The Myth of the Nation in Contemporary Italy: A Multimodal Analysis of Matteo Renzi's Speeches in English

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Abstract

The article investigates how the Italian ex-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi produced a stereotypical view of Italy and the Italian national character to create shared background knowledge and construct his audience as ideological subjects. Although his political campaigning focused on radical innovation, his rhetorical strategies, both verbal and nonverbal, reinforced traditional values and the myth of the nation by turning it into common sense. These strategies were particularly noticeable in the speeches that he delivered in English to a lay audience, in which he frequently improvised and professional linguistic mediation was generally limited.

The article presents the results of a pilot study that was conducted on two sample speeches that Renzi delivered in English at Georgetown University and Harvard. Based on the assumption that language expresses the system of values and beliefs of the speaker, the study applied Jeremy Munday's model for evaluation in translation in order to foreground Renzi's stance on the grounds of his discursive choices. Drawing upon Critical Discourse Analysis, Munday's model was integrated with the analysis of implicit cognitive resources and culture-specific nonverbal language (hand gestures) in order to bring to the fore implied subtexts and, accordingly, the speaker's axiological and ideological positioning. The article provides a brief overview of the relationship between discourse, power relations and identity, introduces the methodology adopted in research, provides an example of analysis and discusses the outcomes of research.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) - Italianness - Matteo Renzi - multimodal analysis - stereotyping

Introduction

When Matteo Renzi was appointed in February 2014, he was the youngest Prime Minister in the history of the Italian Republic. In the first phases of his campaigning and institutional activity, his enthusiasm for innovation frequently took some radical overtones – so much so that he used to define himself as the *demolition man* [2011: 45; 182-202; 2012:

98; 2013: 6-7, 19; 2017: 56-59, 111][1]. Although in his book of 2013, evocatively entitled *Oltre la rottamazione* (*Beyond Demolition*, my translation), he declared that this iconoclastic phase should leave room to a less radical evolution [2013: 3-33], the notions of change, dynamism, innovation and reforms would remain the leitmotifs of his political discourse in the years to come.

Renzi's iconoclastic communication, however, hid recurring references to a stereotyped view of the national character and to conservative values. The clash between Renzi's statement of intention and his communication strategies was even more dramatic in the speeches he gave in a second language – which, to my best knowledge, was mainly English – to a lay audience. Whether Renzi frequently diverted from the written text that had presumably been prepared by his staff and improvised, or chose to give his speech without any translation support, his communication relied on verbal and nonverbal, implicit and explicit, strategies that promoted a view of a country deeply rooted in traditional, if not stereotypical, values.

The study discussed in this article originated precisely from acknowledging this contrast in Renzi's communication. In particular, it analysed the resources that contributed to reinforce this traditional view of the country, foregrounded the type of national character Renzi outlined in his speeches, analysed its function in discourse to shed light on his implicit political message, and formulated hypotheses about the causes and purpose of these resources.

The rationale for analysing stereotyping in Renzi's speeches in English was manifold. On a theoretical level, I took on the assumption that meanings have a social effect and text analysis may shed light on the process of meaning-making (Fairclough [2003b: 11]). Moreover, as power is enacted in discourse, analysts should focus on systematic contradictions and inconsistencies in institutional discourse in order to foreground the real political persona behind the mask and expose possible manipulation and deception (Fairclough [2001: 239]; Wodak [2001: 4-5; 2013: xx-xxiv]; Wodak and Meyer [2001/2009: 5]). Finally, the study

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[1] The Italian term *rottamatore*, which literally means 'car breaker', has been translated both as 'scrapper' and 'demolition man' in the international media (see, for instance, the Financial Times: https://www.ft.com/content/5fdb9710-940d-11e3-a0e1-00144feab7de). I opt for 'demolition man' instead of 'scrapper' because the latter may also recall the notion of fight that is absent in the Italian term.

filled a gap in existing research in intercultural communication in an institutional context, since, to my best knowledge, most research focuses on cultural mediation in relation to migration in a variety of forms, but little or no attention has been devoted so far to the way a leader's identity is negotiated in (self)translation.

On an analytical level, investigating whether Renzi the 'demolition man' contributed to reinforce stereotypes and clichés was of paramount importance to define what type of 'articulation of political themes' was being constructed in discourse (Fairclough [2000: 89]). This is because, far from being limited to political discourse, such articulation also involved the dynamics of group formation and, consequently, national identity.

Due to the heterogeneous nature of the notion stereotyping, I use 'stereotype' as an umbrella term that includes a variety of allusions to concepts and enactments of behaviours that are traditionally ascribed to the Italian national character. To identify the most common traits of Italianness, I focused on some pivotal concepts that emerged from studies of Italian identity: the loyalty to one's own community (municipalism and familism) and its daily, contemporary expression, namely the passion for football; the strong – at times even tyrannical – influence of the Catholic Church; the ability to develop duplicity and transformism to construct alliances as a defence against oppressive regimes; an almost obsessive pride for a past that is seen as glorious as opposed to a decaying present – whose backwardness seems to affect the South even more – and the consequent need for reformation; the rich artistic heritage that makes Italy one of the favourite tourist destinations worldwide; the extensive use of semiotic hand gestures, which form a culture-specific language of their own (Ginsborg [2001]; Patriarca [2010]).

