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The (d)evolution of political communication in Italy: Beppe Grillo's case

In the 21st century, together with the rapid widespread of social media and digital communication, political parties and their leaders have started to make use of modern technologies to support conventional representation. Following Silvio Berlusconi's resignation in 2011, the Italy's political scene has seen an immediate re-evaluation which, after the subsequent governments of both center-left and center-right coalitions lasting until 2018, has brought about significant changes to the traditional party system.¹ One of them involved the appearance of a new political group, the 'Five Stars Movement' (translated literally from Italian: *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, hereinafter abbreviated as 5SM) led by Beppe Grillo, comedian and TV personality who gathered an enormous confidence of nearly 9 millions of Italian voters in the early parliamentary election of 2013 disappointed by the existing political leadership within last twenty-five years of the so-called 'Second Republic'. That record was broken in the polls of 2018 when Grillo's party not only improved and rose up to 10.5 millions of votes, but also entered the governing cabinet with Luigi Di Maio as deputy prime minister.

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1 See: Ł.J. Berezowski, "A Semiotic Analysis of Italy's Political Discourse. Silvio Berlusconi's Case", [in]: *Current Perspectives in Semiotics. Text, Genres, and Representation*, eds. M. Kopytowska, A. Gałkowski, Peter Lang GmbH, Berlin 2018, pp. 157–174.

In the present article we aim to analyze, in both political and linguistic terms, the phenomenon of a virtual party initially without a structured organization that subsequently conquered Italian citizens notwithstanding generational and ideological differences among them. In particular, the object of the research shall be dedicated to the figure of its charismatic leader explored in the perspective of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Historical background

Founded earlier in 2009, the 5SM came to the top league of the Italian political scene only in May of 2012. It is the first time when such an unexpected victory in both local and regional elections has been experienced. The success was doubled later that year when Grillo's political project was ranked the first in the regional voting in Sicily, and even the most disbelieving commentators started to think (or, actually, to worry) that the 5SM might play an important role in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. A year prior to that, very few political observers noticed the existence of the initiative and considered it as both evanescent and significantly irrelevant. It was headed by Beppe Grillo, a comedian and actor with an uncommon professional career. After several years of popular appearances on the public TV channels in the 1980s, he was expelled from mainstream television as the aftermath of playing tricks on the former governing Socialist Party during a prime time broadcast. Subsequently, Grillo continued to act in theaters, attracting less numerous but loyal audience with his performances that increasingly concentrated on current political affairs, in particular on environmental topics and a hard criticism of the degeneration of today's capitalist economy. Shortly, the same issues shall be extensively covered in the blog that Grillo began in 2005 (mentioned thereafter).

The public expression of Beppe Grillo contains all the features of distinctive communication which is characteristic of many Italian politicians, but it also includes elements of attitudes which can be defined as steered or acquired skills. Grillo as both comedian and actor consciously takes advantage of his natural and spontaneous professional competences. This relates to the level of verbal communication (both spoken and written) as well as to non-verbal one (like gestures, facial expression, body language, use of symbols, pictures and objects considering all these elements in semiotic perspective). Verbal communication represents a phenomenon consisting of speech acts that shall be classified as 'written speaking discourse' on the one hand and 'spoken writing discourse' on the other.² It means that Grillo, when producing

² G. Nencioni, "Parlato-parlato, parlato-scritto, parlato-recitato", [in:] *Di scritto e di parlato. Discorsi linguistici*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1983, pp. 126–179, http://nencioni.sns.it/fileadmin/template/allegati/pubblicazioni/1983/ScrittoParlato/ScrittoParlato_sette.pdf [accessed on: 1.05.2020].

a written speech act (in particular via his website: www.beppegrillo.it, which constitutes an ideal example of virtual hypertextual communication genre), tries to make use of simple and well-ordered language, but expressive, pragmatic and performative at the same time. His expression is not much divergent from the one presented by the majority of bloggers in general. Furthermore, Grillo pays attention to the coherence of his speech, keeping the content transparent in terms of form and style notwithstanding his excessive temper and casual style of communicating with the public. Both stage and actor experience facilitates him to achieve the objective set and to play a role of locutor (mostly interlocutor or rhetor in classical terms). To say more on that, as sophisticated actor and satirist, Grillo is capable of directing scenes of his choice, sequencing them to predict the final effect which aims at provoking and stimulating the spectators with the use of discursive signals such as curses, swear words and blasphemies.³

