Personal and Group Identity in Facebook Political Posts

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1. Introduction: new genres of political communication

During the last decades, the domain of political communication has extended significantly, along with the use of new media, leading to the constitution of new genres of communication. The traditional perspective stated that the voters express their feedback for the politicians' activities most clearly during elections time. Nowadays, such view seems to be increasingly challenged by the advanced use of the Internet and social media, enabling virtually any user to address political leaders. The communication of political messages through channels like Facebook or Twitter has become commonplace, even in the cases where the posters are politicians in office, like state presidents or ministers.

The brevity of the messages posted on social networks may give the impression that the new genre lacks the depth of traditional genres of political communication such as direct speeches, parliamentary debates, broadcast interviews or talk-shows. In spite of their brevity, the political messages posted on social networks fulfill multiple functions. Besides the goals of informing and persuading the readers, the political posts contribute to the construction of a specific in-group, by maintaining the cohesion of the supporters around a political leader. Such a case is examined in this paper, which focuses on the messages posted on his Facebook page by the leader of the Italian party Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, in regard to the immigration issue. The research aims to analyze the discursive construction of the poster's identity and the relationships between in- and out-groups, by paying attention to the intertextual dimension of the Facebook political messages.

2. Politics on the social media

The role played by Facebook and other social sites in contemporary communication shows an increased interest in the formation and maintenance of social bonds in the virtual sphere. The contemporary development of the social media seems to mark a shift in the use of internet, through the emphasis placed on the interpersonal function of online communication rather on the informative one (Zappavigna 2012: 2). Recent research points out the similarities between the

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interactions carried out on the social media and real-life conversations (Zappavigna 2012: 5). This conversational dimension has lead to various trends of research in the area of online communication. One research direction shows interest in the analysis of the linguistic features of the online exchanges (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2006; Holt 2004; Crystal 2001). Another research direction draws on symbolic interactionism (e.g. Calka 2015), paying attention to the fact that the interactions on the social media require the participants' engagement in positive facework (West, Trester 2013: 145) in order to maintain the social bonds. Such research work pays attention to the discursive level of the messages and to the social context constituted in interaction, addressing questions of cooperative or uncooperative behaviour and the constitution of power relationships between users.

The discursive roles and identities assumed by the posters in social media exchanges represent a domain which deserves further examination. It is true that social media tend to enhance the impression of a "common ground" that unites users, simulating the existence of "horizontal" relationships between the posters and the commenters. The "basic social moves" such as "friending", "liking" or "commenting" (West and Trester 2013: 134), made possible through the use of Facebook, maintain the illusion of exchanges between participants with equal or similar status. However, social media tend to be increasingly employed by institutional or organizational senders which aim to create a connection with a large audience while avoiding the frame of formal or official interactions.

In the case of political communication, the use of social media presents a series of advantages for the speakers/ posters. First, online messages can reach an audience which is theoretically unlimited, while direct speeches address a limited number of people only. Another advantage regards the possibility of avoiding the 'filter' represented by the media which might have presented the political messages from a biased perspective. The frequency of the exchanges may give the impression of an existing, steady bond between the politician and the public, as the former can even engage in a dialogue with the commenters of the posts. Not last, the use of social media allows politicians to express their stance on current topics of interest, with a speed of reaction which would have been impossible through the use of 'traditional' print media.

In order to analyze the new genre of political communication, attention needs to be paid to the broader discursive and social context. Political messages posted on the social networks should not be viewed in isolation, but integrated in the complex represented by the entire public discourse of the speaker/ addresser. They form only a part of the discourse issued by a politician or a political group and may be used in order to reinforce specific attitudes, stereotypes or inter-group polarities, which are already constructed in other communication genres. From this perspective, Facebook comments posted by politicians belong to two different fields of action: the formation of public attitudes, opinion and will, since they address the masses of voters, at least theoretically, and the field of political advertising (Wodak 2009/ 2011; Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Like the web sites of political candidates, which aim to both persuade new electors and maintain the bond with the already dedicated supporters (Holt 2004: 136), the posts on the social media have a marked persuasive function. Unlike webpages, the posts represent a more dynamic and flexible

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communicative genre, allowing the readers to post comments, which gives the impression of a conversation, even if an asynchronous one (West, Trester 2013: 141). It remains, however, debatable whether such social exchanges, even between politicians and their supporters or opponents, represent a reliable form of public debate or a real dialogue. As the analysis below reveals, political posts can reinforce the distinctions between in- and out-groups and exclude the antagonistic voices from the discussion in the public sphere.

