

Course of Sociology

THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF POPULIST COMMUNICATION

A comparative analysis of the political discourse in Italy

Prof. Stoeckl Kristina

SUPERVISOR

Perinelli Beatrice

ID: 106722

CANDIDATE

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a noticeable change of direction in political communication in Italy. The contributing factors may be many, but the one that caught my attention and inspired the writing of this paper was the rise and popularization of populist strategies. Thanks to Critical Discourse Analysis, its tools, and the contributions offered by the literature, I was able to conduct an empirical case study, highlighting the evolution of certain parties' communication strategies on a national scale. Starting with the case of the communication of Beppe Grillo, the founder of Italy's 5 Star Movement, which served during the analysis as an element of comparison, I first analyzed the strategies of two parties in the political right spectrum, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in 2013 and, subsequently, those of the same parties in 2024. What has emerged is that, in recent years, many parties have approached communication strategies that were once the exclusive preserve of populist parties. Leaving aside the content and value dimension of parties, this study has thus highlighted an important transformation in national political communication, bringing to light a general trend that has seen many parties abandon their traditionally austere communication strategies to adopt a more direct, empathetic, and attention-grabbing communication.

CHAPTER 1: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND POPULISM

INTRODUCTION

Political communication is a complex system of communicative exchanges involving multiple actors: institutions; politicians; and citizens as voters. Rather than a linear and unilateral exchange of information, one can speak of a complex ecosystem that requires the use of defined strategies that are not limited to the linguistic sphere but also involve a careful study of image, political and social marketing. An interesting contribution about political communication is that offered by Brian McNair, prolific author and accredited professor in social sciences and communication studies. He defined it as the 'purposeful communication about politics' which includes 'not only verbal or written statements but also visual media of signification such as dress, makeup, hairstyle, and logo design, i.e. all those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political "image" or "identity"¹. The variety of actors involved in such a process, therefore, requires a considered adaptation of possible communicative strategies depending on the audience to be reached, the place where such communication exchanges take place and the message or content to be conveyed. Due to this diverse and complex realm in which political communication occurs one can think about it as a strategic, multifaceted, affective, and multimodal process, encompassing a variety of semiotic practices. Hence, the study of such intricate subject, requires equally as much versatility. For this

reason, throughout the years, many theories concerning the analysis, the deconstruction and the study of political communication have been developed, resulting in a rich and diverse pool of different approaches and perspectives on the subject. However, the perspective I find most interesting, and which best fits the contours of the analysis I propose to address is the critical discourse analysis (CDA). This chapter, after a brief introduction of the above-mentioned approach, will therefore be devoted to the application of CDA to populist discourse, which is, precisely, the main concern of this work.

CHAPTER 1.1: INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical discourse analysis is nowadays an institutionalized paradigm in linguistics, it is not a homogeneous approach, rather it is a system of perspectives harmonized by common and recurring characteristics that function as common denominator among the various theories that coexist within this theoretical approach. CDA emerged as a comprehensive paradigm in the early 1990s within the vibrant cultural context of the University of Amsterdam. Here, linguists and experts in semiotics such as Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen and Ruth Wolak gave rise, from their confrontation, to this movement. The main objective was that of establishing a new nuanced and comprehensive perspective that, through an interdisciplinary frame, would have enabled a critical and multifaceted understanding of discourses. It is now worth mentioning some academic definitions of CDA to offer a clearer and more detailed understanding of it. Norman Fairclough, a pioneer in the application of CDA to sociolinguistics, explains that CDA aims to systematically explore the relationships between discursive practices, texts and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes². Critical discourse analysis is therefore designed to analyze those power relations that perpetuate injustice, imbalances, and manifestations of deviance in the socio-political context. It is aimed at bridging the gap between linguistics, sociology and politics. O'Halloran (2001), a significant figure in the field, defines CDA as an interdisciplinary set of approaches which attempts to describe, interpret and explain the relationship between language, power and ideology manifested in a discourse³.

¹ McNair, B. (2011). *An introduction to political communication* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

² Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

³ O'Halloran, K. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In J. Simpson (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of applied linguistics*.

It should now be more or less clear that when we talk about CDA we are talking about a subject with a heterogeneous and diverse nature. This, by the way, should not leave room for arbitrary conceptions. To make its contours clearer, in fact, it is possible to recognize certain fundamental characteristics that outlive the specificities of each conception. As noted by Machin and Mayr all approaches to CDA are interested in exploring the interrelationship between language, power and ideology⁴. Two of the founding fathers of the subject itself, namely Fairclough and Wodak, note that all approaches to CDA should bear with them a political commitment to emancipation and, consistent with the goals of Critical Theory, should seek to engender social change⁵. Another shared tenet of CDA is the understanding that ‘discourse does ideological work’⁶ and that ideology is frequently produced and reproduced through discourse⁷. Ideologies as defined by Fairclough, are indeed presented as ‘particular ways of representing and constructing society which reproduce unequal power relations, relations of domination and exploitation’⁸. It should therefore be evident now that CDA, in addition to being a complex and diverse subject, is also a perspective that requires an in-depth analysis of discourse that goes beyond the mere textual dimension of the latter and that attempts to highlight its more hidden, often disguised aspects, such as the power dynamics that lie behind it and the ideologies that are transmitted through it in different forms and ways.

Having traced the direct genesis of this approach and spoken of ideology and power relations in relation to discourse, I now find it useful to briefly introduce what many believe is the mother theory of CDA, namely, Foucault’s discourse analysis. Introducing Foucault, to properly grasp his theory in context, he has been a prominent historian, philosopher and sociologist, often associated with structuralist and post-structuralist thoughts. He was a very prolific multidisciplinary thinker, the topics covered in his publications ranged from psychiatry to social institutions. However, in order not to go into too much detail, I will limit myself to one specific publication, namely “*The Archaeology of Knowledge*”⁹ and, hence, I will rapidly review his two main methodological approaches: the archaeology and the genealogy. In the “*The Archaeology of Knowledge*”, a methodological treatise, he set his main theoretical development of the concept of discourse. Five interrelated main

⁴ Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2012). How to do critical discourse analysis. London, UK: Sage.

⁵ Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction: Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction*. London: Sage.

⁶ Fairclough, N., Mulderrig, J., & Wodak, R. (2011). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁷ van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, H. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The Handbook of discourse analysis*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.

⁸ Fairclough, N., Mulderrig, J., & Wodak, R. (2011). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. Van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁹ Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. New York : Pantheon Books.

conceptions of discourse can be identified there: discourses as groups of statements belonging to a discursive formation; discourses as rule-bound practices; discourses as practices specified in archives; discourses as practices constituting objects; and discourses as totalities determining subject positions. Each of these considerations leads Foucault to define some key notions of his discourse analysis. Without delving any further, I will only present some of them here. The analysis of intradiscursive dependencies (of elements within a discursive formation), interdiscursive dependencies (between different discursive formations), and extradiscursive dependencies (between discursive formations and external institutions) are said to be fundamental. Equally important is to identify the anterior discursive structures that subjugate the subjects of the discourse. In the Archeological phase, then, Foucault deconstructs the realm of discourse bringing to light all those related and disguised aspects that lie within it. Moving on to the Genealogical phase, here the author draws on the concepts developed previously, connecting them to a new insight conducted, that of power. Ultimately, therefore, knowledge is presented as biased toward its producers and the interests it serves and discourse is ultimately asserted as the sum of the manifestations of the will to power. The theories developed by Foucault make him an ideological forerunner of critical discourse analysis. In particular, the assumptions that discourses can have potent effects on the constitution of subjectivities and objects, originally advanced in the Archaeology, as well as the view of discourses as manifestations of the will to power linked to practices and institutions, emphasized in Genealogical writings have heavily influenced the development of the abovementioned approach and perhaps make it clearer.

