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Giorgia Meloni intersecting [im]migration, gender issues, and right-wing populism. A case study of the language in social representations acted by her and by the media — a narrative review of psychosocial literature

Gilda Sensales[1], Gabriele Di Cicco[2], Laura Prislei[2], Sofia Sorvillo[1]

[1] *Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy*

[2] *Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Kraków, Poland*

Abstract

The article presents a literature review of the case of Giorgia Meloni, the first woman Prime Minister of a government that, for the first time, saw all right-wing parties, including radicals, at the helm of Italy. The preferred theoretical perspective for selecting studies is social representations (SR), particularly attentive to the analysis of language, which is considered a non-neutral tool embedded in specific ideological and cultural choices that lead to the selection of linguistic markers capable of conveying those choices. The review highlights Meloni's relationship with populism and fascism, both in terms of style — agentic, top-down, but also emotional — and content, which is migrant-centric. The studies presented are also analyzed with respect to the salience of gender identity, as analyzed in Meloni's direct language use in her parliamentary speeches, her social media communications, her statements regarding the Fanpage scandal, and her followers' responses to her Facebook posts. Attention is also drawn to the SR of Meloni constructed by the Italian daily press of varying ideological and cultural orientations. The article concludes by outlining the characteristics of the leadership model that emerged.

Keywords: social representation; (im)migration; right-wing populism; populism; gender

*Corresponding author.
Gilda Sensales, Department of Social and Developmental Psychology,
Sapienza University of Rome,
Via dei Marsi 78, 00185
Rome, Italy
E-mail: gilda.sensales@uniroma1.it
(G. Sensales)

Introduction

This article is a narrative review of the literature, examining, within the theoretical framework of social representations (SR), the language used by Giorgia Meloni and the language used to portray her by various media outlets. Her case is of particular interest as Meloni faces a variety of issues related to migration, gender, fascism, and populism.

Psychosocial studies focusing on language analysis will allow us to outline Meloni's representations through her communication across different contexts, from institutional to social media, over a period extending up to 2026. We also illustrate the representations on her Facebook followers' communication and in the headlines of the Italian daily press.

We will start with the results for all her parliamentary speeches up to January 2026 (Giuliano, 2025; 2026). Then we will move on to those relating to her posts and interactions with her followers on Facebook both during the second Conte government (from September 5, 2019 to February 13, 2021; Prislei et al., 2022; 2023; Sensales, 2024), and over a broader time span from January 1, 2019 to March 23, 2022 (Di Cicco et al., 2024). After that, we will present data on the representations of Meloni and her ministers in the Italian daily press in the month following the formation of her government in 2022 (Sensales et al., 2026b). We will conclude with Meloni's reactions to the racist, anti-Semitic, and neo-fascist remarks of some young members of her party, recorded by hidden cameras of the journalists of the television broadcast "Fanpage" (Pettersson et al., 2026), reported in 25 articles of four Italian newspapers during 2024.

In this way, we will provide an interpretative framework for studying the coherence between the language directly employed by Meloni and the representational processes activated and disseminated by the language of her followers and of Italian newspapers in the aftermath of the changes brought about by a radical right-wing government led for the first time by a woman. In this type of analysis, in line with the perspective of social representations, we will demonstrate that language is not a neutral tool. Still, it can promote specific inferences through linguistic devices that often operate in an opaque manner, contributing to the delineation of contradictory representations of reality.

Before illustrating some of the findings of the aforementioned literature, a brief biographical note on Giorgia Meloni is presented below, which will place the leader within the political and cultural context in which she operates.

Giorgia Meloni in Her Political and Cultural Context

Meloni's political career has been entirely within the Italian radical right, although assessments of her political characterization differ between those who maintain that she remains a member of the radical right (Donà, 2022; Galbo, 2024; Pasquino & Valbruzzi, 2023; Baldini et al., 2022) and those who instead attribute a point of view that has become less extremist (Newell, 2024; Vassallo & Vignati, 2024). The fact remains that, at least until the 2022 elections, her communication is heavily anchored in hate speech against her opponents, so much so that Amnesty International (2022) ranked her second for the use of hate speech, immediately after Matteo Salvini. As Galbo (2024) points out, the political issues the leader addresses follow the typical populist pattern of friend/enemy, good/bad. Meloni practices a rhetoric marked by a "cultural war", in which she fights to defend the identity and security of Italians against those who threaten to destroy the Christian values of our culture, attacking national interests. Within this logic, she promotes nativist and Eurosceptic messages, opposing the alleged threat of Islamization, fighting illegal immigration and the threat of "ethnic substitution", supporting the traditional "natural" family against what she calls the "LGBTQ+ lobby", and increasingly blurring her party's ties to fascism, to the point of ambiguously considering it an outdated experience. An example of this ambiguity is the persistence of the tricolor flame symbol in the FdI logo, which represents a legacy of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the party founded in 1946 by personalities linked to the fascist regime and veterans of the Republic of Salò.

On October 2022, she became the first woman to serve as Prime Minister of the Italian Republic.

The novelty of her case quickly attracted particular attention in the international press. As early as May 2021, the *Financial Times* described her as "the rising star of the Italian far right", comparing her to Marine Le Pen. In April 2023, an editorial in *The Guardian* celebrated her as the woman who led the most right-wing government in Italy since the Second World War, normalizing the radical right in Europe. In 2024, *Forbes* magazine named Meloni the third most powerful woman in the world. In 2025, the American weekly *Time* magazine featured her on its August cover. In January 2026, the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, based on its readers' preferences, declared her the number one world leader in the list of *The Telegraph World Leaders 2025*.

Social Representations in the Study of Political Communication

The review presented here draws on the tradition of social representations (SR), which is particularly sensitive to the role of language in the representational processes constructed by the mass media. The literature reviewed here is selected precisely for its focus on language.

The underlying hypothesis of the tradition of research on SR, in opposition to mainstream social psychology, is that language is not a neutral and transparent tool but rather serves ideological and cultural interests, operating in an opaque manner through specific lexical markers and rhetorical devices that can orient opinions and attitudes. Social scientists are thus called upon to uncover its profound dynamics, thus enabling the acquisition and dissemination of awareness of the processes at work.

SR studies focused on analyzing gender biases in mass media communication have a history dating back to the mid-1980s (Aebischer, 1985; Duveen, 1993; Kruse et al., 1988; Sensales & Chirumbolo, 2004; Sensales & Pisilli, 2006; Dal Secco, Sensales & Areni, 2010). In particular, Kruse and colleagues (1988) investigated the lexical style of the mass media, demonstrating how traditional gender stereotypes influenced the descriptions of men and women. The former were more

active, agentic, in the role of logical subject; the latter were more passive, emotional, in roles of helpless or victim.

Building on these studies, there has been growing interest in analyzing the relationships among language, gender, and politics. This has led to the emergence of a research area on linguistic biases in political communication and gender representations (for a review, see Sensales et al., 2018). Studies have focused on naming strategies, linguistic sexism, and the media-constructed agency attributions on political leaders. The starting point of these studies is that the political world remains androcentric, despite the growing presence of women in recent years. Italy follows this trend, with a parliament with 32.25% women representatives and 34.47% women senators[1] (IPU, 2023). Since 1994, the IPU (Inter Parliamentary Union) has identified the media as the privileged forum for countering stereotypes and prejudices that hinder women's access to politics. Despite this, surveys conducted by several international organizations have shown that women remain underrepresented in political news and are treated in ways that obscure their role and power.

Research on gender, language, and politics has developed from these assumptions, establishing a strong presence in critical social psychology. These studies have capitalized on the growing literature on language and politics (Wodak & Forchtner, 2018) to delve deeper into the role of linguistic sexism, which, when referring to women politicians, favors the generic masculine over the specific feminine. In Romance languages (such as Italian and French), which use grammatical declensions for masculine and feminine, the term generic masculine refers to the preference for referring to women with the masculine declension rather than the feminine or neutral, inclusive forms for men and women. This usage has proven particularly harmful to women as it constructs a collective image of women deprived of their feminine gender, which undermines their self-esteem and effectiveness, threatening their sense of belonging (Mucchi Faina, 2005). Other gender biases analyzed are linked to different naming strategies that penalize women, and to the privation of agency, made explicit through stratagems such as granting more speaking time to men politicians or quoting the words and speeches of men politicians more frequently than those of women politicians.

