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A Corpus-assisted Contrastive Investigation of Migration-related Terms in British and Italian Political Discourse

Abstract

Combining the theoretical background of Critical Discourse Studies (van Dijk 2015a, 2015b; van Leeuwen 2008; Wodak 2015a) with a corpus-assisted methodology (van Dijk 2015a; 2015b), this paper contrastively investigates the discursive representation of migration and migrant people by leading British (Nigel Farage, Jeremy Corbyn) and Italian politicians (Matteo Salvini, Matteo Renzi) in the years 2016-2018, starting from the examination of the collocational profile of such migration-related terms as immigration, immigrant, migrant, refugee and asylum seeker. The period is salient for the global upsurge of populism (Mudde 2004), the Brexit referendum, and the so-called ‘refugee crisis,’ which turned immigration into a hot topic in the political agenda of parties of different orientations. Our empirical analysis sheds light on two opposing views: the negative portrayal of migrants as a threat by right-wing populist politicians across countries (Lorenzetti 2020), while left-wing politicians display a more humanitarian attitude. Regardless of political stance or specific migrant terms, however, the representation of migrant groups as social actors is crucially founded on the strategies of aggregation, collectivisation and functionalisation (van Leeuwen 2008), which ultimately result in the perpetuation of stereotyped and partial depictions that overlook their features as individuals.

Keywords: *migrant categories, critical discourse studies, corpus linguistics, populist discourse, political discourse*

“If he were allowed contact with foreigners he would discover that they are creatures similar to himself and that most of what he has been told about them is lies. The sealed world in which he lives would be broken, and the fear, hatred, and self-righteousness on which his morale depends might evaporate.”

(George Orwell, 1984)

1. Introduction

Interconnectedness and multidirectional flows of people, commodities, money, and information are vital features of globalisation, which brings together remote regions of the world through complex networks (Ritzer and Dean 2015). However, despite growing liquidity and the increasing porosity of barriers, mobility across boundaries does not erase national borders (Bauman 2012), nor does it occur without causing frictions. A case in point is currently represented by large-scale migratory processes and the growing hostility against documented and undocumented migrants worldwide.

Based on UN statistics, in 2020 in the world there were 281 million international migrants, corresponding to 3.60% of the global population (IOM 2021; UN DESA 2021). Overall, the estimated number of people living in a country other than their country of birth has steadily increased over the past five decades and is now 128 million more than in 1990, and over three times the estimated number in 1970 (IOM 2019b). The proportion of international migrants varies significantly across the world, with the USA remaining the country with the largest international migrant population (50.6 million). However, Europe (86.7 million) and Asia (85.6 million) are the regions currently attracting the largest number of international migrants (UN DESA 2021). Most migrations are voluntary and often economically motivated (169 million), while other people leave their countries for a range of compelling and sometimes tragic reasons, such as conflicts, persecutions, and natural disasters (Piguët, Pécoud and de Guchteneire 2011). By the end of 2020, the number of forcibly displaced individuals worldwide due to persecutions, conflicts, generalised violence, or human rights violations amounted to 82.4 million,¹ more than double the number of forced displacements recorded in 2010 (UNHCR 2021). Such an increase is mainly due to unresolved or ongoing conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, the extreme violence inflicted upon Rohingya forced to seek safety in Bangladesh, or political instability, as experienced by millions of Venezuelans. In 2022, such number is expected to increase due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, which since the end of February 2022 has forced almost 7.5 million people to flee their country (UNHCR 2022).² At the same time, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan triggered by the comeback of the Taliban is also causing more displacements (Ferguson 2022; UNHCR 2021).

¹ Discussion about migration is often hampered by difficulties in tracking population flows. However, reliable estimates of the number of migrants in irregular situations worldwide do not exist at a global level (IOM 2021).

² Data as of June 2022 (last update 09 June 2022) (UNHCR 2022).

These data may seem impressive, as regularly emphasised by politicians and the media exploiting the so-called ‘numbers game’ about immigration to draw attention to the number of arrivals and stress the magnitude of the problem (Best 2001; van Dijk 2000; 2018). However, despite the steady increase in migrant numbers over time at a slightly faster rate than expected (UN DESA 1998), international migrants still make up a small minority of the world population. Whilst population movements had existed since long before post-modern society (Bauman 2012), in recent years, intensified mass migrations have led to an inflated perception of risks and threats in receiving countries across the world. The so-called ‘refugee crisis’ that, starting from 2015, saw massive arrivals to Europe of people from other continents travelling across the Mediterranean Sea or overland, often in very precarious conditions to request asylum, contributed to the phenomenon on an impressive scale amidst growing fear of Islamic terrorism. Moreover, the ineffective and often uncoordinated response of the European Union institutions and its Member States in facing the arrivals emphasised the fragmentation of the Eurozone, paving the way for the rise of right-wing populist movements promoting nationalistic policies and systematically scapegoating minority groups for all societal woes (Wodak 2015b).

Migration is a complex phenomenon strictly connected with a multitude of societal processes operating within and across territorial boundaries and is both the outcome of social, political, and economic transformations and the trigger of new societal metamorphoses (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016). However, despite ideally celebrating multiculturalism and socio-cultural changes pushed forward by immigration, late-modern society is still torn between cultural assimilation and ejection of the undesired (Bauman 2012). Young (1999), relying on Lévi-Strauss’s (1955) terminology, speaks of dualism between an anthropophagic strategy aimed at the enforced assimilation of diversity and an anthropoemic one, characterised by the exclusion of outsiders from society.

Such strategies play a crucial role in the rhetoric of many right-wing populist movements and parties that recently raised increasing consensus all over Europe (e.g. *Rassemblement National* in France, *FPÖ* in Austria, *League* in Italy, *Freedom Party* in the Netherlands, *UKIP* and *Brexit Party* in the United Kingdom, *Vox* in Spain, among the others) promoting a Manichean view of society where the ‘lawful’ citizens (i.e. natives) are pitted against usurpers from outside. A prototypical example of a hostile policy introduced out of this growing anti-immigration sentiment is the increased demand in some EU countries for anti-migrant border barriers³ in

³ In recent months, the border fencing theme resurfaced across the bloc, when in October 2021 a coalition of 12 EU countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia) urged the EU to finance border-wall

the style of the one built by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán along the Hungary-Serbia border to defend the bloc from an alleged Muslim invasion threatening Europe's Christian identity. The latter had an antecedent in the (in)famous border wall between the US and Mexico, which was the focus of much of Donald Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric (Lorenzetti 2020).

