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MEDIating Italy: the construction of Silvio Berlusconi's identity

M. Cristina Caimotto

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the construction of identity of the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi through a Critical Discourse Studies approach (Van Dijk 2009). Interviews with Berlusconi and articles published on the La Repubblica website, reporting foreign media views, constitute the main object of enquiry of this paper in the attempt to establish what role these various actors played in constructing Berlusconi's identity.

As others have pointed out (Stille 2006, Ginsborg 2003), Berlusconi's relationship with money, media and political power, and the effect on reporting crystallise problems and issues that exist in all modern democracies. Though, in Italy's case, there are other historical factors involved (Loporcaro, 2006) – apart from Berlusconi's personal monopoly, the Italian case study points to the potential danger for democracy in any country. This work also takes into account the difficulties researchers face when dealing with contemporary political issues in terms of objectivity and proposes tentative solutions based on Corpus-Aided Discourse Studies and News Translation Studies methodologies.

1. Introduction

At the time of writing, media mogul Silvio Berlusconi is still the Italian Head of Government. Four times Prime Minister of Italy, he is one of the most controversial figures in Italian politics and his actions are

discussed worldwide. His most recent political victory to date belongs to April 2008, when he won the early elections, held after only two years under the previous left-wing government. According to Stille (2006), he crystallises problems and issues that exist in all modern democracies: the close relationship between money, media and political power.

The first two years of his current mandate proved particularly problematic: Italy suffered the financial crisis; a ravaging earthquake hit L'Aquila in April 2009, and Fini – once one of Berlusconi's closest allies – publicly criticized Berlusconi and left the coalition in July 2010 to create a new parliamentary group named *Futuro e Libertà*, Future and Freedom. In the meantime, Berlusconi's wife divorced him and he was involved in a series of sex-related scandals.

Berlusconi's figure has been extensively analyzed elsewhere (Edwards 2005; Pasquino 2007; Campus 2006; Amadori 2002; Ginsborg 2003; Musso 2008 to name but a few). Drawing on their work and on Loporcaro's analysis of the Italian mass media, the present paper intends to contribute to the debate by analysing new texts and comparing them with the image created by *La Repubblica* – the newspaper which Berlusconi sued because they continued to ask him ten questions over a period of months, which he never answered.

2. Objectivity and Corpora

Researchers dealing with political discourse studies, who follow a qualitative approach, face difficulties when carrying out their research, because they risk falling into the trap of excessive subjectivity. This work proposes research methods that may help researchers achieving greater objectivity, through the use of Corpus-Aided Discourse-Studies or CADS (Baumgarten 2009). Many scholars (Garzone & Santulli 2004; Partington 2004; Bayley 2007; Duguid 2007; Fairclough 2007 to name a few) believe that corpora, with its empirically verifiable data, can not only be an extremely useful tool to verify the hypotheses developed in qualitative analysis, but can also provide inspiration. As Partington (2004: 12) notes, reading and concordancing not only provide different kinds of insight but also reinforce and complement each other. This qualitative-quantitative method has been employed elsewhere, for example, to analyse Veltroni, Obama and Zapatero (Bani and Caimotto 2010).

An extensive corpus-based study of Berlusconi's speeches already exists: Bolasco et al. (2006, 11) analysed a corpus of 325.000 words collected between 26 January 1994 and 28 April 2005 (when a cabinet reshuffle took place and his third government started). The two corpora created for the present paper comprise respectively 53.908 (corpus B) and 54.060 (corpus R) words and both cover the time span between 13 April 2008 – first polling day – and 30 September 2010 – when Berlusconi asked for a vote of confidence as a consequence of his party's internal troubles mentioned above.

