

The representation of immigrants in the Italian press: Exploring some examples of visual discrimination

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1. Introduction

Thousands of migrants are pouring into Sicily by sea every day, sparking fears that the ancient Mediterranean isle has become ‘the new Lesbos’.¹ According to a ION² report, since 2014 the number of migrants reaching Italy’s shores has spiked: half a million came ashore over the last three years compared with 119,000 in the previous three.³ And Italy’s burden got heavier when a deal with Brussels last year forced it to honor its obligations and process mass arrivals. Until this year, Rome turned a blind eye to many migrants and let them head north. Now, in line with European Union law, Italy is required to set up migrant centers called “hotspots.” Here, officials distinguish between those who say they were persecuted or faced serious harm and those who fled poverty, who are supposed to be sent home. As a result, Italy’s asylum applications have jumped: as of November 2017, they were at nearly 104,000, a record high.

The main objective of this paper is to observe the manner in which the Italian press transmits news items dealing with the arrival of immigrants. We have selected them because most news

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¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3539484/High-five-Europe-patrol-migrant-boats-pick-refugee-dinghies-30-miles-Libya-bring-270-miles-Sicily-new-Lesbos.html>.

² International Organization for Migration.

³ <https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-3-part-1-improving-data-missing-migrants>.

reports deal with the first moment of immigrants' arrival. The portrayal of this moment is very important in the transmission of public opinion because the constant representation of immigrants as human beings in need of help and support from the Italian population suggests that immigrants are a burden to the country, as the section where the analysis is presented will make clear. The decisions relating to how to represent the reality of immigration in the press point to factors such as who communicates with whom and who has the power to represent the reality of immigration in a particular way (Van Dijk, 2008). The press commands power over a population because it can transmit facts in a specific way that is appropriate to its financial or ideological objectives, such as selling newspapers or showing that it is the majority group of the population that has power. People who do not have any real or constant contact with the Other (immigrants) will take the image offered by the media as a frame of reference. Therefore the discourse of the media will be the one that will inform and sustain these people's image of immigrants, making it limited and reduced. In this sense, the main research questions we will try to answer in this article are the following: How are the immigrants who arrive in boats to Sicily portrayed visually? What are the main visual methods of representing the immigrants arriving in boats?

In order to answer these questions, the aim of this research is to offer a critical analysis of the main visual elements involved in the representation of immigrants in a sample of the Italian press. More specifically, I will analyse in detail a selection of images concerning immigrants found in the newspapers *Il Giornale* (an Italian daily newspaper published in Milan) and *Il Giornale di Sicilia* (an Italian daily national newspaper for the island of Sicily) in 2016. In the service of this work, van Leeuwen's (2008) framework on representing social actors provided a starting point for our study. Multimodal resources can build stereotypes as shown in the images analysed in this article. Stereotyping involves reduction and simplification of the main characteristics of the minority group so that they are not represented as 'normal' by the group in power.

This article is organized as follows: the next section concerns the literature review and the theoretical framework used for analysing the selected texts. Section 2 deals with the data and general methodology. Then, Section 3 presents the main results, while section 4 concentrates on the discussion of the results obtained.

2. Literature review

In recent years, the image of immigrants in the press has been studied extensively using critical discourse analysis as a framework (Martínez Lirola, 2006; Richardson, 2004; Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Van Dijk, 2008, among others). Generally, the visualization of migration and migrants is characterized by portraying them as poor people, dependent on the in-group or as people who “invade” other countries and therefore need help and use social services and resources (Richardson and Wodak, 2009). The dichotomy *we–they* is highlighted by publishing negative news articles about them and positive ones of ourselves. *They* are foreigners, defined by ‘race’, religion, or language and, therefore, it is made clear that they do not belong to the in-group and that they will never belong. In addition, Van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework will be used in this analysis because it pays attention to the representation of social actors in discourse from the linguistic and visual points of view. Through this theory, van Leeuwen gives structure for analysing representations of individuals and communities, describing the ways in which a person constructing a representation can grant or deny the agency of an individual or community being represented. Consequently, this framework can be easily integrated within the CDA approach selected because it allows for the observation of how the immigrants that appear in the pieces of news selected are portrayed as social actors. Moreover, it allows us to observe the power of the journalists as members of the in-group of Italian society behind their representation. Both approaches allow for the unmasking of the discursive strategies that appear in the press as a sample of dominant discourse.

