

The Weight of Words

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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a larger work on the concept of life and its ways of representation. Here I set forth a first investigation, performed in the linguistic area. A study on the semantics of the word explored in some specific contexts. In this paper we are going to examine words and sentences used with persuasive finalities, that is examples of rhetorical praxis used by subjects belonging to different cultural origins and groups.

1. *A conceptual debate*¹

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The group of texts chosen for the analysis, is taken from the materials issued for the June 2005 Italian Referendum - when citizens were invited to vote – pro or against – the abolition of the law introduced by the conservative administration, concerning the medical assisted procreation.

The contents of the *corpus* belong to the area of the subjects now identified as ethically relevant, problems connected to the possibilities opened by technological and scientific discoveries, concerning the new ways of being born, growing up, being treated, surviving or dying.

These phenomena of life, once governed spontaneously by nature, are now determined by human decisions and consequently need public debates and shared regulations.

The questions asked in the referendum were about very relevant and delicate subjects, all concerning the concept of “life” so that a real conceptual debate aroused on the semantic extensions of the word - the selection of its meanings, its senses and its referents.

This debate involved primarily the assumptions, meant as an agreement on the value, the belief and the frame that people attribute to the word “life”.

¹ This essay has been extended from studies appeared in 2006 (*Qualcosa è cambiato*, “Nuovi Argomenti”, 34: 208-50) and 2007 (“Il peso delle parole”, in (a cura di) Raffaella Petrilli e Diego Femia, “Il filo del discorso. Intrecci testuali, articolazioni linguistiche, composizioni logiche”, atti del XIII congresso nazionale, Viterbo, 14-16 settembre 2006, pubblicazioni della Società di Filosofia del linguaggio.)

In this paper we are going to examine words and sentences used with persuasive finalities, that is examples of rhetorical praxis used by subjects belonging to different cultural origins and groups.

Consequently in our analysis we didn't follow a traditional way to classify argumentative modes and specific, rhetorical figures. The perspective used to analyse the tokens aims rather to evidence their position as to the context (the conceptual area of the discourse defining the thematic aspect of terminology) and to the cotext studied in its different morphological, lexical and phrasal levels, to show how they get the persuasive finality.

I believe that the study of the textual dynamics and of the behaviour of the occurrences together with their influence on the context can help us to show the weaving of the discourse.

The texts chosen for our study are selected from the *Manifestos* issued to present their arguments by the two opposite fronts: pro-life and pro-choice, and from a selection of texts in two newspapers "Il Foglio" and "La Repubblica" standing on politically opposite positions. The articles were published during the week before the referendum day.

Our method was to control the quantity of the occurrences (no help of software was used) as means to support the analysis of the quality.

The count of the occurrences, that is the frequency of the lexical unit in the text, allows us to study other aspects, i.e. the connotative gradation of the word and its relationships of similarity and opposition with other words in the text. Not only: later in this paper we'll consider the aspect concerning the comprehensibility and readability of the text in the whole, and the relationship of the word "life" with other words in the texts, checking also their inclusion in the VdB².

As we already said, the texts issued were meant to have a persuasive function, so the indicators of text readability play a crucial role defining the meaning that a word acquires in relating with the near words.

As speakers we don't live the relationship with a word as unique, almost as being tied to an isolated atom, but we live it as the word appears to us like a subject, privately, and it functions in public, in the linguistic community, as center where to converge and to connect the threads of a net of multiple relations that it establishes with other words and sentences: that is with the words and sentences of texts and discourses in the occasions where we met it and where we often meet it. (De Mauro, 2005. pp173-74)³

² We refer to the "vocabolario di base", a selection of 7000 words considered as the most easily readable for people that attended school for at least eight years. See De Mauro (1980) and (2005).

³ "Come parlanti il rapporto con una parola non lo viviamo nella sua singolarità, quasi un legame con un atomo isolato, ma lo viviamo in quanto la parola ci si configura soggettivamente, privatamente, e funziona pubblicamente, nella comunità linguistica quale centro di convergenza e raccordo dei fili di una rete di rapporti molteplici che essa intrattiene con altre parole e frasi: con le parole e frasi dei testi e discorsi nelle occasioni in cui l'abbiamo incontrata e più spesso s'incontra [...]", De Mauro (2005), pp. 173-74.

2. The presentation strategies in propaganda texts: quantitative analysis

The front against the referendum, promoting abstention from the vote, is introduced by the “*Manifesto*” of the national committee “*Scienza e Vita*” (Science and Life), a pamphlet written following the traditional rhetorical rules: to be short, clear, using short and simple paratactic sentences, in an easy understandable vocabulary.