Corpus B includes the 32 interviews with Berlusconi archived on the official Government website, www.governo.it.² This corpus comprises a selection of articles from various news providers, which we can presume met with Berlusconi's approval. Corpus R, on the other hand, consists of a collection of articles, downloaded from *La Repubblica* website. These report what foreign newspapers published regarding specific events and scandals involving Berlusconi. According to Audipress, *La Repubblica* is the most widely-read newspaper website in Italy. This research concentrates on the electronic version of the newspaper, both because it allows for the creation of the corpus and also because that is the information people are most likely to read if they search for old articles. The articles were selected by searching the *La Repubblica* archive using the words 'Berlusconi' and the English word 'Times'³ as this provided articles that translated and commented on news from the Anglo-American media; 72 articles were then manually selected.

By analysing the two corpora, it is possible to compare the image Berlusconi wants to give of himself and the image *La Repubblica* created through the reporting of news from the foreign press.

3. News translated

As already argued elsewhere (Caimotto, forthcoming) there is reason to believe that the frequent habit of Italian newspapers of reporting what

² Two interviews included in the archive were excluded from the corpus: one from *Le Figaro* because it was in French and one from Video TV, because it consisted of a video accompanied by a very short summary.

³ Seven newspapers quoted in Corpus R comprise the English word 'Times' in their name: *Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, *Irish Times*, *New York Times*, *Guatemala Times*, *Sunday Star-Times*.

foreign journalists write abroad about Italian issues may well be a strategy implemented by Italian reporters to protect themselves in case of legal prosecutions. This is believed to be particularly relevant in the case of *La Repubblica*, which in 2009 was sued for libel by Berlusconi after conducting the ten question campaign mentioned above.

Interestingly, the charge included reference to this upside down gatekeeping practice (Vuorinen 1995): “...resorting to the expedient of reporting the contents of the French weekly [*Le Nouvel Observateur*], they have published once again untruthful news, reporting circumstances which do not correspond in any way whatsoever to the present situation existing in fact or under law. This action is part of a well-known contention, which has been continuing over the last few months”. (Nigro 2009, personal translation).⁴

Naturally, it would be interesting to understand how the “expedient” was used: was *La Repubblica* reporting relevant critical information - scarcely available in Italy - that would help Italian readers understand the image of Italy constructed in other countries better? The extensive study carried out by Loporcaro (2006: 175-181) demonstrates that the foreign media dedicate a significant amount of space to Italian events focussing on issues related to financial and legal problems, and, importantly, reporting facts that can hardly be found anywhere by the Italian mainstream news providers.

The tentative hypothesis to be verified through the two corpora is that, most of the time, *La Repubblica* did not actually exploit the work of a more reliable Anglo-American journalistic practice but rather employed the translation practice to perpetuate what Loporcaro (2006, 15-16) describes as ‘news as narration’. In his analysis, Loporcaro divides news into two kinds: one is that of news as information – fundamental for democracy to work – the other is that of news as narration, an ongoing story which replaces the role once played by myths. He argues that in Italy, news as narration is the only rule and that the blending of information and entertainment – which affects all Western democracies – has reached unprecedented levels in Italy. One might then expect that the articles coming from abroad would be used to redress this imbalance

⁴ “...con l'espiediente di riportare il contenuto del settimanale francese ha pubblicato ancora una volta - nel quadro della ben nota polemica di questi ultimi mesi - notizie non veritiere, riportando circostanze che in alcun modo corrispondono alla situazione di fatto e di diritto realmente esistente.”

and offer, through translation, a glimpse of the information Italian readers are missing (Bani, 2006).

What seems to happen is actually the opposite: translation is employed as one more tool for gossip and storytelling. A specific case-study has been analysed elsewhere (Caimotto, 2010), which focussed on an article from the *Financial Times* regarding Prodi's victory in 2006. The *FT* simply observed that the victory was too narrow to guarantee the survival of the government for five years and the implementation of the necessary reforms, while Italian newspapers turned the story into the new position held by the British press, now as unhappy about the left-wing victory as it had been about the right-wing victory five years earlier.

