

# Violence in newspaper's language

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This study investigates the relationship between violence and language. It is based on the linguistic analysis of one page of the Italian national daily *La Stampa*. The issue taken under consideration was published after a violent episode during the so-called *Anni di Piombo* ['Years of Lead'] in Italy: the bombing at the Bologna railway Station occurred on August 2, 1980. The analysis of the language is organized on three different levels: lexis, morphology and syntax.

*Keywords: Violence; newspaper; Bologna Massacre*

## 1 Introduction

Violence is recognizable in several situations in which human beings are involved. Is it possible to identify it in language too?

This paper is part of a bigger research project involving the linguistic analysis of seven Italian newspapers whose goal is to study the language used in the account of different violent episodes. The idea of recognizing violence in language was born of a primary need to discover its reproducibility. Is it possible that the word manages to reproduce the violence? If it does succeed in doing so, what tools are used?

The analysis in this paper demonstrates that violence can be part of language, not only in its content, but also in its form. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces the meaning of violence, whereas Section 3 presents violence in recent Italian History, examining in particular the Bologna Massacre. Section 4 consists of an explanation of the meaning of violence with reference to language. In Section 5 the issue of the Italian newspapers *La Stampa*, published on August, 3 1980 following the events of the Bologna Massacre, is analyzed. Finally, the conclusions of the linguistic analysis are summarized in Section 6.

## 2 What does violence mean?

The definition of the word 'violence' appears to be complicated, since even Roland Barthes pronounced the problem insoluble (Barthes, 1981). What he does in the interview edited by Jacqueline Sers, instead, is enumerate the main difficulties interpreting and finding the meaning of this word.

From a philosophical and theoretical perspective, violence would be connected to power, authority and control. Hannah Arendt finds in violence a specific trait: from a phenomenological point of view, violence needs instruments to apply its dialectics. The main difference between violence and

power, therefore, can be summarized in this manner: power has to do with an end and violence with means (Arendt, 1970).

Walter Benjamin considered the issue from a similar perspective. However, in his essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt* (Benjamin, 1999) he prefers to contrast violence (*Gewalt*), law (*Recht*) and justice (*Gerechtigkeit*). Benjamin analyzes the topic arguing that violence can be involved in every human matter except for one: communication. He states that communication, and therefore language, is inaccessible to violence — *Darin spricht sich aus, dass es eine in dem Grade gewaltlose Sphäre menschlicher Übereinkunft gibt, dass sei der Gewalt vollständig unzugänglich ist: die eigentliche Sphäre der »Verständigung«, die Sprache* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 193).

This paper, does not investigate the meaning and implications of violence; it will rather focus on demonstrating that language can be permeated by violence as well as every other aspect of human life.

### 3 Violence in Italian history

During the period that starts from the mid-Sixties and ends with Moro's murder in 1978, Italy has seen the rise of the Christian Democrats (DC) in a coalition with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and Italian Communist Party (PCI) adopting a strategy best described as an 'historic compromise.' The years between the end of the Sixties and 1980 are known as *Anni di Piombo* [Years of Lead], a period marked by a crescendo of violence and acts of terrorism perpetrated by extremist paramilitary groups, whether of the Right or the Left wing. This lapse of time has been called 'strategy of tension' and Anna Cento Bull in her work on Neofascism in Italy attributes the coinage of this expression to the British journalist Leslie Finer, who wrote from Athens and was later expelled from the country (Cento Bull, 2007).

During the *Anni di Piombo* the Far-Right and Far-Left wings, joined and helped in some cases by Italian Secret Services, used bombings, random and targeted assassinations and massacres as a form of demonstration against politics and democracy. The data collected by the Italian Ministero dell'Interno [Home Office] reports 491 deaths, 1181 wounded and 14 591 attacks accounted for politics between 1969 and 1987 (Ventura, 2010). Even though every violent attack was a crushing threat to democracy and freedom in Italy, perhaps the most devastating and terrible events in this lapse of time were six: the Piazza Fontana Bombing in Milan (December 12, 1969); the Massacre of Gioia Tauro (July 22, 1970); the Massacre of the police headquarters in Milan (May 17, 1973); the Piazza della Loggia Bombing in Brescia (May 28, 1974); the Massacre of Italicus (August 4, 1974) and the Massacre at the Bologna Station (August 2, 1980).