As we note in ex.(1), only 19 (3,93%) of the 483 words in the text are not included in VdB.

The referendum material observed under this profile presents quite a different picture. As regards the quantity it is much longer, the text is a dialogue organized in questions / answers aiming to illustrate in depth the content of the referendum questions. The argumentative structure is more complex, in long hypotactic sentences; as regards intelligibility, the picture is not so different looking at the excerpt n.2, we find 58 words that are not included in VdB out of 1621 words of the text, making so 3,57% of the total. These data must be considered also under a different point of view.

These words belong in fact to the lexicon of specialized fields mostly bio-medical, and in some cases legal. These technical specialistic words belong to particular fields of knowledge and, without a specific definition, they are accessible only to a restricted group of speakers.

Propaganda texts	Words not included in <i>VdB</i>	Percentage	Total words	Percentage
<i>Manifesto</i>	19	3,93	483	22,96
<i>Questions</i>	58	3,57	1621	77,04
Totals	77	7,5	2104	100

[1]

In the same way, as we noted above, we don't find a wide gap as regards quantity in the 2 texts, observing the frequency of the lexical unit. We count in fact 6 occurrences in the “*Manifesto*”(1,24%) and 5 in the “*Questions*” of the pro-choice group (0,30) The situation is summarized in the chart n [.2]

Propaganda texts	Tokens	Percentage	Total words	Percentage
<i>Manifesto</i>	6	1,24	483	22,96
<i>Questions</i>	5	0,30	1621	77,04
Totals	11	1,54	2104	100

[2]

In the next paragraph, in a qualitative analysis we'll be dealing with the semantics of “life” finding the referents and the senses in the single occurrences.

3. *The semantics of “life” in the propaganda material: qualitative analysis*

Several indicators point out the strategic role of the word “life” in the “*Manifesto*”. Looking at words close to it, we find the tokens next to words, belonging to the semantic area of safety and protection.

- (1) Tuttavia è essenziale riconoscere delle priorità. Solo il primato della vita garantisce il perseguimento dei diritti dell’uomo e lo sviluppo scientifico ardimentoso e controllato.
- (2) Questo è il primo passo per la difesa in concreto della vita, da sviluppare in tutti i suoi aspetti e tutti i soggetti.
- (3) Non si tratta di una legge perfetta tuttavia essa pone fine al cosiddetto «far-west» procreativo, assicurando ad ogni figlio le garanzie di una vita umana e la protezione di una vera famiglia.

Let us now consider the relationship of the word with the lexemes belonging to the area of science, as shown in passages n. 1 and 3. The pair “science – life” that is crucial in the whole text, implies problems, hinted at already in the *incipit*, where it is stated what kind of relationship should be established between the two in order to avoid social and moral conflicts.

- (4) L’alleanza tra scienza e vita è molto forte nella coscienza di ogni persona. Da una parte infatti la scienza è avvertita come valore decisivo per migliorare la vita e rafforzarne la qualità, dall’altra la vita delle persone e delle comunità spinge la scienza a non arrendersi, fino a produrre benefici concreti a vantaggio non solo di pochi privilegiati ma di tutti.

We try now to identify the sense and the referents of these occurrences in the passages quoted here.

We can find two areas of reference: one more general and descriptive, including the temporal cycle of the human existence and the whole of circumstances related to it, and another where moral values are involved: in fact “life” is meant like a value to protect and safeguard. See the first token in (4) and then in (1 2,3).

Within this area a more specific ground is defined, where the plan of values is intertwined with the referential components of the meaning. The reference is not made explicit directly, but equally valid on a rethorical point of view.

In the passages (1) and (2) the argumentations evidence the primary importance of the requests demanded in the two passages. “Transparency and justice, equality and equal responsibility, values certainly shared, make sense only if we start putting them at the service of those who are weaker and lacking protection: that is in first place the unborn baby”.

In the adopted argumentative strategy, the safeguard and the protection of life are repeatedly quoted, and so they acquire an evocative potential referring to the guarantees of the unborn baby: “who doesn’t have a voice and so needs the solidarity of the entire society.”

In the answers written for the referendum questions the pro - choice group use the word “life” in quite a different way. The inferior number of occurrences suggests that the word was used with some caution, hypothesis confirmed by the qualitative analysis. Looking at the near lexemes we discover that the prevailing semantic association is “expectations” and “hope”.

