

## **Semantic perception of Albanian people in the period February-April 1997 according to some Italian quotidian**

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Received 19.02.2014; Accepted 20.03. 2014

### **Abstract:**

*March of 1997 remains a gloomy and difficult period in the history of Albania. The financial pyramid system started to crumble and together with it the savings of a lifetime. People became homeless, hopeless and jobless. Those with a little hope tried to save and cultivate it abroad. Italy was their first destination. The purpose of our research is to show how this second immigration wave was linguistically described by the quotidian of that time, how this definition influenced the mass perception of people. Did the articles' semantics play a role on the evolution of the perception parable Italians themselves, and then the words, created about the Albanian people?*

*Of course, the answer to the above question is yes. The newspapers at the press, under the qualification as fourth power, did not just had a great echo in the public perception, but it also often influenced it. Many Italians, despite being geographically near Albania, never tried to get to know it, but were satisfied by what they read about this country. As a conclusion what this research tries to highlight is the power of press language, which depending only the used semantics and lexicon is always able to cement or un-cement someone's or something's image.*

**Keywords:** press language, perception, public opinion, influence,

### **1. Introduction**

“The tongue ever turns to the aching tooth” is an old proverb, and the tongue of the press ever turns to the social wounds. It happens that words sometimes are carved and at times edged, at times they attack you, at times they sympathize with you; sometimes they blame you, sometimes they set you free. So, depending on the patterns of words, sentences, texts or different contexts of press, especially newspapers, the reader creates a certain type of perception which is

nearly always dictated. Our research presents a linguistic chronicle, a description of what happened beyond the banks of the neighbour country mainly in March 1997. The quotations belong to four Italian dailies, such as: “la Repubblica”, “Corrieredella Sera”, “ilGiornale”, and “Il Gazzettino”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>All the quotations of the newspapers are translated by the author and some of them have been taken from the book

“Identità catodiche. Rappresentazioni mediatiche di appartenenze collettive” of Pietro Vereni.

## 2. The parable of linguistic panorama on the pyramid phenomenon of 1997

### 2.1 The beginning

Pyramids have not failed yet, but the prelude of what is about to happen is very clear and cannot be avoided.

*“And when, and this is sure, the most considerable and stable companies of an economic point of view will fall (...) Albanians will go back to ferries and speedboats and head to the banks of Puglia”.*(«la Repubblica», February 11<sup>th</sup>)

As you can notice, the language used is simply descriptive, but it is the translation of a close future dictated by images of the past which has not been erased from the memory of Albanians and Italians, as well. The images of us Albanians invading the Italian coast via ferries and speedboats in the '90s are still fresh. People feel fear towards a phenomenon that will likely repeat itself. This is the theme that for months and months will occupy pages of nearly every Italian newspaper.

From time to time, the narrative tone rules where the image of Albanian is that of a “folklore people”, described in sympathy and gratitude for those few important personalities it has given to the world:

*(...) we are attacking what, at that time, was named “the noble Albanian people”. Once upon a time, there was a king named Zogu who got married to a Hungarian countess named Geraldine: a perfect subject of a musical (...) Vittorio Emanuele III became the sovereign of those calm people who dedicated themselves to sheep farming and gave to the world Mother Theresa and Anna*

*Oxa from Bari”.*(«Corrieredella Sera», Biagi, March 5<sup>th</sup>)

But, the fairy tales about kings and queens would not last forever. Later, there is felt a reproaching tone, because the people deceived are described as *“people who had trusted a dream: multiplying their money through paper exchange; the convulsive representation of a capitalism like that in the movies of Frank Capra”*,(«Corrieredella Sera», Cingolani, March 2<sup>nd</sup>).

It was not a dream, but a nightmare, or at least it would become such very soon. In the beginning, this was not described with compassion, but with a kind of superiority towards a people that was going through a real drama: *“a people with empty souls, emptier than their pockets”*.(«Corrieredella Sera», Cigolani, March 2<sup>nd</sup>).

But the compassion and folklore would not last long, despite the geographical vicinity or the same issues regarding immigration, (we should take into consideration the Italian exodus to America), because «ilGiornale», a right wing newspaper, makes the things clear since the beginning: *“Albanians are not “our brothers separated from birth”. At most, they are our unlucky cousins”*.(«ilGiornale», Riva, March 2<sup>nd</sup>). So, when the phenomenon is despised, even the biological ties are made distant in generations. Not brothers anymore, but distant cousins.

