment of a political agenda with viable proposals.

Viability and influence can be measured electorally. The interviewees agree that in the 2026 legislative elections they will evaluate the results of the actions carried out during the eight years of transition (AFP, 2016). In 2022, the Party obtained 0.19% of the votes for the Senate (Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, 2022), far below the threshold required to maintain legal status, suggesting limited political influence, which requires strategic and organizational adjustments.

In relation to political influence as the capacity to participate effectively in decision-making (Dudouet, 2016), Zambrano (2019) states that in the transition of the FARC-EP to a political party the possibility of participating politically without arms and in a sustainable manner is at stake. Although electoral results are not the only indicator, the Comunes Party represents political reincorporation in its entirety, and requires supporters in order to remain in the political arena (Lyons, 2005).

The contrast between theory and interviews shows that each process of political reincorporation is unique. In this case, changes in political strategies and organizational fragmentation create internal weaknesses, affecting the Party's potential viability and influence within the political system.

The challenges identified within the internal criteria have an impact on the process of collective reincorporation of the Comunes Party. However, as several authors point out, this process is not monocausal; its success or failure depends on multiple factors (Dudouet et al., 2016; De Zeeuw, 2007). To understand comprehensively the political reincorporation of the Comunes Party, it is also necessary to address the external factors that affect its performance.

### *External Criteria*

*Interaction with the National Government:* the interviewees refer to certain "rules" that are not written and that affect their political participation and the implementation of the AFP (2016). This challenge is identified as informal institutions; these are composed of the ideologies of the government in power, or even of individual public officials, and are materialized in the implementation of the AFP provisions related to reincorporation, or in political participation in non-electoral spaces. *Francelly* refers to this: "The Party's recognition depends on political will for us to be able to participate in decision-making and in the implementation of the AFP. [...] We have faced difficulties that have become very evident depending on the administration in office and its ideological orientation. [...]" (Fran-

celly, 2025). *Fabio* adds: “Within institutions there are rules that are not written, but they are in force, and they function like a clock; it is what no one says, yet it defines how things must operate. [...] There are invisible boundaries in this form of democracy.” (Fabio, 2025)

Kalmanovitz (2004) describes informal institutions as social and ideological norms that guide the actions of agents. In this case, they constitute invisible boundaries that prevent an open and plural democracy as proposed in the AFP (2016).

The AFP should constitute the solid foundation for the Party’s interaction with governmental institutions, not the informal institutions constructed through temporary ideologies or individual prejudices. It is impossible to conceive the implementation of the Agreement without democratic openness and political reincorporation, which has long-term implications for peace (Marshall and Ishiyama, 2016).

Authors who have studied the political participation of the party Comunes have pointed out how the ideology of the National Government in power influences the performance of its political participation (Salas, 2020; Zambrano, 2019), creating invisible limits in the interaction between the two actors, removing the legal framework from its role as mediator. The AFP must be the normative basis for the interaction between governmental institutions and the Party and its members, above prejudices and political will.

Political Culture and Social Legitimacy: the challenge of stigmatization is identified, reflected in exclusion by other political parties through the refusal of possible alliances, the use of terms by the media, and derogatory comments in territories where the Party seeks to participate politically. As *Gloria* states: “Besides the government, there is stigmatization in the territories; there are areas where it is unsafe to openly identify as a reincorporated ex-combatant.” (Gloria, 2025). Similarly, *Lucas* affirms: “[...] there are specific contexts in which caution or animosity becomes evident when attempting to form alliances or coalitions; many obstacles are placed. People are afraid to participate in politics with us.” (Lucas, 2025).

McMullin (2013) warns that labeling former combatants as dangerous actors has negative effects on their social and political reincorporation. In the case of the Comunes Party, Rettberg and Moreno (2023) identify the “reputation” or “image” of the Comunes Party as a potential obstacle to building political alliances.

Among the ways in which this challenge manifests, the sense of insecurity stands out, which hampers the process of refraining from returning to arms and fully reintegrating (Spear cited in Lyons, 2005). It reduces incentives for the Party's political participation, and although this participation is constitutionally guaranteed by the AFP (2016), the sociocultural dynamics of the contexts in which it takes place may hinder it.

This phenomenon contradicts the objective of point two “Participación política: Apertura democrática para construir la paz” of the AFP (2016). Being linked to diffuse sociocultural dynamics, it is a situation difficult to address. The interviewees propose territorial education on the AFP to increase social legitimacy and foster engagement with the Party.

*Political System:* the interviewees highlight the absence of a political reform that strengthens parties, guarantees equity in funding, and reduces clientelistic practices. As *Lucas* states: “There have been some achievements, such as the opposition statute; there has been a change in the political system, but more progress is needed, to strengthen the parties, the margin of the threshold to maintain legal status —the draft law has been presented seven times and has not been approved by the political regime [...]” (Lucas, 2025).

This challenge is reflected in the rules for maintaining legal status, which require a threshold of 3% of the total valid votes at the national level (Political Constitution of Colombia, art. 108). Previous results for the Comunes Party show vote shares far below this threshold, putting its sustainability at risk once the transitional regime of the AFP (2016) ends and the Party faces the same rules that apply to other parties.

Although some studies do not find a direct relationship between the political system and reincorporation (Manning & Smith, 2016; Söderberg & Hatz, 2016), the interviewees note that the organization of the political system defines the level of democratization (Sisk & Reynolds, 1999), and that the political party must also perceive benefits in this new arena (Lyons, 2007).

Although the AFP established actions to facilitate the inclusion of new parties and movements, several of these have not been implemented due to political will. Rules such as the threshold for maintaining legal status end up favoring large parties with financial and temporal advantages, and indirectly weaken new parties in the political arena, such as Comunes. Overcoming this challenge requires the establishment of a political reform that includes differentiating elements to promote pluralism among parties and strengthen organizational capacity.

### *Conclusions*

This article sought to identify the challenges faced by the Comunes Party in its collective political reincorporation in the post-Peace Agreement period, using a qualitative approach that combined theoretical analysis of the transition from rebel groups to political parties with semi-structured interviews. This approach enabled a contrast between both sources of information and a deeper understanding of the process of collective political reincorporation.

The findings highlight the existence of internal challenges—such as changes in political strategies and organizational fragmentation—and external challenges—such as the role of informal institutions, stigmatization, and the absence of political reform. These challenges do not operate in isolation but jointly influence the Comunes Party's collective political reincorporation, shaping a system that intertwines internal organization with participation in the political system.

Consistent with understanding of reincorporation as an integral and complex process that must be addressed in a differentiated manner (Dudouet et al., 2016), the article focused on the specific case of the Comunes Party and its collective nature. Challenges were identified in their attempt to maintain the collective dynamics developed during their time as a revolutionary political organization in the post-Peace Agreement period, as well as the interaction between internal decisions made at the party level and the configurations of the Colombian political system—a relationship that operates more as feedback than as subordination.

Although the Party currently maintains its legal status, in the 2026–2030 legislative elections it will participate under the ordinary rules of the Colombian electoral system, which implies a risk of losing that status. In this context, the article suggests leveraging the Organization's collective nature to mitigate the effects of the identified challenges as a first step toward redefining political strategies to achieve specific objectives, while acknowledging that structural challenges inherent to the political system require state-level interventions.

Finally, it is recognized that the interviews conducted do not constitute a statistically representative sample, but rather a set selected for diversity of trajectories and experiences. Future research could further explore the interaction between internal and external challenges or develop focused analyses of the challenges identified in the post-election period, incorporating a larger number of cases or levels of analysis.

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## International Volunteering as an Expression of Solidarity Diplomacy in the European Union

In recent decades, the dynamics of international cooperation have incorporated new forms of interaction between societies that go beyond the traditional mechanisms of state diplomacy. In this context, international volunteering has gained increasing relevance as a tool for social, cultural, and political exchange between different regions of the world. In particular, the European Union has promoted programs aimed at strengthening youth participation in international solidarity initiatives, which allows these practices to be analyzed from the perspective of International Relations. In this sense, this article explores how international volunteering can be interpreted as a manifestation of solidarity diplomacy and as a strategy linked to the exercise of soft power in the relations between the European Union and other regions.

In International Relations, the concept of power has historically occupied a central place in theoretical debates. Traditionally, it has been understood as the ability of an actor to influence the behavior of other actors. However, such influence can be exercised through different mechanisms. According to Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2008), an actor may induce others to modify their behavior through coercion, material incentives, or attraction.

Coercive measures are associated with the use or threat of force, while incentives relate to the provision of material rewards. Within this framework, Nye develops the concept of *soft power*, arguing that

attraction allows actors to achieve certain objectives without resorting to force or direct imposition. Soft power is primarily based on three resources: culture, when it is attractive to others; political values, when there is coherence between discourse and practice both domestically and internationally; and foreign policies, when they are perceived as legitimate and endowed with moral authority.

Unlike hard power, soft power does not operate through direct pressure but through the ability to generate attraction and legitimacy. From this perspective, attraction emerges as an alternative form of exercising power in the international system, insofar as other actors voluntarily adopt certain preferences or behaviors. This is the case of the European Union, which according to Ian Manners can influence the behavior of others through the exportation of its values, thereby becoming a distinctive actor in global politics.

In this context, Nye also introduces the concept of *public diplomacy*, understood as the set of strategies through which governments seek to influence the opinions and perceptions of foreign societies. Public diplomacy shifts the focus from exclusively interstate interaction toward direct communication with foreign publics, becoming a fundamental instrument for the projection of soft power.

More recently, new approaches have emerged that seek to deepen public diplomacy by incorporating social dimensions of solidarity. One example is humanitarian diplomacy, understood as a political instrument aimed at promoting respect for international humanitarian law and protecting civilian populations in armed conflicts and other situations of violence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, 2023).

Likewise, strategies such as international volunteering should also be interpreted as one of the practical expressions of solidarity diplomacy, since they focus on promoting values and strengthening the bonds between societies. According to the Italian author Agostino Mantovani (2004), international volunteering, from a historical perspective, originated in a work camp organized in 1920 to rebuild a French village. This experience later served as a reference for other

initiatives. Among them is the *Unione Medico Missionaria Italiana*, which initiated volunteer activities both in Italy and abroad.

Furthermore, Mantovani argues that:

Il volontariato è esperienza di solidarietà e pratica di sussidiarietà: opera per la crescita della comunità locale, nazionale e internazionale, per il sostegno dei suoi membri più deboli o in stato di disagio e per il superamento delle situazioni di degrado. Nel volontariato la solidarietà si fonda sulla giustizia (Mantovani, 2004).

From this perspective, volunteering can be understood as an expression of solidarity diplomacy that integrates social cooperation with expressions of solidarity toward other communities, projecting values and building external relations based on attraction. In the European context, initiatives have been developed that align with the Sustainable Development Goals in cooperation between Latin America and the European Union, addressing major challenges framed within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, such as gender equality, economic development, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability (European Union External Action, 2020). Through these mobility and cooperation programs, the European Union offers young people the opportunity to participate in social, educational, and humanitarian projects in different countries.

The European Solidarity Corps, for its part, has been created as one of the main volunteering instruments promoted by the European Union, where young people become the primary actors of solidarity initiatives. Since its creation in 2016, the program has enabled the participation of more than 150,000 young people in solidarity and volunteering projects, financing more than 22,000 initiatives both within and outside Europe. The program has a budget of more than one billion euros for the 2021–2027 period, reflecting the growing importance that the European Union attributes to youth participation and solidarity initiatives as instruments of international action (European Union Delegation in Türkiye, 2025). Through this program, the European Union seeks to promote youth participation in projects aimed at generating positive social impacts aligned with

the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. In this way, these initiatives not only contribute to the development of host communities but also provide young people with inspiring and empowering experiences that promote the creation of meaningful social change.

In this sense, the development of programs such as the European Solidarity Corps reflects the existence of international action tools that converge in the European Union's commitment to soft power strategies, public diplomacy, and attraction-based initiatives rooted in solidarity. The active participation of citizens, especially young people, demonstrates a commitment to shared values, international cooperation, and the goals established in the 2030 Agenda. In this way, international volunteering not only impacts host communities but also strengthens the bonds between societies and highlights the solidarity-based character of the European Union as an international actor. These initiatives also contribute to incorporating civil society as a relevant actor in the construction of relations between Latin America and the European Union.

From this perspective, international volunteering can also be analyzed as a tool that articulates cooperation, citizen participation, and the projection of values in international politics. In the case of the European Union, mobility and solidarity programs strengthen ties between regions while projecting an image based on cooperation, solidarity, and commitment to global challenges. In this way, the study of international volunteering within the framework of relations between Latin America and the European Union makes it possible to understand how these initiatives are embedded within contemporary international action strategies, where public diplomacy, soft power, and civil society participation play an increasingly relevant role.

In conclusion, international volunteering, from the perspective of International Relations, makes it possible to understand the new diplomatic dynamics of the international system, which have evolved from traditional instruments toward new forms of engagement capable of responding to the current needs of global citizens, as reflected in the commitments established within the 2030 Agenda.

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## Between guaranteeing rights and control: EU-Latin American cooperation on mixed migration flows

### *Introduction*

International migration is one of the most significant phenomena in contemporary global politics. According to the World Migration Report 2024, between 281 and 304 million people currently live outside their country of origin, representing 3.6% of the world's population and reflecting the growing interconnection between regions and economies on a global scale (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

In recent decades, migratory movements have become increasingly complex. Instead of differentiated flows between economic migrants and refugees, current migration routes tend to be composed of mixed migration flows, involving people with different motivations and legal needs. These flows include, among others, refugees fleeing armed conflict, asylum seekers, economic migrants, victims of trafficking, and unaccompanied minors (IOM, 2021).

The complexity of these movements poses significant challenges for states and international institutions, mainly in terms of migration governance and human rights protection. In this context, international cooperation has established itself as a fundamental mechanism for addressing human mobility from a transnational perspective.

The relationship between the European Union and Latin America constitutes an important area of cooperation on migration issues.

Various programs and agreements have been promoted with the aim of strengthening migration management, promoting development, and improving mechanisms for the protection of migrants. However, academic literature such as Castles et al (2005) has warned that these initiatives are often fraught with persistent tension between two objectives: the protection of human rights and political pressure to control migration.

### *Mixed migration flows and migration governance*

According to the International Organization for Migration (2009), the concept of mixed migration flows is used to describe complex population movements in which different types of migrants travel together along the same routes, using similar means of transport, but with different motivations and legal needs.

These flows may include refugees fleeing persecution or conflict, victims of trafficking, migrants seeking better economic opportunities, and people displaced by natural disasters. Although they share similar migration trajectories, their specific needs and legal statuses differ considerably.

The coexistence of multiple migration profiles within the same flow creates significant challenges for migration authorities, as it generates structural tension between the logic of migration control and the IOM's human rights approach. "States must identify the international protection needs of each person and ensure access to mechanisms such as asylum or humanitarian protection" (IOM, 2009, p. 5). However, in practice, migration policies tend to focus on border management and reducing irregular migration. While international legal frameworks establish clear obligations regarding refugee protection and human rights, experience in this new globalized world has shown that States tend to prioritize policies aimed at managing or limiting migration flows.

*Migration cooperation between the European Union and Latin America*

Migration has become a priority area of the European Union's foreign policy and international cooperation. The European strategy seeks to develop partnerships with countries of origin and transit with the aim of addressing the causes of migration, strengthening migration management, and promoting safe and orderly mobility. The relevance of this approach is reflected in the demographic reality of the region, since, according to the European Union Diplomatic Service (2025), 27.3 million citizens of non-EU countries reside in EU member states, representing 6% of the total population of the European Union.

Within this framework, Latin America has been an important partner in various cooperation initiatives related to human mobility, refugee protection, and institutional development in the field of migration. Programs funded by the European Union, such as EUROFRONT, have supported initiatives for the integration of migrants and refugees in different Latin American countries, as well as the strengthening of institutional capacities for migration management and the protection of human rights at the border.

A recent example of this cooperation is the implementation of programs between the European Union, the International Organization for Migration, and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) aimed at promoting the social integration of migrants and refugees in the Latin American and Caribbean communities most affected by COVID-19 (Delegation of the European Union in Honduras, 2020).

These initiatives reflect an approach that combines humanitarian objectives with migration governance strategies, in which international cooperation is presented as a tool for managing the challenges associated with migration flows in a globalized world.

*The tension between human rights protection and migration control*

Despite the discursive emphasis on human rights protection, the literature suggests that international migration cooperation can also

serve as a mechanism for tightening migration control strategies beyond the borders of destination states.

According to Casas-Cortés et al (2015), this phenomenon has been described in the literature as “externalization of migration control,” a process by which states transfer part of the management of migration to countries of origin or transit through cooperation agreements, technical assistance, or financing.

In the case of the European Union, some analyses, such as that by Müller and Slominski (2020), suggest that certain migration cooperation programs have contributed to strengthening border control and migration management capacities in third countries, which could limit migrants’ access to the corresponding international protection mechanisms.