Discourse, power relations and identity

The crucial assumption on which theories on the relationship between power and discourse are grounded is that all utterances are essentially dialogic. Language does not exist as a neutral medium, but becomes 'one's own' only when it is 'appropriated' by the listener (Bakhtin [1981: 280, 282, 293-294]). If communication does not exist in a vacuum, discourse *per se* is a social practice (Fairclough [1989/2015: 55-59]; van

Dijk [1997]). On the one hand, it is a 'mode of action' that shapes individual identities and social relationships (Fairclough [1992: 63-66]). On the other, it depends on context, namely the mental model that determines how the participants in interaction define the communicative event (van Dijk [1997: 2; 2008]; Wodak [2013: xxxi-xxxii]; see also Chilton and Schäffner [2002: 26]; Goffman [1974/1986: 21-26, 563]). Context, moreover, is both subjective and socially-constructed, as it represents a personal interpretation of the situation, but is grounded on a variable amount of shared knowledge that is determined by social cognition (van Dijk [1997: 16-17; 2008: 63]).

The implications of this assumption are very significant for research. First, discourse is essentially evaluative: «[n]o utterance can be put together without value judgment. Every utterance is above all an evaluative orientation. Therefore, each element in a living utterance not only has a meaning but also has a value» (Volosinov [1973: 105]). However, as evaluation depends not only on personal values but also on socially-determined beliefs, ideology plays a crucial role in the production of meaning: «[e]very sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation [...] the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs [...]. Everything ideological possesses semiotic value» (*ibidem*, 10). The evaluative nature of communication in relation to ideology makes the methodological choice of the study all the more relevant, since it takes into account cognitive resources and presumptions in order to bring to the fore the evaluative stance and ideological sub-texts.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony is crucial to understand the complex dynamics that connect power, ideology, leadership and discourse. A concept that emerged in Lenin's rhetoric, hegemony encompasses different aspects of life, from leadership to culture. Interestingly, it is not limited to coercion, but also relies on consensus through the institutions (Gramsci [1975: 1519; 2011]; Fairclough [1992: 9, 91-93; 2001/2003a: 232; 1995/2013: 128]; Lo Piparo [2010: 25]). This notion is particularly relevant as it tightens the connection between power and discourse: «[h]egemony is leadership as well as domination across the economic, political, cultural and ideological domains of a society. Hegemony is the power over society as a whole […] [It] is about constructing alliances, and integrating rather than simply dominating subordinate classes» (Fairclough [1995/2013: 61]). Hegemony, in other words, is the expression of a ruling elite that builds consensus and creates subjects by means of ideology.

This definition highlights three nodal points, namely elites, subjects and ideology. If the leader sets group beliefs and defines national identity by producing ideological representations of the world that serve the purpose of creating homologised subjects (Laclau and Mouffe [1985/2001: 85]), the process of creation of the subject is determined by ideology, which legitimises power by providing a «'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals [...] to their real conditions of existence» (Jessop [2018: 37]). Elites, in short, legitimise their hegemonic power through systems of shared beliefs called ideologies (van Dijk [1998/2000: 48-49; 172-178]; Wodak [2001: 3]).

Though there seems to be some disagreement among scholars on how pervasive and naturalised ideologies are, the relationship between ideology (hegemony) and discourse is beyond doubt. First of all, language *per se* can be an instrument of hegemony as was the case, in Italy, of the debate over the choice of a national language and a normative written grammar (Rosiello [2010: 44]). Above all, discourse provides schemata for the interpretation of reality and, accordingly, reproduces ideologies (Hodge and Kress [1979: 5-6]). Since individuals communicate as group members, ideologies pervade information exchange as well as knowledge in general (van Dijk [1998/2000: 51; 1997: 31-32]): all the structures of discourse – from lexico-grammar to syntax, graphics, non-verbal language, interaction and so on – can be instrumental to express implicit or explicit ideological beliefs (Fairclough [1998/2013: 101-127]; Machin and Mayr [2012]; van Dijk [1998/2000: 200-210; 272-273]). An exhaustive discussion on how these structures have been analysed to foreground underlying ideological assumptions would exceed the scope of this article. I shall, therefore, focus on one that is particularly significant for this study, namely Roland Barthes' definition of myth, which is relevant to analyse how the representation of national identity works on an ideological level (Barthes [1972/2009: 131-187]; Hall [1997: 24-26]).

According to Barthes, representation works through two semiotic systems, namely language (or any mode of representation) and myth, or metalanguage. The sign that results from the combination of a signifier and a signified in the linguistic process becomes the signifier, or meaning, of myth, which Barthes calls *form*. As such, it is the product of a specific reading and, therefore, belongs to history. Once this meaning becomes form and receives a new signified, or *concept*, it abandons all

contingency, becomes abstract and gives birth to a new sign, or *signification* (see figure below).
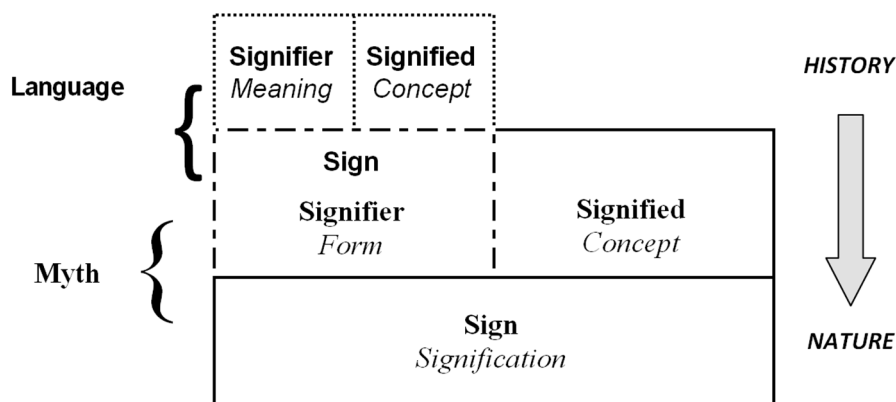

Figure 1. An overview of Barthes' myth (adapted from Barthes [1972/2009: 138])

By transcending history, myth naturalises reality. It «abolishes the complexity of human acts, […] it organizes a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth» (Barthes [1972/2009: 170]). Far from being arbitrary, myth responds to ideological necessity.

