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Humor and Political Discourse: a Corpus-Based Study of Italian Politicians on X

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Introduction

(1) *È davvero il Governo del cambiamento…sì, cambiano idea una volta giorno […] più che un Movimento è uno zig-zag!*
'It really is the Government of the change…yes, they change their minds once a day […] more than a Movement it is a zigzag!
(Matteo Renzi, *Festa dell'Unità*, Ravenna, 2018)

With the humorous statements in (1), Matteo Renzi (former Democratic Party's secretary and former Italian Prime Minister) addressed the Democratic Party audience from the stage of the national *Festa dell'Unità* in Ravenna (Italy). Matteo Renzi's goal was to denigrate the political alliance between Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega (M5S) – Democratic Party's opponents.
As can be seen from the video of the event,[1] Renzi humorously addressed several topics in the hour-long rally, garnering a round of applause and the audience's approval. Humor is the dominant rhetorical strategy of this speech, as exemplified in (1), and seems to be the feature that determines the consensus and appreciation it garnered. Additionally, this discourse is a pertinent example of a text in which humor and propaganda are perfectly integrated; that is, you cannot remove the humorous statements without destroying the message itself. Consider (1), one could also reflect on the fact that the humorous mode could increase the perception of rudeness towards the target (M5S and Lega), or conversely make it more acceptable for the target and less harmful.

In any case, the use of humor may be understood as a sort of brand strategy that allows the politician to position himself with respect to his electorate and to convey a certain self-image: humor is, therefore, both a stylistic and an identity strategy. This is the reason why humor is also used in advertising, as noted for example by Burgers (2010) and Forabosco (2011). In this regard, it is interesting to observe how some commercial brands use certain humorous texts in a recurrent and repetitive way, re-employing the same characters, contexts and scenarios. Consider, for example, the telephone company Wind and his iconic (at least in Italy) sketches performed by the comic trio Aldo, Giovanni and Giacomo.[2]

However, since this is a complex and unusual strategy, it can also lead to potential communication errors: communicative intentions can be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the recipient. However, there are some linguistic strategies (humor markers, such as hyperboles,

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FTgmJaEB8M (link to the YouTube video).
[2] Notably, humor is used in all contexts related to persuasion. See, for example, its use in legal and procedural contexts (Forabosco 2011:358-360).

rhetorical questions, emojis, etc.)—not always present within the text—that signal the writer's/speaker's humorous intention and guide the reader's interpretative process (see Attardo2000b).

As an example of humor with negative repercussions for the speaker, consider the following speech given by Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia) in 2003.

(2) *Signor Schulz, so che in Italia c'è un produttore che sta montando un film sui campi di concentramento nazisti. La suggerirò per il ruolo di kapò. Lei è perfetto!*
'Mr. Schulz, I know there is a producer, in Italy, who is working on a film about Nazi concentration camps. I'll suggest you for the role of a Kapo. You're perfect!'
(Silvio Berlusconi, European Parliament, Strasburg, 2003).[3]

The target of (2) was Martin Schulz (German MEP) and the event caused a complex debate and controversy. Berlusconi tried to downplay the incident by dismissing the offense as an ironic joke in response to a previous provocation (a sort of reactive rudeness, see Culpeper 2011) and by not issuing an official apology. Furthermore, Berlusconi observed that Schulz's gestures called to mind the actor from a television series portraying the Kapo's role. This example, also discussed by Billig (2005), clearly shows how some topics (the Holocaust and all related figures, images, characters) remain taboo and, probably, must remain in the domain of serious discourse.[4]

It is clear that communicative contexts influence the positive/negative reception of humor. In a less institutional context, probably, the effect might have been positive. In this case, however, the event seems to have brought Berlusconi more problems than benefits, namely, diplomatic incidents with Germany, difficulties in managing Italy's European presidency, media coverage, and several requests for a formal apology.

Thus, the potential negative effects of humor question the relationship between political propaganda, commercial advertising, and persuasion by humor. In this regard, Forabosco (2011: 355) notes that, although humor is frequently used in advertising contexts, research on the persuasive effect of humor disproves its persuasive potential. One of the potential problems encountered is that humor distracts the recipients' attention from the content of the message. Additionally, the recipients' predispositions toward humor and the quality of the humor employed also influence whether or not they appreciate humor and, consequently, the brand promoted through a humorous advertising. In

[3] https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DDtDof5Ec5LE&ved=2ahUKEwi9ssWkneCPAxU3h_0HHVBmFsMQtwJ6BAgnEAI&usg=AOvVaw0bHfjbSKo2ZI26hnOIIcC0 (link to the video).

[4] For example, an anti-smoking campaign cannot be based (entirely) on humor. Indeed, it has been found that this leads to a reduction in the number of people who decide to quit smoking (Forabosco 2011:355).

section 5, I will discuss whether, in relation to political humor, the use of humor may have a concrete perlocutionary effect and/or whether humor plays a limited role and is, in some respects, subordinate to the serious mode of communication.

However, the considerations advanced so far may appear rather impressionistic: humor may seem like an elusive and highly variable category, and its effects, as argued, seem to go beyond the vigilance of the speaker. In some ways, this is true. Indeed, individual differences, at all levels (gender-biased, cultural, political and so on) can impact both the recognition of humor, the production of humor, the appreciation of a humorous text, and also the level of sophistication of the humor produced. In this regard, consider humorous forms entirely based on complex intertextual mechanisms, that make the humor recognition task difficult. In any case, numerous scientific theories (see Section 3.2.) have attempted to operationalize the identification of humorous texts, establishing the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a text humorous or not. The methodology adopted here for identifying humor is based on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH; Attardo & Raskin 1991, Attardo 2017) – the most influential, validated, and widely accepted linguistic theory of humor. Essentially, the theory posits that every humorous text must simultaneously activate two concepts or scenarios that are in opposition.

A further source of potential ambiguity concerns the discourse functions for which humor is employed. In this regard, previous studies (e.g., Martin et al. 2003) have distinguished four broad functional categories of humor (aggressive, affiliative, self-enhancing, self-deprecating) providing operational criteria for their identification as well as personality correlates that may motivate the adoption of this communicative strategy (see Section 4). These interpretative frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation for both the analysis and the interpretation of the results. The thesis is accordingly organized so that the presentation of data and findings follows a thorough and comprehensive theoretical account of humor and its communicative functions.

Specifically, numerous studies (see, in particular, Section 5) have examined the functions of humor in political discourse, both in online and offline contexts, employing a variety of research methodologies. As I will illustrate, other studies have investigated the actual effects of humor use (e.g., Bippus 2007), and more precisely, of particular forms of humor, e.g., self-deprecating humor (see Stewart 2011). In any case, the present study does not aim to experimentally investigate or measure the concrete effects of humor. Accordingly, I do not address whether using more or less humor, or preferring certain forms over others, might lead to more effective outcomes in terms of persuasion—that is, in managing and securing public support.

In the field of Italian pragmatics, the use of humor in political discourse has often been overlooked and/or only partial explored (e.g., Milowska-Samul 2013). In this regard, the most recent Italian research project (IMPAQTS, see Cominetti et al. 2023 and https://impaqts.it) on spoken political discourse did not specifically address humor and related pragmatic phenomena (e.g., irony or hyperboles), despite dedicating itself to an extensive annotation of implicit linguistic phenomena with potential persuasive implications (such as implicatures, presuppositions, and various cases of vagueness). It is likely that instances of humor are also annotated with the generic label "conversational implicatures". Additionally, also other studies related to IMPAQTS have generally overlooked humor and its correlates (e.g., Garassino et al. 2022). Moreover, even the very recent study by Valenti (2025), entirely devoted to political communication on X, has neglected the role of humor. The same may be stated, for example, for the recent contribution on the 2022 electoral campaign by Scavo et al. (2023). Significantly, however, in the Italian context – as I will show in Section 8.4 – greater attention has been paid to the automatic recognition of ironic/sarcastic utterances (Section 3.4.2) and to the identification of linguistic features that facilitate their recognition.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap in Italian research on political discourse. Specifically, I present the first attempt, based on a replicable annotation methodology (see Section 7) within the GTVH's framework, of a (qualitative and quantitative) analysis of the use of humor in the Italian political context. To perform this goal, a specific Dataset (see Section 6) was constructed consisting of 7,552 tweets (not previously annotated and automatically extracted) published by a representative sample of 38 Italian politicians during the 2022 national election campaign. In this regard, Sections 1 and 2 are entirely dedicated to presenting the salient features of the new electoral campaigns and, specifically, the 2022 Italian electoral campaign. This context was chosen to provide a well-defined analytical framework, thematically coherent and, given the electoral and persuasive objectives, particularly suitable for the analysis; i.e.: the use of humor may be not completely sporadic and occasional (see also Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022). It is evident that examining other contexts and communicative scenario (e.g., television interviews) could have yielded different results. However, this aspect opens up interesting avenues for future research, namely the extension of the methodology adopted here to other communicative contexts

The construction of a balanced Dataset constituted the first critical step, as it allowed to investigate the use of humor from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, avoiding discussions based on ad hoc examples. Indeed, the phenomenon of cherry-picking' examples is an aspect that should be avoided in any study with scientific pretensions (see Attardo 2020). This dataset

was subsequently employed to perform four annotation tasks, in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the use of humor in election campaigns. The main annotation tasks can be summarized as follows:

1. Recognition and classification of humorous and non-humorous tweets;
2. Classification of the communicative functions (aggressive, affiliative, defensive, self-deprecating, self-enhancing) performed by humor;
3. Identification of humor markers;
4. Annotation and linguistic analysis of some typologies of humor, namely, humorous hashtags and mock-politeness (Taylor 2016) and mock-impoliteness (Haugh 2015) instances.

These annotation tasks and the annotation scheme were specifically designed and performed to answer the research questions underlying this study, which are reported below. The main research question driving the entire analytical process is the following:

> RQ1: What is the proportion of humorous tweets compared to serious tweets? How are they distributed among the 38 Italian politicians considered? Specifically, can individual variation be observed among different politicians or is usage stable/homogeneous among them?

Further questions, relating to the relationship between humor and socio-demographic variables (RQ1a) and policies considered (RQ1b), could also be examined:

> RQ1a: How does the distribution of humor vary with politicians' age and gender?
> RQ1b: How does the use of humor vary in relation to politician's leadership status, politicians' party affiliation, party's coalitions area, and with respect to whether politicians are or not Members of the opposition area?

Addressing these questions quantitatively provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in the 2022 electoral campaign.

Following the quantitative characterization of the phenomenon, I proceeded to examine the communicative functions performed by humor during election campaigns, answering RQ2 and RQ2a. Clearly, for each communicative function, both qualitative data, with a detailed description of the examples, and quantitative data were provided.

RQ2: What distribution of communicative functions is observed? Which communication functions are most used during election campaigns and which are least used?

RQ2a: What usage patterns, concerning to communicative functions, may be identified in relation to the political and socio-demographic variables?

RQ2b: How do politicians use aggression in non-humorous tweets? What distributional patterns can be observed?

Furthermore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the use of aggression and impoliteness in online political discourse, I also annotated and examined non-humorous aggressive/impolite tweets (RQ2b). In this way, it was possible to investigate whether aggression can be conceived as a normalized strategy and whether, in proportion to the number of tweets published, politicians prefer to be aggressive in a humorous or in a serious manner. Additionally, I investigated (also through statistical methods, see specifically Section 8.4) the relationships between humor functions and humor markers –providing also a quantification and a qualitative analysis of the different types (see Burger 2010; Burger & van Mulken 2017) of humor markers attested in the corpus. Moreover, I examined whether politicians' lesser or greater frequency of humorous tweets corresponds to a lesser or greater use of humor markers (see RQ3b).

RQ3: What types of humor markers appear in the corpus, and how frequently do they occur?

RQ3a: What patterns are found between humor functions and humor markers? Do some functions tend to exhibit more markers than others? Do certain functions more frequently feature specific types of markers?

RQ3b: Does the frequency with which politicians use humor affect their employment of humor markers in tweets?

Finally, I explored two specific types of humor: mock-politeness, mock-impoliteness and humorous hashtags (see respectively Sections 9 and 10). The analysis of these phenomena also allowed for a deeper understanding of affiliative and aggressive communicative functions. For these types of humor, which have not been specifically examined in the context of Italian political discourse, I quantified the phenomenon, explored potential correlations with various socio-demographic and political variables, and examined in detail the different types of mock-politeness and mock-impoliteness found and their rhetorical functions. Notably, the analysis and identification of tweets with mock-(im-) politeness also allowed to obtain a sub-corpus of tweets, which could be used for

further analyses devoted to these phenomena. I analyzed (Section 10) humorous hashtags (namely, hashtags intended to be perceived as humorous)– a distinctive feature of textuality in X and a form of intertextuality 2.0 (Gordon 2023). In Section 10, I investigated whether the creativity of these humorous linguistic acts was to be attributed to the politician or whether they were already attested before the electoral campaign. In this latter case, the politician limited himself exclusively to reusing them for other communicative functions.

Overall, the research questions and their associated tasks are designed to pursue the same goal, i.e.: to understand the use of humor in 2022 election campaign as comprehensively as possible. Notably, the annotation of these phenomena resulted in the creation of a sub-corpus of humorous tweets (available in CSV. and XSL. formats) containing humor annotated for various aspects and phenomena, namely: tweet type (reply or generic tweet), humor markers, humor function, and socio-demographic and political information about the politician who published that tweet.[5] Thus, the significance of the study extends beyond the results discussed here. Specifically, the corpus can be made available for other types of analysis with different purposes and goals (see Conclusions).

Finally, the study posed a significant challenge due to the multitude of previously unexplored linguistic aspects and the continuous interplay of qualitative and quantitative methods, particularly in the absence of comparable prior research in the field of Italian Pragmatics Linguistics. Moreover, an additional challenge stems from the study's expansive scope, which covers multiple areas of linguistics—all of which will benefit from the results obtained here. Essentially, the study extends beyond the field of Linguistics of Humor (Attardo 2020), to which it is intrinsically connected and within which it seeks to position itself. Indeed, the study draws on several complementary traditions: to Corpus Linguistics (e.g., Ide & Pustejovsky 2017) and to Content Analysis (Krippendorff 2019) for the construction of the corpus and the annotation process; to Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g., van Dijk 2015) considering the type of data examined, the sociopolitical context under investigation, and the focus on the discursive functions of humor; and to Statistical Linguistics (e.g., Levshina 2015), given the series of statistical investigations conducted to substantiate the hypotheses and findings reported here. The study also engages with Text Linguistics (e.g., Ferrari 2014) and Online Pragmatics of Humor (Weitz 2017), as it examines in detail a specific text type—namely, the tweet—and its distinctive linguistic features.

The structure of the thesis is outlined below.

The first part (Section 1 and Section 2) of the thesis provides a detailed overview of X, the linguistic-textual characteristics of tweets, and electoral campaigns 2.0 (Section 1). Specifically, I

[5] In the future, this dataset could be developed into a searchable and easily accessible resource.

illustrate the context of the 2022 election campaign and revieweed some studies that, from a linguistic perspective, have dealt with the analysis of the 2022 electoral campaign.

The second part (Section 3-Section 5) defines humor from a theoretical perspective, analyzing the main (linguistic) theories of humor and introducing humor discursive functions. Specifically, the Semantic Script Theory of Humor and the General Theory of Verbal Humor were explored in depth. Furthermore, the most salient pragmatic aspects of humor, e.g., its relationship with implicit meanings, were also discussed. Subsequently, Section 4 is entirely devoted to describing the communicative functions of humor. Finally, Section 5 discusses some of the principal studies on X in political discourse, highlighting its modes of use across various political contexts—both European and non-European—and its potential persuasive implications.

The third part (Section 6-Section 7) is essentially methodological. In section 6, I describe the dataset in detail, highlighting its potential and limitations; while in section 7, I outline the annotation scheme and the five tasks completed, report the inter-annotator agreement results, and discuss representative examples of both agreement and disagreement among the annotators.

The fourth section (Section 8-Section10) presents the results of the five annotation tasks. Section 8 contains quantitative results regarding the distribution of humorous tweets in relation to socio-demographic and political variables. I analyze the results of the annotation of humor functions and the distribution patterns observed between functions and socio-political variables. In this section, I also examine the data concerning the annotation of non-humorous tweets that convey aggression and impoliteness. Thereafter, I present quantitative and qualitative results relating to humor markers, specifically analyzing the interaction between markers and the humor functions. Finally, in Sections 9 and 10 I focus, on the phenomena of mock-politeness, mock-impoliteness and humorous hashtags. In these sections, I provide both quantitative results and a detailed description of several of the examples annotated. The concluding section summarizes the main results and proposes directions for further investigation.

1. The social medium X and election campaigns 2.0

In the 2.0 phase of political communication, X (formerly Twitter until July 23, 2023) – an asynchronous platform that can be classified both as a microblogging service and as a social network (Spina 2012: 56, Bentivegna 2015: 14) – has a key role and has exerted, since its introduction in Italy in 2009, and continues to exert, an unprecedented appeal both among professional and regular users interested in politics and current affairs[6]. Indeed, X has become one of the reference platforms in (digital) politics (Jungher 2014). This increased attractiveness has been driven by certain specific characteristics and distinctive affordances of the platform (Section1.2), which have contributed to making it more compelling than other social media. Indeed, adopting a humorous communicative mode (hyperbolic and marked by the use of a regional variety of Italian) Francesco Storace (a member of Fratelli d'Italia) had summarized the pervasiveness of X in political communication as follows: *Facebook era 'na droga leggera ma Twitter è 'na droga pesante* ('Facebook was a light-drug, but Twitter is a hard-drug').[7]

Thus, X's prominent position in public discourse compared to other social media platforms has attracted considerable interest from scholars in linguistics, particularly those focusing on political discourse. The platform has increasingly been regarded as a productive data source for empirical investigation, also owing to the relative ease with which linguistic data used to be (automatically) extracted. For an overview of linguistic studies addressing the 2022 Italian election campaign on X, see Section 2.1. Additionally, in Section 1.3, I examine how X has contributed to redefining the language of politics in the Italian context, adopting a methodological framework grounded in Italian linguistics.

The data collection and analysis for this research were not affected by the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, in October 2022. This acquisition immediately raised at least two critical issues. First, a number of users voluntarily deleted their accounts in reaction to Musk's ideological and political positions. Second, and more significantly from a research perspective, the platform's new policies introduced restrictions on API access, thereby adding complexity to the data-extraction process. Since Musk's acquisition, it is mandatory to subscribe a license.

[6] Notably, the impact of the platform is not necessarily commensurate with the number of its registered users, especially when compared to other social networking services.

[7] '*na* (a reduced form of the Italian indefinite article *una*) is a typical feature of the regional variety of Italian spoken in Lazio (Italy).

In the following sections, I outline the main features of contemporary electoral campaigns, with particular emphasis on the role and impact of X. In addition, I offer a concise overview of the platform's key distinctive features (such as, brevity and informality), that have contributed to its success. Where relevant, I additionally provide an account of how humor relates to the platform's affordances and to the key elements of the electoral campaigns described.

1.1 Electoral campaign 2.0: general traits and the role of X

Theoretically speaking**,** contemporary electoral campaigns may be conceptualized as postmodern electoral campaigns. The defining characteristic of such campaigns is the centrality of the medium in the communication process—that is, media themselves become the protagonists of electoral competition, shaping the language, narratives, and interpretative frames employed by political actors. In addition, what emerges from the analysis of contemporary election campaigns is the pervasive presence and coexistence of both traditional media (such as television, radio, newspapers) and new media (such as social networks). Following the advent of Web 2.0 initiated in 2004—referred to as the "social internet" by Pistolesi (2018: 18)—the digital electoral toolkit, encompassing platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram, came to the fore with the 2013 Italian general election (Novelli 2018), and has since become an indispensable resource for political actors at all levels (Bentivegna 2015: 38). In this light, it is useful to keep in mind Spina's (2012) view: the Web is no longer an occasional space for political activity but a stable and integral one. These new platforms therefore contribute to a progressive reshaping of traditional electoral communication. In particular, the stable use of new platforms, with their inherent features, has contributed to shaping a permanent electoral campaign environment (Novelli 2018*)*: propaganda messages are not limited to the officially electoral period but are posted daily and continuously. Nevertheless, the institutional phase of the electoral campaign continues to hold an ad hoc status, as it remains regulated by specific principles and legal frameworks—such as the provisions established by the *par condicio* law.[8] Essentially, compared to traditional media, the modern electoral toolkit allows political figures to produce short and rapid messages (on X, in particular, the brevity and speed of communication are maximized), thereby constructing a political narrative that is timely, constantly updated, and uninterrupted (Bentivegna 2015: 84). These dynamics benefit both professional users (such as journalists and scholars) and non-professional users (that is, citizens and voters), who are, in a sense, kept informed in real time. Moreover, social media platforms, by virtue of mobile technologies, enable communication from "anywhere, to reach anyone, at any time" (Antonelli 2014: 547). As such, media platforms' users can

[8] The Italian *par condicio law* (Law No. 28/2000) ensures equal media coverage for all political parties and candidates during election periods.

disseminate content to a potentially unlimited and heterogeneous audience—extending beyond digital networks through the phenomenon of media hybridity (Section 2.1). This affords political actors and parties a distinct advantage: not only can they broaden their communicative reach—and, with it, their pool of potential voters—but they can also transcend the spatial and temporal constraints inherent to traditional media broadcasting. In commercial marketing terms, new digital technologies have made it possible to target consumers—and, by extension, voters—at any time and without spatial or temporal limitations (Riva 2016: 128). Overall, these features have made possible the systematic deployment of a continuous and internally consistent propaganda strategy.

However, even though online content consumption is increasingly personalized and allows for the possibility of direct interaction between politicians and citizens potentially suggesting a more "horizontal", thus democratic, model—it may still be appropriate to invoke the concept of "spectator democracy" (Manin 2010), a notion typically associated with legacy media. This model is characterized by a vertical and asymmetrical communicative structure, in which citizens are regarded more as passive recipients than as active interlocutors (Diamanti 2010). Such a perspective stands in contrast to those who may have too optimistically interpreted the rise of digital technologies as signalling a definitive renewal of the democratic system (Coleman & Blumer 2009). In this regard, I contend that more moderate theoretical approaches are preferable. For instance, Bentivegna (2015: 42; see also Gibson & MacAllister 2014) proposes conceptualizing Web 2.0 as a third way in which established offline structures and dynamics coexist with novel opportunities introduced by the digital environment. In this view, it is indisputable that Web 2.0 affords citizens a more active role and increases the visibility of minor parties, which—empowered by the digital environment—are now able to access public attention and communicative spaces that were previously unavailable to them. A comparable dynamic can be observed in relation to the gender gap in politics: indeed, several studies (e.g., Beevolve 2012; Evans 2014) have shown that female politicians are more likely than their male counterparts to maintain an X account and to actively produce content, thereby attaining a degree of visibility that is often limited within traditional media settings. As a result, the discursive arena becomes richer, more inclusive, and more complex. This scenario has also informed the construction of the corpus for the present study, which includes representatives from minor parties as well. Nonetheless, as previously noted, traditional offline patterns continue to reemerge in online environments.

As Bentivegna (2015: 35) underlines: "today's campaign 2.0 incorporates many elements that characterized earlier models". Indeed, major parties and politically entrenched actors—by virtue of their superior financial resources—continue to benefit from a privileged position and enhanced

visibility (Bentivegna 2015: 44–45), even within these ostensibly more open communicative spaces. Such visibility is reinforced by higher levels of user engagement, evidenced by greater volumes of comments, likes, followers, and content shares. As Margolis & Resnick (2000) argued, digital platforms ultimately provide only marginal advantages to new political actors and outsider leaders**.**

The vertical structure outlined above inevitably influences how politicians—or their communication staff—use X. Like other social media platforms, X is often employed as a kind of "personalized press-agency" (Bentivegna 2015: 10; Lessen & Brown 2010), directly managed by the politician and used to issue statements, express public positions, launch attacks, and more. What emerges is the affirmation of an apparently? personalized and, consequently, disintermediated form of communication—one that is handled directly by the political figure, bypassing traditional mediators such as journalists, party officials, or media hosts. As a result, political storytelling becomes a mode of self-narration, satisfying politicians' and parties' desire for increased control over their public image and messaging (Stromer-Galley 2014). Moreover, this absence of mediation, coupled with the politician's constant activity on social media, may contribute to the perception of credibility that the platform generates among citizens (Hwang 2013). Furthermore, as Diamanti (2014: 40) notes, these new communicative practices have given rise to what he terms "immediate democracy". Broadly defined, this concept entails a diminished role for traditional intermediaries—particularly political parties and journalists—and evokes the idea of "direct representation" (Coleman 2005), in which not only institutional political actors but also ordinary citizens are able to actively participate in public discourse. Nonetheless, within sociological scholarship, skepticism persists regarding the actual realization of this participatory ideal. This evolving communicative landscape—characterized by the erosion of traditional intermediaries and the direct, unmediated presence of political figures—has significant implications for the role of political parties. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note how the growing demand for immediacy has contributed to the decline and diminished relevance of parties as central agents of political mediation (Bimber et al. 2012). In their place, a continuous process of personalization—or what Mazzoleni (2004) terms "leaderization"—has emerged, whereby the political subject—namely the individual leader—has become the focal point of political communication and the central protagonist of public discourse. This shift has effectively redefined the figure of the political representative, who increasingly resembles a social media influencer—what Novelli (2018: 153) describes as a "new generation of social leaders"—or even a pop culture celebrity (Mazzoleni & Sfardini 2009). The public image of political actors is increasingly shaped by informality, mainstream appeal, and stylistic features drawn from popular culture—traits that stand in sharp contrast to traditional political norms. This evolution contributes to the perception of a diminished distance between politicians and citizens, fostering a

sense of immediacy and familiarity that redefines political dynamics. The **o**ngoing personalization of political communication, combined with the ever-growing demand for visibility, has amplified the strategic relevance of user engagement metrics—such as shares, likes, and comments. In this context, such dynamics have arguably increased the adoption of specific linguistic strategies—humor, in particular—that enhance the sender's creativity, highlight their rhetorical competence, and foster common ground with audience? Within this scenario, humor functions not only as a marker of a distinctive communication but also as a powerful tool for eliciting emotional responses—an increasingly central element in the logic of persuasive political messaging. Emotional appeal, in fact, facilitates the (re-)establishment of a connection with voters, engaging them through affective resonance in addition to or even in alternative of ideological alignment. This becomes especially relevant in a fragmented electoral landscape, where, as previously noted, party affiliations are weaker and less stable than in the past. In this context, the strategic use of emotion remains one of the most enduring and effective tools of linguistic persuasion (Cavazza 2006). This tendency is reflected in the way contemporary political discourse increasingly shifts toward privatized and personalized forms of public communication. Political figures frequently use platforms such as X to share elements of their private and family lives (1), announce their participation in events (2), or reveal behind-the-scene moments of political activity (3).

(1) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *La dolcezza di mia figlia Alba non ha bisogno di altre parole […]*
'The sweetness of my daughter Alba needs no further words […]'.

(2) Alessandra Todde (M5S): *Ci vediamo domani, 3 settembre, ad Orgosolo per presentare il programma e la squadra del @Mov5Stelle.*
'We will meet tomorrow, September 3rd, in Orgosolo to present the program and the team of @Mov5Stelle.'

(3) Giuseppe Conte (M5S): *No, io Silvio Berlusconi a Bruxelles non me lo ricordo https://t.co/dn9WJfLnjs.*
'No, I do not remember Silvio Berlusconi in Brussels.'

The centrality of the politicians' ego as the primary focus of communication is reinforced by a communicative process that strategically shifts attention away from conventional political issues toward narratives centered on the individual politician's persona (see (1)-(2)). However, as Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2023: 43) rightly observe: "how politicians communicate through Twitter is not necessarily an indicator of how they do it in other scenarios." This highlights the importance

of recognizing the platform-specific nature of political communication, whereby different media channels elicit distinct narrative forms, rhetorical styles, and communicative strategies.

In conclusion, it is important to consider how the tendency to adopt influencer-like traits, such as to talk publicly about one's private life, has affected not only political actors but also citizens and general internet users. Through the autonomous posting and reposting (cf. Section 1.3 on the practice of retweeting), users themselves become active participants in the electoral campaign. This participatory role marks a clear shift from the rationale of traditional media, in which audiences were largely confined to a passive role. Increased civic engagement also exposes political figures to new forms of risk—ranging from online criticism and protest, to the creation of fake political accounts or the reframing of messages (Bentivegna 2015: 60–61), often through humorous reinterpretation (Bonerba & Ceccobelli 2014). In this frame, communicative missteps by politicians frequently become "epic fails", gaining amplified visibility both within and beyond the digital sphere, precisely because they are taken up as objects of public commentary within the 'X-sphere'. In this regard, in response to the demand for immediacy and the need to produce effective, high-impact communication while avoiding potential communicative missteps that may escalate into epic fails, the involvement of professional digital communication staff has become essential.

1.2 X's allure: brevity, hybridity, informality, and sociability

The title of this section summarizes four key elements which have contributed to the platform's success in the field of political communication. As will be shown, these elements have had observable effects both at the linguistic-textual level of the message and have affected the textual typologies adopted by politicians during the electoral campaign. Iin addition to functioning as an effective tool for personalized and disintermediated communication, the platform is marked by the rapidity and immediacy of message dissemination

X enables users—including via mobile devices—to publish short, concise messages (tweets) of up to 280 characters on a wide range of topics.[9] This technical affordance promotes thematic flexibility, although most content tends to converge around forms of storytelling—arguably one of X's defining communicative features. Acceleration is accompanied by simplification: complex reasoning must necessarily be condensed within a strict character limit. As a result, political messaging increasingly resembles advertising, where communicative effectiveness depends on brevity and rhetorical impact. Clearly, the brevity and instantaneity of discourse also entail

[9] Moreover, X stands out for its ease of use and the immediate applicability of its simple and accessible syntax (i.e.; implicit rules that govern the production and interpretation of messages on the platform).

communicative drawbacks. Specifically, the relevance of a tweet may quickly diminish, often resulting in ephemeral messages whose impact fades within a very short time span. In this context, it is possible to hypothesize that humor can function as a rhetorical device that enhances the effectiveness of a slogan, making it, to some extent, more memorable—an effect already observed in advertising discourse (Capozzi 2008). Humorous tweets, in this sense, may act as interruptions within the otherwise monotonous and stylistically homogeneous flow of communication on X.

An additional advantage for political actors who use X lies in the phenomenon of media hybridization (Bentivegna 2015), whereby selected political tweets—especially those deemed significant (that is, more liked, reposted, etc.)—are circulated through television broadcasts and newspaper articles. The reverse process also occurs: newspaper articles and televised debate content are often absorbed and recontextualized within the communicative ecosystem of the X-sphere. This dynamic is largely facilitated by the use of hyperlinks, one of the platform's cores features. In addition, especially during electoral campaigns, it is therefore common for X users to engage in the (automatic) (re-)use of texts or textual fragments originally produced on other social media platforms. This intertextuality contributes to broadening the audience beyond the boundaries of the social media environment. Thus, what emerges is a new media ecosystem in which social media and legacy media intersect and overlap in a continuous and integrated manner (Bentivegna 2015: 91).

The relational function of X extends beyond the intertextual level—that is, the linking of different texts—to include the facilitation of connections among citizens/voters and between them and political actors. This connective dimension is further reinforced by the informal and familiar tone that typically characterizes interactions on the platform—an environment that has been aptly described as resembling a third place (Oldenburg&Brisett 1982): these are public spaces in which informal public life takes place on a daily basis. The informal atmosphere of the platform facilitates public expression and interaction, even among individuals who are not only physically but also socially distant. In addition, in keeping with the distinctive nature of this communicative space, politicians may adopt alternative (linguistic) codes that reflect the specific rules and expectations of the platform. This perceived informality and sense of familiarity among users may help explain the frequent use of humorous communication strategies by political actors on X / Twitter—not solely as rhetorical or persuasive devices, but also as responses to the communicative norms of the platform—thus contrasting with more traditional, serious forms of political discourse (Mulkay 1988). As Papacharissi (2013: 155) notes, these expressive forms are more prominent within new

communicative environments, as they reflect a desire for political discourse governed by norms that diverge from those established by mainstream media and institutional civic frameworks.

This informal and highly interconnected atmosphere also supports the principle of homophily, which sets the platform apart from other of communication media. Homophily refers to "the tendency of individuals to interact with others who share similar characteristics" (Bentivegna 2015: 86), and it manifests as a strong identification with figures or entities in which users recognize themselves—such as political leaders, sports teams, or other symbolic affiliations. In this context, the communicative functions of humor may play a relevant role in reinforcing the relationship between politicians and voters or citizens. In particular, affiliative humor—defined as a form of humor driven by positive and inclusive intentions—can contribute to enhancing a sense of homophily, especially when politicians draw on themes familiar to their audience and rely on background knowledge assumed to be shared with their electorate. This type of humor may be described as an intra-ingroup discursive practice, that is, one that does not involve an external target (that is, the victim of the humorous text). The principle of homophily may also contribute to constituting echo chambers, in which X' users are overexposed—through algorithmic filtering—to content that aligns with their own ideological orientations. This dynamic creates favourable conditions for the success of persuasive strategies, as it enhances emotional involvement between consumers/voters and political figures, thereby increasing the likelihood that such strategies will be effective (Riva 2016: 131).

The phenomenon of echo chambers inevitably leads to a polarization of discursive interactions: narratives about politics and politicians tend to develop in parallel, without generating points of contact or debate. These dynamics foster a division between US and THEM which—drawing on Tajfel's (1999) framework—can be understood as a contrast between ingroups and outgroups within political discourse on X.[10] This polarization may, in some cases, go so far as to undermine the "inherently democratic contribution" of the web (Bentivegna 2015: 118). Indeed, homophily—when combined with an informal and familiar communicative environment—creates the conditions for a drift toward more aggressive forms of interaction.

In such cases, the strength of the ingroup is reinforced through opposition to the outgroup. This dynamic can also be encouraged by the use of aggressive forms of humor—that is, forms of humor that target a specific individual or political party and push toward ridicule (Billig 2005). Humor, particularly when certain humorous patterns are repeatedly employed, contributes to the

[10] These concepts are due to the sociologist H. Tajfel, the founder of Social Identity Theory (see Tajfel 1999).

development of distinctive communicative styles or idiolects associated with individual leaders or parties. These styles function as markers of community identity, reinforced through repetition and grounded in a shared set of values. Notably, aggressiveness—whether humorous or not—can be facilitated by the informal nature of the platform, as there is no requirement for the writer to frame his/her text within the conventions of structured argumentative discourse (Boccia Artieri 2013: 182). This principle becomes particularly evident—and arguably essential—in the context of electoral campaigns, where such dynamics reach their highest level of intensity. The electoral campaign can, in fact, be fully understood as an agonistic setting, in which the construction of (often fictitious) enemies and competitive attitudes aimed at asserting one's own superiority are key features. This emphasis on antagonism and competition recalls certain characteristics of primary orality (Ong 1986).

This polarized communicative dimension, confined within internally homogeneous clusters of users and embedded in an extremely rapid and hyperdynamic flow of information, risks turning into a cacophony of voices. Citizens and voters may appear overwhelmed by the multiplicity of messages—particularly when these are characterized by "a chaotic mix of various types of content" (Spina 2012: 68), whose contexts are not always easily inferable. This cacophony is primarily driven by the mode of political communication, which, as outlined above, is predominantly vertical in nature. This approach is commonly referred to as the "broadcast model": a unidirectional, one-to-many perspective (Spina 2012: 47–48), in which the political actor uses 280 characters to express their opinion, hoping to reach the widest possible audience—both within the platform and beyond (Spina 2012: 91). The underlying aim of this communicative strategy is essentially propagandistic and self-promotional. The need to speak about oneself for promotional purposes is technically defined as "egocasting" (Spina 2012: 92). As a result, communication risks fragmenting into numerous thematic and textual units, exemplifying the triumph of what Habermas (1991) described as an "ephemeral public sphere", whose rhythm is inherently difficult to follow.

Alongside this predominant broadcast-oriented model, a different form of communication aimed at re-establishing a bidirectional relationship between political representatives and citizens/voters is embodied by the one-to-one conversational model (Bentivegna 2015: 48). This may consist either in the mention of a specific user within a politician's message or in a direct reply from a political actor to a tweet posted by a user. Lee and Shin (2014) have shown that, in this regard, X can generate a stronger perceived sense of proximity and connection between users and politicians compared to other social media platforms, which in turn may influence voting intentions and create more favourable attitudes toward political figures. However, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between communication confined to the private sphere and belonging to the public sphere: what

occurs is a collapse between these two dimensions. In any case, as Bentivegna (2015: 53) notes, this form of interaction is often more a simulation of engagement than genuine interaction. Thus, despite the attention this potential for rhetorical bidirectionality has received in academic literature, it remains largely underutilized by political actors. Usually, when politicians adopt this narrative style, they tend to address other politicians or media professionals, and only marginally—and occasionally—ordinary citizens (Jungherr 2014). This observation is also confirmed by Alonso-Muñoz et al. (2021), who emphasizes that political leaders do not generally perceive the platform as a genuine tool for dialogue with citizens. This tendency can also be explained by the practical difficulty of managing dialogic communication at scale, particularly in contexts of high visibility.

1.3 A linguistic and pragmatic typology of tweets

This section aims to define, from a purely linguistic perspective, the essential characteristics of the different types of tweets which will be discussed and analyzed in the following sections. First, a broad definition of a tweet will be provided, followed by an analysis of its various types. In any case, all the categories described below have been treated as the same unit of analysis—generally referred to as a *tweet* throughout the discussion, unless otherwise specified.

The tweet should be understood as the largest unit of analysis in political communication on Twitter/X, that is, "a message autonomously produced by the user" (Bentivegna 2015: 15), conceived as "a small spark of information" (trad. it from Spina 2012) composed of up to 280 characters. From the perspective of the most recent developments within textual linguistics of Italian (e.g., Ferrari 2014), each tweet corresponds to a text—namely, a coherent and cohesive set of meanings aimed at achieving a specific communicative goal. In terms of conversation analysis, each tweet constitutes a conversational turn. Generally, tweets are shorter than the maximum character limit and are multimedial and multimodal in nature; that is, the text may be accompanied by images, videos, quotes, and links that direct users to news articles, other tweets, or external videos and images (Zaga 2012). A tweet can thus be considered a form of "augmented writing" (Fiorentino 2016). Therefore, links represent one of the most frequent strategies of intertextuality 2.0 (Gordon 2023). According to Zaga (2012), tweets containing links are the most common type of tweet. Additionally, the dense presence of links reinforces the mechanisms of hybridization between new and old media, which are fundamental to the platform (see Section 1.2).

To analyze and study humorous texts, these aspects should be taken them into account. There are, basically, two reasons for this. First, some tweets may be classified as humorous only considering the relationship between the text proper and videos/images in some cases present in the links. These tweets represent multimodal forms of humor. Indeed, there are forms of script oppositions (the basic

principle of humorous texts, see Section 3.2.4) triggered by the interaction between text and image(s). In addition, to have a complete understanding of the texts, necessary to provide an informed annotation of them, is fundamental to read all their components, including links. The cases described are exemplified and commented on below ((4)-(5)). (4) and (5) represent the basic and most common forms of tweets. Indeed, (4) —which contains a form of negative irony (it implies that the explanation about electric buses was far from helpful or effective) — consists solely of textual material, whereas (4)(5) includes both the text and a link providing clarification for what is expressed in the text.

(4) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *Una delle cose più utili della campagna elettorale è stata senza dubbio l'informativa sulle caratteristiche ed il funzionamento dei pulmini elettrici.*
'One of the most useful things of the election campaign was undoubtedly the information on the characteristics and functioning of electric minibuses'

(5) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAE): *Poteri speciali...il giorno prima del voto 👇 https://t.co/2r9qEpUwZy #GoldenPower #GazzettaUfficiale*
'Special powers...the day before the vote👇 https://t.co/2r9qEpUwZy #GoldenPower #GazzettaUfficiale'

In some cases, the character limitations imposed by the platform lead the user to produce a tweetstorm: a series of tweets (progressively numbered)—coherent with each other—sent by a single user to structure a thought that would exceed the character limit of the platform. It is also interesting to note that the dataset contains some "extreme" examples of this practice. For instance, tweet (6), with a word play at the end of the text (*in utile* vs. *inutile*), is the fourteenth and final tweet in the sequence to which it belongs.

(6) Luigi Marattin (AIV): *Un voto al Terzo Polo è per costruire tutto questo, nell'immediato e soprattutto nel futuro. Quindi si, hanno ragione i nostri avversari: un voto dato a noi è un voto in utile. 14*
'A vote for the Terzo Polo is a vote to build all of this, both in the immediate and especially in the future. So yes, our opponents are right: a vote for us is a vote in value. 14'

As mentioned, another type of tweet is represented by multimodal tweets, that is, tweets that, in addition to text, include an audio-visual component. For example, (7) is constituted by a text and a video-message, that shows the event described in the text, and is made up by a text and an image:

(7) Giorgia Meloni (FDI): *Il confronto è sempre un bel momento, anche quando un contestatore scavalca le transenne per salire sul palco. […]*

'The confrontation is always a good moment, even when a protester climbs over the barriers to get on stage. […]'

(8) Enrico Letta (PD): *Buon Voto!*

'Enjoy your vote!'

A different category is represented by reply tweets. These are tweets used by politicians to directly respond to other users, whether they are fellow politicians, journalists/opinion leaders, or anonymous voters. The reply can take place either in the comment section of their own tweet or in

the comment section of another user's tweet. It has been observed that direct engagement with users' comments leads to a more favorable perception of politicians by voters (Utz 2009).
In reply tweets, the mention of the user who authored the original message is automatically added by the platform. However, the mention strategy with the @ symbol is notably not exclusive to this type of tweet; in fact, any tweet can include a mention to another user. This communicative practice is not necessarily limited to a single instance. As we will see, in some cases, politicians engage in lengthy discussions, involving complex back-and-forth exchanges with users, sometimes with humorous undertones. The dialogic structure can become even more intricate when multiple interlocutors participate in the conversation. Indeed, when replying to a tweet, users—including politicians—often involve additional participants, who, in turn, may actively contribute to the discussion. In these cases, the interaction appears to replicate, to some extent, the dynamics of spontaneous face-to-face conversations.

The structure of this particular type of tweets is shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, we can observe how Orlando directly responds to a user who had made a critical comment regarding his stance on the Jobs Act. This entire exchange takes place within the comments section of one of Orlando's tweets.

→ original tweet (with link):
['We must give young people the opportunity to build attractive careers, to achieve a better work–life balance, and to secure stable contracts and more substantial wages']

→ reply to Orlando by @user1:
['A somewhat belated stance on the Jobs Act—especially considering that by putting forward figures like Casini and former pro-Renzi centrists as your leading candidates, you come across as lacking credibility']

→ Orlando's reply (X) to @user1:
['I actually said it needed to be overcome back in 2017']

Figure 1: Screenshot of the interaction between Orlando and User1 in Orlando's comments section.

Another type of interaction is illustrated in Figure 2. In Figure 2, the politician humorously responds (through negative irony, cf. 'the logic applied is not exactly that of the most advanced historical analysis') to a user who had previously mentioned him in a tweet. Notably, the user's tweet is also

humorous, as it exhibits an incongruity between the user's text—pretending to ignore the obvious—and Orlando's 2014 tweet, juxtaposed at the end of the message.

→ original tweet (with link), published by @user2:

['Here, I assume, is when @AndreaOrlandosp told to T. Blair that he, Blair, had been archived for 11 years, after the war in Iraq']

→ Orlando's reply to @user2:

['The logic applied is not exactly that of the most advanced historical analysis. I have a dinner with Blair – he becames my point of reference. Berlinguer attens Anrodpov's funeral – he's being controlled by Moscow. The technique gets a lot of likes, but leaves me somewhat doubtful about'].

Figure 2: Screenshot of the interaction between Orlando and User2 in User2's comments section.

Indeed, as noted by Spina (2012: 129-130), albeit only in qualitative terms, reply tweets frequently employ humor, often mirroring the tone of the original message to which they respond, as illustrated in Figure 4. Thus, during the annotation process, I distinguished humor that is used in reply tweets to identify potential correlations between this type of tweet, the use of humor, and its specific communicative functions.

The complexity of studying these text types lies in the difficulty of managing and reconstructing the conversation flow. The structure of dialogic interaction is often irregular: in many cases, a single reply comment is fragmented into two parts, leading to non-adjacent conversational turns. Ultimately, these are messages addressed to the entire audience of followers but specifically directed at the user being replied to, creating a conversational exchange that lies between the one-to-one and one-to-many spheres. This phenomenon represents one of the most significant innovations of (political) communication 2.0: the concrete possibility of establishing a (somewhat equal and direct) dialogue between politicians and users/citizens.

A distinct category is the practice of retweeting (henceforth RT). This practice—comparable to a form of citation—consists of republishing on one's own account a tweet originally posted by another user or by the same user at a different time. The retweeted message gains renewed visibility and dissemination (Spina 2012: 71). The RT practice can be used to amplify the voices of ordinary users (9), public figures and politicians (10), or party/association accounts (11). Additionally, it is

common for users to retweet their own messages to revive them and increase their visibility on their profile (12). A possible variation of RT consists of adding textual material—essentially an introductory comment—before the RT notation. The sequence *RT + @user* (indicating the original author) is automatically generated by the platform. This notation functions similarly to quotation marks, ensuring that the original source is always cited.

(9) Giovanni Donzelli (FDI): *RT @UTENTE: @Donzelli immenso! Grazie di esistere @FratellidItalia #DrittoeRovescio*
'RT @user: great @Donzelli! Thank you for existing @FratellidItalia #DrittoeRovescio'

(10) Alessandra Todde (M5S): *RT @GiuseppeConteIT: Domenica 25 settembre non si può sbagliare. Ecco come si vota. https://t.co/bamQIJcdaT*
'RT @GiuseppeConteIT: You can't go wrong on Sunday, September 25th. Here's how to vote.'

(11) Beatrice Lorenzin (PD): *RT @pdnetwork: Alle #elezionipolitiche del 25 settembre per esprimere il tuo voto è sufficiente barrare il simbolo del PD.*
'RT @pdnetwork: At #politicalelections of September 25th, to cast your vote, simply cross out the PD symbol.'

(12) Angelo Bonelli (AVS): *RT @AngeloBonelli1: Accordi con la guardia costiera libica: quella che tortura gli immigrati, stupra le donne e che spara sui barconi […]*
'RT @AngeloBonelli1: Relationships with the Libyan coast guard: the one that tortures immigrants, rapes women and shoots at boats […]'

The impact of RTs within each sender's communicative flow is variable; in other words, the ratio between original tweets and RTs fluctuates significantly. Likewise, the type of account from which a message is retweeted varies considerably (Brocca & Garassino 2015). During the annotation and analysis, RTs were treated in the same way as other messages.

1.4 The linguistic/textual characteristics of tweets

Beyond the formal aspects related to the platform's constraints, the Italian (political) language used on X is influenced, as also outlined by Dell'Anna (2010), by the general characteristics of the so-called *e-taliano* (Antonelli 2014, 2016). In fact, the language of (neo-)politics lacks the specific vocabulary and structures typical of technical lexicons and is generally comparable to the ordinary language of the average voter (Petrilli 2015). *E-taliano* is, in all respects, a new variety of

contemporary Italian which, following the framework proposed by Antonelli (2014, 2016), is positioned diamesically on the written pole, and, in terms of diaphasic and diastratic variation, in the central area of the model (Berruto 2019). Regarding the diamesic axis, the positioning of forms of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has long been debated by relevant scholarship—not only in Italy (Pistolesi 2018)—and various labels have been proposed over time to describe the ambiguous diamesic nature of CMC (+/- spoken or +/- written). Today, expressions such as writing speech, typed speech, or conversational writing are generally considered outdated (Antonelli 2014). The issue has been largely resolved by considering CMC as a written variety that nonetheless incorporates certain features of spoken language (Pistolesi 2018: 23). Recent multimodal approaches to discourse analysis (Pistolesi 2018) suggest moving beyond the traditional dichotomy between speech and writing, and instead conceiving of CMC textuality as distinct from both traditional writing and oral speech (Ferrari 2017: 12).

Regarding social media—and X specifically—some features originally associated with spoken language have more appropriately been redefined as characteristics of dialogic interaction (Pistolesi 2018: 25). Indeed, a tweet has been described by Zaga (2012: 190) as an utterance within a "multi-voiced conversation," and by Spina (2012: 74) as "a fragment of conversation which, on its own, can only partially convey complete meaning." Moreover, according to Spina (2012: 80), this strongly dialogic and conversational nature—often marked by the presence of discourse markers, deictic and phatic elements (Pistolesi 2018: 26)—represents a break, in political communication, from the monodirectional structure of traditional communicative models (see Sections 1.2-1.3). The fact that tweets are fragments of conversation, and therefore "part of a potentially always-open conversation" (Pistolesi 2018: 26), makes it difficult, at times, for users to contextualize tweets—especially given the frequent intertextual references to images and links—and to fully understand their meaning.

The dialogic nature and textual simplification imposed by the brevity and immediacy of CMC also influence sentence-level syntactic organization of tweets. Indeed, Antonelli (2014) identifies parataxis and short sentence structures as key defining traits of *e-taliano*. According to the corpus analyzed by Spina (2012)—a finding also confirmed by Zaga (2012) in relation to other types of tweets—political discourse on Twitter generally consists of "single-clause sequences or, less frequently, of two or three clauses" (Spina 2012: 119). In the latter cases, coordination and juxtaposition of main clauses are preferred over subordination ("hypotaxis is rare", Zaga 2012: 195). Thus, tweets are generally written additively, horizontally, and serially; each short sentence adds a piece of information to the previous one. According to Antonelli (2014), the predominance of short, coordinative sentence structures is not primarily attributable to diamesic factors, but rather to

diaphasic ones, such as the informality and carelessness that characterize digital textuality. This is supported by the fact that this syntactic feature also marks what is defined (Antonelli 2014: 550) as italiano dell'uso medio ('Italian of average usage'). This syntactic simplification is also reflected in the general predominance of content words over grammatical words (articles, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns). Paradoxically, (political) tweets – despite the speed and informality typical of spoken language – tend to maintain higher lexical density, closer to that found in written language. At the same time, the brevity imposed by the platform's character limits appears to encourage not only greater informational density but also lexical variety. Political texts on X tend to exhibit a more differentiated vocabulary than, for example, televised debates, which are often characterized by a more repetitive and conventional lexical repertoire (Spina 2012: 106).

However, this tendency toward lexical differentiation coexists with opposing trends identified in other studies. For example, Combei (2020), in her analysis of tweets by the two main Italian populist parties (Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega), observes a high level of readability—interpreted as a strong "anti-intellectual imprint" (Combei 2020: 111)—alongside lexical poverty, predictability, and thematic repetitiveness. A similar emphasis on repetition is also highlighted by Petrilli (2015). Nevertheless, according to Spina (2012: 116), political discourse on X still appears more dynamic than its televised counterpart, which tends to rely heavily on pre-structured lexical combinations made available by the Italian language and is marked by a higher degree of formal conventionality.

Considering the diaphasic and diastratic axes, Antonelli (2016: 239) characterizes *e-taliano* as a "highly informal and diastratically transversal" variety. For highly literate users, it may represent a stylistic choice overlapping with *italiano dell'uso medio*; for those who can only type but not write in standard Italian, *e-taliano* becomes "the only possible option" (Antonelli 2014: 551) and is therefore comparable to *italiano popolare*. This informality can also be attributed—not in a technologically deterministic sense (Antonelli 2014: 544–546; Fiorentino 2018: 45)—to what Ferrari (2014: 311) calls the "semiotic urgency" brought about by new digital tools, as well as to a reinterpretation of writing shaped by the frequency and regularity with which users type online ("writing shifts into the sphere of the ephemeral," Antonelli 2014: 547). The informal register and tolerance of orthographic and syntactic errors ("linguistic whateverism", in Baron 2008: 169–173) in tweets by politicians should thus be viewed as deliberate stylistic choices, shaped by the specific characteristics of the platform and medium. Informal and seemingly careless tweeting enable politicians to exert greater influence over citizens and voters. The so-called "paradigma del rispecchiamento" ('mirroring-paradigm') consists precisely in lowering oneself to the (presumed) level of the audience in order to gratify their ego (Antonelli 2017: 57). This calculated and

ostentatious informality—accompanied by hyper-simplified, repetitive, deliberately vague language creating the illusion of clarity, and the occasional use of vulgarity—represents one of the core features of "italiano populista" (Antonelli 2014: 58). This variety is widely used by contemporary politicians, not only on social media, and is reinforced by the sense of familiarity encouraged by the platform. More technically, Antonelli (2017: 58–59) defines "italiano populista" as "an Italian that flaunts an artificial popularity: proudly coarse […] relying on what is politically and grammatically incorrect." Petrilli (2015), in her analysis of political language on blogs, had already identified the prevalence of an informality-oriented style marked by specific stylistic and linguistic traits. Among these, she highlighted the use of regionalisms, dialectal forms, occasional neologisms—including humorous lexical deformations with denigratory intent (one such example is *RigorMontis* to denigrate the Italian senator Mario Monti).[11] Indeed, the legitimization of verbal aggressiveness and the delegitimization of the outgroups are seen by Petrilli (2015: 123) as defining features of the language of *neo-politics*. In this regard, it is important to recall Wodak's (2015) cross-national study of political discourse in twenty-four countries, which identified dichotomization and negative outgroup-representation as among the distinctive linguistic strategies of (populist) political communication.

In conclusion, while the linguistic traits discussed above help to describe part of the (political) language used on X and, more broadly, the nature of *e-taliano*, neither can be homogeneously defined. Indeed, as summarized by Bentivegna (2015: 120): "Twitter presents itself as the space where politics is expressed through multiple linguistic registers" (Bentivegna 2015: 120). As noted by Pistolesi (2018), Fiorentino (2018), and Gheno (2019), the presumed homogeneity of web language—implicit, for example, in labels such as *e-taliano*—is unrealistic ("there is no single language of the web," Gheno 2019: 89), and so is the attempt to offer comprehensive descriptions of the language of Facebook, of political discourse on Twitter, and so on ("containers are not sufficient to define the genres and practices of the web," Pistolesi 2018: 31).[12] In fact, numerous variables—such as personal style, topic, and the characteristics of the intended audience—shape "very different forms of writing control" (Pistolesi 2018: 27) and strongly affect stylistic variation.

1.5 "The one who says I"

When analysing the tweets of the present dataset, I assume that the authorship of the texts is to be attributed to the politicians. While this attribution may initially seem straightforward and

[11] The wordplay is based on the phonetic ambiguity between the Latin expression *Rigor Mortis* and the expression *Rigor Montis* (based on the name of the politician and economist Mario Monti).
[12] This tendency to describe web language as a homogeneous entity can be traced back to the seminal work of Crystal (2001).

unproblematic, a deeper consideration of the role and importance of electoral staffs in contemporary political campaigns inevitably brings the issue to light. The question can be summarized as follows: is it the politician or their staff that writes and publishes tweets? Obviously, any attempt to answer this question inevitably involves a degree of uncertainty but there are linguistical, thematical, and contextual cues that sustain my assumption. Moreover, this assumption is shared by other Italian studies on the topic as well; see, for example, Spina (2012) and Brocca & Garassino (2015).

First of all, it is frequent to read tweets where the politicians talk about episodes of their personal and familiar life: these are barely accessible to other people ((13)). Tweets as (13) confirm how the storytelling adopted by politicians assumes intimate connotations, aimed at eliciting empathy and/or compassion from voters.

(13) Angelo Bonelli (AVS): […] *mia mamma ha l'Alzheimer e mio padre le sta sempre vicino. Una famiglia umile che mi ha insegnato l'onestà e il rispetto. Grazie papà e mamma* ❤️
'[…] My mom has Alzheimer's and my dad is always close to her. A humble family that taught me honesty and respect. Thank you, daddy and mommy 💔'

In addition, tweets marked by the occurrence of linguistic expressions peculiar to the politicians can be frequently read (Cortellazzo 2024). From them, it is possible to infer the politician personal style. For example, in (14) one finds the regional and colloquial expression *rosicante* ('resentuful/salty') that is frequent and typical of Matteo Salvini's style. (Cortellazzo 2024: 217-219).

(14) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Per questo rosicante signore, tal Toscani Oliviero, gli italiani sono tutti "Cog***ni e ignoranti"* […]
'For this resentful gentleman, a certain Toscani Oliviero, all Italians are "idiots and ignorants" […]

Additionally, in some cases, politicians adopt forms of code- or register-switching—that is, they shift from standard Italian to one of the regional varieties of it (characteristic of their native village or city of birth) and/or to more informal and popular registers (see for example *rosicante* in (14)). I assume that register/code-switching is another clue of authorship.[13] A basic form of code-switching is exemplified in (15). Calenda, born in Rome, uses *daje*, which is a typical discourse marker of the Lazio's regional variety of Italian.

(15) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *[…] si combatte da qui. Insieme. #Napoli. Daje forte.*
'[…] we fight from here. Together. #Naples. Come on.'

[13] To examine in depth the (strong) relationship between humor and code/register-switching Attardo (1994).

The authorship of X with respect to the tweet is evident from the direct reply/replies to X's users. These types of tweets clearly demonstrate that politicians use X directly, without any mediation.

Specifically, the use of humor may also be a marker of authorship. Indeed, humour is strongly connected with specific traits of personality and involves the author's creativity, as well as the specific ability to manage complex form of intertextuality and encyclopaedical knowledges. So, it is even more complex to image an *ad hoc* (and also online) creation of humorous texts by the electoral staff than it is in the case of humor-neutral texts. Indeed, humour may be interpreted as a marker of a more personal communicative style. It is important to clarify that adopting this perspective does not imply that all humorous tweets are equivalent in terms of sophistication. For example, as discussed in Section 10, some humorous hashtags are created by other (anonymous) users within the X-sphere and are 'borrowed'—sometimes with modifications—by the politicians.

Thus, to summarize, I adopt the following perspective in my analysis: in any tweets, the authorship of the message is attributed to the politician owner of the X account. Indeed, although the staff may write the tweet, this process is intended to give voice to the politician by adopting their style, their personal traits and (re-)framing their (public) image. So, the politician, publishing the tweet in their account, endorses the topics and the style of the text.[14]

[14] In any case, it is clear that informative tweets (for example, updates on the location of a rally) are more likely to be managed by the staff (see Brocca & Garassino 2015).

2. The 2022 election campaign in Italy

2.1 The Italian socio-political context

The electoral campaign for the Italian general elections began unexpectedly in August 2022—an atypical period and an unprecedented occurrence in the history of the Italian Republic: in Italy August is a vacation month. Unsurprisingly, the campaign was referred (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri 2024: 13) to as a *campagna balneare* ('summer campaign'). In this anomalous context, social media served as a functional tool for responding to the rapid sequence of events and compensating for the absence of structured communication planning. Another notable anomaly of the 2022 election campaign was that, for the first time, all adult citizens were entitled to vote for both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – previously, only those who had reached the age of 21 were eligible.

To briefly summarize the most salient political developments that brought to the summer campaign, the return to the polls was notably triggered by the sudden withdrawal of confidence from the government lead by the prime minister Mario Draghi on the part of Forza Italia, Lega, and Movimento5Stelle (M5S)—parties that had previously supported Draghi's government coalition formed in July 2022. The first signs of crisis emerged on 14 July 2022, when M5S refused to support the so-called *Decreto Aiuti* 'Aid decree' in the Senate. The situation further deteriorated on 20 July, when M5S, Lega, and Forza Italia abstained from a confidence vote. On 21 July, Mario Draghi confirmed his resignation, and the Parliament was subsequently dissolved. As a result, elections were held in advance of the natural end of the legislative term, originally scheduled for March 2023. It is worth recalling that, prior to July, the only parties formally in opposition to Mario Draghi—i.e., not explicitly supporting the government—were Fratelli d'Italia and members of Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra. Consequently, representatives of these parties were the only ones able to present themselves as genuine opposition forces, positioned outside the political establishment.

The timeline of key events leading up to the election was as follows. First of all, electoral symbols were submitted to the Ministry of the Interior between 12 and 14 August; party lists, supporting signatures, and nominations for single-member constituencies were filed at the Court of Appeal between 21 and 22 August. The official campaign period began on 26 August, marked by the authorized display of electoral posters. The first session of the newly elected Parliament was held on 13 October, in accordance with the legal requirement to convene within 20 days from the vote, which took place on 25 September. The date of 26 August—by which time coalitions were confirmed, candidates formally announced, and platforms made public—serves as the starting point for the data

collection for this work (see Section 6.1). The linguistic analysis presented in this study is therefore limited to the one-month period corresponding to the official electoral campaign.
The election concluded with a victory for the center-right coalition, led by Giorgia Meloni as candidate for Prime Minister, which secured 44% of the vote and obtained an absolute majority in both chambers. This outcome had been widely anticipated (as reflected, for instance, in the title of Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri 2024), based on pre-election polls and, more significantly, on the failure to form an alliance between Partito Democratico (PD) and its potential partners (Impegno Civico, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, +Europa), as well as between M5S and Azione–Italia Viva, both of which opted to run independently. Meloni had in fact repeatedly positioned herself as a *premier in pectore*, adopting a reassuring tone toward international investors. These behaviors contrasted with the previous narrative strategically constructed by Fratelli d'Italia, which portrayed Giorgia Meloni as both an *underdog*— i.e., a consistently underestimated political figure—and an outsider. The predictability of the outcome also influenced the communicative strategies of PD (and more broadly, of the center-left coalition), which sought to present itself less as a governing alternative and more as a credible and cohesive opposition force (Ceron et al. 2023: 94).

Notably, Giorgia Meloni emerged as one of the central themes of the electoral campaign (Mancino 2024), both as a target of criticism (e.g., she received several accusations of fascist sympathies from political opponents) and as an object of celebration by her supporters. One of the factors identified as contributing to her success was the continuous attention she received from external sources—journalists, political adversaries, and ordinary social media users—which amplified her visibility (Mancino 2024). The novelty of Meloni's potential to become Italy's first female Prime Minister also contributed significantly to media visibility. This element played a decisive role in what has been referred to as the "epic narrative" surrounding her political rise. This narrative often framed her as a national savior. Despite her long-standing political career and accusations of past ties to fascist ideology, the leader of Fratelli d'Italia was able to project the image of a political figure capable of addressing long-standing problems and correcting the failures of previous administrations.

In terms of media coverage, the campaign notably received limited attention, particularly from legacy media outlets (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri 2024: 36–37). Citizens themselves expressed a generally negative assessment of how the campaign was managed, indicating low levels of interest (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri 2024: 17–18). This can largely be attributed to the monotony and repetitiveness of the topics discussed, as well as to the absence of "significant events during the electoral campaign, capable of influencing the agenda of public debate" (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri

2024: 34). Additionally, the widely anticipated outcome of the election contributed to this overall lack of interest, which was also reflected in high levels of voter abstention – the summer timing of the election further intensified this disinterest.

As for X, the platform played a prominent role in the public debate for the 2022 campaign (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri 2024: 18). This is also reflected in the scholarly attention devoted to it in the following section. The centrality of X is further confirmed by a report published by the media monitoring agency Telpress, which noted that "Twitter remains the dominant media arena in the electoral campaign". The platform provided space for topics that were underrepresented in other media—particularly issues related to social rights and debates concerning Fratelli d'Italia's relationship with fascism. On X, a "distinct internal agenda" emerged (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri 2024: 18), marked by highly divisive and polarizing themes.

Another relevant aspect, from a media perspective, was the introduction of TikTok in the campaign arena and its prominently performative use by several political leaders—particularly by Silvio Berlusconi and his communication team. The platform's significance lies in the strategic exploitation of its algorithmic, in the increasing focus on "politainment" and in highly informal, entertainment-oriented forms of political storytelling. The power of TikTok algorithm—also observed, albeit to a lesser extent, on X—has contributed to what Danaher (2016) defines as a condition of "algocracy" in Western democracies. This dynamic has also influenced politicians' own interventions on X about TikTok, which often adopted humorous style. The examples ((16)-(17)), which include various links, further illustrate the phenomenon of media hybridity discussed in Section 1.1.

(16) Matteo Renzi (AIV): *In questo video per TikTok racconto ai più giovani come ci venne in mente l'idea della #18app.*
'In this video for TikTok I tell the younger ones how we came up with the idea of the #18app.'

(17) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Ebbene sì, anche io da oggi sto su "TikTok", un nome che mi fa letteralmente ca…re!*
'Oh, yeah — starting today, I'm on "TikTok" too. A name that, literally, a name that really pisses me off!'

2.2 Previous studies about election campaign 2022

This section examines the linguistic aspects analyzed and identified in the main studies focused on the Italian 2022 electoral campaign. In particular, I discuss three recently published works that analyzed the campaign as it unfolded across media platforms—especially Facebook and X—paying particular attention to the quantification of (linguistic) incivility and negative rhetoric employed by both political figures and Twitter / X' ordinary users. The aspects discussed in this section serve as the background framework for Section 8.3. That section offers a linguistically grounded analysis of the use of aggressive (attack-oriented) communicative functions, both in the presence and absence of humor, as observed in the annotated and analyzed tweets. Section 8.3 also outlines the methodological criteria adopted in the present research, which greatly differ from those employed in the studies discussed here.

The studies which I present below are the following: the volume by Ceron et al. (2023), whose Chapter 6 is devoted to the treatment of populist rhetoric during the general elections; the article by Scavo et al. (2023), which focuses on the analysis of communication on X by both politicians and official party accounts; and the volume edited by Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri (2024), which, through a collection of contributions, examines communicative dynamics, public agenda setting, election outcomes, and voter feedback of the 2022 campaign. As will become clear, none of these studies explicitly addresses humor or the (linguistic) phenomena associated with it.

Chapter 6 of the volume by Ceron et al. (2023) focuses on the communicative strategies of Italian populism online, analyzing Facebook communication during the electoral campaign, based on a dataset of 4,312 posts published by the official accounts of the main political parties (i.e., those that passed the electoral threshold). The analysis concentrates on the four weeks preceding the vote. The resulting picture is one of a marked decline of populist rhetoric— characterized by references to people as the exclusive source of political legitimacy, references to the existence of (allegedly) dangerous minorities, and language oriented toward anti-elite or anti-establishment themes. This finding can be attributed to the fact that all parties—except for Fratelli d'Italia and Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra—had previously shared responsibilities within the outgoing government. As such, it was not feasible for them to position themselves as anti-system forces, as direct expressions of popular will, or as actors opposing the establishment. In addition, focusing specifically on the rhetorical device of negativity—i.e., the use of language that evokes negative emotions (e.g., hatred) and aims to discredit

political opponents[15]—the authors observe that the Democratic Party heavily invested in negative campaigning, with 32% of its all posts falling into this category, primarily targeting Fratelli D'Italia. A higher level of negativity was recorded also in the case of Azione–Italia Viva, with 34% of its posts falling into this category. Positioned in isolation at the political center, the party needed to carve out an autonomous space, relying heavily on negative messaging to do so. Fratelli d'Italia also made substantial use of negativity, accounting for 30% of its posts. It is reasonable to assume that this strategy was adopted as a form of defensive communication, given the high number of attacks received from the PD, which was, in fact, the primary target of negative messaging across the campaign. In relation to this aspect, the analysis presented in Section 8.3 seeks to determine whether a similar dynamic of attack and defense can be identified in the sub-dataset of humorous tweets.

The study by Scavo et al. (2023) is devoted to the analysis of communication on X, focusing both on political party accounts and on individual politicians (specifically, the leaders of the main parties), with a total of 24,400 tweets examined. The aim is to provide a comparative overview of their presence on the platform and the communicative strategies adopted. As previously noted, and in support of the approach taken in this study, these methodological choices are motivated, on the one hand, by the central role played by the platform and, on the other, by the analytical necessity introduced by the personalization of politics (see Section 1.1), which requires a focus on the content produced by political leaders. As in the previous study, only the main parties and their respective leaders were considered.

Regarding the communicative differences between political leaders and party accounts, a preliminary distinction can be observed in terms of posting frequency: party accounts publish significantly more tweets than the accounts of individual leaders. The only notable exception to this trend is represented by Calenda in comparison with Azione's account. This finding suggests that communication managed by party accounts requires a structured organizational framework and the involvement of a dedicated communication team. Despite posting less frequently than their respective parties, political leaders consistently generate higher levels of engagement—measured in terms of retweets, likes, and comments. In some cases, the difference is substantial: for instance, Silvio Berlusconi's account recorded engagement levels ten times higher than those of Forza Italia. This highlights the fact that political leaders tend to attract larger and more active fanbases than official party accounts.

Further distinctions emerge with regard to the topics addressed by the different accounts. At the thematic level a clear dichotomy can be observed: leaders' accounts generally tend to focus on attacks

[15] As highlighted by Ceron et al. (2023: 34–39), the analysis of this strategy focuses primarily on lexical-semantic criteria and on the explicit components of language. Specifically, the authors rely on lexical analyses conducted through the use of emotion dictionaries. Therefore, the main focus of the analysis is on the explicit component of the language.

to other politicians, self-promotion, and celebratory messaging, whereas party accounts are generally oriented toward political and economic issues (e.g., immigration, energy costs, illegality, etc.)[16]. As noted in relation to the study by Ceron et al. (2023), this does not mean that party accounts completely refrain from using such aggressive and (self-)promotional strategies, but rather that they do so to a lesser extent compared to political leaders. This thematic distinction also helps account for the variation in the engagement levels noted above: indeed, tweets that drawn on emotional dimensions—such as those aimed at discrediting political opponents—tend to be more effective in influencing and mobilizing the electorate. The differences outlined above can be further clarified by comparing the content produced by Giorgia Meloni with that of the official Fratelli d'Italia account. While the party account tends to focus on issue-oriented messaging, Meloni favors tweets with a celebratory tone (Scavo et al. 2023: 221). Indeed, (self-)celebratory communication is a form of discourse that relies less on rational and argumentative components and instead seeks to appeal to voters' emotions and strengthen their sense of belonging (ultimately reinforcing ingroup cohesion).

A detailed discussion of the issues addressed by political leaders and parties across different media platforms can also be found in Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri (2024: 48–61), which includes data on how the salience of these topics evolved over the four weeks leading up to the election. Specifically on X, the five most frequently discussed topics were, in order: the rising cost of living (related to the citizens' income), energy and economic concerns, the war in Ukraine, and social rights. Within these thematic macro-categories, it is evident that different leaders and their respective parties selectively emphasize the topics that are most functional to shaping a credible and advantageous public image. Focusing specifically on the leaders' communication, Salvini consistently highlights issues related to security and immigration; Berlusconi's tweets are primarily focused on business and energy costs; instead, Meloni tends to favor economic matters (Scavo et al. 2023: 216–218).

Despite the differences, both party and leader communication share a common feature: tweets that attack political opponents tend to generate the highest levels of engagement (Scavo et al. 2023: 220). This finding can be interpreted as a parameter of the actual polarization of political discourse on X (see Section 1.2). From a methodological point of view, however, the authors importantly focused only on tweets containing explicit negative criticism or unfavorable commentary (Scavo et al. 2023: 201). This is a crucial point of divergence from the methodology adopted in this study. In addition, the focus of Scavo et al. (2023) is not placed on the specific linguistic devices used to convey

[16] It is precisely this type of tweets, focused on political and technical topics, that obtains the highest level of interaction for party accounts.

aggression—indeed, the chapter does not discuss examples of different types (e.g.; implicit vs. explicit) of verbal attack.

In any case, an examination of the leaders' explicit communication shows that Calenda is the one who most frequently resorts to attack-oriented tweets. While he shares with the Azione party account a focus on policy-related content, his messaging places greater emphasis on attacking political opponents. A similar pattern can be observed in Salvini's communication: he aims to achieve high levels of engagement by alternating attacks on rivals with campaign-related content and insights into his private life. At the level of party communication—which, as noted, tends to adopt a more institutional tone—a more frequent use of the attack function was observed in the accounts of FI, AIV, and the PD. For the latter two parties, the data are consistent with the findings of Ceron et al. (2023) discussed earlier. In the case of the PD, it is worth noting that Enrico Letta achieved his highest levels of engagement precisely through tweets attacking Giorgia Meloni. By contrast, the accounts of Lega, M5S, and FDI appear to make less frequent use of this type of communication. For M5S and FDI in particular, it is also notable that their respective leaders (Conte and Meloni) similarly resort less often to this communicative strategy (Scavo et al. 2023: 218). With regard to Lega, Scavo et al. (2023: 207)—although they do not provide qualitative data—identify an ironic communicative style in the party's attacks, aimed at stimulating the curiosity of its fanbase.

The elements outlined so far contribute to characterizing contemporary electoral campaigns as *dirty campaigns*, that is, campaigns marked by widespread communicative incivility and by discourse conveying negative emotions. In this regard, Bentivegna et al. (2024) empirically tested how the incivility displayed by political actors during the electoral campaign and in daily political communication was perceived by a representative sample of the Italian population. Two surveys were administered to the same representative sample: the former in January 2022, and the latter in September 2022. The aim was to assess the perceived level of incivility in politicians' statements and behaviors.[17] This study, too, focuses on the explicit components of language. For instance, among the trigger items used to assess informational hostility, the following statement is discussed: *Ve lo dico io quello ha strani gusti sessuali* ('Let me tell you, that guy has strange sexual preferences'); instead, for discursive incivility, one of the examples given is the epithet *traditore della patria* ('traitor to the country').

[17]Bentivegna et al. (2024: 73–74) identified five macro-categories of incivility: discursive, discriminatory, vulgar, informational, and violent.

The results, based on a comparison of the two surveys, clearly show an increased public sensitivity to incivility during the electoral campaign period (Bentivegna et al. 2024: 87). Notably, the most significant increase concerns informational incivility—understood as a form of incivility aimed at discrediting opponents by spreading false information, slander, or manipulating facts (Bentivegna et al. 2024: 96-97). The authors also examined whether the perception of incivility was influenced by socio-demographic factors and/or by individuals' levels of media exposure and activity for political purposes.

The analysis shows that socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender and age) do not significantly influence the perception of incivility (Bentivegna et al. 2024: 91). What clearly emerges, however, is that a habit to derogatory content is correlated with high levels of political engagement—such as commenting on or sharing political content—both during and outside the electoral campaign period (Bentivegna et al. 2024: 98–99). By contrast, individuals who merely consume political information, even regularly and frequently, tend to show greater sensitivity, which facilitates the rejection and critical evaluation of political incivility (Bentivegna et al. 2024: 98–99). Therefore, at least at the perceptual level, there is no evidence of complete habit among citizens and voters toward disinformation and communicative strategies of incivility.

The findings discussed above provide a relevant starting point for the present analysis. In fact, it is reasonable to hypothesize that attack and aggression strategies conveyed through humorous modes may be perceived as more acceptable and are likely to be more appreciated—and less contested—by readers, even though this communicative style often amplifies, rather than mitigates, the intensity of the attack against the target. These advantages, primarily, depend on the fact that the derogatory element is, in some cases, implicit (Attardo 2020). Thus, it must be inferred by the recipient and is therefore less likely to be challenged ("egocentric bias principle", Reboul 2011). Moreover, the implicit nature of such content diverts part of the recipient's attentional resources, which might otherwise be engaged in critically assessing the message (Sperber et al. 2010). In addition, the humorous mode may make the offence more acceptable, as—unlike a serious assertion—it tends to be more ambiguous and its meaning is more flexible (Attardo 1994). As a result, the speaker's offensive intentions are perceived as mitigated. Finally, insults or attacks humorously conveyed enhance the appeal of the speaker, since humor is often associated with cleverness (Attardo 1994; Carter 2004), thereby advancing rhetorical and persuasive aims.

These advantages may help explain the use of humorous strategies within the communicative context of electoral campaigns, including their application to highly sensitive or controversial issues. An illustrative example is the following tweet by Carlo Calenda, in which the complex issue of the link

between Fratelli d'Italia and (neo-)fascism (highlighted by La Russa's statements reported in the linked article) is addressed through humor—specifically, by means of an incongruous comparison between La Russa (the future President of the Senate) and the (stereotypical) image of drunken elderly men in small towns ((18)).

(18) Carlo Calenda (AIV): […] c'è anche qualche pirla che ancora dice queste fesserie. In un paese normale non vanno in parlamento, stanno al bar a farsi un grappino e parlare da soli. https://t.co/qd6kO7qUru
'[...] there are still a few fools who continue to say such nonsense. In a normal country, they would not be sitting in Parliament; they would be at a bar, sipping a grappa and talking to themselves'

As previously noted, higher levels of sensitivity or indifference toward incivility are observed among citizens who are more actively engaged in commenting. In this regard, Bentivegna & Rega (2024) have shown that users on X often participate in the electoral debate by attacking opposing leaders or parties and/or defending their own, thereby contributing to the overall climate of incivility and hostility. Chronologically, the intensification of aggressive rhetoric tends to occur as the election date approaches—mirroring patterns typically observed among political actors as well (Gervais 2017). The analysis also revealed that Giorgia Meloni was the leader who received the highest number of attacks (Bentivegna & Rega 2024: 110). This finding is unsurprising, given that she was the leading candidate expected to win the election and, as such, the most likely target of attacks from her opponents (Ceron et al. 2023). This logic of electoral viability also helps explain the lower figures recorded for other party leaders with fewer chances of winning, such as Calenda and Letta (Bentivegna & Rega 2024: 110).
It is particularly interesting, from a linguistic perspective, to observe the different forms of incivility directed at political leaders by users (Bentivegna & Rega 2024: 119–124). For example, attacks to Meloni predominantly focus on her competencies and abilities. In the case of Conte, accusations of spreading disinformation are especially frequent—namely, claims that he lies, deceives, or misleads the public. Similar types of accusations were also directed at Letta. For Salvini, name-calling emerges as the most statistically significant attack strategy, as illustrated by hashtags such as *#SalviniNutellaro* and *#SalviniPagliaccio.*[18] It is worth noting that these attacks by ordinary users — often spontaneous and unplanned (Bentivegna & Rega 2024) — do not go unnoticed by politicians, who frequently respond personally by counterattacking, sometimes adopting a humorous style. As will be discussed,

[18] For the qualitative and quantitative analysis of tweets with humorous hashtags see Section 10.

such attacks are not limited to party leaders and, thematically, often target physical appearance as well. In this case, unlike what was observed for Meloni (Bentivegna & Rega 2024: 120), the denigratory strategies—whether humorous or not—take the form of sexist attitudes and gender-based hate, as illustrated by tweet ((19)), published to attack Laura Ravetto (Lega) with a (vulgar) allusion to her physical appearance.

(19) @User: *Se non ricordo male, lo zio Silvio ti scelse perché stavi meglio senza niente addosso...*
'@User: If I remember correctly, Uncle Silvio chose you because you looked better with nothing on.[19]

[19] In all tweets, all references to users who are not politicians have been anonymized with *@user*.

3. Humor and pragmatics

3.1. General remarks on Humor

The term humor is an umbrella term - without any further attempts at differentiation between sub-terms, such as irony, paradox, mock-(im)politeness, etc. - to indicate the complex of humorous phenomena. Substantially, all humorous phenomena have the same perlocutionary goal, that is, to be perceived and recognized as humorous (Attardo 2020: 98). Notably, in this study, I only examine linguistic humor, which is a subclass of semiotic humor (other types are visual humor, musical humor, and multimodal humor). Linguistic humor has been defined as "humor expressed through language" (Attardo 2020: 25). In turn, the category of linguistic humor can be divided into two subcategories: verbal humor and referential humor. The former is essentially represented by puns (e.g., Attardo 1994, Aarons 2017; see also Section 3.2.5), that is, humorous forms primarily based on similarity or identity between two linguistic expressions at the phonemic or graphemic level. By contrast, referential humor relies on semantic–pragmatic phenomena.