In this context, EU-Latin American cooperation finds itself caught between two contradictory objectives. On the one hand, promoting a human rights-based approach and international protection; and, on the other, strengthening institutional capacities to manage and control migration flows.

### *Discussion*

Analysis of bi-regional migration cooperation suggests that contemporary migration policies are characterized by growing interdependence between regions. The management of human mobility can no longer be understood solely as a national responsibility, but rather as a phenomenon that requires multi-level governance mechanisms.

However, this cooperation also raises questions about the balance between security and the guarantee of rights. Although international regulatory frameworks emphasize the importance of protecting the rights of migrants and refugees, in practice migration policies often prioritize management and control objectives.

Consequently, it is necessary to analyze in greater depth the consistency between regulatory commitments on human rights and

specific practices of international cooperation in the context of migration control.

### *Conclusions*

Mixed migration flows represent one of the main challenges for contemporary migration governance, because the coexistence of people with different migration profiles within the same routes poses significant challenges for identifying individual protection needs and applying differentiated legal frameworks.

Cooperation between the European Union and Latin America is a key arena for addressing these challenges. However, this analysis suggests that this cooperation is experiencing persistent tension between the protection of human rights and migration control strategies.

Understanding this tension is essential for assessing the role of international cooperation in managing human mobility and for moving toward more coherent approaches focused on the comprehensive protection of migrants.

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PART TWO

The Vietnamese Scholars' Experience

## Vietnamese Spatial Cognition and Its Influence on the Acquisition of Italian Spatial Prepositions

### *Introduction*

Language encodes spatial relations in ways that reflect cognitive and cultural patterns. In many Indo-European languages such as Italian, spatial prepositions are organized around relatively stable topological relations between a Trajector (TR) and a Landmark (LM). However, cross-linguistic research shows that languages vary significantly in how they conceptualize and encode space, with some systems relying on less explicit and more context-dependent mechanisms of spatial reference.

Vietnamese presents a particularly revealing case of such variation. In contrast to Italian, Vietnamese spatial cognition is characterized by a hierarchical, frame-dependent system of reference, in which spatial relations are not established solely through direct object-to-object configurations but are anchored to implicit, culturally grounded spatial frames. Central to this system is the notion of a *zero-point* of spatial orientation, an anchoring frame such as the ground, the sky, or the prototypical structure of a house, which may remain unexpressed in language yet plays a crucial role in spatial representation. Spatial interpretation is further shaped by observation strategies and the perceived entity properties as cognitive construal mechanisms. Together, these factors create a dynamic interaction between two modes of spatial reasoning: naïve (subjective) and geometrical (logical).

Despite growing interest in spatial cognition, little research has examined how culturally embedded conceptual structures influence the acquisition of spatial expressions in a foreign or second language, especially Vietnamese learners of Italian, including the role of observation strategies, zero-point anchoring, and hierarchical organization in cross-linguistic transfer.

Against this background, the study investigates the conceptualization of space in Vietnamese and Italian from a cognitive-linguistic perspective. It outlines the distinction between naïve and logical spatial reasoning, and identifies three key factors shaping spatial reference in Vietnamese: entity properties, the role of the zero-point, and observation strategies. On this basis, the study reconstructs Vietnamese cognitive maps across domestic space, geographical orientation, and social hierarchy. It then presents the results from an experimental study on Vietnamese learners of Italian, highlighting semantic transfer, overextension of containment, and shifts in observation strategies, as well as learners' gradual convergence toward the Italian system of direct relational encoding with less reliance on flexible, culturally anchored reference frames.

This study makes three main contributions. First, it advances a cognitive-linguistic account of spatial representation by integrating hierarchical, culturally grounded reference frames with flexible spatial anchoring. Second, it demonstrates how spatial language encodes culturally embedded models of space across domains, offering a systematic reconstruction of Vietnamese spatial cognition. Third, it provides new empirical insights into foreign and second language acquisition by showing how conceptual structures shape cross-linguistic transfer and learners' adaptation to a typologically different spatial system.

Taken together, these contributions shed new light on the relationship between spatial cognition, linguistic structure, and language learning, extending models of cross-linguistic variation by incorporating culturally based cognitive frameworks.

To address these issues, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Vietnamese spatial cognition structured in terms of hierarchical organization and zero-point anchoring?
2. In what ways does this system differ from Italian spatial encoding?
3. How do these differences shape Vietnamese learners' acquisition of Italian spatial prepositions?

Before addressing these questions, it is necessary to introduce a theoretical framework.

### *Theoretical framework*

#### *Two Forms of Spatial Reflection: Naïve vs. Logical Spatial Reasoning*

Perceived space does not coincide with physical space but is reconstructed through culture, social experience, and language (Sapir, 1956; Whorf, 1956; Svorou, 1993; Frawley, 1992). Linguists and cognitive scientists argue that external reality is unconsciously and partially reinterpreted through habitual language use, giving rise to culturally shaped worldviews. This raises the question of how such perceived reality is represented in language.

Psychologists such as Ananiev and Rubalko (1969, as cited in Frawley, 1992) suggest that the reconstruction of external reality and spatial relations occurs in two general ways:

1. *Direct/subjective/“naïve” reflection* – based on intuition, perception, and culturally shaped beliefs. In language, this is reflected in everyday expressions that encode experience rather than formal scientific knowledge. For example, in Vietnamese, phrases like *mặt trời mọc* (the sun ‘grows’) and *mặt trời lặn* (the sun ‘dives’).
2. *Indirect/logical/conceptual reflection* – based on abstract, systematic, or topological reasoning. This perspective treats space

in terms of ideal geometric relations or formal configurations, independent of individual experience.

Within cognitive linguistics, Herskovits (1986) links these forms of reflection to two analytical perspectives on spatial language:

- Fundamental/canonical view – corresponding to naïve, subjective reflection; emphasizes human experience and cultural conventions.
- Geometrical conceptualization view – corresponding to logical/topological reflection; emphasizes abstract, systematic spatial relations.

These two perspectives correspond to the two forms of spatial reflection and are elaborated in the following sections.

### *The Canonical Viewpoint: Subjective and Naïve Reflection*

Naïve or canonical reflection on space emphasizes human experience, perception, and culturally shaped beliefs rather than formal scientific knowledge (Hawkins, 1984; Herskovits, 1986; Langacker, 1987–1990; Svorou, 1993). In Vietnamese, this perspective is encoded in everyday expressions, such as *mặt trời mọc* (the sun ‘grows’) and *mặt trời lặn* (the sun ‘dives’) reflecting folk conceptions of the sun and Earth that differ from modern scientific understanding (Frawley, 1992).

Spatial representation is further reinforced through figurative and reduplicative constructions, like Ly (2005) pointed out:

- Reduplicative constructions with *-úc* or *-ấp* indicate irregular movement or instability: *ván cập kênh* (the board is unstable), *lửa bập bùng* (fire flickers irregularly); *lúc lắc* (wobbly), *ngúc ngắc* (arched or curved movement).
- Adjectival intensifiers encode specific spatial properties depending on the object: *cong queo* (trees/wood), *cong tón* (lips/buttocks), *cong vút* (horns/eyelashes).

- Oppositional adjectives highlight spatial contrasts: *cao kều* (very tall and thin) vs. *lùn tẹt* (very short and flat); *dày cộp* (thick of books) vs. *mỏng dính* (extremely thin).

Through these linguistic devices, Vietnamese speakers construct vivid, anthropocentric spatial images, reflecting a naïve worldview rooted in everyday experience.

### *The Geometrical (Topological) Viewpoint: Logical Reflection*

Logical or geometrical reflection abstracts space into topological and functional relations that are independent of individual perception (Herskovits, 1986; Talmy, 2000; Levinson, 1994). Children initially acquire topological concepts such as proximity, enclosure, and continuity, which later support geometric reasoning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956).

In Vietnamese, topological relations appear in prepositions and relational expressions. For instance, *trong* ('in') encodes containment regardless of object shape:

*Example 1:*

1. *Con kiến ở trong ổ* (The ant is in the anthill)
2. *Con kiến ở trong vòng tròn* (The ant is in the circle)
3. *Con kiến ở trong chai* (The ant is in the bottle)

However, object shape or conceptualization can affect preposition selection. Expressions such as *ngồi xuống chiếu* (sit descend mat\*), *ngồi lên chiếu* (sit ascend mat\*), and *ngồi vào chiếu* (sit enter mat\*) illustrate the interaction of directional, figurative, and topological perspectives.

Overall, Vietnamese favors anthropocentric, figurative descriptions (*trong/ngoài, lên/xuống*), but geometrical reasoning interacts with naïve reflection. Distinguishing these strategies provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing how speakers conceptualize and encode space, forming the basis for subsequent discussion of anthropocentrism and cognitive maps.

### *Anthropocentric Orientation in Spatial Conceptualization*

*Anthropocentrism* is a principle central to human spatial orientation. Unlike egocentrism, it places humans at the center of the universe, considering bodily experience and mental representations in interactions with the environment, events, and language use.

#### *(i) Canonical and Non-Canonical Body Positions*

The upright (canonical) position of the human body, and its deviations, strongly influence spatial orientation and are often projected onto objects. In Vietnamese, parts of the body are metaphorically mapped to objects: đầu người (head) → đầu giường (headboard), chân người (feet) → chân giường (bed legs).

*Example 2:*

1. Tôi đặt tràng hoa lên trên đầu cô bé.

I place the flower crown on the girl's head/on the head of the bed.

2. Tôi đặt tràng hoa xuống dưới chân cô bé.

I place the flower crown descend under the girl's feet\*.

When a person stands upright, head and feet are interpreted literally. When lying down, they may refer metaphorically to the bed, implying a 90-degree rotation of the vertical axis.

This principle extends to larger spaces like theaters or classrooms, where front–back orientation outside corresponds to *trên/đầu* (upper) and *dưới/cuối* (lower) inside. Movement toward the stage is expressed by *lên* (go up), and away by *xuống* (go down). Similarly, moving objects follow a head–tail model: *lên* toward the 'head', *xuống* toward the 'tail'.

From these observations, two types of orientation emerge:

1. *Real orientation*: vertical axis and front–back relation.
2. *Imagined orientation*: rotated axis expressing superiority–inferiority (*trên/dưới*).

Building on canonical body positions, Vietnamese spatial cognition also relies on body-based reference planes and metaphorical mappings.

(ii) *Body-Based Reference Planes and Metaphorical Mapping*

According to Ly (2005), in addition to the three reference planes proposed by Clark (1973), Vietnamese spatial cognition relies on secondary reference planes highlighting the role of the human body. Different body parts are evaluated according to these planes:

- *Vertical plane*: *mũi cao* (high nose), *gò má cao* (high cheekbones), *mắt sâu* (deep eyes), *má hóp* (sunken cheeks), *ngực lép* (flat chest).
- *Secondary plane (perpendicular to vertical)*: *trán cao* (high forehead), *cổ cao* (long/high neck).

The body functions as a container (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), allowing inside–outside distinctions in action expressions: *hít vào* (breathe in), *uống vào* (drink in), *thở ra* (breathe out), *nhổ ra* (spit out).

Many metaphorical expressions also reflect spatial cognition: *bệnh ngoài da* (disease outside the skin) → skin disease; *ruột để ngoài da* (intestines outside the skin) → straightforward or naïve person; *trong bụng ngoài mặt* (inside the stomach, outside the face) → discrepancy between inner thoughts and outward behavior.

These bodily axes provide a framework for understanding spatial orientation in cultural practices.

(iii) *Evidence from Vietnamese Cultural Practices*

Cultural practices illustrate how anthropocentric orientation, rooted in bodily experience, shapes spatial cognition and language use in Vietnamese.

Two cultural practices illustrate this:

1. *Seating arrangements during meals*: people sit on the ground around a mat, next to a tray, or at a table:

- *ngồi vào chiếu* (sit enter mat\*)
- *ngồi vào mâm* (sit enter tray\*)
- *ngồi vào bàn* (sit enter table\*)

The word *vào* (enter) expresses movement into a space. This is literal for the mat but imagined for the tray or table. The action denotes not only location, but entry.

2. *Beds and bus seating*: spatial organization based on *trong* – *ngoài* (inside – outside):

For a bed along a wall:

- *nằm trong* (lie inside) → next to the wall
- *nằm ngoài* (lie outside) → in open side
- *nằm giữa* (lie in the middle)

Bus seating:

- *ngồi vào trong* (sit enter inside\*) → sit near the window
- *ngồi ra ngoài* (sit go out outside\*) → sit near the aisle
- *ngồi vào giữa* (sit enter middle\*) → sit in the middle

Expressions such as *quay mặt vào tường* (turn face toward wall) and *quay mặt ra ngoài* (turn face outward) further demonstrate anthropocentric spatial orientation.

Together, these cultural practices show that human bodily axes and hierarchical valuations provide a consistent framework for interpreting and encoding space, confirming the anthropocentric nature of Vietnamese spatial cognition.

### *Three Key Factors for Studying Frames of Reference in Vietnamese*

According to Levinson (2004), spatial relations can be either binary (intrinsic relations between TR and LM) or ternary (relations involving an observation point). On this basis, three types of Frames of Reference (FoR) are identified: intrinsic, relative, and absolute. Building on this framework, Ly (2005) identifies three central fac-

tors shaping Vietnamese spatial orientation: entity properties, zero-point anchoring, and observation strategies. These interact to form a flexible system that allows multiple ways of describing the same physical scene.

(i) *The entity properties*

In Vietnamese, the properties of entities strongly influence spatial orientation: asymmetry allows objects such as a wardrobe to be described as having a ‘head’ or ‘feet’, while openness or closure determines the opposition *trong–ngoài* (inside–outside) and *vào–ra* (enter–exit). Distance and salience may also guide expression choice.

*Example 3:*

1. *đường trong* (inner road) if it is close to the LM
2. *đường ngoài* (outer road) if it is farther away
3. *vào rừng* (enter forest\*) *vs.* *ra khơi* (exit sea\*)

One common zero-point is the *ground*, which often guides the use of *trên/dưới* (above/below). For instance, layers of paint on a ceiling: the invisible first layer is *lớp dưới* (lower layer), whereas the visible layer is *lớp trên* (upper layer). In this case, visibility and closure influence expression choice than purely geometric logic.

Some entities are intrinsically high (*sky, peak, altar, upper floor*) or low (*water*), while body parts can also serve as LMs (*head, forehead, neck*). Superiority and horizontality are defined relative to the origo rather than the LM itself. Horizontal relations (*trong–ngoài*, inside–outside) follow the same logic: distance, openness, and salience relative to the zero-point guide spatial expressions. For example, *chim bay trên trời* [bird flies *on* the sky\*] illustrates verticality relative to the origo.

Finally, the interaction between humans and spatial entities, together with the origo and the zero-point, plays a decisive role in Vietnamese spatial representation.

(ii) *The role of the zero-point*

The zero-point is defined as a culturally default anchoring frame that structures spatial interpretation independently of, but optionally aligned with, the speaker or observer. Unlike a purely deictic center, it may be grounded in culturally salient spatial domains such as the house, the ground, or the broader inside–outside organization of lived space.

Unlike Talmy's notion of Ground or Levinson's Frames of Reference, the zero-point proposed here operates as a higher-level, often implicit anchoring frame, structuring multiple spatial relations simultaneously. It represents the origin of the spatial coordinate system and functions as the anchoring point for spatial orientation in every spatial event, either explicitly or implicitly.

The zero-point is not inherently equivalent to the speaker's deictic center but may align with the observer in certain contexts. According to Ly (2005), it explains the coexistence of direct and indirect modes of spatial orientation in Vietnamese.

- *Intrinsic orientation*: assigns spatial values directly to the LM; the observer may temporarily align with the zero-point.
- *Relative orientation*: the zero-point structures spatial relations beyond the immediate LM–TR relation, often involving culturally salient spaces such as the house or road.

*Example 4:*

1. *Chân trước của ghế đẩu này hỏng rồi.*

The front leg of this stool is broken.

2. *Tôi chờ anh ở ngoài xe.*

I'm waiting for you outside the car\*.

3. *An đứng trên bảng.*

An stands on the board.\*

In the example 4.1, *trước* assign spatial values directly to the LM.

In the 4.2, *ngoài* (outside) does not express a direct relation between the speaker and the car, but depends on a broader system of references involving the car, the road, and an implicit house. The house is conceptualized as *trong* (inside), while the road is *ngoài* (outside). The road thus functions as the primary zero-point, and the car inherits this externality. The sentence can therefore be paraphrased as ‘*Tôi chờ anh ở trong xe để ở ngoài đường*’ (I am waiting for you in the car parked outside on the road). The speaker functions as the TR, the car as the LM, while the road and house act as primary and secondary zero-points respectively.

In (4.3), in a traditional classroom, the platform below the blackboard functions as the zero-point, motivating the use of *trên* (on/above) relative to the board.

*Example 5:*

1. *Chìa khóa ở trên tủ ấy!* (Speaker and hearer are on a ground floor). Lit. The key is on/above the wardrobe.
2. *Trong tủ, trong cái túi màu xanh dương ấy!* (Listener is where the wardrobe is). In the wardrobe, in the blue bag.

