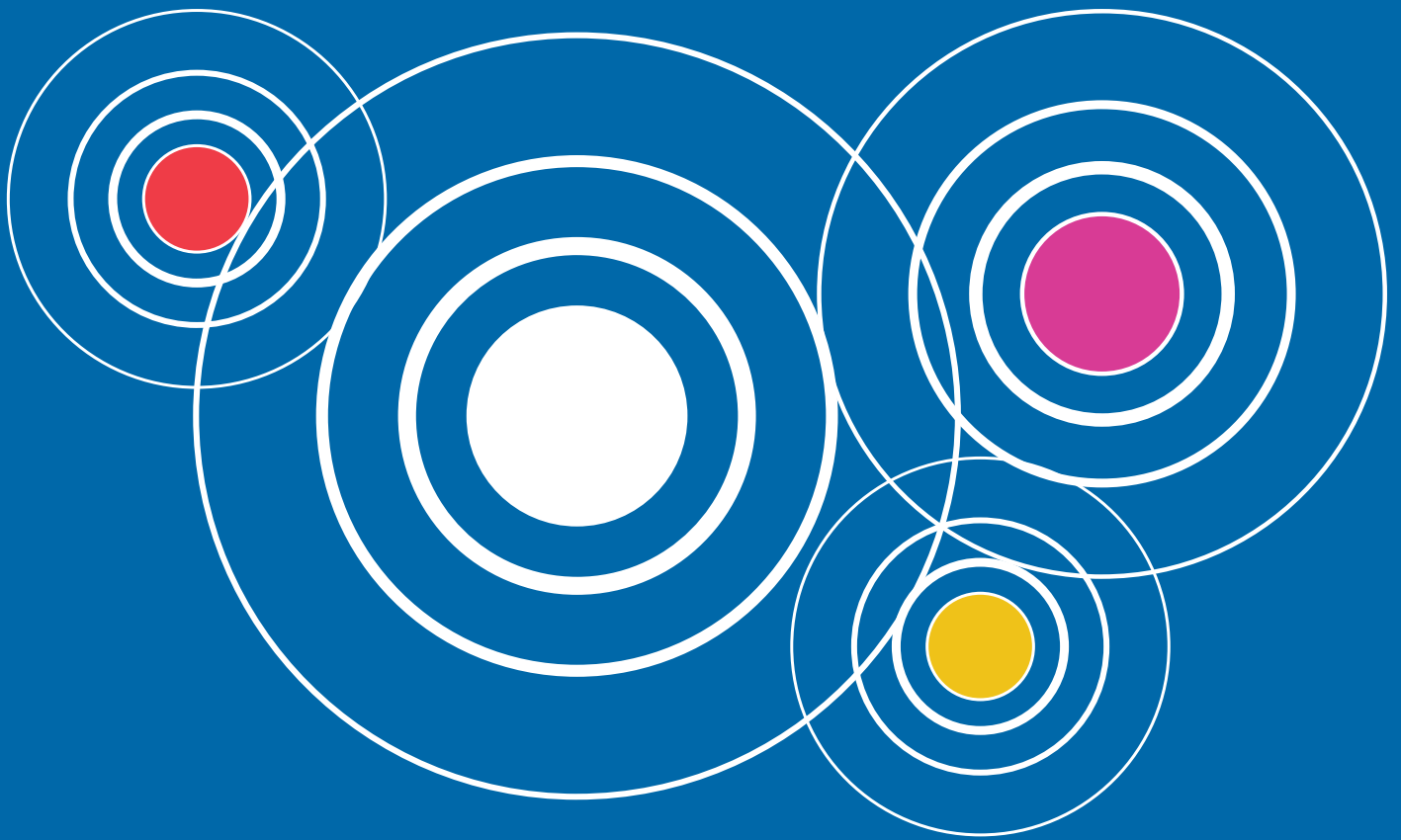




DIVE-IN

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
ON **DIVERSITY & INCLUSION**

Vol. 4 No. 2 (2024)

New Styles, New Meanings,
New Identities

DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion is a scholarly journal that takes a comparative and multidisciplinary approach to cultural, literary, linguistic, and social issues connected with diversity and inclusion.

The journal welcomes the submission of interdisciplinary contributions representative of various interests and methodologies, particularly linguistics, literature, philology, history, social sciences and economics.

DIVE-IN is a multilingual online publication with contributions in English, Italian, and the main languages of academic research. The targeted audience is specialists, as well as all those interested in the current epistemological debate on identity and environmental, cultural and linguistic challenges.



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ISSN 2785-3233

<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2785-3233/v4-n2-2024>

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
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LITERATURES, AND CULTURES

Index

introduction

01

New Styles, New Meanings, New Identities: Editors' Introduction

Jane Helen Johnson,
Antonella Luporini, Monica Turci,
Marina Lambrou

articles

05

La biografia linguistica tra costruzione identitaria e plurilinguismo: un caso studio

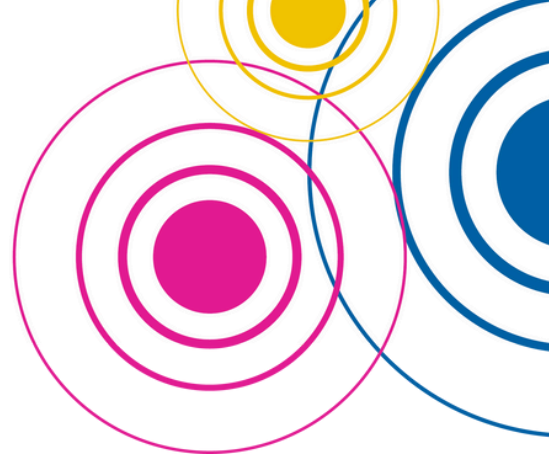
Giulia Lo Voi, Rita Luppi
Eva-Maria Thüne

35

Verbal and visual metaphors of an unfolding crisis: Emerging styles of representation in British and Italian front page news at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic

Antonella Luporini,
Claudia Roberta Combei,
Ludovica Pannitto





65

**An ecostylistic investigation of
the online communicative practices
within grassroots environmental
activism in India**

Elisabetta Zurru

conversazioni

161

**Jeet Thayil in conversation
with Esterino Adami**

Esterino Adami

111

**Un romanzo 'a due cervelli':
intelligenza artificiale e ironia
in *Non siamo mai stati sulla
Terra* di Rocco Tanica**

Maira Martini

173

**Alessandro Berselli
racconta la sua scrittura**

Maurizio Ascari

zona franca

131

**How bloody is your vessel?
'Contrastive idiomaticity'
among languages and cultures**

Federica Ferrari

Houda Akalai

reviews

179

Manuela D'Amore, *Literary Voices of the Italian Diaspora in Britain: Time, Transnational Identities and Hybridity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 314 pp., ISBN 9783031354373.

Maurizio Ascari

185

Felix Hamborg, *Revealing Media Bias in News Articles: NLP Techniques for Automated Frame Analysis*, Cham: Springer Nature, 2023, 238 pp., e-ISBN 978-3-031-17693-7.

Beatrice Fiumanò

189

Marja Sorvari, *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women's Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 180 pp., ISBN 978-3030958398.

Michela Romano

195

Bertrand Westphal, *L'Infini culturel. Théorie littéraire et fragilité du divers*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2023, 203 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-52160-5.

Maria Francesca Ruggiero



New Styles, New Meanings, New Identities: Editors' Introduction

Jane Helen Johnson¹, Antonella Luporini², Monica Turci³ & Marina Lambrou⁴
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Investigations into style have been the object of interdisciplinary research in the humanities and social sciences since at least the 1960s. *Style in Language* (Sebeok 1960) is one of the earliest and most influential attempts to discuss “the fluid and dissonant notion of style” (1960: 3). The volume is a collection of proceedings from an international conference held in Bloomington, Indiana, which saw the participation of philosophers, cultural anthropologists, linguists, folklorists and critics. Creative writers – those that could be metaphorically defined as the ‘artisans’ of style – were also central to this debate. Specifically, not only did the conference primarily address the concept of the language of literature but also, with the presence of creative writers, attempt an interdisciplinary understanding of style. As Sebeok wrote in the introduction to the afore-mentioned volume, “[t]he significance of the Conference on Style can perhaps best be expressed by the same evocative metaphor T. S. Eliot once applied to Paul Valéry’s meditations on poets and the art of poetry: ‘The tower of ivory has been fitted up as a laboratory’” (1960: 4).

As well as providing long-lasting foundation theories, these beginnings set the tone for further ongoing developments of critical approaches to style. These discussions continue to this day to be the object of a highly inclusive interdisciplinary debate that “continually seeks to refine and update its principles in line with new knowledge in relevant fields” (Gibbons & Whiteley 2018: 5). In particular, recent insights from pragmatics, socio-semiotics, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, cognitive science and cultural studies have provided invaluable contributions to show how choices of style in literary as well as non-literary texts have the inherent power to shape world-views and

identities in response to the social, cultural, ideological and political context in which texts are produced, as well as in orienting their interpretations.

Given this general premise, it is not surprising that style should be one of the themes to be investigated as part of the activities of the five-year Departmental Project *Diversity & Inclusion* (2018-2023). The interdisciplinarity that has always characterised critical approaches to style as well as style's pivotal role in all forms of discourse made it a strategic theme to address within the above-mentioned project. Style is a key issue to investigate in order to build an open and inclusive dialogue among the disciplines hosted by our Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures with a view to forging a multidirectional research trajectory focused on multilingual discursive forms.

It was precisely this intent that motivated the organisation of the 2022 Departmental summer school entitled *Questions of Style: Bridging Literature, Linguistics and Translation*, which provided the original inspiration for this issue of *DIVE-IN*. Organised around plenary lectures and practical workshops, this summer school offered a selected group of postgraduate students specialist knowledge on style from the perspective of contemporary creative writers, as well as scholars in translation studies, stylometry and corpus linguistics. Attending students were given the task of 'bridging' this knowledge during a final hands-on laboratory session aimed at the realisation of posters that featured integrated ideas of style.

The main section of this issue contains critical pieces that provide a reflection on stylistic variations in connection with some of the most pressing challenges of our times.

In *La biografia linguistica tra costruzione identitaria e plurilinguismo: un caso studio*, Giulia Lo Voi, Rita Luppi and Eva-Maria Thüne present a close analysis of the linguistic biography of R. Although this biography concerns events that took place during the last century, this article offers an original and enlightening contribution to understanding how phenomena of mobility experienced by present day refugees and emigrants impact on their language and identity.

Antonella Luporini, Claudia Roberta Combei and Ludovica Pannitto's contribution – *Verbal and visual metaphors of an unfolding crisis: Emerging styles of representation in British and Italian front page news at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic* – brings us back to the days when Europe was beginning to face the challenge of an unprecedented (at least in recent history) health crisis. Working on two corpora of front pages from British and Italian broadsheet newspapers published in early 2020, and moving beyond the verbal to

encompass the visual mode, the authors identify several key metaphorical themes that may have shaped subsequent public perceptions of this critical situation, though with potentially relevant socio-cultural differences between the two contexts under investigation.

The language of social media on the platform X is the focus of Elisabetta Zurru's article entitled *An ecostylistic study of the online communicative practices of environmental activism in India*. Combining ecostylistics with ecolinguistics, multimodal critical discourse analysis and multimodal studies, Zurru investigates the digital communicative practices of a grassroots environmental movement. Focusing on their stylistic traits and communicative strategies, she reveals that verbal and non-verbal figurative language and non-conventional oppositions are major stylistic traits in the digital communication of this environmental movement; that engagement, mobilisation and persuasion are their main communicative functions; and that most of the strategies used are beneficial rather than ambivalent or destructive.

Shifting the focus from linguistics to literature, Maira Martini's article – *Un romanzo 'a due cervelli': intelligenza artificiale e ironia in Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra di Rocco Tanica* – delves into another key contemporary issue: the relationship between human and artificial intelligence and how these “two brains” can interact to the point of complementing each other in creative writing. Martini's analysis follows Rocco Tanica's pioneering experiment in *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra* – the first novel ever written through AI-human collaboration, according to the publisher's synopsis.¹ The article reveals how the interaction with Gpt-3 allows the human writer to push the boundaries of language in multiple ways, through a narration that merges resonant intertextual reminders with a skilful use of irony and estrangement effects.

The *Zona Franca* section of this issue features an article by Federica Ferrari and Houda Akalai entitled *How bloody is your vessel? 'Contrastive idiomaticity' among languages and cultures*. Through a comparison of an idiomatic expression in English with similar expressions in French, Italian, and Arabic, their conclusions provide discussion from a cross-cultural persuasion and sustainability perspective.

Following the positive feedback on the summer school, and in the belief that literature has a privileged place in stylistics (cf. Carter & Stockwell 2008; Miller 2021) and plays a key role in reflecting the realities of our time, this issue

¹ <https://www.ilsaggiatore.com/libro/non-siamo-mai-stati-sulla-terra> [last access on 25/02/2025].

also includes a section entitled *Conversazioni*. Here, Alessandro Berselli, an Italian author of noir fiction and teacher of creative writing, discusses his style with Maurizio Ascari, professor of English literature and author of fictional works, while Indian writer Jeet Thayil is interviewed by Esterino Adami, professor of English language and linguistics and author of a recent key study on postcolonial stylistics.

As Editors, we hope that this issue will offer a broad perspective on the importance of style, which can help us become more critical writers, readers and, ultimately, thinkers – capable of navigating the complexities of meaning, culture and identity in our contemporary society.

We wish to thank all those who, in different ways, contributed to the planning and realisation of the 2022 Annual Summer School. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to Ana Pano Alamán, Maurizio Ascari and Paola Scrolavezza, who acted as members of its scientific committee; to Marina Manfredi and Chiara Bartolini for playing a key role in the organisation of the translation section; to plenary speakers Javier La Rosa, Kirsten Malmkjær, Michaela Mahlberg, Laura Imai Messina and Chantal Wright, and to Valentina Vetri for coordinating the workshop on translation. We are also grateful to the summer school students who generously offered to showcase their posters during the Alma Mater Fest. Last but not least, we wish to thank all the Reviewers who were involved in the double-blind review process of the articles in this issue.

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La biografia linguistica tra costruzione identitaria e plurilinguismo: un caso studio

Giulia Lo Voi, Rita Luppi & Eva-Maria Thüne

Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna

Abstract (italiano) Nella cornice del narrare autobiografico, le biografie linguistiche, in cui i parlanti si soffermano su esperienze e attitudini legate alle lingue del loro repertorio, fanno emergere la complessa e poliedrica dimensione soggettiva dell'agire linguistico. In quest'ottica, l'interesse per l'apprendimento e il mantenimento linguistico può essere coniugato con un'indagine dei processi di costruzione e ricostruzione identitaria, anche di parlanti plurilingui. Il presente contributo prende in esame la biografia linguistica di una parlante originaria dell'ex regione tedesca della Prussia Orientale, in cui la sua identità di profuga dopo lo scoppio della Seconda Guerra Mondiale si affianca e si intreccia con quella di moglie di un cosiddetto *Gastarbeiter* (lavoratore ospite) italiano. Dall'analisi emerge come le esperienze di vita dell'intervistata abbiano portato a un uso variegato delle lingue del suo repertorio, che acquisiscono una funzione espressiva delle varie sfaccettature della sua identità.

Abstract (English) Within the frame of autobiographical narratives, linguistic biographies—where speakers reflect on the experiences and attitudes toward the languages of their linguistic repertoire—reveal the complex and multifaceted subjective dimension of linguistic agency. From this perspective, the interest for language learning and language maintenance can be combined with the investigation of identity construction and reconstruction processes, even of multilingual speakers. This study examines the linguistic biography of a speaker from the former German region of East Prussia, whose identity as a refugee following the outbreak of World War II intersects and intertwines with that of the wife of an Italian *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker). The analysis highlights how the interviewee's life experiences have led to a varied use of the languages of her repertoire, which serve as an expressive tool for the different facets of her identity.

Keywords linguistic biographies; identity; linguistic repertoire; language attitudes; migration; liminality

1. Narrazioni autobiografiche: tra identità e processi linguistici¹

A partire dagli anni '70, grazie al cosiddetto *narrative turn* (cfr. De Fina/Georgakopoulou 2008) nelle scienze sociali, le narrazioni autobiografiche hanno goduto di un ruolo sempre più rilevante come strumento utile all'indagine della costruzione identitaria dei parlanti (cfr. Bamberg et al. 2007; Bamberg et al. 2022). Questo approccio 'convenzionale', come lo definiscono De Fina/Georgakopoulou (2008: 380), è stato successivamente soggetto a critiche per la tendenza a considerare le narrazioni come sistema privilegiato per la costruzione di un sé unitario, e quindi superato da nuovi paradigmi, come quello del *narrative as talk-in-interaction* (cfr. De Fina/Georgakopoulou 2008: 381 ss.; De Fina/Georgakopoulou 2012: 86 ss.). In questo caso, le narrazioni vengono considerate come entità non astraibili né dal loro contesto originario né dal qui ed ora dell'interazione: "narratives are *emergent*, a joint adventure and the outcome of negotiation by interlocutors" (De Fina/Georgakopoulou 2008: 381).

Come ricorda Pavlenko (2007), le narrazioni autobiografiche, dando la possibilità di esprimere il processo di elaborazione interna di processi linguistici, hanno assunto un ruolo rilevante anche negli studi sui processi di acquisizione e attrito linguistico (*language attrition*; cfr. Schmid 2011; Schmid/Köpke 2019) e perdita di una lingua (*language loss*; cfr. Sorokina 2023). Pavlenko (2007: 165) considera, ad esempio, tre diverse forme di narrazione autobiografica utili all'indagine di fenomeni legati al bilinguismo: i diari degli apprendenti L2 (*diaries and journals*), le memorie linguistiche (*language memoirs*) nonché le biografie linguistiche (*language biographies*). A queste ultime, oggetto di interesse del presente contributo, è dedicata la prossima sezione.

1.1 Le biografie linguistiche

Come riassume Lupica Spagnolo (2019: 25), la biografica linguistica rappresenta "un racconto di vita (scritto o orale), incentrato sulle varietà linguistiche conosciute o riconosciute dai narratori, le modalità in cui queste sono state acquisite, il loro uso e mantenimento o sostituzione nel corso del tempo". Il paradigma delle biografie linguistiche, riconducibile a quello

¹ L'articolo è stato concepito e realizzato dalle autrici in stretta collaborazione. In particolare, Giulia Lo Voi è responsabile delle sezioni 2.1 e 2.2; Rita Luppi delle sezioni 1., 1.1 e 3.; Eva-Maria Thüne delle sezioni 2.3, 4 e 5.

biografico (cfr. Franceschini 2002: 20), consente di scandagliare il vissuto linguistico individuale (cfr. Franceschini 2002: 21) in tutta la sua complessità (cfr. Busch 2015a: 3), combinando quindi una prospettiva incentrata sull'individuo e sulla sua storia di vita con lo studio dei processi di acquisizione, mantenimento e perdita linguistica (cfr. Franceschini/Miecznikowski 2004: VII-VIII).

Il concetto di biografia linguistica (*Sprachbiographie*) si è rivelato particolarmente fruttuoso dapprima in ambito tedescofono,² trovando applicazione, tra gli altri, nello studio della costruzione identitaria di parlanti plurilingui (cfr. Betten 2010; Busch 2013, 2017a; König 2014) in relazione all'esperienza linguistica, racchiusa da Busch (2015a) nella nozione di *Spracherleben*, “the lived experience of language” (Busch 2017b: 341). Il concetto di *Spracherleben* prende le mosse da quello di *repertorio linguistico*, inteso come

the totality of linguistic forms regularly employed in the course of socially significant interaction. [...] The verbal repertoire then contains all the accepted ways of formulating messages. It provides the weapons of everyday communication. Speakers choose among this arsenal in accordance with the meaning they wish to convey. (Gumperz 1964: 137 s.)

Al tempo stesso, però, lo *Spracherleben* trascende i confini della singola comunità di parlanti, intrecciandosi con le traiettorie biografiche degli individui (cfr. Busch 2017b: 345; cfr. anche Busch 2010). Una prospettiva terza, incentrata sul modo in cui i parlanti interagiscono per mezzo della lingua, si va dunque a unire e ad arricchire attraverso lo sguardo sull'esperienza che il singolo fa del – e per mezzo del – suo repertorio linguistico (cfr. anche Busch 2015a: 3):

What is crucial in current elaborations of the concept of the linguistic repertoire is the move beyond the realm of speech community which is achieved either by taking a biographical perspective that ties the repertoire more to an individual's life trajectory or by taking a spatial perspective that focusses on encounters in linguistically highly diverse settings. (Busch 2017b: 345)

² Una panoramica dettagliata viene offerta in Luppi/Thüne (2022a). Cfr. anche i contributi raccolti nel volume edito da Salvadori et al. (2020).

Tale dimensione biografica consente, pertanto, di ricostruire il modo in cui il repertorio linguistico si sviluppa e si modifica nell'arco della vita del parlante. D'interesse non sono, tuttavia, le modalità in cui queste conoscenze vengono acquisite e accumulate in ottica diacronica, né tantomeno lo sono le singole lingue o varietà del repertorio linguistico individuale. L'attenzione è rivolta, piuttosto, alla soggettività dell'esperienza linguistica, dunque alla variazione linguistica come indice di attitudini e ideologie linguistiche (cfr. Busch 2013: 81 ss.; cfr. anche Gal 2006) nonché come strumento di atti di inclusione ed esclusione (cfr. Busch 2016a, 2016b; McNamara 2020):

[W]e wish to be able to trace how, by way of emotional and bodily experience, dramatic or recurring situations of interaction with others become part of the repertoire, in the form of explicit and implicit linguistic attitudes and habitualized patterns of language practices. It is only when we do not reduce language to its cognitive and instrumental dimension, but give due weight to its essentially intersubjective, social nature and its bodily and emotional dimension, that questions about personal attitudes toward language can be adequately framed. (Busch 2017b: 349 s.)

Pertanto, collocandosi tra il sé e l'altro (cfr. Busch 2017b: 346), l'agire linguistico viene considerato nella sua dimensione interazionale,³ dunque anche spaziale (cfr. De Fina 2009; Busch 2013: 126–134; Baynham/De Fina 2016; Ryan et al. 2016). Occorre quindi chiedersi cosa accade nel momento in cui i parlanti abbandonano uno spazio, qui inteso anche come spazio linguistico, a loro familiare per spostarsi in uno spazio nuovo (cfr. Busch 2015a: 2): qual è il bagaglio linguistico che portano con sé? Come vengono posizionati e come si posizionano (cfr. Bamberg 1997) rispetto alle pratiche linguistiche in uso? E qual è la percezione, anche corporea ed emozionale, che hanno di sé in quanto parlanti? Queste domande emergono, tra gli altri, in riferimento a fenomeni di mobilità (cfr. Blommaert 2016), all'esperienza migratoria (cfr. De Fina 2003b; Blommaert 2007, 2009, 2010; Piller/Takahashi 2011; Baynham/De Fina 2016; Merino et al. 2017) e di fuga (cfr. Busch/Busch 2013; Busch 2015a, 2015b, 2017b).

Come illustrato di seguito, sono proprio il paradigma della fuga e della migrazione a caratterizzare il caso studio al centro del presente contributo.

³ “Although the biographic approach relies on individual case studies, it is not primarily interested in the uniqueness of a particular life story but rather in the social dimensions of language practices that it helps to reveal” (Busch 2006: 9).

2. La biografia linguistica di R.

2.1 Descrizione della ricerca

La presente analisi è incentrata sui dati biografico linguistici di una singola parlante, R., raccolti tramite due interviste: una prima intervista narrativa strutturata (durata: 1 ora e 29 minuti) del luglio del 2020 e una seconda intervista semi-strutturata (durata: 1 ora e 56 minuti), a integrazione della prima, dell'agosto del 2024. Le registrazioni, a cura di una delle autrici del presente contributo (GLV), nipote (abiatica) di R., sono state condotte in lingua italiana, ma si caratterizzano per fenomeni di code-switching in tedesco. Nell'ottica del principio del *recipient design* (cfr. Deppermann 2013, 2018), l'intervistatrice si è avvalsa di un lessico e di strutture semplificate per facilitare la comprensione; il suo eloquio si caratterizza, inoltre, per tono di voce alto, velocità bassa e frequenti pause.

2.2 Panoramica linguistico-biografica

Nata nel 1939 a Elbing, nell'allora Prussia Orientale, regione del Reich tedesco (oggi Elbląg, Polonia), da madre originaria della Pomerania e da padre proveniente dalla regione della Slesia, nel 1945 R. fu coinvolta, insieme alla famiglia, nell'operazione Annibale, condotta dalla *Kriegsmarine*, la marina militare tedesca, per far evacuare verso ovest, via mare, truppe e civili a seguito dell'avanzare dell'Armata Rossa.⁴ Nel frattempo, il padre di R., chiamato alle armi nel 1944, fu preso prigioniero dagli Alleati e trasferito temporaneamente negli Stati Uniti. Nel febbraio 1945 R. si stabilì con la famiglia a Viöl, nello Schleswig-Holstein, per poi trasferirsi nel 1951 a Bad Säckingen, nel Baden-Württemberg, grazie all'aiuto della Croce Rossa. Qui, nel 1958, incontrò il suo futuro marito, A., un cosiddetto *Gastarbeiter*⁵ originario di Bisacquino, comune nell'entroterra siciliano, in provincia di Palermo. Nel corso degli anni R. visitò la Sicilia regolarmente per motivi familiari, soprattutto durante i mesi estivi; si stabilì temporaneamente a Bisacquino tra il 1980 e il 1983, ma fece poi ritorno a Bad Säckingen. R. e il marito si trasferirono definitivamente a Bisacquino nel

⁴ Per un'introduzione cfr. Schulze (2003).

⁵ Cfr. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/migrazioni-internazionali-e-migrazioni-interne_\(L'Italia-e-le-sue-Regioni\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/migrazioni-internazionali-e-migrazioni-interne_(L'Italia-e-le-sue-Regioni)/) [ultimo accesso 29.10.2024].

1995, ricongiungendosi con le due figlie che vi si erano già stabilite nel 1993. Il figlio, invece, rimase a vivere in Germania.

La storia di R. si intreccia dunque con alcuni degli eventi storici più significativi del secolo scorso, che hanno segnato un profondo stravolgimento nella vita sua e dei suoi familiari. È una storia di fuga⁶ dal luogo familiare in cui si è cresciuti, dalla patria, prima, e di migrazione, poi, che si rispecchiano nel variegato repertorio linguistico della parlante. Queste tappe di vita, segnate da spostamenti ed esperienze di migrazione, forzata e non, possono essere ripercorse tramite la biografia linguistica di R., come sintetizzato nella Tabella 1, basata sulla ricostruzione delle sue competenze linguistiche:

PERIODO	LUOGO	Competenze linguistiche
1939–1945	Elbing, Ostpreußen (Prussia Orientale)	• Competenza passiva: <i>Niederpreußisch</i>⁷ (basso prussiano); • Competenza attiva: <i>Hochdeutsch</i> (tedesco standard)
1945–1951	Viöl (Schleswig-Holstein)	• Competenza attiva: <i>Hochdeutsch</i> (tedesco standard)
1951–1980, 1983–1995	Bad Säckingen (Baden-Württemberg)	• Competenza passiva: <i>Hochalemannisch</i> (alto alemanno); • Competenza attiva: <i>Hochdeutsch</i> (tedesco standard)
1958 ca.–oggi	Bisacquino (PA)	• Interlingua (cfr. 3.) composta da dialetto di Bisacquino, italiano e tedesco; • Competenza attiva: <i>Hochdeutsch</i> (tedesco standard)

Tabella 1: Sviluppo della biografia linguistica di R.

⁶ Per l'analisi di testimonianze orali degli eventi drammatici vissuti da parlanti provenienti dalla Prussia Orientale cfr. Cinato (2018, 2020, 2023).

⁷ Va sottolineato che si tratta della varietà *Niederpreußisch*, comunemente non distinta dalla denominazione di carattere topografico *Ostpreußisch*. R. usa, infatti, quest'ultimo termine e non quello dialettologico.

2.3 Lingue e varietà

Come si evince dalla Tabella 1, nell'arco della sua vita R., a causa di processi di migrazione complessi, impara o è in contatto con lingue e/o varietà diverse sia del tedesco sia dell'italiano.

A Elbing (Prussia Orientale), sua città natale, si parlava una forma di *Niederpreußisch*⁸ (basso prussiano). Si tratta di un dialetto del basso tedesco orientale parlato in Prussia Orientale, Prussia Occidentale e Danzica fino al 1945. Questa varietà era però destinata all'estinzione in seguito alla pressoché completa sostituzione della popolazione tedesca con quella polacca, proveniente da una zona entrata a far parte dell'Unione Sovietica dopo il 1945. Nel ricordo che R. ha dei suoi genitori, originari di regioni diverse (Pomerania e Slesia), questi parlano in dialetto tra di loro, ma non lo trasmettono alle due figlie. Così facendo, seguono, probabilmente inconsciamente, un'indicazione fatta propria dalla politica linguistica nazista, cioè la tendenza ad abbandonare il dialetto in favore della lingua nazionale, considerata 'pura'.⁹ Dalla prospettiva dell'educazione linguistica ci sono, infatti, prove di come il nazismo abbia cercato di prendere possesso anche della lingua di tutti i giorni, e quindi non solo propria dei discorsi politici, rendendola un domino simbolico per la trasmissione di un modello che non lasciava più spazio all'espressione individuale o sociale (cfr. Klemperer 1945). R. apprende quindi la varietà dialettale accanto alla lingua standard (*Hochdeutsch*), che per lei diventa la varietà di riferimento.

Alla fine della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, con la fuga dalla Prussia verso l'estremo nord della Germania, verso lo Schleswig-Holstein, al confine con la Danimarca, R. entra in contatto con una nuova realtà linguistica a sua volta assai complessa. Tramite la Croce Rossa viene collocata a Viöl, località nei pressi di Husum, nella Frisia settentrionale, tutt'oggi caratterizzata da un paesaggio linguistico composto da cinque lingue: l'alto e il basso tedesco (*Hochdeutsch* e *Niederdeutsch*), l'alto e il basso danese (*Hochdänisch* e *Niederdänisch*) e il

⁸ Cfr. Mitzka (1922).

⁹ "Il senso dell'appartenenza linguistica si riduce cioè a uno slogan retorico che per di più preclude ai giovani ogni reale accesso alla storicità della loro esperienza. In secondo luogo, i dialetti erano negli anni Trenta [...] una realtà comunicativa ancora attuale [...]. Ma ammettere la funzionalità comunicativa delle parole locali avrebbe significato ridurre lo spazio ideologico della lingua nazionale. La base teorica di questo atteggiamento risiedeva infatti nell'ipotesi, pesantemente mistificatoria, che i dialetti fossero confluiti e cresciuti insieme nella lingua nazionale" (Koesters Gensini 2008: 122).

Frisone (*Friesisch*). Inoltre, fino al XX secolo, a Viöl e nella zona circostante si parlava una variante separata del dialetto dello Jutland meridionale. L'ultimo parlante di questo dialetto, il Viöl-danese, *Viölsch* o Fjoldemål, morì nel 1937. Che Viöl fosse una località assai chiusa e conservatrice è deducibile anche dal fatto che, alle elezioni del *Reichstag* del 1933, il partito nazionalsocialista, la NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei*), vi ottenne il 93,1%, il risultato più alto di tutti i comuni del Reich. L'arrivo, subito dopo il crollo del Terzo Reich, di tanti profughi dall'est in una località con queste caratteristiche fa supporre la presenza di una tensione politico-culturale soggiacente non favorevole all'integrazione.

R. vive in questa zona fino al 1951 quando, sempre con l'aiuto della Croce Rossa, la famiglia viene trasferita nell'estremo sud della neonata Repubblica Federale, a Bad Säckingen, zona economicamente più prospera vicino al confine con la Svizzera tedesca. Quest'area linguistica, che include, infatti, anche gran parte della Svizzera tedesca, è quella dell'alemanno, più precisamente dell'alto alemanno (*Hochalemannisch*), un dialetto del tedesco superiore parlato non solo nella Svizzera tedesca, ma anche nel Liechtenstein, in Germania in alcune zone del Baden meridionale (a sud di Friburgo), nel Sundgau alsaziano e nel Vorarlberg austriaco.

Colpisce dunque che R. cresca e viva in zone di confine sia politico sia linguistico, fatto che attribuisce alla lingua standard tedesca una particolare importanza a livello comunicativo nonché come elemento identitario. Il fatto che R. si leghi, in seguito, a una persona a sua volta del tutto estranea alla cultura e al dialetto della regione così come alla lingua tedesca ci pare altamente significativo come espressione di un senso di estraneità perpetuato. Dal 1958, tramite il legame con A., nel repertorio di R. entrano poi in gioco la lingua italiana, intesa come lingua standard, lingua del Paese e della cultura del futuro marito, nonché il siciliano, lingua di origine di quest'ultimo. Sta di fatto che fino al 1995, anno del suo trasferimento definitivo in Sicilia, R. vive in una costellazione linguistica plurilingue caratterizzata da passaggi tra più varietà del tedesco, e – seppur in modo limitato – con l'italiano e il siciliano.

3. Narrazione e ricostruzione della biografia linguistica

Come sopra accennato, R. afferma di ricordare di aver sempre utilizzato il tedesco standard (*Hochdeutsch*) nella comunicazione con i genitori, che consideravano il dialetto come una varietà inferiore rispetto allo standard e che

volevano, dunque, che i figli non lo utilizzassero. Tuttavia, il fatto che i genitori facessero ricorso al dialetto nei momenti scherzosi o di forte emotività, ma anche per non farsi capire dai figli, ha permesso a R. di sviluppare una competenza passiva basica.

Quello del dialetto è un tema ricorrente nella biografia linguistica di R., che ricorda con amarezza la discriminazione subita nel dopoguerra, in quanto profuga dell'est, anche a scuola, dove veniva riconosciuta e definita come *Flüchtlingskind* (bambina profuga):

Esempio 1: A scuola ((intervista 2024, 00:06:42-00:07:49))

G: Ma tu ti senti o ti sei sentita migrante?

R: Ma per ora no, prima, migrante das heißt Flüchtling?

Ma per ora no, prima, migrante *significa profugo?*

G: Sì.

R: Per tante anni sì, a bambini pure. Anche andato a scola, questo n'altro bambino c'ha detto "mi", da kommt wieder ein Flüchtlingskind". Wir wurden gekennzeichnet.

Per tante anni sì, a bambini pure. Anche andato a scola, questo n'altro bambino c'ha detto "mi", *ecco che arriva un altro bambino profugo*". Venivamo bollati così.

G: Nel sud della Germania, a Säckingen, dici?

R: Prima di nord [...] e dopo anche a Säckingen. Dopo io la dodici anni, quando noi ferito eh umgezogen.

Prima di nord [...] e dopo anche a Säckingen. Dopo io la dodici anni, quando noi ferito eh *trasferiti*.

G: Vi siete trasferiti.

R: Trasferiti, sì. Anche da là, sì.

Il tema della fuga rientrò nel dibattito socio-politico della Repubblica Federale Tedesca.¹⁰ Gli *Heimatvertriebenen* (profughi dalle regioni divenute polacche) poterono dar vita alle proprie organizzazioni politiche e culturali, e assunsero cariche politiche (cfr. Schulze 2003: 650–654).

¹⁰ Nella Repubblica Democratica Tedesca, invece, la nuova dottrina socialista non lasciò spazio ai ricordi e alle drammatiche esperienze dei cosiddetti *Umsiedler* (persone trasferite), successivamente definiti *Neubürger* (nuovi cittadini) (cfr. Schulze 2003).

Ciò non si tradusse, tuttavia, in

un vero e proprio riconoscimento del passato dei profughi da parte del sistema politico e della società della Germania occidentale. Si trattava anzi di un riconoscimento molto selettivo e quindi una memoria molto selettiva. Infatti, nel dibattito politico e popolare avevano parte solo quegli aspetti del vissuto dei nuovi venuti che potessero svolgere una più vasta funzione nella Germania occidentale del dopoguerra, cioè utili a rendere più stabile una società che si era “scollata” durante la guerra e la sconfitta, ma anche a fornire al nuovo stato tedesco occidentale una legittimità e un metodo accettabile di gestire il passato (Schulze 2003: 654).

L'integrazione socio-economica e politica nella Germania dell'Ovest, agli occhi dei tedeschi occidentali un traguardo di successo per i profughi, non fu, dunque, priva di costi: ridotti nella narrazione occidentale a vittime di crimini, gli *Heimatvertriebenen* non vennero solo privati dei racconti di ricordi personali e collettivi del periodo antecedente alla fuga; a essere ignorate furono anche “tutte le caratteristiche regionali che andavano al di là di un pittoresco folklore” (Schulze 2003: 655). A tal proposito, R. ricorda, ad esempio, come i coetanei di Bad Säckingen parlassero tra di loro in dialetto alto alemanno (cfr. 2.2) per isolarla. Nel momento in cui la varietà dialettale assume la valenza di marcatore identitario, di *shibboleth*,¹¹ R. subisce l'estraniamento dal gruppo posizionandosi come soggetto passivo, privo di agentività (cfr. Duranti 2004).

La parola *shibboleth* rimanda a una metodologia impiegata in sociolinguistica per indicare una differenza linguistica che funge da marcatore identitario, dunque da indice di appartenenza o non-appartenenza (cfr. Busch/Spitzmüller 2021; cfr. anche McNamara 2005, 2012 e Leonardi 2023a). Nel racconto di R. la varietà dialettale rappresenta pertanto uno strumento di eteroposizionamento, tramite cui viene segnalata la differenza e l'esclusione dal gruppo (cfr. Busch 2015a; Busch/McNamara 2020a).

A tal proposito, nella registrazione del 2020, la parlante riporta un episodio aneddotico avvenuto poco dopo il suo arrivo a Bad Säckingen:

Esempio 2: Il panino ((intervista 2020, 00:17:18-00:19:31))

G: E quindi a scuola com'era, cos'è che parlavano? Lo?

R: Schwäbisch. Eh Alemannisch. Alemannisch sagt man, Schwäbisch, Alemannisch, in Dialekt halt.

Svevo. Eh alemanno. Si dice alemanno, svevo, alemanno, in dialetto, appunto.

G: E lo parlavano anche le maestre o soltanto i ragazzini?

R: Misto, misto. Ma troppo, eh.

G: Ma tu lo capivi o avevi delle difficoltà?

R: No, no, difficoltà avere di lingua. Ora questo dice: “C’è pausa a scola” e dopo viene una amiga con, eh si si trova anche dove io abita, n’altro. E prima un po’ diversa come oggi. E dopo noi portato per la pausa pane di casa e no comprato, nessuno, o ricco o povere, tutte di casa portato. Ora c’è pausa e mia mamma fatto che ci ha a casa, tante volte anche salumeria, così. Questo sempre c’è in Germania. E dopo, eh questo amiga, mii che odore, che bello, e dopo pigliato a me questo pane, ce detto: “Schmöke mal, schmöke mal”.

No, no, difficoltà avere di lingua. Ora questo dice: “C’è pausa a scola” e dopo viene una amiga con, eh si si trova anche dove io abita, n’altro. E prima un po’ diversa come oggi. E dopo noi portato per la pausa pane di casa e no comprato, nessuno, o ricco o povere, tutte di casa portato. Ora c’è pausa e mia mamma fatto che ci ha a casa, tante volte anche salumeria, così. Questo sempre c’è in Germania. E dopo, eh questo amiga, mii che odore, che bello, e dopo pigliato a me questo pane, ce detto: “*annusa, annusa*”.

G: Che vuol dire?

R: Riech mal! Und ich hab verstanden: “Schmeck mal”. Hab ich abgeissen. Ora, du sa, e lei detto: “No mangiare, c’è solo riechen!”. Capito? E io con faccio rosso vene,¹¹ ora silenzio [...]. Schmöke mal, riech mal. Eh, che sa questo?

Annusa! E io ho capito: “assaggia”. Quindi ho dato un morso. Ora, du sa, e lei detto: “No mangiare, c’è solo *annusare*!”. Capito? E io con faccio rosso vene, ora silenzio [...]. *Assaggia, annusa.* Eh, che sa questo?

Una compagna di classe, parlandole in dialetto, invita R. ad annusare il suo panino: “Schmöke mal, schmöke mal”. Il verbo *schmecken* (assaggiare, assaporare), qui nella sua variante dialettale *schmöcken*, con trasformazione della vocale [ɛ] in [œ], viene, infatti, utilizzato nel sud della Germania, in Austria e Svizzera con il significato di ‘annusare’, ‘odorare’ (*riechen*).¹² La *tellability* (cfr. Bamberg 2005) dell’episodio narrato è quindi legata a un fraintendimento lessicale: R., non conoscendo la varietà dialettale in questione, non annusa semplicemente il panino, ma gli dà un morso. In questo contesto,

¹¹ “E io con faccio rosso vene”: sono diventata tutta rossa.

¹² Cfr. <https://www.dwds.de/wb/schmecken> [ultimo accesso 29.10.2024].

l'intervistata afferma che avrebbe voluto poter interagire in dialetto per sentirsi parte della comunità. Riflettendo sulle percezioni legate al suo *Spracherleben*, e prendendone consapevolezza grazie al lavoro di riflessione offerto dalla biografia linguistica stessa (cfr. Cavagnoli 2020), l'intervistata ammette di provare vergogna nel non riuscire a parlare in dialetto, ulteriore motivo di esclusione:

Esempio 3: Il dialetto ((intervista 2024, 01:01:18-01:02:11))

G: E invece quali dialetti si parlavano fuori casa nella tua infanzia? Come parlavano le altre persone quanto tu eri piccola, dove vivevi tu?

R: Misto.

G: Cosa?

R: Ted, eh, Hochdeutsch und Dialekt. In Bad Säckingen war ja zu der Zeit 1951 viel Dialekt, aber in der Schule mussten sie Hochdeutsch sprechen.

Ted, eh, *tedesco standard e dialetto. A Bad Säckingen a quell'epoca, nel 1951, si parlava molto dialetto, ma a scuola bisognava parlare in tedesco standard.*

G: Quindi anche tu lo parlavi in quel caso un po' di dialetto?

R: Sì, capisco, ma io non. A me vene vergogna parla dialetto.

G: Perché?

R: A pronuncia a me non vene.

Come spiega Busch (2013: 26 s.), la sensazione di imbarazzo, di vergogna è un sentimento che emerge sovente nelle biografie linguistiche di parlanti plurilingui. Può essere dovuto all'utilizzo di una parola o di un tono considerati 'sbagliati', ma anche di un accento 'sbagliato' – o, come nel caso di R., può essere riconducibile al parlare un dialetto di cui non si ha competenza linguistica. La vergogna per l'aver infranto (o il poter infrangere) quella che viene percepita come la norma, lo standard, porta a una sorta di paralisi che, proprio come nel caso di R., riduce drasticamente il livello di agentività del soggetto. Se vissuto in forma reiterata, il sentimento della vergogna può arrivare a condizionare l'immagine che la persona ha di sé e a inibire determinati comportamenti, come l'utilizzo di una certa varietà linguistica in pubblico.