The implications on analysis of Barthes' system is manifold. First and foremost, it highlights the normalizing function of myths and their consequent ideological motivation, which this study tackles by bringing to the fore implied meanings. Second, it underlines the significance of the cultural dimension of representations. Third, it provides a relevant conceptual explanation for the notion of Italianness as a national stereotype: Barthes refers to *Sininess* or *Sininity* – the set of preconceived ideas on what being Chinese entails – as an example of neologism, whose purpose is to support myth-related concepts. By analogy, Italianness, like any other neologism referring to the (supposed) nature of national identity, belongs to the category of myths with an ideological purpose.

The brief overview of the theories on how ideology is reproduced/enacted in discourse highlights the circularity of the relationship between social life and the representations – whether imaginary or real – brought forth by discourse. This is because representations are enacted in networks of social practices that generate (or belong to) discoursal or semiotic production (Fairclough [2001: 3; 1989/2015: 17]; Machin and Mayr [2012: 19]; van Dijk [2001: 114]; Wodak [2002: 149]; Wodak *et al.*

[1999/2009: 8]; see also the notion of 'reflexivity' in Chouliaraki and Fairclough [1999/2001: 26]). This circularity is all the more interesting when it reflects in personal identities, which are subject to representations that, in turn, they reproduce and reinforce as self-fulfilling prophecies.

On a theoretical level, Ernesto Laclau probably developed one of the most comprehensive theories on the dynamics of hegemonic power in relation to discourse. Laclau rejected Foucault's distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices, since every object is an object of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe [1985/2001: 107-108]). Discourse, on the other hand, loses its mental character to become material, as it demonstrated by the performative quality of language (*ibidem*). The consequences of the breaking of the boundaries between discursive and non-discursive are significant. Once again ideologies are far from being mere systems of concepts, since they are embodied in institutions and in the variety of forms of symbolic power (*ibidem*, 109). Moreover, social identities are defined as unfixed, since they exist in an unstable 'system of differences', a network of relations that never reach any point of stability (see van Dijk [1998/2000: 111-113; 2005: 31]; Wodak [2012: 216]). The reason behind the unfixity of social categories is their nature of 'floating signifiers' – elements that cannot reach stability due to the proliferation of signifieds (polysemy) – and it is this very emptiness that hegemony tries (temporarily) to fill in (Laclau and Mouffe [1985/2001: 88, 113]; Laclau [2005: 116, 171; 2007: 43]).

From the standpoint of research, this assumption foregrounds three relevant implications. First, the floating nature of categories as empty signifiers at the centre of hegemonic struggles makes the role of language essential in the tension of society towards stability. Second, institutions and institutional figures are pivotal in spreading ideologies and, in a society that can never reach its full expression, their role is never accomplished. Analysing institutional discourse, therefore, is even more crucial in foregrounding ideological meaning-making. Finally, since identity formation is an ongoing process at the centre of (discursive) relational tensions, possible issues and hindrances arising in the process of negotiating identity in intercultural discourse are pivotal, especially on an institutional level.

In other words, the use of specific resources, does not only bear significant consequences in terms of how the message is decoded, but also affect the process of identity negotiation. If identity is discourse-based

and ideologically constructed (Davies and Harré [1990]; Hall [1996a: 4]; Wodak *et al*. [2009: 14-15]), it can also be considered a choice among different narratives (Somers [1994: 614]; Wodak [2012: 216]). This implies that the consequences of Renzi's choices in his capacity as Prime Minister were significant and far from neutral: according to the dynamics of group formation, he acted as a prototype and his identity was particularly influential for ingroup members to identify with (Hogg and Abrams [1988: 114, 183]; Laclau [2005: 100]).

Methodological considerations

Since the study focused on possible contradictions between the ex-Premier's message of innovation and dynamism and the implied meaning of his verbal and nonverbal messages, the analysis of the resources he used to presuppose shared background knowledge was crucial. More specifically, six categories were considered pivotal in research: past-future oppositions, the inclusive pronoun *we*, stereotypes about Italy, Italian words or 'Italianised' English (calques), jokes and nonverbal communication (semiotic hand gestures). These categories were chosen both because of their relevance and the frequency with which they occurred. Past-future oppositions represented the frame of most of Renzi's communication and were associated with clear-cut evaluative judgments on his part. The inclusive pronoun *we* is generally one of the most frequent rhetoric tools to create shared background knowledge. Stereotypes about Italy were the main focus of research. Jokes and playful remarks aimed to win the approval of the audience and recalled the Italian tradition of friendliness and clientelism, thus representing a form of implicit cultural stereotype. Finally, gestures possessed an intrinsic cultural value, since «one of the most basic and obvious functions of nonverbal communication is to communicate one's culture» (Andersen [1999: 75]); all the more so in the case of Italy, where *emblems* (independent semiotic hand gestures; Ekman and Friesen [1969]) represent a real language of its own and are, therefore, culture-specific.

