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The New Challenges of Populist Discourses in Romance Speaking Countries

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STOCKHOLM
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**PART THREE:
POPULIST VOICES IN ITALY:
BETWEEN TWEETS AND HISTORY**

7. Anger, Fear and Extreme Polarization in Italian Political Discourse: A Multimodal Study of the Tweets by Matteo Salvini and his Supporters during the European Elections

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Abstract

The presence of extreme polarization in political communication on social media has recently attained disruptive dimensions, especially in conjunction with populist propaganda. The dynamics of negative oppositional discourse, however, seem to escape all categorization, especially when it comes to quantifying its relevance along the left–right ideological axis. The study contributes to better understanding the phenomenon through the appraisal and emotion analysis of a sample of tweets by Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian right-wing populist party Lega, and of his supporters’ comments during the European elections of 2019. By including visual and textual resources, the analysis accounts for the intrinsic multimodality of social media.

1. Introduction

The spread of radical polarization in political discourse is a well-known phenomenon that has reached alarming proportions. Its extreme manifestation, hate speech, has frequently shown its disruptive potential to lead not only to individual hate crimes but also to violent riots that undermine the stability of well-established democracies, as the assault on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2021 clearly showed.¹

¹ See, among others: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/01/12/us/capitol-mob-timeline.html>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2021/politics/trump-insurrection-capitol> (last accessed September 2023).

How to cite this book chapter:

Reggi, V. 2023. Anger, Fear and Extreme Polarization in Italian Political Discourse: A Multimodal Study of the Tweets by Matteo Salvini and his Supporters during the European Elections. In: Roitman, M., Bernal, M., Premat, C. & Sullet-Nylander, F. (eds.) *The New Challenges of Populist Discourses in Romance Speaking Countries*, pp. 151–176. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bcj.h>. License: CC BY-NC.

The cause-effect relationship between speech and action was theorized by John Langshaw Austin, who claimed that speech is action, as it constructs social realities (Austin 1975; Bayer 2020: 56). For its intrinsic danger, hate speech has been object of academic studies (Waldron 2012; Ziccardi 2020), as well as national and supranational discussions and law enforcement for years (see, in particular, Bayer et al. 2020; Camera dei Deputati 2017; de Latour et al. 2017; Mc Gonagle 2013).

Although hate speech and extreme polarization are not limited to politics, contemporary political debate provides a very favourable environment (Ziccardi 2020: 6–7). This is because, even if hate speech can be expressed by anyone, it is leaders and influential public figures who amplify and spread polarized discourse (ibidem: 4, 23; Bayer 2020: 56); political movements, therefore, offer the ideal resonance environment thanks to the paramount role of their leaders and spokespeople. This is true for both populist and mainstream parties, whose rhetoric is becoming more and more extremely polarized regardless of their ideological position.

In this context, Web 2.0 plays a crucial part in offering politicians the ideal stage for their propaganda, thanks to limited gatekeeping and sophisticated algorithms for profiling the audience and suggesting popular topics. The role of social media has been widely studied especially in connection with populism as an effective means to spread oppositional discourse rapidly to a wide audience (Engesser et al. 2017; Gerbaudo 2018; Pajnik and Meret 2018), although it should be noted that in some cases the percentage of hate speech on social media is overestimated, as confirmed by a recent study on the use of Twitter in Italy.² Again, the recent case of the attack on Capitol Hill is exemplary of the dynamics of online polarization: on the one hand, former president of the United States Donald Trump was accused of inciting rebellion against President-Elect Joe Biden, was impeached, and was banned from Twitter and Facebook because of fraudulent use.³ On

² The study calculated that only 3.7% of tweets contained hate-related terms, of which 25.4% concerned ideological beliefs. <http://www.datamediahub.it/2020/06/22/rapporto-sullhate-speech-in-italia/#axzz6k6mlnnpJ> (last accessed September 2023).

³ See, among others: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/global-world-reaction-capitol-storming/2021/01/07/c3abfe52-50a7-11eb-af5-fdaf28cfa90_story.html; <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/twitter-facebook-capital-riots-trump-b1784113.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/politics/trump-impeachment-pelosi.html>; https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html. (last accessed September 2023).

the other hand, various web corporations removed the social media Parler – which gives voice to extremists under the flag of free speech – from their servers, since it was among those that were used to organize the riots.⁴

Defining the borders of extreme polarization seems quite hard. Even its most aggressive manifestation, hate speech, is rather a controversial concept. According to a study by UNESCO:

[h]ate speech lies in a complex nexus with freedom of expression, individual, group and minority rights [...]. In national and international legislation, hate speech refers to expressions that advocate incitement to harm (particularly, discrimination, hostility or violence) based upon the target's being identified with a certain social or demographic group [...]. For some, however, the concept extends also to expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance on the assumption that this may fuel targeted discrimination, hostility and violent attacks. In common parlance, however, definitions of hate speech tend to be broader, sometimes even extending to encompass words that are insulting those in power, or derogatory of individuals who are particularly visible. (Gagliardone et al. 2015: 10)

Interestingly, the “Jo Cox” Committee on Hate, Intolerance, Xenophobia and Racism, Final Report by the Italian Chamber of Deputies identified the pyramid of hate, in which stereotypes and misrepresentation provide the foundations for increasingly invasive behaviour that includes discrimination and hate speech, and culminates with hate crimes (Camera dei Deputati 2017). Hate, intolerance, xenophobia and racism, in other words, are highly nuanced phenomena, whose analysis requires a broad spectrum. For this reason, this study is based on the more general notion of extreme polarization, with a focus on those components that discourse analysis can detect quite effectively, namely anger and fear.

