11. Populism in Italy before 1992. An Analysis of Parliamentary Speeches by Guglielmo Giannini, Marco Pannella, and Umberto Bossi

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Abstract

The study adopts a historical perspective, analyzing from a linguistic and rhetorical point of view the parliamentary speeches of three Italian populist politicians before April 1992, that is to say, before the fall of the traditional Italian parties that dominated the scene in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of a new political era. The aim is to ascertain whether the formal characteristics of Italian populist discourse are completely dependent on the general political landscape and on the mass media or whether it is possible to identify any linguistic or rhetorical features that are inherently linked to Italian populism.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been wide interest in the language of populist politicians in Italy, such as Matteo Salvini, the federal secretary of the Lega Nord, and Beppe Grillo, the charismatic leader of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (see for example Giovinazzo 2020; Lotti 2015; McDonnel & Ondelli 2020; Nobili 2019; Ondelli 2014). This is obviously linked to the increasing importance of populist parties in Italian politics since Silvio Berlusconi won the Italian political elections in 1994, as his political profile shows some clear populist attributes (see for example Campus 2006: 135–217). Focusing on the most recent decades, however, leaves it unclear how much the linguistic and rhetorical traits that may be found in the texts produced by these politicians

(political speeches, interviews, tweets etc.) depend on their being popu-
list, or rather on the deep change that both the Italian political system
and political communication itself underwent in those decades. This is
why I will adopt a historical perspective, analysing the parliamentary
speeches of three Italian populist politicians before April 1992, that is,
before the fall of the traditional Italian parties that dominated the scene
in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of a new poli-
tical era. The aim is to ascertain whether or not it is possible to identify
any linguistic or rhetorical features that are linked to Italian populist
discourse itself. This does not mean, obviously, that the features at stake
should be regarded as signs of populism: in other words, the relation-
ship between content and form should be intended as being one-way.

The research framework adopted here diverges from both critical
discourse analysis and the automatic analysis of textual data applied to
politics. It consists instead in identifying syntactic, lexical and rhetorical
features that characterise the style of the texts through close reading,
following a scholarly tradition in the history of the Italian language (see
Colombo 2014; Dell'Anna 2010; Gualdo 2013; Leso 1994).

Before tackling the main subject of this study, however, it is necessary
to explain the conceptualisation of populism that will be adopted here.

2. Approaches to populism

Political scientists and philosophers split into two main groups regar-
ding populism: those who consider it a political style and those who
consider it an ideology. This way of putting things is surely simplistic
because it does not take into account several important nuances and
differences that characterise both groups, but it is nonetheless useful.

One of the leading scientific figures for the first approach is the
Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau, who sees populism as a
discursive strategy employed by elites in order to maximise popular
support. According to this view, the words "people" and "elite" are
just empty boxes, communicational tools that do not refer to specific
and invariable content. As Laclau states in his influential book *On
Populist Reason*:

> There is in any society a reservoir of raw anti-status quo feelings which
> crystallize in some symbols *quite independently of the forms of their poli-
> tical articulation*, and it is their presence we intuitively perceive when we
> call a discourse or a mobilization 'populistic' (Laclau 2005: 123; emphasis
> in original).

Therefore, it is not "the particular character" of an ideology or institution that makes it populistic but "a certain inflection of its themes". Even if they differ from this way of thinking in some aspects, approaches that see populism as an organisational or a cultural style may be redirected to Laclau's setting of the problem.

By contrast, the second group of scholars tries to identify the key concepts that may be seen as typical of populist movements. One of the first attempts in this direction was the seminal book *Populism* by Margaret Canovan (1981). Nowadays, a leading figure within the ideational approach is Cas Mudde, who proposed a definition of populism as follows:

> An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde 2004: 543; see also Mudde 2017: 29).

It must be said that many scholars who use an ideational approach refrain from using the term *ideology*, because they argue that populism may not be compared with classical ideologies such as Marxism and liberalism. For example, Marco Tarchi thinks it better to use the term *mentality* instead of *ideology* and defines populism as:

> la mentalità che individua il popolo come una totalità organica artificiosamente divisa da forze ostili, gli attribuisce naturali qualità etiche, ne contrappone il realismo, la laboriosità e l'integrità all'ipocrisia, all'inefficienza e alla corruzione delle oligarchie politiche, economiche, sociali e culturali e ne rivendica il primato, come fonte di legittimazione del potere, al di sopra di ogni forma di rappresentanza e di mediazione (Tarchi 2015: 77).

Neither Mudde nor Tarchi includes the role of leaders in their definitions, but it must be said that the presence of a charismatic guide who can understand the people and their will because he or she is one of them is one of the main features that characterise most populist movements.

In this paper, I will adopt the ideational approach, even if it is not relevant here which definition is the best and whether populism should be seen as a "thin-centered" ideology, following Mudde, as a mentality, following Tarchi, or as something else. As I aim to ascertain whether we can identify one or more rhetorical features typical of Italian populism before 1992, the ideational approach presents two obvious advantages: first of all, if we are going to study the rhetorical style of populism,

defining populism itself as a style would be very problematic. It is true that the word "style", within the approach pursued by Ernesto Laclau or Pierre-André Taguieff, is intended not just as a manner of writing and speaking (to echo the Oxford English Dictionary) but in a much broader sense.[1] Nonetheless, the chances of starting from where we ought to arrive, thus falling into a vicious circle, would be quite high.

