

## CHAPTER 3

# A typology of insults

## A corpus-based study of Italian political debates on Twitter

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### Abstract

Political discourse has undergone a radical change in recent decades due both to a new conception of politics as entertainment for citizens and to the use of social networks as the primary site of political debate and interaction, among other factors. One of the main linguistic characteristics of this new political discourse is the presence of linguistic elements that fulfil the pragmatic function of insulting opponents. Our study aims to establish a typology of insulting strategies in political discourse based on an analysis of a corpus of tweets by Italian politicians. Our point of departure is an encompassing notion of insult that considers its illocutionary traits and perlocutionary effects. This notion overcomes the

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concept of insult as epithet (such as slurs and other negatively connotated adjectives) and offers a broader perspective on textual constructions where the negatively connotated lexical elements are nouns or verbs, or where the rhetorical devices are key in fulfilling the insulting function. Therefore, three types of insults will be examined here: slurs or derogatory epithets, other insulting epithets, and rhetorical insults.

**Keywords:** hate speech, insult, political discourse, social networks, Italian

### 3.1 Political discourse and social networks

Italian political discourse has undergone a radical change since the 1990s (see Mazzoleni 1998; Dell’Anna 2009, 2010; Scaramella 2016). It no longer involves careful argumentative constructions that employ precise lexical and syntactic structures with the aim of persuading the opponent in the tradition of Ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical discourse. Today political discourse has evolved to become closer to everyday language, and particularly to spoken language in daily interactions (Gallardo 2018, 2022). This has been called the ‘mirroring paradigm’ and means that domain-specific vocabulary and formal register have been abandoned and characteristics of spoken language such as vague terms, impromptu speech, and anacoluthon are often found in political statements both inside and outside parliament (Antonelli 2017: 21–23, 48–50, 54–63). Debates are not often organised as an interchange of arguments and counterarguments because political discourse is no longer primarily argumentative but narrative (Antonelli 2017: 4–5; Gallardo 2022: 61–72). Carefully planned arguments have been substituted by *argumenta ad hominem*—that is, spontaneous attacks on opponents, which are rarely based on facts. Some politicians, such as Silvio Berlusconi, Umberto Bossi, and Beppe Grillo, seem to have played a key role in this process in the Italian scene (Antonelli 2017: 21–35). In fact, spontaneity and improvisation can be observed in political interviews, statements to the press, and—overall—in interactions in mass media.

Regarding computer-mediated communication (social networks, microblogging), studies on the level of legibility of political tweets applying the Gulpease index and the type–token ratio show the high degree of legibility of these texts, which are oversimplified in language (Antonelli 2017: 48–49; Combei 2020). There has hence been a levelling between the speech of politicians and that of the average citizen, which has deprived political discourse of its former aura. This can be considered a strategy to reach different types of voters, especially those with a lower level of education, and to distance the new parties from traditional political parties, which are seen as part of the political elite.

It has been said that mass media have reshaped political discourse, in that they have transformed politics into just another form of entertainment (Antonelli 2017: Ch. 4). The focus has moved away from the problems of civil society that politicians are faced with and towards scandals, rumours, and trivial anecdotes. Media attention is mainly devoted to what politicians say on TV or on social media instead of what they propose in the traditional loci of power such as the parliament or even the press.

One of the clearest changes is the relocation of the pathos dimension in political discourse. According to Aristotle's precepts, pathos has the function of causing the audience to experience emotions in order to predispose them to hear the argumentative part of the discourse—that is, it was a mean of persuasion; in contemporary political discourse, however, emotions have taken the place of arguments and the content of discourse is therefore reduced to the expression of emotions while ideas and facts occupy a marginal position (Spina 2016; Antonelli 2017: 5–7). Although this type of discourse was considered prototypical of populist parties some years ago (Combei 2020),<sup>1</sup> today the

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1 A linguistic definition of populism is based on a particular rhetoric and discursive style: the polarisation of the opposition between two groups (*we* vs *they*: *we* Italians vs *they* foreigners or immigrants, *we* the people vs *they* the political elite; see Paris 2020: 78–80); the role of the implicit meaning to avoid a conscious reception of the message and the possibility of discussing it (Lombardi Vallauri 2019); the use of rhetorical

predominance of emotions in political language is pervasive even in speeches by politicians who belong to more traditional parties (Antonelli 2017: 50–51). However, in the case of Italian politicians it is fair to say that the leaders of the right-wing parties (mainly Matteo Salvini from Lega Nord and Giorgia Meloni from Fratelli d'Italia) are particularly prolific in producing emotional discourse and hate speech.

One way of raising negative emotions in political discourse is by discrediting opponents, attacking or mocking the facts and claims that they present. This discourse strategy has received the metaphorical name of 'flaming' and it is so pervasive that when a group of Italian journalists decided to write a *Manifesto della comunicazione non ostile* (Manifesto of non-hostile communication) they had to declare in point 9 that 'insults are not arguments'. Flaming is fostered by the anonymity and the disembodiment in interactions that take place on social networks (Palermo 2020: 2).

According to Testa (2018), flaming is always successful because 'the mechanism of discrediting never fails. Refuting a discrediting narrative makes it stronger. Presenting a non-discrediting narrative against it legitimates it. Ignoring it [i.e., not reacting to it] underlines the (guilty) helplessness of those who are discredited' (Testa 2018, our translation). This communicative success will explain its dissemination in political discourse and, more specifically, in political discourse in social media.

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figures such metaphors, metonymy, hyperboles, etc., and the presence of polyphony marked by quotation marks; the strategy of refuting the debate based on argumentative discourses by denying the opponent the right to speak (Petrilli 2019b); the use of colloquialism, slang and a plain communicative style (Combei 2020: 106–107). The speaker is always emotionally implicated in the discourse and the main attitudes are negativism and pessimism, appealing to emotions (linked to patriotism and national unity in the case of right-wing populism) and *intimisation* by referring to personal experiences.

### 3.1.1 *The role of the social networks*

Social networks (henceforth SNs) have important advantages for political communication: the possibility of producing and disseminating messages at a massive level; the immediacy that was not possible with traditional mass media; the intertextuality (i.e., the ability to comment on another's words just by reposting a message or a video without having to reproduce their discourse, which leads the audience to believe that there is less manipulation in quoting mechanisms than in the press); the illusion of an interaction with citizens; the de-territoriality (i.e., the possibility of reaching a larger audience who are not necessarily affected in a direct way by the political actions of the speaker, but who may contribute to further dissemination of their messages and who could allow other people, who may be geographically distant, to get to know the speaker) (Spina 2016; Theocaris et al. 2020: 2–3).

The ease of publishing a message on a SN has led to intense posting activity by politicians and their communication advisors, with a rhythm that exceeds just a single daily post. This unceasing bombardment of information, criticisms, mockeries, harsh comments, and so on favours a permanent campaign atmosphere, where differences between election and non-election periods become blurred and it becomes harder to distinguish the discourses produced by government representatives from those issued by the opposition, although members of extreme political parties (both far right and far left) use a more aggressive vocabulary (Torregrossa et al. 2023: 461).

But it has been the formal limitations of the texts, especially on Twitter,<sup>2</sup> that have determined a new type of political discourse, in which texts are shorter, more emotional, and discrediting. There is no space for well-developed ideas, even less for argumentative texts, so politicians have opted to reduce their messages to two types: a) praising themselves for what they have done or are about

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2 Although Elon Musk renamed this SN as 'X' in August 2023, 'Twitter' continues to be the most widespread name among its users.

to do; and b) discrediting others for what they have done or said (Van Dijk 2006).<sup>3</sup> In both cases the aim is to persuade their audience by provoking positive or negative emotions, not by offering a reasoned argument about the qualities or opportunities of the course of action they are praising or criticising.

### 3.1.2 *Twitter and the ‘new’ political discourse*

Twitter, which is more precisely defined as a microblog than as a SN, has attracted the attention of scholars dealing with the ‘new’ political discourse, not only because it is the most used SN for political propaganda all around the world but also because the texts are easily accessible and open to anyone (even those without an account<sup>4</sup>) and it is possible to search texts by author, topic (especially if marked with a hash, #), or keyword.