#### 3.1 Bologna Massacre

In this paper I will take under consideration the last episode mentioned above, the Massacre at the Bologna Station also known as the Bologna Massacre.

It happened on the morning of Saturday, 2 August 1980, precisely at 10.25 a.m. as everyone can still read on the clock outside the railway station that stopped in that moment and was not fixed in memory of those who lived

through that tragic event. A time bomb in an unattended suitcase was placed inside one of the two air-conditioned waiting rooms at the railway station in Bologna. That bomb contained of 23 kilos (50 pound and 11 ounces) of explosives. It detonated at 10.25 a.m. in an overcrowded waiting room. The explosion destroyed not only most part of the main building where the roof collapsed onto the passenger in the room but also the train waiting at the first platform.

In the Bologna massacre 85 people were killed and more than 200 were injured.

#### 4 Violence in language

John Berger, giving his account of the terrible photography pertaining to war scenes that appeared in newspapers, establishes a connection between the violence that the camera isolates capturing a moment of agony, and the violence itself isolated by the experience of that moment. Thinking about the word ‘shot,’ used at the same time for cameras and weapons, he insists stating that it is not a simple mechanic analogy: that image fixed by the camera reveals a double violence underlining the contrast between the moment captured and other moments (Berger, 2013).

Similarly, this work is grounded on the fact that on a linguistic basis, language at different levels (lexical, morphological and syntactical) can denote traces of the violence it is referring to. Language can be deconstructed into a violence of content and a violence of form.

- (1) a. Ammazzalo!  
       ‘Kill him!’
- b. Lo ammazzeresti per cortesia?  
       ‘Would you kill him, please?’

These sentences convey the same information — with reference to the content level — but in two very different ways — with respect to semantics, and therefore to the extralinguistic message they are carrying.

But in the sentence below, the content is clearly not violent, but the formal logic of the cause-and-effect structure gives it a connotation that can be defined as violent, almost threatening.

- (2) Se non studi, non passerai l’esame.  
       ‘If you don’t study, you won’t pass the exam.’

The same sentence would be different — although still a cause-and-effect statement — if the future tense was replaced by the present:

- (3) Se non studi, non passi l'esame.  
 'If you don't study, you don't pass the exam.'

The sentence would be even less powerful and therefore, according to our argument, less violent without the double negative:

- (4) Se studi, passi l'esame.  
 'If you study, you pass the exam.'

The concept of emphasis ought not be automatically assimilated to that of violence. There is no trace of formal violence (nor violence of content) in:

- (5) a. Il caffè lo bevo dopo.  
 '\*The coffee I drink it later.'
- b. Il caffè lo bevi dopo.  
 '\*The coffee you drink it later.'
- c. Bevi dopo il caffè.  
 'Drink later the coffee.'

There is no trace of formal violence (nor violence of content) in (5) a., but there certainly is in (5) b., which is unrelated to same solution at zero degrees in (5) c.

The point is the perception of the linguistic act as an action performed by a person who becomes an agent, hence this linguistic act can also be defined in a way that is linked to violence since this forecasts the abuse of force on the part of one subject on another.

This kind of violence is more recognizable in images or in cinematographic language. To quote an example already highlighted by many, perhaps the most crude and violent scene of all neorealist cinema is the torture of the partisan Manfredi in Rossellini's *Roma città aperta*. Not a single frame shows it, yet the spectator experiences it in the shots of Don Pietro / Aldo Fabrizi who is present at the scene.