Second, if we see populism as a political style, it becomes easy to look at populists as people who merely use a discourse strategy without really believing what they say. Some scholars clearly state this point: as Cas Mudde (2017: 31) explains, they accuse populists "of saying whatever the people want to hear in an opportunistic attempt to gain popularity". By contrast, I will assume that populists, on the whole, do believe what they say and that they use a certain way of saying it because they are convinced that this way is suited to the content they want to communicate. In fact, as Mudde (2017: 31) puts it, "[i]t is unscientific to simply presume that certain politicians lie – or, to put it more neutrally, act purely strategically – and others do not". Before approving or rejecting populist discourses, we have to understand them, and this is my aim with Italy's situation (compare Gualdo 2004: 235–236).

3. Italian populism in the 21st century

As Guy Hermet (2001: 380) observes, Italy is "le site par excellence de la déconfiture des partis parlementaires face aux jeunes formations 'antipolitiques' ou 'postclassiques'", to the extent that it became a sort of laboratory for Western European populism (see also p. 396). This statement is even truer nowadays, when Italian politics is influenced by two clearly populist parties, the right-wing Lega Nord and the left-wing Movimento Cinque Stelle.

While the Movimento Cinque Stelle is quite recent, having been founded in 2009, the origins of the Lega Nord date back to 1989. Moreover, from 1992 until recent times, Italian politics has been deeply shaped by Silvio Berlusconi, a politician who has shown many populist features joined together with ideas that belong to liberalism. In fact, the 2004 manifesto of Berlusconi's party, Carta dei valori di Forza Italia, states

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[1]   See for example Taguieff (2002: 80), where populism is considered "un style politique susceptible de mettre en forme divers matériaux symboliques et de se fixer en de multiples lieux idéologiques, prenant la coloration politique du lieu d'accueil. Il se présente aussi, et inséparablement, comme un ensemble d'opérations rhétoriques mises en œuvre par l'exploitation symbolique de certaines représentations sociales."

a clear rejection of populism: "La nostra visione della politica è lontana da concezioni populiste, che immaginano di dover difendere una presunta purezza del popolo anche attraverso l'espulsione dal 'sistema' dei suoi nemici." Nonetheless, Berlusconi's rejection of professional politicians, his incessant reference to the so-called "società civile" (civil society), and his role as a charismatic leader may be seen as populist elements (see Tarchi 2015: 279–302; at p. 302 the quotation from the Carta dei valori).

As a result of this political panorama, Italian scholars have written extensively about populist discourse during the last two decades. Even if it is impossible here to take into account all that has been said about the political language used by Berlusconi and the leaders of the Lega Nord and Movimento Cinque Stelle, it is worth recalling some key concepts. As a premise, it must be acknowledged that some of these analyses have a strong prejudice as their starting point. In other words, their aim, whether it is clearly stated or not, is to unveil and denounce how a politician deceives public opinion. Reading these kinds of papers, it becomes evident that the authors think about themselves as defenders of the truth who, thanks to their better understanding, can show to savant colleagues what should stay behind the curtain and how to explain it to naive readers. Some scholars see ground for this attitude in the fact that populists represent a threat to democracy. Even if one may be worried about the growth of populist movements in the West and one may feel far away from their political claims, populism as such "cannot be described as anti-democratic per se" (Mény & Surel 2002: 5). As Marco Tarchi puts it:

> i movimenti populisti non rifuggono mai dal misurarsi con i concorrenti sul piano della conquista del consenso e delle leve del potere […]. E non si può trascurare il fatto che, in tutti i casi in cui in contesti democratici consolidati i movimenti populisti sono entrati in coalizioni di governo, non hanno cercato di modificare i caratteri di fondo del regime (Tarchi 2015: 65).

It is also wrong to equate populism with fascism and the extreme right, even though Italian fascism undoubtedly showed populist features. The populists' view of the state and its relationship with civil society is in fact the exact opposite of that of fascists, because for populists it is the society that comes first and has no need to be led and directed by the state (see Tarchi 2015: 119). Indeed,

> many parties on the extreme Right are not populist and many populist movements are too specific, heterogeneous or eclectic to be identified with

the extreme Right […]. Traditionally, the parties on the extreme Right have a declared aversion to democracy and claim to combat its existence, but at the same time populist parties insist that they are the only democrats, because they want to restore power to the people (Mény & Surel 2002: 4).

Bearing all this in mind, we can note that many scholars have pointed out how Berlusconi's way of communicating was innovative inasmuch as it provided drastic simplification. According to Dell'Anna and Lala (2004: 159), "Berlusconi ha costruito un linguaggio fatto di un vocabolario quotidiano e alla portata di tutti". Campus (2006: 167) observes that he adopted "un linguaggio politico che, essendo pensato per il veicolo televisivo, è appunto semplice e colloquiale, pieno di detti popolari e modi di dire, influenzato dal gergo sportivo e pubblicitario. […] Un linguaggio così semplice da apparire a taluni quasi semplicistico e approssimativo, ma che risulta comunque sempre chiaro e comprensibile." The same has been noted for both leaders of the Lega Nord: as for Umberto Bossi, we can quote a passage published on *Lombardia autonomista* in 1992, where he contrasts himself with Martinazzoli, who was at the time the national secretary of the Democrazia Cristiana:

> Quello che io dico […] lo capiscono tutti. Ed è per questo che mi votano. Quello che dice lui invece (e dicono i suoi più autorevoli "amici" dc) è difficilmente comprensibile perché fa parte del gergo del "politichese" (Bossi, quoted in Sarubbi 1995: 23).

