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ESTER DI SILVESTRO

THE POPULIST LEADER

Self-Representational Strategies in Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini

PAOLO LOFFREDO

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 7

List of Figures and Tables 9

Introduction 11

Chapter One
Populism

1.1. The cornerstones of populism 17
1.1.1. The people 18
1.1.2. The elite 20
1.1.3. The general will 20
1.1.4. The leader 21
1.2. The causes of populism 23
1.2.1. (Far-)right populism 25
1.3. Approaches to populism 27
1.4. Populist communication 29
1.5. Populism in the United States 33
1.6. Donald Trump 35
1.7. Populism in Italy 37
1.8. Matteo Salvini 39

Chapter Two
Corpora and Analytical Tools

2.1. Corpora building 45
2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis approach 47
2.3. Corpus Linguistics approach 53

Chapter Three
Donald Trump

3.1. I am an outsider fighting for you 57
3.2. I will never stop fighting for you 63
3.3. One last shot at me 69

Chapter Four
Matteo Salvini

4.1. Da ministro e da papà 75
4.2. Io voglio difendere i diritti di chi non ha voce 83
4.3. È colpa mia anche questo…???! 94

Chapter Five
The Man of the People, the Saviour and the Victim

5.1. The man of the people 107
5.2. The saviour 109
5.3. The victim 111
5.4. Comparing the leaders' self-representation in tweets and traditional speeches 112

Conclusion 115

References 119

Index 135

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List of Figures and Tables

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Charteris-Black's (2006: 26) model for leadership communication. 49
Figure 3.1: Trump's tweet 20 January 2017. 57
Figure 3.2: Trump's tweet 10 February 2017. 58
Figure 3.3: Trump's tweet 27 June 2017. 63
Figure 3.4: Trump's tweet 18 April 2017. 63
Figure 3.5: Trump's tweet 11 January 2017. 69
Figure 3.6: Trump's tweet 15 June 2017. 70
Figure 3.7: Trump's tweet 3 July 2017. 71
Figure 3.8: Trump's tweet 11 January 2017. 71
Figure 4.1: Salvini's tweet 24 June 2018. 75
Figure 4.2: Salvini's tweet 3 June 2018. 76
Figure 4.3: Salvini's tweet 23 April 2018. 78
Figure 4.4: Salvini's tweet 5 May 2018. 83
Figure 4.5: Salvini's tweet 12 August 2018. 83
Figure 4.6: Salvini's tweet 22 August 2018. 85
Figure 4.7: Salvini's tweet 17 September 2018. 95
Figure 4.8: Salvini's tweet 13 February 2018. 96
Figure 4.9: Salvini's tweet 14 September 2018. 97

List of Tables

Table 2.1: Corpora composition. 46
Table 2.2: Keywords categories and sub-categories. 54
Table 3.1: In group keywords in the Trump Tweet Corpus (reference corpus enTenTen2018 US domain). 62
Table 3.2: In group keywords in the Trump Traditional Corpus (reference corpus enTenTen2018 US domain). 62
Table 3.3: Concordances of the word 'fight' in the Trump Tweet Corpus. 68
Table 3.4: Concordances of the word 'fight' in the Trump Traditional Corpus. 68

Table 3.5: Concordances of the word 'witch' in the Trump Tweet Corpus. 70
Table 3.6: Concordances of the word 'fake' in the Trump Traditional Corpus. 73
Table 4.1: In group keywords in the Salvini Tweet Corpus (reference corpus itTenTen16). 82
Table 4.2: In group keywords in the Salvini Traditional Corpus (reference corpus itTenTen16). 82
Table 4.3: Concordances of the word *combattere* ('to fight') in the Salvini Tweet Corpus. 91
Table 4.4: Concordances of the word *difendere* ('to defend') in the Salvini Tweet Corpus. 92
Table 4.5: Concordances of the word *combattere* ('to fight') in the Salvini Traditional Corpus. 93
Table 4.6: Concordances of the word *difendere* ('to defend') in the Salvini Traditional Corpus. 93
Table 4.7: Collocates of the word 'Salvini' in the Salvini Tweet Corpus. 103
Table 4.8: Concordances of the word *giornalista* ('journalist') in the Salvini Traditional Corpus. 104

Introduction

This work grew out of my personal and academic interest in understanding how populist leaders, and particularly far-right ones, manage to be successful. The events that led me to think about this subject, while I was still a master's degree student, were the Brexit Referendum and the Election of Donald Trump in 2016, and the establishment of the Conte I government between *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle* in 2018. I began to realise that something was changing and not necessarily for the better or in the direction I hoped for.