Before moving to the analysis of the two corpora to verify the tentative hypothesis introduced above, the next two sections focus respectively on Berlusconi's first speech and on the influence that British and American politics have had over Italian politics.

4. The Past

Berlusconi's political success can be ascribed, among other aspects, to his extensive work on language and communication. When announcing his candidacy for the first time on 26 January 1994, Berlusconi broadcast a message that was transmitted by every newscast that night. *Forza Italia*, his party, was presented only two months before the elections and won in spite of the short time available. The following passage of that speech is analysed here as the construction is considered particularly significant. Berlusconi is here referring to "orphans and those who look back nostalgically on communism". "This is why we are forced to oppose them [the left-wing]. Because we believe in individuals, family, enterprise, competition, development, efficiency, free market and solidarity, the daughter of justice and freedom" (personal translation).⁵

If we observe the lexico-grammatical structure of this passage, we can notice that the use of the pronoun *noi* (we) is not necessary in Italian and its marked use here can be ascribed to an attempt to reinforce the polarization between Us (good) versus Them (evil/guilty) (Van Dijk 2006: 370). Even more significant is the *Forza Italia* manifesto list of ten

⁵ "Per questo siamo costretti a contrapporci a loro. Perché noi crediamo nell'individuo, nella famiglia, nell'impresa, nella competizione, nello sviluppo, nell'efficienza, nel mercato libero e nella solidarietà, figlia della giustizia e della libertà."

values, which have been classified here, either according to their intrinsic conservative framing or, to their more universal reference to ‘natural principles’.

individual	}	These four values are typical of right-wing positions, favouring individuals and their skills in achieving their business goals. As far as “family” is concerned, in an Italian discourse it is usually connoted with references to the Catholic Church and its war against other forms of relationship, such as living together or same sex couples.
family		
enterprise		
competition		
development	}	These are the first two words that are, in general, universally accepted.
efficiency		
free market		This is the last ‘right-wing term’ in the list, a very strongly felt conservative principle.
solidarity	}	The list is closed by three universal principles.
justice		
freedom		

Because of the way this series of *Forza Italia*’s values is constructed, it implies that ‘the left’ is against all these values. The list starts with three terms that form a scale, from a single person to a group of people, which gives the whole utterance a climatic effect, culminating in the most important word: ‘freedom’. It is important to notice the connection between ‘free’ market and ‘freedom’. As reported in Bolasco *et al* (2006: 47), Berlusconi usually likens the ethics of liberty to ‘liberalism’ and plays on the confusion of the adjectives ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalist’ (*liberale* and *liberista*).⁶

⁶ The meanings intended here are: *liberal*: respecting and allowing many different types of beliefs or behaviour; *liberalist*: in favour of laissez-faire and the free market.

5. Anglo-American influence over Italian politics

At the beginning of Berlusconi's political career, the United Kingdom influenced Italian politics in as much as Berlusconi often presented himself as the Italian counterpart of Margaret Thatcher. Then, starting from the 2001 election, Berlusconi began to give the United States more prominence. A very relevant aspect is the influence Frank Luntz had on Berlusconi's language and communication. Probably the best known conservative political consultant and pollster in America, Luntz was hired by Berlusconi in 2001 (Luntz, 2007: 138) and helped him with his election campaign. The 'contract' Berlusconi signed during a television programme, between him and the Italian people, was suggested by Luntz and inspired by the 'Contract with America' released by the Republican Party in 1994.

Starting from 2006, a new election system was put in place which effectively obliged parties to form separate left and right wing coalitions, finally cancelling the five or so party centrist governing coalitions that had driven Italy for many years. Interestingly, this new system was presented to Italians as based on British and American examples. This, together with the disappearance of radical left parties in 2008, resulted in a political spectrum which is now much closer to those of the UK and the US. American politics entered Italy in 2006 in one more way: the televised debate between the two main candidates. Such debates were presented as *all'americana*, the American way, because the speakers had to respect specific times, and each of them was guaranteed the same number of minutes to answer the same question. The debate was certainly very different from the kind of messy discussion that Italians were used to, in which speakers get attention according to the loudness of voice.