Psychosocial Literature on Giorgia Meloni, the Leader at the Intersection of Migration, Gender, and Populism

The topic of migration clearly illustrates the evolution of Meloni's culture, which marked a decisive turning point in 2021 (Echeverría & Finotelli, 2024) with the publication of Meloni's autobiography, "I am Giorgia. My Roots, My Ideas". The book includes an entire chapter dedicated to the topic of migration in which, for the first time, the concept shifts from [im]migration as harmful, risking the loss of European nations' identity, leading to ethnic substitution, to the idea of migrants' necessity to counteract the demographic decline, dramatically described as a danger that could lead to the extinction of the Italian people. From this new awareness, the idea of reopening legal immigration channels was born, opening up flow decrees with quotas capable of responding to the emergency. Once the need for immigrants has been established, the task is to select "the best", culturally compatible with the national identity. At the same time, the importance of controlling the factors that push people to emigrate is reiterated through a plan for the development of Africa (which in 2023 will become the "Mattei Plan", to encourage collaboration between Italy and African states for economic and social development, capable of preventing the causes of irregular migration). These ideas became part of the manifesto "Ready to revive Italy", developed in preparation for the September 2022 elections.

Echeverría and Finotelli (2024) note that, from that moment and throughout the first year of the Meloni government, there was a "hyperactivity in the field of migration and an overexposure of the Prime Minister on the issue" (p. 241). The government's intervention focused, on the one hand, on border control and the repression of irregular immigration, with widespread publicity ensured by political communication, and, on the other, on the management of regular flows, in this case practiced with little media visibility. In this way, the government distanced itself from the radical positions it had asserted when Meloni was in opposition, adopting a model of "reluctant openness" that did not deviate from the migration management policies of the previous twenty years. By doing so, "has shown itself, once again, to be highly effective in riding popular fears and promising drastic solutions when in opposition, and then reacting with extreme open-minded pragmatism (e.g., the 'flows decrees') and with harmful, outwardly restrictive initiatives (e.g., the new crackdown on temporary protection for humanitarian reasons) — once in government"(Echeverría & Finotelli, 2024).

This is the overall picture that illustrates the evolution of Giorgia Meloni's migration policies, her party's, and her government's. Within this framework, the role of the leader is at the intersection of race, gender, and right-wing populist ideology. This ideology, upholding traditional gender roles and openly proposing itself as sexist, anti-feminist, and anti-progressive, creates contradictions among women leaders of this orientation. These contradictions are addressed through specific discursive and representational strategies, the subject of studies promoted by social psychologists (see, for example, Pettersson, 2017; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024).

In this context, Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes (2024) have devoted their work to examining Meloni's anti-gender and anti-immigration policies aimed at addressing these contradictions. The Italian leader allegedly extolled gender equality as her achievement and, at the same time, supported the defense of traditional gender roles, claiming it as one of her party's main objectives. Also, with respect to gender issues, Meloni sought to strike a balance between harshness, seen as a typical attribute of right-wing populist men leaders, and gentleness, ascribed to women in positions of power. She combined the characteristics of a man public figure with markedly feminine, intimate tones, which were also used within political communication geared towards the entertainment register typical of a celebrity politician[2] (Cilento, 2023; Sensales, 2024a; Campus & Mazzoni, 2021). For example, she has displayed her dual role as an independent woman and a caring mother, also through reassuring linguistic choices that have avoided her leadership being perceived as a challenge to masculine power. Sensales and

Prislei (2025; see also Minervini, 2024; Sensales, 2024a) have emphasized how Meloni, in declaring her preference for the generic masculine, rather than the specific feminine, to define her office (the Prime Minister, with the definite article declined in the masculine before the neuter noun Prime Minister), indicated her desire not to challenge the androcentric rules of politics to avoid activating forms of hostile sexism that would be harmful to securing the broadest possible consensus among her electorate.

On the other hand, Meloni's anti- and a-gender policies are reflected in the fact that the Brothers of Italy party has the lowest percentage of women in the current parliament, a percentage that remains lower even in her government than in the last decade. Women's issues are afterward marginalized in the legislative proposals and parliamentary questions presented by the Brothers of Italy party (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

It should be noted, however, that Meloni's party appears to be the most attentive to these issues among the political forces in her government (Cavalieri & De Giorgi, 2025). Even in Meloni's public discourse, analyzed in the tweets published on her official Twitter account from 2013 to 2021, women's issues remain marginalized. In the latter case, these issues are often used to advance femonationalist[3] arguments (De Giorgi et al., 2023).

Consistent with these findings, two studies conducted by Cavazza and Roccato (2024) and Keeling and Ladini (2025) on right-wing voters in the 2022 general election show that Meloni's gender was an irrelevant factor in voting decisions for both men and women. This finding may explain Meloni's choice to obscure her electoral success as a woman, made explicit both in the linguistic sexism she favored when referring to her political office and in her masculine-style clothing.

This choice, linked to a conservative populist culture, was later reiterated in relation to migration issues. In this case, Meloni constructed a narrative in line with that of other right-wing leaders who have supported anti-immigration positions, in which "migrant" men are portrayed as a threat to the safety and freedom of women, both "native" and "migrant", and "migrant" women as victims of their own culture, from which they can only be saved by overcoming it. Implicitly, this narrative is anchored in a Western normativity of family and nation, grounded in the superiority of whiteness, according to which "migrant" women must raise their children in a culture of integration to deserve protection. As Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes (2024) demonstrate, such a model did not prevent Meloni from referring to migrant women not only as victims of their culture and their men, but also as the main cause of dysfunctional families, thus confirming the racist stereotypes typical of white supremacist ideology.

Italian Studies on Language in Political Communication "By" and "About" Meloni

With the aim of providing a rich summary and rigorous interpretation of the available knowledge (Sukhera, 2022), this article presents a narrative review of the predominantly Italian psychosocial literature on social representations "by" and "about" Meloni, across various contexts. Narrative review, in fact, represents a valuable tool through which examining and integrating the findings of different and diverse studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Ahmad, 2025). Therefore, only empirical studies that explicitly referred to the Social Representations Theory to analyze the language used by Giorgia Meloni or about her, through a quantitative or qualitative approach, have been included in the review.

Studies on Giorgia Meloni's Parliamentary Language

Two studies have analyzed Meloni's language in her parliamentary speeches. The first study (Giuliano, 2025) focuses on 159 speeches from the 15th to the 19th legislature, up to the 450th session of the Chamber of Deputies on March 19, 2025, for a total of 249,932 occurrences and 16,437 distinct words, equal to 6.58%. They were analyzed with TalTac software (Bolasco, 2013) to evidence the words that characterize Meloni compared to other political leaders, such as Berlusconi, Pannella, Prodi, Craxi, Togliatti, D'Alema, De Gasperi, and Nenni. The results show, in the nominal forms, three lemmas that recall the identity theme on which the Brothers of Italy's political line is based: Italy, Italians, and nation. Specifically, the term "nation" accounts for 24% of the total occurrences of this form across the entire corpus, including that of the other leaders. This is followed by terms related to the far-right's security perspective, such as "fight against immigration" and "order", including, for example, security, borders, and immigration. In this context, only Meloni, compared to the other leaders analyzed, uses expressions such as "border defense", "human trafficking", "governance of migration flows", and "irregular immigration". In these words, we can recall the difference between "migrant", a word considered "politically correct" because its present participle indicates a more active role, and "immigrate", which, in Italian, is a past participle (*immigrati*), a symptom of a passive and invasive phenomenon (Sensales et al., 2021). These linguistic differences confirm the basic assumptions of SR theory regarding the opacity and non-neutrality of language, as well as those of socio-psychological research, which has demonstrated the importance of labels in inducing specific, more or less prejudicial inferences (Wyszynski, Guerra, & Bierwiaczonek, 2020). Discussing irregular immigration in a context where calls for border protection, the fight against human trafficking, and the need to stop departures are all about encouraging alarmist and stigmatizing communication towards migrants.