(5) [...] si è voluto imporre un solo punto di vista, una sola etica di parte [...] Le conseguenze di questa decisione sono soprattutto concrete e investono la vita di milioni di persone.

(6) Ogni anno che passa la speranza di vita si allunga anche perché medici e scienziati instancabilmente cercano e trovano nuove terapie [...].

(7) [...] Più semplicemente per il rispetto verso le persone, tutte, e per amore della vita.

(8) Si vota per una vita migliore. [...] Si vota per dei valori importanti che toccano l’esistenza quotidiana di ciascuno di noi: vita, speranza, guarigione.

Contrary to what we noticed in the text n.1, in these new passages quoted above, the writer aims to evidence the agreement between the two terms “science” and “life”, drawing attention to the role of science in supporting life, and above all, it defines the ideological area.

The above mentioned aspects are more evident if we try to see how the observed occurrences are referring to some precise senses. In fact the descriptive sense is prevailing, See ex. N.5,6,8 - the first of the two tokens -. They are mainly referring to the condition of the human existence also when the sense is on the value level (see n.7,8) though assuming a sense contrary to what we observed in text (n.1): in fact they are linked to the preceding lexemes and to the semantic area to which they refer.

The analysis of the observed occurrences shows a wide gap between the two texts. If in the “*Manifesto*” “life” plays a crucial role, as we already said, in the “*Questions*” of the pro-choice group a strategy of caution and defence prevails .

As regards quantity this fact is confirmed by the low number of occurrences found, as regards quality there is a fluctuation between a reference to a generically descriptive character and another bound to the plan of values where they try to stress the positive character of the association with the semantic area of science. In other words, they try to reverse the rhetorical scheme of “*Manifesto*”, and to assign a positive value to the relationship with science and knowledge, using words belonging to the area of a present hope and of a future time.

4. *The semantics of “life” in the newspapers “La Repubblica” and “Il Foglio”*

From the two selected newspapers we chose to analyze the issues of the last ten days preceding the referendum. For each newspaper we selected 9 articles and interviews dealing in different ways with the problems concerning the referendum questions and the political-cultural debate raised by them. Also for these texts we followed the same method used for the material just examined: that is checking the number of the frequencies of the lexical unit and a qualitative study of the semantics of the word.

4.1. *Qualitative analysis*

In the newspaper “Il Foglio” the word “life” plays a central role as it is confirmed paradoxically by the careful and limited use of this word by the director and the staff of the newspaper.

(9) Per un’ora [...] ha spiegato agli illuministi il segreto della biologia, la macchina della riproduzione umana [...] la fecondazione divinamente e medicalmente assistita che crea la comunicazione tra maschio e femmina, e dà luogo alla vita di un essere umano [...] ha soprattutto spiegato deprecando e salmodiando laicamente il cretinismo di chi ignora i dati di fatto, la differenza scientifica tra cellule vitali, il materiale genetico, e organismo vivente, l’embrione umano⁴.

(10) Tra i carissimi nemici annoveriamo tutti coloro che [...] hanno spostato per pudore e non per dissimulazione disonesta il senso del discorso su principi ovvii come la salute della donna e la libertà di ricerca, magari sapendo che le donne stavano peggio senza la legge e la ricerca starà meglio quando si darà la cura della vita e non della sua eliminazione come limite etico⁵.

(11) Loro [...] si sono improvvisati teologi [...] però hanno tralasciato di spiegarsi sull’unica questione che conta, il principio di realtà conciliato con la ragione: in quel microscopio che lascia vedere l’embrione umano, in quelle ecografie che spiegano come la vita umana stia dove sta e non dove vorremmo che stesse noi vivi adulti [...] si vede tutto il dolore di un mondo che crea per vie tecniche e per vie tecniche distrugge vita umana, avvilisce l’individuo e il suo diritto negato alla condizione di cosa e di strumento dell’io e delle sue voglie [...].⁶

(12) [...] Laici che attribuiscono alla donna e al suo ministro profano di culto, il tecnico di laboratorio, il potere di vita e di morte sulla radice di essere umano prodotta in nome del desiderio di maternità [...]. Laici incapaci di uscire dal linguaggio e attingere almeno una verità che non sia relativa, la verità della vita al suo inizio. Laici scolastici che si rifugiano in S. Tommaso e parlano dell’anima bestemmiando il Dottore Angelico, mescolando la sua sapienza con le nostre concrete, attuali conoscenze biologiche, con il nostro potere di creare la vita in laboratorio e di distruggerla.