The study adopted Jeremy Munday's model for evaluation in translation (2012) to analyse two official videos of Renzi's speeches in English, which he addressed to a general audience at Georgetown University in 2015 and Harvard in 2016. By combining James R. Martin and Peter White's Appraisal Theory (2005) with Paul Chilton's Deictic Space

Theory (2004), Munday's framework highlights the strategies of evaluation and self-positioning of the speaker. Besides the set of linguistic structures, the speaker is also offered the choice among a variety of personal values and social beliefs embedded in axiology and ideology: it is this stratification of knowledge and implied meanings permeating the message that this study foregrounded.

Following Appraisal Theory, Renzi's rhetorical resources were analysed in terms of *engagement, attitude* and *graduation,* where engagement and attitude represent, respectively, the stance of the speaker towards external voices and the speaker's feelings, whereas graduation expresses the degree of intensity of both engagement and attitude. Attitude can be expressed towards feelings and emotions (*affect*), or ethics, behaviour and capacity (*judgement*), or things and phenomena (*appreciation*). The speaker may dismiss different viewpoints (*monoglossia*) or acknowledge them by showing a variable degree of tolerance (*heteroglossia*). These categories are further divided into a system of specific sub-categories that account for a variety of implicit and explicit rhetorical modulations.

On the other hand, Chilton's Deictic Space Theory was used to foreground Renzi's position with reference to time, space and modality (namely, the axiology and ideology of the speaker). Deictic positioning is graphically represented as the intersection of three vectors along which the main semantic resources employed are placed according to their distance from the centre/speaker (deictic centre). The far end of the modality axis is the location of the 'Other' (see example below).

Since implicit cognitive resources were crucial to understand Renzi's strategies to construct a shared background, the study tested whether Munday's model provided a viable method to account for their presence both in verbal and nonverbal language. In particular, the framework was applied to second-language production instead of inter-language translations. Moreover, explicit and implicit stereotypes, calques, jokes, dexis and semiotic hand gestures were analysed simultaneously with textual resources. Semiotic hand gestures, in particular, were pivotal in the analysis of Renzi's rhetoric both as indexical of the Italian stereotype and as a significant visual component of analysis, thus contributing to yet another innovative feature, multimodality. Finally, the two models were completely integrated since the data from appraisal analysis were used to populate the deictic positioning chart and the results they generated

contributed to interpretation (for a full discussion of the methodology see Reggi [2019]).

Overall, the study drew upon Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA, insofar as it took on the assumption that discourse is a social phenomenon embodying power relations, originates from a discourse-related problem, is multidisciplinary, has linguistic analysis as its main core and reflects on the analysis itself (Chouliaraki and Fairclough [1999/2001: 60-68; 2003b: 209-210]).

Example of analysis

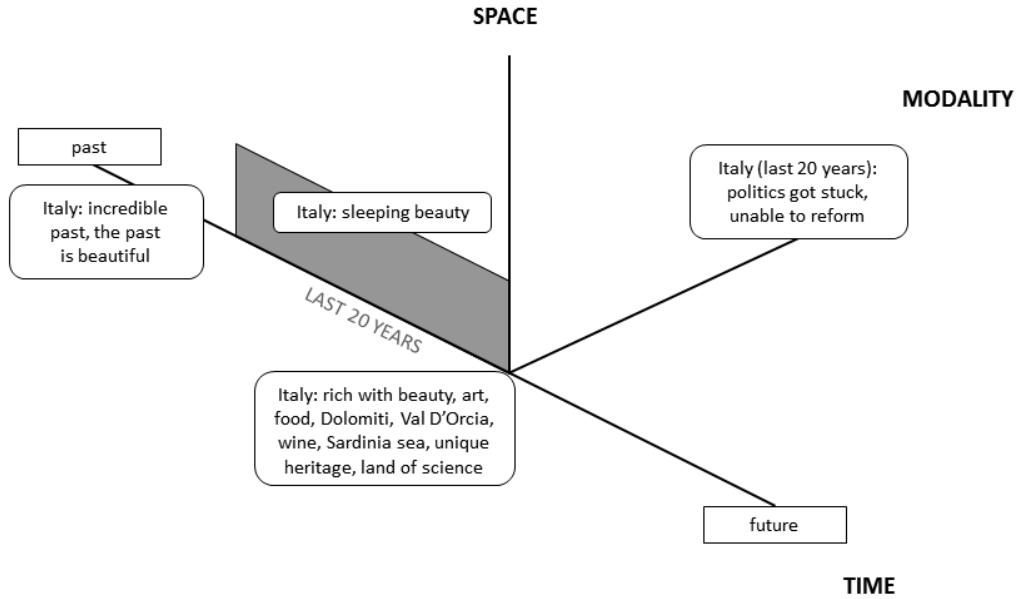Extract from the speech at Georgetown University:

I believe the future, in Italy, is more interesting than the past. Oh, I know eh? I know very well the incredible past of my country. Italy is rich with beauty art, food... [...] So... we... we know the past in Italy is beautiful. Buzzfeed gave 39 reason last week not to visit Italy: Dolomiti, Val D'Orcia, wine, Sardinia sea, and we can continue. We have an unique art heritage and more than half the Unesco global heritage are in our country. Italy is a land of science, of experiments, of innovation. Of course you might think they used to have Leonardo da Vinci now there is Matteo Renzi, this is a really problem for the decline... symbol of decline of Italy. [...] Italy for the moment, in the last 20 years, in particularly in the last 20 years Italy seems a sleeping beauty. Politics, government, what you call in Washington DC 'beltway' got stuck. The world changed around us and for a long time Italy were unable to reform.