For instance, the following excerpt from the period when Meloni's party was in opposition is cited from Giuliano as emblematic of Meloni's narrative [6, XVII-493, 2015][4]: "Or perhaps you have dispensed so much humanity to all the migrants on the globe that you have none left for those citizens whose fault is speaking your own language and who are just as desperate as the many you care for, with the difference that they also helped establish the institutions you are devastating. So, if now and then you also care for Italian citizens — we, as Brothers of Italy, demand and continue to demand 'Italians first' — if you also realize this now and then, you are doing the right thing".

As can be seen from this excerpt, there is an overuse of what Ostiguy (2009, 2017) defines as "low" language, typical of populism, already widely used by Meloni on social media (Di Cicco et al., 2024), but in open contrast with the institutional setting, which would require a very different register. Other examples are the expressions "I'll say more", "look at that", "put on your feet", "make me laugh in your face", and the choice of a colloquial style, with typical oral expressions such as the impersonal "you": "if you want to be a free nation", "your borders". This style is characterized by a strong polemical tone, with ironic and sarcastic undertones.

Another excerpt, also from the opposition period, takes up the theme of the caste/bad vs. the people/good, dear to populism: "The real issue, from my point of view, is to establish who should truly hold sovereignty in Italy: whether the people should hold it, as we all say, or whether it should instead be held by the Palace, with its intrigues and subterfuges" [7, XVIII-691, 2022].

Regarding overused pronominal forms, Giuliano (2025) notes the presence of references to the first-person singular "io" (I). These are clear indicators of the speaker's desire to emphasize his own subjectivity and place itself at the center of the scene (Delbarba, 2021; di Pace & Pannain, 2025). Populist communication is often characterized by this pronominal choice, which Salvini also favors (Di Cicco et al., 2024; Sensales & Di Cicco, 2024; Sensales et al., 2021) and that Meloni has confirmed on social media (Di Cicco et al., 2024). In the case presented here, it is used despite the parliamentary setting, by its very nature preferring a formal register through the impersonal form. As noted, often Meloni contravenes this rule, using the pronominal form "I" even when the text does not syntactically justify it. It is employed rhetorically to emphasize a personalized, charismatic, and individual leadership that the leader evidently values, exhibiting it not only on social media but also in institutional settings.

Going into detail, Meloni's use of the pronoun "I" and its corresponding pronominal particles "me" and "myself" is evident, including the clitic form of the verb ("allow me" ["permettetemi", "permettimelo"]). The use of the first-person singular is the highest among the other leaders analyzed. For Meloni, it is 31.50 per 10,000. At the same time, for other leaders it is significantly lower, such as 7.91 for Aldo Moro and 7.31 for Gianfranco Fini, the latter being his predecessor as the recent leader of the Italian right. Only two other leaders come close to Meloni's figure, though still below it. They are Alcide De Gasperi (founder of the Christian Democrats and Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953), with 26.27, and Giorgio Almirante (one of the founders of the Italian Social Movement, of which he was secretary between 1947 and 1950 and, subsequently, between 1969 and 1987), with 25.86. Continuing the reflection about Meloni's use of the pronoun "I", Giuliano highlights another difference from other leaders: a close connection to her personal sphere rather than to her role as MP, Prime Minister, minister, or leader of the opposition. The scholar emphasizes that Giorgio Almirante himself, undoubtedly a favored ideological reference point for Meloni, used the pronoun "I" to underscore his political faction's representation. Giorgia Meloni, with a masterful adherence to the "mirroring paradigm" (Antonelli, 2019; Caminati, 2020), has shifted language from the "politichese" (politicking) of the First Republic to the "gentese" (a neologism indicating the language of the common people) of the Second Republic, which later became typical of populism[5]. Thus, the leader constructs a narrative that seeks to obscure her active role in the much-stigmatized caste, asserting that she is nothing other than one of the people, through whom the people can reflect themselves. On this basis, with the "I", Meloni, in her parliamentary speeches, refers to herself as a person, as a woman, as a fan of her favorite team. It is no coincidence that the implicit reference to this pronominal form was repeatedly used in her speech in Piazza San Giovanni on October 19, 2019, "I Am Georgia. I Am a Woman, I Am a Mother, I Am Italian, I Am Christian." These words were intended to confirm her membership in the ranks of the common people and quickly became a refrain that went viral, with a video garnering over six million views.

A last result of Giuliano's study concerns the "Sentiment" analysis applied to her speeches in the 17th, 18th, and 19th current legislatures. The result can be summarized in two points: the leap in positive occurrences during the 19th legislature, corresponding to the period of her government, accompanied, again in the same legislature, by a sharp decline in the negative index, from 50.05% in the 17th legislature to 51.84% in the 18th to 30.51% in the 19th. These trends are commented on by Giuliano, who recalls the well-known hypothesis of the prevalence of positive terms over negative ones, illustrated in the "Proposal for a Dictionary of Positive and Negative Terms", according to which the negativity threshold for such a dictionary is around 45%. In the case of the results just cited, Giorgia Meloni's tone is negative in the first two legislatures, when she is in opposition, and positive in the last legislature, when she is Prime Minister. While these are expected values, Giuliano also shows how they indicate Meloni's alignment "with the salient characteristics of parliamentary debate: first, the bitter confrontation between majority and opposition, the polemical tone, the violent verbal exchanges, the pursuit of consensus among her core constituency, and then the partial raising of the formal register in government communications, which are centered on the narrative of the Executive's 'successes'."

The second analysis presented by Giuliano (2026) maintains the focus on Giorgia Meloni's parliamentary speeches in the last three legislatures, updating the survey to the latest, the 19th, as of January 31, 2026. In this case, the corpus consists of 206 speeches, totaling 321,050 occurrences and 18,521 distinct words, which is 5.77% of the total.

As a theoretical-interpretative framework, it refers to the syntagmatic or paradigmatic arrangement of her political speeches (see Beauvois & Ghiglione, 1972; Ghiglione et al., 1998). According to this approach, the speaker develops a personal style by manipulating two distinct attitudes in linguistic communication. The prevalence of one or the other depends on the context and the speaker's intentions. It's a matter of deciding whether it's more important to talk about something (paradigmatic attitude) and thus construct a universe of objects, or to talk to someone (syntagmatic attitude) and thus construct a universe of relationships. The choice of ingredients for a speech depends on the balance between the speaker's two predispositions. In a speech where the paradigmatic register prevails, the choice

of words is more precise, the lexicon is more articulate, and the style is more formal; conversely, the propensity to use a syntagmatic register highlights the type of relationship between the speaker and the interlocutors, prompting inclusive/exclusive evaluations, expressions of consensus, or critical positions, even openly polemical or accusatory.

The specific vocabulary of Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister, in the corpus relating to her speeches in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic, allows to highlight her use of words as Prime Minister compared to the two previous legislatures in which she was in opposition (17th and 18th), identifying the prevalence of the paradigmatic or syntagmatic disposition.

The vocabulary of overused words (probability <0.001) by Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister, clearly indicates a shift in semantics from the contingent to the systemic, with a bias toward geopolitical vocabulary. It is found nouns with a high institutional density, such as colleague, European Union, senator, role, rules, and abstract nominalizations, such as security, priority, defense, and strategy. They are nouns that reinforce the transformation of problems into objectives and are linked to both international policy choices — European defense, European security, global security — and domestic policy choices — border defense, defense of national interests, national security, citizen security, energy security, food security. References to immigration, investment, budget, and work represent social and economic policy issues. However, the term "work" largely refers to government activity, with expressions such as "work we have done", "work we are doing", and "we are working". Even adjectives are characterized by the same normative and institutional semantic field: important, fundamental, strategic, effective, central, and complex.

As Giuliano notes, these results could be partly interpreted as indicators of the paradigmatic disposition of the discourse (formal, reasoned, and content-oriented construction), but among the adjectives, Giorgia Meloni's choice to personalize her role as Prime Minister and, consequently, the syntagmatic disposition stands out. Indicators of this identity-based choice in communication style are already evident from the prominent position of possessive adjectives in the top ranks of the overused words: our (in the different declension *nostra,* nostro, nostre), and, above all, my (*mio*).