The use of dysphemisms (i.e., a marked form which expresses a speaker’s view or attitude towards the listener or group) is a resource for textual manipulation that allows people-journalists, in the case of our study-to use visuals in a way that fosters describing a particular reality or group of people in a manner that reinforces values and social codes. In this sense, the way immigrants are represented is manipulated to offer a negative view of the people portrayed. Following van Leeuwen (2000) and his concept of visual racism, we will use the term *visual dysphemism* to refer to the cases in which images show the pejorative side of a social reality or group of people-immigrants, in the present case.

In general, studies dealing with the visual and linguistic representation of immigrants in the Italian press point out that

immigrants are represented as different from the in-group of the population as regards race, appearance, culture, language and origin (Bruno, 2016). This is one of the strategies used by the press in order to restrict the arrival of immigrants in Italy. Consequently, it is the Italian population that is the group with power and immigrants are represented as inferior and dependent on the in-group. In this sense, the negative visual representation contributes to persuade readers to have a negative image of immigrants.

However, there are fewer studies on the representation of immigrants in the Italian press and they focus more on lexical items rather than on visual elements (Taylor, 2009; Bruno, 2016). Our main concern in this study is with visual elements and the message they convey in the whole piece of news. There are many studies that pay attention to multimodality and the role of visuals in the construction of meaning (Baldry and Thibault, 2006; O'Halloran, 2004; O'Halloran and Smith, 2011, among others).

Following Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 177), the authors of the visual grammar that will be the theoretical framework of this article, there are three main types of composition in multimodal texts: (a) 'information value': the place in which elements are located, for example, from left to right, top to bottom or from the centre to the margins, can add a specific value; (b) 'salience': the different elements of a composition that are designed to catch the readers' attention, for example, appearing in the first or second place, the size of an element, colour contrast or sharpness; and (c) 'framing': the presence or absence of frames that connect or disconnect elements of meaning in terms of whether they go or do not go together in the making of meanings.

3. Data and methodology

The majority of the news items dealing with Sub-Saharan immigrants focus on their first moment of arrival on boats; for this reason, we have chosen news items that inform the audience about these events. The selection of multimodal texts is necessary because they offer not only linguistic but also visual information about immigrants. The data collected were compiled with all the news items that dealt with the first moment of arrival in boats which appeared in the digital version of two Italian newspapers, that is, *Il Giornale* and *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, from 1 January 2016 to 2 October 2016. The first newspaper is regarded as right-wing, while the second one has been chosen because it is based in Sicily, one of the areas with the highest percentage of immigrants

in Italy. All in all, 105 news reports were obtained from the online archives of the newspapers under analysis: 75 from *Il Giornale* and 30 from *Il Giornale di Sicilia*. However, there is no difference between the ways these two papers represent the issue. Regarding the different news items, 27 were monomodal, i.e., they consisted simply of written text, whereas 78 were multimodal, i.e., they were comprised of photographs in which the immigrants under analysis were represented, as well as written text.

The corpus is wide enough to analyse certain texts in detail and to reach some conclusions. Due to the limitations of this paper, and following the tradition of CDA, we will choose just three multimodal texts (Figures 1, 2, 3) to illustrate the main visual and linguistic characteristics of the descriptions of sub-Saharan immigrants when they arrive. The selected texts were chosen because they are representative of the recurrent techniques by which immigrants are portrayed during the first moment of their arrival in Italy. These techniques were identified by observing the representation of the in-group and the immigrants in all the news items selected. The texts chosen as examples show that immigrants are portrayed as different from the in-group of the population. The news items selected portray the three main ways in which immigrants are represented after their first moment of arrival: immigrants who need to be rescued (Figure 1); women and children arrive and they are vulnerable (2); and immigrants waiting for being taken back to their countries of origin (3).