Appraisal analysis

	Transcript	Appraisal analysis	Value
1	**I believe** the future, in Italy, *is MORE interesting* than the past	I believe: heteroglossic engagement (entertain); is more interesting: monoglossic engagement, appreciation (+reaction) and graduation (force: +intensification)	future/past: opposition; repetition of the concept already stated
2	Oh, **I know** eh? **I know** VERY WELL		Oh, I know eh?/I know very well: Italian calque and intonation; intonation also invokes a conceding-countering structure; hand gesture (Italian emblem) meaning 'I/my': deictic positioning
3	*[Renzi quickly touches his chest with both his open hands while pronouncing the words 'I know very well']*	I know: heteroglossic engagement (proclaim: concur) and graduation (force: +intensification by repetition and the use of hand gesture); very well: graduation (force: +intensification)	
4	the *incredible past* of my country	incredible past: appreciation (+reaction)	my country: deictic positioning; incredible past: stereotype
5	Italy **is rich** with *beauty, art, food* (...) soccer		beauty/art/food/soccer: stereotypes; nonverbal communication and lower pitch while pronouncing 'food': invoked shared knowledge
6	*[Renzi raises his gaze to look at the audience, frowns, quickly nods and slightly opens his palm while pronouncing the word 'food']*	is rich: monoglossic engagement and appreciation (+valuation); beauty/art/food: appreciation (+valuation)	
7	So... we... **we know** the past in Italy is *beautiful*	we know: heteroglossic engagement (proclaim: concur); is beautiful: monoglossic engagement and appreciation (+valuation);	so: reinforces background knowledge by summarising the previous concept; the past is beautiful: stereotype; inclusive 'we'/past: deictic positioning
8	**We have an** *UNIQUE art heritage* and more than half the *Unesco GLOBAL heritage* are in our country	we have: monoglossic engagement; unique art heritage: appreciation (+valuation) and graduation (force: +intensification); Unesco global heritage: invoked appreciation (+valuation) and graduation (focus: +sharpen)	unique art heritage: stereotype; inclusive 'our': deictic positioning

9	**Italy is** a land of *science*, of *experiments*, of *innovation*.	Italy is: monoglossic engagement; science/experiments/innovation: invoked judgement (social esteem: +capacity)	invoked opposition with 'heritage' (repeated twice)
10	`Of course you might` `think they used to` `have Leonardo da` `Vinci now there is` `Matteo Renzi, this` `is a REALLY problem for` `the decline... symbol` `of decline of Italy.`	you might think: heteroglossic engagement (entertain); problem/decline: invoked judgement (–capacity) and graduation (force: +intensification by repetition and hand gesture); really: graduation (focus: sharpen)	joke reinforced by a hand gesture (illustrator); of course: conceding structure
11	 [Renzi mimics a sloping surface while pronouncing the word 'decline']		
12	Italy for the moment, in the last 20 years, in particularly in the last 20 years **Italy seems** a *sleeping beauty*. Politics, government, **what you call** in Washington DC 'beltway' *got stuck*.	Italy seems: heteroglossic engagement (entertain); beauty: invoked appreciation (+valuation) mitigated by 'sleeping': judgement (social esteem: –capacity); what you call: heteroglossic engagement (attribute: acknowledge); got stuck: monoglossic engagement; stuck: judgement (social esteem: –capacity)	for the moment/in the last 20 years: deictic positioning reinforced by repetition; sleeping beauty: irony and stereotypes
13	**The world changed** AROUND US and for a long time **Italy were** *unable to reform*.	the world changed/Italy were: monoglossic engagement; changed around us: invoked judgement (social esteem: –capacity) and graduation (force: +intensification by hand gesture); unable: judgement (social esteem: –capacity); reform: invoked judgement (social esteem: +capacity)	the world changed/Italy were: monoglossic engagement; changed around us: invoked judgement (social esteem: –capacity) and graduation (force: +intensification by hand gesture); unable: judgement (social esteem: –capacity); reform: invoked judgement (social esteem: +capacity)
14	 [Renzi cups his right hand upwards and briefly rotates it to form a circle while pronouncing the words 'around us']		

Deictic positioning

Rhetorical ambivalence

The study highlighted that the references to Italianness that Renzi used in his rhetoric in English were multifarious and complex: they ranged from stereotypes to quotations, involved verbal and nonverbal resources alike and were both implicit and explicit. Overall, they (re)produced a stereotypical view of the country that stood in dramatic contrast with Renzi's change-oriented political programme. The study showed that, though Renzi apparently celebrated innovation and invoked a future of radical change, he constantly reaffirmed and reproduced the *status quo* by means of two main strategies: stereotyping and referencing. Below I shall explore how these resources appealed to specific ideologies to create meaning.

Renzi referred to the stereotypes of the Italian character by either *quoting* or *enacting* them in a variety of ways. On the one hand, he naturalised some clichés, both explicitly and implicitly, by quoting them as a matter of fact by means of monoglossic structures: «Italy is rich with beauty art, food [...] We have an unique art heritage and more than half the Unesco global heritage are in our country»; «Culture? Masterpieces?