3. Description of the corpus and theoretical framework

The corpus consists of 3 messages posted by the Italian politician Matteo Salvini on his Facebook page, between March and September 2015 and of the comments to these messages, posted by the followers. The total number of words is 7.334. Online access to the posts and to the corresponding comments was free during the period of data collection, between August and September 2015.

The three core posts have been selected due to the topic discussed, as all of them regarded the situation of foreign immigrants, an actual political issue in Italy, at the time the corpus was gathered. A further reason for the selection regarded the ideology of the Lega Nord party. As the name shows, Lega Nord is an Italian party which enhances the sense of regional belonging over the national or the European collective identity of the Italian people. The political organization which began its activity in the 1980s, as the Lega Autonoma Lombarda, merged with other regionalist groups and expanded so fast that, in a decade, it became the largest political party in the North of Italy (Cento Bull, Gilbert 2001: 8–9). The alliance became a political party and changed its name to Lega Nord (LN) in the early 1990s. At present, LN has a stable group of voters and is represented in the Italian Parliament. The success of the party has been influenced by a series of factors such as the socio-economic situation of Italy, especially that of the Southern regions, and the problem of corruption among public representatives (Cento Bull, Gilbert, 2001: 13–15). As the party's ideology incorporates nationalist and regionalist aspects, it tends to be viewed as a populist right-wing party (Ennser 2012: 159, Jaschke 2001: 10). The analysis of the posts aims to identify whether the in-groups constructed are predominantly nationalist or regionalist ones.

The methodology applied draws mainly on the evaluation theory by Martin and White (2005), especially with the linguistic and discursive resources employed in the realization of the category of engagement. Following this approach, (dis)alignment will be defined as "'agreement/disagreement with respect to both attitudinal assessments and to beliefs or assumptions about the nature of the world, its past history, and the way it ought to be" (Martin and White 2005: 95). Secondarily, the analysis will pay attention to the broader framework represented by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which assumes that "power relationships are not natural and objective; they are artificial, socially constructed intersubjective realities" (Fowler 1985 :61).

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4. Discussion of the posts

Similarities and differences between the in- and the out-groups are created in the Facebook exchanges, through a complex process of meaning construction. This process entails two phases. As West and Trester observe, Facebook interactions begin with a post, to which other users respond. The answers or comments to the posts are optional and show "that the hearer is also interested in things that are interesting to the speaker" (West, Trester 2013: 145). In the case of political messages, the moves of "liking" and "commenting" acquire new meanings: besides the interpersonal value, the readers thus show their commitment or support to the ideology sustained by the politician – author of the posts.

In the case analyzed, the first phase is represented by the main posts written by the Italian politician Matteo Salvini. Besides conveying the politician's viewpoint on the immigration issue, the messages aim to distinguish the party Lega Nord from other political formations and, thus, to legitimate the ideological position represented by this politician and his party on the Italian political stage. A common trait of the posts selected consists in their intertextuality, as Salvini discusses other speakers' statements, which he quotes more or less explicitly. However, a detailed analysis of the texts reveals that, in this manner, Salvini also questions the opposing views about the sensitive topic of immigration and about the ideology of the LN.

In the second phase, Salvini's stance is enforced or countered by the comments posted by the various Facebook followers, in reply to his posts. It is important to note that such comments are not made in isolation or simply in reply to the text of Salvini's post. The authors of the comments are persons who are already familiar with the LN ideology and/or with Salvini's views. The comments reveal a high degree of uniformity and agreement with the stance expressed in the main post. At the time of data gathering, the first post analyzed had received more than 17,000 evaluations of "like", while more than 20,000 readers "liked" the second post by Salvini. The third post was "liked" by more than 6,000 readers, but the relative low number can be attributed to the chronological dimension. As the third post was selected only a few days after it had been published, it can be presumed that not many users had had time to read it. The agreement with the politician's viewpoint is also visible in the attempts made by his supporters in order to "silence" the commenters who disagreed with Salvini, by excluding them from the virtual conversation.