⁴ G. Ferrara, *Se non si vaneggia*, «Il Foglio», 7 giugno 2005.

⁵ G. Ferrara, *L’avversario che ci piace*, «Il Foglio», 11 giugno 2005.

⁶ G. Ferrara, *Sì dissimulano*, «Il Foglio», 10 giugno 2005.

In these excerpts we find a similar sense to what we already found in the “*Manifesto*” referable to the life-span of the human existence. Here there is a strong accent on values and mainly the link with reference is more explicit.

As it is shown in the three occurrences, the argumentation aims to name the referent identified in (la vita umana che inizia) “the human life at its beginning”. There are many re-wording in these texts and they point out the markedness: (la radice di essere umano) “the root of a human being”, (vita nascente) “a growing life”, (vita che è già, ma non ancora) “a life that is already, but not yet here”, (vita biologicamente umana) “life biologically human”, where, “a man is contained”(è contenuto tutto un uomo.)

In the main part, the selection of the senses is oriented towards a reference to the pre-natal life. In fact the life that is meant to defend it is life preceding birth. Moreover defending this kind of life it allows to safeguard other forms of life, and to stand for life as a whole. In this way the process of selection for the referent generates the rhetorical effect to point out and to strengthen a hierarchy of values.

The opposition between the semantic areas of “science and life” that we already met in the propaganda literature is greatly emphasized in the quoted passages of “*Il Foglio*”: See for example (n.10) where “life” and “research” are opposed; and “research” and “freedom” are associated. Here “freedom” acquires a deeply negative meaning: it expresses a lack of sense of limit and responsibility; This reference becomes more evident at the end of the passage where it is urged “a care for life”, to be contrasted with a research having its “elimination as an ethical limit”.

Also in other excerpts, see (11, 12) there is a semantic contiguity between words belonging to the area of science and other words referring to the the act of putting an end, destroying. The type “power” appears in two occurrences in these excerpts to evidence the risks associated to an arbitrary use of science: that “creates” and “destroys” irresponsibly if there isn’t a law based on stated values regulating it, or even worse, if science is allied with the blind and similarly careless desire of women.

The other polemical side of the argumentation in (11) and (12) is addressed to the appeals for laity coming from the pro-choice groups. “Lay” is used in a strong derogatory way together with “relative”, and emphasized by being in opposition with “truth”, that appears in two occurrences: one associated with “life” and the other with “language”. It is quite interesting to note the negative restriction on the word “language”, whose sense here is understood to be equivalent to an empty rhetoric far away from the world and its values.

In fact the “lay people” are individuals unable to get out of the language so foreign (outside) the world of life.

The occurrences of “life” in the analysis of the articles taken from “*La Repubblica*” are semantically homogeneous. The senses to which they are related, vary between a descriptive reference to “life”:

“a condition of what it is living an essential propriety of living organisms, as they live, grow, reproduce and die: the whole of the phenomena that are typical of such organisms.....”

and a reference to the life - span of human existence without shifting to the plan of values so frequent in “*Il Foglio*”.

It is not surprising that when this shift occurs in some statements, this word appears in inverted commas to evidence an unusual character and the extension of the meaning. This is the case of Levi-Montalcini when she mentions the case of embryo – cells.

(13) Il loro non utilizzo [...] preclude a priori la possibilità di usare cellule staminali che rappresentano un prezioso patrimonio “di vita” che in un prossimo futuro potrebbe essere usato come terapia di malattie neurodegenerative o di altra natura⁷.

This is in general the prevalent sense, but polemically when they allude to the argumentations of the opponents. A good example is given by these excerpts from articles by Scalfari in “La Repubblica”.

(14) Benedetto XVI è entrato a gamba tesa sulla questione della procreazione medicalmente assistita. Più e più ancora di quanto non avesse fatto il suo predecessore, il quale più e più volte aveva parlato della necessità di preservare la vita dell’embrione come persona, dell’aborto come infanticidio, auspicando leggi che incorporassero questi valori [...].

(15) quanto al partito della vita e della morte, questa divisione di campo in *black and white* è vergognosamente falsa⁸.

(16) [...] Ecco gli intellettuali atei che sono accorsi al fianco di Ruini, leggono in questo Referendum una minaccia al paradigma giudaico-cristiano che vede nella vita umana non una manifestazione dell’evoluzione biologica ma un dono di Dio⁹.