Once the corpus was selected, we applied some of the principles of CDA in order to investigate the relationship between the discourse used in the news items under analysis, the social reality they transmit, and the ideology behind each linguistic and visual choice.

In addition, van Leeuwen's (2008) characterization of social actors will be useful when exploring the dysphemistic representation of the above-mentioned immigrants because it allows us to observe how these immigrants that appear in the pieces of news selected are portrayed as social actors from the linguistic and the visual point of view. Social actors can be referred to as *individuals* or as *groups*, both verbally and visually. The visual representation of social actors calls for one to pay attention to social distance, social relation and social interaction in order to understand the portrayal of people in the visuals and their relationships with the audience (van Leeuwen, 2008). This model is also useful to observe whether immigrants are portrayed as groups, as individuals, active, passive, etc.

4. Analysis

Having explained the main characteristics of the corpus of examples and the main method of analysis, this section will concentrate on offering the main general characteristics of the news items of the corpus. In so doing, three multimodal pieces of news will be described in order to systematize the main ways in which immigrants are represented dysphemistically from a visual point of view.

4.1. Immigrants who need to be rescued: the very first moment of arrival

Figure 1⁴ is characteristic of the very first moment of arrival because you can see that the boat is still in the sea. This picture was selected as it clearly represents the distance and the differences between the immigrants and the rescuers. A man belonging to the majority group, who is wearing white clothes and is completely protected, appears in the foreground, and the immigrants are portrayed in the middle ground and foreground (the fence has the symbolic meaning of controlling them).

One of the main characteristics of news items like this one is that immigrants are represented as a group and nothing is said of them as individuals. The orange waistcoats that they wear contribute to their homogenization. Moreover, they are represented as passive, waiting to be taken to Italy and provided with help for their basic needs. There is a clear difference between the group of immigrants wearing dark clothes and the man on the left in white clothes. On the one hand, he is wearing a half mask and a hood as protection, which suggests that the others are sickly, perhaps infectious. The fact that he is standing while the group of immigrants are sitting gives him symbolic power as the only member of the in-group in the image. His presence and the fence in the foreground further establish the difference between *we* and *they*. Moreover, his deportment suggests the concept of capture. On the other hand, immigrants are collectivised and assimilated (van Leeuwen, 2008). Regarding information value (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), it seems that none of the represented participants are looking at the audience,

⁴ Source: Ansa news agency, published on *Il Giornale*, in <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/immigrati-battuto-ogni-record-nel-2016-gi-sbarcati-171mila-1336586.html>.

which allows no possibility of interaction or dialogue between the represented social actors and the latter.

FIGURE 1



Source: Ansa, 2016 (published on *Il Giornale*).

The analysis of social distance, social relation and social interaction allows us to observe how interpersonal relations with the audience are established (van Leeuwen, 2008). There is a clear distance between the different social actors represented and the audience due to the barrier between them. We are invited to observe the action without participating in it because the people represented are not in a close shot. Following van Leeuwen, “In pictures as in real life, distance communicates interpersonal relationships” (van Leeuwen, 2008: 138). In this sense, distance is symbolic in this news item and it suggests that the immigrants are strangers and have nothing to do with us. In regards to social relation, there is a horizontal angle since we see immigrants from the side. Symbolic detachment is suggested since immigrants are not observed at eye level; they are shown from some distance (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Considering social interaction, this is a clear example of an offer image because the social actors do not look directly at the readers, and therefore there is no explicit demand. In this sense, the different people are represented as “[...] objects for our scrutiny rather than as subjects addressing the viewer with their

gaze and symbolically engaging with the viewer in this way” (van Leeuwen, 2008: 141).

