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The “Words” to Represent the Migrants in the Mediterranean. The Case Study of an Italian Newspaper

Social representations of “diversity” appear to be mainly influenced by the information conveyed by the mass media in their dual role as mediators of reality and opinion leaders, often becoming a “distorted reflection” of reality. News about arrivals of migrants in the Mediterranean, as well as violent or terrorist events, can be a few examples through which the public opinion constructs a specific image of the Other. At the same time, using words such as illegal immigrant, refugee, emigrant, may help in reinforcing an image able to reduce socio-cultural distances – or, conversely, to expand them. In this sense, public opinion will tend to juxtapose their own frames of interpretation to those proposed by the media, re-building a specific kind of reality filtered by the media. In support of the above, this paper aims at introducing a proposal for the development of a vocabulary of [the] media based on an analysis of the words used by some of the most popular Italian newspapers to represent the Other: the frequency and use of the words in news headlines can illustrate, by way of example, how the media, in some cases, are instruments able to spread among the public stereotypes and attitudes that can in turn lead to a narrowing and / or opening of relations towards the Other.

Keywords: MassMedia, Mediterranean, Migrations, Others, Social representations.

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«Слова», используемые для представления мигрантов в Средиземноморье. Тематическое исследование итальянской газеты

Социальные представления о «многообразии», как представляется, в основном формируются под влиянием средств массовой информации, выступающих в двойной роли как посредников между населением и реальностью и как лидеров общественного мнения, зачастую дающих «искаженное отражение» реальности. Новости о прибытии мигрантов в Средиземноморье, о фактах насилия и террора могут служить примерами, с помощью которых общественное мнение создает специфический образ Другого.

го. В то же время использование таких слов, как нелегальный иммигрант, беженец, эмигрант, может помочь в укреплении образа, способного сократить социально-культурную дистанцию или, наоборот, увеличить ее. В этом смысле общественное мнение будет стремиться к сопоставлению своих собственных фреймов интерпретации с теми, которые предлагают СМИ, восстанавливая конкретную реальность, отфильтрованную СМИ. В подтверждение вышеизложенного данная статья ставит целью предложить проект по разработке словаря СМИ на основе анализа слов, используемых некоторыми из наиболее популярных итальянских газет для представления Другого. Использование слов в новостных заголовках и их частота могут служить примером того, каким образом средства массовой информации в некоторых случаях распространяют в обществе определенные стереотипы и установки, которые, в свою очередь, приводят к ограничению и/или расширению контактов с Другим.

Ключевые слова: *СМИ, Средиземноморье, миграция, Другие, социальные репрезентации.*

Words matter in the migration debate.

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1. The representations of migrants and the role of media “frames”

Attitudes towards others depend to a great extent on the idea that one holds about them, on the interpretations of their past and present actions, and on the predictions of what they will do in the future (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Attitudes (positive or negative orientation) towards something or someone are guided by our perception of them (Mangone and Marsico, 2011): social reality springs not only from social meaning, but also from the products of the subjective world of individuals. When an individual or group charges another individual or group with the responsibility for their critical situation and/or suffering, it leads to the attribution of a mistaken fault to a person or group identified as an *enemy* (Girard, 1987). The ascription of responsibilities suggests solutions to social problems, while the rules determining the truthfulness of the explanations can work to either contain or increase violence and/or to control the social order.

The latter aspect is particularly important if one considers the media's ability to suggest to the public the social representations on which they base and remodel their social interactions and actions. A concrete

example are the news stories with immigrants as protagonists (the problem of immigration has been in the agendas of European politicians and of those from the Mediterranean basin for some years) that act as sounding board for some social issues concerning crime and the protection of citizens' well-being.

The media might convey images and information able to reduce socio-cultural distances, or, conversely, expand them by reproducing representations that reinforce people's opposition to immigrants. Migrants are seen through different lenses also depending on various factors, including the proximity to the phenomenon (the problem of migration is dealt with differently in southern European countries than in continental or Nordic ones): they are "clandestini" [irregular migrants], "profughi"¹ [evacuees], "rifugiati" [refugees], and "delinquent" [delinquents].