In terms of non-verbal communication Grillo seems to be even more meaningful. Several specific elements of this kind of expression propagated by the Italian politician linked with the rhetorical figures contribute to define it as idiolect called 'grillese' (a customized jargon-coded variety of language; *grill-* < *Grillo* + *-ese* a nominal suffix of lexems specific to Italian language names, such as *inglese* 'English', *francese* 'French', *svedese* 'Swedish', etc.). It can be noted not only due to certain fixed characteristics and visible manifestations of his behavior, but also (if not primarily) due to his presence in public space and virtual reality. Perhaps Grillo follows, even if not deliberately, a widely held pattern of Italian scandalized politicians of the past including Silvio Berlusconi, Alessandra Mussolini, Ciciolina or Nicole Minetti, albeit his political views differ from them all as much as coincide.⁴ The prototypes of Beppe Grillo's attitude can be searched more outside strict politics; one of them to be mentioned was Dario Fo, the Italian Nobel prize winner for literature in 1997, dramatist and satirist, a father of left-wing radical theater in Italy.

Non-verbal communication: analysis #1

To start with non-verbal communication analysis in Grillo, it is worth paying attention to several gestures characterizing 5SM leader. Italian semiotician Giovanna Cosenza defines them as "extreme body" (It. *corpo estremo*), which

3 U. Eco, "Sull'insulto", *L'Espresso* 2015, 2.10, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/opinioni/la-bustina-di-minerva/2015/09/30/news/sull-insulto-1.232015> [accessed on: 1.05.2020]; translated into Polish by: A. Gałkowski, „O zniewadze”, *Tygiel Kultury* 2015, issue 7–12(223–228), pp. 81–82.

4 See: Ł.J. Berezowski, "Non solo Berlusconi: rassegna panoramica dei populisti italiani della «Seconda Repubblica». Una prospettiva storico-linguistica", [in:] *Populismo y propaganda: entre el presente y el pasado*, eds. Ł. Szkołpański, A. Woch, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2020, pp. 175–188.

should be perceived as ‘a body eccentric in its behavior and reaction’, intended for comical or even disgusting effect (e.g. silly faces resembling puppets used as masks by actors of traditional Chinese or Japanese theaters).⁵ Grillo, undeniably controls and makes use of gestures and facial expressions, being totally aware of the impact that they could have on the audience.

Some of Grillo’s attitudes that can be analyzed from the perspective of “behavioral semantics”⁶ are:

- use of distinctive masks achieved thanks to a clever mime acts (either extremely tragic or comic ones) featuring an inborn ability to switch smoothly between them; these are full of exaggeration in action, amplified tones and scream (mouth agape effect);
- use (or sometimes even abuse) of a *bras d’honneur* gesture (in Poland known as ‘Kozakiewicz’s gesture’ after Władysław Kozakiewicz who displayed it after winning the gold medal in the pole vault at the 1980 Summer Olympics in front of a hostile crowd in Moscow); Grillo applies it habitually and impassively; moreover, he points his finger at particular parts of body, offending and slandering his political adversaries. This leads to boost the effect of repulsion and disgust towards the person being an object of insulting words produced by the comedian;
- search for maintaining direct contact with the audience or the interlocutor (physical one), chatting with the use of a deictic pronoun ‘you’ accompanied by his index finger turned towards people he is not friends with, violating personal space of the speaker by patting on the shoulder of arms of the interlocutor in order to gain control over them; this kind of stance is full of contradiction since once Grillo cuddles his opponent during a discussion, which is not matched with harassing tone and content of his speech in a conflict situation;
- by and large, the use of non-conventional gestures, which are regarded as inappropriate, deriding, defamatory, blasphemous, insulting public taste, etiquette and personal beliefs such as athletic gestures performed among the crowd, simulating the distribution of holy communion, wiping his bottom using a newspaper, spitting at the audience, amplifying typical Italian gestures with additional hand and body movements.

5 G. Cosenza, *Grillo’s communication style: from swear words to body language*, 2013, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23248823.2014.886417?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=rita20> [accessed on: 1.05.2020].