Another important distinction concerns the cognitive stimulus (humor) and its emotional effect (that is, mirth) and its physical manifestation, such as smiling and laughter. In any case, humor is not directly correlated with these manifestations. Indeed, humor may occur without mirth, laughter, or smiling or, conversely, laughter and smiling may be caused by embarrassment and not by humor. Additionally, smiling and laughter may occur spontaneously, as a sort of unvoluntary act. Thus, laughter and smiling cannot be used uncritically to identify humor (Attardo 2020: 42). To sum up, there is not a direct correlation between humor and mirth, laughter and smiling. They are not coextensive terms. The presence of laughter, or of other similar phenomena, is not enough to determine that there was a humorous instance. Additionally, another false assumption is that laughter is directly proportionate to the intensity and quality of humor (Attardo 1994: 11).

Another essential point regards the distinction between humor and humor appreciation. Humor is a property of the stimulus (that is, the text in a broad sense) and its properties pertain to the competence level (the level of *langue*, following Saussure's framework). Thus, the recognition of the humorous mode of the text is independent of its appreciation. In some cases (i.e., failed humor instances), humor fails to be interpreted as such by the audience. The recognition of humor exclusively depends on the identification of those semantic and pragmatic properties deemed necessary and sufficient for its occurrence. Instead, humor appreciation (i.e.: the hearer's

manifestation of their enjoyment) is related to the communicative context, that is, to a specific speaker, a specific hearer, and a specific situational context. Generally, the appreciation of humor consists in manifestations of enjoyment or displeasure. Thus, humor appreciation concerns the performance level (the level of *parole*, following Saussure's framework). The distinction between recognition and appreciation is also supported by neurological evidences (Attardo 2020: 47).
It is also possible that the humorous interpretation is entirely the responsibility of the addressee and independent of the speaker's actual intentions (i.e., they did not intend to be perceived as humorous). Two hypotheses might be proposed:

1. The humorous interpretation constitutes a genuine misinterpretation, whether more or less deliberate;
2. The audience intentionally interprets the text in a humorous way, "deciding to move to the non-bona-fide mode of communication" (Attardo, 2020: 174), that is, humor.

Thus, Attardo (2020: 174) argues what follows: "all humor is intentional, either in the intention of the speaker, the hearer, the audience, or any combination thereof."

3.2. Theories of humor

As noted by Attardo (2020: 59), there are several theories of humor, and new theories of humor emerge all the time.[20] Interestingly, Attardo (2020) also notes that "Amazon.com lists 8000 books under the *theories of humor*". However, the (modern) theories of humor are commonly classified into three (macro-)categories:

1) Incongruity Theories;
2) Hostility Theories (or Superiority Theories);
3) Release and Relief Theories.

Importantly, Release Theories and Hostility/Superiority Theories are not compatible with Incongruity Theories (see Raskin 1985). In essence, it is important to emphasize that Release Theories and Hostility Theories focus primarily on the effects of humor rather than on the causes that produce it. As we will see in Section 3.2.1 and Section 3.2.2, in many respects, it is impossible to consider all uses of humor as being based solely on aggression, release, or play.

[20] Often these are re-proposals of already existing theories, and in many cases the degree of scientific method is rather neglected.

In the following sections, I will outline the essential tenets of these theories. In particular, I will focus on two linguistic theoretical models, the Semantic Script Theory and the General Theory of Verbal Humor, which have been recognized as the most influential linguistic humor theories of the past two decades. It should be emphasized that these linguistic theories are much more closely related to incongruity theories than to the other two. Finally, one must refer to Attardo (1994: 14–59) for a comprehensive survey of both ancient and modern theories of humor, and what follows builds upon this fundamental study.

3.2.1 Release Theories

These theories establish that humor is exploited to release tensions and energy and is useful to force the established laws and conventions at any level (cultural, social, linguistic, and so on). From a linguistic point of view, the release of tensions arises from the evasion of Grice's Cooperative Principle and from the general morphological and phonetic rules of a language (see, for instance, the creation of humorous neologisms). This perspective is connected to the phenomenon of language defunctionalization within humorous discourses.

Related to these theories are the approaches that identify humor as play. This playful nature of humor may explain the reason why the hearers/readers of a humorous text suspended their disbelief (a sort of blocking of their epistemic vigilance, Sperber et al. 2010) in order to appreciate and understand the humorous text. The playful and ludic aspect of linguistic humor is also stressed by Freud (1960) according to whom humorous use of language is close to children's pleasure in creating new words.

3.2.2 Hostility Theories

The ancient theories (e.g., Plato's and Aristotle's) all mention the negative element of humor, connected with its aggressive side. This theory is also sustained by Bergson (1901) according to whom humor is used to correct deviant behaviors and extravagant attitudes. More recently, Billig (2005) underlined how humor is employed in different contexts entailing aggressiveness and a conflictual goal. Importantly, speakers can use humor deliberately or unconsciously as a strategy to be aggressive. According to Billig (2005), the aggressive side of humor is used by the speaker to show their superiority over the target of humor, that is, the butt of the humorous text. Such sense of superiority is enhanced precisely by the positive feelings that the speaker and their supporters derive from the denigration and humiliation of the target. However, not all humorous texts have an aggressive goal and a hostile component. Probably, some scholars tend to conflate the presence of mild criticism with aggressive style. One possible consequence of overextending the category of

aggressive humor is that its explanatory power may be weakened (Attardo 2020: 67). This would result in a certain inability to grasp the actual aggressiveness in the texts.
Consider, for example, tweet (20). In this case, it is difficult to argue that there is an aggressive component. In other cases, such as instances of mock-impoliteness (see Section 9.2), the aggression is only simulated, since the speaker's intention is to reinforce solidarity and affiliation with the target of the tweet and the message's recipients.

(20) Alessia Morani (PD): *Mai come in questo caso dobbiamo dire "*VOTA ANTONIO*" #Ancona #collegiouninominale #ElezioniPolitiche22 #VotaPd*
'Never like in this case must we say "VOTE ANTONIO" #Ancona #single-member constituency #PoliticalElections22 #VotePd'.

In (20), humor is triggered by the intertextual reference—highlighted through the use of capital letters and quotation marks—to the film *Gli Onorevoli* (1963).[21] In one of the film's most famous scenes, the character played by Totò repeatedly shouts, through a megaphone, the slogan "Vota Antonio! Vota Antonio! […]". The coincidence that allows Alessia Morani to use this quote lies in the fact that the candidate supported by the PD in Ancona is named Antonio as well.
To conclude, it is true that most of humor, especially in certain contexts, is aggressive and superiority-based, not all humor is so (Attardo 2020: 67).

3.2.3 Incongruity theories

Incongruity theories have constituted one of the most fertile lines of research in the twentieth century and have served as the starting point for modern linguistic (semantic–pragmatic) approaches to humor. These theories are essentialist theories, in that they attempt to clarify what key elements make humor funny. Notably, essentialist theories aim to identify the main feature(s) that can explain a specific phenomenon. This is the reason why linguistics has tended to side with this kind of theory, indeed: linguistics is aimed to reduce linguistic behavior to a small set of definite rules. In addition, it is generally accepted that incongruity is a key condition for humor.
Incongruity theories are essentially based on the presence of two opposed ideas or meanings (the incongruity phase), followed by a resolution phase. Thus, humor consists of two phases: incongruity

[21] In *Gli Onorevoli* (1963), Totò plays an unlikely political candidate whose electoral campaign, filled with comic mishaps and grotesque promises, satirizes the mechanisms of political propaganda and the superficiality of electoral rhetoric in postwar Italy.

and resolution. In a nutshell, the essence of humor is based on a two-stage-process, i.e.: the perception of the incongruity and its resolution, or in certain cases the unresolved perception of incongruity. Basically, incongruity is a semantic (in a broad sense) concept, as it is based on the attribution of meaning to a regularity observed in reality. The use of a semantic framework determines an equivalence between semantic linguistics theories (such as Semantic Script Theory) and incongruity theories. As noted by Attardo (1994: 49), this closeness has led to the frequent (mis-)classification of linguistically based theories with incongruity theories. Briefly, incongruity theories are based on the mismatch between two ideas in the broadest possible sense. An exhaustive and well-known definition of incongruity is provided by McGhee (1979:6-7): "when the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous".[22] Practically, incongruity is based on a violation of expectations and captures the mismatch of expectations. Notably, a humorous text may contain multiple incongruities. For example, jokes have more than one punch line, the part of the text that triggers incongruity (Attardo 2020: 88).

The latter part of the cognitive process of humor, i.e., resolution process, is generally misunderstood. For example, it is expected that the resolution phase removes the incongruity. In fact, in many texts the resolution is only partial, that is, a residue of incongruity remains. It is also likely that part of the appreciation of humor derives precisely from the fact that a residue of incongruity remains active and perceptible. In particular, the General Theory of Verbal Humor is the first linguistic theory to address the issue of humor resolution. The key concept is the logical mechanism that provides an explanation of the absurdity found in humorous texts.

3.3 Linguistic (semantic-pragmatic) Theories of humor

The strength of these theories lies in their formal rigor, their grounding in illustrative examples, and their ability to provide systematic rather than ad hoc explanations. Importantly, the concepts developed and employed within these frameworks were not introduced specifically to account for the mechanisms of humor; rather, they are autonomous notions, valid and applicable beyond the (linguistic) study of humor itself.

3.3.1 The Sematic Script Theory (SSTH)

It should be emphasized at the outset that the SSTH, as a competence theory, was developed within the framework of generative grammar. Its underlying aim is to account for the humor competence of

[22] An explanation of incongruity is also provided by Bisociation Theory. A definition of "bisociation" is similar to the concepts of overlap and (script) opposition described by Script-based Theories (Raskin 1985).

the native speaker of a given language (not only American English). The basic assumption is that, just as speakers can provide grammaticality judgments on a sentence, so too can they determine whether a given text is humorous or not. Thus, SSTH is a theory of competence of an idealized speaker/hearer and not a theory of performance. Indeed, the context and the specific characteristics of the speaker are deemed irrelevant in determining whether or not a text is humorous

The Semantic Script Theory, developed by Raskin's (1985) fundamental work, is widely recognized to have been one of the most successful theories of humor. The goal of SSTH is to establish the conditions necessary to consider a text as humorous, which constitutes the essentialist component of the theory. Thus, SSTH is a theory of competence of an idealized speaker/hearer and not a theory of performance. The SSTH has the aim to explain the native's speaker's humor competence, as a speaker can tell if a sentence is well formed or not. Practically, the theory has the minimal goal to describe how it is possible to construe a humorous text and how it is possible to recognize it. According to this theory, the communicative context is not relevant to determine the humorous nature of the text but, clearly, it is necessary to its perception, appreciation and, eventually, reaction to a humorous text.

The main hypothesis of SSTH is articulated as follows (Raskin 1985: 99):

1. The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts;
2. The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite (…). The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part in this text.

To sum up this theory with Attardo's (1994: 205) words: "if a text is compatible fully or in part with two scripts, and the two scripts happen to be opposed to each other, then, and only then, will the text be classified as funny". Interestingly, SSTH uses just three concepts to analyze humorous texts, that is, scripts, opposition, and scripts' overlapping. Furthermore, these three concepts provide the sufficient and necessary conditions to describe a humorous text.

Before discussing the concepts of oppositeness and overlapping, it is crucial to define the notion of script. Briefly, a script is an organized chunk of information about something (Attardo 1994: 198) and is evoked directly by lexical items.[23] Basically, scripts are ideas, meanings, and thoughts. Thus, scripts may be both concrete and abstract. In addition, scripts are open-ended: they may be reviewed, updated, and redefined during a conversation or during the reading of a text. Importantly,

[23] In this context, other similar equivalent terms of scripts are frames, schemata, scenes, and memory organization packets. In particular, "frame" and "script" are synonymous, according to Attardo (2020:115).

scripts are connected with each other by relationships. The relationships can be of different semantic nature (hyponymy, synonymy, antonymy, synonymy, etc.). Additionally, scripts may be also activated implicitly ("implicit activation of scripts", Attardo 2020: 125) by inferences, presuppositions, or conversational and conventional implicatures.[24] To sum up, the sum of scripts, their links, and all the connections form the speaker's semantic network, that is, all information that a speaker has or, in other terms, the sum of his/her semantic knowledge.

According to Raskin (1985), there are different types of scripts: scripts, macro-scripts, and complex-scripts. Specifically, macro-scripts are scripts with a chronological organization, such as TO FISH (the order of scripts are: WAKE UP, DRIVE, BUY BAITS, etc.). Instead, complex scripts are scripts made of other scripts but without chronological organization between them, such as such as the script PEACE, which activates other scripts such as ENEMY, WAR; DISEASE, etc.

Attardo (1994: 203, 2020: 128) provides this definition for the concept of "overlapping": "two scripts are said to overlap in a text if the text overall or parts of it are compatible with both scripts". The concept may be also interpreted as a coexistence of senses in the same text. However, the overlapping of two scripts is not a sufficient condition to interpret a text as humorous. For example, metaphorical, allegorical, cryptical texts, clearly based on overlapping scripts, are not necessarily humorous texts. Thus, a second parameter is necessary to interpret at text as humorous: an opposition of scripts. Raskin's (1985:108) definition of opposition is as follows: "two linguistic entities whose meaning are opposite only within a particular discourse and solely for the purpose of this discourse". Following Raskin (1985), all scripts oppositions fall into three high level (abstract) oppositions: actual vs. non-actual; possible vs. impossible; normal vs. abnormal.

Example (21) may now serve to illustrate the theory outlined above:

(21) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Sono veramente PRONTI…per prendere in giro la nazione.*
'They are truly READY…to make fun of the nation.'

The tweet in (2) instantiates a Concrete Script Opposition at the textual level: PRONTI A GOVERNARE (READY TO GOVERN) vs. READY TO MOCK (NOT READY TO GOVERN). These are complex scripts: READY TO GOVERN activates scripts such as COMPETENCE, ABILITY, SERIOUSNESS, whereas READY TO MOCK activates scripts such as DECEPTION, INCOMPETENCE, MOCKERY. This opposition is specific and exclusive to this text. In addition,

[24] The literature on these pragmatic phenomena is extensive. Therefore, I refer the reader to the following works. For the notion of presupposition see Sbisà (2007), Stalnaker (2002), and Domaneschi (2014). For implicatures see Grice (1975), Levinson (1983), and Lombardi Vallauri (2019).

this opposition can be traced back to a more abstract one: ACTUAL (they are not ready to govern) vs. NON-ACTUAL (they are ready to govern). Interestingly, the presence of humor is marked by the presence of the capitalization (see *PRONTI*, 'READY') and the several full stops, which thus function as contextualization cues.

The concrete application of this theory to an Italian tweet demonstrates that SSTH is not specific to English, nor specific of jokes, although it was elaborated analyzing a corpus of jokes. This is allegedly one of the main shortcomings of SSTH argued for by revisionist approaches. According to them, SSTH is a theory of the text-type English/American joke. However, regarding to the languages, SSTH has been successfully applied to several languages, such as Russian, Polish, Chinese, and African languages (Attardo 1994).

Against this background, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the SSTH and incongruity theories. As pointed out by Attardo & Raskin (2017), these theoretical formulations must be kept separate, although there are certain points of overlap. Attardo and Raskin (2017) observe that, at a logical level, the SSTH precedes incongruity theories, since a definition of incongruity is only possible on semantic–pragmatic grounds. In this sense, incongruity theories may be said to presuppose the logical models and concepts introduced by the SSTH.

3.3.2 The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

The GTVH, discussed in Attardo & Raskin (1991) and Attardo (1994), is a revision and an updating of SSTH. It is first necessary to clarify the use of the adjective "general". This adjective has been employed because the theory may account for any type of humorous text and any types of humorous phenomena. For example, Attardo (2001) applies GTVH to different types of text, regardless of the length. This justifies my application to political tweets, as one should not assume that a textual type not analyzed in Attardo and Raskin (1991) or in Attardo (2001) cannot subsequently be taken into consideration.

Moreover, GTVH is a linguistic theory that includes any level of linguistical analysis, not only semantics, such as: pragmatics, textual linguistics, sociolinguistics and narratology.

The main enhancement is the introduction of five additional Knowledge Resources (KRs) to the Script Opposition, which was borrowed from SSTH. These knowledge resources are not a chaotic set of concepts, but rather a system organized along hierarchical and linear dimensions. Specifically, the KRs are a sort of toolbox, in which any knowledge resource is useful to fulfill a specific task and to analyze a specific aspect of humorous texts (Attardo 2020: 138). Thus, it is not mandatory to consider,

for any humorous text, all tools at the same time. The organization of Knowledge Resources is shown in the Figure 3:

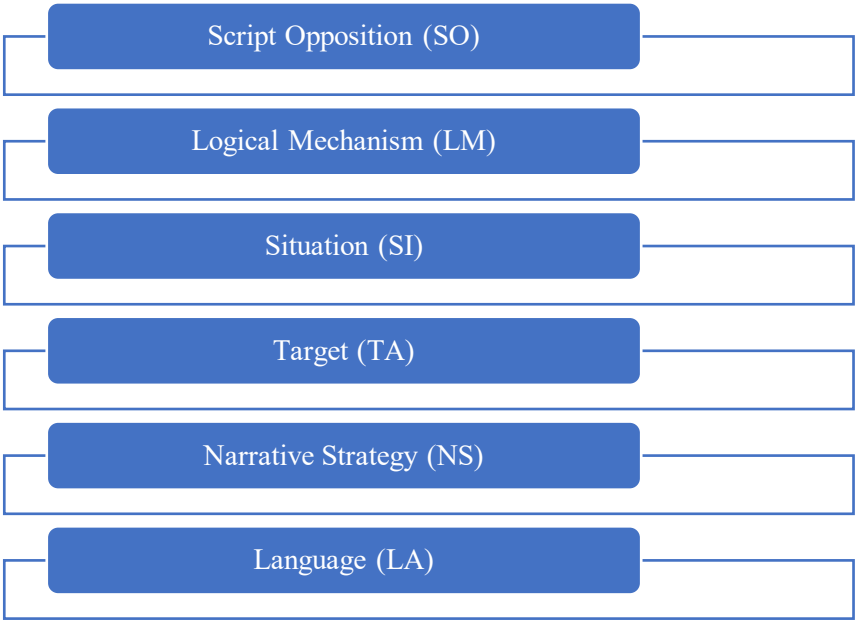

Figure 3: Hierarchical Organization of the Knowledge Resources (adapted from Attardo 1994: 227).

The knowledge resource Language (LA) regards the linguistic aspects of humorous texts (i.e., phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical). Specifically, it concerns the textual organization of the linguistic elements that trigger a humorous interpretation. Notably, the occurrence of humor markers (such as punctuation marks, emojis, discourse markers; see example (21)) in a text is rubricated under LA. Additionally, stylistic features are included in LA, such as the use of different and incongruous registers to produce humor. Considering all these aspects, Attardo (2020: 141) proposes to substitute the label "Language" with "Semiotic Strategy". This knowledge resource is also useful to explain the differences between puns (cf. verbal humor) and other types of humor (cf. referential humor). Indeed, LA, which encompasses all levels of linguistic analysis, may explain the phonological (e.g., homophony and homonymy), morphological and syntactic ambiguities that are exploited in puns. Specifically, ambiguity determines the main issues related to puns: the latter cannot be translated while non-punning humor can be (Attardo 1994: 220). Nevertheless, pun and non-punning humor cannot be distinguished based on SSTH: they both are essentially regarded as based on the same mechanisms, specifically, overlapping and script opposition.

The knowledge resource Narrative Strategy (NS) is related to the organization of the text from a narrative point of view. Clearly, any humorous text has a specific narrative structure, such as a narrative organization, a question-answer structure, or an instance encapsulated in a rhetorical question. Additionally, considering conversational humorous texts, NR accounts for the disposition

and organizations of conversational turns. Thus, Attardo (2020: 142) pinpoints how is probably better to use the expression "Textual Organization" to label this knowledge resource.

Target (TA) is an optional KR, and it specifies the butt of the humorous text (Attardo 1994: 224). It is optional because texts that are not aggressive clearly do not have a target. Generally, targets are human (for example, in our study, politicians or other X'users) or institutions, beliefs, ideas, thoughts, abstract notions and so on. Notably, a distinction must be made between the target and the subject (hearer, speaker, or a third party) to whom the text is directed. Necessarily, humor is oriented toward a participant. The point is that if an aggression and an impolite attitude occur, the person whom the humor is oriented (e.g., humor oriented to the reader) becomes a target; if there is no aggression or impoliteness, there is no target. For example, a humorous tweet posted by a politician can be explicitly addressed to another politician (through the use of the @ symbol), if the tweet instantiated a form of aggressive humor, the politician mentioned is also the target of the text.

The situation (SI) of a humorous text is constituted by all the elements and events involved in such humorous text. According to Attardo (2020: 147), the SI is "the KR that describes the environments in which the events of the joke (cf. or of other types of humorous text) take place". Probably, SI is a sort of generic (mental) scenario that the text evokes for the reader(s)/hearer(s).

The knowledge resource Logical Mechanism (LM) is connected to the concept of incongruity resolution (see Section 3.2.3). Briefly, LM explains the logical way in which the two scripts are activated together. It is also possible that the resolution is not complete but just partial and/or uncomplete. LMs can be very different in different humorous texts, and they may have different degrees of complexity from juxtapositions to false analogies. Attardo et al. (2002) provide an exhaustive classification of LMs. However, as acknowledged by the authors themselves, LM is one of the most controversial and complex parameters of the GTVH. The knowledge resource Script Opposition (SO) and overlap have been previously defined in relation to SSTH (see Section 3.2.4). These definitions have not been modified by Attardo & Raskin (1991) and Attardo (1994). However, it must be emphasized that higher-level abstract oppositions constitute only a partial explanation.

Indeed, each humorous text realize these abstract oppositions into text-specific and concrete oppositions. This is an implementation brought about by GTVH. Additionally, Attardo et al. (2002) introduce an intermediate level that connects the concrete/textual opposition with the very abstract/higher level opposition. To provide an exhaustive explanation, I recall the definitions set out in Attardo (2020: 152): "each humorous text will instantiate one very abstract Script Opposition in a very concrete, text-specific opposition […]. There may be any number of intermediate scripts, increasingly abstract, bridging the distance between the scripts occurring in the text and the very abstract oppositions identified by Raskin".

Finally, the KRs may also explain the similarity between humorous texts. Two texts are more similar in direct proportion to the number of KRs they share. Conversely, they differ more when many of their KRs do not match. Furthermore, humorous texts differ the more different the KRs that are placed higher on the scale in Figure 3 are.

In what follows, I will apply the GTVH to an Italian political tweet. Indeed, GTVH has been applied to several textual types and to different languages (see Attardo 2020: 153-154 for a complete list of references).

(22) Deborah Serracchiani (PD): *Meloni smentisce Salvini: le sanzioni funzionano. Questa è la coalizione unita!*
'Meloni contradicts Salvini: sanctions are working. This is the united coalition!'

The language of (22) is standard Italian. The style employed in (22) appears to be overall homogeneous. Moreover, (22) contains no puns, as there are no ambiguities at the syntactic, morphological, or phonological level. The humor (22) in is triggered by the last sentence, which can be interpreted as a punch line. Indeed, punch lines tend to occupy the last position of the text (Attardo 1994). Interestingly, in (22) the exclamation mark may be interpreted as a cue of humor.

As for its Narrative Strategy, the text is made of two parts. In the former part (*Meloni smentisce Salvini: le sanzioni funzionano* 'Meloni contradicts Salvini: sanctions are working'), Serracchiani summarizes the issues affecting the Right Wing's coalition. This is a pseudo-quotation, which evokes a newspaper style. The latter part is the humorous sentence originally authored by Serracchiani, which makes sense only considering the former part.

The target is the Right-Wing coalition and, more specifically, Meloni (leader of FDI) and Matteo Salvini (leader of Lega). In (22) is, thus, instantiated an aggressive form of humor.

Concerning Situation, the context is the electoral campaign of August 2022. It is widely known that Serracchiani is a member of the Left-wing coalition and, so, a political opponent of the Right-Wing coalition including Meloni and Salvini.

The Logical Mechanism of (22) is juxtaposition (Attardo et al. 2002). The former sentence and the latter sentence activate different and incongruous scripts, which are brought together with the mechanism of juxtaposition. It may also be hypothesized that the irony in (22)—namely, that the coalition is anything but united—emerges from a deliberately false reasoning on the part of Serracchiani.

Let us now turn to Script Oppositions. The reality summarized in (22) is that Meloni contradicts Salvini; therefore, what emerges is opposition and lack of agreement. The script activated here is thus DIVISION/CONTRADICTION. By contrast, the latter part of the tweet activates the script UNITY/COHESION, which implies the absence of internal contradictions or conflicts. In both cases, these are abstract and complex scripts that, in turn, activate other scripts. The higher-level script opposition is represented by the opposition between the REAL (the coalition is divided) and NOT-REAL (the coalition is actually strong and unified).

Interestingly, the GTHV can account for the humor elicited by puns in greater detail than the SSTH, as it includes a KR for Language (LA). A concise definition of pun is reported in Attardo (2020: 178): "a pun is a textual occurrence in which a sequence of sounds must be interpreted with a formal reference to a second sequence of sounds, which may, but need not, be identical to the first sequence". See the example in (4) below:

(23) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Elettore, non fare Casini*
'Voter, don't make Casini/mistakes'

Indeed, by using the LA parameter, it is possible to observe the presence of homophony between *casini* ('mistakes'), script1, and *Casini* (last name of the Italian politician Pierferdinando Casini), script2. Clearly, the two senses co-occur in the text. Thus, the pun is based on linguistic phenomena (such as homophony) and focused on the signifier level of language (Attardo 2020: 176). Thus, (23) is to be interpreted as an invitation both not to make mistakes and not to vote for Casini. The two invitations coincide according to Sgarbi's perspective. In conclusion, puns are a particular type of humor and they are based, as other humorous phenomena, on overlap and scripts opposition.

3.3.3 GTVH and Register-based Humor

Registers are language varieties associated with a given situation, role or social aspect of the speaker's experience (Berruto 2019). Additionally, specific subject matters can be associated with specific registers. For example, the language of politics 2.0. has specific linguistic features, such as dysphemisms, dialectal elements, and inferential punctuation marks (see Section 1.3). Additionally, what speakers are talking about influences their choices at lexical, syntactic, prosodic, and textual levels. Notably, registers may be conceptualized in a statistical way: certain linguistic features tend to co-occur (are more statistically probable to emerge) in relation to certain contexts, subjects,

audience and so on. However, there is not a unique and universal accepted definition of register in relation to humor (Attardo 1994).

A first theoretically description of register-based humor is offered by Alexander (1984: 60): "selecting a lexeme or a phraseological unit from a different style level than the context would predict". However, as noted by Attardo (1994: 236), Alexander's analysis is only partial and does not use technical terminology. Let us now define register-based humor in GTVH's terms. According to GTVH, register-based humor may be defined as "humor caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers" (Attardo 1994: 230). First of all, it should be noted that, according to the GTVH, the connections between scripts are not identical. Some scripts are closer to each other and have shorter connections, while others are more distant and linked by more complex connections. Whenever a script is activated, both the closer and the less-related scripts are also activated. The existence of long-distance links between scripts explains the association between a communicative context, a genre, or a situation and the lexical material most frequently used to discuss it. For instance, the use of sports-related vocabulary may trigger the activation of the SOCCER script. Register variation is thus based precisely on the weak activation of long-distance scripts ("scripts weakly activate distant scripts," Attardo 1994: 252). Consider now, in detail, the example proposed by Attardo (1994) concerning the lexemes "doggie" and "dog". These lexemes pertain to different registers: "doggie" is related with baby talk or motherese; "dog" is related with a standard variety of English directed to adults. Thus, these words create respectively associations or weak links to the scripts CHILD and ADULT. Additionally, "doggie" evokes scripts such as NURSING, BABYSITTING, and other situations related to childhood. Thus, register-based humor may be defined as the co-occurring activation of two or more scripts that weakly activate some other scripts, among which there are at least two opposite scripts. For example, if an aggressive wolf attack me and I scream "Could you call back your doggie?", I create an opposition between the script CHILD, activated by the lexeme "doggie", and the scripts DANGER and ATTACK, evoked by the context. This is in line with Partington (2006)'s analysis that also considers as cases of register-based humor also situations where the event and the situation clash with the language used to described it. Additionally, as this example shows, it is sufficient that some small portions of the text, sometimes just one word, pertain to a noticeably different register to obtain a potentially humorous clash.

Recently, computational approaches have been developed to detect and analyze register-based forms of humor. For example, Venour et al. (2011) adopt a methodology whereby words are located in a multi-dimensional space, and incongruity between words should correspond to a relatively large

distance between those words within said space. The distance in the space is calculated considering the frequency in which words occur in different types of corpora.

Interestingly, what has been observed for register-clash is also valid for code-switching, in particular when there is a co-occurrence of a standard variety of language and a dialect or a regional variety of the standard language. Specifically, Attardo (2020: 310) argues that dialects, in general, are connected with humor, as there is a more or less implicit devaluation of dialects that makes them suitable to non-serious/playful uses of the language.[25] These are, therefore, linguistic codes appropriate for non-serious use of language. Moreover, these codes also carry a strong identity value for the speakers who employ them (Berruto & Cerruti 2019), and their use in humorous contexts may also serve to reinforce cohesion between speakers and hearers, based on a shared repertoire of linguistic resources.

In what follows, the tweets in (24) contains a case of register-based humor triggered by the contrast between two different styles, while the tweet in (25) involves the use of a non-standard regional variety of Italian.

(24) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Siamo tutti felici @EnricoLetta che ti stia divertendo con questo tuo giochino rosso o nero. https://t.co/xr7NczNYE*
'We are all happy @EnricoLetta that you're having fun with this red or black game of yours. https://t.co/xr7NczNYE'

In (24), the register used by Calenda is incongruous with the context and the target of the text (that is, Enrico Letta). The diminutive form and the expression of happiness activate the CHILD script, which is inappropriate given the political scenario and Letta's political role, which evokes the ADULT script. Given this opposition, Calenda's stylistic choices generate humor, while at same time denigrating Letta by implicitly comparing him to a child. Moreover, there is also an explicit comparison between Letta's electoral campaign (based on the contrast between red and black) and a sort of childish game.

(25) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Daje forte. #ItaliaSulSerio https://t.co/oyfSyZbyWG*
'Come on hard. #ItaliaSulSerio https://t.co/oyfSyZbyWG'

[25] Dialects or regional varieties of Italian activate several cultural-biased stereotypes. For example, Southern dialects have low prestige and are generally stigmatized (De Pascale & Marzo 2016).

In (25), an expression typical of the Lazio regional variety is used (i.e., *Daje*). This expression could be considered incongruous with the political context in which it occurs, with Calenda's role and status, and with the topic addressed in the link (that is, the use of European funds for the development of Southern Italy). Notably, clashes of register or code are generally considered contextual cues or markers of humor, and more specifically of irony. Thus, a challenge arises in distinguishing between register incongruity as an autonomous type of humor and as a marker of the speaker's humorous intention. I will explore this aspect in more detail in Section 8.4.5 on humor markers.

3.4 Pragmatics of humor

From the previous paragraph is clear that humor has a significant pragmatic component. A common misconception is that SSTH does not include a pragmatic component. However, Raskin (1985) includes in his theory a pragmatic level.[26] Indeed, the concept of script includes speaker's world knowledge and encyclopedic information (it lies on the semantics-pragmatics continuum). Addtionally, Raskin (1985) argues about how humor is based on violation of the Grice's Cooperative Principle and of the four Maxims (Quality, Quantity, Manner, Relation) in which CP is articulated (Grice 1975). Considering this violation, Raskin (1985) conceptualizes humor as a non-bona-fide mode of communication, opposed to a serious and bona-fide mode.

3.4.1 Is humor a flout or a violation?

It is widespread that humor determines a violation of the Grice's CP. The CP is articulated in four Maxims ("they are instances of CP", Attardo 2017). In this regard, Attardo (1994: 272-273) argues how humorous texts may violate all the four Maxims established by Grice and that it constitutes a genuine violation (hat is to say, a deliberate non-observance of the Maxims). In this regard, it should be noted that Grice (1975, 1989) establish a difference between flouting or exploiting the Maxims or violate them. i.e., the speakers fail to conform to the prescriptions of Cooperative Principle. By contrast, in the case of flouting the Maxims, the violation is overt, which enables the recipient to infer that while one Maxim has been violated, another (or others) is still being obeyed. Substantially, from Grice's point of view the flouts are done openly (i.e., there is a mutual knowledge between speaker and hearers that the speaker is violating of one or more maxims), whereas violations are covert.

[26] It is clear that the use of the term "Semantic" in the name of the theory may facilitate a misinterpretation. Nevertheless, the SSTH (and, consequently, the GTVH) incorporates pragmatics within the domain of semantics. This pertains to an extended notion of Semantics.

Thus, flouts are said to exploit Maxims (Grice 1989: 30). From Grice's point of view the flouts are done openly, whereas violations are covert.

Evidence that this constitutes a genuine violation lies in the fact that humorous texts—like other texts involving violations—mislead the recipient by suggesting one interpretation which, upon the activation of a second script, requires a reinterpretation of the text and a redefinition of the information it conveys. Moreover, the violation of a single Maxim is sufficient to constitute non-observance of the CP (Attardo 2017: 176). However, there have been a few attempts to claim that humor is not a genuine violation of the Grice's CP, either by claiming that the violation is merely mentioned, or attributed to a character in the text (Sperber &Wilson 1986). In this way, it is possible to account for the apparent paradox of humorous texts, namely that they involve a violation of the principles of the Cooperative Principle while the text nevertheless remains cooperative (i.e., its vehicles information and may be understood by the hearers/readers). The greatest efforts to demonstrate that humorous texts do not entail a genuine violation of the Maxims have been made particularly within the framework of Relevance Theory (see Yus 2017 for a detailed discussion of the analysis of humor within Relevance Theory). Interestingly, a new analysis has been recently discussed by Goatly (2012). Goatly (2012) intends humor as a short-term violation (a particular type of flout). However, the violation/non-observance is not a flout: it is not recognized at the time of first processing, which means it is not blatant and evident and hence fails the central test for flouts. Thus, humorous text may generate implicatures because the hearer is deceived by the speaker's violation and takes it as truthful and sufficiently relevant but those implicatures are not just the normal ones that a serious non-deceptive utterance would have produced. Specifically, it is difficult to understand what implicatures triggered by the violation would be: the hearer may derive only vague inferences ("some of the violations lead to no intended meaning at all"; Attardo 2020: 165). This vagueness of humorous inferences has been acknowledged in a recent study by Mannaioli (2025), which specifically focuses on the indeterminacy of ironic utterances. Thus, the implicatures generated by humorous deviations of the CP are different in comparison to standard implicatures, implicatures that flouts generate outside of humor.

Finally, analyzing the violations of CP, Attardo (1999) argues that the violations follow the Least Disruption Principle (LDP). LDP is essentially governed by the following parameter: minimize your violations of the CP. This Principle establishes that it is better to keep the violation short as possible. Indeed, if the violation is extended, and consequently more complex, they may lose the motivation to engage in the interaction. Recent studies demonstrate that the violation of CP is limited and occupies small portions of the text. For example, in relation to political discourse, Tsakona (2011)

demonstrates that ironical sequences, during Greek parliament discussions, tend to not exceed the three utterances. Also, Ruiz Gurillo (2009) pinpoints how ironical conversational sequences occupy a single conversational turn. However, especially in conversations with friends and in peculiar type of texts (such as texts based on jocular mockery), there are long humorous sequences, because the hearers respond to the humorous turn adopting the same mode or supporting the humorous performed by the speakers. In this way, return to the serious mode (or *bona fide* mode) is delayed.

3.4.2. Humor and Irony

Let us now examine, from a pragmatic perspective, one particular type of humor (Dynel 2009), namely irony. It is worth recalling that humor is the umbrella term for this phenomenon, not the other way around.

Irony is often described as saying the opposite of what one actually thinks (e.g., Burgers et al. 2012). Such a characterization would imply a violation of Grice's (1975) Maxim of Quality.[27] However, Attardo (2000a, 2020) has shown that the violation of any Gricean maxim can give rise to irony. Consider, for example, the exclamation *It seems to be drizzling* uttered during a violent storm: this can be regarded as an ironic expression on the basis of a violation of the Maxim of Quantity. This example also illustrates that irony is triggered by an opposition, which—as noted—is the main feature of humorous texts. There is a clear opposition between two scenarios and conceptual frames (between "raining storm" and "drizzle"). Yet, as Attardo (2000a) points out, for an utterance to be genuinely ironic this opposition must also be perceived as contextually relevant and inappropriate with respect to the situation of utterance. Inappropriateness can be conceived as a mismatch with what we presuppose should occur in a given situation (Attardo 2000a). Thus, when a speaker says It seems to be drizzling in the midst of a tempest, we must assume that the statement is both inappropriate and, at the same time, related to the context and intended to convey a specific attitude. Based on these assumptions, I can infer—by "repairing" the violation—that the speaker is expressing annoyance and highlighting the unexpectedness of the event. According to Attardo (2001), this perception of inappropriateness persists even after the violation has been resolved, and it is precisely this lingering tension that generates the humorous effect.

Considering communicative functions, irony can be aggressive as in (26), i.e., negative irony. Note that the context is one in which Salvini criticized numerous political choices of Letta

[27] Attardo (2020:388) provides the following definition: "a form of implicature in which the speaker utters a sentence *X* while implying something different, often opposite (*not-X*). to what the statement's meaning is".

(irony's target). In other cases, irony has positive and affiliative implications, namely: positive irony (see (27)).[28]

(26) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *5 marzo. Bravo Enrico, non ne sbagli una.*
'March 5th. Well done Enrico, you never get it wrong.

(27) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *La "cattiva influenza" di Salvini preoccupa l'ex presidente della Commissione Europea?*
'Does Salvini's "negative influence" worry the former European Commission president?

In (27) Salvini actually implies a positive evaluation of his own work. Note in this case also the presence of the quotation marks which mark Salvini's ironic intent.[29] For the markers of humor and irony, see Section 8.4. The existence of genuine positive irony has recently been called into question by Dynel (2018). The main argument rests on the rarity of such forms—beyond *ad hoc* examples—and on the observation that many instances do not convey merely a positive connotation. Because they often contain linguistically untruthful negative elements, recipients may nonetheless perceive aggression or impoliteness. From a terminological standpoint, it should also be noted that many cases of negative irony are frequently labeled and analyzed as sarcasm (Attardo 2020: 168–169). As we shall see, certain manifestations of both negative and so-called positive irony converge with the phenomena of mock-politeness and mock-impoliteness, insofar as they involve linguistic forms associated with politeness (e.g., the use of *Bravo*, 'Well done') in (26) or with impoliteness. Irony can therefore be conceived as a macro-category to which other phenomena are "subordinated". In Section 9, I will examine some cases of mock-politeness, which, if interpreted as forms of positive irony, refute Dynel's (2018) position, as they are real and not *ad hoc* examples. Furthermore, the rare occurrence of the phenomenon does not seem to be a valid reason to deny its existence or reduce it to a myth.

[28] Attardo (2020: 388) argues how: "irony can also be positive, i.e., it expresses a negative judgment to imply a positive one".
[29] In this respect, it is a case similar to negative echoic irony (i.e., irony that negatively echoes someone's words). For further information on echoic irony, see Sperber (1984) and Attardo (2000a).

3.4.3 Humor as a non-bone-fide communicative mode

Basically, humorous texts present a paradox: they exemplify non-cooperative behavior (based on the violation of the CP) and yet they make perfect sense, convey information, and are correctly interpreted by recipients. Consequently, there is no perception of genuine non-cooperativeness on the part of the audience. Moreover, such texts are never regarded as forms of lying. As Raskin (1985) noted, humor—unlike lying (a form of non-bona-fide mode of communication)—is cooperative and can be likened to play. To answer to this problem, Raskin (1985: 89) introduced the term "bona-fide" (Latin's expression for "good faith", BF) to indicate the ordinary information-conveying mode of language and the term non-bona-fide (NBF), to indicate other modes of communication not entirely aimed to information-conveying, along the lines of Austin (1962: 22) definition of humor as a "parasitic mode". Specifically, NBF communicative mode is applied to utterances that do not follow Grice's CP (Raskin 1985: 100); instead, BF communication are utterances that follow the CP. According (1985) to Raskin, BF and NBF represent the two extremes of a continuum along which texts can be placed: at one end, a university-level engineering manual exemplifies the highest degree of BF, while at the other, a (more or less) explicit lie occupies the NBF pole. In this continuum, therefore, humor would be positioned closer to the NBF pole. Specifically, Raskin (1985) argued that humorous texts operate according to a distinct set of maxims, parallel to the standard ones. For instance, with respect to the Maxim of Quality, speakers are not committed to the truth of their utterances. In essence, Raskin (1985) elaborates a humor-specific CP: a principle of cooperation for humorous-telling, which essentially relativizes each maxim to the context of humorous mode. This would constitute a genuine violation of Grice's Maxims, since the speaker follows a different Cooperative Principle. By contrast, in cases of flouting, the speaker violates one Maxim while clearly adhering to another.

In any case, Raskin (1985), while considering humorous texts as NBF communicative mode, does not deny that they are nonetheless capable of conveying information and concepts. In this regard, Attardo (1993, 1994), entering this debate, argues that humorous texts convey, in any case:

1. all presupposed information and active stereotypes within the texts;
2. all meta-messages, i.e., information about the user, their knowledge, and communicative goals;
3. all inferences and (conversational and/or conventional) implicatures activated by the text remain active and can convey information.

It can, therefore, be concluded that "the hearer and the speaker know that otherwise NBF text can be used to convey a serious meaning" (Attardo 1994: 328). Additionally, jokes and other types of

humorous text can perform various communicative functions (e.g., aggressive, defensive, self-defeating, etc.). Substantially, all social functions of humor remain active. It is also noteworthy that the recipient and/or target of a humorous text reacts to the serious part of the message. This serves as another evidence that participants in the communicative exchange treat the message as serious.

3.4.4 The importance of the implicit in humorous texts

Clearly, implicit elements—such as presuppositions, implicatures, and vagueness (see Lombardi Vallauri 2019 for an exhaustive description in relation to Italian political discourse and marketing)—play a central role in the construction of humorous texts. Notably, this mode of communication relies on a delicate balance between explicit and implicit content. In particular, the mechanisms (incongruity and script oppositions) that constitute the humorous text would be disrupted if everything were made explicit; thus, some information must necessarily remain unsaid. Additionally, the presence of implicit elements also enhances the surprise and unexpectedness of the humorous text. This explains why the element that introduces the second script or second sense is generally not presented in the initial stages of the text: introducing it too early would undermine the suddenness of the humor, while likely reducing the effectiveness of the humorous act. The proper balance between explicit and implicit elements also contributes to the sophistication of the humor. For example, Ferrar (1993: 244) pinpoints how the dynamic between implicit and explicit content is the crucial factor in the creation of a humorous text. Specifically, sophisticated humor is characterized by the need for complex logical processing, requiring multiple inferential steps (Attardo 1994). Another type of sophisticated humor occurs when the humorous effect is activated by the presence of scripts known only to a limited number of individuals. Thus, intertextuality (Gordon 2023) may also be analyzed as a form of sophistication, as the references it contains are not necessarily accessible to all recipients, particularly when they involve allusive references whose sources are not explicitly mentioned.

3.4.5 Principal pragmatics properties of humor

In summary, these are effects that the speaker may wish to achieve directly through the use of humorous texts. The main properties, as described in Attardo (1994) and Attardo (2020), are: decomittment, defunctionalization, and social management. I will now examine them in detail.

The fundamental element of the decommitment function is that the meaning conveyed by humorous texts is retractable, so according to Brown & Levinson (1987: 229): “the speaker may back off from his or her utterance without losing face”. So, the crucial aspect lies in the deniability, or retractability, inherent in the humorous mode (“the speaker can deny responsibility for what he or she is saying”, Attardo 1994: 327). In particular, the speaker has the option of denying the truthfulness

of their statements by attributing them to the humorous mode. Consequently, the speaker does not have to bear the consequences of their assertions. In this way, the speaker can distance themselves—either explicitly or implicitly—from the content conveyed humorously. Consider, for example, the use of phrases such as *"*I did not mean it seriously*,"* *"*I am just joking,*"* or *"*I am only kidding*"* after mitigating the negative effects of the humorous behavior. Another aspect related to decommitment is probing, whereby the speaker can introduce potentially aggressive content that might threaten the target's face ("issues that might be too threatening to be handled overtly," Attardo 1994: 326) through humor rather than through serious discourse, thereby gauging the reactions of the target and the audience.To sum up, decommitment provides the opportunity to retract "any of the implicatures and even inferences that would normally be carried by said utterance in context" (Attardo 2020: 273).

Defunctionalization concerns the possibility of a loss of meaning in some humorous texts. Particularly nonsense humor or puns may cause a "defunctionalization" of language. Essentially, defunctionalized language refers to language employed not for the primary purpose of transmitting information, but for playful goal. Indeed, according to Apter (1989: 134), humor is a paratelic activity, in contrast to "telic" activities that are goal-oriented. Substantially, defunctionalization occurs whenever language is employed for purposes other than the straightforward transmission of information. In such cases, the focus shifts from conveying propositional content to creating a playful or entertaining effect, highlighting the flexibility of language and its capacity to generate enjoyment, surprise, or aesthetic appreciation. Defunctionalization thus represents a crucial dimension of humor (see Release Theories in Section 3.2.1), illustrating how linguistic structures can be re-framed to achieve effects beyond conventional communicative goals.

Humor serves an important role in social management by facilitating both disaffiliation and affiliation (Attardo 1994). It is a strategic tool for creating in-groups and out-groups: the use of humor automatically generates a bonding experience for the in-group, allowing members to share in the experience of mirth, while simultaneously excluding the out-group. In the context of political discourse, the out-group typically consists of political opponents (and rival parties) and their supporters. Specifically, by generating a sense of camaraderie among those who share the humorous experience, humor strengthens social cohesion within the in-group. This effect is particularly pronounced when the speaker and their audience or supporters engage with the same humorous text. Moreover, humor is instrumental in establishing common ground and enhancing audience involvement. It not only reinforces group identity but also promotes engagement and attention. These aspects of humor will be further explored in Section 4 and Section 9, where humor communicative functions are discussed in detail.

4. Humor Functions

4.1 Humour functions: affiliative, aggressive, defensive, self-deprecating, self-enhancing humor

In the previous sections (see Section 3.3), the role of humor as a social management strategy was briefly discussed, that is, as a tool with significant social impact used to strengthen or build relationships within one's ingroup and to distance or delineate boundaries with the outgroup. In order to examine the functions of humor in political discourse, and in political humorous tweets, I adopt a functionalist perspective. In sum, functional theory posits that messages serve a functional purpose, most often realized through the advertising strategies of acclaim, attack, and defense. It is appropriate to use functional theory to examine campaign messages because "such discourse is intended as a means of accomplishing a goal: winning the election" (Benoit 2007: 32). The purpose and focus of the messages are intended to persuade voters. The purpose and focus of the messages are at the core of functional theory because both these concepts bolster the under-standing of political campaign strategies.

The choice of well-defined communicative contexts is a fundamental feature of functionalist approaches, together with the selection of authentic data spontaneously produced by the speaker. Indeed, in order to fully understand the functions of humor, it is necessary to reflect on the socio-cultural context in which the humorous instance was produced (Schnurr & Plester 2017: 314). This aspect is particularly crucial for the process of identifying potentially humorous instances. The aim of these functionalist approaches is to contribute to developing a comprehensive and general view of the complexity and multifunctionality of humor. To achieve this, a functionalist approach must necessarily combine both qualitative (requiring an in-depth analysis of the use of humor and the context in which it occurs) and quantitative research perspectives. Among the limitations identified by Schnurr & Plester (2017: 318) for this line of research, there are two aspects that the present study helps to address. First, the lack of studies focusing on the functions of humor in online environments and dealing with written texts; second, the scarcity of studies analyzing data in languages other than English. The latter point aims at achieving a deeper understanding of the functioning of humor in general.

Additionally, the functionalist analytical perspective has led to a radical recognition of humor as a complex and ambiguous strategy. From this standpoint, functionalist approaches have highlighted how a single humorous instance may simultaneously perform multiple functions ("humor can never be reduced to one single function, meaning or purpose", Kuipers 2011: 41–42). This

comprehensive view has progressively displaced simplistic understandings of humor that emphasize only its positive functions. Instead, humor is often used as a tool to attack or disrupt (Schnurr & Plester 2017: 310). Nevertheless, as Koivukoski et al. (2025) observe, few studies examine the distinctive content features of these humor styles —let alone across the party spectrum. To address this gap, I analyze recurrent patterns within the categories of aggressive, affiliative, and self-deprecating humor, with particular attention to how candidates employ these styles both to legitimize themselves and their ideas, and to delegitimize their political opponents and their behavior.

In the following paragraphs, I analyze in detail the five different types of humor identified in the literature. For each, I provide not only a general description but also an examination of their psychological correlates, i.e., connections with personality traits and differences related to social variables (specifically age and gender). Furthermore, I discuss their potential persuasive implications in political communication. These sections constitute the theoretical and methodological premises for Sections 8.1 and 8.2., where the results of the annotation process are analyzed.

Two final clarifications are needed. First of all, from a theoretical perspective, the five functions can be grouped into two macro-categories: maladaptive types of humor (aggressive humor and self-deprecating humor) and adaptive styles (affiliative, defensive, self-enhancing). Additionally, in the discussion that follows, I do not distinguish between primary and secondary effects, that is, between the effects the writer aims to achieve through humorous instances and those that are reached indirectly, beyond the writer's intentions. It should be emphasized that this approach does not require assuming that different humor functions are consciously selected by the writer.

4.1.1 Aggressive humor

The most ancient theories on humor (cf. Plato, Aristotle) focus on the aggressive side of humor (see Attardo 1994 for an exhaustive explanation). As noted by Attardo (1994: 50), aggressive humor is also known as exclusive humor (see also Zillmann 1983). This is essentially a form of humor employed at the expense and at the detriment of one's relationships with others: this is the dark side of humor, or the use of humor as a weapon (Hempelmann 2025). Aggressive humor can be understood as a form of verbal face-threatening act, namely: the self is enhanced by denigrating, disparaging, excessively teasing, or ridiculing others (Geen & Donnerstein 1983). It is directed at a specific target, whose main flaws are attacked or ridiculed. For this reason, it is a strategy for conveying impoliteness. On the other hand, this strategy serves to strengthen ingroup cohesion at the expense of the outgroup: it is no coincidence that aggressive humor is highly valued when politicians share the same political orientation (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2023).

Similar to forms of self-defeating humor, aggressive humor is negatively associated with well-being and may represent a more detrimental and potentially unhealthy use of humor. It also encompasses using humor to manipulate others through an implied threat of ridicule (Janes & Olson 2000). More broadly, it denotes the tendency to employ humor without considering its potential impact on others (e.g., sexist or racist humor) and includes compulsive expressions of humor, in which individuals find it difficult to resist the impulse to make jokes that are likely to harm or alienate others.

Considering psychological aspects, this form of humor is positively related to hostility and anger, while being negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Moreover, aggressive humor is negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness – both generally unrelated to affiliative and self-enhancing humor.

With regard to gender differences, Martin et al. (2003) find that males report a much greater tendency to engage in aggressive forms of humor such as sarcasm, ridicule, and ‘‘put-down’’ humor. The is consistent with previous evidence suggesting that men engage in more potentially maladaptive forms of humor than women (Martin & Kuiper 1999). On the other hand, femininity is negatively related to aggressive and self-defeating humor. Additionally, the negative masculinity dimension (unmitigated agency), which reflects hostility, competitiveness, and cynicism, is most strongly related to aggressive humor.[30]

Instead, in relation to age, Martin et al. (2003) argue how younger participants score higher on aggressive humor than older participants: older adults are generally less likely to use humor to disparage, ridicule, or manipulate others than adolescents. Similarly, Mendiburo-Seguel (2022) observes that “older politicians use less humor overall, and specifically use less aggressive and self-deprecating humor”. Greengross (2013) points to a progressive weakening of this communicative mode with age, as well as to a reduced reliance on aggression once a certain social status has been achieved.

4.1.2 Aggressivity and Impoliteness

“Aggression” constitutes a fundamental part in the definition of impoliteness, which is to be understood as a form of communication that is conflictive, verbally aggressive, and generally non-socially-cooperative (Bousflied 2008: 75). Moreover, the concept of aggression overlaps with that of attack outlined in Garassino et al. (2019, 2022) in relation to Italian political discourse: politicians attack someone/a fellow politician or express criticism towards some specific issue.

[30] The same is noted by Greengross & Miller (2008).

Considering the dataset analyzed in this study, aggressivity and impoliteness are employed strategically. In particular, impoliteness serves a specific, goal-orientated function. The concept of strategic impoliteness is also clearly connected with the notion of intention (more technically attributing intention), i.e., the reconstructed plausible intention of the speaker to be impolite. Recently — especially in Culpeper (2011) — the relationship between impoliteness and intentionality has been problematized and regarded as non-essential: an utterance may be considered impolite regardless of the speaker's intentions.

At linguistic level, Culpeper (2005, 2011) essentially distinguishes two super-strategies for conveying impoliteness and performing face-threatening acts. He differentiates between on-record impoliteness and off-record impoliteness. These two strategies are not mutually exclusive and may coexist within the same speech act, functioning as overarching strategies to enact impoliteness. Ideally, they can be conceived as points along a continuum.

On-record strategies of impoliteness are linguistic strategies that explicitly attack the interlocutor's face by denying their expected face wants, needs, or rights. Within this category fall the so-called "conventionalized impolite formulae" (Culpeper 2011: 135–136), which are characterized by a relatively low degree of creativity. These include insults, negative expressive, pointed criticism, dismissals, message enforcers, silencers, and the overt verbalization of prejudices or stereotypes. Such expressions and strategies are impolite across virtually any type of context (Culpeper 2011: 137) and are therefore particularly resistant to mitigation, making it difficult for speakers to disown or disclaim responsibility for them. Harris (2001) describes them as "intentional and explicitly face-threatening (or face-enhancing) acts". Example (28) shows a tweet with a form of on-record strategies: Calenda addresses a user who had criticized him using personalized negative assertions to negatively impact the user's behavior.

(28) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *@utente1 Che modo stupido e illiberale di discutere.*
'@user1 What a stupid and illiberal way to argue.'

By contrast, off-record impoliteness strategies are face-threatening acts conveyed indirectly, through implicatures or presuppositions. These forms of impoliteness allow for a greater degree of deniability and provide stronger protection for the speaker's own face. Consequently, indirect or implicit strategies tend to be more frequent than explicit ones (Culpeper 2011). From a linguistic perspective, they are particularly interesting to study, displaying a higher degree of creativity and

stylistic markedness. This category is itself internally diverse, and can be further classified into form-driven, convention-driven, and context-driven strategies.

Form-driven impoliteness are cases of implicational or inferential impoliteness: the strategy relies on the violation of one or more of Grice's Maxims. Such instances involve "implicit messages which are triggered by the formal surface or semantics of a behavior and which have negative consequences for certain individuals" (Culpeper 2011: 156–157). Within this category, presuppositions are likewise subsumed, as Culpeper (2011) notes, since they can serve as a linguistic device for transmitting backgrounded information in ways that compromise or threaten the target's face. In Culpeper's (2011) framework, these behaviors can be subsumed under different labels, such as *insinuation, snide remarks,* or *innuendo.* Tweet (29) shows an example of *form-driven impoliteness.*

(29) Francesco Lollobrigida (FDI): *Noi non siamo ricattabili*.
'We cannot be blackmailed.'

In (29), the statement cannot be considered sufficiently informative; Lollobrigida's real communicative goal lies in the implicature, which serves an attack function: namely, "the other parties are subject to blackmail". Note that Lollobrigida intentionally does not specify which parties he is referring to.

Convention-driven impoliteness is a form of impoliteness that combines within the same utterance linguistic elements oriented towards a polite interpretation with features that instead point towards an impolite interpretation. The central aspect here is the mismatch, which can be either internal or external. Internal mismatches encompass verbal formula clashes, that is, the coexistence of expressions conveying politeness alongside linguistic elements that signal impoliteness, producing a direct conflict between formulae. They also include mismatches between linguistic features and non-linguistic cues such as visual, oral, or prosodic signals. Such mixed messages appear to exacerbate the degree of impoliteness (Culpeper 2011). By contrast, external mismatches occur between the expressed behavior and the surrounding context (typically, "the polite context contrasts with the current impolite communicative context", Culpeper 2011: 179). For the examples, I refer to Sections 9 and 10, where I discuss in greater detail one specific form of convention-driven impoliteness, namely mock-politeness, which is grounded in either internal or external mismatch and shows deep connections with humor.

Finally, context-driven impoliteness refers to situations where "impoliteness interpretation is primarily driven by the strong expectations flowing from the context" (Culpeper 2011: 180). These are cases in which a particular behavior is expected but is deliberately absent or withheld.

The distinction between more on-record and more off-record forms becomes particularly relevant in terms of perceived offense, as well as the sophistication and consequent appreciation of the humorous instance. Regarding the perception of offense, "it is departures from the conventional […] that led to higher evaluations of impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011: 194). For example, in cases of mismatches, the high conventionality of the polite formulas employed can actually increase the perception of impoliteness. It is worth noting that the perspective of Brown & Levinson (1978) follows a different trajectory, as they argue that the more indirectly impoliteness is conveyed, the less offense is taken. However, as Culpeper (2011: 194) emphasizes, the directness or indirectness of an impolite act must be evaluated in relation to the power dynamics between speaker and target. For instance, in high-power relationships, directness is not perceived as impolite, whereas in contexts where the speaker holds lower social status, impoliteness is strongly perceived regardless of whether it is performed implicitly or explicitly.

Aggressive humorous instances span the entire continuum of on-record and off-record strategies outlined above, encompassing both more explicit and more implicit forms. In any case, what matters is the coexistence of two opposing scripts. In this regard, see examples (30) and (31). Even a series of insults, such as those in (30), are likely to be perceived as potentially amusing and pleasurable by Bonelli's ingroup, in contrast to the target or his supporters. Bonelli explicitly calls the user to whom the tweet is addressed as rude and ignorant (note the invitation to study).

(30) Angello Bonelli (AVS): @utente1 *Guardi lei è un cafone, secondo io non sono un parlamentare, terzo non risponde nel merito perché non è in grado. Studi che anche alla sua età avanzata le farà bene.*
'@user1 Look, you are a jerk. Secondly, I'm not a member of parliament. Thirdly, you are not answering the question because you're not capable of it. Studying will still do you good, even at her advanced age.'

On the other hand, in (31) impoliteness is triggered by a mismatch between co-textual elements. Considering the co-text (which describes a conflictual political situation), the formula of politeness *che coalizione unita e coesa* ('a united and cohesive coalition') is to be reinterpreted as insincere and implying its opposite.

(31) Michele Gubitosa (M5S): *Oggi scopriamo da #Letta che l'alleanza con i Verdi non è per governare, ma solo elettorale. E in risposta arriva #Bonelli che lo attacca. Che coalizione unita e coesa!*

Today we learn from #Letta that the alliance with the Greens isn't for governing, but merely for electoral purposes. And in response, #Bonelli comes attacking him. What a united and cohesive coalition!

4.1.3 Self-deprecating humor

Self-deprecating humor involves excessively disparaging humor, attempts to amuse others by doing or saying funny things at one's own expense as a means of ingratiating oneself or gaining approval, allowing oneself to be the ''butt'' of others humor, and laughing along with others when being ridiculed or disparaged. Specifically, this type of humor is a peculiar form of aggressiveness where the target has to be the (writing) politician himself.

This dimension is also hypothesized to involve the use of humor as a form of defensive denial, or the tendency to engage in humorous behavior as a means of hiding one's underlying negative feelings, or avoiding dealing constructively with problems (Kubie 1971). Although individuals who are high on this humor dimension may be seen as quite witty or amusing, there is an element of emotional neediness, avoidance, and low self-esteem underlying their use of humor (Fabrizi & Pollio 1987). This style of humor is expected to be positively related to neuroticism and negative emotions such as depression and anxiety, and negatively related to relationship satisfaction, psychological well-being, and self-esteem. In addition, the use of this type of humor not only indicates that an individual recognizes and is willing to openly acknowledge personal shortcomings but it also conveys social and cognitive intelligence through the ability to elicit laughter (Greengross & Miller 2008).

It is useful to pinpoint that there is a strong relationship between self-deprecating humor and the aggressive one: both of them may be conceptualized as maladaptive styles of humor. These types of humor are thus negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness – concepts that are both generally unrelated to affiliative and self-enhancing humor (Martin et al. 2003). In addition, Martin et al. (2003) note that individuals who frequently employ aggressive humor also tend to make greater use of self-deprecating humor and underline how aggressive and self-defeating humor may represent more detrimental and potentially unhealthy uses of humor.

With respect to gender, both aggressive and self-defeating humor show positive correlations with unmitigated masculinity and negative correlations with femininity ("males also reported a greater tendency to engage in the excessively self-disparaging", Martin et al. 2003). This correlation,

as previously discussed, is a unifying feature across all maladaptive humor styles. Nevertheless, more recent researches offer a more nuanced picture. Sirigatti et al. (2014), for instance, report no significant gender differences in the use of affiliative, self-enhancing, or self-deprecating humor (see also Edwards & Martin 2010).

Considering age, a comparable pattern emerges: both affiliative and self-enhancing humor show no statistically significant variations across different age groups, suggesting that these humor styles may be more stable and less sensitive to socio-demographic factors than their maladaptive counterparts.

A wide range of studies, differing in methodology and scope, have examined the rhetorical and argumentative benefits of self-deprecating humor in political discourse, as well as its persuasive impact on the electorate. Findings diverge sharply: while some analyses highlight the positive features of this strategy, others emphasize its drawbacks or note its relative infrequency in empirical data. As Bippus (2007) observes, the perception that self-deprecating humor is more appropriate, helpful, and effective than other-deprecating humor has become something of a prevailing stereotype among political communication experts — including politicians themselves. This interpretive tradition ultimately rests on the assumption that "a candidate's humor is seen as more effective when it is directed at himself as compared to his opponent" (Bippus 2007: 116).

Moreover, among the positive outcomes associated with this humor style, one of the most frequently observed is its capacity to enhance empathy and identification between the audience and the speaker (Meyer 2000). Politicians who demonstrate the ability to gently mock their own flaws and avoid taking themselves too seriously are often perceived as more approachable, likable, and less threatening (Vaillant 1977; Ziv 1984). In this sense, self-deprecating humor tends to function as a humanizing strategy, allowing candidates to appear more relatable and personable to the public (Krasner 2008).

Self-defeating humor also performs a defensive function (Kubie 1971), insofar as accusations or stereotypes attributed by opponents are downplayed, neutralized, or, in some cases, reframed as strengths of the speaker. Vaillant (1977) aptly describes this mechanism as a "mature defense mechanism". Beyond its defensive role, self-deprecation may also serve to assert superiority — thus connecting it to the Superiority Theory of Humor, which, as discussed earlier, is often associated with aggressive forms of humor. In an electoral context, such superiority is closely linked to social prestige and a heightened sense of self-confidence, both of which self-deprecating humor contributes to creating and reinforcing. Indeed, only individuals with high levels of prestige and confidence can afford to mock themselves publicly, thereby engaging in a form of "conspicuous consumption". At

the same time, self-deprecating tweets may signal a candidate's ability and courage to laugh at their own shortcomings in the public arena, thereby enhancing and amplifying their social prestige.

These positive aspects and the persuasive potential of self-deprecating humor have also been acknowledged by politicians themselves. In particular, Yarwood (2001) highlights how American politicians interviewed in his study emphasize the usefulness of this communicative strategy in neutralizing criticism. As Senator Simpson noted, "the best humor is the one you tell on yourself" (Yarwood 2001: 364). By appropriating and reframing criticisms and stereotypes directed against them, politicians can effectively undermine and nullify rhetorical devices employed by their opponents' propaganda. This perception finds empirical support in Baumgartner (2007), who demonstrates that the use of self-deprecating humor increases the likelihood of garnering votes and political support. Similarly, Young & Lukk (2017) identify both the high frequency and the electoral advantages of this strategy, particularly through their analysis of its use in talk shows during the primaries.

On the other hand, Stewart (2011) offers a more cautious interpretation. While confirming that self-deprecating humor is consistently rated more favorably than other-deprecating humor — meaning that participants tend to evaluate it more positively — he argues that this effect is not absolute. Its impact depends on the pre-existing preferences of citizens and voters: self-deprecation appears less effective in persuading undecided voters and functions more as a strategy to reinforce the convictions of those already leaning toward a candidate. The persuasive force of self-deprecating humor also varies depending on the identity of the speaker. Stewart's (2011) study reveals, for instance, that Barack Obama's use of this strategy proves significantly more effective than John McCain's.

Other studies, as noted above, have highlighted the limited persuasive impact of self-deprecating humor, often observing that its frequency within analyzed corpora is relatively low. Bippus (2007) examines the influence of self-directed versus other-directed humor used by fictional U.S. congressional candidates during the 2004 election cycle. He finds no significant differences in participants' ratings of humor quality between self-directed and opponent-directed humor, and furthermore observes a lack of "interaction between candidate affiliation and respondent affiliation" (Bippus 2007: 114). Additionally, this suggests that, at least during the 2004 election cycle, in-group/out-group humor did not play a significant role: in fact, Republicans in the study sometimes preferred humor from the Democratic candidate over that of the Republican candidate. Similar findings regarding the limited influence on public opinion are reported by Becker (2012). Stewart

(2012) further qualifies the effectiveness of this strategy in political discourse, noting that it is underrepresented relative to other humor functions. Quantitative analysis revealed that humorous comments predominantly targeted the out-group or competitors for the presidential candidacy, with nearly two-thirds of all laughter-inducing comments directed at these targets. In contrast, only about one in ten humorous comments focused on the candidate themselves. Thus, Stewart (2012) concludes that, *"*at least within competitive settings such as political party primary debates, self-deprecatory humor might not serve the candidates' needs to differentiate themselves through humor". A similar low frequency of occurrences is observed by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022), in a corpus of tweets published by Chilean politicians during the electoral campaign. This study (see also Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2023), finds no substantial differences in audience evaluations between self-deprecating tweets and humorous self-deprecating tweets. The only observed difference is that humorous self-deprecating tweets elicited higher assessments of the candidate's self-confidence, while other dimensions — such as agreeableness, closeness, and status — are unaffected: the evaluation of these three attributes did not differ between humorous and non-humorous self-deprecating tweets.

In my view, there appears to be a potential flaw in Stewart's (2012) reasoning. It is not necessarily the case that the low prevalence of self-deprecating humor reflects a limited persuasive impact of this communicative strategy in differentiating between in-group and out-group audiences. The limited use of this humor style may instead be attributable to two main factors. First, its limited occurrence could reflect a lack of confidence in the level of prestige a candidate perceives themselves to hold, and, and thus in their ability to engage in "conspicuous consumption" by publicly making fun of themselves (Miller 2009; Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). In other words, while self-deprecating humor has persuasive potential, it requires performance by politicians with high social status and established prestige. Second, self-defeating humor is inherently perceived as potentially detrimental to well-being when overused, as it involves self-denigration and the suppression of one's own emotional needs (Martin et al. 2003). Excessive use could therefore backfire, undermining the perceived competence or image of the politician. This consideration leads to the hypothesis that lower-tier politicians, or those with less established leadership, may be more inclined to employ self-deprecating humor than well-established, high-status politicians. For these individuals, the potential risk to face or reputation is lower if the humorous intent is not fully recognized by the audience. It is important to note, however, that self-deprecating humor is generally much more attractive than other-deprecating humor when used by high-status potential mates, regardless of gender, whereas low-status individuals do not appear to derive the same attractiveness benefit from self-directed humor over other-directed humor. Finally, variations observed across different studies may also be influenced by cultural and

political contexts. In some cultural settings, self-deprecating humor may be more socially acceptable and effective, whereas in others it may be less tolerated or less persuasive.

4.1.4 Self-enhancing humor

The primary aim of self-enhancing humor is to enhance the self in a manner that is both tolerant and non-detrimental to others (Martin et al. 2003). Greengross and Miller (2008) describe it as a fundamentally positive form of humor. Under this label, we include both instances in which praise is directed by the speaker toward themselves or their political party, as well as cases in which praise is directed toward others (praise-to-other according to Garassino et al. 2022).

This humor function reflects a generally humorous outlook on life, a tendency to be frequently amused by life's incongruities, and the ability to maintain a humorous perspective even under stress or adversity (Kuiper et al.1993). It is closely related to coping humor (Martin 1996), perspective-taking humor (Lefcourt et al. 1995), and the use of humor as an emotion regulation or coping strategy (Martin et al. 1993). This aligns most closely with the Freudian conception of humor, narrowly defined as a healthy defense mechanism that allows individuals to mitigate negative emotions, while maintaining a realistic perspective on potentially aversive situations. It is important to distinguish this form of humor from aggressive humor, which also elevates the speaker's social face but does so at the expense of denigrating the opponent. This observation highlights that a certain degree of overlap between humor categories is, to some extent, inevitable. For example, Garassino et al. (2022) show that the functions of attack and stance-taking can overlap, particularly in relation to presuppositions and implicatures

In comparison to affiliative humor, self-enhancing humor has a more intrapsychic rather than interpersonal focus and is therefore not expected to be as strongly associated with extraversion. Given its emphasis on regulating negative emotions through humorous perspective-taking, this dimension is hypothesized to be negatively related to negative affective states such as depression and anxiety, and more broadly to neuroticism. Several studies have demonstrated that adaptive humor styles — both affiliative and self-enhancing— are positively associated with various indicators of psychological well-being, including openness to experience, self-esteem, intimacy, relationship satisfaction, mature and effective coping strategies, positive self-evaluative standards, subjective happiness, and primarily positive moods and emotions (Sirigatti 2014). Additionally, self-enhancing humor has been found to correlate positively with cheerfulness and negatively with negative mood, though it shows no significant relationship with seriousness. Another statistically significant association links this communicative function to extraversion, openness, and optimism (Martin et al.

2003: 67). Consequently, the tendency to maintain a humorous perspective on life and to regulate one's emotions through humor — particularly self-enhancing humor — appears to reflect an agentic dimension, embodying personality traits such as independence, self-sufficiency, and self-confidence. Individuals who use humor to strengthen interpersonal relationships are also likely to engage in self-enhancing humor (Martin et al. 2003). Conversely, negative femininity (unmitigated communion) is found to be negatively associated with self-enhancing humor, and to a lesser extent with affiliative humor, suggesting that those who employ these two presumably benign forms of humor are less likely to be overly submissive, servile, or easily hurt.

Considering gender and age, self-enhancing humor scale reveals non-significant effects for both gender and age. This finding is corroborated by Sirigatti (2014), who also notes that the datasets analyzed are often unbalanced with respect to these parameters. According to Martin et al. (2003), a positive correlation emerges only for older women compared to younger women.

From a rhetorical perspective, it is evident that this pragmatic function can potentially be face-threatening for the speaker: explicit praise may risk damaging the speaker's face. For this reason, Garassino et al. (2022) investigated the ways in which this function is often conveyed implicitly. Similarly, the use of humor may make the deployment of this communicative function more acceptable. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this function is generally less compromising and problematic than the attack function; consequently, the use of implicit strategies — particularly implicatures— is less necessary.[31]

4.1.5 Affiliative Humor

Affiliative humor is essentially a non-hostile and tolerant use of humor that affirms both self and others and is presumed to enhance interpersonal cohesion and attraction. This style of humor is expected to be positively associated with extraversion — arguably the most statistically significant personality trait — as well as cheerfulness, self-esteem, intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and predominantly positive moods and emotions (Martin et al. 2003). Research shows that politicians who frequently employ affiliative humor are often the same individuals who also make greater use of self-enhancing humor (Martin et al. 2003).

It should be noted that, in some cases, mild aggressiveness or playful teasing within affiliative humor can serve to reinforce ingroup solidarity and cohesion ("Also, affiliative humor may involve

[31] A general interest in politics appears to be positively associated with the use of affiliative and self-enhancing humor styles (Krefer et al. 2021).

gentle teasing or playfully poking fun at others within one's own group, which could be seen as containing some mildly aggressive elements", Martin et al. 2003: 53). Indeed, there may be elements of aggressiveness in affiliative humor (e.g., friendly teasing), which cannot be entirely disentangled from more hostile uses of humor. Functional analyses of humor in these cases are therefore more complex, as such humor often exhibits considerable ambiguity. This link between affiliative and mild aggressiveness is further supported by findings that individuals who frequently joke and laugh with others to enhance relationships also show some tendency to engage in sarcastic or hostile humor (Martin et al. 2003: 59). These aspects will be explored in Section 10, focusing on mock impoliteness.

Regarding socio-demographic variables such as gender and age, males overall score slightly higher on affiliative humor than females. Additionally, younger participants demonstrate significantly higher affiliative humor scores than older participants, with older adults generally engaging less in joking and laughing with others — possibly due to reduced participation in social activities. As for gender differences across humor styles, males reporte higher use of aggressive humor than females, whereas no significant gender differences are found in affiliative, self-enhancing, or self-defeating humor (Sirigatti et al. 2014).

From a rhetorical and persuasive perspective, Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2023) find that aggressive tweets receive lower likeability scores compared to affiliative or self-deprecating humor, whether presented in serious or humorous contexts. Affiliative humor appears to have a broadly positive impact regardless of the political affiliation of the sender, and it may represent the most effective way for politicians to make a favorable impression on recipients, including those outside their ingroup: "affiliative humor seems to be a good way for politicians to generate a good impression on people of any political affiliation" (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2023: 42). These affiliative posts emphasize positive emotions and reveal the personal side of candidates, making them more relatable (Coleman et al. 2009; Meyer 2000). In this regard, affiliative humor aligns closely with the definition of humor as a form of social play, fostering camaraderie between speaker and audience (Attardo 1994: 324). Moreover, the tendency to laugh and joke with others is particularly associated with higher levels of intimacy in relationships. Finally, affiliative humor also positively influences perceptions of the speaker's social status (Martin et al. 2003).

4.1.6 Defensive Humor

Defensive humor has been largely absent from studies aimed at classifying the communicative functions of humor. Nonetheless, defending oneself against accusations from others constitutes a key communicative goal that politicians often pursue through their discourse. It should be noted that in

many cases humor may function as an automatic response akin to a defense mechanism (Vaillant 1977). In such instances, the use of humor is less a deliberate, strategic choice and more an instinctive, reactive response. This communicative mode is aligned with the pragmatic "defensive" function examined by Cominetti et al. (2022, 2024) in relation to linguistic implicatures, vagueness, and presuppositions, and has also been incorporated into the annotation process of the IMPAQTS corpus.

From a functional perspective, defense can be understood as conveying one's righteousness and non-guilt (Cominetti et al. 2022). For the purposes of this study, it is essential to specify that this is carried out humorously. Accordingly, the definition most suitable for our research is: humorously discrediting a position, accusation, or attack made by a political opponent or rival party. In some cases, this function overlaps with the aggressive humor function. In such instances, the attack on the opponent's face becomes more legitimized and socially acceptable: "does not make it polite, but it can to a certain extent make impoliteness more legitimate and socially acceptable" (Kebrat-Orecchioni 2013: 40). This function of humor can, to some extent, be aligned with what Kienpointer (1997) describes as reactive rudeness (or reactive impoliteness), conceptualized as a form of counter-aggression. Alternatively, this function may be equated with "coercive impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011), i.e., offensive language deliberately used to compel (potential) critics to withhold their future criticisms. As Culpeper (2011: 252) notes, coercive impoliteness "seeks a realignment of values between the producer and the target such that the producer benefits or has their current benefits reinforced or protected". By launching counterattacks against individuals who have criticized their policies, governments may avoid engaging with the substantive points of the criticism, continue implementing policies that may not be beneficial to the protesters, and potentially discourage people from voicing their concerns in the future. Generally, this type of impoliteness is considered legitimate only because of its position within a speech act sequence (Culpeper 2011: 206); that is, it occurs in response to a prior face-threatening act (FTA), as showed in (32):

(32) Andrea Orlando (PD): *Candidano un gilet giallo in Puglia, una "filo Lukashenko" in Campania, un filosofo nemico giurato di Draghi in Sardegna. Però l'accordo tecnico con Verdi e Si avrebbe irrimediabilmente compromesso la nettezza della proposta.*
'They are fielding a Yellow Vest candidate in Puglia, a "pro-Lukashenko" candidate in Campania, and a philosopher who is a sworn enemy of Draghi in Sardinia. However, the technical agreement with the Verdi and Si would have irreparably compromised the clarity of the proposal.'

In this instance, both aggressive and defensive functions are present. The humor is triggered by the paradox between the list of politically outrageous actions carried out by others and the perception of

the political alliance between the Greens, SI, and the Democratic Party as problematic: a juxtaposition of what is abnormal but presented as normal and what is normal but presented as abnormal. The communicative goal of this paradox is to discredit or minimize the accusations made by opposing forces, portraying them as having engaged in reckless political actions, thereby protecting the Democratic Party's operations. Notably, Orlando employs overstatements to highlight the paradox and criticize rival politicians (e.g., portraying them as supporters of Lukashenko's dictatorial government in Belarus). It is also worth noting the use of indefinite-description presuppositions (Lombardi Vallauri et al. 2021), as *un gilet giallo in Puglia* ('a yellow vest candidate in Puglia').[32] This strategy allows Orlando to shield his own face from directly making accusations against other political figures.

[32] The 'Gilets Jaunes' (Yellow Vests) were a grassroots protest movement that emerged in France in late 2018, initially sparked by rising fuel taxes and broader concerns over the cost of living. The movement, named after the high-visibility vests worn by participant.

5. Humor and Political Discourse

In this study, I will focus exclusively on political humor, essentially understood as humor produced and performed by (Italian) politicians. Thus, situate my work within a prevailing scholarly trend that has largely overlooked the reactions and production of humor by citizen voters.
However, the premise is that humor is not regarded as a prototypical feature of political and media discourse. So, it means that the use of humor is not random but fulfills specific functions. This aspect is also evidenced by the fact that political humorous statements end to attract press coverage and consequently generate a media resonance. This type of attraction often also serves to distract the press and voters from the main important issues.

A further significant element is that political humor exhibits coherence links to serious political discourse, without a contextual knowledge on political issues, political humor cannot be correctly interpreted and, consequently, appreciated (Tsakona & Popa 2011).[33] However, such links are not exactly intertextual, but rather contra-textual. The difference between the two kinds of links could be summarized as follows: while intertextual links speak of the same things in more or less the same way and aim at building consensus by projecting certain views as "dominant" and "non-negotiable", contra-textual links. i.e., "echoing the words and ideological stances of the opponent with a view to fulfilling a mocking and discrediting function" (Vasta 2004: 112). More specifically, political humor brings to the surface the inconsistencies and inadequacy of political decisions and acts, and the incompetence of political leaders, i.e., it reveals the contradictions within political reality. Specifically, humor – precisely because it does not directly inform on political facts but rather it functions as a vehicle for commentary and critique of them – does not have a prototypical transactional function (i.e., transmission of information) limited to (see Raskin 2008: 27).

The socio-political context is important not only for understanding political humor but also influences the extent to which political humor can be freely exercised. It is clear that in modern liberal democracies, this is an entirely unrestricted domain, subject to no form of regulation.

All political forces, both members of Opposition or of the Government, can be targets and authors of humorous texts without distinction. In this regard, it is interesting to note how, for example, in the former Soviet Republics humor and laughter were strictly banned from the parliament under Communist rule (Tsakona & Popa 2011: 14). Thus, the mere fact that politicians themselves employ forms of humor, even if often with aggressive intentions and aimed at affirming their own superiority, may be considered a characteristic of democratic governments. This does not, however, exclude the

[33] This aspect is particularly significant given the role of the annotators in this project, i.e., a lack of knowledge of the political debate can compromise the task of humor recognition and annotation.

possibility that humor may also be used to persuade antidemocratic purposes, e.g., silencing and marginalizing political rivals.