There are several factors that explain why politicians prefer Twitter over other SNs such as Facebook or Instagram. First of all, Twitter can be considered a ‘non-mediated field’ (Testa 2019, 2020)—that is, no one controls how much a politician posts, a clear violation of the Italian *par condicio law* (28/2000) which states that the visibility of a political party on mass media should be determined by the number of votes in the last election. Indeed, new political parties such as Lega and Fratelli d’Italia have disseminated their messages mainly through Twitter and other SNs.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Van Dijk (2006) considers than emphasising positive information towards Us and negative information towards Them, on the one hand, and de-emphasising negative information towards Us and positive information towards Them, on the other, are key strategies in polarised discourse.

4 This was at least so until Elon Musk’s introduction in 2023 of new rules on data access.

5 ‘Lega’ is commonly used as an abbreviation for both the historical Italian party Lega Nord and for its recent informal successor Lega per Salvini Premier, established in December 2017 by Matteo Salvini. No distinction is made between the two parties in today’s speech, one being the continuation of the other, so the terms ‘Lega Nord’ and simply ‘Lega’ are used to refer to the same party.

In addition, there is no mediation of disputes, debates, and discussions, unlike in debates broadcast on TV and radio.

This means that Twitter is the perfect place to gain visibility and to draw the attention of a huge number of users. Moreover, citizens seem to have established an awkward equation between the visibility of a politician on SNs, the politician's importance and the quality of their political agendas.

The short time span between the creation of the message in the mind of the politician or the communication advisor and the followers reading that message is another determining factor: there is no time (and no space) for articulated speeches. The only objective is to make an impact on the audience. Given that incendiary news is disseminated more quickly, politicians will often choose to make an impact through messages conveying disturbing information or by inspiring negative emotions regarding a particular fact.

One final characteristic of the way Twitter has reshaped political discourse is that the messages are linked to a particular politician, for politics has become personal—it is no longer just a question of a party or an ideology. In addition, citizens have the illusion of having 'direct contact' with the politicians in that they are able to respond to their posts. Most politicians, however, do not read, much less respond to, citizens' posts or messages. The use of SNs is unidirectional on their side (Antonelli 2017: 11): they are not interested in knowing what the people think about their acts or decisions—they simply use SNs as a means of political propaganda.

Among the linguistic characteristics of this type of text (see Brocca, Garassino, and Masia 2016), our study will focus on the presence of insults, which are very frequently used in political discourse to delegitimise an opponent. The frequency of insulting lexical elements and discursive strategies is indicative of a change in the social consideration of insults. While insults were until relatively recently considered a sign of a low level of education, a lack of argumentative resources, and male chauvinism, the politicians of the 2020s belonging to different political orientations,

with different degrees of education, and without gender distinctions use insults (with the exception of blasphemy; see Dell'Anna 2009; Antonelli 2017; Faloppa 2020). Andrino and Pérez Colomé (2021) report that in the campaign for the regional elections in Madrid in April 2021, 79,840 tweets with insults were published, 5346 of which were directed at candidates or parties. Insults are often used as lexical tools to convey hate speech but not all types and forms of insults count by themselves as hate speech, which is a more complex phenomenon (see [Chapter 1](#), [Section 1.3](#), in this volume).

SNs foster the proliferation and dissemination of insults, which are of course not only found in tweets posted by politicians. In fact, insults are a linguistic feature that allow a Twitter user to be identified as a hater or a troll (Pistolessi 2020), normally interacting under a false profile and hiding their real identity.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.1.3 *Aims and structure*

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the form, frequency, and types of insults found in tweets published by Italian politicians between 2020 and 2022. Given that lexical insults are easily identifiable by automatic filters in most SNs, we have observed that insulting strategies in this type of text do not always match the most prototypical slurs and insulting epithets reported in previous Italian studies (De Mauro 2016; see [Section 3.4.2](#) below). Politicians instead show a preference for negatively connotated terms that acquire insulting functions in specific contexts and for more elaborate discursive strategies based on rhetorical figures.

Based on the data in our corpus, a second aim is to establish a typology of all the insulting mechanisms found in these short texts to demonstrate the variety and richness of linguistic devices

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6 According to Pistolessi (2020: 97–98), the main difference between a hater or flamer and a troll is the use of insults. While haters use insults frequently, trolls do so less often, instead looking to disrupt other people's conversation with provocative, senseless, or offensive actions.



that are intended to fulfil a denigratory function. Finally, we note the need to widen the concept of ‘insult’ to accommodate these new textual forms, provided that the pragmatic function is not modified.

For this reason, it is important to determine what is meant by ‘insult’ in this specific context. In [Section 3.2](#) we offer a definition of insult in the framework of the theory of speech acts, thus taking into account its illocutionary characteristics and its perlocutionary effects. This definition highlights the pragmatic nature of insults and does not circumscribe insults to a pre-established set of linguistic characteristics. In [Section 3.3](#) the corpus extracted from Twitter is presented and some methodological decisions are addressed, while in [Section 3.4](#) the typology of insults that emerged from the analysis of our corpus is introduced based on two main criteria: the role of the addressee ([Section 3.4.1](#)) and the linguistic mechanisms at play. Regarding this last criterion, we distinguish between insults based on lexical elements, mainly but not solely epithets ([Section 3.4.2](#)), and insults of a more discursive and rhetorical nature which are constructed following the scheme of rhetorical figures ([Section 3.5](#)), mainly metaphors ([Section 3.5.1](#)) but also hyperboles, parallelisms, and irony ([Section 3.5.2](#)). The chapter ends with the conclusions of our study regarding the creativity of political discourse on SNs ([Section 3.6](#)).

### 3.2 Insulting as a speech act

Insults are complex social phenomena that have a variety of forms and fulfil different functions according to different cultural contexts, languages, speakers, and communicative aims (Domaneschi 2020: 10). They have been at the centre of 21st-century multidisciplinary research, in fields such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, law, philosophy of language and linguistics, among others (see, among many others, Cepollaro 2020; Domaneschi 2020; Faloppa 2020; Bianchi 2021; Nitti 2021, with specific reference to Italian; see also [Chapter 2](#) in this volume).

From a psychological point of view, insults have been studied with regard to how they shape and transform our social identity, because they can weaken the sense of belonging to society among some groups of individuals. The psychological effects of insults are intertwined with the sociological perspective: insults reinforce social asymmetries and discrimination; they contribute to marginalising ethnic, national, religious, or gender-based minorities. Therefore, legal studies consider some insults a crime under certain circumstances because they threaten social cohesion and democratic values.<sup>7</sup> There is, of course, a big debate about insults and the limits of freedom of expression to which different countries have reacted in different ways, with the divergence between the legislation in EU countries, the UK, and the USA being particularly striking (Domaneschi 2020: 8–10; Faloppa 2020).

For our purposes, insults will be approached from a pragmatic perspective, and specifically within the framework of the theory of speech acts (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Uttering an insult is a speech act *per se*, with a particular illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects. Following Austin's classification, it can be considered a verdictive speech act similar to judging, evaluating, or condemning. Regarding the illocutionary force, we may say that an insult conveys the speaker's intention to anger, to humiliate, to shame, to disregard, or to hurt someone or something with their words, but also to show their power, to attract attention, to force someone to do something, and even to show affect (Domaneschi 2020: xiv).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, regarding the functions of language, insulting has both an emotive and a referential function. The emotive function

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7 These circumstances mainly include the cases when insults are uttered in public, damaging the honour of the insulted person by accusing him/her of committing certain acts with prior knowledge of their falsity or with reckless disregard for the truth.

8 In this last case, which will not be taken into account in our study, insults are means to reinforce social ties between interlocutors and are then considered strategies of positive politeness or, to use Zimmerman's (2003: 57) terminology, anti-politeness.

is linked to the fact that insults convey the speaker's negative emotions, such as disdain, scorn, contempt, or disgust. At the same time, insulting someone involves offering a negative representation or evaluation of the insulted person; there is a claim, an assertion about someone, there is an implicit or explicit predicative function by which one characteristic or quality is attributed to a subject. This underlying structure distinguishes insults from curses, which express a wish for the future. To the extent that there is a type of representation (i.e. a link between the words and the extra-linguistic reality), it is possible to speak of a referential function, although the emotive functions overwhelm it in the act of insulting.

