

The distinctive use of the Italian language in Nuruddin Farah's late production

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the use of the Italian language in Nuruddin Farah's later works, i.e. in the so-called *Past Imperfect* trilogy (2005-2011), in comparison to his earlier texts. Academic studies about the presence of the Italian language in his production are quite the exception. This article proposes a new assessment of the role and use of Italian in one novel in particular, *Links*, by comparing it to Farah's previous output. I question the dichotomy between colonial and local language and challenge the concepts of transnational and diasporic. I argue that Farah's use of Italian should be studied according to the development of the themes of his fiction, as they have shifted and broadened in scope from the early portrayal of the decolonising period to the latest representation of a more global and neocolonial environment.

Keywords

Nuruddin Farah, colonial language, Italian colonialism, diaspora, transnationalism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism

This article offers a critical reading of Farah's late work and suggests an updated perspective on the role of the Italian language by focusing on the novel *Links* (2005). To this end, I propose the novel *Sardines* (1981) as the main counterexample to highlight the shift concerning the role of Italian from the early to the late novels.

I argue that the aforesaid linguistic shift has occurred following a thematic development from the first trilogy, *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* – made up by *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983) – through the second, *Blood in the Sun – Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1992) and *Secrets* (1998) – to the last, *Past Imperfect – Links* (2005), *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2001). To be more precise, Farah has shifted the focus of his novels from “the problematics of decolonisation and nationalism to [...] those of self-rule,” to a more “cosmopolitan, global and transnational” perspective (Gikandi 2002, 455; Weinberg 2013, 26; Ngaboh-Smart 2004, 15).

In order to analyse how Italian has changed accordingly, I have structured this article in two parts: first, I explain the idea of language in Farah's terms and the concept of ‘intellectual debate’; second, I focus my analysis on the novel *Links* (2005) with a comparative look at *Sardines* (1981), in order to highlight the shift in Farah's literary career, marked “not by sharp

breaks but by shifting emphases” (Alden and Tremaine 1999, 43). The novel *Links* will be analysed with reference to the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora, both fundamental to an understanding of the constantly changing relationship between the protagonist’s identity, belonging and language.

Nuruddin Farah and his multi-lingual background

In over four decades, Farah’s literary production has distinguished itself for being free from any narrow cultural, national, geographical and literary classification. Its polyphony, the variety of characters, the broad transnational cultural references and the distinctive insight into women’s experience have challenged any theoretical inclusion in a single literary category (Okonkwo 1985). Several academic studies have dealt with Farah’s rich corpus of writings by analysing the issues of identity, belonging, nationalism, gender, colonialism, patriarchy and clannism in relation to the Somali nation-building process after independence (Wright 1992, 1997, 2002; Hitchcock 2010; Masterson 2013; Moolla 2014). For this reason, Farah has been labelled as a “postcolonial, postmodern, anglophone, diasporic, exilic writer of the ‘Third World’” (Hitchcock 2010, 91). Indeed, he has engaged with a variety of fictional forms, different modes of writing and polyglot and polyphonic styles, wielding English, Somali and Italian as his linguistic tools.

However, even though it may be challenging to label Farah according to the multifaceted theoretical perspective with which he engages, the concept of language has remained unchanged over time in his writings, as he himself remarked in several interviews from the 1980s to the 2010s (Farah 1988; Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 1992; Alden and Tremaine 1999; Appiah 2004; Niemi 2012; Wainaina 2016). So, in Farah’s terms, language can be understood as the writer’s tool for the exploration of the characters’ beliefs, thoughts and ideas, rather than a carrier of culture (Samatar 2011, 93). Moreover, language has the power of shaping and negotiating identities and relations, as scholars Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine have suggested in their pivotal work on Farah (1999).

In this regard, in the long-lasting dispute about English vs. African languages, which started at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere in 1962, Farah did not take sides explicitly (Niemi 2012, 330). Since then, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have been regarded as the two emblems of the opposite positions raised from the dispute: the former supported the use of the English language as a literary medium, while the latter suggested employing indigenous languages instead of the colonial ones (Achebe 1975; Ngũgĩ 1981).