Verbs also contribute to this interpretation due to the frequency with which they are used in the first person singular (e.g., "I think", "I said"). Overall, the verbs are commissive or planning verbs (e.g., "works", "supported", "demonstrated"), or they are assertive verbs that aim to control the communicative frame (e.g., "we are", "said").The rhetorical purpose in speech is "illocutionary": the speaker, in their utterance, establishes priorities, establishes interpretations, and, in this context, carries out a political action.

The overuse of verbs such as "work", "strengthen", "build", "supported" signals a communicative strategy characterized by operationality and competence: a responsible, process-oriented ethos. In this context, the repeated and highly significant presence of the deontic modal verb must (<dovere>) in the present subjunctive form "debba" (must) reduces the scope for dissent, transforming a possible political option into an operational necessity, as if it were a technical rather than ideological choice. The repetition of "must" ("debba/debbano") is not only a stylistic choice, but a grammatical device that constructs necessity as a structural fact of the discursive world: the obligation becomes inevitable.

In light of these considerations, Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister, in her oratory predominantly makes the syntagmatic choice of communicating to the interlocutor, who from time to time is the colleague or the senator who interacts with her with a polemical note, the opposition groups, her majority of the Aula, the Aula as a whole, or the people of the electors who, virtually, are always present in the debate as the maximum extension of institutional representation. Assuming the role of Prime Minister significantly alters the themes and arguments of Giorgia Meloni. Still, it does not modify the substance of a syntagmatic orientation, consistent with the charismatic function of power and with the specific personalization of politics that has come to fruition and "institutionalized" in these years after Berlusconi's rule.

Giorgia Meloni's polemical and accusatory disposition (ideally inherited from Giorgio Almirante) as an opposition MP in the 17th and 18th legislatures — quick to highlight, even sarcastically, the government's problems, errors, crises, failures, and poor decisions — has faded but not disappeared. She shifts from "you're wrong" to "no, let's do it" in a careful construction of the legitimacy mechanism of a right-wing government, still centered, as is its tradition, on the role of the leader, a charismatic leader who makes decisions and assumes responsibility.

Central to this choice remains the construction of a well-defined image of the president. Giorgia Meloni's refusal to be called "the" (*la*, in feminine declension) Prime Minister, which some had thought a kind of coquetry at her inauguration, has, as also other scholars quoted, instead revealed itself over time as a clear cultural, ideological, and political choice, along with the replacement of the inclusive term "country" with the identitarian and exclusive term "nation".

The first-person singular pronoun forms, although not used by Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister are clearly prominent in her role as an opposition MP; they are nevertheless indicative of the leader's construction and her public and political ethos, which favors a transgressively informal communication style, a trait that has persisted even in her role as Prime Minister.

Studies on the Social Media Language of Giorgia Meloni and Her Followers

As the literature indicates, social media is the communication tool of choice for populist leaders (Gerbaudo, 2018; Engesser et al., 2017). Meloni confirms this role. Thus, for example, in the four weeks preceding the 2022 elections, Salvini led the Facebook engagement with 365 posts, while Meloni and Conte played a much more limited role, publishing only 176 posts each (Massidda & Saccà, 2022). However, Meloni's attention in the digital infosphere accounts for approximately 34% of total engagement, while Salvini's share is less than 15%, and Conte's is 11%. Massidda and Saccà (2022) attribute this result to the journalistic prominence afforded to the various leaders during the campaign month by online news sources, which highlighted Meloni's clear superiority, with coverage

of nearly 31%, while Salvini's coverage was nearly 16% and Conte's just over 9%. The data cited above, therefore, make it particularly interesting to study the digital communication of Meloni and her followers.

Studies on this type of communication, including those on followers, have focused primarily on reactions via emoticons, while investigations into linguistic aspects are rare (Barfar, 2019; Harel et al., 2020; Prislei et al., 2023; Sylwester & Purver, 2015).

In what follows, we review a series of empirical studies examining Giorgia Meloni's Facebook posts and the comments of her followers, in comparison with those of other Italian political leaders and their respective followers, before she became Prime Minister of Italy (see Table 1 for an overview of the main methodological characteristics and key findings of the studies included in the review).

In particular, Prislei et al. (2022) analyzed Facebook communication during the Conte II center-left government (5 September 2019–13 February 2021), focusing on five leaders: two right-wing populists, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini; an eclectic center-left populist, Di Maio; and two center-left non-populists, Laura Boldrini and Nicola Zingaretti (see Table 1 for a sum-up of the study). Their results showed that right-wing populist leaders, particularly Giorgia Meloni, framed migration through exclusionary and security-oriented rhetoric emphasizing national identity and illegality. Meloni's communication also frequently evoked sadness, anger, and anxiety, potentially activating fear and resentment. Moreover, both Meloni and Salvini displayed limited lexical variety, repeatedly using the same words, in line with the simplified style typical of populist communication on social media (see for example Salgado and Stavrakakis, 2019).

Tab. 1. Summary of the Empirical Studies Included in the Review

Study	Dataset	Topic	Political actors / sources	Analysis	Main findings
Prislei et al. (2022)	1,171 Facebook posts; lemmatized corpus of 6,046 words.	Representations of migration during the Conte II government.	Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Luigi Di Maio, Laura Boldrini, and Nicola Zingaretti	SPAD-T lexical analysis; VOSPEC procedure identifying typical words ($p < .001$).	Right-wing populist leaders framed migration as a security emergency through exclusionary, alarmist, and denigrating language. Meloni emphasized border defence, illegality, political opponents, and national identity. Her communication also showed limited lexical variety and frequent references to sadness, anger, and anxiety. Meloni and Salvini displayed limited lexical variety.
Prislei et al. (2023)	Four most-liked comments for each of the 1,171 posts analyzed in Prislei et al. (2022); 4,684 comments.	Followers' representations of migration and their relationship with political leaders.	Followers of Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Luigi Di Maio, Laura Boldrini, and Nicola Zingaretti.	SPAD-T lexical analysis; VOSPEC procedure identifying overrepresented words ($p < .001$).	Meloni's followers partly reproduced her securitarian framing of migration, expressing anxiety and fear, but focused more strongly on employment and welfare. Their comments displayed marked affection, encouragement, and emotional closeness toward Meloni, frequently addressing her by her first name.
Sensales et al. (2024)	10,949 Facebook posts and the four most-liked comments for each post; 43,796 comments.	Gendered linguistic biases, naming strategies, and leadership representations in followers' comments during the Conte II government without restricting the analysis to migration.	opulist and non—populist leaders - Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Luigi Di Maio, Laura Boldrini, Nicola Zingaretti - and their followers .	SPAD-T analysis; MOTS step for general vocabulary and VOSPEC for overrepresented words ($p < .001$).	Meloni was frequently addressed by her first name and as «Mrs.», but also through institutional titles. Her followers attributed predominantly agentic traits such as preparedness, clarity, intelligence, and determination, combining emotional closeness with recognition of her authority and leadership.
Di Cicco et al. (2024)	Facebook posts and four highest-rated comments published from January 1, 2019, to March 23, 2022: 7,707 posts and 30,828 comments for Meloni; 10,090 posts and 40,360 comments for Salvini; 2,203 posts and 8,812 comments for Conte.	Representational fields of populist leaders and their followers.	Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Salvini, Giuseppe Conte, and their respective followers.	SPAD-T lexical analysis; two factorial analyses producing representational fields for leaders and followers; Corda analysis of representative excerpts.	Meloni's discourse combined sovereignism, exclusionary populism, national and party identity, anti-immigration rhetoric, and a strong ingroup–outgroup distinction. She adopted an agentic, charismatic, top-down leadership style and informal "low" language. Her followers rarely criticized her and expressed familiarity, affection, and recognition of her authority.

A first extension of these data, analyzing followers' comments, was proposed by Prislei and colleagues (2023; Table 1). The results showed that Meloni's followers only partly echoed her migration-centered narrative. Although they expressed fear and security concerns about migrants, their comments focused more strongly on employment, work, and welfare issues. At the same time, they showed marked affection and support for Meloni, frequently addressing her by her first name, which signaled emotional closeness despite this partial thematic discrepancy.