Up to this point, we have limited ourselves to examining the genesis of CDA as an academic approach, but it may be equally useful to analyze its main theories, which will be helpful in the specific analyses to be conducted in the course of this work. To avoid further digression, here I will present three main theories, each belonging to a different school of thought and developed by one of the founding fathers of the CDA. The Discourse-Historical approach is the first I'm going to analyze. Often referred to as "DHA" it was largely influenced by the work of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Jurgen Habermas and was developed by Ruth Wodak¹⁰. This approach has evolved over time since the study on Austrian post-war antisemitism and some of its older characteristics still represent the cornerstones of its more recent developments. DHA largely relies on the application of the principle of triangulation, which implies taking a whole range of empirical observations, theories and methods as well as background information into account and hinges on three different critical points: text or discourse-immanent critique, which is aimed at discovering inconsistencies, self-contradictions and paradoxes in the intra-textual or intra-discursive structures; and future-related prospective critique,

which seeks to contribute to the improvement of communication by unbiasing and fairing it. Ideology and power are, as in other CDA approaches, of paramount importance. As pointed by Wodak himself ideology serves as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse, hence one of the main aims of his approach is to demystify the hegemony of specific discourses by uncovering the ideologies that establish and perpetuate dominance and power relations. Concerning the second approach, it is often referred to as "Dialectical-rational". This model is intellectually indebted to the work of Michel Foucault and Michael Halliday and adopts a grand-theory approach, in contrast to the DHA which focuses its attention more on the development of conceptual tools. Developed by Fairclough¹¹, this approach is transdisciplinary, it borrows concepts from other theories and other social sciences enabling the analyst to address both the semiotic elements of a discourse as well as the relations between the semiotic and social processes behind it. There are three main dimensions of Fairclough's analysis: the text, which thus requires an analysis of grammatical, structural, and textual cohesion; discursive practice, which involves the study of the genesis of texts, their distribution, and how they are consumed; and social practice, which concerns the analysis of the broader social context in which texts and discourses operate. To fully understand the direction of Fairclough's analysis, it is necessary to emphasize the aspect of social change through discourse. Indeed, critical discourse analysis is aimed at revealing the power dynamics hidden in discourses and promoting emancipation and social justice. Lastly, the Socio-cognitive model has been developed by one of the most influential figures of the critical discourse analysis: Teun Van Dijk¹². He explores the field of critical discourse studies through a sociocognitive perspective. Here again, discourse is defined as a fundamental social practice that reflects and constructs power and identity relations in society. The sociocognitive approach focuses on analyzing how language and discourse are used to represent and perpetuate social, ideological and cultural inequalities. Hence, Van Dijk's analysis is multi-layered, encompassing the linguistic and discursive strategies used to manipulate, persuade or dominate people and groups, the various text structures, rhetorical strategies and underlying ideologies present in dominant discourses. In summary then, it was possible to trace the genesis of CDA, analyzing its earliest influences, distinctive features and main theories. Although the distinctiveness of each of the theories mentioned so far has been highlighted, it is worthwhile to return to a concept previously mentioned, namely the presence of common traits in all the perspectives

¹⁰ Ruth Wodak, (2001). *The Discourse-Historical Approach in Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications.

¹¹ Fairclough, N. (2013). "A dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis in social research". *ResearchGate*.

¹² Van Dijk, T. A. (2014). 'Critical Discourse Studies: A Sociocognitive Approach.' In *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by Ruth Wodak & Michael Meyer. London: Sage.

associated with CDA. As Machin and Mayr have pointed out, in fact, all such theories are aimed at highlighting, analyzing or subverting the existing interrelationships between language, power and ideology¹³. It is of paramount importance to keep this in mind in order to proceed with the study proposed in this paper. Indeed, these concepts will be taken up, adapted and explored in the following sections in relation to populist discourse, the salient features and characteristics of which will be explained in the next sub- chapter.

¹³ Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis*. London, UK: Sage.

CHAPTER 1.2: POPULISM AS A COMMUNICATION PHENOMENON

Populism is certainly not a new phenomenon; indeed, one could even speak of populist waves if considered the various phases in which populist groups, movements and parties have burst onto the political scene over the years. Nevertheless, since 2010, Europe has witnessed an explosion of euroscepticism and populism, hence the labelling of the 21st century as the “populist era”¹⁴, the “populist Zeitgeist”¹⁵ or the “populist revival”¹⁶. The new wave certainly brought with it novelties and changes compared to, for example, the populism of the 1990s, but before discussing the specific characteristics of these movements, it is crucial to briefly explain what is meant by populism. The term 'populism' has acted as an umbrella term in recent years, encompassing a wide range of meanings in a tendentially vague and confused way. Narrowing the field, here I find it useful to mention some academic definitions of the term. Cas Mudde, an influential British politologist, defined populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be a direct expression of the *volonté générale*, to say, the general will of the people¹⁷. Benjamin Moffitt, another outstanding political scientist, conceptualized populism as a ‘political style’, emphasizing the role of populist leaders, conceived as performers, and regarding ‘the people’ as both a construction and the audience of the performance, in an almost theatrical vision of the populist realm¹⁸. A further influential approach was elaborated by the political scientist Jan-Werner Muller, that defined populism as ‘a set of distinct claims and ... inner logic’¹⁹. Content, in the sense of ideology, and form go hand in hand and rhetorical or discursive strategies act as bonding agents for the two. Different definitions of the concept have inevitably led to different analytical methods of the phenomenon.

The socioeconomic approach²⁰, for example, developed by Jeffrey Sachs, Rüdiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, analyzes and focuses on the economic patterns of populist governments in a sort of economically deterministic interpretation of populism. On the other hand, the approaches developed by Mudde, Kaltwasser, Muller and Moffitt focus exclusively on the ideological and

¹⁴ Krastev, I. (2012). The Populist Moment. EUROZINE, September, 18. www.eurozine.com/the-populist-moment/.

¹⁵ Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*.

¹⁶ Roberts, K. M. (2007). Latin America’s Populist Revival. *SAIS Review*.

¹⁷ Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Moffitt, B. (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

¹⁹ Muller, J. W. (2016). *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

²⁰ Sachs, J.D. (1989). ‘Social Conflict and Populist Policies in Latin America’. w2897. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w2897>.

performative aspects of populism. The study I propose here is certainly more akin to the second model I mentioned. In fact, I will basically focus on the ideological and formal aspects of the populist phenomenon, concentrating mainly on the communicative strategies implemented by most populist leaders and thus bringing to light the communicative patterns used to convey their ideologies, empathize with voters and, above all, emerge as solid competitors in the contemporary political scene.

Now that the contours of the term populism have been defined I can go on with the analysis of the salient features of populist communication, which, as explained, will be the focus of the next paragraphs. Starting from the term 'populism' itself, we can deduce the first key element of populist rhetoric: the people. 'The people' is seen as an idealized social aggregate, ostensibly devoid of social class, a homogeneous identity in which specific interests are lost and the inherent differences of society are flattened²¹. The centrality of the people produces an alibi for other rhetorical and ideological constructs. The first I am going to present is the idea of direct representation. 'Ordinary citizens' must be given their voices back and people should therefore have more influence on the political decision-making process²². Populisms act not as intermediaries between the voters and the power, rather they are the spokesmen of the people, they 'genuinely' give voice to the will of the people that must be brought back to center of the political discourse. An example of this rhetoric can be found in the contemporary Italian attempt to introduce the direct election of the prime minister. This choice, indeed, is being promoted precisely with the aim of allowing citizens to directly express their preference for the head of government, giving the illusion of a system that is more representative and more faithful to the will of the people. Another element that directly stems from the centrality of the people and that, in a certain sense, is complementary to it, is that of anti-elitism²³. The elite is accused of being alienated from the people, of having no idea what ordinary people find important and of only representing its own interests. Given the vagueness of the concept of 'the people', the elite as well is an ambiguous and hazy group, to which are attributed incompetence, corruption, selfishness, and the failure of the democratic system itself. Some refer to economic elites, others to cultural elites, or others refer to media elites, for example corrupt journalists, the majority, by the way, lash out at a political elite, whose contours however still remain cryptic. This division between the people and the elite creates a dichotomy that forms the cornerstone of populist rhetoric. On one side, the people represent wholesome values, rightful interests, and needs to be fulfilled. On the other side, there is the enemy, the elite, who erodes the political system and

²¹ Müller, J.W. (2016). *What Is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812293784>.

²² Canovan, M. (1981). *Populism*. New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. <http://archive.org/details/populism00cano>.