The twofold way in which people "look" at immigrants can be influenced by how the news is presented, by the type of language the media chooses to construct and represent an event, and by the interpretations provided to the public. These may reproduce stereotyped images of otherness, or provide extreme generalizations. Immigrants are at times the authors of criminal acts, at times protagonists of vicissitudes with dramatic implications. However, this dichotomy of interpretation can be associated with the different "positions" adopted by the media when dealing with and presenting a story to their target audience.

This line of reasoning implies the role of the "frame" or context – *frame space* (Goffman, 1981) – within which the communicative event takes place. Broadly, the frame represents the social environment within which are performed both the communicative practice and the interpretation of what is transmitted, with the relative construction of meaning. It is a socially defined reality (itself resulting from a previous modified situation) and its level of control cannot be determined in advance due

¹ There is no official translation for the Italian term "profugo" [evacuee]. In everyday speech and language, it is normally translated as *refugee* or *displaced person*. However, none of these conveys the precise aura of meaning associated with the word "profugo" [evacuee], at least in the Italian context. This is particularly true for refugee, which in Italian is the adjectivization of a past participle ("rifugiato" [refugee]) and as such brings with it the idea of a completed action, of someone who, more or less, has found and reached his or her final destination. On the contrary, "profugo" [evacuee] conveys the idea of an ongoing movement, an uninterrupted flight or escape. We thus chose to employ a term that, to the best of our abilities, could convey both the idea of movement and that of *force majeure*.

to multiple causes (coexistence of transmitters/receivers, multiplicity of transmitters and receivers, interpretation and/or representation, problems of experience and knowledge). In the context of mass communications, the *frame* sometimes refers to the media's power of *agenda setting*, to the simple thematization, or to the ideological framework (Bruno, 2014); other times the *frame* refers to how the information is presented, the media's chosen point of view.

On the issue of news and the media, Tuchman's definition (1978) is particularly interesting: the *frame* is understood as a *window on the world*, through which people have the opportunity to learn about themselves and others, about the lifestyles of other nations and societies populations¹. The media represent this opening that allows to see the reality outside. However, what is seen is a portion of reality: what is delimited by the frame itself. The concept of window allows for various conceptual interpretations. What matters, however, is the role of negotiator of meanings ascribed to the public, especially as far as media content is concerned. The *framing effect* introduces a psycho-social perspective according to which people change their own judgments (and attitudes) when a theme is presented within the given frame. This not only prompts people to deal with that specific theme, but it also changes their attitudes. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) define *framing effects* as changes in judgments generated by subtle alterations in the definition of a judgment or in the choice of problems: an almost persuasive outcome affecting the various publics of the news. The *frame* is therefore well suited to discuss the public's ability to re-create images of reality based on media-filtered content: a two-ways process where people are "stimulated" by mass-media information. The media may promote prejudiced attitudes towards the *Others* (in our case, the immigrants), by means of stereotyped representations, affecting social representations of alterity that are constructed also in personal interactions, in the working environment or in the peers' group.

The media can help bringing together and/or pushing apart different cultural universes. Therefore, if it is true that the perception of the *Other* may appear distant and, similarly, that the news can shorten this distance, it is also true that *frames*, by delimiting a specific image of reality, can impose a careful organization of the concepts and themes in it,

¹ For the sake of completeness, we provide Tuchman's full definition: "Through this frame, Americans learn of themselves and others, of their own institutions, leaders, and life styles, and of those of other nations and societies" (1978, p. 1).

which, in turn, from a macro perspective, define the *worldviews* where the narratives are set. Consequently, the issue is connected to the idea of culture and hence of potentially pre-existing cultural frames that are stimulated and activated (Bruno, 2014). The *framing* process thus consists of the emergence of these sets of meanings, through references and cultural *resonances* (Gamson, 1992). On this basis, the cultural dimension is an important element in the process of production of meanings. The *frame* is thus a multidimensional concept that can be described as the set of verbal, visual, and symbolic contents that are reorganized within a text and constitute a significant moment in the construction of meaning (Reese, 2003).