In (5.1), the wardrobe functions as the LM, but *trên* does not indicate support or containment; instead, it marks a position above the zero-point, aligned with the ground floor and the speaker’s origo. In (5.2), the TR–LM relation remains the same, but the zero-point shifts to the upper floor. The wardrobe becomes the deictic center, and containment is foregrounded.

Thus, a single spatial configuration may yield multiple Vietnamese expressions depending on the zero-point and observer perspective, whereas Italian typically encodes a more stable LM–TR relation (e.g., *La chiave è nel salotto*). Depending on the zero-point, spatial expressions may encode containment, neutral location, or projective relations (above, below, or external).

In general, two modes of spatial representation can be distinguished in Vietnamese:

1. the LM coincides with the zero-point;
2. the LM is distinct from the zero-point, which may correspond to the ground, the observer, or an implicit reference (e.g., house or road).

This distinction is particularly evident in the cognitive map of the traditional Vietnamese house, discussed later.

*(iii) Observation strategies: direct vs. indirect*

Observation strategies are treated as cognitive construal mechanisms that determine how spatial relations are established, rather than purely descriptive categories.

Vietnamese spatial descriptions employ two main strategies:

1. Direct observation, oriented toward the LM;
2. Indirect observation, oriented toward a secondary reference point (zero-point, *origo*).

The first establishes a direct relation, while the second establishes an indirect mediated relation, as in the table below:

Strategy	Example (Vietnamese)	Translation	Interpretation
Direct strategy	<i>Xe ở trong sân</i>	The car is in the yard.	A direct spatial relation is established between the TR and the LM.
Indirect strategy	<i>Xe ở ngoài sân</i>	(lit.) The car is outside the yard.	The spatial relation is mediated by a secondary reference point (zero-point), rather than solely by the LM.

*Table 1: Two Vietnamese observation strategies*

In the indirect strategy, the car may still be within the yard but is described relative to a secondary reference point (e.g., the house), with the yard conceptualized as *ngoài* (outside), showing that spatial interpretation depends on both the observer and the zero-point. The choice between strategies depends on contextual salience: direct construal is favored when TR–LM relations are foregrounded, and indirect construal when broader spatial frames are salient.

These factors show that Vietnamese spatial reference is frame-dependent and jointly shape cognitive maps across domains, as discussed in the following section.

### *Vietnamese Cognitive Maps*

Cognitive mapping is an interdisciplinary field that examines how spatial knowledge is represented and organized in the mind. It involves mental representations of environments, integrating knowledge about places and their features. In linguistics, frames of reference are commonly used to describe spatial relations, while the direct application of cognitive maps to language studies is less frequent.

Cognitive maps reflect both universal spatial processing and culture-specific perspectives shaped by language, experience, and social factors. Unlike cartographic maps, they are schematic, selective, and dynamically updated, relying on salient reference points (LMs).

From an ethno-psychological perspective, Ly (1994, 2001, 2005) reconstructs Vietnamese cognitive maps as integrating physical, social, and spiritual hierarchies, which influence spatial language and may persist across contexts. Vietnamese spatial expressions often involve secondary reference points and vertical conceptuality, in contrast with Italian, which relies more consistently on direct TR – LM relations.

The following table summarizes key differences between Vietnamese and Italian cognitive maps (L1).

Aspect	Vietnamese (L1)	Italian (L1)
<b>Observation Strategies</b>	Two types: direct and indirect	Mainly direct observation
<b>Attention Distribution</b>	Broad: physical, functional, psychological, social factors	Narrow: mainly concrete spatial relations like containment and support
<b>Physical &amp; Functional Oppositions</b>	Closure: <i>trong phòng ngủ</i> (in bedroom) / <i>ngoài phòng khách</i> (outside living room)	Clear focus on containment/support relations
	Size: <i>trong sân</i> (in yard) / <i>ngoài bãi</i> (in field)	
	Distance: <i>trong đất liền</i> (on mainland) / <i>ngoài hải đảo</i> (on islands)	
	Height: <i>trên núi</i> (in mountains) / <i>dưới xuôi</i> (in lowlands)	
	Visibility: <i>trong tối</i> (in darkness) / <i>ngoài sáng</i> (in light)	
	Experience: <i>trong Nam</i> (in the South) / <i>ngoài Bắc</i> (in the North)	
<b>Secondary Reference Point</b>	E.g., <i>ngoài đường</i> (outside road) vs <i>trên/trong đường</i> (on/in road); <i>trên tủ</i> (above wardrobe) vs <i>trong tủ</i> (in wardrobe)	Less common; focus on direct TR-LM relations
<b>Social &amp; Symbolic Hierarchies</b>	Social and spiritual verticality influences spatial meaning	Generally absent

	Social: <i>trên thành phố</i> (in city) / <i>dưới quê</i> (in countryside)	
	Spiritual: <i>dâng lên đức Phật</i> (offer up to Buddha) / <i>gửi xuống hạ giới</i> (send down to earthly world)	
<b>Spatial Relation Shift</b>	Restricted when LMs fixed to attributes (e.g., <i>trên Sapa, ngoài Bắc</i> )	More flexible relational shifts
<b>Preference</b>	Reliance on zero-point, secondary references, and cultural values	Reliance on direct physical relations

*Table 2 Comparison of Vietnamese and Italian Cognitive Maps (L1)*

The comparison shows that Vietnamese spatial cognition is broader and more frame-dependent, while Italian relies more consistently on direct relational encoding.

These differences are most clearly reflected in the cognitive map of the traditional Vietnamese house, which serves as a primary spatial framework organizing relations such as *trong–ngoài* (‘inside–outside’) and on which multiple secondary zero-points are anchored. The following section examines this domain in detail.

### *The Cognitive Map of the Traditional Vietnamese House*

A traditional Vietnamese house is typically located in a village and organized as a semi-enclosed compound, fenced for privacy yet integrated into the community. Two common layouts exist: L-shaped (with *nhà trên* main/upper house and *nhà dưới* subordinate/lower house, often the kitchen), and *Môn*-shaped, featuring a central main hall and two lateral spaces.

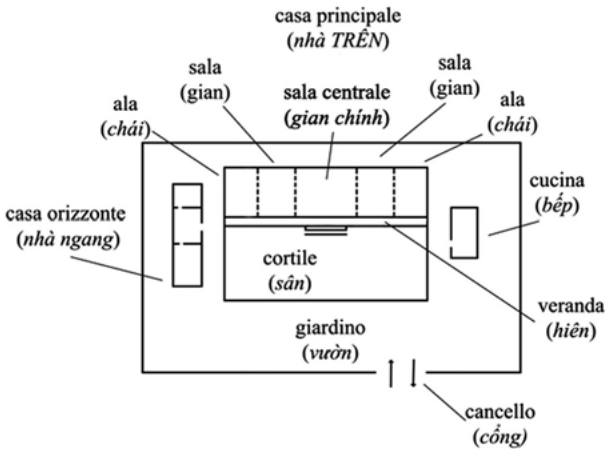


Figure 1 The complex of a house with three rooms and two wings

Regardless of the layout, the house complex usually includes a main house, secondary buildings, a courtyard, a garden, a pond, a granary, a chicken coop, and a gate. The main house (*nhà trên*) is the most important and is divided into *gian* (central sections) and *chái* (lateral, enclosed wings). The *gian* align along the front–back axis, separated by wooden columns, forming an open structural core rather than fully enclosed rooms. Typically, the number of *gian* is odd, reflecting cultural beliefs about prosperity.

The central *gian* is the most prominent: larger, more visible, and directly aligned with the entrance. It serves key social and spiritual functions, ancestor worship and receiving guests, and is elaborately decorated. In contrast, the side *gian* and especially the *chái* are more private, used for sleeping or storage.

This internal organization establishes a gradient of openness and visibility: the *gian* remain structurally open and socially accessible, whereas the *chái* are more enclosed and private. This contrast directly motivates the linguistic opposition *ngoài* (external/open) versus *trong* (internal/closed), with the central *gian* typically conceptualized as *ngoài* and the lateral *chái* as *trong*.

*(i) Containment and functional differentiation*

Spatial relations in a traditional Vietnamese house are shaped not only by geometric enclosure but also by size, openness, visibility, and function. The central *gian*, being larger, more visible, and socially accessible, is conceptualized as *ngoài* (external/open), whereas the lateral *gian* and especially the *chái*, smaller and more enclosed, used for sleeping or storage, are *trong* (internal/closed).

According to Ly (2005), open spaces facilitate social and ritual activities, while lateral and enclosed spaces serve intimate and protective functions, aligning with Toporov (1982), who notes that open spaces enable access and interaction, whereas closed spaces afford concealment and protection.

*Example 6:*

1. Location: *ngoài phòng khách* (in/outside the living room); *trong phòng ngủ* (in the bedroom)
2. Motion: *ra phòng khách* (go out to the living room), *vào phòng ngủ* (go into the bedroom)

Thus, *ngoài* encodes openness, accessibility, and social exposure, while *trong* encodes enclosure, privacy, and protection.

This conceptualization extends to objects and transitions: Movement toward open areas (e.g., courtyard, corridor, or spaces connected to the exterior) is expressed by *ra* ('exit'), and toward enclosed spaces by *vào* (enter). Windows, as intrinsically open elements, are associated with *ra* and *ngoài*. When two spaces share similar properties (e.g., two bedrooms), *trong* and *ngoài* distinction is neutralized, and movement is expressed by *sang/qua* (pass across).

The system also applies in modern sequential layouts: spaces nearer the entrance are *ngoài*, deeper spaces are *trong*.

Beyond containment, domestic space encodes superiority–inferiority relations along a vertical axis, structured by functional and cultural values rather than physical elevation.

(ii) *Relations of superiority and inferiority in the house*

Within the house, spaces are organized along a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. When multiple constructions are present, the main house (*nhà trên* upper house) contrasts with subordinate structures such as the kitchen or side buildings (*nhà dưới* lower house). This reflects both functional importance, residence, hospitality, ancestor worship, and, in many cases, slight physical elevation.

Open areas such as the courtyard and garden are conceptualized as *ngoài* (outside) due to their openness and everyday functions such as drying crops, raising animals, or hosting family events. Movement patterns align with this organization:

- *lên* (go up) toward the main house
- *xuống* (go down) toward subordinate spaces (kitchen, storage)
- *ra* (go out) toward open areas (courtyard, garden)
- *vào* (go in) toward enclosed spaces (*chái*)

This system is extended even where no real elevation exists. In modern “tube houses,” lower floors (e.g., living room, kitchen) are conceptualized as *dưới* (below), while upper floors (e.g., bedrooms) are *trên* (above), with movement expressed accordingly (*lên/xuống*).

This principle also applies to public spaces such as classrooms or theaters, where orientation depends on salient elements (e.g., blackboard, stage) that function as focal points, rather than purely physical position.

(iii) *The house as a zero-point and secondary reference*

The house itself may function as an implicit secondary reference point, as discussed above. Among its defining properties, its status as a closed and bounded space is often foregrounded. This is reflected in a gradient of spatial elements ordered by degree of openness: [-] *nhà* < *sân* < *vườn* < *cổng* < *ngõ* < *đường* < *đại lộ* [+]  
house < courtyard < garden < gate < alley < street < avenue

This hierarchy shows how spatial relations are structured not only by geometry but also by degrees of enclosure, accessibility, and social function. Vertical relations (*trên/dưới, lên/xuống*) and the contrast between central *gian* and lateral *chái* together provide the model for extending *trong/ngoài* distinctions, encoding functional, social, and perceptual hierarchies.

In sum, the cognitive map of the traditional Vietnamese house emerges from the interaction of spatial layout (*gian–chái* structure), functional organization, and cultural values. These factors shape both spatial cognition and linguistic encoding, explaining why the house can serve as a central zero-point in Vietnamese.

### *Geographical Cognitive Maps of Vietnam*

In addition to the spatial model derived from the traditional Vietnamese house, broader geographical and cultural factors also contribute to the formation of Vietnamese cognitive maps. These factors influence how large-scale spaces such as regions, landscapes, and administrative territories are conceptualized and linguistically encoded.

#### *North–South orientation*

The use of *trong* (inside) for the South reflects historical and cultural perceptions: until around 1010, Vietnam was concentrated in the spacious, flat and already known North; as the territory expanded southward, it became narrow and elongated in the central, mountainous in the west, maritime in the east. According to Nguyen Tai Can (1991), *trong* marks confined spaces, the South is conceptualized as ‘internal’, the North as ‘external’, expressed in *vào Nam – ra Bắc* [enter South – exit North] where *vào/ra* gain geographic value: *vào* X toward the South, *ra* X toward the North.

*Example 7:*

*Sống trong Nam, bố mẹ tôi thường nhắc những kỷ niệm về quê hương ngoài Bắc.* Living [inside] the South, my parents often recalled memories of our hometown [outside] in the North.

*Highland–lowland orientation*

Another key spatial opposition in Vietnamese is the highland–lowland distinction: mountainous areas are associated with *lên* (go up), and plains or deltas with *xuống* ('go down'): *lên Sapa* (go up to Sapa), *lên Buôn Mê* (go up to Buon Me), *xuống Hải Phòng* ('go down to Hai Phong' (a seaside city)).

These expressions reflect not only topography but also a conceptualization of space in which elevation is a salient dimension, integrated into territorial knowledge (e.g., [NORTH–WEST] as high, [EAST] as low).

In Italian, vertical terms (*salire/scendere, su/giù*) are also used for north–south movement but are not tied to topography. For instance, *sopra* (e.g., *Prato è sopra Firenze*) indicates relative location or latitude rather than the hierarchical or culturally grounded values found in Vietnamese.

*3.3 Social Hierarchy*

Tavares et al. (2015) show that the hippocampus plays a central role in constructing the social map: a 2D representation of social relations formed during interactions, based on power (social distance) and affiliation (social direction). This abstract map guides episodic memory and language. Spatial metaphors like *salire la scala sociale* (climb the social ladder), having a 'narrow social circle' or feeling 'close to someone' reflect this cognitive mapping.

Ethno-psychological studies (Ly 1994, 2001, 2005; Phan 2013) show that Vietnamese encodes social hierarchy spatially: *lên Bộ* (go up to Ministry), *lên gặp giám đốc* (go up meet director), *xuống xã* (go down to commune), *xuống gặp nhân viên* (go down meet staff),

reflecting status and social distance. High-status places take *trên* (e.g., schools, ministries, cities), while lower ones take *dưới*.

*Example 8:*

*Tôi có thể rời bỏ làng chài nhỏ bé này để chuyển tới sống trên thành phố...* I can leave this small fishing village to live (up) in the city...

Administrative hierarchy is also encoded linguistically: higher-level units (province, city) are *trên*, lower ones (village, hamlet) *dưới*. Speakers use expressions such as *trên tỉnh* (up province\*) vs. *dưới quê* (down countryside\*). Within cities, central districts and historic monuments are *trên*, peripheral ones *dưới*. Vietnamese speakers abroad maintain this orientation (e.g., *trên Modena* - up Modena).

Socio-cultural and spiritual hierarchy further reinforces this mapping, as in *dâng lên đức Phật* (offer up to Buddha\*). Such social-spatial encoding is not observed in Italian.

Vietnamese spatial cognition thus emerges as an integrated system combining anthropocentric orientation, hierarchical organization, zero-point anchoring, observation strategies, and culturally grounded models. This system underlies cognitive maps across domestic, geographical, and social domains and provides the basis for cross-linguistic variation and Italian L2/LS acquisition.

These cognitive patterns are systematically reflected in language, particularly in the use of spatial prepositions. The following section examines how these differences emerge in Vietnamese and Italian.

*Standard Use of Spatial Prepositions in L1*

The study analyzed Vietnamese and Italian L1 prepositions, based on dictionary descriptions and corpus data, to establish a baseline for learner data. Differences reflect attention focus and conceptual values, shaped by culture, experience, and history, rather than perception. Three main relations were examined: containment, verticality, and neutral topological relations.