²³ Barr (2009); Goodwyn (1978); Laclau (2005); Mudde (2004).

exploits the people for personal gain. Such a rhetoric is exemplified by the use of 'us' and 'them', stemming from the struggle between good and evil. This aspect manifest itself also in relation to a recurrent exclusionism. Populists, indeed, claim to defend the collective identity of the 'true' people against enemies from outside as well. It depends on the context whether the outsiders are immigrants, unemployed, or people of another religion or race, but what is important is that "the people" is threatened both from the outside and from within. And it is precisely in this artificial dichotomous context that the populist movement, rather than the party, proposes itself as an outsider, a salvific guide that distinguishes itself from predecessors and contemporaries and presents itself as the only direct and honest voice of the people. Another interesting and useful aspect to explain is the organizational one. In fact, as specified above, we often refer to populist movements rather than parties. The reason for this linguistic quibble is actually quickly explained. First of all, as just explained, populisms have as their main objective to distance themselves as much as possible from other parties. Presenting themselves as a movement, and not as a party, is a first step towards achieving this desired motive. Secondly, populists want a loosely mediated relationship between leader and followers. This means that populists want to get rid of intermediate institutions and organizations and hence, organize themselves in informal or anyways atypical structures. However, this trend has a fundamental collateral side-effect: the centrality of the leader. In fact, power, and especially populist communication, is centralized in the figure of a charismatic leader who presents himself as a person of the people and speaks directly to his voters. This results in a substantial lowering of the linguistic register, which takes the form, for example, of the recurring use of swear words, aggressive tones, dialectal expressions and unusual dress practices for political reality. I would now like to conclude by briefly presenting the last recurring characteristic of populism and, more specifically, of populist communication. The first is that of catastrophism²⁴, a tendency that implies the recurrent allusion to imminent dangers, unprecedented crises, and which carries with it a series of expressions obviously linked to this semantic sphere. The primary objective of this trend is obviously to create, on the one hand, a sense of urgency by belittling the opponents, be they political or economic, who have caused this crisis to come unstuck, and, on the other hand, to empathize with the public. Like oracles, populisms, predict imminent crises, announce them in a way full of *pathos* and present themselves as the saviors of the people who are vulnerable and scared.

In conclusion, this chapter has addressed the populist phenomenon with a particular focus on its communicative aspect. Despite the vagueness of the term itself and considering the obvious regional

²⁴ Betz, H.G. (2002). Populism in Western Europe.

differences it can have, I have attempted to offer an overview of this interesting trend, highlighting its characteristics, which I have summarized in Table 1. So far, I have focused on listing and briefly explaining the main characteristics of populist communication. My analysis, mainly oriented towards the ideological and formal aspects of the phenomenon, highlighted how populist leaders use specific communicative strategies to convey their ideologies, empathize with voters and gain a foothold on the contemporary political scene. The centrality of 'the people' and anti-elitism are key elements of this rhetoric, which take the form of a dichotomous language of 'us versus them'. However, it is important to understand that the elements I have mentioned do not make up a complete and universal list. Some might find other aspects more explanatory, while others might not recognize the relevance of some of the ones I have mentioned at all. However, the aim here was to identify possible communication patterns and to present those that, in my humble opinion, are the most relevant traits of populist discourse. In the next chapter, in fact, I will move on to the empirical analysis of populist discourse, retracing and attempting to highlight the aforementioned characteristics.

Table 1

KEY POINTS	DESCRIPTION	OBJECTIVE
The "People"	Presented as a homogeneous identity, deprived of its inherent social distinctions.	Used to empathize with the audience creating a sense of community.
Direct representation	The "People" must be brought back to the center of politics and their voices and interests must be properly represented.	Reinforces the image of the party as the only one wanting the well-being of the people, giving the impression of working for a fairer and more representative system.
Anti-elitism	Elite is presented as a corrupt, incompetent and a selfish group.	Creating a common enemy reinforces the sense of community and can help divert attention from key issues by pointing to an elite said to be responsible for the country's problems.
Exclusionism	Defending the 'true' people against enemies.	As in the case of anti-elitism it creates internal cohesion and offers a scapegoat to divert attention from internal problems.
"Us-them" rhetoric	Derived from "The people" and "Anti-elitism".	This polarization simplifies the political message by making clear what is good and what is bad, accentuates the role of the party as the savior of 'us' and focuses on the emotionality of the voters.
Charismatic leader	Leader at the apex of a loose organization, often referred to as a movement rather than a party.	It allows the personalization of politics, creating an individual and direct link with voters, makes political discourse more emotional

CHAPTER 2: APPLICATION OF THE HIGHLIGHTED THEORETICAL ELEMENTS TO EMPIRICAL CASES

INTRODUCTION

After having, in the previous chapter, analyzed the academic role of critical discourse analysis and brought to light the typical characteristics of populist communication, in this chapter I will apply these aspects to empirical cases. I will draw from a corpus of rallies, press conferences and interviews held around 2014 in the Italian context to collect said empirical examples. In the next section I will review a speech by Giuseppe Piero Grillo, better known as Beppe Grillo, exponent and leader of the 5 Star Movement back then. From the analysis of this speech I will then move on to a brief comparative analysis with other speeches held by leaders of other political forces during the same period, keeping Grillo as a reference. The aim is to offer a first image of populist communication in Italy and then to highlight possible developments occurred in the present day.

CHAPTER 2.1: GRILLO'S RALLY

Before delving into the analysis of the rally held by Beppe Grillo on May 23, 2014 in Piazza San Giovanni, Rome, for the European elections, it is good to offer a brief introduction of our protagonist. Giuseppe Piero Grillo, in full, became famous through his work as a comedian from the 1970s onwards. He often dealt with current affairs, economics and politics in his sketches. In the early 2000s, the comedian entered the online world, opening a blog that became extremely popular and highly appreciated by the public²⁵. Perhaps it was because of this consensus that he went further, starting the 5 Stars Movement in 2009, flanked by the entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio. Grillo was immediately one of the most representative examples of the populist wave that swept across Europe in the 2010s, proposing himself as an almost absolute novelty on the national political scene.

Although many of the speeches and interviews given by the comedian are extremely interesting to analyze from a politolinguistic point of view and beyond, for obvious reasons of space, I will limit myself to analyzing, as previously mentioned, the rally he held on May 23, 2014 in Piazza San Giovanni for the European elections. First of all, I find it interesting, before deconstructing the communication patterns used, to pay attention to an element that has only been briefly mentioned so far: the dress practices. Since the establishment of the democratic Republic after the end of the

²⁵ Beppegrillo.it, managed by Giuseppe Piero Grillo, covers topics such as current affairs, politics, and economics. Available at: [Il Blog di Beppe Grillo - Il Blog di Beppe Grillo](http://www.beppegrillo.it)

Second World War, Italian politicians have instituted, and since then adhered to, a dress code based on ritual modes of elegance and formality, of austerity. Considering Grillo's dress practice, it is evident that it underlies a strategy to reduce the distance between the leader and the electorate, starting with the use of informal attire, where the mediocrity of the products correlates with the vulgarity of the language, which will be subsequently analyzed. Grillo, in fact, presents himself to the audience in casual clothing: jeans, a black shirt, and rolled-up sleeves. This is already a tangible expression of the break with the pre-existing political dress code. This is a strategy with a dual function. On the one hand, in his public presentation, the comedian portrays himself as a 'man of the people', casual and informal. On the other hand, he distances himself from his predecessors, who were always formal and austere.

The first thing that jumps out when analyzing the rally is definitely the element of improvisation. In fact, Grillo does not read out a speech, he speaks off-the-cuff, acting like a presenter who improvises on a pre-set list. Using an element of analysis belonging to the world of theatre, one could speak of a "4th wall break"²⁶. The leader often addresses the audience directly, seems to listen to their reactions, leaves room for collective expressions (shouts, interjections, replies) or sometimes invites them to reply and complete his sentences. It would seem to exploit his comic legacies, as we shall see later, in fact, the linguistic choices also support this thesis. This seems to be a strategy based on the enhancement of the sensitive and sensory component of the relationship between audience and performer, aimed at building an emotional connection with the audience. Moreover, as pointed out in the previous chapter, the use of strategies belonging to the world of theatre is an aspect that recurs in populist communication²⁷. For example Grillo addresses the audience, or rather, seems to create an individual relationship with each member of the audience by saying:

"Hai capito com'è?"

"Do you understand what it is like?"

(Grillo 2014, 6:35)

He asks a question, obviously rhetorical. Shortly afterwards it is the audience itself that, rising in common voice, asks about the Metro C, about the Expo, and Grillo replies, as if it were a one-on-one conversation.