Italy provides an interesting environment for research on extreme polarization owing to the high number of offensive or discriminatory postings on social media and the general tendency to trivialize – and, accordingly, tolerate – hate speech, xenophobia and discrimination in political and public debate (Bayer et al. 2020: 81). The campaign for the European elections of 2019, in particular, offers relevant material for analysis for three reasons that were peculiar to – though maybe not exclusive to – the Italian situation. First, the elections concerned one of the most controversial topics of current political debates,

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/technology/apple-google-parler.html> (last accessed September 2023).

namely the European Union and Italy's role in its institutions. Second, the elections took place at a time of political instability that turned the vote for European bodies into a surrogate for domestic elections. Third, these peculiar conditions triggered relevant analyses of online communication that provide abundant material for discussion and comparison. Among them I shall take into consideration Amnesty International Italy's Hatred Barometer,⁵ which measured the topics that were most popular with Italian party leaders, the number of negative remarks they were associated with and the number of negative comments they elicited.

On the basis of these considerations, this study contributes to research on right-wing populist discourse online by investigating which emotions and attitudes prevailed in the interaction between Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Italian party Lega Nord, and his supporters on Twitter during the last months of campaign for the European elections. In particular, the analysis focuses on different forms of negativity as the supposed recurring pattern of right-wing communication to assess whether it was predominant and which forms prevailed. On a methodological level, the study expands existing frameworks for qualitative analysis by combining appraisal analysis and emotion analysis and applying them to both textual resources and visual resources such as emojis and images. The analysis is then completed with descriptive quantitative data. The rationale for including visual resources lies in the broad notion that meaning is multimodal (Halliday 1985/2004: 3; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 6), all the more so in social media communication, in which visual elements play a pivotal role as meaning-making resources because of both their pervasiveness and variety and their capacity to express feelings and emotions. For example, messages containing emojis are more emotionally loaded and elicit affective feedback in newly generated texts (Kralj Novak et al. 2015). Qualitative multimodal analysis, therefore, can significantly contribute to reach a wider perspective on the modulation of affective language, which is predominant in online communication (Higgins 2017).

The following sections will introduce the operational definition of populism used in the study, describe the relevance of social media in contemporary politics, provide an overview of Salvini's political figure and his party, describe the methodology and discuss the outcome of analysis.

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.it/cosa-facciamo/elezioni-europee> (last accessed September 2023).

2. Populism and social media

Although populism is one of the most debated notions in current political debate, outside the academic world populism is predominantly seen as a negative phenomenon, a degenerative process that deteriorates democracy. To avoid this bias, the study focuses on two complementary definitions. The first definition sees populism as a “political communication style of political actors that refers to the people” (Jagers and Walgrave 2007: 322), and underlines the pivotal function of communication. The second considers populism a “thin-centered ideology” that sees society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6). The term “thin-centered” is pivotal, as it underlines the shifting nature of populism, which does not necessarily embrace rightist or leftist ideologies but may appropriate themes and tones of either (or both). Regardless of the positioning of a populist movement along the right–left ideological axis, therefore, its nature remains essentially divisive and oppositional. What may change on the grounds of ideology is the nature of these antagonist groups: the in-group may coincide with the underprivileged, the native inhabitants of a region/nation, or both; the out-group, on the other hand, usually includes the so-called elites (from bankers and bureaucrats of the European Union to the political establishment), and, for right-wing nationalist populism, also migrants (Sauer et al. 2018: 159–161).

If we accept that semiosis is part of social processes (Fairclough 2001/2006: 122; 2001/2003: 234), and, consequently, text is a form of social action (Fairclough 1992: 211), politics is unavoidably dependent on communication for several reasons. First, language is pivotal in political practices as there would be no propaganda without it. Second, it is language that offers a specific representation of the world, a representation that is instrumental to specific ideological purposes (Chilton 2004: 6; Chilton and Schäffner 2002: 3; Fairclough 2000: 3, 156–157), all the more so since the 1980s, when politics became progressively “mediatized” (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Higgins 2018; Strömbäck 2008). Although celebrity politicians were not new in history – Benito Mussolini was a typical example – the 1980s represented a turning point after which the marketization of politics became a self-evident phenomenon, spin doctors became pivotal figures in a politician’s success and hard-core ideologies were replaced with new programmes that politicians “talked and re-talked into being” (Fairclough 1995/2013: 381). Thus, a simpler, more colloquial style substituted the often-cryptic jargon of traditional political discourse, and the

media were exploited to their full potential to seek a direct contact with the electorate.