To understand why insults are so frequent in political discourse, it is important to analyse their perlocutionary effects. These can be divided into three types:

- a) Effects on the addressee (the political opponent in our case): insults cause a wide variety of emotions ranging from intimidation to fear and rage.<sup>9</sup> One of the most common effects is offence—that is, awareness of having been morally, psychologically, or economically harmed (Domaneschi 2020: 42). They are face-threatening acts (Culpeper 1996; Palermo 2020: 2) that cause politicians to lose their credibility and their authority, and sometimes their honour; this loss may have direct consequences for their career. Insults are a very effective means of delegitimising opponents and discrediting them in front of potential voters.

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9 Scholars have discussed how important the effects on the addressee and the speaker's intention are in defining a speech act as an insult. In other words, can we define something as an insult if no one feels insulted or if no one intends to be insulting, even when our words are perceived as offensive? This question is not relevant to this study in that every post in our corpus reveals a clear intention to insult a target, which will be accepted as a sufficient criterion to consider the posts as insults, even if we have no access to the target's reaction (i.e. to their perception of those posts as insults), except when the readers retweet and comment on them.

- b) Effects on supporters: these are the most interesting effects for the purpose of our research. Attacking a rival is perceived as a sign of strength on the part of the speaker and, as a consequence, the speaker is viewed as a competent, courageous, and coherent person. In other words, insults reinforce the speaker's public image (Palermo 2020); this means that the prestige of the insulting person is increased, which may have an electoral return (see Cavazza and Guidetti 2014). Insults also help to strengthen political positions, by acting as political and ideological propaganda.

In addition, insults encourage discrimination, hatred, and violence against some individuals, groups, and communities. By doing so, they bolster the sense of belonging to a dominant group among like-minded audiences, thereby reinforcing social prejudices and stereotypes. This is often expressed through the well-known opposition between 'we' and 'they', which creates identity borders to separate two groups (Van Dijk 2006; Paris 2019): the group of people who share the same political ideology and world view as the author of the post and the group of people who are denigrated or represented by the humiliated political opponent.

Therefore, despite the common negative evaluation regarding the act of insulting, the fact is that insults have a *covert prestige*, to use Labov's words, and convey values such as authenticity, closeness to the people, genuineness, courage, and so on (Labov, cited in Domaneschi 2020: 131).

- c) Effects on 'neutral' observers: even when the audience do not have a clear political position in favour of the speaker, it has been proved that insults weaken political opponents and help to normalise discriminatory behaviours and attitudes. In fact, they can transform harmless individuals into a threatening group (Bianchi 2021: 11).

However, without denying the importance of the theory of speech acts in defining what can be considered an insult, the pragmatic analysis shows that insults are not always easily identifiable and

are highly context-dependent (Alfonzetti 2009: 67). What can be considered an insult in one context may not be considered as such in a different one. Terms such as ‘communist’ and ‘fascist’ describe historical movements and ideologies, but in political debates on- and offline they are employed to vilify the opponent with the audience’s complicity.

Insults are often accompanied by other aggressive acts such as accusations, threats, and curses, which are not always easy to distinguish from insult itself. Another way of approaching the task of defining insults is within the framework of prototype theory. The characteristics of a prototypical insult are the following (Alfonzetti 2009: 71–77):<sup>10</sup>

- a) An insult is a verdictive act: a negative judgement or a negative evaluation about a person, regarding their physical characteristics, personality, facts and actions, moral qualities, etc.
- b) An insult is an expressive act: the speaker expresses an emotion, a feeling regarding the addressee such as hate, rage, contempt, or disdain.
- c) The speaker has the intention of causing offence, or of angering, vilifying, or harming the addressee.
- d) The insult has perlocutionary effects, i.e. it psychologically affects the recipient.
- e) The addressee must be present in the communicative situation.

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10 Regarding characteristics (e), (g), and (j) in the list, insults on SNs are not prototypical insults because the addressee is never present in the same communicative situation in which the insult is produced and is not always directly addressed (see [Section 3.4.1](#)). Being of written nature, paralinguistic, kinetic, and proxemic elements play no role in this type of insult. For other speech acts that are similar to insults but do not share all of the prototypical features, see Alfonzetti (2009: 73–74), who considers that defamation is a different speech act, while in this study—as we shall see later in this chapter—defamation is considered a specific type of insult.

- f) The addressee must interpret the insult as offensive. And this interpretation is necessarily based on a common axiological system.
- g) The insult is directed to the recipient in a vocative form.
- h) The use of negatively connotated adjectives, nouns, adverbs, and so on.
- i) The syntactic structure is reduced to a noun phrase (normally as apostrophe), categorisation structures N+di+N (N + of + N), assertive sentences, rhetoric questions, and emphatic constructions (e.g. *che X che sei*, 'what a [X] you are').
- j) Insults are accompanied by several paralinguistic (high volume), kinetic, and proxemic phenomena.

According to Domaneschi (2020: 64), three contextual factors seem to determine the identification of an insult: the speaker's status, the place of production, and the power that the speaker has in that place. When these conditions are met, saying something (particular words or expressions) becomes doing something (offending, angering, humiliating). Insulting is not just a matter of uttering a negative evaluation about someone; it also presents the speaker as having the power, the capacity, and the right to do so. Politicians have a high social status and hold a privileged position in accessing economic resources and information. They also occupy a privileged position on Twitter, shown by their number of followers and the reactions and comments raised by each of their tweets. This position is the source of their *auctoritas*, the moral locus from which they maintain the right to insult the opponent. But a clarification is required here: the relationship between the insulting and the insulted subjects does not necessarily pre-date the insult itself; on the contrary, it can be a consequence of the concrete speech act of insulting.

In this study, following Canobbio (2010), insults will be defined as linguistic elements (words, phrases, clauses, sentences, textual structures) that speakers use when performing speech acts that are intended to cause offence to the addressee. What is important

in this definition is that the criteria for distinguishing what is an insult and what is not are not strictly linguistic (let alone lexical) but pragmatic: an insult is defined based on the speaker's intentions and the harm it can cause to the addressee and the audience (Alfonzetti and Spampinaro Beretta 2010). From the politeness theory perspective, insults constitute an act of non-mitigated disagreement that threaten the positive face of the addressee (Brown and Levinson 1987; Palermo 2020) and block any further negotiation (Moïse 2006). They represent a point of high tension in verbal interaction because they are manifestations of non-cooperative interaction and impoliteness (Culpeper 1996), a type of verbal violence which might evoke (and provoke) physical violence.

### 3.3 The corpus

In order to analyse insults as speech acts in political discourse on SNs, and particularly on Twitter, we have manually collected and analysed a small sample of 250 tweets from 27 politicians belonging to seven different political parties, from left wing to right wing: Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement), Partito Democratico, Azione, Italia Viva, Forza Italia, Fratelli d'Italia, and Lega.<sup>11</sup> The names of the politicians are displayed in [Table 3.1](#).

The tweets were collected between August 2020 and May 2022, and they deal with a wide variety of topics: the COVID-19 pandemic, immigration, social revolts, parliamentary activities, new laws. No specific hashtag or keyword was selected.

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11 Our corpus is very small compared to the usual dimensions of Twitter corpora in other studies, because we have chosen to undertake a qualitative analysis. No automatic filters were used in the selection of tweets in order to avoid a selection based on lexical criteria or hashtags. We carried out a manual search on Twitter at different times and looking at different political accounts for two years, and selected only those tweets with a clear insulting intention. It is our intention to enlarge the corpus; here we are presenting only some preliminary results.

**Table 3.1:** Italian politicians and political parties represented in the corpus.

M5S	Partito Democratico	Azione	Italia Viva	Forza Italia	Fratelli d'Italia	Lega	Independent
L. Azzolina	M. Di Maio	C. Calenda	M. Renzi	S. Berlusconi	D. Santanchè	M. Salvini	C. Cottarelli
C. Sibilia		M. Richetti	M. E. Boschi	M. Gasparri	G. Meloni	C. Borghi	
V. Raggi		F. Carpano	L. Noja	L. Ronzulli	I. La Russa		
N. Morra			T. Bellanova	E. Vito	W. Rizzetto		
D. Toninelli			L. Nobili				

In collecting the tweets, the aim was to achieve a balance in the ideology of their authors, the topics, and the time of year. However, it was not easy to obtain the same number of tweets for each political party, as some parties, such as Fratelli d'Italia, were much more active on Twitter than others, as shown in [Table 3.2](#). The average number of tweets per party is 15–17 but M5S and Forza Italia are underrepresented in our corpus, while Fratelli d'Italia is overrepresented (46.8 per cent of the tweets in our corpus were posted by their members).