²⁶ Expression used in cinema, theatre, television and literary works, originating in Bertolt Brecht's theory. It refers to a character who directly addresses the audience, breaking the system of fiction of the work or performance.

²⁷ See footnote 18 in Chapter 1.

Another pivotal element is definitely the 'us-them' rhetoric²⁸. Grillo speaks in the plural, immediately lashing out against politicians, in the first seconds of the extract he refers to parliamentarians, in an ironic tone he distances himself from Casini, a historical exponent of the Christian Democracy and later a member of the Union of the Centre. He seems to identify two factions, on the one hand the 'we', in which the movement is obviously placed, and on the other, the 'they', which seems at times to be addressed to all those who are not in the square, the other politicians, entrepreneurs, certainly Europe. Directly quoting an extract of the speech:

*"Noi abbiamo fatto una proposta di legge, ce l'abbiamo qua, i parlamentari, tre cose semplici che loro non hanno fatto da 20 anni potevano fare tre cose... tre cose che ca**o ci vuole."*

*"We made a bill, we have it here, the MPs, three simple things that they haven't done for 20 years they could do three things... three things what the f**k it takes."*

(Grillo 2014, 8:36)

Here the 'we' and 'they' are not only explicit but also almost self-explanatory. The 'we' indicates the movement, the good, the only one that has been able to highlight and try to fight the country's problems. The 'they' represents the parliamentary groups of the previous governments, the predecessors, who in more than twenty years, as it is read, were unable to solve such simple and obvious problems.

Another element that emerges and that is, somewhat, Grillo's signature trait, is the frequent use of vulgar language. In this context, the foul language has a dual function. On the one hand it is, as always, aimed at breaking down any existing difference between the leader and the audience. Grillo, emphasizes his figure as a man of the people in this way, lowering the linguistic register and showing himself to be incensed, so as to empathize with the audience. On the other hand, given the specific expression used, it is aimed at belittling previous administrations, the possible efforts made, thus questioning their seriousness and efficiency. Posing, therefore, himself as the only possible savior of the people. The polarization between 'us' and 'them' is a common denominator throughout the all discourse, as well as one of the undeniably distinctive features of populist communication. Another example that can be quoted is in reference to Europe:

²⁸ See Chapter 1

“Noi aumentiamo il debito e loro si riprendono il credito, appena ci hanno ripreso il loro credito totalmente ci mollano, come la Grecia. Ecco perché bisogna andare lì, adesso che abbiamo ancora un un potere contrattuale. Hanno ancora il 30% del nostro debito, andiamo lì o ce lo spalmano o non lo paghiamo più, come ha fatto la Germania”

"We increase the debt and they take back the credit, as soon as they have taken back our credit they dump us, like Greece. That's why we have to go there, now that we still have a bargaining power. They still have 30 per cent of our debt, we go there or we spread it out or we don't pay it anymore, like Germany did."

(Grillo 2014, 18:09)

The enemy here, 'they', is obviously Europe, which oppresses and crushes 'us', the Italians, the nation. Here Grillo uses two other interesting elements to reinforce his ideas. On the one hand the catastrophic element²⁹, on the other, the element of *pàthos*. In fact, with a harsh and direct language he hints at the seriousness and possible effects of this scenario, to be averted as long as 'we have bargaining power'. On the other hand, the 'we' is seasoned with strong emotional charge, he almost seems to be willing to mobilize an army, stir up the crowd, of which he is a member.

Another distinctive trait, previously mentioned in the declination of coarse language, is that of verbal abusiveness. First of all, it is important to note that this element too, seems to derive from comic legacies, the rather colorful language choices, in fact, were his trademark already on stage. Grillo gives different forms to this aggressiveness. On the one hand, the strong tones he uses, the shouting, the direct and brazen way in which he poses himself are certainly intended to highlight the difference between him and the 'others'. On the other hand, the swearing itself makes him recognizable, emphasizes his 'normality', helping him to blend in with 'us', with the people. Finally, the insults, hardly present in this excerpt, perform a dual function: to express one's contempt for the opponent; and they are attention-grabbing. The insulting effectiveness of his speeches results from the nonchalance with which he treats linguistic norms. The insulting power derives, in fact, from the infringement of cultural taboos, especially those most strongly interdicted in Western culture such as death or sexuality.

*“Gli dai il codice fiscale di chi ca**o deve bombardare, lì gli bombarda il c**o.”*

*“You give him the social security number of who the f**k he has to bomb, there he bombs his a**.”*

²⁹ See chapter 1

(Grillo 2014, 12:43)

The topic here is that of technology, its rapid progress, and the inability of governments, including Europe, to keep pace. It is an emphasizing element, highlighting the seriousness of the problem and the hypocrisy of the enacted laws. Contextualizing this highly representative aspect, it is important to understand that these linguistic expressions are directly linked to the ideological strand represented by the M5S, namely, that of anti-politics and the contestation of the current political system. The language, seasoned with anger and contempt towards the political class, aligns with the ideology of the movement, which involves criticism and rejection of the current political system.

A final peculiar aspect of Beppe Grillo's communication that I would like to emphasize is his strategy of alternating between two modes of identification: detachment from the role of expert authority; and the assumption of direct representation of the 5 Star Movement. On the one hand, Grillo often avoids speaking as a competent authority, preferring instead to address the public and the voters with expressions such as:

<p><i>“Non vinciamo io ve lo dico subito, noi non vinciamo stavolta, no no no, noi noi stravinciamo.”</i></p>	<p><i>“We don't win I tell you now, we don't just win this time, no no no, we win big.”</i></p>
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(Grillo 2014, 05:56)

In this way, he tries to transfer the credit and responsibility for political actions directly to the people, emphasizing the idea that the Movement is a collective force, guided by the common will of the citizens. On the other hand, in specific contexts, Grillo strongly identifies with the Movement, speaking in the first person and assuming a representative and decision-making role, as in the case where he declares, referring to Europe:

<p><i>“Io voglio andare là e parlare chiaro.”</i></p>	<p><i>“I want to go there and speak plainly.”</i></p>
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(Grillo 2014, 17:13)

Here, instead, the figure of the leader emerges, centralizing power. This duality in his communication not only reinforces the perception of Grillo as a spokesman of the people, but also allows him to maintain a personal and direct link with the Movement, embodying its ideals and objectives. This

communication strategy helps to build an image of Grillo both as an integral part of a democratic and participatory movement and as a charismatic and influential leader.

It is now clear that Grillo's seemingly genuine and improvised speech is actually the manifestation of a well-defined ideological and communicative strategy. Many of the patterns highlighted in chapter one have, in fact, been recognized in his discourse. Starting from the “us-them” rhetoric, through verbal aggressiveness, to the presentation of the leader as if he were one of the people, these are all traits that, with obvious regional differences, serve as a common denominator of populist communication around the world.

CHAPTER 2.2: MARONI AND MELONI'S COMMUNICATION

This section will analyze the communication styles of two other Italian party leaders in those years: Roberto Maroni, then federal secretary of Lega Nord, and Giorgia Meloni, then president of Fratelli d'Italia. This analysis aims to offer a clearer picture of the political landscape at the time, highlighting the rhetorical strategies and communication patterns used by the two leaders. The aim is to complete the picture of what will serve as the first term of comparison for the comparative analysis that will be developed in the following chapter, where the communication styles in Italian politics today will be examined.

As for Roberto Maroni it will be analyzed a press conference held on January 10, 2013. As in the case of Grillo, it is good to start immediately with a detail related to the dress code. Roberto Maroni, presents himself to the public in formal attire, wearing a suit. An interesting detail is the choice of the tie, green, the distinctive color of the party he is representing. It is already clear from here, therefore, how the image that the Lega Nord leader wants to convey to the public differs from Grillo's one. Right from the start, also in terms of language, a substantial difference between the two leaders is noticeable. As pointed out in the previous section, Grillo adopts all the typically populist communicative contrivances: verbal aggressiveness; informal register; and dialectal expressions. Maroni, on the other hand, is calm, uses technical terms and does so in a thoughtful manner. He still seems to be very much adherent to what some call political jargon or, in Italian, "*politichese*"³⁰, characterized by an austere, serious and complex communicative style.