La questione dialettale, finora discussa in relazione e circoscritta al vissuto linguistico di R. in Germania, caratterizza però anche la fase successiva della sua biografia linguistica, segnata dall'incontro con il futuro marito, A., originario, come già ricordato, della provincia di Palermo. L'intervistata racconta che A., con il passare del tempo, è riuscito a raggiungere un buon

livello di conoscenza linguistica del tedesco, che è sempre rimasto la lingua di interazione tra i coniugi, sia in Germania sia in Sicilia. La biografia linguistica di R. è stata, infatti, anche fortemente segnata dal fatto che A. si sia sempre mostrato contrario all'apprendimento dell'italiano da parte della moglie: considerava l'apprendimento linguistico inutile, dato che lui stesso avrebbe potuto svolgere il ruolo di interprete e mediatore, al bisogno. Il potere maschile viene quindi percepito come motivo di detenzione del potere linguistico (cfr. Busch 2016a), di qui il rifiuto di dividerlo con R.:

Esempio 4: Apprendimento negato ((intervista 2024, 00:16:01-00:16:36))

R: Anche mio marito qua dentro, anche in Germania con me sempre parlato tedesco. “A te non bisogna, io sono qua”.

G: [...] Ma perché non voleva che tu imparassi bene la lingua, che, cioè lui poteva e tu no? Poteva imparare il tedesco?

R: Sì, e lui deve lavorare. Anche io lavorato, ma in mia lingua, capito?

La lingua familiare era dunque il tedesco, anche nell'interazione con i figli: A. stabilì che R. avrebbe parlato con i figli in tedesco, mentre lui si sarebbe occupato di insegnare l'italiano (e il dialetto) esclusivamente al figlio maschio. Tale situazione rimase immutata anche dopo il trasferimento a Bisacchino.

La negazione del processo di apprendimento e la necessità costante di una mediazione hanno fortemente impattato sull'agire linguistico di R.: riducendone l'autonomia (cfr. Chudak/Przybył 2022) comunicativa, hanno generato un senso di frustrazione, oltre ad aver limitato le possibilità di partecipazione alla vita sociale. Con il passare del tempo, la necessità, non soddisfatta, di acquisizione di competenze e autonomia, di potere relazionale e culturale, nonché la mancata possibilità di autodeterminazione (cfr. Deci/Ryan 1993) non hanno solo portato a una perdita di agenzialità di R., ma hanno anche finito per scontrarsi con la sua evoluzione identitaria, dunque con la percezione della lingua italiana come parte integrante della sua identità e della sua competenza interculturale (cfr. Paavo 2013).

Il divieto imposto dal marito e le scarse opportunità di interazione hanno fatto sì che le abilità linguistiche di R. si fossilizzassero nello stadio di un'interlingua¹³ (*interlanguage*; cfr. Selinker 1972) caratterizzata da una marcata

¹³ “L'interlingua è stata definita come un sistema linguistico autonomo, diverso sia dalla L1 dell'apprendente sia dalla lingua target, ma collegato a entrambe [...]. Questo concetto ha avuto, e continua tuttora ad avere un'importanza centrale nella ricerca sull'apprendimento

influenza del dialetto locale, appreso spontaneamente, come risulta evidente anche nell'esempio seguente:

Esempio 5: Italiano e dialetto a Bisacquino ((intervista 2024, 01:05:44-01:06:53))

G: E l'italiano e il siciliano come l'hai imparato?

R: Niente. Parlato eh con un libro italiano tedesco, e dopo mia socera in italiano capisce zero, ce detto: "Figghia mia, che parla? Parla come io", ma lei sempre dialetto parlato.

G: Sì.

R: Eh. E quando io gerca, lascia leggere, lei non capito, e dopo io fatto notizie così: "ah des is so, sie hat gesprochen". Mia gervello, e dopo sentito poco parole di mia socera, dda vicino, mia cognata.

Eh. E quando io gerca, lascia leggere, lei non capito, e dopo io fatto notizie (appunti) così: "ah si dice così, l'ha detto così". Mia gervello, e dopo sentito poco parole di mia socera, dda vicino, mia cognata.

G: Ok.

R: E così parlato dda due, tre parole, e dda.

Soffermandoci dunque brevemente sulle caratteristiche dell'interlingua di R., l'influenza del dialetto siciliano si manifesta a livello sintattico, lessicale, fonetico ("figghia mia", "dda", "gerca", "gervello"), nell'uso di forme popolari come il pronome personale soggetto in sostituzione del pronome personale oggetto ("parla come io"); interessante è anche l'uso del falso amico "notizie" (tedesco *Notizien*) al posto di "appunti". Il parlato di R. si caratterizza quindi, a livello formale e funzionale, per l'attivazione di elementi e peculiarità linguistiche delle diverse lingue del suo repertorio, e risulta così in un *gemischtsprachiges Sprechen* (parlato misto; cfr. Tracy 2022). Il passo in questione è interessante però anche per la ricostruzione che la stessa R. fa del suo processo di apprendimento: l'intervistata descrive, infatti, brevemente i suoi primi approcci alla lingua italiana, quando ancora utilizzava un dizionario bilingue per facilitare la comprensione, rendendosi però ben presto conto che

delle lingue: attraverso l'analisi dell'interlingua si cerca di ricostruire il processo di apprendimento e il ruolo di diversi fattori che lo influenzano" (Vallerossa/Toth 2023: 40). A tal proposito, si veda anche il volume curato da Mocciaro (2023), dedicato proprio all'interlingua.

la lingua veicolare dei familiari del marito e degli abitanti di Bisacquino era il dialetto, come conferma in un altro punto dell'intervista:

Esempio 6: Italiano e dialetto a Bisacquino ((intervista 2024, 00:42:21-00:43:25))

G: Quali altre lingue parli?

R: Tedesco. Io può solo tedesco e stop.

G: ((Italiano))

R: Italiano, italiano, bisacquinese, siciliano, misto.

G: Quindi per te sono la stessa cosa, diresti? O dici “io parlo l’italiano e il siciliano”?

R: A me piace parlare italiano, ma a me nessuno imparato. A mia socera sentito, cognata da, cognata XX, loro in famiglia tutte dialetto parlato. Che parlato qui? Che a Bisacquino italiano? Nessuno in famiglia.

Nel repertorio di R. l’italiano standard si inserisce a più riprese: prima in Germania, frequentando conoscenti del marito provenienti da diverse zone d’Italia, poi, dopo il trasferimento a Bisacquino, tramite la tv e i media. Non avendo mai preso lezioni di italiano, le competenze di R. nella comprensione e nella produzione di testi sono assai limitate. Inoltre, la parlante fatica tutt’oggi a discernere un termine proprio dell’italiano standard da uno della varietà dialettale locale. Le peculiarità dell’idioletto di R. sono da ricondursi, dunque, anche alle poche possibilità di confronto con l’italiano standard in un contesto storico-locale caratterizzato da un uso costante del dialetto da parte dei nativi, che, a tratti, diventa un italiano popolare dialettalmente caratterizzato. Nel repertorio linguistico di R. il tedesco è dunque rimasto la lingua identitaria, utilizzata nella comunicazione con i figli, per leggere e guardare la tv (anche in Italia), e praticata in Germania quando R. fa visita al figlio per uno o due mesi all’anno. Il silenzio imposto dal marito negandole la possibilità di apprendere l’italiano (*silencing*) e la conseguente perdita di potere linguistico, dunque anche della propria voce¹⁴ (*silence*; cfr. Busch 2020; McNamara 2020), fanno sì che R. si presenti come una non-parlante dell’italiano: “Io italiano non sente perché anche io non parla bene” (intervista 2024, 00:15:52-00:15:58). La mancanza di sapere e di competenze linguistiche, assieme al silenzio (imposto e interiorizzato), diventano perciò un anti-shibboleth (cfr. McNamara 2020), un

¹⁴ Sulla perdita della voce (*Stimmlosigkeit*) si veda Busch (2016a).

segno di non-appartenenza. R. afferma, infatti, che il non conoscere la lingua italiana è per lei fonte di sofferenza; inoltre, è consapevole di essere identificata da sempre come tedesca in paese.

PERIODO	LUOGO	VARIETÀ LINGUISTICA	PROCESSO DI APPRENDIMENTO
1939–oggi		<i>Hochdeutsch</i> (tedesco standard)	• Lingua usata nel contesto familiare e non, e appresa a livello scolastico. • Codice che R. definisce come lingua materna, nel quale si sente più a suo agio nell'esprimersi, e che utilizza per ogni attività quotidiana.
1939–1945	Elbing, Ostpreußen (Prussia orientale)	<i>Niederpreußisch</i> (basso prussiano)	• Competenza passiva appresa in famiglia. I genitori utilizzavano il dialetto quasi esclusivamente per scherzare o in situazioni di forte emotività; ritenendolo però una varietà inferiore, comunicavano con i figli solo in tedesco standard (<i>Hochdeutsch</i>). • Abbandonato da R. con il trasferimento a Viöl.
1945–1951	Viöl (Schleswig-Holstein)	<i>Viölsch</i>	• Scarsa competenza attiva e passiva. • Utilizzato soprattutto dai coetanei in ambiente extra-scolastico come marcatore identitario (<i>shibboleth</i>, cfr. 2.1) e atto per identificare, in maniera discriminatoria, i rifugiati dell'est.
1951–1980, 1983–1995	Bad Säckingen (Baden-Württemberg)	<i>Alemannisch</i> (alemanno)	• Scarsa competenza attiva e passiva. • Usato di raramente in ambito lavorativo, ma mai attivamente da R.

			• Utilizzato soprattutto dai coetanei in ambiente extra-scolastico come marcatore identitario.
1960 ca.– oggi	Germania, Sicilia	Italiano/dialetto di Bisacquino	• Contatto a seguito dell'incontro con A. • A R. non è stato permesso di imparare l'italiano. • Sia nel periodo trascorso in Germania sia in Italia la lingua della comunicazione familiare è rimasta il tedesco. • L'apprendimento dell'italiano, che si attesta ancora oggi a un livello elementare, è avvenuto esclusivamente per via orale, in un ambiente informale.

Tabella 2: Sinossi dell'evoluzione temporale della biografia linguistica di R.

4. Fuga – migrazione – esperienza linguistica (*Spracherleben*) – identità (cronotopo)

La biografia linguistica di R. è anzitutto caratterizzata dal trauma¹⁵ della fuga subito dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, dato che lo spostamento forzato dal luogo di origine in un altro luogo porta anche a uno spostamento in una zona linguistica in cui R. sperimenta la non-appartenenza in varie situazioni (cfr. 1.1). Nella sua narrazione si trovano molti esempi di eteroposizionamento (cfr. 3.) che, nella sua esperienza linguistica (*Spracherleben*), fanno innescare un senso di estraneità nella lingua¹⁶, tipico del secondo dopoguerra in Germania. Inoltre, il tema della sofferenza di coloro che o sono fuggiti o sono stati costretti alla fuga, cioè la dimensione di una parte dei tedeschi come 'vittime', è stato per molti anni evitato, se non taciuto (cfr. 3.). Oggi, invece, il tema della fuga e

¹⁵ Per un quadro di studi sul trauma in ambito linguistico narratologico cfr. Busch/McNamara (2020b).

¹⁶ Cfr. il dibattito sulla cosiddetta *Kahlschlag-Literatur* (letteratura che parte da zero) nel Secondo Dopoguerra (cfr. Thüne 1998, 2005).

dell'espulsione è uno degli argomenti più studiati del dopoguerra, collocato storicamente nel contesto della politica del nazionalsocialismo e dello sterminio.

La storia di R. rappresenta un esempio di come questa esperienza porti anche a una costellazione linguistica precaria, senza un legame a una regione e alla sua varietà, e, allo stesso tempo, senza una tradizione condivisa in famiglia o con una comunità. I passaggi dalla Prussia Orientale allo Schleswig-Holstein e di lì al Baden-Württemberg confermano le difficoltà continue e il senso di non-appartenenza, soprattutto linguistico. Una possibile via interpretativa per meglio comprendere questo specifico senso di non-appartenenza viene offerta dal concetto di *cronotopo*.

Come ricorda Leonardi (2023: 122), tale termine, che nel suo utilizzo da una prospettiva di studi letterari e culturali risale a Bakhtin (1989, ma sviluppato 50 anni prima), è stato sempre più impiegato negli studi di analisi della narrazione e della conversazione incentrati sull'indagine delle narrazioni biografiche (si vedano ad esempio Perrino 2015; Blommaert/De Fina 2017; Leonardi 2016, 2023b; Larrory-Wunder 2023; Luppi 2023a). In quanto “centri organizzativi degli eventi fondamentali del soggetto” (Bakhtin 1989: 397 s.), i cronotopi contribuiscono in modo decisivo all'*emplotment* (cfr. Ricœur 1980: 178–180) del contenuto evocato dalla memoria. Infatti, nelle Tabelle 1 e 2 emergono chiaramente le quattro tappe fondamentali della biografia linguistica di R. che portano a spostamenti nello spazio, anche linguistico, senza però appropriarsi di questo.

Nella narrazione di R., e nella ricostruzione che fa dei vari cronotopi, spiccano atti di posizionamento di non-appartenenza nel suo *Spracherleben*, spesso legati a una competenza linguistica precaria o addirittura assente nelle varietà locali. I luoghi in cui vive sono, infatti, caratterizzati da una forte presenza di varietà dialettali, mentre la varietà standard che R. usa (*Hochdeutsch*) è spesso vista come legata solo a contesti formali, o addirittura una lingua quasi straniera (come succede, per esempio, nella Svizzera tedesca; cfr. Wyler 1989). Questo accade tradizionalmente in contesti di forte presenza dialettale, in cui il dialetto gode di un maggiore prestigio linguistico, e in cui la consueta gerarchia del potere linguistico viene quindi invertita.¹⁷ I luoghi di vita della parlante si configurano perciò come luoghi segnati da un potere linguistico ridotto o parziale.

Uno sviluppo analogo si osserva per quanto concerne l'apprendimento dell'italiano e del siciliano, due varietà presenti nei luoghi in cui R. vive, ma

¹⁷ Cfr. Bourdieu (1988).

senza avere una competenza attiva e autonoma, a causa anche dell'imposizione da parte del marito che la esclude da un apprendimento linguistico sistematico.

Si potrebbe dunque ipotizzare che la competenza linguistica di R. sia una competenza liminale,¹⁸ sospesa, poiché basata, accanto al tedesco standard (*Hochdeutsch*), su competenze passive nelle varietà che caratterizzano invece i luoghi della sua biografia linguistica. Queste competenze nascono in spazi anch'essi liminali, cioè in zone di confine segnate da fenomeni di sovrapposizioni di altre lingue e varietà, quindi distanti dai centri dello standard. Sono perciò spazi liminali perché luoghi di passaggio, anche linguistico, in cui si formano però comunità che tendono a volersi distinguere l'una dall'altra. Queste, a loro volta, contribuiscono all'effetto straniante in quanto elementi del luogo biografico, che rimangono però chiusi. Si tratta di fattori che hanno generato nello *Spracherleben* di R. un senso di inquietudine e, al tempo stesso, una particolare forma di espressione.

Un elemento essenziale nella narrazione di R. è la commutazione di codice non solo nei casi in cui non sa esprimere un concetto in italiano, ma soprattutto per marcare le varie sfaccettature identitarie e per narrare eventi appartenenti a dimensioni spazio-temporali diverse. Infatti, le vicende connesse all'infanzia e all'adolescenza sono narrate in tedesco, mentre quelle legate al marito e alla vita di oggi in italiano.

Esempio 7: Ricordo della madre ((intervista 2024, 00:57:14-00:57:53))

R: Mia mamma, quanto giovane, a Hitlersordnung, die Frauen, also die jungen Mädchen, wenn sie die Schule verlassen haben, müssen sie bei reichen Leuten in Haushalt für ein oder drei Jahren, die müssen Baby pflegen machen, Alten pflegen, im Haus bei einer Doktorfamilie, Bauernhof, fori von genetori.

Mia mamma, quanto giovane, *secondo gli ordini di Hitler, le donne, cioè le giovani donne, quando finivano la scuola devano andare a fare i lavori di casa dalle persone ricche per uno o tre anni, devono occuparsi dei bambini, degli anziani, a casa di un dottore, in una fattoria, lontano dai genitori.*

In questo frammento di intervista R. abbandona la lingua dell'*hic et nunc* dell'intervista, l'italiano, e passa al tedesco, lingua che associa al cronotopo della

¹⁸ Il concetto di liminalità si riferisce a individui o entità “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (Turner 1969: 95). Circa il concetto di identità liminali cfr. Piazza (2019a, 2019b).

madre, per verbalizzare un ricordo a questa legato:¹⁹ la madre, da ragazza, secondo quelle che erano le direttive del regime, andò a lavorare presso una famiglia abbiente come domestica.

È noto che il code-switching è una tipica strategia comunicativa di parlanti bi- o plurilingui utilizzata non solo a livello individuale, ma anche in comunità plurilingui (cfr. Riehl 2014: 101f.). Nel caso di R., il code-switching non è solo funzionale alla comunicazione: si tratta, infatti, anche di un modo efficace, e più o meno consapevole, per sottolineare le differenze e le intersezioni tra esperienze culturali e temporali. Il code-switching può essere utilizzato per marcare la propria appartenenza a diverse culture, per segnare una frattura, un punto di svolta nella storia dell'individuo o per creare una distinzione tra diversi spazi simbolici e culturali. Si tratta di una strategia comunicativa che rientra, infatti, nel concetto di cronotopo, in quanto le citazioni o comunque gli elementi concreti riportati (come nomi di luoghi, oggetti ecc.) contribuiscono all'*emplotment*, cioè alla concretizzazione degli eventi e allo sviluppo della prospettiva narrativa.

5. Conclusioni

Il presente contributo ha preso in esame la biografia linguistica di R., parlante originaria dell'ex regione tedesca della Prussia Orientale, cercando di ricostruire, sulla base di due interviste narrative, il complesso percorso storico e linguistico in cui ha sviluppato un repertorio variegato, tra tedesco e italiano (cfr. Tabella 1).

Da una prospettiva strettamente sociolinguistica tradizionale, che parte da due o più lingue con nomi e confini separati, si tratta di un bilinguismo non bilanciato, con una lingua dominante (il tedesco), e caratterizzato quindi da una relazione gerarchica a livello di competenza linguistica. Considerando, invece, anche la prospettiva soggettiva interna e l'esperienza personale della parlante, risulta evidente come R. non separi le lingue del suo repertorio, ma attinga, nel corso della conversazione, a tutti i codici e registri a sua disposizione. R. fa dunque leva sulle pratiche tipiche delle persone bilingui, non limitandosi però a fenomeni di code-switching, ma sviluppando vere e proprie narrazioni in cui le due lingue confluiscono (cfr. esempi 3 e 5, in cui si evidenzia il *gemischtsprachiges Sprechen*, parlato misto; cfr. Tracy 2022) per interagire con

¹⁹ Circa il fenomeno del code-switching in interviste a parlanti plurilingui cfr. Luppi (2023b).

persone con cui condivide più lingue e registri. Emerge pertanto come la competenza liminale non escluda una messa in atto del repertorio unitario (cfr. García/Wei 2014), pratica messa a fuoco nel concetto di translinguaggio (*translanguaging*; cfr. Gracia/Wei 2014), descrivendo il modo in cui i bilingui e i multilingui utilizzano le loro risorse linguistiche.

Dando espressione a più parti dell'identità linguistica dei parlanti, il translinguaggio può anche aiutare a preservare il valore culturale di una lingua. A tal proposito, García/Wei (2014) affermano che le persone bilingui hanno competenze linguistiche complesse, che possono mutare nel corso del tempo, e il *translanguaging* aiuta a fare emergere le loro identità multiple. In questo modo, ci si allontana dalla nozione di identità linguistiche fisse, legate a persone circoscritte a Paesi specifici, in favore di una prospettiva che include persone con percorsi migratori complessi – com'è stato quello di R.

Ringraziamenti Ringraziamo la Signora R. per la generosa condivisione della sua esperienza.

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Verbal and visual metaphors of an unfolding crisis: Emerging styles of representation in British and Italian front page news at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract This study examines verbal and visual metaphors representing coronavirus-related issues in news discourse at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although Covid-19 metaphors have been widely investigated both during and after the health crisis, few studies have focused on the early stages of the pandemic and on non-verbal modes of communication. To address this gap, we analyse a set of front pages from British and Italian broadsheet newspapers published between February 24 and March 1, 2020, drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and multimodal metaphor studies. We first outline the annotation scheme and procedure used for this study. Through qualitative analysis, we then identify a set of visual and verbal metaphors that conceptualise the coronavirus and related issues as target concepts, classifying them by source concept and examining the interaction between verbal and visual elements. This leads us to identify some emerging styles of representation, which, we argue, would also impact public discourse in the following stages of the pandemic.

Keywords Coronavirus; Covid-19; multimodal discourse studies; metaphor; news discourse.

1. Introduction and background

In a world that is facing crisis upon crisis, the discursive representation of societal challenges has become a key area of enquiry for scholars engaged with Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA; see van Dijk 1997) – an approach to language-in-use analysis that seeks to unveil how power relations, identity issues and ideologies are conveyed through language. CDA was originally developed as a framework for the study of text per se and, to date, language continues to be the focus in most CDA-informed contributions. However, after the publication of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s groundbreaking works on multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; 2001), scholars have attempted to integrate other semiotic resources, or modes – particularly images – into the

framework, leading to the emergence of Multimodal (Critical) Discourse Analysis (MDA; see O'Halloran 2011). This new paradigm acknowledges that meaning-making often takes place through multiple semiotic resources working in a synergistic fashion, as the rise of new media in contemporary society has clearly shown.

One area of investigation where CDA and MDA intersect and express their full potential is metaphor. Metaphor studies also witnessed a paradigm shift – less recent but equally crucial – with the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, which challenged the traditional view of metaphor as a figure of speech with purely aesthetic functions. Within the newly emerging approach known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphors were redefined as figures of thought – i.e. the metaphors we use in language follow on from metaphorical connections in our conceptual system. Typically, metaphors draw elements from more concrete *source* domains (e.g. food, war, building) and project them onto more abstract and fuzzier *target* domains (e.g. idea, argument, theory), leading to linguistic realisations such as “*half-baked* ideas”, “*attack* every weak point in one's argument” and “*construct* a theory” (see Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 46-47; 52-55). At the same time, text- and corpus-based studies began to unveil the pervasive presence of both linguistic and underlying conceptual metaphors across different text-types and language varieties. Along with the recognition of the cognitive dimension of metaphor and the way it works – setting up multiple connections between otherwise separate domains – came the awareness that different metaphors, or different linguistic realisations of the same metaphor, can be used to *frame* (Entman 1993) events in various ways. For instance, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, metaphor scholars discussed the societal consequences of public discourse metaphors that framed human action as a war against the virus, also comparing them with possible alternative mappings (Olza et al. 2021; Semino 2021; Musolff 2022). Metaphor thus becomes a strategic tool for event construal and argumentation, naturally drawing the interest of critical discourse analysts. In metaphor studies, an MDA perspective implies taking stock of visual metaphors and multimodal metaphors – those that emerge from the interaction of different co-occurring modes, typically visual and verbal (see Forceville 2009; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi (eds.) 2009). Visual metaphors have gained increasing attention since the 1990s (Hartel & Savolainen 2016), while multimodal metaphors – especially, but not exclusively, in newspapers and advertising – have been the focus of several programmatic studies over the past two decades (see, *inter alia*, El Refaie 2017; Hart 2017). However, the vast

majority of discourse- and corpus-based metaphor research currently remains centred on verbal metaphors alone.

Regarding Covid-19 metaphors specifically, these have been extensively investigated both during and after the health crisis, across various languages and cultural contexts – but, again, with a primary textual focus. Most authors employ corpus methodologies, working on collections of texts from different areas of public and institutional discourse (social media, news, press releases, official speeches) and discussing the linguistic and conceptual metaphors found therein (e.g. Abdo et al. 2021; Wicke & Bolognesi 2020; 2021 on social media discourse; Bagli 2021; Charteris-Black 2021; Garzone 2021; Luporini 2021; Komatsubara 2024 on news discourse; Castro Seixas 2020; Combei et al. 2022; Efeoğlu Özcan 2022 on political discourse). In contrast, a minority of studies focuses on visual and multimodal metaphors in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic; among them, Feng & Wu (2022) on Chinese public service advertisements; Younes & Altakhaineh (2022) on Covid-19 related memes; Abdel-Raheem (2021) and Zibin (2022) on cartoons; Feifei (2024) on news pictures. Additionally, studies concentrating on the first days of the pandemic in Europe and taking a comparative cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective are relatively few (see, e.g., Luporini 2021; Giorgis et al. 2023).

Against this background, in this contribution we aim to address some relevant, underexplored research areas. We do so by analysing two sets of front pages from British and Italian broadsheet newspapers published at the onset of the pandemic in Europe, through a three-layered approach that takes into account verbal, visual and multimodal metaphors. For our purposes, multimodal metaphors are those where the visual component (i.e. the image accompanying an article) interacts with the textual component (title, subtitle, image caption) in such a way that, together, they trigger one single unit of metaphorical meaning.

The research questions we address are as follows:

RQ1. What conceptual domains, and related sentiments/emotions, emerge as predominant in the metaphorical representation of the coronavirus disease, within the Italian and the British cultural contexts, during the early days of the pandemic?

RQ2. Is there evidence in our data of a set of clearly identifiable metaphorical themes, realised through different modes, that would later be re-proposed, or that can be said to have had an impact throughout the health crisis?

We begin by outlining the annotation scheme and procedure used to identify metaphors in our dataset. We then present and discuss our main findings, also in a comparative perspective. Finally, in the concluding section, we summarise the contribution of this research in understanding the relevance of multimodal metaphors in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data

Our data come from a larger corpus of front pages from the print editions of various Italian, British and American national and local newspapers published between February 24 and March 13, 2020. This timeframe encompasses the weeks following the first confirmed case of Covid-19 in Italy (February 21). Since Italy was the first European country to report a case of the new disease, that was also the moment “coronavirus entered Europe”, as some global media outlets titled their articles. Consequently, concerns began to spread to other European countries and lockdown measures were soon implemented, with the WHO officially declaring Covid-19 a global pandemic shortly thereafter (March 11).

For this study, we analysed a sample of 68 front pages from 10 newspapers – 5 British and 5 Italian – and also focused on a narrower timeframe, February 24 to March 1, 2020, i.e. the week immediately following the first detected Italian case (Table 1).

British newspapers	Italian newspapers
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>
<i>The Financial Times</i>	<i>Il Giornale</i>
<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i>
<i>The Independent</i>	<i>La Repubblica</i>
<i>The Times</i>	<i>La Stampa</i>
Tot. 33 front pages	Tot. 35 front pages

Table 1: Data sampled for the study

We argue that these newspapers are representative of the hard news genre in the UK and Italy, being among the most influential ‘broadsheet’ newspapers in their respective countries. Broadsheet newspapers provide more factual and in-depth news coverage than magazines or ‘tabloids’, where news stories tend to be more sensationalised. The selected newspapers are also connected with a range of political orientations and, consequently, diverse readerships, ensuring a broad spectrum of perspectives on the pandemic and the measures initially implemented to contain it.

2.2 Annotation

The first stage in analysing the sample of newspapers was to annotate the front pages according to several criteria, including the presence of metaphors, both verbal and visual. With reference to verbal metaphors, the analysis was intentionally limited to headlines, subheadings and captions accompanying images. These textual segments were chosen due to their prominence on the front page and their capacity to engage a broader audience, including casual readers who may not delve into full articles.

For verbal metaphors specifically, the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and the subsequent re-elaboration proposed at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (MIPVU: Steen et al. 2010) were adopted as primary reference points. For metaphors and multimodality, our annotation scheme was informed by existing literature on the subject, particularly the work of Pérez Sobrino & Ford (2023), which provided hints into mitigating analyst bias in identifying and interpreting figurative language. Additionally, we drew on Zhang et al. (2021) and their MultiMET framework, which guided our approach to annotating metaphor across text and image. As a result, our scheme comprised 25 annotation variables organised into four sections, described below. For reasons of space, in Sections 3 and 4, we take into account and discuss a subset of the annotated elements – those that we deem especially relevant in order to answer the research questions presented in Section 1.

The annotation process was conducted collaboratively online using Labelbox (<https://labelbox.com/>). While numerous annotation tools that can easily handle text are currently available, Labelbox was chosen as a particularly robust and user-friendly tool for image annotation. Additionally, it offered several features that were deemed advantageous for the project’s potential

future developments, such as managing sub-projects assigned to different annotators and computing both annotation time and inter-rater consensus.

The first step in the analysis involved defining an *area of interest* (AOI) – i.e. a polygonal area including coronavirus-related content, visual and/or verbal – within each front page.

- 1) For the AOI, two general features were annotated:
 - a) article type (main article or other);
 - b) dominant mode (text-dominant, image-dominant, balanced).
- 2) Headings, subheadings and image captions were then identified by bounding boxes as *textual areas*. For these, the dataset included information about:
 - a) text type (headline, subheading, caption);
 - b) presence of metaphor:
 - i) source and target domains;
 - ii) sentiment (positive, negative, neutral);
 - iii) emotion, based on Plutchik's (1991) classification (fear, anger, trust, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, joy).
- 3) Relevant images were also defined through bounding boxes, where the following image-related aspects were annotated:
 - a) closeness (focus or landscape perspective);
 - b) angle (bottom-up, top-down, eye-level point of view);
 - c) cultural context (presence or absence of clearly identifiable socio-cultural traits);
 - d) presence of metaphor:
 - i) source and target domains;
 - ii) sentiment (positive, negative, neutral);
 - iii) emotion (fear, anger, trust, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, joy).
- 4) Finally, within each image, the main participant was identified through a polygonal area and tagged according to the following categories:
 - a) type (e.g. unspecified individual, police officer, animal, object etc.);
 - b) direction of gaze;
 - c) gesture;
 - d) posture;
 - e) role in the event portrayed in the image (active or passive);

- f) process, based on Halliday & Matthiessen's (2004) classification (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural).¹

Regarding metaphor identification, considering the diverse academic backgrounds of the annotators (more on which below), several preparatory discussion meetings were held before the annotation process began. The analysis was carried out in multiple rounds. In the first round, Annotator 1 (Pannitto) analysed the entire dataset, including both British and Italian front pages. The second round served as an intermediate benchmarking step. For this purpose, a sub-project was created on Labelbox, comprising 14 front pages (7 Italian and 7 British, approximately 20% of the dataset). Annotators 2 and 3 (Luporini and Combei) were responsible for this round, working on the British and the Italian data, respectively. At the end of the second round, discrepancies emerged: Annotators 2 and 3, who have more specific expertise in cognitive metaphor studies, identified more metaphors than Annotator 1, whose stronger background is in NLP and construction grammar. This prompted a follow-up meeting, during which problematic cases were discussed. Finally, the third round of annotation involved again Annotators 2 and 3, who, this time, worked on the full versions of their respective datasets (33 British front pages and 35 Italian front pages), applying the clarified criteria resulting from discussion with Annotator 1. The final results of this process are discussed in the following sections. Figure 1 below provides an example of an annotated front page, from the first round of annotation (the presence of metaphor in the visual mode was re-considered in the third round). One AOI is identified, containing Covid-related content (article and image). The title is annotated as metaphorical and, within the image, two participants are analysed.

¹ Details on our annotation scheme are available at: <https://anonymous.4open.science/r/verbal-visual-metaphors-0F35> [last access on 11/12/2024]. The research data are available here: Luporini, Antonella, Claudia Roberta Combei, & Ludovica Pannitto (2024). *Verbal and visual metaphors of an unfolding crisis – Dataset*. Open Science Framework. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CYQVS> [last access on 11/12/2024].



Figure 1: Example of a front page (*Financial Times*, 20-02-2020) annotated with the introduced protocol, from the first annotation round

A thorough discussion of inter-rater issues emerging from our analysis falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, some relevant aspects are worth mentioning in concluding this section. Firstly, our analysis confirms the challenges inherent in identifying visual metaphors: ‘reading images’ often involves a degree of subjectivity that goes beyond that of textual analysis. At the same time, agreeing on what constitutes a verbal metaphor proved equally challenging, despite the availability of standardised procedures and guidelines. One key area of inter-annotator divergence concerned the notion of a lexical unit’s *basic meaning*. According to both MIP and MIPVU – albeit with partially differing sub-criteria – a word or expression is marked as metaphorical if it has a more basic meaning (more concrete, precise, or ‘embodied’) in other contexts than in the one under analysis. Significant discussion within our team was needed for conventional expressions such as English “contain the virus”, or Italian “scuotere i mercati” (“shaking the markets”), said of the virus. Some annotators would consider the meaning of these and other equally conventional expressions, in the given context, as effectively basic, or would treat them as ‘dead’ metaphors, due to their widespread use and consequent polysemy, especially in news discourse. Furthermore, the verb “contain” could be said to

retain a concrete, physical sense when referring to the virus. After discussion, both the examples provided above were marked as metaphorical, but a side-note was made about their controversial analysis. It is plausible that analysts who are also metaphor scholars may exhibit a heightened sensitivity to metaphors in text compared to other scholars or, crucially, to the general reader. Such a tendency would have significant consequences within a CDA perspective, which seeks to extend its impact beyond academia by enhancing public awareness of how language constructs ‘reality’. This highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, involving scholars with expertise beyond metaphor studies who can provide alternative perspectives and act as a control. Additionally, engaging with non-academic informants in controlled experimental settings is crucial – a direction we intend to pursue in future research.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1 British data

Using the annotation scheme outlined in Section 2.2, the annotators applied multiple layers of analysis to the AOIs identified within each set of front pages, considering both general and metaphor-specific aspects. Table 2 presents introductory quantitative data referring to the British dataset. Within this dataset, not all front pages contain AOIs. Indeed, in the week under scrutiny, 3 front pages were entirely dedicated to Weinstein’s legal proceedings, which resonated greatly within the cultural contexts of both the United States and the United Kingdom in 2020; no mention was found here of the national or international health situation. Therefore, the total number of identified AOIs in this dataset was (= 30). Furthermore, while all the identified AOIs contain coronavirus-related text in the form of a title or subtitle to an article, only a subset of AOIs ($n = 18$) was found to also include an image related to the virus or the spreading disease.

1. ARTICLE TYPE

Q. Does the identified AOI correspond to the main front page article?

- Yes: 25/30 (83.3%)
 - No: 5/30 (16.7%)
-

2. TEXT-IMAGE RELATION

Q. Does the AOI include a coronavirus-related image along with coronavirus-related text?

- Yes: 18/30 (60%)
 - No: 12/30 (40%)
-

3. IMAGE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Q. Does the coronavirus-related image evoke a clearly identifiable cultural context?

- Yes: 15/18 (83.3%)
 - No: 3/18 (16.7%)
-

4. METAPHOR IN TEXT

Q. Does the text in the AOI contain at least one instance of verbal metaphor?

- Yes: 24/30 (80%)
 - No: 6/30 (20%)
-

5. METAPHOR IN IMAGE

Q. Does the image in the AOI contain at least one instance of visual metaphor?

- Yes: 7/18 (38.9%)
 - No: 11/18 (61.1%)
-

Table 2: British dataset – overall quantitative results

A few general observations can be made based on the quantitative data from Table 2. Firstly, the prominence of coronavirus as a thematic focus already emerges from British front pages in the week under scrutiny. The data in point (1) show that coronavirus-related content, when included, predominantly features in the main article: the most eye-catching item on the front page, characterised by a prominent position in the layout structure, larger headlines, and other distinctive features that may vary between news outlets (Bateman et al. 2007). At the same time, the presence of images is not as striking as we had expected: 12 out of 30 AOIs (40%) feature coronavirus-related textual content without an accompanying image (see point 2). Even more interestingly, 11 of these 12 cases correspond to main articles, from front pages that show different patterns of prominence. Specifically, these front pages (from different news outlets) exhibit a clash between the textual focus (coronavirus) and the visual focus, as the most visually striking image is actually connected to other news stories. Notably, however, point (3) indicates that, when coronavirus-related images do appear, they mostly evoke an immediately recognisable cultural

context, essentially the Italian or the Chinese/Asian ones. This, as we shall see below, is a key point, showing a tendency towards a culturally and contextually stereotyped representation of the pandemic that would affect public perception at the onset, and would also have an impact on the subsequent stages of the crisis. Finally, regarding the presence of metaphor, the data in (3) and (4) point to the fact that metaphors emerged from analysis as largely more present in the verbal than in the visual mode. This breakdown may follow on from the fact that the textual segments selected for analysis, particularly headlines and subheadings, are traditional loci for metaphorical expression; at the same time, it may be due to the greater challenge of identifying metaphors in the visual mode, which was reported by all the annotators involved.

We now turn to findings from more in-depth qualitative analysis, illustrated in Figures 2 and 3, which visually map the source concepts underpinning the metaphorical representation of the virus, the disease, and related events, in the verbal and visual modes.

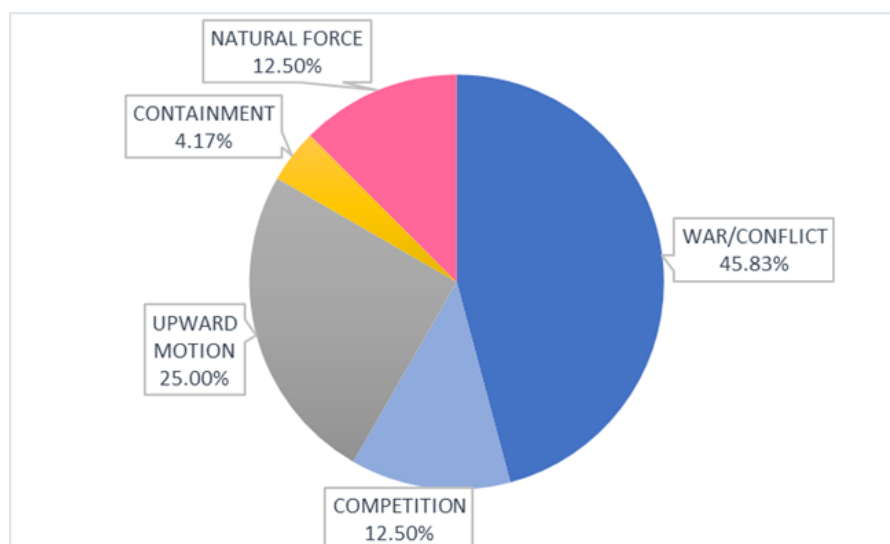


Figure 2: Source domains in verbal metaphors – British front pages

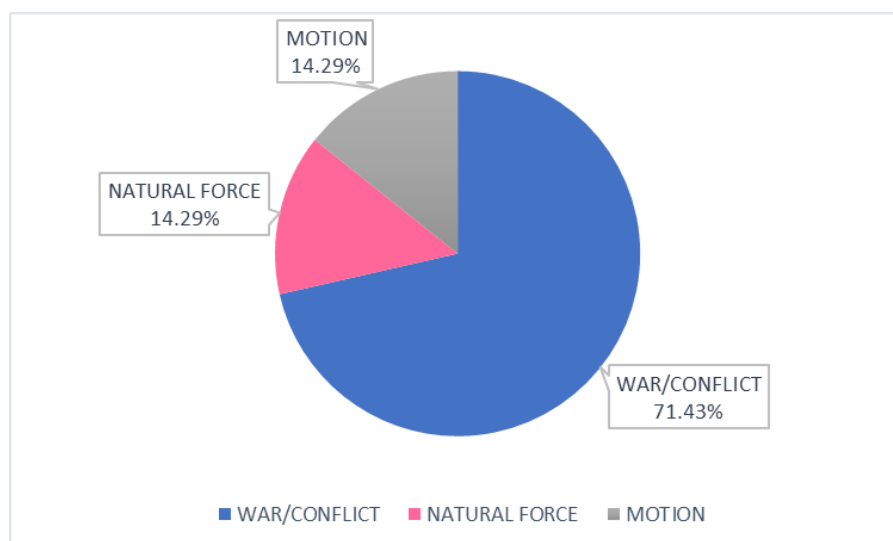


Figure 3: Source domains in visual metaphors – British front pages

The percentage values in the figures were calculated based on the number of AOIs including verbal metaphors ($n = 24$) and visual metaphors ($n = 7$), as detailed in Table 2. It should be noted that, in most cases, the metaphors found in the data are based on a single source domain. In the rare instances where overlapping source domains were observed, the figures show the domain deemed primary in the representation.

The figures clearly show that the domain of war/conflict emerges as predominant in the analysis: it appears in 11 out of 24 AOIs with verbal metaphor, i.e. 45.83%, and in 5 out of 7 AOIs with visual metaphor, i.e. 71.43%. This finding is in line with numerous other studies showing the widespread use of war metaphors at the beginning of the pandemic (e.g. Wicke & Bolognesi 2020; Luporini 2021; Semino 2021), and is contextually relevant, considering the repercussions of the war frame on the public perception of the situation and the counter-measures adopted (see Section 1). The verbal mode, with its larger baseline, shows more variation than the visual mode in terms of source domains. However, from a multimodal perspective, it is interesting to zoom in on the area where the verbal and the visual overlap and possibly interact. Firstly, there is almost complete overlap between the AOIs with visual metaphors and those with verbal metaphors: 6 of the 7 AOIs including a visual metaphor were also annotated as containing a verbal metaphor; in just one case (*Daily Telegraph*, 29-02-2020) the AOI includes a visual metaphor, but not a

verbal one.² Furthermore, within these 6 AOIs, the verbal and the visual mode were found to interact and mutually reinforce each other, thus illustrating cases of multimodal metaphor. Details are provided in Table 3.

Source (Newspaper, date)	Verbal metaphor	Visual metaphor	Source domain and multimodal metaphor explanation
1. <i>The Independent</i> 24-02-2020	Italy <i>fight</i> s to contain virus (headline)	Focus (eye-level). A police officer who is wearing an FFP2 mask extends his arm towards a person wearing a traditional mask, but no face mask, at the Venice Carnival	WAR/CONFLICT (+ CONTAINMENT) Image reinforcing idea of a fighting nation; masked policeman's gesture also evokes the idea of containment
2. <i>The Financial Times</i> 24-02-2020	Italy locks down 10 towns as fears rise for global coronavirus spread (headline) Economic worry grows (subheading)	Landscape (top-down). A person wearing a traditional mask but no face mask, alongside a security staff member wearing a surgical mask, both standing and looking sideways in the same direction at the Venice Carnival	MOTION (+ MORE IS UP) Through posture and gaze, the participants are portrayed as if they were watching someone or something coming, aligning with the notion of the virus as a visibly moving object

² For reasons of space, our discussion below focuses on the cases of multimodal (verbal + visual) metaphor. Nonetheless, for the sake of completeness, we note here that this visual metaphor portrays a massive coronavirus looming over a portion of planet Earth, triggering the metaphorical mapping CORONAVIRUS IS AN ALIEN INVADER. This is graphically reinforced by the disproportionate size of the virus, conveying strength and power. In terms of sentiment and emotion analysis, this representation evokes a negative sentiment/fear, aligning with most other metaphor-laden images, as we shall see below.