The findings of Sensales and colleagues (2024; Table 1) showed that Meloni's followers frequently addressed her by her first name or as "Mrs.", but also used institutional titles, combining potentially gendered naming practices with recognition of her political authority. Rather than diminishing her status, the use of her first name reinforced her image as "one of the people" and coexisted with strong attributions of agentic traits such as intelligence, preparedness, clarity, and determination. These representations appear consistent with the expectations surrounding populist leadership, particularly during periods of uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when decisiveness, strength, and control may be especially valued (Molinario, Di Cicco, Prislei, et al., 2024; Molinario, Di Cicco, Sensales, et al., 2024).

However, it is worth noting that populist leaders are increasingly adopting a communication style that blends individual autonomy with communal qualities, resonating with their followers. For example, Geva's (2020) analysis of French populist leader Marine Le Pen and her followers shows how "gender symbolism" — which allowed her to present herself as both "daughter", "mother", "warrior", and "captain" — allowed her to be perceived as a representative of the "people". This multifaceted representation helped her followers see her not only as a caring "mother of the nation" but also as a powerful and decisive leader, blending traditional feminine qualities with those typically associated with masculine authority.

The overall findings stimulate reflection on the evolution of gender as an increasingly fluid concept, capable of transcending, even among ordinary individuals, conventional role prescriptions associated with a binary vision based on the contrast between masculine and feminine. This is a contrast that feminist literature has long considered harmful and sought to overcome, as it rests on a fictitious naturalization of differences that consolidates them within an essentialist vision of gender (Ehrlich, 2008a; 2008b; Freed, 2003). Our findings show how a changing reality asserts itself even at the level of ordinary understanding. Through language, followers, in their comments, relate to leaders with a concept of gender that oscillates between stereotypical and counter-stereotypical modalities, both in naming strategies and in the use of linguistic markers linked to agency, communality, and affectivity. From this perspective, social media communication offers innovative features designed to overcome traditional gender biases. The hope is that traditional media can also embrace this trend, making political representations more open to valorizing women's contributions.

Finally, the study of Di Cicco and colleagues (2024; Table 1) identified, for Meloni, a representational field structured around sovereignism, exclusionary populism, national and party identity, anti-immigration rhetoric, and a marked ingroup–outgroup distinction. Meloni's communication was characterized by an informal, highly personalized "low" register, an agentic, top-down leadership style, and recurring appeals to sovereignty, patriotism, the traditional family, and opposition to gender ideology. Her discourse also relied on assertiveness, victimization, and the delegitimization of political opponents, reinforcing a charismatic leadership model in which she acted as an "identity entrepreneur" for her group. Her followers largely reproduced this framing and addressed her in a warm but deferential tone, frequently using expressions such as "good Giorgia" and "great Giorgia". Their comments were rarely critical and combined emotional closeness with recognition of her authority, reflecting the personalized and disintermediated communication typical of digital populism.

These studies, presented in Table 1, however, covered only the period preceding Meloni's electoral victory, leaving open the question of how her Facebook communication changed after she became Prime Minister. In the next section, we present the analysis of the political mainstream communication (on Italian newspapers) focused on social representations of Meloni's government in the first month of its debut.

The Language of the Italian Press on the Debut of the Meloni Government

Moving from social media to the press, the quintessential mainstream medium, we will draw on a study focused on the social representations of Meloni and the government ministers constructed by six different newspapers in the month following its formation (Sensales et al., 2026b). The titles, collected at the Senate Library in Rome by querying the Quid platform with all the names of the ministers and the Prime Minister, totaled 1,383 and were published by Il Manifesto and La Repubblica (left-wing/center-left, with 123 and 249 titles, respectively), Corriere della Sera (center, with 252 titles), Il Giornale and Il Tempo (right-wing/center-right, with 237 and 242 titles, respectively), and Il Fatto Quotidiano (independent, with 280 titles). They refer to the period from October 22, 2022, to November 22, 2022, coinciding with the first month since the election of the new Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, and the formation of the new government. As the authors note, the first month since the government's formation was considered the period of greatest newsworthiness for the debut of this new government and its Prime Minister. Coverage of both the 6 women and 18 men ministers, totaling 24 members, as well as that of the Prime Minister, was monitored. Scholars have used headlines as the unit of analysis, considering their significant role in presenting news and influencing readers' comprehension (Eco, 1971; Leòn, 1997; Condit et al., 2001). Research in this area has also shown that headlines serve as cognitive shortcuts for readers, who often avoid the full articles (Andrew, 2007). They perform a framing function, crucial in the construction of meaning (Entman, 1993). Finally, because they are editorially crafted, headlines reveal the newspapers' communication strategies (Areni et al., 2008). Here, too, the study focused on language using the SPAD-T to identify overall vocabulary (MOTS step) and over- and underrepresented

lemmas (VOSPEC step, probability <0.001)[6]. The latter were identified using two different clustering methods: with respect to headlines, organized into three groups, focusing on women ministers and Meloni, men ministers, and both women and men; with respect to headlines related to the ideological-cultural orientation of the newspapers, grouped into four clusters referring to the political orientation of left/center-left, center, right/center-right, and independent newspapers.

The corpus under analysis consists of 38,628 words, of which almost 29% are different. The analysis of the general vocabulary (MOTS step) yielded results regarding the newsworthiness of various political figures, sexism and non-sexism, and naming strategies. Among the results, Giorgia Meloni stands out as a statistical and symbolic exception, with 414 headlines dedicated to her, placing her at the center of the media space and accounting for nearly 30% of news coverage in the month of her government's inauguration. She is given visibility far exceeding that of any other politician, regardless of gender. Suffice it to say that the two deputy ministers, Salvini and Tajani, feature 78 and 20 headlines, respectively. This trend shows clearly a leader-centric communication style that emphasizes the absolute novelty of Meloni, first woman to govern the country.

Analyzing the sexist and non-sexist language used in headlines about all the women in government, including Meloni, the results show a prevalence of non-sexist forms, with approximately 26% of the feminine-specific and epicene forms, compared to nearly 9% of the sexist forms, including the generic masculine and the asymmetrical feminine. Focusing on Meloni, references to the specific feminine account for just over 70% of the instances, totaling 189 out of 269. The epicene forms (premier and president, without the article) refer only to Meloni, totaling 90 occurrences. These data reveal a representation that makes Meloni's gender specificity widely visible, despite her explicit request to be referred to with the generic masculine form and despite gender having been an irrelevant factor in her electoral victory (Cavazza & Roccato, 2024; Keeling & Ladini, 2025). Her women ministers, on the other hand, are penalized, with the non-sexist form of the specific feminine used only 30% of the time, compared to 57% of the generic masculine. In this latter sexist form, Meloni is cited with 42 references to the generic masculine (*il* premier, *il* leader, *il* president, with the masculine declension of the article) out of a total of 98. Therefore, the generic masculine is used in 43% of cases for Meloni and in the remaining 57% for her government's women ministers. References to the dissymmetrical feminine form are almost completely saturated in Meloni, accounting for 22 of 25 references. Overall, these trends confirm the results highlighted in other studies (Sensales et al., 2026a), revealing an evolving reality in which inclusive but also still discriminatory uses of language coexist. In particular, the reference to sexism, with the generic masculine prevailing over the asymmetrical feminine, validates the continued normativity of the masculine as a linguistic standard for the exercise of power, operating as a "non-neutral generic" (Stahlberg et al., 2007), which universalizes the masculine while attempting to obscure the feminine specificity.

About naming strategies, again regarding Meloni, there are 1,045 citations in total, distributed as follows: 140 are for the given name alone (13.4%), 643 for the surname alone (61.5%), and 272 for both the given name and surname (26%). These are extremely high frequencies, unmatched by those of other politicians, confirming her high newsworthiness, already highlighted in the coverage of her headlines. This figure is due to two novelties represented by Meloni: she is the first woman to hold the office of Prime Minister in Italy, and she leads a right-wing party that, for the first time, has achieved the highest level of electoral consensus across parties. Suffice it to say that, immediately after Meloni, Salvini has the highest frequency, but only 283 mentions, of which 17 are with the first name (6%), 189 are with the last name only (66.8%), and 77 are with both first and last names (27%). Comparing the percentage frequencies, we note that the clear difference between the two leaders is the use of first names, with Meloni's name mentioned twice as often as Salvini's. Scholars point out that this result is only apparently consistent with the literature, which shows a gender bias toward women politicians, who are more frequently cited by their given name than their men colleagues (Falk, 2008b; Uscinski & Goren, 2011). In reality, in Meloni's case, this use, rather than producing an image of women inferiority, as generally argued in the literature (Sebastian & Bristow, 2008; Takiff et al., 2001), brings her closer to her people without undermining her authority. Meloni's strategic communication choice, as repeatedly emphasized, succeeds in fostering a sense of familiarity among the people she intends to represent, counteracting the idea of belonging to the political caste, which is the object of populism's stigmatization. In the case illustrated here, newspaper headlines serve as a sounding board for this choice.