Food? Lifestyle? Holidays?»; «Italy is a bridge, natural bridge in the relation between Europe and Africa»; «I'm Italian, I speak a lot». Surprisingly, he found himself in the paradoxical situation of mentioning such clichés even when his interlocutor, Jeff Immelt, contradicted him and mentioned engineering as a different, more modern interpretation of Italian primacy. When narrating the episode at Georgetown University, Renzi not only expressed a commonplace view of the country he officially represented during his conversation with Immelt, but he also reinforced his own opinion by adding an overtone of surprise.

On the other hand, Renzi frequently enacted some specific behaviours that constructed a stereotypical ingroup prototype. To begin with, he frequently showed a significant degree of municipalism by referring to his hometown, Florence, even when it was not strictly relevant. He both mentioned his experience as a mayor and did not miss any opportunity to refer to Florence in a variety of ways, both explicitly and implicitly. He mentioned his passion for football and his being a fan of the team of his hometown; chose Leonardo da Vinci as an example of the Italian 'genius'; joked about the name 'Villa Firenze' and Amerigo Vespucci; quoted Florence and the Renaissance as an ideal balance of artistic and financial development, and so on. Another element that outlined Renzi's institutional persona as stereotypical is his own Catholic heritage. Though he did not mention the Church very often, his Catholic upbringing is quite significantly summed up in his warm appreciation of the Jesuit tradition of Georgetown University, which, significantly, place him in a fully conservative position[2].

Also the high frequency of witty remarks and jokes in his rhetoric is quite indicative. Since they were recurrent in both speeches, but increased whenever the interactions became more spontaneous and were sometimes unsuccessful due to improvisation or misunderstanding, they seemed to be born of the speaker's urge to please the audience rather than being simply a rhetoric device. Finally, the stereotype of Italianness is significantly embedded in Renzi's extensive – and often very complex – use of Italian semiotic hand gestures, accompanied by calques and interferences of the Italian language.

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[2] The religious order of the Jesuits has long been deemed responsible for the stagnation and the decadence of Italy during the Counter-Reformation (Barzini [1964/1996: 320]; Patriarca [2010: 65, 69]).

The second strategy consisted in recalling (both implicitly and explicitly) mainstream theories dating back to the 19th and early 20th century. These references are pivotal to understand Renzi's political discourse as they involved his programme of innovation, showed a complex interplay of opposing influences and provided an explanation to his contradictory attitude towards the past.

First, the main themes and tones of Renzi's programme remind of the iconoclastic rhetoric of the first decades of the 20th century. His enthusiasm for technological innovations, radical change, youth, dynamism and speed recall the violently radical programme of the Futurist movement (Barile [2014a: 36; 2014b: 7-8]); so much so that his use of the term 'demolition' was directly associated to Fascist rhetoric by an official voice of the former Communist Party[3]. Overall, Renzi's iconoclastic claim to modernity, his celebration of youth and dynamism, his urge to renovate Italy and build the new Italians by reviving past glories, his passion for modern media, his use of everyday language and appeal to emotions, have their legacy in the performative politics of right wing movements and in Benito Mussolini's communication style (Corner-Pels [2003: 8-9]; Falasca-Zamponi [2000]). Renzi himself implicitly testified to this legacy when he expressed his contempt for the passive, past-oriented attitude of the Italians.

Second, both Renzi's positivistic optimism for the future and his obsession with backwardness and regeneration were heir to a debate that involved intellectuals and politicians for centuries. Whereas his definition of the country as a 'sleeping beauty' recalls similar comments by writer Madame de Staël and poet Alphonse De Lamartine (Patriarca [2010: 27]; De Lamartine [1825: 62-63][4]), the solutions he proposed evoke the reformation programmes of the Father Founders. Thus, Renzi echoed Benedetto Croce, Vincenzo Gioberti and Giuseppe Mazzini, to name only a few, in his attempt to propose a 'Mediterranean way' to regenerate Italy as opposed to the model of Northern Europe. He suggested that such a solution would be grounded on the presumed primacy of the country as the cradle of civilisation due to its position in the Mediterranean and its humanistic legacy – supposedly rich in beauty, emo-

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[3] Prospero, M. 'Pd: rottamazione, idea fascistoide', *l'Unita*, 16 October 2012.

[4] «[T]out dort,/Tout, jusqu'aux souvenirs de ton antique histoire./Qui te feraient du moins rougir devant ta gloire !/Tout dort!»

tions and ethical values – which would lead to a new Renaissance. Moreover, his reference to Florence as the most successful example of innovation and culture in Italy exceeded the boundaries of localism to recall those intellectuals – among them, Gioberti and Alessandro Manzoni – who advocated the supremacy of the Florentine culture and literature in the debate on the national language of the newly born Kingdom of Italy (Marazzini [1999]).

More importantly, Renzi's faith in progress and the positive development of history dates back to the age of European imperialism and are grounded on modern idealism – which saw in Croce its most important Italian representative – and its aim to reform society through 'struggle, commitment and mediation' (Bauman and Bordoni [2014: 80, 122]). It is worth noting, however, that Renzi's version of idealism was highly inconsistent. While embracing the rational, solidarity-oriented collectivism of the Hegelian school, he also embodied postmodern irrational subjectivism by celebrating innovation for innovation's sake, flexibility and change and behaving as an individualistic, post-ideological politician (on the contrasting dynamics of modernity and postmodernity, see Bauman and Bordoni [2014: 80-84, 113-128]).