One of the most debated issues in humor research relates to the impact of humor on politics and to its influence on public opinion. This debate reflects a more problematic question regarding the persuasive power of political humor (see Introduction). With regard to this issue, three positions can be distinguished. For some scholars (e.g., Raskin 1985, 2008) humor would have a power limited to the sole confirmation of stereotypes/concepts already widely diffused in society; for others (e.g., Billig 2005, Perez 2022) humor has the genuine capacity to affect reality and exert extralinguistic influence on recipients. However, Raskin (1985) does not deny that humorous texts can convey serious information (see Section 3.3.2), but he contends that these neither produce significant real-world effects nor possess the capacity to alter or influence reality. These considerations, therefore, clearly limits the persuasive effects of humor in political discourse and commercial advertising. To support this view, Raskin (2008) notes that politicians tend to use humor primarily for emphasis or to insult their adversaries, rather than engaging in serious political activities or implementing socially significant strategies. Finally, using a culinary metaphor, Raskin (2008) argues that humor is just icing on the cake. Oring (2008) echoes the same position in his analysis of political cartoons, noting that even someone seriously offended by the cartoons would not contend that their impact is comparable to that of major conflicts. A different perspective is offered by Perez (2022) regarding the impact of aggressive and stereotypical humor in jokes, suggesting that a humorous mode may facilitate the dissemination of derogatory content, rendering it more socially acceptable and less open to criticism. This raises the question of whether the repetition of stereotypes in jokes—which correlates with racism and aggressiveness—should be attributed to humor itself or to the underlying concepts being conveyed.

A more moderate view is supported by Mulkay (1988). Essentially, the potential effect of political humor depends on the recipient of the humorous text. The recipient can, in fact, discard the serious implications of the message, interpreting the text as pure humor, or attend to the social consequences and "real" implications of the humorous text. In this latter case, we are confronted with forms of impure or applied humor (Mulkay 1988: 67). These serious implications acquire significance only when embedded within real-world social contexts and clearly defined social frameworks (Mulkay 1988: 177). According to Tsakona & Popa (2011: 16), scientific approaches to humor must adopt a vision of humor as close as possible to applied humor, otherwise it would be a phenomenon not fully worthy of the attention of academic studies.

The debate under examination arises directly from these theoretical considerations of Raskin (1985) and Mulkay (1988) on the status of humor. For Raskin (1985), humor is a non-bona fide form of communication, from which serious or true information is generally not expected (in accordance with the Maxim of Quality). In a similar vein, Mulkay (1988) distinguishes between the serious and the humorous mode. Thus, in the humorous mode coherence and true sensitivity are much less restrictive. However, Mulkay (1988) observes that there is no a priori definition between humorous or serious mode: the interlocutors decide each time whether they wish to enter the humorous mode or not.

The debate is consistent with the perspective of humor as a subordinate mode (Mulkay 1988: 217–219), a position also addressed by Raskin (2008).[34] From Mulkay's perspective, humor functions as a communicative mode that is essentially derivative, involving the reinterpretation of communicative modules and linguistic resources drawn from serious discourse. For instance, in his analysis of sexual and political humor, Mulkay (1988) observes that the resources of humor are frequently repurposed to pursue serious objectives, while also emphasizing that humor primarily operates as a form of play rather than as a direct engagement with practical realities. The real-world impact of purely humorous material is therefore limited, as it only gains significance when related to ongoing criticism or confrontation within the serious realm (Mulkay 1988: 177). Subordination, however, should not be interpreted as inferiority or as limiting the use of humor. Thus, Mulkay (1988) acknowledges that political concepts are often conveyed through comic or humorous means, including visual forms, and he does not exclude the possibility of serious implications or real-world effects of humor.

A further limitation of the humorous mode—and a sign of its subordination, according to Mulkay (1988)—is attributable to a certain 'apathy' in the production of political humor, characterized by the repetition of specific clichés and stereotypes, which leads to stagnation and limits its real-world impact and potential persuasive effects. In political discourse, what typically occurs is the reproduction of concepts, forms, and attitudes already present and widespread in external reality, transposed into a different communicative scenario. Substantially, political humorous texts present a paradox since elements of laughter/comic and seriousness coexist ("a sum of real and ludicrous", in Mulkay 1988: 203). Political cartoons, for example, are integrated into serious political discourse (1988: 204), and recipients must always be able to make a serious reading by linking the cartoon to the broader political context in which it participates (1988: 197). The same principle applies to sitcoms, where topics are not original but rather familiar concepts and themes presented in a skillfully humorous manner. Indeed, political tweets, such as those analyzed in this study, are not detached from social and real-world contexts; they are embedded within well-defined communicative and

[34] This could be also derived from a treatment of the humorous mode in contrast to the serious mode. Something similar to the relationship between Impoliteness and Politeness.

social frameworks. Only through this embedding do they acquire an active social potential, reinforcing the idea that humor can effectively perform serious work only within reasonably well-defined social contexts (Mulkay 1988: 177).

5. 1 Humor and online/offline political discourses

Sections 5.1 provides a synthesis of the principal contributions to the study of political discourse in both offline and online contexts. This section is likewise significant for situating the present study within a broad and well-established research tradition. Two aspects are particularly salient in these sections. The first point is that the studies differ in their research methodologies; the second point is that the studies investigate different political contexts and employ different types of data. Thus, notwithstanding their considerable diversity, it is possible to offer a comprehensive and nuanced account of the role humor plays in political discourse. Finally, I review studies investigating or experimentally assessing the persuasive impact of humor. However, the focus of our research is not to empirically investigate the potential persuasive effects of humorous tweets. Noteworthy, studies concerning specific humor's functions are analyzed in Section 4.

Raskin (1985) dedicates a full chapter to political jokes, emphasizing both their widespread appeal and their importance for the study of humor. Raskin's study reveals that one of the dominant functions of humor (if not the most important one) is critique based on the comparison between how politics is conducted and how it should be conducted (scrip opposition: REAL vs. NON-REAL).,

Compared to Raskin's studies from the 1980s, scholarly interest in political jokes declined. However, this approach was also adopted by Tsakona (2017), who analyzed a large corpus of canned jokes (596 texts) referring to the Greek financial crisis.

Meyer (1990) focused on Ronald Reagan rhetorical strategies to enhance his appeal. Generally, it emerged that Reagan employed humor to defuse tension during debates to criticize opponents' authority without appearing overly harsh or negative; while simultaneously fostering positive responses from his audiences. Thus, the function of humor is aggressive in nature, aiming to assert the superiority of the speaker. The emerging insight is that humor can be regarded as a persuasive strategy, aptly illustrated by the title of the paper: "A Politician's Velvet Weapon".

Crawford (1999) proposed an analysis of humor in the 1992 presidential debates. She collected videotapes of the three debates between George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot, identifying individual differences in both the use and frequency of humor. Across all three debates,

Ross Perot employed humor significantly more often than either Clinton or Bush. This finding suggests that underdog candidates (e.g., R. Perot) tend to employ humor more frequently as a strategy to gain visibility and enhance their status. Overall, the study demonstrates that humor played a marginal and limited role in the debates and was relatively infrequent. However, Crawford's analysis offers little insight into how the candidates employed humor to support their arguments when it arose, nor does it provide historical context concerning the use of humor in presidential debates.

Yarwood (2001) adopted a notably peculiar methodology, drawing on testimonies from American politicians serving in Congress, diversified by geographical background, historical period, leadership roles, and prestige. The primary aim is to identify, through the politicians' own words, the benefits and functions of humor in political discourse. Among the positive aspects highlighted is humor's capacity to enhance audience attention: "it increases receptivity and fosters a greater sense of participation and engagement" (Yarwood 2001: 362–363). Humor allows politicians to continue addressing serious topics while presenting them in a more accessible and less confrontational manner. This dynamic can also be observed in online political discourse, where the monotony and constant flow of posts and tweets may be disrupted by the strategic use of humorous texts, effectively framing the online campaign as an extended narrative.

The study also emphasizes humor's connection to aggression and the ridicule of others. Politicians themselves tend to view such forms of humor as less sophisticated and inferior, yet they acknowledge certain strategic advantages. In particular, ridicule can target opponents who challenge their positions and, when skillfully applied, can undermine the leadership of rival politicians ("bring down a formidable adversary", Yarwood 2011: 368). Moreover, humor allows for indirect attacks, enabling politicians to criticize opponents without explicit attacks, thereby benefiting from the deresponsibilization that humor affords.

Additionally, as will be discussed in Section 8.2, self-targeted humor is recognized for its significant potential, as it enables the speaker to disarm or neutralize an otherwise hostile audience. Overall, this approach highlights both the pragmatic and strategic dimensions of humor, illustrating how it can simultaneously entertain, engage, and subtly influence political dynamics. In any case, the politicians' own accounts reveal the potential risks associated with the incorrect or inappropriate use of humor.

In particular, there is concern that voters may attend exclusively to the humorous aspect of a message, overlooking its substantive content. This could also entail the risk of not being perceived as serious politicians. In this regard, humor is recognized as a "marked" communicative mode and is, therefore, used more sporadically. Moreover, politicians emphasize the need for specific communicative skills to perform humor effectively. In particular, it is necessary to select the appropriate context, timing,

and topics, and to appear credible when employing this mode of communication. For this reason, politicians who are skilled in using humor constitute a kind of elite and are consequently more easily identifiable and recognizable. One negative consequence of using humor without the proper skills is that the speaker's communicative intentions may be misunderstood – a risk similar to the mismanagement of implicatures (Lombardi Vallauri 2019). Notably, it is impossible to predict the inferential processing of recipients, and it is uncertain who will actually read the message and how they will react to the presence of humor. Self-directed or self-deprecating humor is also potentially dangerous, as individuals who share the speaker's shortcomings may take offense at the highlighted aspects. Finally, the interviewed politicians appear to be attentive to the relationship between humor and gender, noting, for instance, certain stereotypes regarding women's ability to perform humor effectively in public (Yarwood 2001: 378).

Mueller (2011) analyzes parliamentary debates in Germany, noting that most instances did not display any clear humorous element, nor any script opposition (see Attardo & Raskin 1991), which would allow the responses to be interpreted as genuine humor. Overall, both amusement and laughter emerge as containing elements of aggressiveness and conciliation to varying degrees. The fundamental difference between laughter and amusement can be illustrated by contrasting "laughter and applause" with "amusement and applause": while the former can reliably be interpreted as ironic and denigratory, the latter indicates consensus between the speaker and (at least part of) the audience. Mueller (2011) also addresses the use of verbal humor and the role of script opposition triggered by shifts in linguistic register (see Section 3.3.6). However, within the context under examination, it is not always possible to draw a clear distinction between formal and informal styles. This aspect is important because it is an element that can also be observed in the data I have examined: the language used by politicians in tweets always oscillates between a formal and an informal register. Furthermore, as seen in Section 2.1, in contemporary Italian political discourse, certain linguistic features of informality have become standardized, i.e., they are perceived as normal and not incongruous (neither to the context nor to the co-text).

Finally, considering the functions of humor, Mueller's (2011) data from the German parliament, there seems to be an equal distribution between aggressive and amusing humor. Such a difference may be related to the fact that in the German parliament collaboration and consensus among parliamentarians in the form of political coalitions are more common than in the Greek one. Considering the data of this study, it is likely that the highly competitive and antagonistic context of the electoral campaign affects the functions associated with humor.

Rhea (2012) proposes a diachronic and a statistical-quantitative analysis on the American presidential debates from 1960 to 2008. It is important to point out that the definitions adopted to recognize or not humor do not make explicit reference to the linguistic theories developed by Raskin (1985) or Attardo & Raskin (1991). Quantitative analysis reveals that humor increased during the 1980s and 1990s, before beginning to decline in the 2000s, reaching its lowest point in 2008. In particular, the author recognizes a decisive role in the diffusion of humor by Ronald Reagan. Rhea (2012) identifies three factors contributing to a potential decline in the use of humor. The long-standing political success of Democrats, who generally use it less and do not consider it a reliable rhetorical strategy, is one of the main reasons. The author reflects, for example, on how Al Gore has a more rigid and introverted personal style than personalities like Ronald Reagan or George Bush. Furthermore, humorous interventions have recently been heavily criticized by media and the political specialized press. This prompted for example, Obama and his staff to not use humor in the 2008 American primary debates. Additionally, the decline in usage may be linked to recent periods of economic stagnation, military and social conflicts, that make the use of humor more complex. Considering this scenario, it may be deemed inappropriate for politicians to treat them humorously. Additionally, this study finds that candidates do not employ different types of humor as a communication strategy related to a specific coalition or to politician status. Generally, the most frequently used forms are those involving irony and sarcasm, aimed at ridiculing and undermining the opponent's position ("this use of sarcasm and ridicule highlights the power of humor in argument", Rhea 2012: 125).

Now, I focus on researches associated with Villy Tsakona and her research group (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece). These studies combine a qualitative methodology with a critical reflection on the sociolinguistic dimensions of humor—particularly the relationship between conversational participants and the functions (especially the aggressive one) that humor fulfills within discourse. Furthermore, an important aspect of these studies is to consider humor in relation to the textual genre – the theoretical paradigm is that of Textual Linguistics and Narratology – in which it is used, which also affects the communicative success of this communication modality. From a methodological standpoint, it should be noted that the studies discussed below explicitly adopt the General Theory of Verbal Humor as an analytical tool for identifying instances of humor. I now turn to examine five exemplary studies on political humor.

Tsakona (2009) analyzes data from the official proceedings of the Greek Parliament, focusing on two central political figures: the Greek Prime Minister and the opposition leader. The analysis

shows that parliamentary humor functions as a means of constructing and damaging participants' public image and political identity, while also serving as a tool for attacking opponents. The results do not differ from those reported by Harris (2001), that considers humor to be a means of ridiculing the opponent and threatening his/her positive face. Another interesting aspect to observe is that humor is used as a defensive weapon to divert attention from the more complex issues discussed during the debates and which directly involved the sampled politicians. However, the expectation of a serious mode of communication may turn against the humorist, undermining his or her efforts. In the case at hand, the humorous frame introduced was redirected against the speaker, resulting in accusations of frivolity and lack of political responsibility. However, as argued by Forabosco (2011: 362), it is likely that these judgments are influenced by pre-existing prejudices towards the politician, namely: the previous negative or positive consideration towards that politician affects the appreciation of that politician. Overall, the results suggest that what ultimately matters are not only the speaker's intentions and the hearer's expectations, but also contextual parameters and the constraints imposed by the genre. Notably, the less formal context (Sections 1 and 2) analyzed in the present study may reduce the expectation of a strictly serious communicative mode, thereby lessening the potentially negative impact of humor on the politician employing it.

Tsakona (2011) applies the GTVH methodology and relies on the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics – particularly considering the influence of language-use contexts and the social relationships between participants in the conversation. Tsakona (2011) investigates irony as a discursive resource Greek parliamentarians employ to fulfill their institutional roles and to negotiate verbal rules of conduct in highly institutionalized and confrontational debates. What emerges is a complex vision of humor, which allows the politician to manage the complexity of relationships within parliament. In addition to its aggressive function, humor also helps to maintain parliamentary protocol and also creates, even with forms of intertextual humor, cohesion with subsequent speeches. Moreover, the article also analyzes the reactions elicited by the use of ironic utterances. The results reveal that irony is considered a common and 'legitimate' discursive practice in the Greek parliament and is not generally negatively evaluated by Greek MPs. Such findings highlight the significance of contextual parameters for the sociolinguistic analysis of pragmatic phenomena and lead to a critical evaluation of those previous results which are based on the study of decontextualized and/or fictional ironical utterances and exchanges.

Tsakona (2013) focuses on the socio-pragmatic functions of punning which appears to be the most frequent form of humor Greek politicians produce in parliament. It focuses on the 2007 non-

confidence debates.[35] The qualitative analysis of the data shows that puns serve three main goals in parliamentary deliberation: they are used to attack and/or denigrate the opponents; to challenge them; and to indicate a friendly and affiliative atmosphere in the parliament. Overall, the puns analyzed predominantly serve an aggressive and a denigratory function; while the least represented function is that of solidarity or affiliation. Thus, puns are less frequently used to foster cohesion among parliamentarians or to highlight their shared experiences and roles

Additionally, it seems that the majority of puns come from PASOK, namely the major Opposition party which promoted the no-confidence debate. Therefore, the politicians' institutional role is correlated with the use of humorous forms. Moreover, Tsakona (2013) suggests that puns are used as a means of showing off verbal skills; i.e., parliamentarians try to project themselves as eloquent orators who are capable of outscoring their adversaries in a highly competitive context. In particular, puns are also employed to convey hostility in engaging, memorable, and creative ways. This creativity further enables politicians to capture the audience's attention.

Archakis & Villy Tsakona (2009) focuses on longer textual segments—humorous narrative texts—establishing connections with studies on storytelling and narrative performance. From this study emerges as politicians use humor to enhance their popularity, while simultaneously diverting the audience's attention from the substantive issues under discussion (Tsakona 2009). Additionally, this strategy also makes counter-arguments more difficult to formulate. The study also highlights how humor is employed as a strategy to convey an impression of informality and everydayness. Indeed, as noted by Carter (2004), humorous metaphors, hyperboles, and puns are also characteristic features of everyday language. Thus, parliamentarians transfer a common discursive practice in Greek culture from its prototypical oral and informal context to a communicative scenario tendentially dominated by non-narrative and serious discourse.

I now examine more recent studies that have focused on analyzing political humor in online communicative contexts (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), from a predominantly quantitative and experimental perspective. In particular, I analyze extensively studies by Borah (2016) and Mendiburo-Seguel and colleagues (2022, 2023, 2024)

Borah (2016) is a purely quantitative and sentiment analysis study, dedicated to the American political campaign on Facebook in both 2008 and 2012. The study, however, is not specifically dedicated to the study of humor and its functions. The findings from the emotional appeal variables

[35] In the results sections (e.g., Section 9) the puns identified in the examples will be appropriately discussed.

demonstrate differences in the use of campaign strategies among the candidates. Both John McCain and Mitt Romney's campaigns used fear and danger as the most common emotional appeal. Instead, Barack Obama's posts used humor and enthusiasm. Notably, 11,5% of all Facebook messages posted by Barack Obama contained humorous emotional content—compared with 3.1 percent for John McCain—but by 2012 humorous posts have risen to 21%. Specifically, Romney did not use any posts with humor. These data become even more noteworthy when compared with other contexts, where humorous postings are far less frequent. For instance, Jungherr (2014) shows that during the 2009 German federal elections the proportion of humorous messages ranged from only 0.1 to 0.6 %. During the 2016 Spanish electoral campaign, Lopez et al. (2017) observe that humor is least used content type by political parties and politicians on Twitter. Notably, however, Pablo Iglesias employed it in 5.9% t of his tweets, and one of these—a joke about his association with communism—became the most retweeted message of the entire election. Interestingly, considering Barack Obama's campaigns, the posts that showed enthusiasm and had an element of humor received the most "likes" and "shares". Moreover, it emerges that McCain and Romney generally use the posts to attack and contrast the actions of their political opponents, particularly Obama. The posts coded as fear and danger were all attacking the opponent. Thus, the cultural stereotype that aggression is more of a Republican strategy is confirmed. Instead, Obama uses fewer attack posts than the other two candidates. However, he tends to use more attack posts when he was a nonincumbent in 2008. Similarly, López-Meri et al. (2017) found that the attack function is especially evident in the profiles of parties in opposition to the government, which prioritized criticizing and discrediting the ruling administration.

Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) analyzed a corpus of 6,500 tweets published by 28 Chilean politicians during the election campaign. The corpus size is comparable to the one used here. The results from the annotation task are interesting and provide valuable insights for our study. However, the study does not explicitly reference a specific theory for discriminating humorous tweets, which negatively impacts the study's reproducibility. Furthermore, the study also identifies the communicative functions performed by humor in tweets. This aspect is interesting because it avoids considering humorous tweets as a uniform communicative category. Another possible limitation regarding the annotation of communicative functions: indeed, it is not explicitly stated whether a tweet with multiple forms of humor with different communicative functions (e.g., affiliative and aggressive functions) is annotated for the predominant function only, or for all functions present.

First of all, the analysis of the tweets shows that 7.0% of them had humorous intent: 5.2% were aggressive, 1.2% were affiliative and 0.2% were self-deprecating. More specifically, male

politicians used more humor than female politicians in general. Specifically, male politicians used more aggressive tweets than female politicians. In this regard, however, the unbalance of the data test should be noted: twenty-two male politicians and only five female politicians were sampled (see Section 6 for my Dataset). Considering age, older politicians used less humor overall and less aggressive humorous tweets. Regarding political affiliation, there were no differences between left-wing and right-wing politicians regarding the total use of humor and aggressive humor. Minimal and non-statistically significant differences are found for the use of affiliative humor. Similarly, Stewart (2011) noted that there are no significant differences between Republicans and Democrats regarding how they use humor focused on the in-group or out-group (Stewart 2011). Finally, the opposition group appears to use more aggressive humor than the majority/government party, regardless of which specific political affiliation is in charge ("when politicians are part of the opposition, they use more aggressive humor", Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022: 7). Similarly, opposition politicians tend to rely more heavily on implicit strategies to convey attacks and criticism (Garassino et al. 2022).

Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2023) uses the same humorous tweets to construct an experimental study with nearly 800 Chilean subjects. The goal is to compare serious tweets and humorous tweets to identify differences in appreciation. Furthermore, regarding the discursive functions of humor, the study tested the effectiveness of the functions (See Section 4) of humor by comparing them to the same discursive functions but performed in a serious manner. In terms of gender, no differences were observed in the evaluation of female and male politicians, with participants assessing humorous instances in a similar manner. Regarding political affiliation and the discursive functions of humor, the findings indicate that aggressive and self-deprecating humor were more highly rated when the politicians shared the same political orientation. In contrast, no interaction effect was observed for affiliative humor.

Regarding aggressiveness, aggressive humor appears to offer certain advantages over serious statements, as the politician is perceived as less socially incompetent. In both cases, however, aggressiveness affects perceptions of agreeableness and interpersonal competence. Moreover, the use of aggressiveness does not seem to improve evaluations of the politician in terms of status, intelligence, or self-confidence. This leads to the hypothesis that the preference for aggressive forms of humor is determined by the fact that it strengthens ingroup cohesion and increases the level of attention/attraction to the message due to the emotional pleasure associated with negative emotions, and does not depend on how the politician's personality traits are assessed. This would explain why aggressive humor is also the most frequently attested form of humor (see Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022). In this regard, Krefer et al. (2021), analyzing 452 adult citizens, note that humor expressing

superiority—particularly aggressive instances of humor—appears to have a stronger effect on liberals than on conservatives.

Regarding affiliative humor, both serious and humorous affiliative tweets yielded positive outcomes across all domains when compared to aggressive humor. Additionally, serious affiliative tweets were rated more positively in terms of interpersonal competence, suggesting that a serious tone may be preferable when attempting to convey this type of competence. A potential drawback of affiliative humor is that the sender's intentions may be misinterpreted, for example, being perceived as aggressive. Concerning self-deprecating humor, no significant differences were observed between the use of humorous or serious tweets for this function. Even when performed humorously, this function does not seem to affect perceptions of agreeableness or closeness. The persuasive effects of self-denigrating humor thus appear somewhat limited. The main distinction lies in the fact that humorous forms of self-attack tend to result in higher evaluations of the sender, at least in terms of self-confidence.

The same scholars (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2024) recently designed a new experimental study to test the persuasive effect of humor. In this study, they used videotapes with humorous sequences, intended for a group of experimental subjects, of two politicians belonging to opposing ideologies and coalitions. The most significant finding is that politicians' use of humor increased their likeability and the reported likelihood of being voted for, with emotions mediating this relationship. Indeed, emotions were crucial in this process, as there was little to no evidence of a direct effect of humor on voting probability. For example, in one observed candidate, the use of humor increased participants' likelihood of voting for them, as it reduced negative emotions toward the candidate among supporters of other coalitions. The most important assumption, claimed by the authors themselves (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2024: 8), is that the positive and negative emotions as key mediators in the relationship between politicians' humor and their likeability and vote probability. One caveat is that what seems to matter most in voting decisions is the ideology and political affiliation of the citizen/voter. In this regard, Bippus (2007), examining the influence of political affiliation on the perceived effectiveness of politicians' use of humor during the 2004 election cycle in USA, rejected the hypothesis that respondents would rate humor from a candidate of their own political affiliation more positively than that of a candidate from the opposing party. Paradoxically, both Democrats and Republicans perceived humor from a Democratic candidate as more effective than from a Republican. However, Bippus (2007) suggests that the greatest impact on perceived effectiveness is the quality and sophistication of the humor—particularly respondents' assessments of timing and contextual relevance. Moreover, the content of the messages plays a clear role in humor appreciation. This is especially significant for forms of self-deprecating humor, which are more

effective when based on personal stories and experiences, creating a more familiar and relatable atmosphere. For this type of humor, the politician's leadership also seems relevant; namely, lower perceived leadership corresponds to less effective humor. Other studies (cf. Krefer et al. 2021) have shown, for example, that interest in political issues may lead to a preference for affiliative and self-enhancing humor, and a rejection of aggressive humor. Similarly, individuals who are attentive to migration policies, minority rights, racial equality, and social issues tend not to favor maladaptive forms of humor, namely aggressive and self-deprecating humor. In any case, politically active and inactive individuals appear equally capable of producing humor and equally able to enjoy it in everyday life.

Finally, from a rhetorical rather than experimental perspective, Polk et al. (2009) provide valuable insights into the persuasive effects of humor. They argue that humor can discourage audiences from scrutinizing and counterarguing political messages: recipients may either dismiss the message as 'mere joking' or refrain from careful processing due to the complex inferential effort required and humor's distracting potential. This mechanism functions as a powerful persuasive tool, analogous to advertising strategies aimed at bypassing epistemic vigilance and preventing recipients from thoroughly evaluating conveyed information. Notably, the degree of recipients' political efficacy—their belief in their ability to participate in and influence the political system—appears directly related to their tendency to scrutinize and counterargue humorous political message.

Overall, considering the studies examined above, Tsakona & Popa's (2011) assumption that the actual influence of political humor on citizens' (voting) behavior remains largely unknown is fully supported. The same problematic nature emerges when considering the use of humor in commercial advertising ("huge sums of money are invested in humorous advertainments, but data resulting from research on the persuasive effect of humor disapprove its persuasive potential", Forabosco 2011: 355). Finally, what can be said is that the relationship between humor and persuasion still remains an open and complex question (Forabosco 2011).

6. Dataset

The dataset is constituted of 7,552 tweets, published during the 2022 election campaign by Italian politicians, in the period between 25 August (inclusive) and 25 September 2022 (inclusive). Data extraction was performed automatically, prior to the platform's official transition to X, by means of the open-source extraction tool *twarc.*[36]

For each politician considered, all tweets (including retweets and replies) published within the selected time frame were collected. In addition, I did not use specific queries to *a priori* extract humorous tweets: for example, I did not use metapragmatic hashtags, such as #ironia ('#irony') or #umorismo('#humorism'), or para-linguistics markers of humor, such as emoticons and/or heavily punctuation signs (e.g., !!??); see Section 8.4. Moreover, the selected politicians' accounts were not previously examined to quantify the greater or lesser presence of any (potentially) humorous tweets.

In the following sections, I outline the structure of the dataset on which linguistic annotation and analysis were carried out, highlighting its strengths as well as its shortcomings, including the data balancing issues encountered during the data selection process. Additionally, I define the main criteria used during data selection.

The data were extracted from 38 Italian politicians' accounts. For each politician, the official account, active at the time of the electoral campaign, was selected. Essentially, the criteria that guided the politicians' selection and the construction of the corpus were basically two. To begin with, I collected a sample of tweets that was as representative as possible of the ongoing political context and balanced with respect to the relevant variables identified by the previous scholarship on humour (see Section 5) as the most salient in relation to online political discourse. For convenience, I divided the variables into those pertaining to politics and those related with sociodemographic values. The former variables refer to politicians' party and coalition affiliation; institutional roles of the politicians or lack thereof, and whether they are party leaders or members of the opposition in relation to the Draghi's government. The latter variables relate specifically to politicians' gender and age. Furthermore, with regard to the second criterion, as Krippendorff (2019) points out, a dataset must be sufficiently large to allow for effective processing, interpretation, and scholarly management.

Table 1 provides an overview of the internal structure of the dataset. The politicians are ranked in descending order based on the number of tweets published during the period under consideration. For each politician included, the dataset contains metadata as for the institutional role held, the age, the

[36]*twarc* is a command line tool and Python library for collecting and archiving Twitter JSON data via the Twitter API. For further information see: https://twarc-project.readthedocs.io/en/latest/.

party affiliation,[37] and the number of tweets sampled during the reference period (along with the corresponding percentage out of the total). The challenge of obtaining a balanced dataset arises from the fact that politicians (and/or their electoral staff) make use of the platform X in different ways. Thus, the number of tweets published during the electoral campaign varies depending on the politicians' X style. As noted by Spina (2012: 88) and Brocca & Garassino (2015), politicians exhibit very different individual publication averages. The weight of individual variability is an inherent and unavoidable factor in (political) communication. For this reason, the exclusion of certain political profiles (e.g., Dario Franceschini, Anna Maria Bernini, Giulia Buongiorno) — although relevant within the national political context — was determined precisely by their limited use of the platform during the electoral campaign.[38] For example, the three aforementioned politicians have, in fact, all published fewer than thirty tweets.

Politicians	Politician's Roles	Age	Party	Number of tweets	%
Carlo Calenda	European Parliament	40-50	AIV	991	13,12
Gianluigi Paragone	Senator	50-60	ITAE	672	8,9
Guido Crosetto	None	50-60	FDI	552	7,31
Enrico Letta	Deputy	50-60	PD	485	6,42
Eleonora Evi	European Parliament	30-40	AVS	415	5,5
Matteo Salvini	Senator	40-50	Lega	399	5,28
Andrea Orlando	Minister	50-60	PD	331	4,38
Angelo Bonelli	None	50-60	AVS	270	3,58
Luigi DeMagistris	None	50-60	UP	220	2,91
Giuseppe Conte	None	50-60	M5S	201	2,66
Laura Ravetto	Deputy	40-50	Lega	186	2,46
Luigi Marattin	Deputy	30-40	AIV	181	2,4
Silvio Berlusconi	European Parliament	80-90	FI	175	2,32
Vittorio Sgarbi	Deputy	70-80	NM	168	2,22
Aboubakar Soumahoro	None	40-50	AVS	158	2,09
Mara Carfagna	Minister	40-50	AIV	140	1,85
Daniela Santanché	Senator	50-60	FDI	139	1,84
Beatrice Lorenzin	Deputy	40-50	PD	136	1,8
Benedetto Della Vedova	Deputy	50-60	+EU	123	1,63
Giovanni Donzelli	Deputy	40-50	FDI	117	1,55
Matteo Renzi	Senator	40-50	AIV	114	1,51
Deborah Bergamini	Deputy	50-60	FI	112	1,48
Francesco Lollobrigida	Deputy	40-50	FDI	108	1,43
Giorgia Meloni	Deputy	40-50	FDI	105	1,39
Licia Ronzulli	Senator	40-50	FI	103	1,36

[37] The following interpretations apply to the acronyms: AIV=Azione-Italia Viva; ITAE=ItalExit; FDI=Fratelli D'italia; PD=Partito Democratico; AVS=Alleanza Verdi Sinistra; UP=Unione Popolare; M5S=Movimento5Stelle; FI=Forza Italia; NM=Noi Moderati; +EU=+Europa; IC= Impegno Civico.

[38] I excluded politicians who had posted fewer than 40 tweets during the 2022 election campaign.

Chiara Appendino	None	30-40	M5S	102	1,35
Maria Stella Gelmini	Minister	40-50	AIV	101	1,34
Deborah Serracchiani	Deputy	50-60	PD	94	1,24
Alessandra Todde	Minister	40-50	M5S	93	1,23
Nicola Fratoianni	Deputy	40-50	AVS	82	1,09
Simona Malpezzi	Senator	40-50	PD	78	1,03
Raffaele Fitto	European Parliament	50-60	FDI	75	0,99
Michele Gubitosa	Deputy	30-40	M5S	69	0,91
Lorenzo Fontana	Deputy	40-50	Lega	68	0,9
Alessia Morani	Deputy	40-50	PD	53	0,7
Paolo Gentiloni	European Parliament	60-70	PD	49	0,65
Emma Bonino	Senator	70-80	+EU	47	0,62
Luigi Di Maio	Minister	30-40	IC	40	0,53
				Tot. 7552	**100%**

Table 1: Distribution of tweets by politicians, roles, parties.

In relation to individual variability, by calculating the overall average number (that is, 198.7368 in the period 25 August to 25 September) of published tweets, it is possible to identify the profiles that deviate most significantly from this average, and thus can be considered (negatively or positively) outliers in terms of their activity on X during the campaign. It should also be noted that an active and consistent use of the platform tends to correspond to a more conscious and strategic use of X and its functionalities. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the presence of these outliers inevitably impacts the overall distribution of the data with respect to all the variables considered for the construction of the corpus (such as gender).

Politicians	**Total_Tweets**	**Standard Deviation_from_mean (198.7368)**
Carlo Calenda	991	792,2631579
Gianluigi Paragone	672	473,2631579
Guido Crosetto	552	353,2631579
Enrico Letta	485	286,2631579
Eleonora Evi	415	216,2631579
Matteo Salvini	399	200,2631579
Luigi Di Maio	40	-158,7368421
Emma Bonino	47	-151,7368421
Paolo Gentiloni	49	-149,7368421
Alessia Morani	53	-145,7368421

Table 2: Positive and negative outliers in terms of X activity.

Carlo Calenda is the politician who produces more tweets compared to the others, despite his base of supporters being relatively small when compared to that of other politicians. As noted by Scavo et al. (2023: 206), he is the politician who publishes the most tweets on a daily basis (around 29 tweets per day).

6.1. Data and political variables

In this section, I provide an in-depth examination of the distribution of the data across each of the variables considered, with particular attention to highlighting and motivating/explaining any imbalances present in the dataset.

Regarding the variable politicians' role, described in Table 3, the political role refers to the XVIII legislature and to the period of the elections. Four values were considered for this variable, i.e: Deputy, Senator, European parliament member, (Vice-)Minister. With the exception of the category "(Vice-) Minister" the data collected are fairly well balanced (cf. Table 3). Indeed, Di Maio (Minister of Foreign Affairs), Gelmini (Minister for Regional Affairs), and Todde (Vice minister of Economy) published fewer tweets respect to the average.

Politicians' Role:	**Deputy**	**Senator**	**None**	**European Parliament member**	**(Vice-)Minister**
N. of tweets:	1964	1552	1503	1705	705

Table 3: Distribution of tweets according to specific roles.

As can be seen in Table 3, the greatest part of the sample is represented by politicians active in both the Italian and European Parliaments (some clearly have also a role in their parties). The label "none" was assigned to those politicians who did not hold institutional and official (political) roles at the time of the campaign. One might be inclined to consider "none" a synonym of outsider at the time of the 2022 elections; however not all politicians labelled with "none" can be considered prototypically outsiders. For example, Chiara Appendino held an institutional position as Mayor of Turin, Giuseppe Conte served as Prime Minister from 2018 to 2012, and Guido Crosetto had been a member of Parliament with Forza Italia. Instead, Aboubakar Soumahoro displays the typical traits of an outsider: no prior official political experience, no previous candidacy, and affiliation with a marginal party within the parliamentary landscape.

Considering now the variable party's affiliation, the politicians belong to twelve different parties (Figure 4). The aim was to represent the entire constitutional framework (Spina 2012: 85) and not to exclude minority parties (i.e., newly formed parties and/or those that did not surpass the electoral threshold) from the selection — unlike what has been chosen for instance, in Scavo et al. (2023) and Ceron et al. (2023). These studies, focused on the (linguistic) analysis of politicians' communication on X and Facebook during the electoral campaign (see Section 2.1), examined only the data of the major parties and their respective leader. For each coalition (see below), only the parties officially present on the electoral ballots were considered, excluding those that provided external support to the

coalition only (e.g., Destra Liberale Italiana to the Right-wing coalition). The overall distribution of tweets in relation to the party affiliation of the politicians is showed in Figure 4.

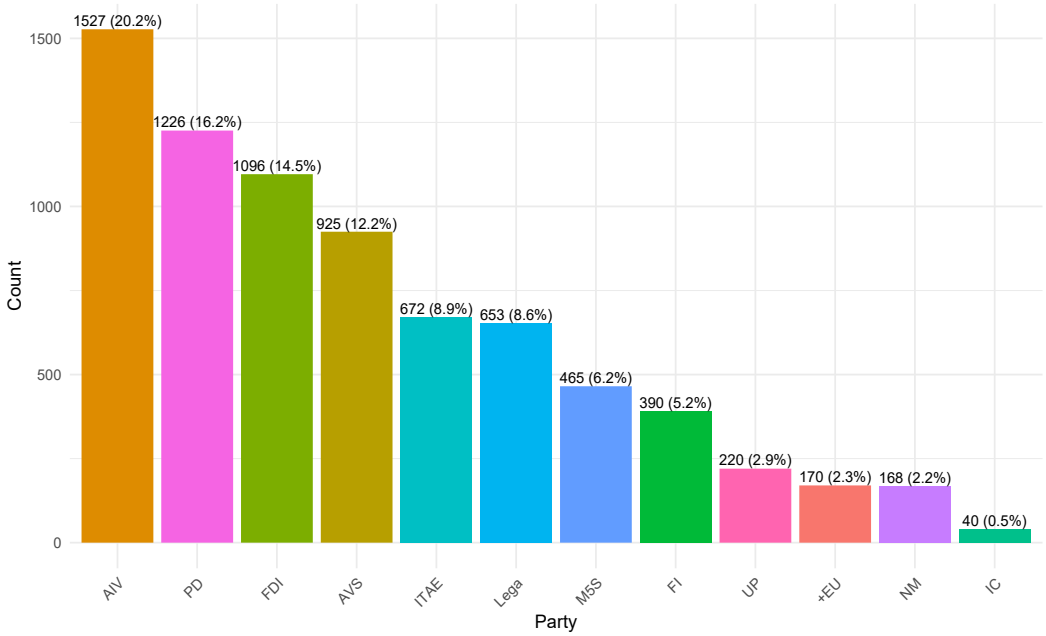

Figure 4:Distribution of tweets by political parties.

In addition, for each party, I distinguished between leader and non-leader politicians (Table 4). As shown (see Section 2.1), this distinction marks a difference compared to numerous studies on political communication on X, which have focused exclusively on the linguistic analysis of leaders' discourse (Alonso-Muñoz et al. 2016, Scavo et al. 2023).

Leader	**Non-Leader**
Tot. 3674 (48,64%)	Tot. 3878(51,35%)

Table 4: Overall Distribution of tweets by Leader/Non-Leader status.

The operational criterion for this distinction is based on whether the politician is the political head of the party and represents a potential candidate for prime minister.[39] Moreover, in the cases of Enrico Letta and Giorgia Meloni, leadership is reflected not only at the party level but also at the coalition level. For minor parties (IC, NM, UP, ITAE), only the party leader was included. The only exception

[39] For instance, Salvini's leadership is evidenced by the inclusion of his last name in the party's official name, that is, Lega-Salvini Premier.

is represented by *Noi Moderati*: instead of Maurizio Lupi (fewer than 50 tweets), Vittorio Sgarbi was selected, as he remains a representative and core figure for the party at least in terms of media attention. The distribution of tweets in relation to the parameter leader vs. non-leader is shown in Figure 5. It is clear that single politicians' style affects the data distribution described in the figures: see for example the impact of Calenda (who tweets four times more respect to the average) in Azione-Italia Viva party (see Figure 5) and in the group of leaders.

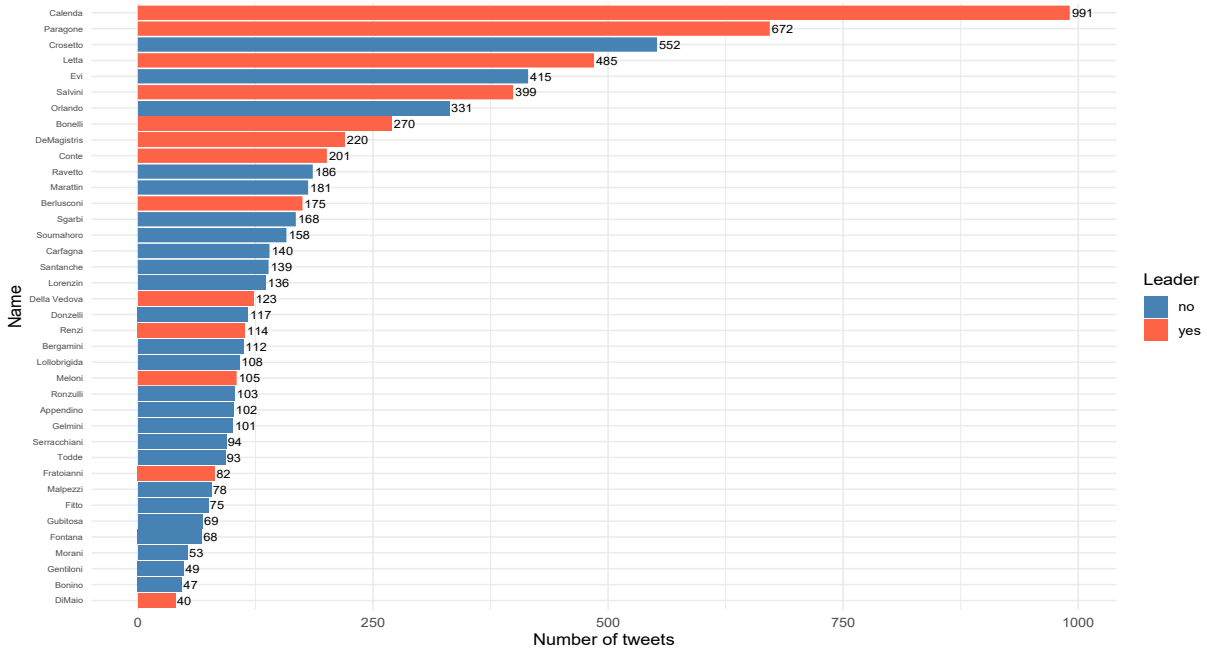

Figure 5: Distribution of tweets by Leader/Non-Leader status.

In addition, Figure 5 shows that party's leaders tendentially published more tweets in comparison with non-leaders. In any case, some exceptions emerge: for example, Giorgia Meloni (leader of FDI) tweeted less than Guido Crosetto and Giovanni Donzelli (non-leader politicians of FDI); Nicola Fratoianni (leader of AVS) tweeted less respect of Eleonora Evi (non-leader). As show in the following section, these differences do not seem to be linked to gender. Indeed, a female leader tweets less than non-leader men in FDI, and vice versa considering AVS. It should also be noted that this distinction between leaders and non-leaders has resulted in an imbalance in the number of politicians considered for each party (see Table 5).

Party's Name	Number of politicians
PD	7
FDI	6
AIV	5
AVS	4
M5S	4
FI	3
LEGA	3
+EU	2
IC	1
ITAE	1
NM	1
UP	1

Table 5: Number of politicians in relation to parties.

Furthermore, this distribution also occurred because of the need to maintain a balance with respect to the parameters of coalition parties vs. opposition parties (see below).[40] Indeed, the growing centrality assumed by party leaders and the importance of coalitions — especially in the context of electoral campaigns — have notably weakened the significance of belonging to a specific party. In fact, this variable has often been overlooked in studies on humor (e.g., Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022). For the analysis of the variable coalition affiliation, I took into account how parties grouped together in preparation for the elections, reaching agreements on the presentation of shared electoral programs, the distribution of single-member constituencies, and, in the event of electoral victory, the joint appointment of the Prime Minister. The two main coalitions that ran in the elections were the left-wing coalition (Table 6) and the right-wing coalition (Table 7).

Party's name	Tot. Tweets
PD	1226
AVS	925
+EU	170
IC	40
Tot:	2361 (31,26%)

Table 6: Left-wing coalition.

[40] In addition, an effort was made to balance the gender variable within these categories as much as possible.

Party's name	Tot. Tweets
FDI	1096
FI	390
LEGA	653
NM	168
Tot:	2307 (30,54%)

Table 7: Righ-wing coalition.

Outside these coalitions, there are autonomous parties, that is, parties that did not join any of the coalitions (Table 8).

Party's name	Tot. Tweets
M5S	465
AIV	1527
ITAE	672
UP	220
Tot:	2966 (39.3%)

Table 8: Autonomous parties.

Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the overall distribution of tweets according to the *political coalition* parameter and that in relation with the politicians. Interestingly, non-coalition parties display a higher number of tweets, despite having fewer political representatives included in the sample compared to other political forces. This highlights how X represents a valuable resource for "marginal" political forces, which leverage social media to gain visibility and support in comparison to their marginal role in traditional media. As already observed, this increased activity is not directly correlated with high levels of engagement, which is the metric for evaluating an account's success.

Figure 6: Distribution of tweets by political coalition.

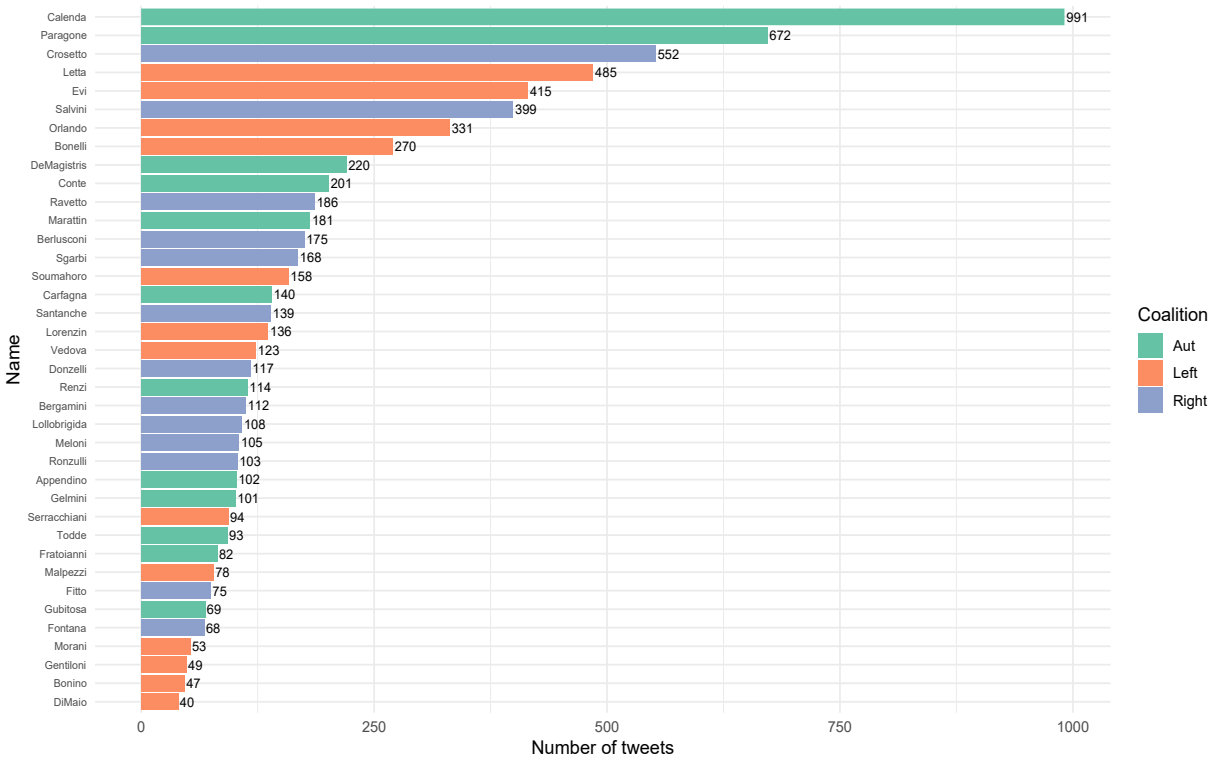

Figure 7: Distribution of tweets by politicians and coalition.

The final political variable considered, regardless of whether a politician belonged to a coalition, concerns their support for—or opposition to—the Draghi government. In fact, the political crisis of July 2022 — triggered by the abstention of the Movimento 5 Stelle and the walkout of Lega and Forza Italia during the confidence vote — led to the resignation of the executive, which was accepted by the President of the Republic on July 21st 2022. Consequently, these parties were

classified as opposition parties. In this regard, it is worth noting that, prior to July 2022, only Alleanza Verdi-Sinistra and Fratelli d'Italia (excluding individual politicians belonging to the Gruppo Misto di Opposizione) had not shared government responsibilities with the Draghi government. These were therefore the only two parties that could present themselves during the electoral campaign as external to the government establishment.

I also classified Unione Popolare and ItaExit as opposition forces, as both parties had distanced themselves from the Draghi government in their electoral platforms. As for Noi Moderati, it was classified as an opposition force, since Vittorio Sgarbi (the only NM politician considered here) had repeatedly abstained from voting confidence in the Draghi government.

The distribution of tweets with respect to this parameter is shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9. The latter also taking into account individual politicians.

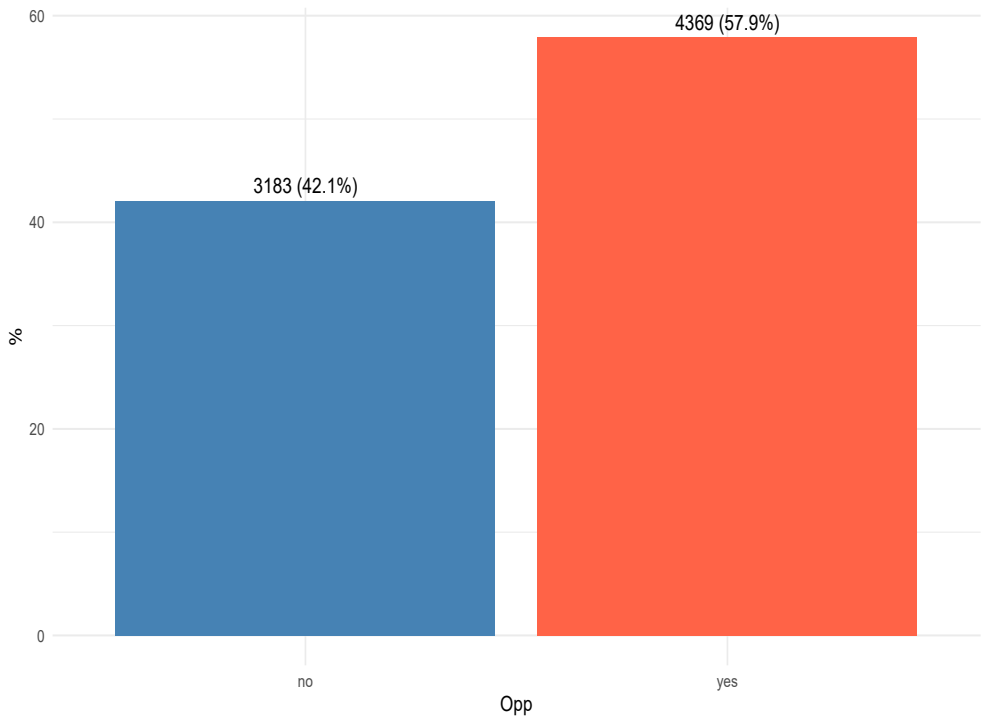

Figure 8: Distribution of tweets by opposition status (yes/no).

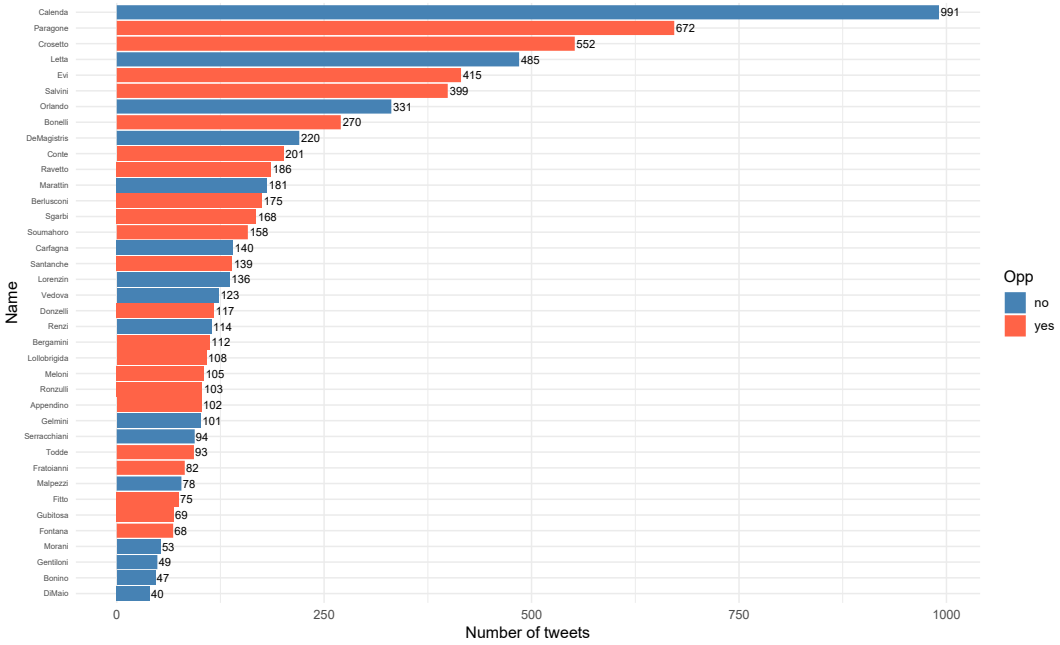

Figure 9: Distribution of tweets by politicians and opposition status.

6.2. Data and sociodemographic variables: gender and age

Overall, 23 male and 15 female politicians were considered for a total of 5648 tweets and 1904 tweets, respectively. In relation to gender, the dataset is, therefore, rather unbalanced.[41] This asymmetry is linked to several factors, including the following: the general predominance of male politicians in the Italian, European and international political landscape (74.00%; United Nations Development Programme 2020); and the substantial gender gap in positions of power, especially in Italy (https://www.ilpost.it/2025/03/07/donne-potere-manager/).[42] Indeed, when considering the intersection between the leaders' group and female politicians, the only female leader included in the dataset is Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia. Additionally, for minor parties only party leaders were selected and, given the absence of female leaders, this resulted in a data imbalance in relation to the gender variable. In any case, efforts were made to avoid the marked imbalance found, for instance, in the paper by Menidburo-Seguel et al. (2022), where only five female political figures were selected compared to 22 male profiles.

A more detailed analysis of the gender variable in relation to the other parameters considered reveals interesting patterns. First of all, the distribution of tweets published by female politicians

[41] The numbers of politicians sampled in relation to gender are comparable with those of Spina (2012: 86), who had also found the inevitable imbalance towards the male gender, inherent in the current representation of males and females in the Italian political system.

[42] For further in-depth exploration of the topic, the following documents are recommended for consultation: in particular, limited to the Italian scenario, it is useful to consult the report "Sesso è Potere 2025" (https://drive.google.com/file/d/15NPjII-W5_yFpBVJLyEVYk1GUsK2v64e/view). To analyze the global scenario, see the Gender Gap Report: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Gender_Gap_Report.

varies according to the coalition considered. In fact, Figure 10 shows a higher percentage of tweets by women within the left-wing coalition compared to the right-wing coalition. The data are comparable, given that five female politicians were selected for the right-wing coalition and six for the left-wing coalition. As for male politicians, the number of tweets published by the left-wing and right-wing coalitions is roughly equivalent (1456 and 1662 tweets, respectively). A stronger presence is observed in the male group for independent parties; however, this is primarily due to the peculiar and intensive use of X by Carlo Calenda (AIV), Luigi De Magistris (UP), and Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit)

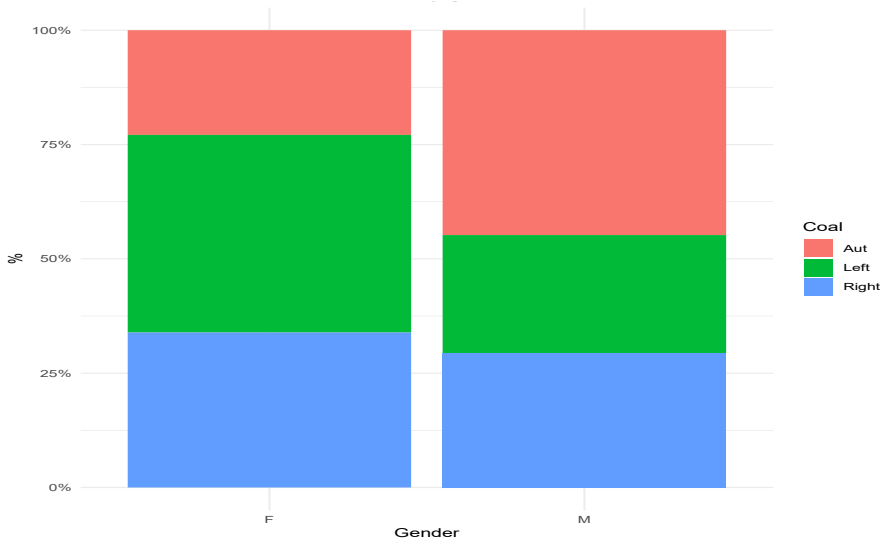

Figure 10: Distribution of tweets by gender and coalition.

What we observe is, therefore, once again a notable individual variability. This data also makes it difficult to generalize about who publishes more tweets based on gender, even considering the variation within the parties. In fact, considering AVS, Eleonora Evi (415 tweets overall) tweets more than her male colleagues (510 tweets overall). In the PD party more women are considered for the study than men, but they published less tweets than their male colleagues (361 vs. 865). Analyzing AIV it can be observed that Mara Carfagna tweets more than Matteo Renzi (who is the party leader) but less than Luigi Marattin and Carlo Calenda. Therefore, this analysis appears to be at odds with the findings of Evans et al. (2014). According to that study, which was based on data from the 2012 U.S. electoral campaign, female candidates consistently published more tweets on average than their male counterparts.

As for the age of the politicians, the sample represents quite broad age groups. In fact, the use of social media and the understanding of their importance in political communication now appears to

be a consolidated aspect of political communication. Figure 10 shows the age range in which each politician can be classified. Table 9 presents the overall distribution of tweets in relation to age ranges.

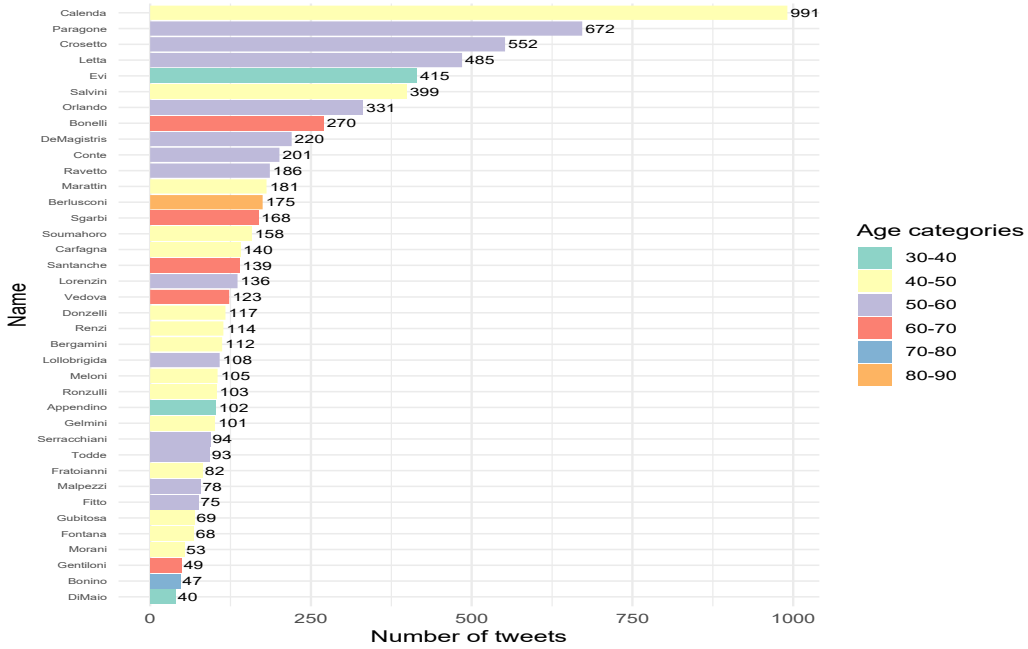

Figure 11: Number of tweets per politician with age range.

Age	Number of tweets	%
30-40	557	7,38
40-50	2793	36,98
50-60	3231	42,78
60-70	749	9,92
70-80	47	0,62
80-90	175	2,32
	Tot. 7552	100%

Table 9: Overall distribution of tweets by politicians' age.

The intersection between gender and age also reveals interesting insights (see Figure 12): in particular, among the young politicians, women are the most active in tweeting – specifically, Chiara Appendino and Eleonora Evi). A predictable imbalance arises from the fact that most of the data for both genders are concentrated in the age group between 40 and 60 years old. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of part of parties' leaders and other candidates for parliamentary roles are predominantly found in this middle age range (i.e., neither too young nor too old), also considering a general absence of a generation of young leaders in Italy. The data relating to the 80-90 age group all come from Silvio Berlusconi (FI), the oldest politician who ran in the 2022 national election.

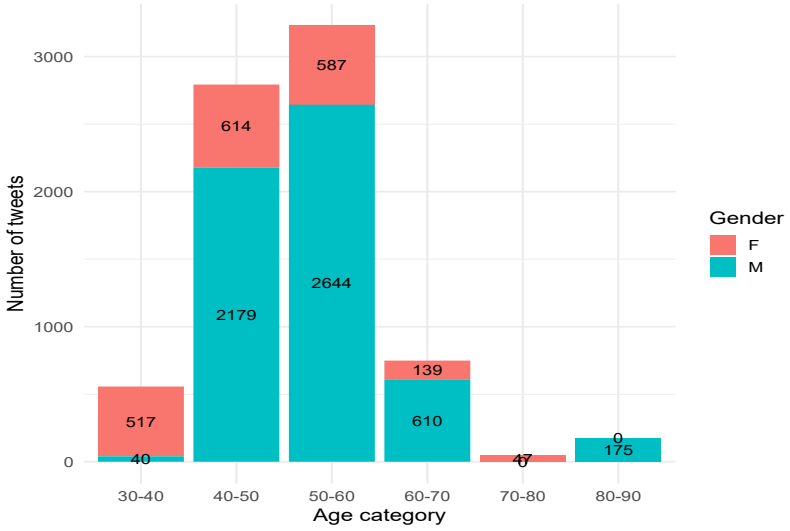

Figure 12: Stacked distribution of tweets in relation to gender and age.

Analyzing the relationship between coalitions and age (see Figure 13), it can be observed that all tweets published by younger politicians (who are also predominantly females, see Figure 12) originate from members of the left-wing coalition. Furthermore, an unbalanced distribution of data is evident in the 40–50 age category, where most tweets are produced by politicians from independent parties (e.g., Calenda, Marattin, and Carfagna) and the center-right coalition (e.g., Matteo Salvini, Giovanni Donzelli, and Deborah Bergamini). In the 50–60 age group, the data distribution appears more balanced across the coalitions. Conversely, in the 60–90 age range, all tweets come from politicians affiliated with either the left or right coalition; notably, no independent party politicians are present in this age category.

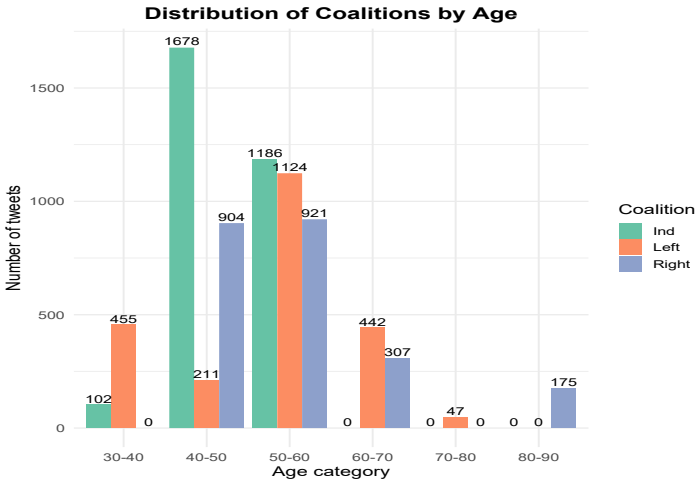

Figure 13: Distributions of tweets by coalitions and age.

7. Methodology

7.1 Annotation process: general remarks

This section is central because many studies on political humor employ methodologies that limit the reproducibility of their analyses—for instance, by not relying on an established linguistic theory—which in turn complicates the interpretation of their findings. For example, Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) limits themselves to providing this operational definition to identify humorous tweets classify "any tweet that was intended to entertain or comically attract attention". Notably, this definition is methodologically insufficient and it does not use theoretically concrete criteria to distinguish between serious and humorous tweets. Furthermore, there is no explicit appeal to linguistic theories of humor (e.g., Relevance Theory or General Theory of Verbal Humor). Other studies examining spoken discourse (e.g., Stewart 2011) have identified humorous instances by analyzing the amused reactions of bystanders, such as laughter or thunderous applause. Clearly, these phenomena are not available for my study and, moreover, the correlation between humor and laughter is theoretically problematic.

To address these issues, the annotation process adopted a well-defined methodology (General Theory of Verbal Humor) for humor recognition and a rigorous protocol, which is described here.

Essentially, the annotation process adopted here is the one described by Pustejovksy et al. (2017) and Finlayson & Erjavec (2017) – see Figure 14:

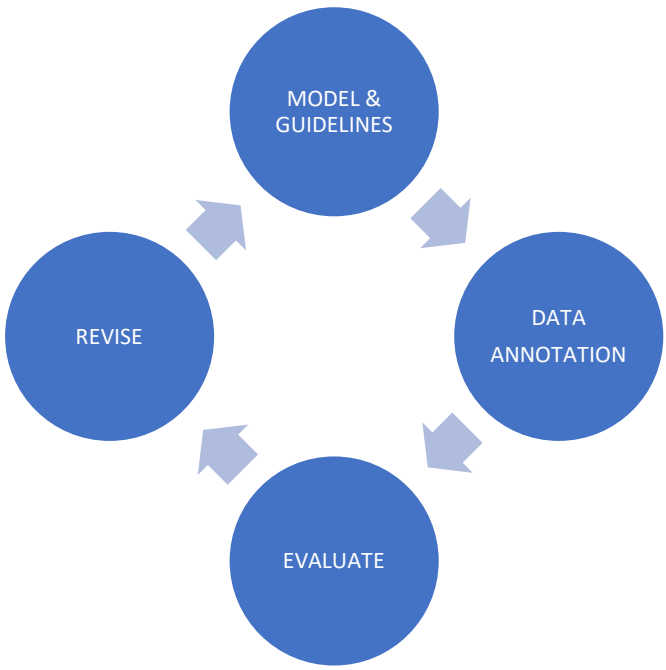

Figure 14: Graphical visualization of the annotation process

The first step in the process involves the project leaders setting up the conceptual framework for the project. In this stage, there are the following subtasks: 1) collecting existing theories of the phenomena (see Section 3.2); 2) developing an annotation scheme (see this Section); 3) constructing a balanced corpus (see Section 6). Notably, to my knowledge, there is no elaborate annotation scheme for Italian to identify the phenomenon considered here, nor are there any annotated corpora that take the same phenomenon into account.

The second stage is the actual application of annotations to artifacts (e.g., recruit annotators; write guidelines; track IAAs to ensure quality of annotation; train annotators in the annotation workflow). The annotation tasks were carried out by three human annotators (Ann1; Ann2; Ann3). Ann2 is the expert annotator and serves as the benchmark against which the work of the other annotators is compared.[43]

The evaluation stage is dedicated to the exploration and visualization of the annotated data to get a qualitative sense of its scope, quality and character. Developing statistics to numerically characterize the data. The final step involves the data inspection. If the data fails inspection, the scholars have to return to modify the model and to correct the labels. Overall, the adopted methodology ensures the ultimate goal of any annotation task, namely that the features selected for encoding a specific phenomenon are sufficiently rich to allow for the subsequent training of machine learning algorithms for automatic classification.

Importantly, each type of annotation was carried out in standoff format, meaning that the original artifact was never modified. Importantly, any spelling errors—whether misspelled words or incorrect punctuation—were preserved, as the annotated texts were not altered directly. The annotation was carried out on tweets that had not been previously annotated or analyzed. The unit of analysis is the tweet in its entirety, including the textual component as well as links, emojis, videos, and/or attached images. In this way, all contextual and co-textual elements were taken into account. This practice is widely regarded as best practice in annotation. Clearly, once the annotations (i.e., metadata) were added, the corpus became more richly structured. All annotations were performed manually and involved a multilayer approach, i.e., multiple types of labels were applied to the same text. For each task, I deliberately sought to minimize the number of labels employed (see Section 8), in order to avoid an excessive proliferation of categories that could increase the overall complexity of the annotation scheme, according to Krippendoff (2019).

[43] It is universally acknowledged that having multiple annotators work on at least a consistent portion of data is essential for an estimate of the amount of variation.

7.2 Annotation tasks

Prior to the annotation of linguistic phenomena, each tweet was annotated with socio-demographic and political information about its author (see Table 10). These metadata provide relevant contextual details that allow for a more fine-grained analysis of the communicative strategies under investigation. This level of annotation was performed only by Ann2. Notably, these data are available online.

Socio-demographic information	**Political information**
Gender	Istitutional Roles
Age	Leadership status
	Political Coalition
	Opposition's membership
	Party's affiliation

Table 10: Socio-demographic and political metadata

Following this process, six annotation tasks were conducted; these are described in the following sections. Furthermore, in the specific sections, I have reiterated the methodological choices and highlighted some potential issues.

The first task (Figure 15) consisted of recognizing humorous tweets from non-humorous ones (or serious tweets). To carry out this task, the criteria of the General Theory of Verbal Humor were adopted (see Section 3.2.5). The necessary and sufficient criterion is the simultaneous presence of scripts that overlap and, at the same time, are opposed to each other. All tweets classified as humorous can therefore be traced back to one of the abstract oppositions discussed by Raskin (1985): REAL vs. NOT-REAL; NORMAL vs. ABNORMAL; GOOD vs. BAD. Consider in this regard tweet (33) in which there are not the necessary and sufficient conditions to interpret the text as humorous. Thus, (33) is a serious text, according to Raskin (1985).

(33) Aboubakar Soumahoro (AVS): *Oggi, NOI - lavoratrici, lavoratori e imprese - dobbiamo unirci per salvare il LAVORO, chiedendo al governo in carica di usare qualsiasi mezzo di economia di guerra per tutelare le famiglie e le imprese.*
'Today, WE – workers, men and women, and businesses – must unite to save JOBS, demanding that the government in power use every means of the war economy to protect families and businesses.'

Regarding humorous tweets, it is worth noting that a humorous tweet may contain only one instance of humor, as in the case of (34), or two or more instances of humor, as in (35). In other cases, for example (36), a single word combined with a link is enough to trigger a humorous interpretation. Additionally, considering (34)-(36), the unit of analysis, from a syntactic point of view, is extremely variable. Importantly, the unit of analysis may consist of a single word, a single utterance, or multiple utterances, which may be either assertive or interrogative.

(34) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Continuate con questa lungimirante campagna @pdnetwork @EnricoLetta. Io non penso invece che voi siate il male o pericolosi Bolscevichi etc. […]*
'Continue this farsighted campaign @pdnetwork @EnricoLetta. I don't think you're evil or dangerous Bolsheviks, etc. […]'.

In (34) a single instance of humor is present in *Continuate con questa lungimirante campagna @pdnetwork @EnricoLetta* ('Continue this farsighted campaign @pdnetwork @EnricoLetta'). This utterance is a case of mock-politeness (see Section 9) aimed at denigrating the actions of the Democratic Party (PD). Considering the electoral campaign context, the utterance cannot be interpreted as an expression of genuine politeness; rather, the opposite must be inferred. The campaign was anything but far-sighted. Accordingly, a concrete opposition emerges between FAR-SIGHTED CAMPAIGN vs. NON-FAR-SIGHTED CAMPAIGN; an intermediate script opposition between IMPOLITENESS vs. POLITENESS and a more abstract script opposition between REAL vs. Not-REAL. The other sentences are to be considered serious and bona fide.

(35) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Gravissime le parole di Tremonti su Draghi. Un governo che ha portato il paese vicino al default. E questo sarebbe il granitico ministro della destra? Sai la gioia tra gli investitori.*
'Tremonti's words about Draghi are extremely serious. A government that brought the country close to default. And this is supposed to be the granite-like right-wing minister? You know the excitement among investors.'

In (35) there are two instances of mock-politeness. The first is instantiated in the rhetorical question (*E questo sarebbe il granitico ministro della destra?* 'And this is supposed to be the granite-like minister of the right?'); the second in the statement *Sai la gioia tra gli investitori* (lit. 'You know the joy among investors'). In both cases, the literal interpretation of the statement is inadmissible and the

opposite meaning must be inferred by the reader, which leads to interpreting the instances as expressing impoliteness.

(36) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *#asteroide* https://t.co/BFdHN0LCCk
'#asteroid https://t.co/BFdHN0LCCk'

In (36) the humorous tone is triggered just by *#asteroid*. It is sufficient to clarify that #astereoid is an exaggerated desire to see the world destroyed, caused by the absurd programs developed by other parties. The exhaustive explanation of (36) is available in Section 10.

Importantly, during the annotation process, I applied the legal principle *in dubbio pro reo* (also used in the creation of the IMPAQTS's corpus, see Cominetti et al. 2023). According to this principle, if there was uncertainty as to whether a tweet was humorous or not, it was recommended to label it as non-humorous in order to avoid the presence of false positives.

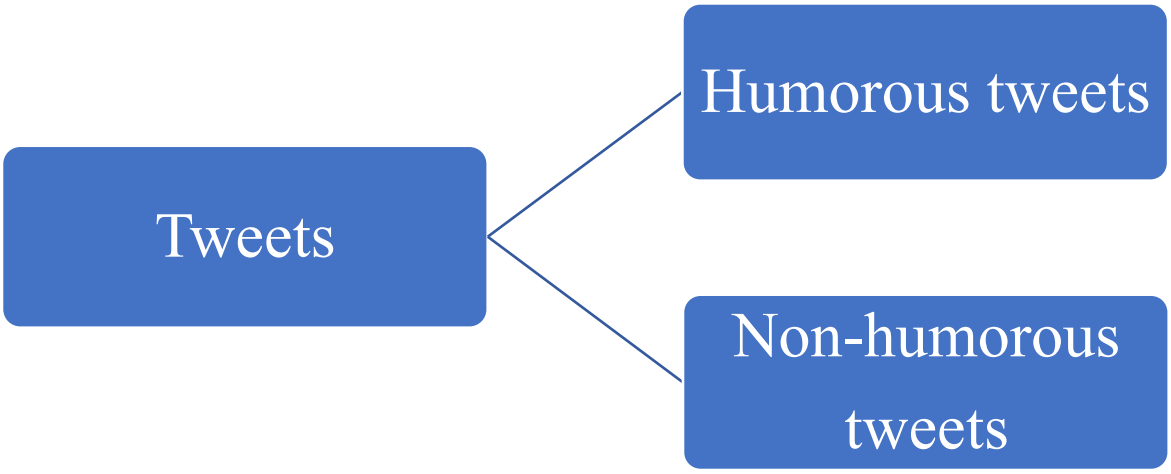

Figure 15: Graphical representations of the first annotation's task.

Additionally, for tweets classified as non-humorous, I subsequently discriminated against tweets containing forms of aggression and/or impoliteness. During this annotation task, as will be seen in detail in Section 8.2, I followed the off-record or on-record treatment of impoliteness, as described by Culpeper (2011).

Completed this first task, annotation focused on tweets classified as humorous (i.e., with one or more instances of humor). For these tweets, the presence or absence of humor markers – namely, linguistic elements that indicate the communicative mode adopted by the tweeter (Burgers & van Mulken 2017) – and the typology of humor markers were annotated. Notably, different instances of

humor may present different types of markers, even within the same tweet, or the same typology. A description of the marker types and further aspects related to annotation is provided in Section 8.4. In this regard, consider (37):

(37) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@Utente 1 E comunque adoro che ci siano disturbati che mi mettono in schermo gigante* 😂😂😂😂*non lei eh per carità* 😂
'@User 1 And anyway I love that there are insane people that put me on a giant screen 😂😂😂😂 not You, for goodness' sake 😂'

In (37) the two instances of humor are both marked by the use of smiling emojis (😂). In the first instance (*adoro che ci siano disturbati che mi mettono in schermo gigante* 😂😂😂😂, 'I love that there are insane people that put me on a giant screen') the emojis are reduplicated; in the second one there is one emoji (*non lei eh per carità* 😂, 'not You eh, for goodness sake 😂').

(38) Guido Crosetto (FDI): 😂😂😂 *ha ragione! È stato bravissimo.* […]
😂😂😂 He's right! He was great. […]

In (38) the first instance of mock-politeness (😂😂😂 *ha ragione!* 'He's right!') is marked both by the use of the emojis and the exclamation mark; while the second instance (*È stato bravissimo* 'he was great') by the use of the superlative (see the Italian augmentative suffix *-issimo*).

Subsequently, the five communicative functions (see Section 4) performed by humor were annotated: affiliative, aggressive, affiliative, defensive, self-deprecating, and (self)-enhancing. For this task, the unit of analysis are the single instances of humor. Notably, in some tweets, the humorous instances all perform the same function (see (39)); while in other tweets (see (40)), the functions performed are different. Therefore, it was not possible to use only the tweet as the unit of analysis. In cases where the function was identical, as in (39), the same label was consistently assigned to each humorous instance within the tweet.

(39) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): *La Meloni da #oppofinzione a Draghi diventerà il puntello del #Draghistan.*
'Meloni, from #oppofiction to Draghi, will become the prop of #Draghistan.'

In (39) there are two humorous neologisms (marked with #), in both of these neologisms the function is aggressive.[44]

[44] See Section 10 for an exhaustive explanation of the humorous hashtags in (39).

(40) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM)*: Evidentemente Casini è meglio di me. Potrà fare molto, come sempre ha fatto. Per Bologna e per l'Italia.*

'Casini is clearly better than me. He can do a lot, as he always has done. For Bologna and for Italy.'

In (40) *Evidentemente Casini è meglio di me* ('Casini is clearly better than me') is a form of self-denigrating humor; mentre *Potrà fare molto, come sempre ha fatto* ('He can do a lot, as he always has done') is a form of mock-politeness with aggressive function. Interestingly, I also annotated humorous instances where the aggressive and defensive functions are co-present (the label used is "aggressive-defensive"). Specifically, this peculiar form of aggressiveness may be equated with the concept of "reactive rudeness", described by Culpeper (2011)–see also Section 8.2.2.

In any case, for each instance of humor I selected only the dominant one (Graham et al. 2016: 771). Finally, I annotated also three types of humor present in the tweets. In particular, as outlined in Sections 9 and 10, I focused on the humorous instances of mock-politeness, mock-impoliteness, and humorous hashtags. In Sections 9 and 10, I also reported the criteria used to identify the types of humor in question.