Something similar may be said of Matteo Salvini, the actual federal secretary of the Lega Nord: according to Ondelli (2017), his speeches, compared to those by Angelino Alfano (of the right-wing Alternativa Popolare) and Matteo Renzi (of the left-wing Partito Democratico), were the easiest to understand even for people who attended school for just eight years ("anche per chi ha la licenza media").[2]

In contrasting speeches by Matteo Renzi and Beppe Grillo, the charismatic leader of the Movimento Cinque Stelle, Lotti (2015: 110, 114) observes that the latter shows "attenzione nella scelta delle parole e cura della semplicità"; in fact, "il linguaggio di Grillo è semplice, comprensibile e costituito da parole di base, ma allo stesso tempo non esclude l'uso dei tecnicismi". But, while Renzi's communicative style is calm, Grillo's is impetuous and makes use of slang expressions and even insults. This remark has been made by almost all of the scholars who

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[2]   See McDonnel and Ondelli 2020 for a new and different evaluation of this simplicity in populist discourse.

dealt with Grillo's political language. Following Ondelli, it is interesting to underline the fact that swearwords are not just frequent but they are used to highlight populistic topics, such as the contrast between the people and the elite:

> Per esempio, le espressioni con culo (terzo lemma esclusivo più frequente) identificano da una parte il popolo virtuoso e lavoratore: *[…] donne che non hanno le labbra di polistirolo e i culi di gomma. Sono donne che lavorano, che tirano su la famiglia, sono donne che si fanno un culo così dalla mattina alla sera […]* in opposizione all'establishment nullafacente: *[…] tre anni, trentasei mesi, più di mille giorni perché quattro senatori muovessero il culo per ascoltare 350.000 cittadini […]* (Ondelli 2014).

The same is true for Matteo Salvini: his speeches are full of embarrassing words, like *cazzo*, *palle* and *fregarsene*. What strikes the analyst is the fact that these swearwords are usually used as a means of attacking political opponents, for example by calling the Italian state a thief (Ondelli 2017).

However, if we look back at the speeches of Berlusconi and Bossi, we do not find a large number of curse words. In Berlusconi's case, vulgarity is absent, and Bossi's speeches display just one occurrence of *somaraccio* ("moron"), which is a light insult compared to those used by Grillo and Salvini (Ondelli 2016: 337–338). Many scholars have indeed noted coarse language when studying the communication of Bossi and the Lega Nord (see for example Antonelli 2000: 227). Still, this seems to be restricted to slogans and some interviews, rather than being an ever-present feature.

Moreover, it is worth asking whether the use of simplified and vulgar language should be seen as typical of populist movements or as a feature related to modern political communication itself. In a seminal essay, Giuseppe Antonelli (2000: 215) drew a distinction between the Italian language spoken by politicians during the so-called First Republic and the Second Republic. Unlike France, Italy did not undergo any institutional regime change after World War II: the term Second Republic ("seconda Repubblica"), introduced by newspapers and widely accepted nowadays, designates the transition from a political scene dominated by traditional parties, mostly the Democrazia Cristiana and the Partito Comunista Italiano, to a new panorama, characterised by the birth of new political subjects like Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the Lega Nord and the Partito Democratico della Sinistra, which rose from the ashes of the Communist Party (compare Colarizi 2007: 170–203).

According to Antonelli, the shift from the First to the Second Republic brought with it a corresponding shift from the "superiority paradigm" to the "mirroring paradigm". In the superiority paradigm, politicians speak in a better and more cultivated style than most of their voters, thus giving them a model to look at. A 1992 quotation from the linguist Benvenuto Terracini explains the underlying criterion: "tutti sanno il fascino che hanno per il volgo le parole difficili: non le intende, ma sono di moda, piene di possibilità impensate, quindi tanto più attraenti quanto più avvolte nella nebbia" (quoted in Antonelli 2000: 215). Within the mirroring paradigm, politicians no longer try to impress the public with their cultivated speech. Quite the opposite: they use "parole semplici e in vari contesti – compresi talvolta quelli istituzionali – sempre più parolacce […]. Che ci piaccia o no, d'altronde, le parolacce fanno ormai parte del modo di esprimersi quotidiano e informale di quasi tutti gli italiani" (Antonelli 2011: 44).

Ondelli (2017) points at this problem by asking: are we all populists? In fact, using simple words and sentences and even resorting to insults are features linked to the crisis of traditional political movements and modern mass media rather than to a populist inspiration, even if populist politicians are characterised by more frequent and intense exploitation of these rhetorical choices. Gabriele Pedullà (2019), in his foreword to an anthology of the most important Italian political speeches, identifies microphones, radio, cinema and television as the reasons why political oratory radically changed in the Nineties:

> Per interi decenni, amplificazione elettrica della voce, radio, cinema e televisione sono stati soprattutto uno strumento attraverso il quale milioni di cittadini potevano familiarizzarsi sempre meglio con i propri rappresentanti; poi, gradualmente, il mezzo ha avuto il sopravvento sul messaggio (per riprendere una famosa formula di Marshall McLuhan) e i politici hanno cominciato a modulare i propri discorsi per renderli più compatibili all'universo dei mass media. Grosso modo nel giro di una generazione, tra la metà degli anni Settanta e la metà degli anni Novanta, è cambiato tutto (2019: CCIII–CCIV).