## 5 Violence in newspaper's language

In the introduction to his *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek affirms that the violence he defines as subjective, that is, perceivable and recognizable episodes performed by identifiable actors, corresponds to an invisible violence that, according to the philosopher, is objective, of two types: symbolic, or of language and of form, and systemic, i.e. the product of economico-political

systems in which we live (Žižek, 2008). The theoretical premise underlying this research consists precisely of this intention to analyze and identify the linguistic elements that manifest themselves in this kind of objective violence.

In order to conduct this linguistic analysis it is necessary to select a corpus in which the matter is undoubtedly violent to reduce to zero this variable. As a consequence, the texts needed should have a violent topic and a non-fictional writing genre: for this reason the entire research is focused on articles taken from seven Italian newspapers and precisely the ones printed the day after the massacres occurred during the *Anni di Piombo* in Italy. In this paper only the issue of one newspaper, *La Stampa*, will be presented.

## 5.1 *La Stampa* issue August 3, 1980

*La Stampa* is one of the oldest Italian newspapers with a political alignment linked to the center-left wing. It is not in the author's intentions to investigate the political orientation of this newspaper, since the analysis will not be focused on politics.

The newspaper issued on August 3, 1980 will be the one analyzed in this paper because of the facts that happened on the previous day, known as the Bologna Massacre. *La Stampa* dedicates 5 pages to this event, in which there are 16 articles reporting of the massacre.

### 5.1.1. A linguistic analysis of the front page: headlines

*La Stampa* front page (see Figure 1) shows 2 photos and 6 articles of which 1 complete box and 1 complete article, while the others continue on the following pages of the newspaper.



Figure 1. *La Stampa*, August 3, 1980. Front page downloaded from [www.lastampa.it](http://www.lastampa.it).

The main headline is a complete sentence in bold on two lines, whereas the bottom headlines are two direct speeches.

On a lexical level, the headlines are giving an image of disaster, stressing the number of people involved (*'folla'* means 'crowd') and humanizing the sentence even more using a verbal phrase (*'saltare in aria'*) which involves a verb (*'saltare'*, which means 'to jump') used exclusively with living beings instead of an equal expressive verb like (*'esplodere'* which means 'to explode' as *'saltare in aria'*).

Adjectives are almost absent in the top headlines but their presence grows in the bottom headlines where the adjectives used are meaningful (*'sconvolgenti'* means 'disturbing', *'semidistrutta'* is 'partially destroyed') or inflected in the superlative form (*'gravissimi'* referring to the people injured would correspond to the English phrase 'very seriously injured').

The main headline closes with a question (*'è un attentato?'* 'is it an attack?') and the following subheading (*'Paese senza pace'* 'Country without peace' and *'Le prime ispezioni escludono un incidente'* 'first investigations exclude the accident') lead to a specific answer. It is interesting to highlight that even though the answer seems to be positive — yes, this is an attack —, in the two sentences there are two negative forms, one in the preposition *'senza'* [without] and one in the verb *'escludere'* [to exclude]. The idea of instilling a feeling of doubt, dissolved few lines later into a dramatic certainty expressed in a negative way, is precisely what is intended when referring to violence in language.

### 5.1.2. A linguistic analysis of the front page: Articles

The articles are numbered starting from the left and not from the main one (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. La Stampa's front page: articles numbered.

Article 1 is the only complete article on the front page. In Italian newspapers the article in this position — ‘*articolo di fondo*’ — has a particular informative function. It gives a brief account of a fact offering considerations and implications about it. On a morphological level, in this article the verb inflection swings between the impersonal and the first plural, almost always preferring a passive diathesis, which in some cases consists of three or four words (‘*si è pensato*’ ‘it has been thought’, or “*ci si è aggrappati*” that in English could be translated as ‘people were hanging on’, or “*potrebbe essere stata rotta*” ‘it could have been broken’). This morphological solution contributes to a sense of powerlessness and impotence facing a terrible event such as the railway bombing.