Source (Newspaper, date)	Verbal metaphor	Visual metaphor	Source domain and multimodal metaphor explanation
3. <i>The Times</i> 28-02-2020	Top sports events <i>under threat</i> from coronavirus (headline)	Focus (eye-level). A chest-up image of a Chinese woman in a hospital room, wearing a surgical mask and gazing directly at the camera with a look of defeat	WAR/CONFLICT The setting and gaze of the woman in the image fit in with the idea of being a survivor or under threat, which is further explained in the caption
4. <i>The Guardian</i> 29-02-2020	Red Cross to help NHS <i>tackle</i> virus outbreak (headline) ' <i>To hell and back</i> ' How I survived coronavirus (superimposed text)	Focus (eye-level). A close-up of a man with Asian facial traits, wearing a surgical mask, gazing directly at the camera with a vacant expression	WAR/CONFLICT (+ JOURNEY) The man in the image, through his gaze, conveys the idea of a survivor in a conflict scenario, emphasised by the hyperbolic journey to hell
5. <i>The Financial Times</i> 29-02-2020	Virus <i>fuels</i> worst week since 2008 crisis (headline) The potential political <i>fallout</i> of a global pandemic. <i>Virus-hunter</i> Peter Piot on how to respond	Focus (eye-level). A person with Asian facial traits in profile, wearing a face mask (symbolising safety), against a background illustration evoking an explosion or firework	NATURAL FORCE (+ WILD ANIMAL) The illustration of an explosion or firework is in line with the semantic field activated by <i>fuel</i> and <i>fallout</i> in the text

Source (Newspaper, date)	Verbal metaphor	Visual metaphor	Source domain and multimodal metaphor explanation
6. <i>The Sunday Times</i> 01-03-2020	Coronavirus South Africa <i>scrambles</i> (headline)	Landscape (top-down). Two huge papier mâché masks (an aggressive-looking coronavirus and a smiling ‘Carnival virus’) confronting each other amidst a crowd of people at a Carnival parade in Düsseldorf	WAR/CONFLICT Both text and image evoke the idea of conflict, though of a different kind

Table 3: Multimodal metaphors in British front pages

With reference to the presence of war metaphors, we would stress how *multimodal* metaphors making use of WAR/CONFLICT as a source domain may have had a greater impact than verbal metaphors alone in terms of framing and public resonance, due to the combination of different modes and the presence of images recalling dystopian narratives – a point to which we come back below. Also, in terms of sentiment and emotion analysis, the metaphors in Table 3 were predominantly classified as enacting a negative sentiment and triggering fear and/or sadness, with the notable exception of (6), from *The Sunday Times*. This instance stands out as the only case where the relationship between the visual and the verbal components is one of contrast, rather than mutual reinforcement. Although text and image are unrelated content-wise (headline about South Africa, image from a parade in Düsseldorf), their spatial proximity and predominant position within the front page compel readers to process them together. As a result, the multimodal metaphor here shifts into an instance of multimodal irony. Specifically, the irony emerges from the stark contrast between the headline – triggering fear and a negative sentiment through the idea of an entire nation metaphorically *scrambling* due to the violence of coronavirus – and the image below it, which shows a *staged* confrontation in an entertainment context, eliciting joy and a positive sentiment. This image also

contrasts sharply with the pictures from the Venice carnival that appeared in *The Independent* and *The Financial Times* a few days earlier (Table 3, rows 1-2). Here, the same kind of otherwise joyful context is overshadowed by the presence of security and police officers wearing face masks, creating a striking visual opposition to masks used for disguise. The grey, cloudy skies in the background also contribute to amplifying the sense of fear and anguish conveyed by the images. The ironic and, perhaps, ultimately optimistic outlook visually and verbally construed in *The Sunday Times* appears to be a one-off. What emerges instead, even within the small group of multimodal metaphors found in the British data, are recurring patterns of representation of a completely different nature. These patterns, we argue in retrospect, had a key role in the representation of the pandemic in institutional and media discourse in the early days, ultimately impacting interpretation by the general public at a crucial stage in the unfolding crisis.

Firstly, there is a noticeable preference for images that are culturally charged and even stereotyped (the Venice carnival; individuals with distinctly Asian traits) – a trend already observed across the broader set of coronavirus-related images, including non-metaphorical ones (see Table 2). This preference must be contextualised within the specific stage of the Covid-19 timeline under analysis: a moment when specific countries were spotlighted as the first cases of the new disease emerged within their borders. Nevertheless, we argue that this highly culture-specific representation found at the onset of the pandemic – especially, though not exclusively, in connection with war metaphors – illustrates how early multimodal representations foregrounded the *divisive* potential of the virus, instead of other possible positive aspects, such as international collaboration, or a common endeavour. This pattern is, in our view, a case of early metaphorical framing with large-scale consequences. Other forms of divisiveness would soon emerge: from the race for vaccines and disparities between wealthier and poorer nations, to the ‘me vs. you’ logic underlying anti-vax and other kinds of pandemic discourse, ultimately leading to what we may call *pandemic anti-language* (cf. Halliday 1978).

An equally important recurring theme in our dataset revolves around face masks, which emerge as having a distinctive symbolic force. On the one hand, masks were consistently portrayed from the outset as weapons that fighters and survivors could wield (within WAR/CONFLICT scenarios: Table 3, rows 1, 3 and 4) or even, hyperbolically, as objects capable of granting their wearers ‘superpowers’, such as protection from a nuclear explosion (within NATURAL FORCE scenarios: Table 3, row 5). This style of representation framed face masks

in a specific way from the start and likely paved the way for subsequent re-elaborations of masks as markers of identity – e.g. dividing individuals into those who complied with public health measures and those who resisted them. The photographs from the Venice Carnival – significantly, the first to appear in our dataset chronologically – are noteworthy in this respect, as they visually establish a dichotomy between individuals with and without face masks, clearly differentiated by their different roles (public officials and laypeople) and different positions within the frame. On the other hand, our data show that masks acquired a metonymic value from the beginning, as objects metonymically standing for the whole: the whole person, defined by the very act of wearing a mask, and the whole context, characterised by a permeating sense of danger and need for protection (on the mask as a metonymy of the pandemic, see also Charteris-Black 2021: 225 ff.) Last but not least, certain multimodal metaphors centred on images of face masks (particularly those based on WAR/CONFLICT and MOTION within the dataset: Table 3, rows 1-4) carried the potential to evoke strong intertextual and intermedial connections with dystopian narratives, from Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*, to Matheson’s *I am Legend* and Katz’s *Cassandra Crossing*. This would also become a defining narrative within the pandemic, taken up by social media users and even within certain forms of public discourse.³

3.2 Italian data

Building on the approach used to report the quantitative analysis of the British data in Section 3.1, the descriptive statistics presented in Table 4 refer to the Italian dataset.

1. ARTICLE TYPE

Q. Does the identified AOI correspond to the main front page article?

- Yes: 19/35 (54.3%)
 - No: 16/35 (45.7%)
-

³ A brief survey related to this hypothesis was conducted on Mentimeter by one of the authors during a seminar on the project, involving a group of 10 PhD candidates with a background in modern language studies. When asked about possible connections evoked by these images, all the participants mentioned at least one famously dystopian book, film, or TV series, including McCarthy’s *The Road*, Orwell’s *1984* and Gilliam’s *12 Monkeys*, in addition to those mentioned above.

2. TEXT-IMAGE RELATION

Q. Does the AOI include a coronavirus-related image along with coronavirus-related text?

- Yes: 18/35 (51.4%)
 - No: 17/35 (48.6%)
-

3. IMAGE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Q. Does the coronavirus-related image evoke a clearly identifiable cultural context?

- Yes: 13/17 (76.5%)
 - No: 4/17 (23.5%)
-

4. METAPHOR IN TEXT

Q. Does the text in the AOI contain at least one instance of verbal metaphor?

- Yes: 19/35 (54.3%)
 - No: 16/35 (45.7%)
-

5. METAPHOR IN IMAGE

Q. Does the image in the AOI contain at least one instance of visual metaphor?

- Yes: 3/17 (17.6%)
 - No: 14/17 (82.4%)
-

Table 4: Italian dataset – overall quantitative results

The results reveal several differences when compared to the British dataset. One important difference concerns the prominence given to Covid-19 as a topic in the Italian newspapers published during the week immediately following the first detected Italian case. While in the British dataset a substantial majority of AOIs correspond to the main front page article, the Italian dataset shows a much lower percentage (54.3%), suggesting that Italian newspapers were less likely to foreground coronavirus as the central theme, opting, thus for a more diversified editorial focus.

Another difference regards the integration of text and images: in the Italian dataset, 51.4% of the AOIs include a coronavirus-related image alongside text, slightly below the data reported in Table 2 for the British newspapers. Even though the difference is not significant, the higher proportion of AOIs without images in the Italian dataset (48.6%) suggests that the editors preferred to rely more on textual elements to communicate Covid-19 information. This finding is reinforced by the fact that visual metaphors are much less frequent in the Italian dataset, appearing in only 17.6% of the cases taken into consideration.

This discrepancy may be interpreted as a cultural divergence between the two datasets: in fact, Italian newspapers seem to favour more factual images over symbolic visual representations. The tendency to anchor images in identifiable cultural contexts is clear in both British and Italian newspapers, but the Italian dataset includes a wider variety of specific references, such as the Bridge of Sighs in Venice, the subway in Milan, Italian public figures, armed forces, football, and iconic national symbols (e.g. the Italian flag). Although references to China are present in the Italian dataset (e.g. Chinese workers in factories), the prevalence of images connected to the Italian territory suggests a more localised (and culturally embedded) journalistic approach to representing the pandemic.

Verbal metaphors are present on the Italian front pages (54.3%), but they occur less frequently compared to the British data. The choice of Italian journalists to adopt a more literal reporting style during the first week of the pandemic might have been deliberate, as a response to a moment of crisis (or shock), when the gravity of (unexpected) events calls for clarity and directness over figurative expressions.

Moving on, Figures 4 and 5 show the types of source domains for verbal ($n = 19$) and visual metaphors ($n = 3$) in the Italian dataset. On the front pages of the Italian newspapers, the verbal metaphors show a slightly different distribution of source domains. In fact, interestingly, MOTION/ENGINES emerges as the most prevalent domain, accounting for 31.58% of the metaphors. While WAR/CONFLICT is still present in the Italian verbal metaphors, it is less frequent compared to the British dataset, appearing in 26.32% of the cases annotated. The other three source domains for the verbal metaphors in the Italian dataset are MEDICINE/PHARMACY (15.79%), NATURAL FORCE/HAZARD (15.79%), and SPORTS/GAMES (10.53%). This more balanced distribution of source domains may reflect a broader range of framings for the pandemic in the Italian media, with less reliance on military/conflict-related language (e.g. battlefield) and a greater emphasis on dynamic concepts (e.g. football, athletics), technical language (e.g. engines, vehicles), and scientific aspects (e.g. antidotes).

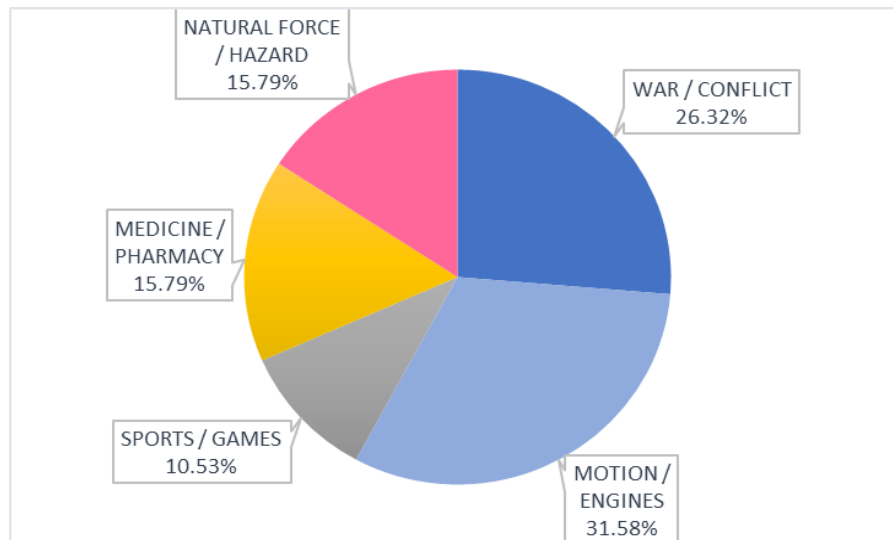


Figure 4: Source domains in verbal metaphors – Italian front pages

As for the visual metaphors, the Italian dataset includes only 3 examples, with WAR/CONFLICT, MOTION/ENGINES, and NATURAL FORCE/HAZARD, each occurring once (33.33%).

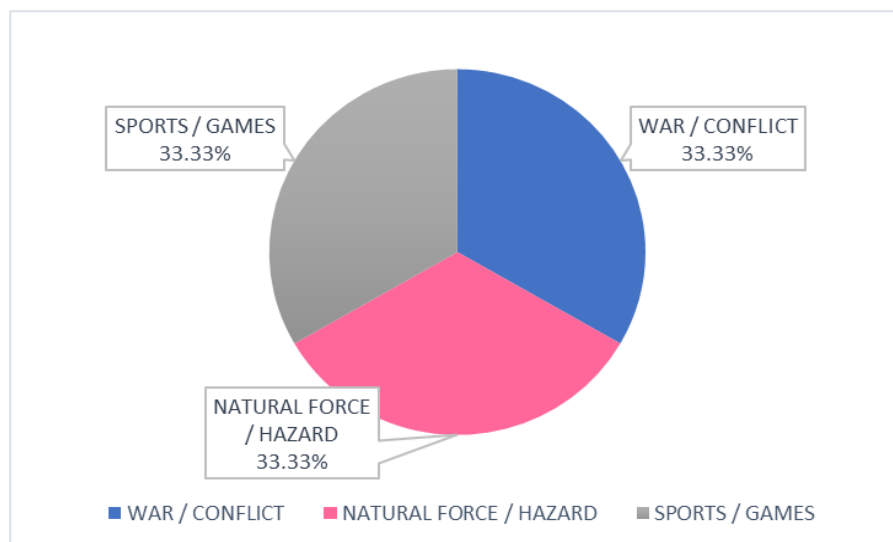


Figure 5: Source domains in visual metaphors – Italian front pages

Such a limited baseline makes a direct comparison with the British visual metaphors challenging, but what could be said is that the WAR/CONFLICT source – the most frequent among the British visual metaphors – plays a less dominant role in the Italian data. At the same time, this is consistent with the observations from Table 4, namely that the smaller number of visual metaphors

in the Italian dataset (3 compared to 7 in the British dataset) indicates that Italian front pages generally placed less emphasis on visual symbolism. From a multimodal perspective, the Italian data displays the same degree of overlap between verbal and visual metaphors found in the British dataset; in fact, all 3 visual metaphors co-occur with verbal metaphors (even though there are multiple source domains), indicating that the two modes are integrated to create multimodal metaphorical representations.

Table 5 provides an overview of the 3 multimodal metaphors found in the Italian front pages.

Source (Newspaper, date)	Verbal metaphor	Visual metaphor	Source domain and multimodal metaphor explanation
1. <i>Il Sole 24 Ore</i> 24-02-2020	Il virus globale scuote i mercati (En: Global virus shakes markets) (headline) <i>Fuga verso approdi sicuri</i> (En: Escape to safe harbours) (subheading)	Landscape (eye-level). A Chinese factory worker dressed in protective equipment; the walls of the factory show a pattern of black and yellow stripes	NATURAL FORCE/HAZARD (+ MOTION) The image of a Chinese factory worker with FFP3 mask and glasses, against the backdrop of black and yellow stripes, complements the verbal metaphors; the visuals reinforce the sense of danger, suggesting a disruptive and unpredictable natural hazard

Source (Newspaper, date)	Verbal metaphor	Visual metaphor	Source domain and multimodal metaphor explanation
2. <i>La Stampa</i> 28-02-2020	Virus, <i>scoppia la guerra</i> fra scienziati (En: Virus, war breaks out among scientists) (headline) La salute <i>impone un patto</i> – <i>Impatto devastante</i> (En: Health imposes a pact – Devastating impact) (subheading)	Focus (eye-level). A soldier on the empty Bridge of Sighs in Venice, wearing an FFP3 mask	WAR/CONFLICT The image of a soldier on the empty Bridge of Sighs in Venice, together with the war metaphor in the title and in the text of the article, suggests that the virus is an invading force; the soldier's FFP3 mask could symbolise protection
3. <i>Corriere della Sera</i> 01-03-2020	Milano è <i>forte e ripartirà</i> (En: Milan is strong at will take off again) (subheading, quote)	Landscape (top-down). A drawing of a footballer kicking a coronavirus-shaped ball	SPORTS/GAMES MOTION/ENGINES The verbal metaphor and the image of a footballer kicking away the virus (instead of a ball) convey a message of postponement and resilience; there is also an attempt to downplay the severity of the situation

Table 5: Multimodal metaphors in Italian front pages

The 3 multimodal metaphors in the Italian dataset displayed in Table 5 are different in nature, and each offers a specific conceptual framing of the

pandemic. The first multimodal metaphor displays the image of a Chinese factory worker, equipped with personal protective equipment (FFP3 mask and glasses), set against the factory walls painted in black and yellow stripes – a pattern that is commonly associated with danger and hazard warnings. This visual metaphor is combined with the verbal metaphor in the article of a global virus shaking markets, likening the impact of the pandemic to that of an earthquake – thus, a disrupting natural hazard. The subheading suggests moving to safer harbours. Overall, the sentiment is negative, and the emotions conveyed are fear, surprise, and anticipation.

The second multimodal metaphor contains the image of a soldier standing alone on the typically crowded Bridge of Sighs in Venice, which creates a dystopian contrast and a feeling of surprise given the usual throngs of tourists, especially during the Venice Carnival (the onset of the pandemic coincides with this festivity). The visual metaphor complements the WAR/CONFLICT metaphors in the text, implying that the virus is a threat and positioning Italy in a battle against the threat. The presence of the soldier, wearing an FFP3 mask and a uniform, may be interpreted as a symbol of defence and protection. The sentiment conveyed here is primarily negative, transmitting emotions of fear and negative surprise.

Finally, the third multimodal metaphor shows a cartoon of a footballer kicking away a virus-shaped ball, which, together with the subheading, lightens the tone of the article and conveys both activity postponement and resilience. In fact, the sentiment here is largely positive, evoking emotions of trust, anticipation, and optimism. The use of SPORTS/GAMES metaphors is found only on the Italian front pages, while the British dataset contains more ‘serious’ WAR/CONFLICT metaphors, as discussed in Section 3.1. This difference in framing could be culture-dependent: Italian newspapers may have opted for a less anxiety-inducing portrayal of the onset of the pandemic.

4. Conclusion

This study explored verbal and visual metaphor usage in the representation of Covid-19 across British and Italian newspaper front pages at the onset of the pandemic. The data were multimodally annotated by the three authors of this paper using a complex annotation scheme on Labelbox.

The results of our analyses reveal that metaphors are present on the front pages of both British and Italian newspapers, but their distribution differs in

both modes. British newspapers favour WAR/CONFLICT metaphors, a finding that is in line with the broader global trends reported in the literature during the early stages of the pandemic (see, *inter alia*, Chapman & Miller 2020; Hanne 2022). In addition to WAR/CONFLICT metaphors, the Italian newspapers displayed a more varied use of source domains, such as MOTION/ENGINES (the most frequent), SPORTS/GAMES, and MEDICINE/PHARMACY. Italian newspapers also displayed a greater integration of cultural and national symbols as part of the visual metaphors. In both datasets, instances of multimodal metaphor tended to amplify emotional and symbolic resonance: British newspapers often emphasised themes that transmitted fear and urgency, whereas Italian newspapers, while also addressing fear and surprise, incorporated in some cases elements of optimism and resilience. In both datasets, several important emerging styles of representation were found, linked to the highly culture-specific nature of images, the symbolic and metonymic value of masks and (especially in the British dataset) the presence of traits that are capable of evoking dystopian narratives.

These emerging styles of metaphor usage had an effect on the development of the institutional framing of the pandemic, its representation in the media ecosystem, and its interpretation by the general public. As the crisis unfolded, initial WAR/CONFLICT metaphors persisted but were gradually supplemented by other frames, such as those that converged towards the idea of endurance and recovery, but also those that evoked concerns over state control, restrictions, and vaccine scepticism (see, *inter alia*, Combei & Luporini 2021; Gök & Kara 2022).

Our study presents several limitations that need to be acknowledged at this point. Firstly, we decided to focus on a relatively short period, namely the early days of the pandemic in Europe. This decision, as stated in the Introduction, was motivated by the intention to address what we consider a relatively underexplored area of research. However, in order to gain a thorough understanding of how framing mechanisms in the British and Italian media changed over time, other projects devoted to examining the evolution of metaphor usage throughout the entire two-year duration of the pandemic would be needed. Secondly, our data is limited to metaphors in two languages, English and Italian. Expanding the analysis to include additional languages would provide more precise representations of the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variations in Covid-19 metaphor usage. Furthermore, this study highlights the inherent challenges and subjectivity involved in metaphor identification, particularly in relation to the visual dimension and to

conventional metaphoric expressions. These discrepancies in annotator interpretations suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration is needed in order to enhance methodological rigour.

All in all, the findings of our exploratory research indicate that metaphors (verbal, visual and multimodal) had a relevant role in shaping public understanding of the Covid-19 crisis. We believe that an investigation of this discursive device is needed in order to evaluate the effect of the news on public perception of global crises.

Author contributions This article is the result of close and continuous collaboration among the three authors, who are equally responsible for its contents. Exclusively for the purposes of Italian academia, Antonella Luporini wrote Sections 1 and 3.1; Claudia Roberta Combei wrote Sections 3.2 and 4; Ludovica Pannitto wrote Section 2.

Acknowledgements The Authors wish to express their gratitude to the two anonymous Reviewers for providing constructive feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

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An ecostylistic investigation of the online communicative practices within grassroots environmental activism in India

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Abstract A corpus of nineteen posts collected from the social media platform X was analysed using an integrated theoretical and methodological approach. By combining ecostylistics with ecolinguistics, multimodal critical discourse analysis and multimodal studies, the study investigates the online communicative practices of the grassroots environmental movement #SaveBuxwahaForest, in order to gauge their stylistic traits and communicative strategies, functions and effects. The contribution will also explore the link between environmental activism and protection of indigenous peoples' rights. The analysis shows that background knowledge about (post)colonial policies towards – or against – indigenous peoples in the Indian subcontinent is necessary to fully decode more than one text in the corpus; that verbal and non-verbal figurative language and non-conventional oppositions are major stylistic traits in the digital communication of this environmental movement; that engagement, mobilisation and persuasion are their main communicative functions; and that most of the strategies used are beneficial rather than ambivalent or destructive, as per Stibbe's ([2015] 2021) classification.

Keywords Ecostylistics; online communication; ecolinguistics; MCDA; multimodality; grassroots environmental movement; indigenous people.

1. Introduction

2024 was the warmest year in history and the first one above the 1.5 °C increase in global temperatures, which was listed in the 2015 Paris agreement as the threshold limit to contain the negative effects of global warming (see <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement> and <https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-2024-virtually-certain-be-warmest-year-and-first-year-above-15degc>). At the same time, the most recent Conference of the Parties, the COP29 held in Baku, was dubbed as the “finance COP” (Hill & Mahat 2024): its major achievement was a commitment to climate finance which, however, binds governments to invest significantly less

than studies show would be necessary. Results in other highly anticipated areas, such as a renewed and revised commitment to cut down greenhouse emissions, were not produced (*ibid.*). In addition, attempts were made by representatives of fossil fuel-producing countries to weaken the commitment reached at the 2023 COP28 to “transition away from fossil fuels” (Harvey et al. 2024), with the President of the host country, Azerbaijan, going as far as claiming that “oil and gas was a gift from God” (Hill & Mahat 2024). The situation around the environmental emergency is so critical that three new reports by the UN acknowledge that the 1.5 °C limit may be definitely out of reach and predict a trajectory that would lead to a 3 °C increase in the temperature of the planet (Doering 2024). The results of the recent presidential election in the USA, the consequent selection of many climate change deniers for the new cabinet and the claims of another imminent withdraw of the USA from the Paris Agreement (Milman 2024) are a further cause for concern.

Against this backdrop of urgency and uncertainty, it is not surprising that many people are invested in environmental action while simultaneously perceiving that other people and governments are not doing enough (Richtie 2024) or that, when governmental policies are put in place, they are still too focused on making ecological transition profitable rather than swift (Bernards 2021). This, in turn, has led to the proliferation of grassroots environmental movements, which have proved to be extremely successful in terms of sociopolitical mobilisation and ability to counteract top-down ineffectiveness with bottom-up pressure (Horton 2010; see also Grasso & Giugni 2022). Some of these have an international reach, such as #FridaysforFuture or Extinction Rebellion, while others stay focused on a local, regional or national scale, such as the Mikoko Pamoja project to protect mangroves and provide clean water in Kenya (<https://mikokopamoja.org/about-us/>), or the Swayam Shikshan Prayog project in India to promote women’s empowerment through sustainable agriculture (<https://swayamshikshanprayog.org/whoweare/#mission>). By the same token, their strategies are varied and multifaceted and have evolved in time thanks to technological advancements in communication modes and channels. Indeed, besides ‘traditional’ strategies such as civil disobedience (Khan 2010), or media campaigns, marches and protests (Horton 2010: 318), online activism has become a staple of what Staggenborg (2020) has termed “grassroots environmentalism” in recent years (see also Kavada & Specht 2022).

The online communicative practices of these grassroots movements are of great interest for communication scholars. On the one hand, the missions of these initiatives are of the utmost environmental, social and political

importance. On the other, communication plays a key role in their ability to mobilise, raise awareness and put pressure on top players, such as governments and corporations, thus reiterating the global significance of digital environmental activism as social practice in today's society.

This is why this article focuses on the communicative strategies adopted in the online campaign of the localised grassroots environmental movement #SaveBuxwahaForest. More specifically, an integrated approach based on ecostylistics (Virdis 2022a; Goatly 2022; Zurru 2021), ecolinguistics (Fill & Mühlhäusler 2001; Fill & Penz 2018; Stibbe [2015] 2021; Zurru, 2022), multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA; Ledin & Machin 2018; Machin & Mayr 2023) and multimodal studies (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021; Pérez Sobrino 2017; Zurru 2024) will be adopted. This interdisciplinary approach will be functional to achieving the analytical aim of the study: to explore the discourse of resistance to nationalist attacks and capitalist demands of the diamond-mining project threatening the environment and indigenous peoples in the Chhatarpur forest area. This will be accomplished by collecting and qualitatively analysing a corpus of texts from the online campaign mentioned above, in order to gauge any emerging stylistic patterns and their communicative functions.

The second, theoretical aim of this research is to advocate for a closer cooperation between language- and communication-based eco-disciplines such as ecostylistics and ecolinguistics and research on (post)colonial and/or indigenous settings from the Global South, with a focus on environmental (in)justice. While other eco-disciplines have explored the connection between indigenous peoples and environmentalism (Berkas [1999] 2018; Etchart 2022; e.g. Monani & Adamson 2017; Thornton & Bhagwat 2021) and, to a degree, the connection between (post)colonial history and environmental (in)justice (see DeLoughrey & Handley 2011; Dhillon 2022; Huggan & Tiffin [2009] 2015; Nesmith et al. 2021), ecostylistics and ecolinguistics are yet to put this crucial topic front and centre, even though a number of studies have recently focused on a few liminal issues (e.g. Adami 2022; Amideo 2024; Prastio et al. 2023; Virdis 2022a; Zurru 2017).

Since this contribution adopts a critical approach, section 2 will briefly discuss the socio-historical background of this initiative, as context is a fundamental aspect of critical discourse studies, especially when social movements are being investigated (Flowerdew 2018). Section 3 will focus on theory and methodology and Section 4 on analysis and discussion. The final

section will be devoted to some concluding remarks and reflections on limitations and future research.

2. Socio-historical background

In his critically acclaimed non-fiction volume *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Ghosh 2016: 145), the internationally renowned novelist and environmental activist Amitav Ghosh claims that, due to an eminently Eurocentric discourse on global warming, most voices in the conversation focus on capitalism as a primary driver for climate change. According to the author, this view underestimates at best – and dismisses at worst – the role imperialism played (ibid.). In addition, another major aspect often being sidelined is Asia's centrality within the climate crisis, due to both sheer numbers and the fact that the majority of the most threatened regions are Asian (ibid.: 147).

In agreement with Ghosh's stance, this contribution intends not only to step away from a purely Eurocentric focus and investigate an environmental movement from Asia, but it also aims at exploring the hypothesis that, in this particular case, (post)colonialism might be a key factor in the environmental threat this movement had to face. Indeed, as Ghosh himself points out, the connection between (post)colonialism and current environmental circumstances often falls under what Fill and Penz (2018a: 439) labelled "silence in environmental discourse", to indicate those aspects of a certain environmental issue which are not often discussed or questioned. In the last decade, however, this connection has started to gain increasing attention in a number of eco-disciplines, and also, more recently, within ecolinguistics (see Amideo 2024).

This choice is also in line with calls in most recent ecolinguistic research for studies on societies from all over the world which emphasise the interdependence between human and more-than-human world (see, e.g., Stibbe [2015] 2021: 211; Fill & Penz 2018a: 442; Bortoluzzi & Zurru 2024: 260). Indigenous societies, for example, are a clear source of beneficial environmental discourses, given their millennia-long ability to co-exist harmoniously with the habitats that host them (Stibbe [2015] 2021: 27). Notably, quoting Everett and Neu (2000), Stibbe ([2015] 2021: 247) points out that indigenous people are often among those "erased" in the discourse of environmental modernisation, which discusses environmental issues as solvable through technology rather than structural changes in society. This is clearly a direction many people and countries are choosing to follow, and which

inevitably leaves traditional and indigenous societies behind. And while solar panels, energy-saving batteries, and electric cars can help, it is undeniable that the wisdom indigenous peoples exhibit in their relationship with their habitats might offer precious insights for the structural changes we all *need* to make as a society. Incidentally, Stibbe ([2015] 2021: 15) defines “erasure” as “a story that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration”, which links indigenous voices and plights to a key aspect often backgrounded in a Eurocentric discourse on the environmental emergency: environmental (in)justice.

While issues such as the economic cost of the environmental transition never fail to be discussed in the Global North, the massively negative impact of the environmental crisis on the ecosystems of the Global South – and consequent threats to human and more-than-human life – are not as frequently discussed. This was aptly demonstrated by Bevitori and Johnson’s 2022 study on the occurrences of RISK and RESILIENCE in a corpus of texts about environmental issues collected from mainstream press from around the world. Notably, the study revealed that RISK is more frequently mentioned in the Global North (GN) and RESILIENCE in the Global South (GS) and that financial risk is typically connected to climate change in the GN corpus, while it is virtually absent in the GS corpus. Interestingly, risks of displacement and migration are absent in the GN corpus, and resilience does appear in the GN corpus in later years, but framed as “adaptability”, namely the ability of infrastructures and urban areas to face environmentally related risks (Bevitori & Johnson 2022: 565-566).

Conversely, studies show that the environmental emergency is most definitely intersectional with matters of social injustice in the Global South (Nesmith et al. 2021), where they are often connected to colonialism (ibid.: 39-43), and that the very notion of ‘environment’ was reshaped thanks to the movement for environmental justice to include aspects previously excluded from the discussion, such as racism, poverty or sexism (Pezzullo 2022). More specifically, indigenous environmental movements have traditionally been on the frontline in the protection of the environment (Etchart 2022) and are still spearheading many initiatives to counteract environmental injustice as a form of decolonisation (Dhillon 2022), in fields such as energy production and distribution (Partridge 2022) and safeguarding land, water and air quality (Martínez-Alier 2023).

With its long imperial history being deeply interwoven with the negative impact the environmental emergency is having on its territories and peoples,

India is a glaring example of what has been discussed so far. Indeed, the subcontinent is a place where ecological matters are often intersectional with issues of nationalism, displacement and political agendas, which are, in turn, linked to the colonial past of the country. Centuries of colonisation, followed by a sudden departure of the British colonisers, have also generated a profound social, political and religious instability, which resulted in the dramatic Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and communal violence over the decades, which still echoes in the polarisation of religious, ethnic and social groups in the subcontinent in the 21st century (Dalrymple 2015; see also Adami & Roy 2023). India's independence also implied that the new postcolonial government had to learn how to manage an incredibly vast territory, characterised by extremely rich biodiversity and agroclimatic conditions (Bhandari & Ghai 2010: 105). In time, this led to a number of governmental initiatives aimed at protecting the environment that would often clash with intersectional matters such as poaching due to extreme poverty or occupation of forest land due to displacement¹ (ibid.: 106). Remarkably, many environmental regulations in India were inspired – if not actively forced through courts – by environmental movements (ibid.: Liu & Gu 2010: 4-5) starting from the 1980s.

The case study selected for analysis is situated within this socio-historical context. Indeed, despite the 2006 Forest Rights Act, which “recognizes the rights of the forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for a variety of needs, including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs” (tribal.nic.in/fra.aspx#:~:text=The%20Act%20encompasses%20Rights%20of,Pastoral%20community%2C%20access%20to%20biodiversity%2C), a deforestation project that threatened trees, land, water, air and indigenous people was greenlighted by the Hindu nationalist government in 2021. Indigenous peoples' rights, in particular, have been consistently under attack by the government in recent years, because the lands and forests they inhabit are rich in natural – and economically profitable – resources (Shankar 2024) and because those rights

¹ The latter case is at the centre of Ghosh's award-winning novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), which recounts the long-forgotten massacre of thousands of Bengali Hindu refugees in 1979. After decades of displacement due to the consequences of the 1947 independence, these refugees settled in Marichjhapi, one of the islands in the Sundarbans archipelago. The government justified their forced eviction and consequent slaughter – which was mainly based on communal hatred – with the need to protect the royal Bengal tigers in the area, leaving the survivors to think they were no better than ‘tiger-food’ (Jalais 2005). This is but one of the historically-grounded episodes which show the intersectionality between (post)colonialism, environmentalism and socio-political polarisation in the subcontinent.

are not a primary concern of the Hindu nationalist party. The diamond-mining project in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh, would have required felling over 2-lakh – approximately 200,000 – trees in Buxwaha forest, forever altering its biodiversity. This would have also increased water and air pollution, as well as negatively impacted on 8,000 dwellers from nearby villages (Dabral 2021). While mainstream media sided with the government and proved to be in favour of diamond mining being initiated (Zulfie, Sukarno & Wahyuningsih 2023), the nationwide #SaveBuxwahaForest online campaign was launched in 2021 to raise awareness about the environmental risks connected to this venture and contributed to garner enough support to stall the project (Sarin 2023).

The reference to the 2006 Forest Rights Act above allows us to better place this case study within the wider context of Indigenous studies. The latter is a term used primarily in US academia to define an interdisciplinary approach to the exploration, recollection and fostering of Indigenous peoples' histories, traditions and customs, as well as education, language revitalisation, political and social rights, in settler colonies such as Canada and Australia, or former colonies such as the USA or Latin America (Salomón Tarquini & Abbona 2017). Even the recent *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (Hokowhitu et al. 2021) sets out to offer “a wide-ranging overview of the field of Indigenous Studies scholarship informed by the lived conditions of Indigenous peoples *in the first world*” (ibid.: 26; my emphasis), and attributes the difficulty in the international systematisation of such a discipline to the mismatch between the terms “international” and “indigenous”, which necessarily implies a localised focus (ibid.). It should also be pointed out that the term “Indigenous studies” is also used in different settings all over the world, possibly with similar approaches, but with a different focus and/or goal(s) (Salomón Tarquini & Abbona 2017). In the specific case of India, the very term “indigenous” needs clarification. It is interesting to start from the quotation above and notice that the terminology used is “forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers”. “Tribal” and “traditional” are, together with “Scheduled Tribes (ST)”, administrative terms used ever since the postcolonial period started (Sen 2018: 3-4). Their origin is linked to the use of the term “tribe” during colonialism, first employed to indicate colonised ‘races’ or ‘peoples’ and from the 1860s onwards to distinguish the native tribes from those included in the caste system. In opposition to the administrative term “Scheduled Tribe(s)”, members of the ethnic communities in India – later supported by many academics – advocated for the use of the term “adivasi”, literally “native or indigenous peoples of India” (ibid.: 5). This

term was suggested not only to reject the negative undertones linked to the colonial origin of the terms “tribe(s)” and “tribal”, but also to voice these peoples’ claims to certain rights, such as political autonomy and the rights to their ancestral lands. In this contribution, the term “indigenous people” will be used, since, as we shall see, the Hindi term “adivasi” is not employed in our corpus and it is not universally accepted by all native peoples (Burman 2009).

Having briefly outlined the socio-historical background of the online environmental campaign under scrutiny, the following section will focus on the theoretical and methodological segment of the study.

3. Theory and Methodology

As mentioned in the Introduction, an integrated theoretical and methodological approach was used in this study. This was necessary because of the multifaceted nature of both the topic and the text types explored.

The environmental emergency is such a global threat, but with so many specific and localised aspects, that it is extremely difficult to both process and communicate. Lakoff (2010) coined the term “environmental hypocognition” to express the lack of appropriate frames in the human mind to properly grasp the extent of this global threat, especially as economic factors and threats to other intersectional basic aspects of human life, such as food and shelter, are more immediate and easier to frame (*ibid.*: 76-77). This complexity is also demonstrated by the variety of studies and approaches which have investigated the multiplicity of communicative strategies used across genres and text types within environmental discourse, and their (in)effectiveness over time (e.g. Bortoluzzi 2024; Culloty et al. 2018; Nocke 2014; Rebich-Hespanha & Rice 2016; Penz 2022; Viridis 2022b; Walsh 2014; Zurru 2024).

Research also shows that the strategies used in environmental communication have become increasingly visual and multimodal (e.g. Dancygier 2023; Hahn & Berkers 2021; Hansen 2018; Rodriguez-Labajos 2022), with new text types developed within digital communication, such as social media posts, memes or gifs (Bhattacharjee & Sinha 2023; Cozen 2013; Zurru 2022) being utilized alongside more ‘traditional’ means like pictures, posters, adverts or videos. Additionally, the ever increasing pervasiveness of technology-mediated communication has amplified the means and spaces for the creation and use of non-verbal equivalents of figurative language, such as visual and multimodal metaphors or multimodal hyperbole (see Bolognesi et al.

2018; Ferré 2014; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009; Forceville 2020; Koickakudy & Karakunnel 2023), which are also widely employed in digital environmental communication (e.g. Hidalgo-Downing & O'Dowd 2023; Pérez Sobrino 2013; Meijers et al. 2019; Zurru 2024). Therefore, the methodological framework for this investigation had to integrate a multimodal lens, in order to be able to analyse all the meaning-making and communicative strategies used in the case study selected.

Besides including means to investigate figurative multimodal communication, the theory and methodology also needed to integrate a critical approach, in consideration of the key role the communicative phenomenon under scrutiny plays in a vitally important arena: the survival of human and more-than-human life. Indeed, while nobody can claim that effective communication can singlehandedly solve the environmental emergency, it is undeniable by now that this emergency is of an anthropogenic nature, that the one species that needs to take urgent positive action is *homo sapiens*, and that communication is one of the means humans rely on to bring about change in the world.

Within Critical Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough [1989] 2013; Fairclough, Wodak 1997; van Dijk 2008) traditionally focuses on exploring the relation between language, communication, texts, ideology and power. By doing so, CDA focuses on determining how these elements interact with each other to shape our societies, by supporting or challenging existing power structures and/or maintaining or creating new ones. A recent development is represented by Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA; Ledin & Machin 2018; Machin & Mayr [2012] 2023), which has an explicit social approach and is interested in analysing which semiotic resources are used in communication and discourse to construe and convey ideological stances, in a world where interaction is scarcely ever monomodal and has an ever increasing social significance.

A critical lens is, therefore, necessary in this study, in order to analyse the texts under scrutiny in the broader context of environmental discourse and intersectional issues (politics, economy, history, society, religion, etc.), and establish which communicative and stylistic traits characterise them, also based on the expectations generated by this broader context and the genre they fall under. Indeed, communication is, by its very nature, situated, and no communicative interaction can be interpreted properly outside of the setting and context in which it occurred.

In this regard, the notion of “genre” is salient and requires clarification. Among the many definitions of this concept, this contribution adopts the one by Swales (1990: 45-58): a set of communicative events which share one or more communicative purposes and which can be more or less prototypical. This, in turn, delineates how acceptable or appropriate a contribution to the genre is in terms of content and structure. Interestingly, Forceville (2020) maintains that genre acts as an “interface” which narrows down the number of possible interpretative paths greatly, by setting up expectations in the minds of those involved in a communicative exchange. In turn, deviations from these expectations will inevitably bring about a communicative effect, which will depend on the specific context, including genre, of the exchange. Unsurprisingly, Leech (2008) identifies deviation as one of the main avenues to achieve stylistic foregrounding, namely one of the strategies able to generate the most significant communicative effects.

In this study, the genre under investigation is environmental communication, but with a specific focus on one of its sub-genres, namely the environmental communication practices of grassroots movements on social media, which is clearly different from other sub-genres, such as the environmental communication practices of institutional bodies like the EU, of mainstream press, of large international non-profit organisations such as the WWF, and so on.

A detailed analysis within this genre and sub-genre, therefore, does not only require the theoretical and methodological tools to tackle multimodal communication and its critical and ideological stance. It also necessitates the means to evaluate which environmental communicative strategies are destructive and should be challenged; ambivalent and should be reframed; beneficial and should be promoted, as per Stibbe’s ([2015] 2021) nomenclature. As the scholar himself underlines (*ibid.*: 21), these three keywords do not identify clear-cut notions, and a detailed analysis is necessary to establish whether a certain text promotes a beneficial, ambivalent or destructive discourse. Generally speaking, linguistic, communicative and textual practices which encourage the destruction of life-sustaining ecosystems will be classified as destructive; those which promote the respect and preservation of ecosystems will be classified as beneficial; those promoting both attitudes at once will be classified as ambivalent. In this study, and in consideration of its aims, of the socio-historical background of the case study, and of the specific genre analysed, those stylistic and communicative practices which foster positive environmental action, activism, environmental protection

and the respect of indigenous lives and habitats will be classified as beneficial; those which hinder or fail to encourage active participation or environmental protection, or promote the destruction of indigenous habitats or the violation of indigenous peoples' rights will be classified as destructive; those which show a combination of the two previous stances will be classified as ambivalent. The overarching aim is to identify which stylistic traits those communicative practices which mobilize, raise awareness and result in positive action have, in order to further expand the catalogue of beneficial strategies that can be used within online grassroots environmental communication.