**Table 3.2:** Number of tweets per political party in our corpus.

Political party	Number of tweets	Percentage of tweets in the corpus
M5S	5	2.0
PD	17	6.8
Azione	17	6.8
Italia Viva	13	5.2
Forza Italia	8	3.2
Fratelli d'Italia	117	46.8
Lega	17	6.8



The same imbalance is found in the number of tweets per politician. It was not possible to obtain an equal number of tweets from each politician, again because some politicians publish not only a higher number of tweets than others but also a higher number of tweets containing insults. The most active politician on Twitter is without doubt Giorgia Meloni, the leader of Fratelli d'Italia who became prime minister in October 2022, and she also authored a high number of tweets with insulting mechanisms in our corpus (92). Other politicians whose tweets often have a clear insulting function are Mario Di Maio (17), Daniela Santanchè (12), Matteo Salvini (10), Matteo Renzi, and Matteo Richetti (9 each).

We are conscious of this imbalance in our corpus, but for the purposes of our study—which does not aim to correlate ideologies and political movements with insulting strategies—we consider a corpus of 250 tweets, all exhibiting insulting strategies, to be sufficient as a first step in our research to explore the discursive dimension of the insulting strategies in contemporary political discourse. The focus here is on the linguistic mechanisms that are subordinate to the insulting function and not on the language of different political parties from a comparative approach.

### 3.4 Types of insults

Insults will be classified according to two different criteria: a) the addressee, and b) the linguistic mechanisms involved.

#### 3.4.1 *The role of the addressee*

An insult is a communicative event with two main participants: the addresser and the addressee. Depending on the addressee, insults can be classified as injury, defamation, or blasphemy.<sup>12</sup> Injury is an insult directly addressed to a specific person, not necessarily in

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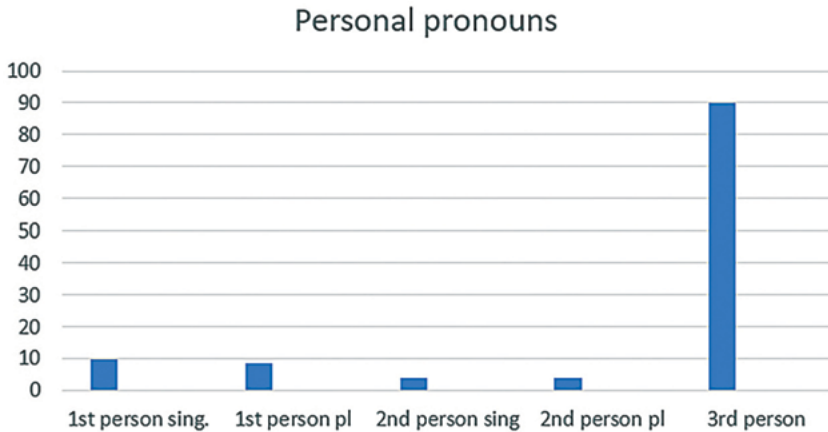
12 Not all scholars agree with this classification (see, e.g., Alfonzetti 2009). For an attempt at clarifying concepts such as offence, defamation, outrage, contempt, and slander, see Domaneschi (2020: Ch. 2).

the presence of others—in other words, it can be a private event; defamation is an insult about someone or something in front of an audience which is not the target of the insult (Palermo 2020), and not necessarily in the presence of the insulted person; blasphemy is an insult addressed to God or to a person, object, or place considered sacred or linked to divinity in some way (Domaneschi 2020: 125–129). This last type of insult is extremely rare in Italian political discourse because it offends the sensibilities of a substantial proportion of the population and is thus carefully avoided even by politicians who openly claim to be atheist. Moreover, blasphemy has sociological connotations, in that it is usually considered a sign of a low level of education, of a limited capacity to present personal opinions in well-constructed discourse, and of impoliteness.

Insults on Twitter are clearly of the second type, because politicians insult opponents or rivals as a discourse strategy to gain credit or to reinforce their own political position in front of an audience of possible voters. According to the Collins Dictionary, ‘defamation is the damaging of someone’s good reputation by saying something bad and untrue about them’.<sup>13</sup> One way of determining whether an insult can be considered injury or defamation is by analysing personal pronouns. As shown in [Figure 3.1](#), the most used personal pronouns in politician’s tweets are those of the third person, while the second person, either singular or plural, which is the form found in injuries, is rarely used.

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13 *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. ‘Defamation (n.)’, accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/defamation>.



**Figure 3.1:** Personal pronouns in Italian politicians' tweets.

An example of injury using the second-person singular is:

- (1) '**You** can attack me as much as you like. [...] And **remember**: Rome will never vote Lega Nord, will never vote for the person who cried "thieving Rome" or for those fascists and racists that **you** put on your lists' (@virginiaraggi, 9 September 2021)



An example of a politician directly addressing the audience is (2), where Giorgia Meloni creates a very dynamic text by placing the first-person pronoun and possessive (*i miei libri*, 'my books'; *io*

'I') in opposition to the third-person singular (a university professor); she uses the well-known opposition 'we' vs 'they' (*noi di destra*, 'we right-wing parties') while still giving the impression that she is interacting with the audience (who are addressed using the second-person plural pronoun *vi*, 'you'):

- (2) 'Do **you** think it is acceptable that a university professor should joke about the fact that **my books** have been turned upside down to symbolise that **I** should be hanged? This is one of the "brains" teaching respect, tolerance and freedom of expression to the youth. Thank goodness **we** right-wing parties are the haters...' (@GiorgiaMeloni, 28 May 2021)<sup>14</sup>



Giorgia Meloni 🇮🇹 🇺🇦  
@GiorgiaMeloni

Ma vi sembra normale che un docente universitario scherzi sui miei libri ribaltati per simulare il fatto che io venga appesa? Ecco una delle tante "menti" che insegnano ai giovani rispetto, tolleranza e libertà di pensiero. Menomale che i seminatori di odio siamo noi di destra...

**IL PROFESSORE UNIVERSITARIO  
CHE SCHERZA SU UNA POLITICA  
APPESA A TESTA IN GIÙ.**

<sup>14</sup> Many tweets are multimodal in that besides text they also contain pictures, audio, and video. Their meaning is significantly conditioned by this multimodality, but the study of the global meaning of these posts would require a semiotic analysis. In our study only the linguistic component of the tweets will be described and we are well aware of the limitations of the analysis derived from this decision. In any case, we have not altered the tweets and they are reproduced in this chapter in their original form, to allow the reader to fully understand the text. The only minor edits to the tweets involved recropping and underlining.

However, most tweets take the form not of an interaction but of a description, as in (3).

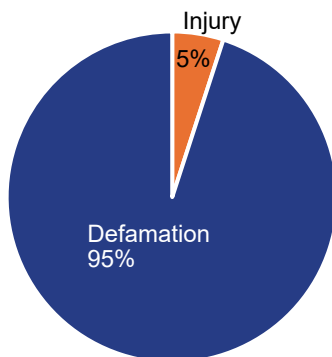
- (3) ‘This “gentleman” is simply insane’ (@matteosalvinimi, 15 July 2021)



Based on the use of personal pronouns, then, 95 per cent of the tweets in our corpus can be considered defamation, as shown in [Figure 3.2](#).

Nevertheless, an insult on a blog or a SN is never a private insult and, in this sense, every insult on Twitter, regardless of the type of pronouns being used, can be considered defamation—that is, the damaging of someone’s good reputation by saying something bad and untrue about them.<sup>15</sup> Besides, the target is never present when the text is materially produced (written and posted on the SN), thus one of the main criteria for an insult to be considered an injury is not fulfilled. Consequently, the data in [Figure 3.2](#) are to

<sup>15</sup> *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. ‘Defamation (n.)’, accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/defamation>.



**Figure 3.2:** Injury vs defamation in politicians' tweets.

be understood as follows: 5 per cent of the tweets imitate a direct dialogue with the target, using second-person pronouns and addressing the insult directly to the target, but the fact of posting the insult on a SN turns it into defamation.

### *3.4.2 Linguistic mechanisms as insulting strategies: the epithets*

According to the types of epithets that are used to convey an insult, we can identify two types of insults: slurs or derogatory insults, and other insulting epithets.

