Mediterranean migration and the language of crisis: an Italian case study

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DESPITE DIVERGENCE IN POLICY response, EU Member States seems to agree that the migratory inflow they are currently experiencing is 'a crisis' of unprecedented scale (Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). Italy is among the EU Member States most focused on framing the issue in terms of 'crisis'. This vocabulary did not occur randomly, but it is the outcome of a political process aimed at pursuing the domestic and foreign policy goals of the Italian government (Campesi, 2011). For example, reference to a 'crisis' can be seen as a way to reassure the Italian public that the migratory inflow is only temporary and will not restructure the Italian social fabric. Further, the need for 'emergency' public spending to face the 'crisis' can help Italy in justifying a not-so-righteous fiscal policy (Campesi, 2011).

Methods

Is our goal to explore the extent to which this discursive strategy has trickled down to society level through representation in daily news. To do so, it will explore a one-year sample (01/12/2014 – 01/12/2015) of news reporting from the most circulated broadsheet newspaper in Italy: *Il Corriere della Sera*. Results were retrieved via LexisNexis by searching for the word *crisi* [crisis] in association with one or more of the terms *profughi*, *migranti*, *immigrati*, and *rifugiati* (masculine, feminine, singular, and plural suffixes), a corpus of 430 articles.

Following Baker et al. (2008), the entire corpus was first scrutinized with methods in Corpus Linguistics (CL) (Backer, 2006) through the *AntConc* software package, and namely word frequency, collocation analysis, concordance analysis and keyness (this one measured against a corpus of 500 random articles retrieved from the same newspaper within the same timeframe; the cut-off point was set at the top twenty words in the keyness list). A sub-sample of forty articles was then extracted for closer analysis through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as operationalized by Fairclough (1985) to uncover the ideological message therein implied.

Word frequency and keyness

The most recurring world in the corpus is *crisis*, appearing in 781 different occasions. The words *displaced people* and *migrants* have almost identical frequency (respectively, 441 and 437 hits). The words *immigrants* (279) and *refugees* (243) are not as common. Overall, a scan of the most occurring words suggests a dominance of language referring to domestic or EU-level politics and policymaking on migration issues. A first insight offered by word frequency analysis is that people on the move are almost exclusively represented with plural nouns, with masculine singular forms and feminine forms largely absent. Qualitative parts of the study confirm

this pattern, suggesting that what makes people on the move newsworthy is their character as a (large) group. Analysis of keyness shows a similar picture, with words referring to the management of the *crisis* and its EU-wide dimension having the highest keyness. *Crisis* tops the list (Chi2 = 1069.77), and words referring to people on the move selected for the search string also enjoy high keyness, ranking respectively 3rd (migrants) 4th (displaced people), 7th (immigrants), and 10th (refugees). The high prominence of the words *Germany* and the last name of its Chancellor, *Merkel* (11th and 20th for keyness), offers a first hint of a trend that will be object of discussion below.

'It is a crisis of unprecedented dimensions'

Collocation analysis for the word *crisis* suggests a close association with migration-related vocabulary, but also with words referring to the financial recession. Concordance lines seem to confirm this trend and highlight the recurrence of the cluster *crisi dei migranti* [migrants' crisis] or *crisi dei rifugiati* [refugees' crisis]. This formulation potentially suggests that the crisis 'belongs' to the migrants, and not to Italy, its government, or its people. One further trend common to *crisis* as well as all the other words in the search string is the newsworthiness of 'numbers' of incoming people, which emerged during collocation analysis and was confirmed in qualitative parts of the study. CDA confirmed that the economic recession is a constant presence in virtually all articles. The main narrative more or less overtly argues that Italy is incapable to set up a functioning reception system because of its financial troubles, further worsened by the burden of incoming migrants. The villains in this story are Germany and EU institutions, portrayed as hostage of German interests. Blaming Germany and the EU for the economic recession is a well-known trend in the Italian public sphere (Bellucci, 2014) as well as in other Southern European contexts (Tzogopoulos, 2012). The conflation of the migrants' crisis with the economic recession seems to have extended this trend to a new and unrelated scenario.