The need for an unmediated, emotional dialogue with the public makes populism particularly dependent on media, especially social media. With its roots in Russia and America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, populism is far from being a new phenomenon (De Cleen 2019). However, the first decades of the third millennium have provided fertile ground for it to thrive, for at least two reasons. On the one hand, many contemporary societies have become progressively post-ideological, whereby new forms of transversal activism and civic participation have replaced traditional ideologies (on modernity and postmodernity, see Bauman and Bordoni 2014). On the other hand, Web 2.0 offers accessible, participatory platforms for more direct and bidirectional political communication, encourages the display of feelings and emotions – unrestricted by very little gatekeeping – and elicits wide participation and engagement from the audience (Higgins 2017). The structure of social media platforms offers a wide array of visual elements to display affective messages, and their algorithms encourage personalized communication and a sense of community and solidarity, thanks to filter bubbles and echo chambers (Gerbaudo 2018; KhosraviNik 2017). Social media, in other words, provide populism with a suitable stage to perform the discursive construction of an imaginary community grounded on antagonism.

It is possible that right-wing populist parties have made oppositional discourse extreme (Wodak 2015: 1–24), since their rhetoric exploits the fear brought forth by globalization to construe a heartland (Taggart 2004). As a consequence, these populist movements may be particularly keen on taking advantage of the potential of the new media: “[w]hile classical political communication provides voice, articulates, ‘sells’ existing opinions, visions, interests and identities, right-wing populist communication creates the opinions, visions, interests and identities it claims to represent” (Sauer, Krasteva and Saarinen 2018: 28). However, other movements along the ideological spectrum opted for a violently divisive rhetoric (Ziccardi 2020: 139) to create their community. For example, the Italian Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement), a post-ideological, anti-establishment movement closer to the left, was born out of a series of rallies in which comedian Beppe Grillo vehemently accused politicians of being corrupt and inept; so much so that one of its most successful events was the so-called V-Day, whose name embodied the violently derogatory nature of Grillo’s rhetoric.⁶ Years

⁶ V stands for “Vaffanculo” (Fuck off).

later, Grillo himself got involved in a case of misogynistic episodes of hate speech against Laura Boldrini, president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies (Spallaccia 2017: 229–265).

While advocating plebiscitary forms of representation, populism paradoxically celebrates strong, charismatic leadership (Taggart 2004), which is central for two main reasons. First, the polarization of populist rhetoric “frames issues as reflecting irreconcilable differences in norms, identities and interests while exaggerating intra-group homogeneity and intergroup differences” (Bos et al. 2020). The leader, therefore, is essential in the in-group/out-group cleavage and in the definition of group identity as s/he sets the values and beliefs of the community (Hogg and Abrams 1988: 113–114; Tajfel & Turner 1986). Second, the aim of this type of oppositional discourse is to fuel anger and, above all, fear, which is crucial in creating a sense of community and cohesion, and in reinforcing the power of the leader as the “bearer of security” (Ziccardi 2020: 122). Populist leaders, therefore, construct their image as saviours and common people at once and, to pursue the delusion of unmediated participation, build an almost symbiotic relation with their audience by presenting themselves as “authentic” and their political views as “common sense” (Wodak 2015: 125–150). Thus, anger and fear satisfy the political nature of populism as an alternative to neoliberal representative politics and its manifestations, such as globalization and multiculturalism.

This explains the paramount importance of charismatic leaders in populist movements: thanks to divisive rhetoric based upon calculated ambivalence and provocation, they demonize enemies and turn political ideas into a mission, so much so that they are metonymically identified with their parties (Wodak 2015: 125–150). Quite predictably, in a political debate that privileges emotions to rational reasoning and harsh antagonism to inclusiveness, anger, fear and extreme polarization thrive, with leaders and supporters being both victims and perpetrators.

3. Italy and the Lega

Italy provides an interesting breeding ground for populist movements, with one of the highest occurrences of social media posts including indicators of populist discourse, such as anti-elitism, the exclusion of the out-group and references to the people (Bennett et al. 2020). Although Donald Trump was perhaps the most exemplary populist leader worldwide, he still represented a traditional party system. In Italy, on the other hand, Movimento Cinque Stelle has been represented in local

administrative bodies since 2008 and in power with different coalitions since 2018. Its share of the vote – currently at 16.4%⁷ – reached 32% at the general elections of 2018. If Movimento Cinque Stelle was groundbreaking in its approach to direct participation of the electorate in the decision process, however, it is the rightist populist party Lega Nord (Northern League, rebranded as Lega – League – in 2018) and, above all, its leader, Matteo Salvini, that have exploited it to the full (Diamanti 2019).

Currently in power within a centre-right coalition, the Lega was born as a regionalist-secessionist party in 1991: it invented and consolidated the idealized community of northern Italy in opposition to the central government and the “backward” south of the country. As such, it was the first Italian party that developed a complex, capillary propaganda system, which spanned from stickers, house organs, merchandising and illegal billboards to anthems and spectacular rituals (Lettieri 2011; Woods 2009; Zaslove 2011: 87). Although the independentist rituals and symbols were progressively abandoned as the Lega shifted towards nationalism, the attention to propaganda marketing developed even further when Salvini became secretary of the party in 2013. New colours, logos and slogans were chosen to promote the new positioning of the Lega, and the potential of online communication was (and still is) skilfully exploited by Salvini with the collaboration of social media strategist Luca Morisi (Pregliasco 2019).