Populism is certainly not a new political phenomenon since it was identified for the first time during the 19th century in Russia (Canovan 1981: 61). However, it is still relevant as we are currently witnessing a revival of this phenomenon and especially of (far-)right populism. Just think about the elections of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in the Americas, or the success of European leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Geert Wilders, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini. Even after an apparent setback during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, populism continues to be pervasive and successful as it thrives precisely in times of crisis (Brubaker 2021: 79). Indeed, this strong reappearance in the international panorama is due to an overall atmosphere characterised by uncertainties and instabilities from political, social and economic perspectives. The financial crisis of 2008 is surely one of the main triggers of this climate of general instability and uncertainty, since it led to economic austerity measures (Tormey 2019: 53), which obviously caused dissatisfaction among citizens who already distrusted mainstream parties perceived as being part of the political elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 99). In addition, it should not be underestimated the populist leaders' strategical employment of topics concerning minorities - who allegedly threaten social order, traditions, religion, and culture - in order to gain people's consensus. On the one hand, the immigration phenomenon is probably the most popular topic used by (far-)right populist politicians because it is very easy to trigger anxieties, uncertainties and fears after all the terrorist attacks that followed 9/11. On the other hand, feminists and the LGBTQIA+ community represent for (far-)right populists a real threat because they fight for a new and inclusive vision of the world that strongly jeopardises the social order - supported by these politicians - which involves notions such as traditional family and fixed gender roles (Mudde 2019: 140). As a result, the uncertain atmosphere characterised by real or just perceived - political, social and economic - threats has favoured the rise of

peculiar politicians and outsiders (Tormey 2019) such as Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini, whom I chose as the leaders to investigate in my research.

This work aims to be a contribution to the broader field of study of populism - trying to give an additional insight of US and Italian far-right populist discourse - from a linguistic and critical perspective using a methodological approach that combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Corpus Linguistics (CL). My goal is to highlight similarities useful in identifying trends shared by far-right populist leaders as well as revealing differences by analysing and comparing the self-representational strategies of Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini. Moreover, the analysis - looking at both tweets and traditional speeches - also pays attention to a possible evolution of populist discourse that has had to adapt to new online platforms such as Twitter.

I specifically chose Trump and Salvini because of their similar but distinct political backgrounds and shared stances, so that I could easily point out similarities and differences. In fact, the time-spans chosen for data collection are perfectly comparable as they include the last three months of their election campaigns and the first seven months in government. This choice allowed me to analyse both strategies related to their self-promotion as leaders and also those used during their time in government while they were dealing with issues such as the judicial opposition Trump faced concerning his Travel ban and that faced by Salvini for blocking several NGOs (e.g., *Aquarius* and *Diciotti*) from docking in Italian harbours and preventing immigrants' disembarkations.

Chapter 1 provides a theoretical introduction to populism presenting the main features that define the phenomenon and the causes of its current revival in the world, especially in Europe and in the United States, with a particular focus on far-right populism. In addition to a summary of the approaches that have been used to study populism, the chapter delves into populist communication paying special attention to online platforms and, more precisely, on Twitter by exploring the perfect synergy between this social network and populist discourse. Furthermore, the chapter contextualises populism in the United States and Italy through a synthetic overview of its rise and evolution in these countries, and introduces Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini as populist leaders outlining their political careers and populist rhetoric. Corpora building and the combined methodological approach of the comparative analysis are addressed in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to the findings of Trump's and Salvini's respective analyses and

show some of the most exemplifying[1] tweets, traditional extracts, keywords and collocate lists, and concordances. Chapter 5 discusses and compares the results of Trump's and Salvini's analyses highlighting the differences that emerged but especially pointing out the similarities leading these leaders to portray themselves as men of the people, saviours and victims.

[1] Those examples that allowed me to show multiple strategies simultaneously.