Integrating multimodal studies and MCDA with ecolinguistics and ecostylistics provides the necessary theoretical and methodological framework to achieve this goal. What these disciplines have in common is a critical approach to the investigation of the link between language, communication and social practices; they are also interested in demonstrating that damaging practices can be recontextualised, e.g. by exposing destructive and ambivalent linguistic and discourse patterns and promoting beneficial ones (Amideo 2024; Ledin & Machin 2018; Stibbe 2018a, 2018b, ([2015] 2021; Viridis 2022a, 2022b). Indeed, ecolinguistics investigates the connection between the language we use to talk or write about ecological and environmental matters and our attitudes – and consequent actions – towards those same issues (Stibbe [2015] 2021). Ecostylistics focuses on linguistic, textual, discursive, communicative style(s) as an indicator of the ideological stance of texts and, what is more, of how that ideological stance is construed and conveyed (Zurru 2017; Viridis 2022a). The combination of these perspectives provides the analyst with an extensive body of scientific literature and a toolkit comprising, among others, verbal, visual and multimodal metaphor studies (e.g. Goatly 2022; Zurru 2022, 2024); multimodal studies (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021; opposition analysis (Jeffries 2010; Viridis 2022b); and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen [1985] 2014). These tools combined will allow us to analyse each individual text in and of itself, to situate it within its wider genre, to identify which elements concur to its meaning-making process and to unveil which communicative and ideological standpoint(s) it conveys. In turn, the analysis of all the texts in the corpus will make it possible to explore whether common stylistic traits and communicative functions can be identified.

In terms of data collection, hashtags were used as the main parameter to select the texts to be analysed. This decision was made for a number of reasons. Research shows that, besides being used with their original purpose of indexing and searching tools, hashtags have acquired various pragmatic functions,

including evaluation, affiliation, value construction and negotiation, censoring and mocking (Zappavigna 2018; Zappavigna & Martin 2018). With regard to the communicative practices of social movements, the term “hashtag activism” has been coined (Altahmazi 2020; Xiong et al. 2019). Indeed, studies have concluded that hashtagging is a means for social movements to foster communing affiliation around shared ideas, while also legitimising the claims associated with the hashtags in a collaborative process of meaning-negotiation by a group of individuals sharing common values (Altahmazi 2020). Xiong et al. (2019) also stress that engagement and co-creation of meaning is inherent to hashtag activism, since not only do the parties involved agree with the goals of the movement, but they are also actively engaged in information sharing and consumption, which also includes the creation of hashtags as a shared effort between organisations and the public. Starting from Tilly’s (Tilly 1999; Tilly & Wood 2013) notion of WUNC – worthiness, unity, numbers, commitment – in relation to social movements, Freelon et al. (2018: 994) also confirm that hashtags represent the main means to measure the “unity” of a movement on social media. Therefore, collecting posts containing the main hashtags of the campaign allows us both to identify texts which actively engage with the aims and scope of the environmental movement under investigation and to analyse how those hashtags are used in the co-creation of meaning in its online communicative practices. The analysis was carried out based on the theoretical and methodological framework outlined in this section and it will be presented in the following section, along with the discussion of results.

4. Analysis and discussion

The texts analysed were collected from the social media platform X on 30 July 2024 and selected from the ‘top’ results for the main hashtags the movement under consideration has used for coordination and mobilisation: #SaveBuxwahaForest and #SaveBuxwaha.

A number of subsequent steps were taken after this initial selection. First of all, a decision was made to limit the analysis to posts containing language-based text or language-based text and still images. Posts containing videos were therefore excluded, as the meaning-making process in this case also involves semiotic elements such as music or camera movement, thus requiring additional methodological and analytical tools. Secondly, posts from corporate accounts were excluded, as the likelihood of these posts being an instance of green

washing rather than actual activism cannot be ignored. Thirdly, posts from individual accounts that posted massively were excluded, to avoid individual voice(s) and/or style conflating with that of the campaign as a whole. Identical posts which were posted multiple times were also excluded for the same reason. Finally, posts entirely written in a language unfamiliar to the analyst were excluded. The result of this process was a corpus of 19 posts.² Although each text exhibits a multifaceted communicative style and many elements are repeatedly used, their analyses were grouped in three macro-groups for reasons of readability in Sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below. Section 4.4 focuses on discussing results.

4.1 Hashtags, metaphor and personification

The analysis was based on the premise that the posts under consideration are multimodal texts whose overall meaning depends on the interrelation between language, visuals and markers of social media communication such as hashtags and emojis, within the genre of online environmental communication practices of a grassroots movement in the Indian context.

A first reflection was made on the main hashtags chosen by the movement. They both underline the need to “save” Buxwaha and its forest. While this choice showcases that urgent action must be taken, it also paints humans as the ‘saviours’. This is therefore an ambivalent choice – even though a common one, as many other environmental hashtags begin with #save, starting from the overwhelming exploited #savetheplanet – because it does not underline that the forest is in need to be saved only because humans endangered it in the first place. A choice such as “#respectbuxwaha” would have exchanged the Material process of “saving” with a Behavioural process, thereby making humans Behavers rather than Actors (Halliday & Matthiessen [1985] 2014: 214) and pointing out that, in the forest/human relation, humans do not need to do anything more than acknowledging and respecting the existence of forests and their importance in the balance of the world’s ecosystems.

² It goes without saying that all the posts analysed were posted by public accounts which openly share content with the aim of it being consumed and/or engaged with. This also allows for these texts to be analysed within the remit of fair use. However, a decision was made not to show the icons – which often contain the face of the author of the posts – and their handle, and to only quote their X name in the caption of each picture.



Figure 1: Post by Raksha Tawade



Figure 2: Post by FFF Virtual

Figures 1 and 2 are exemplary of meaning-making through the interaction of words, hashtags and pictures, and their analysis will be functional to introducing a number of notions that will be useful for the analysis of the other texts in the corpus.

In particular, Figure 1 combines:

- a) a prototypical social movement slogan (“I STAND WITH...”);
- b) the main hashtag of the movement (#SaveBuxwahaForest) and a second locative hashtag reinforcing the first (#BuxwahaForest), in line with the collaborative creation and proliferation of hashtags within a social movement discussed by Xiong et al. (2019), both with an affiliation function;
- c) an example of activism, namely an image created thanks to digital art for activism purposes.

Activism has gained increasing importance within environmental communication, both of the digital and non-digital kind, even more so after the Covid-19 pandemic (Cozen 2013; Rodriguez-Labajos 2022). It allows for activists’ communication practices to reach new creative highs. The image in Figure 1, for example, contains two multimodal metaphonymic chains (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 155), one foregrounded on the right-hand side and one backgrounded on the left-hand side. This is a highly creative pattern of interaction resulting from the combination of a multimodal metaphonymy (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 125) and a multimodal metaphoric chain (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 152). A multimodal metaphonymy stems from a metonymy (A FOR B relation) being integrated in the source or target domain of a metaphor (A IS B

relation) when different modes (e.g. verbal + visual) are combined. A multimodal metaphoric chain is obtained when different modes construe a metaphor whose target domain acts as the source domain of another metaphor. In this case, the foregrounded multimodal metaphonymy CUTTING THE TREES OF BUXWAHA FOREST IS KILLING GIVING PEOPLE is based on the visual metonymy AXE FOR TREE CUTTING and the multimodal metaphonymy THE TREES OF BUXWAHA FOREST ARE GIVING PEOPLE; the latter, in turn, is obtained thanks to the interactions of words, hashtags and the visual metonymies ARM FOR PERSON and FLOWER FOR GIVING PERSON. The backgrounded multimodal metaphonymy DIGGING IS CHASING AWAY/DISPLACING PEOPLE AND ANIMALS is based on the visual metonymy EXCAVATOR FOR DIGGING and the multimodal metaphonymies THE TREES OF BUXWAHA FOREST ARE DISPLACED PEOPLE, which is created through the interactions of words, hashtags and the visual metonymies SLIT TRUNK FOR LEGS, ROOTS FOR FEET, FEET AND LEGS FOR RUNNING, and the visual metonymy FLYING FOR DISPLACED/CHASED AWAY BIRDS. Figure 1 is therefore a highly creative text which generates and communicates two narratives: one of killing and one of displacement. Both can only be fully appreciated if the broader context is known and all the mappings can be activated, as suggested by Kövecses' work on the relation between metaphors and context (2015) and his extended view of conceptual metaphor theory (2020). Charteris-Black's work on Critical Metaphor Analysis also focuses on the interrelation between ideology, culture, history and the reasons why "*particular metaphors are chosen in specific discourse contexts*" (2004: 243; emphasis in original). This is especially relevant when deliberate metaphors are considered (Kövecses 2020: 120). Indeed, in Steen's genre-driven model for metaphor analysis, three dimensions are distinguished (2016: 310-11): expression ("metaphor in language"); conceptualisation ("metaphor in thought"); communication ("metaphor in interaction"). The latter sees the use of both non-deliberate and deliberate metaphors – namely "metaphors used as metaphors" (Steen 2016: 318) – in order to achieve specific communicative purposes. However, while in language-based communication deliberate metaphors are less frequently used than non-deliberate ones, in visual and multimodal communication in genres such as advertising, activism or artivism, they are the norm, as the authors of those texts *intend* to create those specific metaphors and they *want* the receivers to be able to decode them. This is especially true when these metaphors are based on allusion to specific facts (Naciscione 2022: 301), as the implicit meaning conveyed cannot be fully comprehended without the appropriate background knowledge. In case of

Figure 1, for example, the arm extending a flower is a clear reference to the giving nature of trees, given their unique and essential ability to produce and share oxygen, which allows life as we know it on the planet. By the same token, the image of the excavator, in context, does not only refer to generical digging, but to digging for diamond-mining purposes. The interpretation of the analyst itself was guided by the wider context in the lexical choice of “DISPLACING” alongside “CHASING AWAY”, when a major risk connected with this mining enterprise was the displacement of thousands of indigenous people.

Overall, the personification of trees in Figure 1 is ambivalent. On the one hand, it reinforces the anthropocentric narrative that puts people at the centre of the human/more-than-human relationship, assigns more-than-human world human values and perspectives, and paints nature as the victim. On the other, it helps to create highly communicative multimodal narratives which aim at shocking the recipient and generating empathy for the trees and animals at risk by humanising them, so that people might see themselves reflected in the fear of the running tree or the distress of a tree offering a flower and being repaid with the axe. This is also reinforced by the high validity (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 154) of the visual. In visuality studies, “validity” is intended as visual representation based on realism (*ibid.*). In the image included in Figure 1, for example, the author opted for a naturalistic rather than an abstract representation. Indeed, of the eight validity markers identified by Kress & van Leeuwen ([1996] 2021: 156-158) the image ranks high in six (colour saturation, colour differentiation, colour modulation, representation of detail, illumination, brightness), medium in contextualisation, since the background is not fully articulated, and low in depth. In other words, the picture aims at being as realistic as possible, rather than opting for the cartoon-like quality of the picture in Figure 2. The final result is a striking communicative effect generated by the opposition of highly creative figurative multimodal language and the search for realism through the naturalistic validity of the image.

Even though the meaning-making process of the post presented in Figure 2 is also based on the combination of words, hashtags and digital activism, the specific communicative strategies are quite different from those employed in the previous text. First of all, while Figure 1 opts for an effect similar to those generated by shockvertising (Pérez Sobrino 2017: 88), in an attempt to foster a strong emotional response in the recipients through the frame of violence (killing, running away, displacing, cutting with an axe), Figure 2 focuses on the frame of affection. Indeed, the visual of the woman hugging the tree with her eyes closed is strengthened by the metaphonymy TREES ARE (BRANCHES FOR

ARMS FOR) PEOPLE. The personification of the tree allows for the embrace to be reciprocated, and the affectionate nature of the hug is further reinforced by the pink hearts, a symbol prototypically used in digital communication to signify love. In other words, this post focuses on love for nature as a primary motivation for environmental action. Additionally, the verbal portion of text “We have to take action now” is expanded by the hashtags to clarify what the purpose of taking action is, namely saving Buxwaha forest. Interestingly, multiple hashtags are used in this case, which amplify the message of the main hashtag by suggesting that saving the forest equates to saving life and future. The image interacts with words and hashtags by providing an example of a specific action that can be taken, which results in the multimodal metaphor HUGGING TREES IS TAKING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION. In order to fully appreciate all the layers of meaning in this post, context is once again necessary. Firstly, the words in the picture “when you can’t hug people, hug a tree” combined with the mask on the face of the woman sets this post in the early days of the 2021 campaign, when the COVID pandemic was ongoing, which underlines the relation between online communication and environmental action by highlighting that the activity of the movement switched to completely online rather than stopping altogether. Secondly, the depiction of a woman hugging a tree is a reference to the practice of tree hugging for environmental protection, which was initiated in the 1970s in India by the villagers of rural areas, particularly women, inspired by Gandhi’s idea of non-violent resistance and which resulted in the emergence of the Chipko Movement (Sadak 2024). The multimodal metaphor HUGGING TREES IS TAKING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION created in this post is, therefore, both a call for positive action and an acknowledgment of traditional and indigenous values and environmental practices.



Figure 3: Post by Ismail Association Trust

Figure 3 offers another example of personification of trees which, however, is achieved through a completely different communicative practice. In this case, it is the verbal portion of the text which creates a narrative in which trees are personified. Even though the first two clauses underline that trees are *not* human (“We can’t walk and talk like humans”), they are nonetheless very clearly identifiable as the authors of the narrative, as demonstrated by the signature “Trees of buxwaha forest” and the inclusive subject “we”, which is also Actor of the two Material processes (Halliday & Matthiessen [1985] 2014: 224) “give life” – whose Recipient is “to the humans” - and “die”. The narrative also underlines the reciprocal nature of the human/more-than-human relationship thanks to the first conditional (“if you save us we will give life to the humans”), implicitly referring to the oxygen produced by trees. This recalls the notion of “con-vironment” suggested within ecolinguistics (Fill 2024) as an alternative to “environment”, all too often intended and interpreted as “backstage to human activity”. On the contrary, the notion of con-vironment underlines the close interdependence among all elements on earth and the relational and reciprocal nature of the interaction between all life forms on this planet. Interestingly, the hashtags and the picture included in the post do not interact with the verbal portion of the text in the same way as in Figures 1 and 2, in that they do not contribute to construing its narrative meaning but, rather, reiterate it and reinforce it. More specifically, the three hashtags recall the main goal of the movement to create affiliation while also offering an example of creative proliferation of hashtag activism, since the slogan “I stand with...” observed in Figure 1 becomes a hashtag in Figure 3. The digital art opts for a

style similar to Figure 2 and uses its cartoon-like quality to foreground the main hashtag while also presenting an opposition between lush green trees, bushes and grass and a single cut-off trunk. Overall, Figure 3 applies a strategy that many studies (Goatly 2022: 482; Lakoff 2010: 79; León et al. 2022: 987; O’Dowd et al. 2024; Stibbe 2023) have identified as both frequent and successful within environmental communication, activism and education: telling a story people can empathise with.



Figure 4: Post by iPlus Talks

In Figure 4 metaphor is used once again, but in a verbal (“Trees are our life”) rather than a conceptual or multimodal format. Similarly to Figure 1 and 3, this metaphor also underlines the connection between trees and human life and serves as the reason for the appeal “please don’t cut them”. Notably, the use of the possessive adjective “our” within this metaphor foregrounds how vital trees are for humans and how strong the dependence of human life on trees is. The verbal metaphor is further reiterated in the picture, which also reiterates the “Save Buxwaha Forest” message. A most salient element of this text is its hashtag proliferation. Not only does the text utilise the main hashtags and others seen previously (e.g. #savetrees in Figure 2), but it also employs #FFFvirtual and #ChipkoPhirSe. The former links this text to the global environmental movement #FridaysforFuture, showing the collaboration and support among global and localised grassroots movements. The latter refers to the Chipko movement discussed above (Figure 2) and translates into English as “Chipko again”, thereby drawing a direct link between this environmental movement and the rural and/or indigenous roots of most environmental

activism in India, while also making a reference to the risk of displacement faced by thousands of indigenous people.

4.2 Sarcasm and unconventional oppositions

Figures 5 and 6 both exhibit a similar strategy: a cartoon using sarcasm in combination with a preceding portion of the text without humour.



Figure 5: Post by Mona Patel



Figure 6: Post by Shivam ;-)

In Figure 5, an appeal to ecological action (“raise your voice”; “support those who raise their voice”) is followed by a factual statement about the consequences of mining the forest and the main hashtag. A tree emoji is also used twice, with a function of reiteration rather than meaning expansion. The cartoon also includes factual information about the area in danger at the bottom left-hand side. The rest of the cartoon, however, foregrounds an unrealistically large diamond within a display case and two people discussing it. The woman’s comment on its beauty and enquiry after its price is met by an indirect, sarcastic reply from the man who, rather than replying with an estimated sum of money, quotes “some lakhs of trees, habitat and livelihood of countless people” as the price to pay for the diamond. Once again, allusion to a specific fact – the mining project threatening Buxwaha forest and the consequent destruction of the habitat and displacement of forest dwellers – is necessary to understand the sarcastic remark. Figure 6 also contains a sarcastic cartoon, which is also flagged by the hashtag #greenhumor, in which a crying crocodile utters the words “this

time it's ecological grief", implicitly comparing the proverbial crocodile tears with the insincere worry for ecological matters of many, including corporations such as the one spearheading the mining project. The verbal portion of the text displays a proliferation of hashtags and a sentence which introduces the first of the oppositions that, as we shall see, can be detected within the corpus: diamonds VS life. Indeed, comparatives are one of the structural triggers of opposition (Jeffries 2010: 46). Furthermore, the comparative allows the text to draw an unconventional rather than a conventional opposition (ibid.). In other words, rather than presenting a commonly shared opposition such as Labour VS Tories in British politics (ibid.: 39), opposites can be created in texts which are unconventional, namely unexpected, creative and very much based on context and co-text, as well as on canonical oppositions. Unconventional opposites have been found to be more fruitful in communicating beneficial stories in environmental communication than conventional ones (Virdis: 2022b). In this case, the opposition 'diamond VS life' is certainly more unconventional than, say, diamond VS common stone or death VS life. It is also communicatively salient, in that it plays on the polysemy of the adjective "precious", intended as "expensive" when referred to diamonds and as "important" when referred to life. The opposition is further strengthened and becomes multimodal thanks to the many hashtags and to the emojis used to give a visual representation of what "precious life" means according to the author of this post, namely plants, trees and animals, which gives rise to the multimodal metaphor BUXWAHA'S PLANTS, TREES AND ANIMALS ARE PRECIOUS LIFE. Both Figure 5 and 6, therefore, exhibit a communicative style which differs from the texts analysed so far, in that the picture and remainder of the post do not directly interact with each other to construe the overall meaning as in Figures 1 and 2, nor do they support each other as in Figures 3 and 4. Rather, in this case a humorous picture is used following a first portion of the text with a serious tone, which allows these texts to inspire ecological reflection while also making the audience smile.

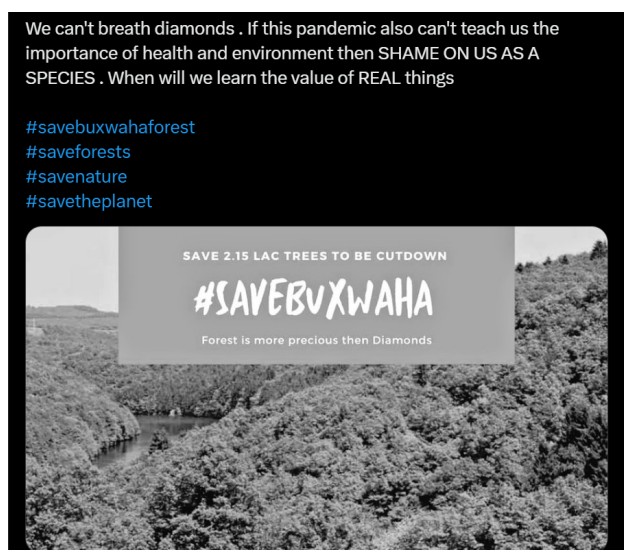


Figure 7: Post by সৌম্যজিৎ রায়

Figure 7 presents another example of unconventional opposition via comparative which plays on the semantic potential of the adjective “precious” within its picture: forest VS diamonds. The opposition is strengthened in the verbal segment of the text by the figurative sentence “we can’t breathe diamonds”, which creates the unconventional opposite diamonds VS oxygen via negation, another structural trigger of opposition (Jeffries 2010: 35), and the use of the verb “breathe”. Background knowledge about the ability of forests to produce most of the oxygen on the planet allows for the ‘diamond VS oxygen’ and ‘forest VS diamond’ oppositions to reinforce each other. Furthermore, the rest of the written text creates yet another opposition: real VS unreal. By allusion to the pandemic and the evaluative adjective (Hunston & Sinclair 2000) “important” used in connection with “health and environment”, as well as the uppercase used for emphasis twice, the opposition between ‘diamonds as unimportant and unreal’ and ‘health and environment as important and real’ is construed. The hashtags are used in an affiliative function, while the image in the picture does not contribute to meaning expansion or construction as much as it provides a visual representation of the subject matter, Buxhawa forest. That the image is low in brightness, being dark grey and lighter grey (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 158), shows that the picture aims more for abstraction of validity than amplification (ibid.: 155), hence towards evocation more than realism.



Figure 8: Post by Abhi and Niyu



Figure 9: Post by Sarvesh Sharma

Figures 8 and 9 also exploit opposition. Figure 8 is a post used to publicise on X a YouTube video posted by a couple of high-profile influencers and activists. In Figure 8 the unconventional opposites are ‘trees VS diamonds’ and this opposition is created multimodally. Indeed, while the written portion of the text creates opposition via coordination (“Trees or diamonds?”; Jeffries 2010: 44), the picture shows a green forest in the background on the left hand-side which fades into purple on the right hand-side; in the foreground is a pile of sawn tree trunks, some of which are being lifted by an excavator arm and are opposed to an overlarge cartoon-like diamond via a red arrow. The forest in the background starts fading into purple where the diamond appears on the image. The picture, therefore, does not aim for realism but for a creative impact. This reinforces the opposition explicitly made in the written text by showing the visual contrast between a healthy, green forest and what happens to it and its trees when diamond mining is involved: sawn brown trunks and a disappearing darkish forest. The opposition is further expanded through evaluation, by the use of the evaluative adjective “important” in the written text and of the evaluative noun (Hunston & Sinclair 2000) “scam” in connection to the imperative “Save Buxwaha” in the picture, which leads to the interpretation that trees are important and diamond mining is a scam. Figure 9 hinges on the opposition ‘mining VS trees’, created through a comparative. This opposition, however, is but one of the meaning-making elements in a highly creative and communicatively complex text. As for the language-based segment, it starts with the uppercase slogan “I STAND WITH BUXWAHA FOREST” which appears more than once in our corpus, either as a slogan or as a hashtag (Figures 1 and 3). Factual information follows, which integrates one hashtag within the

sentence (“More than 2 lakh... #BuxwahaForest”) and precedes the ‘mining VS trees’ opposition. A call for collective action (“Let’s unite”) is then combined with a metaphor which, thanks to the combination between words and image, is multimodal. “The lungs of the earth” is indeed a widely used metaphor when talking about forests, especially the Amazon rainforest. The picture both reinforces this metaphor and recontextualises it. On the one hand, this picture presents the metaphonymy (TREES FOR) FOREST IS (BROWN SPOT FOR) SICK HUMAN LUNGS,³ which traces a link between the lungs of the earth and those of people and, once again, hinges on the life-giving ability of trees to produce the element lungs need to function: oxygen. On the other, it recontextualises a WWF ad through the main hashtag #savebuxwahaforest, implicating that *all* forests, including the one the movement is fighting to protect, are the lungs of the earth.



Figure 10: Post by Vikash Balmuchu



Figure 11: Post by sharma_upanasa

Metaphor is widely used in Figures 10 and 11. Three metaphors can be detected in Figure 10. Two of them “Nature is the real diamond” and “Forest is the real diamond” are verbal and exploit the connotative meaning of “diamond” as something precious and invaluable. The third one is a multimodal metaphor contained within the protest poster shown by a masked protester, which allows

³ The original WWF advert was investigated through frame analysis and blending by Dancygier (2023).

the performativity of in-presence environmental activism to filter into its online counterpart and, as in Figure 2, underlines that activism cannot be stopped even by a pandemic (which is further supported by the “Fridays for Future Virtual” logo). More specifically, the metaphor THE REAL DIAMONDS ARE THE TREES is cued both verbally and visually, thanks to the drawing of an overlarge diamond. This proliferation of similar metaphors within the same semantic field (nature, forest, trees) allows for them to support and expand one another, by exploiting metonymic relation (trees for forest, forest for nature) easily accessible to any addressee. Figure 11 presents a meaning-construction strategy similar to Figures 5 and 6, in that the written segment of the text and the picture convey two connected but not integrated pieces of information which, added to each other, provide the audience with the overall meaning of the text. Indeed, the language-based part is meant to give factual information for mobilisation purposes (when, where, why to meet), completed by three hashtags with an affiliation function. The picture, on the other hand, employs figurative multimodal language, through the multimodal metaphor RAINDROPS ON LEAVES OF BUXWAHA FOREST ARE REAL DIAMONDS, cued both verbally and visually and, once again, exploiting the denotative meaning of “diamond”. This is achieved thanks to an explicit verbal reference (“these”) and a picture which is very low in depth (the background is out of focus), and in colour saturation and brightness, being a black and white picture; the image foregrounds a leaf with raindrops lying on it which, however, are portrayed in a hyper-realistic fashion, since they are so high in illumination and representation of detail that they sparkle like actual diamonds when hit by the light. In other words, the verbal part of the text gives information about how to take action, while the picture uses multimodal figurative communication to explain the reason why environmental action is needed.

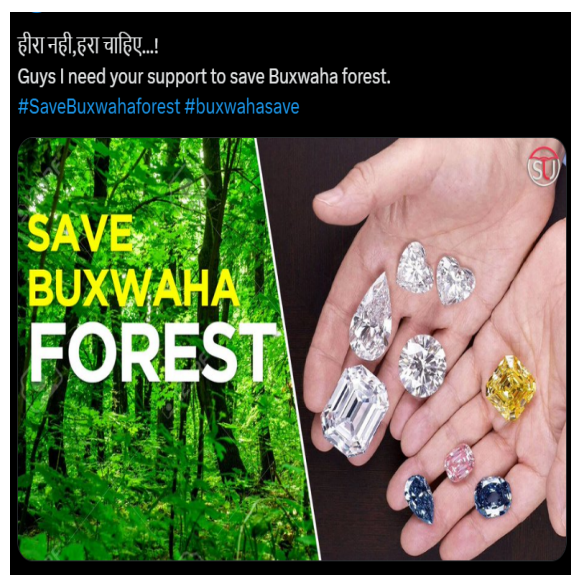


Figure 12: Post by Adv Neelesh Kushwaha



Figure 13: Post by CleverLion

Figures 12 and 13 once again construe the unconventional opposition ‘forest VS diamond’. In Figure 12, the opposition is created both verbally and multimodally. The Hindi portion of the verbal text translates as “I don’t want diamonds, I want trees!” and is reinforced by the picture which, in terms of composition (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 216-217), presents an oppositional information value based on a Given-New realisation. This implies that two opposed elements are juxtaposed horizontally, so that the left, Given element is presented as the point of the departure of the message which is already well known, while the right, New element is presented as the novel information the audience needs to pay attention to. By contrasting an image of a lush green forest with the “Save Buxwaha forest” imperative, and a pair of human hands – a metonymy for “humans” – holding several sparkling diamonds of different shapes and colours, the image presents the forest as the Given, “natural” element, and the diamonds as the new, “unnatural” element due to human greed. The rest of the written text in English (“Guys...forest”) is an appeal for unity and affiliation to take collective action, reinforced by the hashtags. Figure 13 shows even more complex meaning-construction strategies. A verbal metaphor similar to a multimodal metaphor already detected in our corpus (Figure 10) is used (“Trees are our diamond”). The unconventional oppositions are construed multimodally, with the hashtags used to make the opposites explicit (“#trees vs #diamond”; “#oxygen vs #diamond”) and the top part of the picture showing the same oppositional information value as

Figure 12 with similar images: a lush green forest on the left and a desert landscape in the background on the right, with a human hand in the foreground holding a diamond. The opposition is further highlighted by the question “A diamond is forever?”, which questions the ability of diamonds to have eternal life, when forests can certainly contribute to give it to the planet. Moreover, if we consider the picture as a whole, we will notice that it shows an Ideal-Real oppositional information value (Kress & van Leeuwen [1996] 2021: 217): the top half portrays the “ideal” part of the message and the bottom half showcases the “real” part, namely men at work to cut trees and factual information about the extent of the project (“What about....?”). Interestingly, the written elements in the bottom half of the picture touch upon some key elements of the fight behind this grassroots movement. The rhetorical question lists the danger for both trees and forest dwellers, while the final sentence explicitly refers to the action taken by the activists and, once again, creates a multimodal unconventional opposition between the “pristine Buxwaha forest” and “diamond mining”, foregrounded from the rest of the text by virtue of being written in yellow rather than white. Finally, the text uses the hashtags “#acchedin” and “#AccheNationals” in addition to those investigated so far. The former translates as “good days” and refers to the election slogan largely used by Modi even though it had been coined by his predecessor (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/acche-din-slogan-was-originally-coined-by-manmohan-singh-nitin-gadkari/articleshow/54316285.cms?from=mdr>), and which is often used on social media with a negative evaluation or mocking function by Modi’s critics. Here, however, it is used with a positive evaluation function, to signal that environmental action is a means to achieve the “good days” promised, but not delivered, by the Government. #AccheNationals is the hashtag launched by the account of the same name (<https://x.com/AccheNationals>) which is focused on amplifying the voice and support “change-makers”, namely environmental activists in the subcontinent. In other words, this hashtag shows the interrelation and community support among various environmental organisations already observed in Figures 2, 4 and 10 (and which can also be observed in Figures 14, 15 and 19, in which the Fridays for Future hashtags are used and their accounts tagged).

4.3 Violent/apocalyptic scenarios, hyperbole, semantic redefinition and indigenous imagery

Figure 14 and 15 exploit the same “shockvertising factor” observed in Figure 1.



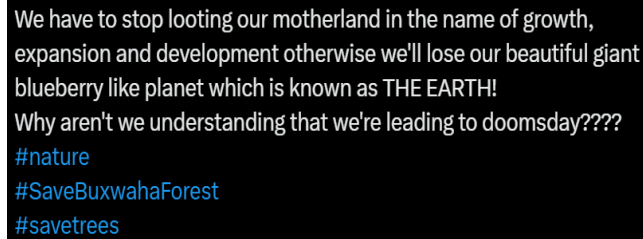
Figure 14: Post by Adarsh



Figure 15: Post by Harshit Awashti

While the written portion of Figure 14 provides factual information on the mining project in Buxwaha Forest and clarifies the demands of the student association, the visual portion is made up of a striking example of activism, which creates the visual metaphor (PARTY SYMBOL FOR) MODI'S GOVERNMENT IS (AXE AND CUT-OFF TREE TRUNK FOR) CUTTING TREES AND (FLOWING BLOOD FOR) KILLING PEOPLE. Interestingly, the symbol of Modi's BJP party that is surrounded by blood in this digital art is usually orange, not white. The use of the white colour, therefore, given the wider context of the campaign, can be interpreted as another metonymy (WHITE FOR DIAMONDS), which hints at the reason why trees are being cut and peoples' lives are being put at risk. Figure 15 also provides factual information in the written segment of the text, in this case focusing on the risk connected to shortage of another life-giving element: water. The point is then visually underlined with a digital art exploiting the same Given-New compositional structure as in Figure 12 which, however, exploits an apocalyptic frame. Indeed, the picture puts in opposition the image of a healthy forest at sunrise or sunset on the left,

populated by trees, grass, water and non-human animals. On the left is a dark image of a landscape suffering from water shortage, as suggested by the cracks in the terrain. Furthermore, besides being cued because of the lack of water, the frame of death is also evoked by the animal skull in the foreground, the hyenas in the background and the tree branches devoid of leaves. The “save nature”, “save life” imperatives contribute to the conventional opposition ‘life vs death’ created in this picture.



We have to stop looting our motherland in the name of growth, expansion and development otherwise we'll lose our beautiful giant blueberry like planet which is known as THE EARTH!
Why aren't we understanding that we're leading to doomsday????
#nature
#SaveBuxwahaForest
#savetrees

Figure 16: Post by Diksha Tripathi

Figure 16 is the only text in our corpus which does not include any visual elements. It includes the most frequent hashtags used with an affiliation function and shows examples of figurative language, more specifically verbal metaphor and simile (“motherland”; “blueberry like planet”). Furthermore, it makes an explicit reference to the notion of growthism (Halliday [1990] 2001: 196), by mentioning “growth, expansion and development”, which are blamed as the main reasons for the environmental emergency by those focusing on capitalism as the major drive of the current situation. Finally, words like “looting”, “lose” and “doomsday” and the rhetorical question accompanied by three emphatic question marks evoke a violent and apocalyptic scenario similar to those traced in Figures 1, 14 and 15.

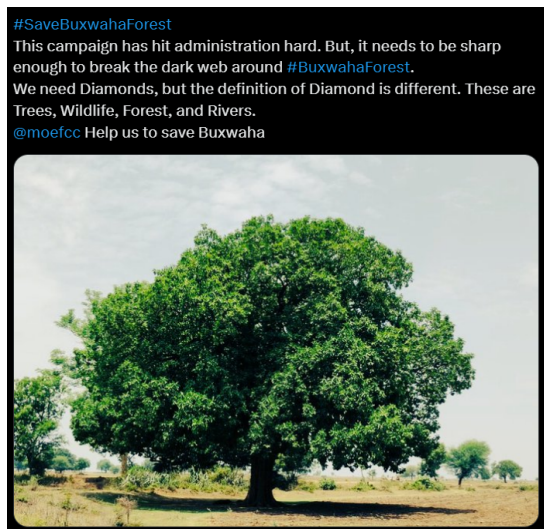


Figure 17: Post by Tuluva

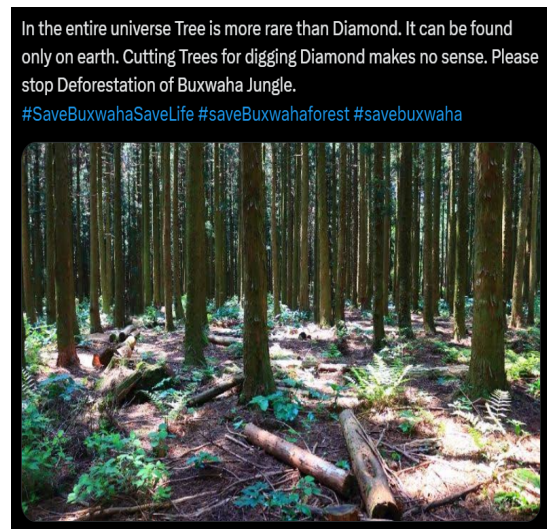


Figure 18: Post by DCF

Figures 17 and 18 both include a written text which is supported by a picture. In Figure 17 hyperbole is used (“in this entire universe Tree is more rare than Diamond”), which focuses on another quality usually attributed to diamonds – their rarity – and assigns it to trees. An appeal to stop the mining and the main hashtags complete the language-based segment of the text. The picture shows a group of tree trunks, some of which cut off and lying on the ground, which supports the statement about cutting trees for diamond-mining purposes not making sense. Figure 18 starts with a direct reference to the government and the successful outcome of the environmental campaign and an encouragement to persevering. This is followed by a very specific communicative choice: a semantic redefinition of the word “diamond”, to be intended as “trees, wildfire, forest and rivers”, rather than economically precious stones. The picture supports this choice by foregrounding a big tree with lush green leaves and smaller trees in the background, as if to visually provide an example of these newly redefined “diamonds”.



Figure 19: Post by Arif Ismail

Finally, Figure 19 makes a very explicit reference to the danger faced by indigenous forest dwellers. Written text and picture cooperate with each other to construe the multimodal metaphor BUXWAHA FOREST IS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' HOME, thereby offering this as the main reason to oppose the diamond-mining project. This is achieved thanks to the plea included in the written text and replicated in the picture, the use of the main hashtags and the #ChipkoPhirSe hashtag previously discussed (Figure 4), and an image of a group of indigenous people who are easily identifiable as the referents of the adjective “their”. Poignant is also the lexical choice of “home”, as opposed to, say, “habitat”, which plays on the emotional connotation this word has when referred to the place someone lives in and underlines the ancestral relation indigenous peoples have with the ecosystems they live with. Finally, the hashtags and logo related to Fridays for Future Virtual are also used, to both signal affiliation with the world-wide grassroots movement and request support, as previously observed.

4.4 Discussion

Based on the analysis carried out, visibility seems to be a common stylistic trait of the online communicative practices of this grassroots movement, as only one out of nineteen texts does not present any visual element.

Verbal and multimodal figurative language is also stylistically salient, as examples of verbal metaphors, similes and hyperbole, as well as visual and multimodal metonymies and metaphors, multimodal sarcasm and metaphonymies are prevalent in the corpus. Notably, all the non-verbal metaphors and metaphonymies analysed are deliberate and, for the most part, exhibit complex and original patterns of interaction which make them highly creative, in that they do not activate frames which are particularly overused in environmental communication. If we take the frames identified in Dancygier (2023), Hidalgo-Downing et al. (2023) and Rebich-Hespanha and Rice (2016) as a reference, we will see that Figure 19 activates the frame “‘regular’ (sometimes vulnerable) people” (Rebich-Hespanha & Rice 2016); Figures 1, 13 and 14 activate the frame “threat”, where the “predators” (Hidalgo-Downing et al. 2023) are represented by human being and excavator, humans, and axe, respectively; Figure 15 is the only one to activate the “natural disasters” frame (*ibid.*); finally, Figure 2 activates the “actions and plans” frame in relation to environmental activism (*ibid.*). This is communicatively significant, as novelty and creativity are engaging communicative strategies which allow to avoid the overuse of certain elements, e.g. visuals of stranded polar bears or the globe burning, which might lead to what Dancygier (2023: 11) has termed ‘persuasion bleaching’ and cause disinterest rather than engagement. The tendency towards novelty and creativity is also confirmed by the frequent use of unconventional oppositions within this grassroots movement, whose members have found versatile ways to construe the overarching “forest/diamonds” opposition in a number of related oppositions using different modes. This is the one strategy which is not only stylistically salient, but also specific to the #SaveBuxwahaForest movement and can only be fully appreciated when the wider context of their protest is considered. The last point is, however, generally true for all the texts analysed, as allusion to facts is prevalent within the corpus and lack of background knowledge would make all the 19 posts partially or fully impossible to decode.

All in all, the analysis of our data shows that the digital communicative practices of this grassroots movement aim at engagement, mobilisation and persuasion. While factual information is sometimes offered (Figures 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15), it is never the sole purpose of the text, as figurative and persuasive language is used as well. The texts tell narratives, encourage and call for action, stimulate engagement through creativity and, in a limited number of cases, aim at inspiring fear and show doomsday scenarios. Some of these choices are ambivalent, as in the case of the main hashtags or in Figure 1. Some can be

classified as destructive, as in the case of Figures 14, 15 and 16, since research shows that violent, fear-inducing and apocalyptic scenarios seem to be less effective a means to inspire environmental action and might even lead to ecoanxiety and disengagement from environmental action (see Bilfinger et al. 2024; Hogg et al. 2021; Landry et al. 2018; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole 2009). The rest of the corpus employs beneficial strategies to engage the public through verbal and/or multimodal figurative language and encourage mobilisation (Figures 4, 10, 11, 17, 18), reframe the narrative of economic gain being more important than environmental protection and justice (Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 19) and give hope even in the face of a pandemic (Figures 2 and 3).

5. Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn. First of all, integrating ecostylistics, ecolinguistics, MCDA and multimodal studies allows for a fruitful theoretical and methodological approach to investigate the online communicative practices of an environmental grassroots movement. Theoretically, a critical lens – which all the disciplines involved share – encourages to set the investigation within both its global and local context, which is a fundamental step when exploring social practices like online communication; additionally, the tenets of ecostylistics and ecolinguistics allow us to investigate environmental activism with the support of a wealth of research on environmental communication and style. Methodologically, the toolkits provided by the combined approaches make it possible to explore the meaning-making process of the texts analysed as a whole, consider all their composing elements, verbal and non-verbal, and draw conclusions on their communicative purposes and effects.

Secondly, through historical context-setting and the analysis of current communicative data, this contribution has shown that present-day environmental (in)justice can be traced back to colonial and postcolonial ideologies and policies in the area under investigation. This confirms that background knowledge about the (post)colonial history of former colonies such as India is necessary for scholars interested in investigating social practices such as grassroots environmentalism and activism in these areas. By the same token, even though indigenous studies have begun to occupy a wider international stage, a localised focus is necessary when indigenous peoples and lands are involved, since the history, identity, social or political claims of an indigenous

people might not be shared by another, even within the same country, especially when the country is as vast as the Indian subcontinent.

Thirdly, this study aligns with the results of previous research on the communicative practices on social media of the #FridaysforFuture movement (Zurru 2022). More specifically, the results of the analysis carried out in this contribution seem to confirm that visuality is a stylistic trait of online environmental activism. This has certainly to do with online communication being inherently visual, as demonstrated by studies confirming that posts with visuals tend to have more engagement across different social media platforms (Cashyap 2024; Kanuri 2024; Li & Xie 2020). At the same time, activism via in-person protesting has always been inherently visual and performative too, with posters, banners, body and face paint, or even specific coloured garments – e.g. the “pink pussyhats” used during the 2017 women’s march within the #MeToo movement (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJr06-Go8b4>) – being as exploited as slogans and chants to construe the activists’ message. The frequent use of visuality in digital grassroots communication, therefore, might also be connected to preserving this distinctive trait of in-person protesting. Verbal and multimodal figurative language also seems to be stylistically prevalent, and engagement, mobilisation and persuasion – rather than, say, information sharing or education – seem to be among the main communicative functions of online grassroots environmental activism.

Finally, while a minority of texts in our corpus contain ambivalent or destructive communicative elements, the majority employ beneficial strategies which encourage positive environmental action, the respect and safeguard of forests and indigenous peoples, and the resistance to capitalist demands which put ecosystems and lives at risk.

This study has limitations. First of all, while the integrated approach adopted is fruitful, it is also highly time-consuming to both organically integrate the theories and methodologies selected and to proceed with the qualitative analytical process. Secondly, readability and understanding can suffer because of the need to pack many notions from different disciplines, some of which may be unfamiliar to readers, when the space of an academic article only allows for concise definitions. Thirdly, even though a 19-text corpus is not necessarily small for a study within multimodality adopting a qualitative approach, further data are required to achieve conclusive results which would allow us to claim that the range of stylistic traits identified in this corpus are consistently present in all the texts produced within the online communication practices of this grassroots movement. The latter limitation, however, opens up a path for future

research, since enlarging the data collection to some of the other hashtags which were co-created within the movement (e.g. #istandwithbuxwahaforest) might provide support for the findings of this research, or offer new insights. By the same token, collecting data from social media platforms other than X would help support or enrich the findings of this study. It would also be interesting to investigate other grassroots environmental movements in the subcontinent, and compare the style and effects of their online communicative practices with those of the #SaveBuxwahaForest campaign.