The same may be obviously said about the Internet, as Antonelli notes in his book *Volgare eloquenza*, where he bemoans the decline of Italian political language in the last decades:

> All'affermarsi di quella che abbiamo chiamato "volgare eloquenza" ha sicuramente contribuito lo spostarsi di gran parte del dibattito politico nell'ambito virtuale (ed emotivamente molto esposto) di Internet (Antonelli 2017: 99).

4. The corpus

My analysis originates in the problems and questions outlined above. The aim is to ascertain whether or not there are rhetorical features that may be seen as typical of Italian populist discourse before the Nineties, that is, before the profound communication changes ushered in by new media and by the transition from the First to the Second Republic. I will therefore take into account the parliamentary speeches of three Italian politicians: Guglielmo Giannini, Marco Pannella and Umberto Bossi.

The first, born in 1891 and having grown up in Naples, was a journalist and playwright. In 1942, during World War II, his son Mario died in a plane crash. This event transformed Giannini's once-apathetic attitude towards fascism to one of hatred, and stimulated him to engage actively in politics instead of just minding his own businesses. On 27 December 1944, he founded a new weekly publication, *L'Uomo qualunque* (*The Common Man*), which in autumn 1945 reached a circulation of 850,000 copies. Tired of the fascist dictatorship and the intrusion of politics into the lives of private citizens, and also of the return of traditional parties, Giannini, following the success of the weekly newspaper, founded an opinion movement called Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque ("Common Man's Front"). Giannini's view of political affairs is explained in his book *La Folla: Seimila anni di lotta contro la tirannide*, published in 1945, where one can find all the ideas typical of populism in the 21st century (compare Tarchi 2015: 177). The Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque gained 5.3% of votes in the parliamentary election of 1946, getting 30 deputies to the Constituent Assembly, including Giannini himself. But, after a few years, a series of wrong political choices caused many people to stop supporting the party, which got only five deputies and one senator in the parliamentary election of 1948. Giannini was nominated to be a member of parliament only in 1949, due to an appeal, and the Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque came to an end (see Setta 1975).

Born in 1930, Giacinto Pannella, also called Marco, was among the founders of the Partito Radicale. He remained its charismatic leader until his death, despite promoting frequent turnover for the role of secretary. From 1960 to 1962, Pannella was in Paris as a correspondent of the Italian newspaper *Il Giorno*. After returning to Italy, he contributed to leading the Radical Party to fight against the Catholic Church and military power. He was one of the movement leaders that obtained the introduction of legal divorce in 1970 and won the referendum on this same law in 1974, getting nearly 60% of the votes. After this political

battle, Pannella became famous in the whole country. He was elected member of parliament in 1976, and he characterised his political action by non-conventional methods, such as obstructionism, hunger strikes, and the promotion of several referendums on many different topics, to let the people decide for themselves (see Teodori 2017).

Some political scientists do not consider Pannella to have been a populist. Gianluca Passarelli, for example, claims that:

> the Radical Party, founded by Marco Pannella, is a libertarian party formed in the 1970s that we cannot consider as a populist party due to the fact that it recognizes the legitimacy of the centrality of law, despite the fact that radicals also fight to change many policies and laws. Instead, populist parties and movements do not recognize the role of law, which they publicly contest and which they try to delegitimize (Passarelli 2015: 227).

However, it is disputable that populist parties do not recognise the role of law: as we have already seen, they must not be confused with right-wing extremism, which aims to shake the foundations of democracy. By contrast, the strong propaganda of the Partito Radicale against political parties and institutions seems quite populistic. In this sense, Hermet (2001: 400, 404) considered it "ancêtre du futurisme antipolitique et 'postindustriel'": the radicals may be seen as populists, on the one hand, because of "leur message primordial, centré sur la mise en œuvre immédiate d'une citoyenneté participative de plein exercice offerte à tous", on the other hand, because of other complementary elements such as "leur dénonciation de la corruption et de l'hypocrisie des partis établis comme du système de gouvernement en vigueur dans son ensemble" and "l'ascendant charismatique de leur leader". In fact, as Marco Tarchi (2015: 216) notes, Pannella shows the main attributes of a populist leader: "Uomo provvidenziale estraneo ai maneggi dei potenti, vendicatore dell'intero popolo, sempre disposto all'ascolto degli umili e dei trascurati, amplificatore degli stati d'animo diffusi tra la gente."

Born in 1941, Umberto Bossi graduated from high school (*liceo scientifico*) and later began studying medicine at the University of Pavia, though he did not get a degree. In 1982 he founded the weekly publication *Lombardia autonomista* and in 1984 the political movement "Lega Lombarda", of which he became federal secretary. Both the weekly publication and the movement were renamed "Lega Nord" at the beginning of the Nineties. In 1987 Bossi was elected senator, but his movement polled only 1.8% of the votes; a few years later, however, at the regional elections in 1990, the Lega obtained 20% of the

votes in Lombardy, the most populated and richest region in Italy, and 5.4% in the whole country, showing that the landscape was rapidly changing (Colarizi 2007: 192–194). During the transition from the so-called First Republic to the second one, Bossi rode the wave, presenting himself as the new man in politics and becoming a protagonist on the Italian political scene together with Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi. As Gianluca Passarelli (2015: 234) writes, "even though the party's leadership has stressed the territorial claim in particular, the main element defining the L[ega] N[ord]'s activity and style is its strongly rooted populism". There is little doubt among scholars about it, and it is usually acknowledged that populism is a specific trait of the Lega since its origins. According to Tarchi:

> nelle motivazioni che ne determinano la nascita, nelle forme di espressione, nello stile di azione, nelle caratteristiche della leadership e dell'organizzazione, nei temi valorizzati per attrarre consensi, così come nelle strategie adottate nei vari periodi dell'evoluzione che lo ha portato a essere, da gruppuscolo marginale quale era in origine, prima movimento di opposizione e poi partito di governo in tre diversi periodi, il leghismo appare come un'incarnazione quasi idealtipica del populismo (Tarchi 2015: 243).