The complete box which reports in bold the claim of responsibility by the fascist group of NAR — ‘*Nucleo Armato Rivoluzionario*’ — eventually retracted and denied, is numbered with 2. For the linguistic analysis, since it is written in the style required by the purpose, on this box there are no remarkable observations to make.

The leading article is Article 3. The very beginning presents nominal style sentences in which the words are relevant and significant: ‘*strage*’ [massacre], ‘*sangue innocente*’ [innocent blood], ‘*saltare in aria*’ [to explode in a very meaningful expression, to blow up], ‘*esplosione*’ [explosion], ‘*attentato*’ [attack], ‘*bomba*’ [bomb]. The reader finds in this story precise facts, data, the measure of the crater left by the bomb, the time of the explosion, the number of people involved, the hospitals where the wounded were left. The leading article’s detailed slant is informative, its syntax is made of fast and sudden sentences. This observation might seem paradoxical if compared to what was said about Article 1, but this kind of precision and accuracy in the information communicates a sense of anxiety and alarm to the reader as much as the vagueness of Article 1.

Article number 4 occupies the position of the *articolo di spalla*, a column reporting an important fact that is usually different from the other front page big news. Nonetheless, on *La Stampa*’s front page, as well as on every national daily on August, 3rd 1980, every article was dedicated to the Bologna Massacre, therefore Article 4 also focuses on the same topic, but with a different point of view. It reports how the Prime Minister and the President reacted to the news. The construction of this article is relevant for the analysis: three of four paragraphs begin with direct speech. Two of the first lines in each paragraph end with a question mark and one with an exclamation mark. This questioning and alarming style reverses the approach that politics should use when dealing with important matters. It is expected from politics to give answers, to take actions, to work on solutions. What the structure of the article conveys, instead, is the opposite: confusion, hesitation, fear.

On the bottom of the front page, Article 5 consists of several interviews. First, a doctor’s experience of the tragedy while he was working at one of Bologna hospitals and then interviews of those who survived to the attack. With other intense nominal sentences and parataxis style, the reader experiences the event approaching it from the distance — first the doctor’s story and then direct witnesses. In the end the article’s new focus starts to

develop: the investigation. The description in the direct speech is obviously made of first person verbs (singular or plural like: ‘ero’ ‘I was’, ‘avevamo’ ‘we had’, ‘stavamo mettendo’ ‘we were putting’, ‘ho sentito’ ‘I heard’, ‘non ho più capito’ ‘I haven’t understood’/‘I couldn’t understand anymore’).

Article 6 is placed under the column about politics and is a piece dedicated to the President’s reaction. What stands out in this article is an argumentative answer that the President gave to a journalist when he asked about his impressions: ‘Come vuole che abbia reagito quando ho visto quei due bambini sdraiati con le braccia aperte e che adesso forse sono morti...’ [How do you expect me to react to the image of two kids lying down on the ground with open arms that by now could be dead...]. The journalist decided to report, among all the declarations the President has made, the one in which he is openly argumentative if not verbally violent.

## 6 Conclusions

The elements presented above arose from the analysis of *La Stampa*’s front page, carried out to highlight and explain that language is capable of transmitting violence by means of its form and not only of its content.

The analysis was structured on different levels: lexical, morphological and syntactical. It was easier to demonstrate how vocabulary could be violent: when reading ‘*sangue innocente*’ [innocent blood] it is clear that the journalist is exaggerating because it is impossible that all the victims were actually innocents. Or in ‘*spaventosa strage*’ [terrible massacre], could a massacre be not terrible?

It was more complex to explain where to find violence in terms of morphology. The focus on verbal diathesis, even though there are many differences between Italian and English verbal construction, was the perspective preferred. The passive was interpreted as a way of creating a sense of distance from reality and of focusing on the events but at the same time as a threatening menace of the unknown.

Regarding the syntax, the study showed that sometimes writing consisting of nominal sentences can give immediate and instantaneous flashes much more violent than accurate and detailed descriptions.

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