However, even if claiming non-involvement in this linguistic debate, Farah implicitly agrees with Achebe, in his incidental suggestion that any language could be used for the aim of representation. To a question about Ngũgĩ’s idea of language, Farah laconically answered that the content was most important and not the language in which it is expressed (Jussawalla

and Dasenbrock 1992). This suggests that Farah challenges the idea of uniqueness and authenticity of language, supporting instead the concept of 'function'. The latter, introduced by Achebe, explains the ability of a language to adapt to the content according to the writer's creative use (Achebe 1975, 61-62). Farah's attention to content rather than authenticity or form is confirmed also by the dominant mode of his fiction, which has been labelled 'intellectual debate'. Since his characters can be distinguished by the "concepts of identity and relationship that they serve to articulate," they often stand back from any psychological portrayal, authenticity, or verisimilitude (Alden and Tremaine 1999, 162).

However, these theories about language understood as a tool to express the characters' thoughts, inform mainly the English linguistic perspective, thus shadowing the more composite role of Italian and Somali in Farah's novels. Indeed, the existing academic studies about the use of language in his *oeuvre* are based predominantly on the analysis of English as Farah's preferred fictional medium. Until now, only a few academic articles have studied the use of Italian (Gorlier 1998; Vivan 1998; Weinberg 2013; Ahad and Gerrard 2004; Fotheringham 2018).

In fact, the Italian language plays a more nuanced and multi-layered role than expressing the character's thoughts and supporting the intellectual debate, as exemplified by the protagonist of *Links*, Jeebleh, compared to Medina, the main character of *Sardines*. In this regard, I wish to show how Italian informs a more realistic and mimetic perspective, so as to highlight Somalia's historical background and how it loses, in *Links*, the colonial power of establishing hierarchical relationships among the characters ascribed to it in such works as *Sardines*. Indeed, in *Links*, the English language endorses this latter function, as the analysis will show.

The Italian language in *Links*: a transnational and diasporic perspective

The *Variations* trilogy suggests that the Italian language in Somalia in the 1970s was a remnant of colonialism and of the AFIS period (the Trust Territory of Somaliland under Italian administration which ruled from 1950 to 1960). In this context, the Italian language is exposed to an ambivalent relationship due to the recent memory of the colonial era (Gorlier 1998; Vivan 1998; Weinberg 2013). In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Farah draws a parallel between Mussolini (called *il Duce*) and Barre, to underline the continuity in Somali politics from the first dictator to the current one, dubbed *Generalissimo* (Vivan 1998).

Scholar Claudio Gorlier, who surveyed the Italian words regularly used by Farah, underlines the degree of inventiveness given by misspelling the words due to typographical reasons but, more probably, because of a deliberate choice in the sense of abrogation (Gorlier 1998). Farah indeed seems to reject the correct use of standard Italian so to adapt it to the Somali oral use and local linguistic practices.

In the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy, Italian was still present in his fiction to mark the legacy of colonial power and to question the issue of cultural identity, nation and belonging at the end of

Siad Barre's regime. In *Gifts*, the characters Bosaaso, Abshir and Duniya emphasise the continuity between the colonial and the post-independent period by saying that Somalis "weren't allowed to go anywhere near Croce del Sud in the 1950s, when the Italians were the master race here" (Farah 1993, 235). Indeed, the hotel called *Croce del Sud* (Southern Cross), designed by architect Carlo Enrico Rava in 1934, achieved great renown in Mogadishu and became the emblem of the colonial aesthetics of the Fascist period (Ali and Cross 2014). The Italian language survived in Somalia until the outbreak of the civil war, as the language of toponymy, bureaucracy and of speech, used by Somali people who had studied abroad in the 1950s and the 1960s, as in the case of Medina, the protagonist of *Sardines* (Weinberg 2013). This means that, soon after independence, the Italian presence was still dominant and, as architect Rashid Ali explained, "the café culture, cuisine (*pasta* become a staple Somali diet) and the unhurried Mediterranean tradition of evening strolling" were embraced by Somalis in their everyday life, at least in Mogadishu (Ali and Cross 2014, 13). Ali's statement highlights also that the influence of the architectural form cannot be confined to the formal level, but is strictly linked to cultural, linguistic and social practices. As Gorlier notices, these traces underline the legacy of the Italian language between the colonial and the post-independence period, as well as the complex role that Italians played in the making of Somali identity (1998).

While previous studies of Farah's use of the Italian language, such as the recent works by Grazia S. Weinberg, Ali Mumin Ahad and Vivian Gerrard, and Christopher Fotheringham, have been fundamental to our critical understanding of Farah's *oeuvre* as a whole, they have also remained in the minority of the academic output on the author. Hence, an update which considers the *Past Imperfect* trilogy from the linguistic perspective is necessary, because, both in *Links* and *Crossbones*, Italian still plays a role that should not be underestimated.