Looking at these three populist politicians, my analysis will concentrate on their parliamentary speeches, and not consider television talks, interviews and the like. This is meant to avoid the possible confusion introduced by considering different media and to allow a comparison between the three: even if Pannella and Bossi speak in the television era, while they are talking to other members of parliament they appear to be in the same communicative setting as Giannini.[3]

However, it must be added that official transcripts of parliamentary sessions changed over time towards a greater degree of trustworthiness. In 1987, Aurelia Mohrhoff, who was in charge of recording parliamentary speeches at the Camera dei Deputati, recounts:

> Non più tardi di una quindicina di anni fa il comandamento del nostro superiore gerarchico era, per noi giovani stenografi: "Se l'oratore ha parlato male, tu devi farlo parlare bene". […] Ne risultava un testo asettico, "imbalsamato", e tutto sommato, diciamolo francamente, falso (Mohrhoff, quoted in Giuliano 2016: 135).

The situation changed over time:

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[3]   Note that parliamentary sessions have been video-recorded since 1996.

Abbiamo oramai al nostro attivo una serie di piccole conquiste […] I no-
stri resoconti parlano oggi non la lingua del Parlamento, ma quella del
parlamentare[4].

Even with this warning in mind, it seems fair to compare parliamentary
speeches from different decades. As for Giannini, I analysed his speeches
at the Camera dei Deputati during the first legislature (08.05.1948–
24.06.1953). For Pannella, I considered the speeches pronounced at the

Table 11.1. Corpus.

Speaker	Parliamentary sessions m.s.: morning session a.s.: afternoon session n.s.: night session	Rough number of words	Rough number of characters (excluding spaces)
Giannini	16.11.1949, 20.12.1949 a.s., 07.06.1950, 09.06.1950 a.s., 27.06.1950 a.s., 21.12.1950 a.s., 10.06.1952 a.s., 16.06.1952, 17.06.1952 n.s., 18.06.1952 a.s., 24.06.1952 n.s., 19.12.1952 a.s., 18.01.1953, 13.03.1953 a.s.	39,000	201,000
Pannella	(the year is always the same, 1976) 09.07, 15.07, 27.07, 28.07, 29.07, 05.08, 10.08, 28.09, 29.09, 30.09, 01.10, 07.10, 08.10, 12.10, 15.10, 19.10, 22.10, 26.10, 27.10, 28.10 m.s., 29.10, 08.11, 09.11, 10.11, 11.11, 18.11, 22.11, 24.11, 25.11 m.s., 25.11 a.s., 30.11 a.s.	71,000	375,000
Bossi	01.08.1987, 21.11.1987, 19.02.1988, 23.04.1988, 10.02.1989, 26.07.1989 a.s., 27.07.1989 a.s., 02.08.1989 a.s., 01.08.1990, 16.01.1991 a.s., 17.01.1991, 19.04.1991 a.s., 20.04.1991, 25.06.1991 m.s., 16.07.1991, 25.07.1991 m.s., 31.01.1992	25,000	140,000

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4   Quoted from Giuliano (2016 : 135); see also Cortelazzo (1985), Gualdo
(2013: 135–137), Telve (2014: 46–49) and Colombo 2014: 269–271).

Camera from July to November 1976, at the beginning of the seventh legislature. A good reason to limit the scope to five months is that Pannella's speeches are much more frequent and usually longer than those of Giannini and Bossi. As far as Bossi is concerned, I looked at the parliamentary speeches held at the Senato during the tenth legislature (02.07.1987–23.04.1992). All the speeches considered are those published in the official transcripts of parliamentary sessions. I took into account only plenary sessions and did not analyse obituaries or short speeches that comprise five lines or less in the official transcripts. Table 11.1 clarifies the corpus considered.[5]

Even though the scientific literature on the language of politics in Italy is fairly rich (a recent survey is provided by Cortelazzo 2017), this is not the case as far as parliamentary speeches during the so-called First Republic are concerned (see Dell'Anna 2010: 60–62; Gualdo 2013: 135–137). The main basis for comparison for our study is Luca Giuliano's blog *Parola di leader* (paroladileader.com), which shows the results of a research project into parliamentary speeches delivered by 84 political leaders from 1948 to 2011. Unfortunately, Giuliano's automatic analysis of textual data is quite distant from the scientific perspective adopted here: as Bolasco (2013: 41) puts it, "il trattamento automatico dei testi […] presuppone di *non leggere* il testo" (italics in the original), whereas our analysis is based on close reading.[6]

5. Populist parliamentary speeches before 1992

It is no easy task identifying something in common between our three politicians. If we look at language simplification, we do not find a clear trend to set Giannini, Pannella and Bossi apart from other speakers. As for the latter, some passages show a style of speaking that does not avoid long and articulate sentences like the following:

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[5]   The corpus is imbalanced across the politicians, but as the speeches are analysed qualitatively, I thought it preferable to cover the whole legislature (just the first months for Pannella) rather than obtain a balance between them. To identify Bossi's relevant speeches, I utilised the index of parliamentary sessions of the Senato della Repubblica for the tenth legislature (years 1987–1992, vol. XLIII, second part, tome I). As for Giannini and Pannella, I supplemented the information provided on their webpages on the internet site "Camera dei deputati. Portale storico" with personal research (note that Pannella 2019 is largely incomplete).