6 See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/behaviourist-antics> [accessed on: 1.05.2020].

Non-verbal communication: observation #1

Beppe Grillo represents exceptionally unconventional set of behaviors: he is original, creative and shocking, thus overshadows a crown of ordinary Italian politicians who are not capable of controlling their reactions as much as Grillo is. The 5SM leader knows no embarrassment or compromises. Yet, it seems quite probable that his attitude is just a sheer game of appearances focused on gaining respect and wide recognition among his supporters known as *grillini* (*Grill/o* + *-ini* a plural hypocoristical lexical end designating a group of supporters). Reflection-provoking embittering, building ambivalent reactions, sowing doubt are the most common techniques of communicating used by Grillo. Perhaps it is his idea for gaining success for the movement he leads rather than fulfilling personal desires and ambitions. He is said to have grilled politicians as Bettino Craxi, Silvio Berlusconi and recently Matteo Renzi, all of them belonging to the ruling class of the last 25 years. His deeds in this regard shall be the subject of long-term research led by political scientists to prove Grillo's range of dismissing prominent statesmen. For the time being, the answer is not so evident.

The Five Stars Movement, regardless of the origins of its name, stands for five priorities that this anti-establishment, eurosceptical and environmentalist political group is heading for:

- public water and its relevance for people;
- environment and its protection;
- free-of-charge right to Internet access for everyone;
- sustainable economic development;
- innovative transport policy, guaranteeing facilities for cyclists and owners of ecological vehicles.

Each of these demands is represented by a separate yellow star forming the party's logotype.⁷ It is the best exemplification of an image that a politician and his party can use to publicize proper brand in both verbal and non-verbal communication with the citizens applicable to similarly encoded symbols. However, in 2015 Grillo surprisingly decided to cease any personal identification of himself with the movement, depriving it of his name in the official party documents and graphics.

Although this may not be apparent, in spite of many stereotypes that arose around 5SM including the accusations of populism⁸, its leader sets very realistic goals which find social justification, both globally and locally. Once achieved,

⁷ See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MoVimento_5_Stelle_Logo_vettoriale.svg [accessed on: 29.06.2020].

⁸ See: Ł.J. Berezowski, "Political communication in the post-representative Italian democracy: towards a digital era of populism", *Kwartalnik Naukowy OAP UW e-Politikon* 2019, issue 31–32, pp. 69–98.

they may contribute to the improvement of society life on one hand and on the other reveal helplessness of formerly governing political parties which would never admit failures or impotence.

Verbal communication: analysis #2

When it comes to discussing Beppe Grillo's verbal communication, the object of research shall be the content of his superblog *beppegrillo.it*. Such analysis has been carried out with the use of Expert System program based on Cogito technology which allows to separate semantic contents of given hypertext (e.g. frequent blog entries). Critical reference shall be made to some arrangements of the research commissioned by *La Stampa* journalists.⁹

The analysis concerned the entire body of the website published between 2005 and 2012. It was established that in the aforementioned period the number of posts increased fourfold (from 350 to 1400). This means that Grillo is a fruitful, efficient and ultimately resistant commentator. Looking down at the rating of topics that dominated the first two positions, this included the judiciary and trials as well as elections. A little less attention is paid to crime and microeconomics. These are followed by politics, terrorism, banking, media, investigations and arrests, parliament, litter and environment pollution, local authorities, business and finance, nuclear power, budget and taxes, labor market, healthcare, public debt, telecommunication, energy, political parties and movements, market and stock exchange, public gatherings, education, publishing market.

Among the nouns of major occurrence (both common and proper ones) on the blog terms *Italia* and *italiano* are to be mentioned. These are followed by: *paese* 'country', *politici* 'politicians', *Silvio Berlusconi* (understandable after two decades of Berlusconi's era), *partito* 'party', *governo* 'government', *stato* 'state', *movimento* 'movement', *parlamento* 'parliament', *processo* 'trial', *reato* 'criminal offence', *azienda* 'company', *debito* 'debt', *democrazia* 'democracy', *acqua* 'water', *referendum* 'referendum', *magistrate* 'judge'. Interestingly, Rome was of lower occurrence than Milan (*Roma, Milano*) as well as the EU topped over the USA (*Unione Europea/UE, Stati Uniti*).

The terms of the highest occurrence confirm the list of topics that Grillo has been mostly involved in.

In addition to the nouns' rating, the study revealed the list of the most frequently used verbs. The rating is opened by *fare* 'do', *potere* 'can', *dovere* 'must', *dire* 'say', *inviare* 'send', *volere* 'want', *stare* 'be', *andare* 'go', *sapere* 'know', *venire* 'come', *pagare* 'pay' through *parlare* 'speak', *dare* 'give', *arrivare* 'arrive', *leggere* 'read', *vivere* 'live', *sentire* 'hear/feel', *succedere* 'happen', *decidere* 'decide', *passare* 'spend', finally *votare*

⁹ <https://www.lastampa.it/blogs/2013/03/12/news/il-linguaggio-di-beppe-grillo-1.36972289> [accessed on: 1.05.2020].