Another pivotal element of the populist discourse, as has been abundantly emphasized so far, is the us-them rhetoric. Here it can be said to be almost absent, or rather, it can only be declined in the natural dynamics of political opposition. The 'we' used, in fact, is not a 'whoever', it is an exclusive 'we', the Lombards, primarily. It does not allude to a common, flat people with generic interests, but rather speaks of a specific community with a well-defined territorial dimension. It is clear from the outset that the "we" is not an umbrella term open to anyone who wants to be part of it. Symmetrically, "they" is referred to a specific political enemy, which faithfully and consistently reflects the party's secessionist ideology: the rest of Italy. One can certainly not speak, therefore, of an empathic strategy used to move masses, to bring the greatest number of voters together. On the

³⁰ A neologism used in Italian journalistic jargon, and in the language of political communication, to indicate a sub-code of the Italian language, forming part of the language of politics, characterized by a pompous, cryptic, complicated style, consciously used by Italian politicians in public communication.

contrary, it almost seems like a rejectionist, elitist communication with defined contours. Offering a well-descriptive example of what has just been said:

“Al governo ci sarà qualcuno che non vuole. Dovranno fare i conti con noi perché Lombardia, Piemonte, Veneto e Friuli Venezia Giulia saranno una massa critica sul piano economico ma prima ancora sul piano politico e istituzionale con cui qualunque governo ci sarà a Roma dovrà fare i conti.”

“In the government there will be someone who does not want to. They will have to reckon with us because Lombardy, Piedmont, Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia will be a critical mass on an economic level but first and foremost on a political and institutional level with which any government there will be in Rome will have to reckon.”

(Maroni 2013, 19:55)

Here it is evident that there is no attempt to involve, include, rather, the recipients of the communication and of the policies are mentioned and listed, without leaving room for more inclusive interpretations. On the other hand, the enemy, the “they”, is made explicit in the same way, it is Italy, any government that could hinder the goals defined by the party. It is also interesting the absence of a pathetic and empathic component, the leader is rigid, outspoken and austere.

The last element that I find interesting to emphasize, as previously done in the case of Grillo, is that of the competent identity and the party’s image. Maroni portrays himself as a competent and responsible subject, despite the fact that he does so in keeping with his title, he often refers to the rest of the group, often mentioning its members. He is not, as in the case of Grillo, an individual who stands as a representative of the people, making them responsible, but a party leader, who carries out the will of voters and colleagues by making himself responsible for policies and choices.

“La proposta centrale, la sfida vera che pone la Lega agli altri, che pongo io agli altri.”

“The central proposal, the real challenge that the League poses, that I pose to others.”

(Maroni 2013, 08:44)

Maroni, here, carries out the will of the party, not as an individual centralizer of power, but by virtue of the role conferred on him. Concluding the analysis of Maroni, one can speak of an apparently technical, defined communication aimed at engaging a narrow electoral base. It is not, therefore, like in the previous case, a strategy aimed at involving the masses or leveraging general and broad themes. Rather, it is a traditional communication, whose strategic nature probably lies in the transmission of defined, specific, elitist ideals, with austere, direct, and traditional methods.

The third and last communicative example to be proposed in this chapter is that of Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia and current head of government, whose interview with 'La Stampa' on February 13, 2013 will be analyzed. As in the previous cases, I will begin by highlighting the clothing choices adopted by the politician. Meloni presents herself formally, wearing a shirt and a jacket, she is composed and neat. There is therefore, at least on the surface, no obviously transgressive or strategic element in the stylistic choice, with the exception of the party pin she wears.

First of all, I emphasize the linguistic element. Meloni does not use a vulgar language, there is no verbal aggressiveness, she tries to maintain a formal register, yet fails to disguise the regional inflection, which, as will be highlighted in the next chapter, will become her trademark. An element, in my opinion, worth of mention is the presentation of the party. As already introduced in the first chapter, among the distinctive features of populist parties, is the figure of a charismatic leader who centralizes the power of the group he or she represents and creates an almost personal bond with the voters. Giorgia Meloni seems to reject this possibility, thus explaining her choice to found a new party, moving away from Berlusconi's PDL:

“Superare l'idea di un partito che dipende unicamente dal carisma del leader che è il grande limite secondo me del centrodestra in questi anni.”

“To overcome the idea of a party that depends solely on the charisma of the leader, which is the great limitation in my opinion of the center-right in recent years.”

(Meloni 2013, 12:22)

Giorgia Meloni, therefore, proposes her party as one with concrete and defined values that are able to outlive changes in leadership and offer an alternative to a party whose consensus is solely due to the approval and respect of the voters for the leader. Another interesting element is the style with which Meloni responds to the interviewer's questions. The leader of Fratelli d'Italia is always clear and concise, responding in a direct and non-evasive manner, even when faced with 'difficult' questions. Drawing from the interview:

“Lei può andare a prendere le mie dichiarazioni di settembre su Fiorito e sono esattamente le dichiarazioni che ho fatto a Sky la settimana scorsa e cioè ho detto che mi sono trovata in difficoltà di fronte a un partito che a uno come Fiorito permette di autosospendersi quando lo dovrebbe cacciare a calci.”

“You can refer to my statements from September about Fiorito, and they are exactly the same as the statements I made to Sky last week. I said that I found myself in difficulty with a party that allows someone like Fiorito to self-suspend when he should be kicked out.”

(Meloni 2013, 03:52)

Here there are two interesting elements: on one hand, Meloni does not shy away from the accusations made against her; she responds directly and explicitly, as explained in the previous paragraph. On the other hand, she highlights her credibility by presenting herself as a responsible subject and emphasizing the consistency of her statements. These are characteristics that did not emerge in Grillo, at least not in the same manner. Indeed, while it is necessary to remember that he was in a different context, Grillo answers questions from the audience in an evasive manner, shifting from one topic to another with the apparent goal of continuing his pre-established agenda, engaging the audience only on an emotional level. Thus, these represent different interaction strategies: the first, Meloni's one, aims to present herself as a solid, coherent, and consistent actor; the second Grillo's one, is oriented towards emotional mobilization, creating a sense of direct and engaging

interaction with the audience.

I then use the rhetoric of 'us-them' as a final tool of analysis. From the communicative point of view, going back to the previous sections, this has multiple objectives, among them certainly the emotional mobilization of the audience. In Meloni there is a "us", and there is a "them" as well, however, as in the case of Maroni, it would not appear to be a catch-all "us", nor a catch-all "them" pointing at anyone as an enemy of the people. Thus, there does not seem to be an objective of emotional mobilization of the masses, rather, it is a matter of an identity-related "we" and, again, of a "they" identifying a natural political enemy to defeat.

In conclusion, the communicative examples provided in this section, as evidenced by the analysis conducted, differ radically from our empirical benchmark: Grillo's communication. Although, due to the availability of suitable speeches on the web, the speeches for the three leaders were delivered in different circumstances and even slightly different periods, the study focused exclusively on the communicative aspect, attempting to set aside ideological and content-related issues. I can thus, nevertheless, draw conclusions from the analysis conducted so far. Grillo represents our reference point and analytical tool, while Maroni's Lega communication and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia communication are our variables. As the study reveals from a communicative perspective, Grillo faithfully replicates several typically populist strategies, to name a few: verbal aggressiveness; presenting society as a polarized reality; the empathetic element. In Maroni and Meloni, these elements are almost absent; they generally adhere to a more technical and rhetorical style of communication, certainly less focused on attention-grabbing. Maroni, on the one hand, heavily relies on the ideology, almost elitist, promoted by his party also from a communicative standpoint, often emphasizing the recipients of his thoughts, policies, and speeches, leaving little room for populist and catch-all interpretations. Meloni, on the other hand, appears more direct in her communication, conveying a sense of novelty; however, she never presents the "we" as a heterogeneous and vaguely defined group, but always in reference to her electoral base: the center-right. From this, the opponents are derived with the same precise identity: Monti's technical government, Europe. Thus, from this initial analysis we can conclude that, the populist communicative features, well rooted in Grillo's communication, in 2014, appear only as vague influences in the communicative choices of the other parties under examination. In the next section, the analysis will shift, instead, to the communication strategies adopted by Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in the current year, with the aim of highlighting possible evolutions and changes, keeping Grillo as a model of comparison.