Several studies have discussed the chameleonlike nature of the Lega, which promotes nationalism while retaining some of its regionalist claims (Reggi, 2023, in press) and, for this reason, suggest definitions such as populist regionalism, radical right populism or populist insurgency (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017; Newth 2019; Zaslove 2011). Even the positioning of the party along the left–right ideological axis seems far from clear-cut: not only is the Lega’s electorate largely constituted by underrepresented categories (Policastro 2019) but Salvini himself has also claimed to be the real heir to the values of the Italian left.⁸ Nonetheless, the markedly oppositional discourse that takes a stand against the European Union, identifies the main out-group as migrants

⁷ Source <https://www.termometropolitico.it/sondaggi-politici-elettorali> (last accessed September 2023).

⁸ A very recent example is Salvini’s statement during an interview in July 2020 https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2020/07/09/salvini-i-valori-della-sinistra-di-berlinguer-raccolti-dalla-lega-_2874b3d1-8bcf-4464-b11c-4f82d6e5d3ec.html (last accessed September 2023).

– especially Muslims – and defends the traditional family against LGBTQ+ rights ascribe the party to the ideological right. Salvini's support for other right-wing leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump speaks volumes in this regard.

The party's affiliation to the international right and Salvini's skilful presence on social media, therefore, make his dialogue with the electorate all the more interesting and relevant to analyse when approaching extreme polarization, especially if we consider his charismatic leadership. With Salvini, the commodification and branding of the political leader (Wodak 2015: 134–136) has reached unprecedented peaks in the Italian Republic. For his electorate, Salvini is both the next-door neighbour and the Captain (Capitano), and his voters are fans who, rather than contributing to the political programme with their ideas, celebrate him emotionally and unconditionally (Diamanti 2019), so much so that perhaps the most famous call to action of the Lega's campaigning was the “Win Salvini” (Vinci Salvini) contest for the 2018 elections, in which the supporters who first liked his postings on Facebook could win a phone conversation and an appointment with their Captain. It is worth underlining the paramount importance of social media in this call to action as a way to bypass mainstream media (and their gate-keeping) and engage the audience in the celebration of the leader. As Salvini himself underlined when advertising the follow-up edition of the contest, on the occasion of the European elections of 2019, “everybody will be against this video: great professors, great intellectuals, big newspapers, analysts, sociologists, but we use the web, as long as they leave it free, and win on the web” (“questo video avrà tutti contro, professoroni, intellettualoni, giornaloni, analisti, sociologi, ma noi usiamo la rete, finché ce la lasciano libera, e vinciamo in rete”).⁹

Besides Salvini's call to action, the European elections of 2019 provide a relevant context to analyse the leader's “dialogue” with his audience on social media, especially regarding negative feelings and attitude, since the electoral campaign took place during a period of intense political polarization. First, these elections concerned the European Union, so they combined the competition against political opponents within the Italian political arena – the leftist Partito Democratico (Democratic Party or PD) above all – with the marked Euroscepticism of the party's propaganda since the late 1990s (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017:

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=385938898675241> (last accessed September 2023).

632–635). Second, they took place at a time when Salvini was minister of the interior and deputy prime minister of a troublesome coalition cabinet with the other populist party, Movimento Cinque Stelle. The electorate's response, therefore, would also bear significant consequences on the balance of forces within the government. Finally, during the last weeks of campaign Salvini visited – and praised – the barrier that Hungary had raised along its border with Serbia against migrants, a visit that added to the polarized climate at the time.

On the other hand, the emergence of a high level of negativity in this context should not be taken for granted. A recent study on the activity of Salvini's fans on Facebook reports that the reaction of anger (3.6%) to his postings is, on average, higher than those to other politicians', but is not the highest; moreover, it is much less frequent than like and love, respectively 87.5% and 5% (Carone and Cavallaro 2019). Moreover, the negativity rate detected in Salvini's postings by Amnesty International Italy was less than several other politicians' from ideologically different affiliations.

4. Methodology

The study focuses on Salvini's campaigning on Twitter in the weeks between 23 April and 2 June 2019, and is designed as a qualitative analysis of both the leader's tweets and a sample of the comments by his supporters. The tweets and comments refer to Salvini's official profile, @matteosalvinimi. Due to the high frequency of Salvini's postings, only those with references to the elections (whether in the text or as hashtags) were taken into consideration, for a total of 109 tweets. The comments were selected following the order in which they showed first, for an average of approximately 15 per tweet, for a total of 1,703. Since the analysis was applied to both textual and visual components, for replicability's sake, the postings were captured as screenshots and archived in .jpg or .png format following their visualization order.

As we have seen above, the concept of hate speech is quite controversial in itself. Analysing the presence of extreme polarization in general, therefore, can be very challenging, especially since “some words might be negative, might even have the meaning of hate, but the context makes them not hate speech-related” (Watanabe et al. 2018). Context, in these cases, is fundamental: capitalization, punctuation, emojis, metaphors, irony and so on are pivotal to the disambiguation of implicit

meanings. For this reason, the study was conceived as a qualitative, manual analysis of extreme polarization based on appraisal analysis and emotion analysis. The former helped to identify expressions of negative judgement and negative affect, whereas the latter focused on negative emotions such as anger and fear as opposed to positive ones such as happiness and love. Qualitative data were then analysed with relevant quantitative information to obtain a more exhaustive interpretation of the results.