It has been pointed out that some of the ambivalence embedded in Renzi's rhetoric was an expression of his composite personality and his intention to appeal to the electorate of the left and the right alike by drawing on the style and programme of the New Labour to develop his own 'Third Way' (Barile [2014a: 14, 18, 58-62]). According to this interpretation, Renzi's praise for dynamism was a way to make Italians more cosmopolitan (Barile [2014b: 8]), while appealing also to a more conservative electorate by displaying the everyday communication style of the 'person next door', based on emotions and storytelling (*ibidem*, 58, 88-94, 117, 132). In other words, Blair's carefully-constructed 'normalness' (Fairclough [2000: 97-100]) was transformed by Renzi into Italianness. Therefore, Renzi's frequent references to his experience as a mayor, his limited command of the English language and his markedly Italian accent were instrumental to connect to his audience (as much as his Florentine accent to connect to his Italian electorate), since he behaved as first among equals and embodied the traits of the Italians (Barile [2014a: 58]; Galimberti [2015: 40]), like Berlusconi did with their vices (Savio [2014: 317]).

I only partially agree on explaining the inconsistencies in Renzi's communication as part of his personal strategy to reconcile contrasting

behaviours and beliefs. It was indeed my intention to go beyond this interpretation and attempt deeper understanding of political and ideological implications in the in-depth linguistic and multimodal analysis discussed in this study. First, as I have already pointed out, the Italian legacy of this communication style dates back to the beginning of the 20th century within right-wing movements. When Renzi gained his position at centre stage in contemporary political arena, these techniques had largely been exploited by centre-right parties (Loporcaro [2004: 95]), whereas the left still preferred a more traditional approach. Indeed, it was Silvio Berlusconi who introduced the innovations that Renzi would follow and develop in the years to come. Moreover, celebrations of local identity such as municipalism did not belong to Italian left-wing discourse, which heavily contested it as a potential source of sectarian interests (Pratt [2001: 90]). Finally, Renzi's almost obsessive reference to stereotypes and the traditional Italian culture largely exceeded the boundaries of informal style to embrace the century-long attempts to forge the Italian national character.

Italianness and the myth of the nation

Renzi's rhetorical strategies bore a significant ideological consequence for two reasons. On the one hand, identity is a choice and is constructed in discourse. On the other, ideology plays a crucial role in keeping stereotypes (and group membership) stable. Whether spontaneous or carefully staged or the interplay of both dynamics, Renzi's identity foregrounded illusory dynamism and modernity while perpetuating the founding elements of Catholic political tradition. This is because Renzi produced precise ideological representations, or slogan-images (Simons [2000: 96]), of Italy and the Italian character that sounded innovative and change-oriented while, at the same time, being reassuringly familiar. To do so he made extensive use of two main strategies of political communication, legitimisation and coercion, namely the forms of 'soft power' (Nye [1990]).

Renzi realised his own form of soft power by constructing a political persona that embodied stereotypes and reproduced clichés. On the one hand, his rhetoric devices, from culturally-loaded emblems to calques, jokes and his limited command of English converged into the creation of *the* Italian. On the other, monoglossia, rhythmic deictic gestures and the

authoritative pitch and volume of his voice underlined his leadership role and contributed to make his figure prototypical. Significantly, in the speeches analysed in this study Renzi used the explicit locution 'I am' only to define himself either as a leader or a typical Italian. The function of Renzi's Italianness, therefore, was twofold: it overtly defined his own identity, but implicitly determined the characteristics of group membership and set its goals, values and beliefs.

While reproducing the prototype of the Italian citizen, Renzi also reproduced the myth of the nation. He constructed, in Anderson's terms, an 'imagined community' [2006] with a mythical past and a mythical geographic space. Indeed, the symbols and traditions that have been created to consolidate modern nations are largely based on the reinvention of the past (Billig [1995: 38]; Bell [2003]; De Cillia *et al*. [1999: 150, 154-155]; Kedourie [1993: 70-82]; Smith [1991/1993: 140, 161]; Wodak *et al*. [2009: 25]). Together with a geographical territory with an idealised landscape and borders to be defended, history is, therefore, the main pillar of nationalism (Bell [2003: 76]; Billig [1995: 74-78]; Smith, [1991/1993: 14, 69, 117]). Indeed, the ultimate purpose of representations is to build a sense of belonging to a common ground, and one of the most effective ways is manipulating collective memory.

> Memory is a concept that is readily employed to represent a whole host of different social practices, cognitive processes and representational strategies and what gets submerged, flattened out, is the nuance, texture and often-contradictory forces and tensions of history and politics. In particular it can elide the manner in which such 'memories' are constructed through acts of manipulation, through the atavistic play of power (Bell [2003: 71]).

The community that Renzi built gathered around the inclusive pronoun 'we' that he frequently used, very relevantly, when discussing about shared values and the Italian cultural and artistic heritage. To define the geographic space of the community he recalled traditional clichés, 19th century reform programmes and an ethical vocation by referring to a «boot», a «bridge between different cultures», «a natural bridge in the relation between Europe and Africa», and to the Mediterranean as the «connection between our roots and our future […] the custodian of our memory». Similarly, he reinvented a mythical past to be revived by celebrating the Florentine Renaissance and praising humanistic culture and emotions. Community, geographic space and history, therefore, were all grounded on the general, unspecified notion of «values», which

Renzi chose to frame his myth of the nation, a myth that he summed up in the slogan «[i]f the world asks […] beauty... ask the... connection, ask dignity, ask values, this world asks Italy».