CHAPTER 3: COMMUNICATION OF LEGA AND FRATELLI D'ITALIA IN 2024

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the previous section, this chapter will focus on the analysis of the communication strategies of two parties already analyzed: Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. Here, speeches from the current year, namely 2024, will be examined in order to provide a more complete picture of the communicative evolution of these parties. Keeping Grillo as a constant of analysis and referring to the table in Chapter 1, drawn up in the light of the theoretical framework examined, an attempt will be made to highlight any analogies between the communication of these parties and the purely populist communication in an attempt to corroborate or refute my thesis that populist strategies have progressively influenced the entire national political communication system.

CHAPTER 3.1: SALVINI'S RALLY

The first speech to be analyzed in this section is that of Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Transport in the current Meloni's government. Salvini, a member of the Northern League since 1990, has a long militancy in the party that has allowed him, over time, to emerge as a leading figure and to usher in a significant change in the party's political path, moving away from the theme of Padania independence and embracing, among other issues, Euroscepticism and the fight against immigration, succeeding Roberto Maroni in the party secretariat in 2013. As previously explained, the analysis of Salvini's speech will serve to examine the development of the party's communication over the past decade. Specifically, it will focus on a rally held in the run-up to the regional elections in Basilicata this year.

Firstly, it is interesting, as has been done before, to highlight the choice of clothing made by the leader of Lega. Keeping Maroni's case in mind³¹, the attire was quite in line with the standards prescribed by the etiquette. In this case, however, the leader presents himself to the public rather informally, wearing a windbreaker, closed up to the neck, and jeans. However, in order to assert that this stylistic aspect is related to a shift towards populist practices, it is important to also consider from the outset the aspect of our primary interest: the communicative choices of the leader. First of all, it is interesting to note how he speaks directly to the audience, addressing them multiple times, creating the illusion of a two-way interaction. In Maroni's case, although there was a genuine

³¹ See Chapter 2.2

exchange with journalists, it was a rather austere and formal communication. Here, on the other hand, Salvini addresses people informally, as if talking to acquaintances, precisely to give the impression of being 'one of the people', empathizing with them and removing existing distances. Offering an example extracted from the chosen speech:

“Fatevi un applauso. Anche alla signora del primo piano, al signore del terzo là in fondo. Un po' comodi eh, signora lei è un po' troppo comoda là, però vabbè fa niente, veniamo da lei a bere il caffè alla fine.”

“Give yourselves a round of applause. Also to the lady on the first floor, to the gentleman on the third over there. A bit comfortable there, madam, but it doesn't matter, we'll come to you for a coffee afterwards.”

(Salvini 2024, 04:10)

This also reveals another typically populist aspect, namely, the lowering of the linguistic register. Using colloquial expressions and barroom phrases to create a more direct and empathetic connection with voters. This approach aims to make ordinary people feel closer and understood, breaking down formal barriers and getting closer to their everyday language. Another curiously common aspect of Grillo's communication is that of switching from one topic to another, seemingly without any logical connection. Salvini talks about war, ecological transition, surrogacy, without actually following a logical thread between the topics. This is to maximize returns in terms of consensus by instrumentally using sensitive topics.

Another element that recurs frequently in populist rhetoric and that is found in Salvini's speech is what I have previously called exclusionism. As already seen, exclusionism primarily serves to create internal cohesion and to divert attention from the country's actual problems. Drawing directly from the speech:

“Abbiamo il dovere di bloccare un'immigrazione clandestina insostenibile per le nostre città, non possiamo mantenere gli immigrati di tutto il resto del mondo solo in Italia.”

“We have a duty to stop illegal immigration that is unsustainable for our cities, we cannot keep immigrants from the rest of the world only in Italy.”

(Salvini 2024, 01:10)

In this case, the element of exclusionism first and foremost serves to create a common enemy, namely illegal immigrants, to, as seen above, create cohesion and a sense of community. Exclusionism, however, also serves other purposes in this context. Firstly, it obviously helps to make the listener foreshadow a dangerous situation, constructing what I previously presented as catastrophism. Secondly it helps Salvini constructing a sense of protection and responsibility towards the people, heightened by the fact that he presents himself as the victim of an unfair trial³² By doing so Salvini poses himself as a competent, responsible and, above all, fair and loyal subject, to the detriment of his opponents. Drawing from the speech:

“Questo mi è costato un processo grazie alla sinistra, che in Parlamento, PD e 5 Stelle ha deciso che io dovessi andare a processo perché ho bloccato gli sbarchi dei clandestini. Ogni mese quando vado nel Tribunale di Palermo rischiando 15 anni di galera per aver fatto il mio dovere ci vado a testa alta, perché difendere i confini dell'Italia è un dovere di ogni cittadino.”

“This cost me a trial thanks to the left, that in Parliament, PD and 5 Star decided that I should go to trial because I stopped the landings of illegal immigrants. Every month when I go in the court of Palermo risking 15 years in prison for having done my duty I go there with my head held high, because defending Italy's borders is the duty of every citizen.”

(Salvini 2024, 01:26)

As introduced earlier, the mention of the trial serves precisely to make Salvini assume the role of a responsible and loyal subject. Not only does he take on what, he says, are unjust accusations from his opponents, but he does so by virtue of the power conferred on him by the voters and by virtue of the choices made to fulfil the promises made to voters. Secondly, the backdrop to this mention is certainly that of an imminent danger threatening the country. This tendency towards catastrophism is found at various points in the speech. Offering another, even more striking, example:

³² In July 2019, a hundred migrants remained on the Coast Guard ship for six days due to a ban on disembarkation by the then minister, Matteo Salvini, against whom proceedings for kidnapping were opened. TG24, Sky. 2020. ‘Nave Gregoretti, cosa è successo e perché Salvini rischia il processo’. 12 February 2020. <https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/approfondimenti/caso-nave-gregoretti-salvini>.

“Un'Europa che vuole mettere fuori legge le auto a diesel e a benzina per costringerci ad andare tutti in giro fra 10 anni con le auto elettriche cinesi. È una follia senza senso dal punto di vista economico, ambientale, sociale ed industriale.”

“A Europe that wants to outlaw cars with diesel and petrol in order to force us all to drive around in 10 years time in Chinese electric cars. It is economically, environmentally, socially and industrially senseless madness.”

(Salvini 2024, 02:07)

The danger, presented here as imminent, is Europe. This theme, ironically similar to the one used ten years earlier by Grillo, even takes on the same nuances. Salvini sets out to protect voters from this imminent danger, creating a bond of *pathos* with them and promising them security against this ‘senseless madness’. This catastrophism takes the form of an ascending climax in the following minutes, where Salvini speaks of a World War III and of the duty to protect ‘our children’ in an attempt to sharpen empathy with the listeners. This allows me to get to the last key element of this analysis, what I have referred to so far as the us-them rhetoric. As reiterated so far, this strategy first of all allows for the creation of a sense of community, enabling almost anyone to identify with the "us", thereby fostering a system of empathy and trust with voters. Secondly, it helps to simplify the political message by depicting only two groups: the "us," which obviously includes the speaker, who embodies healthy values and acts as a protector of citizens, and the "them", which often represents a multifaceted and undefined collectivity, just as in the case of Salvini . Already in the first few minutes of the video being referenced:

“A sinistra si ricordano della Basilicata la settimana delle elezioni. Peccato che quando sono stati al governo, ci sono stati quasi sempre loro, sia in regione che a Roma, della Basilicata nessuno si ricordava.”

“On the left, they remember Basilicata during election week. It's a shame that when they were in power, and they've been in power almost always, both in the region and in Rome, no one remembered Basilicata.”

(Salvini 2024, 00:01)

Here the enemy is obviously the opposition, portrayed as negligent and incapable. However, as noted in the rest of the speech, the "they" changes, describing other enemies and subjects.

“A Bruxelles mangiatevi la farina di vermi, noi ci teniamo i peperoni cruschi, noi vogliamo i frutti del nostro territorio, i frutti del nostro mare, della nostra terra, della nostra fatica.”

“In Brussels, you can eat worm flour, we'll keep our 'peperoni cruschi.' We want the fruits of our land, the fruits of our sea, our earth, our hard work.”

(Salvini 2024, 02:46)

Or again, still referring to Europe:

“Dobbiamo prepararci a cambiarla completamente questa Europa.”