Figure 16 shows the annotation schemata and the five-annotation task:

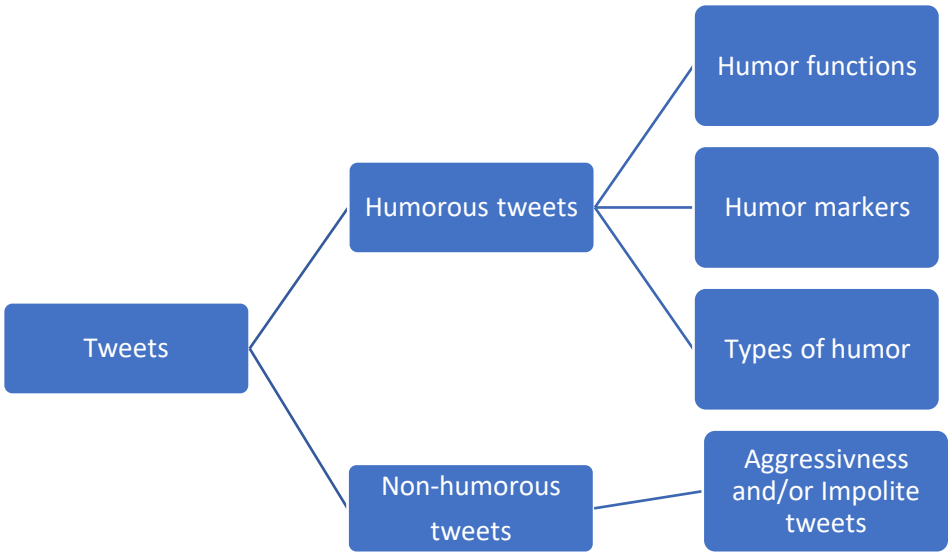

Figure 16: Annotation schemata (five tasks).

The annotation tasks were performed by three human annotators (see Section 7.3) using Excel spreadsheets, with a predefined set of labels, based on the guidelines provided in the codebooks (see Appendix B-D). Specifically, only one of the annotators annotated the entire Dataset, according to all

five tasks described in the Figure 15. The other two annotators worked only on a percentage (specifically 10%) of the dataset (Krippendorrf 2019). In the Appendix, A I provide a detailed description of the annotated dataset and its graphical visualization. Additionally, Appendix A also contains a graphical visualization (with a description) of the annotation of humorous tweets imported on the INCEpTION platform [31.4].[45] In the future, it is possible to make the annotated dataset publicly available through this online platform – as well as in .csv and .xlsx formats.

7.3 Inter-Annotator Agreement: results and qualitative examples

The annotation's reliability process consisted of three tasks (see Table 1). Three human annotators are involved. The first and the third human annotators (Ann1 and Ann3) are Italian Master's students in Linguistics, with no prior expertise in humor studies and was trained exclusively through codebooks containing theoretical information and examples (see Appendix B-D). The second human annotator (Ann2, thesis's author), an Italian PhD student specializing in the linguistics of humor and political discourse, served as the baseline against which all other annotations were evaluated. The theoretical background between Ann 1 and Ann 3 (semi-expert annotators) is equivalent, however there may still substantial variability between them. Thus, differences between the annotators should be investigated by calculating agreement among subgroups of annotators. Table 11 provides an overview of the annotations' task performed by the three annotators:

Task	Data
(1) Recognizing humorous vs. non-humor tweets	200 tweets
(2) Recognizing discourse-pragmatic functions of humor	100 tweets
(3) Recognizing humor markers	100 tweets

Table 11: Distribution of data and annotators for each annotation task.

However, it should be noted that Ann2 is the only annotator who carried out the annotation across the entire dataset and also in the remaining two tasks. As can be seen, for each task, approximately 13% of the humorous tweets (766 tweets) was submitted to Ann1 and Ann2. This ensures that the annotation methodology enjoys a certain reliability and representativeness. For the sample annotated by the three annotators, Ann2 made the final decision about the group of cases the coders disagreed on. In case of partial disagreement, the label assigned by two raters was selected. In cases of complete

[45] https://inception-project.github.io/ (see also Kilie et al. 2018).

disagreement, a consensus-building meeting was conducted to reach a decision that was as democratic and objective as possible. In any case, Ann 2 acted as an "expert consultant".

7.3.1 Task1: Humor vs. non-humor

The first task is dedicated to recognizing tweets containing humor. Ann1 and Ann3 were each provided with 100 humorous tweets and 100 non-humorous tweets, which had been preliminarily annotated by Ann2. As shown in Figure 17, it is immediately apparent that all annotator pairs reached a significant level of agreement. However, the counts provided in Figure 2 reflect only raw (or observed) agreement (Artstein & Poesio 2008), which can be misleading, as it does not account for accidental agreement.

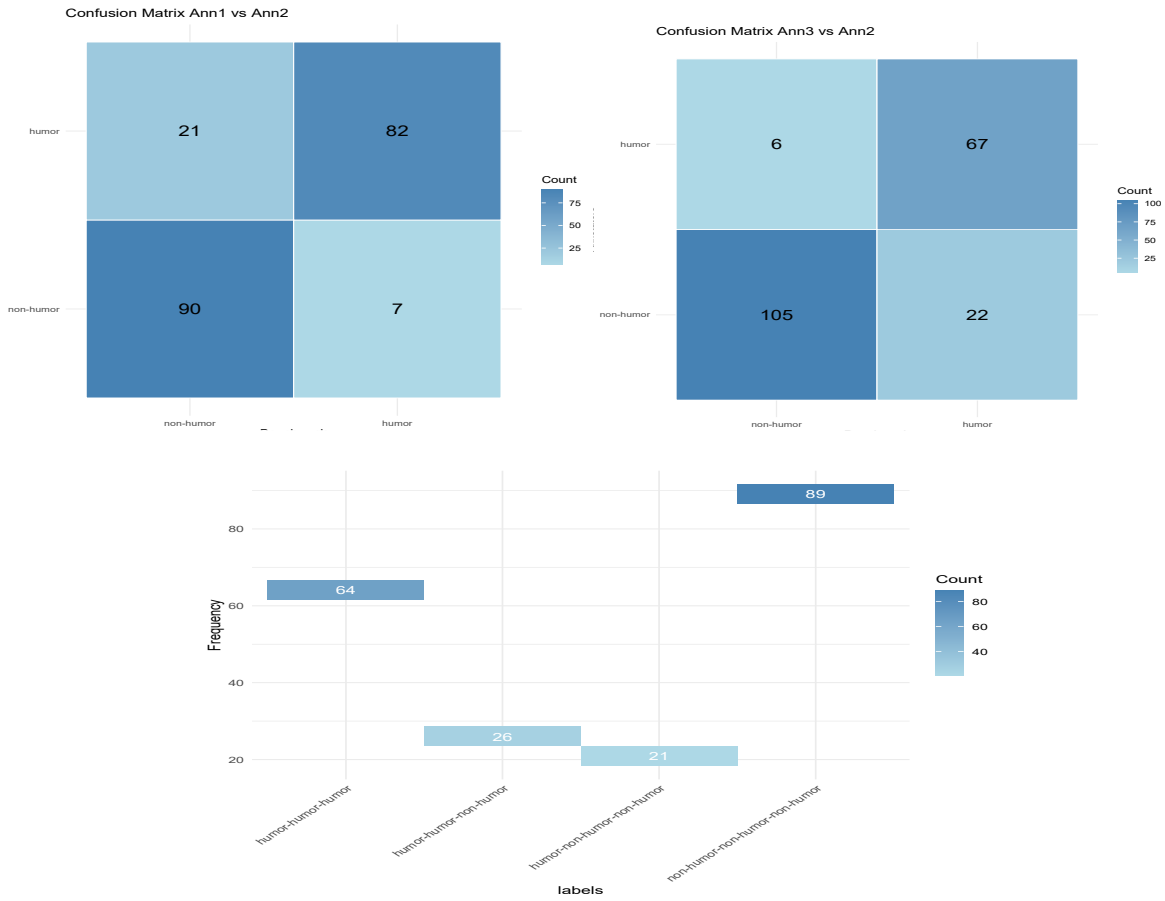

Figure 17: confusion matrices pair regarding the identification of (non-)humorous tweets.

To address this, interrater agreement is typically evaluated using indexes such as Cohen's Kappa (see Table 12). Overall, following the interpretation of Cohen's kappa proposed by Landis & Koch (1977: 165), where values between 0.61 and 0.80 indicate "substantial agreement" and values

above 0.81 reflect "almost perfect" agreement, all annotator pairs show relatively high levels of agreement.

I also calculated the Fleiss' Kappa Coefficient for 3 Raters (200 tweets), i.e., Fleiss Kappa = 0.682 ($Z = 16.7$; $p < .001$). In this case as well, the level of agreement is more than satisfactory, according to Landis & Koch (1977).[46]

	Ann1&Ann2	**Ann1&Ann3**	**Ann3&Ann2**
Cohen's kappa	k = 0.721 (Z=10.3; p < .001)	k= 0.623 (Z = 9.23; p < .001)	k= 0.711 (Z=10.2; p < .001)

Table 12: Identification of the humorous (versus non-humorous) tweets among the different pairs of annotators.

Table 13 reports some of the most evident cases of disagreement between the annotators.

It is interesting to note how in (42) even the presence of the quotation marks, used as humor markers, does not determine absolute homogeneity in the annotation (see the performance of Ann3).

The tweet in (41) is more problematic. Indeed, the humor may be triggered by the paternalistic and condescending tone used by Calenda, which could be intended to ridicule and belittle the target of the tweet. Probably, this stylistic nuance is not captured by Ann1.

[46] Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) obtained k=0.93 for the same task. Appendix F includes the scripts used to measure inter-annotator agreement.

Tweet	Humor	Non-Humor
(41) C. Calenda (AIV): *Professore, questi suoi tweet mi sembrano sempre più infantili. Eppure ha scritto delle così belle introduzioni ai testi di Bobbio. Perché screditarsi da solo in questo modo. Suvvia* 'Professor, these tweets of yours seem more and more childish to me. Yet you wrote such beautiful introductions to Bobbio's texts. Why discredit yourself like this? Come on?'	Ann2&Ann3	Ann1
(42) V. Sgarbi (NM): *Monumenti nell'incuria a Calderara di Reno, dove governa la Sinistra. Altro che "buon governo".* Neglected monuments in Calderara di Reno, where the Left governs. Anything but "good governance".	Ann1&Ann2	Ann3
(43) E. Letta (PD): *In parallelo #Salvini e il #Cremlino si oppongono alle sanzioni EU alla Russia. In perfetta consonanza. Alla sovranità di quale paese fa riferimento il capo della Lega?* 'At the same time, #Salvini and the #Kremlin oppose sanctions EU against Russia. In perfect harmony. Which country's sovereignty is the Lega leader referring to?'	Ann1&Ann3	Ann2

Table 13: Examples of agreement/disagreement between annotators.

Interestingly, in (43) the humorous interpretation is triggered by the presence of the rhetorical question ('Which country's sovereignty is the Leaga leader referring to?'), which can be interpreted as a humorous instance, based on the logical mechanism of ignoring the obvious (Attardo et al. 2002). Following the consensus meeting, tweet (43) was evaluated and interpreted as exhibiting humorous intent.

7.3.2 Task2: Humor functions

Regarding the ability to discriminate between the different discourse-pragmatic functions of humor (see Section 4), the confusion matrices in Figure 18 report all the cases of (dis)agreement for each annotation pair:

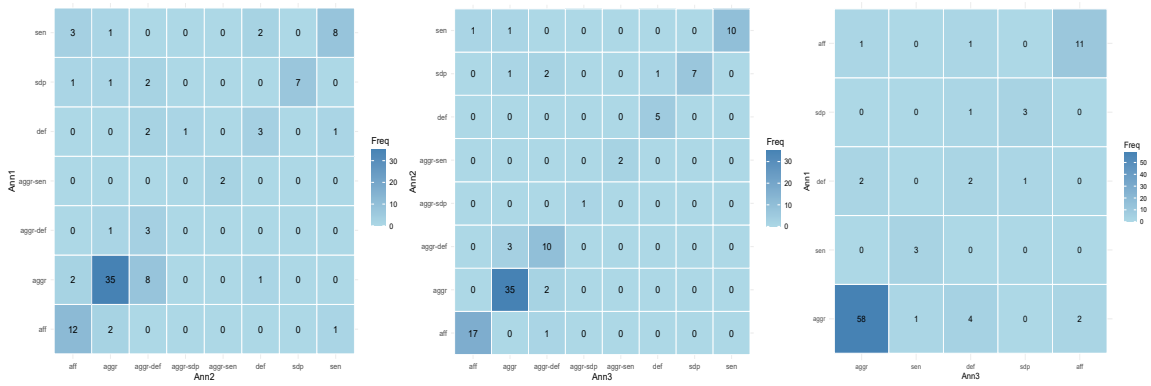

Figure 18: Confusion matrices displaying the frequency of (dis)agreed cases for each annotation pair regarding the functions of humor in tweets.

Table 14 contains the corresponding Cohen's kappa scores:

	Ann1&Ann3	**Ann1&Ann2**	**Ann2&Ann3**
Cohen's kappa	k=0.438 (Z.14.6; p < .001)	k=0.61 (Z=12.6; p < .001)	k=0.840 (Z = 17.3; p < .001).

Table 14: Identification of the functions of humorous tweets among the different pairs of annotators.

Regarding Cohen's kappa, Ann1&Ann2 and Ann2&Ann3 pairs achieved a level of substantial agreement. Instead, Ann1&Ann3 pair achieved a level of moderate agreement (see Landis & Koch 1977). Additionally, the Fleiss' Kappa for 3 raters is: Fleiss' Kappa = 0.712 (z =25; p < .001).[47] Interestingly, as illustrated in Figure 18, the annotators found the greatest agreement regarding the aggressive function. This arises from the fact that it is the most frequently occurring category within the dataset. One might hypothesize that the annotators had become primed by this communicative function, which may have also led to an overextension of the function during the annotation process.

[47] The Cohen's *k*-value concerning the annotation of the humor functions are in line with those described in Graham et al. (2016: 771) and in Garassino et al. (2022: 15-16).

Table 15 reports some of the most evident cases of disagreement between the annotators:

Tweet	Ann1	Ann2	Ann3
(44) V. Sgarbi (NM): Sgarbiman mangia solo“borlengo”: lardo, aglio, rosmarino e parmigiano reggiano. Ricordate: l’Aglio ci tiene lontani dai Casini! ‘Sgarbiman eats only “borlengo”: lard, garlic, rosemary, and Parmigiano-Reggiano. Remember: garlic keeps us away from the Casini!’	Aggressive S-enhancing	Aggressive S-enhancing	Aggressive S-enhancing
(45) G. Crosetto (AIV): Certo, i democratici sono quelli come lei, per cui è regime ciò che non pensano loro! […] ‘Of course, the democrats are people like you, for whom the regime is what they don't think it is! […]’	Aggressive	Aggressive-defensive	Aggressive-defensive
(46) V. Sgarbi (NM): “*Professore, ho tutti i suoi libri nella lista. Da leggere”. E leggili, stronzo! […]* ‘Professor, I have all your books on my list. To read.” And read them, asshole! […]’	Aggressive	Affiliative	Affiliative

Table 15: Examples of agreement/disagreement between annotators.

In (44) the two instances of humor (the neologism *Sgarbiman* and the pun activated by *Casini*) with different functions are recognized and correctly identified by all three annotators.

In (45) Ann1 fails to identify the defensive nuance of the irony (a reaction to previous accusation of FDI’s anti-democratic behavior). This cannot be regarded as annotation errors. Indeed, the communicative functions share common features, and the subtle distinctions among them may overlap. Instead, in (46) the aggression is perceived as real by Ann1 and not as merely simulated (i.e., (46) is a case of mock-impoliteness) with the aim of strengthening the relationship with the voter and electorate. It is probable that a different knowledge of the context and of Vittorio Sgarbi’s personality may have influenced this interpretation. Furthermore, differences in annotators' sensitivities may affect their perception of aggressiveness.

7.3.3 Task3: Humor markers

As shown in Table 16, the annotation results concerning humor markers are less satisfactory than those observed in the previous two tasks. This outcome is mainly attributable to two factors. First, the present task involves a larger set of labels than the previous ones (see Section 8), which naturally increases the likelihood of disagreement among annotators.

The second factor concerns that some types of markers – such as tropes as markers (e.g., hyperbole, understatement) and schematic markers (e.g., register/code-switching – require complex pragmatic skills that may differ significantly between different annotators. On the contrary, other types of markers (e.g., emojis; typographic markers) are more easily identifiable and, therefore, they facilitate agreement between annotators.

	Ann1&Ann2	**Ann1&Ann3**	**Ann2&Ann3**
Cohen's kappa	k=0.524 (Z= 16.2; p < .001)	k=0.438 (Z= 14.6; p < .001)	k=0.466 (Z=15.8; p < .001)

Table 16: Identification of humor markers among the different pairs of annotators.

Additionally, the Fleiss' Kappa for the three raters is: Fleiss' Kappa = 0.471 (z = 25.1; p < .001). The results are in line with Burger (2010). Burger (2010) underlines how, after the first round of coding, the Cohen's Kappa was low and only after a second annotation round did the results improve. However, overall, the results obtained are all within the moderate strength of agreement range (0.41-0.60), according to Landis & Koch (1977: 165).

However, one way to improve the results could be to reduce the number of labels used and/or to identify only the macro-categories of markers (namely, schematic, typographic, morpho-syntactic, and trope as markers). However, this strategy could result in a loss of relevant information and reduce the information made available by the annotation: in particular, the rhetorical figures used as markers.

A further step could be to enhance the training focused on specific types of markers, specifically tropes as humor markers (see example (48) and (50)).

Table 17 reports some data concerning to the annotation of humor markers, that will be discussed later:

Tweets	Ann1	Ann2	Ann3
(47) C. Calenda (AIV): *Appena appena un programma di mille pagine. Sintetizzo: giardini sempre recintati e illuminati [..]* 'Just a thousand-page program. To summarize: gardens always fenced and illuminated [...]'	Repetition	Understatement	Understatement
(48) V. Sgarbi (NM): *#politiche2022 #senato #bologna Anche Casini, valutando l'utilità del voto, alla fine a Bologna voterà per me.* '#politics2022 #senate #bologna Even Casini, evaluating the usefulness of the vote, will ultimately vote for me in Bologna'	No-markers	No-markers	Hyperbole
(49) L. Ravetto (Lega): *E si certo ho lavorato dieci anni tra Stati Uniti e Milano ma l'inglese lo devo imparare da lei*😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂 'And yes, of course I worked for ten years between the United States and Milan but I have to learn English from you😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂'	Emojis	Emojis	Emojis
(50) M. Salvini (Lega): *La "cattiva influenza" di Salvini preoccupa il presidente della Commissione europea? [...]* 'Does Salvini's "bad influence" worry the President of the European Commission? […]'	Puntuaction marks + rhetorical question	Puntuaction marks + rhetorical question	Puntuaction marks

Table 17: Examples of agreement/disagreement between annotators.

In (47) Ann 1 does not identify the reduplication of *appena* as a linguistic strategy to trigger the rhetorical figure of understatement, which is used as a marker of irony with a self-enhancing function. In (48) the absurd scenario (Casini and Sgarbi are political opponents) is interpreted as an overstatement by Ann3. Probably, in (48) the overstatement is not a humor marker but the factor that triggers humor, introducing the script opposition NORMAL vs. ABNORMAL in the text. As outlined

by Burgers & van Mulken (2017), the distinctions between types of humor and marker of humor are a problematic aspect, at the theoretical level, and this criticality also affects the annotation process as well. Instead, Ann 2 and Ann1 identify absence of humor markers, that is, there are no linguistic devices that (explicitly) mark the humorous mode.

In (49) the markers are more evident and, therefore, the annotators' agreement is favored. Specifically, the laughter emoji is reduplicated eleven times and, thus, the humorous mode is easily identifiable.

Instead, in (50) the three annotators agree on the use of punctuation (high quotation marks) as markers of the positive ironic statement *cattiva influenza* ('bad influence'); while they differ on the role of the rhetorical question. Thus, in (50), Ann1 does not consider the rhetorical question as a marker of irony.

As seen, in all three tasks the Cohen's kappa is below the 0.80 (viz., almost perfect agreement). In any case, a lower *k* is to be expected when one deals with pragmatics. It can even be considered unavoidable, as shown by current research on discourse annotations and other pragmatic phenomena (e.g., Graham et al. 2016, Garassino et al. 2022). Notably, pragmatic reasoning is heavily based on contextual information and, thus, annotators may arrive at different interpretations of the same linguistic material. These interpretive differences, in turn, can lead to divergent coding preferences and annotation strategies.

8. Quantitative Results

8.1 Humorous tweets in the 2022 election campaign

In this Section, I report and discuss the results obtained from the first annotation task, i.e., discriminating between humorous and non-humorous tweets (Section 7).

Figure 19 illustrates the distribution of humorous and non-humorous tweets in the Dataset. The distribution of the two categories mirrors the results reported by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022), with a comparable dataset of tweets (Section 5). This comparability of results suggests further qualitative and quantitative comparisons between datasets – also with a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic methodology. Additionally, this distribution, considering the number of tweets published by individual political figures, shows that humor is a marked communicative mode and, as such, occupies only a limited part of politicians' messages. It is clear that, during an electoral campaign, politicians cannot consistently rely only on a non–bona fide communicative mode (see Section 3.3.2).

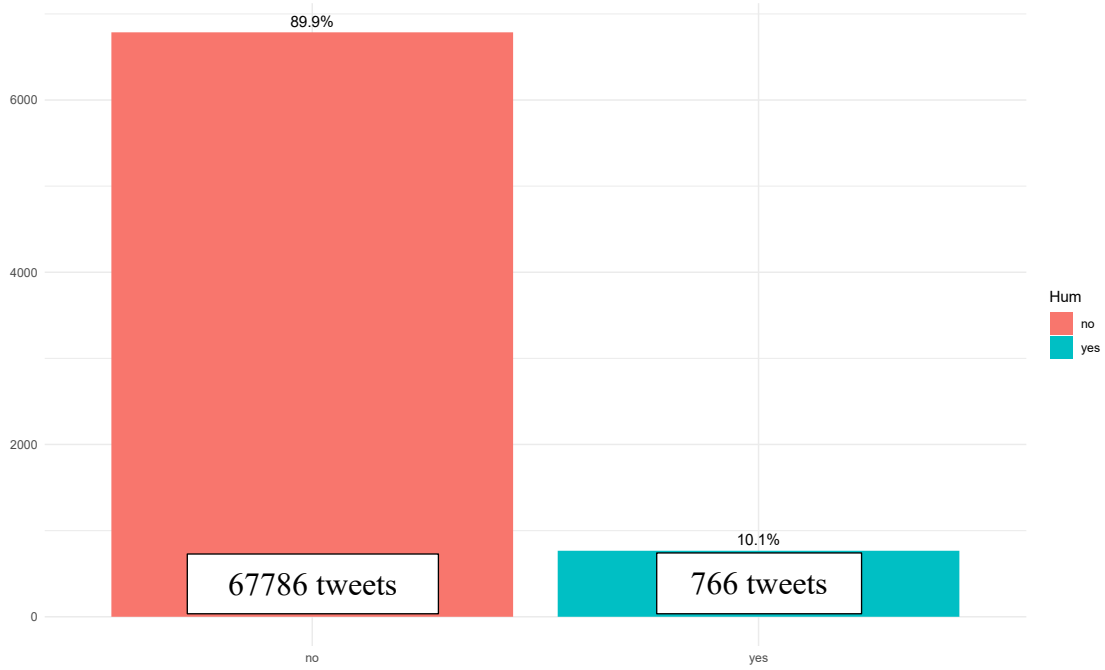

Figure 19: Distribution of non-humorous vs. humorous tweets.

Table 18 contains the number of tweets with the relative percentages, for each of the 38 politicians, with one or more instances of humor.[48]

[48] In Section 6, I reported the tweets available for each of the politicians considered.

Politicians' name	Humorous tweets	% all humorous tweets (tot=766)	% (politicians' tweets)
Carlo Calenda	145	18.9	14.6
Guido Crosetto	104	13.6	18.8
Gianluigi Paragone	99	12.9	14.7
Matteo Salvini	56	7.3	14.0
Andrea Orlando	55	7.2	16.6
Vittorio Sgarbi	50	6.5	29.8
Laura Ravetto	42	5.5	22.6
Luigi Marattin	18	2.3	9.94
Daniel Santanché	18	2.3	12.9
Enrico Letta	14	1.8	2.89
Michele Gubitosa	12	1.6	17.4
Giovanni Donzelli	11	1.4	9.40
Nicola Fratoianni	11	1.4	13.4
Eleonora Evi	10	1.3	2.41
Alessia Morani	10	1.3	18.9
Giorgia Meloni	9	1.2	8.57
Debora Serracchiani	9	1.2	9.57
Angelo Bonelli	8	1.0	2.96
Giuseppe Conte	8	1.0	3.98
Luigi De Magistris	8	1.0	3.64
Chiaro Appendino	7	0.9	6.86
Luigi Di Maio	7	0.9	17.5
Matteo Renzi	7	0.9	6.14
Benedetto della Vedova	7	0.9	5.69
Deborah Bergamini	6	0.8	5.36
Licia Ronzulli	6	0.8	5.83
Lorenzo Fontana	5	0.7	7.35
Beatrice Lorenzin	5	0.7	3.68
Silvio Berlusconi	4	0.5	2.29
Maria Stella Gelmini	4	0.5	3.96
Francesco Lollobrigida	4	0.5	3.70
Mara Carfagna	2	0.3	1.43
Aboubakr Soumahoro	2	0.3	1.27
Alessandra Todde	2	0.3	2.15
Simona Malpezzi	1	0.1	1.28
Raffaele Fitto	0	0	0
Emma Bonino	0	0	0
Paolo Gentiloni	0	0	0
Tot.	**766**	**100**	**100**

Table 18: Humorous tweets and political identities.

The extreme variability in the data (see Table 18) clearly indicates that individual stylistic variability is a determining factor in understanding the distribution of humor in political discourse. Humor is an individual linguistic trait and a rhetorical tool, linked to personal creativity skills and to the self-image that a politician is willing to offer. For example, it is likely that Giorgia Meloni and Enrico Letta, leaders of the two main coalitions and main candidates for Prime Minister, want to project to their electorate an image of seriousness, competence, and ability to manage the Country. This analysis is also valid for professional and long-standing politicians such as Paolo Gentiloni and Emma Bonino who may not conceive humor as a communicative strategy suitable for the institutional image, they have construed for themselves. It can also be assumed that Letta and Meloni may share a mutual willingness to adopt comparable communication styles and similar rhetorical strategies; in this way, their confrontation/contrast appears to be essentially based on societal issues and programs rather than on communication styles and strategies.

In contrast, politicians such as Calenda, Crosetto, Orlando, Paragone, Ravetto, Salvini and Sgarbi more frequently resort to this communication strategy more. Regarding Calenda, Crosetto, Paragone, and Sgarbi, this finding is also linked to the fact that they are non-traditional political figures. They are socially active beyond politics, with political experience that followed or came to overlap with earlier professional careers. Their different background likely shapes their communication style. For example, consider that both Paragone and Sgarbi have extensive experience in television broadcasting: it is therefore likely that they know how to adopt communication models capable of engaging with the audience and breaking the monotony of institutional conversation. Notably, Sgarbi is well known in Italy for his exuberant behavior—at times marked by episodes of pronounced vulgarity—during his appearances as guest on various television and radio programs.[49] Moreover, his communicative style is frequently marked by shifts in register, often juxtaposing dysphemisms and a rude language with complex reasoning articulated in a sophisticated lexicon—an incongruity underscored by his background as a university professor and author of works on art history and criticism. As for Paragone, he is the leader of a party (ITAEXIT) with a strong anti-establishment and extremely populist stance. Thus, Paragone's humor can also be seen as an anti-establishment linguistic strategy, intentionally and strategically distinct from the conventional language of politics.

With regard to Calenda and Crosetto, in addition to their extensive political careers, both have accumulated substantial experience in the industrial and financial sectors. Calenda, for example,

[49] Several video document Sgarbi's most well-known arguments (e.g.,https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DYAcGWusr6bo&ved=2ahUKEwiwvrid5tCPAxXCwQIHHeJWALkQFnoECB4QAQ&usg=AOvVaw1wKDMVY4mkWrGx15veuHC0).

served as president of Confindustria and as director of the Interporto Campano, while Crosetto has held, among other roles, the position of senior advisor to the aerospace company Leonardo and president of the Italian Space Companies Association. Consequently, they too may be seen as cultivating an 'alternative' communicative style—one that helps construct an image distinct from that of traditional politicians and is clearly shaped by linguistic features typical of marketing and commercial mechanisms. To some extent, these marketing-oriented communicative patterns can also be attributed to Laura Ravetto (Lega), given her long professional background as an international business lawyer. Specifically, humor may be configured both as a strategy related to marketing logics (cf. the speaker's deresponsabilization for the content) and, given that it is a marked modality and closely connected to creativity, as a distinctive stylistic feature.

As an outlier, Salvini, despite his long political career, demonstrates an exuberant communicative style, marked by coarse language, grammatical lapses, and occasional incursions into regional dialects (Nobili 2019: 676) – linguistic features of "*volgare eloquenza*" (Antonelli 2017). The use of humorous tweets, often with aggressive intent, can undoubtedly contribute to further distinguishing Salvini's speech, which is also marked, at a gestural level, by emphatic and theatrical linguistic patterns (Nobili 2019).

Andrea Orlando (PD) is a sort of unique case within the left-wing coalition (see Section 8.1.2): indeed, he is the only politician in this coalition to use humor at a significant rate. In any case, Orlando's career, entirely spent in politics and as a party official, did not suggest the adoption of a non-serious communicative mode.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that Renzi's style diverges noticeably from that of his party co-leader Calenda, underscoring once again the importance of accounting for individual differences. Furthermore, Matteo Renzi limited use of humorous tweets (only seven humorous tweets) mitigates—at least in the context of communication on X—the perception of Renzi as a politician for whom comic style is a defining hallmark of his discourse (see Di Cuia 2014: 22).[50] However, it is probable that in other communicative contexts Renzi's humorous style is more prominent. Consider, for instance, Renzi's well-known retort question (based on the logical mechanism "ignoring the obvious"): *Fassina chi?* ('Fassina, who?'), uttered in reply to a journalist's question about the political program put forward by Stefano Fassina, serving as undersecretary for the economy in Renzi's government.

[50] This interpretation is also shared by other political figures. For example, Salvini stated during a television broadcast: "Renzi è un comico, non un Presidente del Consiglio" ('Renzi is a comedian, not a Prime Minister', see https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DG6FImwG20yE&ved=2ahUKEwik8t_O2NKPAxXnhP0HHYMUF0cQtwJ6BAgdEAI&usg=AOvVaw2UbIgbQm7JCxz0dmn89JbX).

8.1.1 Humorous tweets and sociodemographic variables

In this Section, I examine the distribution of humorous tweets in relation to the gender and age pf the politicians. Notably, there is an imbalance in the dataset regarding the overall number of tweets published by male and female politicians (see Section 6). In any case, Mendiburo-Seguel's (2022) assumptions that female politicians use fewer instances of humor than male politicians are confirmed. In this regard, consider Table 19, which shows the distribution of humorous or non-humorous tweets in relation to the gender variable. The difference is statistically significant (χ^2 (1) = 29.26, p < .001).

	Female politicians	**Male politicians**
Non-Humorous tweets	1773 (93%)	5013 (88,80%)
Humorous tweets	131 (7%)	635 (11,20%)
Tot:	1904	5648

Table 19: Distribution of (non-)humorous tweets by gender.

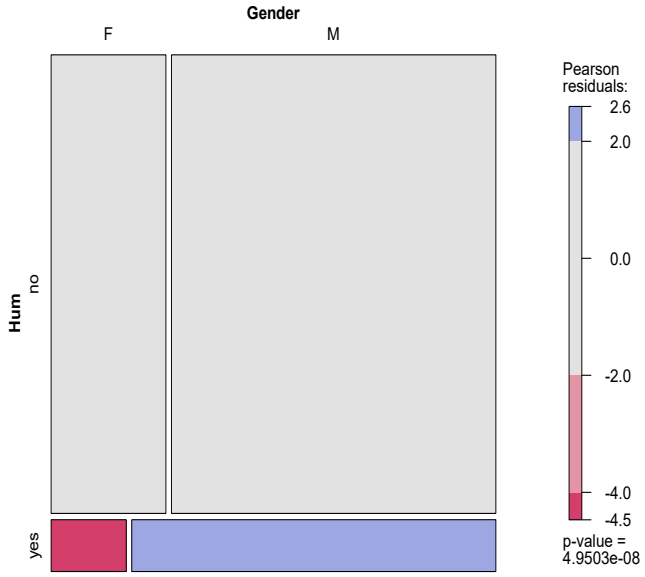

Figure 20: Mosaic Plot for humor and gender.

Additionally, see Figure 20, male politicians tend, overall, to use more humor in their communication on X.[51] However, this trend has, however, been observed in general even outside the literature dedicated to the study of political discourse (e.g., Lakoff 1975 and Kothoff 2006). It is likely, therefore, that cultural gender biased-stereotypes continue to influence the management of this rhetorical strategy: the use of humor by female politicians has not yet been fully accepted. In any case, other factors beyond gender biased-stereotypes may also be at play.[52] The only exception to this trend is Laura Ravetto (Lega), who, however, may be influenced by individual characteristics (e.g., her experience as an international business lawyer). As I will show (Sections 8.2 and 9), Laura Ravetto uses humor (especially aggressive humor) precisely to reaffirm her political abilities, her qualities, and, ultimately, also to respond to criticism of her physical appearance.

In relation to the politicians' age, Table 20 illustrates the distribution of humorous and non-humorous tweets.

	30-40	**40-50**	**50-60**	**60-70**	**70-80**	**80-90**
Non-humorous tweets	533 (95.70%)	2489 (77%)	2880 (89%)	666 (88.90%)	47 (100%)	171 (97.70)
Humorous tweets	24 (4.30%)	304 (23%)	351 (11%)	83 (11.10%)	0	4 (2.30%)
Tot:	557	2793	3231	749	47	175

Table 20: Distribution of (non-)humorous tweets by age.

Interestingly, the group of younger politicians (30-40) exhibits a tendency to not use humor, see Figure 21. This finding does not confirm the evidence that humor production tends to be more consistent at younger ages (Greengross 2013). Instead, it is confirmed that humor stabilizes during middle age, and declines in later years ("older politicians use less humor overall", Mendiburo-Seguel 2022: 5).

[51] The mosaic plot "reflects the total proportions of the cells, rows and columns in the contingency table" (Levshina 2015: 219). Thus, the size of each rectangle is related to the number of occurrences within the cell. Tiles are shaded according to the standardized residuals of the χ^2 test. Additionally, the colors of the rectangles indicate the level of statistical significance. Blue hues indicate cells whose observed frequencies exceed the expected values (positive residuals), red hues indicate cells with frequencies below expectation (negative residuals), and gray indicates cells whose observed frequencies are close to the expected values (residuals near zero).

[52] For a comprehensive bibliography on humor and gender, see Kothoff (2006) and Attardo (2020: 304–306). Also noteworthy is Attardo's statement: "once more the humorless woman myth is laid to rest" (Attardo 2020: 306).

Figure 21: Mosaic plot for humor and age

This aspect, combined with a limited use of the platform X and new media resources, may also help explain Emma Bonino's and Silvio Berlusconi's limited use of humor.[53]

Probably, Silvio Berlusconi (internationally well known for his histrionic and rhetorical skills, see the introduction in Billig 2005), resorts to humor more frequently in public or televised debates, due to his greater ability to handle traditional media and to benefit from the proxemics component (i.e., body language), which is absent in written communication.

[53] As observed in Brocca & Garassino (2015), Berlusconi's tweets—at least in 2013—were largely impersonal and clearly managed by a staff that recirculated statements produced elsewhere along with various information. This may also have influenced the 2022 data.

8.1.2 Humorous tweets and political variables

Party affiliation is the first political variable to consider in order to examine whether different parties employ distinct communication strategies. The distribution of humorous and non-humorous tweets by political parties is shown in Table 21. The dataset reveals statistically significant variation in relation to this variable (χ^2 (11) = 222.36, p < .001).

Political Party	Non-humorous Tweets	Humorous tweets	Tot.
+EU	163 (96%)	7 (4%)	170
AIV	1351 (88,50%)	176 (11,50%)	1527
AVS	894 (97%)	31(3%)	925
FDI	950 (86, 70%)	146 (13,30%)	1096
FI	374 (96%)	16 (4%)	390
IC	33 (82,50)	7 (17,50)	40
ITAEXIT	573 (85,30%)	99 (14,70%)	672
LEGA	550 (84,20%)	103 (15,80%)	653
M5S	436 (93,80%)	29 (6,20%)	465
NM	118 (70, 20%)	50 (30,80%)	168
PD	1132 (92,30%)	94 (7,7%)	1226
UP	212 (96,40%)	8 (4, 60%)	220
Tot.	**6623**	**776**	**7552**

Table 21: Humorous and non-humorous tweets by political parties.

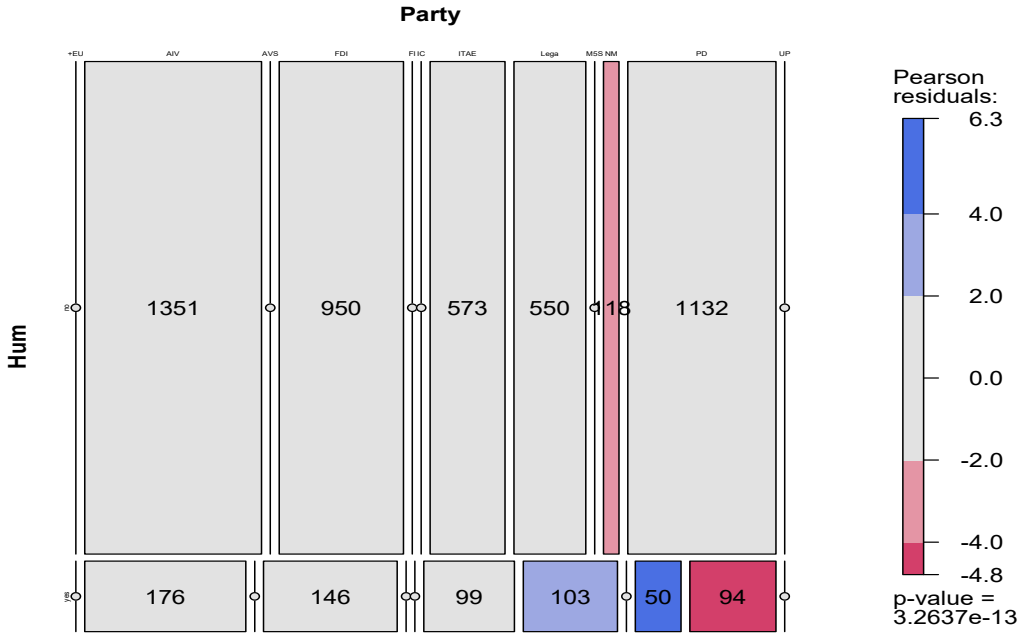

Figure 22: Mosaic plot for humor and parties.

Figure 22 clearly illustrates that the Democratic Party (PD) tends to use fewer forms of humor than expected: in fact, it has a significantly high negative coefficient. Within this party, there is a certain homogeneity among the analyzed politicians: no profile uses humor more than others.
Interestingly, the Lega party uses more forms of humor than expected (see Figure 22). Clearly, the sum of Salvini's and Ravetto's humorous tweets affects this result (see Table 18).

Regarding political coalitions, the distribution of humor is presented in Figure 23. In the Italian political context, there is a differentiation in the overall use of humor between the right-wing and the left-wing coalition. This finding contrasts with Stewart's (2011), who reported no significant differences between U.S. Republicans and Democrats in their use of humor, and with Mendiburo-Seguel et al.'s (2022), who likewise observed no differences between left- and right-wing politicians in overall humor use.

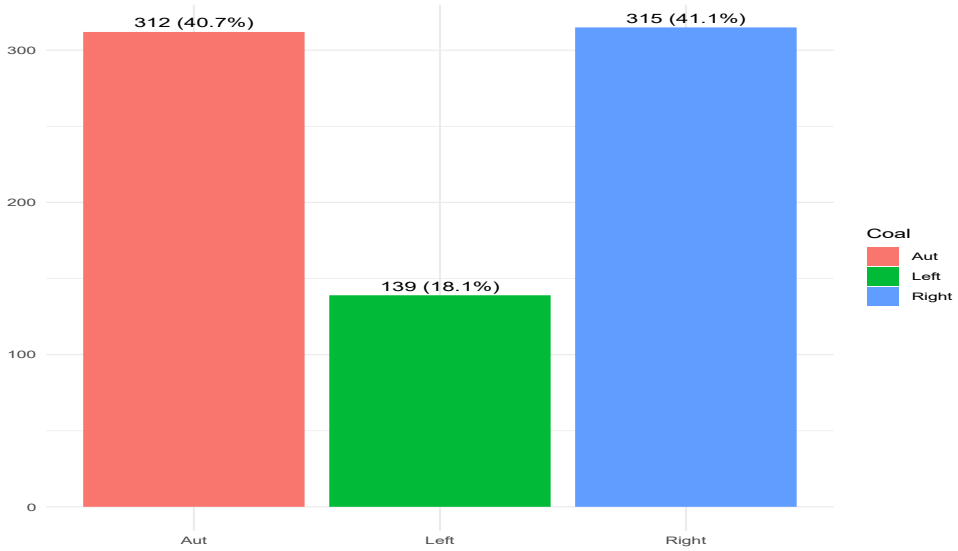

Figure 23: Distribution of humor tweets by coalitions.

Figure 24 highlights how humor is managed differently by Italian political coalitions (see significant differences in Pearson residuals):[54] there is also a positive association between the Left-coalition and the use of non-humorous tweets.[55] However, this finding is probably explained by the Left's tendency, which has become a sort of political-cultural stereotype, to construct a self-image based on seriousness, concreteness, and political ability, while at the same time attributing the opposite characteristics to the Right. See, in this regard, the statements made by Enrico Letta during the

[54] Pearson's residuals compare the observed with the expected frequencies for each cell of the contingency table (a residual is considered to be statistically significant if it is higher than 2 or lower than −2 (Levshina 2015: 217–221).
[55] In any case, it is always necessary to consider that within each coalition there are differences between the parties and single politicians.

electoral campaign to the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on 3 September 2022: "la logica del buttare tutto in vacca non ci appartiene, a noi appartiene la logica della serietà" ('The throwing everything to the dogs approach is not in our nature, the logic of seriousness belongs to us').[56] This statement conversationally implies that the logic of non-seriousness belongs to the other parties (which, intentionally, they are not specified). Thus, what could have been considered a sort of cultural stereotype is confirmed by the data, analyzed using a reproducible methodology and grounded in a validated theoretical framework.

Additionally, Figure 24 shows that only the right-wing coalition has a significant positive trend in humor production. This data clearly depends on the presence of Salvini, Ravetto, Crosetto, and Sgarbi in this coalition (see Table 18).

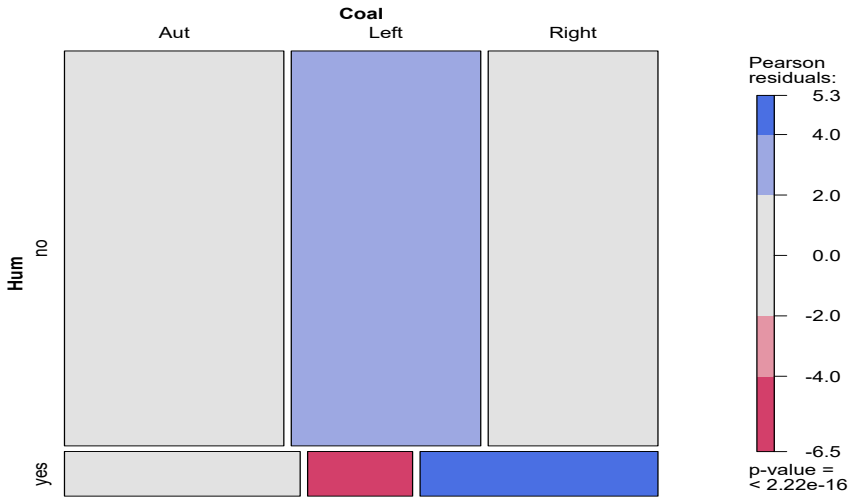

Figure 24: Mosaic plot for humorous tweets and coalitions.

Additionally, considering the autonomous parties, there is no evidence of a significant deviation. Consequently, the parties which are not framed within any coalitions do not attempt to differentiate themselves from the two main coalitions by extensively employing humor. It is likely that some differentiation exists in terms of the issues addressed and their electoral programs.

The politicians belonging to the oppositions area (in relation to the Draghi's Government) show a stronger tendency to employ humor (see Figure 25) likely as a form of anti-establishment rhetoric, a trend also identified and described by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022).

[56] Enrico Letta's discourse is available at: https://video.corriere.it/politica/letta-tik-tok-non-luogo-cabaret/29a507cc-2aa3-11ed-8fa9-879da6ca29ec. Consider also the Letta's statements, in the same discourse, about the use of TikTok by Italian politicians: "Tik Tok non è un luogo di cabaret, non è un luogo di varietà" ('Tik Tok is not a place for cabaret, it is not a place for shows').

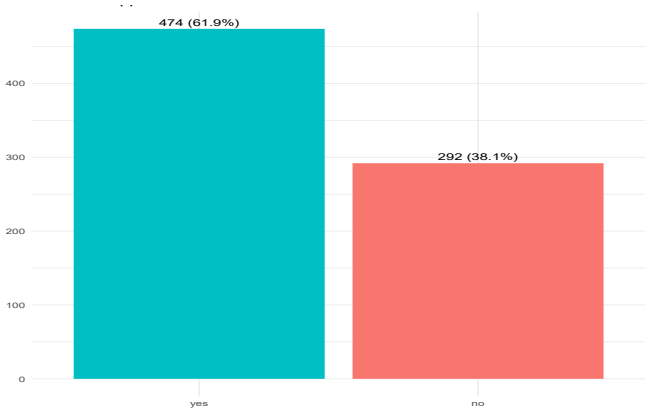

Figure 25: Distribution of humorous tweets by opposition group's membership.

Tsakona (2013) notes how the largest opposition party tended to rely more heavily on humor—specifically on puns with an attacking function.[57]

However, Figure 26 shows that the observed values do not differ significantly from the expected values (the residuals are close to zero). There is no significant association in these categories' combination, although there may be variability in percentage values (see Figure 25), i.e., 474 tweets (61,9%) published by members of opposition versus 292 tweets (38,1%) published by other politicians. In essence, whether or not politicians belonged to the opposition during the present government at the time of the election campaign is not a significant variable, at least in the 2022 election campaign.

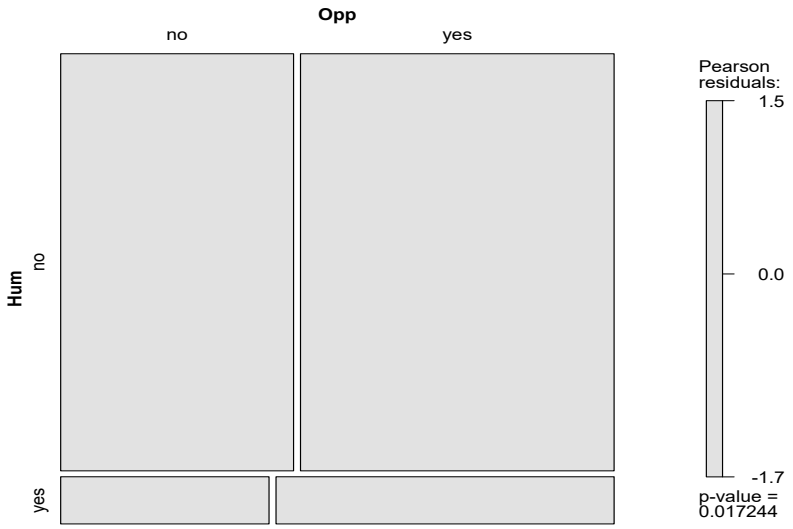

Figure 26: Mosaic plot for(non-) humorous tweets and coalitions.

[57] Tsakona (2013) does not include any statistical analysis.

Table 22 shows the distribution of humorous tweets, according to the leadership parameter.

	Non-humorous tweets	Humorous tweets	Tot.
Leaders	3494 (90,10%)	384 (9,90%)	3878
Non-leaders	3292(89,60)	382 (10,40%)	3674

Table 22: Distribution of humorous tweets according to the leadership parameter.

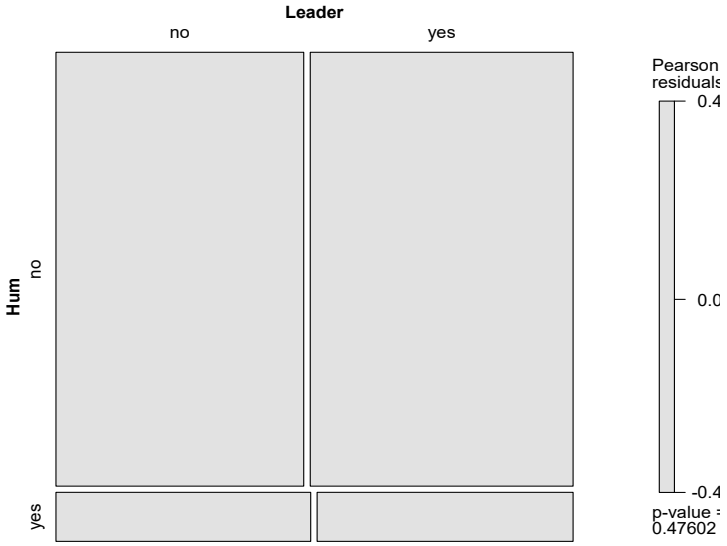

Figure 27: Mosaic plot for (non-)humorous tweets by leader/non-leader politicians.

Considering Table 22 and Figure 27, it is not possible to assert that the non-leader politicians rely more heavily on humor as a communicative strategy. This pattern does not align with Stewart's (2012) analysis, according to which underdog and/or second-tier candidates are more likely to use humor —particularly to attack out-group targets. Thus, observing Figure 27, it is possible to assert that humor is used both by party and coalition leaders to enhance their leadership status (humor enables leaders to perform their role more effectively, as noted by Tsakona & Popa 2011: 7), and by non-leader politicians to improve their leadership, at least at a communicative level. Indeed, as noted by Tsakona (2009: 230), humor has a strong relationship with leadership, conceived also as the ability to adopt rhetorically effective strategies. Additionally, Table 22 and Figure 27 indicate that occupying a leadership position within one's coalition or party does not lead to increased humor usage. In this regard, note the low presence of humorous tweets in the data of Giorgia Meloni, Enrico Letta, and even Silvio Berlusconi. Thus, leadership and higher political prestige do not influence the use of this rhetorical strategy in the 2022 Italian election campaign.

8.2. Humorous tweets and functions: distribution and analysis of correlations

8.2.1 Humorous tweets to convey aggressiveness

Figure 28 contains the results of the annotation of the communicative functions performed by each of the instances of humor found in the 766 humorous tweets.[58] What emerges is a clear and incontrovertible predominance of aggressive forms of humor (716 occurrences, viz. 80.5%). This trend is consistent with Machal et al.'s (2021) study, according to which the most common style of humor for politicians on social media appears to be aggressive toward political opponents. More recently, this result has also been observed by Koivukoski et al. (2025), that confirm the predominance of aggressive humor over less aggressive forms of it, underscoring the extent to which discursive aggression has become a salient and recurrent feature of political communication across Europe. This point is clearly evidenced in Tsakona's studies (2009, 2013) on the Greek political context as well (see Section 5).

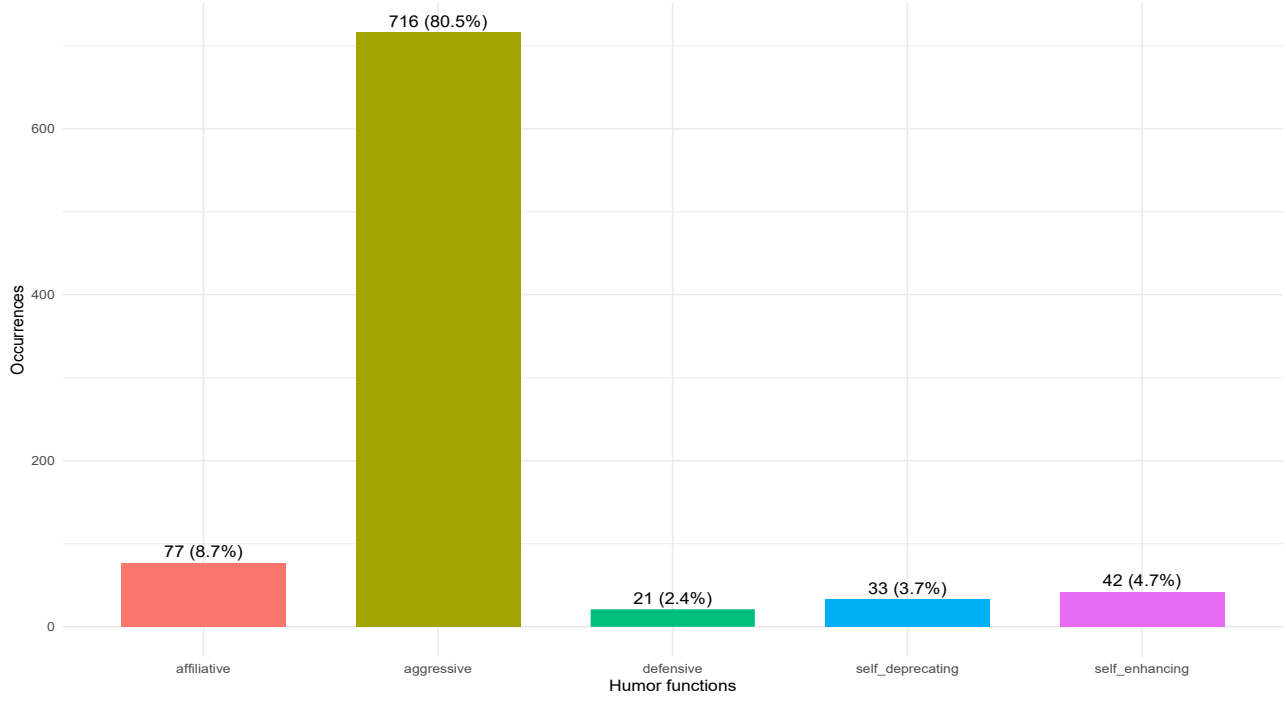

Figure 28: Occurrences and percentages of humor functions in the Dataset.

Regarding the gender variable, both female and male politicians tend to use humor predominantly as an aggression tool, as shown in Table 23. There is no statistically significant difference between the two groups of politicians based on gender ($\chi^2(1) = 0.34$, $p > .05$). Thus, all politicians, regardless of gender, prominently tend to resort to aggressivity – as showed by Figure 28.

[58] It is important to note that a humorous tweet may embed multiple instances of humor, each potentially fulfilling distinct communicative functions.

Essentially, when male politicians and female politicians resort to humor during election campaigns, they do so aggressively. The use of humor as a weapon of aggression and offense therefore appears to be a generalized pattern, at least during election campaigns. Probably, this is due to the textual genre considered: clearly, the electoral campaign makes significant use of agonistic and antagonistic communicative strategies.

	Aggressive humorous instances	**Non-aggressive humorous instances**	**Tot.**
Female politicians	120 (78,40%)	33 (21,60%)	153
Male politicians	596 (81,00%)	140 (19%)	736

Table 23: Distribution of (non-)aggressive humorous instances by gender.

Figure 29: Mosaic plot (non)-aggressive humor and gender.

Table 24 displays the annotation's results regarding the leadership status. This variable is also statistically significant (χ^2 (1) = 32.38, $p < .001$). The same level of statistical significance is also observed when the analysis accounts for the variable of coalition membership ($\chi^2(1) = 4.11$, $p < .05$).

	Aggressive humorous instances	Non-aggressive humorous instances	Tot.
Leader	401 (87,90%)	55 (12%)	456
Non-leaders	315 (72,70%)	118 (27,30%)	433
Opposition	436 (78,40%)	120 (21,60%)	556
Non-opposition	280 (84%)	53 (16%)	333

Table 24: Distribution of (non)-aggressive humorous instances and leadership and oppositions' status.

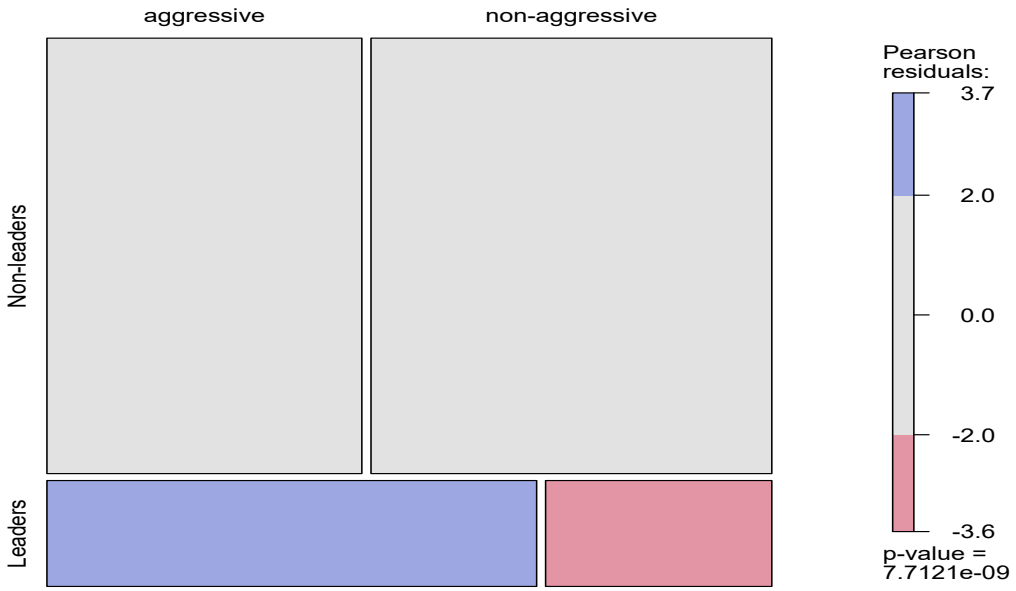

Figure 30: Mosaic plot (non)-aggressive humor and leadership.

Figure 30 shows that leaders tend to adopt more aggressive strategies, that is, there is a significant deviation from the expected values. Probably, this trend depends on the fact that leaders are often the target of accusations and criticism. Thus, a form of communicative function adoption occurs, namely: they use aggression as a reaction to a previous aggressive speech act. The same trend can be observed among members of the government versus members of the opposition. As illustrated by Figure 31, the chi-square test yields a significant result ($p < 0.05$); however, when examining the individual cells, no substantial deviation between observed and expected frequencies can be detected. Analyzing aggressive humorous tweets, Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) found that the decisive factor was whether the party was in government or in opposition, i.e., opposition parties, regardless of affiliation, tend to employ more aggressive humor, while governing parties rely more on affiliative humor. For instance, in Chilean context, right-wing parties in opposition produced more humorous tweets than left-wing parties in government.

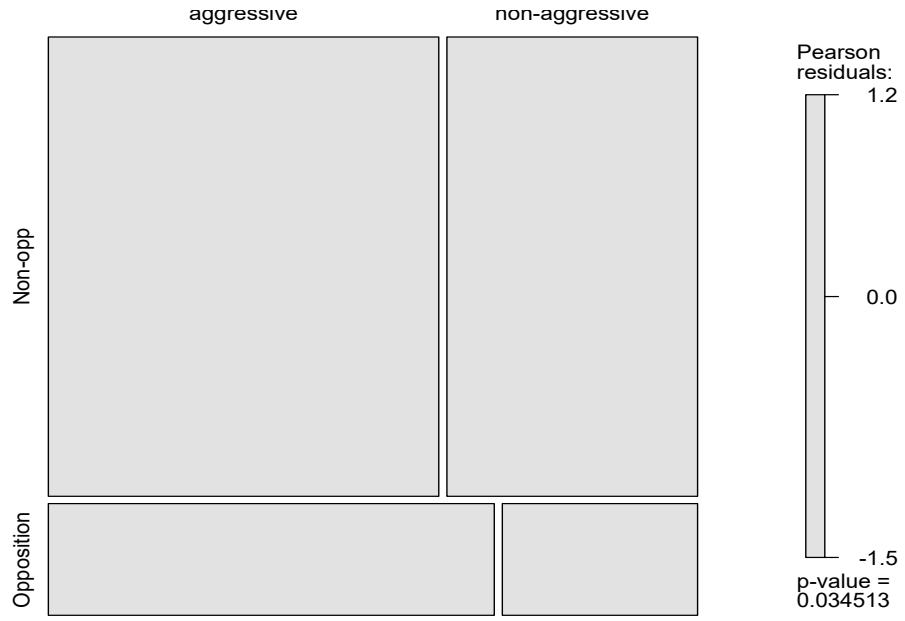

Figure 31: Mosaic plot (non)-aggressive humor and opposition's status.

Finally, considering the distribution at coalition level, consider what is reported in Table 25. The chi-square test (χ^2 (2) = 3.39, $p < .001$) reveals that there are differences between the coalitions. This finding is in contrast with the results of Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022: 5): no differences in the use of aggressive humor were found based on political affiliation ("there were no differences between left-wing and right-wing politicians regarding total use of humor and aggressive humor").

Coalitions	**Aggressive humorous instances**	**Non-aggressive humorous instances**	Tot
Autonomous parties	333 (87,40%)	48 (12,60%)	381
Right-wing	267 (73,30%)	97 (26,70%)	364
Left-wing	116 (80%)	29 (20%)	145

Table 25: Distribution of (non)-aggressive humorous instances by coalitions.

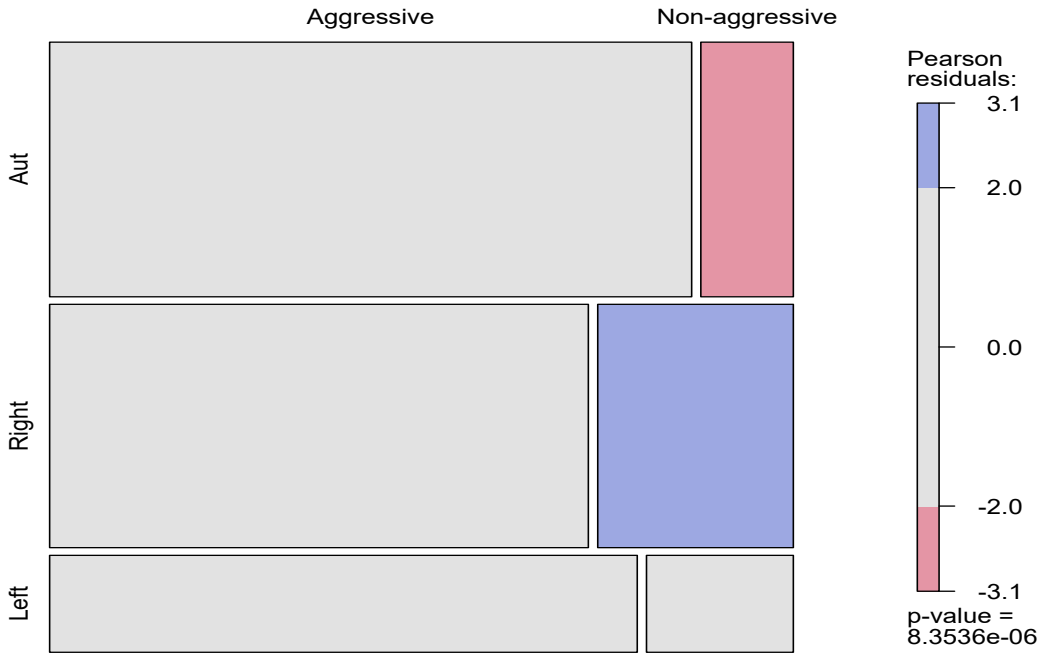

Figure 32:Mosaic plot (non-)aggressive humor and coalitions.

As shown by Figure 32, there is a negative tendency for autonomous parties to use non-aggressive forms of humor, in proportion to the other coalitions (even within autonomous parties, the aggressive function still overwhelmingly prevails); while the opposite trend is observed for the right-wing coalition. In this regard, Krefer et al. (2021: 4) suggest that "aggressive humor may be more characteristic of liberals than conservatives". However, it is true that from the perspective of Italian politics, autonomous parties (with the exception of AIV) cannot be considered liberal parties (such as ItaExit). In relation to political coalitions, Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) also found a greater tendency for members of the Right-wing coalition to use affiliative humor. As I will show (Section 8.3), some politicians from the Right-wing coalition are those who most often use affiliative and self-deprecatory forms.

8.2.2 Aggressive-defensive humor

Out of the 716 instances of aggressive humor, 158 (viz., 22%) tweets can be classified as forms of aggressive-defensive humor (see Section 4.1) or reactive rudeness (Kienpointner 1997:266), that is, an aggressive humorous response to a previous criticism. These forms of aggressiveness, according to Culpeper (2011: 206), are forms of aggression that are generally more accepted and tend to be considered as appropriate. Specifically, in these forms of humor, the target of the aggressive humor is explicitly identified and addressed within the text of the tweet. Generally, these instances typically

take the form of a direct reply to attacks received in the comment section of a tweet posted by the politician, representing accusations personally directed to the politician. Accordingly, the politician's response is direct and takes place within a defined chronological timeframe.

Overall, of these 158 forms of aggressive-defensive humor, 35 are performed by female politicians, while 123 by male politicians. It can therefore be assumed that male politicians respond more frequently to criticism with this function. A future study could also investigate whether male politicians are also more frequently the targets of aggression from other X users. Interestingly, there is an even distribution of this function between reply messages (80 tweets), that is, addressed to a specific user, and tweets that are not replies (78 tweets).

In what follows, I examine in detail some forms of aggressive-defensive humor targeted at specific X's users:

(51) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@utente 1 @utente 2 Le faccio rispondere da Pollock*
'*@user1 @user2* I'll have Pollock respond to you'

Using an absurd humorous tweet such as that in (51), Orlando responds to users who had previously criticized him for his cultural and intellectual proficiency. Orlando creates a fictional scenario in which he pretends to invite a more culturally qualified person to reply to @user1 and @user2.

The entire political class is also being defended, as Crosetto's tweet (52) shows.

(52) Guido Crosetto (FDI): @utente 1 *Colpa dei partiti…* 🤦'
'@user1 It's the parties' fault... 🤦'

This is an ironic statement (that is, the opposite of what is stated is to be implied –the fault is not of the parties–and contextually inappropriate), marked by the use of inferential punctuation (...) and the emoji. This emoji (🤦) expresses disdain towards the criticism addressed at the Italian political class mentioned in ((52)) at the Italian political class.[59]

[59] This emoji draws on the (historically established) "facepalm" meme. This gesture conveys a sense of dismay and typically signals a reaction to someone's momentary lapse in logic, judgment, or memory (see https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/facepalm).

Another example is in (53) below:

(53) Laura Ravetto (Lega): @utente1 *E si certo ho lavorato dieci anni tra Stati Uniti e Milano ma l'inglese lo devo imparare da lei*😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂
'@user1 And yes, of course I worked for ten years between the United States and Milan but I have to learn English from you 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂'

In (53), Ravetto defends her cultural and linguistic skills, which are being questioned by the @user1. Note how the reduplication of the smiley emoji discredits and ridicules the target's position, thus allowing the politician to better defend her own face.
The paradox highlighted by Ravetto (i.e., an international lawyer receiving negative comments on her English from an anonymous X's user) clearly also contains an attack against the user: it implies that the user cannot judges Ravetto's linguistic skills. Therefore, the scripts opposition is: (ENGLISH) COMPETENCE vs. (ENGLISH) NON-COMPETENCE.
Consider now tweet (54):

(54) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *@EnricoLetta sono settimane che dici che votare noi è come votare la Meloni, che siamo truffatori, che chi non vota voi è amico di Putin e No Vax e la campagna rabbiosa è la nostra?*
'@Enrico Letta, for weeks you have been claiming that voting for us is equivalent to voting for Meloni, that we are fraudsters, that those who don't vote for you are friends with Putin and the Anti-Vax movement, and that the angry campaign is ours?'

In (54) Calenda defends himself against Enrico Letta's accusation of having launched a political campaign based on attacks and criticism. His defense rests precisely on highlighting the paradox, which triggers an incongruity and is inherent in Letta's position: that is, criticizing the angry campaign of his opponents after having himself based his electoral campaign on aggression (e.g., accusing the other political forces of being fraudsters). Note that in (54) the sequence of accusations is deliberately repetitive. The script opposition is AGGRESSOR vs. VICTIM (or ATTACKER vs. ATTACKED). Letta frames Calenda as the aggressor, while Calenda switches the roles, portraying Letta as the true source of hostility. The humor is based on the logical mechanism of role reversal.

In contrast, in non-reply tweets (see (55)-(57)), the target is not explicitly mentioned. Therefore, these tweets are used to respond to more general, vague, and indirect accusations.

(55) Daniela Santanché (FDI): *Dedicato a quotidiani, TV e intellettuali di sinistra che tutti i giorni provano a gettare fango su @GiorgiaMeloni e #FdI. Continuate pure così, il voto degli italiani vi seppellirà […].*
'Dedicated to the left-wing newspapers, TV channels, and intellectuals who attempt to cast aspersions on @GiorgiaMeloni and #FdI. Keep it up, the Italian vote will bury you […].

Note how the criticism, described in (55) is no directed specifically to Santanché, but more generally at her party (FDI). Therefore, Santanché humorously invites FDI's detractors – who remain intentionally underspecified –to keep on with their denigratory and defamatory electoral campaign (this is a case of mock-politeness, see Section 9).

The case of (56) is more complex and allows us to understand how humor is a strategy for managing relationships between politicians.

(56) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *Godzilla è un amico! Ci troviamo per il poker (Texas hold 'em) tutti i giovedì. Con King Kong, la signorina coniglio, Lupin III, il nonno di Heidi e Paperone. Questo giovedì c'è un posto libero. Se riesci passa!*
'Godzilla is a friend! We meet for poker (Texas hold'em) every Thursday. With King Kong, Miss Rabbit, Lupin III, Heidi's Grandpa, and Scrooge McDuck. There is a spot available this Thursday. If you can, come by!'

Specifically, (56) is an aggressive-defensive response to the tweet in (57), reported by Crosetto as a screenshot.

(57) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Direi che la campagna elettorale sta raggiungendo vette inesplorate di idiozia. @GiorgiaMeloni contro #PeppaPig prossimo episodio? Crosetto contro Godzilla OGM. Berlusconi contro Sampei comunista? Conte contro Lady Oscar elitaria?*
'I'd say that the election campaign is reaching uncharted heights of idiocy. @GiorgiaMeloni against #PeppaPig next episode? Crosetto against GMO Godzilla. Berlusconi against the communist Sampei? Conte against elitist Lady Oscar?'

In (57), Calenda, to contest the FDI controversy against the children's cartoon Peppa Pig, constructs an absurd and imaginary scenario. Calenda imagines a series of mock controversies: between Crosetto and Godzilla as the monster is a genetically modified creature; between Berlusconi and Sampei (another cartoon character) as Sampei is a Communist, and between Conte and the elitism of Lady

Oscar (a character from a popular Japanese animation series serving the Queen of France).[60] By means of this scenario, Calenda underscores how absurd FDI's position is.

In (56) Crosetto adopts the same communicative style and the same type of humor (absurd humor). He imagines a scenario in which FDI members play poker with various cartoon and comic book characters, inviting Calenda himself to join. Calenda's absurdity (see (57)) is used against him. Thus, (56) involves not only the adoption of the same communicative mode but also of the same type of humor of (57).

8.2.3 Serious and humorous aggressivity

Numerous studies have described the pervasiveness of aggressiveness and impoliteness forms of communication in political communication (e.g., Wodak 2015; Wodak et al. 2020; Garassino et al. 2022; Scavo et al. 2023). In particular, as noted in Section 2.1, the 2022 Italian electoral campaign provides not only clear evidence of the frequent use of impoliteness but also noticeable variations across political actors. In this section, I report the methodology and results of the annotation related to the presence or absence of forms of aggression and impoliteness, carried out on tweets previously annotated as non-humorous.[61]

Specifically, I deploy Culpeper's (2011) analytical framework – recently also employed in Wodak et al. (2020) to investigate Berlusconi's and Trump's strategies of impoliteness – to annotate and analyze aggressive and impolite serious tweets. Thus, I focused both on-record or off-record (namely, implicational strategies of impoliteness), as described in Section 4.1.2. Indeed, as noted in Wodak et al. (2020), no systematic attention is given to matters of (im)politeness in many studies about political discourses. Specifically, for the on-record impoliteness strategies, I primarily followed the discussions in Brown and Levinson (1978), Culpeper (2011), Wodak et al. (2020), as well as the notion of 'attack' presented and analyzed in Garassino et al. (2022).

Notably, the focus here is not on how these strategies are perceived by the targets of the attack—that is, whether they are interpreted as genuine forms of impoliteness—nor on the severity or harmfulness attributed to these aggressive speech acts. Moreover, this section does not focus on forms of praise or self-praise, which, from the perspective of Brown & Levinson (1987), can be conceptualized as face-threating acts and as forms of impoliteness.

[60] Note the repetition of rhetorical questions (that is, questions that clearly do not presuppose an answer).
[61] Tweets analyzed in this Section must not contain any humorous instances.

The methodology adopted here differs from that of studies by Scavo et al. (2023) & Ceron et al. (2023), specifically dedicated to the Italian political-electoral context. These studies adopt a definition of aggressivity that, from a linguistic and pragmatic point of view, is quite vague. Indeed, according to their perspective, a tweet can be classified as aggressive when it contains an explicit criticism or a negative comment on something attributable to a political opponent, be it specific (for example, a specific politician or a specific programmatic proposal of an opposing party) or vague (for example, the reference to a broad group, such as "the left", "the right", "populists" etc.). No reference is made to the implicit level of the language and to indirect strategies to convey attacks. It is therefore not possible to have a full understanding of whether tweets with these forms of impoliteness have been considered in the analysis.

Instead, the methodology adopted here allows us to take into account cases like (58), in which the aggressive component is maximally explicit, and cases like (59), in which aggressiveness is implicit.

(58) Beatrice Lorenzin (PD): *Quella tra Lega e Fratelli d'Italia è una coalizione finta. Con loro c'è il rischio che nasca un governo già morto.*
'The coalition between the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia is a sham. With them, there's a risk of forming a dead government.

(59) Matteo Renzi (AIV): *Gli unici seri su questo siamo noi*
'The only ones who are serious about this are us'

In (59) the reader has to infer (by conversational implicature) that the other political parties are not serious: it is, therefore, an off-record form of impoliteness. The definition of aggressiveness provided by Scavo et al. (2023) could have led to an exclusion of this tweet.

Table 26 shows the result of serious aggressiveness annotation task. Overall, there are 1,314 tweets that can be classified as aggressive (viz., 17.4% of the entire dataset, which totals 7,552 tweets).

Politicians	N. Tweets	Aggressive humorous tweets	Aggressive tweets	%_aggr	%_aggr_hum
Appendino	102	3	11	10,8	2,9
Bergamini	112	5	28	25	4,5
Berlusconi	175	0	50	28,6	0
Bonelli	270	6	46	17	2,2
Bonino	47	0	3	6,4	0
Calenda	991	98	187	18,9	9,9
Carfagna	140	2	31	22,1	1,4
Conte	201	7	9	4,5	3,5
Crosetto	549	53	99	18	9,7
De Magistris	220	6	32	14,5	2,7
Di Maio	40	5	4	10	12,5
Donzelli	117	3	9	7,7	2,6
Evi	415	6	24	5,8	1,4
Fitto	75	0	24	32	0
Fontana	68	5	15	22,1	7,4
Fratoianni	82	11	29	35,4	13,4
Gelmini	101	2	9	8,9	2
Gentiloni	49	0	4	8,2	0
Gubitosa	69	9	32	46,4	13
Letta	485	12	21	4,3	2,5
Lollobrigida	108	2	42	38,9	1,9
Lorenzin	136	3	7	5,1	2,2
Malpezzi	78	1	19	24,4	1,3
Marattin	181	10	44	24,3	5,5
Meloni	105	4	20	19	3,8
Morani	53	5	6	11,3	9,4
Orlando	331	20	38	11,5	6
Paragone	673	85	200	29,7	12,6
Ravetto	186	17	13	7	9,1
Renzi	114	6	23	20,2	5,3
Ronzulli	103	1	20	19,4	1
Salvini	399	39	82	20,6	9,8
Santanché	139	10	24	17,3	7,2
Serracchiani	94	7	36	38,3	7,4
Sgarbi	168	15	17	10,1	8,9
Soumahoro	158	1	11	7	0,6
Todde	93	1	10	10,8	1,1
Vedova	123	4	35	28,5	3,3
Tot:	**7552**	**464**	**1314**	**17,40**	**6,14**

Table 26: Distribution of aggressive humorous tweets and aggressive non-humorous tweets and their percentage on the total.

Thus, among most politicians, aggression is more frequently expressed through serious communication. However, it is interesting to analyze some communicative profiles in detail.
Specifically, Calenda is the politician who, overall, most frequently uses attacking/aggressive humorless tweets (see Scavo et al. 2023). Instead, Sgarbi has roughly comparable rates of aggressive humor and humorless aggression. The same is true for Enrico Letta. Letta generally employs minimal humor and aggression; however, when he seeks to be aggressive, he often relies on humor. Additionally, Laura Ravetto seems to use humor as a preferred rhetorical weapon to convey aggression (9,1% of aggressive humorous tweets vs. 7% of non-aggressive humorous tweets). As for other politicians (e.g., Berlusconi, Lollobrigida, or even Bonelli) instead, is clearly that humor is not the preferred method for conveying aggression

The overall preference for non-humorous forms is linked to the fact that one cannot insistently resort to humor as a communicative strategy, since the positive properties of this modality would be weakened by overuse. Additionally, a humorous statement can be misunderstood, that is, the real communicative intentions of the speaker can be misinterpreted. In this regard, consider the use of strategies such as mock-politeness or negative irony, in which the explicit level of the text conveys expressions of politeness that must be reinterpreted in relation to the co-text/context (see (60)). Clearly, an incorrect understanding of the message leads to a misunderstanding of the speaker's communicative intentions.

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(60) Mara Carfagna (AIV): *Solo per spirito di responsabilità non rispondiamo: perché non ci pensate voi post elezioni, che siete così bravi?*
‘We are not answering out of a sense of responsibility: why don’t you guys think about it after the elections, you who are so good at it?’

(61) Giuseppe Conte (M5S): *Cosa resterà di questo Governo dei Migliori? Ditemelo voi, io non lo so.*
‘What will remain of this so-called Government of the Best? You tell me, I don’t know.’

In (60)-(61), although the interrogative structure marks the aggressive intentions of the politicians, the reader might mistakenly interpret the message as conveying a positive meaning and interpret (60)-(61) as genuine politeness.

I analyzed the distribution of (non-)aggressive and humorless tweets in relation to socio-demographic and political variables. Table 27 contains the distribution by gender. The result of the chi-test (χ^2 (1) = 32.63, p < .001) suggests that the data variation is significant in relation to this variable.

	Aggressive Tweets	**Non-aggressive tweets**	**Tot:**
Female politicians	261 (14,70%)	1512 (85,30%)	1773
Male politicians	1053 (21%)	3960 (79%)	5013

Table 27: Distribution of (non-)aggressive tweets by gender.

