Diversity of migrant communication in the absence of mutually intelligible linguistic codes in the example of J.M.G. Le Clézio’s novella “The Shepherds”

In his novella “The Shepherds” (1978), J.M.G. Le Clézio establishes a contrast between two forms of communication, one of which he assigns to the life of a settled, modern world, and the other to a life of migration. The former relies on linguistic codes to such an extent that outside of a common linguistic ground, communication shuts down. Exposure to the demands and conditions of an environment of migration, on the other hand, generates new, or rather more intrinsic, modes of communication through which the individuals in question acquire more varied communicative competencies. In the example of “The Shepherds”, the city-boy Gaspar joins a group of nomadic children in another “country” where language, as he understands it, loses its function. The absence of language provides fertile ground for much more diverse forms of communication. As Gaspar learns to recognize the semantic value of all types of audio and visual motion around him, his integration into this new environment advances. The author thus diminishes the importance of language acquisition for integration and highlights various other points of contact between an individual and his new environment. Himself a migrant, Le Clézio portrays migration as an experience that rids his protagonist of the contraints of an environment where forms of communication are limited, and gives him access to resources that are lost in modern societies.