“We need to prepare to completely change this Europe.”

(Salvini 2024, 02:02)

Here, the "us vs them" rhetoric is even more evident. On one side, there is Europe, the enemy to be fought, seeking to strip Italy of its national identity; on the other, there is Salvini, representing the people and protecting its values. The intent, of course, is to create a sense of community. The choice to specifically reference, in the previous excerpt mentioned, "peperoni cruschi", a typical Lucanian dish, is interesting and not accidental. This serves to portray the leader as a member of the community he claims to protect, allowing him to convey a sense of belonging to the culture of the land he proposes to govern with his party. In the second excerpt, by contrast, Salvini uses an almost military language, as if addressing an army, rousing the audience and intensifying the sense of community already created by the use of the "us".

In conclusion, the excerpt of Salvini's speech analyzed so far highlights several interesting aspects concerning political communication. Firstly, the stylistic choices and linguistic register indicate a significant departure from his predecessor, Roberto Maroni. Secondly, as highlighted in the previous sections, much of the populist rhetoric seems to surface in the leader's communication. This is evident not only in the themes chosen, sometimes ironically similar to those of Grillo, but also in the communication strategies employed. Indeed, there is a notable use of catastrophism, the us-versus-them dynamic, and even exclusionary elements, all characteristics that, as pointed out in the first chapter, are recurring features of populist communication.

CHAPTER 3.2: MELONI'S RALLY

In this second section of the third chapter, the focus will be on a speech given by the current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni. As in the previous case, any similarities and differences with the speech analyzed in the second chapter, dating back to 2013, will be examined. Unlike the analysis of the Lega, in the case of Fratelli d'Italia, both speeches were delivered by the same politician, or more precisely, the same leader: Giorgia Meloni. This will allow for a clearer highlighting of any shifts in the party's communication. Specifically, the speech to be analyzed was held in Piazza del Popolo, in Rome, in June 2024, by the current Prime Minister.

Giorgia Meloni presents herself to the public wearing a blouse, whereas, recalling the interview with the press given by the prime minister in 2013, the attire was very neat, unmistakably formal. Already from here, also considering the role she plays in politics today, one could see a change of direction. Considering from the outset, even the linguistic element, Meloni does not use formality, rather she indulges in colloquial expressions and, picking up on an element already highlighted in the interview held by the premier in 2013, she does not disguise her dialectal inflection. This, however, now seems to be used instrumentally, hinting at an aspect on which this analysis will later focus, her cadence takes on identity connotations with respect to the desire to present herself as a representative of the people, humble and close to the voters, an element not found in the previous analysis. Starting immediately with what is one of the highlights of the analyses conducted so far, I offer a careful examination of the first few minutes of the conference. The leader opens her appeal to the voters in this way:

“Dicono che ormai le campagne elettorali e la politica anche più in generale si facciano soprattutto in rete e sui social, non per noi. Per noi le campagne elettorali si fanno ancora soprattutto guardando le persone negli occhi, perché quelle persone possano vedere se il nostro sguardo è sincero. Noi non rinunceremo mai alla piazza, non rinunceremo mai a stare in mezzo alla gente perché è esattamente da dove siamo venuti e per ricordarci chi siamo ora e sempre sarà qui che torneremo: in piazza, in mezzo alla gente.”

“They say that by now election campaigns and politics even more generally are mostly done online and on social media, not for us. For us, election campaigns are still mostly done by looking people in the eye, so that those people can see if our gaze is sincere. We will never give up the square, we will never give up being among the people because that is exactly where we came from and to remember who we are now and always it will be here that we will return: in the square, among the people.”

(Meloni 2024, 01:43)

This first appeal with which, not surprisingly, the rally opens has a number of interesting elements. First of all, the marked and judicious use of the polarization between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In this case, the use of ‘them’ certainly serves to denigrate and devalue the opponent, perhaps the journalists, but rather than focusing on a distinct identity against which to lash out, it is used to distinguish and bring out the leader and her party. Indeed, as we have already seen, one of the pivotal elements of populist communication is precisely to make the movement or party stand out as different, new, in the context of the political scene in which it asserts itself. Here Giorgia Meloni tries to do just that, distancing herself from anyone who sees it differently and presenting herself as the only alternative to a trend that aims to dehumanize politics. This allows her, moreover, to work on another populistically relevant aspect: the emotional appeal. The premier addresses the people, as if she were in the middle of the crowd, and uses the square to remind people that her party is a party that cares about ‘the people’. She works a lot on the empathetic element and does so precisely by recalling her origins, by recalling the origins of the party that, in her words, started from there: from the square, from the contact with the people. This strategy is, moreover, skillfully employed in all its nuances throughout the speech. Shortly afterwards, in fact, she uses ‘we’ not only to distance herself from her opponents, but also to extol the role of the voters. Referring directly to the speech:

“Quando ho annunciato quella candidatura ho detto anche che lo facevo a patto di poter contare su di voi, a patto che ci foste voi a fare la campagna elettorale anche per me, a portare su tutto il territorio nazionale le ragioni di questo mio impegno diretto in una partita che noi sappiamo essere decisiva per il futuro di questa nazione. Questa è la mia unica manifestazione in questo mese di campagna elettorale, se me lo sono potuta permettere è perché c'eravate voi a sostituirmi. Grazie anche per questo, grazie per non avermi lasciato sola ... il 25 settembre del 2022 insieme a milioni di Italiani noi abbiamo scritto la storia, abbiamo archiviato

la lunga stagione dei governi tecnici, delle maggioranze Arcobaleno, dei governi creati in laboratorio. Abbiamo dato all'Italia finalmente un governo legittimato dal voto popolare.”

“When I announced that candidacy I also said that I was doing it on the condition that I could count on you, on the condition that you were there to campaign for me as well, to bring everywhere the reasons for my direct involvement in a game that we know is decisive for the future of this nation. This is my only demonstration in this month of electoral campaigning, if I have been able to afford it, it

is because you were there to take my place. Thank you also for this, thank you for not having left me alone ...on 25 September 2022 together with millions of Italians we have written history, we have archived the long season of technical governments, of Rainbow majorities, of governments created in laboratories. We have finally given Italy a government legitimized by the popular vote.”

(Meloni 2024, 04:42)

As already seen in Grillo, this strategy is widely used to emphasize the role of the party as a collective movement, whose strength depends precisely on the collective. The voter is made a participant and, to some extent, responsible for political victories and defeats, and thus a strong identity and emotional bond is also created between leader, movement and citizen. Another element mentioned already in the first chapter, and crucial in identifying populist communication, is that of direct representation. As previously analyzed, this rhetoric reinforces the image of the party as the sole defender of the people's interests and aims to bring their needs back to the center of the political debate. Meloni, here, directly refers to the proposed constitutional reform concerning the premiership³³ and uses it precisely to distance herself from opponents and to strengthen the idea of the people as the true leaders of a just and factually representative democracy, as emerges from the speech:

“Abbiamo varato una riforma che dà gli italiani il diritto di scegliere direttamente da chi vogliono essere governati: è la riforma costituzionale sul premierato... Perché a loro proprio non va giù l'idea che possano essere i cittadini gli italiani a eleggere direttamente il presidente del consiglio, loro vogliono che a decidere continui a essere il palazzo con i suoi giochi...”

“We have passed a reform that gives Italians the right to directly choose who they want to be governed by: it is the constitutional reform on the premiership... Because they really can't stand the idea that it could be the citizens, the Italians, who directly elect the Prime Minister; they want the decisions to continue being made by the establishment with its power plays...”

³³ The premierate reform is part of a bill, the text of which was approved on 3 November in the Council of Ministers, that aims to amend the Constitution and the current electoral mechanism to allow citizens to directly express their preference for the head of government.

(Meloni 2024, 07:57)

Moving towards the conclusion, I find it appropriate to take a step back and return to the analysis of the linguistic register and tones used. Giorgia Meloni does not seem to resort to profanity, but rather draws from a decidedly informal vocabulary. She often uses idiomatic expressions and highly colloquial forms, primarily to reinforce her mockery of opponents. The tone is aggressive, and the speech seems, at its most critical points, to take on the characteristics of an ascending climax, at the peak of which she often places slogans and impactful phrases. Even the Prime Minister, it seems, like in the case of Salvini, addresses an army, stirs it up, and exploits its fervor. It is precisely in this new communicative system that her use of the Roman accent takes on greater significance. In fact, this element, already highlighted in the analysis of the 2013 press conference, now seems to have become a true communicative tool. Whereas initially, it seemed to betray her by revealing her humble origins, it is now used to emphasize them and to create a more direct and emotional connection with voters.