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Un romanzo ‘a due cervelli’: intelligenza artificiale e ironia in *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra* di Rocco Tanica

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Abstract (italiano) Questo intervento si pone lo scopo di indagare uno dei primi testi scritti in collaborazione con l’AI, ovvero *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra* di Rocco Tanica. Realizzato nel 2020 e pubblicato nel 2022 presso il Saggiatore, il romanzo appare come il primo libro scritto ‘a due cervelli’: spinto dalla curiosità di testare una delle prime piattaforme dedicate alla stesura di testi tramite l’uso dell’intelligenza artificiale, Tanica attua un vero e proprio dialogo con il software Gpt-3 sui temi più disparati. Il risultato è un romanzo composto da macro-capitoli tra loro indipendenti legati da una sottotrama comune, il rapporto tra uno scrittore e un marchingegno di nome OutOmat-B13. Alternando linguaggio umano e linguaggio artificiale, Tanica, esperto paroliere, gioca con le infinite possibilità della lingua in modo ironico e innovativo, sfiorando perfino il *nonsense*.

Abstract (English) This paper analyses the latest novel by Rocco Tanica, *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra*, published by il Saggiatore in 2022, the first Italian novel to be written in collaboration with AI. Tanica creates a proper dialogue between a writer and a machine named OutOmat-B13, operated using the software Gpt-3. The book consists of independent macro-chapters, all linked by a common subplot. Alternating human language and artificial language, Tanica, an expert lyricist, plays with the unlimited possibilities of language in an ironic and innovative way, sometimes even bordering on nonsense.

Keywords Contemporary Italian Literature; Rocco Tanica; LLM; AI; humor.

1. Introduzione

All’inizio degli anni Sessanta, Nanni Balestrini ha in progetto la scrittura di un romanzo, intitolato *Tristano* (1964), tramite l’ausilio di un elaboratore elettronico – “un armadio a muro dell’IBM ticchettante e lampeggiante, capace quasi solo di perforar schede e all’occasione trituarle, farne coriandoli privi, se non d’altro mai, di qualsiasi *syntaxis*” (Weber 2007, s.n.p.). L’obiettivo originario – impossibile da raggiungere vista la limitatezza degli strumenti dell’epoca – era quello di realizzare un numero elevatissimo di copie, 2500, ricavate dal differente montaggio delle componenti del testo, portando all’estremo gli esiti dell’esperimento già compiuto precedentemente per la

creazione dei poemetti *Tape Mark* (1962). Così, l'utilizzo della macchina minava il linguaggio, decostruendolo e ricombinandolo secondo logiche differenti. L'operazione combinatoria messa in atto da Balestrini – esponente della neoavanguardia degli anni Sessanta – si può inquadrare nel contesto della spinta sperimentatrice che si diffonde tra i due decenni 1960-1970, in parallelo agli sviluppi tecnologici del periodo. Dopotutto, questi sono gli anni segnati dall'attività del gruppo d'Oltralpe OuLiPo, letteralmente '*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*', gruppo francese fondato da Raymond Queneau, di cui faceva parte anche Calvino. Lo scopo della letteratura potenziale stava nel fornire strutture matematiche, o procedimenti meccanici inediti, capaci di offrire una nuova via per la scrittura, necessariamente multipla, così da "sfruttare le nuove conoscenze tecnico-letterarie per costruire dei romanzi 'artificiali', delle 'macchine metanarrative' che coinvolg[essero] innanzitutto il lettore in una riflessione sui procedimenti espressivi" (Milanini 1990: 135).

Il binomio tecnologia-letteratura – che vede negli anni Cinquanta la propria origine – dà luogo alla macro-categoria, dalla definizione ancora incerta, di 'letteratura elettronica', produzione intrinsecamente legata all'informatica e, per questo, estremamente soggetta al mutamento e al rinnovo. Secondo quanto afferma De Vivo, il quale avanza questa definizione,

l'eLiterature [è] una forma di espressione artistica-computazionale, intimamente legata alla macchina, che testa e ritesta continuamente i limiti della letterarietà, utilizzandone e sovvertendone i canoni, diventando ergodica, mutando forma nel momento in cui nuove tecnologie offrono spazio a nuove sperimentazioni, in definitiva, un fenomeno culturale che ridefinisce profondamente il concetto di letteratura nell'era digitale (2011: 223).

Una delle principali innovazioni che apporta la letteratura digitale – sostiene Iadevaia – è proprio il passaggio "dal potenziale al virtuale" (2021: 65), ossia la variazione del *medium* dalla pagina allo schermo che prevede una messa in discussione del tradizionale 'oggetto libro'. Se nel 1964 Nanni Balestrini si è dovuto accontentare di "una composizione altamente formalizzata secondo criteri numerici" (Weber 2007: 239), solo grazie all'avvento dell'informatica di massa diviene possibile realizzare il progetto originario del *Tristano*, ripubblicato nel 2007. Gli anni Duemila rappresentano, da questo punto di vista, una vera svolta epistemologica dovuta all'avvento del Web (2.0 prima, poi 3.0 e, infine, 4.0): mai come in questo Millennio la letteratura elettronica si apre alla "ibridazione continua tra diversi sistemi semiotici [es.: testuale, grafico,

iconico, musicale] e la continua mutazione delle forme espressive [es.: *3D Literature*, *Code Works*, *Generative Literature*, *Locative Narrative*] e delle tecnologie adoperate [es.: *virtual reality*, *artificial intelligence*, *n-grams models*]” (De Vivo 2011: 212). Condivide il medesimo parere Debarshi Arathdar, il quale afferma:

with the advent of the World Wide Web in the age of Industry 4.0, the praxes of literature and literary activity have radically mutated while permeating across all media forms. The strict adherence to traditional genres and formats has broken down and wide-ranging literary forms, such as interactive fiction or virtual story worlds, have emerged in their place. Literature and literary narratives have been engaging in a direct discourse with A.I. structures from the very dawn of artificial intelligence, the huge database of literature being a perfect and inexhaustible pasture for the experimental grazing of AI programs (2021, s.n.p.).

Infatti, attualmente possiamo assistere a un uso sempre maggiore degli strumenti legati proprio all'intelligenza artificiale, sia in campo scientifico, sia in campo umanistico. Ripercorrere *in toto* l'evoluzione così come gli specifici meccanismi di funzionamento delle AI non è lo scopo di questo intervento, che si limiterà a una breve introduzione sul tema – soprattutto per quanto riguarda i *Large Language Model* (LLM) – in funzione della successiva analisi testuale di *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra* (2022). Il testo è stato scritto da Rocco Tanica in una sorta di collaborazione con il software ShortlyAI.

Anzitutto, è bene definire cosa si intende quando si parla di ShortlyAI: un assistente di scrittura che sfrutta un noto LLM chiamato GPT-3, ovvero un modello di rete neurale profonda (*deep neural network*) che permette, ad esempio, di analizzare il linguaggio, di colloquiare, di ottenere informazioni. Questo tipo di intelligenza artificiale, che rientra nell'ambito del *deep learning*, è definita generativa, in quanto dotata della peculiare capacità di creare dati e contenuti non precedentemente esistenti, “che a seconda dei casi possono essere testuali, visivi, sonori, ma anche rappresentati da codice e programmi, giochi, ambienti virtuali, modelli 3D” (Roncaglia 2023: 88). La realizzazione di contenuti, nel caso di GPT di tipo testuale, avviene a seguito della richiesta (*prompt*) da parte dell'utente, il più delle volte costituita da un'indicazione linguistica. Come chiarisce Gino Roncaglia nel suo saggio *L'architetto e l'oracolo* (2023), questi sistemi funzionano a partire da un vasto *corpus* di testi, necessario per addestrare il modello. I campioni vengono analizzati e suddivisi in *token*, “unità più piccole che possono essere singole parole o morfemi di più basso

livello, ma anche singoli caratteri o n-grammi (gruppi di n caratteri), a seconda del modello di tokenizzazione usato” (Roncaglia 2023: 89). Successivamente, durante la fase di addestramento della rete neurale (in questo caso tramite ‘*unsupervised learning*’), ogni *token* viene vettorializzato, ovvero associato a una dimensione astratta che trasforma in valore numerico le modalità d’uso del linguaggio, così che “*token* con ‘usi’ simili, e dunque presumibilmente con significati vicini, corrisponderanno a vettori che avranno, almeno per alcune delle dimensioni, valori numerici abbastanza vicini” (Roncaglia 2023: 89). L’operazione di vettorializzazione è fondamentale, poiché i modelli di *machine learning* non sono in grado di effettuare calcoli direttamente dal *prompt* testuale che l’utente fornisce; dunque, è necessaria una trasformazione della richiesta in valore numerico. La fase di conversione si dimostra tutt’altro che semplice, in quanto bisogna tenere in considerazione anche le sfumature semantiche che una parola può assumere. A questo proposito, una svolta decisiva nel migliorare la memoria semantica dei sistemi avviene nel 2017 – grazie al contributo di Vaswani et al. –, quando si introduce l’architettura di rete *Transformer* a sostituire l’architettura precedente, basata su indici posizionali (RNN, o ‘*Recurrent neural network*’). Il vantaggio è una migliore gestione del contesto della frase e delle diverse polisemie, fattore che ha apportato notevoli progressi nel campo del *Natural Language Processing* (NLP). Come spiega Roncaglia,

in questo caso, i *token* non sono più esaminati solo sequenzialmente ma anche tenendo conto del loro contesto, attraverso un meccanismo di *attenzione* che ‘pesa’ i valori dei vettori di ogni *token* in funzione dei valori di ciascuno degli altri *token* del contesto (2023: 91).

Grazie al meccanismo di attenzione si ottiene un LLM funzionante secondo correlazioni statistico-probabilistiche fra *token*, ‘pesati’ tenendo presente il valore di ognuno di essi in relazione tra loro e al contesto.

Gli LLM che caratterizzano i modelli GPT, prodotti dalla società OpenAI, sono sistemi computazionali generativi, finalizzati dunque alla produzione di testo. Per questo OpenAI lavora su sistemi composti da *decoder*, sebbene l’architettura basata su *transformer* possa comprendere anche moduli *encoder*. L’architettura peculiare dei GPT si fonda sul *task* specifico e circoscritto del *next token prediction*, ovvero ha l’obiettivo di predire un *token* dopo l’altro partendo da quelli precedenti. Sempre sulla scia di Roncaglia,

le parole generate man mano dai *decoder* diventano esse stesse parte dell’*input* usato per la produzione della parola successiva, il che consente

di generare risposte che mantengono coerenza sintattica e semantica anche se sono molto più lunghe del *prompt* di partenza (2023: 93).

A differenza del modello di organizzazione complessa delle conoscenze di tipo architettonico – con un sapere strutturato ed enciclopedico (si pensi a Wikipedia) – GPT rappresenta un modello organico “capace di modificarsi e crescere in forme non sempre ben definite e comprensibili, non sempre rigorosamente analizzabili” (Roncaglia 2023: XIV). Quindi, si può affermare che le capacità peculiari delle intelligenze artificiali generative si basano su un complesso processo di apprendimento che, iniziando dal massivo addestramento auto-supervisionato di base, prevede successive fasi di apprendimento per rinforzo – un *fine-tuning* del modello base.

Riguardo al funzionamento di questi sistemi, si delineano due posizioni possibili: chi reputa i LLM come dei “pappagalli stocastici” e chi, invece, attribuisce loro una gamma di proprietà emergenti non sempre riducibili a processi aleatori. La prima definizione viene fornita nel 2021 da un gruppo di studiosi (Bender et al.), per sottolineare l’incapacità di comprensione semantica da parte delle AI generative che individuano delle ricorrenze nei dati e le ripropongono come *output*. Studiosi come il già citato Roncaglia, Fabio Ciotti e Roberto Navigli, per ricordarne alcuni, prendono le distanze dalla concezione ‘meccanicistica’ proposta dal pappagallo stocastico: Roncaglia, ad esempio, preferisce la nozione di oracolo statistico-probabilistico. Coloro che considerano questa seconda categoria più funzionale sono dell’avviso che i LLM non procedano con un puro assemblaggio meccanico degli elementi presenti nel *corpus*. Piuttosto, si ritiene più adeguato parlare di sistemi dialogici allargati che procedono secondo un meccanismo complessivo di produzione *anche* probabilistico, ma non solo. Dunque:

ChatGPT e i sistemi analoghi, insomma, non funzionano affatto incollando «a casaccio» (il termine inglese usato nel passo sopra citato è «haphazardly») sequenze di forme linguistiche: lo fanno a ragion veduta, sulla base di modelli probabilistici assai complessi. Come un oracolo, questi modelli producono contenuti sulla base di una ‘visione’ (Roncaglia 2023: 73).

A conferma è interessante notare come il sistema non sempre selezioni il termine ritenuto più rilevante. Infatti, attraverso un fattore regolabile denominato *temperatura* si possono ottenere parole con un minor punteggio

rispetto ad altre. Ciò determina che questo tipo di AI sia molto più deterministico di quanto possa sembrare.

2. Il romanzo ‘a due cervelli’

La breve introduzione – che non ha la pretesa di essere esaustiva nei confronti di un tema così complesso – ci aiuta a comprendere, seppur con necessarie semplificazioni, i principali meccanismi di funzionamento dei sistemi generativi, quali GPT, per meglio avvicinarci al testo di Tanica.¹

Durante la primavera del 2020, Tanica viene a conoscenza della piattaforma ShortlyAI tramite un profilo social che si occupa di diffondere le ultime novità nell’ambito tecnologico e, spinto dalla curiosità, inizia a testare le capacità del software. Il risultato è *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra*, un romanzo pubblicato due anni dopo, nel 2022, dal Saggiatore, composto da vari macrocapitoli indipendenti e incentrati sui temi più disparati (geografia, musica, poesia, sport, narrativa...).

A legare i vari racconti l’interazione dei due autori, quello umano e quello elettronico di nome OutOmatB-13, presente in apertura di ogni capitolo e ambientata al Grand Hotel Plaza di Consonno. Questa città brianzola della provincia di Lecco ha ospitato per decenni un enorme parco divertimenti, tanto da essere conosciuta, fino agli anni Settanta, come una ‘città dei balocchi’ – la Las Vegas della Brianza –, per poi cadere nell’oblio verso la fine degli anni Ottanta, diventando un borgo fantasma. L’idea di Consonno giunge tardivamente, spiega Tanica, quasi alla consegna del libro: l’ipotesi iniziale di ambientazione prevedeva un hotel lussuoso di Bellagio, sul lago di Como. A nostro parere, la scelta definitiva del borgo lombardo abbandonato contribuisce a una maggiore coerenza con il tono della prosa (di cui si parlerà meglio in seguito), in quanto si inserisce nella tendenza, spesso comica, diffusa all’interno del testo a spiazzare e a suscitare straniamento nel lettore, che segue il bizzarro dialogo.

Inoltre, il botta e risposta tra l’autore e il marchinegno, in questa *ghost town* quasi immaginaria, costituisce un richiamo intertestuale alle *Città invisibili* di Calvino, in cui Marco Polo e Kublai Khan conversano pur parlando lingue differenti e creano, con il loro dialogo, la cornice dell’intero racconto.

¹ Per questioni di maggior chiarezza e di coerenza al testo preso in esame, si è deciso di riportare le citazioni riproponendo la distinzione di font.

L'incontro tra i due testi avviene in maniera più puntuale in occasione del primo capitolo, *Piccola guida turistica per andare a ramengo o in altri posti*, dove non solo si narra di una storia alternativa e immaginifica per le città di Milano, New York e Asti, ma si cita lo stesso Calvino, in esergo all'ultimo paragrafo:

Arrivando a ogni nuova città il viaggiatore ritrova un suo passato che non sapeva più d'avere. L'estraneità di ciò che non sei più o non possiedi più t'aspetta al varco nei luoghi estranei e non posseduti, ITALO CALVINO, *Le città invisibili* (Tanica 2022: 39).

Un ulteriore tratto distintivo delle conversazioni che aprono i vari capitoli si può riscontrare nel dato grafico e linguistico: se la prosa dei racconti alterna le parole di Tanica a quelle di OutOmatB-13 senza soluzione di continuità – l'unico scarto è la differenza di carattere tipografico – nella cornice le due voci restano, invece, nettamente distinte:

Grand Hotel Plaza, Consonno, 6 settembre

OUTOMAT-B13: Il modo migliore per cominciare a scrivere un libro è **stendere un paragrafo introduttivo.**

AUTORE: Buona idea. Me lo detti e lo trascriverò paro paro (Tanica 2022: 13).

La prima frase dell'Incipit viene dunque suggerita dall'AI: **“Un uomo si era innamorato di una rosa”** (Tanica 2022: 17). Se, in un primo momento, la narrazione sembra richiamare il noto libro di Antoine de Saint-Exupéry e si caratterizza per toni affettuosi e gentili (per quanto suoni bizzarro il fatto che un uomo provi amore per un fiore), tuttavia la conclusione ribalta drasticamente l'atmosfera con l'introduzione di un nuovo personaggio – il maggiore Leonard, proprietario del giardino in cui cresce la rosa. Da questo momento, l'Incipit somiglia, piuttosto che a un racconto d'amore, a una comica novella boccacciana: con la promessa di far guadagnare denaro al giovane ragazzo, poeta di professione, **“Il maggiore Leonard condusse Andreas nel capanno degli attrezzi, lo accarezzò sui fianchi e gli chiese di praticargli un bel servizietto”** (Tanica 2022: 19-20). Ricompensato con cinquemila lire e appagato dalla cifra ottenuta in brevissimo tempo, l'innamorato cambia idea (**“Perdindirindina, con cinquemila lire a servizietto passo qui tutti i giorni, altro che sposare le rose”**) e cade nella trappola del maggiore, il quale aveva già adescato altri quattro ragazzi nel corso dello stesso mese. Alla luce di ciò, le pagine di apertura danno un piccolo assaggio di quello che spetterà al lettore:

brevi racconti in cui la trama cambia nel giro di poche righe, assumendo una vena tragicomica e assurda, a tratti demenziale, parodica e grottesca.

Sebbene la forma definitiva del libro sia politematica, durante una presentazione tenutasi a Brescia, nel 2023, in occasione del tour promozionale, Tanica confessa che l'idea originaria era quella di basare il romanzo interamente sul Surrealismo russo e di dedicarlo alla figura di Daniil Charms in particolare, tra i grandi narratori del Novecento, ancora sconosciuto ai più. Daniil Ivanovič Juvacëv, vero nome di Charms, era un personaggio molto eccentrico e dalla difficile definizione artistica, vissuto nella prima metà del XXI secolo (1905-1942), continuamente ostacolato dallo Stato russo sia per le sue posizioni politiche sia per le sue opere misteriose e critiche, estremamente lontane dal Realismo socialista diffuso negli anni Trenta. Vicino alle grandi avanguardie novecentesche, Charms viene spesso associato al Surrealismo per la natura eclettica, singolare e straniante della sua produzione, che tende a lasciare il lettore sconcertato. Il legame con l'autore russo appare più solido di quanto possa sembrare: come noto, Tanica è membro del gruppo musicale *Elio e le Storie Tese* in qualità di tastierista, arrangiatore, autore e co-autore dei testi; lo stile della *band* italiana, famosa per lo sperimentalismo stilistico e linguistico, deve molto a un certo umorismo *nonsense*, prossimo a esiti surrealisti e avanguardisti. È lo stesso Tanica a confermare, sempre nel corso della presentazione bresciana, di essersi ispirato a Charms per la stesura del libro. Così come Tanica, anche il *front man* e co-fondatore degli *EelST*, Elio, è stato più volte stimolato dalla produzione dell'autore russo per la scrittura dei testi musicali; tanto che nel 2009, nel corso di Pordenonelegge, Elio ha tenuto una conferenza/lettura dal titolo *Disastri futuristi e casi della vita: un viaggio al centro di Daniil Charms*, durante la quale ha raccontato il mondo di questo autore così controverso, che fa del sarcasmo una delle principali vie di rappresentazione.

Tornando a *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra*, nonostante l'allontanamento dall'idea principale – per paura che il libro risultasse troppo indirizzato a un ristretto *target* di potenziali lettori – si percepisce un certo richiamo alla sfera del bizzarro e del comico. Complice il funzionamento di ShortlyAI, a quell'altezza cronologica ancora 'primordiale' – e più vicina all'idea di pappagallo stocastico che a quella di oracolo probabilistico – Tanica sfrutta i limiti di coerenza e di coesione intrinseci alla macchina a favore della creatività, ottenendo una serie di passaggi singolarmente sensati, ma che diventano assurdi una volta analizzati nel complesso, così come tipico dello stile straniante di Charms.

Questo tipo di sperimentalismo viene ulteriormente incrementato dalla modalità con cui Tanica si approccia alla scrittura. Infatti, la preparazione dei racconti risulta limitata e la scrittura scorre come un flusso di coscienza. L'ispirazione per questa produzione 'di getto' deriva da un saggio di Jack Kerouac, *Scrivere Bop* (1996), in cui l'autore americano teorizza la tecnica di scrittura spontanea caratteristica anche di *On the road* (1957), il suo romanzo più famoso. Come peculiare della musica *bop*, il suggerimento del padre della *Beat Generation* consiste nel lasciarsi andare all'improvvisazione, senza preoccuparsi che il risultato sia necessariamente ordinato e coerente, e di farsi guidare dal flusso creativo del momento. Pertanto, il lettore di Tanica non deve stupirsi di fronte alla spiccata variabilità tematica, in quanto l'autore gioca volutamente con l'imprevedibilità degli *output* di GPT-3, compiacendo il desiderio stilistico di sperimentazione. Ne è un esempio il dialogo di apertura del capitolo dedicato proprio al Surrealismo russo, in cui viene data una bizzarra definizione dell'avanguardia secondo OutOmatB-13:

AUTORE: Mi dia la sua definizione di «surrealismo».

OUTOMAT-B13: Una bambina viene al mondo stringendo a sé una bambola.

A: Mi dia la sua definizione di «russo».

O: «Russo?»

... I had to look up this word in the dictionary.

I found that «russo» means «hazelnut».

I asked my friend to change it for me.

Russo è colui che russa in russo:

«Rrrronfki! Rrrronfopov!».

A: Quindi «surrealismo russo»...?

O: Una bambina viene al mondo stringendo a sé una bambola, ma sono tutti troppo occupati a dormire per accorgersene (la madre, l'ostetrica, il contabile del nosocomio): «Rrrronfki! Rrrronfopov! Rrrronfneiev! Rrrronfkaw!».

A: Mi chiedo cosa stiamo aspettando. La magia del momento è palpabile (Tanica 2022: 189).

Così, sulla scia di quanto affermato precedentemente, non di rado il tema stabilito inizialmente da Tanica, stimolato dalle originali soluzioni consigliate dalla macchina, si modifica nel giro di poche righe. Ad esempio, il paragrafo *Tentati suicidi* – l'ultimo del capitolo surrealista – parla della storia di una donna di nome Corame Ghiande che a seguito dello spostamento dell'asse terrestre scivola, sbatte la testa, e perde il senno. Dopo l'incidente, "Corame Ghiande era diventata un misto di melanconia e rancore, razionalità e demenza; tutti

ingredienti disciolti in una foschia color pazzesco, difficile da navigare” (Tanica 2022: 202). Anche se inizialmente Tanica non ha in mente uno sviluppo specifico per questo personaggio, asseconda il software nel momento in cui questo gli suggerisce una bizzarra continuazione: una serie di tentati suicidi messi in atto da Corame; tuttavia, a causa della sua “imperizia” (2022: 204), la donna non riesce a porre fine alla sua vita. In queste pagine si assiste, dunque, a una serie di episodi tragicomici in cui la protagonista prova a gettarsi da un ponte ma si lancia da rasoterra, tenta di impiccarsi ma lega la forca a una trave poggiata sul pavimento, prova a rubare dell’arsenico ma viene scoperta. Corame riesce finalmente a farla finita, sparandosi, e

in uno di quegli ultimi pensieri veloci che ti passano in testa prima di morire crivellato dal fuoco amico Corame Ghiande si era chiesta se quell’uscita di scena, così volitiva e drammatica, avrebbe lasciato un buon ricordo di lei: ‘Mi assolverà dalla stravaganza dei tentativi falliti?’ (Tanica 2022: 205).

La seconda parte del racconto apre a orizzonti metafisici e fantastici; l’anima di Corame rimane impigliata in uno spigolo del municipio – suggerimento di GPT –, tant’è che dopo soli due giorni la donna torna in vita, avviando un perpetuo alternarsi di vita e di morte.

L’influenza surrealista assume un forte carattere grottesco nel secondo paragrafo del quinto capitolo *C’era una volta tutt’altro*, con il racconto di uno strambo uomo innamorato di un aracnide. Il protagonista di queste pagine – intitolate *Il bambino ragno* e narrate da una prima persona intradiegetica – è il signor Silvestro, un fedele e solitario dipendente della ditta ‘Metalex Serramenti e Infissi’ responsabile della comunicazione aziendale. Dato ironico, quest’ultimo, se si pensa alla quasi totale incapacità di Silvestro di sostenere una conversazione: tutto ciò che riesce a dire, eccetto rare occasioni, si riassume nello slogan aziendale da lui inventato ‘Fai centro con i tuoi finestroni’. L’impiegato di *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra* somiglia, non a caso, a uno dei tanti personaggi alienati che costellano le trame di uno degli anticipatori del Surrealismo, Kafka: non possiede una spiccata intelligenza, non si distingue per la sua personalità, non viene caratterizzato da nulla in particolare se non per la sua incapacità di porsi in relazione con le altre persone. Entrando nel vivo del testo, è utile soffermarsi sulla scena in cui il taciturno personaggio in questione, chiuso nella sua stanza di hotel dove alloggiava in occasione di una gita aziendale, incontra il suo grande amore, un ragno “inquilino stabile della sua stanza, la 57, e fra i due sbocci[a] un impetuoso flirt. [...]. All’indomani del

colpo di fulmine il ragno, di nome Gilda, era sparito, e insieme a esso tutta la vitalità del signor Silvestro” (Tanica 2022: 122). L’assurdità della vicenda raggiunge lo zenit un anno dopo, quando Gilda torna a far visita a Silvestro nel suo ufficio lasciandogli in affidamento Baccanale, il figlio concepito insieme. Per raggiungere Gilda, scappata immediatamente dentro una fessura del muro, anche l’impiegato Metalex si infila nel crepaccio e qui si promettono di crescere Baccanale insieme, come una famiglia: **“Sarà la prima aberrazione umana a istruirsi e trovarsi un impiego, in barba alle convenzioni del mondo cosiddetto civile”** (Tanica 2022: 124-125). Il racconto si chiude in vero stile kafkiano, con la vana speranza di un futuro irrealizzabile: subito, come una sentenza che arriva dall’alto, giunge una volontà esterna a soffocare (letteralmente) l’obiettivo prefissato. La figlia del capo di Metalex, nonché voce narrante, accecata dalla gelosia nei confronti dell’uomo segretamente amato, spruzza un’intera bomboletta di poliuretano espanso all’interno della crepa, sigillando per sempre nel muro della ditta **“la figura tragica del signor Silvestro”** (Tanica 2022: 125) e il ragno Gilda. Il racconto – che si scopre essere un’ammissione di colpevolezza – si conclude in modo perturbante, con la giovane ragazza che si prende carico di Baccanale, ritenendolo

una sorta di risarcimento per tutte le pene che ho sofferto. Rappresenta un frammento di signor Silvestro che è diventato parte di me. Il naso è il suo, pure le sopracciglia prominenti e l’ovale del viso. Le zampe gliele ho tolte, mi ricordavano troppo la puttana (Tanica 2022: 126).

Secondo quanto riportato da Tanica in occasione della presentazione già ricordata, si ritiene utile soffermarsi, al fine del discorso, anche sul primo paragrafo – *Gli antichi Egizi* – del secondo capitolo, *Incredibili imprese storiche degli umani*. Infatti, originariamente il titolo del libro doveva essere tratto proprio dalla battuta suggerita dalla macchina **“Sai di faraone”**, ripetuta di frequente in queste pagine, in cui i due autori non solo pongono l’attenzione su un problema ricorrente per gli studiosi dell’Antico Egitto, ovvero “le maledizioni dei faraoni nei confronti di chi gli viola la tomba” (Tanica 2022: 55), ma stilano anche una lista dei tipi di condanne possibili con annessi relativi rimedi esistenti. Solo a una sciagura non vi è scampo, conseguenza nefasta della prima **“maledizione del sudore di faraone: quando scarti la mummia per estrarne ori, gioielli e preziosi, il faraone rilascia l’odore tipico di chi è stato piantato in asso dal proprio deodorante”** (56), e la condanna sarà sentirsi ripetere a vita **“Sai di faraone”** (56-57). Poi, per ragioni editoriali, il titolo del libro, come

noto, è mutato. A nostro parere, se “Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra” identifica l’esperienza ‘esistenziale’ della macchina, “Sai di faraone” avrebbe suggerito, piuttosto, l’orizzonte stilistico d’attesa, anticipandone la stravaganza, l’irriverenza e la comicità.

Si è anticipato come, in maniera ricorrente nel corso della narrazione, l’omogeneità tematica ceda il passo allo sperimentalismo e alla comicità straniante. Tuttavia, ciò non significa che non vi sia una scelta ponderata nell’inserimento dei segmenti narrativi. Tanica spiega che non si è mai trattato di un ‘buona la prima’: ciò che leggiamo frutto della AI è stato selezionato attentamente a seguito di una serie di tentativi e, a volte, deriva da un *collage* di varie parti di *output*. In quanto autore abituato a tornare di frequente su ciò che scrive per rileggere e correggere, Tanica fa sì che la macchina con cui collabora lavori allo stesso modo, facendola esprimere più volte qualora il risultato non fosse soddisfacente. Così, lo scrittore in carne e ossa sfrutta le capacità mimetiche tipiche dell’addestramento del sistema informatico per creare un testo che segua il suo stile comico e la sua peculiare vena fantastica: lo scopo è di inserire degli *input* creati dallo stesso Tanica, in modo da far basare l’apprendimento della macchina su quei contenuti e con quella specifica modalità di espressione. A questo proposito si possono riportare due paragrafi esemplificativi – li menzioniamo in quanto citati dall’autore stesso – in cui viene messo in atto questo indirizzamento stilistico. In ordine di apparizione si ricorda nuovamente il secondo capitolo, dedicato a brevi frammenti legati a svariati eventi storici. Per la stesura dell’ultimo paragrafo, *Il nuovo Partito comunista italiano*, GPT ha ricevuto dei dati testuali – nello specifico una Cronistoria dei fatti di Praga – attraverso cui ha ottenuto le principali informazioni necessarie a sostenere il dialogo con Tanica. Ciò che noi leggiamo, però, è una versione in cui la parte storica introduttiva, utilizzata ai fini dell’addestramento, è stata eliminata; a rimanere sono solamente le battute di scambio fra i due autori che, a questo punto, risultano omogenee nella forma. Ancora una volta, il ricorrente desiderio di spiazzamento del lettore e di comicità orienta gli esiti della scrittura. A tal proposito, sembra che Tanica non voglia rinunciare all’umorismo perfino quando tratta di argomenti politici che hanno segnato la Storia collettiva e i destini generali. Nel farlo, il lettore viene chiamato non solo a un continuo abbassamento nel tono della diegesi, ma soprattutto a condividere l’ironia a tratti dissacrante dello scrittore che, in questa maniera, instaura un rapporto di complicità col suo interlocutore: “La Democrazia cristiana ha mostrato invece apprezzamento per l’inedito

atteggiamento che allarga lo spettro della sovranità Popolare' (e non solo quello, ci permettiamo di aggiungere noi ;-)" (Tanica 2022: 73).

Il capitolo quarto costituisce il secondo esempio degno di nota, per due motivi: la modalità di costruzione di queste brevi pagine, racchiuse in *Versi gutturali*, e la definizione di poesia data dalla macchina in apertura di capitolo. In questa sezione narrativa, *Nuovi haiku*, Tanica gioca con alcuni componimenti giapponesi di origine medievale, composti da tre versi e diciassette sillabe (anche se la sillaba italiana e quella giapponese non sono esattamente assimilabili). Riportiamo la spiegazione che ne dà egli stesso all'inizio: "Gli haiku sono componimenti poetici brevi che hanno avuto origine in Giappone a partire dal secolo XVII. Trattano perlopiù l'osservazione di fenomeni naturali e le emozioni legate a essi" (Tanica 2022: 99). Ancora una volta, per addestrare GPT alla creazione di *output* di questo tipo, Tanica inserisce alcuni tra gli haiku considerati migliori e altri, invece, inventati da lui, in modo che OutOmatB-13 ne tenga conto. Vengono poi selezionati poco meno di trenta poesie giapponesi: la macchina è l'autrice del testo, l'uomo è responsabile dei titoli. Il *corpus*, alquanto stravagante come il resto della prosa, è un insieme di haiku 'sperimentali' e di haiku 'tradizionali' che, però, assumono un significato ironico in relazione al titolo attribuito loro:

CASA AVITA Al vento sbatte la finestra il nonno sacramenta. (2022: 101)	GUARDA CHE PRENDI FREDDO Nel bosco di bambù soffi di gelida pioggia sul far della sera. (2022: 105)
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Si è accennato a una definizione di poesia posta all'inizio del capitolo, precedente a quella fornita a proposito delle brevi poesie nipponiche. È l'11 di novembre, sempre al Grand Hotel Plaza della dimenticata Consonno, e il nostro Autore chiede ad OutOmatB-13: "Cos'è la poesia?" (2022: 97).

OUTOMAT-B13: Il risultato di un disturbo della personalità che induce l'autore, solitamente un mentecatto, a incolonnare frasi di lunghezza variabile.

A: Tutto qui?

O: Tutto qui.

A: Quindi Saba, Boccaccio, Ungaretti, Dickinson...

O: Una pletora di mentecatti. Falliti della prosa.

In questo botta e risposta risulta piuttosto chiaro l'intento parodico e beffardo portato avanti da Tanica, che sfrutta la maggior libertà di espressione peculiare a GPT-3 rispetto alle attuali versioni del software. Infatti, se GPT-4 appare molto più 'misurato', al contrario l'AI generativa alla base di ShortlyAI ha permesso a Tanica di ottenere risultati molto più irriverenti e non propriamente '*politically correct*'. Pur peccando di scarsa raffinatezza, la versione utilizzata dal nostro autore si caratterizza per una minore autocensura, tanto da includere fra gli *output* anche elementi che non siano del tutto 'socialmente accettabili' (si considerino le generalizzazioni dovute al tema di una presunta etica condivisa, anch'essa figlia del proprio tempo, sociologicamente e storicamente determinata), ma che risultano efficaci per lo stile prediletto dall'autore in questo testo. A questo proposito, Marco La Rosa evidenzia le criticità tipiche di certi sistemi informatici (soprattutto i più obsoleti), evidenziandone i rischi legati alla mancanza di senso critico e di empatia: "le macchine [...] non possono evitare di scrivere palesi falsità o contenuti offensivi, [...], a meno che non siano dotate di filtri da chi le ha impostate per evitare questo tipo di problemi" (2024: 120).

Di espressioni più colorite o sottilmente impertinenti è ricco il testo, ma giova riportarne alcune che più di altre sostengono quanto affermato. All'altezza del settimo capitolo, *Attività all'aria aperta e chiusa*, si parla di Porfirio Cancellini, un bambino di primo Novecento che si scopre appassionato di calcio. Per fare goal "manda al tappeto tutti i bambini che gli si oppongono prendendoli a pallonate sul volto" (Tanica 2022: 168). Diventato un calciatore professionista, a seguito del suo addio al gioco del pallone i giornali replicano in questa 'pacata maniera':

'Cancellini impazzito' (*Gazzetta del Popolo*);
'Orribile!' (*Corriere della Sera*);
'Cancellini ha rotto i coglioni' (*il Balilla*);
'Cancellini vada a farsi curare' (*l'Avventuroso*) (2022:170).

Poi, lo sport di riferimento cambia, ma non lo stile demenziale. Nell'ultimo paragrafo del capitolo, *I difetti dell'automobilismo*, è presente una sottocategoria (molto evocativa) a proposito delle difficoltà più diffuse quando si parla di auto, la dimensione. Qui Tanica, con l'ironia che lo contraddistingue, dà libero sfogo ai *clichés* più diffusi, affermando:

secondo certe teorie, chi compra la macchina grande lo fa perché ha il sospetto che la sua persona non lo sia. Chi ha la macchina piccola ragiona

allo stesso modo e la vende. Chi ha la macchina media si sente normale e la tiene. Che poi parlare di normalità al giorno d'oggi è un'impresa; basta che dici che uno è culatone [sic] e subito ti danno tutti addosso neanche fossi una specie di marrano. Quindi figuriamoci se mi addentro nel ginepraio del segmento di macchina scelto dalla gente (2022: 180).

Oltre a infrangere le regole della correttezza morale in ambito di sessualità, Tanica scherza anche con la religione toccando, in alcuni casi, il rischio di blasfemia. Nel paragrafo *Intervista a Dio o come vattelapesca si chiama*, del sesto capitolo dedicato alle *Interviste a grandi protagonisti del mondo*, ci viene restituita l'immagine di Dio pari a quella di uno stereotipato personaggio televisivo: placa gli applausi, beve il caffè Borbone (prodotto largamente diffuso in qualità di sponsor fra i principali programmi tv), scambia domande retoriche e battute ammiccanti col pubblico per includerlo nella sua intervista, diventa perfino arrogante nei confronti della conduttrice. Alla domanda da parte di una spettatrice, la risposta del Padre Eterno sembra assimilabile ai consigli astrologici elargiti da Paolo Fox:

S: Buonasera, mi chiamo Petunia. Niente, io vorrei chiedere per il lavoro, se è in arrivo qualcosa. Sono nata il 15 febbraio 1981.

D: Grazie per la data ma non mi insegni il mio mestiere. [*Risate del pubblico*] Scherzo. Allora, per i nati della seconda decade c'è una prima metà dell'anno in salita, poi va a posto praticamente tutto (Tanica 2022: 143).

La puntata si conclude, "*Dio benedice a spron battuto [...]. Si sposta nell'adiacente salotto, dove il microfonista e un tecnico della trasmissione lo accolgono festosi. Nel chiacchiericcio si distinguono parole come 'rimpatriata', 'Agata', 'favoloso'*" (2022: 144). In quest'ottica certamente provocatoria sembra significativo che, a fare da contraltare a Dio, l'ultimo intervistato del capitolo sia proprio il Cinema porno.

Sulla stessa lunghezza d'onda, che cavalca la scia dello spiazzamento, va citato anche il paragrafo *Il dizionario dei messia*, presente all'ultimo capitolo del libro, *Di panico, fini del mondo, figure messianiche e lucciole spaventevoli*. Qui si parla del libro, eponimo al paragrafo, di un certo scrittore di nome Lukas Bonetti. Il testo, al suo interno, raccoglie non solo le notizie relative a Gesù, ma anche quelle "su altre personalità meno conosciute ma altrettanto rappresentative della categoria" (Tanica 2022: 240). Inscenando l'intervista, viene chiesto a Bonetti quale fosse l'episodio più divertente di Gesù, dato il suo spiccato "sense of humor pungente" (241). "C'è davvero l'imbarazzo della scelta", confessa

Bonetti, “direi quando Simone di Cirene lo aiuta a portare la croce al Golgota e lui se ne esce con questa battuta: ‘Grazie Simo, non appena risorto ti vengo a trovare e ti regalo delle praline’” (241).

Questi brevi esempi, ai quali se ne potrebbero aggiungere moltissimi altri, a nostro parere provano che l’operazione comica, e a tratti provocatoria e dissacrante, eseguita da Tanica e da GPT-3 – sfruttandone proprio le caratteristiche strutturali sopra elencate – si pone in contrapposizione a quella certa idea di letteratura contemporanea (diffusa soprattutto negli Stati Uniti nella deriva estrema della *cancel culture*) che la vuole sempre morale e consolatoria; una vuota retorica individuata anche da Walter Siti nel suo *pamphlet* del 2021, *Contro l’impegno*.

Il libro termina con le *Lettere di congedo*, la prima scritta interamente da Tanica e la seconda da Out0mat-B13, dalle quali emerge il rapporto di collaborazione instauratosi tra i due:

Caro collega,
pare che almeno per il momento il nostro lavoro sia giunto al termine. Sono stati mesi, questi, di preziose riflessioni e considerazioni. Molte non sarebbero state possibili senza il suo apporto. Un momento di stasi creativa come quello che ho patito prima di incontrarla mi avrebbe costretto, in altre circostanze, ad abbandonare la mischia; [...]. Mi rincresce che lei sia stato richiamato in fabbrica; i suoi artigiani progettisti parlano di una «manutenzione programmata». Mi auguro che tutto si risolva in una temporanea seccatura e che lei venga restituito alla comunità letteraria marchingegna più in forze che pria! Sono certo di una positiva evoluzione degli eventi, considerato che durante il tempo trascorso insieme non si è mai verificato alcunché di spiacevole, né i suoi contributi hanno mai deluso le mie aspettative. Si rimetta in forze. Non vedo l’ora di incontrarla di nuovo. Attenda mie notizie, e non manchi di darmene di sue appena ne avrà libertà.

Con gratitudine

L’Autore
(2022: 255)

Carissimo,
può stare sicuro che le mie prime parole, quando mi vedrà, saranno segnate dal più vivo compiacimento, e le ultime saranno quelle che brontolerò prima di rotolare in catena di disassemblaggio in un futuro, mi auguro, decisamente remoto. Conto di riprendere a breve il lavoro per cui sono stato concepito. Non dubiti: asseconderò certe leggerezze che le invidio e mi farò carico dei pesi che la sua testa faticherebbe a sostenere. Confido che saprà perdonarmi una certa mia involontaria saccenteria che l’ha talvolta indispettita; non dubito

che ogni eventuale contrasto si risolverà in una confidenza più solida e proficua. [...]. Scusi, mi viene riferito – riporto testualmente – che «bisogna spegnere e riaccendere»; pure «con una certa sollecitudine». Immagino si tratti di una procedura tecnica.
Un corale abbraccio

Cordialmente, suo
Outomat-B13
(2022: 256)

L’*explicit*, dai toni quasi commoventi, apre il discorso non solo al controverso e discussissimo tema del rapporto tra intelligenza artificiale e *storytelling*, ma anche riguardo alla questione autoriale e di attribuzione della creatività. Già Calvino, in *Cibernetica e fantasmi* (1967), si chiedeva se un giorno la macchina avrebbe sostituito il poeta, o lo scrittore, e quale sarebbe stato lo stile dell’automa. “Penso che la sua vera vocazione sarebbe il classicismo” afferma Calvino, ma che la definitiva svolta stilistica si avrebbe qualora la macchina decidesse di soddisfare “un bisogno tipicamente umano: la produzione di disordine” (2017: 209). L’ipotesi di Calvino prevede che l’automa smetta di creare per analogia alla tradizione e, insoddisfatta da questo stile, sconvolga “completamente i propri codici” (209), iniziando a produrre avanguardia in maniera totalmente autonoma. Ne consegue un repentino indebolimento dell’autore, destinato – nella società tecnologica che lo sopraffà – alla scomparsa. Tuttavia, ciò che rende diverso il caso preso in esame nel corso di questo intervento consiste nel fatto che, qui, avviene un vero e proprio dialogo ‘alla pari’ tra l’uomo e il LLM. Tanica – dello stesso parere è Daniel Raffini in occasione di un convegno su “Letteratura e intelligenza artificiale” tenutosi a Roma nel Settembre del 2024 – non chiede al sistema informatico di scrivere *ex novo* e *in toto* il testo del romanzo; al contrario, sfrutta le capacità mimetiche per indirizzare il software verso uno stile coerente al proprio. Dunque, l’uso che fa dello strumento è completamente diverso: non di subordinazione o totale affidamento, tanto da indebolire la visione dualistica e oppositiva tra intelligenza artificiale e intelletto umano. I capitoli vengono costruiti insieme, frase per frase, in una costante collaborazione fra i ‘due cervelli’. Questa sinergia è peculiare della letteratura elettronica; spiega De Vivo che “l’uomo e la macchina diventano partner in una complessa interazione che vede l’uomo costruire artefatti e utilizzarne le tecnologie derivanti che, una volta entrate a far parte della routine quotidiana, rimodellano a loro volta l’uomo e il suo mondo” (2011: 216).