Aspect	Vietnamese (L1)	Italian (L1)
<b>Observation Strategies</b>	Direct & indirect: [DIRECT] topological observation or [INDIRECT] projection-based strategies; zero-point anchoring, secondary reference points (e.g., <i>ngoài Bắc</i> , <i>ngoài đường</i> , <i>trên tú</i> )	Mainly direct: focus on direct TR–LM relations
<b>Containment / Inclusion</b>	<i>trong</i> , <i>vào</i> : [IMMERSION], [INTEGRATION], [INCLUSION], [INSERTED], [ATTACHMENT]; LM: [3D], [2D DELIMITED]; static ( <i>trong</i> ) vs dynamic ( <i>vào</i> ); influenced by LM salience (e.g., northern LM vs southern goal); [PROTECTED], [DARK], [HIDDEN] contexts typical for ( <i>trong</i> , <i>vào</i> )	<i>in</i> , <i>dentro</i> : [CONTAINMENT]; LM: [3D], [2D DELIMITED]; direct TR–LM mapping; less sensitivity to LM physical/functional/psychological features
<b>Exclusion / External Space</b>	<i>ngoài</i> , <i>ra</i> : [OPENNESS], [DISTANCE], [EXPERIENCE], secondary reference; may include “external” conceptual space; North–South distinctions ( <i>ngoài Bắc</i> )	<i>fuori</i> : [EXCLUSION]; mainly literal external space; less variation based on LM features
<b>Verticality / Superiority</b>	<i>trên</i> , <i>lên</i> : [HIGH PLACE], [SUPPORT], social hierarchy, spiritual sites; LM can be physical (mountain, sky, high floors), social (city, government), spiritual (sacred sites)	<i>su</i> , <i>sopra</i> : [SUPPORT]; LM mainly physical support; social/spiritual dimensions generally absent
<b>Verticality / Inferiority</b>	<i>dưới</i> , <i>xuống</i> : [LOW], [INFERIORITY]; flexible TR/LM reference; direct/indirect	<i>sotto</i> : [LOW PLACE]; references TR only; direct TR–LM mapping

<b>Neutral Topological Relations</b>	<i>ở, tại</i> : [NEUTRAL], [PROXIMITY], [INTEGRATION]; overlap with containment, verticality or figurative relations; LM less relevant; allows substitution for prepositions (trên, trong, dưới, ngoài)	<i>a</i> : limited neutral relations; mainly [PROXIMITY]; sometimes functions as grammatical marker rather than spatial marker
<b>Figurative Uses</b>	[UNION OF PEOPLE], [PROFESSION], [SCHEMA CHANGE]; relational shifts allowed; may combine with containment, verticality, neutral relations depending on context	[UNION OF PEOPLE], [PROFESSION], [SCHEMA CHANGE]; focus on direct TR-LM relations

Table 3 Standard Use of Spatial Prepositions in L1

These patterns reflect underlying differences in cognitive mapping between Vietnamese and Italian.

Feature	Vietnamese	Italian
Orientation	Anthropocentric	Object-centered
Core relation	Zero-point based	TR-LM direct
Reference type	Often indirect	Mostly direct
Key opposition	trong-ngoài, lên-xuống	in-su-sotto
Conceptual basis	Cultural + experiential	Geometric + topological
Spatial flexibility	High	Lower
Role of observer	Central	Limited
Social/spiritual	Strong	Minimal

Table 4: Cognitive mapping between Vietnamese and Italian.

Based on this framework, the experiment tests whether Vietnamese learners rely on zero-point orientation and indirect observation when interpreting Italian spatial relations.

### *Experimental Study*

Spatial frameworks in L1 guide how learners interpret space in L2 (Bowerman & Choi, 2003; Majid et al., 2004). Vietnamese speakers rely on zero-point anchoring and speaker-centered reasoning, which can affect their initial use of Italian spatial prepositions, often causing overextension. With experience, learners gradually align with the Italian system, which emphasizes direct topological relations.

### *Methodology*

The study uses elicitation tasks and naturalistic observations to examine how Vietnamese learners of Italian map spatial concepts from L1 to L2/LS. The following section presents the participants and data.

### *Participants and Data*

The study is based on three groups: Vietnamese learners of Italian in a foreign language (LS) context, Vietnamese learners in a second language (L2) context, and native Italian speakers (L1), all exposed to the same stimuli eliciting spatial prepositions.

A total of 80 participants were included (60 learners, 20 native speakers), all university students of comparable age. Learners were divided into LS and L2 groups and further classified into developmental stages (L2 I, L2 III; LS I–III) based on exposure and CEFR levels, determined via questionnaire and institutional data. The L1 control group consisted of students from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, selected.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through two complementary tasks:

#### *Spontaneous description task*

Participants described a detailed city image (J. Müller, 1976) to elicit natural production of static spatial relations.

#### *Controlled elicitation task*

A complementary oral and written task included 142 spatial contexts (68 visual, 74 written), based on Bowerman & Pederson (1992). Each stimulus represented a TR–LM relation, which participants described in Italian; in the oral task, they also reproduced the descriptions in Vietnamese.

### *Procedure and Transcription*

Sessions were conducted in an informal setting and audio-recorded (~14h 47m). Data were transcribed orthographically, capturing pauses, repetitions, and self-corrections. Transcriptions were produced by the researcher and reviewed by native speakers.

### *Pilot Study*

A pilot study in Italy and Vietnam validated the stimuli and procedure; the data were not included in the analysis.

### *Results*

#### *Spontaneous Description and Targeted Tasks*

In spontaneous descriptions, L1 Vietnamese emphasizes projective relations (*xe ngoài đường*), while L2/LS Italian relies on direct observation and topological relations (e.g., *bici in strada*), focusing on the core components of prepositions; only at advanced stages L2/LS approximate L1 patterns. Targeted data show unacquired semantic components mostly concern figurative spatial relations. Differences exist between learners' preposition prototypes

and L1, but spontaneous L2/LS production shows no significant difference. Vietnamese influence is marginal, mainly in contexts involving sky, ground, and water, e.g., nonstandard use of *su* with high-space contexts.

*Regarding specific prepositions:*

IN is often overextended early on, functioning as a “super-preposition” and applied beyond its core containment meaning, but learners gradually refine its use to align with target norms.

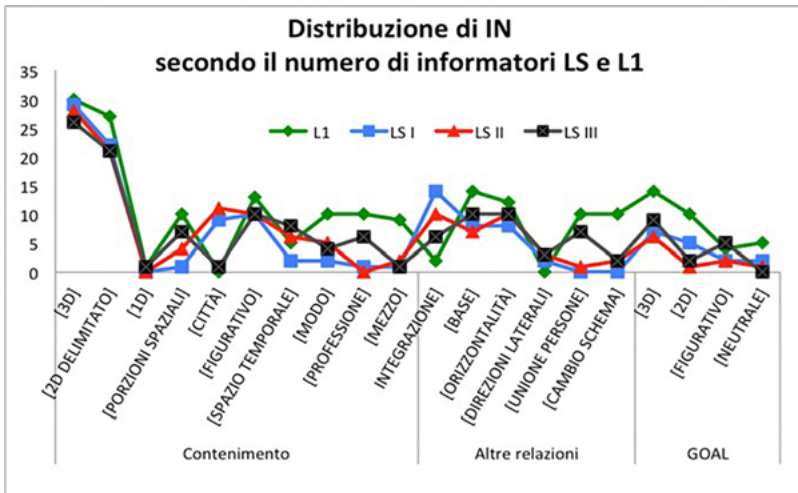


Figure 2 The use of “IN” according to the number of LS and L1 informants

SU is predominantly linked to high places or LMs, with learners focusing on LM properties rather than spatial relations, though advanced learners begin distinguishing trajectory and result.

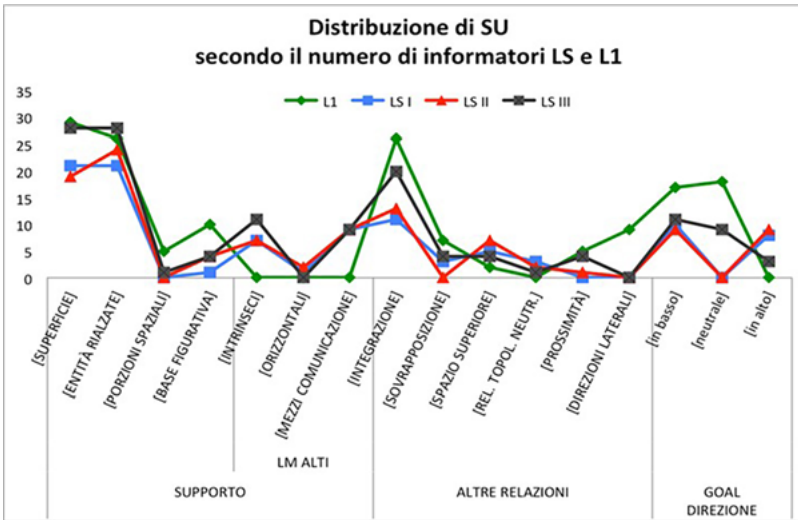


Figure 3 The use of “IN” according to the number of LS and L1 informants

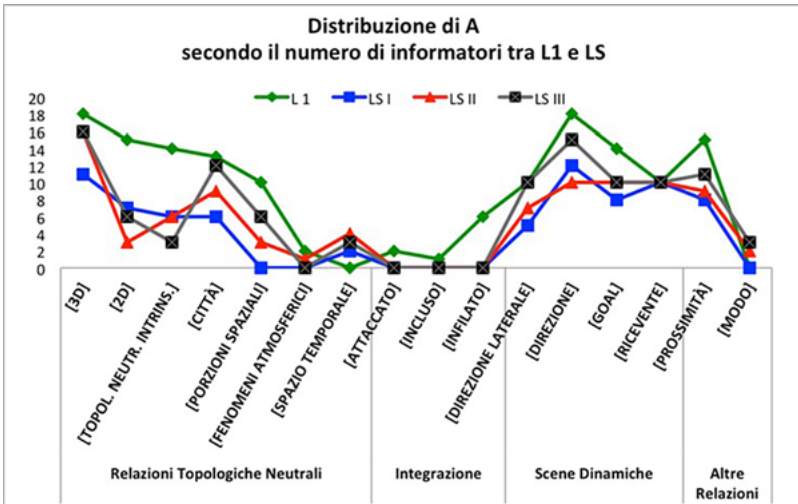


Figure 4 The use of “A” according to the spatial scenes between LS and L1

A shows unstable usage in neutral spatial contexts but appears more consistently in constructions involving transfer or change,

encoding [RECIPIENT] and [GOAL], likely due to chunk-based learning rather than direct L1 transfer.

### *Key Semantic Patterns and Observation Strategy Dynamics*

The results indicate three main tendencies:

1. Transfer of L1 spatial meanings into Italian;
2. Gradual acquisition of target-like semantic distinctions;
3. Oscillation between observation strategies, especially early on.

This reflects a restructuring from L1 spatial cognition toward L2/LS-specific representations.

Vietnamese influence is selective, mostly affecting spatial domains involving sky, ground, and water, as well as overextension of *su* with high-place contexts. Some learners shift observation strategies depending on context, showing dynamic interaction between cognitive systems. No clear transfer of social spatial representations is found in learner Italian.

Observation strategies evolve through phases:

- Early stages: oscillation between L1 projective reasoning and Italian direct observation;
- Middle stages: dominance of direct observation when LMs or secondary reference points are salient;
- Advanced stages: systematic, target-like use of prepositions, though some overgeneralization (notably of *su*) persists.

### *Observation Strategies in Learner Language*

Learner production shows systematic oscillation between direct and indirect observation strategies, particularly in early stages and during language switching.

Learners tend to adopt direct strategies when a secondary reference point can be activated or when they are aware of marked prepositional usage. However, L1 conceptualization continues to

influence interpretation, as seen in constructions such as *giacca sotto attaccapanni* or *orecchino sotto/in orecchio*, where spatial relations are reanalyzed through Vietnamese cognitive patterns.

At advanced stages, variability decreases, but often results in systematic overgeneralization, especially of *su*.

#### *Observation Strategies Across Phases:*

- Early stages: oscillation between L1 projective reasoning and Italian direct observation
- Mid stages: direct observation dominates when LM is high/low in L1 or secondary reference exists
- Advanced stages: systematic L2/LS-like use; *su* for high LM, *in* for containment, *a* for movement/recipient.

#### *Discussion and Implications*

The data show that Vietnamese learners of Italian navigate spatial encoding through interaction between their native cognitive maps and the target language system, with three key patterns:

4. Semantic transfer and overextension: Vietnamese prepositions like *trong/vào*, encoding immersion and inclusion, are often mapped onto Italian *in*, blurring static vs. dynamic distinctions. This reflects hierarchical L1 structures and zero-point anchoring.
5. Observation strategy adaptation: Learners oscillate between Vietnamese indirect, frame-dependent observation and Italian's direct TR - LM focus. With proficiency, they increasingly adopt Italian direct relational encoding, guided by LM salience and zero-point anchoring.
6. Convergence toward target norms: Early strong transfer decreases as learners acquire Italian patterns for verticality, sup-

port, and topology. Figurative uses in Vietnamese may initially interfere but align gradually with Italian norms.

These findings support the cognitive-linguistic framework that hierarchical organization, culturally anchored zero-points, and observation strategies jointly shape L2/LS performance. They extend previous research by showing how learners manage complex cognitive and linguistic interactions.

Zero-point anchoring and hierarchy in Vietnamese cognition shape L2/LS preposition use, emphasizing SLA models should include cultural schemata. Pedagogically, explicit focus on L1–L2/LS differences in containment, verticality, and topology, supported by visual/contextual aids, can enhance learning. Methodologically, combining spontaneous and targeted tasks effectively reveals subtle cross-linguistic influences and is recommended for typologically diverse languages.

### *Conclusion*

This study reveals that Vietnamese spatial cognition is shaped by a hierarchical, context-dependent system anchored on a flexible zero-point that integrates physical, social, and geographical dimensions. Italian, in contrast, relies on stable Trajector–Landmark spatial relations grounded in geometry. Vietnamese learners of Italian initially transfer their native spatial schemas, causing overextension and shifts in construal, but gradually adapt to Italian's direct relational encoding.

These findings highlight how culturally embedded cognitive frameworks influence cross-linguistic variation and L2/LS acquisition, emphasizing that learners navigate complex interactions between cognition and language rather than simple category mappings.

Future research should examine these processes across diverse languages and contexts, employing longitudinal and multimodal methods to better understand how observation strategies and zero-point anchoring shape second language spatial cognition.

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Tran Tinh Vy

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## **Foodscapes in Asian Migration Literature: Taste, Memory, and Identity**

### *Introduction*

The seminar “Foodscapes in Asian Migration Literature: Taste, Memory, and Identity” examines the role of food in shaping identity, preserving memory, and expressing power dynamics within Asian diaspora literature. Addressing gaps in foodscape theory and methodology in studying Asian migration literature, the seminar focuses on two main approaches: first, systematizing the theoretical framework of foodscape-particularly within migration literature; and second, applying this framework to analyze how food and culinary practices articulate memory, identity, and cultural resistance in Asian diaspora narratives. In 4 sessions, we delve into key themes such as food as a repository of memory, cultural hybridity through food, foodscapes as spaces of negotiation between identity and power, and the commodification and politicization of Asian dishes under globalization. Drawing on the concept of foodscape, the cultural and political terrains surrounding food practices, we examine how migration writers use culinary narratives to articulate their senses of belonging, displacement and resistance.

The group of 6 works, with each session including 2 works, studied in this seminar includes *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui, *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Sour Sweet* by Timothy Mo, *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong, *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan and

Fresh Off the Boat by Eddie Huang. To some extent, each work chosen here is expected to serve as a fragment of the larger mosaic of Asian migration, thereby reflecting the complexity and diversity of Asian diasporic communities in the context of global migration. The diversity of the migrant community is represented not only through the characters and their migration stories but also through the migration trajectories of the authors themselves. Each author represents different waves of migration, implying differences in context as well as in the push-and-pull factors driving migration. For instance, the two Vietnamese American authors, Monique Truong and Thi Bui, belong to different migration waves. Belonging to the wave of migration immediately in 1975, Monique Truong was evacuated by air and resettled directly in North Carolina. By contrast, Thi Bui belonged to the second migration wave, from around 1978 to 1982, commonly referred to as the “boat people,” characterized by their mode of migration. Though both belong to the 1.5 generation, their experiences of displacement and memory differ. Truong migrated at the age of seven, but her family resided outside of large Vietnamese communities, so her proximity to the diasporic community was indirect. As a result, memories of the homeland are faint, and writing becomes the means of constructing memory. Migrating as a child, Thi Bui’s understanding of her family’s migration history primarily came through the stories of relatives and her surrounding environment. *The Best We Could Do* reimagines that inherited memory—what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.” In the case of Amy Tan, her family’s migration history is linked to the broader Chinese migration to the U.S. after the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949). The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 opened legal pathways for Tan’s family to migrate, primarily for religious and occupational reasons—her father was both an electrical engineer and a Baptist minister. Her most famous novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, reflects both the tensions within the diasporic community and the complex migration experiences of her family, particularly those of her mother. Cultural negotiations, generational gaps, gendered violence, and domestic abuse constitute

both the material and the recurring themes of her writing. Timothy Mo, author of *Sour Sweet*, embodies a mixed heritage identity—his father was a Hong Kong Chinese and his mother English. As part of the 1.5 generation, he migrated with his family to the U.K. at around age ten, when Hong Kong was still a British colony, in search of better educational and work opportunities. Colonial heritage shaped his cultural awareness even before the family's migration, influencing his perception of Chinese identity as a complex turning point. Like many migrant literatures, his works grapple with cultural conflict—assimilation, exclusion, ambivalence. However, his mixed heritage adds another dimension, positioning him as an in-betweener who simultaneously affiliates with and distances himself from immigrant communities. *Sour Sweet* thus should not only be read as a family narrative but also as a fictional reimagining of Chinese immigrant life, with hybridity expressed through both theme and style. The case of Kevin Kwan, author of *Crazy Rich Asians*, represents voluntary migration driven by family decisions rather than collective diasporic waves. Born into a wealthy Chinese Singaporean family, Kwan enjoyed an elite upbringing before migrating to the U.S. around 1984–1985. Unlike many immigrant narratives, his story was not shaped by poverty or discrimination, but rather by a cosmopolitan hybridity that became the core of his satire. *Crazy Rich Asians* draws heavily on this transnational elite perspective, satirizing Singapore's ultra-rich while also exploring cultural intersections. Eddie Huang, author of *Fresh Off the Boat*, is the son of Taiwanese migrants who came to the U.S. during the 1970s–1980s. Following the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) and the establishment of two political entities—PRC in Beijing and ROC in Taiwan—a wave of educational-economic migration took place, partly supported by U.S. aid to Taiwan. Born into a relatively affluent family that ran a seafood business in America, Huang did not face the same degree of cultural negotiation as earlier Chinese migrants. Instead, he became a voice of the millennial Asian American generation, addressing racism and identity crises in a multicultural, post-2000 U.S. context of identity politics.