Growing hostility towards immigrants ultimately proved to be the driving force for the Leave success in the Brexit Referendum of June 2016 and the subsequent withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU after a profoundly divisive campaign led by Nigel Farage with his slogan "we need to get back control of our borders" (Zappettini 2019; Lorenzetti 2018; Goodwin and Milazzo 2017; Goodwin 2017; Gietel-Basten 2016). At the same time, immigration mobilised the political and mediatic debate in Italy, where the *League*, a former ethno-nationalist party turned national, started gaining electoral mileage under the leadership of Matteo Salvini by drawing on people's fears of terrorism and crime (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018; Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017). Exploiting rising anti-immigration anxieties through massive and permanent campaigning on both media and social media, it eventually placed first in the 2018 political election⁴ following Salvini's pledge to put "Italians first," deport 500.000 unauthorised immigrants, close ports and stop the 'invasion' of people arriving on the Italian shores on boats, arguing that they would only contribute to raising the crime rate in the country (Berti 2021).

Through the years, the Maastricht Treaty had aimed to turn the European Union into an increasingly borderless society, deliberately fostering a fluid labour regime marked by high levels of cross-border flows between Eastern and Western Europe and between the EU and its periphery. However, in time, incoming arrivals from the Global South started to be viewed as increasingly problematic, and while European receiving countries continue to varying degrees to fulfil their humanitarian commitment in several ways, they have become far less welcoming to uninvited guests (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016).

Securitisation, namely the tendency of modern nation-states to construct migration as a security problem, thereby linking it with terrorism or human trafficking, plays a crucial role in migration management (Bauman 2016; Mavroudi and Nagel 2016) and profoundly shapes the way migrants live and are perceived in receiving societies. A fundamental component of such

projects to prevent illegal immigration (Nielsen 2021). However, at the moment, such requests have always been denied by the EU (Barigazzi 2021).

⁴ The *League* placed first at the 2018 general political election as part of a joint centre-right coalition, where it ran together with *Go, Italy!* (Forza Italia), *Brothers of Italy* (Fratelli d'Italia), and *Us with Italy* (Noi con l'Italia). The *League* obtained a resounding success, becoming the third largest party in Italy with 17.4% of the vote. One year later, at the 2019 European Parliament election in Italy, it doubled its electorate, winning 34.3% of the vote.

bordering practices is the proliferation of migrant categories that specify their status (i.e. refugee, asylum seeker, economic migrant, among others). Such categories are predominantly founded on the dichotomous parameters of time/space, location/direction, legal status and cause of migration (Collyer and de Haas 2012) and officially aim at establishing varying rights and privileges allocated to those residing within the borders of receiving countries. However, these terms *de facto* differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate newcomers, demarcating the population from ‘the others’ and creating hierarchies of citizens-subjects positioned differently within the body politics. Moreover, despite their apparent neutrality, in social psychology, these noun labels have been argued to act as “labels of primary potency” (Allport 1954, 179). They disproportionally (and distortedly) magnify specific attributes of individuals while backgrounding others and elicit an essentialist perception, pointing to an alleged underlying permanent essence shared by all members of such categories (Eide 2010; Rothbart and Taylor 1992), which in turn is the basis for stereotyping and differentialist racism (Taguieff 2001). Furthermore, in the discourse of politicians and the media, these descriptors have shifted into blunt pejoratives and tools that dehumanise and distance by casting doubt on the legitimacy of newcomers’ claims (De Coninck 2020), to the point that some media outlets have questioned their fairness (Malone 2015; Taylor 2015).

Not only has the usage of these labels become increasingly politicised (De Coninck 2020; Crawley and Skleparis 2018), but on account of politicians’ and media actors’ preferential access to mediatic channels—hence to the mind of the public at large—these negative representations may have an impact on public opinion, ultimately legitimising prejudice and discrimination towards minority groups (van Dijk 2002).

Employing the theoretical perspective of Critical Discourse Studies (van Dijk 2015b; Wodak 2015a; Chilton 2004), which sees discursive and linguistic data as both reflecting and (re)producing ideologies in society (van Dijk 2013), this paper contrastively investigates the discursive representation of migration and migrant groups by four leading British (Nigel Farage, Jeremy Corbyn) and Italian politicians (Matteo Salvini, Matteo Renzi) of different political orientation, starting from the collocational profile (Sinclair 1991) of such migrant terms as *immigration*, *immigrant*, *migrant*, *refugee* and *asylum seeker*.

The aim of this research, which is part of a larger project on the language and rhetorical strategies of populist discourse (Lorenzetti 2020; 2018), is firstly to investigate in what ways people on the move are linguistically and rhetorically represented in the discourse of politicians of different political orientations in the period 2016-18. Secondly, the paper attempts to shed light on how and to what extent the choice of specific lexemes may contribute to this

representation. Finally, it seeks to unveil differences that may emerge cross-linguistically/nationally or based on political stance.

The paper is structured as follows; it discusses the primary features of left-wing and right-wing populism and their respective views of society and standpoints within the migration debate. Next is a delineation of the central tenets of critical discourse studies as the theoretical background of this research. Then the data and methodology of our study are introduced. Our case study follows. It begins by discussing the definitions of existing migrant categories and further examining the data in our research. Empirical results of our analysis reveal that migration is a highly polarising topic in the discourse of politicians of different political orientations, instrumentally employed in the positive presentation of one's own values and the negative portrayal of the opponent (van Dijk 2002; 2000). Right-wing populist politicians articulate their stance around the threat trope (Lorenzetti 2020), highlighting topics that depend on their respective countries' contextual situation, while left-wing politicians display a more humanitarian stance coherently with the moral values embodied by their political orientation. Regardless of political stance differences, however, distinctions among migrant categories do not seem pivotal for the politicians analysed, and discursive representation is primarily based on the strategies of aggregation, collectivisation, and functionalisation of migrants (van Leeuwen 2008), magnifying their alleged shared identity features while overlooking their individuality, and leading to the perpetuation of a stereotyped and biased characterisation.

2. Populism and its relationship with migration

In investigating the usage of migrant descriptors by politicians, it is vital to introduce the concept of populism and its relation to migration.

The wide range of diversified political outlets in terms of electoral appeal or political trajectories that, in the last few decades, have been linked with populism prompted scholars to argue that populism is a quintessential element of our times. While in political science, populism has often been viewed as a controversial and elusive concept (Panizza 2005), leading to a proliferation of heterogeneous scholarly definitions, more recently, a significant academic consensus has emerged for the ideational approach (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). The latter reduces its definition to a minimal core, "seeing it as a political discourse that posits a cosmic struggle between a reified 'will of the people' and a conspiring elite" (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 514).