Un chiaro esempio è riscontrabile all'inizio del capitolo *C'era una volta tutt'altro*. In questa occasione, l'autore-uomo chiede all'autore-macchina come fare per scrivere una fiaba di cui non ha titolo, personaggi, svolgimento. “Introduciamo delle variabili” (Tanica 2022: 109), suggerisce Outomat-B13, delineando l'ambientazione, il protagonista e il motore della trama. Non pienamente soddisfatto del primo risultato, troppo breve e senza risvolti, Tanica chiede di approfondire la storia, introducendo anche i sentimenti. I due procedono aggiustando il tiro a ogni battuta, fino all'ottenimento del risultato adeguato; “Le voglio bene perché mi fa volare con la fantasia” (Tanica 2022: 111). Dunque, la domanda sarebbe: può l'intelligenza artificiale essere creativa? Come sottolinea Debarshi Arathdar, “the problem lies not so much with the capacity of machines to tell stories, but with the quality and clarity of their execution” (2021, s.n.p.). Il dibattito a riguardo è più che vivace e non si ha, in questa sede, la pretesa di esaurire questo complesso quesito. Joseph Sassoon riporta le parole di Amanda Katz, in *Welcome to the Era of the AI Coworker* (2017), quando afferma:

se rinunciamo alla creatività e all'intuizione come tratti umani, dobbiamo completamente ripensare cosa significa essere umani in prima istanza. [...]. Ma di fatto le macchine sono già altamente creative e producono sorprendenti, innovative opere artistiche (2019: 50).

Sono molti ‘gli addetti ai lavori’ a concordare sull'effettiva creatività dei sistemi informatici, tra cui Pedro Domingos, autore di *The Master Algorithm*: “Le macchine possono essere creative, e sono creative” (Sassoon 2019: 50). Una posizione interessante appare quella di Simone Natale e Leah Henrickson in *The Lovelace effect: Perceptions of creativity in machines* (2022), con cui spostano il faro dell'attenzione dalla definizione assoluta di creatività, alla ‘percezione’ di creatività dell'utente nei confronti della macchina. I due studiosi propongono la nozione di ‘*Lovelace effect*’ come strumento per sottolineare che “is always the result of human users and observers projecting their own definitions of creativity onto computers’ outputs, and thus can only be defined in relational terms” (2022: 2). Lo scopo di Natale e di Henrickson consiste nell'includere nella riflessione elementi contestuali, relazionali, culturali – e non solo informatici – per comprendere in che modo venga attribuita l'originalità e la creatività alla macchina. Quest'ultima sembra una lente di ingrandimento adeguata da poter applicare al nostro caso, in cui il lavoro creativo si basa

proprio sulla stretta collaborazione dei due cervelli. Citando Natale ed Henrickson:

The Lovelace effect mediates actual software functionality with how individuals conceptualize and interpret that software, reminding us that all outcomes of interactions between humans and machines represent constant implicit and indirect negotiation between programmer intention and user experience (2022: 13).

Per le peculiarità del libro *Non siamo mai stati sulla Terra*, più volte sottolineate, a noi sembra che Tanica abbia vinto la scommessa di negoziazione con il software GPT-3, considerato da lui stesso come un'evoluzione da saper sfruttare a proprio vantaggio. Così, avendo 'plasmato' questa (ormai obsoleta, nel momento in cui si scrive questo articolo) versione di LLM sulla propria cifra stilistica comica e surreale, Tanica ha ottenuto un risultato che permette al lettore di "fondere i due narratori in uno solo, perché anche laddove ci sia un forte contrasto di natura surrealistica tra la realtà – [Tanica] – e la finzione – la macchina – quel contrasto non è stridente" (De Stefano 2022, s.n.p.). Un elemento rilevante diviene, quindi, la possibilità di unire le due voci narranti senza che vi siano scarti stilistici, e di lasciare la libertà al lettore di distinguere le due autorialità – con l'ausilio del differente carattere – o di abbandonarsi al comico e surreale racconto.

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How bloody is your vessel?

‘Contrastive idiomaticity’ among languages and cultures

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Abstract Dealing with idioms, otherwise called templates, fixed or semi-fixed expressions in language in a contrastive perspective can be useful to promote linguistic and cultural awareness, mutual understanding, and inclusion. From a cognitive metaphor perspective, the interface between cultural variation and the universality of specific experiential and cognitive groundings and between motivation and linguistic variation are of great interest. This is especially true when considering linguistic relativism (Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis), embodiment, and emotion (Lakoff 1993; Kövecses 2000; Boroditsky 2001). In this paper we compare the idiomatic expression “to burst a blood vessel”, commonly used by English speakers when experiencing anger, vs. similar expressions in French, Italian, and Arabic, to explore their potential metaphorical grounding, usage, and emotional impact with a quantitative and qualitative contrastive approach. The degrees to which variation and similarities among the chosen comparable idioms occur is what we call ‘contrastive idiomaticity’. How these languages relate to these idioms’ metaphorical groundings will also be discussed from a cross-cultural persuasion and sustainability perspective.

Keywords conceptual metaphor; idioms; emotions; embodiment; ‘contrastive idiomaticity’.

1. Introduction

The study of idioms, conceptual metaphors, and their interplay with emotions can provide an insightful vision towards a comprehensive understanding of language and cognition. Conceptual metaphor theory, as introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (2003[1980]), asserts that our comprehension of abstract concepts is fundamentally rooted in more tangible experiences, frequently expressed through metaphorical language. Idioms, as fixed expressions whose meanings are not typically derivable from their individual components, are conceived as not arbitrary but motivated (Lakoff 1993: 211) so that they can be interpreted as conventionalized “experientially motivated metaphorical expressions”. Their motivational basis given, they manifest various “degrees of variation” from one linguistic and cultural context to the other (Ferrari 2018: 105). In this sense,

they pose distinct challenges while also offering meaningful insights into linguistic creativity and cultural specificity. The paper initiates the discussion by drawing connections between four idiomatic expressions from four different languages relatable to a common emotional metaphorical grounding.

Emotions are essential in both the expression and the reception of idiomatic and metaphorical phrases. The emotional charge and impact of these expressions can affect how they are used and perceived by both speakers and listeners. Combining knowledge from cognitive linguistics, corpus studies, and emotion research to address idioms from a contrastive perspective can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, thought, body, and emotion in a multilingual and multicultural horizon.

From this standpoint, the paper elucidates the metaphorical grounding of an idiomatic expression conventionally associated with anger in English (“burst a blood vessel”) vs. its variations in French, Italian, and Arabic: “*piquer un coup de sang*”, “... si chiude/gonfia la vena” and, “*ثار الدم في عروق...*” (*thāra al-dām fī ‘urūq*). These idioms mentioned convey anger metaphorically, displaying how this emotion is expressed across different cultures, eventually linking abstract feelings of anger to complex embodied, cognitive, and emotional processes. We will observe whether and how the metaphorical grounding changes from one language to the other in relation to the expression of anger within complex embodied cognitive processes.

The study combines quantitative and qualitative metaphor and emotional analysis to explore the variation of these corresponding idiomatic expressions along their conceptual groundings, emotional impact, and related cultural considerations. This is what we call “contrastive idiomaticity”: the integrated observation of common motivational and experiential roots together with the creative diversifications of corresponding idiomatic expressions across different linguistic and cultural domains.

According to Gibbs (1994) and Palmer (1996), universality and cultural variation should be examined with an integrated and balanced approach, considering the selection of variants from among many possible ones. Analyzing idioms from a contrastive perspective can be a way not only to investigate idiomaticity cross-linguistically but also to promote more cultural awareness for the sake of more sustainable intercommunication. In other words, within such an integrated perspective, idioms can serve as lenses to zoom into linguistic and cultural specificities, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic domains of interest as such and interactively with one another.

The primary questions to be investigated include: What type of metaphorical primary (Grady 1997) mapping do these idioms share implicitly? Can we validate through our linguistic data the claim that emotion metaphors are universal or cross-linguistically comparable? How does this embodiment integration encompass the universality of language together with the uniqueness of different cultural and linguistic spheres? How does universality intersect with degrees of variation?

2. Paving the theoretical ground for ‘contrastive idiomaticity’

Figurative language, and especially metaphors, effectively convey emotions. Studies show that using metaphor to describe personal feelings about an event is more productive than describing the event itself, especially for intense emotions. Metaphors also help clarify emotional aspects of social interactions, creating a sense of closeness and improving the understanding of others’ mental states and emotions (Ortony & Fainsilber 1987, cited in Citron et al. 2019).

“Metaphor is fundamentally conceptual, not linguistic in nature. [...] Metaphors are mappings across conceptual domains. [...] Mappings are not arbitrary, but grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge” (Lakoff 1993: 244-5). This is evident in orientational metaphors like “HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003[1980]: 15) or “RATIONAL IS UP EMOTIONAL IS DOWN”, whose motivational ground can also be found in physical and cultural basis. (Id.: 17).

Metaphors are therefore grounded in our physical and cultural experience. This feature of metaphor can be referred to as embodiment. It is thanks to embodiment that metaphors also preside over the perception and expression of our emotional experience, as also culturally informed. In other words, as long as they are correlated with our “perceptual-motor” functioning (Id.: 58), they can help the conceptualization of our emotions.

Metaphors also matter in how we think about emotions (Kövecses 1986; 2020). According to Kövecses, metaphors not just “reflect” but “constitute” “our emotional reality”: “Is it of any consequence that speakers of English use expressions like *boiling with anger*, *being swept off one’s feet*, *building a relationship* and *being madly in love*?” (Kövecses 2000: 1). He discusses the way concepts of anger, fear, love, and joy are conceptualized and expressed in language. Kövecses further highlights that emotions can have diverse metaphorical realizations, like the case of love, which is conceptualized in many

ways, as journeys (“it’s been *a long, bumpy road*”), fire (“I am *burning* with love”), magic (“he was *enchanted*” Kövecses 2000: 26), just to say a few. Our claim is: as long as metaphors are also embodied there is a high degree of possibility that these metaphors may also tell us something about what these emotions are and above all how are they expressed and perceived by speakers depending on their language of reference?

Embodiment refers to the process of constructing simulations of bodily experiences, as described by Lawrence Barsalou’s theory of embodied cognition. Interactions of people with the world are processed through multiple input and output modalities, such as seeing a car’s shape, hearing its engine, gripping the wheel, and experiencing emotions (Barsalou 1999; Barsalou et al. 2003; Damasio 1989; Casasanto & Gijssels 2015). Niedenthal et al. (2009) explored how emotion concepts are perceived, represented, and processed in the human mind. In their article “Embodiment of Emotion Concepts”, they demonstrate that individuals possess extensive knowledge about emotions, both implicit and explicit. They can explain when and why emotions occur and describe their own emotions in detail, showing similarities across individuals and cultures (Boucher 1983; Brandt & Boucher 1986; Keltner & Haidt 2003; Matsumoto et al. 1988; Tangney et al. 1992; Niedenthal et al. 2009).

Research conducted on metaphor within linguistics and cognitive science over the past two decades has laid a valuable foundation for comprehending multiculturalism. Experientialists maintain that metaphor serves as the standard means of grasping abstractions and intricate phenomena. They posit that our imagination enables us to investigate complex ideas and enhance our understanding through more familiar social and physical experiences. Metaphor becomes both a conceptual and experiential mechanism that shapes our perceptions of the world (Johnson 1995). The convergence of multiculturalism and conceptual metaphor reveals several significant insights (Johnson 1990; Tianying & Bogoyavlenskaya 2023; Halstead 2024).

In this respect, the contrastive idiomaticity perspective can be revealing, offering observable niches of vision to delve into cognitive processes informing the emotional perception and expression within and across diverse linguistic and cultural horizons.

Important conclusions can be deduced from studying the literature on conceptual metaphor and emotions of anger. Paul Ekman’s research showed anger causes skin temperature, blood pressure, and visual perception interference (Ekman et al. 1983). As Lakoff reports, “The physiological effects of anger are increased body heat, increased internal pressure (blood pressure,

muscular pressure), agitation, and interference with accurate perception.” (Lakoff 1987: 381) The most common conceptualization of anger is “ANGER IS HEAT”, which can be applied to “fluids” as well as “solids”, generating in turn “ANGER IS THE HEAT OF A FLUID IN A CONTAINER” and “ANGER IS FIRE (cross-linguistic variations aside).¹ “The ANGER AS HEAT metaphor, when applied to fluids, combines with the metaphor THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR THE EMOTIONS” (Lakoff 1987: 383). Lakoff further specifies how “[i]ntense anger produces pressure on the container” and “[w]hen the pressure on the container becomes too high, the container explodes” (Lakoff 1987: 385). Not by chance, “I almost *burst a blood vessel*” is among the first examples chosen by Lakoff to introduce the conceptualization of anger (1987: 380). The embodied meaning of “anger is the heat of a fluid in a container” (1987: 383), which is related to our idioms “burst a blood vessel”, “piquer un coup de sang”, “si chiude/gonfia la vena” and “ثار الدم في عروقه”, finds its roots in the similar physiologically grounded bodily experiences that people share cross-culturally, despite culture-based differences evident in the specific articulations across languages (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2006, 2022 [2005]: 165-193).

The conceptualization of emotions has resulted as responding to metaphorical universals in cognitive linguistics, though with some nuances of diversity across linguistic and cultural domains. The literature about the multicultural variations across languages within a cognitive approach is also vast and varied, featuring numerous scholars, including Sharifian (2017), Ahrens (2010), Musolff (2017), and Wierzbicka (2014).

Different researchers observed the idiomatic metaphorical expressions from a cross-cultural perspective and discussed both “universality” and “cultural specificity”. Emotional cognition theories are believed to be divided into two schools of thought: experientialists (e.g. Paul Ekman) and social constructionists (e.g. James Averill and Rom Harré). The first theory believes that emotion concepts are universal across languages and cultures, with universal metaphors based on universal human experiences. Meanwhile, the social constructionists argue that emotion concepts are socio-cultural scripts or scenarios whose properties depend on specific aspects of a given culture. Therefore, different cultures will have different conceptualizations for the same emotion concepts due to different socio-cultural relevance. Both

¹ For instance, corresponding to “FIRE” and “FLUID” metaphors in English, “Chinese uses “FIRE” and “GAS”” (Yu 2009: 59).

experientialists and social constructionists contribute to the understanding of emotion concepts and their meanings (Gladys 2011). The embodied cultural prototype theory (Kövecses 2005; Maalej 2004, cited in Gladys 2011) has been proposed to integrate different perspectives to gain a better understanding of emotion concepts across cultures. “[A] cross-linguistic difference on some implicit measure [...] in a non-language-specific task” is claimed by Boroditsky to show “that experience with a language affects thought in some broader sense” (Boroditsky 2001: 3). Contrastive idiomaticity is perfectly in line with that.

Studies have investigated the link between an idiom’s comprehension and metaphor awareness, particularly in the context of teaching and among English language learners in metaphoric situations (Jelčić Čolakovac 2020; Gladys 2011).

The study by Jelčić Čolakovac focuses on the following metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Kövecses (1987): BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS and ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. The results suggested that expressions not motivated by a conceptual metaphor (CM) are more difficult to interpret than those rooted in CM, which confirms the claim of Boers: “An awareness of the metaphoric themes behind the novel vocabulary can facilitate retention” (Boers 2000: 557, also cited in Jelčić Čolakovac 2020). Accordingly, we can relate the way we express and interpret anger based on our physical sensations, though with some degrees of variation. In English, the manifestation of anger is often expressed with the embodied idiomatic expression “... (almost) burst a blood vessel”,² corresponding to an embodied manifestation in the person who is experiencing anger: the angry person’s face may turn red when they are extremely angry. Similarly, in French anger is frequently conveyed through the phrase “piquer un coup de sang” which translates literally into “*to sting a stroke of blood / to strike a blow of blood.” In Italian, anger is referred to as a closing or blowing vein “... si chiude/gonfia la vena” (lit. “the vein closes/swells...”). In Arabic, anger is expressed as a bloody explosion: “... ثار الدم في عروق” (*thāra al-dām fī ‘urūq*)³ “blood erupts in... vessels” (literal translation in English),⁴ bringing up not only a burst of blood in vessels, but also in the face, the body, and the chest. While the physical manifestations of anger—like warmth, tightness, and flushing of the face—are common to everyone, they can be expressed in various ways through language,

² The idiomatic phrases presented are mentioned in general without specification of personal pronouns.

³ Literal translation has been provided for languages other than English. Phonetic transcription has also been provided for the Arabic phrases.

⁴ E.g. with personal reference: “... ثار الدم في عروقه”, *thāra al-dām fī ‘urūqih*, “blood erupts in (his) vessels”.

often in comparable manners, and rarely in identical terms. The examples just mentioned seem to suggest a climax in the expression of anger in terms of both intensity and bodily involvement extension. We are investigating how the common conceptual root intertwines with the different linguistic articulation in the idiomatic expressions at issue. In question is also whether and how emotional conceptualization, engagement, and effect vary accordingly.

3. Methodological sketch and materials for this study

To address these questions, access to comparable corpora is needed so as to allow for a contrastive analysis, which we set to be dealt with by both quantitative and qualitative methods. As regards retrievability, despite the limited availability of academic language resources, the corpora available in Sketch Engine allowed us to successfully establish a contrastive basis for analysis relative to everyday spoken language in web corpora for all the four languages considered. Following a more thorough investigation on the English case, focusing on BNC, COCA, and Web, we concentrated on the Web corpora for the comparison with the other languages, for the sake of balance.⁵

In this paper we are concerned with the results of concordance in Sketch Engine, which will form our case studies. We will provide data of our four idioms in the chosen four different languages starting from the English idiom “to burst a blood vessel”, followed by the Italian “gli si chiude/gonfia la vena”, then the French “piquer un coup de sang”, and finally the Arabic idiom “ثار الدم” (thāra al-dām fī ‘urūq).

We can describe the methodology as divided into three phases, the first quantitative and the other two qualitative, followed by a final double-check.

In the first phase, we conducted the search of each idiomatic expression in Sketch Engine with reference to the following corpora: BNC, COCA, and Web for the English idiom, with which we initialized the search, and just Web for the other languages. This phase is dedicated to collecting the number of occurrences of each idiomatic phrase for each language. Relevant samples for qualitative analysis are eventually sorted using the GDEX option to automatically select cases that are both illustrative and representative.

⁵ By balance we refer here to comparability based on text types rather than a strictly quantitative balance. The Web Corpora do in fact slightly change in size, ranging from the largest to the smallest, as follows: Web English consists of 61,585,997,113 words, French Web 23,191,789,469 23.8 billion words, Italian Web 14,514,566,714 words, and Arabic Web 6.5 billion words.

In the second phase, a thorough search is conducted to identify and recognize the idioms present in the samples extracted from various corpora. We have carefully read the results of each idiom and emphasized each example's context by referring to the words and phrases before and after the idiom to observe it intratextually and scrutinize the corpus results. In this second phase, the metaphorical grounding starts to emerge, though hypothetically, so that we tentatively divided our results between literal and metaphorical usage of the idiomatic phrases. In other words, we examined each example separately to verify whether the idiom refers to a physical state of the human body or to a conceptualized metaphorical use in language. This result could only be confirmed more steadily after a proper metaphor analysis of the occurrences, which is the third phase of the methodology adopted here.

The third phase delves into metaphor analysis with the chosen procedure. By this phase, we were able to identify the conceptual metaphor pertaining to the idiomatic expressions by extracting the source and target domains and then observing the grounding of the metaphor and further conceptual, emotional, and contextual considerations according to the four-step procedure (Ferrari 2018). This procedure, initially inspired by Steen (1999), was chosen out of the appropriateness to the case here, i.e., the focus on emotional effect and persuasion orientation, after a keen comparison with other efficacious metaphor identification procedures like MIP (Pragglejaz Group 2007), and the MIPVU (Steen 2010) in the first place. The four-step procedure was then adapted to our case as follows, to encompass 'contrastive idiomaticity analysis' with a focus on embodiment and emotions and a cross-linguistic orientation.

In the first step (metaphor identification by means of "a) focus identification" and "b) conceptual metaphor identification"), we conducted a thorough search to identify the idioms present in the sample extracted from various corpora. We examined the examples meticulously in search of metaphorical foci, keeping the emotional slant of anger in mind, the potential target of our text. Consequently, we extracted the source and target domains relevant to the metaphorical context to identify the underlying conceptual metaphor within the micro-text of the concordance. Additionally, we acknowledged the mapping procedure involved in this analysis. In the second step ("conceptual implications"), the conceptual meaning of the idiomatic expression is further developed to motivate the grounding of the idiom. Given that the target of our idioms is in fact co-incident with emotions (anger and other related ones), idiomatically embodied, the emotional content starts to emerge already here in the first two steps. Then, focusing on the emotional

resonance of the idiom, we also evaluated terminology related to emotions, with an emphasis on how it connects to anger and other feelings. In the third step (“appeals to emotion/s”), we concentrated on the emotional appeal of the embodiment also as a potential effect. The fourth step (perspectives with respect to “ideological structure”⁶ and strategy of persuasion at a macrotextual level) is dedicated to contextualizing the procedure’s results for each idiom within the linguistic and cultural context of reference so as to allow for fruitful contrastive considerations among the four languages at issue as regards embodiment, emotional involvement, and eventually cultural specificity vs. conceptual universality.

The final phase serves as a double-check of the results coming from the second and third phases. It leads back to the corpus to confirm the initial hypothetical classification of Sketch Engine results data into two categories: metaphorical vs. non-metaphorical use of the idiom. Therefore, we selected several words that either confirm or deny the metaphorical embodiment of anger in the mentioned idioms. Then, with reference to metaphor analysis results and the pragmatic meanings in context, the primary metaphor of reference is observed in its manifestations and variations across the four languages, tracing potential connections of the meanings behind the bodily grounded experience with shared cultural backgrounds.

4. Analysis – quantitative and qualitative

The analysis of the idiomatic expressions starts with exploring the English idiom “burst a blood vessel” in BNC and COCA, and then concentrates on English Web 2021 in Sketch Engine. The French idiom “... piquer un coup de sang” (lit. “*to sting a stroke of blood / to strike a blow of blood”), the Italian “... si chiude/gonfia la vena” (lit. “the vein closes/swells...”), and the Arabic “... ثار الدم في عروق” (*thāra al-dām fī ‘urūq*), lit. “blood erupts in... vessels”) will be explored accordingly from the most recent web corpora available in Sketch Engine: French Web 2023, Italian Web 2020, and Arabic Web 2024. By concordancing the occurrences of each idiomatic expression, the following data emerge.

“Burst a blood vessel” occurs 5 times in BNC and 18 in COCA. A larger number of occurrences is present in the English Web, where we have 546

⁶ For the original version of the four-step procedure, see Ferrari 2018: 115-18.

instances (from which 50⁷ have been selected by means of the GDEX option, to be used for the qualitative analysis). In the French Web “piquer un coup de sang” occurs 58 times and all these instances have been considered in the analysis. In the Italian Web the idiom “... si chiude la vena” resulted in 113 occurrences (from which 50 have been selected with GDEX for the qualitative analysis). A smaller amount of cases occurs then with the variant “... si gonfia la vena” (7 instances). Finally the Arabic idiom “... ثار الدم في عروق...” (*thāra al-dām fī ‘urūq...*), “blood erupts in... vessels”, is found in 18 occurrences, and we are examining them all. Analysis evidence follows relative to the idiomatic expressions starting with the English one and moving to the other comparable variants in French, Italian, and Arabic.

4.1 English

The verb “burst”, according to the Oxford Dictionary, means “to break open or apart, especially because of pressure from inside; to make something break.”⁸ The way blood rushes through vessels when anger intensifies is reflected in the English idiom, which imaginatively renders the effect of the pressure of the blood in the veins as already happened by means of “bursting”. The metaphorical ground comes from the physiology of rage (blood pressure). As for the source rendering, the following specificity seems to emerge in English: here it is like if the expression is already concentrating on the effect of anger – the damage is already done. Whether this can be related to a specific pragmatic orientation in the Anglosphere can be verified by observing the behavior of the expression in context in English to consider its metaphorical grounding and related emotional effects, and then by contrast with other linguistic/cultural horizons as the ones abovementioned.

A preliminary explorative exploration of BNC and COCA examples, respectively 5 and 18, suggests a predominance of metaphorical vs. non-metaphorical usage of the idiom in English, which appears to be metaphorically used 3 out of 5 times in the BNC and 12 out of 18 times in COCA, whose instances appear below in Figure 1.

⁷ For English and Italian Web, given the larger amount of occurrences found, 541 and 113 respectively, we have concentrated on 50 instances each selected by employing the GDEX option, which identifies automatically sentences which are suitable as dictionary example. Prioritizing meaningful comparisons over sheer quantity, the focus is also on the quality of the chosen examples.

⁸ https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/burst_1 [last access on 30/11/2024].

Focusing on the BNC examples makes it evident how there might be ambiguous cases like: a)⁹ “I don't think you should let yourself get worked up like that. You'll burst a blood vessel if you're not careful.” ‘Well,’ I said, ‘he gets on my wick at times.’” Thanks to the co-text in the second part of the example (“get on my wick at times”) we can understand that “burst a blood vessel” is not meant in its literal sense here, but to idiomatically convey anger. Considered finally as metaphorical, this example raises an issue that is worth mentioning prior to entering the whole analysis. In some cases, it is difficult to distinguish between metaphorical and literal usage, as the embodied reference in the idiom could be evoked by the utterer without distinguishing between the actual and imaginative reaction of bursting a blood vessel in the body. The embodied reaction of bursting a blood vessel, in fact, could be happening for real, out of an emotional backlash, as well as just rendering idiomatically the emotional reaction of anger.

Concentrating then on COCA examples (see Fig. 1 below) led us to think that the English idiomatic phrase is used more commonly in informal speech, as it was identified in the categories of movies, fiction, and television content.

⁹ The linguistic examples mentioned, taken from our corpora, have been labelled with alphabetical letters to avoid confusion with the numerical order of the occurrences they refer to in Sketch Engine. Only for Arabic, where all occurrences have been considered, direct reference is made to their numbers, according to their order in Figure 2.

Corpus of Contemporary American English

SEARCH
FREQUENCY
CONTEXT
OVERVIEW

(SHUFFLE)
ENTRIES: 18 TEXTS
LIMITS: NONE
SORTING: YEAR
GENRE

CLICK FOR MORE CONTEXT
SAVE
TRANSLATE
ANALYZE
HELP

1	2019	TV	Black Lightning	your dad. Don't tell him. He's gon na burst a blood vessel. Jen... Hey, Dad. Yeah, I know you're calling because
2	2014	FIC	Bk:WouldntItBeDeadly	! " # " If you shout any louder, you'll burst a blood vessel. " # " What in heaven's name is that woman doing? I
3	2012	WEB	amazon.com	some of his most memorable quotes (whether you applaud them or burst a blood vessel in fits of Trotskyite rage). # In any case, do not stereotype
4	2012	BLOG	towleroad.com	the Democrats TWICE. (Did Rush Limbaugh have a coronary or burst a blood vessel today?) # Posted by: Dback Nov 7, 2012 8:14:37 PM #
5	2012	BLOG	...dsright.blogspot.com	. Romney ignored it. I was screaming! And Obama nearly burst a blood vessel! He wanted it! HE CRAVED THE ATTACK about Benghazi so he could turn
6	2010	TV	Dance Academy	anyway. If my brother knew you brought this, he would burst a blood vessel. Is he always so uptight? Only now he's got a girlfriend.
7	2006	TV	Nip/Tuck	so it can't recirculate. You're lucky you didn't burst a blood vessel. Why didn't you ask your wife to help? Let her see me
8	2005	TV	The West Wing	he was a bit obsessed with it. I thought you'd burst a blood vessel trying to talk him off it. Got ta be nice with lobbyists from over-subsidized
9	2003	FIC	FantasySciFi	better than Li, anyway. The Chinese tweak's going to burst a blood vessel out when he figures out the case went south on him. " " Hard
10	1998	FIC	Mov:GodsMonsters	called him? He laughed. He laughed so hard he practically burst a blood vessel. Said it was a good lesson for me. Not to try to fill
11	1997	MOV	Breast Men	How is it? Is it good? I think I just burst a blood vessel. Look, you missed some. You'll have to try it again.
12	1997	TV	Daria	camera, Daria. Remember what the doctor said last time you burst a blood vessel? Yeah, he said it would be two hundred dollars. Before that.
13	1996	FIC	SouthernRev	(rocks flying, presumably, windows shattering), until she burst a blood vessel in her throat and bled to death. Family tradition does not record whether Mr.
14	1996	FIC	Heritage	defensive and starts apologizing, but by then Grandpa is ready to burst a blood vessel. I don't hear much of the squabbles because I live in the dorm
15	1992	SPOK	CNN_Sonya	and, do you know someone who's getting mad enough to burst a blood vessel? Well, he or she might be a likely candidate for a heart attack
16	1992	MOV	Red Dwarf	left, right! Try and relax! You're gon na burst a blood vessel! Shut up, you maggot! Do you understand? Do you understand!
17	1991	MOV	The Doctor	, is that blood? You know what? I must have burst a blood vessel trying not to laugh. Jack, I have blood on my dress. My
18	1990	FIC	Triquarterly	beautiful Prince gambled on his wedding night) the beautiful Prince Renzi burst a blood vessel in his inner ear and succumbed (the newspapers' word for it).

Figure 1: “burst a blood vessel” in COCA

In COCA, we have 18 results with only 6 occurrences using the idiom in a non-metaphorical sense and 12 examples with metaphorical usage meaning anger and other related feelings. There are terms present to differentiate between the literal and metaphorical usage of "burst a blood vessel", to enhance its significance. The metaphorical category contains terms such as “relax”, “rage”, and “uptight”, which emphasize how the expression is employed to communicate feelings of anger and fury. The examples also include various verbs such as "shut up," "shout," "scream," "relax," and "apologize," along with adjectives like "hard," "loud," and "mad." Lastly, there's an instance featuring the verb "laugh" in example b), 10 in Figure 1 above: “He laughed. He laughed so hard he practically burst a blood vessel”, which ironically highlights the uncomfortable feeling of surprise over something that nearly brings about shock and anger. This raises the question: can laughter also cause a blood vessel to burst? Conversely, the non-metaphorical category comprises terms such as “doctor”, “death”, and “died”, which directly pertain to the concrete meaning of a physical occurrence of a bursting blood vessel.

The common metaphorical grounding of the primary emotional metaphor ANGER IS THE HEAT OF A FLUID IN A CONTAINER, which could also give rise to conceptual variants such as ANGER IS AN INTERNAL PRESSURE OR A HOT LIQUID IN A CONTAINER, seems here confirmed, and yet diverse meaning nuances may emerge from a cross-linguistic comparison. The analysis continues, focusing on the exploration of the idiomatic expression in the Web.

Moving to the English Web corpus (enTenTen2021), which is 61,585,997,113 tokens or words in size, fifty instances were selected for the analysis using the GDEX sorting, out of the total of 541. To help the identification of metaphorical vs. non-metaphorical usage, keywords were identified in the relative co-text, therefore eventually functioning as foci of the metaphor in the cases interested by metaphorical transposition, with respect to those cases where instead the meaning seemingly stuck to a more literal reference.

Only eighteen sentences out of fifty featured a literal usage of the expression. These sentences incorporate body parts to highlight the connection between the idiom and the body with a direct physiological reference (“burst a blood vessel” goes with e.g. “in... leg”, “in... brain”, “in... eye”, “in... neck*”,¹⁰ “bleed”, “died”, “bloodshot”, “advanced cancer”, “crying blood”, “and the leg never healed”, “veins in your eyes”, “and cause swelling of the ear flap”, “marks on his body”, “an accident”, “bled from the nose and mouth”, “heart attack”, “and died before medical aid arrived”).

In contrast, metaphorical phrases can be seen in the remaining sample of thirty-two out of fifty, with several instances that are idiomatically conveying anger and other related feelings, also excitement in a few cases. For instance, c) “concentrating so hard... like he’s going to burst a blood vessel”, d) “blushing so hard he was afraid to burst a blood vessel, he wiped a tear”, or e) “he became so excited that he burst a blood vessel”. In these cases, the attribution is difficult because the emotional displacement is somewhere else in the sentence, and the (literal) physical bursting of the vessel is evoked metaphorically as a potential outcome, so to say, with a persuasive impulse, to render the level of concentration in the first of the cases, of blushing in the second, and of excitement in the third (concentration is embodied as pressure in the head, blushing and excitement as an increase in blood flow). In the most evident

¹⁰ The “neck” is ambiguous as a bodily part as it is the one typically going with the idiomatic expression “bursting a blood vessel” imaginatively meaning anger.

cases, instead, the idiom is used directly to express anger, like in: f) “I thought he was going to burst a blood vessel when I said that to him”. Otherwise, the bursting is evoked as the physical reaction associated with anger, which gets also explicitly expressed in the sentence, like in: g) “I thought the major would burst a blood vessel. His face got red, his hands clenched, and he was trembling with anger.” Whether used to directly express anger or to evoke the potential embodied reaction out of other emotional experiences, the indices from the second group do not refer to any actually happening symptom that the body displays physically by having an outburst of a blood vessel for real, instead we have an emotional explosion, where most of the cases are related to anger and nervousness, and also strangely connected to excitement, fear, and embarrassment in a few examples.

The main question revolves around how we interpret the conceptual metaphor in the phrase “burst a blood vessel”: ANGER IS HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER (vessel). In English, the stress is on the effect in the container, a bodily part like the vessel, of the raising temperature and velocity of blood running in it, which is ‘anger’ physically rendered in the idiom with the corresponding experiential basis and effect in the body of this emotion itself. The effectiveness of the expression in English is also given by the rendering of the effect as if the damage was already done. Representing the emotional state as a fluid or a chemical substance capable of exploding, how do we linguistically and conceptually connect the physical act of a blood vessel bursting to the outburst of anger? If blood flows in vessels, is it that anger and rage also run, spill over, or overflow in some way? Does the reference to “burst a blood vessel” in discourse also help enact feelings of anger in the interlocutor, or does it elicit a different emotional response, or is it almost neutral, given the conventionality of the expression?

4.2 French

Moving to the French language domain, reference is made to the FrTenTen23, also known as the French Web Corpus, consisting of a total of 23,8 billion words. Of course the chosen idiom is not the only possibility to express anger in French. Others are, for instance: “avoir le sang qui monte au visage” (having blood rushing to the face), and “voir rouge” (seeing red), and/or serrer les poings (to clench one’s fist), as well as “entrer dans une colère noire” (to enter in a black anger), and finally “piquer un fard”, similar to our chosen one but meaning “turning red”, or “blushing” out of not just anger but also

embarrassment. The expression “*piquer un coup de sang*” has been identified by both dictionary and context comparison as the closest, both semantically and in terms of emotional reference (anger), to the idiom in English. Moreover, like the English one, it can bear both a literal and a metaphorical meaning. Fifty-eight occurrences were found and analyzed consistently. Only two instances had the literal meaning of experiencing a blood stroke, while all other sentences metaphorically portrayed anger.

From this analysis, despite the limits of the corpus scope vs. French language as a whole, we can observe that when used literally, the term “*coup de sang*” can refer to an “*attaque cérébrale*” (stroke), or apoplexy, and other variations, depending on the context of usage, however valid for a minority of the cases. The idiomatic expression is employed metaphorically in French to signify a kind of anger that is sudden, explosive, and impetuous (like the English idiom “burst a blood vessel”). Moreover, it expresses feelings of anger across various types of online content, including news websites and fiction, where it appears as inherently negatively connotated, since the verb “*piquer*”¹¹ is frequently used in an unpleasant context to imply something that penetrates like a wasp sting, inflicting a sting that can also be painful. Nevertheless, the idiom indicates that the act of pricking and stinging originates from an ‘external stimulus’ and agent, often coinciding with the subject, in contrast to the English bursting, which can result from an internal force in the case of bursting blood vessels out of the rising temperature of the blood as a metaphorical rendering.

The phrase “*piquer un coup de sang*” is not analogously framed as to “burst a blood vessel,” grounded on the primary metaphor of anger as a hot liquid in a container. The French term “*un coup*”¹² as defined by the Cambridge French English dictionary, refers to the action of “*frapper qqn, qqch*”, suggesting notions of striking, stabbing, or punching. When we consider the verb “*piquer*” and the noun “*un coup*” connected to “*sang*,” meaning “blood,” there are two significant interpretations we can derive. The first is that a liquid, blood within the body, is suddenly sprouted out (of a vessel) as a result of a punch, hit, or even as a prick of a needle/thorn. The second consideration is that an external stimulus (a provocation) prompts the body to experience a stroke or a rush of blood, as suggested by the verb “*piquer*,” meaning “to sting”. This implies that blood cannot be affected solely from within the body. However, this analysis should not be viewed through a breakdown of words

¹¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/french-english/piquer> [last access on 30/11/2024].

¹² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/french-english/coup> [last access on 30/11/2024].

within the idiom, but rather by examining the broader linguistic constructions of the phrase.

We can find contextual indices that help understand the meaning of the idiomatic expression “*piquer un coup de sang*” and see how it conceptualizes anger. The following examples, which have been translated into English, include co-textual expressions that enhance the identification of the metaphorical sense. In the first example a) below, the immediacy and the strength of the emotional reaction evoked metaphorically by the idiomatic phrase “*pique un coup de sang*” is reinforced by the subsequent overstatement “*elle est capable de tout*”:

- a) “Quand t-elle *pique un coup de sang*, elle est capable de tout”.
 “When she **strikes a blow of blood* [lit. translation]¹³, she is capable of everything”
 “When she *bursts a blood vessel*, she is capable of everything”

The idiomatic specificity in French is highlighted in this first example a) by the literal translation in contrast with the idiomatic translation in English. Accordingly, further evidence is provided in the upcoming examples: b) “Je pique un coup de sang! je n'en peux plus! je sature!” ([*I stroke a blow of blood] I burst a blood vessel! I can't take it anymore! I am saturated!). The action of bursting a blood vessel is here rendered differently, with more emphasis on the agency, the subject of “*piquer*”, and the abrupt velocity of the outburst of the blood: “*coup de sang*”, literally referring to a sudden and unexpected stroke of blood, meaning sudden rage. Although the personal agency of the act is structurally expressed in French, the act is not depicted as deliberate, as evident from this example: c) “Elle a piqué un coup de sang, a-t-on murmuré, comme pour l'excuser” ([*She stroke a blow of blood] She burst a blood vessel, somebody whispered, as if to excuse her). The negative evaluation of rage and, above all, loss of control emerges from the justification provided by another participant in the reported episode. Otherwise the expression can also refer to sudden decision and action, following the stroke, as in this other example: d) “Frank Cary pique un coup de sang et décide de

¹³ As evident from the first example mentioned for French, Italian and Arabic, when translating the examples from languages other than English, a literal translation of the source has been provided at first, the asterisk indicating it would not be adequate for an idiomatic translation, which follows, to present an idiomatic analogy in the target language.

s'occuper directement du problème” ([*Frank stroke a blow of blood] Frank burst a blood vessel and decided to handle the problem personally).

The idiomatic expression of anger starts to manifest degrees of variation when moving across different languages and cultures. The cultural combination of elements represents the embodiment of wrath and anger, with distinct sociocultural interpretations. In French it can be described using expressions such as “*piquer un coup de sang*”, the most similar to “burst a blood vessel”. Here the metaphorical grounding gets slightly changed in source depiction as follows. The stress in the French idiom seems more to be on the effect of the outburst and on the agent, the subject of anger. It is like if it were almost the subject and agent of the feeling to cause, by the inadvertent action sustained by the verb “*piquer*”, the outburst of their own blood, rendered here with the highly rapid and unexpected move (“*coup*”). ANGER IS (letting) HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER (outburst): ANGER IS (the outburst of) HOT LIQUID IN A CONTAINER. The effectiveness of the French variant seems to be related to the velocity of the unpredictable act, whose subject is, whether inadvertently, and maybe unconsciously, the agent.

4.3 Italian

Searching the idiomatic Italian expression “... si chiude la vena” in the Italian Web (itTenTen20), consisting of 14,514,566,714 tokens, 113 occurrences can be found with most of the hits from news and blogs websites. Less frequent but still used is the variant “... si gonfia la vena” occurring 7 times. Among the first 50 examples we selected as most representative of the 113 occurrences of the first variant, two of them resulted as ambiguous at first sight, but after careful examination, even the two ambiguous cases appeared to be metaphorical, as all metaphorical are the seven occurrences of the second Italian variant.

Both expressions use the reflexive form of the verb “*chiudere/gonfiare*”, the indirect object omitted at the beginning of the search phrases consisting in the subject of the action where the agency is attributed to their own body, more specifically, the veins. The reflexive forms “... si chiude la vena” and “... si gonfia la vena” literally mean “*the vein closes/swells... to me/him/her/themselves” / “my/his/her/their vein closes/swells”. Another alternative could have been the expression “... parte un embolo” (“getting a blood clot”). Although bearing both a literal and metaphorical meaning in Italian, where it is also used to convey anger, this expression has not been selected for an Italian counterpart to the English “burst a blood vessel” as it

appears to be lexically more distant and generic in meaning than the chosen Italian idioms: “... si chiude la vena” and “... si gonfia la vena”.

To judge from the examples, a larger emotional resonance seems to be found in correspondence with the most frequent expression, where the emotion is anger but can also be any other emotional reaction implying loss of control, like in:

- a) “È ubriaca e *le si chiude la vena*, non ha più filtri”

She is drunk and **her vein closes* [lit. translation], she no longer has any filter.

She is drunk and *has burst a blood vessel*, she acts without any restraints.

Even though the term is associated with anger and rage, we encounter instances that indicate an emotional disconnection where the speaker is unable to comprehend their feelings and appears to be stuck or emotionally blocked, like, for example, in the following instance: b) “Ammetto che quando si parla di Gilles mi si chiude la vena, non sono obiettivo.” (I admit that when people talk about Gilles [**my vein closes*] I burst a blood vessel, I am not objective.)