All these aspects suggest that British and American politics play an important role for a variety of reasons – for both the right and by the left-wing parties. This can be considered one of the reasons that drive journalists to report information about British and American politics and also why they dedicate much of their attention to information and comments regarding Italy published abroad. We will now focus on news articles from the UK and the USA published on *La Repubblica* website.

6. Berlusconi vs. *La Repubblica*

Berlusconi has often demonstrated his ability to detect what his public wants to hear and is able to change his declarations accordingly. There is, however, one key idea in his communication which never seems to falter or change, and that is his criticism towards ‘the lefties’, ‘the radical left’ or ‘the communists’. As shown above, this leitmotiv has been present ever since his very first political speech. He constantly accuses ‘the extreme left’ of impeding his work through a “campaign of hate” against him and through a “conspiracy of the magistrates”, and the judiciary in general.

That is why analysis of corpus B began with the image of ‘the left’ and ‘the communists’ that can be found in interviews. 128 occurrences for *sinistra*/left, and 10 for *centrosinistra*/centre-left were found. It is interesting to observe the kind of verbs associated: has always forgotten / has always (unrealistically) demanded / obstinately insists / has accused / has done everything to thwart us / has completely distorted the truth / blackmails / criticizes / mouths platitudes / blocks/ is getting it all wrong.⁷

If we compare these with the image of the left that results from searching for occurrences of *sinistra* in corpus R (54 occurrences), the image is not very different. References to *sinistra* either refer to the political slant of the foreign newspapers quoted – hence they are not about Italian left-wing parties – or report words from Berlusconi and his entourage, reinforcing, by doing so, the negative frame that Berlusconi’s discourse constructs: as Lakoff (2002) explains, every time a frame is evoked it is also reinforced.

According to Bolasco et al. (2006: 25), Berlusconi tends to avoid some specific words (in comparison to the Italiano-Standard and Repubblica-90 frequency lists included in Taltac software). Among these, four were chosen: *donna*, *chiesa*, *banche*, *mafia* (woman, church, banks, mafia). Here are the frequency results:

Corpus B	Corpus R
donne/a 12	donne/a 96
	donnaiolo/i [womanizer] 2

⁷ ha sempre dimenticato / ha sempre preteso / si ostina / ha accusato / ha fatto di tutto per ostacolarci / ha stravolto la verità / raccatta / critica / si riempie la bocca / osteggia / sta sbagliando tutto.

chiesa/e	10	chiesa	39
banca/che	26	banca/che	6
bancario/i	5	banchiere	3
banco	2	bancaria	1
		banco	1
mafia	5	mafia/e	8
mafioso	1	mafiosa/e	5
		mafioso/i	3

Table 1 frequency of woman, church, banks, mafia

These numbers suggest that *La Repubblica* used the foreign articles mainly to report gossip related to the sex scandals. The vast majority of the occurrences of *donna/e* in corpus R belong to articles that deal with the sex-related scandals, coupled with a few occurrences referring to women objecting to Berlusconi's attitude towards the opposite sex. The occurrences found in corpus B refer to pension age (6), abortion (2), euthanasia (1), Angela Merkel (1) and only two refer to women as such (e.g. "I adore women. And he who loves respects"). (personal translation)

As far as church is concerned, in 9 occurrences Berlusconi describes the very good relationship between his party and the Church, while in one he states "The TV I have created has always been a positive TV. This positivity has won over everybody and everything, and even those who wished and still wish to see me begging for money on the church steps."⁸ (personal translation)

Most of the time, corpus R reports information about the clash between Berlusconi and the Church as a consequence of the sex-related scandals. Only 3 occurrences are about other topics. A few occurrences deal specifically with Dino Boffo, the director of *Avvenire*, a newspaper with a catholic slant, who was forced to resign because of a false scandal created by a Berlusconi family owned newspaper, *Il Giornale*.