#### Slurs or derogatory insults

Slurs are insults that are addressed to individuals based on their belonging to a particular group (normally a minority group in a given community) defined on the basis of race, gender, religion, nationality, and so on. This type of insult has received considerable attention in Italian, particularly from philosophers of language (Cepollaro 2020; Bianchi 2021) and linguists (Faloppa 2020). They are very common in SNs.

In [Table 3.3](#) we offer a list of the most common Italian slurs based on previous inventories (De Mauro 2016; Domaneschi 2020: 18–19). Some of them are found cross-linguistically and are

easy to understand; others are specific to the Italian culture (e.g. the derogatory use of white-collar professions to show distrust or suspicion) and unusual in other cultures. This explains why the English translations offered in the table do not always function as derogatory insults in English-speaking contexts, but this is not the place to analyse the specific context of use of each of them. Slurs found in our corpus are marked in bold.

**Table 3.3:** Examples of Italian slurs.

Types of derogatory insult	Examples
Race	<i>negro, asiatico, giallo</i> 'nigger, Asian, yellow' <sup>16</sup>
Sexual orientation	<i>frocio, lesbica, paraculo, travestito</i> 'fag, lesbian, bastard, transvestite'
Nationality	<b><i>cinese</i></b> , <i>albanese, bulgaro, beduino, ebreo, giudeo, zulù, mongolo, turco, sodomita</i> 'Chinese, Albanian, Bulgarian, Bedouin, Jew, Jewish, Zulu, Mongol, Turk, sodomite'
Religion	<b><i>islamista</i></b> 'Islamist'
Region or city (North vs South Italy)	<i>terrone, polentone, meridionale, genovese</i> 'peasant [a pejorative term for Southern Italians], polenta-eaters [a pejorative term for Northern Italians], southerner, Genoese'
Social stereotypes	<i>gesuita, mammalucco, ayatollah, mafioso</i> 'Jesuit, Moor, ayatollah, mafia man'
Humble professions	<i>pescivendolo, cafone, buffone, carrettiere, parrucchiere, pecoraio, portinaia, scaricatore di porto</i> 'fishmonger, oaf, buffoon, cart driver, hairdresser, shepherd, doorman, docker'
'Well-respected' professions	<i>accademico, professore, avvocato, leguleio, paglietta, cattedratico, politico</i> 'intellectual, professor, lawyer, university professor, politician'
Political orientation	<b><i>comunista, fascista, nazista, populista, antisemita, immigrazionista, grillino</i></b> 'communist, fascist, Nazi, populist, antisemite, immigrationist, Grillo supporter' <sup>17</sup>

16 Translations to English are only approximate and meant to help the reader, as it is very difficult to find an insult that will cause the same impact and that will point to the same characteristic as the original Italian insult.

17 Beppe Grillo, an Italian comedian, founded M5S in 2009; the party has been very active in Italian politics ever since.

The characteristic of this type of insult is that even if it appears in a negated assertion such as:

(4) Carlo non è frocio.

‘Carlo is not a faggot.’

The negative connotation and the offence directed to the group (in this case homosexual people) does not disappear because it is entailed by the epithet (Domaneschi 2020: 111). However, slurs are not common in political discourse because politicians are aware that, by insulting a minority group, they may lose potential voters. The slurs in our corpus are thus almost entirely limited to political orientation (‘communist’, ‘fascist’, ‘Nazi’, ‘populist’, etc.) because ‘one of the quickest ways for an extremist to discredit anyone who disagrees with them is to call them a sexist, a fascist a racist, a nazi or any other “ist” word, primarily because they are deeply damaging and “sticky” labels’ (Bule 2017). In addition, the interpretation of an epithet that uses a political orientation as a derogatory insult implies sharing a common axiological system (Alfonzetti 2009: 72). Slurs relating to political orientation have therefore become an effective way of discrediting opposing perspectives, causing deep fractures in civil society and democratic institutions.

It is also possible to find slurs directed towards groups that do not have the right to vote in the country, such as the so-called ‘illegal immigrants’, or foreign citizens such as Chinese people. Right-wing parties also insult individuals who belong to religions other than Catholicism by using slurs such as ‘Islamic’. Examples (5) and (6) contain some of the slurs mentioned above:



- (5) ‘Italy, Europe, Western world: shame! To leave women and children in the hands of **Islamic** throat-slitters is not human [...]’ (@matteosalvinimi, 15 August 2021)



Matteo Salvini  
@matteosalvinimi

Italia, Europa, Occidente:  
vergogna!  
Lasciare donne e bambini in mano  
ai tagliagole islamici, dopo anni  
di battaglie e sofferenza, non  
è umano. Qualcuno al governo  
dovrebbe rileggersi “La rabbia  
e l’orgoglio” e “La forza della  
ragione” della grandissima Oriana  
Fallaci.

- (6) ‘[...] Anyone who winks to the anti-vaxxers supporters in the name of generic “freedom” is putting Italy at risk. Let’s listen to the science, not to **populists**.’ (@marcodimaio, 29 July 2021)



Marco Di Maio  
@marcodimaio

Anche [#Fedriga](#) sconfessa  
[#Salvini](#) sul [#GreenPass](#). La  
battaglia contro il Virus dovrebbe  
essere di tutti, senza distinzioni  
politiche. Chi strizza l’occhio ai  
NoVax in nome di una generica  
“libertà” mette in pericolo l’Italia.  
Ascoltiamo la scienza, non i  
populisti

Other insulting epithets

Insulting epithets addressed to opponents on the basis of individual characteristics and not because of their belonging to a group are found more frequently. The insulting function of these epithets is based on the relation between the source of meaning which points to a specific experiential area (a scatological element, for instance) and the target, the insulted person, who is often considered as deviating from an idealised model. This explains why people with physical or mental disabilities are often targeted and thus stigmatised (Domaneschi 2020: 25–28).

Many of these epithets (or nouns used as epithets) have no intrinsic negative value (e.g. nouns referring animals and vegetables). They become insults in specific contexts in which the participants in the communicative interaction share a common cultural background and axiological system. Some of the most frequent Italian insulting epithets, arranged by semantic fields, are shown in [Table 3.4](#) (De Mauro 2016; Domaneschi 2020: 18–19; Faloppa 2020; Palermo 2020).

**Table 3.4:** Examples of Italian insulting epithets

Types of insulting epithets	Examples
Psychological characteristics (in reference to mental disability)	<i>imbecille, idiota, cretino, minorato, tonto, ritardato, inetto, analfabeta, folle</i> 'imbecile, idiot, dumb, retard, stupid, incompetent, illiterate, crazy'
Physical characteristics (in reference to physical deformity and disability)	<i>gobbo, zoppo, abnorme, handicappato</i> 'hunchback, cripple, abnormal, handicapped'
Character traits (in reference to negative behaviours)	<i>imbroglione, pigro, scansafatiche, tirchio, bigotto, falso, ipocrita, intrigante, cattivo</i> 'swindler, lazy, lazybones, miser, sanctimonious, false, hypocrite, meddlesome, evil'

Types of insulting epithets	Examples
Sexual organs and sexual attitudes	<i>cazzo, cacchio, minchia</i> (when manipulated within a nominal expression: <i>testa di cazzo</i> 'dickhead'), <i>coglione, puttana, rotto in culo, cornuto</i> 'dick, euphemism for <i>cazzo</i> , prick, moron, bitch, fag, cuckold'
Criminal activities	<i>criminale, ladro, terrorista, assassino</i> 'criminal, thief, terrorist, murder'
Scatological elements	<i>stronzo, pezzo di merda, cesso</i> 'asshole, piece of shit, toilet'
Animals	<i>maiale, asino, troia, cagna, vacca, zoccola, pappagallo</i> 'pig, donkey, female pig [whore], bitch, cow [whore], sewer rat [whore], parrot'
Vegetables	<i>finocchio, broccolo, pera cotta, (testa di) rapa</i> 'fennel [faggot], broccoli [fool], cooked pear [fool], turnip [block head]'

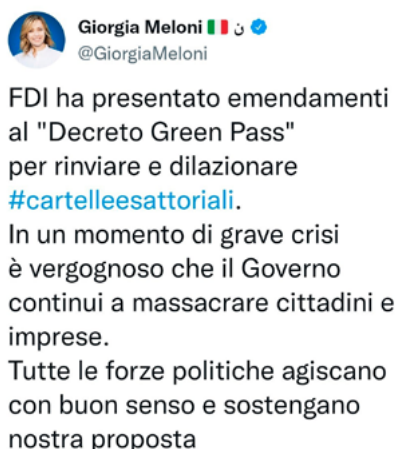
This type of insult, particularly those regarding psychological characteristics, character traits, and criminal activities, is much more frequent. It is possible to establish a scale in which criticism of social abilities (*folle*, 'crazy'; *insensate*, 'insane') or degree of competence (*incompetente*, 'incompetent'; *incapace*, 'unable') occupies a lower position than attacks on the moral quality of the person (*vergognoso*, 'shameful'; *indegno*, 'ignoble'; *bugiardo*, 'liar'). In our data, moral insults, which are considered more harmful to public image and prestige, are by far the most frequent. This means that politicians try to cause moral harm to their opponents as a recurrent strategy to discredit them.