2. The “names of the others”. A lexical analysis of the last thirty years on *la Repubblica*’s pages

Social changes can also contribute to cause deep transformations in a language lexicon. For example, in some cases the change is linked to the emergence of a new social sensitivity, a theme or problem that is brought to the attention of the public in such a way as to help shape the forms and ways of looking at things. Although the reference object remains unchanged, the vocabulary may transform, suggesting new perspectives of meaning. Among the many possible examples, we will mention the change in the lexicon used for people with difficulties: in the Italian context, this marked the passage from *handicapped person*, to *disabled person*, and finally to *differently abled person*.

It is also true, however, that lexical changes often translate into a mere rhetorical exercise (*politically correct* language) unable to take root in social reality, without transforming the way in which people relate to other people or things. In the case of immigration, it is still unclear whether the lexical variations that characterize the way of representing the subject are ascribable to a real change of attitude (or opinion) from people, or to mere fashion trends. In other words, the names attributed to those who come to Italy with disparate improvised, makeshift vehicles in the hope of improving their living conditions are as yet uncertain and unsettled: from the more neutral “immigrati” [immigrants] to “extracomunitari” [non-EU migrants], from “clandestine” [irregular migrants] to “migrante” [migrants], “profughi” [evacuee], “refugees” [rifugiati], and “richiedenti asilo” [asylum-seekers].

Starting with the official English definitions proposed by the European Union (Appendix A), that find their equivalent in Italian (though many of them remain untranslatable), we carried out a cross-examination of the five most popular dictionaries in Italy through a research by semantic area, that is, through words or groups of words whose meanings are closely related. It was thus possible to identify, within the immigration theme, those words that define its “protagonists”, which also match with those listed in Daniela Pompei’s book (2013), *Le parole dell’immigrazione* [*The Words of Immigration*].

The research has taken into account the frequency of occurrence of each term in the last decade of the last century (from 1990 to 1999) and the first twenty years of third Millennium (from 2000 to 2019) in the articles of the daily newspaper *la Repubblica*¹. We selected the sample of articles through a keyword search that added a people-related “category” to the main “theme” of *immigration*. The results thus take into account the number of articles in which the newspaper deals with the issue of immigration and use a “category” (and therefore a name) to identify a particular group of people. To this end, each category has been inserted in the plural, so as to exclude individual cases and stories related to personal experiences and to represent, as far as possible, the whole phenomenon.

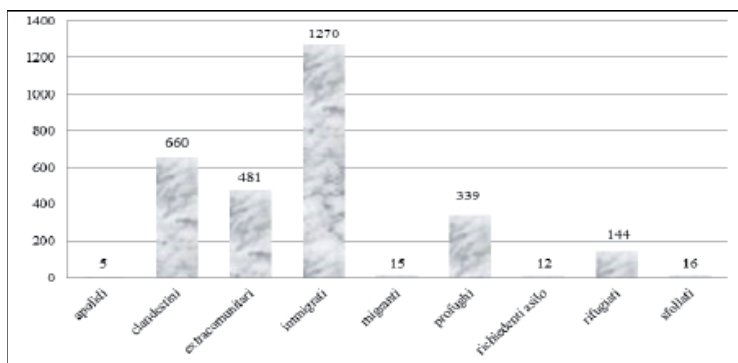
Based on the above, we have included the following keywords: immigration / “apolidi” [stateless persons]; immigration / “clandestini” [irregular migrants]; immigration / “extracomunitari” [non-EU migrants]; immigration / “immigrati” [immigrants]; immigration / “migrant” [migrants]²; immigration / “profughi” [evacuee]; immigration / “richiedenti asilo” [asylum-seekers]; immigration / “rifugiati” [refugees]; immigration / “sfollati” [displaced persons].