As I wish to show, this linguistic presence is exceptional if compared to Farah's early production, primarily because of the time setting and the deeply disparate historical backgrounds of the novels. Somalia went from Barre's dictatorship, the main backdrop of the *Variations* trilogy, to the tumultuous twilight years of his regime and the Ethiopian-Somali conflict, central to the *Blood in the Sun* series, to the civil war portrayed in the *Past Imperfect* trilogy. In particular, *Links* records the turbulent time of Somalia after the 1993 US-led military initiative known as "Operation Restore Hope." Written from the viewpoint of a limited third-person narrator, the novel tells the story of Jeebleh, a Somali living in New York, and his return to his native country after years of exile. As a Dante scholar who attended the University of Padua and Rome in his youth, during his stay in Mogadishu Jeebleh draws several parallels between Dante's *Inferno* and the present-day Mogadishu. Ruled by two main warlords and their brutal militia-men, constantly dazed because of the chewable narcotic *qaat*, the city lies divided physically by a line that separates the Southern and the Northern area, as well as socially, as clan loyalties and blood affiliation organise the community of Somalis who still live in the city.

In this context, the Italian language plays a consistent role and, even though less

quantitatively present, it underscores the thematic shift in Farah's production. While in *Variations* the setting is the post-independence period after the AFIS, the period fictionalised in *Past Imperfect* is decades later, the 1990s. Farah's novels have definitely achieved a global and transnational perspective, moving on from the decolonisation process of the early production, and the use of the Italian language has shifted accordingly.

Italian informs *Links* in two ways: firstly, Farah places the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri as the main paratext. Dante represents the central reference of Jeebleh's cultural horizon and, at the same time, the *Divine Comedy* is the literary antecedent from which *Links* is drawn, as the numerous quotations from *Inferno* in the epigraphs illustrate. According to scholar Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, because of the several intertextual references to themes and structure, Farah's novel can be considered "an allegorical rewriting of [...] and a commentary on Dante's *Inferno*" (2016, 71). The *Divine Comedy* could, therefore, be understood as the literary bond between the *Inferno* and Mogadishu and as the connection of the protagonist with two different cultural influences (Moolla 2014, 158-160; Brioni 2015, 116). However, the *Divine Comedy* also builds a link between the condition of exile, experienced by Dante, and the expatriate condition of the protagonist Jeebleh, who struggles to reassess his idea of home and his identity in the new Somalia.

Secondly, Farah uses unglossed Italian words and expressions in the text. I will provide a survey of the words present in *Links*, which can be divided into three main groups: the first one is made up of single words and short expressions usually emphasised in italics and never translated; the second includes most of all proper names; the third involves sentences that refer generally to Italy or Italian culture. I decided not to focus on singular words only, but rather to widen the inclusion and embrace any references to the Italian background, to better understand the multidirectional relationship between the language, the main characters, and their cultural *milieu*. For practical reasons, it may be helpful to list them, in the form of a catalogue, and then draw some conclusions (numbers of pages and translations are provided in parentheses).

In the first group, made up of single words/phrases, we find: *spaghetti all'amatriciana* (44, 138), *momenti della verità* ("moments of truth," 169), *liceo classico* ("high school," 202), "*Che maledizione!*" ("What bad luck!," 210), *carbonara* (330), *arrivederci* ("goodbye," 334).

In the second group, made up of proper names, we find: Mogadiscio (with the Italian spelling in all Farah's novels), Padua (14, 56, 84, 181, 183, 185, 189, 191), *Inferno* (Dante's poem, 23, 57, 193), Fiat Cinquecento (64, 150), Pisa (71), "Parmesan cheese" (116, 330), Fellini's 8½ (316), Geronimo Verroneo (318).

The third group, made up of sentences, consists of: "a large sign, handwritten in [...] Italian" (37), "the words for fate and place of birth, sex [...] were written in Italian, and spelled incorrectly" (40), "For some years they had lived together in an apartment in Padua, in Italy" (56), "I remember Seamus and the three of us in Italy" (86), "Was it because Bile had quietly