In many cases, these epithets are used to modify nouns and verbs that describe politicians' words and actions, such as *folli misure restrittive* ('crazy restrictive measures'), *vergognose affermazioni* ('shameful claims'), *coprifuoco insensato* ('foolish curfew'). They can also be nominalised, as in (7), or can be part of an attributive structure, as in (8):

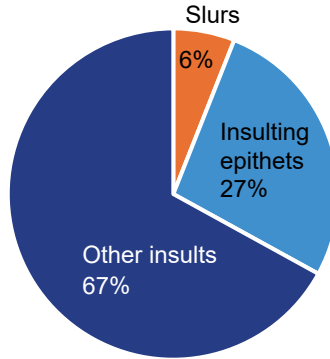
- (7) '[...] Now the government goes directly to Libya to bow and scrape and to kiss the slippers of the Libyan tribe leaders. So have the **incompetents** that govern us humiliated Italy.' (@GiorgiaMeloni, 19 December 2021)



- (8) '[...] In a moment of deep crisis, it is **shameful** that the government continues to ruin citizens and companies. [...]' (@GiorgiaMeloni, 8 September 2021)



A quantitative analysis of the two types of insults described so far shows that, contrary to what is found in the literature, epithets are not the most common linguistic strategy for insulting used by politicians on SNs. In fact, slurs represent only 6 per cent of

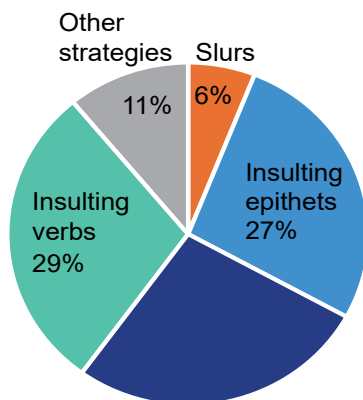


**Figure 3.3:** Preliminary quantitative analysis of insulting mechanisms in our corpus.

the insulting mechanisms (for the reasons mentioned above) and insulting epithets only 27 per cent, as can be seen in [Figure 3.3](#).

In fact, many of the insulting lexical elements found in our corpus are not adjectival in nature but nominal or verbal: nouns and verbs convey negative connotations as frequently as adjectives, as can be seen in [Figure 3.4](#). They refer to:

- a) Agents: *aggressore* ('aggressor'), *odiatore* ('hater'), *truffatore* ('cheater')
- b) Attitudes: *sdegno* ('disdain'), *ipocresia* ('hypocrisy'), *intolleranza* ('intolerance')
- c) Actions: *bugie* ('lies'), *latrocinio* ('robbery'), *folia* ('madness')
  - i Fraudulent actions: *rovinare* ('to ruin'), *danneggiare* ('to damage'), *attaccare* ('to attack')
  - ii Negated positive actions: *non avere idee* ('not to have ideas'), *non meritare* ('not to deserve'), *non sapere* ('not to know')
  - iii Endured actions (presented from the point of view of the victim): *essere attaccato* ('to be attacked'), *essere calpestato* ('to be stepped on'), *essere parte lesa* ('to be the offended party').



**Figure 3.4:** A quantitative analysis of insulting strategies in our corpus.

Some examples to illustrate this use are in (9) and (10) (cf. *Così hanno ridotto l'Italia* 'So have they humiliated Italy' in (7) and *massacrare* 'to ruin' in (8) above):

- (9) 'We are depriving the students of years of life, I hope it will be soon possible to go back to school safely. But to know that all this depends on Minister Azzolina, known for her **incompetence**, is not reassuring [...]' (@matteosalvinimi, 23 November 2021)



Matteo Salvini  
@matteosalvinimi

**#Salvini:** Stiamo togliendo agli studenti anni di vita, spero che si possa tornare presto a scuola in sicurezza. Anche se sapere che tutto questo dipende dal ministro Azzolina, di nota incompetenza, non è rassicurante, e qualche dubbio resta. **#RadioCapital**

- (10) ‘The government has approved a mandatory #green-pass, a pass that **jeopardises** citizens’ freedom, further **destroys** the economy and [...] It is the umpteenth **shame** [...]’ (@GiorgiaMeloni, 22 July 2021)



Giorgia Meloni 🇮🇹🇺🇦  
@GiorgiaMeloni

Il Governo ha approvato l'obbligo del #greenpass, un lasciapassare che lede la libertà dei cittadini, devasta ulteriormente l'economia e di fatto impone l'obbligo vaccinale per accedere a molte attività. È l'ennesima vergogna che FDI contrasterà con tutte le sue forze. (1/2)



In some cases, the negatively connotated noun has the textual function of a labelling tag or anaphoric encapsulator, both of which are very frequent in journalistic and political discourse (see, among others, D’Addio Colosimo 1988; Francis 1994; Conte 1999a,b; Borreguero 2006, 2018; González Ruiz 2008, 2010; Lala 2010; Llamas 2010a,b; Izquierdo Alegría and González Ruiz 2013; López Samaniego 2015; Korzen 2016). This type of anaphor summarises a previous idea by adding a valuative tag, like in the case of *estratto del delirio di Conte* (‘an excerpt of Conte’s delirium’) in (11):

- (11) “‘The security decrees have thrown thousands of immigrants into the streets deployed in the suburbs and the countryside: Salvini has failed as a minister; it is a fact’. An excerpt of #Conte’s **delirium** for Il Corriere. But does he really think that he can fool the Italian people forever?’ (@marcodimaio, 9 July 2021)



Marco Di Maio 🇪🇺 🇮🇹  
@marcodimaio

«I decreti sicurezza hanno messo per strada decine di migliaia di migranti dispersi per periferie e campagne: Salvini da ministro ha fallito, è un dato di fatto»  
Un estratto del delirio di #Conte al Corriere.  
Ma pensa davvero di poter prendere in giro gli italiani per sempre?



Although a lexical study would certainly be interesting,<sup>18</sup> our research focuses on other insulting strategies which are not exclusively lexical and have a more discursive nature. We will call them

18 For instance, linguistic creativity in the configuration of new insults is a very interesting field of research that will not be dealt with in this study. In most languages, some prefixes and suffixes have acquired pejorative values and are found particularly frequently in the formation of insults. In Italian, this is the case for *-uccio* (*professoruccio*) and *sub-* (*subnormale*). See Domaneschi (2020: Ch. 1) for these and other linguistic characteristics of lexical insults.



rhetorical insults, and they represent 11 per cent of the insulting devices in our corpus.

### 3.5 Rhetorical insults

Rhetorical insults are discursive insults: the insulting function is not fulfilled solely by lexical elements, but results from a more complex and developed discursive structure. In fact, lexical elements such as those analysed in [Section 3.4.2](#) are integrated into carefully planned textual structures.

We have labelled these structures ‘rhetorical insults’ because they are based on rhetorical figures, such as parallelism, metaphors, and irony, among others. They are highly polyphonic in that they quote, summarise, and attribute words to others, words that let the reader deduce what the ideas or behaviour of the insulted person are.

Rhetorical insults also require a certain cultural common knowledge in order to identify idioms and referents and also a specific understanding of the highlights of the political scene (the most recent facts and declarations, the most active or prominent politicians).

Finally, an important advantage is that, unlike slurs, they cannot be easily detected by automatic filters and can then be disseminated in a more efficient way.

We will focus on four rhetorical structures that are particularly frequent in our corpus: metaphors, hyperbole, parallelism, and irony. We will then illustrate how cultural referents play a role as part of the insulting strategy.