4.2. Portraying the arrival of women and children

There are very few news items in which women and children appear represented in the corpus (17%) and Figure 2⁵ is one example. As was the case in Figure 1, this news item also coincides with the very first moment of arrival. As in the previous image, immigrants appear represented as a group in Figure 2, but here there are no members of the majority group, so that the attention is on the migrants. There are different vectors joining them by means of their heads, shoulders, arms and hands. However, this is different in the sense that this visual depicts the representation of women and children, more specifically as part of the family, and these groups are considered the most vulnerable members of society. The baby girl represents the focus of the image. The fact that she looks directly at the audience implies that she requests an answer, inviting readers to sympathize with her social situation, to feel pity and compassion. Therefore, she interacts socially with the audience because she is demanding that readers react and, consequently, this would constitute an example of a demand image (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006).

FIGURE 2



Source: AP, 2016 (published on *Il Giornale*).

Considering social relation, there is a frontal horizontal angle, in which the frontal plane of the image producer (and likewise the viewer) and the frontal plane of the represented actors are parallel. The frontal

⁵ <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/soli-nelle-mani-dei-trafficienti-destino-dei-bimbi-immigrati-1039398.html>.

angle means “involvement” between the viewer and the people represented in the visual; i.e., the social problem portrayed affects the Italian society and the immigrant women who arrive. This idea is reinforced because the social actors are observed at eye level (van Leeuwen, 2008).

4.3. Waiting for a new destiny after the first moment of arrival

Figure 3⁶ is another text in which immigrants’ representation as social actors is characterized by their portrayal as a group. This is an example of an image where no one from the majority group is depicted; therefore, all the attention falls on the immigrants. In van Leeuwen’s (2008) terms, they are collectivized and assimilated so that any depiction of their distinctiveness as individuals is avoided. The notion of an indeterminate identity is thus present because they are portrayed as unspecified, anonymous people (van Leeuwen, 2008).

FIGURE 3



Source: LaPresse, 2016 (published on *Il Giornale di Sicilia*).

These immigrants are doing nothing, homogenised by wearing clothes of the same colour and by the blankets that some of them use to cover their bodies. All the immigrants are joined by vectors, as lines

⁶ http://gds.it/2016/06/10/migranti-giornata-di-sbarchi-in-sicilia-in-2mila-tra-palermo-messina-e-augusta_524386/.

that establish orientation, thereby connecting all the immigrants and causing one to perceive them as a unity. Vectors also situate the sub-Saharanans, who are represented at the same level, emphasizing that they share the same social situation. Moreover, portraying so many sub-Saharanans together suggests the impression of a cumulative invasion and of immigrants as people who are in need. Some immigrants are standing up on the right, thereby being accorded more importance than the rest of the immigrants who are lying down. Moreover, their size is larger due to the camera angle and the direct eye contact with the viewer of the middle figure contributes to highlight this part of the visual. This is one of the most strongly illuminated points in the visual, particularly due to the white t-shirt and the white bag that the immigrant in the middle of the three standing is carrying. Consequently, the principle of information value is accomplished because the most important part of the visual appears on the right.

Immigrants emerge as objects to be observed by readers. This visual illustrates well what van Leeuwen (2008) refers to when he says that

[...] the strategy of objectivation, representing people as objects for our scrutiny, rather than as subjects addressing the viewer with their gaze and symbolically engaging with the viewer in this way” (van Leeuwen, 2008: 141).

This visual depicts a clear foreground, a mid-ground and a background. The background is blurred, which contributes to the concept of *collectivization* and also to establishing a distance between the subjects of the image and the audience. This highlights the interpretation of certain differences between *we* and *they*, between the world of immigrants and the world of the Italian society. In regards to social distance (van Leeuwen, 2008), the immigrants who appear on the right seem to be close to the audience, while those in the mid-ground and background do not. They come into view in a long shot and, therefore, they are represented as strangers who have a different social reality to that of the in-group, which contributes to highlighting the differences between them and us. However, we observe them at eye level (vertical angle), which suggests that, although we are detached from their reality, we are invited to observe them, to analyse what they do, making clear that “They are depicted as socially “below us” as low in power compared to us” (van Leeuwen, 2008: 139). When considering social relation, it is observed that the image is taken from the right-hand corner; consequently, the social actors who are not in that corner