Although the messages posted by Salvini regard the topic of immigration, the migrants themselves represent only a secondary target of his criticism. The politician never addresses the migrants or the members of other cultures directly, and, at least in the first two posts selected, no aggressive words are explicitly used in connection to the migrants. Instead, the main target is formed by the state authorities, who are accused of not protecting the interests of the Italian people. All the three posts have a clear intertextual structure, as they begin with a quotation, followed by Salvini's commentary or interpretation. In all the cases, the interpretation advanced by Matteo Salvini is a negative one, serving to express his dissent from the stance of the Italian government. The dissent expressed in the posts which will be analyzed below regards three different aspects. In post (1), the politician criticizes the use of

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particular terms by the President Mattarella, which he considers inappropriate. Post (2) expresses disalignment in regard to the level of content, as Salvini rejects a specific measure proposed by other public persons in order to help the refugees. Finally, in the third post, the disalignment regards both the level of content and that of expression and is linked to a marked criticism against the speaker quoted.

The first post has been selected because of the marked negative judgment conveyed, which is here based upon a statement issued by Sergio Mattarella, the current President of Italy. Here, Matteo Salvini selects an adjective with a negative meaning ("contagiosi"/ *contagious*), which he employs in a reverse manner, inverting the target of the critic.

> (1) In tempi di crisi economica può crescere il rischio del CONTAGIO xenofobo e RAZZISTA" ha detto oggi il Presidente Mattarella. Per me sono "contagiosi" quei politici, di sinistra, che si preoccupano dei diritti "degli altri", e se ne fregano degli italiani. E basta con 'sta menata del razzismo! (M. Salvini, March 2015)/ *During economic crises the risk of xenophobic and RACIST CONTAGION may increase', said President Mattarella today. For me the 'contagious' ones are those left-wing politicians, who care about 'other people's' rights and don't give a damn about the Italians. And enough with this nonsense about racism!* (Author's translation)

The structure, consisting in a quotation from the speech of the Italian President followed by Salvini's personal opinion, seems to indicate the politician's right to freedom of expression. By discussing the President's intervention, a politician may encourage the debate in the public sphere or sustain the right of the electorate to be informed about the decisions made by the authorities. However, the comment below the quoted text shows a marked disalignment. In this manner, the LN representative claims for himself a discursive status which appears to be equal to that of the President. By attacking the point of view expressed by the highest authority in the state, Salvini legitimates himself as an authority through his discourse. This interpretation is sustained by the position of the first-person pronoun, at the beginning of the second utterance ("Per me..."./ *For me...*). Further, the politician legitimates his authority through the mention of the Italian citizens ("se ne fregano degli italiani"*/ don't give a damn about the Italians*). Through this reference, Salvini accuses the left-wing politicians of not fulfilling the expectations of the people. The criticism against the sustainers of the left-wing ideology can be interpreted as an accusation against the governmental actors as well, because the comment was posted in a period when the Italian Council of Ministers was presided by Matteo Renzi, a leader of the Democrat Party ("Partito Democratico"), the main actor of the Italian left-wing. The hortatory utterance forming the conclusion aims to enhance the poster's authority even more. He assumes a symbolic form of control over the debate in the public sphere, by demanding that racism should no longer represent a topic of discussion.

The message seems to have as a main goal the communication of the politician's stance and of his concern for the Italian citizens' rights. The beginning and the ending of the message are symmetrical to a certain degree, as they raise the topic of racism. A secondary goal of Salvini's message consists, therefore, in the

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rejection of the negative labels of 'xenophobia' and 'racism', that have been applied to the ideology promoted by the Lega Nord.