Though inclusive, myths naturalise reality. They erase complexity and represent reality as uncontested and uncontroversial (Baker [2006: 3, 8-11]; Bell [2003: 75]). In other words, they offer the «symbolic generalization» that reduces complexity and makes explicit communication largely redundant (Luhman [1979: 130]). Myths, therefore, are «uni-vocal» narrations (Bell [2003: 75]) and can be constructed only by excluding dialogic voices. All forms of fellowship, community and solidarity depend upon meanings which are shared and can be taken as given, and no form of social communication or interaction is conceivable without some such 'common ground'. On the other hand, the capacity to exercise social power, domination and hegemony includes the capacity to shape to some significant degree the nature and content of this 'common ground', which makes implicitness and assumptions an important issue with respect to ideology (Fairclough [2003b: 55]).

If Blair extensively made categorical statements to claim moral authority and toughness (Fairclough [1995/2013: 388-389]), Renzi used monoglossia and presumptions as a significant instrument in the process of myth-making to naturalise representations by excluding alternative voices (Fairclough [2003b: 42-47]). It is worth noting that humorous remarks and nonverbal language also played a pivotal role in this mythical narration. Gestures, in particular, largely contributed to making communication more immediate since they are spontaneous, appeal to emotions, and (re)produce and naturalise shared culture.

Whereas the frequent and extensive use of these techniques was instrumental to engaging with the audience, they were also crucial in creating the necessary trust to ensure that the myth of the nation got across. Trust is indeed a pivotal notion in Renzi's rhetoric. It needs a familiar world that builds upon a simplified vision of history in order to define (and present) a reassuring, uncomplicated version of the future (Luhman [1979: 20]). It is through trust, therefore, that Renzi naturalised a familiar, selectively appropriated, version of the past to pave the way to a positive, simplified future. Thus, the many inconsistencies and contradictions in Renzi's talk lost their power in the vagueness of myth.

Concluding remarks

Since not only did Renzi quoted clichés, but he also embodied them, his political persona emerged as culturally-loaded, even provincial, as testified to by the incidents of miscommunication that occurred during his speeches. Such a specific choice had very significant consequences on the values and beliefs that Renzi promoted, which were the ultimate focus of this study. Indeed, all the strategies discussed above are far from being ideologically neutral. A 'mediatised' politician who inherited the communication style of media tycoon Berlusconi, he drew inspiration from pop culture and the show business and adopted their techniques based on conversationalism, sociability, emotions, irrationality, casual-ness and friendliness (Barile [2014a]; Corner-Pels [2003]; Higgins [2018]; Street [2001, 2003, 2004]). His rhetoric was heir to this 'picto-rial' tradition and privileged visual resources (gestures and facial expres-sions) to data, and emotions to information. Though he insisted on the role of education and culture, the putative audience of his talks was noth-ing more than the passive public of a show.

Renzi, therefore, emerged contradictorily as a post-ideological politi-cian that acted as an ideologised politician. The ambivalence depends on the two parallel planes along which Renzi's communication unfolded: the explicit celebration of innovation and modernity, which Renzi broad-cast as an entertainer, and the implicit consolidation of a traditional form of nationalism, grounded on Catholicism, which he partly enacted and partly expressed through the discursive strategies described in the previ-ous sections.

Hypotheses on the ultimate functions of such strategies would largely exceed the scope of this study. Instead I shall make some final observa-tions on the dynamics of nationalism. The modern notion of nation-state is based on the need for citizens to share the same loyalties and values (Gellner [1997/1998: 7]). This social identity is so well-established that not only does the loyalty towards the ingroup become primary, but it even substitutes any other (Hobsbawm [1972: 388]). Cultural homoge-nisation, however, should not be conceived as fixed and stable, but a pro-cess that involves struggle and tension (Hall [1996b: 617]). This is be-cause individual identity is not univocal or stable in time, but is a work in progress, since it is composed of numerous identifications that indi-viduals may change during their lives (De Cillia [1999: 154]; Wodak, [2012: 216]). Cultural homologation, therefore, is the outcome of the

strife of competing narrations, which struggle for hegemony over alternative voices by producing and re-producing representations of the world (Bell [2003: 75]; Billig [1995: 38-39]; Lippmann [1922/1998: 238-239]).

Within the context of contemporary politics Renzi's rhetoric seemed to respond to the current 'state of crisis' (Bauman and Bordoni [2014]) almost to perfection, at least theoretically. Selective remembering – and, consequently, selective forgetting – is not limited to tyrannical regimes, but is widely practised by democracies to exert control over their electorate. Given the present condition of paralysis due to the separation of politics and power (*ibidem*, 12), the only response lies in the manipulation of collective memory (*ibidem*, 61), in the nostalgic recreation of that mythical 'elsewhere' that Zygmunt Bauman calls «retrotopia» [2017: 3-5]. Indeed, far from reviving the past in the present or making it a viable solution to current problems, myth lives outside history, as already envisaged by Barthes. Renzi's version of the so-called 'civic nationalism' (Chouliaraki [2000]) – naturalised as a dominant ideology by a long tradition – provided the electorate with something with which they had been familiar for centuries: a reassuring, simplified representation of a mythical dimension that promised to pave the way to a likewise mythical future.

However, though Renzi's strategies were successful in ensuring a large consensus until 2015, they could not prevent its dramatic downfall, which led to the poor result of the Democratic Party in the general election of March 2018 and the consequent rise of a right-wing coalition. A possible explanation may lie in that he recurred to traditional ideology to meet the demands of a disoriented, post-ideological electorate. Renzi chose to fill the signifiers that had been left empty by contemporary hegemonic struggle with traditional meanings instead of taking on a hegemonic struggle and meet the challenges of globalised, post-ideological politics.

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