The other trend, regarding the overuse of the surname alone, aligns with the literature, which maintains that this form of naming conveys an implicit attribution of authority. Experimental research has, in fact, demonstrated that, when this form is used (compared to that of the first and last name), there is a tendency to attribute to the person a higher status, greater prestige, and a greater probability of receiving recognition, including financial recognition (Atir & Ferguson, 2018). Further, this tendency leads to another gender bias, according to which, on average, people are more than twice as likely to refer to men professionals by their last names as to women professionals. In our case, the difference in citing only the last name between Salvini and Meloni exists, but it's actually a small gap, just over 5 percentage points in favor of Salvini.

Moving on to the analysis of characteristic words for men-ministers vs. women-ministers, another element of discrimination emerges: a symbolic trivialization of news, expressed through references to the private sphere and limited to headlines about women, particularly Meloni. In this context, words like "compagno" and "Giambruno" appear, referring to her partner and the father of her daughter, Andrea Giambruno. These references are almost absent in headlines about ministers, which instead focus on the political-institutional dimension. In this way, a narrative is constructed in which women's political credibility is secondary to relational and emotional events, in line with a trend widely documented in the literature (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Sensales et al., 2026a). Even on issues within the purview of women, particularly Meloni, a sort of

ghettoization is evident, with references to religious and value-based contexts through words like "church" and "rights".

In contrast, the counter-stereotypical reference to the international context should be emphasized: "G20", "Biden", "Macron", and "NATO". Related to these words, the authors, specifying that the international sphere attributed to Meloni is usually the prerogative of men, state that it reflects her particular activism practiced from the very beginning in this field. This activism, evidently, could not be ignored by journalists, who, however, construct titles in which the personal sphere also intrudes with the mention of the daughter's presence on her international trips. Here are some examples of headlines[7]. The 850: "MELONI ARRIVES IN BALI. DIPLOMACY AND LOW TONES, THE LINE WITH FRANCE. The leader at the G20, with her daughter Ginevra today at the meeting with Biden, tomorrow she will see Xi/Jinping at the summit with Macron. They will cross paths for 36 hours, but a face-to-face meeting is only a hypothesis. The arrival of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, 45, was welcomed upon her arrival in Bali for the G20". The 1133: "G20 Bali talks about missiles with Erdogan. MELONI REACHES AGREEMENT WITH DICTATORS: WEAPONS AND BUSINESS (AND RIGHTS?) dossier with Xi, nothing on the Silk Road. The 5 Star Movement presents a motion on weapons […]".

But one finding highlights the discriminatory intent of journalistic communication: headlines about men ministers omit all references to the Prime Minister, who is among the least frequently used bigrams in this grouping. This finding is particularly interesting because it suggests a semantic distinction between men's power and women's leadership. It's as if political discourse, when represented from a man's perspective, elides women's power, thus reinforcing the naturalization of men's power, the only available in the androcentric sphere of politics.

Moving on to analyze the differences in newspapers' political and cultural orientation in Meloni's portrayal, we will cite below only the results for the two dailies: left-wing/center-left and right-wing/center-right. For the first group, of left and center-left newspapers, the authors note that among the overrepresented words are references to the Prime Minister, most frequently cited by her first and last name, and with her political office declined in the specific feminine form "the premier" (with the definite article "la" declined in the feminine form).

Among the characteristic words are those related to migration, women, and rights. Below, the example of headline 307 highlights the government's opposition to welfare policies: "Collision course on migrants: CLASH WITH FRANCE AND THE EU: ITALY MUST RESPECT THE LAWS. Paris is irritated by the government's strict tone: Giorgia Meloni attacks doctors for disembarking NGO ships...the refusal to let the Ocean Viking dock is unacceptable."

The word "woman/women" is overrepresented and used, for example, to refer to "extraordinary" women who "have made history", such as in headline 1154, "the women cited by Meloni. The feminine pantheon of Meloni is made up of 16 women (mentioned by name only): from Rosalie Montmasson, who was among Garibaldi's, to the former president Elisabetta Casellati ..."; Article 607, one of the few to use the reference to her institutional role, Prime Minister, clarifies her position regarding the role of women in her government: "THE PARADOX OF GIORGIA FIRST PRIME WOMAN IN DEFIANCE OF FEMINISM. The former MSI arrived at Palazzo Chigi without questioning the patriarchal structure of society. She has no other women figures around her: therefore the men of FdI do not see her as a danger". In this headline, the subtext underscores that Giorgia Meloni is far from the feminist discourse, appearing as a reassuring figure to her fellow party members.

In headlines, RIGHT is a word used to spatially emphasize the orientation of the majority of his government, often in a sarcastic tone, as in article 263: "YES, PRIME MINISTER [with feminine declension] MELONI IS RIGHT-WING", or headline 253: "Chain reactionarie, IN THE NAME OF THE RIGHT, MELONI IMMEDIATELY BEGINS TO HIDE THE PROBLEMS".

Finally, the few instances of use of the given name highlight a negative argumentative context regarding the linguistic sexism implicated in some of Meloni's cases in the headlines 636: "the controversy IN THE PRESS RELEASES GIORGIA IS "THE" ["IL", article in masculine declension] PRESIDENT "THE LINGUISTIC CHANGE BECOMES A CASE", and 1242: "GIORGIA "THE" ["IL" article in masculine declension] PRESIDENT BY FREE CHOICE".

The use of the first name is characteristic of right-wing and center-right newspapers. It occurs in a context that not only avoids any questioning of the linguistic sexism implied in the choice of the generic masculine instead of the specific feminine, but also underscores its complete irrelevance, as directly emphasized by the Prime Minister herself. The headlines cite Meloni primarily by her first name, and very rarely by her surname alone or her title. In both cases, in fact, these two forms are underrepresented. Two examples that use, along with the first name, also the surname alone, and the reference to her institutional title are found in headline 069: "Palazzo Chigi denies the secretary general's note. She quips: "Just call me Giorgia". MELONI DELETES THE "MR" [generic masculine] FROM PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS." and from the title 450: "DEM [reference to the Democratic Party] OBSESSION ON "THE" ["IL", masculine declension of the determinative article] OR "THE" ["LA", feminine declension of the determinative article] PREMIER". Palazzo Chigi: "It's called Mr. President". It's controversial. Meloni: "Call me Giorgia..."... Then the clarification from [*dalla*, dissymmetrical feminine] Meloni who asks to be called only "the [*il*, masculine declension of determinative article] Prime Minister"... The [*Il*, masculine declension of determinative article] head of government: "I Go ahead... I deal with bills, taxes, and work." In both headlines, the use of the surname is accompanied by references to her political office and statements, which, by reiterating her preference for the generic masculine, also highlight the contrast between the irrelevance of the linguistic sexism problem and the importance of her actions in governmental policies.

This grouping, as in the previous one, also features references to opponents the "left". However, this is accompanied by references to one's own political party, the "right". References to "work", the "Senate", "Europe", and "NGOs", are also noted. An example of the use of the leader's

first name in a context strongly stigmatizing the left, evoking the end of Mussolini and the same fate expected for Meloni, by the left-wing protesters, is found in title 546: "The violent left. Investigators are working to identify those responsible. THE HATE PROCESSION IN BOLOGNA: GIORGIA HANGED UPSIDE DOWN".