Displaced people

Syrians and *emergency* are the two strongest collocates of *displaced people*. Other frequent collocates refer to their large number, condition of displacement, and current location in camps. Going through concordance lines for *displaced people*, first qualitative insights suggest a focus on relocation, especially in the context of EU quota policies. A minority of concordance lines refers to domestic politics, especially tensions with the xenophobic right and the benevolent stance of the Catholic Church towards displaced people.

A narrative suggesting the existence of a moral imperative to offer support to forcibly displaced people was detected through CDA. As partially noticed in concordance analysis, the main proponent of the humanitarian message is neither Italy nor the EU, but rather the Catholic Church. Articles reporting on official speeches of the Pope as well as interviews with members of the Clergy and even local priests are strikingly common in the corpus. This offers further evidence corroborating the findings of an already extensive literature arguing that the influence of the Catholic Church in Italian public affairs is far from vanishing (Giorgi, 2012).

Migrants

Despite overlaps with the language referring to *displaced people*, reporting on *migrants* has a quite distinct profile. *Migrants* collocates closely with vocabulary suggesting urgency in the humanitarian and political response to the *crisis*. The presence of 'quotas' among the most co-occurring collocates suggests a closer focus on EU-level policy making. Concordance analysis confirms the overlap with *displaced people*, but also suggests that the main focus is the management of the *emergency*, not the humanitarian imperative. CDA suggests the existence of a double and at times contradictory narrative in which securitization and humanitarianism are the two paradigms through which to look at the *crisis* (Perkowski, 2016). In this context, the cluster *economic migrants* makes its first appearance, with noteworthy consequences. While those fleeing persecution are portrayed as somewhat entitled to European solidarity, those migrating to improve their economic conditions have to be deported. This discourse reproduces and reinforces a well-known divide between *asylum seekers* and *economic migrants* (Bakewell, 2008). Despite being purely discursive, the material consequences of this divide can be dramatic for people on the move in terms of rights to entry and stay in destination countries.

Immigrants

The word *immigrants* collocates with words that suggest their permanence on the Italian territory. Remarkably, there seems to be no *immigrants' crisis*. This might suggest that the *crisis* exists in discourse only insofar as it is connected to the reception system, but it vanishes once immigrants get out of reception centres and disperse over the territory. Concordance analysis for *immigrants* confirms that they are represented as being already 'here'. Furthermore, some concordance lines highlight their positive impact on the economy, their disadvantaged position in society, and their vulnerability to organized crime.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a sizable share of concordance lines refers to anti-immigrant far right

Rank	Collocate	t-score (>2)	Frequency (>4 2:2)	frequency left	frequency right
1	economica [economic]	8,35	71	1	70
2	migranti [migrants]	5,53	35	6	29
3	greca [Greek]	4,55	21	0	21
4	umanitaria [humanitarian]	4,42	20	0	20
5	siriana [Syrian]	3,96	16	0	16
6	libica [Libyan]	3,57	13	0	13
7	grande [large/great]	3,44	14	14	0
8	rifugiati [refugees]	3,42	14	0	14
9	ucraina [Ukranian]	3,25	11	0	11
10	tempi [times]	3,20	11	11	0
11	soluzione [solution]	3,19	11	11	0
12	globale [global]	2,94	9	1	8
13	grave [severe/harsh]	2,92	9	9	0
14	affrontare [(to) face]	2,88	9	8	1
15	inizio [bginning]	2,86	9	9	0
16	finanziaria [financial]	2,79	8	0	8
17	gestione [managment]	2,71	8	8	0
18	profughi [refugees]	2,63	11	2	9
19	migratoria [migratory]	2,61	7	0	7
20	medio [medium]	2,52	7	0	7
21	aggravarsi [worsening]	2,43	6	6	0
22	rappresentanza [delegation]	2,42	6	1	5
23	risolvere [solve]	2,37	6	5	1
24	aree [areas]	2,37	6	6	0
25	attuale [current]	2,34	6	5	1
26	fuga [escape/flee]	2,33	6	5	1
27	partiti [political parties/those who have left]	2,31	6	2	4
28	umanitarie [humanitarian (plural)]	2,21	5	0	5
29	superare [overcome]	2,16	5	5	0
30	effetto [effect]	2,14	5	5	0
31	Siria [Syria]	2,09	6	3	3
32	senza [without]	2,04	7	0	7
33	lavoro [job]	2,04	7	3	4