spun Jeebleh's Italian nostalgia back to Mogadiscio?" (86), "in a vulgar Italian gesture of a fig" (88), "school text in Italian" (116), "An attached note advised him, in Italian, of the numbers" (125), "receiving awards from an Italian monsignor" (155), "the opportunity to go to Italy on scholarship" (170), "an Italian-made affair" (179), "It reminded him of their days in Padua" (181), "in the apartment in Padua" (183), "Mira's father [...] was a diplomat based in Rome" (183), "When they met last, in Padua, they used Italian" (185), "In Padua, Seamus used to describe himself as 'a colonial!' [...] he was at a loss to find an equivalent word in Italian" (189), "Jeebleh would have to run a fever of nerves before reintroducing the see-sawing games of their younger days in Italy" (191), "I recited a verse from Dante's *Inferno*" (193), "He [...] saw a slim book in Italian written by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel" (226), "A wine of bottle of excellent Italian vintage, bought in Rome" (258), "Jeebleh remembered Italian youths making on their motorcycles through the streets of Padua" (294), "We communicate only in pidgin Italian, which he could barely use to order a meal at an eatery in Turin" (318).

If we compare this with the survey made by scholar Claudio Gorlier of Farah's first work, we see that the Italian words recur less often. This decrease was already noted by Gorlier, who explained that the use of Italian would ultimately decline, as well as "Somalia's linguistic links" with the Italian language (Gorlier 1988, 785). Indeed, in *Links*, the Italian words are limited to the bureaucratic use in hotel papers, as written reminders of the past occupation.

In the context of civil-war Somalia, therefore, the presence of Italian references mostly serves to underline a gap between the present-day generation of Somalis, unaware of or uninfluenced by the colonial rule directly, and the previous one, that of Jeebleh and his lifelong friends, Seamus and Bile, grown "following a custom which has seen many Somalis [...] furthering their studies in Italian institutions" (Weinberg 2013, 31). Farah himself informs the reader that all of them attended university in Padua and Rome, as well as Hagarr, Bile's mother (Farah 2005, 170). However, Italian words do not only mark a generational gap and a transformed historical scenario, they also underline the shift in the building of characters' identities. Indeed, if in the previous trilogies Italy shows its influence as the former colonial presence, in the *Past Imperfect* novels the United States rises as the latest emblem of the neocolonial global dynamics. This shift does not mean that the two periods are divided by a clear line, but rather that they are still interconnected, simultaneous and indivisible, as the adjective 'imperfect' of the title's trilogy suggests. Italy has become one of the superpowers in an economically dominant position, along with the US, the UK, and China, but it has lost his role of cultural role model, as it was for the older generations. The main references for young Somalis are definitively global and are represented by American movies, Bollywood and YouTube videos (Farah 2005, 274, 294; Farah 2011, 8, 9, 21, 127).

Therefore, in *Links*, Jeebleh struggles to locate his identity in the new (dis)order of things (Masterson 2013): he recalls the lost Italian period of youth, possibilities and promising future for him and Somali people with a feeling of bittersweet nostalgia. Because of the ill-fated turn

of events in his own country, Jeebleh's life in Italy is depicted as bohemian, and recalled nostalgically using cheerful anecdotes and references to his university years (Farah 2011, 82). An overall tone of wistfulness is implied when the reminiscences of Jeebleh, Seamus and Bile are connected with Italy (Farah 2005, 80-87, 191). Farah places the references to Italian culture, previously surveyed, when the memories surface, so as to better describe Jeebleh's melancholic feelings towards his youth. A true enthusiast of *spaghetti all'amatriciana*, Jeebleh's personal link with the Italian language seems to be marked neither by the engagement with nor by the burden of colonialism. In *Links*, the latter remains implicit and it is not experienced by the protagonist in the same critical contradiction as in *Sardines* (Farah 1981, 23, 206-208). Italy and the Italian language represent the common ground where his friendship with Bile and Seamus is sustained, having been the crucible in which their relationships were forged. Jeebleh describes their friendship as "a country – spacious, giving, and generous" and it could be argued that the prominent language spoken in this imagined country was Italian (Farah 2005, 57, 185). The latter is also one of the links between Somali people across the globe, as suggested in a particular episode in the novel, when Jeebleh talks about the book by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel who, while in exile in Italy, wrote her autobiography *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (Farah 2005, 226).