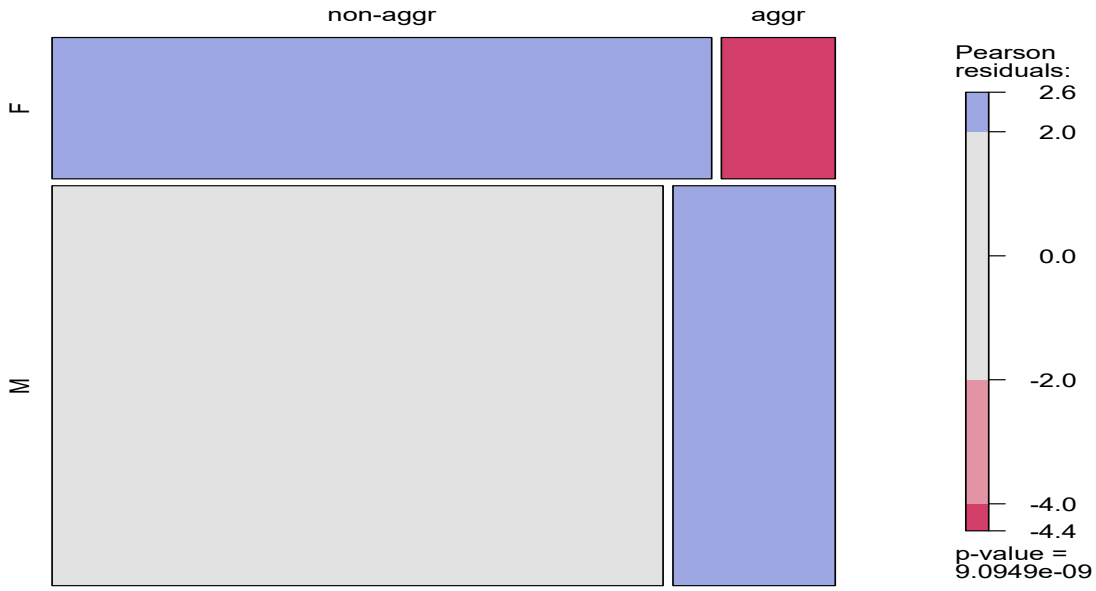


Figure 33: Mosaic plot for (non-)aggressive tweets and gender.

In contrast to what has been observed for humorous instances, aggressive tweets show there is an inverse trend between male politicians and female politicians in the management of this communicative function. Specifically, male politicians tend to produce more serious aggressive tweets than female politicians (see Figure 33).

Table 28 summarizes all the results related to political variables:

	Non-aggressive tweets	Aggressive tweets	Tot:
Autonomous parties	2025 (76,60%)	617 (23,40%	2642
Left-wing	1895 (88,10%)	254 (11,80%)	2149
Right-wing	1551 (77,80%)	443 (22,20%)	1994
Opposition's members	3083 (79%)	815 (21%)	3898
Non-opposition's members	2389 (82,70%)	499 (17,30)	2888
Leaders	2754 (78,90%)	738 (21,10%)	3492
Non-leaders	2718 (82,50%)	576 (17,50%)	3294

Table 28: Distribution of (non-)aggressive tweets by political variables.

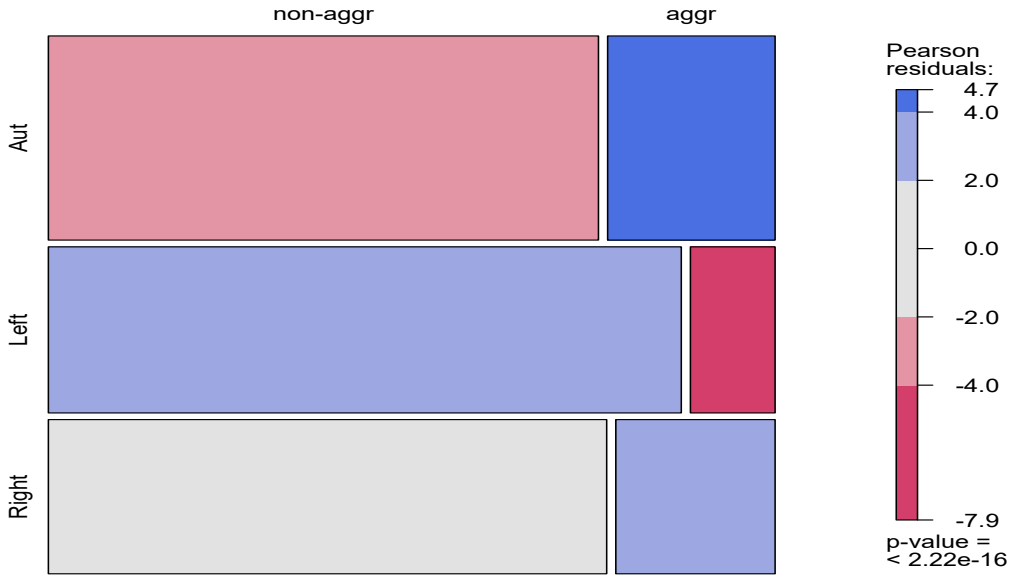


Figure 34: Mosaic plot for (non-)aggressive tweets and coalitions.

Furthermore, Figure 34 clearly shows how the three coalitions use different aggressive styles (χ^2 (2) = 115.65, $p < .001$). In particular, the Left-wing coalition tends to avoid aggressive forms and to employ non-aggressive ones more frequently than the other coalitions.

When looking at the absolute figures, it is clear that non-aggressive texts prevail within each coalition.

Conversely, the Right-wing coalition tends to use a greater number of aggressive forms than expected. Regarding non-aggressive behavior, the Right-wing coalition shows deviation from expectations.

This finding aligns with the analyses conducted by Wodak (2015) and Wodak et al. (2020), who argue that intentional, strategic provocation and scandalization serve key functions for far-right populist politicians, enabling them to dominate media agendas while simultaneously diverting attention from potentially unpopular policies. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is that the strongest positive association with aggressiveness concerns parties outside the Government's coalition. This is further underscored by the negative association observed with non-aggressive tweets. The same trend was identified by Scavo et al. (2023; see Section 2.1). Moreover, frequent resort to aggressive messaging on Facebook by non-coalition parties—especially members of AIV—had already been noted by Ceron et al. (2023).

Considering the opposition or non-opposition parameter (Figure 35), the chi-square test (χ^2 (1) = 20.84, $p < .001$) also reveals that being or not being a member of the opposition leads to a statistically significant variation. In particular, avoidance is observed in the use of negative strategies by non-opposition members and, conversely, a statistically significant tendency for opposition forces to use aggressive strategies.[62]

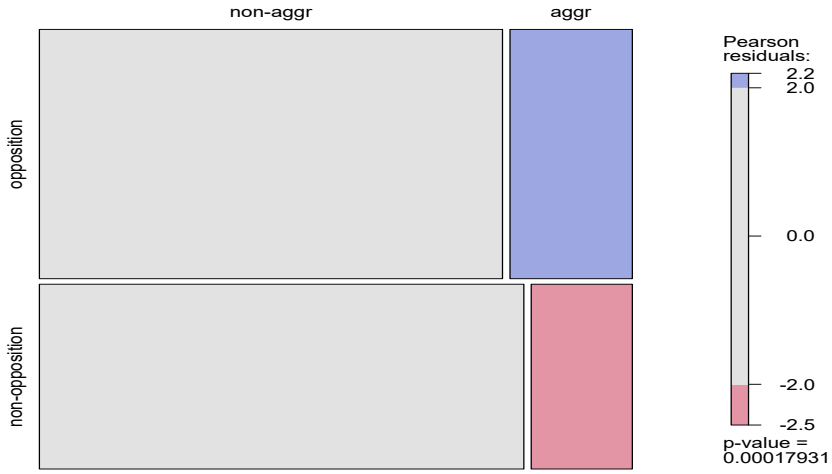


Figure 35: Mosaic plot for (non-)aggressive tweets and opposition's membership.

In relation to leadership, this parameter determines a statistically significant variation (χ^2 (1) = 26.89, $p < .001$). Lopez-Meri et al. (2017) highlight criticism as a central function of political communication on Twitter, as both parties and leaders use the platform to attack opponents. Scavo et al. (2023) also observed that party leaders used forms of aggression more substantially than party accounts (see Section 2.1).

[62] This data is in line with the findings of Lopez-Meri et al. (2017).

Figure 36 shows that there is a negative tendency for non-leaders to use aggressive tweets; while there is a positive one for leaders. These findings therefore suggest that the most visible figures within each party are also those most actively engaged in discrediting political opponents. They further indicate that serious aggressiveness is not a weapon exploited by non-leaders to gain visibility or assert their own superiority. On the contrary, it appears to function as a strategy for reaffirming their status and underscoring their superiority in relation to other party leaders.

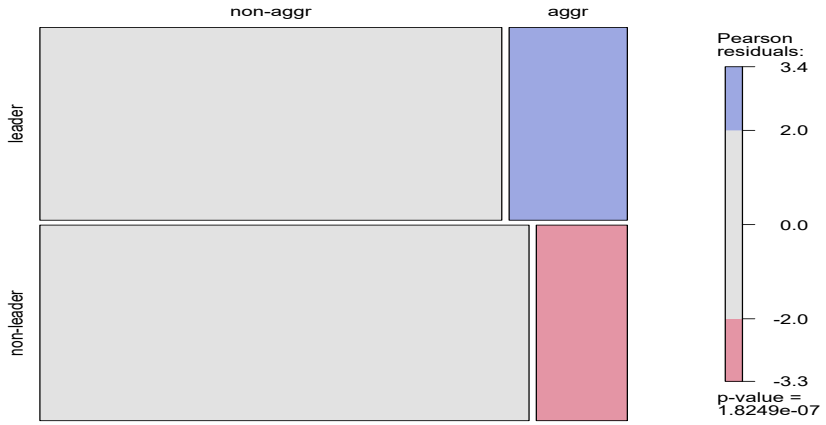


Figure 36: Mosaic plot for (non-)aggressive tweets and leadership.

In the following pages, I aim to outline a framework to explain the predominantly recourse to aggression. First of all, the use and effect of this communicative function can be explained with reference to Superiority Theory (see Section 3.2.2), which holds that humorous amusement may arise from communication conveying a sense of personal or ingroup superiority over others. Criticizing an opponent thus provide the speaker with greater status and prestige, by projecting a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority. From this perspective, laughter stems from the perceived superiority of the laugher over the target. Adopting an aggressive stance — whether humorous or not — may also lead the speaker to be perceived as more intelligent, more authoritative, and endowed with greater social prestige. Moreover, there is a self-reflexive pleasure in witnessing someone else's misfortune or in observing another person in a worse condition than oneself. However, as Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2023) demonstrate, aggressive humor does not appear to positively affect perceptions of self-confidence, intelligence, or status. On the contrary, in most of the characteristics assessed, aggressive messages result in lower evaluations, although the negative effect is somewhat mitigated when the messages are humorous. The findings concerning self-confidence are less pronounced than in other domains: humorous aggressive tweets generate higher evaluations of self-confidence compared to other traits and are also evaluated more positively than serious aggressive or self-deprecating tweets.

Despite these nuances, the evidence does not convincingly suggest that aggressive humor enhances perceptions of self-confidence, intelligence, or status. The overall pattern confirms that aggressive humor tends to be a double-edged strategy: it can momentarily entertain or signal superiority, but it does not reliably translate into more favorable evaluations of the communicator's qualities.

Further positive aspects associated with the use of aggressive and impolite attitudes are the following:

1. emotional pleasure;
2. aesthetic pleasure;
3. deresponsabilization and (un-)challengeability (cf. off-record and humorous impoliteness);
4. tweet's visibility and engagement.

With regard to emotional pleasure (as described in Culpeper 2011), observing impoliteness generates a state of arousal in the observer, which can itself be experienced as pleasurable. Moreover, many voters admire and identify with political figures who continuously transgress social taboos and conventions. Such politicians are, therefore, valued for their ability to display emotions without mediation, appearing maximally authentic, genuine, and capable of resonating with their electorate. Obviously, the emotional pleasure is shared neither by the targets nor by their supporters (Dynel 2011: 120). Closely related to this phenomenon is the notion of voyeuristic pleasure, whereby exposure to impoliteness enhances the observer's emotional engagement and intensity. The voyeuristic pleasure converges with the aesthetic pleasure associated with the creativity of humorous expressions. In some cases, impoliteness may be deployed primarily as part of "playing to the audience", meaning that the goal of discursive aggression is to impress or amuse onlookers, bystanders, or followers, rather than to interact with or change the behavior of a specific critic or opponent. Aesthetic pleasure is enhanced precisely through the combination of impoliteness and humor, which increases the overall creativity of the speech act. This is due to the fact that humor endows impoliteness with a high degree of non-conventionality, reflecting the positive association between unconventionality and perceived creativity.

The speaker/writer's deresponsabilization for the conveyed content is particularly relevant for forms of implicational impoliteness and, clearly, also for impoliteness conveyed through humor. In political discourse, politicians often prefer to convey impoliteness off-record — whether humorous or not — in order to protect their own (positive) face (Goffman 1967: 5) while

simultaneously enhancing persuasive effect (Lombardi Vallauri 2019). Indeed, off-record strategies are more persuasive because recipients actively participate in constructing meaning through their own inferences. In this way, the recipient of the message (not the target) shares part of the responsibility with the speaker/writer for the conveyed aggression or impoliteness. In addition, this shared responsibility reduces the challengeability of the implicit content (Garassino et al. 2022: 10).[63] Indeed, according to the principle of egocentric bias (Reboul 2011), the recipients are generally less inclined to question—i.e., to activate their epistemic vigilance toward—the content they contributed to elaborate. Moreover, implicit contents tend to bypass the recipient's epistemic vigilance, as it is inherently difficult to direct attention toward what is indirectly conveyed (Sbisà 2007: 3). In this regard, it has been shown that Italian politicians on Twitter exhibit a significant tendency to convey implicitly—whether through implicatures or presuppositions—content serving an attacking or impolite function.

Moreover, attacks conveyed through implicit and humorous means render the politician less personally involved, thus signaling greater control over the situation and emotional detachment. By contrast, a serious and explicit attack may make the speaker appear less in control, as it suggests emotional investment and direct engagement in the conflict. Notably, humor affords the speaker a means of minimizing the offense perceived by the target. As noted by Wodak et al. (2020), the perception of offense by targets or their supporters can be dismissed as a mere lack of sense of humor. Additionally, Wodak et al. (2020) note that impoliteness can serve as an effective distraction through scandalization and provocation.

Another noteworthy aspect is that aggression can increase a message's visibility and view count. Visibility here refers to metrics such as retweets, comments, and the sharing of a post across other platforms, reflecting the phenomenon of media hybridization. Furthermore, like other emotionally charged content (e.g., Bene 2017), humor has the potential to capture users' attention and encourage engagement (e.g., likes, shares, comments), which in turn boosts a post's visibility through algorithmic amplification (Borah 2016). Culpeper (2011: 218) similarly notes that "negative stimuli attract greater attention because of the inherent threat they pose".[64] However, this strategy can also produce negative effects for those who employ it: the use of other-deprecating humor by high-status individuals may be perceived as unjust, ridicule or egocentric gloating, thereby decreasing its appeal. High-status individuals risk losing social standing when mocking inferiors, whereas low-

[63] I refer the reader to Sbisà (2007) and Garassino et al. (2022) for a more extensive discussion of the difference between presuppositions and implicatures.
[64] Scavo et al. (2023) also observed how attack strategies increased engagement levels.

status individuals may gain social status by mocking superiors. It is no coincidence that that politician who employ aggressive humor are often less well-liked and are less likely to receive votes (Baumgartner et al. 2015). Moreover, these dynamics are particularly pronounced with respect to gender. High-status women are perceived as more attractive as long-term partners when using self-deprecating humor, but less attractive when employing other-deprecating humor. This reflects a gender stereotype that, to some extent, constrains the expressive strategies available to female actors. Such evidence aligns with Shaw's (2002) analysis, which finds that female politicians in the House of Commons are less inclined to use attack-oriented discursive strategies and feel less comfortable doing so. Despite occupying the same roles and operating within the same institutional community, male and female politicians often enact distinct behaviors and discursive practices. Nonetheless, within contemporary and digital electoral politics, this stereotype may exert less pressure, allowing greater expressive freedom for female politicians. The results outline a complex situation and a complex framework to describe. While humorous tweets show little difference between male and female politicians—indicating substantial homogeneity in the use of humor as an aggressive strategy—this balanced distribution does not hold for instances of serious aggression. It is likely that serious aggression, without the "shield" of humor, still represents an obstacle to attacks the Other (namely, there is a positive tendency to resort to serious and non-aggressive tweets) for female politicians. This data consistently differs from what was recently found by Evans et al. (2014) regarding how house candidates used Twitter in their 2012 campaigns. Specifically, this study showed that women are significantly more likely to use attack tweets, campaign tweets, issue-oriented tweets, and mobilization tweets ("they are also significantly more prone to criticism", Evans et al. 2014: 458).

Considering the frequency of aggressive strategies, it is worth questioning whether these instances can genuinely be categorized as impoliteness. Concepts such as legitimization and neutralization (Culpeper: 2011) need to be taken into account. In the communicative context of electoral campaigns, attacks appear indeed to function as the norm rather than the exception. As noted by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2013: 35), electoral campaigns create a communicative space in which direct attacks against opponents can be formulated without mitigating or attenuating strategies. In such contexts, what occurs is often better described as non-politeness rather than impoliteness. Culpeper (2011) stresses the importance of distinguishing between sanctioning/legitimating and neutralizing impoliteness. Neutralization occurs when the perlocutionary effect of an utterance is blocked — when the face-threatening act is not taken seriously or is interpreted as accidental, so that "the target will not take offence at the perceived face-attack" (Culpeper 2011: 217). By contrast, the communicative

context of electoral campaigns seems to favor the legitimization of attack rather than its neutralization, since denying the perlocutionary effect would undermine its persuasive function.

Wodak et al. (2020: 15) speak of the shameless normalization of impoliteness, observing that "the refusal of the political decorousness expected of senior office has been normalized, and the void filled with the language of convivial patronage, prejudice and exclusion". Harris (2001) offers a similar interpretation, noting that frequent attacks in political debate render these speech acts a form of "political impoliteness": even severe verbal attacks do not halt debate or compromise socio-political relations among parliamentarians. Moreover, legitimization diminishes the relevance of the mitigating strategies described by Brown & Levinson (1987), which are "largely absent" in political discourse ("the mitigating linguistic strategies which Brown and Levinson associate with threats to positive face are largely absent", Harris 2001). Indeed, in the context of inter-party competition, intentional face-threatening acts are not only expected but may even be encouraged and celebrated by party members and supporters as crucial steps toward securing electoral victory (Hansonn 2024). Specifically, politicians and parties (re)define their identity precisely through ongoing confrontation and contrast with groups or individuals who, from time to time, oppose them.

It is clear, however, that the perception of impoliteness varies significantly depending on the type of communicative setting and genre. Indeed, Culpeper (2011: 206) notes "if the threshold is set high on a scale of impoliteness, then behavior which in other contexts may be very impolite is likely to be perceived as upholding the reciprocity norm and thus is likely to be taken as less impolite". Additionally, electoral campaigns render such attacks more legitimate and less marked than in other contexts. This is probably determined by the lack of physical or proximate interaction between the producer and the target of humorous aggression. Therefore, it is essential to extend the analysis to other contexts in which the electoral campaign unfolds, such as public speeches, rallies, talk shows, and similar settings.

In conclusion, this section not only quantifies the presence of aggressive and impolite tweets but also assesses, with a reasonable degree of reliability, the extent to which it is appropriate to speak of a longer-term normalization of impoliteness in Italian political discourse—beyond purely qualitative considerations. Moreover, the findings discussed here are a starting point for future research aimed at developing tools for the automatic detection of aggressive language in Italian and for lexical studies seeking to elaborate a vocabulary of aggressive political language. This line of inquiry is equally valuable from an interlinguistic and comparative perspective.

8.3 Underrepresented functions: self-deprecating, (self-)enhancing, defensive and affiliative functions

Self-deprecating, (self-)enhancing, defensive and affiliative are significantly underrepresented in the Dataset compared to the aggressive one. This aspect is most likely related to the fact that all the data analyzed pertain to the electoral campaign, which, as observed, is generally characterized by antagonistic and agonistic strategies (see Section 2). Thus, it is likely that there is a sort of textual genre bias in analysing electoral tweets. As noted, (humorous) aggressiveness tends to correlate with a higher number of retweets and comments. These aspects characterize aggressiveness as a more useful and effective communication strategy.

In essence, what can be concluded, at least quantitatively, is that during election campaigns, there is a preponderance of campaigning that pokes fun at others and their positions (a counter-campaign, one might say) rather than at one's own flaws, and that aims to create humor through a casual tone, intended for their own electorate in order to consolidate support. Ingroup solidarity appears to be preferentially consolidated by opposing one's opponent rather than by addressing one's own electorate, at least considering the use of humor.

Figure 37 illustrates the occurrences (with the relative percentages) of non-aggressive humorous instances annotated in the Dataset.

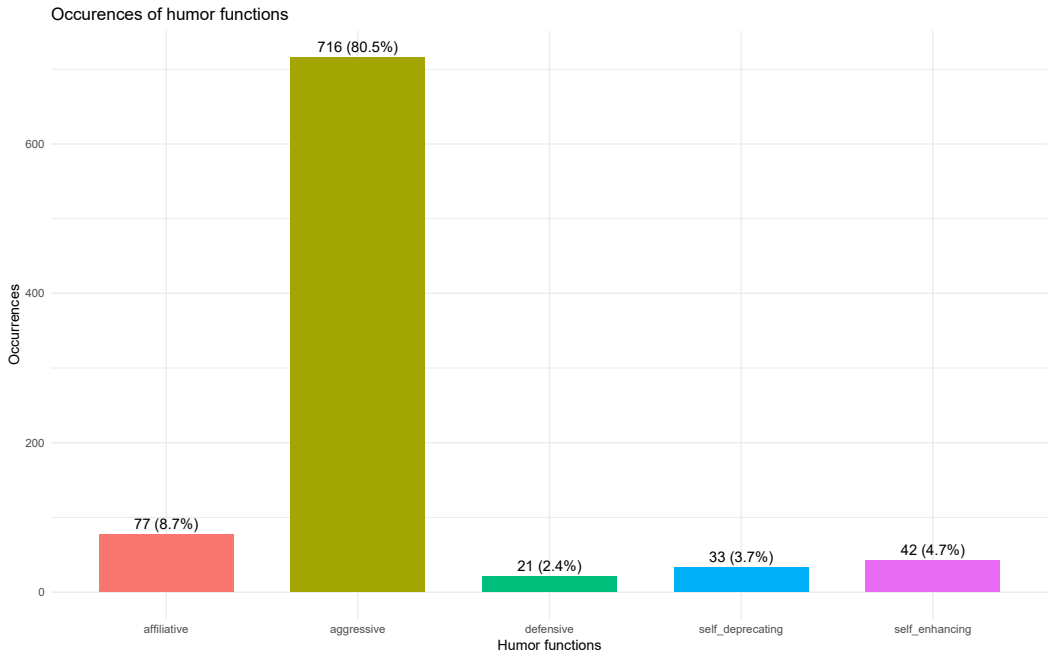


Figure 37: Occurrences and percentages of humor functions in the Dataset.

The prevalence of aggressive humor was also observed in the study by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) with regard to a corpus of tweets published by Chilean politicians during election campaign. Notably, also in this study the percentages of self-deprecating humor were lower than those of affiliative humor.

In the following paragraphs, each of these communicative functions will be analyzed qualitatively to observe their use in context and their rhetorical properties. The limited number of occurrences makes it impossible to adopt sophisticated statistical analyses.

8.3.1 Self-deprecating humor

Overall, 33 instances of self-deprecating humor were found. Thus, self-deprecating humor, although it can provide benefits for the politician's image (Baumgartner 2007), it is rarely used by politicians. This is also noted by a recent study by Koivukoski (2025: 86) that argues how "overall, self-deprecating humor was not used that often by candidates".

Table 29 shows the distribution of instances of self-deprecating humor in the dataset.

Politicians	Occurences	Party's Leadership	Coalition
Andrea Orlando	6	No	Left
Laura Ravetto	6	No	Right
Guido Crosetto	6	No	Right
Vittorio Sgarbi	5	No	Right
Eleonora Evi	2	No	Left
Giorgia Meloni	1	Yes	Right
Carlo Calenda	2	Yes	Aut
Enrico Letta	1	Yes	Left
Gianluigi Paragone	1	Yes	Aut
Aboubakar Soumahoro	1	No	Left
Alessia Morani	1	No	Left
Michele Gubitosa	1	No	Aut
Tot.	**33**		

Table 29: Distribution of instances of self-deprecating humor.

As can be seen from the Table 29, twelve politicians use this function (with different frequencies) out of 38 politicians. Let us now observe their distribution in relation to the different socio-political variables. In relation to gender, it is possible to observe the following distribution, i.e., male politicians: 23 occurrences; female politicians: 10 occurrences. At the statistical level, there is a correlation (χ^2 (1) = 4.45, $p < 0.05$), between the politician's gender and the use of this communicative function. In contrast to Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022: 5), my data reveal a different pattern. The results point to a possible trend among male politicians, potentially related to the greater social

prestige often attributed to the male gender, which makes this strategy more acceptable when performed by males and more face-threatening when performed by females. This trend had also been discussed by Martin et al. (2003: 30) as follows: "femininity was negatively related to aggressive and self-defeating humor".[65] In any case, the results obtained could also simply reflect the dataset imbalance (itself a reflection of an existing cultural bias), namely the predominance of male politicians in the dataset.

Poltical Variables	**Occurences of self-deprecating humor**
Leader	5
Non-Leader	28
Opposition's area	23
Non-Opposition's area	10
Left-Wing Coalition	11
Right-Wing Coalition	18
Autonomous Coalition	4

Table 30: Self-deprecating humor and socio-political variables.

As regards the distribution in relation to the political variables, it is illustrated in Table 30. The results show that this is a communicative function not necessarily directly correlated with the high prestige/status of the political representative. It appears that second-tier figures are more inclined to adopt this communicative approach. This is likely due to a lower risk of compromising their own image. For this type of candidates, a sort of greater communicative and expressive freedom is evident.[66] This may also help explain why this function is used more often by political parties in the opposition (the majority of which are forces belonging to the Right coalition) of the Draghi government.

Additionally, contrary to what was reported by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022), a statistically significant correlation was found between belonging to a particular coalition and the self-deprecating function (χ^2 (2) = 9.02, $p < 0.05$). The Right-wing coalition has more frequencies of self-deprecating humor than expected, specifically considering contingency tables.

Regarding the relationship between humor markers and this communicative function, I refer to Section 8.4.6.8, where I will show that there is statistical significance in the use of humor markers in relation to this function. This is likely due to the fact that it is a communicative strategy that is

[65] In this regard see also Sirigatti et al. (2014), that underlined how males reported a slightly higher mean score on self-enhancing and self-defeating humor. Additionally, no correlation with age was found by Martin et al. (2003).
[66] The comparison between leaders and non-leaders is statistically significant (χ^2 (1) = 16.33, $p < .001$).

quite compromising for the writer's face. In fact, on a pragmatic level, it may be conceptualized as a form of (self-)mock-impoliteness (see Section 9.2), that is an apparent act of self-directed face-threatening behavior. Actually, the writer's goal is the opposite, namely: to strengthen and safeguard one's own image, speaking humorously about his/her weaknesses. As noted in Section 4, the use of self-deprecating humor is associated with high levels of self-confidence, a personality trait that could be correlated with greater power. Additionally, the humorous effect associated with this communicative function contributes to lending it a positive rhetorical value. In fact, self-deprecating messages are rated better when performed humorously than when performed seriously (Section 4).

In what follows, I analyze in detail some tweets with occurrences of self-deprecating humor. In this way, it is possible to describe the different forms it takes and the various themes associated with it. In this regard, as observed by Greengross & Miller (2008), the defects highlighted by self-deprecating humor can concern very different themes (e.g., general intelligence, personality traits, moral virtues, mental health, or physical attractiveness).

For example, in (62)-(63) the topic addressed concerns the (supposed) physical defects of political exponents:

(62) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@user1@user2 Adoro inquietare* 👽
'@user1@user2 I love disturbing 👽'

(63) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@user1 Ma ovvio* 👽👽👽😝❤️‍🩹
@user1 But obviously 👽👽👽😝❤️‍🩹

In (62)-(63), Ravetto uses this communication strategy to appear superior to the criticisms she receives regarding her physical appearance. Specifically, Ravetto was criticized by users for her appearance: because of numerous cosmetic surgeries, she is compared to an alien. Ravetto seems to endorse the criticisms received both through linguistic expressions (*ma ovvio*, 'but obviously') and through the alien emojis. Additionally, in (63), the other emojis (😝❤️‍🩹) express mock-politeness, i.e., false complicity and solidarity with the target of the text.

These examples are replies addressed to other X's users. From a distributional perspective, in 19 cases self-deprecating humor is present in a reply tweet. This may hint at a rhetorical strategy with defensive goals: it is used to respond to potential criticisms/accusations received from other political figures or from non-politician X users.

The politician's body aspect is also the topic of (64):

(64) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Vedi la somiglianza, almeno fisica?* https://t.co/ifgVOYqRVe

'Do you see the resemblance at least physically? https://t.co/ifgVOYqRVe'

In (64) Calenda mocks his physicality in comparison to Winston Churchill's (and in this way also plays on his political abilities).[67] So, the tweet expresses a comparison with Churchill on a physical rather than political level (cf. obesity). The script opposition, activated by the comparison, is between Churchill as a historical/political icon vs. Churchill as a physical stereotype of obesity. Thus, Calenda considers himself comparable to the English politician only on a physical level. This allows to defuse the denigrating potential of the humorous epithet "Churchill dei Parioli" ('Churchill of Parioli'), circulating during the election campaign. The tweet to which (64) replies seem to allude this epithet.[68]

The same self-confidence is shown by Meloni in (65). In this case, Meloni posts a smiling selfie in front of a grotesque caricature that mocked her smile. As Meloni herself stated, it is always better, even on a strategic level, to respond to these criticisms with humor.

Superiority is also shown through the insinuation placed between the two brackets and marked by the wink emoji.

[67] (64) consists of the text *in politica tutto è possibile* ('in politics everything is possible') + the Gif of W. Churchill swimming.

[68] Parioli is an exclusive neighborhood in Rome.

(65) Giorgia Meloni (FDI): *Rispondere sempre con il sorriso (Almeno finché dura 😉)*

'Always respond with a smile (At least while it lasts)'

In other tweets (cf. (66)-(67)), the topic of self-deprecatory humor is one's own (political) skills and intelligence. For example, in (66) Orlando pretends to make fun of his own political incompetence. These are accusations made by the user to whom Orlando's reply tweet (66) was addressed. The list of flaws takes on hyperbolic characteristics, both in terms of the number of flaws listed and the severity of the issues criticized (e.g., *Io sono ignorante,* 'I am ignorant'). The hyperbole makes Orlando's humorous intent explicit.

(66) Andrea Orlando (PD): *Stabilito che io non possa esprimere valutazioni in quanto ignorante, populista, comunista, nullafacente, ignaro degli effetti dell'inflazione. Restano i dubbi. Ps non conosco il prof che lei aggiunge https://t.co/hNJkn4R4v1*

'Established that I cannot express opinions as I am ignorant, populist, communist, do-nothing, unaware of the effects of inflation. Doubts remain. P.S. I don't know the professor who you add. *https://t.co/hNJkn4R4v1*'

There are also tweets in which Andrea Orlando formulates (fake) admissions of guilt (see 'I was wrong again!', in (67)) and pretends to acknowledge the errors attributed to him by the users of Xsphere (see (68)-(69)).

(67) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@utente Bisogna difendere Blair? Ho sbagliato anche stavolta! Sorry!*

'@user1 Should we defend Blair? I was wrong again! Sorry!'

(68) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@utente1@utente2@utente3 Prove inconfutabili di collusione.*

'@user1@user2@user3 irrefutable evidences of collusion.'

(69) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@utente1 Mi hai scoperto*

'@user1 You got me'

In (70), Michele Gubitosa pretends to accept the criticisms directed at the M5S by Dario Franceschini (member of the PD). However, given the issues at stake, the self-attack does not appear credible. In fact, these are extremely positive political actions (at least from the perspective of the Gubitosa's party), such as having prevented rearmament and having challenged Draghi on the issue of energy bills.

(70) Michele Gubitosa (M5S): *Hai ragione #Franceschini, è tutta colpa del @Mov5Stelle e di @GiuseppeConteIT. È colpa nostra aver impedito il riarmo per 14 mld di euro e aver sollevato a #Draghi il problema delle bollette. Prendiamo atto che la campagna del #Pd si basi sul piagnisteo contro di noi. Auguri*

'You're right, #Franceschini, it's all the fault of the @Mov5Stelle and @GiuseppeConteIT. It's our fault for having prevented the €14 billion rearmament and for having raised the issue of utility bills with #Draghi. We acknowledge that the #PD's campaign is based on whining against us. Best wishes.'

In (70), forms of mock-politeness are also present (see Section 9). In the first statement, there is the explicit acceptance of the political analysis of Franceschini (PD). In this regard, consider the statement *Hai ragione #Franceschini, è tutta colpa del @Mov5Stelle* ('You're right, #Franceschini, it's all the fault of the @Mov5Stelle'), that is a (simulated) reinforcement of the target's face. Thus, the self-derogatory speech act follows the acceptance of the positions supported by the opponent. In this way, it is made more credible.[69]

In (71)-(72), instead, politicians mock their own intelligence and qualities.

(71) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@utente@utente Questo lo dice lei! (Cit.)* 😂😂 *(Intendo la storia dell'intelligente)*

'You says so! (Quote) 😂😂 (I mean the story of the intelligent one)'

[69] Auguri ('Best whishes'), a highly conventionalized polite formula, is the second instance of MP.

(72) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *E - caro Claudio - c'è davvero bisogno di tutti e anche di me* 😅
'And – dear Claudio – we really need everyone, including me 😅'

It is interesting to observe how in (72) the form of self-deprecating coexists once again with a case of mock-politeness, activated by the polite formula *caro Claudio* ('dear Claudio'). Interestingly, in (71)-(72) the emojis marks the tweet as humorous.

Unlike what I have analyzed so far, the following tweets focus on the personal affairs of the politicians and/or their character and personality traits. For example, in (73), Calenda hyperbolically accentuates the alleged elitism attributed to him, claiming to prefer Vacheron Constantin (an extremely expensive brand of watches) to Rolex (another expensive brand). Calenda takes up the theme of luxury watches from a statement of Letta, who used the metaphor of selling fake Rolexes to highlight the Third Pole's spread of fake news.[70]
In this way, Calenda humorously rejects this accusation and pokes fun at his own shortcomings of elitism and ostentation of wealth.[71]

(73) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Vabbè. Direi che il dibattito si sta alzando di livello @EnricoLetta. Non porto orologi ma nel caso, essendo notoriamente elitario, direi più Vacheron Constantin veri che Rolex falsi. Ci vediamo fra poco a Cernobbio e ne parliamo.* https://t.co/BQXWlE7qLn
'Alright. I'd say the debate is getting a little heated @EnricoLetta. I don't wear watches, but just in case, being notoriously elitist, I'd say more real Vacheron Constantins than fake Rolexes. See you soon in Cernobbio and we'll talk about it. https://t.co/BQXWlE7qLn'

In (74), Sgarbi humorously responds to Massimo Gramellini's article in the Corriere della Sera (a popular newspaper) in which he was attacked. The use of smiling emoji also underlines Sgarbi's humorous intent.

[70] Letta's statement can be read by clicking on the link attached to (71).
[71] In this regard, I quote (directly in English) the first part of a humorous (and aggressive) tweet published during the election campaign by Enrico Borghi (Democratic Party): "The Napoleon of Parioli claims to be the one to decide in other people's homes […]. Calenda is referred to as the 'Napoleon of Parioli' (a well-known exclusive district of Rome). See also (62).

(74) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Ebbene sì, mi è arrivata la bolletta* 😂

'Yes, I received the bill 😂'

Indeed, in the article quoted in (74), Massimo Gramellini repeatedly resorted to humor in order to ridicule Vittorio Sgarbi's ecological position. In particular, the journalist attributed Sgarbi's renewed interest in environmental issues to mere financial gain, as the article states: "yesterday Sgarbi, like millions of other Italians, also received his electricity bill." Moreover, later in the text Gramellini employs an intertextual form of humor by quoting (with distortions) a verse from a famous song by Fabrizio De André: "Sgarbi has started giving good advice because he can no longer set a bad example." Additionally, the article of the title explicates the humorous intentions of Gramellini. Indeed, "Vittorio Thunberg" is a humorous comparison between Sgarbi and the young environmentalist Greta Thunberg. Sgarbi in (74) adopts the same communicative strategy used by Gramellini, i.e., he humorously accepts the hypothesis that his environmentalism stems from contingent economic issues (namely, to pay the electric bill).

(75) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Sono particolarmente attratto dal matrimonio. Degli altri.* 🤣

'I'm particularly attracted to marriage. Of others. 😂'

In (75) Sgarbi makes fun of one of his own blunders, which was also reported in several newspapers. Rumor had spread that he had mistakenly attended the wrong wedding, showing up at a ceremony to which he had not been invited. Moreover, by playing on the ambiguity of the verb *attrarre* ('to attract'), which can also carry a sexual connotation (in the sense of 'to be seduced), Sgarbi humorously amplifies his own machismo and virility, alluding to his interest in adulterous and extramarital affairs. The tweet in (75) is structured as the punchline of a joke: the final twist comes

only after a long pause, represented by the full stop. What is incongruous and unexpected is not the attraction to one's own marriage, but rather to that of others.

8.3.2 Affiliative humor

Overall, 77 occurrences of affiliative humor were noted in the dataset. The politicians who use more than 10 occurrences are Sgarbi (20 occurrences), Crosetto (13 occurrences), and Calenda (10 occurrences). Other politicians have less than 4 occurrences. Considering the gender distribution, the following pattern is observed: male politicians (65 occurrences, 84%) and female politicians (12 occurrences, 16%). The gender difference is significant ($\chi^2(1) = 38.13$, $p < .001$) and reveals a clear preponderance of male politicians. In relation to the coalition parameter, the following distribution is observed: Autonomous parties (23 occurrences, 30%), Left-wing coalition (7 occurrences, 9%), Right-wing coalition (47 occurrences, 61%). A positive correlation is found between the use of affiliative humor and coalition membership ($\chi^2(1) = 32.5234$, $p<.001$). In particular, Right-wing politicians tended to use more affiliative humor than left-wing politicians.[72] The data confirm what was observed by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) in the Chilean context. Regarding the Opposition vs. Non-Opposition parameter, there are 57 occurrences (74%) for Opposition members and 20 occurrences (26%) for non-Opposition members. The variation is statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) =18.58$, $p< .001$). Notably, the presence of Sgarbi and Crosetto – the politicians who most frequently use this function – in the Right-wing coalition and in the opposition group may have influenced the distribution of the data.

I now provide a qualitative analysis of selected tweets.
In tweets ((76)-(78)), Guido Crosetto make references to aspects of everyday life and personal events. In (76), Crosetto plays on the fact that he was the sculptor of a newly inaugurated statue; in (77), he pretends to ignore a party colleague's problems related to excessive rain and invites him to buy a swimming pool; in (78), he jokes with Anna Paola Concia (PD) about not having been invited by her. Interestingly, these tweets are directed at politicians who are not affiliated with Crosetto's party or, as in (78), at rival coalitions. Notably, in all these tweets, humor markers prevent the user's communicative intentions from being misinterpreted, and consequently, to avoid affecting the relationships between friends and politicians.

[72] Pearson Residuals: Autonomous parties (-0.53); Left-wing Coalition (-3.69); Right-wing coalition (+4.20).

(76) Guido Crosetto (FDI): @pojetti *Non l'ho inaugurata!! L'ho scolpita!* 😂
'@pojetti I did not inaugurate it!! I created it! 😂'

(77) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@AlbertoBagnai Prendi una piscina!!*
'@AlbertoBagnai Buy a swimming pool!!'

(78) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@annapaolaconcia Però i vecchi amici non li chiami!!!*😂😂😂
'@annapaolaconcia But you don't call your old friends!!!😂😂😂'

In (79), Salvini (Lega leader) reported an episode of his domestic life. The humorous element, i.e., *ha detto che "FORSE" sceglierà la Lega* ('he said that "MAYBE" he will vote Lega'), is marked both by the use of caps lock and quotation marks. The humor is activated by opposition between the script NORMAL (the son of the Lega leader tendentially must vote for his father's party) and ABNORMAL (Salvini's son is thinking of voting for another party). Interestingly, note also the use of the Latin epistolary form *P.s.*('post-scriptum') to introduce the final humorous statement.

(79) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *E che sorpresa! Devo essere sincero, mi sono commosso, ho cercato di nasconderlo un po', anche perché da mio figlio Federico (che è molto riservato) non me lo sarei proprio aspettato. P.s. Domani voterà per la prima volta, e ha detto che "FORSE" sceglierà la Lega (2/2)*
'And what a surprise! I have to be honest, I was moved, I tried to hide it a bit, also because I really wouldn't have expected it from my son Federico (who is very reserved). P.S. Tomorrow he will vote for the first time, and he said that "MAYBE" he will choose the Lega (2/2)'.

Tweets (80)-(81) are, instead, specifically linked to the theme of the electoral campaign. In (80), Donzelli uses humor to increase his closeness to the electorate and attract the consensus of undecided voters, as the user he is addressing in (80) appears to be. The type of humor used in (80) is a form of positive irony. In fact, the expression *lo dico disinteressatamente* ('I say this selflessly') is inappropriate: Donzelli is one of the leading candidates of Giorgia Meloni's party. The irony is also marked by the use of two emojis (😂😉) and the interjection (*eh*).

(80) Giovanni Donzelli (FDI): *@utente1 @GiorgiaMeloni Sarebbe un'ottima scelta! Lo dico disinteressatamente eh* 😂😉
'@user1That would be a great choice! I say this selflessly, eh 😂😉'

In (81), this is triggered by the invitation to readers to be moderate (*siate moderati*). This expression constitutes a pun, as *moderate* simultaneously activates two senses, i.e., to be balanced vs. the name of Sgarbi's party (*Noi Moderati*). Notably, (81) includes a list of elements referencing Christian tradition, which, considering the context could potentially trigger register-based humor, and also the idiomatic expression *non fate le capre* ('Don't be a fool') – a typical expression of Sgarbi's idiolect.

(81) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM)*: Siate moderati. Siate buoni cristiani. Fate l'amore. Cercate la pace. Salvate la bellezza. Non fate le capre.* https://t.co/OfSJkVt4fS
'Be moderate. Be good Christians. Make love. Seek peace. Save beauty. Don't be a fool.'

Regarding aggression, I will focus on a particular type of affiliative humor (i.e., mock-impoliteness) that uses an apparent explicit attack on the Other to enhance the ingroup's solidarity (Section 10). In these cases, it is clear that misunderstandings can arise between the speaker/writer and the recipients. The study by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2023) clearly showed that serious affiliative messages were evaluated more positively by citizens/voters because they were less likely to be misunderstood by the recipients.
In any case, a certain nuance of aggressiveness is also present in affiliative forms such as (82):

(82) Mattero Salvini (Lega): *Qui #Monza, di rosso solo la Ferrari! #ItalianGP*
'Here in #Monza, only Ferrari is red! #ItalianGP'

In (82), through the pun activated by the ambiguity of red1= a metonymy (based on the color of Ferrari's vehicles) to indicate Ferrari's cars vs. red2=a metonymy to indicate the Communist Party, Salvini wants to underline his connection with the ingroup, his own electorate, and to exclude the outgroup. This strategy inevitably has an aggressive and impolite function (intended as exclusion) aimed at the detriment of Left-wing parties (outgroup). Finally, images and photographs designed to provoke laughter among the electorate were also annotated. In this regard, it is interesting to note, for

example, how Alessandra Todde shares in a tweet an image depicting two elderly women holding slogans from the Movimento 5 Stelle.[73]

8.3.3 (Self-)enhancing humor

The overall occurrences of the phenomenon are 42. This data is already significant in itself since Mendiburo-Seguel (2022) did not find any occurrences within their dataset. This aspect is interesting because it paves the way for comparisons between datasets linked to different geopolitical contexts and different languages.

This function is likely diminished in certain political contexts, even if performed humorously. A similar finding is present in Garassino et al. (2022) who noted that, in relation to implicit meanings in political discourse, this communicative function is underrepresented compared to the other functions analyzed (e.g., attack, defensive, etc.). Table 31 reports the distribution of data in relation to the following variables: coalition, opposition, leadership, and gender.

Socio-political variables	**Occurrences**
Male politicians	33
Female politicians	9
Left-Wing	4
Right-Wing	24
Autonomous parties	14
Leader	14
Non-Leader	28

Table 31: Distribution of self-enhancing humor by socio-political variables.

Considering the variable leader, the difference between the two groups is statistically significant (χ^2 (1) = 4.78, $p < .05$). Specifically, non-leader group tend to use significantly less this strategy: it is likely that exponents who already have leadership within their own party have no need to propagandize their own image and that of their party in a self-referential way.

Regarding the coalitions, the distribution across the three groups differs significantly (χ^2 (2) =14.29, $p < .001$).

[73] The image is not included for privacy reasons, as it is not possible to obscure the faces of all individuals (non-politicians) depicted. However, tweet's identity is: 1567463990300639233.

Pearson residuals indicate that Left-wing coalition is below the expected frequency (r = –2.67), Right-wing coalition is above the expected frequency (r = +2.67), and autonomous parties do not deviate from the expected value (r = 0). Finally, analyzing gender, the distribution across the two groups differed significantly (χ^2 (1) = 13.71, p < .001). Pearson residuals indicated that male group was above the expected frequency (r = +2.62), while female group was below the expected frequency (r = –2.62).

I now examine some examples ((83)-(91)). This category also includes praises directed to other political figures and/or others (cf. (83)).

(83) Licia Ronzulli (FI): *Il leone ha ruggito ancora!!*
'The lion roared again!!'

In (83), the humorous metaphor (Silvio Berlusconi is identified with a lion) clearly has the value of exalting the courage and strength of Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi also makes use of this function; an example can be found in tweet (84):

(84) Silvio Berlusconi (FI): *Ops, ho colpito ancora!* https://t.co/lCHHp01SFw
'Ops, I struck again!'

The video (see the link in (84)) shows Berlusconi hitting a fly that was disturbing the recording. In (84), the humor (a pun) is activated by the ambiguity of the verb *colpire*, which means both, literally, to hit and, figuratively, to surprise/impress someone. Additionally, the latter meaning alludes to Berlusconi's previous political and economic successes. In this regard, also note the presupposition triggered by the adverb *ancora* ('again'), which takes for granted that "Berlusconi has surprised other times". The interjection (*Ops*), through which Berlusconi pretends to be astonished by his own success, also contributes to the humorous tone of the text. A similar expression of surprise and shock at an apparently unexpected event occurs in (85):

(85) Guido Crosetto (FDI): https://t.co/WjVVjP3tOE *Ops* 😂😂😂

The linked video documents the success of FDI's electoral rally in Palermo. This event became the focus of public debate because the Left-wing coalition had anticipated low turnout and suspected that FDI might circulate edited videos to portray a crowded square. The tweet aims to refute both of these

assumptions. The humor is triggered precisely by the simulated surprise. In (85) *Ops* is more the factor of the humor than a humor marker.

Considering Sgarbi's humorous tweets, the use of the wordplay *Sgarbiman* (in four tweets) is observed as a means to showcase his own qualities, through a comparison with the comic book hero Superman. It is noteworthy that in (86) there is also the use of two stylistically marked lexemes, such as *funambolico* ('audacious') and *felliniano* ('Fellini-style') which, belonging to an unusual and literary register, generate a form of register-based humor and highlight Sgarbi's humorous intent.

(86) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *La funambolica e felliniana campagna elettorale di Sgarbiman per battere il democristiano Casini a Bologna.*
'The *funambolic* and *Fellinian* electoral campaign of Mario aimed at defeating Casini in Bologna.'

In tweets (87)-(88), Laura Ravetto exalts her own physical characteristics (aesthetic beauty). However, it is clear how this function is used as a defensive tool to respond to criticisms about her physical appearance. The relationship with the defensive function is also discussed by Martin et al. (2003). It should be investigated whether accusations related to physical appearance are predominantly targeted to female politicians.

(87) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@User1 Dubito sa* 😂 *venga a trovarmi in qualche gazebo a Legnano e potrà constatare di persona. Si rassegni, ho cervello e pure denti splendidi* 🤪
'I doubt it 😂. Come visit me at one of the gazebos in Legnano, and you can see for yourself. Give up— I have a brain and also a splendid set of teeth 😜'

(88) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *Rassegnati, sono bona* 😂😂😂
'Give up, I'm cool😂😂😂'

Instead, tweets ((89)-(90)) concern more specifically political topics and those related to the election campaign.

(89) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Appena appena un programma di mille pagine […]*
'Just a little thousand-page program […]'

(90) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Taglio IRAP, IRES per 12Mld, decontribuzione per i neo assunti; normativa su imprese energivore; piano banda larga; Competence Center; finanziamento ITS; piano straordinario Fiere; Riforma ICE; Riforma camere di commercio; blocco riconoscimento Mes Cina..e altra robetta varia.*

'€12 billion in IRAP and IRES cuts, tax relief for new hires; regulations for energy-intensive businesses; broadband plan; Competence Center; ITS funding; extraordinary trade fair plan; ICE reform; Chamber of Commerce reform; blocking of MES recognition for China...and other little things.'

Tweets ((89)-(90)) use the same rhetorical device to praise AIV's political program. Specifically, both tweets understate what AIV has done: in (89) *appena appena* ('just a little'); in (90) the general extender (Overstreeet 1999) *e altra robetta varia* ('and other little things'). These expressions, however, are incongruous to what is reported in the co-text (in (90) see the long list of proposals formulated by AIV). In both cases, the understatement is actually intended to praise AIV's program. From a rhetorical perspective, (91) is also noteworthy.

(91) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Fasciocomunista provaci. Non mi sono mai fatto spaventare dalle minacce. Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, 21. Chiama per appuntamento.*

'Fascist-communist, try it. I've never been scared by threats. Corso Vittorio Emanuele II, 21. Call for an appointment'

In (91) Carlo Calenda extols his own strength, courage, and ability to resist intimidation. Calenda pretends to provide information for an appointment, but in reality, the appointment he alludes to is aimed at violently resolving the conflict with the user. Thus, a script opposition is observed between MEETING/APPOINTAMENT and STRUGGLE. Moreover, the second meaning activated appears incongruous with Calenda's political status and the context of the electoral campaign. In this case, the connection with the personality traits of masculinity identified by Martin et al. (2003) in relation to self-enhancing humor is quite evident.

This trait can also be observed in relation to *Sgarbiman* (the Superhero metaphor) and the metaphor in (83), referring to Berlusconi. Example (89), thus, shows that there is an inherent aggressive component. Indeed, as stated by Martin et al. (2023: 53): "relatively benign forms of self-enhancing humor may involve deriving some inner amusement and pleasure from observing or imagining the ignominious defeat of one's adversaries".

8.3.4 Defensive humor

This is the least represented strategy in the corpus: only 21 occurrences are annotated in the Dataset. In this section, I ignore the cases labeled aggressive-defensive (see Section 8.2.2). In the examples examined here, there is no aggression within the humorous instances. They are examples of "genuine" defensive instances. Given the small number of occurrences, I will restrict my analysis of the phenomenon to a purely qualitative perspective. In (92)-(93), Salvini uses positive irony (i.e., affirming negative aspects to imply the opposite). In both tweets he uses quotation marks (e.g., "*la cattiva influenza*", 'bad influence') to highlight the humorous tone and to invite the reader to infer a meaning opposite to what is asserted.

(92) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Insulti a Laura #Pausini che "osa" non cantare Bella Ciao in tivù. Insulti a Selvaggia Roma che "osa" difendere il diritto di un bimbo di essere adottato da una mamma e un papà. […]*
'Insults to Laura #Pausini who "dares" not to sing Bella Ciao on TV. Insults to Selvaggia Roma who "dares" to defend a child's right to be adopted by a mother and father. […]'.

(93) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *La "cattiva influenza" di Salvini preoccupa l'ex presidente della Commissione Europea?*
'Does Salvini's "bad influence" worry the former European Commission president?'

Defensive irony is also present in (94). In (94), Orlando responds to a comment from a user who had accused the PD of limiting investments in Italy with its proposals on relocations. Orlando implies that the same proposals have not affected the flow of investments in France. Specifically, in (94) there are no markers highlighting the humorous intent of the text.

(94) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@utente1 @utente2 @pdnetwork Infatti in Francia non va nessuno*
'@user1 @user2 @pdnetwork Indeed, nobody goes to France'

(95) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@utente1 @utente2 @utente3 @utente4 Non importa se poi quelle misure, al netto del 110, le ho difese io, immagino.*
'@user1 @user2 @user3 @user4 It doesn't matter if I defended those measures, excluding the110 law, I suppose'.

Tweet (95) was used by Orlando to reply to users who accused him of not defending measures considered crucial for the nation's welfare. In (95), irony is used to imply the opposite of what is stated, namely: it is extremely important that those measures were subsequently defended by Orlando. Also in this case, there are no markers signaling the insincerity or inappropriateness of the message, yet the statement can be correctly interpreted by taking into account its communicative context.

8.4 Humor Markers

In this Section, I present the results concerning the annotation of humor markers. I technically define the concept of humor markers in detail in Section 8.4.1. At this point, it is enough to observe that humor markers are "signals of humorous devices" (Burgers & van Mulken 2017: 385) and, as such, their primary function is to facilitate the recognition of a humorous utterance (Attardo 2000b).

In order to justify the inclusion of this Section, a preliminary remark is necessary: studies focusing on the analysis of humor in political discourse have generally paid little attention to this aspect and have not explored it in depth—for instance, by providing a list of the most frequent markers. For example, Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) do not consider humor markers, and when defining the criteria used to identify humor in tweets, they make no reference to them. A reference—broad and unspecific—is included only in relation to explicit and/or metapragmatic humor markers, such as *ahahaha* or *what funny*. The same applies to Tsakona (2009) and Tsakona (2011), despite the fact that both works are explicitly dedicated to irony. Indeed, humor markers have been extensively studied specifically in relation to irony (see further below).[74]

As we will see, however, the analysis of specific markers allows for a broader understanding of politicians' use of humor and offers further insight into the rhetorical strategies they adopt in the election campaign. For example, it is worth noting that the political profiles under consideration differ significantly in their use of markers, just as they do in their use of humor. This stylistic variation may be explained in different ways. For instance, a hypothesis could be that a more frequent use of humor may correlate with a reduced use of markers, as the speaker's communicative intentions can be more easily inferred by an audience likely familiar with their communicative style.

Furthermore, concerning the relationship between the communicative functions of humor and the use of specific markers, it is worth investigating whether any differences emerge. It may be reasonably hypothesized, for example, that forms of self-deprecating humor rely more heavily on markers in order to avoid potential communicative out-goal on the part of the speaker. This aspect, too, has not been directly addressed by previous scholarship. Indeed, the studies by Stewart (2011, 2012), focused specifically on self-deprecating humor, do not examine its relationship with markers—except for laughter, which is considered a cue for identifying and recognizing a humorous communicative act.

In addition, studies such as Reyes et al. (2013) and Barbieri & Seggion (2015), which focus on the linguistics features used for the automatic detection of humorous tweets (or, more precisely, irony), do not analyze tweets published by political figures, although they consider political tweets

[74] In addition, Yarwood (2001) does not explicitly mention markers, nor the politicians' own awareness that the use of markers may influence the perception and performance of humor.

(marked by *#politics*). From this perspective, the present work provides a starting point for future research in the field of computational linguistics and natural language processing.

Starting from these premises, I now illustrate the structure of the Section, which unfolds into three parts. In the first part, I provide a theoretical introduction to the study of humor markers and their role within the text. At the end of this section, I present the most relevant studies—including those focusing on Italian—that have addressed the automatic detection of humorous and/or ironic tweets, based specifically on the identification of humor markers. These studies offer a starting point for the second part, where I introduce the list of humor markers used for annotation.

In the second part, I present the annotation scheme used for identifying markers, the types of markers considered, and the methodological choices adopted. To effectively doing so, I display the most relevant examples to illustrate the categories of markers under consideration. In addition, I address one of the main challenges concerning humor markers, namely the distinction between specific markers and types of humor. For example, hyperboles (as well as rhetorical questions) may be used as independent rhetorical figures with a distinct humorous purpose, or, in certain cases, may serve to mark other forms of humor, such as irony or mock-politeness. Ultimately, the purpose of this section is to present a comprehensive account of humor markers and to adapt it to the Italian context. All of the studies cited thus far are based on English (cf. Attardo 2000b) or Dutch (cf. Burgers 2010). Thus, a crucial addendum of this study is precisely to enrich the existing list of markers with reference to Italian, and to identify which markers are most frequently used in the corpus—also in relation to the communicative functions (self-deprecating, aggressive, defensive, affiliative, and self-enhancing) associated with the various instances of humor.

The third part presents the results of the annotation task, focusing on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the markers identified in humorous tweets. Quantitatively, the results allow for the development of a frequency-based list of the markers found in the corpus, as well as of the combinations in which they appear. This opens the way for future applications aimed at generating statistical comparisons both across datasets of the same type and across different textual genres, following, for instance, the approach adopted by Hancock (2004). Another useful application could involve exploring whether cross-linguistic differences exist—both with regard to the presence of markers in tweets and the specific types employed—by comparing datasets in different languages.[75] Next, I present the results—including statistical ones—regarding the variation in tweets containing markers across the different political identities considered, outlining possible interpretative patterns for the observed differences. In addition, quantitative results are provided on the relationship between

[75] For example, the dataset used here is comparable—in terms of genre, topic, and number of collected items—to that of Mendiburo-Seguel (2022), which focuses on Chilean data.

humor markers and humor functions. The aim is to highlight the distinction between different functional types of humor—a dimension often overlooked in studies on political discourse and humor (cf. Mendiburo-Seguel 2022: 4)—and to explore whether the presence or absence of markers varies accordingly. Finally, the analysis also examines whether the presence of markers is influenced by the nature of the tweet itself, that is, whether it is a direct reply (to a citizen or politician) or an original tweet posted by the politician.

8.4.1 Humor Markers: an introduction

Several works focus on the study and classification of humor markers (see, for example, the list provided in Burgers & van Mulken 2017). This line of research is pursued primarily for two reasons: first, from a theoretical perspective, to facilitate the classification of figurative and creative uses of language; second, from a computational point of view, to develop systems able to automatically detect a wide range of humorous utterances. This task is also relevant for advancing the development of (automated) humor generation systems (cf. Ritchie & Mashtoff 2011). However, most studies on humor markers—whether linguistic or computational— notably tend to concentrate on irony markers (cf. Carvalho 2009; Barbieri & Saggion 2015; Burgers & van Mulken 2017). This focus is largely due to the fact that irony is one of the most extensively studied forms of humor (Colston 2017), and, as a result, research on irony markers is more developed (cf. Burgers & van Mulken 2017: 385). In addition, in some studies (e.g., Cignarella et al. 2020), the term *irony* is used as an umbrella term to refer to humor in general, without adhering to the technical definition of humor (cf. Attardo 1994, 2020).

In any case, it is essential to specify that, although irony and humor are related to some extent—in that some irony is humorous, and some humor is ironic—they should not be conflated (see Dynel 2023). From the perspective adopted in this analysis, as outlined in Burgers & van Mulken (2017), markers traditionally presented in the literature as irony markers (such as punctuation marks) are also used—and prove useful—for identifying and classifying other types of humor forms. In this regard, we may consider tweets in (96) – (97), which exemplify two types of humor distinct from irony.

(96) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Di Maio, ministro degli Esteri in carica, invece di lavorare per fermare una guerra che sta mettendo in ginocchio anche molte famiglie e imprese italiane, SVOLAZZA come l'ape maia tra una pizzeria e l'altra…*

'Di Maio, the current Foreign Minister, instead of working to stop a war that is also bringing many Italian families and businesses to their knees, FLIES like Maya the Bee from one pizzeria to another...'

In (96), the use of capital letters (typographic marker of irony, cf. Haiman 1998) highlights the verb *svolazzare*, which marks the humorous comparison (Dynel 2009) between Di Maio and *Maya the Bee* (a children's cartoon character). This humorous comparison is further reinforced by the wordplay involving *Di Maio* and *Maia*, a variation based on a single vowel change (*o>a*). In addition, the several full stops (see Muecke 1978) contribute to the humorous intent by prompting the reader to notice the contrast between what would normally be expected of a government minister and what, instead, appears completely inappropriate—being carried on the shoulders of restaurant staff.[76]

(97) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *"Professore, ho tutti i suoi libri nella lista. Da leggere" E leggili, stronzo! (con affetto, chiaramente)* 🤣.
"Professor, I have all your books on my list. To read." And read them, asshole! (with love, of course)😂.

(97) is an example of mock-impoliteness (Bousfield 2008), in which an apparent insult is used to signal affiliation and closeness between the politician and the voter (the target of the mock attack). The non-bona fide nature of the attack is marked both by the laughing emoticon—which clearly indicates a humorous tone, together with the explicit comment in parentheses—and by the exclamation mark (Seto 1998).

As illustrated by examples (96) – (97), humor markers function as meta-communicative cues or signals that indicate the communicative mode adopted. It is important, however, to distinguish humor markers from factors that are constitutive—rather than optional— to humors, that is, essential properties of a text (Attardo 2000a) to determine whether it can be classified as humorous or not. These include, as noted in previous sections, script opposition or relevant inappropriateness, in the case of ironic utterances.[77] Humour markers just alert the reader to the fact that an utterance is humorous, as noted by Attardo (2000b:7) in relation to irony.[78] To summarize, humour markers hint at the reader that the speaker takes a different stance on the propositional content in the utterance they express and describe the manner in which an act is done (mock vs. serious, in Hymes' 1972: 217 terms).[79]

[76]A description of the event is available at the following link: https://www.virgilio.it/notizie/di-maio-vola-sulle-note-di-dirty-dancing-il-video-del-balletto-con-i-camerieri-in-pizzeria-diventa-virale-1541903.
[77]As noted by Attardo (2001), specifically in relation to irony, context and co-text are not markers but factors pointing at humor and/or irony: indeed, an utterance is humorous/ironic only in a specific context/co-text and without this context/co-text and/or in another context/co-text the same utterance cannot be interpreted as humorous/ironic.
[78]A comprehensive discussion of the distinction between irony factors and markers, as well as the correlation between specific factors and specific markers, can be found in Burgers (2010).
[79] In Gumperz's (1977) terms, markers can be conceptualized as "contextualization cues". As Gumperz (2015: 315) noted, contextualization cues are *"verbal signs which serves to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation and*

What has been discussed so far makes it clear that humor markers are optional; that is, they are not required for a text to be humorous (Haiman 1998: 18).[80] A humorous text can be processed and understood as such even in the absence of specific markers (Gibbs 1994). These positions are also summarized in the following statement by Hancock (2004): "no single cue provides an unconditional guarantee of irony comprehension, and the absence of signals does not preclude ironic intent". Along similar lines, Burgers & van Mulken (2017: 386) note that markers are not "determinants or infallible pointers," since "irony markers are not always used to mark irony" (Burgers et al. 2012: 305). This interpretation is shared across studies on humor and irony. This means that none of the markers discussed in the next paragraphs should be interpreted as exclusive clues that guarantee that an utterance is humorous.

However, it is also clear that the presence of markers facilitates interpretation, making it less dependent on context and encyclopedic knowledge and common ground. We can resume this view analysing two different tweets: (98) is characterized by two markers that make the politician's humorous style easier to identify; instead, in (99), no markers are available to the reader, but at the same time, the communicative intent of the writer can be inferred by appealing to the specific context of the electoral campaign.

(98) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@utente1 Ultimamente…* 😂😂
'@user1 Lately…😂😂'

In (98), emoticons (😂) and punctuation marks (i.e., several full stops) signal the politician's communicative modality as *non-bona fide* (Mulkay 1988). Guido Crosetto responds to a user's criticism regarding government investments by asserting that public debt has, in fact, been too closely controlled by politics in recent times. His reply aims to overturn this claim, prompting the reader—through the use of markers—to infer that the user's statement is not at all a recent development. Clearly, these markers do not explicitly or metalinguistically indicate a humorous intent. Rather, all elements covertly signal the communicative mode; that is, they serve as cues to guide the reader's interpretation (Burgers & van Mulken 2017: 386).

(99) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *5 marzo. Bravo Enrico, non ne sbagli una.*
'March 5th. Well done Enrico, you never get it wrong.'

thereby affects how constituent messages are understood." In Tannen's (1979: 37) terms, they are expressions used by the speaker to *"signal what activity they are engaging in"*.

[80] "It is possible to be ironic or sarcastic without any overt sign of the speaker's insincerity" (Haimann 1998: 18).

In (99) the humorous intent—Salvini aims to prompt the reader to infer the opposite of what is explicitly stated, turning politeness into impoliteness—is more difficult to detect due to the absence of markers that would signal the communicative mode. In this case, it is necessary to rely, generally, on background knowledge of the Italian political context and, specifically, on the context of the 2022 election campaign.

8.4.2 Humour markers and processing

In the previous section, I implicitly assumed that the cognitive interpretation of the utterance was facilitated by the presence of markers. In fact, there is an ongoing debate regarding the actual role of humor markers in text processing and whether it is appropriate to speak of processing facilitation. It is interesting to note that major studies on the topic adopt two diametrically opposed positions—either that markers help facilitate interpretation, or that they play no relevant role.

A negative stance is sustained, for example, by Giora et al. (2007) and Fein et al. (2015). These experimental studies, which analyzed real-time processing, emphasize that markers do not (always) facilitate processing. In their studies, participants were asked to read short dialogues in which one speaker made an ironic remark, followed by either a literal or an ironic ending. The researchers tested, with specific lexical tasks, whether the presence of irony markers would help readers process the ironic meaning more quickly. The general assumption underlying these studies is that, if a marker facilitates the recognition of irony, it should also reduce reading and decision times of the participants. However, across several experiments, no facilitation effect was observed. Indeed, ironic utterances consistently took longer to process than literal ones, even when participants were made aware of the ironic nature of utterance by the markers. Based on these results, the authors conclude that the salience of the meaning plays a more important role than the presence of (co-)textual markers when participants process irony.

By contrast, Voyer and colleagues (e.g., Woodland & Voyer 2011; Voyer et al. 2016) provide empirical evidence that different co-textual markers can interact to facilitate processing. In their experiments, utterances delivered with either a sincere or a sarcastic prosody (serving as a co-textual marker) were combined with either positive or negative co-texts. Across studies, processing was faster when prosody and co-text were congruent (e.g., sarcastic intonation with negative context) than when they were incongruent. These findings suggest that utterance-level markers (e.g., tone of voice) interact with co-textual information to support the utterance's processing. Similar findings are reported by Burgers et al. (2012). The authors provide evidence that utterance markers are used precisely when, in a given context, it is more difficult to interpret a statement as ironic ("markers can be helpful in situations where the irony is more difficult to detect", Burgers & van Mulken 2017:

394). Thus, these results confirm that markers are used (+/- consciously) to facilitate the processing by recipients.

A moderate position is, instead, adopted by Giora et al. (2016), who focus on the concept of defaultness in the interpretation of ironic versus literal utterances. Giora et al. (2016) argue that defaultness is the key factor in predicting processing. To be considered a default interpretation, a non-literal reading must be accessed more quickly than the literal one – even in the absence of contextual cues. In Hebrew (the language analyzed by Giora et al. 2016), for instance, expressions involving the negation of strongly positive terms (e.g., *not the best*) systematically trigger a non-literal interpretation, which can be regarded default interpretation. Findings from four experiments suggest that default meanings are consistently activated before alternative interpretations, irrespective of word salience or contextual support. This confirms that certain utterance markers—specifically those associated with default interpretations—may play a particularly influential role in guiding comprehension. As outlined by Burger & van Mulken (2017), clarifying which markers are linked to the concept of defaultness, and how, remains an interesting avenue for future research.

8.4.3 Automatic detection of humorous texts

As noted by Burgers & van Mulken (2017: 395), the automatic detection of humor by statistical or probabilistic models has received much scholarly attention. The main goal is to identify a set of cues/features to test models able to (automatically) differentiate between humorous text and non-humorous text. As will be shown, the models under examination take into account both paralinguistic markers (e.g., quotation marks, emojis) and linguistic features such as n-grams (chunks of text combination) and sentiment analysis outputs. However, as mentioned in Section 8.4, most work in automatic humor analysis has focused primarily on the recognition and detection of irony. In particular, studies that have examined social media content (e.g., tweets or Amazon user reviews) have focused on collecting data with ironic and/or humorous texts on the basis of metalinguistic hashtags, and only subsequently have researchers attempted to identify the possible humor markers present in those tweets (cf. Davidov et al. 2010; Reyes et al. 2013; Vanin et al. 2013; Skalicky & Crossley 2014; Kunneman et al. 2015). These studies typically contrast datasets that contain ironic texts—identified through user-generated tags such as #irony, #sarcasm, or #not—with one or more non-ironic datasets, selected based on other hashtags (e.g., #politics). This may represent an issue, as noted by Davidov et al. (2011), since the use of metalinguistic hashtags can result in a high number of false positives—that is, texts mistakenly interpreted as humorous—within the dataset. Indeed, as noted by Sykora (2020: 1), several studies developed "models trained on training data of highly

questionable quality". Furthermore, some of these studies do not explicitly refer to other theoretical criteria for identifying humorous or ironic utterances/texts, such as the recognition of humor or irony factors. As a result, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether all texts containing the described markers are indeed associated with humorous content. A critical perspective on humor detection is also offered by Wallace (2015), who argues that all probabilistic computational approaches to irony and/or humor detection are inherently flawed unless they take into account the pragmatic context—that is, knowledge about the speaker and about the communicative scenario. From this perspective, all results must be considered partial and incomplete.[81] Nevertheless, some of the findings from these studies provide a useful starting point for the list of markers presented in Section 8.4, particularly with reference to those markers that are consistently identified across multiple studies and appear to have cross-linguistic validity. The discussion that follows does not claim to be exhaustive; rather, it draws on the most frequently cited studies on the topic (see for example Burger & van Mulken 2017: 395-396), as well as those mostly relevant to the aims of the present research. Importantly, these studies provide only pragmatic algorithms and patterns for the detection of humor and irony, without offering any theoretical advancement or integration with existing models.

The discussion below is organized as follows: the first paragraph presents studies based on Portuguese and English, while the second one focuses on research concerning Italian. Within the first group, the first two studies discussed do not focus on Twitter data; however, they are foundational works, whose findings must be taken into account in any study of humor.

Carvalho et al. (2009), analyzing Portuguese data, employed eight linguistic patterns previously identified as potentially associated with irony: diminutive forms, demonstrative determiners ($P_{demonstrative}$), interjections ($P_{interjections}$), heavy punctuation (P_{punct}), quotation marks (P_{quote}), laughter expressions (e.g., emoticons, *LOL*) (P_{laugh}), verb morphology (e.g., the type of pronoun used for the addressee), (P_{verb}), and cross-constructions (where adjectives relate to the noun, they modify via the preposition *de*), ($P_{cross\text{-}constructions}$). The goal was to assess which marker(s) most reliably matched instances of irony by evaluating their precision in identifying ironic statements, including false positives (literal sentences incorrectly identified as ironic) and cases in which contextual cues were insufficient to determine whether irony was present. Among the tested patterns ($P_$), P_{laugh} and P_{quote} achieved the best performance, with precision rates of 85.4% and 68.3%, respectively. However, P_{quote} and P_{punct} also produced notable false positive rates, incorrectly

[81] Similar assumptions had already been expressed by Utsumi (1996).

labeling approximately 22% and 28% of literal sentences as ironic. In the case of P_{punct} most errors were due to misidentification of rhetorical questions or emphatic negative statements as ironic—for example, *Onde estão as alternativas democráticas?!* ('Where are the democratic alternatives?!'), which does not necessarily convey irony. As shown, the most productive patterns were those directly linked to punctuation marks and keyboard symbols, which serve to represent oral or gestural expressions in written text (P_{quote}, P_{laugh} $P_{punctuaction}$, and $P_{interjections}$). By contrast, patterns requiring more structured linguistic knowledge— $P_{diminutive}$, $P_{demonstrative}$, P_{verb}, and $P_{cross\text{-}constructions}$ — though theoretically well-motivated, proved less effective for irony detection in user-generated content. Notably, the $P_{diminutive}$ pattern did not match any sentence in the evaluated dataset. In this regard, my results show that diminutives are frequently employed as markers for humorous tweets (cf. Section 8.6). One possible limitation of Carvalho et al.'s (2009: 3) work, however, is that their analysis considered only diminutive forms referring to public personalities (e.g., *Socratezinho*) or political entities.

Caucci & Kreuz (2012) investigated the role of several lexical factors in the identification of ironic or sarcastic statements. They randomly collected 100 sentences from Google Book Search that included the phrase "said sarcastically", and then removed the adverb "sarcastically" in order to eliminate any explicit cue indicating ironic content. Each sentence was manually analyzed to determine whether it contained one or more of the following linguistic features: (i) adjectives and adverbs (e.g., lovely, perfectly), (ii) interjections (such as *gee* and *gosh*), and (iii) punctuation marks such as exclamation marks or question marks. A group of 101 participants was then asked to rate these sentences—alongside a set of control utterances—based on how likely they were to be interpreted as ironic, without any additional contextual information. Ratings were made on a seven-point Likert scale (0 = not at all likely; 7 = very likely). The results showed that the sarcastic sentences received higher average ratings than the control sentences (4.85 vs. 2.89). A statistical analysis was conducted to determine which lexical features best predicted participants' judgments: only interjections resulted to be a significant predictor. For this reason, in this work, I paid particular attention to the analyze interjections and discourse markers in humorous tweets (Section 8.5).

Davidov et al. (2010) raise important concerns regarding the reliability of metalinguistic hashtags, such as #sarcasm or #irony, when used to automatically label corpora for sarcasm detection tasks. As noted by the authors, in several cases the tags are often added to non-sarcastic or non-ironic tweets: thus, this issue introduces a high number of false positives in the dataset. This observation underscores the importance of caution when relying solely on user-generated hashtags for annotation and motivated the authors to explore more refined classification strategies. To pursue this goal,

Davidov et al. (2010) built their dataset from two distinct sources: Twitter and Amazon product reviews, each contributing equally to a total of 66,000 entries. For Twitter, sarcastic tweets were identified via hashtags like #sarcasm, while non-sarcastic examples were drawn from unrelated tags (e, g., #sports). Aware of the inconsistency of user-generated tags, the authors considered this subset as a secondary gold standard, supplementing it with manually reviewed data. For Amazon, a small annotated seed set of sarcastic reviews served as the basis for semi-supervised expansion, using web search to retrieve structurally similar sentences. Non-sarcastic samples were randomly selected from neutral or negatively rated reviews that showed no overt markers of irony.

To automatically annotate the data the authors employed a semi-supervised pattern-based approach (Semi-Supervised Algorithm for Sarcasm Identification; SASI). The model first extracts linguistic surface patterns—sequences of high-frequency words and variable slots for content words—from a small annotated seed set. These patterns are used to construct feature vectors representing each sentence; then used in a k-nearest neighbors–like classifier. In addition to surface patterns, the model incorporates punctuation-based features (e.g., exclamation marks, capitalized words, quotes) and sentiment-based cues (e.g., presence of strongly positive terms like "great" or "excellent" in semantically negative contexts). Notably, while punctuation marks alone were weak predictors of sarcasm, some elements, such as several full stops, provided more reliable when used in combination with other features. This study, by contrast, shows that specific punctuation marks (e.g., exclamation points and quotation marks) are used as humorous markers in many tweets, previously classified as humorous based on the presence of Script Opposition (see Section 7).

Then the performance of SASI was evaluated through a five-fold cross-validation and human-annotated test sets. On the Amazon dataset, the full SASI model achieved an F-score of 0.827, substantially outperforming both baseline methods and simpler configurations based on isolated features. On the Twitter dataset, performance remained robust (F-score: 0.545 on hashtag-labeled data), despite the domain's increased ambiguity and structural noise. Moreover, cross-domain training experiments—using Amazon data to classify Twitter posts—produced competitive results, highlighting the generalizability of the learned features across platforms. These findings suggest that irony exhibits recurrent structural patterns that can be captured and modeled effectively through feature-rich, semi-supervised approaches such as SASI.

Reyes et al. (2013) identifies a multidimensional model for irony detection in Twitter, grounded in the assumption that irony cannot be captured through a single linguistic cue, but rather emerges from the interaction of multiple textual features. The authors frame the problem by highlighting the pervasiveness of irony in online texts and its interference with tasks such as sentiment analysis and opinion mining. Given the absence of contextual cues in microblogging platforms, their

approach adopts a linguistically informed feature-extraction model. The corpus used for evaluation consists of 40,000 tweets divided into four equal subsets of 10,000: one subset labeled with the hashtag #irony, used by Twitter users as a metalinguistic annotation (reflecting an informal understanding of irony), and three subsets labeled with #education**,** #humor, and **#**politics, respectively, serving as comparison groups. Only the hashtags were removed; no additional preprocessing (e.g., spelling normalization) was applied. The model is built around four core feature groups: signatures**,** unexpectedness**,** style, and emotional scenarios, each articulated through sub-dimensions. The authors test the representativeness of these features in relation to the #irony subset and evaluate their capacity to discriminate ironic from non-ironic tweets. Among the most reliably dimensions are counter-factuality**,** contextual imbalance, pleasantness, and skip-grams (i.e.: word sequences that contain or skip over arbitrary gaps).[82] For instance, tweets in the #irony set exhibited lower semantic relatedness between terms compared to the other sets, indicating higher contextual imbalance. Additionally, they contained more emotionally charged terms, particularly those associated with high activation and low pleasantness values. The analysis also shows that ironic tweets share significant lexical similarity with humorous ones. Such proximity complicates classification, as many ironic tweets are misidentified as humorous in both balanced and imbalanced scenarios. The classification experiments, conducted using Naïve Bayes and decision trees, reveal that the model performs better under balanced distributions (50% ironic, 50% non-ironic). In contrast, imbalanced distributions (30% ironic, 70% non-ironic) result in decreased recall and precision, confirming the model's sensitivity to class skewness. Among the stylistic features, pointedness (e.g., capitalized words, punctuation, emoticons) and temporal imbalance **(**opposing temporal frames—typically present vs. past) emerge as relevant for both ironic and humorous tweets. In conclusion, the study validates the hypothesis that irony is best detected through a combination of linguistic, semantic, and affective features. Although individual dimensions vary in informativeness depending on the comparison set, the four-feature model offers a coherent and scalable framework for irony detection in microblogging contexts. The authors underline that the effectiveness of the model is contingent upon text genre and distributional balance, and suggest that future work should focus on refining genre-sensitive models and exploring the interface between user perception and linguistic annotation of irony.

Barbieri & Saggion (2015) conducted a study on tweets collected through the use of hashtags such as #irony, #education, #politics, and #humour, treating irony and humor as two distinct phenomena. The analysis was carried out using various linguistic parameters, including frequency of

[82] Features such as polarity, affect, and pleasantness were identified as indicative of ironic content also in Reyes et. al (2011).

use, written vs. spoken register, structural features, lexical intensity, use of synonyms, ambiguity, and sentiment orientation. Based on these metrics, the authors compared the different corpora. The main findings show that ironic and humorous tweets tend to contain more common words and have a greater average word length than other types of tweets. The intensity of adjectives and adverbs was found to be a relevant feature to identify humorous/ironic texts. Regarding emoticons, the humorous corpus featured about four times more emoticons than the other corpora, with 2,065 emoticons identified versus only 360 in the ironic corpus. From these results, the authors conclude that those who use irony tend to mask their communicative intentions, while users of other forms of humor are more explicit. However, the study presents several issues, mainly related to the automatic classification of tweets based solely on hashtags. First, tweets tagged with thematic hashtags such as #politics or #education may in fact contain humorous or ironic elements but fail to be identified as such, since it is not mandatory to explicitly indicate the communicative mode through hashtags. In addition, it is unclear whether the tweets marked with #humour are genuinely humorous according to rigorous theoretical criteria; therefore, the use of emoticons in these cases might not reflect the presence of humor factors. Lastly, the study considers only a very limited range of emoticons (i.e., four types) and provides no methodological grounding for this decision. In summary, although the work by Barbieri & Saggion (2015) offers interesting insights into the use of lexical and paralinguistic elements in humorous and ironic texts, it is weakened by methodological limitations—particularly in terms of data classification and emoticon analysis—that affect the reliability of its results.