[6]   It is also worth mentioning Bagaglini (2018), a PhD thesis about Guglielmo Giannini's political language, analysed within the framework of critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics.

> Noi, con tanta buona volontà, accettiamo la logica in base alla quale in una situazione di emergenza come quella attuale debbano comunque prevalere gli interessi del paese e quindi non voteremo contro questa riedizione straordinaria del Governo Goria, nonostante il disaccordo profondo sui contenuti, sulla validità, sulle finalità della sua manovra finanziaria, che non risana ma che aggrava sprechi, disservizi, ingiustizie (Senato della Repubblica, 19.02.1988, p. 66).

Guglielmo Giannini, maybe because he was a playwright, employs some learned words, like *burbanzoso* ("arrogant"), *colluttanti* ("fighting"), *foia* ("excitement"), *querimonie* ("complaints") and *vulnera* ("wounds"), all used in the speech delivered on 16 November 1949 (pp. 13521, 13519, 13519, 13518, 13521, respectively) and labelled literary or uncommon words not only by de Mauro (1999–2000), but also by Cappuccini and Migliorini (1959), which is a reference nearer to when the speech was held (I did not have the chance to refer to the first edition, published in 1945). Giannini even displays some fine literary references, like the following paraphrase of Dante's verses "tu ne vestisti / queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia" (Inferno XXXIII, 62–63):

> Dopo aver fatto di tutto per divorarci, oggi state facendo di tutto per irrobustirci. Potrei dunque dire, parafrasando il poeta: "Tu ne spogliasti queste povere carni ed or ne vesti" (Camera dei Deputati, 09.06.1950, p. 19263).

The same is true for Pannella: speaking at the Camera on 11 November 1976, he uses a Latin saying, *perinde ac cadaver*, and makes a tasteful reference to Dante (Inferno XXVII 120) in the following passage, where he refers to the speech of another member of parliament, Ferdinando Di Giulio:

> Lo avrei applaudito molto più a lungo di quanto non lo abbiate applaudito. Ma la pura e sterile gestualità, la mancanza sostanziale di moralità di un discorso del genere, quando viene rivolto a chi si sa che non può accoglierlo, per la contraddizione naturale che non lo consente... (p. 2060).

By contrast, Umberto Bossi is no cultivated man, though he sometimes quotes philosophers such as Vico and Kant. His mistake in pronouncing the word *sicumera* ("arrogance"), on 31 January 1992 (p. 42), is quite revealing:

> BOSSI. Stupisce perciò la sicùmera dell'onorevole Forlani.
> LAMA. Si dice sicumèra!

D'AMELIO, *sottosegretario di Stato per* i *lavori pubblici*. Si dice sicumèra. Ignorante!
BOSSI. Grazie per la correzione!

As far as the leader's role is concerned, we can point to the fact that Guglielmo Giannini often refers to himself and his own personal life during his speeches, putting himself in the spotlight. Pannella does not do the same, but his exhibitionist behaviour draws others' attention to him. For example, on 7 October 1976, Pannella refuses to sit down at his place, forcing the assembly president to let him out. His party comrades Mellini, Faccio and Bonino immediately follow his example. By contrast, Umberto Bossi is much less ready to attract attention to himself: he always speaks on behalf of his party, even if he is its only member in the Senate, and he does not refer to personal facts. Even if Bossi has been undoubtedly a charismatic leader, this does not emerge from his official speeches.

Let us turn to coarse language: obviously, the very fact that the speeches we are dealing with are parliamentary ones prevents the speakers from using swearwords. As Dell'Anna (2010: 51) recalls, "l'intervento parlamentare è […] un esempio di parlato formale", even though "il grado di formalità varia in base allo stile espressivo del personaggio politico, alla carica ricoperta in Parlamento e alla rilevanza politica, economica, sociale del tema discusso". That is why, when Pannella uses the word *balle* ("bullshit") on 30 November 1976 (pp. 2744–2745), he begs for pardon at the same time: "Forse di nuovo le libertà potrebbero essere conculcate […] non perché i compagni comunisti siano meno democratici […] non perché stalinisti: balle – chiedo scusa di questo termine."

On another occasion (9 November 1976), Pannella speaks of *diarrea* ("diarrhoea") to denounce the critical conditions which prisoners live in, and the assembly president reproaches him:

PANNELLA. Il detenuto, di notte, se è ammalato o (chiedo scusa, ma di queste cose la Repubblica consente ed esige che parliamo) se ha diarrea per un'ora, non ha altra soluzione che quella tremenda che voi potete immaginare, in assenza di servizi igienici e del bugliolo.
PRESIDENTE. Onorevole Pannella!
PANNELLA. Signor Presidente, la diarrea è una pessima cosa ed è triste doverla citare, ma la diarrea per i detenuti nel carcere delle Murate è un emblema di come vive la nostra Repubblica. Non è colpa mia (p. 1926).