The shift between the early and the latest works becomes clear if we compare the experiences of the two protagonists of *Sardines*, Jeebleh and Medina. Both have pursued their academic career in Italy and have returned to Somalia after their studies abroad. However, while Medina inhabits the so-called 'third space' theorised by Homi Bhabha (1992), namely the displacement induced by the feeling of being both a native and an outsider due to the knowledge of the former colonial language and culture, Jeebleh does not feel the same identity-related uncertainty because of his Italian influences. Medina's condition of in-betweenness in relation to Italian and Somali culture differs, I would argue, from Jeebleh's position, which is the result of neocolonial dynamics where the main role is played by the US. Indeed, the novel *Links* questions and fictionalises the influence that a dominant culture has, in particular the American one, in shaping the representation of a less powerful country such as Somalia, in terms of producing, controlling and sharing information, representations and images. In *Links*, Farah directly engages with the "Operation Restore Hope" and challenges the representation of the military intervention made mainly by the American media. From that moment, Somali people have been depicted as savages and Mogadishu as "the world-capital of things gone to hell" (Fogarassy 1999; Bowden 1999, 7; Draper 2009; Myers 2011, 138). Through the status of Jeebleh – a native Somali and an American citizen – Farah aims "to represent and examine the US military intervention from Somali eyes," in direct conversation with the Academy Award-winning film *Black Hawk Down* and the non-fiction book of the same name (Myers 2011, 138-139).

This difficult process of identification and belonging to two different national groups is

played out on the field of language. In the case of *Links*, however, Italian does not represent the point of contention. Rather than his knowledge of Italian, it is Jeebleh's Somali passport and the American citizenship which cause him identity-related troubles and exclusion from clan-based Somali practises (Farah 2005, 9, 32-36). If Medina finds herself split between her Somali heritage and her acquired Italian belonging, Jeebleh instead struggles with his American nationality, rather than with his cultural connection with Italy.

At this point, the terms 'transnational' and 'diasporic' may be helpful to better understand Jeebleh's position as portrayed in *Links*. According to the definitions suggested by scholars Cristina Bradatan, Adrian Popan and Rachel Melton, 'transnational' and 'diasporic' should not be used as synonyms; indeed, "while transnational [subjects] are firmly rooted in the host country and are involved in the social life of the community," diasporic people "have little or no mixing with their country of adoption" (Bradatan *et al.* 2010, 176-177). In the case of Jeebleh, he constantly asks himself how to express his feelings about the US, reaching the conclusion that he cannot say he loves his host country, being only "engaged with America" (Farah 2005 42). Even though he considers New York as his home, he doubts he "would use the word 'happy' to describe [his] state of mind there" (Farah 2005, 266). Accordingly, in the novel there are no references to his life in the US and almost nothing is related about his family, job, house or anything else linked to his everyday life. In this sense, Jeebleh may be considered diasporic, since his emotional life seems to be more connected with his home country than with his host land (Bradatan *et al.* 2010). However, his relationship with Italy may be understood as closer to the idea of transnationality, even though at the time of the story it is linked to his memories. Indeed, as the presence of the words in Italian suggests, Farah gives the reader more information about the period spent by Jeebleh in Padua and Rome, decades earlier, than his current life in New York, which surfaces rarely and only in relation to his wife and daughter, who are largely absent from the novel. In this regard, it should be noted that Jeebleh, at the end of the text, draws a parallelism between Dante's analysis of his ruinous time of infights and the present-day situation of Somalia (Farah 2005, 331).

If we consider his Somali origin and his American citizenship, the issue of identity becomes problematic, and all the more challenging in light of his having studied in the former colonial country. Jeebleh himself experiences, as the whole third chapter of *Links* shows, the excruciating situation of being constantly questioned about his belonging, both by Somalis in Mogadishu, and by the American people in New York, who always assume that he has arrived recently as a refugee. As Jeebleh states, his relationship with the adopted country is far from serene: "I was fed up being asked by Americans whether I belonged to this or that clan" and, similarly, he remarks that it is "irritating to be asked by people at the supermarket which clan I belong to" (Farah 2005, 36). According to the analysis by scholar Dodgson-Katiyo, "characters who return to Somalia from the West do not necessarily move from 'the comfort zone' into 'a chaotic situation', since 'they have problems in the comfort zone'" too (2016, 72). Again,