More specifically, Mudde, drawing on the work of Freedon (1996), argues that populism is "a

thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ *versus* ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be the expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, 543). Thin ideologies are defined as those restricted to a narrow core and thus unable to offer a comprehensive view of societal problems as thick ideologies (like socialism, fascism, or liberalism) typically provide (Freeden 1996, 485-550). Therefore, populism seldom exists in its pure form but borrows elements from other host ideologies that are crucial for promoting specific political projects and appealing to a broader public (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Such host ideologies enable the formation of different subtypes of populism, coupled with a) the selection of a specific ‘enemy’ and b) the sense of ‘the people’ foregrounded. Hybridity is thus a feature shared by all forms of populism that are contextual and merge different aspects and identity narratives depending on the specific socio-political contextual situation (Wodak 2015b; Taggart 2000).

‘The people’ is a core concept of populism, a construction that can be subsumed into three discursive frames: a) the nation in either civic or ethnic sense, b) the (economic) underdog, and c) the ordinary people (Canovan 1984; 1981).

In all cases, the main distinction and cosmic struggle between the people and the elite is related to a secondary feature, namely political power, socioeconomic status, or nationality. Since all manifestations of populism usually merge more than one of these secondary features, it is unlikely that only one of the mentioned senses of ‘the people’ comes to the fore.

Left-wing populism and right-wing populism thus emerge from the different interplay of these elements. They are both anti-elitist and construct politics as a dualistic struggle between Good and Evil. However, they fundamentally differ in their position on equality (Bobbio 1997). Left-wing populists champion an egalitarian society with policies promoting equality through redistribution and inclusivity, press a solid social rights agenda, target political, economic, and social elites, and fight for popular sovereignty, social justice, and democratisation (Katsambekis 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Thus, they emphasise a pyramidal view of society based on the UP/DOWN axis, where the people, as the underdogs, are at the bottom of the social scale and are set against a powerful usurper at the top.

Conversely, right-wing populists view inequalities and hierarchies as intrinsic to society, and their policies prioritise individual initiative and competition. They stress a nuclear view of society based on the IN/OUT dimension: who rightfully belongs to the people by birth as opposed to outsiders in a nativist sense (Lorenzetti 2020, 102). Hence, while left-wing populists embrace an inclusive society where minority groups may feel empowered and not marginalised, right-

wing populism champions nativism. Its ultimate aim is the (re)creation of a monocultural state, where citizenship is based on ethnicity (Mudde 2019).

Right-wing populist parties, according to Mudde (2019), have become increasingly mainstream in the last two decades when sociocultural issues and the so-called identity politics, including more or less pronounced advocacy of white supremacy, started to dominate the political debate, in the wake of specific events, like the rise of jihadist terrorism, and the so-called refugee crisis. Mutual permeability and reliance on similar core issues and proposed solutions ultimately resulted in the radicalisation of mainstream right parties, which started to move towards the populist radical right foremost in terms of immigration, but also law and order and European integration, eventually creating a fertile ground for the resurfacing of racism and discriminatory discourse hidden behind such liberal themes as free speech, political correctness, and LGBTQ+ rights (Mudde 2019; Wodak 2015b).

The rhetorical trope that mass immigration represents a security and existential threat to the nation has always been salient among right-wing populists often associated with the conspiracy theory of “the Great Replacement.” Such a theory, disseminated by French writer Camus (2012), argues that welcoming immigration policies, particularly those impacting non-white immigrants, would be part of a plot by liberal elites to undermine or ‘replace’ the political power and culture of white people living in Western countries, posing particular emphasis on Islamophobia.

3. Theoretical background

This work draws on theories from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), an interdisciplinary research framework that views language as a form of social practice (Wodak 2015a; van Dijk 2015b; van Leeuwen 2008; Chilton 2004) and subsumes various approaches committed to analysing how ideologies and power relations are expressed, enacted, and reproduced through text and talk (van Dijk 2013). These approaches share the foundational assumption that discourse is at once socially constitutive and socially shaped (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Fairclough and Wodak 1997) and is the primary setting for the production and dissemination of prejudice, discrimination, and racism in society (van Dijk 1997; Wodak 2015).

This phenomenon may occur at both the micro- and macro-levels of discourse and the level of interaction and cognition. At the micro-level, discourse may be explicitly discriminatory, but at the same time, it may influence social cognition through mental models and frames⁵ (Lakoff

⁵ A frame in social science is an unconscious and often automatic mental structure that allows us to understand reality and shape our ideas and concepts. Deep frames entrenched in our mind

2014). Therefore, it may contribute to the acquisition and spread of ethnic prejudice, the perpetuation of stereotypes, or the legitimisation of hate speech and intolerance towards minority groups. Finally, at the macro-level, media discourse or political discourse may be considered institutional manifestations of dominant groups' shared ideologies.

Politicians, in this respect, play a crucial role since, as ideological leaders of society, they may easily “establish common values, and societal concerns, [...] formulate common sense as well as the consensus, both as individuals and leaders of the dominant institutions” (van Dijk 2002, 148), while their power primarily rests upon their preferential access to public fora, and thus to the minds of the public at large.

Two approaches mainly inform this research, namely van Dijk's (2015b) socio-cognitive framework and van Leeuwen's (2008) representation of social actors. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is characterised by its reliance on the Discourse-Society-Cognition triangle and studies the relationship between discourse and society, arguing that it is cognitively mediated through the mental representation of language users in both their role as individuals and social beings. First, the linguistic structures of texts that contribute to their discursive component are interpreted and explained in terms of underlying socially shared beliefs and ideologies, considering how they influence people's mental models (van Dijk 2013; 2002). Finally, the extent to which and how such discourses and their underlying cognitions are socially and politically functional in the (re)production and spread of inequality is investigated.

Typical patterns of the discursive reproduction of ideological “Us *versus* Them” polarisation outlined by van Dijk (2013; 2002) are geared towards positive self-presentation and negative representation of the out-group at multiple levels of discourse, namely:

- At the syntactic level, emphasis on Our positive actions and Their negative ones in sentences with such syntactic structures as word order, topic-focus articulation, and the strategic usage of active and passive constructions. Passive sentences, where agents are left implicit or placed in final position, help mitigate responsibility for negative actions, a strategy typically adopted for in-group members. In contrast, negative actions by the out-groups are foregrounded through active constructions, often leading to the critical accumulation of negative predicates.

constitute our moral worldview, and shape our ideals of what is morally right and wrong. Framing is not neutral and pre-empts the activation of the opposite frames and an adequate understanding of specific issues from different viewpoints (Lakoff 2014).