'vote' and *cambiare* 'change'. One may only imagine how many different collocations can be formed with the use of only two last verbs: *votare "sì" o "no"* 'vote "yes" or "no"', *votare per questa legge* 'vote for the bill', *votare contro la riforma* 'vote against the reform', *cambiare l'Italia* 'change Italy', *cambiare la società* 'change the society', *cambiare la situazione politica* 'change the political situation', *cambiare lo status quo politico* 'change the political *status quo*', etc. Not negligible for this research is the grammatical tense: the *inviare* verb, which is regularly used for computer commands such as *inviare il messaggio/la risposta* 'to send a message/a reply', is recorded innumerable number of times.

Among the most frequently displayed public figures, apart from above-listed Berlusconi, there are an investigating journalist Marco Travaglio, involved in reporting news stories and current politics, followed by the current mayor of Naples Luigi De Magistris and former left-wing prime minister Massimo D'Alema. The international list starts with former US presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Generally speaking, current politicians and affairs are the most likely to appear, hence the personal list may vary for years 2012–2020. Donald Trump has been recorded 40,000 times, whereas former Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi – almost 51,000 times. Similar ratings relate to institutions and parties, following the ranking list: *PD Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party), *PdL il Popolo della Libertà* (People of Freedom), *Camera dei Deputati* (Chamber of Deputies), *Senato* (Senate), *Viminale* (the Viminale hill housing the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and toponymes such as: *Milano* (Milan), *Europa* (Europe), *Roma* (Rome), *Torino* (Turin), *Stati Uniti* (United States of America), *Genova* (Genoa), *Bologna* (Bologna).

Verbal communication: observation #2

Under a superficial reading of Beppe Grillo's blog, we can acknowledge that the author highlights a number of cross-cutting themes regarding domestic and foreign policy agenda. As a matter of fact, there is no single topic that has not been mentioned, in particular as far as Italian political, social and economic realities are concerned. However, once deepened, the analysis clearly shows that the references to facts and opinions are plenty of rich base terminology, while the message is still simple and clear enough. It maintains a predominantly journalistic and commentary style, highlighting events and political views, thus contributing to reflections upon mentioned issues (e.g. by raising questions). Grillo has a sharp and witty tongue (as in spoken *grillesse*, cfr. above), unscrupulously provocative and swashbuckling, but hitting the point. Some of the nicknames invented by the blogger attributed to Italian politicians include: *Gargamella* or *Zombie* for Luigi Bersani (center-left party leader), *Topo Gigio* for Walter Veltroni (It. *topo* 'rat'), *Prodi Alzheimer* for Romano Prodi, *Rigor Montis* for Mario Monti (during his governance), *Elsa Frignero* for Elsa Fornero (of It. *frignare* 'to cry'),

Salma (It. *salma* ‘dead-body’) for Giorgio Napolitano (former President of the Republic), *Psiconano* for Silvio Berlusconi (*psico-* ‘psycho-’ + It. *nano* ‘dwarf’). Finally, there are additional descriptive terms used in a very unceremonious manner: for instance, he once defined Giuliano Ferrara, the editor-in-chief of *Il Foglio* daily paper as a *container pieno di merda liquida* ‘container full of liquid shit’.

Concluding remarks

As noted above, one of the major recalled element of Beppe Grillo’s criticism, as his distinctive feature, is the populist language. Actually, the typical leader of a populist movement is someone who personifies the common sense of “the man in the street”, as opposed to the unnecessary complications and artificial divisions that characterize political elites.¹⁰ Therefore, defining his leadership as populist is not any offence since Grillo himself provocatively once referred to it as “populist”. Calling Five Stars Movement a party is of bigger insult since its members stress that they do not form a party but a “movement” and it may not be included in the traditional left-right paradigm. Instead, they claim to be a “non-association” with headquarters located in the blog run by their leader.

Grillo’s movement find some common features with the similar initiatives in the whole Europe (Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Kukiz ‘15 in Poland), being a sort of response to dissatisfaction of the voters formerly supporting traditional parties or simply fed up with the manner of conducting policy excluding them from active participation and preferring direct democracy-based system.