The tweets and the comments were first analysed following James Martin and Peter White's appraisal theory (2005) in order to define the interpersonal relationships and the social identity that the speaker builds for her/himself (see Figure 7.1). Among the multi-layered classifications that the system offers, the analysis focused on the three main categories of attitude: judgement (the evaluation of people's behaviour), affect (personal emotions and feelings) and appreciation (the evaluation of events, situations and things) in their positive or negative connotation. For a more accurate description of the emotional involvement of the speaker, the analysis also annotated whether a resource was intensified or not (graduation). Graduation can be obtained with a variety of semantic and textual resources such as adverbs, capitalization and punctuation, but also visual resources (emojis above all) and hashtags, which foreground meaning and add emotional overtones. These resources, however, may be used simultaneously: the same emoji may be repeated in a long series, or an intensified concept such as "extraordinary", for example, may show in capital letters and be followed by a series of exclamation marks. To avoid confusion, the analysis considered only one level of intensification, which was considered satisfactory for the scope of the study.

Besides personal attitude, expressions of emotion were annotated according to the categories of trust, fear, anger, love, surprise, sadness, disgust, happiness and anticipation (Plutchik 2001), with particular attention to the analysis of negative affect, anger and fear as symptoms of extreme polarization. The annotations of both appraisal and emotion analysis were carried out using the UAM Image Annotation Tool (<http://www.corpustool.com/features.html>), which also provided relevant frequency data. Finally, the analysis was completed by annotating the rhetorical strategies most frequently used by the speakers when expressing negative judgement or hostility against political opponents, in order to offer a deeper insight into the communication dynamics and the intensity of polarization.

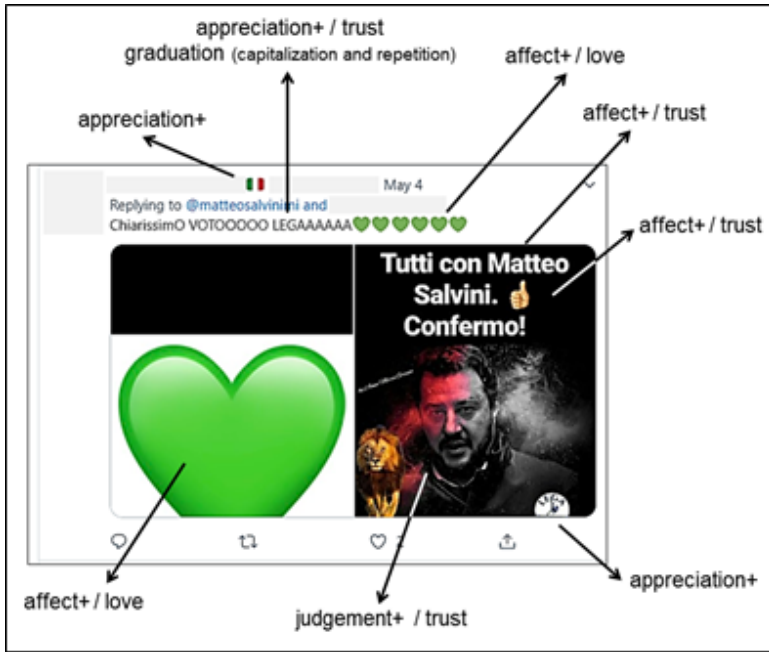


Figure 7.1. An example of appraisal and emotion analysis applied to the multimodal resources of a comment by one of Salvini's supporters.

Social media communication includes multimodal material that is connected to form a hypertext, which makes its meaning-making process not just multimodal but intrinsically hypermodal (Lemke 2002). Dealing with the complexity of this process of logogenesis poses difficult questions concerning implied subtexts and references that may make the final interpretation all the more subjective. It was essential, therefore, to set some rules and apply them systematically to all material, to ensure consistency and replicability.

First of all, in both types of analysis, visual resources were labelled on the grounds of the most salient information they conveyed. While visuals expressing emotions were not particularly ambiguous and, as such, were annotated as instances of a specific emotion and as affect in appraisal analysis, more general images could be challenging. For consistency's sake, in appraisal analysis visual resources referred to individuals were classified as judgement, whereas political symbols, flags and so on were annotated as appreciation. However, if these resources were associated to shapes or other images referring to emotions (e.g. a heart-shaped flag), they were labelled as affect and according to the emotion they expressed (e.g. love).

Second, material such as official graphics were split in their elements (symbols, slogans, protagonists and so on) and analysed as such in order to account for the speaker's semantic choices. This is because the image was deliberately chosen among many others of the official repertoire to convey the speaker's message with a specific overtone. For example, some interactants chose to express their affiliation to the party in a more emotional manner by posting a graphic image containing a heart-shaped flag, whereas other preferred the party symbol. Also, hashtags provide a very interesting challenge to social media discourse analysis owing to their multifarious function of organizing text, conveying meaning, framing utterances, expressing emotions and establishing social relations (Zappavigna 2018). In this study they were generally categorized according to their content. For instance, the hashtag #salvinidontgiveup (#salvininonmollare) was annotated as positive affect and trust.