In the Italian context, the main studies on the automatic detection of humor and/or irony in tweets are reviewed in what follows.

Gianti et al. (2012) describe *Senti-TUT*, a corpus of approximately 6.000 Italian tweets manually annotated for sentiment analysis, with a specific focus on political discourse and the phenomenon of irony. The corpus is divided into two main subgroups: TWNEWS, which gathers political commentary from Twitter, and TWSPINO, a collection of satirical tweets from the well-known blog *Spinoza.it*. The goal is to provide a sentiment resource that accounts for irony, a linguistic device known to interfere with polarity detection in opinion mining. The annotation is performed at two levels: a morpho-syntactic level, and a sentiment level, manually labeled using five categories: *POS (positive)*, *NEG (negative)*, *HUM (humor and/or ironic)*, *MIXED (mixed polarity)*, and *NONE*. It should be noted that, in this study, the concept of humor is used as an umbrella term, including instances of irony as well.

Later, each tweet was independently labeled by at least two annotators, and disagreements were resolved through a third annotation or discarded if consensus could not be reached. The authors

acknowledge the subjectivity of irony perception, which led them to exclude about 3% of tweets due to persistent ambiguity. Two main features characterize the ironic tweets of the corpus. First, the authors observed frequent use of adult slang, echoic irony, and language-based jokes, often exploiting ambiguities tied to politicians' names, in particular to perform offensive puns. This finding is consistent with what was observed in Section 8.3.: namely, that there is significant overlap between humorous and aggressive texts, whereas it is not the case when comparing humorous and positive/affiliative texts.

In addition, some (multi-word) expressions (e.g., *finalmente, speriamo bene, fiducia*) are identified as signals of humor. Secondly, they noted that non-humorous or informative tweets tend to be concise and frequently include a hyperlink, as exemplified by tweet TWNEWS-186: *Chi è Mario Monti?* http://t.co/BZewchzZ ('Who is Mario Monti? http://t.co/BZewchzZ'). In any case, this observation—lacking quantitative support—cannot be considered a definitive heuristic. As illustrated by humorous tweets (138) and (146) below, not only is a link present, but it is precisely this link that enables the tweet to be properly interpreted as humorous and correctly contextualized. However, it is useful to observe that irony markers (such as hashtags or other tropes) are not a central focus of the study and, so, the annotation guidelines make no explicit reference to this. However, the inclusion of a broader range of markers, well-documented in the literature, could have made the annotation task more fine-grained and facilitated the annotators' task.

Sanguinetti et al. (2020) present an Italian Twitter corpus specifically designed for the detection and study of hate speech (HS) against immigrants. Comprising 6.000 manually annotated tweets, the corpus was developed as part of the Hate Speech Monitoring program at the University of Turin, with the goal of providing a resource that captures the multifaceted nature of hateful discourse in social media. The corpus was constructed using a neutral keyword-based filtering approach, aimed at avoiding bias introduced by explicit slurs or offensive terms. After a first round of annotations (1,827 tweets), additional keywords were derived from frequent terms in HS tweets (e.g., *invadere*, *comunist*, *barconi*) to expand the dataset. Two annotation campaigns were conducted: one by expert annotators, and another via CrowdFlower (a crowdsourcing platform). Each tweet was annotated with multiple labels by at least two annotators; a third annotator performed the task to resolve disagreements, and in the crowdsourced set, accuracy was monitored using gold-standard test tweets. A novel multi-layer annotation scheme was proposed to capture the complexity of hate speech. In addition to a binary HS label, the following categories were used: aggressiveness (none / weak / strong); offensiveness (none / weak / strong); irony (yes / no); stereotype (yes / no), and intensity (scale 0–4, applicable only if HS is present). Results of the annotation process revealed that stereotype, aggressiveness, and offensiveness were the most common co-occurring categories in

hateful tweets, with irony present in 11% of cases. However, inter-annotator agreement was relatively low across all categories—particularly for intensity and irony—highlighting the difficulty of establishing consistent judgments in a domain marked by subjectivity and pragmatic nuance. Also in this case, irony markers (such as hashtags or punctuation-based cues) are not a central focus of the annotation guidelines: thus, this choice may have impacted the detection and annotation of irony.

8.4.4. Methodologies and annotation schema

In the data collection process, all tweets published by the 38 selected politicians during the reference period were included (see Section 6).

Among these tweets, I then applied the GTVH to distinguish those containing one or more types of humor from those without humorous tone. Later on, I proceeded to annotate the humor markers—obviously only within the subset of tweets previously identified as humorous. Notably, as discussed in Section 8.2, previously to the identification of the markers, the communicative functions of each instance of humor were annotated.

The first step in annotation was to discriminate tweets that contained at least one instance of marked humor from those that did not present humor markers in any instance. The basic question guiding this task was the following: is there at least one form of humor with one or more markers?

For tweets where the answer to the previous question was *yes*, specific marker(s) in the different instances of humor were annotated. Additionally, in cases where there are multiple instances of humor within the same tweet, I also counted the instances without marker(s). This procedure allows for the analysis of the correspondence between the communicative functions (previously annotated) and the humor markers. The annotation schema is described in Figure 37:

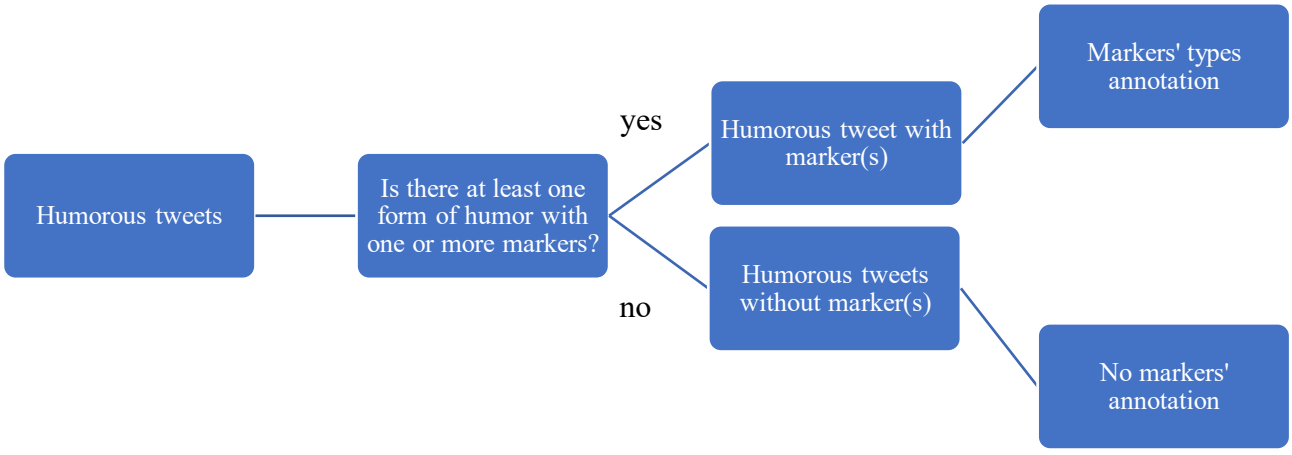


Figure 38: Humor markers' annotation schema.

With regard to the latter point, as will be shown below in this Section, it is important to note that two general cases can be distinguished. The former one involves tweets in which any instance of humor is marked, as in (100). The latter one involves tweets in which only some of the humor instances are marked, as (101). In some tweets, containing two forms of humor, there are cases where the first instance is unmarked, while the second one is marked.

(100) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *Che meraviglia il bullismo verso le donne da parte di chi si professa progressista! Complimenti eh!*
'How wonderful the bullying of women by those who profess to be progressive! Congratulations eh!'

In example (100), the two utterances convey mock politeness targeted towards Ravetto's haters. The first humor instance is marked by the exclamation mark, while the second one is marked by both the exclamation mark and the discourse particle *eh*.

(101) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *La "cattiva influenza" di Salvini preoccupa l'ex presidente della Commissione Europea? Gli italiani hanno votato, il Centrodestra governerà a lungo e bene, Juncker stia sereno.*
'Does Salvini's "bad influence" worry the former president of the European Commission? Italians have voted, the Center-Right coalition will govern well and for a long time, Juncker may stay easy'.

In (101), the quotation marks prompt the reader to distance themselves from the literal meaning of the expression and to interpret it ironically. By contrast, the form of mock politeness *Juncker stia sereno* ('Juncker may stay easy') is unmarked. It is therefore up to the reader—based on contextual knowledge and, for instance, the well-known tweet *Enrico, stai sereno* ('Enrico, take it easy') published by Matteo Renzi in 2014—to infer Salvini's communicative intent.[83]

As mentioned, humorous tweets were not selected on the basis of metalinguistic hashtags or explicit markers. Indeed, markers were annotated only after the dataset was collected – this methodological criterion makes the annotation more reliable. Specifically, I first isolated tweets containing appropriate humor factors, and only subsequently annotated the markers. The

[83] Originally, it was a sincere tweet published by Renzi to politically reassure Letta. After a period, since Renzi obtained the role of Prime Minister at the expense of Letta, the text was reinterpreted as humorous.

methodological model for this analysis is contained in Adams (2012), who explicitly links the GTVH and humor markers as complementary tools for identifying humorous texts, highlighting the need to adopt both strategies. Although certain linguistic elements frequently co-occur with humorous utterances, there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence. Relying solely on markers may result in both false positives (i.e., the presence of linguistic elements typically associated with humor in contexts that lack actual humor factors) and false negatives. In additions, this annotation procedure is useful because it enables further studies (computational and statistical) on this dataset: for example, one could select a specific marker within this dataset and (statistically) observe its distribution among humorous and non-humorous tweets and compare it with that of other datasets.

To conclude this section, I discuss tweets in (102) and (103), which may be misclassified due to the occurrence of some punctuation marks usually associated with humor.

(102) Enrico Letta (PD): […] *Dopo aver girato l'Italia in queste ultime settimane, è tempo di ritrovarci tutti nella stessa piazza. Saremo tantissimi, vi aspetto!*
'After touring Italy these past few weeks, it's time to meet altogether again in the same square. There will be so many of us, I'll be waiting for you!'

(103) Giuseppe Conte (M5S): ...e *a fine serata una pausa nel cuore di Catania con @NuccioDiPaola, sempre #dallapartegiusta* https://t.co/boeLxvrBQB
'...and at the end of the evening a break in the heart of Catania with @NuccioDiPaola, always #dallapartegiusta'

In (102) the exclamation mark does not indicate the presence of humor: the linguistic factors required to support a humorous interpretation—such as script opposition and relevant inappropriateness (in the case of irony)—are absent, as are the necessary contextual cues. Thus, the exclamation mark serves only to signal the jussive force of the utterance. The same applies to tweet (103), where the several full stops—although frequently associated with humor (Hancock 2004)—are used to evoke a broader context in which the utterance is situated. In this case, the context is situational (rather than textual), which is also suggested by the image published with the tweet.

8.4.5 Types of humour markers

This section and the following ones exclusively focus on markers in the utterance, that is, markers that draw the reader's attention to the fact that a sentence is humorous (note that Attardo 2000b only

focuses on markers of irony, though the same analysis a can be extended to humor). Markers in the discursive co-text are not taken into account. Co-textual markers alert the reader that the author may be about to use an ironic or humorous utterance. In other words, a co-textual (irony and/or humor) marker can help create what Utsumi (2000) refers to as an "ironic environment", in which the use of irony is almost expected by default. For instance, a humorous utterance can generate the expectation that further humorous utterances will follow. A similar mechanism is observed for ironic utterances, as in the cases described by Burgers (2010:143) as "irony preceding the irony". The same holds for the use of tropes. The presence of tropes (e.g., hyperboles, understatements, etc.) before ironic utterances increases the likelihood that such utterances will be correctly interpreted as ironic. As summarized by Burgers & van Mulken (2017): "the other tropes can create an expectation of tropes".

Before discussing humorous markers, it should be clarified that, due to the source of the dataset (i.e., tweets published online), two macro-categories of markers were excluded from the analysis: paralinguistic markers (e.g., syllable lengthening, cf. Attardo 2000b) and visual markers (e.g., slow clapping in the air, cf. Muecke 1978). For a more in-depth discussion of these markers, the reader is referred to Burgers & van Mulken (2017) and Gironzetti (2017) with references therein.

The following classification is based on the schema developed by Burgers (2010), Burgers et al. (2012) and Burgers & van Mulken (2017). These studies provide an overview of the main types of utterance markers identified through corpus analysis of irony in Dutch written discourse. The authors argue that irony markers can be broadly divided into four categories: (1) typographic markers, (2) morphosyntactic markers, (3) schematic markers, and (4) other tropes. Progressing through these categories, the nature of the markers gradually shifts from linguistic to more pragmatic signals. This validated framework was adopted for the present study, although some modifications were introduced to make it more suitable for the analysis of Italian-language data.[84] Notably, regarding the Italian language, there are no comprehensive studies specifically aimed at systematizing humor and/or irony markers. One notable exception is Mizzau's work (1984), although some limitations have been noted by Attardo (2001). Other key works frequently cited throughout this section include Muecke (1978), Seto (1998), Attardo (2000b), Burgers et al. (2012), and Adams (2012). Each of these studies, using different methodological approaches, develop a taxonomy of the linguistic markers most commonly associated with irony and/or humor.

Importantly, all humor markers may potentially co-occur within the same humorous instance. However, for the sake of clarity, the examples presented in this section illustrate one marker at a time in order to highlight their specific features and related challenges. As previously noted, the reader should bear in mind that no linguistic element can be considered an irony or humor marker *per se*.

[84] See Appendix B-D for the annotators' codebook.

Rather, it is the co-occurrence of certain linguistic features that may facilitate the (automated) detection of irony. Moreover, outside of a clearly defined context, it is often difficult to determine whether a given linguistic item (such as an adverb) functions as a marker or not.

8.4.5.1 Explicit/Direct markers

With these markers, the author of the humorous text explicitly and overtly conveys their humorous or ironic intent to the audience. Burgers and van Mulken (2017) distinguish two main types of direct markers: explicit/metalinguistic references and hashtags. As for explicit references, Kovaz et al. (2013), for example, identify ironic utterances in blogs and literary works by searching for phrases such as "said sarcastically" or "said ironically". An example from the dataset of this study is shown in (104):

(104) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@User1@User2 E non mi ha chiesto scusa? 😂 scherzo eh!*
'@User1@User2 And did you not apologize to me? 😂 I'm just joking!'

In (104), the humorous intent—namely, that the request of apology is not genuine but entirely fictional—is explicitly marked by the verb *scherzare* ('to joke'), which directly conveys Ravetto's communicative intention. The humorous tone is further reinforced by the use of a laughing emoji and an exclamation mark. The example in (104) shows the only occurrence of a metalinguistic comment in a tweet that can be classified as humorous. In other cases, metalinguistic expressions such as *ironia* ('irony', 3x occurrences); *sarcasmo* ('sarcasm', 5x); forms of the verb *scherzare* ('to joke', 4x) and *scherzo* ('joke', 2x); *battuta* ('joke', 1x) are used in texts with a serious communicative mode. Considering for example ((105)-(106)):

(105) Angelo Bonelli (AVS): […] *C'è poco da fare sarcasmo con la camorra*.
'[…] There is no sarcasm to be done with the Camorra.'

(106) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *Era sarcasmo infatti*. 🤦
'It was sarcasm, indeed. 🤦'

In (105) Bonelli negatively judges the linguistic choices of an AIV politician, who had classified a previous comment about the Mafia as mere sarcasm and, therefore, as a comment not to be judge

seriously; instead, in (106) Crosetto clarifies his communicative intentions to a user who had misunderstood him.

With regard to hashtags, Reyes et al. (2013) and Kunneman et al. (2015) employ explicit tags—such as #sarcasm, #irony, and #humor—to identify ironic and humorous content on Twitter. However, as discussed in Section 6, this strategy cannot be applied to the present corpus, as such markers are seldom used and prove largely unproductive in this specific context. Furthermore, reliance on these hashtags may lead to a great number of false positives.

8.4.5.2 Typographic markers

Emoticons/emojis

Emoticons and emojis are clearly distinctive of communication 2.0: they are relevant in communicative contexts where the number of characters is constrained by social media platforms (see Section 1.2). It is also clear that emoji(s) can be identified as elements strictly connected with informal styles and non-argumentative genres. The relationship between emojis and humor has been the subject of extensive research (e.g., Hancock 2004, Adams 2012, Yus 2025). Specifically, Hancock (2004) investigated the use of emoticons as cues for detecting irony, examining their frequency in comparison to other markers such as ellipses, punctuation, and amplifiers across different textual genres. As for Italian, one may cite, for example, Chiusaroli (2016) and Valenti (2025) – the latter specifically devoted to the use of emoticons in Italian political tweets. In (107) there is a clear example of emojis as humor markers:

(107) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@User E comunque adoro che ci siano disturbati che mi mettono in schermo gigante* 😂😂😂😂
'@User And, anyway, I love that there are insane people that put me on a giant screen 😂😂😂😂'

In (107), the emojis mark Laura Ravetto's ironic intent: the intended meaning is the opposite of the literal one. Furthermore, in (107), the reduplication of emojis serves to intensify the illocutionary force of the stance and to facilitate its recognition by the reader (Valenti 2025). All types of emojis are taken into consideration. For instance, in relation to mock-politeness (Taylor 2016), clapping emojis are used to simulate congratulations to the targets of humor (i.e., Mario Draghi), as exemplified in (108). Also note the presence of punctuation marks (…) as humor markers.

(108) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *Ha messo il tetto al prezzo del #gas, lui.* 👏👏👏*.....bravo ciula!*

'He put a cap on the price of #gas, him. 👏👏👏.....well done, idiot!'

Typographic features

The key function of typographic features is to highlight the word(s) that trigger(s) the script opposition, thereby prompting the reader to make inferences and reinterpret the literal meaning of the expression. In some cases, the entire humorous utterance is emphasized. In this regard, scholarship has primarily addressed the use of boldface (Kreuz 1996), capital letters (Haiman 1998), and the elongation of vowels and/or consonants (Adams 2012). The use of capital letters is exemplified in (109), where capitalization foregrounds the humorous distortion of the title of the novel authored by Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973) *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (1946). In addition, capital letters are used to simulate the style of newspapers article headlines.

(109) Luigi Marattin (AIV): *Il PASTICCIACCIO BRUTTO DELLA CESSIONE DEI CREDITI EDILIZI: L'ULTIMO DISASTRO INFLITTO AL PAESE DAL M5S […]*
'THE UGLY MESS OF THE SALE OF BUILDING CREDITS: THE LATEST DISASTER INFLICTED ON THE COUNTRY BY THE M5S […]'

In this category, I have also included what the literature (cf. Burgers 2010; Burgers et al. 2012) labelled as *other special signs*. Specifically, I have incorporated two markers found in the dataset that, to the best of my knowledge, have not been addressed in previous research. These include the use—as humor marker—of the abbreviation *P.S.* (or *p.s.*), derived from the Latin epistolary formula *post scriptum*,[85] and the abbreviation *cit.*, which introduces a quotation that may be either genuine or fictitious (i.e., falsely attributed).

(110) Andrea Orlando (PD): *@User La prima cosa è stata fatta (Pnrr). Sulla seconda abbiamo fatto dei passi importanti in alcuni settori (edilizia) La terza e la quarta era sul tavolo delle parti sociali quando è caduto il governo. Ps in coalizione con la dx non è stato facilissimo.*
'The first thing has been done (PNRR). On the second we have made important steps in some sectors (construction). The third and fourth were on the table of the social partners when the government fell. Ps in coalition with the right-wing party was not very easy'.

[85] For a quantitative account of this marker within the dataset, see Section 8.6.

In example (110), the ironic utterance (marked also by an understatement, see below), serving both an aggressive and a defensive function, is introduced by *Ps.* The final jab line (a sort of *fulmen in clausula*) is thus framed as a marginal addition to the text.
The contrast between the speech act of attack (pragmatically salient) and the marginal status, at the textual level, conveyed by the abbreviation contributes to the humorous nature of the text: it is a peculiar type of incongruity. However, not all occurrences of PS mark humorous utterances, see (111).

(111) Pierluigi Marattin (AIV): *Prendiamo pure tutti i televisori extra, le automobili extra. […] Ps. Serve un'addizionale Ires sul comparto energetico.*
'Let's take all the extra televisions, the extra cars. […] Ps. We need an additional IRES on the energy sector.'

In (111), *Ps.* introduces a final and serious remark regarding the provisions to be taken by the government. The humorous statement (a form of hyperbole) in fact, precedes the abbreviation.

Finally, it is worth noting that no instances of some typographic markers discussed in previous scholarship (i.e.: crossed-out text or the use of extravagant fonts) could be identified in the dataset, as instead found by Burgers (2010). This evidence backs up Burgers' (2010) hypothesis that these markers are specific to advertising graphics. Moreover, the corpus does not contain instances of boldface or vowel/consonant elongation.

8.4.5.3 Morpho-syntactic (and lexical) markers

Whilst the category of morpho-syntactic, humor markers have more subtypes of markers than either tropes or schematic marker (this fact is also evident in Burgers 2010; Burgers & van Mulken 2017)

Punctuation marks

From a theoretical perspective, these markers occupy an intermediate position between typographic markers and morphosyntactic markers (Burgers 2010). The latter categorization has been adopted despite the awareness that many of these punctuation marks primarily serve a communicative–textual function (Ferrari et al. 2018), i.e.: prompting the recipient to complete and/or elaborate their inferences about the text.

At the methodological level, for reasons of annotation economy, a single label was used for all punctuation marks. This choice facilitated the optimization of annotation quality and inter-

annotator agreement, while avoiding excessive fragmentation among the labels employed. In particular, the punctuation marks examined are as follows: quotation marks, the exclamation mark, and the several full stops. Among the punctuation marks identified as cues for irony and, more broadly, for humor, quotation marks are particularly relevant (Hancock 2004 and Attardo 2000b). Here, the focus is on the use of distancing quotation marks. In this case, quotation marks serve both to highlight a word that may activate a script opposition and to indicate that the literal meaning of the expression or utterance should be set aside in favor of an alternative interpretation. In (112), the reader is expected to infer the opposite of the positive adjective placed in quotation marks.

(112) Enrico Letta (PD): *La "moderata" #Meloni annuncia che cambieranno la #Costituzione da soli.*
'The "moderate" #Meloni announces that they will change the #Constitution by themselves.'

In other cases, quotation marks function as a trigger for intertextuality (Gordon 2023): reference, through linguistic or multimodal resources, to other texts or cultural artifacts (e.g., songs, films, tv shoes, etc.). As noted by Dynel (2009), intertextuality may produce humor through an opposition between the context and the genre of the original utterance and the context and the genre in which it is re-used (Dynel 2009) – as shown in (112). In (112), the opposition lies in the mismatch between the context, genre, and topic of the tweet under analysis—a propaganda tweet posted during an election campaign—and the original source of the quotation, a popular song by the Italian band 883.

(113) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *L'energia è tutta dentro logiche finanziarie ed il primo ballista è #Draghi. E con lui chi lo tenuto in vita: dalla Lega al PD, dai 5 Stelle a Renzi e compagnia cantante. L'esercizio ipnotico del "tranquilli, siam qui noi!"*
'The energy is all within financial logic and the first liar is #Draghi. And with him those who kept him alive: from the Lega to the PD, from the 5 Stelle to Renzi and company. The hypnotic exercise of "don't worry, we are here!"

Specifically, considering the absence of such a mismatch, quotation marks may simply introduce reported speech, without any connection to humor (operating within a polyphonic–enunciative dimension), see example (113). Carvalho (2009), in this regard, has pointed out potential errors in automatic language analysis of humor.

(114) Gianlugi Paragone (ItaExit): *[...] Di fronte ad un PdC che dice: "volete la pace o il condizionatore", quale dibattito politico volete sviluppare?*

‘Faced with a Prime Minister who says: "do you want peace or air conditioning", what political debate do you want to develop?’

In (114), the text in quotation marks is a citation from a speech actually delivered by Mario Draghi during his term as Prime Minister. In this case, Paragone uses quotation marks only to introduce reported speech.

With regard to several full stops (or ellipses, in Hancok (2004)) — regarded as “punctuation marks with strong interactive value” (Pecorari 2018: 167) — they tend to occur more frequently in text genres that are less argumentatively rigid and more stylistically creative. Hancock (2004) notes that they are particularly productive within computer-mediated communication (CMC). Specifically, several full stops prompt the reader to generate interpretive inferences (i.e., a range of cognitively relevant inferences tied to the ongoing communicative act) and to reinterpret the utterance beyond its literal meaning. The absence of several full stops—replaced, for instance, by a full stop—would impose a greater cognitive burden on the reader when reconstructing the communicative intent of the writer (Pecorari 2018: 171). Moreover, ellipses reinforce the identity-based relationship between speaker and addressee, as they create a context in which the speaker hints at knowledge assumed to be shared with the implied reader. This kind of insinuation—characterized by a strong allusive value—can be roughly paraphrased as: “we understand each other, we are on the same wavelength” (Pecorari 2018: 168). All these functions are clearly exemplified in (115).

(115) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Sì, fate con calma lì a Bruxelles, tanto non c’è fretta…….*

‘Yes, take your time there in Brussels, there’s no rush anyway…….’

In (115), considering the conflictual political relationship between Lega and the EU and the ongoing political and economic crisis affecting Europe, the reader is invited to reconstruct a meaning that is opposite to the literal one: the European Union must act immediately. Notably, the uses of several full stops signaling the non-exhaustive nature of a list (i.e.: an open set of textual referents) and marking inter-textual continuity are not relevant for the aims of the present analysis, as they trigger a limited communicative–inferential value.

The use of the exclamation mark as a humor marker is limited to instances where it conveys emotional or exclamatory emphasis, also implying an evaluative stance toward the propositional content of the utterance. This category includes various types of speech acts associated with “enthusiasm, surprise, irony, disappointment, dismay, indignation, polemic, anger,” and similar attitudes (Lala 2018: 201). Thus, cases in which the function of exclamation marks is purely jussive

(i.e., emphasis linked to coercive force) or optative (i.e., expression of desire or aspiration regarding the content)—as thoroughly described in Lala (2018) with reference to Italian—are excluded from the analysis.

(116) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Il gas a 341 euro al megawattora. Un privilegio da ricchi essere alla canna del gas!*
'Gas at 341 euros per megawatt hour. A privilege of the rich to be broke!'

For example, in (116), the paradox and the apparent attack toward the readers'/voters' face (mock-impoliteness, Bousfield 2008) are marked precisely by the use of the exclamation mark (see in particular Section 9).[86]

The use of repeated exclamation marks (e.g., *!!!!*) is also common in 2.0 textuality. Equally typical are instances where the exclamation mark is combined with the question mark (e.g., ?!, !?). The use of these peculiar signs in humorous texts is discussed in Attardo (2000b: 9). In such cases, these signs help to highlight the sense of unexpectedness and surprise typical of the humorous utterance, in (117) triggered by the rhetorical question at the end (see Section 8.5.5). This humorous usage is not particularly emphasized in specialist studies on punctuation—for instance, it is not discussed in Ferrari et al. (2018: 201–215).

(117) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Letta dice che non vuole governare con i 5S, non vuole fare larghe coalizioni, non vuole neppure governare con Bonelli e Fratoianni. Ma allora con chi cavolo lo vuole fare il governo con il Mago Zurlì?!*
'Letta says he doesn't want to govern with the 5S, he doesn't want to form large coalitions, he doesn't even want to govern with Bonelli and Fratoianni. But then who the hell does he want to form a government with the Wizard Zurlì?!'

Interjections/Discourse markers

As noted in the previous section, the use of interjections and, more generally, discourse markers have been identified by Caucci & Kreuz (2012) as a good predictor of humor.[87] For a comprehensive list of Italian discourse markers see Sansò (2020). Interestingly, among the observed interactional and

[86] *Essere alla canna del gas* is an Italian idiomatic expression meaning 'to be in a state of extreme poverty'.
[87] Interjections may be defined as "conventionalized linguistic signs that express a speaker's current mental state, attitude, or reaction toward a situation" (Ameka 2006, p. 743).

cognitive functions, Sansò (2020) does not cite the use of discourse markers as markers of humor/irony.[88]

(118) Silvio Berlusconi (FI): *Ops, ho colpito ancora!* https://t.co/lCHHp01SFw
'Ops, I'm still successful!'

In (118), Berlusconi uses an interjection to express (in a simulated manner) astonishment and disbelief at the action—killing a fly—shown in the linked video. This expression of surprise is reinforced by the use of the exclamation mark. It should also be noted that the humorous nature of the text lies primarily in the wordplay triggered by the Italian verb *colpire*, which, in addition to its literal meaning "hit" or "beat", can also mean "to succeed" or "to make an impact." In this sense, Berlusconi—through a self-enhancing tone—would be alluding to his own political and entrepreneurial successes. This category of markers also includes onomatopoeic representations of laughter (Davies 2015). In Hancock's (2004) terminology, these onomatopoeias are described as "adapted vocalizational signals." In such cases, speakers "imitate" face-to-face interaction by verbalizing their paralinguistic responses (e.g., laughter). The acronym *LOL* also falls into this category. However, as will be shown, there are no occurrences of this acronym in the dataset.

Evaluative Morphology

Since affixes are language-specific, they are considered language-specific markers (Burgers 2010:11). In this category, affixes are taken into account—not only suffixes but also foreign-derived prefixes (cf. *maxi-*)—that perform a pragma-morphological function by modifying nominal, adjectival, adverbial, or verbal bases in order to express subjective evaluation. According to Scalise's (1994) definition, these are affixes that alter the semantics of the base they attach to without changing its lexical category or grammatical features. In addition, evaluative affixes in Italian can be combined cumulatively.

Alterative affixes—especially those of the nominal type—primarily convey a quantitative meaning, encoding features such as [large] or [small]. The dimensional meaning expressed by these affixes may pertain to the physical size of the referent, its temporal extension, the intensity of an action, or the quantity of elements comprising the referent. In addition, alteratives may express qualitative or evaluative meanings, such as [positive] or [negative] features. The topic of (alterative)

[88] Importantly, many discourse markers are used as politeness strategies in tweets classified as cases of mock-politeness. In this regard, Sansò (2020) mentions discourse markers such as *per favore* ('please'), *scusa* ('sorry'), *gentilmente* ('kindly') and phrasal discourse markers such as *per così dire* ('let's say'), *qualcuno potrebbe dire* ('one could almost say').

affixes has been extensively addressed across all levels of linguistic analysis and through both qualitative and quantitative/computational approaches (cf. Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994), Grandi (2007)); see also the entry "alterazione" by Livio Gaeta in the *Enciclopedia dell'Italiano* (Treccani 2010).[89] For each type of alteration, the main affixes discussed in the aforementioned studies—as well as in the references cited therein—are listed below.

Among diminutive suffixes, the most common in Italian include: *-etto, -ino, -ello, -uccio, -uzzo, -iccio, -iccetto, -iccino, -iccello, -attolo, -iciattolo, -ottolo, -uncolo, -uolo, -olino.* As for augmentatives, the main suffixes are: *-one/a, -rona/e, -issimo/a*, as well as foreign-derived prefixes such as *extra-, maxi-, mega-, mini-, super-,* and *ultra-*. It is worth noting that *-one/a* is frequently used to describe negative human traits (e.g., lack of intelligence or laziness). With regard to pejorative evaluative morphology, for verbs the suffix *-azz-* (e.g., *sbevazzare,* 'to booze') is notable; for nouns and adjectives, relevant suffixes include *-iccio-*, *-occio-*, *-ozzo-*, *-eccio*, *-astro/a*, and *-otto/a*. These forms can also carry an augmentative nuance. Indeed, the concept of largeness is frequently linked to negatively marked excess or deviation from what is considered ordinary or standard. Moreover, when added to adverbial bases, these suffixes may express a mitigating function. In contemporary Italian, the pejorative prefix *arci-* has also shown increased productivity, often with humorous connotations.

It is important to keep the evaluative morphology distinct from register variation, even though the use of diminutive and augmentative suffixes may sometimes overlap with phenomena such as baby talk (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994). Moreover, diminutives and augmentatives often contribute to increasing the level of politeness in a text, helping to mitigate the speaker's intentions and requests. For this reason, their use is particularly relevant in cases of mock politeness. With regard to the relationship between evaluative affixes and linguistic register, Grandi (2007) also notes that such affixes tend to occur more frequently in texts leaning toward informality and orality. In addition, alterations involving augmentative prefixes or suffixes, e.g., *bacissimi, bacioni*, *bacione*, (terms that can be translated into English as 'big kisse(s)') have been labelled as evaluative morphology, although they may also be classified as instances of hyperbole. This categorization aims to make the present analysis suitable for potential morphological studies, particularly in the context of automatic information extraction. These forms are also discussed by Seto (1998) as distinct from other types of hyperbole, given their close connection to language-specific morphosyntactic features. Example (119) illustrates the use of the polysemous suffix *-otto*—both diminutive and pejorative—in a humorous text.

[89] See https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alterazione_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)/.

(119) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *In Parlamento giravano tutti in tondo ed il più fessacchiotto è stato Salvini.*
'In Parliament everyone was going round in circles and the biggest idiot was Salvini.'

In (119), the suffix *-otto* serves to reinforce the implicit comparison between Salvini, traditional establishment politicians, and children (script opposition: children vs. adult politicians). The reference to *girotondo*, a well-known children's game, activates the child-related frame. The suffix specifically contributes to constructing an image of incompetence—(negative) trait stereotypically associated with children.

Adjectival/Adverbial Forms

This group of markers includes evidential adjectives and adverbs (e.g., *chiaro*, *chiaramente*, *letteralmente*), as well as modal or epistemic adverbs. Modal/epistemic adverbs are further distinguished based on the degree of speaker commitment to the truth of the proposition: those expressing weak commitment (e.g., *probabilmente*, *forse*, *presumibilmente*, *possibilmente*, *verosimilmente*) versus those expressing strong commitment, such as *sicuramente*, *esattamente*, *assolutamente*, *certamente*, *indubbiamente*, *innegabilmente*, *provatamente*, *certo*, *davvero*, and equivalent adverbial phrases such as *senza dubbio*, *di sicuro*, *senz'altro*. The use of such adverbs and adverbial expressions is also discussed in Muecke (1978).

(120) Giorgia Meloni (FDI): *ma veramente dopo che hai tentato di spiegarmi come devo fare la destra ora vuoi tentare di spiegarmi cosa significhi essere una donna?*
'But really, after you tried to explain to me how I have to do the right, now you want to try to explain to me what it means to be a woman?'

In (120), the adverb *veramente* ('really') contributes to emphasizing the paradoxical aspect embedded in the rhetorical question, reinforcing a sense of unexpectedness. The contrast involves a tension between normal and abnormal: a left-wing man (Enrico Letta, leader of PD) explaining to a right-wing female leader (e.g., Giorgia Meloni) not only how to handle the right-wing coalition, but also how to be a woman.

8.4.5.4 Schematic markers

According to the definition provided by Burgerss & van Mulken (2017: 387), these are phenomena that produce a deviation from the ordinary composition of a word, utterance, or text.

Repetition

The phenomenon of repetition occurs when a certain statement is repeated—ironically—within the same text, as noted by Kothoff (2006).[90] By violating the maxim of quantity and the conventional syntactic structure of the utterance (i.e., the maxim of manner), repetition prompts the reader to focus on the text and to draw further inferences in order to interpret the utterance more effectively. Thus, the logical and semantic incongruity is reversed at the syntactic level.

(121) Carlo Calenda (AIV)**:** *Il Governatore del @pdnetwork applaudito da Letta chiede il voto utile per i 5S per fermare il ritorno del Duce! Nientemeno. Il Duce.*
'The Governor of @pdnetwork applauds from Letta asks for the useful vote for the 5S to stop the return of the Duce! Nothing less. The Duce.'

In (121), Calenda's aim is to humorously expose the inconsistency and triviality of the Democratic Party's program. Thus, the repetition—abnormal and unnecessary—of *Duce* is intended to underscore the irrational and disproportionate nature of the PD's appeal to vote for the M5S out of fear of a potential return of fascism. The implicature derived from this violation of the maxims of Manner and Quantity is, broadly speaking, the following: "the return of fascism is an absurd and unrealizable scenario". This implicit content serves to sharpen the logical–semantic contrast with the expression of astonishment (*nientemeno* 'nothing less')[91] and with the supposed usefulness identified by the PD.

In addition, as described in Burgers (2010) and Burgers & van Mulken (2017), a distinction must be made between repetition and echo, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of echo irony (cf. Sperber & Wilson 1986). The phenomenon of repetition occurs when lexical material is repeated within the same text. The preferred label in this case is therefore co-textual repetition. Tweet (121) clearly illustrates this phenomenon. In contrast, an (ironic) echo implies that the ironic utterance repeats a taken-for-granted utterance or statement that is not explicitly mentioned earlier in the text (Hay 2001). From this perspective, an echo may refer to a statement made between the interlocutors

[90] The use of *repetition* is also examined by McCarthy & Carter (2004) as a syntactic strategy for identifying hyperbolic expressions, which are not necessarily ironic or humorous.
[91] The conventional implicature of *nientemeno* (similarly to *perfino* and/or *addirittura*) is that the event described by the utterance is unexpected and out of the ordinary.

in a prior conversation, or to well-known expressions drawn from other domains such as politics, sports, or popular culture.

Register/code switching

Register switching occurs when a humorous utterance or text includes material and/or syntactic structures that belong to a stylistic register different from the one normally expected in that communicative context and/or in relation to the genre of the text. According to Haiman (1998), shifting linguistic register is a way of attracting attention and prompting increased (linguistic) reflection on the part of the reader.

Consider also the use of dialectal expressions or regional varieties of Italian. As Apte (1985: 191) notes, "certain dialect or languages are perceived as more suitable media for humor than others". Indeed, when two varieties coexist, one is often selected for humorous purposes. As Siegel (1995: 227) observes: "a switch to code appropriate for humor can be a signal that the content is not serious". Thus, the mere switch to the humorous variety may function as a *contextualization cue*. The use of a regional variety of Italian for humorous purposes can be illustrated by tweet (122).

(122) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAE): *Lealisti de noantri* 👇 https://t.co/rXzzkb3FN
'Loyalists of *noantri'*

In (122), the utterance is ironic. As shown in the linked content, Paragone's aim is to highlight the contradiction within FDI (a party in opposition that contributed to the fall of the Draghi government, yet whose members have declared loyalty to it). The choice to use the variety of Italian spoken in Rome is not incidental, but rather motivated by the fact that both Lollobrigida and Meloni (the FDI politicians mentioned in the article) were born in Roma.

Other cases described in previous scholarship (Burgers 2010: 105) occur when the author adopts a highly formal and elaborate register—such as legal or bureaucratic jargon—when addressing another platform user. In particular, Seto (1998) refers to an excessively polite style, replete with honorifics, which plays a central role in the construction of *mock-politeness*.

To conclude, with regard to this marker, it is important to note that the boundary between the use of register as a *humor marker* and register variation as a *type of humor* is difficult to establish. The criteria adopted in this study are as follows. The first step is to identify the overlap with other forms of humor. If the register/code shift co-occurs with another form of humor (e.g., negative irony), the

role of register as a marker becomes more evident. In the absence of other humorous strategies, a mere shift in register or code—resulting in script opposition and contextual inappropriateness (in relation to irony)—can be classified as a distinct form of humor; that is, in such cases, stylistic or register variation is the only humorous factor.

8.4.5.5 Tropes as markers

Unlike other markers, the use of tropes requires the addressee to engage in a higher level of inferencing in order to decode both the meaning conveyed by the marker itself and the humorous utterance as a whole. Indeed, a trope may be defined as "a deviation from the ordinary and principal signification" of an utterance (Corbett & Connors 1999: 379). Various tropes have been identified as markers of irony and humor, including metaphorical expressions (Hao & Veale 2010), hyperbole (Muecke 1978), understatement (Seto 1998), and rhetorical question (Barbe 1995).

With regard to this category of markers, an ongoing debate concerns whether the rhetorical figures mentioned above should be interpreted specifically as markers of irony or rather as a distinct type of figurative language that may have humorous effects. Following Whalen et al. (2009), we also contend that not every metaphor, hyperbole, or understatement is automatically ironic. The central issue, as will be discussed for each of the tropes considered, lies in the presence or absence of a switch in the evaluative domain (e.g., a shift from a positive to a negative concept). The presence of such a switch activates an interpretation compatible with either positive irony or negative irony. Thus, the approach adopted in this study differs from that proposed, for instance, by Averbeck (2015), who claims that "a sentence including a hyperbole, understatement, or rhetorical question is deemed to be ironic by default." A similar perspective is also found in Gibbs (2000), who argues for categorizing different types of figurative speech under the broader umbrella of irony.

A further point worth considering is that, as also emphasized in the work of Gibbs (2000) and McCarthy & Carter (2004), these rhetorical figures tend to co-occur. In this regard, Norrick (2004) observes that metaphors frequently contribute to the construction of hyperbolic expressions. As a result, it proves difficult to develop specific protocols that allow for a clear distinction between these phenomena.

Understatement

Generally, the understatement consists in the minimization of a concept – often through the negation of its opposite. As summarized by Burgers (2010: 101), in an understatement something is presented as "less significant than it really is". Following Seto (1998), there are two types of understatement:

meiosis and litotes. Without further elaboration, a case of meiosis occurs, for example, when the expression "upset" is used to mean "infuriated". Instead, litotes is the phenomenon involved for example in the use of "not bad" to mean "very good".

Generally, the understatement is used to express (or conceal) politeness, as part of an emphasis-avoidance strategy (Brown & Levinson 1987). The functioning of this rhetorical figure in relation to irony is well described, among others, by Seto (1998) using the following utterance "John just might be a little bit of a genius" –the context assumes that everyone is aware of John's cultural limitations. The expression *a little bit of a genius* undergoes semantic strengthening, being elevated to *a real genius*. This emphasis on the positive dimension further increases the inappropriateness of the utterance within its context of enunciation, thereby making it easier to infer its ironic nature—namely, that the phrase *a real genius* should be interpreted as its opposite, *a real idiot*. Let us apply the inferential process just described to tweet (121):

(123) Pierlugi Marattin (AIV): *Per un motivo molto semplice: allora non c'era il Var. Adesso si, e sentirsi dire "vabbè ma quella telecamera non l'avevamo" è piuttosto interessante come risposta.* 'For a very simple reason: there was no VAR. Now there is, and hearing someone say "well, but we didn't have that video-camera" is quite an interesting response'.

In (123), *piuttosto interessante* ('quite interesting') functions as a euphemistic expression intended to convey the meaning of *very interesting.* Based on the communicative context—a critique of the use of VAR during football matches—the utterance is interpreted ironically, with the reversed meaning: the intended interpretation is the exact opposite of what is explicitly stated. Thus, the point being made is not that the topic is engaging or intellectually stimulating, but rather that it is nonsensical, or even naïve. In this case, the understatement contributes to identifying utterance (123) as ironic, i.e.: it further amplifies the inappropriateness of the literal utterance within its context of enunciation. What is crucial in (123), to identify irony, is the evaluative switch (a switch from a positive to a negative domain, or vice versa). Indeed, the positive interpretation, conveyed at the explicit level, is inappropriate in this context (Attardo 2000).

The typology of understatement also includes cases where the speaker is reluctant to use a word or to express a concept. Among these uses, I include intrinsically vague expressions such *una specie di* ('a sort of') and *qualcosa del genere* ('something like'); adverbial hedges such as quasi ('almost') and forse ('perhaps'); and modulators of the speaker's degree of confidence (e.g., *sembra, mi pare, pare,* cf. Sansò 2020:30). In this regard, Seto (1998) proposes utterance (124) as an example of ironical understatement, as it is uttered in a context where it is clearly pouring rain.

(124) *It seems to be raining*

In (124), the speaker's (simulated) hesitation in the face of overwhelming evidence—namely, the downpour—contributes to the inappropriateness of the assertion.

Hyperbole

A hyperbole can be briefly conceptualized as "a speaker overstating the magnitude of something" (Colston 2007: 194). McCarthy & Carter (2004) and Carter (2004) point out that hyperbole is a linguistic phenomenon frequent across a wide range of contexts— not necessarily literary texts, nor texts consistently marked by a humorous and/or ironic tone.

At a theoretical level, this research does not distinguish cases of non-extreme hyperbole, extreme case formulations, and the broader phenomenon of overstatement—defined by Norrick (2004) as "any extravagant statement of amplification." A similar position is taken by Cleridge (2011), who states: "I have decided to treat hyperbole as a unified phenomenon, combining hyperbole, overstatement and extreme case formulation under one big umbrella." For a more detailed theoretical discussion of this complex distinctions, see McCarthy & Carter (2004). To briefly summarize, a key difference—which may also affect utterance processing—between extreme formulations and hyperboles lies in the type of Conversational Maxim being violated. Indeed, extreme formulations tend to violate the Maxim of Quality, whereas non-extreme hyperboles violate only the Maxim of Quantity. These distinctions are also explored in Gibbs (1994), who emphasizes the role of speaker intentionality to distinguish the phenomena.

Considering the relationship between irony and hyperbole, Kreuz & Roberts (1995) argue that hyperbolic constructions, including adverbs such as "absolutely," "really," "precisely," "simply" and "certainly" followed by an adjective with an extremely positive valence (e.g., 'brilliant', 'fantastic', 'grandiose', 'wonderful'), typically constitute a reliable marker of the ironic intention of the speaker. Seto (1998: 246), in addition, mentions the English adjective *real*, the adverb *such* and extreme adjectives such as *total* and *absolute*. The use of hyperbolic adjectives as markers of ironic statements is also reported by Muecke (1978). The tweet (125) confirms Kreuz & Roberts' (1995) statements:

(125) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *@luigidimaio è protetto nell'uninominale. Sostenuto peraltro da De Luca, con grande coerenza di entrambi*.
'@luigidimaio is protected in the single-member constituency. Supported by De Luca, with great coherence from both'.

In (125) the phrase *grande coerenza* ('great coherence') is a hyperbole used to signal that the statement is ironic. In other words, the overstatement of the positive adjective towards Di Maio (IF) and De Luca (PD) clarifies Calenda's communicative intentions. Based on the Italian political context, one can infere that these two politicians are not role models of coherence at all: in fact, for years, De Luca (Governor of the Campania region) has harshly criticized Di Maio's actions.

Importantly, not all hyperbolic expressions must necessarily be interpreted ironically (Burgers et al. 2012). An exhaustive discussion of the differences between irony and hyperbole is offered by Cartston & Wearing (2015). According to this study, it is not possible to equate the phenomena both because irony does not necessarily require the presence of hyperbolic expressions – in many contexts, indeed, non-hyperbolic expressions (e.g., 'well done', 'thanks for your help', 'happy days') are readily understood as ironic – and because not all hyperbolic expressions are ironic. *Indeed,* in the absence of a switch in the evaluative domain, *hyperbole* merely functions as "an overstatement of the actual state of affairs" (Carston & Wearing 2015). In this regard, McCarthy & Carter (2004) highlight the internal contrast incapsulated in hyperbole: in particular, the overstated reality is in contrast with actual or expected reality.[92] This internal contrast is essential for the humorous interpretations of hyperbolic expressions, being traceable back to an opposition real vs. non-real.[93] In addition, with respect to *humor*, McCarthy and Carter (2004:178) observe that "speakers do not expect to be taken literally or even too seriously" when using hyperbole. McCarthy & Carter (2004) also describe, in non-ironic contexts, hyperboles used to perform self-deprecatory humorous speech acts. The self-deprecatory use of hyperbolic expressions is also described in Christoulidou (2011): "the teller proffers the strongest point of her complaint or criticism" – therefore, the speaker creates an extreme and unreal description of himself. In any case, it is useful to reflect on how hyperboles are not necessary: indeed, hyperbole is a very general communicative resource (McCarthy & Carter 2004: 170). To summarize, a hyperbole may be ironic or non-ironic and also humorous or non-humorous. Thus, tweet (126) exemplifies a humorous (and not ironic) hyperbolic construction:

(126) Andrea Orlando (PD): *Più falchi su TW che a Francoforte, spero che là abbiano argomenti più solidi […].*
'More hawks on TW than in Frankfurt, I hope they have more solid arguments there […]'.

[92] The paper by McCarthy&Carter (2004) is also interesting because it provides a list of the most frequent English expressions used to create hyperbolic statements. Among these the authors include: expression of numbers, words referring to large amounts/quantities, words referring to size, degree and intensity, and the use of peculiar expressions such as *literally*, that has gradually become a marker of hyperbolic expressions.
[93] For McCarthy & Carter (2004) a fundamental parameter to identify hyperbolic expressions is to consider the disjunction (cf. incongruity) of these expressions from the general context. According to the authors, this concept well correlates with the that of (in-)appropriateness described by Attardo (2000b).

In (126), *falchi* ('hawks') is a metaphorical expression, drawn from technical-specialist discourse, referring to politicians or economists who advocate for more austere policies. In this case, the hyperbole— triggered by the comparative construction—creates a contrast between what is normally expected (i.e., that the European Parliament includes several 'hawks') and what appears implausible or paradoxical, i.e., stricter monetary policy is supported by citizens/X(Twitter) users. In (126), in addition, no switch in the evaluative domain occurs.

Rhetorical Questions (RQs)

Schaffer (2005) provides the following definition of rhetorical question: "a rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser's commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee's mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity". Thus, according to Blankenship & Craig (2006: 111), a rhetorical question is a "statement framed as a question" to which a reader is not expected to provide an answer. Muecke (1978) emphasizes that, unlike other interrogative expressions, "the non-interrogative nature is transparent".

The role of rhetorical questions in the perception and processing of ironic utterances is discussed by Kreuz et al. (1999). Schaffer (2005) observes that rhetorical questions are intrinsically connected to humor, precisely because their content and syntactic structure often appear unusual or incongruous. Schaffer (2005), in this regard, notes that the punch line of the jokes is frequently embedded within a rhetorical question. Tweets (127)-(128) show two different uses of rhetorical questions. In (127) the rhetorical question is a marker of irony, while (128) a case of humorous (but not ironic) rhetorical question is exemplified.

(127) Matteo Renzi (AIV): *Loro promettono leggi che noi abbiamo già fatto: bello, no?*
'They promise laws that we have already made: nice, right?'

In (127),[94] the utterance is ironic: there is a switch from a positive to a negative domain: the paradox described, in fact, cannot really be classified as something exciting or nice but, on the contrary, as something extremely negative.

[94]In (127) more precisely, we are dealing with a *tag question* (Burgers 2010: 107), i.e., a declarative or imperative statement followed by a question tag—an interrogative element that turns it into a rhetorical question.

(128) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *Fate dei corsi di formazione particolari per sparare delle stupidaggini così grosse o è un'abilità innata?*

'Do you take special training courses to come up with such stupid things or is it an innate ability?'

In (128), based on encyclopedic knowledge, the question cannot be interpreted as genuine or sincere. Indeed, this statement underlines the political incapacity of FDI's political adversaries. Within this rhetorical question primarily through denigration and attack against the target.

8.4.6 Quantitative and Qualitative Results

8.4.6.1 How many tweets are marked?

As discussed in Section 8.1, tweets tagged as humorous are 764 out of 7550, viz. 10,11% of the dataset. In this section, I focus on these humorous 764 tweets to analyse the relationship between humor and markers, based on the methodology described. Preliminary results are shown in Figure 39. Notably, in Figure 39, the unit of analysis is the whole tweet and not the instances of humor in tweets.

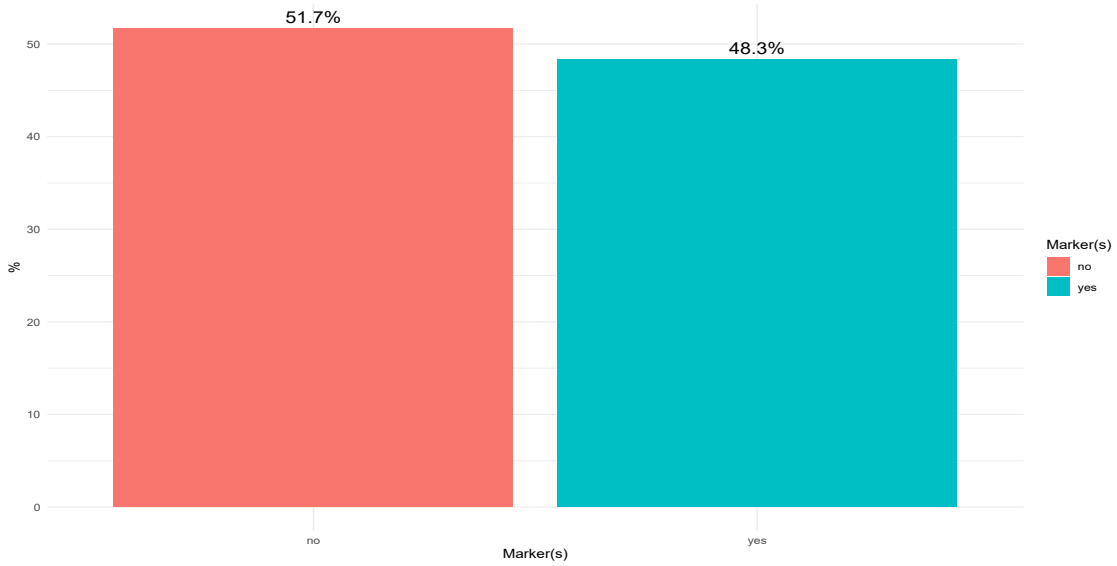


Figure 39: Non-marked Humorous tweets vs. Marked Humorous tweets

From Figure 39 it clearly emerges that there is a similar distribution between marked humorous tweets (370 tweets, 48,3 %) – including one or more markers – and humorous tweets lacking markers (396, viz. 51.7%).

8.4.6.2 Humorous tweets with markers: distribution by politician

In this section, I analyze the distribution of marked humorous tweets, in relation to the 38 politicians considered.[95] The main goal is to explain the divergent use of humorous markers by politicians. In this regard, two mutually exclusive hypotheses can be advanced. The first hypothesis posits that politicians who more extensively employ humor as a communicative strategy also tend to use more frequently humor markers than politicians who publish fewer humorous tweets. In this case, it may be assumed that the use of markers is correlated with a greater rhetorical control over humorous

[95] Three politicians do not use humorous tweets (see Section 8.1).

performance. The alternative hypothesis posits that politicians who make more extensive use of humor are less likely to explicitly mark it in their tweets and the opposite is true for politicians with fewer humorous tweet.

Name of the politicians	Humorous tweets	Marked humorous tweets	Unmarked humorous tweets	% with markers
Chiara Appendino	7	4	3	57.0
Deborah Bergamini	6	3	3	50.0
Silvio Berlusconi	4	4	0	100.0
Angelo Bonelli	8	2	6	25.0
Carlo Calenda	145	45	100	31.0
Mara Carfagna	2	1	1	50.0
Giuseppe Conte	8	5	3	62.5
Guido Crosetto	100	61	39	61.0
De Magistris	8	1	7	12.5
Luigi Di Maio	7	3	4	42.9
Giovanni Donzelli	11	8	3	72.7
Eleonora Evi	10	3	7	30.0
Lorenzo Fontana	5	1	4	20.0
Nicola Fratoianni	11	3	8	27.3
Maria Stella Gelmini	4	1	3	25.0
Michele Gubitosa	12	5	7	41.7
Enrico Letta	15	6	9	40.0
Francesco Lollobrigida	4	1	3	25.0
Beatrice Lorenzin	5	0	5	0.0
Simona Malpezzi	1	0	1	0.0
Luigi Marattin	18	13	5	72.2
Giorgia Meloni	9	4	5	44.4
Alessia Morani	10	4	6	40.0
Andrea Orlando	55	28	27	50.9
Pierluigi Paragone	100	46	54	46.0
Laura Ravetto	42	36	6	85.7
Matteo Renzi	7	4	3	57.1
Licia Ronzulli	6	5	1	83.3
Matteo Salvini	56	40	16	71.4
Daniela Santanché	18	9	9	50.0
Deborah Serracchiani	10	4	6	40.0
Vittorio Sgarbi	49	20	29	40.8
Aboubakar Soumahoro	2	1	1	50.0
Alessandra Todde	2	0	2	0.0
Benedetto della Vedova	7	2	5	28.6

Table 32: Distribution of marked and unmarked humorous tweets by politicians (by alphabetical order).

First of all, to assess whether the identity of the author influences the likelihood of using humorous markers in tweets labeled as humorous, I fit a generalized linear mixed-effects model (GLMM) with a binomial distribution and logit link. The binary dependent variable marker_bin indicates the presence (1) or absence (0) of a humor marker. A random intercept for author (ID) was included to account for author-related variability. The mixed model (marker_bin ~ 1 + (1 | ID)) yielded an AIC (Akaike Information Criterion) of 1016.6 and a deviance of 1012.6. The intercept estimate was –0.114 (SE = 0.159, p = 0.475), corresponding to an average predicted probability of marker use of approximately 47%. The estimated variance of the random intercept for author was 0.421 (SD = 0.649), indicating variability across authors. In addition, I compared the mixed model to a null model including a random effect for observation-level IDs (marker_bin ~ 1 + (1 | obs)), which yielded a substantially higher AIC (1062.2) and deviance (1058.2).[96] The likelihood ratio test showed a reduction in deviance of $\Delta = 45.64$ in favor of the author-level model. In addition, the adjusted ICC (Intra-Class-Correlation) for the mixed model was 0.114, indicating that 11.4% of the total variance in marker use is attributable to differences between authors. This suggests the presence of a stylistic variation in the marking of humor. Some authors have a higher probability of using humor markers, while others have a lower probability.

Having established that individual style explains part of the variance in the use of humorous markers, I examined whether this variation is systematically related to authors' humorous activity. Specifically, I fitted a binomial generalized linear model (GLM) to test whether the proportion of humorous tweets containing explicit markers changes as a function of the total number of humorous tweets produced by each author. In this model, the number of marked tweets was modeled as a binomial outcome with the total number of humorous tweets as the denominator. This allows evaluating whether more prolific humorous authors tend to mark their tweets more or less frequently, shedding light on possible regularities in individual stylistic behavior. The results showed a significant and negative effect in relation to the number of tweets ($\beta = -0.00415$, $p = 0.005$), indicating that the authors who are more prolific in producing humorous tweets tend to use markers with lower proportional frequency.[97] In any case, this result does not exclude the possibility that the politicians who produce more humorous tweets use markers when necessary (see (129)).

[96] In the model, *obs* is a unique identifier assigned to each individual observation (i.e., each tweet). When included as a random intercept term (1 | obs), it functions as an observation-level random effect. It also allows avoiding the overestimation of the effects of other random terms. The equation of the model is provided in Appendix F.

[97] Applying the Spearman test the first hypothesis seemed to be confirmed. In fact, the Spearman correlation highlighted a weak positive association ($\rho = +0.293$) between a greater number of tweets and the presence of markers. This discrepancy in results can be attributed to the fact that the Spearman correlation does not take into account the number of tweets per author; thus, overestimating the effect of extreme proportions in small samples.

(129) Carlo Calenda: (AIV): *Ripeto, Gasparri ha sfiduciato Draghi e non contento gli dà anche ordini. Gasparri. Maurizio Gasparri.*
'I repeat, Gasparri has voted in favor of the motion of no confidence against Draghi and, as if that were not enough, he also proceeds to give him instructions. Gasparri. Maurizio Gasparri.'

In (129) the repetition is necessary to make the recipient infer the humor-generating paradox (ability vs. inability) of Maurizo Gasparri's operation against Draghi (supported by Calenda). The fact that Gasparri votes in favor of the motion of no-confidence against Mario Draghi is abnormal (what is normal would be that Draghi continues to lead the govern). The repetition violates the Mode Maximum and invites the addressee to imply something like "Gasparri is unworthy to judge Draghi's actions as politically inferior". On the basis of this inference, it is possible to grasp the parody, which generates humor. The fact that Gasparri (activates the inability script) challenges Mario Draghi (with whom the concept of political ability is associated) turns out to be abnormal (abstract script) compared to normality: Draghi is not challenged by Gasparri.

(130) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *San Severino Marche. Ecco fatto. Volevo rivotare ma i Carabinieri mi hanno circondato.* 😂
'San Severino Marche. Done. I wanted to vote again but police officers surrounded me. 😂'

In (130), the emoji helps to deem Sgarbi's arrest by police officers as not real (script opposition: real vs. not real). The image accompanying the tweet, which shows Sgarbi smiling between three police officers contributes to defining the humorous tone of the text.

To complement this result, I performed an additional analysis using tweet-level data. Authors were grouped into three categories of humorous productivity—low (1–10 humorous tweets), mid (11–30), and high (>30)—based on the empirical distribution of the dataset (Table 32). I then fitted a binomial mixed-effects model predicting whether each humorous tweet contained a marker, with *humor_use* as a fixed effect and author (ID) as a random intercept. This model structure allows us to test whether differences in humorous productivity correspond to systematic, categorical differences in marking behavior, while accounting for individual stylistic variability. A likelihood-ratio test comparing this model to a null model with only the random intercept indicated that *humor_use* did not significantly improve model fit (χ^2 (2) = 3.61, p = 0.165). None of the fixed-effect coefficients reached statistical significance (all p > .05).[98]

[98] humor_use mid: β = 0.48, p = .236; humor_use high: β = 0.63, p = .065.

Considered in combination, the two modelling approaches point toward a broadly consistent pattern, but one that emerges more as a gradual tendency than as a categorical distinction. The continuous, author-level GLM suggests a modest negative trend: as humorous productivity increases, the proportional reliance on explicit humorous markers tends to decrease. This pattern is consistent with the idea that politicians who use humor more frequently may find markers less necessary, as their humorous style becomes more predictable to their audience and can be inferred from contextual cues and prior knowledge without overt markers. However, when the same information is collapsed into broad low/mid/high categories and modelled at the tweet level with random intercepts for authors, the effect is no longer strong enough to yield statistically (robust) differences between groups. The mixed-effects analysis therefore does not provide categorical support for the hypothesis that more prolific humorous users rely less on explicit marking. These results indicate that the relationship between humorous productivity and the use of markers is relatively weak and gradual, rather than reflecting sharp distinctions between authors. In other words, while individual authors do differ in how often they mark their humorous content, these differences are better captured as a subtle continuum than as stable, discrete classes of low-, mid-, and high-frequency humorous users.[99]

[99] See Appendix F for the full model equations and R scripts.

8.4.6.3 Types of markers and their frequency

In this section, the markers found in the set of 369 humorous marked tweets are presented and discussed. This account does not ignore the possibility that several markers may co-occur in the same utterance. reports the number of occurrences for each marker in the dataset, together with the corresponding percentages. I have chosen to separate the humorous utterances marked with the abbreviation P.S. in order to highlight the frequency of this specific marker, as it is a special sign specific to the present dataset. Additionally, among the typographic markers, one does not find crossed-out text, unlike the results in Burgers's (2010) dataset. This difference is linked to the fact that Burgers (2010) analyzed commercial advertising textual material, typically characterized by particular graphics and fonts. Overall, these are frequency distributions for each analyzed marker in the dataset.

Markers	**Frequency**	**%**
Puntuaction marks	187	39.62
Emojis	107	22.67
Rhetorical question (Rq)	30	6.36
Register	28	5.93
Interjections/Discourse markers	24	5.08
Evaluatative Morphology	21	4.45
PS (special sign)	16	3.39
Typographical features	16	3.39
Hyperbole	16	3.39
Repetition	10	2.12
Adverbs/Adjectives	12	2.54
Understatement	5	1.06
TOT:	472	100

Table 33: Types of markers, their frequency, and corresponding percentages.

The data presented in Table 33 is also reported in Figure 40:

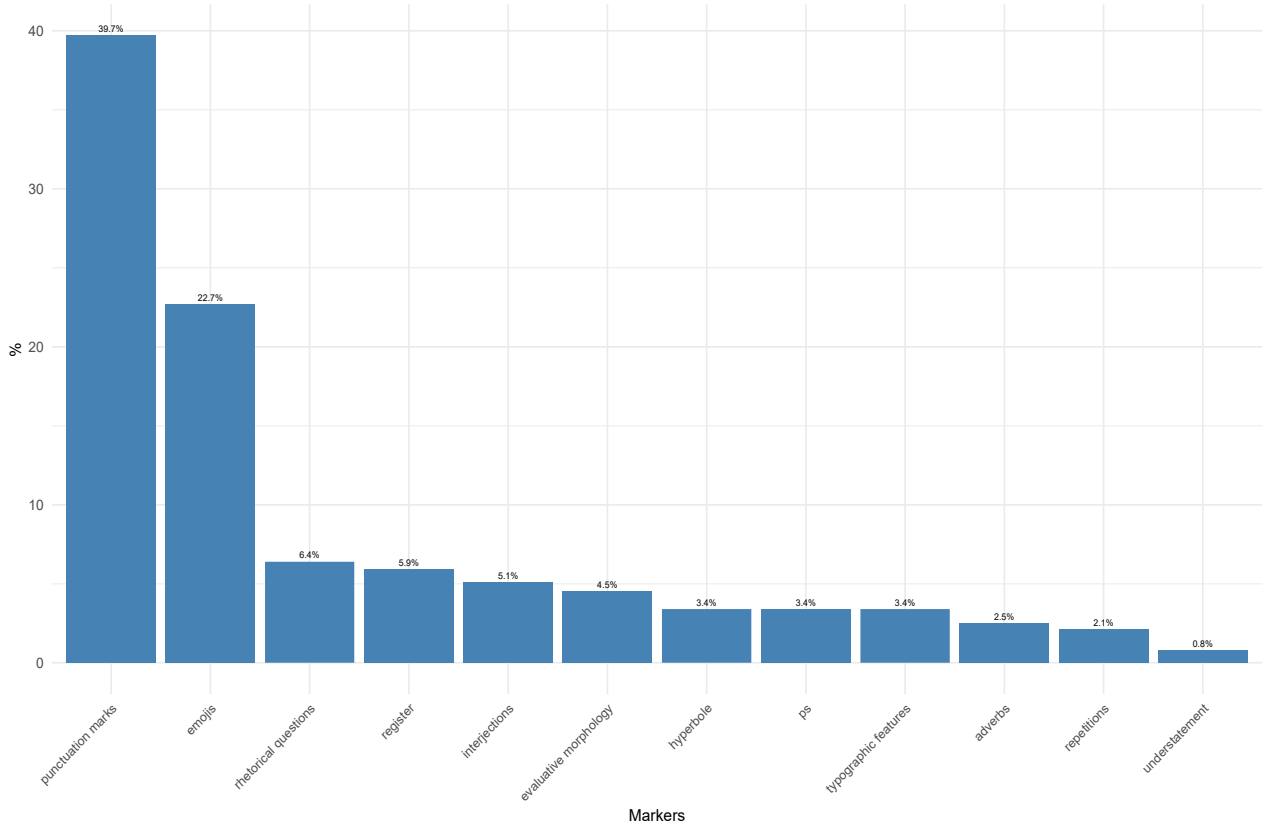


Figure 40: Types of markers, their number of occurrences, and corresponding percentages

Table 34 contains the frequencies relative to the macro-categories of markers.

Macro-types of Markers	**Frequency**	**%**
Tropes	51	10.61
Schematic	50	10.61
Typographic	139	29.50
Morphosyntactic	232	49.25
TOT	**472**	**100**

Table 34: Types of markers, their number of occurrences, and corresponding percentages.

The data presented clearly confirm, as noted by Burgers (2010), that humor markers are not used with the same frequency within a single dataset. The varying frequencies of occurrence may be interpreted as an indication of the typical nature of certain markers in the dataset under examination and in the typology of texts analyzed. In fact, regarding macro-types, what clearly emerges is the evident

predominance of morphosyntactic and typographic markers. Specifically, the most frequent markers within these categories are, respectively, punctuation marks and emojis. This result can be explained by several factors. First, punctuation marks have been identified as typical markers of written textuality (Burgers 2010) – in particular, this holds for quotation marks (Wilson & Sperber 1992). This is consistent with Burgers et al. (2012): "morpho-syntactic and typographic markers are used less often in the purely verbal genres than in the multimodal genre". In addition, Hancock (2004) observed that punctuation was the most frequently used marker in written texts, compared to other markers (e.g., amplifiers, nonverbal signals, and emoticons). Hancock (2004) argued that this frequency is related to the fact that punctuation marks determine the prosody of text, thus confirming that prosodic cues are important for spontaneously produced humor texts. However, the relationship between punctuation and prosody—at least with reference to Italian—has been widely questioned (e.g., Ferrari et al. 2018). In summary, it can be argued that the correspondence between punctuation and prosody is indirect, underspecified, and only partial (Ferrari 2018: 21–22).

The fact that emojis are textual elements typical of 2.0 communication accounts for their great presence in the dataset. In relation to emojis, this finding contrasts with the results reported by Burgers (2010), in which no occurrences of emoticons were found—however, Burgers (2010) does not include texts written through computer-mediated communication.[100] Thus, the use of emojis extends to political communication 2.0 (Valenti 2025), also during election campaigns. Therefore, it is a phenomenon that characterizes Italian 2.0, even in text types that are not informal or limited to ingroup communication. Moreover, the structure of the dataset and the annotation methodology make it possible to open a new line of research aimed at verifying whether the occurrence of emojis in humorous tweets is statistically significant compared to non-humorous texts, and which types of emojis are most frequent in humorous vs. non-humorous tweets.

I now proceed to examine the relatively lower occurrence of emojis with respect to punctuation marks. This result is consistent with the experimental study by Hancock (2004). According to Hancock (2004), the use of emoticons to signal ironic/humor intent do not enhance the perception of text-based messages as humorous.[101] Additionally, emoticons make the writer's intentions too explicit, which leads—at least in computer-mediated communication—to a preference for markers such as ellipses ("…") to signal humorous utterances. In this regard, it is to pinpoint that punctuation marks — as Hancock (2004) points out, ellipses should be considered separately from other

[100] It is also interesting to note that emoticons are often cited as an important signal for conveying irony or humor in mediated contexts.

[101] An additional explanation discussed by Hancock (2004) is that the participants in his study are not familiar with the use of emoticons convention. However, more than twenty years later, this explanation is no longer sustainable.

punctuation marks — may also make the communicative intent explicit. For example, distancing quotation marks clearly explicit the communicative intent, when clearly not employed in a citational way. In any case, as will be discussed in the following sections, it is necessary to examine the use of emojis in relation to the communicative functions of humorous tweets.

As for tropes, the result is consistent with Burgers' (2010: 128–129), who observed that tropes were used more often in purely verbal genres and less frequently in multimodal ones. The lower use of tropes may be related to the fact that "tropes are a cognitively more demanding category of markers and work differently from the other categories of markers" (Burgers et al. 2012: 305). It can be hypothesized, in fact, that these are more complex markers, both to process for the reader, and to construct for the writer. For this reason, their occurrence may be more limited. Accordingly, Burgers (2011: 129) argues that tropes are a peculiar type of marker, whose use should be addressed separately from that of other categories. The cognitive complexity may explain why, among tropes — as noted by Burgers (2011)— understatement is the least frequently used among tropes. In fact, as noted by Seto (1998), understatement requires a shift from a lower point on an evaluative continuum to a higher one – in ironic contexts, moreover, there is a switch from a negative to a positive evaluation, or vice versa.

As for schematic markers, the reasons for their low frequency may vary. In relation to co-textual repetition—which, as noted by Burgers (2010), is less frequent than register—the syntactic constraints of X (i.e., a maximum length of 280 characters) may make its use more difficult. With regard to register or code switching, it can be hypothesized, for example, that the use of regional or dialectal varieties of Italian may be perceived as inappropriate by (some) politicians, given the communicative and electoral context. Furthermore, the use of such varieties requires metapragmatic competence on the part of the politicians, which cannot be taken for granted.

8.4.6.4(Combination of) Humor Markers per utterance

It is relevant to that all macro-typologies of markers can occur both alone and in combination. As noted by Burgers et al. (2012: 119), multimodal texts tend to contain combined humor markers more frequently than purely verbal genres. Burgers et al. (2012) does not show, however, the actual combinations attested in the corpora. Instead, this section first presents the distribution of markers within individual instances of humor, followed by an analysis of the types of markers that co-occur within the same humorous instance.

Humor markers per instance	**N. occurrences**
1 marker per instance	305
2 markers per instance	71
3 markers per instance	4

Table 35: Occurrence of total number of humor markers per instance.

Table 35 indicates how many humor markers are included in the same instance of humor. It shows that most humor instances had one marker (305x instances) or two markers (71x). A few humor instances with three markers (4x) were also found. Instead, humorous utterances with four or more humor markers were not found in the corpus. This is in contrast with Burgers's (2010: 119) data: utterances with three, four and five markers were found – although to a much lesser frequency than the other combinations. However, what emerges from both studies, even considering different languages and types of texts, is that the more markers are added, the rarer the occurrences become. This may suggest the potentially redundant nature of combinations with more than two markers.
These are cognitively costly constructions, which may also violate the principles of linguistic economy. In addition to the restrictions imposed by X, the variation in the text types under consideration may help explain the differences observed in comparison with Burgers (2010).

The combination types found in the 75 instances of humor with more markers are presented in Table 36 (ordered by frequency):

Types of markers combinations	Frequency
punctuactions+emojis	31
punctuaction+interjections	7
punctuaction+typographic features	7
interjection+emojis	3
emoticon+PS (special sign)	3
punctuaction+hyperbole	2
punctuactions+PS(special sign)	2
adverb+hyperbole	1
adverb+rhetorical question	1
emojis+intrjection+evaluatative morphology	1
emojis+punctuaction+hyperbole	1
emojis+punctuaction+interjection	1
emojis+register	1
emojis+rhetorical question	1
emojis+typographic feature	1
hyperbole+punctuaction marks	1
evaluatative morphology +emojis	1
evaluatative morphology +interjections+emojis	1
evaluatative morphology +understatement	1
punctuaction+evalutative morphology	1
punctuaction+register	1
punctuaction+repetition	1
punctuaction+rhetorical question	1
register+interjection+typographic features	1
register+rhetorical question	1
repetition+register	1
typographic features+rhetorical question	1

Table 36: Types of markers combinations and their occurrences.

Table 36 shows that the attested combinations mostly involve members of different typologies (e.g., emojis+puntuaction marks or puntuaction marks+typographic features). The combinations between markers of the same typology are, overall, the least attested (see for example repetition + register). In this regard, no combinations of two or more tropes, as markers of humor, are annotated in the same utterance. This result may be explained by the cognitive effort that an utterance of this type would require for the readers (see Section 8.4.2). Furthermore, it is evident that some combinations are not attested overall. For example, the same utterance is never marked by an adverb and a typographic feature.

Moreover, the most frequently attested combination is emojis+punctuation marks (31 occurrences). These are, as said, the most frequent markers overall (in combination and not). Tweet (131) exemplifies this combination:

(131) Giovanni Donzelli (FDI): *Per fortuna c'è Letta! E sai che lo dico seriamente. Alla nostra crescita ci pensa Letta…* 😉
'Luckily there is Letta! And you know I mean it. Letta takes care of our growth… 😉'

In (131) the humorous comment attacking Enrico Letta (Secretary of the PD) is marked by both inferential punctuation (ellipsis) and the winking emoticon (😉). These elements 'wink' the reader to saturate the utterance with the information available in their encyclopaedical knowledge – the emoticon contributes precisely to strengthening this (presumed) common ground – and to grasp the paradoxical nature (as seen, FI and PD are electoral rivals) of the comment.

We can also note that most combinations have low frequency. Let us consider, for example, the co-occurrence between emojis and the special sign PS (3x occurrences):

(132) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *P.S. Caro Roberto, hai vinto una querela che spero servirà a portare soldi a qualche associazione di volontariato che combatte la mafia coi fatti, non con le parole* 😉 (3/3)
'P.S. Dear Roberto, you won a lawsuit that I hope will help bring money to some voluntary association that fights the mafia with facts, not with words 😉 (3/3)'

Tweet (132) exemplifies a case of mock-politeness: it is a false advice and an insincere expression of solidarity (cf. the use of the adjective *dear* followed by the target's proper name) with Roberto Saviano (an Italian writer and journalist, political committed against Mafia and well-known for its opposition to the Lega's political proposals). The overall tone of the statement is rather paternalistic

and corrective, thus impolite. In (132), there are two markers that signal the humorous tone. The first one is the abbreviation P.S. that reinforces the context of an informal and benevolent exchange, a sort of pseudo-epistolary communication, between Salvini (the sender) and Saviano (the recipient). The use of the expression *Caro Roberto* ('Dear Roberto') also conforms the tweet to (pseudo-)epistolary style. Instead, the winking emoticon (😉) plays an ambivalent role, i.e., it contributes both to depict the scenario of solidarity between Matteo Salvini and Roberto Saviano (i.e.: apparent impoliteness) and to lead the reader to infer an aggressive allusion (i.e.: impoliteness), conveyed through conversational implicature: Saviano fights the mafia only with words.

In other cases, the combinations constitute *hapax legomena*. In this regard, (133) exemplifies the combination between emoji(s) and rhetorical question to mark a case of negative irony, targeted to Marco Travaglio (a journalist and a political enemy of Renzi, with the reputation of having received many convictions for defamation).

(133) Matteo Renzi (AIV): *Altra condanna per Marco Travaglio. Ma che strano, vero?* 🤷
'Another conviction for Marco Travaglio. Curious, isn't it?🤷'

We may also consider, in (134), another infrequent combination, that is, interjection + evaluative morphology (augmentatives) + emojis:

(134) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@utente1 @zona_bianca @utente2 Urca 8 follower (tra cui il Ciocca…?) un successone il tuo profilo* 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂
'Wow 8 followers (including Ciocca…?) your profile is a great success 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂'

In (134), humor is triggered by a form of mock-politeness (see Section 9). There are three types of markers: the interjection of astonishment (*Urca*); the augmentative morpheme *-one* (*success-one,* 'big success') and nine emoticons of laughter (😂). These elements collectively serve to highlight the insincere nature of the compliment aimed at the user: having a social profile with only eight followers cannot be regarded as a success.

8.4.6.5 Markers and communicative functions

In this section, I present the types of markers identified for each communicative function of humor, along with their respective frequencies, in order to highlight similarities and differences. Subsequently, I statistically explore whether there are interactions between communicative functions and types of markers. Furthermore, this analysis will allow to show, for each communicative function, the proportion between marked or unmarked humorous instances, so as to show whether there are statically significant differences between the presence/absence of markers and certain functions.

There is an imbalance in the dataset: instances of aggressive humor are predominant. This result, as seen in the previous Sections (see Section 8.2), is caused both by the trends of political communication 2.0 – characterized by tendencies to negativize the opponent and by a normalization of impoliteness – and by the communicative context (election campaign) typically defined by agonistic and conflictual argumentative strategies. The communicative functions are presented in order of decreasing frequency. For each of the communicative functions, I report the typology of humor markers and their occurrences.

8.4.6 6 Aggressive humor and markers

As seen in Section 8.2, I annotated 716 instances of aggressive humor. Table 37 presents the types of markers found in the 224 instances of aggressive humor that contain one or more markers – the remain 334 cases are not unmarked.

Types of markers	**Frequency**	**%**
Puntuaction marks	76	33.90
Emoji(s)	26	11.60
Rhetorical question(s)	20	9.00
Evaluatative morphology	14	6.50
Register	11	5.00
Hyperbole	10	4.40
Typographic feature	10	4.40
Puntuaction+emojis	9	4.10
Interjections	7	3.10
Puntuaction+typographic features	7	3.10
Repetition	7	3.10
Adverbs	5	2.20
Puntuaction+interjections	5	2.20
Understatement	4	2.00
Emojis+typographic features	2	1.00
Adverbs+rhetorical question	1	0.44
Emojis+intejection	1	0.44

Interjections+evaluatative morphology+ emojis	1	0.44
Puntuaction+interjections+emoji(s)	1	0.44
Emojis+rhetorical question	1	0.44
Hyperbole+puntuaction	1	0.44
Puntuaction+repetition	1	0.44
Puntuaction+rhetorical question	1	0.44
Repetition+register	1	0.44
Rhetorical question+typographic features	1	0.44
Tot. instances with marker(s)	**224**	**100**

Table 37: Markers and instances of aggressive humor.