The same newspaper maintains the same line and does not allow doubts. In her writings, Albanians are described as a nation fed on violence.

*“Cousins who should not be trust, especially if we take into consideration that they are a*

*“nation which has always been fed on violence”.*(«ilGiornale», Caputo, March 4<sup>th</sup>).

As it is clear in the above rows, the language of violence and the violence of language is hard not to influence on the perception and the creation of dichotomies me and the other, Italians and Albanians, natives and foreigners. Fear feeds violence; violence feeds words and words feed newspapers.

*“Albania is not an exception, but just the weakest link in the chain that connects Serbia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania. Different nations... linked by a common fate: inability to manage the transition period from communism to free entrepreneurship”.*

(«Corrieredella Sera», Cigolani, March 2<sup>nd</sup>)

The above rows confirm how delicate and unstable has always been peace in Balkan, and how important this region continues to be in maintaining the balance between East and West.

*“Today the Albanian past tries to take the lead, but in its present conditions it risks to set on fire Kosova, Macedonia and the whole Balkan.”*(«Corrieredella Sera», Venturini, March 4<sup>th</sup>).

Someone fears that this violence might expand in all the ex-communist Eastern countries. *“Today in Albania, tomorrow in Romania and, maybe, in Russia?”*(«Il Gazzettino», Ostellino, March 4<sup>th</sup>) *whereas another one thinks that the echo of this event might influence on all of the European countries: “(...) a crisis that destabilizes more the Balkan, which will have grave consequences for the whole Europe”* («Il Gazzettino», Tito, March 4<sup>th</sup>)

*“USA (...) knows that after Albania, it will be Kosova’s turn to explode (...). Then, it is the turn of Macedonia, full of American*

*soldiers sent to limit the fire set in Balkan. On the other side, Greece is alarmed on the fate of its national minorities in the South Albania”*,(«Corrieredella Sera», Cigolani, March 2<sup>nd</sup>).

Here, language has highlighted all those wounds, which, even today, have not healed in Balkan. Albania, Kosova, Macedonia, Greek’s pretences for south Albania’s territories includes not only Balkan, but it can also feed and deepen the fight between Russia and America, etc.

*“Another Somalia, another Lebanon? No, because Albania is here, it is situated in Europe and, for our greatest misfortune, it is located in Balkan, an old and blooded area which looks like a “gunpowder barrel””.* («Corrieredella Sera», Venturini, March 15<sup>th</sup>).

Just mentioning a gunpowder barrel is linguistic gunpowder for the people’s mind. The words sound booms earlier than the explosive itself. Of course, some of the many consequences are prejudice, marginalism, and distance.

Normally, from this situation, people’s naivety, deceit, deceivers, fury and power do not come out of the nothingness. Since the decline of communism, transition and emplacement of democracy have lacked, because“(...) More than forty years of communism under the ice of the totalitarian system, under the attack of a police state, left things just the same they were. Nothing could develop or mature” («la Repubblica», Viola, March 16<sup>th</sup>).

## 2.2 Climax

When the catastrophe is not hypothetical anymore and when the government of

Tirana accepts, by mid-March, that the situation is out of control, the newspapers' language as well, cannot distance itself from metaphorical fatalities. Here is what Italian dailies write: "*Albania falls apart*" («Corrieredella Sera», Cingolani, March 14<sup>th</sup>); "*In two weeks, the protest of those who were deceived, changed its course, in the beginning, it appeared as a political uprising, then as a rebellion, in the end, it was transformed into a humanitarian, political and diplomatic catastrophe*" («Corrieredella Sera», Cingolani, March 14<sup>th</sup>), In such a situation, the minister of Internal Affairs "*enforced the borders and closed the door to another possible wave of refugees*" («Corrieredella Sera», Cingolani, March 14<sup>th</sup>). "*Albania does not exist anymore*" («Corrieredella Sera», Biagi, March 18<sup>th</sup>), or "*the government has fallen in Tirana*" («Il Giornale», Ricossa, March 19<sup>th</sup>).