Although the role played by Facebook in Salvini's media strategy is pivotal because of his great number of followers (Carone and Cavallaro 2019), the study focuses on Twitter for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, Twitter does not prompt many immediate reactions like Facebook, as the reader is offered the only options of commenting/replying, retweeting or "liking" a posting. This means that more complex reactions such as anger, fear, happiness, and so on can be expressed only by commenting on a tweet, and, accordingly, using a variety of visual and textual resources. This provides very articulated material for analysis, considering that emotions are frequently expressed by means of emojis, which, in turn, elicit affective feedback (Kralj Novak et al. 2015). Moreover, Twitter is the ideal environment to construct and perform personal and social identities: its limited word allowance and the possibility to retweet and use hashtags¹⁰ encourage the construction of personal identities and elicit social bonds and a sense of community (Papacharissi 2014: 27, 94–114; Stephansen and Couldry 2014). Finally, Twitter provides political actors with an unmediated, popular stage far from the influence of traditional media (Higgins and Smith 2014: 85), while at the same time bringing hot topics to their attention.

5. Findings and discussion

Overall, the analysis of Salvini's tweets highlights the marked predominance of positive attitude and emotions (Table 7.1). Emotion analysis

¹⁰ These are now available on other social media as well.

Table 7.1. The main results of sentiment and appraisal analysis of Salvini's tweets.

Emotion	Occurrences	% of total	Appraisal	Occurrences	% of total	no graduation (% of category)	graduation (% of category)
anticipation	42	25%	judgement-	81	19%	65%	35%
happiness	40	24%	judgement+	116	27%	44%	56%
trust	43	26%	affect-	5	1%	60%	40%
love	7	4%	affect+	129	30%	47%	53%
fear	11	7%	appreciation-	19	4%	95%	5%
anger	24	14%	appreciation+	73	17%	66%	34%

shows the preponderance of positivity up to 79% of all occurrences expressing feelings, shared almost equally among anticipation, happiness and trust. On the other hand, expressions of anger amount to 14% and fear to 7% of the total; on the other hand, disgust, sadness and surprise are absent in the tweets under examination. It should be noted that these percentages may shift due to the subjective attribution of anger or fear to lexical choices such as “threat”, “subjugation”, “job insecurity” and so on. Still, the total of 21% negative emotions is quite low. As far appraisal analysis is concerned, positive occurrences amount to 74% of the total of all instances of appraisal. In particular, positive affect reaches as much as 30%, followed by positive judgement (27% of total occurrences). Although judgement is mainly positive (59% of all instances of the category), negative judgement is the most frequent negative resource, with 19%, followed by valuation and affect, with percentages as low as 4% and 1%, respectively.

These general data elicit two preliminary observations, which confirm Salvini’s rhetoric as typical of right-wing populist communication, while, at the same time, foregrounding some distinctive traits. On the one hand, despite the prevalence of positive judgement, there is no doubt that the limited difference between positive and negative instances is in line with the oppositional communication style of populist leaders. On the other hand, positive affect represents the highest number of expressions of attitude, whereas negative affect is almost absent.

It is interesting to note that the presence of intensified and non-intensified resources is quite balanced, as Table 7.1 indicates. Although the category of appreciation shows the predominance of non-graduated resources, the others are either balanced or show the prevalence of intensified instances in the positive version and non-intensified in the negative one. For example, 56% of positive judgement and 66% of positive appreciation are expressed by means of graduated resources, whereas 65% of negative judgement is not intensified, being expressed through textual resources alone. Positive affect is almost equally expressed by means of non-graduated and graduated resources (respectively 47% and 53% of the category). Overall, non-intensified resources are slightly predominant, with a total of 234 against 189 (45% and 55% of the total of occurrences, respectively). Salvini’s online communication, therefore, relies on non-intensified texts and intensified resources alike, which mainly include capitalization and emojis indicating, in most cases, various degrees of happiness.

Although his rhetoric is often divisive, as the high number of expressions of judgement indicates (46% of the total, followed by affect with 31%), Salvini softens its impact in a variety of ways. One of the rhetorical strategies he uses most often consists in metonymically hiding the target of his remarks behind abstract or general nouns. Thus, he frequently invites his electorate with “Let’s set Europe free”¹¹ (“liberiamo l’Europa”), and refers to the Lega’s adversaries as “arrivals [of migrants]” (“sbarchi”), “anger, violence and the past” (“rabbia, violenza e passato”), “the Europe of job insecurity, Fornero law, immigration gone wild, taxes, destruction of Made in Italy” (“l’Europa della precarietà, della Fornero, dell’immigrazione selvaggia, delle tasse, della distruzione del Made in Italy”), “the silence of almost all television networks, the shameful headlines of big newspapers”, (“silenzio di quasi tutte le elinquent, titoli vergognosi dei giornali”), and so on. The expressions “bureaucrats, bankers, do-gooders, boats” (“burocrati, banchieri, buonisti, barconi”), which Salvini repeats like a mantra to sum up the enemies of the Lega (and, in his opinion, of the Italians), exemplifies these discursive strategies.