The markers described in Table 37 are distributed in the four macro-typologies of markers as shown in Table 38:

Macro-typologies of markers	**Frequency**	**%**
Morphosyntactic markers	137	53.10
Typographic markers	61	23.64
Tropes as markers	39	15.11
Schematic markers	21	8.15
TOT	**258**	**100**

Table 38: Macro-types of humor markers and their occurrences.

As noted above, the forms marked by punctuation (category of morphosyntactic markers) and emojis (category of typographic markers) prevail – as noted, they are the most frequent markers overall. Consider, for instance, the use of quotation marks in (135) to indicate a form of negative irony (*"poteri forti",* "strong powers") and the laughter emoji in (136).

(135) Daniela Santanché (FDI): […] *il popolo sta con Giorgia, a loro lasciamo i poteri "forti" #votaFDI*
'The people are with Giorgia, we leave the "strong" powers to them #voteFDI'

(136) Daniela Santanché (FDI): […] *E niente, non ce la possono proprio fare. E complimenti per l'originalità* 😂
'And nothing, they just can't do it. And congratulations on the originality 😂'

In relation to aggressivity, the consistent use of rhetorical questions (also in combination with other markers), increases the occurrences of tropes as markers.[102] The association between this trope and the aggressive function is evident since it is marginally used in other communicative functions (2 occurrences).[103] In this regard, Ilie (1994) identified among the functions of rhetorical questions their ability to challenge and alter assumptions, beliefs, and ideas active in the context of the utterance (Ilie 1994:128). In this regard, Brown & Levinson (1987: 223-225) had described rhetorical questions as able to strengthen the critical intent of sarcastic comments.[104]

For example, in (137) the rhetorical question is used to mark a case of negative irony, aimed precisely at reversing the notion of political competence that some parties, formerly in opposition, hold about themselves. It should be specified that the political parties targeted by the humor are deliberately not mentioned explicitly. This is a case of intentional vagueness.

(137) Mara Carfagna (AIV): *Ma è surreale che chi ha fatto cadere Draghi ora lo supplichi. Solo per spirito di responsabilità non rispondiamo: perché non ci pensate voi post elezioni, che siete così bravi?*
'It is surreal that those who brought down Draghi now beg him. Only out of a sense of responsibility we do not respond: why don't you think about it after the elections, you who are so good?'

In (138) Carlo Calenda uses, instead, a rhetorical question to make parody of Enrico Letta's (PD) the electoral strategy – the link, at the end of the tweet, refers to a tweet published by Letta (target of the parody).

(138) Carlo Calenda: *Sono rosso o nero Enrico?* https://t.co/Fu6fM4EO3H
'Am I red or black Enrico? https://t.co/Fu6fM4EO3H'

Among morphosyntactic markers, I now focus on instances marked by evaluative morphology (12 occurrences). Below, I report two tweets in which the alterative suffixes are used to underline the parallelism between politicians and children (script opposition: COMPETENCE vs. INCOMPETENCE).

[102] As I will explore in the next section, even though aggressive humor shows the highest proportion of tropes, no statistically significant difference was found compared to other genres, not even when compared to genres where tropes are absent.
[103] The instance of affiliative humor marked through rhetorical questions is a case of mock-impoliteness: aggression is simulated to express closeness.
[104] The use of rhetorical questions to strengthen the illocutionary force of a speech act is also noted by Anzillotti (1982).

(139) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): *In Parlamento giravano tutti in tondo ed il più fessacchiotto è stato Salvini […]*
'In Parliament everyone was going round in circles and the biggest idiot was Salvini'

In (139) Paragone compares the activity of the Parliament to a typical childhood game, round and round. In this way the parliamentarians are compared to children. Within the group of parliamentarians, Paragone selects Salvini (Lega) and defines him as the silliest. Thus, an opposition arises between the COMPETENCE script, activated by the fact that the reference is to politicians, and the INFANTILISM script, activated by the children's game mentioned in the text.
The diminutive suffix *-otto* being typical of baby talk, contributes to reinforcing the initial comparison and the concept of naivety/incompetence of Italian politicians. The suffix increases the perception of impoliteness.
The same denigrating comparison is contained in tweet (140) by Carlo Calenda. The diminutive *-ino* suffixed to the lexeme *gioco* ('game') making up *giochino* ('little game') reinforces the comparison between the electoral campaign of PD and its leader with the playful activity of children.

(140) Carlo Calenda: *Posso partecipare anche io al giochino? Se votate PD rischiate di far vincere Fratoianni. Se votate la destra rischiate di far vincere Putin […]*
'Can I join the game too? If you vote PD, you risk making Fratoianni win. If you vote right, you risk making Putin win […]'

Instead, superlative affixes are used, for example, to mark cases of mock-politeness – as illustrated in (141):

(141) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@user 1@user2 Intanto il coraggiosissimo economista ha impedito la visione del suo tweet che gli ripropongo qua in screen shot*😇
'In the meantime, the very brave economist has prevented the viewing of his tweet which I am reposting here in a screen shot😇'

In (141) the positive adjective *coraggioso* ('brave') is inflected to its maximum degree, through the superlative suffix *-issimo*. The interaction between this overstatement and the context, which reports an action that is anything but courageous, makes it possible to infer the humorous tone of (141).

8.6.4.7 Aggressive-defensive humor and markers

I annotated 158 instances of aggressive-defensive humor. Table 39 shows the types of markers found in the 75 marked instances (ordered by frequency) – 83 cases of aggressive-defensive humor are not marked.

Types of Markers	Frequency	%
puntuaction marks	31	41.33
emojis	14	18.67
emojis+puntuaction	8	10.67
register	4	10.67
rhetorical question	4	5.33
typographic features	4	5.33
adverb	2	5.33
adverb+hyperbole	1	2.67
emojis+ typographic features	1	1.33
evaluative morphology	1	1.33
evaluative morphology +interjection+emoji(s)	1	1.33
evaluative morphology +understatement	1	1.33
interjection	1	1.33
register+interjection	1	1.33
register+rhetorical question	1	1.33
TOT:	**75**	**100**

Table 39: Markers and instances of aggressive-defensive humor.

Table 40 contains the frequencies relative to the macro-types of markers.

Macro-types of markers	Frequency	%
Morphosyntactic	48	53.33
Typographic features	29	32.22
Trope	7	7.78
Schematic	6	6.67
	90	**100**

Table 40: Macro-types of humor markers and their occurrences.

Analyzing Table 39 and Table 40, the same distribution of markers found in Section 8.6.4.5 regarding aggression emerges. As seen in 8.2, however, these are more hedged forms of aggression rather than genuine aggressiveness. The lower degree of aggressiveness may also account for the reduced need to resort to linguistic elements that signal the communicative mode adopted. In particular, from Table 40 it emerges clearly that rhetorical questions, hyperboles and evaluative affixes are the less attested

forms with this function. As seen in the Section 8.4.6.5, in fact, these linguistic elements contribute in various ways to increasing the (perceived) aggressiveness of the statements in which they occur. Specifically, rhetorical questions have a drastically reduced use in aggressive-defensive tweets. This data confirms how, therefore, this trope is strongly related with aggressivity, at least within this dataset.

It is also interesting to note how a further difference between the aggressive and aggressive-defensive functions concerns typographic markers. In fact, applying a z-test, the aggressive-defensive function has proportionally more typographic markers (especially emojis, 19%) than the aggressive function. This difference is significant ($p = 0.010$). Considering this category of markers, it is evident, for example, that different types of emojis are used from those discussed in the previous sections.

For example, in (142), the eye-rolling emoji (🙄) helps to grasp the ironic and humorous tone of the statement. Indeed, Ravetto wants to communicate that she is sure of the opposite: her opponents will not examine in depth her political activity. In fact, Ravetto had previously been accused of being distant from the electorate.

(142) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *Sono certa darete anche spazio alle foto di volantinaggio ai mercati e ai miei vari incontri sul territorio… certissima eh!* 🙄
'I'm sure you'll also include photos of the flyers from the Markets and my various local events... absolutely eh! 🙄'

In (143), Crosetto used irony to defend the role of political parties, which are accused by the mentioned X's user of being responsible for the flood disaster in the Marche region due to their negligence. The humorous instance is not only marked by the several full stops but also by the resigned emoji (🤦), that explicitly explains Crosetto's thoughts on what the X's user tweeted:

(143) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@utente1 Colpa dei partiti…*🤦
'@user 1'It is parties' fault… 🤦'

8.4.6.7 Affiliative humor and markers

I annotated 77 instances of affiliative humor. Table 41 shows the types of markers found in the 44 marked instances (ordered by frequency). In 33 instances, there are no markers.

Marker types	Frequency	%
puntuaction marks	16	36.36
emojis	9	20.45
emojis+puntuaction	9	20.45
emojis+interjection	2	4.55
puntuaction+ typographic features	2	4.55
emojis+puntuaction+hyperbole	1	2.27
puntuaction+hyperbole	1	2.27
puntuaction+register	1	2.27
rhetorical question	1	2.27
register	1	2.27
typographic features	1	2.27
	Tot. 44	**100**

Table 41: Markers and instances of affiliative humor.

Macro-types of markers	Frequency	%
Morpho-syntactic	32	52.46
Typographic	24	39.34
Tropes	3	4.92
Schematic	2	3.28
Tot:	**61**	**100**

Table 42: Macro-types of humor markers and their occurrences.

Considering Table 42, it is evident that the occurrences of tropes and schematic markers are limited. It is likely that there is a tendency to use more explicit and less cognitively complex markers to avoid the risk of the writer's intentions being misunderstood, thereby undermining the strategy of approaching the ingroup. For this reason, it is also possible to assume that affiliative humor, proportionally, uses more markers than the others functions. The same hypothesis may be formulated with regard to self-denigrating humor (see Section 8.4.6.8). An attempt to provide statistical support for this hypothesis is contained in Section 8.4.7.

In the following tweets (144)-(145), I provide examples of the most frequently used markers associated with this communicative function. In (144), a laughing emoji is used to mark Sgarbi's

humorous intention, while in (145) Guido Crosetto uses reduplication of the same emoji in combination with several full stops.

(144) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *San Severino Marche. Ecco fatto. Volevo rivotare ma i Carabinieri mi hanno circondato.* 🤣
'San Severino Marche. Done. I wanted to vote again but police officers surrounded me. 😂'

(145) Guido Crosetto (FDI): @annapaolaconcia *Ah….non pensavo che avessi 10 anni più di me…..*😂😂
'@annapaolaconcia Ah …I didn't think you were 10 years older than me…..😂😂'

In both tweets, it is evident that the use of such markers contributes to shaping a communicative style that is perceived as pleasant and engaging, primarily intended to foster a sort of relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere for the readers. Moreover, the content of the tweets is trivial and devoid of any concrete political engagement. In particular, (145) consists of a conversational 'debate' between two politicians (Guido Crosetto and Anna Paola Concia) around their respective ages. In (146), I exemplify a tweet in which code switching is used as a marker.

(146) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Ao' come anche!* https://t.co/zYiPP7nUJr
'Oh, what do you mean with "too"! https://t.co/zYiPP7nUJr'

In (146), an instance of mock-impoliteness is marked by both the exclamation mark (*!*) and the use of the Romanesco variety (notably, the interjection *Ao'*, which is a salient feature of Romanesco), which hints at an informal register and introduces a shade of (simulated) verbal aggressiveness, in line with (sociolinguistic) stereotypes that associate Southern-Central regional varieties with emotional expressiveness and bluntness.

8.4.6.8 Self-deprecating humor and markers

A total of 33 instances of self-deprecating humor were identified, with 19 (57.60%) displaying one or more markers, and 14 lacking any.

Types of markers	Frequency	%
emoji(s)	10	53.00
emoji(s)+puntuaction	2	10.50
hyperbole	2	10.50
puntuaction	2	10.50
adverbs	1	5.30
emoji(s)+typographic	1	5.30
register	1	5.30
TOT	**19**	**100**

Table 43: Markers and instances of self-deprecating humor.

Macro-types of markers	Frequency	%
Typographic features	14	61.00
Morpho-Syntactic	6	26.00
Tropes	2	9.00
Schematic	1	4.00
TOT	**23**	**100**

Table 44: Macro-types of humor markers and their occurrences.

From Table 43 and Table 44 one may note how punctuation (belonging to morphosyntactic markers) is not the most frequently occurring category with this function, while it is attested with higher frequency in all the communicative functions observed so far. Here, typographic markers are predominant, with emojis representing the most frequent subtype within this category. Consider, in this regard, the tweets in (147)-(148).

(147) Laura Ravetto (Lega): @utente1@utente 2 *Ma ovvio* 👽👽👽😝❤️
'@user1 @user2 Obviously 👽👽👽😝❤️'

In (147), Laura Ravetto accepts the content of an insult, posted by a user in the comments section of a tweet featuring a photo of the deputy, which describes her as disturbing or creepy, like an alien. The aim is to strengthen her image, showing indifference and superiority to criticism. The alien emoji

contributes both to reinforcing the idea of acceptance of criticism and to the scenario of informality. The sticking out tongue emoji (😝) also reinforces this communicative goal.

The same rhetorical device can also be detected in (148) – the insult targeted to Ravetto is the same as in (147) .

(148) Laura Ravetto (Lega): @utente1 @utente2 *Adoro inquietare*👽
'@user1 @user2 I love being creepy👽'

I will describe now a tweet ((149)) in which no marker appears. In this context, readers are asked to infer the user's communicative intentions exclusively on the basis of the context and their own encyclopedic knowledge. There are no explicit linguistic elements that allow to detect the humorous tone of the utterance: there is no concrete admission of responsibility on Orlando's part.

(149) Andrea Orlando (PD): @utente 1@utente 2 *Prove inconfutabili di collusione.*
'@user 1@user 2 Undeniable evidence of collusion.'

It is possible that, in tweets such as (149), the politician can lead to a potential communicative 'out-goal': the recipient may not grasp the ironic/humorous tone and, therefore, consider the admission of guilt, for the crime of collusion, as truthful. Thus, a hypothesis that I intuitively held was that there would be a greater tendency to mark utterances in order to prevent the speaker's intentions from being misunderstood, and to ensure that self-criticisms were not interpreted as serious or sincere.

8.4.6.9 (Self-)enhancing and defensive humor and markers

These are forms of humor that overall have a small number of occurrences within the dataset. Specifically, for the (self-)enhancing function I identified 42 occurrences (18 with markers and 24 lacking them), while for defensive humor I identified 21 occurrences of which only 10 have markers.

Types of Markers	Frequency	%
puntuaction marks	6	33.00
register	3	16.00
emojis+puntuaction marks	2	11.00
emojis	2	11.00
puntuaction marks+evaluatative morphology	2	11.00
interjections	1	6.00
understatement	1	6.00
emojis+register	1	6.00
TOT:	**18**	**100**

Table 45: Markers and instances of self-enhancing humor.

Types of Markers	Frequency	%
punctuation marks	4	40.00
adverbs	2	20.00
emojis	1	10.00
interjection	1	10.00
evaluatative morphology	1	10.00
typographic features	1	10.00
TOT:	**10**	**100**

Table 46: Macro-types of humor markers and their occurrences

The examples (150)- (151) shows the use of markers in relation to these communicative functions:

(150) Pierluigi Marattin (AIV): *Sono soldi che costoro - ma guarda un po' che cattivi - prima o poi rivogliono indietro, con una remunerazione rapportata al rischio che corrono.*
'It is money that they – just look at those villains – sooner or later want back, with remuneration commensurate with the risk they take.'

In (150) the parenthetical clause (signaled by "–") introduces a form of mock-impoliteness aimed at defending the system of loans provided by banks – unjustly accused, according to the politician, of profiting at the expense of Italian savers. The discourse marker *guarda un po'* ("just look at that")

contributes to the perception of astonishment as simulated, an interpretation supported by Marattin's known political stance. In the politician's view, the banks' position is entirely justified.

(151) Laura Ravetto (Lega): […] *Rassegnati, sono bona*😂😂😂
'Face it, I'm hot😂😂😂'

In (151) , the use of emojis and of a regional variety of Italian (e.g., *bona*) signals a humorous tone when expressing explicit praise for one's physical appearance, allowing the writer to preserve her face and avoid appearing overly self-celebratory. Taken together, these stylistic strategies render Ravetto's speech act more lighthearted in tone and less likely to be perceived as provocative.

8.4.7 Statistical analysis

After presenting the results, I now aim to address two research questions concerning the relationship between humor markers and communicative functions, using statistical parameters. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Which communicative functions most significantly require the use of markers?

RQ2: What statistically significant differences emerge in the distribution of marker types across the various communicative functions under consideration?

Communicative functions	**Occurences with markers**	**Occurences without markers**
Aggressive	224 (40.14%)	334 (59.85)
Aggressive-Defensive	75 (47.46%)	83 (52.53%)
Affiliative	44 (57.89%)	32 (42.10%)
Self-deprecating	19 (57.57%)	14 (42.42%)
Self-enhancing	18 (42.85%)	14 (33.33%)
Defensive	10 (47.61%)	11 (52.38%)

Table 47: Occurrences with/without markers, in relation to communicative functions, and their frequency.

To answer the first question (RQ1), it is useful to analyze the proportions between occurrences with markers and occurrences without markers in relation to the six functions considered. An exploratory comparison of the proportion of marked texts (Table 47) across humor functions shows that self-deprecating humor (57.57%) and affiliative humor (57.14%) exhibit the highest relative incidence of humor markers. These figures are notably higher than those observed, for example, for aggressive (40.14%) and self-enhancing (42.85%) functions, suggesting a potential trend in marker usage

patterns. In order to evaluate the statistical significance of the observed trends, the following procedure is adopted.

First of all, a chi-squared test of independence revealed a statistically significant difference in the distribution of humor markers across humor genres (χ^2 (5) = 11.33, p <.05). In addition, standardized residuals indicated that affiliative occurrences are marked more than expected (+1.71), while aggressive occurrences less (–1.12). Also, in relation to self-deprecating humor, one may note that there is a tendency to employ more markers: a positive residual (+1.22) suggests a higher-than-expected use of irony markers.

To evaluate whether some humor genres are more likely to include humor markers, pairwise comparisons were conducted using Z-tests for the difference in proportions. These analyses compared the proportion of texts containing at least one humor marker across all genre pairs. The strongest contrast emerged between Affiliative and Aggressive functions: Affiliative texts displayed a substantially higher proportion of marked instances (57.89% vs. 40.14%), yielding a robust Z value (Z = –2.94, p = .0033). A further—though weaker—trend appeared for Self-deprecating vs. Aggressive humor (57.57% vs. 40.14%), which produced a marginally significant result (Z = –1.98, p = .0480). These effects are consistent with theoretical expectations and converge with the pattern of standardized residuals obtained in the χ^2 test. Other contrasts showed smaller differences in proportions and did not approach significance (e.g., Aggressive vs. Aggressive-Defensive: Z = –1.65, p = .0993; Affiliative vs. Self-deprecating: Z = 0.031, p = .9753; Self-enhancing vs. Defensive: Z = 0.616, p = .5381). After applying false discovery rate (FDR) correction, none of the pairwise comparisons remained statistically significant (all pairs p > .05), including the two contrasts that showed the strongest uncorrected divergence (Affiliative vs. Aggressive; Self-deprecatory vs. Aggressive). Taken together, these results indicate that although no pairwise difference survives correction for multiple testing. Affiliative and Self-deprecatory functions consistently show the highest proportions of humor-marked texts, supporting the broader interpretation that humor marker usage exhibits genre-driven tendencies rather than a uniform distribution across communicative functions

To address the second research question (RQ2), a generalized linear model (GLM) with a quasi-Poisson distribution was used to predict humor marker frequency. A quasi-Poisson model (McCullagh & Nelder 1989: 194-200) was adopted to account for overdispersion in the count data, allowing the variance to exceed the mean while preserving the log-link structure appropriate for frequency-based linguistic measures. The model included marker types (morphosyntactic markers, typographic markers, tropes, and schematic markers), humor functions (affiliative, aggressive,

defensive, self-deprecating, self-enhancing) and their interaction as fixed effects, with the log of total marker counts per text entered as an offset to control for baseline differences. Morphosyntactic markers served as the reference (baseline) level for the factor *marker type*, so that all estimated contrasts represent deviations from this category. The model revealed a strong main effect of marker type ($p < 0.001$), while no significant effect of genre ($p > 0.1$) nor any function × marker interaction reached statistical significance. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons of estimated marginal means (emmeans)[105] confirmed that, relative to morphosyntactic markers (reference level), all other marker types were used significantly less frequently: Typographic markers: $\beta = -0.48$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = 0.044$; Schematic markers: $\beta = -1.23$, $SE = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$; Trope markers: $\beta = -0.91$, $SE = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$. These coefficients indicate that, controlling for overall marker production, morphosyntactic markers were significantly more prevalent than other types across the dataset. The rate ratio for schematic markers, for example, was $(-1.23) \approx 0.29$, suggesting they were approximately 71% less frequent than morphosyntactic markers. This pattern underscores the primacy of structural and syntactic strategies in the explicit marking of humor, independently of genre affiliation.

Additionally, Fisher's exact tests are employed to explore specific associations between humor functions and marker types. This allowed for a more fine-grained analysis of distributional patterns that may not have emerged in the previous model. The analyses reveal meaningful contrasts in the types of humor markers used across genres. First of all, the Self-deprecating genre relies disproportionately on typographic markers, compared to Aggressive ($p < .001$; FDR-adjusted $p < 0.05$). In addition, the aggressive genre shows a much higher reliance on morpho-syntactic markers compared to Defensive and Aggressive-Defensive ($p < 0.001$, FDR-adjusted < 0.05). Despite some descriptive trends, several genre comparisons failed to reach statistical significance. For example, no reliable differences emerged in the use of trope markers between Self-deprecating and Affiliative genres. Although the use of tropes seems more used in Self-deprecating function, the comparison does not pass the threshold of significance ($p > .05$).

To further support the findings, I performed a mutual information analysis (Church & Hanks 1990) test to identify particularly strong associations between specific genres and marker types. Unlike global models, mutual information focuses on localized co-occurrence patterns, offering insights into pairwise dependencies that may not be captured by aggregate statistical tests. The overall MI value was low (MI = 0.058), indicating that communicative functions contribute minimally to predicting which marker type is employed. Marker-specific MI scores were also very low (all < 0.03), suggesting that even when Fisher tests detect significant contrasts, the underlying associations remain

[105] It is a package in R (https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/emmeans/index.html).

weak.[106] Taken together, these findings show that communicative functions exhibit certain localized preferences for specific marker types, while the overall dependence between the two variables remains limited.[107]

8.4.8 Tweets with multiple humor instances

In this section, I aim to observe how markers are distributed within tweets that present one or more instances of humor. Overall, there are 61 tweets (16, 50% on 370 marked humorous tweets) that have two instances of humor of which at least one presents a marker. Within this group, 47 tweets have the first instance of humor with a marker. Of these, 24 tweets have a marker only on the first instance and none on the second instance, while 18 tweets have both instances with markers. For the first typology, consider tweets (152) and (153):

(152) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *La "cattiva influenza" di Salvini preoccupa l'ex presidente della Commissione Europea? Gli italiani hanno votato, il Centrodestra governerà a lungo e bene, Juncker stia sereno.*
'Does Salvini's "bad influence" worry the former president of the European Commission? Italians have voted, the Center-Right coalition will govern well and for a long time, Juncker may stay easy'.

The first instance is a case of positive irony marked by the use of distancing quotation marks "cattiva influenza" (*"bad influence"*). Instead, the second occurrence of humor (cf. *Juncker may stay easy*) is not accompanied by any overt linguistic markers.

(153) Carlo Calenda (AIV)*: Gravissime le parole di Tremonti su Draghi. Un governo che ha portato il paese vicino al default. E questo sarebbe il granitico ministro della destra? Sai la gioia tra gli investitori.*
'Tremonti's words on Draghi are very serious. A government that brought the country close to default. And this is supposed to be the granite minister of the right? You know the joy among investors.'

[106] Typographic features (MI=0.0270); Morpho-Syntactic (MI=0.0237); Trope (MI=0.0146); Schematic (MI= 0.0134). The last two marker types show the weakest association with genre, exhibiting consistently low frequencies across all categories.
[107] see Appendix F for the GLM equation as well as the R scripts for the GLM and the mutual information analysis.

In (153) the first instance of humor (*this is supposed to be the granite minister of the right?*) is marked by the use of the rhetorical question. The second instance (*you know the joy among investors*) lacks markers.

In (154) the two forms of irony are both marked by the use of distancing quotation marks, present on the verb *osare* ('to dare').

(154) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Insulti a Laura #Pausini che "osa" non cantare Bella Ciao in tivù. Insulti a Selvaggia Roma che "osa" difendere il diritto di un bimbo di essere adottato da una mamma e un papà*
'Insults to Laura #Pausini who "dares" not to sing Bella Ciao on TV. Insults to Selvaggia Roma who "dares" to defend a child's right to be adopted by a mother and father'

Then, there are 12 tweets in which only the second instance of humor is marked.

(155) Pierlugi Marattin (AIV): *Ieri ho fatto una domanda a Maurizio Leo, la mente economica di quel partito. Qualcuno sa tradurmi cosa ha risposto?* […]
'Yesterday I asked a question to Maurizio Leo, the economic mind of that party. Can anyone translate what he answered? […]'

In (155), the first utterance contains a case of mock-politeness (*the economic mind of the party*), since it is merely a simulated praise*;* in the second utterance, instead, the denigratory insinuation to the target's poor linguistic skills are marked by the use of a rhetorical question.
In addition, there are 10 tweets with three instances of humor, at least one of which has a marker. Only in two cases, the three forms of humor are marked – as in (156).

(156) Laura Ravetto (Lega): @_DAGOSPIA_ *Naturalmente darete anche ampio spazio alle foto dei miei volantinaggi ai mercati e dei miei incontri pubblici vero? Ne sono certa…mi amate moltissimo voi..ah no siete Dago…no no, voi amate solo la mia ex collega di partito ora fiera portatrice di voti a sinistra (indovinello 😜)*
'Of course, you'll also give ample space to photos of me handing out flyers at markets and attending my public meetings, right? I'm sure of it...you love me very much...oh no, you're Dago...no no, you only love my former party colleague, now a proud vote-getter for the left (guess 😜)'

Indeed, in (156) an instance marked by the use of the rhetorical question and the adverb *naturalmente* ('naturally'). In the second instance, the several full stops are used twice (these features confer a dialogic texture to the written text, aligning it more closely with the characteristics of spontaneous speech). In the last utterance, instead, the allusive emoji with the tongue sticking out is the marker.

Within the dataset, there are also 48 tweets that contain two or more instances of humor without markers (see (157)).

(157) Daniela Santanché (FDI): *La sinistra riparte da Elodie, Loredana Bertè e Chiara Ferragni. Forza e coraggio. Auguri #elezionipolitiche2022 #FdI @GiorgiaMeloni https://t.co/ytq7xomfip*
'The Left-wing coalition restarts with Elodie, Loredana Bertè and Chiara Ferragni. Strength and courage. Best wishes #elezionipolitiche2022 #FdI @GiorgiaMeloni https://t.co/ytq7xomfip'

In both forms of mock-politeness, namely the encouraging formulas *Forza e coraggio* ('Be strong and courageous') and the wish formula *Auguri* ('Best whishes'), are both devoid of humor markers.

8.4.9 Markers and typology of tweets

	Markers *(yes)*	**Markers *(no)***
Basic tweet	240 (64.86%)	307 (77.52%)
Replies	130 (35.13%)	89 (21.71%)
Tot.	370	396

Table 48:Humor markers and typology of tweets.

As noted by Spina (2012), politicians use not only basic tweets but also replies. These tweets are generally used to respond to generic users or other politicians. The syntax of X provides two strategies, specifically, # and @ symbols, to directly mention the user at whom the reply is addressed. It is possible to hypothesize, in this regard, that there is a greater tendency to mark instances of humor in reply tweets, so as to avoid that one's communicative intentions may be misunderstood and consequently the politician be accused of being excessively aggressive and impolite towards probable electors. Indeed, as seen, this is the communicative function most attested in the dataset.

Comparing the percentages, reply tweets containing markers (59.4%) display a higher frequency of marker use than basic tweets (43.8%). This trend is also confirmed by the chi-square test (χ^2 (1) = 14.59, $p < .001$), which outlines a statistical significance between the type of tweet and the use of markers or the lack of it. The odds ratio is 1.88: it is almost twice as likely that a basic tweet contains a humor marker compared to a reply tweet.

9. Mock-(im-)politeness, Humor and political tweets

9.1 Mock-politeness: humor, creativity and persuasion

This section investigates the frequency and the (persuasive) functions of mock-politeness (MP hereafter) by Italian politicians, underling the relationship between MP, humor and persuasion. In Italian political discourse, the use of MP as an autonomous pragmatic phenomenon has been overlooked, even by recent studies: these have dealt, as seen, more generally with the macro-category of conversational implicatures (e.g., Lombardi Vallauri 2019). Thus, notably, the work carried out here may serve as an update to the annotation task proposed by Lombardi Vallauri's project (IMPAQTS; https://impaqts.it/), as it allows for an expansion of the range of implicatures considered as well as of the strategies of aggressiveness.

In any case, MP has recently been studied with different methodologies and in relation to different communicative contexts. For example, Taylor (2016) investigated the functions of MP in Italian and English blogs; Dynel (2016) analyzed mock-politeness as a strategy to vehicle impoliteness in popular American tv shows; Qiu et al. (2023) explored the use of MP (labelled as "self-mockery") in Chinese instant messaging; finally, Hansson (2024) qualitatively analyzed the use of MP in political-institutional communication on X. Specifically, Hansonn (2024) draws attention to how strategic blame avoidance in government may involve coercive impoliteness, that is, the use of expressions that attack the face of (potential) critics with an aim of forcing them to withhold their (future) criticism. As suggested by Hansonn (2024), it is necessary to study specific implicational forms of linguistic aggression in other political and cultural contexts and in different types of languages. In addition, Taylor (2016: 25) states that it would be interesting to investigate the use of MP for humorous purposes. Specifically, this section is precisely framed in this research trend. The section is articulated as follows. First, I describe the phenomenon of MP and its textual and persuasive functions. Afterwards, I present quantitative results, observing the distribution of MP across different political coalitions and political identities. Finally, I qualitatively examine the different types of MP attested in the dataset.

The term "mock-politeness" has been originally coined by Leech (1983). An exhaustive definition of the phenomenon is provided by Haugh (2015). Haugh (2015: 278) defines MP as: "an ostensibly polite stance, which is indicated trough the occurrence of a (non-)linguistic form or practice that would in other circumstances be associated with a polite attitude, masks or disguises an "impolite" stance that arises trough implicature". In Culpeper's classification (2011), MP is described as a form of "convention-driven implicational impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011; Taylor 2016): a verbal

strategy that "mixes features that point towards a polite interpretation and features that point towards an impolite interpretation" (Culpeper 2011: 165-169).[108] Thus, there is a mismatch between politeness and impoliteness features, at the co-textual and/or contextual level, that leads to an implicature of impoliteness (Taylor 2016: 18). In Haugh (2015), MP and also its counterpart, mock-impoliteness, are brought together under the catch-all term of "im/politeness implicatures". Notably, as for other forms of implicational impoliteness (i.e., non-conventional impolite formulae), the impoliteness understanding does not match the surface form or semantics of the utterance (Culpeper 2011: 17). Impoliteness emerges through implicature, exploiting Grice's Maxims (Dynel 2016: 139). In essence, the perlocutionary goal of MP utterances is, therefore, different from that which arises from the decoding of the truth-conditional meaning of the utterances and aims to express genuine impoliteness. An instance of MP is exemplified in (158):

(158) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Evidentemente Casini è meglio di me. Potrà fare molto, come sempre ha fatto [...].*
'Evidently, Casini is better than me. He will be able to do a lot, as he has always done [...].'

In (158) Vittorio Sgarbi shows, by praising Pierferdinando Casini's qualities, an apparently polite attitude towards him. However, by analyzing the electoral context (Sgarbi and Casini were competing in the same electoral college), the readers may infer that Sgarbi actually wants to communicate the opposite of what was asserted and, therefore, aims to criticize Casini's (political) actions. The explicit politeness attitude masks impoliteness, conveyed indirectly by an implicature.[109]

In addition, Culpeper (1996) stresses how, in MP, linguistic forms and attitudes (conventionally) conveying politeness tend to appear obviously insincere, based on the co-text and context (Culpeper 2011:118). In this regard, Bousfield (2008) pinpoints how a specific (extralinguistic) context is crucial for MP to be effective. Moreover, insincerity may be marked by (para-)linguistic cues, that is, cues that clarify the writer's intentions. They may be equated to the irony/humor markers described in Section 8. However, as noted by Taylor (2016), it is arduous but necessary to discriminate between politeness's cues (strategies that triggers the pseudo-polite

[108] MP is an off-record strategy of impoliteness– indeed, MP can never be directly expressed (Bousfield 2008).
[109] A 'sincere' reading—one meant as genuine praise for the result—remains plausible, despite the electoral climate and Sgarbi's well-known polemical style. Political commentators, however, remain cautious about how to interpret the statement. For example, the newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* ran the headline "La "sportività" di Sgarbi" ('Sgarbi's "sportsmanship"'), using the double quotation marks. See the article at the following link: https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2022/09/26/elezioni-2022-la-sportivita-di-sgarbi-evidentemente-casini-e-meglio-di-me-potra-fare-molto-come-sempre-ha-fatto/6817316/.

behavior) and insincerity's cues. The example in (159) illustrate the complexities arising to discriminate between these cues:

(159) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *[...] Ma questi di sinistra pensano di essere simpatici? Classico radical chic ignorante e cafone, gli mando un bacione e sorrido […]*
'[…] Do these left-wing supporters think they're nice? Classic ignorant and rude radical chic. I send him a big kiss and smile […]'

In (159) *gli mando un bacione e sorrido* ('I send him a kiss and smile') is literally a strategy to communicate politeness. However, analyzing the context and linguistic co-text (*radical chic ignorante e cafone* 'ignorant and rude radical chic' is a slur), Salvini actually wants to mock his opponents by displaying a paternalistic attitude and indifference to their criticisms. The augmentative suffix (*-one* in *bacione* 'big kiss') increases the degree of politeness and, at the same time, makes the literal interpretation of the statement less credible.

However, Dynel (2016: 143) argues that, unlike irony, overt untruthfulness is optional for MP. Notably, the relationship between MP and irony is quite complex. In this regard, several scholars have been considered MP as an equivalent phenomenon of irony and/or sarcasm (e.g., Leech 1983; Culpeper 1996). However, following Haugh (2015) and Dynel (2016), I consider these phenomena as distinct.[110] Specifically, Dynel (2016) argues that MP does not necessarily entail the untruthfulness that triggers the implied evaluation typical of ironical utterances (in other words, the presence of an evaluative implicature is necessary to classify an utterance as ironic, but it is not for MP).

In any case, it is difficult to clearly identify the types of phenomena and behaviors that can be classified as MP (Taylor 2016). Accordingly, Taylor (2016: 19) argues that MP and irony are "large autonomous areas which overlap at points". According to Taylor (2016) the only key factor to distinguish the two phenomena is that in some circumstances irony is used to vehicle genuine politeness (i.e., positive irony). Positive interpretations are not possible for genuine instances of MP. However, the challenge of distinguishing the two phenomena is likewise reflected at the metapragmatic level. In fact, the Italian term *sarcastico* ('sarcastic') is more frequently used to describe behaviors that perform MP (Taylor 2016: 151) rather than genuine cases of negative irony (or sarcasm).[111]

[110] The main point for Haugh (2015) is that "one being interpreted as being ironic or sarcastic does not necessarily mean one will be evaluated as mock-polite or even impolite".
[111] To indicate MP, other attested labels are, for example, *parodia* ('parody'); *viperismo* ('viperism'). Another frequent label used to indicate MP in Italian is *paternalismo* ('paternalism'/ 'patronizing').

From a theoretical perspective, it is also possible to distinguish between two forms of MP, depending on the type of mismatch observed. The mismatch may occur either between the (extralinguistic) context and the linguistic features or only at the co-textual level. The former type is classified as an external mismatch, and the latter is regarded as an internal mismatch (Taylor 2016: 22-25). In cases of MP by external mismatches, the context projected by a (linguistic) behavior mismatches the context of use. Thus, linguistic polite strategies are incongruous with the extra-linguistic context. As a result, the text is reinterpreted as impolite, without any additional verbal indications of incongruity. Consider the following example:

(160) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Povero Putin. La guerra a sua insaputa [...].*
'Poor Putin. War without his knowledge [...].'

For example, in (160), considering Calenda's political positions against Putin's government, the expression of solidarity towards Putin is reinterpreted as deeply insincere: Putin cannot be identified as a real victim. Thus, the aim of (160) is to ridicule the positions of (Italian) Putin's supporters.[112]

Instead, MP by internal mismatch provides that the polite and impolite moves are co-textual ("verbal formula mismatch", Culpeper 2011).

(161) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Letta è partito chiedendo un generico tetto nazionale al prezzo dell'energia ed è finito a copiare, uguale uguale, la nostra proposta. Bene così Enrico.*
'Letta started by calling for a generic national cap on energy prices and ended up copying our proposal exactly. Good job, Enrico.'

In (161), the former utterance is a face-attack towards Letta, accused of having copied the AIV's electoral proposals ("on-record attack", Culpeper 2005). Instead, the latter utterance (*Bene così Enrico* 'Good job, Enrico) seems to express appreciation: see for example the use of the proper name to express the idea of a close relationship. However, on the basis of the previous co-text, this statement is insincere and aimed at masking impoliteness: the addressee must, therefore, infer the opposite of what is asserted. In this way, all the text in (161) is a source of impoliteness.

[112] An allusion can be detected to a statement made by Claudio Scajola, minister in the third Berlusconi government. Scajola claimed that the purchase of a luxurious apartment in central Rome, registered in his name, had occurred "without his knowledge". This property became the subject of a media scandal. The phrase "without his knowledge" quickly turned into a humorous catchphrase used by the press to mock the minister's explanation. A summary of the case is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vevenk4nDwc.

Generally, as noted by Taylor (2016), the speaker moves from politeness to impoliteness, as in (162).

(162) Giorgia Meloni (FDI): *No caro Enrico, l'unico pericolo è per il sistema di potere della sinistra.*
'No dear Enrico, the only danger is for the left's power system'.

In (162), there is first a polite expression (highly conventionalized), that is, *caro Enrico* ('Dear Enrico'), followed by a presupposition of existence with an attack function (*il sistema di potere della sinistra* 'the left's power system'): it is presupposed that a left-wing power system exists. In cases such as (162), the cognitive load for the readers is increased ("multiple processing and extra investment", Taylor 2016: 192), as they have to re-interpret the initial politeness in light of the subsequent impoliteness. Instead, instances such as (161), with a shift from impoliteness to politeness, are less frequent (Taylor 2016). Importantly, the addition of insincere politeness at the end of the text enhances the impoliteness and the attack force towards the target.

As showed, the mismatch between features and impoliteness features is the key element of the various forms of MP. The connection between MP and humor can also be traced back to this mismatch (Dynel 2016). Humorous text, as argued by Attardo & Raskin (1991), involves the coexistence of two opposing scripts (Attardo 2020). For MP, there is an opposition between a script POLITENESS and another script IMPOLITENESS, both activated by contextual and/or verbal elements. The same type of script opposition occurs for the phenomenon of mock-impoliteness. This script opposition could be one of an intermediate level. For example, if we re-consider the example in (161), there is a concrete, textual opposition between the act of copying an electoral program and being a good politician; then, an intermediate level opposition between POLITENESS (conveyed by *Bene così Enrico*, 'Well done, Enrico") and IMPOLITENESS (conveyed by *l'unico pericolo è per il sistema di potere della sinistra*, 'the only danger is for the left's power system'). This intermediate opposition finally leads to an abstract opposition between NOT-REAL and REAL or GOOD vs. BAD. Thus, the incongruity between IMPOLITENESS and POLITENESS contributes to the humorous interpretation. In addition, the mismatch (polite formula vs. impolite formula) triggers a cognitive oscillation, typical of humorous phenomena (Dynel 2016).

Appropriately, Culpeper (2011:23) notes that forms of convention-driven mismatch (as MP) are especially likely to be covered by terms such as harsh jokes/humor. Also, Haugh (2015: 5) notes

that mock-politeness attitude provides amusement for the overhearing audience. Clearly, it is a subtype of impoliteness, which may sound humorous to recipients that are not the targets of face-threat. This connection between MP and humor is also argued for by Taylor (2016: 197) considering the metapragmatic level. Indeed, she states that mock-politeness instances are frequently followed by meta-comments such as "hilarious" or expression such as *ahahah*. Additionally, Taylor (2016: 98) notes how, in certain circumstances, the author of a MP utterance is praised for his good sense of humor.

At a rhetorical level, as exemplified by tweets in (158)-(162), the primary function of MP is therefore to perform a face-attack (as genuine impolite forms). Indeed, as stated by Haugh (2015: 285): "a mock-politeness implicature can thus accomplish a negative assessment in a way that exacerbates the potential offense for the target". However, despite the intensification of the offense, MP may help politicians to show control of the situation ("a means of expressing aggression while maintaining control and this is what makes (im-)politeness mismatch so central to institutional and public discourse types", Taylor 2016: 139). This is not the case if the speaker uses a bald-on-record attack such as slurs: in these cases, the speaker's emotional involvement clearly emerges.

Furthermore, the speaker, by attacking the opponent's face (the target of the humor), enhances his own face by presenting themselves in a position of superiority and confines the outgroup (the target) to a position of subordination ("coercive impoliteness", Culpeper 2011: 225-233). This aspect is increased in texts where the target of the MP is an ordinary citizen/voter. In this circumstance, rudeness reinforces the asymmetry of power relationships and increases the conflictual nature of the interaction (Orletti 2000). Moreover, the target of MP is often positioned in such a way that is difficult to respond without appearing churlish or inadvertently putting on-record what has been left off-record.

Furthermore, observing someone's face being damaged publicly through humor provokes a sense of emotional pleasure and involvement in the audience ("entertaining impoliteness", Culpeper 2011: 233-239). This involvement is also corroborated by the aesthetic pleasure that derives from the recognition of linguistic creativity (Carter 2004). Indeed, MP is an unconventional form of impoliteness (different, for example, from insults/slurs) and, therefore, stimulates the readers' mental activity: PM, in fact, requires complex inferences and common ground between locutors and their audience. Specifically, the link between PM, humor and linguistic creativity plays a crucial role in communication 2.0: the use of unusual and impactful linguistic expressions increases views, engagements and retweets (Scott 2022).

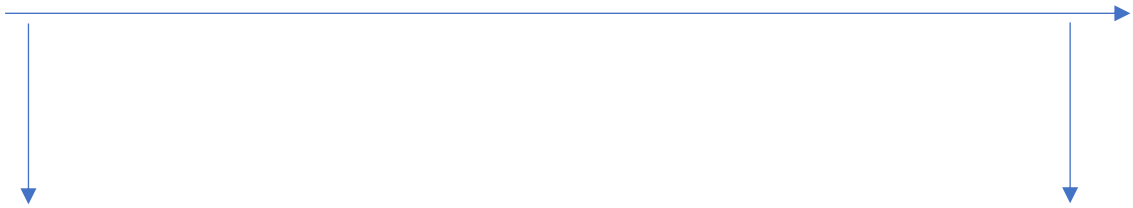
Furthermore, it can be hypothesized that MP, especially when used in a reactive way (i.e., in response to a previous attack), also determines a status of (rhetorical) superiority for the locutor.[113] By responding indirectly, the speaker in fact displays both a greater indifference toward the criticism received and a higher degree of linguistic skills, as they adopt original and creative forms of aggressiveness. Thus, the writer/speaker- the politician in this specific case - may employ MP to present their aggressive behavior as more skillful in comparison to the strategies adopted by the opponents. This way, the speaker induces observers/hearers of these conversational exchanges to view the preceding attacks as lacking sophistication. This aspect, therefore, enhances the locutor's positive face.

Finally, it is possible to conclude that face-attacking and face-saving functions may operate simultaneously in instances of MP: "in protecting his/her own face, the participant attacks that of the interlocutor" (Taylor 2016). The aim is to protect the speaker's face, clearly not that of the target. As with other conversational implicatures, part of the responsibility for introducing the derogatory content is shifted onto the hearer, thereby partially exonerating the speaker to vehicle impoliteness and aggressivity. Indeed, as Haugh (2015: 307) notes, "the impoliteness stance remains unofficial". This function is closely related to the pragmatic concepts of decommitment and deniability, both of which are also relevant in other humorous forms. In this regard, varying degrees of deniability may emerge depending on the type of mismatch (external or internal) involved. In the case of external mismatches, there are no explicit linguistic markers signaling the insincerity of polite expressions; so, the speaker's aggressive or offensive intentions can only be inferred from the extra-linguistic context, making them opaquer. Conversely, in instances of internal mismatch, there is a switch from politeness to impoliteness expressed overtly within the co-text. As a result, the face-threatening act becomes less deniable and more difficult to retract. In this case, it is the textual linguistic elements themselves that determine the reinterpretation of the text as conveying impoliteness. Moreover, explicit and implicit forms of impoliteness are contextually present and, as shown, contribute to the emergence of co-textual mismatch. Therefore, it becomes evident that responsibility for the impolite attitude necessarily falls on the speaker as well, and cannot be entirely 'shifted' onto the recipient, as in the case of external mismatches.

In this regard, consider the difference between examples in (159) and (160). In (159), it is evident that Matteo Salvini finds it more difficult to distance himself from the charge of having delivered an attack, given the presence of the impolite expressions *Classico radical chic ignorante e*

[113] In certain circumstances, the impoliteness implicatures that emerge by the use of MP react to and sanction perceived offence on the part of participants in the interaction. Thus, they are used to react to previous negative assessments or offences.

cafone (‘Classic, ignorant, and rude radical chic’). The lower the cognitive effort required on the recipient’s part, the lower both the likelihood that the recipient’s capacity for contestation will be constrained by the principle of egocentric bias and the possibility for the speaker to dissociate from the impoliteness conveyed. Figure 41 provides a summary of the concepts outlined in this Section.



More Covert:
+deniable
+egocentric bias

More Overt:
-deniable
-egocentric bias

External Mismatch (see (160))

Internal Mismatch (see ((159))

Figure 41: External/ Internal Mismatch and the concepts of deniability and egocentric bias.

9.1.1 How to identify Mock-Politeness?

The system described in this Section has been developed to account for the phenomenon of MP from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. For instance, Hansson (2024) does not provide quantitative observations. The author, in fact, argues that "there are no methods for identifying implicational coercive impoliteness (and thus instances of mock-politeness) automatically in large datasets, as there are no lexical indicators specific to this type of face-attack". Nevertheless, the absence of an automatic system for these off-record impoliteness strategies does not preclude the possibility of manual analysis—such as the one carried out by the author on a limited set of examples—that takes into account both the linguistic co-text and the extralinguistic context in order to identify the mismatch. It is precisely from an annotation of this type, applied to such a large dataset such as that of the present work, that models for automatic language analysis can be developed.
The annotation task of this work was structured as follows. First, based on Bousfield (2008) and Culpeper (2011), tweets containing conventional or non-conventional forms of impoliteness were identified (see Section 8). This procedure also made it possible to assess the incidence of tweets conveying impoliteness through MP as compared to those employing other strategies. Additionally, in order to detect cases of internal incongruity, the potential presence of conventional and/or non-conventional politeness strategies within tweets displaying impoliteness was examined, drawing on Brown & Levinson (1987) and Terkourafi (2005). These included, among others, greeting formulas, affective address forms, instances of vagueness aimed at safeguarding the recipient's face, hyperbolic expressions conveying affection for the recipient, e.g., *bacione/i*, *bacissimi* ('big kisses'), inclusive formulations (e.g., the inclusive *Noi*), and cooperative moves such as expressing understanding and solidarity, offering praise, thanks, or assistance (Brown & Levinson 1987: 125–129). Furthermore, emojis and images functioning as politeness markers (e.g., smiling emojis, kiss or hug emojis, hearts, clapping hands) were also considered, so as to incorporate multimodal forms of incongruity.

Finally, in tweets displaying exclusively politeness forms (i.e., in the absence of co-textual mismatch), their consistency or sincerity with the co-text and context was examined, in order to identify cases of MP arising from external incongruity. For example, in (163), Appendino's expression of thanks, following the full publication of her interview by the mentioned newspaper, can be regarded as entirely sincere.

(163) Chiara Appendino (M5S): *Grazie per l'intervista che trovate oggi sulle pagine del @fattoquotidiano.*
'Thanks for the interview you can find today on the pages of @fattoquotidiano'.

9.1.2 Quantitative Results

The goal of this Section is to provide a preliminary quantification of MP in Italian political discourse on X. The annotation allowed us to identify 233 tweets with one or more forms of MP, i.e., 12.20% of the tweets with forms of rudeness. These findings suggest that the use of MP, although not highly pervasive, plays a role within the communicative strategies employed—at least on X—by political figures to convey impoliteness and humor. The quantitative evidence supports the theoretical attention devoted to the phenomenon and underscores the need for a qualitative investigation of its realization and uses. Notably, in the productions of Di Maio, Bergamini, Fitto, Soumahoro, Fontana, Gentiloni, and Lorenzin—who nonetheless employ other forms of impoliteness and/or humor—this phenomenon is absent. MP is thus a rhetorical strategy not uniformly adopted by all politicians.

Politician's name	**Tweets featuring MP**	**Tweets with other forms of humor**	**Total number of tweets featuring impoliteness**
Giuseppe Conte	6 (37,5%)	2	16
Chiara Appendino	2 (14%)	5	14
Giorgia Meloni	3 (11%)	5	28
Giovanni Donzelli	2 (12%)	9	17
Matteo Salvini	28 (21%)	28	133
Laura Ravetto	21 (47%)	21	45
Silvio Berlusconi	1 (2%)	4	51
Licia Ronzulli	1 (4%)	6	22
Matteo Renzi	1 (3%)	7	29
Carlo Calenda	66 (21%)	145	315
Mara Carfagna	1 (3%)	1	33
Angelo Bonelli	9 (17%)	13	53
Nicola Fratoianni	3 (7%)	11	40
Eleonora Evi	5 (17%)	6	30
Emma Bonino	0	0	3
Benedetto della Vedova	5 (13%)	2	37
Enrico Letta	1 (3%)	14	34
Deborah Serracchiani	5 (11%)	5	46
Vittorio Sgarbi	10 (30%)	39	33

Gianluigi Paragone	13 (4%)	87	292
Luigi de Magistris	2 (5%)	8	38
Guido Crosetto	22 (12%)	100	181
Michele Gubitosa	4 (12%)	8	32
Alessandra Todde	1 (9%)	1	11
MariaStella Gelmini	0	4	13
Francesco Lollobrigida	2 (5%)	2	42
Simona Malpezzi	1 (5%)	0	20
Luigi Marattin	2 (3%)	16	57
Alessia Morani	1 (9%)	9	11
Daniela Santanché	4 (10%)	14	41
Luigi di Maio	0	7	10
Deborah Bergamini	0	6	33
Raffaele Fitto	0	0	24
Aboubakar Soumahoro	0	2	11
Lorenzo Fontana	0	5	20
Paolo Gentiloni	0	0	4
Beatrice Lorenzin	0	3	12
Andrea Orlando	11 (13%)	44	82
Tot.	**233**	**639**	**1913**

Table 49: Occurrences of tweets with MP (the percentage is calculated on the total number of tweets with strategies of impoliteness).

Considering individual variation, one may observe that Giuseppe Conte, Carlo Calenda, Angelo Bonelli, Matteo Salvini, Vittorio Sgarbi, and Laura Ravetto exhibit a higher proportion of MP occurrences relative to tweets displaying impoliteness, compared with other politicians. It can thus be inferred that these politicians rely more heavily on MP when choosing to convey impoliteness. In particular, Matteo Salvini and Laura Ravetto emerge as the communicative profiles that make the most frequent use of this strategy. In particular, Ravetto employs MP in 21 tweets as a rhetorical tool to counter users' criticisms regarding her physical appearance and/or abilities. MP is, thus, used as a means to (re)assert competence and treat criticism with indifference, feigning approval. Angelo Bonelli operates similarly, predominantly using MP to respond to users who had previously attacked him. This observation allows us to note that, at least at a distributional level, MP functions as a form of reactive rudeness explicitly aimed at countering directed accusations. Regarding Sgarbi, the frequency of this communicative strategy can be explained in terms of a style—marked by polemical

intensity and humor—that lies outside traditional communicative norms. A similar characterization applies to Paragone (former television host and journalist), whose anti-establishment and Eurosceptic positions likewise set him apart from conventional communicative frameworks. Furthermore, the distribution of mock-politeness was analyzed in relation to coalition membership and position within the coalition. Consider Table 50 and Table 51.

Coalitions	**Parties' names**	**Tweets featuring MP**	**Tweets with other forms of impoliteness**
Left-wing coalition	PD+IC+Europa+SV	41 (12%)	333
Autonomous parties	AIV, UP, IE, M5S	96 (17%)	576
Right-wing coalition	FI+FDI+Lega+NM	97 (12%)	800
		234	1709

Table 50: Distribution of MP by coalitions.

	Tweets with MP	**Tweets with other forms of impoliteness**
Leaders	121 (19%)	643
Non-Leaders	113 (11%)	1066

Table 51: Distribution of MP by leaders vs. non-leaders.

As shown in Table 50, certain political groups employ MP more frequently than others to convey impoliteness. However, no statistically significant correlation emerges between the use of MP and political alignment (χ^2 (2) = 4.88, p > .05).

For instance, the strategy is scarcely observed in the output of FDI and FI. The case of FDI (the only party not supporting the Draghi government) contrasts with the general tendency of opposition parties to rely more frequently on implicit strategies compared to government parties (Cominetti et al. 2023). Given the almost predetermined outcome of the elections (Ceron et al. 2023), it can be hypothesized that FDI had greater freedom to formulate direct criticisms and attacks. Regarding FI, and in particular Silvio Berlusconi, the absence of this strategy is likely tied to Berlusconi's generally limited use of social media (Ceron et al. 2023: 98). It is also noteworthy that the percentages of MP use among left-wing politicians and those not affiliated with any coalition are similar. Nonetheless, as observed earlier in this section, substantial differences can be identified among individual politicians within the same coalition. Consequently, it is possible to draw individual communicative styles characterized by the use MP. This level of individual variation is clearly crucial for such phenomena, which rely

heavily on the speaker's linguistic creativity and are closely connected to humor—an aspect influenced by individual speaker characteristics as well (Attardo 2020: 304–309).

Considering the leadership parameter in conjunction with coalition membership, it can be hypothesized that, for leaders of non-coalition parties (e.g., Carlo Calenda, Giuseppe Conte, etc.), the use of an original, impactful, and creative strategy allows them to carve out communicative—and consequently political—visibility. In Calenda's case, this pattern aligns with a consistent use of other forms of impoliteness. Notably, within AIV, Renzi produces fewer instances of MP compared to Calenda, indicating that the two leaders of the Third Pole have adopted distinct communicative strategies. In this regard, particularly significant is the case of Laura Ravetto, who is not a party leader. Thus, the higher frequency of MP is influenced by holding a leadership position, as suggested by the comparison between Carfagna and Appendino and among Renzi, Calenda and Conte. At a statistical level, a comparison between leaders and non-leaders reveals a significant correlation between this variable and the use of MP and/or other forms of impoliteness (χ^2 (1) = 17.11, $p < .001$): leaders use MP significantly more than would be expected, unlike non-leaders.[114]

9.1.3 Qualitative Analysis

In this section, I firstly analyze the instances of internal mismatch MP and then the cases of external mismatch, in order to understand how MP is used and the forms it takes.

Considering MP by internal mismatch, in 30 tweets out of 233, MP is instantiated through the opening formula *Caro/a ('Dear')* + the proper name of the opponent politician, which is a highly conventional greeting formula. This formula is subsequently followed by explicit attacks and criticisms directed at the political opponent.

Notably, as pointed out by Tsakona (2011: 226), the use of the first name of a political opponent is in itself a strategy to show oneself superior and break the rules that require colleagues to address each other with a minimum of formality.

For Example, in (164) and (165), both targets (Giuseppe Conte and Giorgia Meloni) are explicitly accused of possessing inadequate political competencies. As noted in Section 9.2, the high conventionality of the courtesy formula accentuates the mismatch with the impolite expressions, thereby exacerbating the attack and intensifying the perception of humor. Moreover, the conventional

[114] At the gender level, there is no statistical significance (χ^2 (1) = 0.00012, $p > .05$). Thus, female and male politicians seem to use MP with the same frequency.

formula occurs in a text with a paternalistic and corrective tone, positioning the speaker as superior to the target (see (162)).

(164) Mara Carfagna (AIV): *Caro @GiuseppeConteIT, la salute della democrazia è a rischio per l'#unovaleuno, per chi ha portato in Parlamento incompetenti e irresponsabili*.
'Dear @GiuseppeConteIT, the health of democracy is at risk because of #oneisone, because of those who brought incompetent and irresponsible people into Parliament.'

(165) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Cara @GiorgiaMeloni, se in tanti anni di politica non hai appreso la differenza tra democrazia come processo elettorale e democrazia come stato di diritto, non sei pronta o adeguata per governare un grande paese occidentale.*
'Dear @GiorgiaMeloni, if in all your years in politics you haven't learned the difference between democracy as an electoral process and democracy as the rule of law, you are not ready or adequate to govern a major Western country.'

The example in (166) is more complex than those in (164) and (165):

(166) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): [...] *Caro Enrico, attaccati al mio!* (*ma anche no...* 😂)
'[…] Dear Enrico, hang to mine! (but also not... 😂)'

In (166), Sgarbi pretends to offer to Enrico Letta a bus ride (the expression should be literally interpreted as attach yourself to my bus), in response to Letta, who had posted before messages complaining about issues with his electric bus. Clearly, the appreciation of the text also depends on knowledge of the extralinguistic context and specific Italian idioms. Thus, the formula *Caro Enrico* appears to reinforce a climate of cameraderie, especially since only the proper name (*Enrico*) is used, implying a close relationship. However, the solidarity is merely apparent, as Sgarbi retracts the invitation to use his bus (*ma anche no...* 'but also not....'). As noted by Haugh (2015: 4–5), a MP attitude is often triggered by a ridiculous suggestion that is not genuinely helpful. This way, Sgarbi mocks Letta and ridicules him and his ecological choices. The use of the emoji (😂) amplifies the tone of ridicule and underscores the insincerity of the initial offer. Additionally, it is also plausible that the Italian expression *attaccati al mio* represents a reduced form of the (somewhat popular) Italian dysphemistic idiom *attaccati al cazzo* ('hang to my dick'). The retraction expressed by *ma anche no* (*'but also not'*) could thus be interpreted as referring specifically to the invitation to attach oneself to the male sexual member. The use of inferential punctuation (...) reinforces this reading, functioning

as a subtle cue for the reader to infer the sexual reference. Tweet (166) illustrates a linguistic behavior characterized by hypermasculine traits, triggered by the sexual allusion.

Finally, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the examined construction (Dear + politician's proper name) has undergone a process of conventionalization in Italian political discourse. Thus, this formula is primed for mock-polite usage and consequently as an impolite expression. Importantly, this conventionalization is specific to certain discourse types and not universally applicable. Hence, this observation holds only within the type of political discourse examined in this study.

With regard to the use of proper names, it is worth noting the employment of other forms of address that are incongruent with the context in which they appear. In this respect, I observed the use of titles or surnames (honorifics and polite formulae) even when a close relationship exists, or conversely, the use of nicknames when the relationship between the speaker and target is characterized by rivalry rather than closeness.

(167) Luigi Marattin (AIV): *Segretario @EnricoLetta, ma questa campagna cromatica è un elegante apprezzamento del capolavoro di Stendhal o una velata propaganda per la sua fede milanista…?*
'Secretary @EnricoLetta, but is this chromatic campaign an elegant appreciation of Stendhal's masterpiece or veiled propaganda for your AC Milan allegiance...?'

In (167) the highly institutionalized formula *Segretario @EnricoLetta* followed by an implicit critique to Enrico Letta's electoral campaign should be interpreted as denigratory, akin to a sarcastic use of honorifics (see Haugh 2015: 288; Bousfield 2008: 106–107).
The same applies to the use of nicknames—which typically signal a close, friendly relationship—when employed between rival politicians, as in (168).

(168) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Ecco "Giuseppi", oggi puoi anche dire di avere sostenuto, con il reddito di cittadinanza, l'industria dell'auto! https://t.co/4FE8DdTeCq @stampasgarbi*
'Well, "Giuseppi", today you can also say that you supported, with the citizen's income, the car industry!'

Consider, in (168), the use of the nickname *"Giuseppi"* in place of Giuseppe Conte (the leader of M5S). The sign *""* is used to refer to a quote of Trump's. Indeed, *Giuseppi* is the name—unclear whether a typo or a nickname—employed in a tweet by Donald Trump to praise Giuseppe Conte's

political actions. Thus, *Giuseppi* constitutes a form of intertextuality. Considering Sgarbi's opposition to M5S and its program, the nickname is deployed insincerely, serving to mock Giuseppe Conte. The denigration is further reinforced by negative irony in the latter part of the utterance (*puoi anche dire di avere sostenuto, con il reddito di cittadinanza, l'industria dell'auto!*, 'you can also say that you supported, with the citizen's income, the car industry'): the statement is inappropriate and contrasts with the newspaper article linked, requiring the reader to infer the opposite of what is explicitly communicated. The exclamation mark functions as an irony marker in (168). Consider now example (169).

(169) Eleonora Evi (AIV): *#Conte vuol farci credere di essere riferimento della #sinistra #ecologista per raccattare qualche voto ma non dimentichiamoci chi sono i suoi amici. #Trump #Giuseppi #AlleanzaVerdiSinistra* 🔴
'#Conte wants us to believe he's the leader of the #ecological #left to snag a few votes, but let's not forget who his friends are. #Trump #Giuseppi #AlleanzaVerdiSinistra🔴'.

In (169), the hashtag *#Giuseppi* is used in reference to Giuseppe Conte. *#Giuseppi* echoes a tweet published by Donald Trump, as described in relation to (168).
In (169), the nickname is used insincerely, functioning as a mocking device. The text frames Conte as attempting to position himself as a reference point for the "eco-left" to attract votes, while implicitly questioning the sincerity of his alliances (*non dimentichiamoci chi sono i suoi amici*, 'let us not forget who his friends are'). Finally, the combination of hashtags *(#Trump, #Giuseppi*) clarifies the friendly relationship between Donald Trump and Giuseppe Conte.

Another type of MP involving internal mismatch is represented by greeting formulas (conventional form of politeness), both at the opening and closing of a text, which are followed and/or preceded by impolite expressions. With regard to closing formulas, the typology observed is variegate, composite, with expressions such as *buonanotte ('goodnight')***,** *peace and love (in English), cari saluti ('best regards')***,** *buona campagna* ('enjoy your electoral campaign')**,** *buona strada* **(**'enjoy your trip'), 👏. In all such cases, these greetings—when considered in relation to the co-text and context—emerge as insincere and inappropriate.

(170) Matteo Salvini (Lega): [...] *Tutto passa, non la cretineria di alcune teste calde. Peace and love.*
'Everything passes, not the stupidity of a few hotheads. Peace and love.'

In (170), published in relation to the occupation of a school in Milan, the greeting formula *peace and love* follows a form of aggression (*la cretineria di alcune teste calde*, 'the stupidity of a few hotheads', including a definite description presupposing that the guys involved in the occupation are stupid). So, this expression does not convey genuine politeness but rather impoliteness and an attitude of both compassion and contempt toward the students who occupied the school. Additionally, the greeting formula *peace and love* is a form of intertextuality: it is a greeting typical of the youth left-wing movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, the criticism is performed by reusing the same language as the target to whom the criticism is addressed.

In other tweets such as (171)-(172), the purpose of using MP appears to be to take away, at least virtually, the opponent's right to speak and to interrupt the conversation. The perception of impoliteness is greater in cases like (171), where the conversation between the politician and the user/citizen is interrupted. In these cases, MP contributes to increasing the social and conversational inequality that exists between politicians and citizen-voters.

(171) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@utente1 Ripeto, quando vuoi ti spiego la legge elettorale. Buona notte*
'@User1 I repeat, whenever you want I'll explain the electoral law to you. Good night.'

(172) Eleonora Evi (AVS): *Se non ci si riesce ad esprimere senza insultare figuriamoci capire la differenza tra import e export. Saluti.*
'If you can't express yourself without insults, imagine understanding the difference between import and export. Regards.'

For instance, in (171), *Buona Notte* ('Good Night') is employed to terminate the exchange with User 1, who had been accused of being unfamiliar with the electoral law. In (172) the greeting formula (*Saluti*, 'Regards') is institutional and formal. This makes the speaker's impolite and distancing intent more readily perceptible, thereby rendering it more difficult to accept an interpretation of the greeting —and of the entire text— as genuine politeness.

(173) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@utente1 Difetti ne ho parecchi ma non credo la stupidità 😜. [...] Se non volete conoscermi, pace e un abbraccio anche a voi* 😄
'@User1 I have many flaws but I don't believe I am stupidity 😜. [...] If you don't want to get to know me, peace and a hug to you too 😄'

In (173), the closing expression (*pace e un abbraccio anche a voi* 😄 'peace and a hug to you too 😄') appears insincere, as it is marked by an overstatement: it is excessively affectionate (a request for

peace and a hug) in the context in which it is produced: Ravetto had been accused of lacking intelligence by @User1. The use of the smiling emoji (😄) further amplifies this excess of affection and closeness.

In tweets (174) and (175), mock-politeness is conveyed solely through the waving-hand emoji. Here, too, the greetings are insincere, serving instead to mock the opponent and to terminate the interaction in an apparent polite way.

(174) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): *@utente1 Faccio io. Non ti disturbare. Clic* 👏.
'@User1 I'll do it. Don't bother. Click 👏.'

(175) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): *@utente1 @RaiTre Lascio volentieri a lei questa "modernità".* 👏
'@utente1 @RaiTre I'll gladly leave this "modernity" to you. 👏'

Note that, in (175), the MP follows the expression *questa "modernità"* ("*modernity*") used in an ironic sense, as suggested by the use of quotations marks, to contrast the position of the mentioned user.

Among the cases of MP with internal incongruence, it is worth noting the peculiar use (8 tweets out of 233) by Matteo Salvini and Laura Ravetto of the affective closing formulas *bacio* ('kiss'), *bacini* ('little kisses'), *bacioni/e* ('big kisses'), 😙 (e.g., in (176) MP is expressed only by the kissing emoji). These formulas convey an attitude of condescension toward the opponents' actions. In cases such as (177)), the insincerity of the expression also emerges through hyperbolic forms (such as the augmentative suffix *-one/i* in *simpaticone* '[lit.] big funny guy' and *bacioni* 'big kisses'), which undermine the plausibility of a literal interpretation of the utterance: the politeness expressed is excessive in relation to both the context of use and the preceding co-text.

(176) Laura Ravetto (Lega): @utente *Io 'prima' facevo l'avvocato d'affari tra Milano e NY... quindi evitate di sparare idiozie sui social* 😙
'@user I used to work as a corporate lawyer between Milan and New York before... so please avoid spouting nonsense on social media 😙'

(177) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Un vero esempio di Democrazia... complimenti! Dal 25 settembre quanto Maalox dovrà prendere il simpaticone che ha fatto queste scritte? Bacioni a lui.*
'A true example of democracy... congratulations! From September 25th, how much Maalox will the funny guy who wrote these graffiti have to take? Big kisses to him.'

In (177), additional forms of MP are instantiated. For example, in the first utterance, *complimenti* should be regarded as an insincere expression of praise (particularly in light of the negative irony conveyed by *un vero esempio di democrazia* '*a true example of democracy'*)[115], further emphasized by the use of the exclamation mark. Likewise, the expression *il simpaticone 'the big funny guy'*, marked by the augmentative suffix *-one*, cannot be taken as sincere, given that it is a compliment directed at an individual accused of writing graffiti against the Lega. Thus, (177) also illustrates how the rhetorical–persuasive force of a tweet may rest entirely on the use of MP.
Let us know turn to example (178).

(178) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *[...] Ma questi di sinistra pensano di essere simpatici? Classico radical chic ignorante e cafone, gli mando un bacione e sorrido, pensando alle elezioni di domenica 25.*
'[...] But do these leftists think they're funny? Classic, ignorant, and rude radical chic. I send them a kiss and smile, thinking about the elections on Sunday the 25th.'

The target of (178) is the Italian actor and director Paolo Virzì, who had repeatedly accused Matteo Salvini in several public statements. In (178), alongside the hyperbolic formulation *un bacione ('a big kiss')*, the expression *sorrido* ('I smile') also occurs: it is a feigned display of joy. As is evident from the subsequent co-text, this is in fact a mocking smile, referring to the (auspicated) Left-Wing coalition's defeat in the 25 September elections. Furthermore, impoliteness is conveyed through highly conventional Italian slurs, namely *ignorante e cafone* ('ignorant and rude').

The kissing emoji (😘) is also featured by the tweet in (179), in which Guido Crosetto responds to two users who had previously attacked him. In this case, MP generates a sort of paternalistic stance, marked by excessive understanding and compassion toward the users (see the utterance *mi sono affezionato a lei ed ai suoi insulti* 'I've grown fond of her and her insults'). Particularly noteworthy are the affectionate-compassionate expression *un abbraccio* ('a hug') and the religiously connoted expression *la pecorella smarrita da aiutare* ('the lost sheep to be helped'). Here, the politician's

[115] Indeed, insulting political figures through graffiti represents the very opposite of a democratic attitude.

superiority is achieved through an implicit and hyperbolic comparison with the Christian priest whose role is (metaphorically) to guide a flock of lost souls. Politeness, moreover, is conveyed through the formal address *Lei*. Additionally, in (179), the interpretation of the multiple ellipsis proves difficult: in this case, its function may be not inferential but merely textual, namely, to rhythmically structure the text.

(179) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@Utente1 @Utente2 No, io in realtà sto cercando di aiutarla…deve essere drammatico vivere sommersi dall'odio…. I've grown fond of you and your insults. Lei è diventata la pecorella smarrita da aiutare. Un abbraccio.* 😉😘
'@User 1@User2 No, I'm actually trying to help you... it must be tragic to live submerged in hatred... I've grown fond of her and her insults. You become the lost sheep that needs helping. Hugs. 😉😘'

The following tweets in (180)-(184) represent cases of MP from external and contextual mismatch. Notably, as underlined by Taylor (2016: 25), this is the least studied typology of MP due to its greater complexity.

(180) Giuseppe Conte (M5S): *Occhio ragazzi, Salvini ha trovato il modo per risolvere i problemi dei giovani. Tutti a fare il militare!*
'Watch out, guys! Salvini has found a way to solve young people's problems. Everyone, join the military!'

In (180) Conte pretends to address young voters and to praise Salvini's proposal to reinstate compulsory military service. Given the broader context of the electoral campaign and the M5S's opposition to such a measure, Conte's linguistic politeness cannot be interpreted as sincere. Rather, from the interplay between the context and the text, we must infer that Conte's real perlocutionary aim is to ridicule Salvini and to highlight the inconsistency of his proposal (i.e., that compulsory military service will not solve Italian young citizens' social problems). The derision of Salvini's proposal is further intensified by Conte's use of the verb *ha trovato* ('has found'), which frames Salvini's project as if it were a discovery and therefore the outcome of elaborate reasoning. In addition, the exclamation *occhio ragazzi* ('watch out, guys') further reinforces the impression of (mock) astonishment at Salvini's supposed discovery. Through these rhetorical devices, Conte not only belittles Salvini's proposal but also underscores his own superiority—both politically and communicatively.

(181) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *Dov'è adesso l'uomo che "ha salvato l'Euro"? Dove è #Draghi per salvare la piccola impresa? #gas #speculatori #carobollette*
'Where is the man who "saved the Euro" now? Where is #Draghi to save small businesses? #gas #speculators #high bills'

In (181), Draghi is depicted by Paragone as the savior of the Euro and as a potential solution to the issues of small Italian businesses. However, in light of Paragone's Euroscepticism and his party's anti-Draghi electoral campaign, it is evident that such praise is insincere and that the real intention is instead to disparage Draghi's work. Notably, the interrogative structure in (181) signals Paragone's humorous intent. The use of quotation marks in *l'uomo che "ha salvato l'Euro"* (the man who "saved the Euro"), a definite description that presupposes his content (Domaneschi 2014), is also noteworthy: these quotation marks can be interpreted either as citation marks, referring to the discourse of Draghi's supporters, or as a humor marker that invites the recipient to infer the opposite of what is asserted.

(182) Matteo Salvini (Lega): […] *Gli italiani hanno votato, il Centrodestra governerà a lungo e bene, Juncker stia sereno.*
'Italians have voted, the Centre-Right will govern for a long time and well, Juncker take it easy.'

In (182), the displayed cooperativeness and concern for Juncker's emotional state constitute a case of MP. In fact, (182) should be contextualized within a dispute between the political forces of the right-wing coalition and certain members of the European Parliament, who had expressed concern over potential authoritarian tendencies of the Italian right-wing coalition.
Specifically, *Juncker stia sereno* ('Juncker take it easy') is a clear intertextual allusion (with a different proper name) to a rather well-known instance of MP, uttered by Matteo Renzi in 2014 during a Tv show.[116] The statement was subsequently quoted in a tweet (183) by the official account of the PD.

(183) *@MatteoRenzi 'Non mi interessa prendere il posto di nessuno, voglio fare le cose che interessano agli italiani'#enricostaisereno* (tweet published by @pdnetwork on 18/01/2014).
'@MatteoRenzi 'I'm not interested in taking anyone's place, I want to do the things that interest Italians' #enricotakeiteasy'.

[116] It should be noted that Renzi's message was originally sincere and was only reinterpreted as insincere and humorous after the handover from Letta to Renzi in the Presidency of the Council.

The humorous and disparaging exploitation of the expression *stare sereno* ('take it easy') is also evident in (184):

(184) Matteo Salvini (Lega): *Enrico stai sereno, il 25 vincono la Lega e gli Italiani. #25settembrevotoLega*
'Enrico, take it easy, on the 25th Lega and the Italians will win. #September25 vote Lega'

In this case, there is no distortion of the original text, as the target of the aggressive humor is the same as in the original message. Arguably, the construction *Politician's Name* + *stai sereno* ('take it easy') has undergone a process of conventionalization within Italian political discourse, partly due to its viral spread on television and online in a humorous way and that to the fact that it is directly interpreted by the readers as a form of MP rather than being processed as genuine polite expression.

9.2 Mock-impoliteness

Research on mock impoliteness has focused largely on English (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2008), and especially on different varieties of this language (e.g., Australian English). To date, no systematic study is available on Italian and, more specifically, on the use of this phenomenon in Italian political discourse.

The term "mock-impoliteness" (henceforth MIMP), as well as its counterpart "mock-politeness", was coined by Leech (1983).[117] It was originally regarded as a synonym of "banter" (Culpeper 1996) and often discussed under the label "teasing" (Haugh 2017). The relationship between MIMP with banter and teasing shows many issues discussed concerning the relationship between MP and irony. Clearly, MIMP has been seen as a counterpart of MP and has attracted less attention rather than MP, reflecting the way in which politeness has generally attracted, in linguistics, more attention than impoliteness.

The phenomenon should be interpreted as the reverse of MP and, as with the latter, the interpretation of mock impoliteness triggers a more complex process than in the case of polite or impolite acts. Haugh (2015: 278) provides the following definition to describe MIMP: "in the case of mock-impoliteness implicature what is implicated could legitimately be evaluated as "impolite" but is in this instance framed (or treated) as "non-impolite" is reinterpreted as non-genuine impoliteness".[118]

[117] Eelen (2001) argued against the use of the term mock-impoliteness as it is not impolite at all for the participants. Kienpointner (1997) used the umbrella term "simulated rudeness" (encompassing mock impoliteness, ritual insults and various forms of ironic rudeness).
[118] This definition constitutes a refinement of the formulation previously proposed in Haugh & Bousfield (2012: 1100): "evaluation of talk or conduct that are potentially open to evaluation as impolite by at least one of the participants in an interaction, and/or as non-impolite at least two participants".

Thus, an ostensibly impolite stance masks a polite stance: MIMP is generally treated as affiliative by the participants in the communicative exchange.

The definition is, in some respects, similar to that proposed by Culpeper (1996: 352): "impoliteness that remains on the surface, since it is understood that it is not intended to cause offence". According to Culpeper (1996: 356), MIMP is generally used as a strategy of social harmony. Additionally, Culpeper (1996) underlines how mock impoliteness involves the speaker saying (or implying) something that is "clearly untrue". However, as noted by Haugh & Bousfield (2012), defining mock impoliteness with reference to a speaker's intention to not offend is problematic and, moreover, it is problematic to assume that the content of MIMPs is always clearly untrue. According to their perspectives, MIMP is better conceived as something that appears to be impolite but that, given what is said, is regarded as untrue by participants (and not always clearly untrue), thus being understood as a means of conveying politeness and creating or affirming solidarity.

A further definition has been proposed by Sinkeviciute (2019). She describes MIMP as a face-threatening acts (FTA) that is not evaluated as offensive, but rather as non-impolite in terms of its form and content. Thus, she uses the label jocular face-threatening acts. Generally, the impolite stance is framed as jocular or non-serious on a specific occasion ("mock impoliteness implicature arise in ostensibly jocular or non-serious sequences", as per Ruiz-Gurillo 2024). With MIMP, even the target of simulated impoliteness may engage in jocularity and perceive funniness. The connection with humor is further emphasized by Haugh & Bousfield's (2012) work.

Table 52, adapted from Sinkeviciute (2019) and Ruiz-Gurillo (2024), summarizes the points discussed so far:

Production	**Target's reaction**	**Jocular results**
Face threating-acts (potentially impolite)	Non-Impolite (Haugh&Bousfield 2012)	Mock-Impoliteness
Face supporting-acts (potentially polite)	Impoliteness (Taylor 2016)	Mock-Politeness

Table 52: Production-evaluation model for potentially jocular verbal behaviors.

As for MP, mock-impoliteness implicatures can allow participants to position themselves as less accountable for that which has been implicated, or at least as having not said it, and in that way, may decrease the perceived degree of offence. Thus, the defunctionalization principle of humor is active. In any case, MIMP can also be used to accomplish serious interactional business or goal. The connection with humor does not, in fact, undermine the fact that, through this behavior, participants aim to "accomplish serious interactional business in an unofficial manner while simultaneously

occasioning amusement among participants" (Haugh & Bousfield 2012). In this regard, Taylor (2016) speaks about the truth-telling potential of what she calls "banter" (that is, MIMP) which allows a participant to communicate their true feelings under the cover of play. However, the main goal of the attitude is clearly to generate the entertainment of the over-hearing audience as well.

A substantial issue in the description of this phenomenon is terminological in nature. Generally, MIMP has been treated as an umbrella term that includes a variety of acts such as banter, teasing, jocular mockery, jocular insults, and mock aggression (Haugh 2015: 278). Specifically, several of these behaviors have been identified through previous work on interactional humor in different varieties of English.

These practices are described and listed by Haugh & Bousfield (2012). I will examine some of them in detail in what follows. Teasing has been described by Haugh (2017: 206) as provocative cutting down or setting up of a target that is construed as (ostensibly) non-serious. As noted by Haugh (2017), teasing has in turn been employed as an overarching category to encompass a range of linguistic behaviors, both serious (e.g., annoying) and humorous (e.g., friendly fictional). Additionally, as there is a wide range of teasing practices, some of which may not yet have been uncovered by researchers, there is still a considerable amount of work to be done in furthering our understanding of the dynamics of teasing in interaction.