In general, different migration experiences contribute to the construction of diverse culinary narratives, in which food and culinary practices can become a hinge of memory and nostalgia, culinary spaces as heterotopias, and a channel for purification and ethnicization of culture in general. Beginning with an introduction to the theoretical framework of culinary landscapes, we will then explore a number of Asian diasporic literary works, thereby attempting to establish an analytical model for issues of memory, identity, and power revolving around the axis of food and culinary practices.

### *From Foodscape to Diasporic Foodscapes Studies*

The term “foodscape” combines the words “food” and “-scape,” and it represents an interdisciplinary concept that examines food or cuisine in relation to its social, cultural, and historical contexts. Initially, the term was used to describe the spatial distribution patterns associated with food production, distribution, and consumption (Kühne 2023, 1). To empirically investigate these “real” and “concrete” food spaces, quantitative methods such as georeferencing in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), measurement, and mapping are applied. Recent studies have shown a shift in the study of foodscapes from positivism to sociological and discursive approaches (Kühne 2023, 13-14). This shift recognizes that foodscapes encompass both individual and social structures, as well as the ways in which people experience them. Food studies, originally linked to agricultural geography (Bowler and Ilbery 1987), evolved into food geography (Atkins 1988), which then shifted its focus toward consumer behavior, particularly the spaces of production, distribution, and consumption.

Giséle Yasmeeen’s work titled *Foodscape: Public Eating, Gender Relations and Urban Change* (1996) is considered pioneering in the proposal of this concept. By incorporating empirical information related to gender, food systems, and urban change in Bangkok, Yasmeeen raises three fundamental questions: (1) How is the food system in

Bangkok represented and interpreted? (2) How has gender shaped the foodscape in terms of both food establishments and customers? (3) How has urban development affected food provision spaces (i.e., food outlets), and how have the owners responded? Foodscapes serve as a useful tool in this study because the concept illustrates how public eating and selling contexts facilitate gendered performances, how physical spaces act as spatial representations, and how food production and consumption highlight a reciprocal relationship between society and space, influenced by historical, linguistic, and political contexts.

Following Yasmeen's work, Kevin Morgan further developed the concept of foodscape in relation to urban policy, food justice, and food citizenship in his article "Local and Green, Global and Fair: The Ethical Foodscape and the Politics of Care" (Morgan 2010). While Yasmeen's framework allows for a relatively open and flexible approach to the diverse practices and consumption methods in a specific place, Morgan emphasizes the ethical aspect, coining the term "ethical foodscape." As a subsystem within the broader food system, the ethical foodscape refers to a space formed by various alternative foods that share common values (Morgan 2010, 1853). These products, such as those labeled ethical, organic, or local, aim to positively contribute to human health, the environment, the local economy, or biodiversity. Thus, the ethical foodscape can be understood as a shared space promoting ecological integrity and social justice. Morgan further clarifies the ethical and environmental principles that define the ethical foodscape by exploring the internal contradictions and political dynamics within the alternative food sector, such as the tension between "local and green" versus "global and fair" values. Extending the definition of foodscape from a mere food supply network, Morgan's approach incorporates a moral and political framework where individual and community food consumption behaviors are linked to ethical values like social justice and sustainable development. This framework laid the groundwork for research on foodscapes concerning food justice, food policy, and urban foodscape.

Aesthetic, normative, and symbolic approaches to foodscapes—as explored in works such as Sedelmeier (2018) and Vonthron et al. (2020)—reveal a close theoretical affinity between the term “foodscape” and the broader concept of “landscape” (Adema 2006). The shared suffix “-scape” underscores a perspectival mode of apprehending phenomena (Kühne 2023, 29), a link made especially apparent in German, where “foodscape” is rendered as *Nahrungslandschaften* (food landscapes). Traditionally, landscape encompasses the spatial organization of production, distribution, and consumption. Drawing on landscape’s long conceptual lineage, foodscape research adopts a pluralistic stance in both theory and methodology, emphasizing the intersection of material space, subjective consciousness, and the socio-cultural production of knowledge—an approach reminiscent of Popper’s three-world schema. Within the production-distribution-consumption triad, consumption is considered central, driven by human need and shaping upstream processes. This view grounds five key criteria for analyzing foodscapes: availability (the presence of food sources compatible with individual needs); accessibility (the spatial proximity and ease of reaching food locations); affordability (relative cost to consumers); accommodation (conditions like operating hours and ease of mobility); and acceptability (socio-cultural alignment of food and food environments) (Vonthron et al. 2020, 17–20).

Although the term “foodscape” is credited to Yasmeen’s dissertation, its conceptual foundation is traceable to Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), where he conceptualized globalization as a fluid, subjective flow of disjunctive “scapes.” The “-scape” in “foodscape” parallels Appadurai’s five scapes—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (Appadurai 1996, 33–36)—each representing imagined worlds where subjects perceive, navigate, and reconstruct their realities. While Appadurai did not explicitly use “foodscape,” his article “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India” (1988) frames cuisine as a political, social, and

cultural structure. Like Benedict Anderson (2016), Appadurai underscores imagination as a social practice essential to the formation of identity, memory, and community in the global era. Building on these ideas, scholars such as Krishnendu Ray, Anita Mannur, and Psyche Williams-Forsen have elaborated “foodscape” as a global cultural imaginary—an interactive landscape where food mediates power, politics, identity, and memory. Thus, Appadurai’s landscape framework provides a dynamic basis for interpreting food as both a material and social space of negotiation and cultural reconstruction.

In his chapter “Landscape Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Foodscapes: A Neopragmatic Proposal” (2023), O. Kühne outlines a range of theoretical traditions in landscape studies. The essentialist approach regards landscapes as enduring natural and material wholes with intrinsic core and peripheral values (Chilla et al. 2015; Gainling & Leibenath 2021, cited in Kühne 2023). However, this view has waned. Mid-20th century positivist paradigms reconceived landscape as a quantifiable object—subject to spatial analysis, ecological zoning, and computational modeling (Tilley 1997, cited in Kühne 2023). Foodscape studies often inherit this empirical bent, particularly in GIS-based analyses of food availability and flows. Alternatively, structuralist approaches emphasize landscape as a product of social discourse, symbolic representation, and classification (Luhmann 1986, cited in Kühne 2023). These perspectives—rooted in social constructivism (e.g., Cosgrove 1984), system theory, and discourse analysis (Leibenath & Otto 2013; Gerstlauer & Fischer 2023, cited in Kühne 2023)—highlight landscape as a projection of socio-cultural meaning onto physical space. Recent innovations also include phenomenological methods (centered on lived experience), actor-network theory (emphasizing non-human agency), and assemblage theory (Kühne 2023). Together, these frameworks show that landscape—and by extension foodscape—is not a static object, but a complex interplay between physical space, personal perception, and cultural knowledge production.

Norah MacKendrick's twin publications in 2014 offer a significant sociological critique of the concept of foodscape. In her article "Foodscape" published in *Contexts*, MacKendrick traces the term's geographic origins and its growing use in urban and public health studies to describe urban food environments. However, sociologists have expanded the concept to encompass "institutional structures, cultural spaces, and discourses that mediate our relationship with food" (MacKendrick 2014, 16). While acknowledging the ubiquity and spatial diversity of food environments—from grocery stores and farmers' markets to school cafeterias, food trucks, and online platforms—MacKendrick emphasizes foodscape's analytical dimension, particularly its ability to reveal institutional and organizational dynamics. She argues that the spatial boundaries and morphology of foodscapes reflect class- and race-based stratification, shaped not solely by consumer choice or taste, but also by structural forces such as retail redlining and the profit motives of the industrial food complex. MacKendrick further identifies various types of foodscapes—such as the corporate-organic foodscape (in which large corporations co-opt organic branding through food politics discourse) and the gourmet foodscape (defined by cultural narratives of class distinction and the construction of culinary hierarchies via media channels)—to demonstrate how space, institutions, culture, and discourse together shape how food is accessed, consumed, and culturally signified. In "More Work for Mother: Chemical Body Burdens as a Maternal Responsibility," although she does not explicitly define foodscape, MacKendrick examines how individuals interact with food environments, particularly through the lens of precautionary consumption—efforts to monitor and manage food intake in order to reduce chemical exposure. Her analysis foregrounds the social and spatial dynamics of food-related consumption practices, noting that availability and accessibility are uneven across social groups and neighborhoods. Consequently, precautionary consumption underscores how class and resources mediate individual agency in navigating foodscapes.

In “Spectacular Foodscape: Food Celebrities and the Politics of Lifestyle Mediation in an Age of Inequality” (2015), Johnston and Goodman explore how food celebrities mediate contemporary foodscapes. More than entertainers, these figures act as cultural agents who actively shape public perception and expectations surrounding everyday food. Through diverse media platforms, food celebrities delineate and regulate what foodscapes can or should be, framing dominant “grammars of good food.” Studying them through the foodscape framework allows for critical insight into their embeddedness in the political economy of media production, food marketing, and branding—core mechanisms in constructing the foodscape. The authors argue that celebrity-driven food cultures may inadvertently normalize social inequalities within and across food environments. Thus, critical media analysis, especially of celebrated figures in food culture, is indispensable to any robust investigation of foodscapes.

The turn toward sociocultural and critical theory in foodscape studies positions food as a cultural object intertwined with memory, identity, gender, and race. David Sutton’s anthropological work on food and memory (2001), Lisa Heldke’s critique of colonial assumptions in culinary exploration (2003), and Bell & Valentine’s (1997) study on food and identity all reveal that foodscapes are not merely material terrains but symbolic landscapes. In *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat*, Bell and Valentine pioneer the link between eating practices and geographic, class, and gendered identities. Sutton, in *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, investigates food as embodied memory. Heldke’s *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* challenges “culinary tourism” as a continuation of colonial discourse, analyzing food experiences as acts embedded within cultural power structures. Collectively, these works lay the groundwork for understanding the symbolic functions of food in diasporic communities—where culinary practices mediate memory, survival, cultural negotiation, and reconstructions of “home.”

In addition to Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), Anita Mannur's *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2009) and Krishnendu Ray's *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* (2004) stand as pivotal works that contribute to conceptualizing the diasporic foodscape. While Mannur centers food as a site of memory and resistance in South Asian diasporic narratives, Ray focuses on the domestic table as a terrain where identity, memory, and gender relations are reconfigured.

In *Culinary Fictions*, Mannur defines the diasporic foodscape as a culturally and discursively constructed space within South Asian diasporic communities. Departing from the materiality of food practices, her analysis emphasizes the symbolic, affective, and metaphorical dimensions of food, especially as mediated through literature and cultural production. Unlike anthropological or sociological approaches that ask "what" and "how" people eat, Mannur is more invested in how food functions discursively to negotiate intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Mannur 2009, 9–12). This redefinition shifts the foodscape from a mere socio-spatial configuration toward an affective and contested landscape of culinary identity formation in diasporic and multicultural contexts. Food becomes not only a cultural artifact, but also a narrative strategy for asserting subjectivity, belonging, and resistance.

Her approach draws from but also critiques theorists such as Barthes, Bourdieu, Mintz, and Lévi-Strauss, as well as literary critics like Brown and Wong, by foregrounding rupture over continuity and ambiguity over authenticity (Mannur 2009, 10–14). She critiques the liberal multicultural appropriation of food as a means of "domesticating" ethnic difference. Political speeches, for instance, praising coconut or chicken tikka masala, are read by Mannur as symbolic incorporations that mask the structural realities of racism, labor exploitation, and social exclusion (Mannur 2009, 1–5). Thus, food is weaponized within political discourse and diasporic foodscapes are revealed to be far from neutral. In a postcolonial vein,

Mannur examines the tensions within these spaces as simultaneously affirming ethnic identity and resisting racialized structures, while also risking reinscription into Orientalist representations. Culinary practice becomes both a conduit of nostalgia and a vehicle for asserting belonging, though it may simultaneously reproduce essentialized ethnic imagery (Mannur 2009, 7–9).

In *The Migrant's Table*, Krishnendu Ray frames food as a spatial practice of place-making. Starting from the premise that “food, like religion, is one of the few places that migrants hesitate to abandon in embracing their host culture” (Ray 2004, 1), Ray conceptualizes the foodscape as both a geographic-cultural and symbolic space through which migrants reconstruct identity, memory, and affective ties to homeland. Drawing from Foucault’s notion of heterotopias, Ray describes diasporic foodscapes as heterotopic spaces containing multiple, non-aligned geographies at once (Ray 2004, 6). A Chicago suburb may simultaneously signify Bengal, America, and India. In the everyday practices of Bengali migrant households, food becomes a means of reterritorializing locality within global settings. This symbolic act of “bringing the East home” subtly destabilizes Western norms—not through overt confrontation but via a gradual erosion that reconfigures dominant cultural meanings.

These two works represent distinct yet complementary methodological orientations: Mannur adopts a poststructuralist cultural critique focused on discourse in literature and media, while Ray employs empirical sociology grounded in ethnographic observation. Mannur “reads” how migrant cuisines are narrated and consumed symbolically, whereas Ray analyzes everyday culinary routines as microcosms of broader dynamics such as globalization, migration, and modernity. While Ray details the restructuring of mealtime in Bengali diasporic households, Mannur excavates the symbolic tensions embedded in food’s cultural presence, offering a more nuanced interpretation of cuisine as a politics of memory, desire, and race. Yet both converge on a shared premise: food in the migratory context exceeds mere sustenance—it becomes a medium for nego-

tiating and constructing identity. Both scholars reject essentialist views that portray food as a fixed cultural marker, instead emphasizing its dialogical nature, shaped by global-local entanglements and performed within a web of memory, emotion, and lived experience.

*When Food Is More Than Just Eating: Memory, Othered Spaces, and Ethnicization through Culinary Narratives*

Cuisine as a space of memory, nostalgia, and the effort to create a place called home permeates two novels: Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, a graphic memoir, recounts the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and family memory as a Vietnamese American. Through each illustrated page, Bui narrates her parents' lives before, during, and after the war, their escape and resettlement in the United States, while also reflecting on the transformation of memory across generations. The narrative is framed by the author's experience of giving birth to her son in New York in 2005. This profound event triggers a "wave of empathy" for her mother, whom she calls Má, as Thi begins to view family not just as something she was born into, but as something she has actively created. To bridge the emotional distance between herself and her parents, Thi and her husband moved to California in 2006, where she began interviewing them about their past. In Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, food is far more than physical sustenance; it serves as a sensory bridge for her "memory reconstruction" of family's past. For example, immediately after the physical trauma of labor, Thi's husband and mother bring her phở. The protagonist describes the "hot noodle soup with beef, bean sprouts, and basil" as a dish that "feels like HOME". For Thi, phở is not symbolic in a folkloric sense. It is sensory grounding. Or cooking and preparing food becomes a language of love for the mother's protagonist. While the phrase "I love you" sticks in her throat, she expresses her presence by bring-

ing home baguettes, cooking dinner, and ensuring the family has white rice and green vegetables. Similarly, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* revolves around the differences and conflicts between two generations of women—the mothers, who carry dense memories of China, and the Americanized daughters. At the same time, it is also a journey of reconciliation, understanding, and reconnection with heritage. Food serves as a crucial motif in the novel, functioning both as a cultural symbol and as a structure of memory for the characters. Tan employs cuisine as a cultural code to illuminate intersections, ruptures, and reconciliations between two worlds: traditional China and modern America. In this way, food becomes an archive of nostalgia, a site where diasporic subjects recover identity in exile. For instance, in *The Joy Luck Club*, food preserves traditional Chinese cosmologies, beliefs, and moral systems. In China, food carries profound symbolic meanings: the dim sum shaped like silver ingots symbolizes wealth; long noodles represent longevity; boiled peanuts express the desire for sons; and juicy oranges signify sweetness and abundance. These foods are not nostalgic decorations; they are ritual acts of resistance, revealing Chinese's attempts to impose meaning and hope amid war and starvation. Overall, these two novels illustrate how culinary narratives operate as vehicles of memory and nostalgia, particularly in contexts where diasporic identity is fragmented. Dishes, meals, and acts of cooking are depicted as archives of memory and longing in diasporic literature, transmitting multiple forms of remembrance. We argue that the experience of exile transforms culinary practices into evocative memory archives that transcend both geographical and generational boundaries.