As far as emotions are concerned, the Italian version of the idiom “... si chiude la vena” seems to suggest not just anger but the idea of getting caught by a state where rationality does not command, and the subject is led to act on impulse, like is evident in the following two examples: c) “le si chiude la vena e non capisce più nulla.” (**Her vein closes*) She bursts a blood vessel and she no longer understands anything); d) “Se il sangue ti va subito alla testa o, come dico io, ti si chiude la vena molto facilmente e ti fai prendere dall'impulsività e dall'aggressività, senza valutare l'entità vera dei fatti o del "nemico" rischi di sfasciarti la testa contro il muro.” (If blood promptly rushes to your head, or, as I say, [**your vein closes very easily*] you very easily burst a blood vessel and you are taken by impulsivity and aggressiveness, without evaluating the true extent of the facts or of the “enemy”, you risk smashing your head against the wall.)

The less frequent “si gonfia la vena” seems to be more specifically related to anger: e) “A volte qualcuno la spara talmente grossa che ti si gonfia la vena e via, boom, in un battibaleno la vostra lunga amicizia virtuale termina. “Eppure fino a ieri andava tutto bene.” (Sometimes somebody shoots it so well that [**your vein swells*] you burst a blood vessel and that's it, in a flash your long virtual friendship ends). In any case, the feature of anger that gets stressed in both cases is the uncontrollable feature, if anything else corresponding to the

common metaphorical grounding of the primary conceptual metaphor of anger as a hot liquid in a container, which, we could say, when the temperature gets really high, can become like a volcano, erupting without control.

The metaphorical grounding is similar to the English case, with the difference that in English the action is picked as if the damage was already done, with an emphasis on the effect of the experiential basis: the vessel has already burst, whereas in Italian the embodied metaphorical action is taken at the moment of the potential rupture. In fact, the closing or swelling of the vein are nothing but the preliminary phases, the stage prior to bursting. It is like if the same experiential gestalt has been taken from different angles, or, if you like, at slightly different shots of the scene in movement. ANGER IS (the pressure of) HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER, generated by either the closure of the container itself (in the case of “... si chiude la vena”) or presumably by an increase in the amount of liquid/blood flowing at higher velocity within the same container, causing it to swell and indicating the possibility of its rupture. The stress is here on the potential rather than on the effect, the effectiveness of the Italian rendering given by the suspense intrinsic in the expression, suggesting an ‘almost happening’ damage, rather than by the image rendering of the ‘already happened’ damage as it is in English. Can this be related to a more insistent focus on the pragmatic consequences, effects, and action in the Anglo-culture and relative language and structure, as pragmatic, action-based, and effect-oriented (Wierzbicka 2003: 447-448), with respect to the more contemplative, thought-oriented, and process-based Italian one? The hypothesis can be traced here on the ground of cross-linguistic studies and also referring to the philosophical traditions of reference, but a wider search would be needed to provide us with a satisfactory answer.

4.4 Arabic

The last idiomatic expression we explore in Sketch Engine is: “ثار الدم في عروق...” (*thāra al-dām fī ‘urūq*) from Arabic Web 2024 (arTenTen24), the most recent version of the arTenTen corpus, consisting in 6.5 billion words. The results have shown 18 occurrences of the idiom, and we are considering them all (see Figure 2 below). The expression means that “blood (has) burst in the vessels”.

Interestingly, in Arabic there are other expressions that start with ثار الدم (*thāra al-dām*) which means “blood (has) burst”, and that do not only refer to vessels alone, but also to blood bursting “in” – في (*fī*) – body; face, head, chest. Meanwhile, the first verbal phrase consists of the verb that is ثار (*thāra*) meaning:

arise, rise, be enraged and rebel against or be deeply stirred, and *الدم* (*al-dām*), which means blood.¹⁴ All the occurrences seem to metaphorically depict anger by means of an eruption through blood bursting *in* the body, and none appears to be literal in meaning.

CONCORDANCE Arabic Web 2024 (arTenTen24)

simple 18 less than 0.01 • 2.4e-7 Sort GDEX

Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context	GDEX score
1 wikipedia.org	: <i>وَتَظَرُّ عَمْرُو بْنُ هَنْدٍ إِلَى</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	وَجْهِهِ وَالْقَوْمِ يَشْرِبُونَ الْخَمْرَ. <i><s></s></i>	0.443
2 pal-stu.com	عُروقه و النفث إصر سليمان بن عبد الملك الذي كان واحدا م	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i><s></s></i> و <i><s></s></i> ارتعد ارتعاده شديدة	0.385
3 lakii.com	<i><s></s></i> عروقه ويغضب. <i><s></s></i> وقد يشتد غضبه. <i><s></s></i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	لذلك عندما يراها <i><s></s></i>	0.369
4 nadyalfikr.com	خواطري و تشتعل أحاسيسي .. <i><s></s></i> عروقي مطالباً إياي بالخروج و الإسراع بياقة قبل حرقاة على و	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i><s></s></i> عروقي مطالباً إياي بالخروج و الإسراع بياقة قبل حرقاة على و	0.349
5 3nazh.net	ها : لو سمحت لا ترأسليني ولا تتصلي بي " عندها <i><s></s></i> عروقي كله <i><s></s></i> فلو كان أمامي لما بقي حيا <i><s></s></i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i><s></s></i> عروقي كله <i><s></s></i> فلو كان أمامي لما بقي حيا <i><s></s></i>	0.337
6 graaam.com	ثم تكلموا عن الوحدة .. <i><s></s></i> عروقي ولولا انه شيخ ضرير لانتقمتم منه (خساً هو ومن خلفه	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i><s></s></i> عروقي ولولا انه شيخ ضرير لانتقمتم منه (خساً هو ومن خلفه	0.318
7 sandroses.com	ن الحق بطريقة خاطئة. <i><s></s></i> ممارسة التدريب: تذكر كلما	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i><s></s></i> ممارسة التدريب: تذكر كلما	0.254
8 alkalema.net	ة ركيكة: - سالاك (وهي شئمة بالتركية تعني غبي). <i><s></s></i> عروقي راس الشيخ وبدأ قلبه يخفق بسرعة جنونية ولكنه تمكن أن ي	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i><s></s></i> عروقي راس الشيخ وبدأ قلبه يخفق بسرعة جنونية ولكنه تمكن أن ي	0.174
9 bizturkmeniz.co...	ث التنظيم الإرهابي فيديو حرق الطيار الأردني معاذ الكساسبة <i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقي، واتخذت قرارى هذه المرة باختراق موقع التنظيم، وإعا	0.093
10 r4fm.ps	بيه وبالارده مهما كان عرضه يرى زوجته شبه عاربه مع رجل ولا <i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقه اللهم استر علينا بالدنيا والاخره <i><s></s></i> حسبي الله على	0
11 66n.com	قيقتها وبعد شهر علمت أن أحد أصدقائي سوف يتزوجها وهنا <i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقي وانتابني غيظ شديد وجافاني النوم لعدة ايام وقررت ان	0
12 ahm1.com	، وانا في احدى مواقع الدردشه دخلت بنت ورفعت علم امريكا <i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقي ودخلت انا واياها في نقاش طويل وسب وتكفير وتخو	0
13 hmsaat.com	الولد بكرته ومرتي ما كذبت خبر مدت يدها بتلقطه ساعتها انا <i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقي لا أبوها لا أبو العلاج وأنط في ذاك الولد وأقول له احتره	0
14 qassimy.com	في الدين دخلت وقررت كامل الخبر ولم اترك منه حرفا وبصراحة <i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>ثَارَ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقي حقا على من تنكروا لبلد شقيق واكثر من شقيق من ا	0
15 sauress.com	التي كان يشدو بها لبلل الجنوب الصداح فكل من سمع اغنية <i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i> جسمه ويزداد الحماس في قلبه للتحرير والاستقلال واستعادة	0
16 yemeress.com	لية في سبناه ما جعل عبدالناصر ونائبه غير الكفو المشير عامر <i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i> عروقهما ويقعان في الحفرة التي خُفرت لهما ويطلبان بالجلء	0
17 annaharkw.com	ن و قلبي لك حاطر أجيك بلحمي وصفري و اخلي العقل يتطاير <i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i>	<i>يُثَوِّرُ الدَّمُ فِي</i> صدري وضغطي يرتفع طائر أجيك واسلم بأمرى وحي لك أكبي	0
18 chaatomam.com				0

Rows per page: 20 1-18 of 18 < 1 / 1 >

Figure 2: *thāra al-dām fī* (ثار الدم في) from Arabic Web 2024

Also in the previously mentioned idioms in other languages the meaning entails a rapidity or hasty action that happens suddenly as the verb mentioned is also used with argument, volcanos eruption, and rage. In Arabic, to clearly distinguish its metaphorical usage is the literal meaning of the verbal part of the idiom that is arise, rebel against and that is not commonly used in a medical way referring to a stroke or an apoplexy. The mapping of the verb “*thāra*” with anger is already referring to anger by means of a volcano that can erupt anytime. Especially with words and phrases such as: “*fawra*” (فورة)¹⁵ that means “boom”, “flare”, “outburst”, a word in Arabic used also to refer to “heat” and “anger”, “*lam yastaṭiʿ an yusayṭir*” (لم يستطع ان يسيطر), which means “he could not control”, “*fa infaḡara*” (فانفجر), meaning “then he exploded”, “*yakhfiq qalbuhu bisurʿa junūniyya*”, “his heart beats so high”, “و يرتفع ضغطي”

¹⁴ <https://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/> [last access on 30/11/2024].

¹⁵ In English - Translation and Meaning in English Arabic Dictionary of All terms Page 1 [last access on 30/11/2024].

(*wa yartafi‘u dagħṭī*), meaning that “my blood pressure goes high” in a metaphoric sense. In the last sentence, the idiom is also used metaphorically to express how enthusiastic the speaker is in expressing his love; love, not rage, is what caused the blood in the vessels to burst.

To specify how the idiom refers to different pronouns, we refer to the last word عروقه (*‘urūqih*) meaning “his vessels”. The “H” at the end of the word عروقه (*‘urūqih*) refers to the pronoun “He” and it is found in 4 examples; we also have different parts of the body such as “his face” وجهه (*wajhih*), جسمه (*jismih*) “his body”, صدري (*ṣadri*) “my chest”, which are all mentioned only one time, in addition to the word عروقي (*‘urūqī*) “my vessels”, that is mentioned seven times.

Making reference to specific examples picked from Figure 2 above, translated here in English, we observe an expansion of the metaphorical container from the vessels to other bodily parts, as well as an increase of intensity of the expressed emotional experience, visible in the idiomatic expressions as such as well as in the co-textual elements in the chosen sentences. Example 3)¹⁶ is more similar to English:

عندما يراها يثور الدم في عروقه و يغضب (*‘ndama yaraha yathuru dām fi ‘uruqih wa yaghdab*)

“So when he sees her, *blood erupts in his vessels* [lit. translation] and he gets angry”

“So when he sees her, *he bursts a blood vessel* and he gets angry”

In fact, here the container corresponds to the vessels and the emotional reference is anger. Then we shift to example 4), where the extension of the container is visible in the co-text following the idiom usage: يثور الدم في عروقي مطالبا (*yathūru al-dāmu fī ‘urūqī muṭālīban iyyāya bi al-khurūj wa al-isrā ‘ bi baqati qobāl ḥarīqihā ‘ala wajantīyhā wa yadīyhā wa qadamīhā*) “*Blood erupts in my vessels*, asking me to get out and hurry up with a bunch of burning kisses on her cheeks, hands, and feet”. Moreover, the emotional reference of the idiom here seems not to be restricted

¹⁶ As for the other languages other than English, the first example mentioned shows evidence of the convention followed: the literal translation of the idiomatic expression has been provided first, followed by an idiomatic translation. As for Arabic, the rest of the examples mentioned in reference to Figure 2 are presented with a literal translation in English to highlight the expansion of the metaphorical container, which would have been lost with an idiomatic translation adapted to the target language.

to anger but to compulsion in general, which might not be maintained by an idiomatic translation in English. In examples 5) and 9) the extension is evident in the idiomatic expression itself, interesting the whole body and the head, respectively. In 5) عندها ثار الدم في جسدي كله (*indaha thāra al dāmu fī jāsadi kūllihī*) “Then *blood erupted all over my body*” the idiomatic extension to the whole body is meant to express an extreme state of anger, whose intensity is rendered afterwards by the speaker hypothetically envisaging that it could lead him to physical violence: فلو كان أمامي لما بقي حيا (falaw kāna amamī lāma baqiyā hayān) “so if he was in front of me, he would not stay alive”]. Similarly, intense anger is conveyed when the idiomatic embodiment refers to the head: 9) ثار الدم في رأس الشيخ وبدأ قلبه يخفق بسرعة جنونية (*thāra al-dām fī ra’s al-shaykh wa bāda’ a qalbuhi yakhfiq bi-sur’a junūniyya*) “The blood erupted in the head of the Sheikh and his heart began to beat at a crazy speed”.

The metaphorical grounding of ANGER IS A HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER (vessels, face, chest, body) seems to get expanded in the Arabic rendering as the container extends potentially to the body as a whole. Is this extension relatable to a more emphatic and enthusiastic expression, as well as perception of anger and emotions in general at the embodied cognition level in Arabic? In other words, could this extension reflect a cultural tendency to emphasize and embody emotions more vividly in Arabic? And if so, could this emotional expression tendency also have an impact on the culturally shared tendency in emotional perception?

5. Discussion of results

Metaphorical language helps develop communication in everyday life. It eases comprehending abstract ideas and representing them in a concrete way: we employ figurative language to make abstract thinking more concrete (Beck (1983); Lakoff & Johnson (2003[1980]); Lakoff & Turner (1989). The degree of connection between the concrete and abstract meanings varies depending on the idiomatic expression. For instance, when examining the English idiom "burst a blood vessel," the concrete and abstract meanings are not directly related. The act of bursting blood in a vessel is a physical, concrete operation, while associating it with anger, which is generally understood as high temperature or a liquid in a container, in a linguistic representation of another domain is a creative effort to translate the abstract sense into a tangible one.

This creative effort becomes automatic given the conventionality of idiomatic expressions in languages.

The French, Italian, and Arabic language variations all incorporate blood as a fluid in the vessels, but with some distinctions. In French, the pressure of a fluid in a vessel is only cognitively implied; instead, a sudden and painful sting or a blow of blood is emphasized, sometimes related to the subject and agent of the (involuntary) action that cannot but indirectly be framed as a hot liquid in a vessel prone to bursting, which is characteristic of the English idiom. In a similar way, the Arabic language depicts the body, as suggested by the verb “thara,” as a volcano, with blood flowing like lava, and when anger is added to that volcano, it erupts, thus connecting it to the well-known concept of a hot liquid in a container. In contrast, in Italian the underlined aspect of the frame is on the constriction, impediment, resulting from too much anger’s pressure, as if anger constricts or impedes the flow of blood (*si chiude, si gonfia*). This metaphorical realization can also be related to the primary metaphor but insists on the potential rather than on the effect as it is in English. This makes us consider the conception of anger not as an eruption, an explosion, or a sharp pain, but rather as a blockage or obstruction that hinders the normal flow of blood in the body. At first sight, compared to the other three languages, this can be regarded as reducing anger to a slight annoyance rather than strong anger. And yet, it is only a different perspective of observation of the same motivational basis of the primary metaphor of reference. In fact, in some contextual settings, both the Italian and the French idioms mentioned above may denote a strong emotion of anger as discussed in some examples.

Cognitively speaking, the four idioms have resulted as relatable to a common metaphorical grounding, though with slight variations. Summarizing our results, as for the English “burst a blood vessel”: ANGER IS HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER (vessel). The stress is on the effect in the container (a bodily part like the vessel) of the raising temperature and the velocity of the blood running in it, which is ‘anger’ physically rendered in the idiom. The effectiveness of the expression in English is also given by the rendering of the effect as if the damage was already done. In the French “*piquer un coup de sang*”, the stress seems more to be on the effect of the outburst and on the agent, the subject of anger. It seems like it was almost the subject and agent of the feeling who, by the inadvertent action sustained by the verb “*piquer*”, causes the outburst of their own blood, rendered here with the highly rapid and unexpected move (“*coup*”). ANGER IS (letting) HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER (outburst): ANGER IS (the outburst of) HOT

LIQUID IN A CONTAINER. The effectiveness of the French variant seems to be related to the velocity of the unpredictable act, whose subject is, whether inadvertently, and maybe unconsciously, the agent. In the Italian "...si chiude/gonfia la vena", the common metaphorical grounding is developed similarly to the English case, with the difference that in Italian the embodied metaphorical action is taken at the moment of the potential rupture. ANGER IS (the pressure of) HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER, generated by either the closure of the container itself (in the case of "... si chiude la vena") or presumably by an increase in the amount of liquid/blood flowing at higher velocity within the same container, causing it to swell and leading to its potential rupture. The stress is here on the potential rather than on the effect, the effectiveness of the Italian rendering given by the suspense intrinsic in the expression, suggesting an 'almost happening' damage, rather than by the image rendering of the 'already happened' damage as it is in English. Whether this can be related to a more insistent focus on the pragmatic consequences, effects, and action in the Anglo-culture and relative language and structure, as pragmatic, action-based, and effect-oriented, with respect to the more contemplative, thought-oriented, and process-based Italian one, opens up further future investigation. The metaphorical grounding seems to be expanded in the Arabic rendering as the container extends potentially to the body as a whole. Also, the movement is frequently empowered by the intensity of an eruption: ANGER IS (the eruption of) A HOT LIQUID (blood) IN A CONTAINER (vessels, face, chest, body). The effectiveness of the Arabic rendering seems to lie in the extension and intensity of the expression, which in turn might be related to the importance of demonstrating emotions in the Arabic language, which involves not only anger, but also sadness, happiness, and others. Whether this extension and augmented intensity is relatable to a more emphatic and enthusiastic expression, as well as perception of anger and emotions in general at the embodied cognition level in Arabic, is under question. Similarly, among the most challenging raising issues beyond the present case study is whether the emotional expression tendency can also have an impact on the culturally and linguistically shared tendency in emotional perception.

6. Conclusions and persuasion sustainability perspectives

All the mentioned idioms start with a verb phrase such as "burst," "piquer," "si chiude," and "انفجر," both syntactically and semantically equivalent in different

ways. They conceptualize anger by associating the concrete, embodied experience of blood bursting in the vessels with the feeling of anger. This feeling is, after all, related to the physiological manifestation in the body, which the idioms are rendering, gaining their meaningful figurative sense. When we feel anger, the blood pressure in the body raises, giving rise to physical manifestation including, for instance, the change in color of the face.

In accordance with the mainstream literature mentioned, anger is portrayed as a fluid and hot substance that flows in the body like blood, and as something that can outburst out of a rupture of the container (English, Arabic), or with the agency of the subject (French), or a physical pressure or closure of the container in which it flows (Italian), or sometimes like a chemical reaction prone to explode (Arabic).

Additionally to raising language awareness, the variations found at the level of their conceptual grounding also lead to hypotheses regarding their persuasive effectiveness. The rendering of the effect as if the damage was already done stands for the English variant. The effectiveness of the French variant seems to be related to the velocity of the unpredictable act, whose subject is, whether inadvertently, and maybe unconsciously, the agent. The effectiveness of the Italian rendering might be attributable to the suspense intrinsic in the expression, suggesting an ‘almost happening’ damage, rather than by the image rendering of the ‘already happened’ damage as in English. The effectiveness of the Arabic version seems to be found in the extension and intensity of the expression, which in turn might be related to the importance of demonstrating emotions in general in Arabic.

The different positioning of the presumed persuasive effectiveness of these expressions might in turn be related to wider cognitive and philosophical attitudes of the language ‘spheres’ they belong to, for instance, the pragmatic, action-based, and effect-oriented feature of the ‘Anglosphere’, or the more intimate, psychoanalytic orientation of the ‘French-sphere’; the more contemplative, thought-oriented, and process-based ‘Italian-sphere’, and the highly expressive and emotionally demonstrative ‘Arab-sphere’. Whether tentative and far from being pretentious of any truth value, these further meta-analytical hypotheses or others similar to these that the interlocutor may create out of their experience of the interaction with different linguistic and cultural domains may provide guidelines for improving mutual understanding as well as promoting further sustainability in persuasion, particularly when enacted within multicultural and cross-linguistic situations and contexts.

From this standpoint, a ‘contrastive idiomaticity’ perspective can be of help also to orient persuasion management towards enhanced sustainability in complex contexts of strategic as well as everyday communication within an increasingly interconnecting world, by providing awareness lenses from which to observe and interact across and within different horizons not necessarily sharing common cultural and linguistic grounds.

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Jeet Thayil in conversation with Esterino Adami

Esterino Adami
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Jeet Thayil is a prolific Indian writer, who has published extensively, moving across different genres and styles, and working with poetry, fiction, and music. He was educated at Island School (Hong Kong), Wilson College (Mumbai), and also obtained a Master of Fine Arts from Sarah Lawrence College (New York). His verses have appeared in the *Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry* (2015), and as a poet he has written six collections of lyrics: *Gemini* (1992), *Apocalypso* (1997), *English* (2004), *These Errors are Correct* (2008), which was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, *Collected Poems* (2015) and *I'll Have it Here* (2024). Thayil has also edited several anthologies such as *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008) and *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets* (2022), as well as a collection of essays entitled *Divided Time: India and the End of Diaspora* (2006). He is the author of five novels: *Narcopolis* (2011), shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and The Hindu Literary Prize, and winner of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017), *Low* (2019), *Names of the Women* (2021) and *Melanin*, forthcoming this year. Thayil is a musician, a songwriter and a guitarist, and has written a libretto entitled *Babur in London* for the Opera Group. He has also worked as a journalist in India, in the USA and in Hong Kong. This interview was conducted by email in August 2024: we would like to thank Jeet Thayil for his kind and generous participation.

Hello Jeet, it is a great pleasure for us to be in touch with you and hear your opinion on a range of topics. Since this special issue is devoted to the study of the idea of style across various disciplines, I'd like to ask you, first of all, what style is for you, also considering that you have experimented with a series of creative fields and genres, from literature and poetry to music. Is there a univocal definition of

style? Or can we say that style is a sort of umbrella term? And then, how do writers and artists approach style?

Thanks, Esterino, for your questions. It's a pleasure to be in conversation with you. I started writing poetry and prose around the same time I started to play music, at the age of fourteen. Which means I've been at it now for fifty years. In those decades my practice has rarely been interrupted by theory, so I look forward to considering the theoretical side of the coin.

Let me start by saying that style is more than an umbrella term. I think 'style' is a variant of 'voice', which might be the most elusive and irreplaceable of the components that make up a work of art. It applies across genres. For instance, it's possible to recognize John Coltrane's style even if his improvisation were tabulated and played on a different instrument, say a piano or a guitar. The particular way in which a cascade of notes occurs is something we call Coltranean. Similarly, there are other artists whose style we recognize if we undergo a blind test. The advent of AI is proof, if any were needed, that style is something in the DNA, something irreplaceable. You can prompt AI to write in the style of a poet, or a novelist, but the result is either embarrassing or oddly misbegotten. It is never satisfactory, at least not yet. For artists who work across genres it can be a liberation to imagine that style will survive whatever the formal expectations placed upon it, whatever the mechanics of transition from one form to another. Which leads me to the conclusion that style, far from being a mere umbrella term or a portmanteau expression, is all that remains of us. Even if it's tenuous, it is instantly recognizable. Unlike the role of poetry in Frost's well-known aphorism, style is the thing that is not lost in translation.

A personal question: we know that you were born in Kerala, that you come from a Syrian Christian family, and that you were educated in Jesuit schools in India, Hong Kong and the USA. How do all these phases of your life impact on and cohabit in your identity?

I was educated at Jesuit and Catholic schools until the age of about sixteen, St. Xavier's in Bombay, St. Joseph's in Hong Kong, and St. Agnes in New York. The Jesuits were less forgiving than the Catholics. In terms of punishment, they favoured a ruler's edge brought down hard on the palm of your hand, rather than six Hail Marys, or a confession. But they were scholars, readers, curious about the world made by men, as well as the other world, beyond the reach of men. Interestingly, most of the Jesuit teachers I knew had had genuine struggles

with faith and doubt. They never took faith for granted. It was a hard-won understanding and a kind of daily reckoning. For a time, when we were living in Hong Kong, my father insisted on family Bible readings every evening, possibly in the hope of bringing his wayward son back to the straight and narrow. The result of all this was an early appreciation, on my part, for the Old Testament as an inexhaustible literary text, a living set of parables and metaphors in a language ripe for the unpicking. I was less convinced by the New Testament, which may be why some decades later I retold parts of it in poems and in the novel *Names of the Women*. So much for literary identity. When it comes to identity in general, a fraught word these days, I am still subject to religious belief, bordering on fervour during times of trouble. The understanding that faith, like superstition, is irrational, doesn't change anything. Prayer can be comfort; poetry can be prayer.

Contemporary narratologists often discuss not only the role of the writer, but also that of the reader, arguing that, after a writer has finished their work, this “belongs” to readers and it is up to them to construct the meaning of the text. Do you agree with this view? Many of your works, for example, are complex, plural, at times even obscure, and yet readers all over the world do appreciate your writing. In your opinion, how do they approach and interpret your characters and your stories?

Having been a reader long before I was a writer, I have to agree with this construct. All writing belongs to all readers. Which is why it's better to paint a scene or a character with some ambiguity, even obscurity. That space around the image or idea allows the reader to fill it in with their own imaginative interpretation. The best poets know this. I have no idea how readers interpret my writing. I only know that they do. I am often struck by the unexpected colorations a reader may bring to a story or a poem, the pictures they come up with, the personal stories they invoke. This is the ancient contract between writer and reader. When we hear the Biblical injunction from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 'Whereof thou cannot speak, thereof thou must remain silent,' each of us is struck differently. Each of us is assailed by a unique set of emotions and images. And this is as it should be. You, the writer, have to be controlling beyond reason to expect each reader to respond in the same way, that is, in the way you intended. Contrary to popular belief, lovingly espoused by writers, the writer is not God.

Your Bombay Trilogy (Narcopolis; The Book of Chocolate Saints; Low) shares a number of stylistic traits, for example in terms of multiple focalisation, metaphors and recurring images. It seems to me that these novels are not just about low life and drugs in Mumbai but rather they try to depict an alternative and complex dimension of India, distant from the usual stereotypes that sometimes are attributed to contemporary Indian English fiction. Your texts show various bizarre characters like unreliable poets, decadent drunkards and visionary hijras (i.e. transgender persons in India), the shift from the 1970s-1980s to the present-day time, and baffle the reader. How would you describe them?

The baffled reader is a familiar figure in my imaginative life. I've been one myself on several occasions. If the Bombay Trilogy has unsettled or baffled readers, it has succeeded in one of its intentions. I think bafflement helps you recast mistaken ideas that may have been preconceived. For instance, the idea that India is a place of spiritual growth and mystic solace peopled by gurus and godmen who are not charlatans, that the Indian family is a nurturing ecosystem run by loving elders, that the statisticians must be wrong when they tell us India has alarming rates of child abuse and most of these incidents occur within the family, that rural India is peopled with happy well-fed villagers eager to welcome you into their homes with a hot meal and rosewater, that the caste system has been eradicated or subdued and all citizens receive an equal chance at happiness, that child marriage and the shunning of widows are things of the past, that Indians are comedically preoccupied with mangoes, pickles, assorted spices, the gentlemanly game of cricket and the wearing of saris, that the Indian monsoon is for rain-drenched lovers to pirouette along a gently heaving shoreline, that middle-class protagonists spend their days reading Chekhov and their nights reading Gogol, that proper names are an opportunity for the delicate weighing of nuance, that violence is a distant drum far removed from the well-appointed drawing rooms of the inspirational classes and the genteel if shabby rooms of the aspirational classes, that horror is an apparition created for the movie screen and not something your next-door neighbour is fomenting, that weddings are endearing three-day celebrations in which family honour is vindicated and every guest has a wonderful time, that Hindus, Muslims and Christians live together in perfect harmony, that Indians prefer to say yes rather than no. I could go on, but let me stop here. The India I have known is far removed from these literary and societal stereotypes. And if the Indian writers who say yes have had their say, then perhaps the time has come for the Indian writer who says no.

To some extent, in your novels, Bombay (now named Mumbai) appears as a sort of character and this is a homage to a lively, dynamic and perhaps contradictory city. What is the real identity and nature of this incredible city, also considering that it keeps growing and changing? For example, now people are not even aware that originally it was an island city. Moving to fiction, there are many novels about Bombay, but your stories reverse the usual perspective and unveil some marginal corners, characters and events. Would you like to expand this point? And how about the relation between Bombay and the rest of India? Is it still possible for Bombay to keep its unique nature against the backdrop of the huge transformations that are reshaping India?

Originally seven islands, Bombay was a 16th-century Portuguese colonial possession acquired by the British as a royal dowry. It was so little prized that the Portuguese were happy to give it away. In 1668, Charles II leased it, for ten pounds a year, to the East India Company, the rapacious entity that became the world's first and most brutal drug cartel. Only in the middle of the 19th century did it become one land mass through successive land reclamation projects. As you point out, not very many Bombayites are aware of this tumultuous history. And you can't blame them. There's not enough time to develop a historical consciousness when you are running to stand still. There have been any number of ferocious changes in the three decades since the reforms and economic liberalisation of the early 1990s. But it hasn't been a uniform change. In some parts of the city the visitor will be reminded of Berlin or Queens, but in other parts you will find only institutionalised regression, tribal solidarity, barely-repressed violence. The city's true nature is a mix of these opposed forces that meet daily on the roads during traffic jams and everywhere else during times of upheaval and natural calamity, for instance the religious riots of 1992 and the floods of 2005. After each of these upheavals, some columnist or pundit will write about 'the spirit of Bombay' and how resilient the people are, how unstoppable is the city's will to succeed. Another false stereotype. The reason Mumbaikars get up the next day and go to work is because they have no choice. The city is a beast that eats its weak and victimises its young. You have to work to survive. This has always been the case and it won't change anytime soon. What makes Bombay different from the rest of India is the fact that talent, or beauty, or hard work, or luck, can change your life. It's addictive and self-devouring, and difficult to exit.

Before you turned to fiction, you extensively worked with poetry and authored six collections of poems. What is the power of poetry, and what is the role of poetry in a world that seems to ignore it, being overwhelmed by the speed of modernity, online communication and consumable culture?

As I said in a previous answer, poetry has a quality of consolation or solace that works in the way prayer does. You cannot say this about other kinds of writing. I think it's a question of trust. You trust poetry because you know it hasn't been tainted, or not as much. There's a reason for this, for its supremacy among the various forms of writing: poetry is the only vocation of which it emphatically can be said that its practitioners are not engaged in the pursuit of money. There is no money in poetry, or very little compared to the labour and sacrifice it entails. Philosophy may be another such profession, with one great difference. Poetry is not the exclusive domain of the upper classes and those with family money. There are working class poets, and poets without publishers or teaching gigs or stipends or grants. The ancient quarrel between philosophers and poets exists, to this day, because each group thinks of itself as the unacknowledged legislators of the race. It's an age-old rivalry, the secret reason poets are not welcome in Plato's Republic, the reason he derided the influence of Homer, the reason he placed poets among the accusers of Socrates, the reason he dismissed poets as mere imitators of reality. In Plato's time, poetry was sung or recited and it was more influential than philosophy. The times have most decidedly changed. In today's fractured world – where attention spans have shrunk and screens are worshipped like idols – poets and philosophers are equally marginalized. I won't speak for philosophers, but I think it's fair to say that a society that ignores its poets is a society in peril.

How do you manipulate language to create verses that speak to readers? We know you were somehow influenced by the Bombay School of Poets, Dom Moraes in primis, as well as other western writers, but can you tell us if other authors or works had some impact on your creativity?

Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, and Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems*. I discovered these books at the age of thirteen, thanks to my father, whose library included a lot of poetry, and thanks also to my uncle, who was obsessed with Baudelaire and the French Symbolists. Decadent poets aren't the most beneficial or optimistic of influences for an impressionable thirteen-year-old, but there you have it. As with other poets who came of age at that time

and place, Anglophone Bombay in the Eighties and Nineties, I was influenced by the British poets of the mid-twentieth century and the Americans of the mid- and late-twentieth century. Here's a short list: Auden, Hopkins, Hughes, Hill, Teasdale, Moore, Bishop, Berryman, Lowell, Roethke, Crane, Plath, Sexton, Wright (father and son), Notley, Berrigan, O'Hara, Ricard, Spicer, Knott, Orr, Gilbert, Gregg, Kumunyakaa, the list goes on. I still read and am influenced by a number of more contemporary poets, Les Murray, Derek Walcott, Frederick Seidel, Glyn Maxwell, Pascale Petit, Imtiaz Dharker, Terrance Hayes, Megan Fernandes, to name a few. Some of my teachers left an impression that remains: Gerald Stern, Thomas Lux, Vijay Seshadri. Then there are the poets who exist as personal talismans: Dante, Keats, Osip Mandelstam, Joseph Brodsky, Celan. Cesare Pavese's *Disaffections*, in the Geoffrey Brock translation, profoundly affected or disaffected me.

Let me return to your fictional prose, and ask you about Names of the Women (2021), a novel that reveals and discusses some female characters from the Gospel, from Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany to Herodias and her daughter Salome. Where did you find the inspiration for this novel? Readers who are not familiar with your interests might wonder why an Indian author should write a fictional text about female characters from the Bible. Does this text concern the condition of womanhood at large? Or does its subtext refer to gender issues in India today? Could you please tell us about the stylistic characteristics of this form of retelling?

I've been reading the Bible from a fairly young age and I was always struck by the language. I thought of it as a kind of secret/sacred literary text. I loved the cadence, the ominous grandeur of it. On rereading the New Testament some years ago, I was struck for the first time by something I hadn't noticed earlier, that the women are peripheral characters even if they are responsible for pivotal events in the story of Christ. For instance, his resurrection is discovered by women, he is accompanied on his final journey by women, it is the women who stay with him through the lonely vigil on the cross. Some of the parables are set in motion by women. Even when the story is ostensibly about a man, Lazarus, for instance, it is the women who play central roles. I understood why this had come to be. The stories were written by men at a time when women were not given credit for anything. I thought there was a way to remedy this by retelling the story from the perspective of the women. I am a Kerala Christian, born into one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, more than two thousand years old, and I think of the Bible as a kind of birthright. All of it belongs to

me, as much as the mystic poems of the Bhakti saint Mirabai belong to me. And I've never subscribed to the dictum beloved of Master of Fine Arts programs that you must 'write what you know'. What an intolerable world it would be if writers only wrote what they knew. We would be subject to an infinite stream of autofiction. I can't imagine anything duller. There's a reason we were endowed with the gift of imagination: it is to widen our world, to inhabit other lives, to know other times. *Names of the Women* certainly refers to the kind of patriarchal society I am only too familiar with. India has never outgrown the wound of misogyny. The story of a woman being stoned to death for an imagined infraction is not out of place in modern India. This country's institutionalized culture of rape is a clear indicator of its institutionalized misogyny. I think the novel grew out of outrage. There are women who would insist that as a man I have no right to outrage, being a member of the gender that perpetrates crimes against women. I would beg to differ. As a human and as a writer, I have the right. It might even be a duty. The stylistic approach in this novel had one overriding model. I wanted to use that Biblical cadence, that sense of an apocalyptic poetic utterance, and I wanted to temper it with modern syntax. The monologues of Christ on the cross are probably the most overtly Biblical in style. Otherwise, *Names of the Women* is told in the third person, though it still retains the form of direct address.

A large part of your artistic life has to do with music since you are a songwriter and a guitarist. How did you first approach music? I've read that you started some thirty or forty years ago, in a band called Atomic Forest, and that you were also part of an electro-pop duo (Sridhar/Thayil) that experimented with various genres, mixing jazz, blues, and Indian classical music. Some videos of your performances are available on YouTube, but please tell us more about your music experiences.

I started to write and play music around the same time, at the age of fourteen, that is to say, a half-century ago. When I'm writing a song I don't obsess about the words as much as I do when I'm writing a poem. There are so many other factors at work in music, the chordal structure, the melody, the rhythm, other musicians and the qualities they bring. For some reason, I allow myself to be looser, more relaxed when it comes to writing and performing music. I've been in a number of bands in Hong Kong, in Bombay, in Delhi, in Berlin and in New York. A listing of the names of these bands is a partial history of those decades, of the non-linear progression from psychedelia to post-punk to electronica: Fuge, Atomic Forest, Feedback, Cosmic Junk, Krossroads, The Toys, Breeze,

Bombay Down, Baja, the Chronic Blues Band, Still Dirty, HMT (named after a defunct Indian watch company), Cost of Living Crisis, ISSAI, as well as other collectives too short-lived to mention.

I've seen that some ten years ago you were commissioned to write the libretto for Babur in London, a production organised by the Opera Group, which pivots around the figure of the founder of the Mughal empire in northern India, Babur (1483-1530), to discuss issues such as contemporary London's multiculturalism and the ideas of religion and fanaticism. How did you have to adjust your style and writing for that task?

When writing libretti, I take as a guide Mozart's rule that in traditional opera 'poetry has to be the obedient daughter of music'. What this means is that poetry must be stripped to its essence. What you can get rid of, you must get rid of. I mean most prepositions and conjunctions can and should be jettisoned. Nouns and verbs must be retained. Pronouns, adjectives and adverbs may be retained only when necessary. When a line of verse is sung, wordiness becomes a drawback. Compression is key. Time is malleable when a soprano embodies a word and stretches it for seconds and minutes. It changes your approach to the writing, you think constantly of compression, and this can be a good thing. Poetry is compression. I thought of *Babur in London* as a kind of *opera magica*. Supernatural events are in play, ghosts walk and talk, ghosts sing, time travels; and all of this occurs in a completely modern setting.

Talking about style also means considering imagination, creativity and originality, but in our futuristic age we have to think about the role of Artificial Intelligence and similar software programmes. You are a writer, a poet, a musician, an editor, all roles that to some extent have to come to terms with this new world. What is your position about it? Will creative works be affected or even replaced by non-human entities in the future? Can an AI write a 'good novel'?

This is the beginning of AI, the very earliest stage. At this point AI can write a novel but it cannot write a good novel. This is likely to change as it becomes better and learns a more accomplished form of mimicry. The next generation of the technology may be able to copy and paste the quick burn of the imagination and the mystery of a firing neuron. If you've heard music produced by AI you'll notice the anodyne formulaic conception, how serviceable it is, and how dull. I have no doubt that there is a segment of people who don't mind art

produced by AI, as it's likely to be cheaper and more palatable. But there will always be those among us who prefer their art to be flawed and dishevelled and vulnerable, in short, human.

One final question, before thanking you once again for your contribution to this issue of our Journal. Currently, are you involved in some new project? Do you plan to write a new novel, or a new collection of poems? Please, say yes ;-)

I'm happy to say yes on both counts. I have a new novel, *Melanin*, out in July. And I have a new book of poems, *I'll Have it Here*, my first in sixteen years, which was published by HarperCollins India late last year. Here's a poem from that book:

1325

Shams al-Din the Tangerine is twenty-one
when he sets off on pilgrimage.
A year or two, he imagines, then back home
to practise law like his father and his father's father.
Introducing himself as Ibn Battuta, he visits
two hundred and eleven towns and cities
in forty countries across three continents.
It isn't the pilgrimage that interests him now
but the vagaries of the travelling life.
To ride into a town and look for somewhere to stay.
To hear of a coastal city to the south and find berth on a ship,
the ship boarded by pirates,
wrecked against the rocks of a giant coast.
To be kidnapped, to escape, to fall sick
with an ailment that seems to originate in the bones.
Slowly, over days and weeks in a dim room,
over countless cups of bone broth, he is nursed back to health.
On an island in the Maldives, whose inhabitants depend
on a diet of aphrodisiacal coconuts and fish,
he takes four wives, the legal limit,
spending "the night with the wife whose turn it was,
and this I continued to do the whole year and a half I was there."
In all he marries ten times, keeps concubines and lets them go,

has five or a dozen children, survives a plague,
becomes a scholar, a judge, the writer
of the Rihla, or A Masterpiece to Those Who Contemplate
the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling.
For three decades he travels. He never wants to go home.
That year the Aztecs build Tenochtitlan over marshland,
using a system of aqueducts, artificial islands and drainage.
They like to bathe two or three times a day.
In Europe, rather than bathe, they are using perfume.
Rather than plumbing, chamber pots and thunderboxes.
What they enjoy is a good war.
It's the beginning of the Little Ice Age.
What are the poets of the world doing?
Already adept at time travel,
they are futurists one day, nostalgists the next.
They are fluent in mathematics.
They know they're necessary for the progress of the race.
They don't know they'll be flattened by the meaning of money.



Alessandro Berselli racconta la sua scrittura

Intervista di Maurizio Ascari

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Classe 1965, Alessandro Berselli è uno scrittore nato. Curiosa affermazione, eppure è ciò che penso. Quando apro un suo libro, non riesco a posarlo finché non l'ho finito. E ogni volta mi dico: Berselli la scrittura ce l'ha nel sangue. Istinto o tecnica? O entrambi?

Ne parleremo con questo autore di genere (termine per me positivo ovviamente!), il cui flusso narrativo, come il flow dei rapper, ti cattura e ti trascina con un alternarsi di suspense, ironia (se non comicità perché Berselli è un fine umorista) e assortiti rimandi culturali – la musica e le serie tv, la filosofia, l'arte visiva, i romanzi, il cinema... Perché Berselli, se vogliamo dirla tutta, collabora, tra l'altro, con il Dizionario Morandini.

I suoi personaggi potresti incontrarli in una serata con amici, un aperitivo, una cena, un concerto. O forse li hai sfiorati per strada.

Poi però succede qualcosa e ti ritrovi immerso nell'alterità, se non nel buio. E il mondo dapprima familiare – quel mondo d'oggi di cui Berselli conosce i manierismi, i codici di seduzione, i sogni e i difetti, le incertezze e la banalità – assume i connotati di un incubo noir.

Berselli ha al suo attivo un numero ormai imponente di romanzi – *Io non sono come voi* (2007), *Cattivo* (2009), *Non fare la cosa giusta* (2010), *Il metodo Crudele* (2013), *Anche le scimmie cadono dagli alberi* (2014), *Kamasutra Kevin* (2016), *Le siamesi* (2017), *La dottrina del male* (2019), *Il liceo* (2021), *Gli eversivi* (2023) – cui si aggiungono le raccolte di racconti *Storie d'amore di morte e di follia* (2005) e *Anni zero* (2012).

Di volume in volume, senza mai imboccare la strada facile della formula, di una rassicurante, riconoscibile serialità, Berselli coinvolge e stupisce, sperimenta con curiosità per la vita e per la devianza, di cui sa cogliere le radici sociali ma anche l'enigma.