- At the lexical level, selection of negative words about the out-group coupled with positively connoted lexemes about Us.
- At the macro-level of discourse, selection, and emphasis on positive topics about the in-groups, while stressing negative ones like crime, violence, deviance, or terrorism about the out-groups.
- At the level of schemata, or frames (Lakoff 2014), narrative argumentation is tailored to provide evidence of the negative aspects of ‘the others.’ Thus, immigration is often framed as an issue, a burden, a danger, or generically a threat, a representation that right-wing populist politicians are interested in emphasising, pre-empting the emergence of any sense of *pietas* or solidarity towards people on the move (Lakoff 2014).
- Rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, irony, and euphemism, may be used to effectively highlight an “Us *versus* Them” dichotomy and strengthen the intended narrative (Musolff 2015; Lakoff 2014; Charteris-Black 2011).

In emphasising his view of discourse as recontextualisation of social practices, van Leeuwen (2008) outlines a fine-grained socio-semantic taxonomy of roles allocated to social actors in their representation. Some of the relevant categories to this study are:

- *Genericisation* or *specification*, namely the representation of individuals as classes or as identifiable individuals.
- *Individualisation*, that is referring to social actors as individuals or as groups (*assimilation*). Two major types of *assimilation* are presented: *aggregation*, which relies on statistics to quantify groups, and *collectivisation*, realised by mass nouns (‘the nation’), plural nouns, or nouns denoting groups of people (‘Muslims;’ ‘Italians’).
- *Nomination* and *categorisation*, which refer to the representation of social actors in terms of their unique identity, or the identities and functions shared in several respects with others (van Leeuwen 2008, 42). *Categorisation* can be further subdivided into two subcategories, namely: *functionalisation*, or referring to someone in terms of their profession or role, and *identification*, which focuses on more permanent characteristics. The latter may, in turn, be realised by *classification*, by relying on major categories through which society subdivides classes of people, including age, gender, ethnicity, among others, *relational identification*, which describes people in terms of their personal, kinship or other types of relationships to each other (‘friend,’ ‘colleague,’

‘cousin’), and *physical identification*, using their uniquely identifying physical characteristics, including nominals (‘redhead’).

- *Personalisation* and *impersonalisation*. Social actors may be represented as human beings through proper names, nouns and personal or possessive pronouns. Conversely, they may be impersonalised, that is, referred to by abstract or concrete nouns typically not employed for human beings. *Impersonalisation* may, in turn, occur through *abstraction*, or the reference to a quality applied to them (‘Immigrants are a threat/problem’), or *objectivation*, when social actors are represented by reference to a place or thing they are associated with, including *spatialisation* (‘South-Africa’); *utterance autonomisation* (‘the report says’), *instrumentalisation*, regarding the instrument they typically use, and *somatisation*, through reference to body parts. *Impersonalisation* may background the identity or role of social actors and add connotative meanings to their representation.

4. Data presentation and methodology

For the purpose of analysing the discursive framing of immigration and migrants in the discourse of British and Italian politicians of different political orientations, four corpora were created, including political speeches and social media posts (from Twitter and Facebook) by British Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn, and Italian Matteo Renzi and Matteo Salvini. The corpora are comparable in size and include approximately 70.000 tokens each.

Coherently with the research focus on the lexical representation and categorisation of migrants, examining existing official migrant category definitions was a preliminary step. Texts to include in the corpora were selected based on the presence of the following terms:

- In English: *immigration* OR *immigrant** OR *migrant** OR *refugee** OR *asylum seeker**
- In Italian: *immigrazione* OR *immigrat** OR *migrant** OR *rifugiat** OR *richiedent* asilo*⁶

The time frame for the analysis is 2016-2018, a significant period in many respects. 2016 was the year of the Brexit Referendum, which marked the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Hence, the choice of this time period enables us to gain insight into the pre-and post-Brexit debate about immigration. Moreover, on a global scale, a characterising element is the increasing salience of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in the political agenda of

⁶ The Italian terms in the analysis, as well as the examples reported, were translated into English by the author.

different countries and parties following the rising right-wing populist anti-immigration propaganda (Wodak 2015b).

Politicians to investigate were selected based on their role in the immigration debate and their political orientation, which allows us to gain a comprehensive view across the political spectrum. Nigel Farage was the real *deus-ex-machina* behind the Brexit referendum. With his relentless anti-immigration campaigning at home and within the European Parliament as leader of the far-right *UK Independence Party (UKIP)*,⁷ he significantly shaped the debate and decisively contributed to the Euro-sceptic victory (Lorenzetti 2018). In the post-Brexit period, he went on in his anti-immigration campaigning since 2018 as leader of the newly formed *Brexit Party* (renamed *Reform UK* in 2019), which he founded as an advocate for hard Brexit.

Jeremy Corbyn was the Leader of the *British Labour Party* and the opposition between 2015 and 2020. A strong advocate of the Remain side within the Brexit referendum, when elected as party leader in 2015, he contributed to pushing the party to the left with the rejection of austerity and neoliberal policies and the proposed renationalisation of public services, while the adoption of such slogans as “For the many, not the few” enabled him to establish a political frontier between Us and Them, that led scholars to relate him to left-wing populism (Demata 2020; Mouffe 2018).

In Italy, Matteo Renzi was Prime Minister in 2016 and *Democratic Party (PD)* leader between 2017 and 2018. Upon entering politics at the national level in 2014, he presented himself as ‘the wrecker’ of Italian politics and the personification of change, emphasising the necessity of renewal for the Italian political class. However, reliance on a simple, straightforward language imbued with commercial and television slogans inspired comparisons to Silvio Berlusconi’s populism (Bordignon 2014).

The chosen time range also marked Matteo Salvini’s rising success as *League* Secretary and senator. Moreover, Salvini passed from opposition leader to Deputy-Prime Minister and Interior Minister in the same period after his party won the general political election in 2018.⁸ His increasingly central role enabled him to promote his nationalistic and anti-immigration agenda by skilfully exploiting the power of media and social media affordances to demonise his opponents, stoke fears about marauding migrants, and accuse bureaucrats (Donadio 2019).

⁷ In July 2016, Farage resigned as leader of *UKIP*, arguing that he had accomplished his political mission. After forming the *Brexit Party* in 2018, later renamed *Reform UK*, to speed up the transition process to Brexit, in March 2021, he announced his withdrawal from “active politics”.

⁸ Salvini served as Deputy-Prime Minister and Interior Minister until September 2019, after the end of the so called ‘yellow-green’ government with *Five Star Movement* (Movimento 5 Stelle).