Jeebleh has troubles with his identity at the airport, at the very beginning of the novel, when his Somali passport is not recognised by the police officer at the documents check (Farah 2005, 9-10). Likewise, language poses its own problems of belonging, and incites his feelings of displacement and misunderstanding, as emphasised by the experiences of both Jeebleh and Bile. Indeed, the latter states: "In Somalia the civil war then was *language*, [...] only I didn't speak the new language," addressing his exclusion from the new order imposed by the civil war (Farah 2005, 119). Jeebleh, too, often finds himself in the condition of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. For example, he has difficulties in translating expressions into English, as in the case of *dagaalka sokeeye*, 'civil war' (Farah 2005, 137-138); he struggles with the use of Somali pronouns, trapped in the uncertainty between "we" and "they," to mean Somalis in general or the clans, respectively (Farah 2005, 12, 41, 219); he immediately recognises that the civil war has created its own vocabulary and shaped the language accordingly (Farah 2005, 4). All the linguistic barriers that Jeebleh experiences are not caused by the Italian language; English and Af-Soomaali, instead, function as a means of exclusion and inclusion (Carbonieri 2013). They mark Jeebleh as an outsider who cannot identify either with his American nationality or with his Somali origin. *Links* seems to portray this challenging development of one's own identity, in which both "language and gesture need to adapt to a different context" (Bradatan *et al.* 2010, 176). To be identified as transnational, Jeebleh has to practice his Somaliness and understand that the new context requires the proper set of actions and behaviours according to the social actors involved (Bradatan *et al.* 2010, 177). *Links* seems to encompass all the nuanced identity-related possibilities of someone who, like Jeebleh, identifies with different nationalities or national groups, instead of being alienated or displaced (Niemi 2012, 336).

The feeling of displacement as experienced by Medina in *Sardines* thus presents a crucial difference from the liminal position of Jeebleh: on one hand, Medina's in-between situation is brought on by the dichotomy of having acquired the culture of the colonisers and being a colonised subject while simultaneously being neither of those things. The Italian language, in Medina's case, represents the emblem of her cultural hybridity. On the other hand, Jeebleh's uprootedness does not result from his experience in the former colonial country. In his case, Italian "functions [...] as an identity-grounding home under a condition of displacement" (Bammer 1994, 15).

Conclusion

The use of Italian as a fictional language has changed in Farah's novels from the early to the late production. In the latter, Farah does not burden Italian with its colonial relationship, instead using it as a tool to depict a transnational and diasporic character and also to dramatise the situation experienced by Somali people in the diaspora, with multiple belongings and identities. In *Links*, Farah pays attention to the diastatic levels of the language, namely the variations

which depend upon social, cultural or educational factors. Language, then, is in this way linked to individual and particular events or specific experiences of the characters, and Farah seeks to investigate the indistinct line between such categories as 'colonialism', 'diaspora' and 'trans-nationality'.

However, Farah does not completely absolve Italy for its intrusive and damaging role in Somali society, economy, culture, and politics. The Italian colonial power, in his own words, has changed the internal social order of Somali people and ruled with oppression, humiliation and exploitation for decades (Farah 2011; Weinberg 2013). The ambiguous and self-serving Italian attitude towards Somalia has been clearly highlighted throughout his whole literary production: in the first trilogy, Farah makes no secret of the link between the dictatorship of Siad Barre and that of Benito Mussolini, the latter being a political model for the former in the ways he embodies patriarchy, despotism and the cult of personality; in the second trilogy, the Italian "gift giving acts may be perceived as a structure of delayed colonialism" (Woods 2017, 207). Accordingly, in the later works, Italy rises as one of the countries that illegally exploit, harvest and dump toxic waste in the sea of Somalia, as well documented in *Crossbones*, the last novel of the *Past Imperfect* trilogy. Farah does not refrain from passing judgement on the negative role played by Italy from the post-independence period to the early 2000s. Even though the relationship with the Italian language seems to be unbound from colonial identity-related issues, Farah does not hesitate to underscore Italy as a neocolonial power and emphasises its involvement in illegal activities.

However, the exploitations carried out in Somalia by Italian governments over several decades have not prevented Jeebleh and Bile from developing a sense of affection for the Italian language. In contrast with *Sardines*, in *Links* Italian is mainly evoked by the characters rather than spoken. It is used to connect rather than to communicate (Vivan 1998) and to link Jeebleh and his friends Bile and Seamus to a lost period of their lives. Jeebleh's knowledge of the Italian language rarely surfaces, if not idiomatically, in the spoken practice; Italian then appears to be the language of memory (Vivan 1998). Therefore, Jeebleh occupies an ambiguous area which puzzles "a series of rigid binaries and moral absolutes" (Masterson 2013, 262). This ambiguity results in a composite and nuanced approach to language that, in the case of Italian, appears to be released from the mere logic imposed by the colonial power on colonised subjects. In Farah's novels, different positions coexist under a multilingual framework whose layers should be dealt with singularly, as in the case of English and Italian. Each character develops a personal and complex relationship with language, which cannot be distilled down to generalised categories. As it has been shown, quoting Farah's interviews, this practice seems in agreement with his idea of language as a creative tool in the hands of the writer, rather than as a passive bearer of a whole culture.

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