When specific individuals are targeted, Salvini mitigates his criticism either by ironically implying it (“Boldrini is going to vote for the Democratic Party... one more reason to vote for the Lega!”, “La Boldrini voterà PD... un motivo in più per votare Lega!”) or by transferring it from the speaker to her/his specific statements (“the load of nonsense that Senator Monti talks”, “le enormi sciocchezze che dice il Senatore Monti”). Whenever Salvini calls into question specific groups, he softens the impact of his criticism by means of modifiers that identify a (limited) subgroup: “the 4 losers of social centres”¹² (“I 4 sfigati dei centri sociali”); “if one takes to the streets with helmets, sticks, stones [...] he’s a criminal” (“se uno va in piazza con casco, bastoni, pietre [...] è unelinquente”); “those ‘asylum seekers’ who rape, steal, and deal in drugs” (“i “richiedenti asilo” che violentano, rubano e spacciano”). If most highly polarized tweets are somewhat toned down on a textual level, they are reinforced by juxtaposing two similar but contrasting images that highlight the difference between the Lega’s supporters and their political opponents.

¹¹ All translations in this article are mine.

¹² Social centres in Italy are affiliated to different left-wing political networks. The centres are usually squatted but some of them have legalized their status. They host alternative events such as concerts, exhibitions, farmers’ markets and so on.

The image that accompanies one of Salvini's tweets of 3 May is exemplary of this strategy (see Figure 7.2). The top half – the location of what is ideal, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) – shows Salvini looking at his public at an orderly gathering of the Lega, whereas the bottom half – the location of what is real – shows a woman throwing stones at the police. The headings implicitly compare “decent Italy with the Lega” (“l’Italia per bene con la Lega”) and “the same old ‘democrats’ throwing stones at the police” (“i soliti ‘democratici’ con le sassate alla polizia!”), in which the term “democrat” implicitly recalls the Democratic Party and its support for the activists of Italian social centres. It is worth noting that, even when Salvini portrays his adversaries as aggressive, in the tweets under consideration he never



Figure 7.2. Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvini]. (2019, May 3). An example of polarization by image juxtaposition.

resorts to victimization and rarely to fear, whose percentage, as we have seen above, is very low.

Overall, the analysis of the supporters' comments on Salvini's tweets offers similar results, but with significant divergences (see Table 7.2). Emotions are mainly positive, though the number of instances of negative feelings and emotions is higher (70% and 30%, respectively), with some expressions of sadness (1%), which were absent in Salvini's postings. Interestingly, within positive emotions trust predominates, with 44% of the total, whereas among negative instances anger occupies 28% of the total. Appraisal analysis shows a strikingly similar predominance of positive attitude (76%), though the details of single categories also reveal interesting differences. The type of attitude that is expressed most frequently is affect (39%), followed by appreciation (37%) and, finally, judgement (24%). Within these macro-categories, positive appreciation and positive affect are predominant (33% and 32%, respectively), followed by negative judgement (13%), which exceeds positive judgement (55% against 45% of the category).

The emotions are mainly positive, though the number of instances of negative feelings is higher (71% and 28%, respectively), with some expressions of sadness (1%), which were absent in Salvini's postings. Interestingly, within positive emotions trust predominates with 44% of the total, whereas among negative instances anger occupies 27% of the total. Appraisal analysis shows a strikingly similar predominance of positive attitude (76%), though the details of single categories also reveal interesting differences. The type of attitude that is expressed most frequently is affect (39%), followed by appreciation (37%) and, finally, judgement (24%). Within these macro-categories, positive appreciation and positive affect are predominant (33% and 32%, respectively), followed by negative judgement (13%), which exceeds positive judgement (55% against 45% of the category).

As far as graduation is concerned, Salvini's supporters prefer non-intensified resources. This is the case of positive judgement (57% of the category) and, more evidently, negative attitude, with judgement at 85%, appreciation at 74% and affect at 65%. Very similar to Salvini's postings, affect is almost equally distributed between non-graduated and graduated resources (respectively 2,789, corresponding to 48%, and 3,293, equivalent to 52% of the category). The only resource that is significantly graduated is positive appreciation (85%), which corresponds to the widespread use of symbols of the party and official hashtags to show affiliation and appreciation.

Table 7.2. The main results of sentiment and appraisal analysis of Salvini's supporters' tweets.

Emotion	Occurrences	% of total	Appraisal	Occurrences	% of total	no graduation (% of category)	graduation (% of category)
anticipation	92	4%	judgement-	801	13%	85%	15%
happiness	182	8%	judgement+	653	11%	57%	43%
trust	1049	44%	affect-	353	6%	65%	35%
love	341	14%	affect+	2037	33%	48%	52%
fear	22	1%	appreciation-	305	5%	74%	26%
anger	645	28%	appreciation+	1933	32%	15%	85%
sadness	26	1%					

Although judgement is not predominant in these comments, among the variety of rhetorical devices used by Salvini's supporters it is worth mentioning the array of nicknames referred to political opponents, whose overtones range from irony to insult. While overall their presence is not frequent, some of them are shared across the community, and span "green-eyed lefties" ("rosiconi sinistroidi", referring to those who are excluded from power¹³) to "PDiots" ("PDioti", referring to the Democratic Party, or PD). Others are mildly offensive puns that imply lack of reasoning and ignorance ("asinistra", which links the left or "sinistra" to donkeys or "asini"), political defeat ("sinistrati", which links the left to the idea of accident damage or "sinistro"), or more aggressive invitations to Salvini to "go and kick their ass" ("vai, fagli il quorum", which uses the assonance between "culo" – ass – and "quorum"), or refer – also visually – to the need for political opponents to take medicines to treat stomach ache (Maalox) or haemorrhoids after losing the elections. In a few cases, aggressive comments are addressed to a specific political figure but, overall, they tend to target a whole party, movement or ideology. Finally, some offensive emojis are repeatedly used by a couple of declaredly anti-communist profiles.