Not only food but also culinary spaces, such as domestic kitchens and restaurants, are analyzed as unstable, fragmented, and hybrid spaces, positioning culinary space not merely as a narrative backdrop but as a vital node of cultural intersection. The analytical shift here is from culinary practices to culinary spatiality, drawing upon Foucault's concept of heterotopia to interpret sites such as the kitchen, dining table, migrant markets, and restaurants as loci

of fragmented identity, memory, and emotion in contexts of exile. We hypothesize that the act of eating takes place not in neutral spaces, but in contested zones that resist dominant cultural norms, reactivate communal memory, and rearticulate senses of belonging. We focus on Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* to see how culinary spaces are constructed as heterotopic sites. Mo's novel follows a Chinese immigrant family's journey to London in the 1960s. The primary characters include Chen, a devoted husband facing immigration barriers in Britain; his wife Lily, a staunch upholder of traditional Chinese values; her sister Mui; and Man Kee, the couple's young son. The novel's culinary spaces, ranging from the Chinese restaurant where Chen initially works to the domestic kitchen-turned-small eatery run by Lily and Chen, are analyzed as heterotopias wherein the Chinese in Britain are simultaneously excluded from dominant spaces and able to construct autonomous sites for cultural survival. For example, the Chinese restaurant functions as an exoticized enclave within the British urban landscape, offering Westernized Chinese cuisine. It forms an intense, non-stop workspace where time and activity are structured by service rhythms rather than conventional work–life boundaries. It is a space of difference in which norms of labor, social interaction, and cultural practices diverge from the broader society, revealing how migrant labor is embedded in alternative spatial logics that reflect survival, marginalization, and negotiation with mainstream economic structures. This space, filtered through a Western gaze, embodies both the simulation of ethnic authenticity and the alienation of heterotopic dislocation. Similarly, the restaurant space in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* also reveals hierarchies of class, race, and the efforts of the diasporic subject to resist. Truong's novel centers on Binh, a queer Vietnamese cook employed by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in 1920s–1930s in Paris. As a racialized and sexualized migrant, Binh constantly negotiates the conditions of marginalization. Although Binh orchestrates lavish meals for the elite, he is persistently reduced to a servant, stereotyped as the

subaltern “Indochinois” and stripped of personal agency. Yet the kitchen itself becomes a contested terrain, one of symbolic power, where the cook is not merely a subordinate laborer but also a creative agent who produces gastronomic meaning. For instance, Bìn̄h prepares “American” comfort foods like apple pie and meatloaf, yet he seasons these requests with the “science” of his own tongue, using techniques learned in Vietnam to evoke a nostalgia for places his employers have never been. Or when he prepares complex dishes like oeufs à la neige (eggs in the snow), he is not just cooking in 1930s Paris; he is mentally transported back to the all-night preparations in Saigon in 1923. Bìn̄h’s mode of articulation is not vocal but culinary: he speaks through the language of food. The concept of heterotopia, as developed by Michel Foucault, is applied here to illuminate culinary spaces as cultural sites that operate outside of dominant sociocultural orders. Foucault’s defining principles of heterotopia, such as the mirror-like but deviant reflection of society, the simultaneity and collision of multiple spatialities, and the layers of fragmented memory embedded within these sites, enable us to deconstruct familiar locales such as kitchens, restaurants, and eateries. In doing so, we uncover the deeper layers of cultural, mnemonic, and political meaning that these spaces embody.

Cultural sanitization refers to mechanisms of “cleansing,” “softening,” or “dehistoricizing” food consumption practices. The foundational theoretical issue addressed here is cultural sanitization, a mechanism that involves the removal of culturally “abrasive” or politically charged elements to render a cultural expression more acceptable or consumable. Within the context of gastronomy, this concept refers to the process of eliminating the “strong-smelling,” unfamiliar, or culturally “unpalatable” qualities of food in order to present it as aesthetically pleasing and “safe.” The result of such sanitization is a reshaped image of ethnic identity, what scholars have termed palatable ethnicity: an ethnic identity tailored to be digestible, pleasing, and easily consumed within dominant cultural paradigms. Scholars such as Lisa Heldke in *Exotic Appetites: Rumi-*

tions of a Food Adventurer (2003), Krishnendu Ray in *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (2016), and Tisha Dejmancee in her article “Palatable Ethnicity and the Asian-Australian Food Blogger” (2019) have deployed this concept, either explicitly or implicitly, as a flexible critical tool to examine how food and diasporic identities are modified to accommodate mainstream consumer cultures, thereby obscuring underlying histories, politics, and structural inequalities. While the foodscape comprises the network of culinary practices, spaces, discourses, and food-related symbols within specific sociocultural and political contexts, palatable ethnicity may be understood as a distinctive mechanism operating within the foodscape. It specifically foregrounds how ethnic identities, when mediated through cuisine, are softened, aestheticized, and rendered “market-friendly” to align with dominant spatial and consumer sensibilities.

In the context of globalization, Asian-origin cuisines entering mainstream cultures are often stripped of their political and historical connotations to satisfy global popular tastes. Two texts, including Kevin Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians* and Eddie Huang’s *Fresh Off the Boat*, demonstrate how food is ethnicized to appear ‘exotic,’ while simultaneously rendered ‘palatable’ to fit the logics of global consumerism. Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians* follows Rachel Chu, a Chinese-American economics professor, who accompanies her boyfriend Nicholas Young to Singapore for a wedding—unaware that he belongs to one of the wealthiest families in Asia. Rachel is quickly swept into a world of lavish banquets, familial rivalries, and entrenched social hierarchies. The novel vividly portrays elite Asian social stratification and cultural opulence. Instead of engaging with complex issues such as cultural conflict, immigration, or racism, the narrative emphasizes fashion, food, and high society lifestyles, rendering Asian identity into a glamorous spectacle appealing to an international audience. For example, the novel frequently highlights the extravagant banquets of the wealthy elite (lavish wedding feasts, Colonial clubs). In this context, cuisine appears as a stylized and sanitized symbol of modern Asian affluence, rather than a his-

torically grounded or diasporically nuanced cultural expression. In contrast, Eddie Huang's *Fresh Off the Boat*—a memoir—recounts his upbringing as a Taiwanese immigrant in the United States and his eventual emergence as a chef and restaurateur. Food in Huang's narrative is not merely sustenance but a vehicle for cultural self-exploration, from the traditional Taiwanese dishes prepared by his mother to his experimentation with American cuisine. Unlike Kwan's sanitized representations, *Fresh Off the Boat* treats cuisine as a mode of resistance against dominant stereotypes of Asian American identity and gastronomy. Huang's BaoHaus restaurant, which serves Taiwanese-style gua bao (braised pork buns), becomes emblematic of this resistance. Rather than "Americanize" the dish to appeal to Western tastes, Huang preserves its traditional flavor profile and asserts it as a declaration of cultural pride. For Huang, cooking is not merely a profession—it is an act of defiance against forced assimilation and a reclaiming of cultural authenticity in the face of systemic erasure.

To conclude, the theoretical framework of foodscape has allowed us to examine food and culinary practices in the construction of identity (including the shaping, maintenance, or negotiation of identity) and the expression of memory in Asian diasporic literature, as well as the ways in which diasporic literature articulates power relations, cultural interaction, and resistance. Analyses of several works discussed above reveal the multifaceted nature of culinary discourse in migrant literature—from its role as a repository of memory and nostalgia, to its function as a platform for expressing crises and identity resistance, and to the ways in which culinary narratives become a medium of cultural purification. More importantly, reading these works suggests that culinary space should be understood as dynamic, intersecting, and hybridized—a space where eaters, cooks, and writers about these activities ought to be approached as symbolic agents within the culinary landscape.

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## **Local Community in Italian and Vietnamese Culture: its Role in the Construction of Identity**

### *Introduction*

In many cultures, local communities are not merely regarded as residential units where a group of inhabitants live together; they also constitute a space with a distinct identity, a repository of collective memory, and a site that generates each individual's sense of belonging. Neither as broad as the nation-state nor as intimate and fundamental as the family, local community is an intermediate entity that contributes to the construction of both individual identity and national identity.

The issue of local identity has long been explored in both Vietnamese and Italian culture. In the Italian case, research on local identity and on *campanilismo* - an extreme sense of attachment to and pride in the place where one was born and raised - is especially prominent. In Vietnamese culture, many issues concerning village communities, the ties binding individuals within the community, and questions of identity have likewise been widely examined. Yet the deeper similarities and differences in perceptions of community between a Mediterranean culture and a Southeast Asian wet-rice culture have not been systematically placed side by side for comparison. A study adopting a comparative cultural approach is therefore useful for explaining the reasons behind such similarities and differences. This article seeks to answer two questions:

1. How is local community perceived in Italian culture and in Vietnamese culture?
2. Why does attachment to proximate space remain resilient in both Italy and Vietnam despite the existence of the modern nation-state?

The article employs documentary analysis and synthesis of secondary sources in order to provide an overall picture of how Italian and Vietnamese culture perceive local community. Conceptual analysis is also used to probe more deeply into the layers of meaning of local community, identity, and local identity. Finally, the article adopts an intercultural comparative method, with the object of comparison being the role of local community in the two cultures across the following dimensions: (1) space of memory and sense of belonging; (2) mechanisms for maintaining norms; and (3) the position of local identity in relation to national identity. The cases presented and compared in the article are treated as diverse manifestations of the role of local community, not as independent objects of comparison.

### *Local Community and its role in the Construction of Identity*

#### *Local community*

Community is a term used in many fields of research, and each field approaches it differently and offers a concept suited to its own perspective. In “Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement,” George A. Hillery analyzed ninety-four different definitions of community, according to which community may be understood as “a place to live,” a “spatial unit,” “a way of life” (from an ethnographic perspective), or “a social system” (from a sociological perspective).

Within cultural studies and sociology, local community is often understood as a social space tied to place and relationships. According to Kathleen M. MacQueen and her research group in public

health, local community is a community associated with a specific locale, in which members share social relations, common ties, and a certain degree of shared life. MacQueen and her colleagues also show that community is often examined and understood through such elements as locus, sharing, social ties, and joint action. In other words, when speaking of local community, one must also emphasize the social relations and the process through which individuals in that community share common life practices and common values. From this perspective, local community may be seen as the site where most of an individual's social activities outside the family take place, where the individual locates himself or herself within the community and thereby forms both personal and collective identity.

Another study by Andrew Clark conceives of local community as a living space, arguing that community is the place where social relations are chiefly formed, built, maintained, and experienced within a defined geographical space. From this perspective, community is tied to geographical boundaries, the setting in which the social life of a particular group unfolds.

Cater and Jones (1989), by contrast, define local community as “a socially interactive space inhabited by a close network of households, most of whom are known to one another and who, to a high degree, participate in common social activities, exchange information, engage in mutual aid and support and are conscious of a common identity, a belonging together.”

In this article, local community can be understood as a defined residential space in which members are connected by relatively stable social relations, shared life practices, memories, and cultural norms, thereby generating each individual's sense of belonging to the community and contributing to form collective identity.

### *Identity and Local Identity*

From a sociological perspective, identity is often understood as the set of meanings through which an individual or a community answers the question of who they are. Peter J. Burke defines identity

as “sets of meanings that define who we are” in terms of the social roles we perform, the groups or social categories to which we belong, or the characteristics seen as constituting the distinctiveness of the subject. From this perspective, identity is not a fixed attribute but a structure of meaning formed in social relations, one that also links the individual to broader systems of roles, values, and communities.

From the perspective of cultural studies and human geography, local identity may be viewed as a form of identity associated with place and a specific residential community. The tradition of research on place identity initiated by Harold M. Proshansky regards it as those dimensions of the self defined in relation to the physical environment; more specifically, place identity consists of “those dimensions of self” formed through a complex of ideas, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies associated with a given environment. In this article, local identity is understood in a broader sense than place identity, and includes place, memory, practices, symbols, and social interaction. On that basis, local identity may be understood as the sense of belonging and self-identification generated through the long-term relationship between human beings and their community within a defined local unit, where memories, symbols, cultural practices, and social interactions are accumulated and shared.

If identity emphasizes the question of who the subject is within a network of roles and social groups, local identity emphasizes who that subject is in relation to a specific place. In other words, local identity is not merely an emotional attachment to locality; it is also a form of identity construction in which place becomes an intermediate environment through which individuals and communities establish a sense of belonging, maintain collective memory, and distinguish themselves from other communities. This approach is especially useful when studying the role of local community in Italian and Vietnamese culture, because it allows locality to be viewed not merely as a residential unit but as a space in which identity is constructed and reconstructed.

*Local Community as a Residential Space and a Repository of a Sense of Belonging*

Local community is first perceived as a defined residential space in which members of the community live together, share common spaces and common life activities, and thereby establish, build, and reinforce social relations. The regular sharing of such local practices is the basis on which an individual contributes his or her own experiences to collective knowledge and, conversely, directly receives the influence of the collective in personal perception, conduct, and practice. Local community thus constitutes a level of collective identification, and through the collective's common activities the identity of both the individual and the collective gradually takes shape.

At the same time, Benedict Anderson's analyses in *Imagined Communities* suggest that a person's feeling of attachment to a given place is often taken to be a natural bond rather than a matter of choice. Although Anderson mainly discussed about national community, but this point of view suggests that local community relies far more on direct interaction; yet even at this level, the sense of belonging is not merely a product of face-to-face contact but is also nurtured by symbols, names, memories, and the community's collective imagination of itself.

From the perspective of organizational culture, local community may be seen as an intermediate space between the individual and larger communities such as the region, the nation, or society in general. At the sociological level, Andrew Clark recalls the approach of "community as locality," according to which community is a layer of social relations anchored in a specific place, where contact, obligations, and shared practices occur regularly; it is therefore the nearest level through which individuals experience social life, rather than confronting directly broader and more abstract institutions. From this point of view, local community plays the role of an intermediate layer: it helps produce collective identification, translates broad social structures into concrete lived experience, and helps build each

individual's sense of belonging. This idea is also close to Berger and Neuhaus's concept of "mediating structures", through which neighborhoods, churches, associations, and other proximate networks are understood as institutions that stand between isolated individuals and the "megastructures" of modern society, thereby transmitting values, meaning, and social participation.

### *Local Community in Italian and Vietnamese Culture*

#### *Community as an Institution for Preserving Heritage and Identity*

On the basis of the arguments reviewed above, it can be affirmed that local community is the social environment closest to the individual and the family, the place where cultural values do not exist in isolated or abstract form but are practiced, experienced, and preserved across the time and space of the community. Such concrete practices can be observed in everyday life as well as in festivals and communal rituals.

In Italy, when speaking of local community, one phenomenon that cannot be overlooked is *campanilismo* - a sense of pride in and attachment to (sometimes in extreme form) the customs and traditions of one's city. The term derives from *campanile*, the word used for church bell towers since the Middle Ages. In Italian popular discourse, *campanilismo* is often explained through anecdotes about rivalry between neighboring communities, revolving around the image of the *campanile* as a symbol of locality<sup>1</sup>. Although such anecdotes do not necessarily reflect the strict etymological origin of the term, they reveal how Italians imagine local particularism as

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1 According to a widely circulated oral anecdote in Italy, the term *campanilismo* originated from the rivalry and antagonism between two villages, *Palma Campania* and *San Gennaro Vesuviano*. When the inhabitants of *San Gennaro Vesuviano* built the bell tower of their village church, they deliberately installed clocks on only three sides of the tower and left the fourth side - the one facing *Palma Campania* - blank, so that the people of *Palma Campania* would not be able to tell the time from their bell tower.

a form of pride bound up with comparison and competition. *Campanilismo* is a typical expression of the attachment and pride an individual feels toward his or her community. When this sentiment is elevated to an extreme degree, it can produce local particularism, with a tendency toward communal closure in certain contexts; it may even lead to antagonistic attitudes and the refusal to recognize neighboring communities.

The phenomenon of *campanilismo* is a direct consequence of the fragmented history of the Italian peninsula throughout the Middle Ages. Italy was unified territorially only in 1861, and a sense of national unity emerged only after the First World War (1918). Even during the Fascist period, *campanilismo* remained a significant obstacle to the construction of national spirit and nationalism under Mussolini (Driver, 2025). Precisely because national consciousness emerged much later than the sense of belonging to separate localities - which had formerly been medieval city-states with distinct political and cultural systems - local institutions remain, despite nearly two centuries of national unification, a firm point of support for individuals, one to which they are deeply attached and where they feel they truly belong.