This study integrates CDS tenets with a corpus-assisted methodology (Partington 2010). The latter comes in to solve the problem of the limited number of texts typically examined in CDS-inspired research and allows for the discovery of more representative patterns of discourse and non-obvious meanings “that might not be readily available to perusal by the naked eye” (Partington 2010, 88), starting from the assumption that meanings mostly emerge through context, in non-compositional ways (Rundell 2018). In political rhetoric, and the context of immigration-related discourse, examining repeated discursive patterns is significant since they “show that evaluative meanings are not merely personal and idiosyncratic, but widely shared in a discourse community, [...] and may trigger a cultural stereotype” (Stubbs 2001, 215).

A corpus linguistics methodology in CDS research has already been implemented in studies examining the ideological polarisation of discourse (Flowerdew 1997; Krishnamurthy 1996; Partington 2003), works from the RASIM project at Lancaster University about the representation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the British press (KhosraviNik 2010; Baker et al. 2008; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008), and focusing on Islamophobia (Baker, Gabrielatos and McEnery 2013).

Different stages in our research methodology can be outlined:

1. data examination and description. The corpora collected were uploaded and queried through the Sketch Engine Interface, examining word sketches to reveal the most statistically frequent collocations and the most significant discourse patterns.
2. interpretation. The patterns outlined were interpreted using concordance analysis and examining the texts collected through the CDS framework.
3. explanation of the findings. The patterns outlined were also explained in light of the broad context in which the texts were produced.

5. Migration and migrant categories: What’s in a name?

Migration-related terminology has become increasingly complex and varied through time. Table 1 reports dictionary and official definitions, respectively, from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), of the terms that will be analysed in Section 6.

	OED	IOM
Immigration	The action of immigrating; entrance into a country for the purpose of settling there.	From the perspective of the country of arrival, the act of moving into a country other than one's country of nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence.
Immigrant	a person who migrates into a country as a settler.	From the perspective of the country of arrival, a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence.
Migration	a. The movement of a person or people from one country, locality, place of residence, etc., to settle in another; b. The seasonal movement or temporary removal of a person, people, social group, etc., from one place to another.	The movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State.
Migrant	A person who moves permanently to live in a new country, town, etc., esp. to look for work, or to take up a post, etc.; an immigrant.	An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students.
Refugee	A person who has been forced to leave his or her home and seek refuge elsewhere, esp. in a foreign country, from war, religious persecution, political troubles, the effects of a natural disaster, etc.; a displaced person.	A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.
Asylum Seeker	a person seeking refuge, esp. political asylum, in a nation other than his or her own.	An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker.

Tab. 1: Definitions of migration-related terms

Migration may be described as a movement from one area to another, thus including regions in the same country or abroad. Moreover, some definitions also point to a temporary process (see b. definition from the OED in Table 1) while setting migration apart from other forms of mobility, such as relocation or commuting. At the same time, new categories of migrant-related terms have been coined in the last few decades due to the increasing salience of migration management and securitisation (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016), including, among others, transnational migration, which refers to simultaneous embeddedness, or the processes whereby migrants forge multiple types of relationships connecting their societies of origin and re-settlement (Caglar 2015), or climate change migration, related to environmentally-induced displacements (Piguet, Pécoud and de Guchteneire 2011). Not only does the multiplication of migrant subtypes contribute to making the picture extremely more complex, but definitional differences challenge scholarly comparisons of migration patterns across countries.

Whilst terms such as *immigration* and *immigrant* are univocally defined as related to movement and settlement *to* a nation-system, lack of consistent agreement regarding the status of a migrant raised debate. As reported in Table 1, *migrant* is a fairly general term, an umbrella term not officially defined. However, while IOM adopts an inclusivist definition, considering a migrant as someone who has moved from their usual place of residence, regardless of their legal status and motivations for moving (in short, including refugees or trafficking victims), residualist viewpoints see migrants as people who have moved from their usual place of residence for reasons other than fleeing war or persecution. In short, they assume a sharp difference with refugees (UNHCR 2016), while the OED definition makes explicit reference to labour market and employment as migration drivers.

Moreover, the definition of *refugee* proposed by the UN in 1951 following the adoption of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (reported in Table 1 under the IOM definition) is argued to be individualistic and at odds with situations of large-scale displacements caused by conflicts (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016), since it would focus on single individuals seeking protection from persecution, not whole populations fleeing violence or ethnic cleansing. Furthermore, the adoption of such a definition increasingly stressed the prerogative of individual nation-states in accepting or rejecting people seeking asylum, leading to the politicisation of the humanitarian crisis and the view that asylum seekers are bogus, that is, their persecution and personal endangerment claims would be unfounded even though their origin may correspond to a war area (Sales 2002).

The proliferation of migration-related terms indicates a failure to acknowledge that all migrations may simultaneously be produced by a variety of different drivers and through the

interaction between human agency and additional structural properties beyond the direct control of individuals.

6. Migration-related terms in the political discourse of British and Italian politicians: Linguistic analysis

From a statistical point of view, it is worth starting our discussion by examining the number of occurrences of the key selected terms for each politician, as reported in Table 2.

	<i>Immigration</i>	<i>Immigrant*</i>	<i>Migrant*</i>	<i>Refugee*</i>	<i>Asylum Seeker*</i>
Farage	76	1	66	17	13
Corbyn	22	4	69	40	2
Salvini	69	43	6	2	2
Renzi	75	10	57	9	0

Tab. 2: Frequency of the key selected terms for each politician

As observed, *immigration* is the most widely employed lexeme by most politicians, testifying that the phenomenon tends to be discussed globally and in general terms rather than focusing on specific groups of people, the only exception being Corbyn, for whom the first attested term is *migrant*. The latter lexeme is very common in the discourse of all the politicians considered, probably due to its generality and flexibility. Conversely, *asylum seeker* is the least employed, while the term *refugee* does not frequently occur in the discourse of Italian politicians. Such a low frequency may not be accidental, given the term's focus on the humanitarian crisis and persecution problems of individuals that some political factions try to minimise. The following two subsections discuss the data related to the most frequent collocates for each term considered and present the most relevant co-occurrence patterns for each politician conveniently grouped by nationality.