The comparison of these results with the outcome of the analysis of Salvini's postings shows interesting similarities and differences in the role played by attitude and emotions, and in their significance. Affect and appreciation are mainly positive in both cases, though the role played by positive appreciation in the supporters' comments is significantly more important, due to their need to define in-group identity by celebrating their affiliation to the party. Judgement, on the other hand, seems quite balanced in both cases, though the pre-eminence of the type of instance is reversed: 59% positive occurrences in Salvini's tweets as opposed to 55% negative in his supporters'. The weight of judgement, however, varies significantly, being 47% of total occurrences in Salvini's postings versus 24% of his supporters', corresponding to the oppositional style of populist communication, which is not necessarily reproduced by the supporters, or at least not with the same frequency. The use of graduation is quite balanced in both cases as well, although once again the percentages of predominant resources is reversed, with

¹³ The term "rosiconi", which belongs to standard Italian, was rarely used before Matteo Renzi, ex-prime minister and ex-secretary of the Democratic Party, reintroduced it into common language (https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/domande_e_risposte/lessico/lessico_506.html, last accessed September 2023). It was then appropriated by his political adversaries of the Lega to define leftists.

Salvini using graduation in 45% of cases as opposed to his supporters, who intensify 54% of resources.

Like appraisal analysis, the overall outcome of emotion analysis shows a similar emotional response, with the predominance of positive emotions (79% for Salvini and 71% for his supporters). The percentage of single emotions and feelings, however, highlights a substantial cleavage. While Salvini expresses a variety of feelings and emotions with very little prevalence of one on the others, his supporters seem much more emotionally polarized. For example, in the leader's tweets, anticipation, happiness and trust represent approximately 25% of total occurrences each, followed by anger at 14%, whereas in his supporters' comments trust alone represents 44%, followed by anger at 27%. The difference in the importance of trust is clearly related to the position of the speakers: while Salvini occasionally expresses his confidence in the electorate, the comments by his supporters, on the other hand, are frequently meant to celebrate him and the party, and, consequently, trust is the emotion they express most frequently.

6. Concluding remarks

The analysis shows that, following the natural trend of electoral debate, during the campaigning of 2019 the online exchange between Salvini and his supporters was largely polarized. While Salvini based his postings on judgement, his supporters focused on appreciation to show their positive attitude towards the party. Both the leader and his supporters, however, mostly expressed positive attitude, feelings and emotions, albeit with different nuances due to their respective communicative aims, namely, convincing the public or celebrating the leader. The limited presence of negativity in the tweets by the leader of the Lega is in line with the study conducted by Amnesty International Italy mentioned in the introduction. Despite the difference in methods and sampling, the outcome of analysis is very similar: the Barometer reported a negativity score of 22.6% of posts/tweets, which is very close to the percentage of 24% that is obtained by summing up instances of negative appraisal and negative emotions. Both analyses reported no hate speech.

This outcome should not be generalized, as the context of elections is peculiar as far as polarization is concerned: on the one hand, campaigning may exacerbate oppositional talk; on the other politicians may decide to tone it down to avoid criticisms:

[e]specially at critical times, such as during elections, the concept of hate speech may be prone to manipulation: accusations of fomenting hate speech may be traded among political opponents or used by those in power to curb dissent and criticism (Gagliardone, I. et al. 2015: 10).

This may have been the reason behind Salvini's conciliatory tone when he wished all voters well regardless of political choices by quoting "freedom is participation",¹⁴ a line from a well-known song by Giorgio Gaber, a famous Italian singer, playwright and freethinker. Salvini, in other words, may have deliberately opted for a rhetoric that could elicit strong reactions from his audience – sometimes punctuated by insults or derogatory nicknames as described above – while, at the same time, hiding inflammatory tones behind irony and playfulness in order to remain within the limits of social media gatekeeping.

Investigating the reasons behind Salvini's choices exceeds the scope of this study, from which two considerations clearly emerge. First, focusing on online polarization on the basis of ideology may lead to misleading conclusions, all the more so in the case of populist movements, which frequently show a shifting ideological affiliation and very specific dynamics in the interactions between the leader and his/her supporters. Second, visual elements are essential meaning-making resources that convey or complement information, emotional value and attitude; as such, they are pivotal in online communication, especially for populist discourse. Multimodal methodologies, therefore, should become ordinary practice to improve our understanding of the crucial role online propaganda plays in our times.

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¹⁴ "And anyway, political choices aside, vote well, long live democracy! Freedom is participation!" ("E comunque al di là delle scelte politiche, buon voto a tutti, viva la democrazia! Libertà è partecipazione!").

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