Of the 5 occurrences of *mafia* in corpus B, 3 describe the positive results obtained by Berlusconi's government against criminal organizations; the remaining two, interestingly, share a very similar statement from Berlusconi published in two different newspapers on the same day: "Those leftists have mounted a non-case. They consider me a

⁸ "La Tv che ho creato io è sempre stata una Tv positiva. E la positività ha vinto su tutto e su tutti, anche su quelli che si auguravano e augurano ancora di vedermi sui gradini di una chiesa a chiedere l'elemosina."

bandit, one of the mafia. No. I won't deal with them anymore. Full stop". (*Liberò*) (personal translation).⁹ "They spread false information about school and university. They invent a non-case against Italy's interest such as the one about sun-tanned people [Berlusconi's description of Obama]. I am treated like a bandit, like one of the mafia". Conclusion: "I won't deal with them. Full stop." (personal translation).¹⁰

Finally, references to 'banks' in corpus R are far less numerous than those in corpus B and none of them deals with scandals involving Berlusconi. On the contrary, in Corpus B all the occurrences of *banca/banche* but one are related to the financial crisis and describe Berlusconi's or the government's choices as the best possible solution. The exception refers to the case involving David Mills, a British lawyer who was accused of having been bribed by Berlusconi to protect him from legal accusations related to his financial TV-related activities abroad.

That event is another connection linking British and Italian politics, as at the time of the scandal, the lawyer was married to Tessa Jowell – a British Labour Party politician who was officially questioned regarding a potential clash of interest between her personal life and her ministerial duties. When searching for 'Mills' in corpus B, occurrences were only found in interviews by foreign journalists from *El Mundo* and CNN. In both interviews, Berlusconi answered the question by stating that he is innocent and that the whole issue was invented by 'red' magistrates.

Occurrences of 'Mills' in corpus R are, as expected, more numerous, but when reading the various articles, the overall effect is confusing. The *La Repubblica* articles state that some foreign articles write about Mills, but the *La Repubblica* journalists do not include detailed information as they do when they deal with sex-related scandals. One could argue that this may happen because the case is already explained in Italian articles. But even when reading the Italian articles about Mills it is possible to detect the characteristics that Loporcaro (2006: 68-71) identifies as typical of news as narration: facts are not reported as evidence that will help readers to form their own critical opinion, events are rather

⁹ "Quelli della sinistra hanno montato un non-caso. Mi considerano un bandito, uno della mafia. No. Io non ci tratto più. Punto e basta."

¹⁰ "«[...] Diffondono notizie false sulla scuola e sull'università. Si inventano contro l'interesse dell'Italia un noncaso come quello degli abbronzati. Io vengo trattato come un bandito, come uno della mafia». Conclusione: «Non ci tratto, punto e basta»."

described through the narration of the various positions, and the whole issue becomes a matter of personal opinion. The final part of this paper focuses on the interview Berlusconi gave to CNN, which fully deserves its own section.

7. Berlusconi revealed on CNN

The reading of the Berlusconi corpus brought to light a further interesting aspect related to the selective construction of identity: on 23 May 2009 Paula Newton interviewed Berlusconi for CNN. The Italian Government website includes an Italian article which reports the questions and answers. The whole video of the interview, however, is not available online. On 25 May, CNN released a few short videos and in October 2009 the feature programme *Silvio Berlusconi Revealed* was broadcast and is now available on the CNN website.

It should be pointed out here that in Italy *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* published articles about the interview on 25 May 2009 and both included videos in their online TV pages. *Il Corriere* provided a version with a short introduction in Italian and with Italian subtitles, while *La Repubblica* left the original CNN soundtrack, in which both speakers are dubbed in English (the interview had taken place in Italian). Two videos from Sky news are available online as well and provide summaries dubbed back into Italian. The two articles and the Sky news videos claim to report verbatim what CNN had broadcast that morning, but in fact they are clearly based on the Italian version published on the governo.it website.