6.1 Migration-related terms in British political discourse

In the discourse of former *UKIP* leader Nigel Farage, the most frequent collocates of *immigration* are expressions such as *mass*, *massively increased*, and *open-door*, which, coupled with those reported for *migrant**, emphasise (im)migration as a quantity problem, while at the same time displaying the strategy of aggregation for the representation of migrants as social actors (van Leeuwen 2008), as in (1). The so-called 'numbers game' in immigration-related

discourse has already been highlighted (van Dijk 2018; 2000) as a typical strategy by mass media and politicians to magnify a problem. Unspecified number plurals, like *thousands* and *hundreds*, have a special rhetorical power to convey quantity and quality simultaneously. They indicate an estimate of the magnitude of a problem that must be *stopped* and *controlled*, thus evoking an issue-defining conceptual frame (Lakoff 2014), and the fact that migration, being in its thousands, has the quality to be viewed as a critical problem (Billig 2021). Representing immigration as a problem is an over-simplification that prevents us from penetrating and unpacking a highly complex issue (2). Moreover, by relying on his slogan “back control of our borders,” in (3), Farage frames the government as incapable of handling the situation and underestimating the migration problem.

- (1) Hundreds of thousands of *migrants* across Europe will soon come to the UK once they have EU passports unless we Leave EU. (N. Farage)
- (2) We cannot have an open door to *EU migrants* between now and the end of the Brexit process. Time to get a grip on the *immigration issue*. (N. Farage)
- (3) The British people want back control of our borders, but Mr. Cameron is instead fiddling with *migrant benefits*. (N. Farage)

*Illegal*⁹ is a frequent collocate of both *migrant** and *immigrant**, and as an adjective applied to people on the move is recurrent in the discourse of right-wing populist politicians¹⁰ to stress the view of migrants as criminals, although their offence is very different compared to those of prototypical criminals (4). However, an expression like *illegal immigrants* is hardly neutral and frames the problem as related to illegal border crossing without a visa and immigrants as inherently bad people. Such expressions are strongly discouraged by the UN as they undermine respect for the human rights of migrant people, who may be in an irregular situation, but, as human beings, cannot be illegal (IOM 2019a).

- (4) If all the *illegal immigrants* being rescued in the Channel are allowed to stay, that will encourage even more to come. A tragedy is close at hand. (N. Farage)

⁹ Potter (2014) provides evidence of the emergence of *illegal* as a noun in public discourse, in the plural *illegals*. Although this usage is not documented in our corpus, it appears as a further strategy aimed at the dehumanisation of immigrants.

¹⁰ See Lorenzetti (2020) for a discussion on the usage of the term in Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric.

Recurrence of the collocate *genuine* for both *refugee** and *asylum seeker** displays that suspicion on the authenticity of the refugees' claims is a primary concern for Farage, which leads us back to the criminal scenario activated by *illegal* (5). Moreover, an alleged insurmountability of cultural differences is stressed in Farage's remark. The latter is at the basis of the so-called differentialist racism (Taguieff 2001), a racism without races, which at first sight does not postulate the superiority of certain groups of people but only an incompatibility of cultures, lifestyles and traditions presented as permanent and monolithic. However, the suppression of the hierarchy theme is more apparent than real since the idea of hierarchy *de facto* resurfaces in the expectation that the newly arrived abandon their cultural identity and espouse the one of the receiving country to become fully integrated. Integration is thus presented as emancipation and a conceding of rights (Balibar 1991). At the same time, in (6), a hierarchy among migrant groups is implicitly presupposed, where economic migrants are framed as less deserving and deceitful.

(5) Young men coming from very different cultures who were not going to integrate. Young men, none of whom would have qualified as being genuine refugees. (N. Farage)

(6) 80% of those coming are not Syrian refugees. What you've done is open the door to young males *economic migrants* who behave quite aggressively. (N. Farage)

Table 3 summarises data related to the Nigel Farage corpus.

<i>Immigration</i>		<i>Immigrant</i>		<i>Migrant</i>		<i>Refugee</i>		<i>Asylum Seeker</i>	
Pre-modifier + <i>Immigration</i>		Pre-modifier + <i>Immigrant*</i>		Pre-modifier + <i>Migrant*</i>		Pre-modifier + <i>Refugee*</i>		Pre-modifier + <i>Asylum Seeker*</i>	
Illegal	35	Illegal	1	Illegal	18	Genuine	7	Genuine	6
Mass	14			Economic	10	Unaccompanied	3	Failed	5
Open-door	8			Hundreds of thousands	6	Syrian	2		
Massively increased	7			1 million	5	Orphan	1		
				More	4	Child	1		
				EU/ Albanian	4				
				Many	3				
				Male	3				
<i>Immigration + Noun</i>				<i>Migrant + Noun</i>					
Issue	10			Crisis	10				
Cost	6			Number	4				
Policy	4			Surge	2				
				Policy	2				
				Routes	1				
				Quota	1				
Verb + <i>Immigration</i> as object		Verb + <i>Immigrant*</i> as object		Verb + <i>Migrant*</i> as object		Verb + <i>Refugee*</i> as object		Verb + <i>Asylum Seeker*</i> as object	
Stop	15	Rescue	3	Be	6	Accept	5	Deport	8
Control	9			Accept	4			Arrest	7
Tackle	6			Expect	3				
				Take	2				

Tab. 3: Co-occurrence patterns for the lexemes analysed in the Farage corpus

Jeremy Corbyn’s view of migration emerging from the data analysed radically differs from Farage’s. He underlines that migrants are scapegoated by the government (11) and right-wing populist parties like *UKIP* (7) that frame them as a threat to the country’s economy with their mantra of hate. Conversely, by emphasising immigration as a polarising theme underscoring radically diverging views of society across the political spectrum, Corbyn challenges this stance. He presents migrants as victims of exploitation (8) and highlights their positive contribution to the national economy and welfare as integrated citizens (9). Moreover, his usage of the term *migrant* is inclusive and not negatively connoted.

(7) We will be standing up to the xenophobia of UKIP. Attacking Europe or demonising immigrants doesn’t increase anyone’s pay. There is a vision of despair, a mantra of hate and fear and Labour will never pander to it. (J. Corbyn)

(8) It is not *migrants* that undercut wages but unscrupulous employers. *Migrant workers* are often the victims of the worst exploitation. (J. Corbyn)

(9) Our NHS depends on *migrant nurses and doctors* to fill vacancies. (J. Corbyn)

In both (10) and (11), the humanitarian side of immigration is stressed by Corbyn, who explicitly addresses a complex and intertwined range of migration drivers at the basis of the phenomenon while at the same time focusing on individuals and using an empathetic lexicon.

(10) We won’t ignore the *refugee crisis*—the 65 million people around the world who are escaping oppression, war, climate crises and poverty. We’re standing against those who treat them as enemies. (J. Corbyn)

(11) Boris Johnson's government is preparing to scrap a scheme which enables child refugees and asylum seekers to be reunited with family members in the UK. (J. Corbyn)

Table 4 below reports the most frequent co-occurring patterns that emerged for Corbyn.