However, from the standpoint of identity formation and heritage preservation, the paramount role of local communities - especially in rural Italy - must be acknowledged. Many anthropological studies have shown the central role of *campanilismo* as an invisible institution that protects and maintains the territorial integrity and cultural identity of each village. In *Rethinking Campanilismo: Community and Conflict in Fascist Arezzo, 1922-1928*, Driver argues that *campanilismo* is a mechanism for marking identity. Unlike *Heimat* in German culture or *patria chica* in Spanish culture, which connect localities to national identity, *campanilismo* does not usually serve directly the project of constructing national identity; rather, it emphasizes the network of personal relations within rural communities while safeguarding the highly specific identity of each community. Indeed, in many communicative situations, Italians often identify themselves

not first as “sono italiano” but rather in terms of a specific locality: sono siciliano, sono torinese, sono di Milano, and so forth.

Even in modern life, the role of local communities in preserving and maintaining tradition remains highly visible. A first piece of evidence is the existence of numerous dialects across Italy. Although standard Italian is used for activities shared across the nation, in many localities people continue to use dialect in all everyday activities, both within the family and in society more broadly. According to data compiled by Istat, many local languages and variants are present across Italian territory, including around thirty forms mentioned as local languages recognized by UNESCO. According to Istat as well, in 1988, 32 percent of the Italian population used only or primarily local language in daily communication; by 2024, this figure had declined to 9.6 percent. It is noteworthy that, as of 2024, the proportion of Italians who speak only Italian or who primarily use Italian in all communicative situations is only 48.4 percent (compared with 40.6 percent in 2015); among these, 53.6 percent prefer Italian within the family, 58.7 percent in friendships, and 82.6 percent with outsiders. Istat’s data show that standard Italian is increasingly dominant, but within the family and other proximate relationships, dialects and local linguistic practices still maintain a significant presence. This suggests that local community continues to be an important environment for linguistic identity. In most cases, dialects are regarded as one of the elements that determine a person’s local identity, indicating whether someone is from Naples or Milan, Tuscany or Sicily. Outside the immediate community, dialects also serve as signs through which members of the same community recognize one another. It is thus evident that local community acts as the agent that preserves and sustains identity by maintaining the space in which local language is used.

Beyond dialects, regional cuisine, characteristic architecture, cultural markers, festivals, and heritage also help affirm the identity of local communities. One emblematic example is the role of community in organizing festivals and maintaining traditional values.

The case of the Palio di Siena, the traditional horse race held in Siena, is one such example.

Palio di Siena is a typical ritual-festival of the city of Siena with the most attractive part being the horse race in Piazza del Campo. Yet the Palio should not be regarded merely as a horse race, because the central actors of the festival are the seventeen contrade (districts) - each contrada being a local community with its own territory, residents, organizational structure, and social life. Ten contrade participate in each race, and the entire process of mobilizing finances, labor, material resources, racing strategy, and support activities for the racing team is managed autonomously by the contrade themselves. The victorious contrada wins the Drappellone, a banner symbolizing the superiority of its community's strength and value over rival contrade. The Palio is a typical festival in which neither individual identity nor national identity occupies the central position; what comes to the fore instead is the identity and honor of each local community within the same city. The contrade are not merely parties participating in the race; they are the agents that preserve communal memory and pride and that maintain communal identity through the annual organization of the festival. According to Marzucchi's study, local inhabitants may even regard participation in clashes with rival contrade as a sacred expression of readiness to sacrifice oneself for communal honor, rather than as simple disorderly conduct. The Palio is therefore a concentrated expression of a durable community structure in which historical memory, collective ritual, symbols, honor, and the sense of belonging are re-enacted and reinforced through festive practice. In other words, the Palio is a form of affirming local identity and the vitality of the contrade communities within the cultural life of Siena.

In Vietnamese culture, local community is closely tied to the village or one's city of origin. Many studies of the Vietnamese village emphasize the durability of the village institution as a space for preserving ways of life and social organization, even during periods of intense historical upheaval.

Vietnamese village is associated with structures that organize communal existence, such as the communal house, communal land, village regulations, neighborhood clusters and village markets. It is a composite social space in which members gradually build communal identity through everyday practices, festivals, beliefs, and shared systems of cultural symbols, thereby distinguishing “our village” from “the neighboring village.” Shin’ya Ueda’s study, “The Formation of a Kinh Traditional Village in Hué in Early Modern Vietnam,” shows that the village is not a ready-made unit, nor one that arises “naturally,” but is instead formed step by step, through a process in which relatively closed and fixed groups such as the village and the lineage gradually emerge within the community. This process produces clearer social boundaries, helping to position individuals within networks of local relations, kinship, and shared interests. In this sense, the village is not merely a place to live, but also a mechanism for organizing communal memory and establishing belonging.

The system of the village’s tangible and intangible heritage - such as the communal house, village regulations, spaces for worshipping the tutelary deity, village markets, and other spaces for ritual and customary practice - constitutes a common living space marked by symbolism and historicity. It is where the memory of the whole community is preserved and transmitted across generations, allowing each individual gradually to form an understanding of self and of the community in which he or she lives, together with its particular value system. Consequently, the individual does not regard the village merely as a concrete place of residence, but as the place to which he or she belongs and as one of the components that helps shape personal identity. In that way, the village becomes the agent that preserves and maintains communal identity.

The village’s function of preserving memory and maintaining tradition is expressed particularly clearly through intangible heritage closely bound to the village unit and local community. UNESCO’s dossier on *Quan họ Bắc Ninh* emphasizes that *Quan họ* melodies “express the spirit, philosophy and local identity of the communities in

this region” and “help forge social bonds within and between villages”; that is, the practice of *Quan họ* singing simultaneously expresses local identity and strengthens social ties among villages. Similarly, UNESCO describes *Xoan* singing in *Phú Thọ* as a practice performed in sacred spaces such as communal houses, temples, and shrines during spring festivals, with knowledge, customs, and techniques transmitted from one generation to the next within the community. These examples show that heritage does not exist independently of the communities that practice it; on the contrary, it is precisely the local community that provides the environment in which shared memories crystallized into identity are nurtured, re-enacted, and passed on. Once detached from the practicing community, heritage risks being preserved merely as a cultural trace rather than as a living practice.

In Vietnamese culture, the consciousness of homeland and native place is a durable expression of local identity. In communicative practice, asking about one's city of origin is often not simply a matter of determining where a person comes from; it also serves to position that individual within a familiar regional and communal network. Many studies of village communities in Vietnam have affirmed that the village is a community with relatively clear boundaries, its own institutions, its own tutelary deity, customs, and moral rules. Each village may thus be regarded as a self-contained entity with its own identity, distinct from that of other villages. Asking where a person comes from is therefore not merely asking where they live, but rather locating that individual within a social network made up of different local communities, each with a different identity.

The identity markers of a Vietnamese local community may include local speech, cuisine, festivals, or traditional crafts. Compared with the multilingual and multi-dialectal picture of Italy, linguistic differences among Vietnamese/Kinh communities generally do not form strongly separate systems to the point of obstructing everyday communication; nevertheless, differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and regional nuance remain important markers of local identity.

From the foregoing analyses, it may be affirmed that, in both Italian and Vietnamese culture, local community is not merely the social unit closest to everyday life, but also a space that preserves collective memory and cultural tradition while actively participating in the construction and maintenance of communal identity.

*Local community as a mechanism for maintaining norms and regulating social behavior*

In addition to preserving collective memory and constructing and maintaining collective identity, as discussed above, local community also functions as a social mechanism for delineating the fundamental norms of conduct expected of individuals within the community, thereby determining what counts as right, beautiful, or humane, and which forms of conduct are blameworthy and must be rejected. This mechanism operates through written and unwritten rules established by the community, including norms of conduct, honor, public opinion, recognition, and exclusion.

From a sociological perspective, community is the residential space closest after the family, the place where social relations are established and where individuals share many aspects of common life. It is therefore also the place where norms are concretized as expectations regarding the behavior of each individual as a member of the community. Through this process, community norms are safeguarded and community identity is maintained and protected. Communal identity is thus enacted daily through social evaluation, not only expressed through cultural symbols.

In this article, the comparison is not made by pairing phenomena one-to-one, but by comparing mechanisms of behavioral regulation at the level of local community.

In Italian culture, this function of community is clearly expressed through face, family honor, and informal social evaluation. An easily recognizable example is the logic of *bella figura*. Denise Scannell

Guida (D.S. Guida, 2020) emphasizes that it is a concept linked to civility, to an understanding of the rules of social conduct, and to the way an individual is evaluated and judged by others in communal life. In this case, the individual is often assessed as a representative of the family, bearing the family's honor and the reputation of the community in which he lives. A more classical line of analysis of Italian society likewise shows that honor and reputation are controlled by informal sanctions of a local character; that is, communal praise and blame can shape conduct with a force not inferior to that of formal institutions. Local community in Italy may therefore be seen as the space in which informal social evaluations help actualize norms through the pressure to save face, preserve reputation, and avoid harming the image of oneself and one's family.

In Vietnam, the community's function in regulating norms of conduct is closely tied to village custom, village regulations, and communal public opinion. Trần Thị Quang Hồng's study shows that normative pluralism has long been a feature of Vietnamese society, in which village regulations are sets of rules created by each village for internal application. The study also recalls the saying "the king's law yields to village custom" in order to indicate the durability of self-regulatory mechanisms at the communal level; in other words, norms laid down by the village community may at times carry more weight than the official law of the nation-state. This saying continues to be widely used even in the modern context, even though village mechanisms are no longer as tight and "autonomous" as they once were. This shows that local community still plays a direct role in regulating individual conduct. Analyses of the traditional village system also show that the Vietnamese village had a relatively high degree of closure and self-governance, making local community an environment in which individuals were positioned and evaluated according to common norms. The folk verse, "Even after a hundred years, stone steles wear away / But after a thousand years, the stele of people's judgment still stands," is perhaps the clearest illustration in Vietnamese culture of the community's constant judgment of con-

duct. In that setting, the honor of the family, lineage, and village becomes the object of public opinion - a kind of unofficial moral court which, although not part of written state law, exerts such strong rewards and punishments in terms of social prestige that individuals are compelled to regulate their own behavior in accordance with the values established and deemed normative by the community.

Viewed across both cases, local community not only generates a sense of belonging but also maintains identity through mechanisms that normalize behavior. In Italy, this mechanism appears through informal social evaluation, honor, and reputation; in Vietnam, it appears through village custom, village regulations, and the pressure of communal public opinion. Although the forms of expression differ, the common point is that local community in both contexts has the capacity to determine which behaviors accord with the image the community seeks to protect and which behaviors damage collective honor. Through precisely these mechanisms of praise and blame, recognition and exclusion, communal identity does not dissolve but is repeatedly reaffirmed over time as a living system of values in everyday life.

### *Fundamental differences in local community between the two cultures*

The history of Italy is a history of territorial fragmentation. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Italian peninsula experienced a prolonged period of fragmentation, with the presence and influence of many different political powers. This process contributed to the creation of extremely strong regional diversity. It is clearly expressed in every sphere of life: from cuisine, language, festivals, and religion to other cultural domains. It is therefore not surprising that, in Italy, two neighboring localities may speak markedly different dialects. For the same reason, antagonistic and at times hostile attitudes between localities found increasingly favorable conditions to become deeply entrenched in the cultural life of each community: this is the origin of *campanilismo*, as discussed above. The

history of fragmentation has given regional and local identities in Italy a high degree of durability, and in many cases they continue to function as important frames of reference alongside national identity. Well-known examples include the rivalry between Livorno and Pisa, two Tuscan cities only about twenty kilometers apart; between Pisa and Florence; between Pescara and Chieti; and between Bari and Taranto. This pride in one's own community - sometimes excessive - has both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, local community preserves, develops, and elevates Italian local brands as part of identity, bringing substantial economic value to Made in Italy (as in the cases of prosciutto and Parmigiano Reggiano from Parma, Limone della Costa d'Amalfi, Vetro di Murano, and so on). On the other hand, when local community becomes too strong, Italy's search for national identity remains fraught with difficulty.

Vietnamese culture, by contrast, has followed a historical trajectory very different from Italy's. In Vietnam, local community has been strongly shaped by the long-standing organization of the agricultural village, which emphasizes social relations, communal interests, and bonds among members through shared life practices and common obligations. The village emerged as an intermediate structure between family and nation, the nearest social environment outside the family, but at the same time one always situated within broader political and cultural orders. As a result, local identity in Vietnam generally does not develop as a force opposed to national identity; rather, it tends to exist as a proximate layer within a broader identity structure.

The formation of the modern nation-state in Vietnam did not erase local particularity; instead, it tended to absorb and incorporate it into national discourse. Mai Vũ's study shows that Vietnamese national identity in the early twentieth century was not a single unified block, but was constructed through multiple overlapping and interacting layers of identity. This allows us to understand that local identity in Vietnam is usually not positioned as the negation of national identity, but rather becomes a resource that concret-

izes and enriches national feeling at a more intimate level. At the same time, recent studies continue to record the marked durability of values such as community, hierarchical order, and harmony in Vietnamese culture, suggesting that the logic of local community persists as a social foundation within a broader national identity.

This does not mean that local identity in Vietnam lacks exclusionary aspects; the difference is that its local particularism operates chiefly at the level of proximate community rather than developing into a frame of identity that directly competes with the nation.

At the same time, one cannot deny the existence of extreme manifestations of local identity in the Vietnamese context. One of these is local particularism. This mentality is a consequence of the strong self-governing character of the traditional village, which produced a tendency toward closure and the privileging of insiders. On the one hand, this mechanism helped the village maintain identity; on the other hand, it limited the village's capacity to connect with and adapt to neighboring communities or to larger social units such as the nation. A study of the petty-peasant mentality by Nguyễn Tiến Thư, published in the journal *Văn hóa Nghệ thuật*, also points to a concrete expression of local particularism in the distinction between permanent villagers and resident outsiders. Permanent villagers enjoyed more rights, such as shares in communal land, participation in rituals, and access to communal benefits, whereas resident outsiders were regarded as people from outside the village and had to wait several generations before being fully recognized. The article cites specific evidence from the village conventions of Hành Thiện. In this case, local community may create strict and relatively exclusionary social boundaries toward outsiders.

Another expression of local particularism is the idea that "the king's law yields to village custom." On the one hand, this feature helps the village preserve norms, construct identity, and maintain its own value system; on the other hand, it may lead to the consequence that people value local rules more than law and place communal conventions above the universal rules of the nation.

However, local community should not be equated with local particularism. The problem is that the very factors that once gave village society its durability - self-governance, internal cohesion, and the valorization of tradition - may, under certain conditions, be transformed into closure, exclusion, and conservatism. Precisely at this point, the darker side of local community in Vietnamese culture should be understood as a historical and social possibility rather than as an immutable essence.

Taken as a whole, local identity in Vietnam tends to be integrated into national identity more readily than in the Italian case, although at the level of proximate community there remain certain localist and exclusionary expressions.

### *Conclusion*

From a comparative perspective, local community in both Italian and Vietnamese culture emerges prominently as an intermediate institution that plays a role in the construction and maintenance of identity. Yet local identity in Italian culture clearly bears the imprint of Italy's history of territorial fragmentation, and to this day that local spirit still tends toward a fairly strong form of autonomy - autonomous in its capacity to connect with national identity, and at times confrontational in its relations with certain neighboring communities, even if such tendencies are becoming less extreme. In Vietnamese culture, by contrast, local identity is tied to the durable village institution of a traditional agrarian society and therefore can be more readily incorporated into the structure of national identity.

At the theoretical level, the article suggests that national identity does not replace local identity; rather, these two layers of identity co-exist, interact, and negotiate with one another within cultural life. The cases of Italy and Vietnam show that the formation of the modern nation-state does not necessarily lead to the dissolution of local attachments; on the contrary, in many contexts local identity continues to

function as an emotional, mnemonic, and normative foundation for both individuals and communities. The article further suggests that modernization does not abolish the ‘proximate community,’ but only transforms the way this community is present and operates in contemporary society. On this basis, local community may be read not merely as a residential unit or a geographical-administrative sphere, but as an intermediate cultural mechanism in which values, symbols, collective memory, and norms of conduct are maintained, reproduced, and transmitted. It is precisely at this intermediate level that the relationship among the individual, local community, and national identity becomes more concrete and more analytically accessible.

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## **Integrating Mindfulness into Hybrid Higher Education: A Pedagogical Reflection Inspired by Thích Nhất Hạnh**

### *Introduction*

This article addresses this gap by presenting a pedagogical reflection on a teaching mobility experience that explored mindfulness as an embodied, linguistic, and relational practice within a hybrid academic setting.

The teaching mobility carried out at the University for Foreigners of Perugia within the framework of the PNRR – TNE TRANSIT project represented a meaningful opportunity not only for knowledge transfer but also for intercultural dialogue and pedagogical experimentation. The seminar cycle entitled “*Mindfulness, Language, and Its Application in Academic Life*” was structured into three sessions (09 hours in total) and aimed at introducing students to mindfulness within contemporary academic environments.

Each seminar session involved approximately 7 to 9 students attending in person and between 20 to 25 students joining online. Overall, the participant group was heterogeneous in terms of age, educational background, and cultural origin, contributing to a rich intercultural learning environment.