In a similar manner, the second message sustains the rejection of social policies in favour of the foreign refugees. The correspondence between the two posts is also visible in the discursive organization, as the second texts begins with a quotation followed by Salvini's opinion.

> (2) Qualche "genio solidale" voleva piazzare decine di immigrati nello splendido Convento di Cortemaggiore, fregandosene di 700 anni di storia, arte e cultura. Robe da matti: portateli a casa vostra se li amate tanto, anzi trasferitevi voi a casa loro! (M. Salvini, March 2015)./ *Some 'genius of solidarity' wanted to accomodate dozens of migrants in the wonderful convent of Cortemaggiore, not caring about 700 years of history, art and culture. Crazy things: bring them to your own house if you love them so much, or even better, you move to their home!* (Author's translation)

Here, the foreign voice is not quoted directly, but instead, disalignment to it is marked from the beginning. The identity of the quoted speaker is not clearly indicated and the ironic reference to the unknown speaker leads to the depreciation of the viewpoint expressed. Moreover, in order to foreground the irony, the syntagma "genio solidale" (*'genius of solidarity'*) is inserted between quotation marks. Besides the criticism against the sustainers of immigration, the post also advances a specific understanding of the concept of solidarity with the immigrants. According to the politician's opinion and to the LN views, solidarity needs to be shown towards the members of the in-group, alongside with the preservation of the borders between the in-group and the various out-groups. In order to sustain this stance, Salvini further adopts an informal tone, presenting the policies of care for migrants as exaggerated ("portateli a casa vostra se li amate tanto…"/ *bring them to your own house if you love them so much*). The choice of the Italian verb *amare* instead of *volere bene,* which more frequently carries the connotations of 'care' and 'friendship', serves to depreciate the topic of immigrants welfare and depict it as futile.

In this case as well, the conclusion is formed by an hortatory clause, with Salvini addressing directly his opponents and indicating them the 'right' path to follow. Another way of constructing the poster's authority regards the evaluation of third parties. Here, the politician evaluates directly the Italian national identity, in a positive manner ("splendido Convento di Cortemaggiore"/ *the wonderful convent of Cortemaggiore*; "700 anni di storia, arte e cultura"/ *700 years of history, art and culture*). In contrast, no offensive word is plainly used in order to evaluate the migrants. Instead, Matteo Salvini emphasizes the cultural heritage of Italy, thus backgrounding the migrants. While the Italian national identity is expressed through strategies like individualization, through the reference to a certain historical place, the migrants are treated like an anonymous mass, through the strategy of aggregation (van Leeuwen 2008: 37). In this manner, the out-group formed by the foreigners is backgrounded and their identity is suggested to be inferior to that of the native Italian citizens.

Another target of the direct negative evaluation is represented by the Italian policy-makers, who are considered to be 'supporters' of the migrants because of their tolerant attitude. However, this evaluation is based on a fallacious argument of

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generalization: while the speaker supposed to have proposed the housing of migrants in a convent represents a single voice, Salvini addresses a multitude of readers in his comment, generalizing the condemned attitude. The post lacks essential information for the correct decoding of the quote, because Salvini does not disclose the name of the speaker or the context in which the proposal had been formulated. The only signal that the viewpoint was only proposed and not adopted is the selection of the verb of volition *volere*, used in the past form *voleva* ("wanted"), however, the politician comments on this project as if it were already about to be fulfilled. An explicit disalignment is thus formulated through the negative judgment of the social policies proposed: "robe da matti"/ *crazy things*.

Last but not least, the poster evaluates indirectly the migrants as well, suggesting that they do not deserve to be "loved" and helped.