What is interesting here is the fact that Pannella uses the word *diarrea* as a tool for intensifying the strength of what is said and for shaking the

audience, as the president's reaction shows. This aim is clearly stated in the speech delivered by Giannini on 24 June 1952:

> Credo che qualcuno dei miei onorevoli colleghi si ricorderà di un vecchio rimprovero che mi è stato mosso in questa Camera durante la Costituente, e cioè di avere adoperato nella mia battaglia politica espressioni non perfettamente ortodosse, qualche parola pungente, sonora, pepata, dei modi di dire, insomma, un po' troppo caldi. Bene, non nego quella mia caratteristica: e la voglio rivendicare e giustificare. Quello fu precisamente lo squadrismo verbale di cui mi servii perché non avevo altra arma che quella di dire delle parolacce, e le dissi (p. 39208).

Following Giannini's suggestion, we may note that coarse language does not seem relevant in itself, but as a weapon used to reinforce what the speaker believes is the truth. In other words, the point is not being vulgar or insulting but exaggerating the meaning of what is said to let the people grasp the message.

There is a specific figure of speech that serves this purpose, which is hyperbole: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, this consists of an "exaggerated or extravagant statement, used to express strong feeling or produce a strong impression, and not intended to be understood literally". This is exactly what populists do in their speeches, even if they are often ambiguous about the need to understand them literally or not. A good example is the use of the words *totalitarianism* and *totalitarian* made by Giannini: on 16 November 1949, he mentions "pink totalitarianism" several times, speaking of the Democrazia Cristiana:

> C'è un totalitarismo rosso come ce n'è uno nero che noi borghesi, noi uomini qualunque non amiamo. Ma c'è anche un totalitarismo rosa che nemmeno possiamo amare e che respingiamo (p. 13519).

On 9 June 1950, he speaks about the totalitarianism of the Western Allies:

> [Noi dobbiamo] Tendere con tutti i mezzi a far riconoscere che gli alleati, per loro dichiarazione, hanno combattuto il fascismo e non l'Italia. Anche se oggi ne hanno ripreso il totalitarismo e lo applicano per conto dei loro paesi (p. 19265).

On 24 June 1952, talking about media power in Italy, Giannini again mentions totalitarianism:

> Questa falsificazione della volontà democratica non soltanto non ha effetti democratici, ma finisce per avere effetti di carattere totalitario (p. 39207).

I think it would be naive to assume that Giannini did not know the meaning of totalitarianism or the differences between the fascist party and the Democrazia Cristiana, or between Hitler and Wilson. It is more reasonable to assume that he is using totalitarianism as a hyperbole to communicate his thought.

The same applies to Pannella, when he uses the noun *fascism* and the adjective *fascist* in an extensive meaning to speak about the Italian republican state, Italian judges or the Catholic Church:

> Anche le forze dell'ordine quest'anno hanno pagato un duro pedaggio in nome di leggi che, fasciste come sono, non ne avevamo nel 1953 e nel 1954 (Camera dei Deputati, 10.08.1976, p. 446).

> ROCELLI. Tu eri monarchico; a quel tempo.
> PANNELLA. Quello che ero io in quel tempo, te lo dirò in un'altra occasione. Ma questa polemica, *ad personam*, è gesuitica e fascista: tienilo bene in testa! (Camera dei Deputati, 10.08.1976, p. 448).

> La storia dell'arco costituzionale è una delle più tristi: in suo nome si è fatto passare a lungo un uso fascista della radiotelevisione (Camera dei Deputati, 10.08.1976, p. 454).

> Ma se fascismo non vuol dire queste cose, non adontatevi quando diciamo che siete voi [i.e. the deputees of the Democrazia Cristiana party] i grandi rappresentanti del fascismo, dello Stato corporativo, della dura realtà fascista, e non loro [i.e. the deputees of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) party] (Camera dei Deputati, 10.08.1976, p. 454).

> Il primo dovere è quello di dire se c'è il fascismo nella violenza delle istituzioni, come ce ne è più che nel teppismo privato di questo o di quello (Camera dei Deputati, 28.09.1976, p. 616).

> E per noi il fascismo non sono i teppismi di questo o di quelli: la cifra fascista è la violenza delle istituzioni, la violenza pubblica (Camera dei Deputati, 18.11.1976, p. 2335).

> Sono i problemi relativi alle strutture? Certo, non per la prava volontà di questo o quel magistrato fascista il quale, avendo tante domande di libertà provvisoria, va a scegliere la libertà provvisoria per il ricco e dimentica quella del *dossier* del povero (Camera dei Deputati, 18.11.1976, p. 2336).

> Ma nel Concordato del 1929, vivaddio, vi era e s'affermava lo Stato, fascista, con la Chiesa, fascista anch'essa (Camera dei Deputati, 30.12.1976,

p. 2746; it is worth noting that Pannella goes on saying to the MSI deputees: "Il continuatore di Mussolini è l'onorevole Moro, non voi").

Ve ne diamo atto: non siete nemmeno fascisti [to the MSI deputees]! Il fascismo è altrove: quei valori sono stati trasmessi dall'odio [...] nella DC contro l'alternativa storica che abbiamo rappresentato (Camera dei Deputati, 30.12.1976, p. 2746)[7].

Pannella is also famous for his hyperbolic actions: for example, the parliamentary debate on 26 September 1976 is about the fact that Pannella was arrested that very day in the morning because of his loud protesting during a process against the police officer Salvatore Margherito.

As for Bossi, it is easy to point out many exaggerated statements scattered throughout his speeches. On 2 August 1989, he compares the kidnapping of private citizens to that of the Italian politician Aldo Moro, an event that shocked the whole country:

Le ricordo che nel 1978, l'allora ministro dell'interno Cossiga si dimise ammettendo la inadeguatezza delle misure prese per la liberazione dell'onorevole Moro; credo che ciò che è valso per Cossiga per l'affare Moro dovrebbe valere per il ministro Gava rispetto agli attuali rapiti (p. 45).