Article 381 highlights the legitimacy of the right and the new government in the eyes of several foreign countries. This legitimacy is invoked rhetorically to eliminate concerns about the Italian government's repressive policies, associated with Orbán's illiberal model: "TO THE CHANCELLERIES AND THE CRITICS: THE LEGITIMATION IS COMPLETE. Paris, Berlin, Washington: the world's 'welcome' to Meloni. Violante [politician of the left-wing]: "Responsible face of the right". Benevolent messages. "No way she is Orbán in a skirt. Congratulations destroy all prejudices." In this case, an implicit form of sexism can be detected in the reference to the leader's feminine attire to disclaim that she could be like Orbán.

Finally, an exception to the non-contrastive use of the terms "right" and "left" is found in title 124. In this case, the right and the left would unite in applauding the presence of women in government. In reality, right-wing newspapers are engaging in propaganda distortion here, obscuring the fact that women are vastly underrepresented in the Meloni government, accounting for only 33% of ministers. This is the headline: "Pink Revolution... Right and Left United for Once in Celebration... UNDER THE SIGN OF WOMEN, with never so many in leading roles as in this legislature. Starting with Giorgia Meloni".

We conclude the review of this study, which has highlighted the salient references to women's issues in their various meanings, the relationship to migration in the left newspapers, and the connection to the linguistic sexism and fascist tradition in the right newspapers. Below, we will focus on this last point in relation to an investigation into the Fanpage scandal, addressed by the Italian press and Giorgia Meloni herself.

The Language of Meloni in the Italian Press and on the Web about the "Fanpage Scandal"

Pettersson and colleagues' (2026) study, also within the SR tradition, compared two right-wing populist women leaders: Finland's Riikka Purra and Italy's Giorgia Meloni, both involved in racist scandals involving themselves or their respective parties. Here, we summarize the most relevant findings regarding Giorgia Meloni. In this case, the scholars investigated 25 news articles from four newspapers (La Stampa, La Repubblica, Il Corriere della Sera, Il Fatto Quotidiano) and news websites. These articles focused on four statements by Meloni, variously reported and commented on, regarding the "Fanpage Scandal".

This scandal stems from the investigation titled "Melonian youth" ("Gioventù Meloniana"), conducted by Backstair, the investigative unit of Fanpage.it, which revealed the hidden soul of the young members of the Brothers of Italy party and revealed the double-faced nature of its future leaders. They, while publicly portraying themselves as moderates, in private, in their WhatsApp group chats, felt free to express their worldview, steeped in fascist and racist rhetoric and extremist opposition to political adversaries and journalists in general.

Following this investigation, and after days of silence, Meloni was forced to intervene with four statements, as follows. The first was on June 28, 2024, when, for the first time, she addressed Fanpage's revelations with a press release, also published on her social media accounts and picked up by Italian media, following a session of the European Council in Brussels. The second statement was an official letter from Meloni, published on July 2, 2024, to strengthen her position. The third statement was released on December 16, 2024, during a public speech at the annual political festival organized by Fratelli d'Italia, in which Meloni, addressing the Youth Section directly, clarified her position within a broader political narrative. The fourth statement was released on September 21, 2025, during the Fenix 2025 Youth Party Festival, entitled "Without Filters. The Courage to Live in a New Time".

The authors of the study recall that, as noted by Campus and Mazzoni (2023), Meloni's leadership combines an emphasis on traditional family values with the assertion that her success demonstrates that women can reach the highest political offices without feminist intervention. In this sense, Meloni embodies the paradox of women's right-wing populist leadership described by Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes (2023). She would exploit her gender symbolically, but to reaffirm, rather than challenge, conservative gender hierarchies (Keeling & Ladini, 2025; cf. Pettersson et al., 2023). As illustrated several times, her party's ideological positioning is explicitly nationalist, anti-immigration, and socially conservative, with recurring controversies over racist and xenophobic rhetoric among its members (see also Albertazzi et al., 2023).

Research on women leaders of the populist right has shown that nationalist, anti-immigration, and socially conservative politics often embody a strategic ambivalence through which progress is symbolized in terms of women's visibility in politics, while simultaneously promoting a discriminatory, traditionalist, and nationalist agenda (Cilento, 2023; Pettersson et al., 2023; Sensales, 2024b). For Pettersson and colleagues (2016), the comparison between Purra and Meloni and the analysis of their discourse on racist scandals allows them to examine how questions of identity and ideology are implicated in this discourse, as well as to reflect on the broader dynamics of women's leadership in right-wing populist parties.

Their analyses involved both an actantial approach (Greimas, 1983) and a focus on the leader's language. For Meloni, the findings on her four statements highlight a rhetorical tendency toward repetition, emphasizing that the scandal is the result of: 1) a misconduct of a few individuals, 2) an investigation conducted according to a regime-style journalistic model, 3) a form of stupid folklore, and 4) a bad story. In the first case, Meloni acknowledges the seriousness of the video presented by Fanpage, but limits what emerged to a few individuals who not only do not represent the entire "Young People of FdI" section, but are described as "intruders who didn't understand where they were" and have become the "best allies of those who want to harm FdI". The leader then expresses firm intolerance, using the first person singular ("I say it and I repeat it") to reinforce the idea of intolerance and that of her party "towards any sentiment of racism, anti-Semitism, or nostalgia". Here,

we note that the use of the pronominal form in the first person singular, as already highlighted by Giuliano (2026) in his analysis of her parliamentary speeches, clearly alludes to a personalized, individual, and agentic leadership.

In her first press release (June 28, 2024), Meloni attacks the investigative methods adopted by journalists, equating them with those used "in other times by regimes". Here, she is referring to the investigative journalism employed as a tool of control by fascism, with the complicity of the OVRA, the regime's secret police that monitored and repressed dissent. In this way, she employs a rhetorical device that turns the accusation of totalitarianism, which the young protagonists of the scandal are said to have been inspired by, back on the journalists.

Subsequently, on July 2, 2024, Meloni published a formal letter to the FdI leadership in which she reiterated the two aforementioned elements regarding the misconduct of a few individuals and a "regime-style" investigation. On this occasion, she invokes a mission for her party: "leaving the past behind us" to face the "great challenges of the era we live in", arguing, with an anaphora that reinforces her narrative, "I/ we have no time" for those who fail to understand this great task. This task is then attributed to the entire Italian people, who become the new sovra-ordinate senders of the open letter, and FdI becomes its defender. In the letter, she distinguishes "stupid folklore" from a rational understanding of the past, advocating it as a guide to the future and delegitimizing the banal nostalgia these young people harbor. In the same letter, she then promotes the party as a victim of a "bad history", adopting a victim-centric rhetoric typical of her style (Di Cicco et al., 2024) and of right-wing populism (Bouchafra, 2026; Rovamo & Sakki, 2024). This rhetoric recurs in the statement made at the annual FdI political festival on December 16, 2024, and subsequently at the "Youths without filters" ("Giovani senza filtri") Youth Festival on September 21, 2025. In both instances, she attributes the investigation to a personal attack against herself, which, therefore, cannot and should not compromise the image of the youth organization.

In this case, the authors recall that the implicit reference is to a classic Aristotelian syllogism (Pettersson et al., 2026: p. 15) "If Meloni and the Youth Party are distinct agents, and if the adversary has targeted Meloni, then the Youth Party cannot be the true target of the accusation". It is therefore recognized as innocent of the accusations, according to a dialectic of recurring oppositions — beautiful-ugly, clean-dirty — typical of populist Manichaeism (Sensales, 2024a; Rivera Pichardo et al., 2024; Sensales et al., 2024). Thus, the National Youth is identified as "strong, lively, healthy", with a "clean reputation", in contrast to the investigation, described as "a bad story", which attempts to paint the young militants as "monsters". This sets in motion a dynamic that reframes the main character of the entire affair, who appears as the failed target of the scandal.

Through this analysis, scholars highlight the diverse modulation of Meloni's communication, capable of satisfying a diverse audience, ranging from followers and party members to the broader Italian public.