<i>Immigration</i>	<i>Immigrant</i>	<i>Migrant</i>	<i>Refugee</i>	<i>Asylum Seeker</i>
		Pre-modifier + <i>Migrant</i>*	Pre-modifier + <i>Refugee</i>*	
		Many 13	Syria 3	
		EU 12	Movements 2	
<i>Immigration + Noun</i>		<i>Migrant + Noun</i>		<i>Refugee + Noun</i>
Policy	9	People	15	Rights 10
Target	5	Tory Failure	7	Minors 8
System	3	Failure	6	Crisis 7
				Child 7
				Flows 4
				Camp 2

Verb + <i>Immigration</i>	Verb + <i>Immigrant*</i>	Verb+ <i>Migrant*</i>	Verb + <i>Refugee*</i>	Verb + <i>Asylum Seeker*</i>
Reduce 6	Demonise 2	Blame 9	Flee 2	Reunite with 3
	Ban 1	Scapegoat 4		
		Pay 5		
		Demonise 3		

Tab. 4: Co-occurrence patterns for the lexemes analysed in the Corbyn corpus

6.2 Migration-related terms in Italian political discourse

Matteo Salvini, *League* leader and responsible for a nationalistic turn of his party and the demonisation of immigrants with his mantra “stop invasion,” similarly to Farage, thrives on equating immigrants with crime. *Illegal*, *irregular* and *clandestine* are the most frequent collocates that accompany his usage of *immigrant** and *migrant** (Table 5). Furthermore, his argumentation is geared towards evoking a war scenario with alleged enemies disembarking on the Italian shores and infiltrating the country with crime—(12) and (13).

(12) Stop *irregular immigration*. Stop Invasion. (M. Salvini)

(13) My problem is with those *illegal immigrants* who come here without rules, stealing, dealing drugs, raping. (M. Salvini)

Moreover, the widespread usage of *clandestine* as a collocate for several migrant categories suggests that immigrants for the *League* leader have an inherently deceitful and criminal attitude, backgrounding any sense of humanitarian *pietas* (14) and leading to an essentialist view (Eide 2010; Rothbart and Taylor 1992).

What is more, in Salvini’s discourse, immigration as a topic is instrumental for attacking political opponents or the government (15), a strategy common to Farage in (3) and Corbyn in examples (7) and (11).

(14) The NGO ship “Open Arms” has just disembarked in Spain with 310 *clandestine immigrants* on board. Mission Accomplished! (M. Salvini)

(15) DP has already caused enough problems to the country, allowing a *reckless clandestine immigration*. (M. Salvini)

Coherently with the strategies outlined by van Dijk (2013) to enact the rhetoric of exclusion, when single outgroup members are mentioned, the focus is on their negative acts presented with a fine-grained description, as in (16), leading to the ‘criminal for immigrant’ equivalence chain. The slogan style adopted by the leader is also significant as it recalls Trump’s aggressive

language use (Lorenzetti 2020). The negative portrayal of immigrants also emerges in syntactic constructions with active sentences, where they are framed as agents associated with negative criminal acts (*dealing drugs, committing crimes*) (Table 5).

(16) *A clandestine immigrant* from Northern Africa armed with a knife got on a bus in Milan causing panic among the passengers. We are working for his EXPULSION to his home country. #Zerotolerance for criminals. (M. Salvini)

Furthermore, in (17), immigration is portrayed as dangerous in terms of cultural values, assuming an alleged homogeneity and incompatibility among different cultures viewed as monolithic and dogmatic. Such a discourse strategy, which can be detected in Farage’s discourse as well, underscores the theory of cultural differentialism at the basis of differentialist racism (Taguieff 2001) and conspiracy theories like “the Great Replacement” (Camus 2012), opposing multiculturalism, and a presumed (cultural) pollution of the original values that would derive from integration (5).

(17) *Immigration* is a system to dismantle those values grown together with the progress of this continent. (M. Salvini)

Immigration		Immigrant		Migrant		Refugee		Asylum Seeker	
Pre-modifier + Immigration¹¹		Pre-modifier + Immigrant*		Pre-modifier + Migrant*		Pre-modifier + Refugee*		Pre-modifier+ Asylum Seeker*	
Clandestine	27	Clandestine	17	Clandestine	5	True	1	Clandestine	1
Illegal	16	Irregular	11			Fake	1	Illegal	1
Irregular	10	Illegal	7					Irregular	1
Immigration + noun				Noun + Prep. Phrase + Migrant*		Refugee* + verb		Asylum Seeker* + Verb	
Problem	10			Redistribution of	1	Arrive	1	Deal drugs	1
System	7					Commit crimes	1		
Verb + Immigration		Verb + Immigrant*						Verb + Asylum Seeker* as object	
Stop	25	Disembark	7					Arrest	1
Block	13	Recover	5						
Handle	5	Individuate	3						

Tab. 5: Co-occurrence patterns for the lexemes analysed in the Salvini corpus

¹¹ In the Italian examples, adjectives are usually postponed to the noun, as in “immigrazione clandestina”.

Matteo Renzi, who was Prime Minister¹² and leader of the Democratic Party in the period considered, strongly rejects the idea of immigration as a threat relying on a parallel with the history of Ancient Rome (18).

(18) Italy is a land of *migrants*. The myth of Rome originated from a *migrant*. The Empire is a story of inclusion. (M. Renzi)

While challenging the right-wing populist stance embodied by Salvini that immigration is an emergency for the country (19), however, he mainly resorts to expressions such as *topic*, *problem*, *question*, or *issue* to address the phenomenon—(19) and (20) (Table 6). This *de facto* produces the same impersonalisation through abstraction (van Leeuwen 2008), backgrounding the humanitarian problem (21) of migrant people.

(19) Italy does not have an *immigration emergency*. It has three severe emergencies: low birth rates, education, lawlessness. (M. Renzi)

(20) The hatred that the Right is spreading about the *immigration topic* is a social plague with possible long-lasting consequences. (M. Renzi)

(21) Salvini needs *immigration* to dictate his agenda, but not for solving the problem. (M. Renzi)

At the same time, while the quantity of pre-modifiers to migrant descriptors in his case is not very high, compared to right-wing populist politicians like Farage and Salvini, he also speaks of migrants in terms of quantities (*quotas*, *some thousands*), thus employing assimilation via aggregation in the representation of social actors (van Leeuwen 2008).

<i>Immigration</i>		<i>Immigrant</i>		<i>Migrant</i>		<i>Refugee</i>	
<i>Immigration + Noun</i>		<i>Immigrant + Noun</i>		<i>Noun + Migrant*</i>		<i>Pre-modifier + Refugee*</i>	
Emergency	36	Quotas	4	Emergency	12	Some thousands	7
Question	25						
Topic	10						
Issue	3						
<i>Verb + Immigration</i>							
Handle	15						
Solve	12						

Tab. 6: Co-occurrence patterns for the lexemes analysed in the Renzi corpus

¹² Renzi was Prime Minister until December 2016.