Horror insinuations are not lacking "*In Albania, everything a group of people, a "state" does, that is, law, order, co-existence, love for one's country, belief in the future, tradition, economics, trust seem to have disappeared by a powerful magic of the Lord of Evil*" («Il Gazzettino», Sgorlon, March 15<sup>th</sup>). However, this Harry Potter perspective of magic and Lord of Evil does not suit a newspaper article. Mystification is not rational or journalistic at all. If horror was not frightening enough, there comes medicine together with the diagnosis of medical social pathologies. Linguistic symptoms are as below:

*"It seems to me that Albania has turned into a clinical case of history and politics. But let's be careful, us Italians... It could be us in*

*a not so distant future that could get infected with some kind of Albanian syndrome.*" («Il Gazzettino», Sgorlon, March 15<sup>th</sup>).

*(...) a group of people capable to transport the virus of disorders rebellions in our territory* («la Repubblica», Valentini, March 19<sup>th</sup>).

No one tries to be understanding, ready to justify a nation that for 50 years had suffered under one of the most terrible dictatorship of the ex-communism. After the decline of the iron veil, there comes again the iron language. Maybe it is fair, maybe it is not. But shouldn't a journalist insist more on the facts, explanatory, expiring and witnessing, rather than on comments? Shouldn't we leave to fairy tales the narrations about myths and magic, because let's not forget that the magic of words' semantics is able to increase or decrease the reputation of a whole nation. But fear... Of what? Of whom? "*it is in our best interest to send in Tirana a correct dialogue between the government and the opposition (...)* If this does not happen, we will have to face a possible new invasion of refugees" («Il Gazzettino», Cerruti, March 2<sup>nd</sup>).

### 2.3 Reflection

It took a greater tragedy, like the wreckage of the Albanian ship on the coast of Ontranto's channel, on the night of March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1997, to give a blow to everyone's conscience. Each one suffered regret, remorse and the tolerance, so much predicted, but lacking so much. You cannot point the index finger to other, but to yourself. Sometimes, the left and the right wing had fought whether they should throw Albanians in the sea or not, and when that

happened, here it is what the individual and the linguistic mood of the press was like at that time:

*“The history of Albania affronted us nakedly (...) to ourselves, as if we were in front of a mirror that reflected a real and not deformed image. Not optical illusion at all, this is what we really are. («Il Gazzettino», Pittalis, April 1<sup>st</sup>).*

*“But how is it possible that a nation of 60 million inhabitants, a rich European country like Italy, is afraid of some thousand Albanian refugees, so many that it seems there is not city, no village, no commune left ready to welcome even a dozen of them (...) Instead, it is possible: it is wellbeing and the fear of losing it, it is the unlimited expansion of values and styles of a country that is led by materialism and consumerism (...) The truth is that if a country of 60 million people, a rich and big country like Italy is afraid of a few Albania refugees, it is because it does not feel like a nation at all. («Corriedella Sera», April 1<sup>st</sup>).*

If you read carefully through the lines, it is now Italy that does not feel its own body parts as a united nation. It is a dangerous thing when from the history of the “enemy”, “rival” your own gaps are displayed. The press of that time confirms that now Italians are a nation left without “a state and a government”.

*“Italians fear an invasion of Albanian refugees not because they are racist or chauvinist, but for two opposite reasons. They consider Albanians as hungry Italian, they fear them for they remind them of our primitive self. And they fear the fact that they can risk our wellbeing, security, modernism: they are scared of our*

*inferiority and arrogance. They are refused not because of pride, but they fear for the fragility of our country’s collapsed system, which has within itself many small Albanias and unemployment. They don’t trust Italy and they feel like a disintegrated nation” («Il Giornale», April 5<sup>th</sup>).*

### **3.Conclusion:**

The aim of our research was to present concrete examples of how the morphological-syntax pattern of the newspapers’ language, lexicon and stylistic tones, pave the way of creating an image perception not of a simple event, but a whole nation. From others’ perspective, we are reflected just like the language; adjectives, qualification and apposition describe us. The daily press justifies its powerful reputation quite well, especially in the linguistic aspect and respect. The parable of our perception towards reality will change depending on the parable of usage and function of the words used. In the end, it is the linguistic semantics that defines us to the others. We are what we they describe us to be.

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