Finally, turning to the role of gender in shaping Meloni's response, they highlight that it is only partially aligned with gendered models of scandal communication, which hold that women leaders are expected to adopt more conciliatory strategies than their men colleagues (see Cucchi et al., 2021). In particular, Meloni's strategy appears to assume a "maternal" role, embodying authority and care (see Pettersson et al., 2023), as she declares herself the true target of the investigation while protecting her party's youth organization. At the same time, however, the practice of self-defense and counterattack highlights that Meloni is not bound to reparative strategies based on gender stereotypes. This behavior confirms research findings that the double bind in managing one's identity is less restrictive for women politicians across different orientations. Managing one's identity based on the double bind would, in fact, mean emphasizing femininity by "playing the gender card". As scholars point out, this would be configured as an accusation of exploitation of femininity that must be compared with the equally problematic situation of stereotypical and "masculine" behaviors that can be ridiculed. Thus, in both cases, a situation would be created that favors the loser (Jamieson, 1995). In this regard, studies are repeatedly cited suggesting that right-wing women leaders find it less constraining to behave according to "gender expectations", as they seem to be able to effectively juggle the traditional patriarchal ideology of populist parties and liberal norms on women's rights and gender equality (Bast et al., 2022; Cilento, 2023; Pettersson & Sakki, 2023; Sensales, 2024b). From this perspective, Meloni seems to represent a paradigmatic case of this ability to manage between contradictory elements.

Conclusions

The review presented here has highlighted the recurrence of certain communication modes that cut across different media outlets, delineating a true Meloni style, aligned with the leitmotifs of populism. It is a context-sensitive style, yet it is also tied to the leader's personal, cultural, and ideological characteristics.

In the cases analyzed here, Meloni constructs her identity by acting less as a woman and more as a representative of her party and its ideology, according to a dynamic evident in her parliamentary communication, in various media outlets, and, in the case of the Fanpage scandal, even in her behavior. As we have noted, this dynamic is embraced by her followers and the right-wing press, who recognize her leadership skills and also show their emotional closeness, reflected in the reiteration of her first name, which does not compromise her authority. In the followers, it is echoed in the use of her institutional title, which they address her with in a blend of affection, encouragement, and respect.

The obscuring of her gender identity accompanies this dynamic through the use of the generic masculine, which she herself claims and which the right-wing press attributes to her. In this latter case, right-wing newspapers appear to fully support the Prime Minister's strategy of not wanting to appear challenging men's power, accepting the use of the generic masculine, a symbol of the androcentrism of conservative politics and culture, of which they are a part. Indeed, by avoiding questioning linguistic gender norms (which privilege

the generic masculine over the specific feminine, especially in the most prestigious professions), Meloni seeks to activate what the literature defines as "benevolent sexism" (Glick & Fiske, 2001). That is, a sexism that leads to paternalistically protective attitudes toward a woman who is not perceived as a threat to the status quo (Sensales & Prislei, 2025).

Focusing for a moment on the role of the press, this strategy is being challenged by the left-wing press, which rejects the linguistic sexism it deems irrelevant to the "real issues". By using the feminine in the declension of the office, it seems to question Meloni's subservience to men power and to promote women's role in politics by giving them greater visibility. In this role-playing game, the right-wing and left-wing press appear tendentiously anchored to their different ideological and cultural universes. The right, confirming its patriarchal and conservative values, subverts the grammatical rules of Italian; the left, connecting with progressive values, uses linguistic forms that challenge established sexist conventions. However, in this latter case, she does not shy away from using a naming strategy that undermines Meloni's role by referring to her first and last name rather than just her last name, which would, in this latter case, give more authority to the right-wing leader. This use appears discriminatory, as experimental research has highlighted the undermining of the women's role in this form of naming (Atir & Ferguson, 2018). Several studies that have found this trend in political communication in the Italian press have also explained it by the fact that first and last names reveal the gender of women ministers, who are often new to politics and little-known (Sensales & Areni, 2017; Sensales et al., 2016). In Meloni's case, this usage appears unjustified given her widespread notoriety.

Regarding Meloni's style, the results of the various studies reviewed have highlighted her directive and aggressive manner of communicating, characterized by an informal, "low" register (Ostiguy, 2009; 2017), typically populist, used both in institutional settings, on social media, and in her press releases regarding the Fanpage scandal. The same content she favors, with its central focus on migration and its treatment through an illiberal securitarian logic, aligns with right-wing populism.

A final consideration concerns the leader's incisive agency and empowerment, consistent with literature demonstrating that right-wing Italian women MPs are characterized by such abilities, making them particularly suited to wielding power (Francescato & Mebane, 2011). These counter-stereotypical abilities do not compromise Meloni's emotional connection with her base, as demonstrated by her followers' expressions of affection and closeness. This dynamic demonstrates her successful attempt to manage the "double bind" without being penalized by it. The Italian populist leader, by combining the world of action with that of affection, imbues action with rhetoric and propaganda that convey emotion, fully adhering to the populist model that promotes charismatic leadership, which can often be proven toxic because it is based on a trusting relationship between the leader and her "people".

Limits and Future Directions

This review should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, it is a narrative rather than a systematic review. Accordingly, the selection and synthesis of the literature were guided by theoretical and conceptual considerations rather than by a predefined systematic search strategy. Specifically, we focused on studies grounded in the Social Representations approach and on research examining political communication through linguistic analysis. Although this approach allowed us to provide an integrated interpretation of a coherent body of work, it does not aim to offer an exhaustive overview of all research on Giorgia Meloni or on populist communication.

Second, the studies reviewed focus exclusively on the Italian political context. As a result, the findings should be interpreted within the specific cultural, linguistic, and political characteristics of Italy and cannot be readily generalized to other national contexts or to other forms of populist leadership.

A further limitation concerns the temporal scope of the literature reviewed. Most of the studies examining Meloni's social media communication were conducted before she became Prime Minister, whereas the available research on her communication after taking office remains relatively limited. Future research should therefore investigate how her communication style and leadership representations have evolved in government, particularly in relation to major international events, European politics, and geopolitical crises.

Future research should also examine the broader implications of Meloni's ambivalent use of gendered language. Across different contexts, she alternates between communication that challenges traditional gender stereotypes and communication that accommodates or reinforces them. Although this flexibility may have facilitated her rise to power, it remains unclear whether her leadership model can contribute to women's political empowerment or instead reproduce existing gender hierarchies and forms of subordination.

Finally, future work could extend the present review by conducting a systematic review and, where sufficient comparable evidence becomes available, a meta-analysis. Such approaches would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of the existing literature, a more transparent evaluation of study selection, and a more robust synthesis of findings across different methodologies and research contexts.

Note

[1] In the text, we use the terms women/men instead of females/males (e.g., female senators) to emphasize gender as a social-cultural rather than a biological dimension, thereby avoiding essentialist, natural, and immutable characteristics.

[2] As noted in the literature, Meloni follows the logic of a celebrity politician, extolling her privacy while avoiding the impression of distance typical of celebrity. Instead, she strives to present herself as an ordinary, recognizable heroine whose life arouses curiosity and enthusiasm. This communication strategy, based on emotional approval, is consistent with the populist ideology that simulates a direct connection with its electorate.

[3] The term is a sort of crasis between feminism and nationalism and is used to describe a nationalist ideology associated with a xenophobic reading of the feminist movement (Farris, 2017; Pettersson & Sakki, 2024).

[4] The original Italian versions of the statements quoted here are presented in Section 1 of the "Supplementary Material".

[5] A process that, for Antonelli, would have led from "Vote for me because I speak better (and therefore know more) than you" to "Vote for me because I speak (badly) like you" (Antonelli, 2019: p. 21), according to an echolalic logic of redundant repetition that leads to the construction of emologisms, those slogans, catchy phrases full of ritualized emotion, which recall the evocative power of emoticons and emojis.

[6] In constructing the text file to be analyzed with SPAD-T, the distinction between the titles themselves (transcribed in all uppercase) and the parts relating to the bolt and the loop (transcribed in lowercase) was maintained. When providing examples of titles, the two types of characters will be used here.

[7] The original Italian versions of the headlines quoted here are presented in section 2 of the "Supplementary Material".

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Author Contributions
Gilda Sensales (https://orcid.org)
Contributor Roles: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.
Sofia Sorvillo (https://orcid.org)
Contributor Roles: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.
Laura Prislei (https://orcid.org)
Contributor Roles: Conceptualization, Data curation, Visualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.
Gabriele Di Cicco (https://orcid.org)
Contributor Roles: Conceptualization, Data curation, Statistical analysis.

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