The results allowed us to observe the variations in the use of the categories by the daily newspaper in three ten-year long groups.

¹ The choice of the newspaper is motivated by the following reasons: *la Repubblica* is one of the most read newspapers in Italy, it has a free consultation archive, and its site is the most popular among national newspapers. See <https://it.semrush.com/blog/quali-sono-siti-notizie-piu-visitati-in-italia-ricerca-semrush/> (retrieved on January 6, 2020).

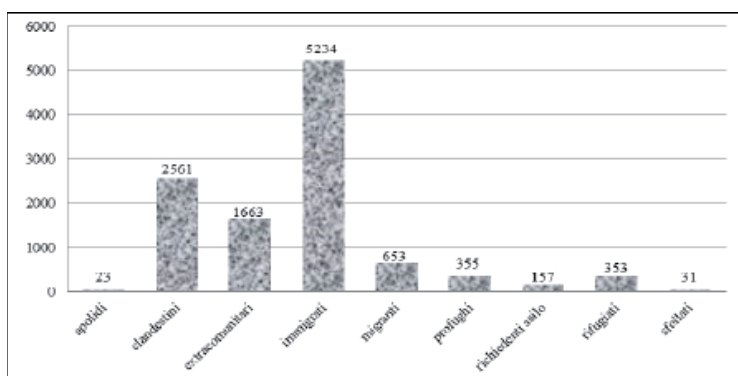
² Following our cross-research on Italian dictionaries, we excluded the term *emigrant* as it is a synonym of *migrant* and less used than the latter in everyday language.

Chart 1 – *la Repubblica* from 1 January 1990 to 31 December 1999



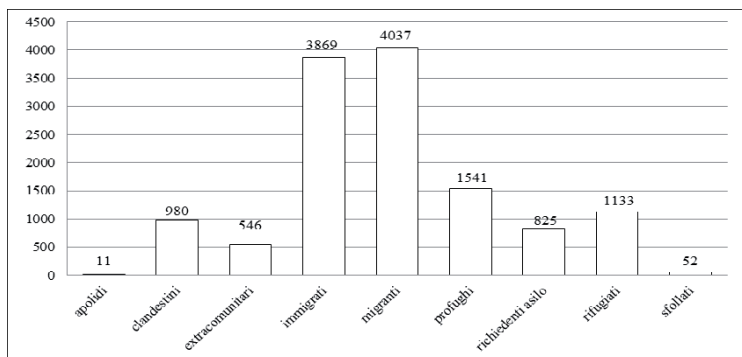
The chart 1 shows that *immigrants* is the most used word in the newspaper with 1,270 articles; followed by *irregular migrants* (660), *non-EU migrants* (481) and *evacuees* (339). Values above 100 are also found for *refugees* (144). Interestingly, *migrants* registers very low values, with just 15 articles.

Chart 2 – *la Repubblica* from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2009



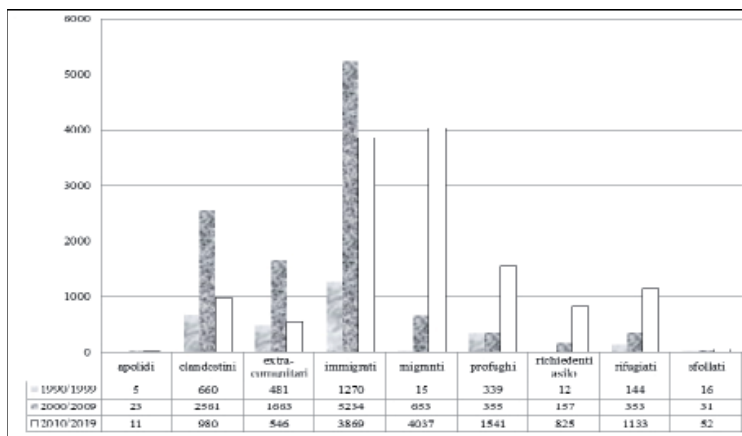
In this decade (Chart 2), *immigrants* again registers the highest absolute value: 5,234 articles. As in the previous chart, *irregular migrants* and *non-EU migrants* confirm consistent numbers, as well as *evacuees* (355) and *refugees* (353). In recent years, the use of *migrants* (653) and *asylum-seekers* (157) has also increased.