This can be demonstrated by the fact that the articles and the two videos on Sky news report passages which were not present in the CNN video. In those passages, Berlusconi talks about David Mills, the economic crisis, and the ‘red’ magistrates. He also defends himself from accusations of having had a relationship with a 17 year old girl, Noemi Letizia. This passage had been excluded by CNN in the first short video and was only partially broadcast in the feature programme. The first short video and the related article on CNN website foreground the passage in which Berlusconi stated that he had never made any gaffe, not even one. This is nowhere to be found in *La Repubblica* or *Il Corriere* articles or even in the Sky news videos. Not a single occurrence of the word ‘gaffe’ is present in Corpus B.

The *Revealed* video on CNN website includes other passages that were not transcribed in Italian, such as a joke about the Italian press always criticizing Berlusconi. Interestingly, in the *Revealed* video some speakers are dubbed while others speak English: Berlusconi's dubbed voice has a marked Italian accent while another participant Giulio Anselmi – presented as one of Berlusconi's prominent detractors – is dubbed by a much more native sounding voice.

When comparing the Italian report with the video, dubious editing can be detected. When Newton asks Berlusconi if he thinks it is “humane” to send immigrants back to their country, the *governo.it* site reports her question as “Ma non è bello respingerli...” [But it's not nice to send them back (personal translation)]. Again, this confirms that the *La Repubblica* article was based on the version published on the government website because in their article they write, using the same *non è bello*, “and to those who point out that it is not nice to send illegal immigrants back, Berlusconi replies:...” (personal translation)].

Paula Newton reports having interviewed Berlusconi for more than an hour. The text reported online is certainly shorter than that and the whole *Revealed* programme is also shorter. As it is not possible to access the whole CNN interview, we do not know how much of what is reported on *governo.it* was actually included in the full interview, nor how many questions and answers were edited. What we do know is the way in which the Italian mass media reported the CNN interview; that is foregrounding what had been foregrounded by Berlusconi's staff on *governo.it* rather than reporting CNN's analysis directly from the source, as the newspapers claimed to have done.

8. Conclusion

Even if the figure of Berlusconi, his identity and the crucial role that communication has played and continues to play in his political career have been extensively analysed by scholars and journalists in Italy and abroad, little attention has been dedicated to the phenomenon of the Italian newspapers' regular reporting of what the foreign media publish about Italy. This phenomenon can be ascribed to two main causes: first, the fact that the Italian public tends to look up to Anglo-American politics and journalism (for different reasons, depending on their political convictions); and second, the fact that Berlusconi's newspaper

critics of hope to be less vulnerable in case of legal trials, given the frequency with which he sues news providers, journalists and anybody who criticises him.

According to Bani (2006, 40) this habit of translating is almost an obsession and “translation becomes a necessary phenomenon: our country is now going through a (temporary?) moment of weakness and translated texts represent a way of thinking about itself and promoting internal debate.”

After briefly introducing the role played by language and the influence of Anglo-American politics in the Italian political system, this paper has analysed the news items published during what is Berlusconi’s current mandate at the time of writing. The two corpora analysed included interviews with Berlusconi selected by his staff and published on the government’s website, and articles selected to show the kind of information the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* has imported from the UK and the USA.

Bani’s hypothesis does not seem to apply to the articles analysed. The compared reading of the two corpora – of which only a few examples are reported in this paper – suggests that the phenomenon of news as narration theorised by Loporcaro is still ongoing. Events are reported by focussing on people and not on their institutional role, reducing the problems to a personal series of episodes which may feed the demands of entertainment very well, but end up weakening the margins a country needs in order to be called democracy.

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