On 19 April 1991, he compares the formation of a new government to a coup d'etat pursued without weapons: "Ecco perché in quest'aula io affermo solennemente che dietro a questo 'governicchio' zoppo forse si sta consumando un *golpe* bianco" (p. 83).

During the same speech, Bossi speaks of an illegal parliament and is reproached by the president of the assembly:

BOSSI. Attenti, però, i signori Andreotti, Cossiga, Craxi: se qualcosa va male a causa di questo parlamento illegittimo, se le elezioni politiche dovessero slittare oltre l'inizio della prossima primavera, se dovesse slittare l'elezione del nuovo Presidente della Repubblica, se qualcuno di voi spera di poter fare altri giochi di prestigio, coperto dalle nebbie dell'ingorgo costituzionale, allora sappia che i popoli che io rappresento cercheranno con forza la democrazia, cioè la libertà e la giustizia che voi negate al paese. Signor Presidente, i democratici non temono di distribuire le schede elettorali nelle mani dei cittadini. Sono i democratici da operetta che hanno paura.
PRESIDENTE. Senatore Bossi, devo ricordare che non è consentito nelle aule parlamentari riferirsi con espressioni come quelle che lei ha usato né al Presidente della Repubblica, né alle istituzioni parlamentari. Parlando di Parlamento illegittimo, lei allude a una qualche tara di illegittimità che

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7   Compare Cortelazzo (1980: 715), who notes that Pannella's speeches show «una visione schematica e generica della realtà».

questo Parlamento non sa di avere. È quindi frase inadatta al Parlamento, e che dovrebbe essere almeno spiegata, perché noi siamo tutti figli del suffragio universale; tutti siamo stati eletti dal popolo. Non riesco perciò a capire dove sia l'illegittimità del Parlamento (p. 84).

It is worth noting that if we analyse the language of Italian politicians who are not regarded as populists, such as Aldo Moro and Giorgio Almirante, we do not find a significant incidence of hyperbole.[8] By contrast, Aldo Moro's texts are characterised by what Desideri (1998: 221) calls softening rhetoric ("retorica della attenuazione"), expressed by the frequent substitution of direct expressions by a negation plus a noun or an adjective, for example *non opposizione, non tradizionale, non usuale, non ostili* and *non formale*. (Desideri 1998: 221).[9] Let us turn to Giorgio Almirante: as Tarchi (2015: 207–210) makes clear, the party he belonged to and led, the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, cannot be seen as a populist formation. However, Almirante's engaging eloquence has some traits that are similar to those found in populist speeches, including the use of neologisms such as *insurrezioncella, clericomarxismo* and *particizzare* (see Giuliano 2020). Thus, it is noteworthy that his parliamentary speeches, as far as I could ascertain,[10] lack any frequent use of hyperbole, even when he expresses strong opinions. A clear example is the speech delivered on 9 August 1976 regarding the third Italian government led by Giulio Andreotti, who accepted the support (through abstention) of the Communist Party but not that of the MSI. Here Almirante (2008: 3414, 3437) employs harsh expressions like "Siamo stati la cartina di tornasole […] dei suoi [i.e. Andreotti's] reali e vergognosi mercanteggiamenti di potere con l'estrema sinistra" or "Voi non vi prostituite, ma avviate il paese alla prostituzione! [to the deputees of the Democrazia Cristiana]", but not hyperboles. In the same speech, and having been interrupted by Marco Pannella, Almirante states the difference between the MSI and the radicals:

[8]   Aldo Moro, member of the Democrazia cristiana, served as secretary of his party, and as minister and prime minister of the Italian state; in 1978 he was kidnapped and killed by the far-left terrorist group Brigate rosse. Giorgio Almirante was secretary of the Movimento Sociale Italiano from 1947 to 1950 and again from 1960 to his retirement in 1987. See Craveri (2012) and Parlato (2020).

[9]   Desideri calls this rhetorical feature "litotes", but the label appears incorrect, as true litotes is a way of strengthening rather than weakening concepts: see Lausberg (1990: 304–305) and Mortara Garavelli (2008: 177). Note that Desideri's analysis consider speeches, interviews and newspaper articles by Moro altogether. On Moro's parliamentary speeches see also Giuliano (2019).

[10]   I considered two speeches held in August and November 1976 (Almirante 2008: 3411–3455). On Almirante's political language see also Cortelazzo (2017: 57–58).

> Voi sfilate in piazza con cartelloni, noi esprimiamo le nostre idee in quest'aula, onorevole Pannella! Noi portiamo serie argomentazioni, e le sue chiassate non ci fanno paura. Impari ad ascoltare! Sono trent'anni che noi conduciamo un'opposizione seria in questo Parlamento. Le buffonate non ci interessano (Almirante 2008: 3428).

In sum, from a rhetorical perspective, hyperbole appears to be key to understanding populist speech in Italy until 1992 and possibly beyond. On the one hand, it has the emotive power to move the listeners and to capture and hold their attention. On the other hand, hyperbole puts populist speeches in sharp contrast with the measured language used by the elite. It seems appropriate to conclude with a quotation from a populist politician who is not Italian but who nevertheless appears to appreciate hyperbole:

> The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration – and a very effective form of promotion (Trump 2015: 58).

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