Chart 3 – *la Repubblica* from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2019



In the latter chart, the most widely used categories are *immigrants* and *migrants*, along with *irregular migrants* and *evacuees*; the use of *refugees* increases (1133) over *non-EU migrants*. With regard, instead, to *stateless persons* and *displaced persons* it seems that both terms have not been particularly successful in everyday language.

Chart 4 – Comparison between three “decades” (1990–2019)



The comparison of the charts shows that *la Repubblica* addresses the issue of immigration much more in recent years. In addition, the lexicon of this newspaper can highlight some key aspects. Firstly, *stateless persons* and *displaced persons* have a lower frequency than the other categories, thus

showing that these terms have not been successfully introduced. Terms like *irregular migrants* and *non-EU migrants* show the highest peak from 2000 to 2009, then decrease in the last decade. As for *evacuees*, *asylum-seekers*, and *refugees*, these terms have been steadily increasing in use over the years. The term *migrants* is particularly interesting: while in the decade 1990/1999 it recorded one of the lowest frequencies, its use has considerably increased in the last twenty years. In any case, *immigrant* remains the category most used in the last thirty years. An interesting aspect that may be representative of the immigration phenomenon concerns the variation of use of categories. If between 2000 and 2009 *la Repubblica* portrayed immigration by associating *irregular migrant*, *non-EU migrant*, and *immigrants* over the years it has gone to a wider and more “neutral” terminology such as *migrants*. It is equally true, however, that there is a difference of meaning between the two categories. According to the Glossary of the European Commission on Migration and Internal Affairs (Appendix B), indeed, *migrant* (and hence, migrant status) indicates when someone moves (voluntarily or forcibly) from his or her country of origin to settle in another. However, in the same Glossary, *migrant* also refers to people who “move” for reasons related to their profession (*migrant workers*). *Migrants* are, therefore, those who are in continuous movement, a status and a condition that suggests a constantly evolving action and which, as in the case of migrant workers, may lead us to assume a steady, uninterrupted link with their country of origin. In the Glossary, *immigrant* indicates someone who has abandoned his/her country of origin to settle permanently in another country. However, although these terms are often commonly used as synonyms, not only their meanings are differently nuanced, but they are also further distinguished by the *time factor* related to the length of the migrant’s presence in a given country. Hence, the *migrant* becomes *immigrant* when his/her permanence becomes stable and lasting (Pompei, 2013). Alongside more generic and “neutral” categories, there are categories that can arouse positive and/or negative feelings. It is the case of the category of *irregular immigrant* that, despite having seen a noticeable decline in use in the last ten years by the newspaper, is still considered in Italy – and, as we will see later on, abroad – “politically incorrect”. For example, an open letter¹ urges journalists and, more generally, the media to use the expression *non-regular migrant* instead of *irregular migrant*, as the latter is considered “incorrect”

¹ <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2017/02/08/perche-va-cancellata-la-parola-clandestino27.html>

and suggesting an *a priori* negative judgment of those who entered a country through unofficial ways¹. This step might also suggest a different *frame*; so, if *irregular migrant* refers to a *frame* within which the *Other* is seen as an *intruder*, *refugees* and *asylum-seekers* suggest a more “solidarity-oriented” view within which the *Other* appears to be a *victim* (Van Gorp, 2005).