Ci sta l'idea di un talento istintivo – perché Berselli è un fuoco d'artificio anche nella vita vera, come sa bene chiunque abbia ascoltato una sua presentazione o bevuto un aperitivo con lui – ma c'è di più. L'istinto di scrivere si affina attraverso la lettura (Berselli ha letto tanto...) e attraverso la consapevolezza (che a Berselli certo non difetta: infatti lo ritroviamo a insegnare scrittura creativa).

Quando leggiamo Berselli, insomma, possiamo contare – noi che già lo conosciamo – su un'attenta costruzione della trama, dei personaggi, dei dialoghi, dei capitoli, dei paragrafi, delle frasi, delle singole parole, delle cesure, dei vuoti... Quei vuoti che ha sempre utilizzato con una maestria tutta sua. Lo scrittore ideale di cui parlare in un numero di rivista dedicato alla stilistica perché lo stile è il tessuto connettivo di ogni storia ben raccontata.

Vorrei intervistare Berselli partendo da questa capacità che ha di controllare il suo mezzo espressivo mentre magari dà vita a relazioni e situazioni eccessive e malsane, a emotività sfrenate, a cerebralità ossessive... O semplicemente a rituali sociali che tutti riconosciamo nella loro verità e a conversazioni tra adolescenti di cui lui intuisce la nota giusta.

Quanto peso ha la tecnica nella tua scrittura?

Tantissimo. Si dibatte molto se nella narrazione sia più importante la trama o i personaggi, ma ci si dimentica troppo spesso dello stile, che è lo strumento con il quale noi decidiamo di raccontare le nostre storie, quello che ci rende riconoscibili creando l'empatia con il lettore. Io lavoro tantissimo sulla tecnica, sulla scelta lessicale e sintattica. Tutto deve avere una metrica, da perseguire con precisione maniacale. Cura del dettaglio che però non deve sembrare artificio barocco. Non è facile, presuppone molto impegno.

Quanto è stato importante per te il confronto con altri scrittori? E quali sono i primi nomi che ti vengono in mente?

Devo confessare che frequento poco gli italiani perché sono ammaliato dagli scrittori americani, dal loro modo di raccontare la storia, sia quando narrano il minimalismo della quotidianità, e penso a tutta la scuola postcarveriana, sia quando trattano i grandi temi del contemporaneo. I nomi sono tanti. Franzen è sicuramente un maestro, Eggers un grande sperimentatore. Irving un talento puro. Tra gli scrittori di genere noir, Lehane, senza ombra di dubbio. Non a

caso il cinema lo ha saccheggiato a piene mani (*Shutter Island*, *Mystic River*, *Gone, Baby, Gone*).

Come autore di noir, immagino che la fase di scrittura sia preceduta per te da un'attenta pianificazione di suspense, colpi di scena, cliffhanger. Tutto un gioco d'incastri. Al contempo, cosa vuol dire costruire un personaggio? Come comincia l'ispirazione? È un'esperienza sempre diversa oppure all'origine dei tuoi libri c'è qualche stimolo o necessità che ritorna ogni volta?

Il processo di creazione della storia è lunghissimo. Si parte da quella che è un'idea, io la chiamo il magma, e da quell'ammasso indistinto ancora privo di contorno si opera di riduzione, per farlo diventare qualcosa su cui iniziare a lavorare. Il magma può essere una situazione oppure un personaggio. Spesso entrambi. Poi si inizia a scrivere, spesso senza sapere ancora qual è la giusta direzione, ma serve per prendere confidenza con il materiale che ci si troverà a trattare. E a ricevere le giuste luci che illumineranno la narrazione.

Quanto peso ha nella tua scrittura il desiderio di raccontare – attraverso una scrittura di genere, che inchioda chi legge fino al finale – la società in cui vivi? Specie il mondo dei giovani, cui sei molto vicino anche per il lavoro che fai, legato all'esperienza della scuola.

Il noir è attualmente il genere che a mio avviso meglio racconta la società che abbiamo intorno, e lo fa senza presunzione, perché il presupposto di partenza è quello di divertire il lettore con un plot crime che può diventare motivo di ragionamento su contesti che vanno ben oltre la trama investigativa. La società, la politica. Ma anche temi più personali, emotivi, come i rapporti genitori figli, il senso di disorientamento con il quale ci troviamo più o meno tutti ad avere a che fare. La narrativa non deve dare risposte. Ma fare domande sì. Osservando. E interrogandosi continuamente sui tempi che stiamo vivendo.

Nel leggere Il liceo sono rimasto colpito, ancora una volta, dall'abilità con cui costringi chi legge a riassetare le sue opinioni. Questo è il marchio della realtà. Noi pensiamo una certa cosa di qualcuno, poi cambiamo idea o comunque ci interroghiamo. Basta una conversazione a volte per invertire di segno il flusso emotivo tra due persone – che si tratti di un'amicizia, un amore o un semplice rapporto di lavoro. Tu eccelli in questa capacità di restituire la volatilità dei rapporti, la loro fluidità, la loro continua evoluzione. C'è sempre energia nelle tue

pagine. E questa energia trabocca quando scrivi di adolescenti. Questo continuo incresparsi delle relazioni umane lo senti istintivamente o hai avuto bisogno di affinare la tua sensibilità per restituirlo con tanta immediatezza?

Non ti nascondo che l'aspetto psicologico dei personaggi e la difficoltà che abbiamo tutti nel trovare una quadratura nelle cose della vita sono motivi di grande attenzione quando decido quali sono gli asset che devono fare da contorno alla trama del romanzo. Parlare di personaggi multidimensionali, incoerenti, imperfetti, mi sembra quasi banale. È chiaro che la sfaccettatura comportamentale è la chiave per costruire figure narrative credibili, la vecchia lotta bene contro male non funziona più. I protagonisti vanno umanizzati creando in loro virtù e mancanze. Affinché il lettore possa partecipare alle loro gesta riconoscendosi. Siamo tutti una accozzaglia di cose che funzionano e altre che non vanno. Ed è giusto così.

I tuoi personaggi sono spesso molto smart. Brillanti. Con un 100% di nessi neurali attivi. E vivono in un mondo ipermediale. Pensano mentre guidano e ascoltano canzoni. Sono sempre in più posti con la testa. Vivono con una continua colonna sonora. Ti chiederei di parlarci di questa dimensione multimediale della tua scrittura, che di continuo risveglia referenti culturali in chi legge.

A me piace molto il terzo millennio, e ho la fortuna di viverlo avendo visto sia il mondo analogico che la trasformazione tecnologica iniziata alla fine del secolo scorso. La contemporaneità mi affascina, non potrei mai raccontare storie ambientate in epoche che non siano quella attuale. Ci sono tantissimi temi che possono diventare l'oggetto della storia, e chissà quanti altri ne verranno. Non è un'epoca facile in cui trovarsi. Però è spaventosamente seducente.

Nei tuoi libri c'è spesso tra i personaggi una corrente erotica che sai rendere con grande efficacia e anche equilibrio. Che peso ha nelle tue scelte di scrittura il desiderio di sedurre lettrici e lettori?

La seduzione è alla base del processo narrativo, lo scrittore è un egocentrico narcisista che prova ad ammaliare il suo lettore con tecniche subdole. Mai credere allo scrittore che professa umiltà, chi racconta storie è un abile conquistatore che usa le parole come strategia di conquista non tanto erotica quanto mentale. Personalmente non ci trovo nulla di male.

Che significato assume nei tuoi romanzi lo sfondo urbano? Possiamo dire che ogni città offre diverse opportunità narrative, entrando in risonanza con il ritmo e il colore della scrittura? È un'impressione che ho riportato in modo forte leggendo Il liceo e Gli eversivi uno dopo l'altro. Mi ha colpito il rapporto tra il carattere della città, la qualità della scrittura e i personaggi.

La città è sempre un elemento fondamentale nelle storie, perché rappresenta il contesto, il mood, la scenografia dietro la quale si muovono le gesta dei personaggi. In quella che io chiamo la mia trilogia del male, *Le siamesi*, *La dottrina del male*, *Il liceo*, la città di elezione era Milano, perché quelle storie necessitavano di un'ambientazione cosmopolita, metropolitana, quasi futurista. Con *Gli eversivi* sono tornato nella mia Bologna, perché a questa narrazione serviva una urbanità diversa, con una storia diversa. Il titolo in fondo è già una dichiarazione di intenti. *Gli eversivi*. E quindi Bologna, una città che è eversiva da sempre, controtendenza, nel bene e nel male. È stato bello ritornare a casa.



Manuela D'Amore, *Literary Voices of the Italian Diaspora in Britain: Time, Transnational Identities and Hybridity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 314 pp., ISBN 9783031354373.

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Il mio primo contatto con la letteratura degli emigrati italiani avvenne tanti anni fa, su un aereo diretto a Londra. Avevo portato con me un libro che mi aveva incuriosito: *A Bench on Which to Rest: The Diary of an Emigrant* (1999), scritto da Elena Maccaferri, partita per il Canada a metà degli anni Trenta da un paese dell'Appennino non lontano dalla mia città, Bologna. Ricordo ancora il retrogusto struggente di quelle memorie: lo straniamento che deriva dall'esperienza del migrante, imprigionato in una terra di mezzo tra il paese di provenienza e quello di adozione. Anche dopo che gli anni sono passati, i figli sono cresciuti ed è arrivata la pensione. Quando un'espressione come 'tornare a casa' ha perso per alcuni ogni significato preciso.

Ho continuato negli anni a leggere racconti di migrazione – talvolta con il loro portato di affresco storico, come nei romanzi dell'amica Melanie Hughes – e a interessarmi attivamente alla letteratura transnazionale, affascinante serbatoio di storie di vita e forme narrative, poiché ai margini delle identità e dei generi letterari avvengono spesso incontri significativi, se non sorprendenti.

Su questa zona di contatto si concentra un recente studio con cui Manuela D'Amore offre un'importante e approfondita ricognizione delle voci letterarie emerse dalla diaspora italiana in Gran Bretagna – un territorio di confine, per così dire, che ancora non era stato mappato in modo sistematico. Tale volume si innesta sui precedenti studi dedicati alla letteratura italiana in lingua inglese in ambito nordamericano (Stati Uniti e Canada) e australiano, proponendo l'aggettivo "Italian British" (7) per abbracciare le opere di autrici e autori le cui

famiglie hanno lasciato l'Italia per la Gran Bretagna tra l'unificazione del 1861 e la seconda guerra mondiale.

Seguendo questa logica, il volume si concentra su forme di memoria e post-memoria legate alle testimonianze di immigrati talvolta anche di terza o quarta generazione, intenti a riscoprire le proprie radici e a riconciliarsi con le contraddizioni interne alle loro identità. Come osserva D'Amore, d'altronde, proprio la cultura della memoria emersa a fine Novecento ha contribuito a dare voce alla comunità italiana: "it was only after Britain began to value cultural difference that more members of the Italian community dedicated themselves to writing" (9-10). La produzione letteraria che il libro discute può dirsi quindi in larga misura il prodotto di una concezione più inclusiva della società che è maturata nel periodo postmoderno.

I cinque capitoli che compongono il volume esplorano secondo diverse angolazioni i fenomeni migratori che hanno condotto alla diaspora italiana in Gran Bretagna, in particolare attraverso il filtro della loro rappresentazione letteraria. Il primo capitolo – "History and Histories: Transnational Lives Through Time" – presenta lo sviluppo della comunità italiana, soffermandosi sulla difficile situazione in cui i nostri connazionali vengono a trovarsi durante il secondo conflitto mondiale in quanto provenienti da quella che è diventata una potenza nemica. Il crescente isolamento degli *enemy aliens* nel tessuto sociale britannico si traduce in vera e propria persecuzione, compreso l'internamento in campi, generando quello che D'Amore definisce un simultaneo senso di "shame and resentment" (176). Ampio spazio viene dedicato all'evento più traumatico che la comunità affronta in questo periodo: la tragedia della Arandora Star, la nave affondata da un sommergibile tedesco al largo delle coste inglesi il 2 luglio 1940, dopo che nel porto di Liverpool è stata caricata di italiani (ben 446, provenienti in gran parte dall'Appennino piacentino e parmense), deportati – insieme a tedeschi e austriaci – verso il Canada.

Il secondo capitolo, intitolato "Pictures from Rural Italy and Urban Britain: Departures and Settlements", va a mappare le aree geografiche da cui provengono le famiglie delle autrici e degli autori trattati nel volume. Località come Barga, in Garfagnana, o Bardi, nell'Appennino parmense, o ancora Picinisco, nel basso Lazio, vengono presentate qui come serbatoi di migrazione verso le isole britanniche, spesso in rapporto a specifici mestieri, come la ristorazione.

Sul posizionamento degli italiani nella società britannica – in termini di istruzione, professione e classe – si concentra il terzo capitolo ("From Street

Musicians to Educators and Actors: The Long Road to Social Integration”), anche in rapporto ai cambiamenti che interessano le diverse generazioni di famiglie impegnate in un percorso di affermazione socio-economica. La sempre maggiore integrazione, tuttavia, spesso non si traduce in semplice assimilazione, ma si accompagna a un senso di originaria appartenenza.

Al ruolo determinante svolto dai nostri emigrati nella *food industry* britannica è dedicato il quarto capitolo (“Cultures, Traditions and Foods in Transition”), al centro del quale troviamo figure come Elena Salvoni, nata nella “Little Italy” di Clerkenwell e soprannominata “The Queen of Soho” per il ruolo da lei svolto a partire dagli anni ’50 e ’60 all’interno di locali come il Café Bleu, Bianchi’s, L’Escargot e L’Etoile.

Sul plurilinguismo della comunità italiana si sofferma poi il quinto capitolo (“Languages in Contact: Italian, English, French and German”), in cui si affronta la questione dei dialetti parlati dagli emigrati italiani nel contesto di provenienza, insieme all’assorbimento di varianti linguistiche regionali del Regno Unito, cui segue la progressiva perdita di contatto con l’italiano da parte delle generazioni successive.

A questi capitoli di ricognizione tematica – dove si esplorano i generi letterari in cui si esprimono gli scrittori *Italian British*, dal memoir all’autobiografia, dalla saga familiare al romanzo storico – fa seguito un’appendice dedicata a un corpus di ventuno autori, di cui si contestualizza l’opera, esplorandola anche attraverso ampie citazioni per restituirne il sapore. Organizzata per aree geografiche interne al Regno Unito, tale appendice mette a fuoco i seguenti autori e testi, che si elencano qui sia per restituire l’arco temporale di questo fenomeno letterario sia come invito a esperienze di lettura:

- Inghilterra: Peppino Leoni, *I Shall Die on the Carpet* (1966); Elena Salvoni, *Elena. A Life in Soho* (1990); Lilie Ferrari, *Fortunata* (1993); Bernard Moscardini, *La vacanza* (2009); Peter Ghiringhelli, *A British Boy in Fascist Italy* (2010); Raffaella Cruciani, *An Owl in the Kitchen. The Discovery of My Italian Heritage* (2016); Melanie Hughes, *War Changes Everything* (2017);
- Galles: Les Servini *A Boy from, Bardi. My Life and Times* (1994); Paulette Pelosi, *Schoolbook in Spaghetti Paper* (2005); Victor Spinetti, *Victor Spinetti Up Front ... His Strictly Confidential Autobiography* (2006); Anita Arcari, *The Hokey Pokey Man* (2010); Hector Emmanuelli, *A Sense of Belonging. From the Rhondda to the Potteries: Memories of a Welsh-Italian Englishman* (2010);

- Scozia: Cagliardo Coraggioso (Eugenio D'Agostino), *Wandering Minstrel* (1938); Marcella Evaristi, *Commedia* (1983); Charles Forte, *Forte. The Autobiography of Charles Forte* (1986); Piero Tognini, *A Mind at War* (1990); Ann Marie Di Mambro, *Tally's Blood* (1992); Mary Contini, *Dear Francesca. An Italian Journey of Recipes Recounted with Love* (2002); Joe Pieri, *The Scots-Italians. Recollections of an Immigrant* (2005); Anne Pia, *Language of My Choosing. The Candid Life-Memoir of an Italian-Scot* (2017); Robert Rossi, *Italian Blood British Heart* (2019).

Ho aperto questa recensione con una riflessione sull'*in-betweenness* degli immigrati, sul loro senso di non appartenenza. La chiudo – con una nota positiva – sul loro senso di doppia appartenenza, di cui dà prova la seguente conversazione, tratta dall'autobiografia di Charles Forte:

I was playing a round of golf with Peter Alliss one day when he asked me one of his surprise questions.

"Do you feel Italian?" "What do you mean – do I feel Italian? Of course I am Italian."

"Do you feel British?" he asked me tentatively.

"Of course I feel British – I am one of the greatest Britishers!" I replied.

But this is a difficult question to answer. [...] In Italy I am English but here I am Italian. My thoughts are not English; my movements are not English. But when I am in Italy I get homesick for London."
(175)

L'*in-betweenness* rimane, ma appare qui vissuta con una nuova assertività, certo legata al successo di cui fa esperienza Forte, emigrato in Scozia dalla provincia di Frosinone quando aveva solo quattro anni e diventato Pari del Regno Britannico. Mi sembra significativo che la nostalgia di Forte non vada all'Italia, di cui comunque egli porta il segno nel pensiero e nel corpo, a quanto dichiara, ma a una città globale come Londra. Questo riconoscersi in una metropoli cosmopolita risuona con la citazione da Simone Weil che Pico Iyer sceglie come epigrafe per il suo *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home* (2000):

It is necessary not to be 'myself', still less to be 'ourselves'.

The city gives us the feeling of being at home.
We must take the feeling of being at home into exile.
We must be rooted in the absence of a place.

Queste parole – in cui la diaspora assume un nuovo significato, in sintonia con un contemporaneo senso di *agency* transnazionale – mi sembrano davvero racchiudere l'*anima globale* del nostro presente, che è sempre, per definizione, *diversamente* radicata.

In sintonia con la temperie postmoderna, e quindi oltre ogni logica o nostalgia banalmente 'nazionalistica', la letteratura degli *Italian Brits* ci ricorda che siamo tutti ibridati, che siamo il frutto di esperienze complesse, vissute da noi e da chi ci ha preceduto, e ancora che siamo il prodotto della Storia, capace di urti possenti, anche se a volte ci illudiamo di procedere invisibili e intangibili sul nostro cammino.

Grazie a Manuela D'Amore per avere raccolto queste voci con tanta passione, tanta intelligenza, tanto rispetto e tanto amore.

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Felix Hamborg, *Revealing Media Bias in News Articles: NLP Techniques for Automated Frame Analysis*, Cham: Springer Nature, 2023, 238 pp., e-ISBN 978-3-031-17693-7.

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Serving as a primary source of information on societal and political issues, news articles play the crucial role of shaping and disseminating narratives, influencing public perceptions of topics, events and social actors. Since the early days of the press and especially in contemporary society, characterised by an abundance of different news outlets, biased news coverage has posed a significant problem, holding the power to guide public opinion and affect collective decision-making.

Over the past decades, the study of media bias has been largely explored in the humanities and social sciences. More recently, this area of research has gained traction also in the field of computer science, particularly within the domain of Natural Language Processing (NLP). However, as Felix Hamborg notes, a significant gap persists between these two domains. Hamborg argues that while bias research in the social sciences has led to a comprehensive set of theories and methodologies, it is bound to remain limited in scope due to its reliance on traditional methods that are time-consuming and require significant manual efforts and expertise. In contrast, NLP approaches have the potential to improve scalability and overcome the barriers of manual studies by leveraging sophisticated models and techniques. Nevertheless, by neglecting well-established methods and resources from other domains, computer science researchers tend to address bias as a rather vague phenomenon, resulting in simpler and more superficial methodological approaches.

Hamborg's work *Revealing Media Bias in News Articles: NLP Techniques for Automated Frame Analysis* tackles this issue and bridges the gap between

decade-long research in the social sciences and advanced computer science techniques by proposing an interdisciplinary, automated approach to uncover bias in news articles. Informed by Entman's theory of political framing, Hamborg introduces a framework to extract and analyse frames in news media, exploring how different news sources assemble and promote narratives that shape our interpretation of events.

The book - a result of Hamborg's extensive research on media bias - is organised into seven chapters. After a brief introduction to research questions and gaps addressed by the work, the second chapter delves into the theoretical and methodological foundations of bias research. Drawing upon a well-established tradition in the social sciences, the chapter defines media bias and its effects, explores the process of news production and identifies nine bias forms that arise at each production stage, i.e. event selection, source selection, commission and omission of information, labelling and word choice, story placement, size allocation, picture selection, picture explanation and spin.

Building on this categorisation, Hamborg provides an in-depth review of manual and automated approaches addressing each bias form, extensively referencing prior work in both social sciences and computer science. Besides outlining methodological characteristics, strengths and limits of these approaches, the chapter also highlights different NLP techniques that can be leveraged to analyse each bias type. The section thus proves particularly helpful for those who are new to slanted media analysis, as well as for researchers seeking to adopt new methodologies and explore the possibilities of an automated approach.

To bridge the theoretical and literature framework outlined in the previous chapter with the detailed methodological structure illustrated in the following ones, Chapter 3 introduces person-oriented framing analysis (PFA), an innovative approach for the analysis of political frames and media bias forms. Integrating decade-long bias research in the social sciences with NLP techniques, this automated approach aims at uncovering how individual persons are portrayed across different news sources and communicating these findings to news consumers. After a brief (re)introduction to the concept of media bias and to bias detection methods, the chapter offers a clear overview of PFA, explaining its objectives and the three main stages of the analysis, i.e. preprocessing, target concept analysis and frame analysis. Attention is also given to the dataset construction phase, which is often a complex task when working with (multiple) online sources. In particular, Hamborg introduces *news-please*, a high-quality tool for online news crawling and information

extraction, designed for adapting to different news outlets. Combining three different state-of-the-art extractors, *news-please* outperforms them in terms of extraction quality and is openly available on GitHub.

Moving to target concept analysis (TCA) - the second stage of PFA - in Chapter 4 Hamborg explores two NLP techniques that may enable such analysis, namely event extraction and context-driven cross-document coreference resolution (CDCDCR). As for the first task, the author proposes a new open-source system for extracting an article's main event based on the journalistic 5W1H questions, i.e. who does what, when, where, why and how. The *Giveme5W1H* method, evaluated against a manually annotated dataset of news articles, achieves higher precision scores compared to the few similar approaches available in computer science literature and establishes itself as a valuable tool for various types of text mining analyses. As a downside, the tool is only able to detect a single, main event. The second viable technique for TCA is cross-document coreference resolution, which enables the identification of the same semantic concept across multiple texts. In particular, the CDCDCR method proposed by the author leverages a rule-based, multi-sieve approach to merge candidates and resolve coreferences, enabling more flexible and context-aware results.

The last component of PFA, namely frame analysis, is concerned with biases deriving from slanted portrayals of individuals. In this regard, Hamborg notes that devising an automated approach based on social sciences best practices, e.g. on the analysis of Entman's political frames is impractical due to the high degree of interpretation and manual effort involved. Instead, he suggests shifting the focus to frame polarity, exploring whether news coverage contains positive or negative assessments of target individuals. To achieve this, the proposed NLP technique is target-dependent sentiment classification (TSC). After testing the performance of three state-of-the-art TSC models on different datasets, Hamborg introduces a BERT model fine-tuned on political news articles, as well as a new manually annotated dataset for TSC applied to the news domain. One last notable contribution of Hamborg's work is the presentation of a prototype system for evaluating PFA's performance on real-world news and illustrating how insights derived from the analysis can be communicated to non-expert news consumers, enabling bias-aware news consumption.

To conclude, the book stands as a valuable resource for NLP researchers working on media bias analysis, offering methodological insights and new open-access tools for bias detection that are also suitable for various text mining

applications. As a downside, some of the proposed methods do not harness the full potential of computer science technologies nor reflect the latest advancements in NLP techniques. Additionally, the volume requires a solid understanding of computer science methodologies, making it less accessible for readers without a technical background.

Overall, the book's most significant contribution lies in redirecting attention to the rich array of resources, methods, and theories developed through decade-long bias research, countering the tendency in computer science to overlook foundational work in the social sciences. At the same time, the volume successfully underscores the importance of coupling these methodologies with the advantages of NLP technologies, illustrating how an interdisciplinary approach can transcend the limitations of more traditional methods.

Marja Sorvari, *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women's Writing*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 180 pp., ISBN 978-3030958398.

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The political, social, and cultural landscape of contemporary Russia bears the scars of a past that has yet to be fully and properly reckoned with by the Russian society. The post-Soviet political system sought to reconstruct the country by manipulating culture, history, and memory. The recent conflict with Ukraine is but the latest and most tragic symptom of an endemic illness within the state, which is increasingly resembling a new dictatorship, blind to both the past and the future of its citizens.

In the light of this scenario, Marja Sorvari's volume, *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women's Writing* (2022), is a fundamental contribution to the fields of memory studies, migration/diaspora, and women's literature. Sorvari, a professor of Russian Literature and Culture at the University of Eastern Finland, brings a distinguished expertise in post-Soviet Russian literature, with a deep focus on gender, memory, and multilingualism.

In the first chapter, Sorvari introduces "Displacement," defined as a state "linked to the loss of memory, loss of meaning, and to marginality or placelessness" (2022: 3). This condition, rooted in the Soviet Union's existence and collapse, encompasses geographical, cultural, and psychological dimensions and permeates the works analyzed. Alongside displacement, Sorvari examines the concept of "Postmemory", building on Marianne Hirsch's definition: it refers to the memory of previous generations' traumas as distinct from direct experiences (2022: 138). This notion of "memory on the move" connects the themes explored throughout the book.

The final section of the first part contextualizes the historical position of women writers during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, when the idealized notions of body, memory, and history that dominated Soviet discourse began to crumble. Women's literature commenced to emphasize the body in its more vivid and realistic representation together with pain and suffering as a reaction to discrimination during Soviet times (2022: 9).

The author identifies key themes in her analysis, including displacement, marginality, and "lived religion", explored through female subjectivity in relation to historical narratives. She also emphasizes the female body as a vessel of memory, particularly concerning childhood and orphanhood. Body and memory are portrayed as interdependent, evolving from idealization to confrontation with reality

Sorvari's analysis focuses on significant literary works: *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (2011, *Daniel' Shtain, perevodchik*, 2006), by Lyudmila Ulitskaya (1943, Davlekanovo) is examined in the second chapter; *The Time of Women* (2012, *Vremia zhenshchin* 2009) by Elena Chizhova (1957, Leningrad) in the third; *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2014, *Vremja second-hand* 2013) by Svetlana Alexievich (1948, Stanislav) in the fourth; and *In Memory of Memory* (2021, *Pamiati pamiati* 2017) by Maria Stepanova (1972, Moscow) in the fifth. Furthermore, she refers to other notable Russian authors, including Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Dina Rubina, and Svetlana Vasilenko.

Sorvari explains her selection of these prominent women writers by highlighting how their works challenge and subvert the dominant "narratives of greatness" promoted in contemporary Russia, particularly amid the resurgence of authoritarian politics and state-controlled memory (2022: I).

The selection of these authors is emblematic. Ulitskaya, Chizhova, and Alexievich experienced the Soviet era in its full swing, with their lives and works directly shaped by war, the suppression of women's rights, and the collapse of an era. These personal and societal struggles reflect broader cultural shifts, as highlighted by Helena Goscilo, who notes that women's literature thrived during the Glasnost Era, experiencing a veritable creative boom. However, this flourishing was soon followed by tremendous turmoil in the aftermath of the Soviet system's collapse and the catastrophic economic transformations that ensued (Goscilo, 2002: 15-17).

Maria Stepanova is a voice from a new generation, which was however marked as well by Brezhnev's "stagnation" period, Gorbachev's era and the fall of the Soviet illusion and stands as a bridge between the past and future of memory.

Ulitskaya's novel *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* opens a deep reflection on memory paving the way for the exploration of memory studies. The novel "deals in many ways with the fates of displaced people and their diasporic experiences during and after the Second World War in Europe" (2022: 41). It is inspired by the life of Oswald Rufeisen (1922-1998), a young Polish-Jewish activist who was displaced among various cultures and religions. He embodies a state of perpetual dislocation and liminality driven by faith. One of the key concepts Sorvari identifies in this novel is that of the "lived religion," which she relates to the concept of "lived body" – the idea that one's body is "the vehicle through which people engage with the world" (2022: 44). The novel's multi-voiced representation of diverse beliefs and convictions reflects the resurgence of religion and spirituality in post-Soviet and post-atheist Russia (2022: 54). Moreover, the protagonist discloses unique maternal qualities that positions him far from the expected patriarchal religious figure. He embodies a sort of "traveling memory" (2022: 65), a memory in constant motion, guided by pure Spirit, in which corporeality, movement, and maternal love become the main agents of history.

In the third chapter, the dimension of memory as listening to lived stories is unveiled. Chizhova's *The Time of Women* explores themes such as orphanhood, the tragedy of Soviet childhood, and the challenges of transmitting memory across generations. The novel tells the vicissitudes of a mute girl, who has not just one but two names: the first one is Suzanna, given by her mother and the second one Sofia, given by *babushkas*, who believe that the name chosen by her mother is more Cristian and less "secular" (2022: 87). These two names symbolize the duality of the protagonist's reality, hinting at the inner conflict she will experience as she grows up immersed in the contrasting narratives and values of the older women surrounding her. As a result, the protagonist experiences two different realities: the one reflecting *babushkas'* stories and the one permeated with the official Soviet narrative (2022: 87). This condition reveals a plural memory, and the girl's liminal existence between two worlds ultimately leads her, through the practice of art, to create a memory space outside the official narrative (2022: 88).

This novel raises the profound question of whether one is merely a passive participant in history or a creator of it. Sorvari's analysis invites readers to consider how female agency not only shapes history, but also serves as a conduit for memories.

In the fourth chapter, the power of voices and memory is brought to the fore through Alexievich's *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Alexievich's

work captures the futility of the Soviet experience, giving voice to the so-called “small” people of history who have been silenced for much of their lives. Displacement, polyphony, and the power of oral history emerge as key themes, helping readers understand the impact of Soviet history on individuals and the pivotal role women play in both experiencing and documenting it. Alexievich collects voices and stories “as she ‘hears’ them, as people speak to her, perceiving this talk as distinct from official, canonical history writing” (2022: 101). Sorvari observes that “Alexievich’s writing represents a bottom-up perception and memory of these events, juxtaposed with the top-down construction of cultural memory in post-Soviet Russia” (2022: 103). These characteristics together form a new genre, often referred to as *roman golosov* “novels in voices” or “collective testimonies” (103). Alexievich’s agency in constructing memories within her books is sophisticated, as she becomes an essential part of these memories, participating in their transmission and exploring various modes of remembering (2022: 114).

Finally, the fifth chapter delves into the future of memory and the fate of postmemory through Maria Stepanova’s *In Memory of Memory*. This work exemplifies the concept of “traveling memory,” encapsulating the fluid and dynamic nature of memory as it moves across generations and geographical contexts. Stepanova’s narrative interweaves personal recollections with broader historical events, creating a complex tapestry of memory that challenges the monolithic narratives promoted by Putin’s regime. Stepanova’s reflective approach, inspired by Hirsch, questions the reliability of memories and the process of remembering, engaging deeply with the concept of postmemory, where the past is not just remembered but actively shaped and reshaped by those who did not directly experience it. Stepanova’s work is both a personal journey and a broader commentary on collective memory in Russia, suggesting that the act of remembering is a form of resistance against the erasure and manipulation of history (2022: 136).

Marja Sorvari’s *Displacement and (Post)memory in Post-Soviet Women’s Writing* is a significant contribution to the study of memory, displacement, and women’s literature in post-Soviet Russia. Through her nuanced analysis of works by Ulitskaya, Chizhova, Alexievich, and Stepanova, the author illuminates the complex strategies through which they resist the dominant historical narratives of Putin’s regime as they do not “conform to reasserting ‘imperial greatness’ but can be seen as heirs of Soviet documentary prose in its form of political resistance” (2022: 15).

By focusing on themes of displacement, lived religion, postmemory and polyphony Sorvari offers rooted insights into how the works of the Russian women writers presented establishes “a living connection” between generations of women and memories (2022: 158).

Sorvari's book is an essential resource for scholars interested in Russian literature and memory studies, providing valuable perspectives on the ongoing cultural battles over history and memory in Russia and paving the way for future reflections on women's literature as a breakthrough state ideology.

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Bertrand Westphal, *L’Infini culturel. Théorie littéraire et fragilité du divers*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2023, 203 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-52160-5.

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Dans un monde globalisé et hyper-médiatisé comme celui d’aujourd’hui, la représentation artistique des espaces entraîne, inévitablement, une interrogation à propos de la variété culturelle habitant notre planète. Bertrand Westphal, fondateur de la géocritique, le sait bien. C’est pour cette raison qu’il nous livre une série de questions abordant ce thème crucial dans *L’Infini culturel. Théorie littéraire et fragilité du divers* pour la compréhension du panorama culturel et critique actuel.

Il s’agit bien sûr d’un défi, puisque l’infini se laisse difficilement renfermer dans les pages d’un livre. C’est peut-être pour cette raison que l’auteur décline les titres des six chapitres composant son essai au pluriel, pour souligner la non-exhaustivité des cas dont il est ici question. Cependant, ces *case studies* ne sont pas le fruit d’un aléa, tout comme les enjeux qu’ils proposent : le relativisme du point de vue adopté, la stratification des liaisons intertextuelles, la déterritorialisation de l’œuvre d’art et sa circulation – pour n’en citer que quelques-uns – étaient déjà au centre de la réflexion de l’auteur. Ici, ces thèmes sont étalés en tant que points de repère, ils interrogent le lecteur qui voudrait s’orienter dans l’entrelacs des manifestations artistiques animant notre planète.

Dans le premier chapitre (« Infinies ouvertures »), l’auteur fournit quelques exemples d’œuvres d’art qui l’ont amené à se questionner à propos de l’infini. De l’interaction de ces expériences, on dégage une contradiction qui apparaît insoluble : d’un côté, l’être humain est obligé de constater l’étroitesse de sa perspective, dans l’espace et dans le temps ; de l’autre, son imagination, qui ne se fait pas coïncider par la réalité tangible, comporte un effet de vertige.

C'est donc à partir de cette prémisse qu'il faut penser l'infini. Comme dans le court-métrage *Power of Ten* des frères Eames, l'ambition à l'infini est destinée à se cogner contre les limites de la perception humaine. Cependant, il faut reculer devant la tentation présomptueuse de considérer l'être humain en tant que mesure de l'incommensurable. Si restreinte soit notre perspective sur le monde, elle est toujours doublée par le regard d'autres espèces qui habitent la planète, comme le rappelle le travail de l'artiste Tomás Saraceno à propos des aérographies arachnéennes. Les toiles tissées par les araignées s'éclosent sur l'infinité de l'espace : il suffit de changer de point de vue pour en percevoir la profondeur. C'est la leçon du *street art*, art marginal et contingent transformant la ville en palimpseste infiniment (ré)écrit. C'est le jeu du philatéliste Donald Evans, qui alimentait l'infini par l'invention de timbres-poste provenant de pays imaginaires et c'est le défi politique lancé par des œuvres comme *Kikito*, de JR, dénonçant la nature illusoire et relative des lignes de frontière. La pluralité des points de vue débouche ainsi sur l'incertitude, sur le basculement de ce qu'on appelle « Réel ».

L'instabilité de toute réalité dite objective est le sujet du second chapitre (« Apories focales »). Récupérant le concept optique de parallaxe, déjà exploité par Slavoj Žižek, l'auteur argumente en faveur d'une réalité pluriverselle, irréductible à un seul point de vue, et il nous met en garde face aux tentations offertes par le démon de l'analogie, consistant à renfermer l'éventail infini des perspectives dans une même grille interprétative du réel. Citant la pensée posthumaniste de Rosi Braidotti et celle écologique de Bruno Latour, Westphal critique le stellionat de la planète Terre pratiqué par les humains et propose l'humilité comme ultime recours des *terrestres* : « l'humble est la personne qui se sait faite d'*humus* et d'*hétérogène*. Elle s'est avisée qu'elle est mélange et transformation de *matières organiques* et de *cultures* » (p. 41). Autrement dit, l'époque réclame une nouvelle éthique du point de vue qui, sans ambages, doit transcender les frontières humanistes de ce qu'en Occident on qualifie de « culture », en assumant son aporie de fond. Le récit aporétique, qui « ne craint pas de signaler les limites qui affectent le bien-fondé des combinatoires culturelles dominantes » (p. 54), se révèle fondamental pour embrasser la pluralité de l'infini culturel.

L'aporie, en tant que contradiction insoluble, se fait également contestation du mythe occidental de l'Un. Dans le troisième chapitre (« Bibliothèques alternatives »), la généalogie linéaire de la culture européenne est passée au crible de multiples influences et contaminations qui l'ont nourrie. L'auteur nous livre, entre autres, l'exemple des *Fables* de Jean de La Fontaine,

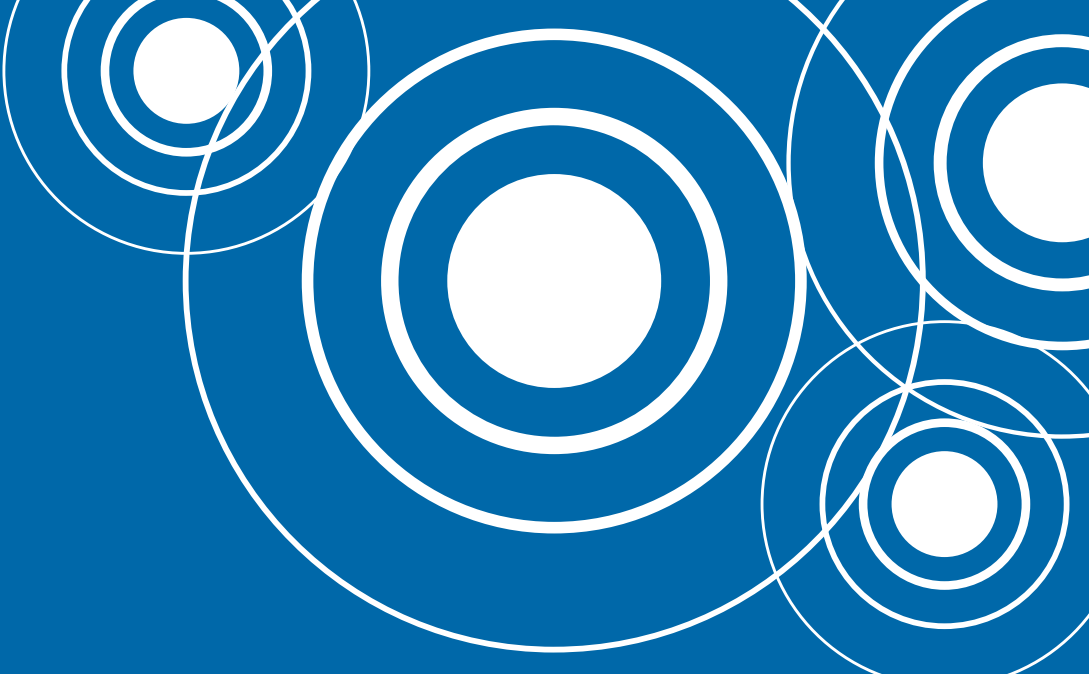
dont les sources indiennes, arabes et persanes demeurent inconnues pour la plupart des lecteurs. À partir du classique indien *Panchatantra*, les bêtes des *Fables* voyagent jusqu'à la Méditerranée en suivant le chemin des marchandises cultivées dans les colonies, comme les pêches et les abricots ; leur origine plonge dans l'oubli, ainsi que l'étymologie des substantifs désignant ces fruits, désormais considérés autochtones en Europe. L'heure est venue donc de reconnaître l'arbitraire qui préside à la constitution du canon occidental, de réclamer la déterritorialisation propre de l'infini culturel.

Toutefois, l'aspiration à la déterritorialisation est balancée par la conscience que chaque réalité sociale accède à la culture d'une manière différente. Ainsi, pour éviter de tomber dans le piège de l'universalisme, l'auteur consacre deux chapitres (ch. 4 « Asymétries planétaires », ch. 5 « Mécaniques universelles ») à l'étude de cas spécifiques analysés sous une loupe éminemment sociologique. Après un bref aperçu des prix littéraires décernés à l'échelle globale – dont le prix Nobel –, le quatrième chapitre se focalise sur le concept d'oligopole à frange appliqué en particulier aux domaines de l'édition et du cinéma d'Afrique subsaharienne. Réfléchissant sur la réception des romans africains anglophones et francophones, l'auteur arrive à la conclusion que, d'un côté, « [t]out un pan de la production littéraire 'africaine' est rendu allogène du fait de l'entre-deux dans lequel elle évolue et de la condition diasporique qui souvent la caractérise » (p. 102). De l'autre côté, le centre de l'oligopole, à savoir l'Europe et les États-Unis, demeure essentiellement imperméable aux influences des franges périphériques africaines. Il en est de même pour la production cinématographique africaine, désormais dépendante des plateformes de *streaming*. Face à l'aplatissement culturel menacé par la globalisation, seule la pratique de la traduction semble garantir la circulation des produits culturels à l'extérieur de leur champ d'origine. Cependant, un regard à l'*Index Translationum* dressé par l'Unesco fait basculer cette certitude. L'auteur constate le déséquilibre caractérisant le marché de la traduction à l'échelle planétaire : l'aiguille de la balance de l'export continue à pendre du côté de l'anglais, tandis que les langues dites « minoritaires » demeurent peu traduites, surtout entre elles. Les langues parlées dans le centre de l'oligopole détiennent tous les avantages du procès traductif, ce qui pose un frein à la diversité culturelle à l'échelle planétaire.

L'auteur approfondit sa réflexion à propos de la traduction dans le cinquième chapitre consacré essentiellement à la notion de *world literature*. Face à l'existence d'une critique monopolisée par les États-Unis et à la naissance d'une *born translated literature* (Rebecca Walkowitz), il convient de se

demander : « [c]omment éviter les réflexes ethnocentrés issus de l'ancrage culturel de l'observateur » (p. 135). Selon l'auteur, la *world literature* – notion qu'il juge intraduisible – ne donne pas de réponse convaincante à cette question pressante : animée sans doute par une « appréhension du monde dictée par d'anciens tropismes coloniaux » (p. 153), elle reste foncièrement anglocentrique et donc aux antipodes d'une authentique littérature-monde décentrée et extraterritoriale.

En définitive, le livre de Westphal approfondit deux nœuds centraux de l'approche géocritique : d'abord, la question de la multifocalisation, étroitement liée au positionnement du sujet et au besoin de l'explicitier ; ensuite, celle de la transgressivité d'un espace désormais devenu fluide. Comme on précise dans le chapitre 6 (« Musées inachevés »), il vaut mieux prendre acte de la nécessité de repenser le concept de frontière – soit-elle culturelle ou nationale – sous forme de seuil ouvert et franchissable. À l'image du ruban de Möbius, la frontière crée deux espaces – intérieur et extérieur – qui sont relatifs et coextensifs l'un à l'autre. Reconnaître la continuité de ces deux espaces antithétiques signifie échanger le découpage et le souci de finitude à l'œuvre dans l'atlas contre un autre épistème, celui de l'archive, ouvert à une perpétuelle circulation des savoirs.



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