In terms of educational background, the group included 15 undergraduate and postgraduate students, 7 students enrolled in language courses, and 7 participants whose academic status could not

be clearly identified. This diversity required the adaptation of teaching strategies to accommodate different levels of academic experience and familiarity with abstract concepts.

Participants also represented a wide range of nationalities, including 9 students from Italy, 2 from Brazil, 5 from China, 2 from Vietnam, and 3 from Mongolia, while the nationality of 7 participants was not specified. This multicultural composition played a significant role in shaping classroom dynamics, particularly in relation to communication styles, participation patterns, and interpretations of mindfulness as a concept and practice.

The age distribution further reflected this diversity: 17 participants were between 18 and 30 years old, 5 were between 30 and 60, and the age of 7 participants was not identified. The presence of both younger students and adult learners contributed to a multilayered learning environment, where different life experiences influenced the ways in which mindfulness was perceived and engaged with.

### *Pedagogical Design and Seminar Structure*

The seminar series was structured into three sessions of three hours each, combining theoretical input, guided practice, and interactive activities. The pedagogical design aimed to progressively introduce mindfulness as both a conceptual framework and an embodied practice, while fostering student engagement through dialogue, reflection, and application.

*Seminar 1* focused primarily on theoretical foundations. It introduced Thích Nhất Hạnh as a central figure in the transmission of mindfulness to Western contexts, alongside an overview of the historical origins of mindfulness and its reinterpretation by contemporary scholars and psychologists. Particular attention was given to how mindfulness has been adapted across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. To support comprehension, the session incorporated comprehension-check questions and examples illustrating how

theoretical concepts could be applied in everyday situations. Open-ended questions were also used to encourage students to express their perspectives and relate the material to their own experiences.

*Seminar 2* introduced a more experiential dimension. It began with a 10-minute guided mindfulness practice, followed by a review of key concepts from the first session. The theoretical focus then shifted to language, silence, and presence. Students were invited to reflect on the role of speech and silence in interpersonal interaction, exploring distinctions between verbal expression and communication more broadly, as well as the significance of pauses and “empty spaces” in dialogue. Open-ended questions encouraged students to provide personal examples, fostering a connection between theory and lived experience. The session also addressed emotional dimensions such as anger, judgment, and shame, examining how these states can be interpreted and transformed within a mindfulness framework. This phase emphasized the relational and interpretative aspects of presence.

*Seminar 3* consolidated and extended the previous sessions. After a 10-minute mindfulness practice and a review of earlier content, the focus shifted to the application of mindfulness within academic life. Students were encouraged to reflect on the specific characteristics and pressures of university environments and to discuss how mindfulness could support their learning processes. Interactive discussion remained central, with students contributing examples drawn from their own academic experiences.

The final part of the seminar consisted of a 60-minute applied activity in which students were invited to practice mindfulness while engaging in an academic task, such as completing an assignment or planning their study schedule. This activity aimed to bridge theory and practice by situating mindfulness within concrete learning situations. At the end of the session, students were asked to formulate a personal definition of mindfulness, allowing for an initial assessment of how the concept had been understood, internalized, and reinterpreted.

In particular, this progression can be interpreted through the lens of David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the cyclical movement between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The seminars were structured to mirror this cycle: theoretical input provided conceptual grounding, guided mindfulness practices created opportunities for direct experience, reflective discussions supported meaning-making, and applied activities enabled students to experiment with mindfulness in academic contexts.

### *Theoretical Framework and Textual References*

#### *Mindfulness as a Universal and Intercultural Practice*

One of the primary outcomes of the mobility was the development of a broader and more nuanced understanding of mindfulness among students. Through the introduction of the life and teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, mindfulness was presented not as a purely religious or clinical technique, but as a universal human practice grounded in awareness, presence, and ethical living.

Students were guided to explore the historical roots of mindfulness in early Buddhism, particularly the concept of *sati*, and its subsequent evolution into contemporary Western practices such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). However, particular emphasis was placed on Thích Nhất Hạnh's contribution in transforming mindfulness into an accessible, everyday practice, detached from rigid religious frameworks and oriented toward peace, understanding, and compassion.

A significant learning outcome was the students' ability to distinguish between:

- mindfulness as a stress-reduction tool,
- and mindfulness as a holistic practice integrating awareness, ethical responsibility, and relational sensitivity.

This shift in perception was evident in both verbal feedback and reflective contributions, especially among those who began to articulate mindfulness not only as a technique, but as a way of being.

### *Language as Practice: Words, Awareness, and Transformation*

The second seminar focused on the relationship between language and awareness, emphasizing that language is not merely a medium of communication, but an active force in shaping both internal and external realities.

Students were introduced to the concept of “Right Speech,” understood as a mindful use of language based on truthfulness, usefulness, kindness, and appropriateness. Through guided discussion and exercises, they explored how tone, rhythm, and intention reflect inner states, and how language can either generate understanding or reinforce conflict.

The interactive format included open-ended questions, short writing tasks, and dialogue simulations. Across the three seminars, the instructor posed a total of nine open-ended questions. In the offline group, students responded directly, generating 11 oral contributions. Notably, approximately 80% of these responses were provided by male students, indicating a gender imbalance in verbal participation that may be linked to confidence, language proficiency, or cultural communication patterns.

Online participation followed a different dynamic. Students typically responded through the chat function, with a small group contributing more consistently. Many online participants showed a strong interest in the responses given by their in-person peers, often requesting that answers be repeated for clarity. This indicates a form of indirect engagement, where listening and observation play a significant role in the learning process.

### *Silence and Presence: Rethinking Communication*

Another key outcome of the mobility was the re-evaluation of silence as a meaningful component of communication. Rather than

being understood as absence or passivity, silence was presented as an active and intentional space that enables deep listening and emotional regulation.

Students explored the distinction between:

- mindful silence, characterized by awareness and presence,
- and reactive silence, associated with avoidance or suppression.

This distinction proved particularly relevant in discussions around conflict, emotional expression, and academic pressure. The idea that “not speaking when angry” can be a constructive practice was received positively, as it reframed silence as a form of care rather than repression.

The integration of silence into communication practices contributed to a more reflective approach among students, encouraging them to pause, observe, and choose their responses more consciously.

### *Embodied Awareness: The Role of the Body in Learning and Communication*

A central pedagogical element of the seminars was the integration of short mindfulness practices, particularly conscious breathing exercises. These practices aimed to reconnect students with their bodily experience as a foundation for presence and communication.

A 10-minute mindfulness practice was conducted at the beginning of two seminars. All offline students actively participated, while online participation could not be directly verified due to the limitations of the digital format. When asked about the usefulness of this practice, seven students explicitly reported that it had a positive impact on their focus and readiness to engage with the lesson.

This suggests that even brief moments of guided awareness can support cognitive and emotional readiness in academic settings. However, it also highlights the need for more effective strategies to engage online participants in embodied practices.

### *Finding and discussion*

#### *Application in Academic Life: Between Engagement and Dropout*

The third seminar focused on the application of mindfulness in academic life, particularly in relation to study habits, stress management, and self-perception.

Students were introduced to practical strategies such as:

- studying in focused time blocks,
- taking mindful breaks,
- observing thoughts and emotions without identification.

A 60-minute activity was designed to allow students to apply mindfulness to academic planning or task completion. However, this phase revealed a significant challenge: among offline participants, five students gradually left the classroom, leaving only two students by the end of the session. Online participants remained connected, but their level of actual engagement could not be assessed.

This outcome suggests that while students may appreciate the concept of mindfulness, sustained engagement in longer, self-directed activities requires additional support, structure, or motivation. It also reflects the broader difficulty of maintaining attention and commitment in contemporary learning environments, particularly in hybrid settings.

#### *Emotional Awareness and Academic Identity*

Another important outcome concerns students' relationship with their own emotions and academic identity. Many participants initially associated their self-worth with academic performance, leading to anxiety, comparison, and self-doubt.

Through guided reflection, students were encouraged to:

- recognize thoughts as mental events rather than objective truths,
- name emotions such as fear, envy, or frustration without judgment,

- develop a more compassionate relationship with themselves.

This process contributed to a shift from a performance-based identity toward a more process-oriented and self-aware perspective. Some students explicitly shared personal reflections on how mindfulness helped them reinterpret their academic challenges.

### *Online Communication and Mindfulness*

The seminars also addressed the role of mindfulness in digital communication. Students reflected on how the absence of tone, body language, and immediate feedback in online environments can lead to impulsive reactions and reduced empathy.

Mindfulness was proposed as a tool to:

- slow down communication,
- become aware of emotional states before responding,
- choose language more intentionally.

This aspect of the seminar was particularly relevant in the hybrid learning context, where online interaction plays a central role.

### *Positive Outcomes and Student Engagement*

In addition to the general learning outcomes, several specific indicators point to a strong level of student interest and engagement.

Following the first seminar, some students explicitly requested the inclusion of mindfulness practices in subsequent sessions, suggesting that the topic resonated beyond a purely theoretical level. One student raised a critical and insightful question regarding the application of mindfulness in corporate environments, asking why companies recognize its importance but do not systematically implement it to improve employee well-being and productivity. This question reflects a capacity to connect the seminar content with broader socio-economic contexts.

Another notable moment occurred when a student brought a book by Thích Nhất Hạnh to class and shared that it had significantly changed his life. This personal testimony highlights the transformative potential of mindfulness when it extends beyond the academic setting.

At the end of the sessions, 15 to 20 online participants expressed their appreciation through messages in the group chat, and several students shared personal reflections on their understanding of mindfulness. Additionally, five students requested access to recorded versions of the lectures, indicating a desire to revisit and deepen their learning.

These elements suggest that, despite some challenges in sustained participation, the seminars succeeded in creating meaningful engagement at both intellectual and personal levels.

### *Qualitative feedback*

Two participants, representing different profiles within the seminar, articulated their experiences in ways that highlight the embodied and reflective dimensions of mindfulness.

James Samuail, a B1.3 language course student, described mindfulness as a moment of pause and reconnection:

*Per me è stato un momento davvero significativo, perché mi ha permesso di fermarmi, respirare e ascoltare ciò che spesso, nella vita quotidiana, passa inosservato... il respiro profondo diventa un ponte tra il corpo e l'anima.*

His reflection emphasizes the role of mindful breathing as a bridge between cognitive focus and bodily awareness, reinforcing the idea that learning is not purely intellectual but also somatic and experiential. His interpretation of silence as “uno spazio che riempie” suggests a shift from viewing silence as absence to understanding it as a productive and generative condition for attention and self-awareness.

Similarly, Giulia Guerrera, an administrative staff member, highlighted the broader applicability of mindfulness beyond the academic context:

*Il silenzio... elimina quelle 'voci dell'ansia'... Mi aiuta a fare focus, a tornare al centro... Credo che la mindfulness sia importante non solo per gli studenti, ma per tutti.*

Her response points to the social and ethical dimensions of mindfulness, framing it as a practice that supports not only individual well-being but also relational balance within families, workplaces, and communities.

Although limited in number, these qualitative responses provide insight into the depth rather than the breadth of student experience. Together, these reflections suggest that mindfulness was not only understood conceptually but also internalized as a lived experience, capable of influencing both personal awareness and social interaction.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Despite the positive outcomes, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the hybrid teaching format made it difficult to assess the level of engagement and participation of online students. In particular, the absence of camera use limited the instructor's ability to observe non-verbal responses, emotional reactions, and actual involvement in mindfulness practices.

Second, while online attendance was relatively high, the number of in-person participants remained limited, resulting in a small sample size for direct observation and interaction. This imbalance affected the depth of qualitative data that could be collected from face-to-face exchanges.

Third, certain activities—especially those requiring sustained attention and independent application of mindfulness (such as the 60-minute practice session)—revealed a decrease in engagement, as

evidenced by the gradual departure of offline students and the difficulty in verifying online participation.

Finally, the use of external feedback tools (such as shared links or forms) proved less effective than expected, as students showed a preference for immediate and informal interaction through the chat function.

These limitations highlight the need for more structured methods of data collection and engagement, particularly in hybrid learning environments.

### *Teacher Reflection and Future Improvements*

From a pedagogical perspective, the mobility experience provided valuable insights into student behavior, engagement patterns, and the effectiveness of different teaching strategies.

One unexpected observation was the higher level of verbal participation among male students, who contributed to approximately 80% of the oral responses. This raises questions about gender dynamics in classroom interaction, particularly in intercultural and multilingual contexts.

Another initial concern—that the lectures might feel overly abstract or fail to elicit student feedback—proved to be only partially accurate. While some activities did not generate the expected level of interaction, others—especially those involving metaphors and concrete imagery—were particularly well received. For example, students responded positively to analogies such as:

- the “hotpot” metaphor, used to illustrate the concept of inter-being in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s approach;
- the “carbonara” metaphor, representing a more structured and formula-based understanding of mindfulness in Western contexts;
- the image of a flame inside a paper lantern, used to describe anger as an energy that can illuminate without causing harm.

In contrast, certain pedagogical choices were less effective. The 10-minute mindfulness practice, while appreciated by some students, did not always directly support the flow of the lecture. Similarly, the 60-minute independent practice session did not produce the expected outcomes in terms of sustained engagement.

Based on these observations, several adjustments are proposed for future iterations of the seminar:

- reducing the duration of each seminar to two hours in order to support sustained attention and optimize student concentration throughout the session.
- extending the guided mindfulness practice to 15 minutes, with more stable and structured audio guidance;
- replacing the long independent practice session with a synthesis activity summarizing the key concepts of the three seminars;
- introducing a clearer self-presentation and providing contact information to strengthen the teacher–student connection;
- designing a post-seminar survey that includes both qualitative and quantitative elements, in order to collect more systematic feedback;
- adapting interaction tools to student preferences, prioritizing direct chat-based responses over external links.

Overall, the experience highlights the importance of flexibility, contextual adaptation, and continuous reflection in the teaching of mindfulness within higher education.

### *Conclusion*

The outcomes of this mobility experience highlight the potential of integrating mindfulness into higher education as a means of fostering awareness, emotional regulation, and meaningful communication. While challenges remain—particularly in hybrid teaching formats and in sustaining student engagement—the experience

demonstrates that mindfulness can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool in intercultural academic contexts.

More broadly, the seminars suggest a redefinition of education itself: from a purely cognitive process to a relational and embodied experience. In this perspective, teaching is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the cultivation of presence, understanding, and human connection.

These findings invite further exploration of how mindfulness-based approaches can be adapted to diverse educational settings, particularly in increasingly digital and intercultural environments. Future research may benefit from combining qualitative and quantitative methods in order to better assess both the depth and the impact of student engagement.

## Biographies

GIOVANNA SCOCOZZA is an associate professor in Language and Translation – Spanish Language at the University for Foreigners of Perugia. Her recent research has focused on the analysis of experiences of non-violent struggle in contemporary Latin American and Spanish contexts, as well as the possible influence of Aldo Capitini's thought in these contexts. She has also been engaged in new reflections on identity and migration issues present in the Hispanic world, always with particular attention to the complex reality of the Spanish Moroccan border. She is currently Director of the Center for Linguistic Assessment and Certification (CVCL) at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, as well as Rector's Delegate for International Relations (Latin America Area). She is a member of the Inter-university Center for Comparative Area Studies: Asia, Africa, Latin America (ASAFAL) – University of Siena, and “Distinguished Visitor” at the Italian University Institute of Rosario (Argentina).

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YUCELIS AROCHA FLOREZ is a social researcher and political scientist in training, with experience in the analysis of peace processes, political participation, and memory-building in Colombia. Her academic work has focused on the political reintegration of the Comunes Party, with particular emphasis on the challenges of democracy, representation, and peace consolidation. She is currently developing research projects on governance, citizen participation, and conflict transformation.

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TRAN TINH VY is currently a lecturer at the Faculty of Literature and Linguistics, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. After receiving her Ph.D. in Vietnamese Studies from the University of Hamburg, Germany (2020), she has focused her research on communities and diasporic literature, memory studies, and postcolonial studies. Her research works have been published in many prestigious academic journals and publishers worldwide, including a forthcoming monograph *Vietnamese Literature in the Diaspora: Exploring Memory, Identity, and Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge, 2026).

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*Transnational Italian in Higher Education. Bridging South America and the Far East through the TRANSIT Project* presents the findings of TRANSIT, a strategic European project designed to redefine Italian Studies through a transnational and intercultural lens, funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU under the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). By bridging the historical multiculturalism of South America with the growing linguistic dynamism of the Far East, the volume explores research paths and academic exchanges that cross traditional boundaries. The contributions address key contemporary issues: from EU–Latin America relations and peacebuilding to migration, identity in diaspora literature, and the integration of mindfulness in hybrid higher education. The collection highlights the role of Italian language and culture as vital tools for dialogue, mobility, and international cooperation. It demonstrates how universities can foster global connections and shared knowledge, showing that Italian Studies today is a fluid space for interaction between diverse cultural contexts and global challenges.

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