Conclusions

The results so far allow us to advance some considerations. First of all, the narrative modes and the use of some categories (and words) with which the media address the issue of immigration and its protagonists appears, in some respects, to have changed over time, especially for what concerns specific names identifying the *Others*. However, we cannot state with certainty whether this change in language corresponds to a real (or partial) change in the point of view on the immigration phenomenon and on its protagonists. It is indisputable that, as some reports and studies (Lai-Momo and IDOS, 2012) show, Italian media have, since the 1990s, addressed the issue of immigration from the point of view of the *emergency*, often pairing *immigration* with *safety*. This highlighted a generalist and somewhat reduced perspective on migrant-related information, often tainted by scaremongering, superficiality, and stereotypes. At the same time, the *Ricerca Nazionale su immigrazione e asilo nei media italiani* (Morcellini, 2009) highlighted how most of the news (over 50%) talked about migrants in articles related to blackmail or court records, 34% of them concerned immigration law debates, 5.3% reported landing news, and finally 7.9% was related to immigration issues. This shows that although the use of words and categories may change over time, mass media’s narrative modes and *frames* may instead remain unchanged.

The linguistic choices and representative modes of immigration seem to have raised interest also by the foreign media. The BBC News Magazine (Ruz, 2015) draws attention to the British media’s use of some terms when dealing with immigration issues: the article reports a research conducted in July through the Nexis database, from which *refugee* emerged as the

¹ The original Italian terms were, respectively *clandestino e migrante non regolare*. In the present paper, we chose to translate the former with *irregular migrant* instead of, for example, *illegal migrant*, precisely for the reasons here adduced: the different “frames” suggested by the two terms. In the Italian language, the word *clandestino* has a particularly strong negative aura of meaning – consider that one of its possible translations is *stowaway*.

most used category in British newspapers (excluding *The Times*, *The Sun* and the *Financial Times*) with 2541 occurrences. As for the use of *asylum-seeker* in British newspapers, it emerged that between 2010 and 2012 the word most frequently associated with it was *failed*. The same argument, as in the case of Italy, concerns the use of *irregular migrants* instead of *illegal migrants*: according to a study by the Oxford University Migration Observatory on a sample of 58,000 articles, the term *illegal* emerged as the most used to describe immigrants. The proposal, in the English version, was *irregular*, or, *undocumented migrant*. The same argument was raised also in the United States when in 2013 the *Associated Press* and the *Los Angeles Times* abolished the expression *illegal immigrant* to identify a person without a valid residence permit. Journalists were urged to specify, when possible, the ways in which people entered the country illegally and from which part of the world they came, paying particular attention to the status of children. The announcement reads: “*People who were brought into the country as children should not be described as having immigrated illegally. For people granted a temporary right to remain in the U.S. under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, use temporary resident status, with details on the program lower in the story*” (Colford, 2013).

The word *illegal* referring to migrants would, in fact, suggests an *a priori* negative judgment of a status and a condition whose nature is often ignored. Migrants, for example, may be waiting for their asylum application to be accepted – and thus becoming “regular”, despite the irregularity of their entry into the country.

The linguistic component is therefore intrinsic in the construction of *media frames*, since, as we have seen, language is important in defining them as frameworks of meaning for reality, because words drag people into their worldview (Lakoff, 2004). The various representations and stereotypes on the concept of *otherness* are therefore considered cultural products that mediate the relationship between people and reality, whereby the vision of reality and the very practical experience are formed within contexts transmitted by culture that is strictly connected to communication, both as information transmitted by the media and as a *popular culture* (Bruno, 2008).