(17) [...] provate a immaginare questo impoverimento generale dell’esistenza, un dibattito sulla vita o sulla morte ridotto a controversia sullo statuto biologico dell’embrione: per di più con la pretesa, [...] di chi si proclama “Movimento per la vita” di condurlo in termini scientifici, cioè di delegare all’analisi dello sviluppo cellulare la decisione non solo di quando finisca la vita, ma anche e soprattutto su cosa si debba intendere per esistenza umana¹⁰.

In the analysis of the passages above, we find again the same considerations about the materials of presentation: in different forms, due to the different types of texts, a defensive strategy prevails. The answers we analyzed show how there isn’t a positive and autonomous confrontation on the semantics of “life”. The ground where they are moving, even though polemically, is the one chosen by the opponents argumentations, that is the sense they have selected for the word. Otherwise caution prevails: how it is proved by the few occurrences in the other texts due to the the fear of facing a strange ground.

The data we observe now are not distant from the picture that Lakoff has commented, speaking of the U.S. democratic campaign, showing how the argumentive modes and the linguistic choices that are directed mainly to denounce and polemize with the opponent can result feeble and ineffective: “When you are discussing with your opponents, don’t use their language. That language evokes a frame,” he states remembering how framing consists in the use of a language carrying a whole vision of the world and moreover how the language is just the place where ideas are mirrored”, because the most important things are ideas”.

⁷ *Natura e sofferenza*, “Repubblica”, 7 giugno.

⁸ *E dopo la provetta toccherà all’aborto*, “Repubblica”, 1 giugno.

⁹ *Gli atei bigotti contro il Referendum*, “Repubblica”, 3 giugno.

¹⁰ Viale, cit..

“In cognitive sciences there is a name for this phenomenon: it is called “hypocognition” and indicates the lack of ideas that one needs, the absence of a frame that can be evoked with one or two words.”

5. *Words that matter*

It is useful now to reflect on the aspects evidenced by the analysis of the lexical units from a philosophical point of view. In detail we want to reflect on the dynamics we have identified in the selection of the senses of the texts produced by the group contrary to the referendum, a selection that the opponents have picked up in the modes we have observed.

The use of the word “life” enters in close relationship with the conceptual ground, the ground of ideas, Lakoff would say. Between the two plans, a tension is generated: the sense that the word acquires in the text enters in conflict with the concept.

As Saussure wrote “unfortunately” linguistics has three ways to relate to words, and the third consists precisely: “in understanding that the word and its sense do not exist outside the consciousness we have of it or that we want to get at any moment. From whatever point of view we look at it, a word exists really only thanks to the approval that it receives moment after moment by those who use it.”¹¹

Therefore let’s try to understand the results of the tension deriving from this usage.

Specific usages of a word can lead to redefine the cognitive levels in various directions: recognizing the complexity of the ideal plan can lead to the widening and to the articulation of its use. In the case of the observed occurrences we noticed a reduction and a fixation, that in the evocative shades aims to acquire the full meaning as a whole. Defending life before birth is the same as defending life as a whole, in all its manifestations; this position becomes stronger in a game of opposition with the words of science that is accused to be too autonomous and to pursue separate aims from collective interests, in society, in one word to move against life.

Investing the whole argumentation, this rhetoric strategy that is determined by the semantic restriction already described, carries results also on a pragmatic ground.

Since Austin (1962) we know that how to use words is a way to do things, and to take part in the things and the world. The observed statements, having a marked illocutive and perlocutive character, are a meaningful example of this use and, on the one hand they show the complex interweaving of the levels determining it - conceptual, linguistic, and extralinguistic -, and on the other hand, how it is necessary to distinguish them, to work in the analysis without losing the capacity of “a real comprehension and control.” Besides they help to show how the performative value shouldn’t be meant how a substitute of the referential one, but rather as a contribute to the definition of the form of referent.

I think appropriate at this point to conclude quoting the words by Fox Keller, in a work on linguistic metaphors in the twentieth century biology:

Since Austin, the performative character of language has been extended by philosophers and literary theorists well beyond the domain of speech-act. In keeping with these developments my assumption is that all language, even scientific language, and should be subjected to the criterion of efficacy. Efficacy is not invoked here in

¹¹ Saussure (2005) quoted in De Mauro (2005).

contradistinction to truth but in the pragmatist sense, as itself a potential measure of truth value; it also provides a way of grounding the social dependency of truth in material reality. It needs to be said, of course, that descriptive statements are performative in a rather different sense from that of the speech-acts: not by virtue of directly enacting their referents but by their purchase on the ways in which we structure and construct our social and material worlds.¹²

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¹² Fox Keller (1995), p. 11.