#### 3.5.1 *Metaphors*

Metaphors are omnipresent in political discourse and have been approached from rhetorical, cognitive, and textual perspectives (see Otieno, Owino, and Attyang 2016). They are considered a very powerful rhetorical strategy due to their persuasive potential. In fact, metaphors structure our understanding of political, social,

and economic issues. The conceptual metaphor ‘politics is war’, for instance, structures the way we think about politics as a battle to be won. Another example is the use of the metaphor of war to explain governmental actions during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (see Castro Seixas 2021).

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a conceptual metaphor is a pervasive culture-wide disposition to conceive one fixed sort of thing in terms of another fixed sort of thing. In every metaphor, a source area and a target area can be identified. The source area is the cultural or experiential area from which the literal meaning of the expression introducing the metaphor stems, while the target area is a more abstract area offering more effective interpretations of the metaphor. Conceptual metaphors can be universal or culture specific. Our cultural backgrounds influence our perception of the world and our use of metaphors. In many cases, metaphors represent subconscious choices on the part of the speaker, based partly on the conceptual structures shared by members of their community (Otieno, Owino, and Attyang 2016: 23).

Metaphors help to shape the structure of political categorisation and argumentation. A good example is the conceptual metaphor ‘politics is a game’ as opposed to ‘politics is war’, which shapes our perception of politics. Metaphors reflect social and cultural constructions to conceptualise the political world but have a less culture-specific nature (i.e. they are more generalised) than metaphors employed to describe personal and familiar relationships, for example.

In the case of the metaphors employed by politicians as insulting strategies, the main source areas are animals (e.g. animalised behaviours such as the way pigs eat and live are attributed to political opponents), dirty places (e.g. places and activities related to the political sphere are described as cesspits or swamps), criminal activities (e.g. politicians are accused of holding the country to ransom and, as a consequence, the country is presented as a victim). An example of this last type of metaphor can be seen in (12), while (13) is a good illustration of how animalised behaviours are

used to portray political opponents. The animal metaphor is an efficient way of dehumanising rivals, and of reducing them to the cognitive and moral level of a beast (Domínguez and Zawislawska 2006; Domaneschi 2020: 92).<sup>19</sup> In this case the image of a jackal pouncing on its prey is used to depict the desire of some parties to administrate European funds:

- (12) ‘The US vice-president and idol of the left, Kamala Harris, says that illegal immigration will be persecuted: the US will defend its own borders, and will “push back” anyone who illegally crosses them. Like every other nation in the world. Except Italy, **hostage** of immigration-friendly left-wing parties’ (@GiorgiaMeloni, 8 June 2021)



<sup>19</sup> In fact, some Italian politicians receive nicknames based on these animal metaphors: Berlusconi, *il caimano* (‘the caiman’), Craxi, *il cinghiale* (‘the big wild boar’), Salvini, *il capitone* (‘the large eel’) (Domaneschi 2020: 130).

- (13) ‘While Renzi plays the game of destruction, #WeGoOn-WithConti in order to not allow the **jackals to pounce** on the Italians’ safe known as the #RecoveryPlan’ (@DaniloToninelli, 13 January 2021)



### 3.5.2 *Hyperboles, parallelisms, and irony*

Metaphors are not the only rhetorical devices found in our corpus. Hyperbole is another traditional strategy that has been used in political discourse since ancient times, with Cicero and Quintilian two of its most emblematic representatives. Hyperbole is an exaggeration in the description of a state of affairs: it exceeds the credible limits of facts in a given context (Claridge 2011: 5), but to be effective it has to have its basis in an intersubjective perception of the state of affairs. The literal and the corresponding hyperbolic expression are part of the same scale.

While hyperbole is a mechanism of linguistic creativity and an important contributor to language change (Claridge 2011), it also is a powerful means of manipulation because it is aimed directly at the addressee's emotions. When confronted with hyperbole, the audience's focus is not on the message but on the emotions the hyperbole inspires.

We have several examples in our corpus that primarily feature harsh criticism by some right-wing parties (mainly Fratelli d'Italia) towards the left-wing government:

- (14) 'A left-wing party that lives on Mars [...]' (@FratellidItalia, 1 September 2021)



- (15) 'The attempted silencing of the opposition continues [...] Welcome to North Korea' (@GiorgiaMeloni, 31 May 2021)



By using these hyperboles, Fratelli d'Italia and its leader, Giorgia Meloni, transform a rational criticism of the government into a claim whose main purpose is to provoke an emotional response in the audience: instead of criticising politicians' lack of awareness of people's real problems, they prefer to say that the government is living on another planet (the planet is often Mars and they speak of a Martian left-wing party); instead of accusing the mass media of discriminating against the opposition on some TV programmes, they compare the political situation with a dictatorship, making the audience forget the substantial distance between a democratic system such as the Italian one and an authoritarian system such as that of North Korea.

Hyperbole also has a side-effect: it undermines the credibility of truthful claims. 'The more false claims that we see, the less likely we are to believe the truthful claims that try to counter them and that is how we get to the point where we no longer believe anything, even if it's backed by good science' (Bule 2017).

Another rhetorical device which is very frequent in our corpus is irony, which requires a particular interpretative effort on the part of the audience. Readers first need to decode the text and process its literal meaning, and then they need to understand that this literal meaning is negated and the message is different, based on the interplay between the literal meaning and readers' knowledge of the world (in our case, the political relationships). This means that the writer presupposes that the audience has a good knowledge of the political situation and is able to infer the writer's intentions; in other words, a complicity may arise between the speaker and the interpreter. The interpreter then becomes aware of the insincerity of the claims. For an ironic message to be effective it must be clear for the interpreter that the speaker does not believe what he says (Pistolessi 2020: 90).

Let us look at two examples by Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing party Lega. In (16) Salvini claims ‘I am longing to meet the nice German rammer’. In fact, he has no desire at all to meet the person in question because the meeting will take place at a trial. To understand the irony, the audience must be acquainted with the fact that Salvini and Carola Rackete, the German sea captain, had a conflict when the former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs did not grant permission for her boat, *Sea Watch 3*, carrying 53 people rescued from a shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea, to make landfall on the Italian coast. After 15 days Rackete decided to approach the Italian island of Lampedusa and was arrested. This caused an international conflict with Germany and a series of trials followed. This post refers to one of these trials. Salvini has always been very critical of Rackete’s activities and decisions, so the adjective ‘nice’ is clearly ironic. The presence of the emoji reinforces the sense of irony.

The tweet in (17), also by Salvini, contains praise of the former government led by Giuseppe Conte. The interpretation of Salvini’s text requires a good knowledge of recent Italian history. In May 2018 Conte was appointed prime minister due to an agreement between Salvini (Lega) and Luigi Di Maio (M5S), but this government failed because Salvini broke up the coalition and Conte resigned in August 2019. In September 2019 a new government was formed thanks to a coalition between M5S and Partito Democratico, and Conte was again appointed prime minister. Salvini was not part of this new government, which explains the resentment evident in his post. This post is a comment on a news article reporting that 57.2 per cent of Italians wanted Conte to resign,

featuring a malicious picture of both Di Maio, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Conte. So, the exclamation ‘what a surprise’ means ‘it is not a surprise’, and the claim that ‘they are so capable and they’re providing such a clear show of efficiency, unity and dignity’ must be understood as meaning the opposite.

- (16) ‘While millions of Italians live among difficulties, uncertainties and fear, for some the most important thing is to prepare other trials against me. I am longing to meet the nice German rammer.’ (@matteosalvinimi, 17 January 2021)





- (17) ‘Look, what a surprise. And yet they are so capable and they’re providing such a clear picture of efficiency, unity and dignity.’ (@matteosalvinimi, 22 January 2021)



Matteo Salvini  
@matteosalvinimi

Ma dai, che sorpresa. Eppure sono così bravi e stanno dando una così bella prova di efficienza, unità e dignità....!



Finally, we will discuss one further rhetorical figure: parallelism. Insults are reinforced when they are inserted into a parallel structure—that is, when two syntactic structures follow a similar pattern. Parallelisms and dichotomies are very useful in creating contrasts between different situations, for example comparing what happens in different places, as in (18). They do not constitute an insult by themselves but reinforce a textual construction and enhance the insulting potential of a post.