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Appendix A

Categories and definitions in comparison between Italian dictionaries¹ and the Glossary of the European Commission on Migration and Home Affairs²

Italian	English
<i>Apolide</i> Si dice di chi non ha cittadinanza in nessuno Stato.	<i>Stateless person</i> Person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law.
<i>Clandestino</i> Chi è entrato e vive in un paese illegalmente, senza regolare permesso di soggiorno.	<i>Irregular migrant</i> People who enter a country, usually in search of employment, without the necessary documents and permits.
<i>Emigrante</i> Chi si è trasferito dal luogo o stato d'origine in un altro luogo o stato.	
<i>Extracomunitario</i> Si dice di cittadino di un paese non appartenente all'Unione Europea. Nell'uso comune, si dice in particolare di cittadini di un paese terzo o quarto mondo.	<i>Non-EU migrant</i> A non-EU national entering (or within) the EU.
<i>Immigrato</i> Chi immigra in un paese o in una regione, per lo più per cercare lavoro.	<i>Immigrant</i> A person undertaking an immigration.
<i>Migrante</i> Chi si sposta per un lungo periodo da un paese a un altro, essendo emigrato dall'uno, e immigrato nell'altro.	<i>Migrant</i> A broader-term of an immigrant and emigrant, referring to a person who leaves one country or region to settle in another, often in search of a better life.

¹ The dictionaries used are: GRADIT-Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana (de Mauro, 2007); Devoto-Oli (2012); Garzanti (2016); Zingarelli (2017); and Sabatini-Coletti (2015).

² Key Migration Terms of International Organization for Migration <http://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>; European Commission Glossary (Migration and Home Affairs) https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/e-library/glossary/v_en (retrieved on January 6, 2020).

<p><i>Profugo</i> Chi è costretto ad abbandonare il proprio paese in seguito a calamità naturali, a eventi militari, a persecuzioni politiche.</p>	
<p><i>Richiedente asilo</i> È un qualsiasi cittadino che abbia presentato una domanda di asilo in merito alla quale non sia stata ancora presa una decisione definitiva.</p>	<p><i>Asylum seeker</i> A non-EU national or a stateless person who has made an application for asylum in respect of which a final decision has not yet been taken.</p>
<p><i>Rifugiato</i> Chi ha dovuto abbandonare il proprio paese per rifugiarsi in un altro paese.</p>	<p><i>Refugee</i> A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him-/herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his/her former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.</p>
<p><i>Sfollati</i> Persone che a seguito di persecuzioni, conflitti armati o violenze, sono costretti ad abbandonare le loro case e ad andar via dal loro domicilio abituale, ma che rimangono entro il confine del loro paese, e quindi, sono soggetti alla sovranità dello Stato di cui sono cittadini.</p>	<p><i>Displaced person</i> Non-EU nationals or stateless persons who have had to leave their country or region of origin or have been evacuated, in particular in response to an appeal by international organisations, and are unable to return in safe and durable conditions because of the situation prevailing in that country, who may fall within the scope of Article 1A of the Geneva Convention or other international or national instruments giving international protection, in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - persons who have fled areas of armed conflict or endemic violence, - persons at serious risk of, or who have been the victims of, systematic or generalised violations of their human rights.

Appendix B

Other categories according to the *Glossary of Migration and Home Affairs*

<p><i>Border resident</i></p> <p>Non-EU national who has been lawfully resident in the border area of a country neighbouring a Schengen State for a period specified in a bilateral Agreement between a Schengen State(s) and a neighbouring non-EU country, which shall be at least one year.</p>
<p><i>Diaspora</i></p> <p>Individuals and members or networks, associations and communities, who have left their country of origin, but maintain links with their homelands.</p>
<p><i>Long-term resident</i></p> <p>Any non-EU national who has long-term resident status as provided for under Directive 2003/109/EC.</p>
<p><i>Migrant worker</i></p> <p>A person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.</p>
<p><i>Returnee</i></p> <p>A non-EU national migrant who moves to a country of return, whether voluntary or forced.</p>
<p><i>Undocumented person</i></p> <p>A non-national who enters or stays in a country without the appropriate documentation. This includes, among others, a person:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- who has no legal documentation to enter a country but manages to enter clandestinely,- who enters or stays using fraudulent documentation,- who, after entering using legal documentation, has stayed beyond the time authorised or otherwise violated the terms of entry and remained without authorisation.