Grillo’s success in the polls of 2018 after Matteo Renzi’s cabinet resignation, as a consequence of the constitutional referendum’s failure, represents a clear sign of the leadership crisis as well as the drifting apart of the ruling class that ignored the problems of ordinary people for several years. Grillo seems to take advantage of this situation pretty well uniting Italians’ reluctance to the EU institutions, illegal migration wave and economic hardship. It is an open question if this emerging model of a political form will evolve into a democratic and open-minded governance rather than a populist and blinkered thinking organization supported by outraged web users (including bloggers and influencers). It is certain, however, that both linguistic and extralinguistic measures applied by Grillo such as rhetorical figures, verbal hyperboles, insults, body language and irony have accomplished their goals in appealing to the electorate that was previously exploited by all parties within the last twenty-five years of the Second Republic. This demonstrates an innovative approach based on political communication that devolves some level of decision-making power to the party supporters. Such pattern is followed by other representatives of the Italian political scene of today.

¹⁰ See: *Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, ed. F. Tronconi, Ashgate, Farnham 2015.

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Przypadek Beppego Grilla, czyli o (d)ewolucji komunikacji politycznej we Włoszech

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza przypadku Beppego Grilla jako fenomenu społecznego, kulturowego i językowego. Jego partia, Ruch Pięciu Gwiazd (Movimento 5 Stelle), zaczynając jako wirtualne ugrupowanie pozbawione zorganizowanych

struktur, zdobyła poparcie Włochów o poglądach lewicowych i prawicowych bez względu na różnice pokoleniowe i spory ideologiczne między nimi. Sukces stronników Grilla w wyborach do parlamentu włoskiego w 2018 roku, osiągnięty w następstwie porażki referendum konstytucyjnego zwołanego przez Mattea Renzi, stanowi jasny wyraz kryzysu przywództwa politycznego, jak i oddalania się klasy rządzącej od zwykłych obywateli, których problemy są od lat ignorowane. Analiza koncentruje się zarówno na warstwie formalnej, jak i merytorycznej: z jednej strony typowa dla Grilla artystyczna ekspresja, której emanacją są gesty, mimika, jak również bezpośredni język pełen hiperboli, figur retorycznych, przekleństw i bluźnierczych sekwencji, przyczynia się do budowy jego bezkompromisowej charyzmy; z drugiej strony nowoczesne technologie i media społecznościowe (blogi, fora, profile) wykorzystywane do efektywnego komunikowania się z elektoratem, kreują obraz polityka otwartego, podążającego za otaczającym go światem. Wszystkie przywołane okoliczności świadczą o nowatorskim podejściu do polityki opartej na rozproszonym komunikowaniu podejmowanych decyzji ze zwolennikami partii, którzy są jednocześnie aktywnymi użytkownikami Internetu: blogerami i influencerami. Ten paradygmat powielany jest obecnie przez innych przedstawicieli włoskiej sceny politycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Beppe Grillo, Ruch Pięciu Gwiazd, włoska scena polityczna, komunikowanie polityczne, werbalny/niewerbalny, media społecznościowe.

The (d)evolution of political communication in Italy: Beppe Grillo's case

Summary

The article aims at analyzing the case of Beppe Grillo and his Five Stars Movement in terms of social, cultural and linguistic phenomenon that – initially as a virtual party without a structured organization – seems to conquer both right-wing and left-wing Italian citizens notwithstanding generational and ideological differences. The success of *grillini* (Grillo's supporters) in the parliamentary election of 2018 as a consequence of Matteo Renzi's constitutional referendum failure, represents a clear sign of the leadership crisis as well as the drifting apart of the ruling class that ignored the problems of ordinary people for several years. The analysis is focused on both form and content: on the one hand, the artistic expression characteristic of Grillo, his gestures, mimicry and direct language plenty of verbal

hyperboles, rhetorical figures, swearwords and blasphemous obscenities that build his uncompromising charisma, on the other modern technologies and social media (including blogs, forums, profiles) that are used to communicate efficiently with the electorate, create an image of an open-minded politician keeping up with the outer world. All the aforementioned circumstances demonstrate an innovative approach based on political communication that devolves some level of decision-making power to the party supporters being active web users: bloggers and influencers at the same time. Such paradigm is followed by other representatives of the Italian political scene nowadays.

Keywords: Beppe Grillo, Five Stars Movement, Italian political scene, political communication, verbal vs non-verbal, social media.

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