The third message selected for the analysis respects the structure of the previous ones. The main difference consists in the voice quoted within the message. In this case, Salvini criticizes the opinion expressed by a Catholic theologist in regard to the Islamic religion:

> (3) Padre Enzo Bianchi, priore della Comunità di Bose, in un'intervista a Repubblica afferma che l'ISLAM non è una religione violenta, e attacca Lombardia e Veneto perché la gente sarebbe XENOFOBA.
>
> Sono uomini di Chiesa o sono IMAM??? Poveri noi... (M. Salvini, September 2015) / *Father Enzo Bianchi, priest of the Community of Bose, in an interview for the Repubblica, says that ISLAM is not a violent religion, and attacks Lombardia and Veneto because the people were XENOPHOBIC.*
>
> *Are they people of the Church or are they IMAMS??? Poor us...* (Author's translation)

As in the other messages, the first utterance is formed by the indirect quotation of Enzo Bianchi's words. There are no marks of the poster's involvement in this section of the message, except the modalization represented by the verbal form 'sarebbe'/ *were*, which is a first sign regarding the difference in the stance taken by Salvini. Further, Salvini's disagreement is not explicitly directed against the truth value of the quoted statement. He introduces, instead, a derogatory comment against all the theologists who share such views, through the strategy of generalization, realized by the use of the plural noun ("uomini di Chiesa"/ *people of the Church*).

Among the three posts selected for analysis, this is the only one which approaches the topic of regionalism. Here, Salvini constructs an in-group which appears to be multilayered. The first level of the in-group is represented by the Italian people of Lombardia and Veneto, which are the Northern regions of Italy traditionally represented by the party Lega Nord. The final utterances, however, extend the group of reference, through the use of the pronoun "noi"/ *us*, which theoretically signifies all Italians who share Salvini's stance. The third message thus conveys, in a more explicit manner, the feelings of solidarity constructed by Matteo Salvini in his previous posts and in his political discourse in general. This solidarity serves to maintain the cohesion among the LN supporters and it is discursively grounded in the assertion of the national identity and of national pride, as opposed to the foreign Otherness represented by the migrants.

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5. Conclusions: public debates and public disputes

The posts analyzed illustrate how the LN leader engages in a specific form of dialogue in the public sphere, by challenging in this manner the viewpoints previously expressed by other political actors. Although his messages have an overt intertextual dimension, they do not provide a stimulus for a public debate. The opposed viewpoints are rejected, in an overarching strategy of disclaim (Martin, White 2005: 118–119) and the stance sustained by the LN politician is advanced as the singularly correct. Hence, the conclusions of the posts have a monoglossic character, which excludes dialogue, in spite of their intertextual structure.

This discursive structure contributes to the construction of a specific identity of the poster. Matteo Salvini presents himself as a voice of authority in the public – and, implicitly, political – sphere, as he challenges the discourse of the established statal authorities. Moreover, this authority is enhanced by the references to the in-group he allegedly represents. In all the three posts, the rejection of the immigration welfare policies is associated with the emphasis on the concern for the Italian citizens. The poster thus legitimates himself as a politician and the party represented, through singularization, as being the only ones willing to defend the interests of the "common people".

In spite of their brief dimension, the Facebook posts contribute to the construction of various in-groups. One of these groups is represented by the people of the regions in the north of Italy, whom the poster claims to defend. In this case, the citizens of such regions are assimilated, in fact, with the supporters of the Lega Nord party. The other in-groups constructed have a broader character. One is represented by the people supporting the right-wing ideology, while the other in-group encompasses all the Italian citizens, being based on shared characteristics like the Italian national culture and national pride.

A salient trait of the analyzed Facebook messages is the marked relation of opposition between the in-groups and the corresponding out-groups. The Italian national identity is represented as being menaced by the migrants' arrival and, further, by the policies of migrants welfare planned by the state authorities. Thus, although the poster denies the xenophobic dimension of his ideology, the rejection of the foreign Other is manifest throughout the posts.

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Abstract

The article explores the phenomenon of political communication through social network sites as Facebook, analyzing three messages posted on his Facebook page by an Italian right-wing politician. The research focuses on the discursive construction of the poster's identity and the relationships between in- and out-groups, by paying attention to the intertextual dimension of the Facebook messages. The results reveal that the politician engages in a specific form of dialogue in the public sphere, by challenging the viewpoints previously expressed by other political actors. The posts also construct the migrants arriving to Italy as a dangerous out-group which menaces the preservation of the Italian national culture and identity. In spite of their intertextuality, the posts do not provide a stimulus for a public debate, but serve to reinforce the ideology of the party represented by the poster.

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