In (18) Giorgia Meloni compares what happens in Spain and in Italy regarding immigration policy, a warhorse issue for her party, and this comparison is followed by the lexical element *buonisti* ('do-gooders') intended to insult left-wing parties accused of not taking the right measures to stop immigration. The pattern is: adverbial complement subject + verb + object. While the adverbial

complements are introduced by the same preposition and the subject is the same in the two clauses (in fact, it is elliptical in the second), the two verbs are in a relation of contextual antonymy ('protect' vs 'open wide'). In (19) the lexical insult (*schifosi*, 'disgusting') precedes the parallel structure in which Salvini expresses his wish for English football fans to be locked up.

- (18) 'In Spain, left-wing parties **protect their country's borders**. In Italy, they **open the ports wide** to illegal immigration. To protect one's country's borders is a duty, but it's hard to understand for the do-gooders' (@GiorgiaMeloni, 15 June 2021)



Giorgia Meloni    
@GiorgiaMeloni

In Spagna, la sinistra difende i propri confini. In Italia, lascia i porti spalancati all'immigrazione clandestina. Difendere le proprie frontiere è un dovere, ma i buonisti a tutti i costi faticano a comprenderlo

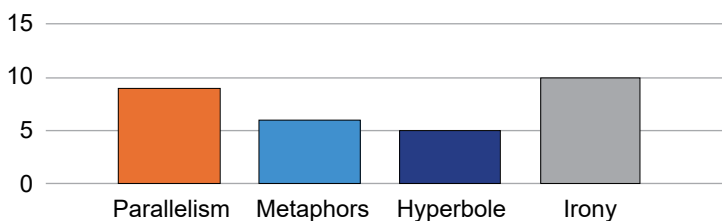


- (19) ‘These English men (disgusting, not fans) have taken defeat well. Instead of kneeling on the pitch, I hope they will kneel in a jail cell.’ (@matteosalvinimi, 12 June 2021)



Salvini's post is a good example of how the textual construction of an insult takes advantage of different mechanisms: lexical, using the insulting epithet 'disgusting', and rhetorical, with two different figures, one formal (parallelism) and one semantic (irony). He plays even with the rhyme *schifosi, non tifosi*.

To sum up, the written nature of these texts, no matter how often a politician writes them and how quickly he/she is supposed to react to the latest news, allows for a minimum of discourse planning. This explains the complex and accurate structure of some of the posts and the use of rhetorical figures as insulting strategies. There seems to be a selection of rhetorical figures with a clear preference for metaphors, hyperboles, irony, and parallelism, as shown in [Figure 3.5](#).



**Figure 3.5:** Percentages of rhetorical figures as insulting strategies.

### 3.5.3 *The role of cultural referents*

We will complete our analysis by briefly discussing the presence of cultural referents as part of insulting strategies. The number of tweets containing these references in our corpus is very low, but it is nonetheless an interesting strategy, aimed at a different type of audience. In these tweets it is possible to identify a hypotext—that is, a text that is referred to by the post and that the audience should be able to identify (Palermo 2013). This is the case for the title of Pirandello’s novel *Uno, nessuno, centomila* (1926) in (20), to refer to the changing political support that Conte seeks for different parliamentary votes; and for the quotation from Feuerbach’s essay *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution* (The science of nature and the revolution), ‘Der Mensch ist, was er isst’ (the man is what he eats) in (21). Nicola Morra accompanies his tweet with a picture of Salvini eating a hamburger, taken from Salvini’s own timeline (Salvini is well known for sharing moments from his private life, which is a communicative strategy avoided by other politicians) with the clear intention of denigrating him.

The question remains: to what extent are readers able to identify the hypotext and to complete the intentional message hidden by these references?

- (20) 'Conte is to me one, no one, a hundred thousand. [...]'  
(@DSantanche, 4 January 2020)



- (21) 'Given that man is what he eats, if the man eats badly, he lives badly.' (@NicolaMorra63, 22 July 2020)



The use of cultural referents in political communication deserves a more in-depth analysis in further studies to assess whether it is a cross-linguistic characteristic of this type of political discourse or is restricted to some cultures. Besides, the audience addressed in this type of tweet does not seem to be the average citizen, to the extent that these texts presuppose a certain knowledge of literary, philosophical, musical, and cinematographical referents, among others. A further question then regards whether we are facing a communicative strategy in political discourse that distinguishes different types of audiences in SNs and privileges a type of hate speech based mainly on discursive constructions and not so on the use of negatively connotated lexical items.

### 3.6 Conclusions

Our research on insults in political discourse has tried to establish a minimal taxonomy of insults in a particular context, SNs—and, more precisely, Twitter—in order to contribute to the analysis of hate speech both in contemporary political discourse and in computer-mediated communication. We conceive of insults as speech acts—following previous research by Canobbio (2010), Domaneschi (2020), Palermo (2020), Bianchi (2021), Nitti (2021)—and our definition is based on prototypical insults uttered with intention of causing offence to the addressee or the person addressed in discourse. However, the consideration of insult as speech act may be controversial from some perspectives,<sup>20</sup> first because insults may respond to different communicative intentions (including the intention to reinforce social ties among interlocutors) and have thus different illocutionary forces. Another argument put forward by scholars critical of this conception is that the perlocutionary effects of insults are variegated and highly dependent on the cultural and social context. We agree with this view on the complex pragmatic nature of insults, but our study is limited to one specific

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20 I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this point.

type of insult with a clear illocutionary force and communicative intention. As we have hoped to show, insults in digital political discourse are aimed both at the political opponent and at the audience, and have a double objective: to belittle and humiliate the rival and, by doing so, to persuade the audience of potential voters of the speaker's (or speaker's party's) superiority as a candidate for a political position. The speaker, as in most speech acts, does not have control over the perlocutionary effects of their acts—that is, the effective reactions and responses of the opponent and the audience, that may in effect be very variegated, and therefore not central to the definition proposed in this chapter.

Therefore, insulting mechanisms in political discourse on SNs differ from insults in other contexts, for example daily interactions or street fighting. From the data that we have analysed, it emerges that although lexical insults represent 89 per cent of the insulting mechanisms in our corpus, slurs and derogatory insults, which have been the focus of so much research, are limited mainly to those relating to political orientation (6 per cent). This is for two main reasons: a) slurs directed at minority groups are carefully avoided because they can have a direct effect on the number and type of potential voters—however, some political parties use slurs to denigrate groups who are not allowed to vote (illegal immigrants or foreign citizens); and b) slurs are easily detected by automatic filters in SNs, at least in the most widespread languages (not only English, but also Spanish, Italian, French, and German among the European languages), which can lead to the deletion of the post.

On the other hand, epithets with a negatively connotated value are as frequent as nouns and verbs with the same axiological character. These elements, which are the most frequent in our corpus (83 per cent), are used to discredit the actions, words, and attitudes of opponents and rivals, and belong mostly to the semantic field of criminal activities or unethical acts.

As we have seen, politicians try to create an impact on the audience by creating complex textual constructions (in just 280 characters). Hence, several strategies are often combined to

produce insults of a more textual than lexical nature: negatively connotated terms belonging to different grammatical categories are embedded within rhetorical figures. Moreover, politicians rely on citizens' previous encyclopaedic knowledge and their capacity to draw inferences from ironic texts and cultural referents.

These texts therefore involve thorough discourse planning that contradicts the idea that insults are emotional, uncontrollable reactions in a moment of anger or rage. The analysed tweets show a careful lexical selection, revealing a conscious construction of a well-defined identity and a discursive strategy—a way to take part in political life, to attract potential voters, to construct one's public persona and to damage rivals. Insults constitute a powerful tool in current political debate that has emerged from the convergence of populism as a rhetorical style that contaminates every political party with SNs as the main channel for the dissemination of political propaganda (Gil de Zúñiga, Michalska, and Römmele 2020: 587–588).

There are, however, some factors that limit the validity of our study: first of all, our corpus is very small and therefore the results may be biased by the selection of the tweets in terms of their quantity but also of their authorship and the unequal distribution between politicians of different ideological orientations. Further studies based on larger corpora of digital texts produced by actors of the political sphere will assess the validity of these results. Besides, it would be interesting to explore whether there is a link between the different types of insults and the ideology of the speakers—that is, whether discursive insults are a strategy that is characteristic of left- or right-wing politicians. On the other hand, the taxonomy of insults may be enlarged or modified when contrasted with larger corpora. Not only the percentages may vary but studies on other languages may show that politicians from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds may differ in the frequency and type of insults employed in computer-mediated-communication. This study intends to be a first step in the establishment of a taxonomy of insults taking as main criteria their linguistic nature (lexical or discursive).



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