Statistically significant collocates for crisi [crisis] (t-scores)

Rank	Collocate	t-score (>2)	Frequency (>4 2:2)	frequency left	frequency right
1	migranti [migrants]	5,07	27	0	27
2	profughi [profughi]	4,09	18	2	16
3	immigrazione [immigration]	3,79	15	0	15
4	affrontare [(to) face]	2,79	8	8	0
5	fronte [frontline]	2,75	8	8	0
6	stato [state]	2,40	7	7	0
7	rifugiati [refugees]	2,31	6	1	5
8	fronteggiare [(to) face]	2,22	5	5	0
9	umanitaria [humanitarian]	1,96*	4	0	4
10	situazione [situation]	1,89*	4	4	0

Statistically significant collocates for emergenza [emergency] (t-scores)
*close but below statistical significance.

movements. More interestingly, several concordance lines referred to Islamic/Muslim immigrants; trend also confirmed by CDA. By using their Middle Eastern origin as a proxy for religious affiliation, immigrants are often overtly represented as being Muslim. The construction of the immigrant as 'Muslim' in most discourses circulating in the Italian press was already detected in the literature. This construction mostly refers to 'Muslims' as a monolithic group of somewhat dangerous 'them' that is unwilling and ultimately unable to coexist with an equally monolithic Italian and Catholic group of 'us' (Allievi, 2005).

Refugees

There is a strong overlap between the word *refugees* and *displaced people*, especially in light of its collocation and concordance with words referring to the humanitarian imperative for assistance and the emergency character of the migration scenario. The statistically significant collocation of *refugees* with *Germany* points again to the Italy vs Germany duality discussed above. However, CDA shows that the picture for refugees is not as uniform as it is for displaced people. Refugees are oftentimes framed as 'a problem' because of the substantial amount of rights granted them by International Law and the related financial burden on the host state. It is in this context that most discussions for a EU-wide refugee quota system takes place, including a not-so-subtle reference to a widespread fear of what is known in the literature as the 'bogus refugees' (Lynn & Lea 2003) in either of these two forms. The first one is the fear that *economic migrants* could pretend to be refugees and thus undeservingly access the benefits of refugee status instead of being deported. The second one refers to the fear that some asylum claimants could actually be (Islamic) terrorists in disguise. This trend could also be reconnected to the representation of the immigrant as Muslim, and of the Muslim as dangerous (Allievi 2005).

The terms of 'crisis'

Three main trends were detected, and namely, 1) a strong overlap between the financial crisis and the migrants' crisis; 2) a duality between Italy and Germany in EU policymaking, with Germany being blamed for most of Italy's troubles; and 3) an obsession with the number of people entering the European space.

When analysed separately, the four categories of *displaced people*, *migrants*, *immigrants*, and *refugees* show overlapping albeit different characteristics. Reporting on *displaced people* is characterized by an overarching humanitarian imperative for assistance, especially advanced by the Catholic Church. Reporting on *migrants* focuses on the mutually reinforcing troubles of Italy in dealing simultaneously with the financial recession and the *migrants crisis*. Reporting on immigrants focuses instead on their presence on the Italian territory, with a relatively overt reference to their Muslim faith as a source of preoccupation. Finally, the word *refugees* shows strong overlap with *displaced people*, but also a preoccupation with economic migrants and potential terrorists acting as *bogus refugees*.■

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