In conclusion, the analysis conducted of the rally held by Giorgia Meloni in the current year, reveals a more or less marked departure from the communicative style used by the politician, and thus the party, previously. Although some of the premier's communication traits seem to have been present in the past, they are now used in a more shrewd, conscious manner. Other aspects are new and, as the analysis shows, changed over time. The strategy with which the party is presented can be taken as an example in this context. At first, as emerged from the analysis, Giorgia Meloni addresses her electoral basis, without strong emotional appeals, distinctly outlining her programmatic line, thus excluding the possibility of catch-all readings. It is, therefore, a party with clearly specified ideals and values, with a solid and defined internal organization that aims to create a system capable of outliving changes in leadership. Today, the party takes the form of a movement whose leader strategically defers competence and responsibility to the voters, despite playing on his charismatic and centralizing role.

CONCLUSIONS

Coming now towards the end of this work, I feel it appropriate to start drawing conclusions from the analysis conducted. First of all, it is good to keep in mind what the objective of the analysis conducted so far was. This work, in fact, aims to, through the application of the theoretical models and principles set out in chapter one, investigate the changes in national political communication in order to confirm, or refute, the thesis that, over the years, Italian political communication has, little

by little, increasingly adopted populist communication strategies. This thesis aims to fit within the theoretical and methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), utilizing its tools to critically analyze political communication in Italy. This approach has enabled an examination of the dynamics of political discourse, deconstructing its most complex strategies and patterns. Indeed, thanks to the diversity of the literature on the subject, I was able to draw on the contributions of various authors, ultimately offering an analysis whose novelty lies in its diachronic perspective. As demonstrated so far, indeed, this thesis particularly focuses on the developments in communication strategies adopted by different political parties.

The approaches that have, in a way, guided my analysis are those developed by Mudde, Kaltwasser, Müller and Moffitt³⁴, particularly focused on the ideological and performative elements of populism. In fact, the aspects concerned with values and contents of the political discourses analyzed, have been avoided here, preferring instead a greater focus on the formal aspect. Thanks, then, to the contributions of authors such as Canovan, Barr and Betz³⁵, it has been possible for me to draw out the salient features of populist communication. From the integration of these key concepts and, in the light of the general approach used, namely that of the CDA, this analysis was able to go into detail on the characteristics of political communication in Italy, up to the point of analyzing its developments.

The rally held by Grillo in 2014 was used as a practical reference for the study of mainstream populist communication strategies. Grillo, in fact, undoubtedly represented a novelty in the national context, using tones and methods that were hitherto almost absent in Italian political communication. Grillo, for example, often resorted to contrivances belonging to the world of theatre. This performative element, as Benjamin Moffitt points out³⁶, is often exploited in populist communication. Also strong is the anti-elitist component, counted among the salient features of populist communication by a multiplicity of great exponents of this subject, among which it is worth mentioning Barr, Goodwyn, Laclau and Mudde³⁷. Grillo, therefore, embodies, in a certain sense, the quintessential populist leader, and for this reason, he was used as a point of reference in the study conducted.

³⁴ See Chapter 1

³⁵ See Chapter 1

³⁶ Moffitt, B. (2016). *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

³⁷ See Chapter 1

At this point, it is possible to begin highlighting the developments in the communication strategies of the two parties under analysis, namely, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. Starting with Lega, the first analysis conducted in the second chapter focused on the leader Roberto Maroni. The study, highlighted a style that is quite distant from populist norms. Indeed, his communication strategy was characterized by a traditional approach, deeply rooted in the linguistic norms commonly used in the political context. Maroni was able to maintain a language and style of communication that faithfully reflected the expectations and conventions typical of Italian politics. He did not deviate from established rhetorical formulas or from expressive modes commonly adopted in public discourse. Maroni, therefore, operated within the boundaries of institutional language. No elements conventionally associated with populist rhetoric were highlighted. There was neither verbal aggressiveness nor the strong polarization between 'us' and 'them', which, in the populist context, gives rise to a whole range of other communication strategies. The case of Salvini, the current party leader, is different, as he clearly resorts to a whole range of typically populist formulas and strategies. Salvini, indeed, seems to embrace the breaking of linguistic norms by adopting an informal, conversational tone. He aims to empathize with the public, frequently employing the populist concept of the 'people' among other populist formulas. He seeks to create a cohesive community, using the techniques of exclusionism and catastrophism, that, as strongly emphasized by Betz³⁸, are typical of populist rhetoric.

In the second case analyzed, the stylistic changes are even more interesting. In fact, it was possible to follow the communicative evolution of the same political figure: Giorgia Meloni. In the first excerpt analyzed, dating back to 2013, the Fratelli d'Italia representative adopts a direct and explicit form of communication, yet it is never vulgar or aggressive. Like Maroni, she attempts to adhere to the linguistic norms expected in political discourse, with only her regional inflection occasionally revealing itself. The communication style appears well-defined, aiming to address a specific electoral base: the center-right. Therefore, there is no undifferentiated 'people', nor, conversely, a vague and undefined enemy. Thus, the simplistic and polarizing narrative that, as Wodak points out³⁹, belongs to populist discourse, does not seem to emerge. In the second speech examined, however, Meloni appears to have completely overhauled her strategy. Seemingly disregarding the formal position she holds, she adopts an aggressive tone, uses colloquial language, and even turns her accent into a strength, a tool to connect with the 'people'. She seems to address an army, heavily relying on

³⁸ See Chapter 1

³⁹ Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073>.

emotional appeal. From a content perspective, it's also interesting to note, as with Salvini, the introduction or emphasis on specific themes, such as the importance of direct representation or the way in which the 'people' should be empowered and engaged, elements that, as mentioned in the first chapter, fall within Cas Mudde's⁴⁰ definition of the populist phenomenon, namely, an ideology aimed at the expression of the *volonté générale*.

Thus, summing up the two analyses outlined in the previous sections, I could conclude that both cases have shown a significant change in direction. From a communicative perspective, in the case of Lega, it could be observed a gradual departure from previously used linguistic conventions. The shift has been from austere and professional tones to a decidedly more popular language. This change has also been accompanied by a necessary revision of the topics addressed, with the abandonment of excessively divisive issues, such as the Padania secession. In the second case, the change is similarly evident in both the themes addressed and the purely stylistic aspects. The assertiveness and directness present in Giorgia Meloni's earlier speeches have given way to more aggressive tones and rhetoric, often disparaging opponents, while becoming increasingly polarizing and pro-people, seemingly devoid of class distinctions or specific interests.

In conclusion, the tools used thus far to critically deconstruct and analyze the speeches under examination have proven essential in capturing the changes in the communication strategies of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia. As this work has shown, we can conclude that, on a national level, there is a flattening of communication strategies, with political parties increasingly adopting approaches that were once the exclusive domain of populist parties. The aim of this work was not to demonstrate that a 'populistization' of parties is occurring in terms of values or content, but rather to highlight that, for reasons of effectiveness and immediacy in political messaging, the populist model is rapidly influencing the communication style of other parties in Italy, not conventionally accounted as populist.

Now that the purpose of this work has been clarified and conclusions have been drawn I can close by explaining its relevance. Monitoring this phenomenon, in fact, is not only interesting from a communicative point of view but is of paramount importance to grasp the possible long term consequences on the political debate it may have. Analyzing just few possible scenarios, if a total flattening of political communication strategies were to occur, this could lead to an impoverishment

⁴⁰ See Chapter 1

of the democratic debate resulting in the erosion of our system. Or again, if this strategy proves to be more effective than others in engaging voters, it could lead to a revival of democratic systems, which are currently in crisis and distrusted by the majority of citizens. This is not merely a topic of academic relevance, more specifically, in the context of communication studies, but rather an extremely significant phenomenon from a social and political standpoint, which, if thoroughly studied, could reveal the future of our systems. In conclusion, I hope that my work can be a starting point for future analyses or even just to stimulate a critical and more conscious analysis of political messaging.

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