6.3 Discussion

Based on the data examined, migration tends to be framed as a problematic phenomenon by all the politicians examined. They all heavily rely on such verbs as *solve*, *handle*, *reduce* and *control*, implying a resolute action on the part of the political authority as mandatory. Right-wing populist politicians, on the other hand, strongly describe it as a problem penetrating their country from the outside, emphasising body politics (Musolff 2015; Wodak 2015b).

Political orientation is crucial in shaping the usage of migration-related terms and, hence, the overall representation of migrant groups. In this respect, Renzi and Corbyn, as leaders of two leftist parties, coherently with the values embodied by their political orientation, display a more humanitarian stance compared to the harsh anti-immigration rhetoric exhibited by Farage and Salvini. While right-wing populists use the lexeme *refugee* only to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the entrants' claims and status (*fake*, *genuine*), Corbyn consistently employs the term, emphasising the humanitarian problem with such collocates as *crisis*, *rights*, or *minors*. Moreover, he harshly opposes the measures and rhetoric of the pro-Brexit government and right-wing parties like *UKIP*, which scapegoat migrants for all societal problems. At the same time, however, reliance on the typical imagery of migrants flowing and references to migrant groups by general plural nouns contribute to their objectification and collective assimilation (van Leeuwen 2008), with the result that they are perceived as homogenous, undifferentiated and deprived of their unique characteristics as human beings. Such a strategy is common to Renzi, who abstracts migration as a problem, and relies on assimilation by aggregation highlighting numbers, and the so-called 'numbers game' (van Dijk 2000), albeit with the intent of minimising the problem.

Considering van Leeuwen's (2008) taxonomy for the discursive representation of social actors, the most common strategies outlined among the politicians analysed are assimilation through aggregation and collectivisation, identification through classification in terms of the major categories through which society differentiates among classes of people, (i.e. in this case mainly ethnicity and nationality), impersonalisation through abstraction ('immigration is a problem') and functionalisation.

Abstraction as a strategy is pivotal in the rhetoric of the two right-wing populist politicians examined. Moreover, in line with the trends outlined in scholarly research on political discourse about immigration (Lorenzetti 2020; Musolff 2015; Wodak 2015b; Charteris-Black 2006; van Dijk 2002; 2013), the data examined suggest that the category 'immigration' and migrant people are negatively polarised in the discourse of both Farage and Salvini. The forcefulness of their stance is expressed through negatively connoted adjectives, such as *clandestine*, *fake*, or *illegal*,

that activate a crime scenario. Moreover, the effectiveness of their rhetoric simultaneously articulated around some of the most basic fears of the individual in modern society, i.e. namely, existential precariousness and insecurity (Bauman 2012), triggers the interpretation that immigration is a threat on multiple grounds:

- A threat to the security of the country, with refugees framed as ‘fraud,’ aiming to deceive the country and its inherently good citizens (ordinary people, but also the people as underdogs affected by dangerous others) according to the right-wing populist logic (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Canovan 1984) and undocumented migrants depicted as criminals invading the nation.
- A threat to the economy referring to the fear of the individual of losing one’s personal independence. Such strategy also leads to the representation of economic migrants as less deserving, parasitic, and thieves at the expense of hard-working citizens, as if fleeing poverty was less morally acceptable than fleeing war or persecution.
- A threat to culture, whereby coexistence is described as problematic due to an alleged incompatibility of different cultural values.

Cross-nationally, these three different articulated threats do not display the same salience. Both Salvini and Farage use aggregation to conjure images of hordes of criminal invaders on the move, and they both rely on collectivisation and impersonalisation through abstraction, thus depriving migrant people of their individuality and status of human beings. However, the security threat is more salient for Salvini, who firmly insists on the alleged criminal status of migrants. Moreover, individualisation, namely the representation of migrants as individual social actors (van Leeuwen 2008), is instrumentally employed by the *League* leader to highlight criminal conduct with active predicates (van Dijk 2000). Conversely, the threat addressing the economy is perceived as more salient for Farage, who consistently uses *economic migrant* as a pejorative term, thus implying a hierarchy among migrant roles. Moreover, both leaders reinforce their negative portrayal of migrant groups implying a cultural clash.

7. Conclusions

Empirical analysis combining the tenets of critical discourse studies with a corpus-assisted methodology revealed that migration-related discourse is extremely polarised in political rhetoric, with right-wing populist politicians projecting a negative representation of migrants as outsiders and others on multiple grounds (Wodak 2015b). Conversely, left-wing politicians, coherently with the moral values embodied by their political orientation, emphasise the

importance of the humanitarian problem. Moreover, in the discourse of the politicians analysed, an emerging discursive trend sees migration and migrant people as the instrumental topic in the argumentation of “political rivalry.” All the categories of migrant people are thus employed as part of the positive presentation of one’s own party and values and the negative portrayal of the opponent (van Dijk 2000). Consequently, migrants are linguistically backgrounded and reduced to an issue and functionalised as a homogeneous and undifferentiated group of people (van Leeuwen 2008).

Migrant-related terms refer to distinct categories of individuals, and such distinctions are designed to allocate different rights and privileges to newly arrived in the receiving countries. While the multiplication of different types of migrants fails to acknowledge the fact that migration, most of the times, is produced by the combinations of a host of “push and pull factors” at the same time (Mavroudi and Nagel 2016), in the discourse of the politicians examined technical distinctions among migrant categories are almost irrelevant. The term *refugee* tends to be delegitimised by right-wing populist politicians with questionable assumptions regarding the claims of the entrants as part of their anti-immigration rhetoric articulated around the threat trope (Lorenzetti 2020), while *migrant* as an umbrella term is instrumentally employed according to a reductionist definition to indicate economic migrants only and assuming migrants as underserving and parasitic.

Moreover, regardless of political orientation, which is pivotal for the negative or positive presentation of migrant groups, migrants tend to be featured as homogeneous collectives, undifferentiated and impersonalised, as problems through abstraction (van Leeuwen 2008) or as numbers through aggregation. This elicits an essentialist view that backgrounds any other salient features they may have as human beings (Rothbart and Taylor 1992; Allport 1954). Such language *de facto* dehumanises them and paves the way for their otherisation and exclusion from the category of legitimate human rights-holders (Bauman 2016), causing a shift of migration from the sphere of ethics to that of crime and emergency.

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