are represented as remote from the reality of the Italian population, which is related with power differences (van Leeuwen, 2008). In this sense, paying attention to social relation, this image is an example of detachment because the viewer is distanced from the immigrants represented, who are angled away from the reader's view. The analysis of social interaction makes clear that this is also an obvious example of an offer image because none of the immigrants look at the audience, and therefore they do not request an answer but they offer themselves to be observed. Consequently, the analysis of this visual suggests that the immigrants portrayed show to be problematic because they are passive human beings who need help after they arrive to Italy.

4.4. Discussion

The general tendency observed in the corpus is to represent immigrants as distanced from the readers as strangers and different from the majority group. In general, the majority of the immigrants arrive on the coast of Sicily without official documents, as they have emigrated from their countries of origin in negative socio-economic conditions; they have left their families behind in order to have a chance of starting a new life in Europe. The different visual choices in the news items analysed suggest the perspective that immigrants are illegal. The fact that the majority of the news items in the Italian press concentrate on immigrants arriving in boats emphasises that the latter arrive without official documents that allow them to work in the country.

Also, the angles observed in the visuals also contribute to giving power to readers, as members of the majority group, representing immigrants socially situated "below us". For example, Figures 1 and 3 are taken from the right; consequently, the immigrants in the background on the left do not appear in a strong position. Eventually, as regards social interaction, the general tendency is that the social actors represented do not look at the audience and therefore no direct interaction is established (see Figure 1). Figure 2 would be an exception. The main visual dysphemisms in the photographs analysed are connected with immigrants being portrayed in need, as being passive recipients of help. Moreover, the general tendency is to represent them as a group and to avoid any reference to them as individuals. In general, the news items analysed portray situations of vulnerability and dependency: immigrants request help after they arrive and they have no social or economic support when they arrive. Whenever there are members of the majority group in the visuals, they

are portrayed as being active, whereas immigrants are passive. The images analysed present immigrants as poor people who are in need, which suggests that they are inferior to the Italian population and that they demand help and support from the very first moment they arrive. This highlights the ‘we-they’ dichotomy, which contributes to bringing to light negative attitudes towards the arrival of immigrants or, as stated by Anderson, “[...] how easy it is for the non-citizen, whatever their immigration or citizenship status, to be imagined as the ‘illegal’ and thereby associated with the criminal” (Anderson, 2013: 5). This dichotomy is also emphasized by the fact that most of the immigrants represented in the visuals do not look directly at the audience (figures 1 and 3), so that there is no direct interaction between them, as the protagonists of the news items under analysis, and the audience reading and viewing the pieces of news.

The main ways in which immigrants are portrayed dysphemistically in the corpus of examples are the following: the general tendency is to represent immigrants as collectivized and assimilated linguistically and visually (van Leeuwen, 2008). Linguistically (in the articles and in the headings), they are referred to by nouns denoting a group of people (*sub-Saharanans*, *immigrants*, *workers*, etc.) or as statistics while, visually, they are portrayed as a group of unspecified, anonymous individuals (van Leeuwen, 2008), and never alone. The active-passive dichotomy is very interesting in the visual representation of immigrants: they are active when they start their migratory project but once they arrive in the Italian coasts and are rescued from the small boats in which they travel, they become passive because they are people for whom the action is done; in fact, most of the images indicate that people from the majority group are the “agents” (actors). Presenting the former as patients implies that they are a burden on the country of arrival. This is clearly seen in Figures 1 and 3. The different visual dysphemisms analysed add to the immigrants’ social exclusion, because they are portrayed in a negative manner and as “the others”, as people who do not belong to the majority group and will never do so van Leeuwen (2008) makes this clear: “Representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended” (van Leeuwen, 2008: 28). In this sense, following van Leeuwen (2008), the main strategies used to exclude immigrants are the following: 1) strategy of objectivation: immigrants are represented as objects, since the majority do not engage with the viewer; 2) strategy of distantiation: immigrants are presented as strangers, isolated from people from the majority group and 3) strategy of disempowerment:

immigrants are also represented as inferior, poorer and with little or no power. In addition, the main visual strategies observed in the texts under analysis assist in creating pity, fear and compassion in readers and viewers. There is a tendency to represent immigrants as standardized once they arrive because they receive blankets or clothes in the same colour (figures 1 and 3). Apart from the sub-Saharanans represented, there are also Italian people in the photographs, usually members of NGOs such as The Red Cross or members of the Social Security Forces, which makes the “*we-they*” division clear. The previous analysis demonstrates that immigrants are represented as invaders who play an active role in their migratory project because they try to travel to Italy, which involves making decisions, working hard in order to make the money that they needed to pay to make the journey, risking their lives in small boats (figures 1 and 3). However, they are also presented as victims when they do not succeed in their migratory projects (figure 2). In this sense, they are portrayed as passive because, once they arrive, it is people from the majority group-NGOs or members of the Social Security Forces-who take care of them, protect them, offering medical care, food, clothes and shelter, and who make decisions for them. In multimodal text 1 there are members of the in-group, and the visual self-presentation strategies adopted in the news items under examination are important because they point out that the in-group is represented through the image of the rescuer (figure 1). The implications of such a way to represent the in-group are that they have a crucial role when immigrants arrive because they are active and what they do affects immigrants directly. This suggests that immigrants could lose their lives without their actions. Consequently, the representation of people of the in-group in the news items analysed can be considered as the visual realization of the *topos* of humanitarianism, that is, on how the actions done by the people who belong to the majority group are essential to protect immigrants’ lives and to offer them primary attention at the very first moment of arrival. Ideologically, said representation implies that immigrants need the in-group and they are portrayed as passive, which contrasts with the active role of the Italian population. Pity, compassion, and help have a crucial role in discriminatory discourse and in reproducing racism because immigrants are represented as a burden for the Italian society from the first moment of arrival. Moreover, the in-group and the out-group are represented in different ways. In this sense, the contribution of this study rests on the insights it offers on the role played by humanitarian discourses in pointing out the importance and superiority of the majority group and in considering immigrants as victims and intruders

at the same time. On the one hand, considering immigrants as victims supports humanitarian help and discourse towards them. On the other hand, their consideration as intruders contributes to racism and discriminatory discourse. In a sense, humanitarian discourse is used to legitimate border control, migrant detention, and deportation (Horsti, 2012). The majority group of the population is that which wields more socio-economic power in all societies; therefore, minorities are less powerful from the discursive, social and economic points of view. In other words, the voices of the majority population are more strongly present, more often quoted and made to appear credible, whereas the voices of minorities hardly ever appear in the press and if they do, they appear victimized.

5. Conclusions

The negative representation of the immigrants after their arrival in small boats justifies the study of the main visual dysphemisms in this article. For example, in all the visuals analysed there are elements that contribute to highlighting the differences between “*we* and *them*”: a fence (figure 1), the colours of the clothes used by members of the majority group (figure 1), the relative size of social actors from the majority group (figure 3), the representation of immigrants as a group (figures 1 and 3), among others. The visual dysphemisms observed in the corpus contribute to the social exclusion of immigrants. The news items analysed give no information about the reasons why immigrants arrive on the Italian coasts. Instead, their representation as vulnerable and needing help is a constant feature. In this way, the way journalists portray immigrants is legitimated. The recurrent negative representation of immigrants in the press contributes to fostering fear in the Italian audience and to the reinforcement of prejudices and stereotypes that assume immigrants constitute a people-problem whose members have nothing to offer to the society of arrival. Their situation is presented as a generalization in which they all seem to be dependent on the Italian population, without any reference to what they could contribute, as a means to emphasize that immigrants are excluded from the majority group because they are “the others”.

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