Banter can be defined as a "rapid exchange of humorous lines orientated toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment rather than topical talk" (Norrick 1993: 29). Specifically, banter attempts to balance hostility and friendship, abuse, sarcasm, and praise.

The interactional practice of jocular mockery (Haugh 2010, Attardo 2020: 224-225) is a specific form of teasing where the speaker diminishes something of relevance to someone present (either themselves or the interlocutor) or a third party who is not co-present within a non-serious or jocular frame. This type of mockery is always performed and marked as non-serious.

The interactional practice of jocular abuse (Haugh 2010) is a specific form of insulting where the speaker casts the target into an undesirable category or as having undesirable attributes using a conventionally offensive expression within a non-serious or jocular frame. This practice is not entirely comparable to put-down humor, which constitutes a genuinely face-threatening act. This form of aggressiveness is characterized by the fact that "the speaker expresses hostility to the victim, ousting the latter from the social group. […] the direct hearer is stigmatized as the out-group member, incapable of obtaining the humorous implicatures" (Dynel 2011: 250).

Additionally, the distinction between teasing and banter versus put-down humor is based on the speaker's benevolence toward the target, with the caveat that this distinction is not always readily

apparent to outside observers who are unfamiliar with the common ground shared by the interlocutors. Moreover, in cases of MIMP (or jocular abuse), as compared to put-down humor, teasing should primarily be perceived as jocular play, given that the aggressiveness is exaggerated: it is a hyperbolized offense that is not meant to be taken literally. Thus, a paradox arises because an exaggerated insult is perceived as less derogatory than a mild one. Consequently, there is a lower likelihood that the reader or recipient will focus on the literal meaning of the expressions, making the violation of Gricean maxims evident.

The perlocutionary effects resulting from the use of MIMP will now be considered. The main goal of MIMP is to strengthen and reinforce social bonds within the group (Ruiz-Gurillo 2024). As noted by Martin et al. (2003: 52): "friendly teasing and playfully poking fun at others may be a way of enhancing cohesiveness in more benign forms of affiliative humor". Also, Kienpointner (1997: 262) suggests that MIMP constitutes a strategy for stressing the fact that the relationship between the participants is so close that it cannot be endangered not even by using rude and aggressive utterances. Additionally, teasing may also mitigate potential offense or embarrassment in some situations as well as be deployed to manage expressions of affection (Di Cioccio 2010). However, MIMP may also involve other secondary effects, such as being understood as impolite (Culpeper 2011). Culpeper (2011: 215), indeed, underlines how MIMP has three main functions in interaction: (1) reinforcing solidarity; (2) disguising coercion; and (3) exploitative entertainment. It is also worth considering that the formation or strengthening of an ingroup inevitably involves the exclusion of outsiders and an increased split from the outgroup. Furthermore, Haugh (2015: 297) highlights that in this linguistic behavior there is a development of "a semi-competitive game of scoring point", which positions the speaker in a superior stance and can undermine group solidarity and cohesion. This behavior involves a form of "cloaked coercion" (Culpeper 2011) whereby the humorous framing serves to minimally disguise the oppressive intent. An aggressive component persists, albeit in an attenuated form. For this reason, Haugh & Bousfield (2012) emphasize that MIMP should not be conflated with expressions of solidarity.

Thus, briefly, behaviors that can be classified as teasing behaviors fall along a continuum from bonding to biting: there is a dualistic nature inside these types of behaviors (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997). Specifically, MIMP always remains open to be evaluated as impolite by some participants: MIMP implicatures may also register offence on the part of one or more participants ("the target, or any participants sympathizing with the target may actually (covertly or overtly) evaluate the talk or conduct as impolite", Haugh & Bousfield (2012: 1103)). It has been observed that, among targets,

teasing (and similar behaviors) can generate negatively feelings such as shame and embarrassment, as well as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This is particularly relevant, analyzing political discourse, when such forms of aggressiveness are directed toward generic users or voters; in these instances, the target may probably perceive the aggression—even if merely simulated—as a genuine and strong offense.

Thus, considering these frameworks, MIMP is neither a form of politeness nor impoliteness per se, and needs to be independently analyzed: MIMP is neither an evaluation of politeness nor impoliteness, but something conceptually distinct, namely, non-impoliteness (Haugh & Bousfield 2012). The concept of 'non-impolite' is used here to refer to an 'allowable offence' that is evaluated as neither polite nor impolite. However, in being potentially open to evaluation as impolite, it is closer in some respects, of course, to the latter. This is the reason why Haugh & Bousfield (2012) suggest that MIMP should be analyzed as an evaluation in its own right.

Considering this interplay between teasing and (im-)politeness, (aggressive) teasing is a dangerous category, given its potential conduciveness to misunderstanding. Indeed, this is a linguistic behavior that is often susceptible to being misinterpreted or constituting a misfire. This explains why teasing and banter typically arise only in interactions between intimates or friends (Culpeper 2011). Clearly, interpretation is more reliable when performed within a group that shares the same linguistic norms and lexical register. Specifically, threats to persons or relationships can also be treated as 'allowable' if participants are generally oriented toward this type of interaction (such as ritualized insults, jesting banter, jocular mockery, jocular abuse, and so on).

Despite the difficulty of evaluating aggressive forms of language as non-impolite, participants are generally able to interpret the speaker's intention correctly. Specifically, contextual cues help the participant situate an utterance within a humorous framework and assess the target appropriately. However, the presence of humorous cues "does not guarantee that a jocular verbal act will be positively perceived or that the typical connotations of particular words would be reversed" (Sinkeviciute 2019: 74). Among these cues, insults may produce an affiliative effect, such that they are understood as "jocular insults" or "jocular abuse" (Haugh & Bousfield 2012). This is illustrated in (28) by *stronzo* ('asshole'), where the conventional meaning of the expression is not taken seriously. Other elements commonly associated with MIMP include rhetorical questions and imperatives. Additional contextualization cues involve harshness and hyperbolic expressions. Essentially, the cues of impoliteness are the same as those identified in the literature on humor and irony (Taylor 2015: 18). There are no cues specific to MIMP. The same holds for MP, except for insults.

The following cases illustrate the use of markers. In (185), Sgarbi employs both a laughing emoji and a metalinguistic clarification in parentheses to make his linguistic choices explicit and to prevent potential misinterpretations of his attitude:

(185) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *"Professore, ho tutti i suoi libri nella lista. Da leggere". E leggili, stronzo! (con affetto, chiaramente)* 😂*"*
'Professor, I have all your books on my list. "Read them!". And read them, asshole! (Lovely, obviously) 😂'

In (185) it was evident from the relationship of esteem between the voter and Sgarbi that the intentions were not to denigrate and attack for real the interlocutor.

(186) Laura Ravetto (Lega): *@utente1 @utente2 E non mi ha chiesto scusa?* 😂*scherzo eh!*
'@user 1 @user 2 And he didn't apologize to me? 😂I'm kidding!'

In (186), the speaker's communicative intentions are playful. Specifically, a simulated accusatory tone is employed for not having received an apology. As noted by Haugh (2017), rhetorical questions are frequently used to convey instances of jocular mockery, which is linked to the aggressive undertone often associated with such questions. In (186), this intention is further clarified at the end of the text with the phrase *scherzo eh!* ('just kidding!') and reinforced by the use of an emoji, helping the recipient correctly infer the speaker's intentions.
Interestingly, certain topics are frequently invoked in cases of MIMP. A comprehensive list is provided by Haugh & Bousfield (2012). Among them are current and past relationships, sexual preference and prowess, habits and personality traits, gaming, items of cultural significance, and a perceived lack of an appropriate degree of modesty. Clearly, these topics are subject to intercultural variation.

9.2.1 Quantitative and qualitative analysis of MIMP

Importantly, instances of humorous self-denigration or self-teasing (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997; Norrick 1993) have been conceptualized as phenomena overlapping with MIPM and, more generally, with the practice of teasing. This phenomenon is discussed separately, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in Section 8. The methodology to identify MIMP follows the same parameters described in Section 9.2. In this instance, on-record and off-record strategies of impoliteness were

observed, which could, however, be reinterpreted in light of the context and co-text as expressions of solidarity and affiliation.

Instances of MIMP attested in the corpus are sporadic. As noted in Section 8.3, aggressive forms and attack strategies with genuine aggressive intent predominate. It is therefore likely that humorous self-denigration is more common in communicative contexts characterized by evident solidarity and mutual knowledge among the speaker, target and meta-recipient (e.g., interactions among friends), and less so in competitive contexts such as electoral campaigns. This is also due to the potential for the speaker's intentions to be misunderstood.

Name of the politician	Tweets con MP
Vittorio Sgarbi	8
Carlo Calenda	4
Guido Crosetto	3
Laura Ravetto	1
Luigi Marattin	1

Table 53: Distribution of MIMP tweets by politicians.

The highest number of instances (8 tweets) is found in Vittorio Sgarbi's hutterances. As noted in Section 8.1, he is also one of the politicians who uses humor the most.

From a qualitative perspective, it is noteworthy that MIMP is often directed at other politicians with the aim of fostering affiliation. The intent is not a real aggression, and these tweets may be classified as jocular mockery.

(187) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Avevo chiesto a Casini di venirmi ad aiutare, ma non è voluto venire.* https://t.co/BlprQCP63o
'I asked Casini to come and help me, but he didn't want to come.'

In (187), the matter relates to Casini's failure to attend the grape harvest, despite having been invited by Sgarbi (this invitation may be real or fictional). Clearly, considering the topic, this is a frivolous controversy, aimed solely at generating public interest and entertainment. There is no real intent to criticize Casini's actions.

(188) Guido Crosetto (FDI): *@annapaolaconcia @user1Però i vecchi amici non li chiami!!!*😂😂😂

'@annapaolaconcia @user1But you don't call your old friends!!!😂😂😂'

In (188) Crosetto complains about not being invited to an event organized by Anna Paola Concia (a center-left politician). The emojis and punctuation indicate that the annoyance expressed is only feigned. In this case, the spirit of camaraderie between party opponents, who are nevertheless colleagues and long-time politically engaged, is strengthened. It can be assumed that the target does not experience discomfort and/or aggression because of this tweet.

The tweets below provide valuable insights for the analysis. In these tweets, Sgarbi pretends to downplay the issues of Italians and ignore their needs. This is a form of jocular mockery based on a deliberate lack of understanding of other people's needs. In any case, these are deliberately exaggerated claims that reveal Sgarbi's true intentions, that is, to show closeness to its own electorate. The goal is to strengthen solidarity and cohesion with his own group of voters.

(189) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Il gas a 341 euro al megawattora. Un privilegio da ricchi essere alla canna del gas!*

'Gas at 341 euros per megawatt-hour. It's a privilege for the rich to be broken!'

In (189) the first statement constitutes the conceptual framework for understanding the text: Gas at 341 euros per megawatt-hour indicates that the cost of gas is extremely expensive (this is a serious and concrete premise). The humorous part is *Un privilegio da ricchi essere alla canna del gas* 'It's a privilege for the rich to be broke!', as suggested by the exclamation mark. This expression constitutes a paradox: it is a privilege of the rich to be extremely poor. Understanding this paradox is based on grasping the Italian idiomatic expression *essere alla canna del gas*, which indicates a situation of extreme poverty.[119] Through this humorous paradox, Sgarbi pretends to mock the problems of the Italian people. The use of an idiomatic expression also occurs in the tweet in (190):

(190) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Ecco. Ci mancava Cruciani. Adesso anche gli "zanzarosi" a Bologna votano Sgarbi al Senato.*

'Here we go. Cruciani was all we needed. Now even the *zanzarosi* in Bologna are voting for Sgarbi for the Senate.'

[119] Haugh (2017) highlights how idioms are often used as cues in jocular mockery.

Ci mancava + Proper Name is an idiomatic expression used to convey annoyance toward someone, in this case Cruciani (host of the Radio Show "La Zanzara"). However, in light of the context, it is reinterpreted positively: the tweet notes that even the *zanzarosi* (a jocular epithet for the followers of the show *La Zanzara*) vote for Sgarbi. The annoyance is therefore only simulated, as the tweet indirectly expresses gratitude for Cruciani's support of Sgarbi's electoral campaign. The same (simulated) indifference toward citizens' concerns is observed in (191):

(191) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Volete risparmiare sulla bolletta energetica? Mettetevi un "Prete nel letto"!*
'Want to save on your energy bill? Put a "Priest in Bed"!'

The solution provided in (191) is ineffective for Italian citizens facing the economic crisis. Indeed, the priest is a tool used to warm beds (a sort of precursor to the hot water bag). Furthermore, the use of the word *prete* ('priest') triggers a pun: priest, in fact, in addition to the instrument described above, also refers to a religious minister. This latter meaning adds a sexual allusion (i.e., having a male priest in bed) that increases the humorous component of the statement.
A more complex case is represented by (192), where without an adequate understanding of the context it is difficult to understand the speaker's intentions:

(192) Carlo Calenda (NM): #asteroide https://t.co/BFdHN0LCCk
'#asteroid https://t.co/BFdHN0LCCk'

It is important to examine the tweet (published by @PagellaPolitica) to which the link refers. The tweet presents inappropriate proposals from various Italian political parties. Following these proposals, Calenda advocates for the destruction of the Earth by an asteroid. Notably, it was news at the time that an asteroid was orbiting the Earth. Thus, the hashtag #asteroide is used to include this tweet in the related trend. However, Calenda's goal is to show solidarity with Italians and to highlight the incompetence of Italian politics: it is the latter that deserves the asteroid, according to Calenda's perspective. Thus, the implicature that is activated from the humorous text is something along the following lines: "The destruction of the Earth is better than this type of politics". Furthermore, it is evident that the destruction of the Earth is an overstatement and that a literal interpretation of the statement in these terms is not supported. Notably, there are no further elements that function as markers of humor in the text.

In the following tweets (193)-(194), Calenda, instead of invoking the arrival of an asteroid, calls for the arrival of a meteorite.

(193) Carlo Calenda (AIV): […] *Ripeto, Gasparri ha sfiduciato Draghi e non contento gli dà anche ordini. Gasparri. Maurizio Gasparri. #Meteorite*
'I repeat, Gasparri has voted no confidence in Draghi, and not content with that, he's also giving him orders. Gasparri. Maurizio Gasparri. #Meteorit.'

In (193), the repetition of *Gasparri* highlights the incongruity lies in the fact that Maurizio Gasparri (a right-wing politician), whom Calenda regards as an inadequate figure, not only casting his vote in favor of a no-confidence motion against the Draghi government (which Calenda consistently praised throughout the election campaign) but even going so far as to offer political advice to Draghi. It is this paradox that prompts Calenda to hope for a meteorite for Italy. Again, note how the humorous element is in the hashtag.

(194) Carlo Calenda (AIV)*: Con la crisi economica in arrivo e centinaia di imprese che soffrono e rischiano la chiusura, la #politica si divide su #PeggaPig. E poi dite che non ce lo meritiamo un meteorite?*
'With the economic crisis looming and hundreds of businesses suffering and at risk of closure, #politics is divided over #PeggaPig. And then you say we don't deserve a meteorite?'

In (194) the reference to the meteorite is placed within a rhetorical question (a type of humor marker, Burger & Van Mulken 2017) addressed directly to Italian citizens/voters. In (194), what makes the meteorite worthy is the excessive attention given by Italian politics to the contents of Peppa Pig (a popular children's cartoon) in a dramatic economic context for businesses.

(195) Carlo Calenda (AIV): *Un paese che merita il meteorite. Una nave sulla darsena industriale. In mezzo al nulla e vicina solo ad un'acciaieria. Chissà, forse la vogliono color fragola o magari su toni autunnali.*
'A country worthy of a meteorite. A ship on an industrial dock. In the middle of nowhere and only next to a steel mill. Who knows, maybe they want it strawberry-colored, or perhaps autumnal tones.'

The context of (195) concerns the controversy surrounding the environmental damage that could be caused by the docking of a ship in the port of Piombino. The absurdity of the controversy is such that it makes Calenda hope for the arrival of a meteorite. The final statement, which underlines the absurdity of the controversy, also contributes to the humorous tone of the text: the opponents of the project do not evaluate the concrete benefits of the regasification implant but focuses on aesthetic and environmental details (considered by Calenda to be of secondary importance with respect to energetic security). Importantly, all of these tweets show a serious intent underlying the playful component: criticizing the actions of Italian politicians and the choices implemented by them. Furthermore, these examples show how, even in this communicative attitude, the broadcaster places itself in a position of superiority with respect to the target. In these cases, the attitude of impoliteness/rudeness towards the target is clear.

10. Humorous hashtags

The use of hashtags (#) is widely recognized as one of the most distinctive and recognizable elements of X's syntax. Thus, it is especially noteworthy to examine how Italian politicians employ hashtags as a means of conveying humor. The use of hashtags to convey humorous instances appears to be an aspect neglected by both studies that have analyzed the pragmatic functions of hashtags (e.g., Valenti 2025) and studies that have specifically focused on political discourse on X (e.g., Lopez-Meri et al. 2017; Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022).

In Section 10.1, the most salient functions of hashtags will be outlined, analyzing their specifics in relation to political communication. In addition, the analysis will focus on the use of metalinguistic hashtags (e.g., #humor) as a possible strategy for data collection and automatic identification of humorous tweets. In Section 10.3, I focus on the humorous hashtags identified in the dataset. A quantitative assessment of the phenomenon is first provided, with the aim of evaluating its productivity within Italian political discourse and analyzing its distribution across the political profiles considered. In addition, I examine the position of humorous hashtags within the tweets, the possible co-occurrence of humorous hashtags within the same text (cf. strings of humorous hashtags, Wikistrom 2014), and the communicative functions they fulfill.

Finally, adopting a qualitative approach, the analysis aims to illustrate the longevity of certain humorous hashtags identified within the X-sphere and to determine whether these represent original creations by the politicians themselves or rather humorous hashtags already circulating within the social media platform that were subsequently re-used by politicians.

10.1 Pragmatics functions of #: an overview

Hashtags are specific elements of X syntax (Davidov et al. 2011) and, as Spina (2012) observes, they cannot be disregarded during the analysis of the text. Notably, this textual element has since spread to other media platforms as well (e.g., Facebook and Instagram).

To begin with, hashtags should be understood as a form of metadata embedded within the social media message. Moreover, the use of the hash symbol (#) turns the words that follow it into clickable links (Zaga 2012). By clicking on such links, users can retrieve all tweets that include the same hashtag. Thus, the primary function of hashtags is to delimit the topic of the tweet (cf. Topic Tags function in Wikström 2014) and to integrate the tweet into an ongoing public conversation on that specific subject. This function already reveals the connection between hashtags and what has

been termed "intertextuality 2.0" (cf. Gordon 2023): hashtag inherently establish links between tweets that share the same tag. Moreover, this topic tag function provides semantic-contextual information that facilitates the interpretation of the text.

An additional function performed by the hashtag is that of addressivity, a function comparable to that fulfilled by the @ sign. Consider the following tweet (196):

(196) Michele Gubitosa (M5Stelle): *Caro #letta, hai voluto seguire l'agenda Draghi fino alla fine? Ecco i risultati. Oggi il #PD chiede un cambio di passo per fronteggiare il caro energia: quando lo dicevamo con @GiuseppeConteIT […].*
'Dear #letta, did you want to follow the Draghi agenda until the end? Here are the results. Today the #PD is asking for a change of pace to deal with the high energy prices: when we were saying it with @GiuseppeConteIT […].

In (196) the function performed by #letta is the same as @GiuseppeConteIT placed a few utterances below: it allows the owner of the mentioned account to be brought into the conversation. Furthermore, the mentioned account is also thematized as a conversational topic.

Consistent with its nature as metadata, the illocutionary force of the hashtag lies in its capacity to provide a metacommunicative commentary on the primary content of the tweet. In this way, hashtags contribute to the meaning of the tweet and guide readers on how the message should be interpreted (Scott 2022: 62). In Scott's (2022) terms, this function of hashtags can be labeled "interpersonal function." In the terms of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986), in these cases the hashtag contributes to the construction of higher-level expressions, like facial expressions and gestures during face-to-face communication.

Consider now the function more closely related to pragmatics: the use of hashtags as a tool for inferential processes. The necessary premise is to underline how hashtags give prominence to the expression and serve to attract the reader's attention, thus making the expression salient and relevant (in the sense of Relevance Theory, Sperber &Wilson 2002). By drawing attention to the tagged content, the tweeter can guide the overall interpretation of the utterance by making certain inferential processes more accessible.
To start, hashtags can be used to provide information to complete the meaning expressed by the utterance. In these cases, hashtags provide the encyclopedic information needed to interpret the

explicit meaning. Furthermore, hashtags can contribute to the correct derivation of implicit meanings, i.e., on X, the absence of a shared common ground risks creating misunderstandings between the writer and the recipient.

In essence, hashtags can guide the recipient's inferential mechanisms by acting on both the explicit component (low- and high-level explicatures) and the implicit component of the language.[120] In addition, this use of hashtags has a significant impact not only on the stylistic and rhetorical level but also on textual economy and processing times.[121]

From a perspective more oriented towards the study of (political) communication and persuasive communication, hashtags have great impact in reinforcing shared knowledge between politicians and voters and in building the ingroup. More precisely, hashtags are aggregation tools, aiming to strengthen social bonds and build interpersonal meanings. It is no coincidence that, particularly in election campaigns, slogans find space as hashtags (Valenti 2025). For example, in (197), Renzi reports the party slogan (cf. *ItaliaSulSerio*) through the #.

(197) Matteo Renzi (AIV): […] *Gli unici seri su questo siamo noi #ItaliaSulSerio*
'[…] The only ones who are serious about this are us #ItaliaSulSerio'

In addition to slogans, # also includes uses that refer to self-promotional and personal aspects of the issuing politician (Valenti 2025: 199-200). For example, events in which the politician has taken part or reforms that they have proposed. In addition, Valenti (2025: 203–204) highlights the function of hashtags as markers of authorship, explicitly indicating—either at the beginning or end of the text—the identity of the tweet's author.

The pragmatically saliency conferred by hashtags is an aspect that needs to be explored in depth with regard to the use of # to mark humorous linguistic acts (with an autonomous perlocutionary purpose). Therefore, the hashtag can be analyzed as an autonomous speech act to which it is possible to apply the criteria of the General Theory of Verbal Humor, as is done for all other statements. Even in this case, the practical function of research and topic tag has a marginal role. Furthermore, this aspect does not seem to be highlighted by recent studies on the subject in the Italian context, such as Valenti (2025). In this contribution, the analysis focuses exclusively on the use of hashtags as a strategy for attacking and denigrating political figures.

[120] Inferential processes contribute not only to what is implicitly communicated by an utterance, but also to what is explicitly communicated (Carston, 2002).
[121] Valenti (2025) qualitatively analyzes hashtags in the political domain with reference to implicit contents.

A more detailed analysis that takes into account the use of hashtags for humorous and playful purposes is in Wikistrom (2014). In any case, this study lacks a systematic analysis based on linguistic theories of humor. Laukuca (2018) also identifies an ironic/humorous use of hashtags when, in a somewhat approximate way, the hashtag is incongruent with the other part of the tweet. Spina (2012: 163) considers only how the humorous hashtags strengthen the aggregating effect and amplifies the popularity of the hashtag and, consequently, its replicability and adoption by other users. In such cases, the hashtag signals to the recipient that the utterance should be interpreted as part of a specific meme set (Spina 2012), thereby positioning the speaker as an active participant in that discursive thread. The tweet is, thus, embedded within a particular conversational frame. As will be shown, however, this is not always the case.

It is also important to clarify —particularly with regard to humorous hashtags— those hashtags inherently convey an evaluative stance. Even hashtags primarily oriented toward informational or ideational functions (i.e., aimed at representing reality) often also fulfill an interpersonal function, expressing subjective attitudes and, at times, strong evaluative judgments on the topic at hand (Spina 2012: 182).

10. 2 Humor detection and hashtags

As seen in Section 8.4, many studies have used metalinguistic # as a tool for detecting humor and irony (e.g., Davidov et al. 2010, Reyes et al. 2013, Kunneman et al. 2015). In many cases the use of hashtags is a sort of an explicit comment on the communicative modality adopted by the utterance (they fall, in fact, into the category of explicit markers). In any case, hashtags do not guarantee the reliability of data, particularly when it comes to detecting humor, sarcasm, or irony. Several studies (e.g., Davidov et al. 2010; Sykora et al. 2020) have pointed out that "hashtag-based datasets, especially for sarcasm and irony, may result in a high proportion of noisy data" (Sykora et al. 2020: 5). As Davidov et al. (2010) also note, "the proportion of genuinely humorous, sarcastic, and ironic surface-level content in such tweet messages is generally very low."

With regard to the dataset of the present study, there are notably no cases of metalinguistics hashtags. In Section 8, I reported a marginal use of explicit linguistic markers. These elements do not seem to be used, at least within the Italian political scenario, to build datasets that take into account the linguistic phenomena under observation. This result is closely linked to the nature of the dataset. Since the tweets were published during an election campaign, the writers' propagandistic intent is particularly strong/present. This context imposes certain constraints on the use of humorous markers: explicitly signaling the humorous communicative modality may reduce the utterance's surprise and unexpectedness, ultimately diminishing the sophistication of the humor and its appeal to the

electorate. Notably, humor is a linguistic phenomenon inherently linked to creativity, and over-explicitness may compromise its expressive potential. Indeed, the appreciation and perceived pleasantness of this communicative mode largely depend on the complex inferential mechanisms underlying the interpretation of the utterance. In this respect, the notion of humor sophistication is particularly relevant: sophisticated humor relies on intricate logical and inferential processes, requiring greater cognitive engagement from the recipient (Attardo 1994: 216). Another form of sophistication involves the use of allusive expressions and references to background knowledge that is not universally accessible. In such cases as well, the explicit signaling of communicative functions may undermine the perceived quality of the text, diminishing its rhetorical impact and the subtlety of its humor.

Moreover, the absence of metalinguistic hashtags may also be attributed to cross-cultural differences among Italian users, reflecting broader cultural patterns and distinct practices in the use of online resources. In this regard, the findings of Kunnemann et al. (2015) are particularly insightful. The author observed that cultural factors significantly influence both the use and reception of sarcasm—especially in relation to the hashtag *#sarcasme*. Notably, Kunnemann et al. (2015) revealed that "speakers of French seem to be more lenient with the hashtag #sarcasme than speakers of Dutch (or English for that matter), because they also use it to signal other rhetorical figures, such as paradoxes, rhetorical questions, and other types of humor." These insights underscore the need for cross-linguistic comparisons of political tweets, ideally within the same community of practice and within the same textual genre.

10.3 Humorous hashtags and 2022 election campaign

10.3.1 Preliminary Results

1 humorous #	2 humorous #	3 humorous #	4 humorous #	TOT tweets
57	9	3	1	70

Table 54: Occurrences of tweets with one or more humorous hashtags.

Overall, the analysis revealed 70 tweets with one or more humorous hashtags (9.5% out of 764 humorous tweets). So, there are 88 humorous hashtags in the dataset.[122] Furthermore, the table shows that tweets with multiple forms of humorous # (e.g., four humorous #) are therefore the most infrequent typology. In addition, no long strings of humorous hashtags (Wikistrom 2014) have

[122] The value corresponds to the total number of humorous hashtags annotated in the tweets.

emerged. Indeed, as noted in Spina (2012: 166), an excessive use of hashtags can lead to the loss of their functionality and rhetorical effect.

Notably, it is possible to find both cases in which humor hashtags are the only instances of humor present in the text (that is, they are the only elements that activate a script opposition) and cases in which they interact with other forms of humor. For example, (198) is an example of coexistence between humorous hashtags and another form of humor.

(198) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *La "meravigliosa" #UE del #TanaLiberiTutti* 👇 https://t.co/ouz2EeYVQ8
'The "wonderful" #EU of #TanaLiberiTutti👇 https://t.co/ouz2EeYVQ8

In (198), there is a case of mock-politeness with an aggressive function (an explicit compliment towards UE, from which the reader has to infer the opposite), marked by the use of double quotation marks, and also a case of humorous hashtags. In this case, there is a sort of parallelism between a typical play for children and the political strategies adopted by the European Union.[123] Thus, the politics of UE is criticized due to having simplistic and flexible rules. The script opposition is based on the coexistence and opposition of play for children (abnormal) vs. institutional politics (normal). The script opposition that sees serious political activities opposed to children's play is an aspect that, as discussed in Section 8.4.5, is a rather productive rhetorical strategy. Interestingly, the negative evaluation conveyed by the hashtag *#TanaLiberiTutti* allows readers to correctly interpret the adjective *"wonderful"* and infer the opposite of what is explicitly asserted. This negative connotation is already hinted at by the use of quotation marks, which serve to block a conventional reading of the message.

(199) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *#politiche2022 #governissimo Dalla Serracchiani solo propaganda elettorale.*
'#politics2022 #supergovernment From Serracchiani only electoral propaganda.'

In (199), instead, humor is activated only by *#governissimo* ('powerful government'): a form of negative irony (also marked by the suffix of the superlative *-issimo*) aimed at criticizing the government's actions. This expression is inappropriate when considering both the immediate context and, more broadly, Vittorio Sgarbi's political stance toward the Democratic Party (PD), of which

[123] In particular, the phrase *Tana Libera Tutti*—used in Italian children's games—means that the round is over and everyone is instantly released and safe, including those who had been eliminated from the game.

Deborah Serracchiani is a member. In (199), furthermore, the use of hashtag is similar to the use of distancing quotation marks or to the use of a sarcastic tone of voice in spontaneous speech. Additionally, the negative irony of *"governissimo"* is made possible by the presence of explicitly negative lexemes in the message (e.g., *only electoral propaganda*).

10.3.2 Position of humorous

Table 55 presents the syntactic position of humorous hashtags in the tweets.

only #	**final #**	**initial #**	**internal #**	**TOT#**
6	57	2	23	88

Table 55: Position of the humorous hashtags within the tweets.

As noted by Scott (2015: 12), hashtags may occupy any position within the tweet. The same was observed by Spina (2012) with regard to Italian. From the analysis, it emerges that the privileged position is the final one. This is the typical position occupied by the hashtags also when they perform other communicative functions. In this regard, it can be hypothesized that the humorous hashtag functions as the punchline of a joke. This way, what is present within the tweet acts as an anticipation to the final utterance. In this position, it also guides to correctly understand (in a humorous key) the previous co-text. The preparatory elements to the final utterance, instead, constitute a sort of jab lines present within the text.

(200) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *Più probabilmente prigioniero del "...mi si nota di più se vengo e sto in disparte o se non vengo per niente?" #EcceBamba*
'More likely a prisoner of "...will I be noticed more if I come and stay out of the way or if I don't come at all?" #EcceBamba'

In (200), #EcceBamba is a pun: "Ecce Bombo" (1978) is the original title of a film by Nanni Moretti. The reference as hashtags to elements of pop-culture for humorous purposes is also described by Wikistrom (2014:147-148). Note, moreover, that *bamba* ('cocaine'), in non-standard Italian, is a lexeme used to indicate cocaine. This way, the author negatively alludes to the altered state of Giuseppe Conte, which is the topic and the target of the tweet. In addition, #EcceBamba also provides the reference to interpret the text in quotation marks, which in fact is a famous quote from the film in question. This utterance is thus a sort of jab line.

In cases where humorous hashtags appear in initial position (only two instances), the hashtag functions as a sort of "content classifier", offering the reader interpretive cues for understanding the right-hand co-text.

(201) Vittorio Sgarbi: *#sgarbinobel Per risparmiare gas, invece degli spaghetti, fatevi un bel timballo di pasta al forno (elettrico) […]*
'#sgarbinobel To save gas, instead of spaghetti, make yourself a nice baked pasta (with electric oven) […]'

In (201) *#sgarbinobel* provides the coordinates needed to correctly interpret the following statement: it is a proposal that is not bona fide. Sgarbi deliberately pretends not to take the problems of citizens/voters seriously and to minimize their needs. The main goal of the tweet is to express solidarity to the electorate using a playful expressive modality. In this case, the function of the humorous hashtag is to perform a form of self-irony (Sgarbi is aware of the absurdity of his own proposals) and to provide an interpretative framework for the co-text.

As regards the cases of internal position-hashtags, one can observe that they have a greater semantic-syntactic integration within the text, as in (202). In (202), a humorous neologism is highlighted through the use of the hashtag. It is obtained by exploiting the derivational morphology of Italian. The suffix *-ite*, added to a word denoting a part of the human body, forms a noun that refers to a disease or disorder affecting that part (e.g., *polmone* 'lung*' >polmonite '*pneumonia*'*).
By adding the same suffix to the word *annuncio* ('announcement') one obtains *annuncite*, which denotes the 'disease' of the EU, namely the tendency to make excessive proclamations. The hashtag #UE instead performs the basic function of topic tag.

(202) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *Putin, probabilmente preparatosi da anni, ha spostato la guerra dal terreno di battaglia al settore dell'energia. E contro una #UE malata di #annuncite, vince ogni singola mossa.*
'Putin, probably having been preparing for years, has moved the war from the battlefield to the energy sector. And against an #EU sick with #Annuncite, he wins every single move.'

Humorous hashtags may be combined in different positions within the same tweet, as in (203):

(203) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *La Meloni da #oppofinzione a Draghi diventerà il puntello del #Draghistan. #GattopardoDuePuntoZero*
'Meloni from #oppofizione to Draghi will become the prop of #Draghistan. #OcelotTwoPointZero'

In (203) there are three humorous hashtags. The first *#oppofinzione* is a pun, based on the lexemes *opposizione* ('opposition') and *finzione* ('fiction'), used to negatively label Meloni's party: accused, therefore, of not making a real opposition. Instead, *#Draghistan* is a neologism created through the suffix *-stan* (suffix linked to the Proto-Indo-European root *steh₂-* indicating "place", "region"). This neologism, which refers to the countries of Central Asia (e.g., Kazistan, Pakistan), alludes to the alleged despotic methods of Mario Draghi's government and the coalition supporting him. In conclusion, the hashtag *#GattopardoDuePuntoZero* is, instead, used to humorously summarize what is expressed in the tweet. In fact, the hashtag, which alludes to the novel "Il Gattopardo" (1958) by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, indicates through a parallelism, how behind the ostentation of change (i.e.: being a radical opposition force) there is actually the intent to preserve the status quo (i.e.: to support Draghi's coalition). To conclude, consider example (204), that consists solely of the humorous hashtag *#ScampagnataElettorale* and a link to a newspaper article hashtag:

(204) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *#ScampagnataElettorale* 👇 https://t.co/9pXybJCAod

'#ElectoralPicNic'

The hashtag *#ScampagnataElettorale* is a wordplay, based on phonetic similarity to *Campagna Elettorale* ('electoral campaign'), and is used to suggest that the campaign is essentially a farce, given that the two main coalitions have already reached an agreement on the distribution of electoral seats. Indeed, the informal term *scampagnata* (derived from the verb *scampagnare*: 'to take a trip to the countryside') refers to a casual outing or picnic among friends. Moreover, the linked article helps clarify the intended meaning of the expression, as it reports on a meeting in Rimini involving the main Italian political parties.

10.3.3 Distribution of humor hashtags by politicians

Table 56 reports the occurrences of humorous hashtags in relation to the politicians considered.

Identity	Coalition	Occurrences
Chiara Appendino	Autonomous	1
Carlo Calenda	Center	4
Deborah Bergamini	Right	1
Vittorio Sgarbi	Center	6
Enrico Letta	Left	3
Guido Crosetto	Right	1
Eleonora Evi	Left	3
Luigi Di Maio	Autonomous	3
Lugi De Magistris	Autonomous	3
Gianluigi Paragone	Autonomous	64
		Tot. 88

Table 56: Distribution of humor hashtags by politicians.

As seen in Sections 10.3.1 and 10.3.2 most of the examples analyzed may be attributed to Gianluigi Paragone. Overall, the instances of humorous hashtags in the tweets published by Paragone are 64 (distributed across 47 tweets). In addition, Gianluigi Paragone appears to be the author who uses the highest number of humorous hashtags within the same tweet: 3 cases of tweets with 3 humorous hashtags; 9 cases with tweets with two occurrences; 1 tweet with 4 occurrences. For all other authors the use of humorous hashtags is marginal. In this regard, Spina (2012: 177) notes that "Italian politicians participate sparingly in the collective ritual of sharing viral and often ironic hashtags, which periodically influenced Twitter users". What has been observed can thus be attributed to a personal communicative style—specifically, a rhetorical feature characteristic of Paragone's discourse. The use of humorous hashtags is, in fact, a specific trait of Paragone's idiolect, at least in the context of communication on X. This stylistic trait is probably attributable to a greater awareness in the use of X's syntax. This greater competence is probably attributable to the fact that the politician in question was previously a journalist and television host, and therefore an expert in communication. In addition, his role as leader of a minority and radically populist party may have favored the use of a more brilliant and unconventional textuality.

It is also possible to hypothesize a factor connected to the politician's age: a younger age may contribute to a more effective proficiency in the use of digital communication tools. In any case, this hypothesis is difficult to be argued for: since Paragone is the same age (cf. 51 years old) or older than other politicians who do not use them (e.g.; Salvini is 49 years old; Renzi is 47 years old).

10.3.4 Functions of humorous hashtags

The most frequently attested function in the overall corpus is the aggressive function (cf. Section 8.3), which also characterizes the use of humorous hashtags. Overall, it is possible to find 76 instances of aggressive humorous hashtags. Aggressive humorous instances can assume different degrees of complexity and sophistication, which therefore affect the rhetorical impact. In fact, as seen in Sections 10.3.2 and 10.3.3, the attack function through humorous hashtags is performed through quite different typologies of humor, e.g., pun (203); neologism (203), forms of parody (199).

(205) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): #MissAspen👇 https://t.co/PwTLJAI3Pr

For example, in (205), Paragone uses a derogatory epithet addressed to Giorgia Meloni. The epithet, referring to the Aspen Institute, conceptualizes Meloni as a sort of protagonist of a beauty contest (think for example of contests such as Miss World, Miss Italia, Miss Europe etc.). One can also perceive a certain degree of sexism and machismo to discredit a female politician.

(206) Eleonora Evi (AVS): *#Conte vuol farci credere di essere riferimento della #sinistra #ecologista per raccattare qualche voto ma non dimentichiamoci chi sono i suoi amici. #Trump #Giuseppi #AlleanzaVerdiSinistra* 🔴 https://t.co/ij9rBLSyKk
'Conte wants us to believe that he is the reference of the #ecologist left to collect some votes but let's not forget who his friends are. #Trump #Giuseppi #AlleanzaVerdiSinistra 🔴 https://t.co/ij9rBLSyKk'.

In (206) the humorous hashtag is #Giuseppi. It is a quotation from a tweet by Donald Trump ("Giuseppi was very very happy" August 2019), referring to Giuseppe Conte and intended to emphasize the mutual esteem between the two political leaders. Thus #Giuseppi is a parody of Trump's tweet. The aim is, indeed, to mock the relationship between the politicians and the Trump's statement. Furthermore, in (206), the hashtag #Trump completes the meaning of the tweet by explicitly identifying the referents of the term *amici* ('friends').

Interestingly, humorous use of *Giuseppi* has become a sort of meme, used to denigrate Giuseppe Conte. In (207), for example, *Giuseppi* is used within a humorous statement used to attack the institution of citizen income (see Section 9.1.3). In this case both the title and the use of the exclamation mark contribute to marking the ironic intent of the tweet.

(207) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Ecco "Giuseppi", oggi puoi anche dire di avere sostenuto, con il reddito di cittadinanza, l'industria dell'auto!* https://t.co/4FE8DdTeCq *@stampasgarbi*
'Here is "Giuseppi", today you can also say that you supported, with the citizen's income, the car industry!'

Another noteworthy case for examining the parodic use of hashtags and their connection to meme practices is exemplified by (208) and (209).

(208) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): […] *Il conflitto è USA-Russia; gli Italiani ne sono già dentro (e non hanno i soldi per pagarla). #pace #condizionatore #Ucraina #carobollette*
'The conflict is USA-Russia; Italians are already in it (and don't have the money to pay for it). #peace #air-conditioner #Ukraine #high bills'

(209) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): *Quella persona che non ha chiesto scusa per la frase più idiota mai sentita negli ultimi tempi, cosa ci dirà questo inverno? #pace #condizionatore #riscaldamento*
'That person who didn't apologize for the most idiotic phrase ever heard in recent times, what will this winter tell us? #peace #air-conditioner #heating'

In (208) and (209) Paragone uses the hashtags *#pace* ('peace') and *#condizionatore* ('air-conditioner'), echoing the textual material of a speech by Draghi from 2022, in order to construct a textual parody aimed at ridiculing the position supported by Draghi.[124]
The same textual elements, serving the same function, also occur in the tweet (210) within the rhetorical question posed at the beginning of the text.

(210) Gianluigi Paragone (ITAEXIT): *Pace o condizionatore? Draghi, se vuoi la pace, prima ci dai tutti i nostri Diritti e tutte le nostre Libertà! #ItalExit #LiberiDiScegliere*
'Peace or air-conditioner? Draghi, if you want peace, first give us all our Rights and all our Freedoms!'

As for other communicative functions, six humorous hashtags with the self-enhancing function, two cases of self-deprecating and four cases of affiliative humorous hashtags were annotated. With regard

[124] The translated text is: "We wonder whether the price of gas is worth paying for peace. When faced with these two options, what do we truly prefer: peace, or comfort with the air conditioning on all summer?" (Mario Draghi, April 2022).

to the self-enhancing function, the use of the hashtag *#sgarbeide* is particularly interesting (see (211)). This neologism is formed with the suffix *-eide*, which is typically used to create feminine nouns derived from proper names, especially in the titles of literary works (e.g., *Eneide*, *Achilleide*), to denote the adventures of the person/character referenced by the base noun. In this case, the hashtag playfully casts the speaker as a hero of classical epic.[125] The incongruity of this comparison is quite evident.

(211) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Avevo chiesto a Casini di venirmi ad aiutare, ma non è voluto venire #sgarbeide* https://t.co/BlprQCP63o
'I asked Casini to come and help me, but he didn't want to come #sgarbeide https://t.co/BlprQCP63o'

Moreover, the use of this hashtag appears to have evolved into a fully-fledged meme within the author's broader ingroup. In fact, it is attested even years after the electoral campaign, as evidenced by tweets (212) and (213), published on 14 October 2023 and 18 January 2024, respectively.

(212) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): #sgarbeide *Pescara/ Il mio pubblico va dagli 11 ai 99 anni.* #sgarbeide *#Pescara*
'My audience ranges from 11 to 99 years old.' '#sgarbeide #Pescara'

(213) Vittorio Sgarbi (NM): *Dopo le scarpe, vorrebbero farmi anche i pantaloni. Eccoli accontentati!* #mestatori #untori #forcaioli #diffamatoriseriali #bullimanipolatori #sgarbeide
'After the shoes, they would also like to make my pants. Here they are satisfied! #troublemakers #spreaders #forcaioli #serialslanderers #bulliesmanipulators #sgarbeide'

Example (213) contains a long chain of humorous hashtags, a type of datum that is instead totally absent in my electoral dataset. These hashtags are aggressive expressions used as forms of mock-impoliteness. The insincere nature of these aggressive expressions is also underlined by the fact that in all cases they are overstatements (i.e., serial slanders). Register also plays a role in marking these

[125] It is noteworthy that this suffix has generated a considerable number of neologisms employed sarcastically to characterize the actions of prominent Italian politicians (e.g., *Berlusconeide* (referred to Silvio Berlusconi), see https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/berlusconeide_(Neologismi)/).

expressions: hashtags such as *#mestatori*, *#untori*, and *#forcaioli* consist of archaic terms that belong to a diaphasically high variety of Italian.

Among the cases of affiliative humor, in (214) Eleonora Evi uses a wordplay based on the substitution of *Jova* (Jovanotti, an Italian singer) with her surname.[126] The wordplay also appears within the tweet itself, and its repetition through the hashtag further reinforces the neologism, giving it the effect of a slogan.

(214) Eleonora Evi (AVS): *Vi aspetto domenica 18 settembre alle 10.30 all' "EVI BEACH PARTY" al #ParcoNord di #Milano per fare insieme un gesto d'amore per la natura! #plogging al parco :)* 🏃‍♀️👆💚*#AlleanzaVerdiSinistra* 🟢🔴 *#EviBeachParty* https://t.co/V7E87ViiAf
'I'll be waiting for you on Sunday 18th September at 10.30 at the "EVI BEACH PARTY" at #ParcoNord in #Milan to make a gesture of love for nature together! #Plogging in the park :) 🏃‍♀️👆💚#AlleanzaVerdiSinistra 🟢🔴 #EviBeachParty https://t.co/V7E87ViiA'

Regarding the self-deprecating function, I examine a rhetorically complex case that involves the use of a humorous hashtag. To simplify the discussion, I will provide a screenshot of the tweet in question. The analysis of (215) is quite complex and, therefore, I will systematically examine all the elements necessary to elucidate the rhetorical strategies and forms of intertextuality present in the text.

(215)

[126] The Jova Beach Party is a summer music festival conceived by Italian singer-songwriter Lorenzo Jovanotti, staged on various Italian beaches.

First of all, the image used by Letta is a parody, spread on the web, of his own electoral campaign, based precisely on the contrast between the color black (which is associated with negative political statements) vs. red (which is associated with positive political statements). To underscore the perceived futility of some of Letta's oppositional stances, the authors of the parody draw on a culinary opposition—namely, the use of *pancetta* (generally disfavored) versus *guanciale* (the preferred alternative) in certain traditional recipes of Central Italy.[127] The fact that the target of this aggressive humor was the PD is demonstrated by the resumption of the slogan *Scegli* ('You have to choose'). Letta thus opts to "play along", effectively choosing to take part in the "contest" depicted in the image. In essence, Letta's tweet (215) can therefore be interpreted as a form of self-parody. This is also supported by the use of the hashtag *#GuancialeTuttaLaVita* ('GuancialeForever") which provides the answer to the contest by selecting the best alternative among those proposed. The self-parody represented a sort of communicative own goal for Letta. In fact, the elements present in (215) became the object of a new parody by anonymous X users. In a certain sense, a humorous cycle was created, which can be summarized as follows: parody → self-parody → (new) parody. These new forms of parody include the reuse of the image in (215). For example, a user associated the hashtag *#GuancialeTuttaLaVita* with the image of a package of bacon's brand called "Guancialetta" (a wordplay between the food brand and Enrico Letta's surname). Another user, by contrast, reposted the image in (215), adding the hashtag #PancettaNera – a playful alteration of the title of the Fascist song *Faccetta Nera* (1935).

10.3.5 Creativity and lifespan of humorous hashtags

As noted in Section 10.3.4, certain hashtags evolve into memes that circulate both within the X-sphere and in the X's production of the politicians under analysis. It can be assumed that these hashtags become part of the idiolect of the politicians under consideration. In contrast, the use of these hashtags may also have an ephemeral nature linked, as we will see below, to the topic to which they refer.

In this regard, we can therefore observe how, within the dataset considered, some humorous hashtags have different frequencies (see Table 57). This degree of repetition also reflects the inherently intertextual nature of hashtags.

[127] The contrast between *pancetta* ('bacon') and *guanciale* refers to a well-known culinary distinction in Italian cuisine: while both are cured pork products, *pancetta* comes from the belly whereas *guanciale* is made from pork cheek.

Humorous hashtags	Occurences in the dataset
#PupazziPrezzolati	4
#PilotaAutomatico	4
#Oppofinzione	3
#TanaLiberaTutti	4
#Missaspen	3
#Euroinomani	3
#DuePesiTreMisure	3
#Sfasciaconti	3
#AgendaRobinHood	3
#Annuncite	2
#Draghistan	2
#Euromelassa	2
#ScampagnataElettorale	2
#Euromeloni	2
#Sgarbeide	2
#Parcondicio	2

Table 57: Recurring humor hashtags.

To assess the longevity of the humorous hashtags identified in the dataset, I conducted an exploratory search on a sub-corpus of 20 randomly selected humorous hashtags. The results clearly show that the majority of them is associated with Gianluigi Paragone, reflecting his more frequent use of this communicative device.

The first goal of this section is, therefore, to observe whether these humorous hashtags are ephemeral or widely used in the X-sphere. Furthermore, I also examined whether the first recorded use of these humorous hashtags originated with the politician employing them during the electoral campaign, or whether the politician merely appropriated a hashtag that was already circulating within the X-sphere. Thus, the goal is to test the relationship between political discourse and creativity (Carter 2004). It is possible to summarize this research question as follows: who are the real authors of these hashtags?

To carry out this investigation, I used the manual search tool under the "research these hashtags" function. Recent changes to X make it impossible to automatically track hashtags without purchasing specific licensing packages. Clearly, such automated tracking would have significantly expedited the research process.

Humorous hashtags	Used by	Originality	Life-span
#sgarbinobel	Vittorio Sgarbi	Yes	ephemeral
#EuroMelassa	Gianluigi Paragone	Yes	ephemeral
#iosonochiara	Chiara Appendino	Yes	ephemeral
#sinistrarubamazzetto	Gianluigi Paragone	Yes	ephemeral
#pizzinidabruxelles	Gianluigi Paragone	Yes	ephemeral
#GhosbusterdelFascismoSponsorizzati	Gianluigi Paragone	Yes	ephemeral
# EcceBamba	Gianluigi Paragone	Yes	ephemeral
#GattoPardoDuePuntoZero	Gianluigi Paragone	Yes	ephemeral
#scampagnataelettorale	Gianluigi Paragone	No	limited lifespan
#MissAspen	Gianluigi Paragone	No	limited lifespan
#Annuncite	Gianluigi Paragone	No	limited lifespan
#Movimento5patacche	Gianluigi Paragone	No	limited lifespan
#AveteGià	Enrico Letta	No	limited lifespan
#Draghistan	Gianluigi Paragone	No	widely used/stable
#TanaLiberiTutti	Gianluigi Paragone	No	widely used/stable
#PupazziPrezzolati	Gianluigi Paragone	No	widely used/stable
#governodeipeggiori	Gianluigi Paragone	No	widely used/stable
#euroinomani	Gianluigi Paragone	No	widely used/stable
#DraghiPilotaAutomatico	Gianluigi Paragone	No	widely used/stable
#condizionatore	Gianluigi Paragone	Undetermined	Undetermined

Table 58: Hashtags in the dataset: originality and lifespan.

In terms of lifespan, the selected hashtags can be grouped into three different categories: ephemeral, limited lifetime and widely used/stable hashtags. The first category (cf. ephemeral hashtags) includes non-productive humorous hashtags. These are hashtags that are used only on this occasion of the electoral campaign and do not occur again within the X-sphere. Thus, in these cases, the hashtags appear to be manifestations of politicians' creativity, as these hashtags also have no prior attestations. Specifically, these creative uses of politics are also those that have a more ephemeral use in the Xsphere. Their ephemeral use is related to the topic that these hashtags address. In fact, these are hashtags that are difficult to use outside the communicative context in which they are first attested. Consider, for example, the use of *#EcceBamba* ((200)). This humorous hashtag is relevant and has a

communicative purpose only in (200) where it is used to clarify the reference to the citation of Nanni Moretti's film in the previous co-text. Further evidence of this aspect can be seen in example (216).

(216) Gianluigi Paragone (ItaExit): *Sono quelli che venivano a intossicare le nostre marce. Con le loro telecamere vigliacche, sempre e solo a provocare. #GhostbustersDelFascismoSponsorizzati* https://t.co/NAMj2vfEug
'They are the ones who came to poison our marches. With their cowardly cameras, always and only to provoke. #GhostbustersDelFascismoSponsored https://t.co/NAMj2vfEug'

In (216) the hashtag is used to ridicule Fanpage (online newspaper), which had carried out an investigative report on an electoral rally of ItaExit, accused of sympathizing with fascist theories/attitudes. The ridicule of the online newspaper is made through the comparison between Fanpage journalists and the Ghostbusters, that is, the protagonists of the film with the same title. The opposition is, therefore, between an ETHICAL JOURNALISM script, which is based on true and documented facts, and a NON-ETHICAL JOURNALISM which is based on invented facts (this aspect makes it explicit the connection with the concept of "ghosts"). This last script is also reinforced by the use of the adjective *sponsorizzati* "sponsored". This adjective refers precisely to the fact that the Fanpage investigative video was promoted for a fee and, therefore, tied to commercial logic. In other cases, labeled as ephemeral, the direct reference to the name of the politician, as in the case of *#Sgarbeide* (Vittorio Sgarbi) and/or the pun *#iosonochiara* (Chiara Appendino), limits the use of this hashtag by other users of the network.[128]

The second category (i.e., limited lifespan + widely used/stable) consists of humorous hashtags that were previously attested: they were not created by the politician at the time of the election campaign. For some of these, labeled with "limited lifespan", the attestations are limited. In fact, none of these hashtags have more than 150 occurrences in the X-sphere. As can be observed, this is driven by the fact that these hashtags are still closely related to the imminent political elections. For example, #MissAspen (cf. (205)) is a specific reference to the Aspen Institute event in which Meloni had taken part. It is clear that this topic cannot be exploited for long to produce humor outside of the election campaign. The case of the "stable" hashtags is different. Again, these are previously

[128] *chiara* has two senses: chiara$_1$= singular adjective ('clear'); Chiara$_2$=proper name. There also appears to be a form of intertextual parody in the now-famous expression 'Yo soy Giorgia', from a speech delivered by Giorgia Meloni in Madrid, which quickly went viral. This expression became the title of a book by Meloni, published by Rizzoli in 2023. The speech can be listened to at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQmIeDToUJU.

attested hashtags, before the politician used them during the election campaign. These tweets have enjoyed wide circulation and sustained relevance, remaining attested and productive up to February 2025. Notably, in many cases the first attestations date back a long way in time. The most exemplary cases are #*TanaLiberiTutti* and #*euroinomani*, which date back to 2013 and 2015, respectively. For example, the pun #*euroinomani*, which evokes *eroinomani* (‘heroin addicts’), is used to denigrate those who blindly support (like drug addicts) the European Union. It is therefore a theme that can potentially be exploited well beyond the election campaign. It is precisely this characteristic that gives longevity to these hashtags. Finally, in relation to humorous use of #*condizionatore* (‘air-conditioner’), it was not possible to evaluate with certainty any of the parameters considered here. Indeed, it is a generic lexeme, that means that the hashtag is used in a large quantity of tweets even on non-political topics and in non-humorous way.

Conclusion

The dissertation deals with the use of humor, and of related aspects and phenomena by 38 Italian politicians on X. The analysis focused on a corpus of 7,552 tweets (automatically extracted), published during the 2022 national electoral campaign. This dataset was subsequently annotated (completely manually) by performing the following tasks:

1. recognition of humorous tweets;
2. identification of the communicative functions performed by humor;
3. detection of tweets containing aggressiveness and/or forms of impoliteness;
4. annotation of humor markers;
5. identification of tweets with mock-politeness, mock-impoliteness, and humorous hashtags.

The annotation also took into account inter-annotator agreement among three annotators. In this respect, the preliminary agreement results — assessed with regard to the first three tasks — turned out to be positive and encouraging. Moreover, I carried out a detailed analysis of selected cases of agreement and disagreement, with the aim of observing and clarifying the possible factors that may have contributed to these outcomes.

The annotation process and the results obtained are expected to contribute to filling a gap in the Italian pragmatic tradition on contemporary political discourse: to date, no studies have extensively examined humor produced by politicians or the related phenomena. Furthermore, much of the existing literature has concentrated on the use of humor by politicians in the American political context (see Section 5). Relevant examples include the studies on the Chilean context by Mendiburo-Seguel and colleagues (2022, 2023, 2024), as well as the works of Stewart (2011, 2012) and Bippus (2007) on U.S. elections. The work presented here situates itself within the tradition of Tsakona and her collaborators, who have studied humor in the field of political communication in Greece. However, compared to these studies (e.g., Tsakona 2009; Tsakona 2011), I adopted a more quantitative and annotation-focused perspective of analysis (making use of a large dataset).

The methodology and research perspectives adopted enabled the achievement of significant results from both a quantitative and a qualitative point of view. This, in turn, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the use of humor during the electoral campaign, that considered not only the communicative functions it served but also the relationships between humor, its communicative functions, and its linguistic markers.

With regard to the annotation task, two pragmatic phenomena were examined in greater depth, both of which exploit — albeit in opposite ways — the presence of a mismatch between forms of politeness and forms of impoliteness. It is precisely this incongruous juxtaposition of opposing elements that enables these phenomena to be classified as potentially humorous and creative. At the level of communicative functions, mock-politeness is aimed — despite the literal interpretation of the utterance expressing politeness — at attacking the target of the message, and it seeks to establish the speaker's superiority, both at the socio-political level and in terms of linguistic creativity/rhetorical skills. By contrast, mock-impoliteness (often identified, at the theoretical level, as teasing or positive irony; see Section 9.2) is used to express an attitude of affiliation and closeness toward the supposed target (at the level of the utterance's literal meaning) of the impoliteness.

As for humorous hashtags, the study provided an opportunity to analyze a distinctive feature universally recognized as characteristic of Twitter's syntax. In particular, it examined in depth their uses and functions, as well as their semantic-pragmatic positioning within the tweet.

The final section of the dissertation provides an overview of the research project in relation to the main phenomena investigated. It also outlines a number of limitations and offers recommendations for future research.

First, the analysis showed that humorous tweets account for approximately 10% of the entire dataset. This usage is comparable to the findings reported by Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022) and suggests the potential for further qualitative and quantitative analyses across datasets, adopting a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic methodology.

Section 8.1 highlights the considerable individual variability (as a stylistic feature) among political figures in their use of humor—particularly in relation to the overall number of tweets published during the electoral campaign. Specifically, humor emerges as an individual linguistic trait and a rhetorical device, closely tied to personal creativity and to the image that a politician seeks to project to his or her electoral ingroup. Notably, non-standard political figures (such as Vittorio Sgarbi and Gianluigi Paragone) appear to make more extensive use of humor, also in relation to the number of tweets they published. As for Paragone, he is the leader of a party (ITAEXIT) with a strongly anti-establishment and markedly populist stance. Thus, his use of humor can also be interpreted as an anti-establishment linguistic strategy, setting him apart from the conventional language of politics. This more conventional use, by contrast, characterizes political figures with more traditional profiles who have previously held prominent institutional roles. In this regard, it is worth noting the absence — or very limited presence — of humor in the data for Letta and Gentiloni.

Regarding the distribution of humor in relation to politicians' gender, Mendiburo-Seguel's (2022) assumptions that female politicians use fewer instances of humor than male politicians are confirmed. Furthermore, the difference is statistically significant (χ^2 (1) = 29.26, $p < .001$). However, it should be noted an imbalance in the dataset regarding the overall number of tweets published by male and female politicians (see Section 6). It is likely, therefore, that cultural stereotypes continue to influence the management of this rhetorical strategy: the use of humor by female politicians has not yet been fully accepted.

Considering age, the group of younger politicians (30-40) has a negative tendency with the use of humor (see Figure 21). Additionally, it is confirmed that humor declines in later years (60-90 ages) – see also Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022: 5).

With regard to political affiliation, the differences in the use of humor prove to be statistically significant, with a clear polarization also at the coalition level: the right-wing bloc exhibits a marked positive trend in humor production, whereas the left-wing bloc is more strongly associated with non-humorous tweets. It must nevertheless be noted that within each coalition there are meaningful differences between individual parties. In particular, the Democratic Party displays a negative tendency in employing humor, whereas the Lega resorts to more forms of humor than expected (see Figure 22) – consider, for instance, the humorous tweets by Matteo Salvini and Laura Ravetto. As for autonomous parties, no significant deviation from the independence model is observed; consequently, non-coalition parties do not seek to distinguish themselves from the two main coalitions through a systematic use of humor – with the exception of certain individual political figures (e.g., Carlo Calenda).

Focusing on the variable of opposition membership, politicians of opposition's area show a higher tendency to employ humor, probably as a form of anti-establishment rhetoric. The same results are obtained by Tsakona (2013), that notes how the largest opposition party in Greek parliament tended to rely more heavily on humor. However, at a statistical level, the trend is not confirmed (see Figure 26).

Finally, considering the leadership parameter, the data show that this factor does not determine statistically significant variations in the use of humor. Specifically, Figure 27 indicates that occupying a leadership position does not increase the likelihood of employing humorous tweets. Moreover, non-leader politicians do not tend to rely more heavily on humor as a communicative strategy. Hence, humor is used in a substantially similar way across politicians, that is, both by party and coalition leaders to reinforce their leadership status, and by non-leader politicians to strengthen it, at least at a communicative level. This confirms the strong relationship between leadership and humor in political discourse, as highlighted, for instance, in Tsakona (2009: 230).

Consider the distribution and analysis of the communicative functions of humor. As explained in the methodological section, in this case the unit of analysis is not the tweet itself but the humorous instances, which within a single tweet may perform the same function or different ones. Among the 766 humorous tweets, I identify 716 occurrences of aggressive humorous instances (about 80% of the total). The remaining humorous instances account for only 20% of the total. Thus, the most common style of humor employed by politicians on social media appears to be aggression directed toward political opponents. This finding remains consistent even when the individual tweet is taken as the unit of analysis.

Specifically, both female and male politicians tend to use humor primarily as a tool of aggression. Furthermore, as no statistically significant gender-specific correlation is observed (Table 23 and Figure 29). This may also be influenced by the textual genre under consideration: the electoral campaign foregrounds the use of antagonistic communicative strategies.

On the other hand, considering the distribution at coalition level, there are differences between the coalitions. This finding is in contrast with the results of Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022: 5), which found "no differences between left-wing and right-wing politicians regarding total use of aggressive humor". As shown by Figure 32, there is a negative tendency for autonomous parties to use non-aggressive forms of humor, while the opposite trend is observed for the right-wing coalition. In particular, leaders tend to adopt more aggressive strategies, i.e., there is a significant deviation from the expected values. While in the Chilean context what was decisive was whether one was a member of the opposition party, regardless of the coalition of affiliation (Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022), this variable does not, however, prove to be decisive in the Italian political context (see Figure 31).

Subsequently, I also annotated and analyzed aggressiveness in the communicative serious mode, that is, aggressiveness found in non-humorous tweets (Section 8.2.3). Overall, in my corpus, there are 1,314 tweets that can be classified as aggressive (17.4% of the entire dataset). It is thus possible to conclude that, among most politicians, aggression and more generally impoliteness are preferably expressed through serious communication. There are however peculiar cases that seem to deviate from this trend: Laura Ravetto, for example, seems to use humor as a preferred rhetorical weapon to convey aggression (9.1% of aggressive humorous tweets vs. 7% of non-aggressive humorous tweets).

In contrast to what was observed for humorous instances, there is a correlation with the gender variable: male politicians tend to produce more serious aggressive tweets than female politicians.

Regarding the coalitions' variable, the strongest positive association with aggressiveness concerns parties outside a governing coalition. On the other hand, Ceron et al. (2023) noted frequent

resort to aggressive messaging on Facebook by non-coalition parties —especially members of AIV. This reveals how crucial it is to compare different media resources.
Considering the opposition or non-opposition parameter (in relation to Draghi's government), a negative tendency can be noted in the use of negative strategies by non-opposition members and, conversely, a statistically significant tendency for opposition forces to use aggressive strategies.

At a theoretical level, I then reflected on why aggressiveness emerges as the most frequently represented communicative function. Building on previous studies (e.g., Culpeper 2011), I identified four possible factors: (1) emotional pleasure; (2) aesthetic pleasure; (3) tweet's visibility and engagement; (4) deresponsibilization (cf. off-record and humorous impoliteness). With regard to factor (3), this study has not provided empirical evidence that aggressiveness and negative emotions tend to generate greater visibility and engagement. This points to future research directions, particularly the systematic measurement of engagement with aggressive tweets — i.e., in terms of likes, comments, and retweets — while also extending the analysis to other social media platforms.
Considering the frequency of aggressive strategies, it is worth questioning whether these instances can genuinely be categorized as impoliteness. As noted by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2013: 35), electoral campaigns create a communicative space in which direct attacks against opponents can be formulated without mitigating or attenuating strategies. In such contexts, what occurs is often better described as non-politeness rather than impoliteness. Thus, the communicative context of electoral campaigns seems to favor the legitimization of attack. Moreover, legitimization diminishes the relevance of the mitigating strategies described by Brown & Levinson (1987). This is further reinforced by the lack of physical or proximate interaction between the producer and the target of (humorous) aggression. Clearly, this kind of legitimization of aggressiveness (rather than its neutralization, according to Culpeper 2011) deserves to be substantiated and compared with what occurs during electoral campaigns in other communicative contexts — for example, those involving physical proximity to the target of humor. Moreover, the results obtained here could also be compared with tweets posted after the electoral campaign, in order to assess whether the textual genre — what might be defined as "campaign tweets" — actually affects the use of aggressiveness.

Regarding the underrepresented functions of humor, the observed distribution is as follows: affiliative (77 occurrences, 8.7%); self-deprecating (33 occurrences, 3.7%); self-enhancing (42 occurrences, 4.7%); defensive (21 occurrences, 2.4%; for a more detailed overview Figure 36). Similar results are reported in Mendiburo-Seguel et al. (2022), where the percentages of self-deprecating humor are lower than those of affiliative humor.

As for affiliative humor (see Section 8.3.3), right-wing politicians tend to use more affiliative humor than left-wing politicians (cf. Mendiburo-Seguel et al. 2022). Additionally, the gender difference is significant ($\chi^2(1) = 38.13$, $p < .001$) and reveals a clear predominance of affiliative humor among male politicians.

At a qualitative level, I have shown (see (80)) that these forms of humor are not entirely devoid of elements of aggressiveness. By contrast, self-enhancing humor occurs 42 times. This result is noteworthy, as Mendiburo-Seguel (2022) did not record any such instances in their dataset. More specifically, the non-leader group tends to employ this strategy significantly less, suggesting that politicians who already hold leadership positions within their party may have less need to promote their own image—or that of their party—in a self-referential manner.

With regard to cases of self-deprecating humor, only 12 politicians (out of 38) use this function, and with varying frequencies. In essence, it is an underrepresented function and, although it can provide benefits for the politician's image (Baumgartner 2007), it is rarely employed by politicians (see Koivukoski 2025). Additionally, it appears that second-tier figures may be more inclined toward this communicative strategy, likely because it entails a lower risk of compromising their public image (see Table 30). At the same time, it allows them to gain greater prestige (also in political terms) by making fun of their own weaknesses. At the coalition level (where the correlation is statistically significant), the right-wing coalition displays a higher frequency of self-deprecating humor than expected. At the thematic level, these tweets address very diverse topics — not necessarily of a strictly political nature. For example, some humorous tweets target the (alleged) physical flaws of political figures. In general, these instances occur as replies to other users on X. From a distributional perspective, it is noteworthy that in 19 cases self-deprecating humor appears in a reply tweet. This suggests that self-deprecating humor functions as a rhetorical strategy with defensive aims, i.e., it is used to respond to potential criticisms or accusations coming from other political figures or from non-politician users of X. I also examined tweets (see (66) and (67)) in which the topic of self-deprecating humor is one's own (political) skills and intelligence.

With regard to humor markers, the first point that emerges is that there is a comparable distribution between marked humorous tweets (369 tweets, 48.3%) — containing one or more humor markers — and humorous tweets without markers (395 tweets, 51.7%). This results clearly confirm, as noted by Burgers (2010), that humor markers are not used with the same frequency within a single dataset.

Specifically, at the level of macro-categories, it can be observed a greater presence of morpho-syntactic and typographic markers compared to tropes and schematic markers. The most frequent

markers within the first two categories are, respectively, punctuation marks and emojis. The fact that emojis are textual elements typical of 2.0 communication accounts for their strong presence in the dataset. Thus, the use of emojis extends to political communication 2.0 (Valenti 2025), including during election campaigns. Moreover, the dataset and the annotation methodology allow for the opening of a new line of research aimed at verifying whether the occurrence of emojis (or emoticons) in humorous tweets is statistically significant compared to non-humorous texts, and which types of emojis are most frequent in humorous vs. non-humorous tweets. It would also be possible to examine whether politicians' tweets employ specific sets of emojis compared to tweets published by other users.

As for tropes, the result is consistent with Burgers (2010: 128–129), who observed that tropes were used more often in purely verbal genres and less frequently in multimodal ones. Additionally, these are more complex markers, both for the reader to process and for the writer to construct. The same complexity can be identified with regard to schematic markers. In relation to co-textual repetition, the syntactic constraints of X (i.e., a maximum length of 280 characters) may render its use more difficult.

As for the number of co-occurring markers, most humorous instances contained one or two markers. The most frequently attested combination is emoji(s) + punctuation marks. In contrast, humorous utterances with four or more humor markers were not found in the corpus (see Table 36). This may suggest the potentially redundant nature of combinations with more than two markers, which could violate the principle of linguistic economy. It is also evident that some combinations are entirely unattested. For example, the same utterance is never marked by both an adverb and a typographic feature.

Subsequently, I investigated (both qualitatively and quantitatively) the distribution of markers within individual communicative functions. In this regard, a chi-squared test of independence revealed a statistically significant difference in the distribution of humor markers across humor types. Specifically, with respect to self-deprecating humor, one may observe a tendency to employ a greater number of markers. The same holds true for the affiliative function. More detailed statistical evidence is reported in section (8.4.7).

Additionally, I explored specific associations between individual genres and marker types. The analyses reveal meaningful contrasts in the types of humor markers used across genres. First, the self-deprecating genre relies disproportionately on typographic markers. Furthermore, the aggressive function shows a much higher reliance on morpho-syntactic markers compared to the aggressive-defensive function. With regard to the relationship between tweet type (reply vs. non-reply) and humor markers, the chi-square test (χ^2 (1) = 14.59, $p < .001$) indicates a statistically significant

association between tweet type and the use (or absence) of markers. Non-reply tweets display more markers than expected. This may be due to the fact that reply tweets adopt the communicative mode already used in the tweet to which they respond: it is therefore unnecessary to signal the communicative mode being employed, as it is sufficient to follow the conversational thread.

Finally, in Sections 9 and 10, I focused on cases of mock-(im)politeness and on humorous hashtags. With regard to mock-politeness (henceforth MP), the annotation enabled us to identify 233 tweets containing one or more instances of MP. Considering individual variation, Giuseppe Conte, Carlo Calenda, Angelo Bonelli, Matteo Salvini, Vittorio Sgarbi, and Laura Ravetto display a higher proportion of MP occurrences relative to tweets with impolite forms. In particular, Ravetto employs MP in 21 tweets as a rhetorical tool to counter users' criticisms concerning her physical appearance and/or abilities. Additionally, no statistically significant correlation emerges between the use of MP and political alignment. Nonetheless, substantial differences can be identified among individual politicians even within the same coalition (see Section 9.1.2). This level of individual variation is clearly crucial for such phenomena, which rely heavily on the speaker's linguistic creativity.
At a qualitative level, considering MP through internal mismatch, I identified 30 tweets (out of 233) in which MP is instantiated through the opening polite expression *Caro/a* ('Dear') + the proper name of the opponent politician, followed by explicit attacks and criticisms directed at the political opponent. In this regard, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the examined construction (i.e., *Dear* + politician's proper name) has undergone a process of conventionalization in Italian political discourse. This hypothesis requires further confirmation and support, also in light of a comparison with other textual genres and communicative contexts. Another type of MP involving internal mismatch is represented by greeting formulas (a conventional form of politeness), both at the opening and closing of a text, which are followed and/or preceded by impolite expressions. Interestingly, in 8 tweets (published by Matteo Salvini and Laura Ravetto), MP is triggered by the use of affective closing formulas *bacio* ('kiss'), *bacini* ('little kisses'), *bacioni/e* ('big kisses') or only by the use of the kissing emoji.

Considering mock-impoliteness (henceforth MIMP; see Section 9.2), tweets with MIMP attested in the corpus are sporadic (only 17 tweets). As noted in Section 8.3, aggressive forms and attack strategies with genuine aggressive intent predominate. Specifically, the highest number of instances (8 tweets) is found in Vittorio Sgarbi's production. From a qualitative perspective, it is noteworthy that MIMP is often directed at other politicians with the aim of fostering affiliation. The intent is not a real aggression, and these tweets may be classified as jocular mockery. In other cases,

affiliation is also manifested by simulating a downplaying of Italians' issues and an ignoring of their needs. This constitutes a form of jocular mockery based on a deliberate lack of understanding of other people's needs. In any case, these are deliberately exaggerated claims that reveal the politician's true intentions, namely to display closeness to their own electorate.
Finally, I closely examined a group of tweets published by Carlo Calenda in which the destruction of the earth is explicitly wished for, with the aim, however, of highlighting the incompetence of Italian politics and thereby (at the inferential level) displaying solidarity with Italian citizens.

Finally, in Section 10, I investigated the use of humorous hashtags in the 2022 election campaign. The analysis revealed 70 tweets with one or more humorous hashtags (9.5% out of 766 humorous tweets): overall, there are 88 humorous hashtags in the dataset. Furthermore, the analyses showed that tweets with multiple forms of humorous # (e.g., four humorous hashtags) are therefore the most infrequent typology. In addition, no long strings of humorous hashtags (Wikistrom 2014) emerged. Interestingly, it is possible to find both cases in which humor hashtags are the only instances of humor present in the text, that is, they are the only elements that activate a script opposition (see tweet (197)). Subsequently (see Section 10.3.2), I examined the syntactic-pragmatic distribution of humorous hashtags. What emerges clearly is that the privileged position is the final one. This is, indeed, the typical position occupied by the hashtags also when they perform other communicative functions. Instead, in cases where humorous hashtags appear in initial position (only two instances), the hashtag functions as a sort of "content classifier", offering the reader interpretive cues for understanding the right-hand co-text. As regards the cases of internal position-hashtags, one can observe that they have a greater semantic-syntactic integration within the text (see (202)).
Subsequently (see Section 10.3.2), I examined the syntactic-pragmatic distribution of humorous hashtags. In terms of distribution of humorous hashtags across the politicians under observation, it also emerges that most of the cases may be attributed to Gianluigi Paragone (64 out of 88). Additionally, Gianluigi Paragone appears to be the author who uses the highest number of humorous hashtags within the same tweet. For all other authors the use of humorous hashtags is marginal. Thus, the use of humorous hashtags is, in fact, a specific trait of Paragone's idiolect, at least in the context of communication on X. This stylistic trait is probably attributable to a greater awareness in the use of X's syntax. Indeed, Paragone was previously a journalist and television host, and therefore an expert in communication.

With regard to the relationship between communicative functions and humorous hashtags, 76 instances of aggressive humorous hashtags were identified. Additionally, aggressive humorous instances can assume different degrees of complexity and sophistication, which therefore affect the

rhetorical impact. In fact, as seen in Sections 10.3.2 and 10.3.3, the attack function through humorous hashtags is performed through quite different typologies of humor, e.g., pun (203); neologism (203), and complex forms of parody (199). As for other communicative functions, six humorous hashtags with the self-enhancing function, two cases of self-deprecating and four cases of affiliative humorous hashtags were annotated.

Furthermore, I examined whether these humorous hashtags were first introduced by the politician during the electoral campaign or whether they were appropriated from hashtags already circulating within the X-sphere. In terms of lifespan, the selected hashtags can be grouped into three different categories: ephemeral, limited lifetime and widely used/stable hashtags. Specifically, the first category (cf. ephemeral hashtags) includes non-productive humorous hashtags. These are hashtags that are used only on this occasion of the electoral campaign and do not occur again within the X-sphere. Thus, in these cases, the hashtags appear to be manifestations of politicians' creativity, as these hashtags also have no prior attestations. Instead, the second category (i.e., limited lifespan + widely used/stable) consists of humorous hashtags that were previously attested: they were not created by the politician at the time of the election campaign. Moreover, none of these hashtags have more than 150 occurrences in the X-sphere. As can be observed, this is determined by the fact that these hashtags are still closely related to the imminent political elections. The case of the "stable" hashtags is different. Again, these are previously attested hashtags, before the politician used them during the election campaign. These tweets have enjoyed wide circulation and sustained relevance, remaining attested and productive up to February 2025. Notably, in many cases the first attestations date back a long way in time (e.g., #*TanaLiberiTutti* and #*euroinomani*, which date back to 2013 and 2015, respectively).

The discussion now moves from a synthesis of the results to a consideration of the study's limitations and directions for future research. First of all, it is to consider how the dataset might be enriched in several directions.[129] Clearly, it is necessary to expand the sample of politicians, aiming to better balance the dataset in relation to the socio-political variables. For example, increasing the number of female politicians will result in a more homogeneous set of data. Additionally, it is important to enrich the sample including a greater number of politicians in the 30-40 age group and those over 70. Moreover, the corpus could be expanded to include tweets by the same politicians from the pre- and post-election periods, enabling comparisons of the use and communicative functions of humor with the findings presented here.

[129] However, the automatic extraction of 7,552 tweets constitutes a considerable amount of data.

The extension of the dataset would also enable to carry out comparative studies with other annotated corpora on humor in other political contexts, both within and beyond Europe. It should not be overlooked, of course, that the implementation of the Dataset undergoes difficulties due to new policies introduced with the transition from Twitter to X, which affect the automatic extraction of data. In this regard, a further aspect that deserves attention—one that would provide a broader perspective on humor in electoral campaigns and beyond—concerns the collection and analysis of tweets in the humorous tweets' comment section. Examining these replies would allow for both qualitative and quantitative insights into cases of humorous adoption (Attardo 2002) by X users. Such an analysis would also make it possible to investigate whether adopting a humorous mode entails the use of the same humorous markers and communicative functions (e.g., whether aggressive humorous tweets elicit a statistically significant number of aggressive humorous replies). Along these lines, it would also be worth exploring whether users tend to respond to tweets with mock-politeness and/or impoliteness with humor of the same type.

Regarding the annotation scheme, the scheme (Section 7) could be enriched by including all the Knowledge Resources proposed by the GTVH. The annotation of humorous tweets could, for example, include the analysis of the logical mechanisms and the narrative strategies used in the humorous texts. Additionally, all the typologies of humor could also be annotated, for example by adopting the taxonomy discussed by Dynel (2009). Clearly, expanding the annotation tasks will inevitably require more time and the involvement of additional annotators, as well as a greater number of annotation rounds. Given the theoretical complexity of the pragmatic phenomena under investigation, such an expansion is necessary to strengthen inter-annotator agreement and to enhance the overall reliability of the annotation scheme. The annotation scheme could also benefit from its application to other languages and to different text typologies (e.g., longer texts with greater syntactic complexity). Furthermore, it is necessary to develop an annotation model that takes multimodality (e.g., images, videos, GIFs) into account and its use in generating humor.

The results presented here also offers significant implications for computational linguistics. For instance, large language models (e.g., LLAMA, GPT) could be employed to automatically detect humor and its communicative functions. LLMs have also the potential to accelerate the annotation workflow by reducing the time required for annotator recruitment and training.

Specifically, the dataset could be used to train large language models (LLMS) to recognize humor, humor markers, and humor functions. In this regard, the data presented in Section 8.4 may be used to train LLMS to recognize Italian humor markers—also expanding the range of text types

considered. A challenge for LLMS may be the recognition of tropes (e.g., hyperboles, metaphors) used as humor markers. Additionally, unlike previous studies, the present analysis of markers encompasses all types of humor rather than focusing solely on irony, thereby broadening the potential applications of the findings reported here. Indeed, several studies have focused exclusively on irony markers (see 8.4.3). With regard to humor markers, further researches could investigate specific humorous markers (e.g., emojis, punctuation marks). Interestingly, comparative analyses could be conducted between the use of markers in humorous and non-humorous tweets. Additionally, LLMs training could address the recognition of serious forms of aggressiveness and impoliteness, based on what is discussed in section 8.2.3. The dataset may be used to implement automatic recognition of off-record forms of impoliteness and aggression.

Finally, humorous tweets may find application in research on experimental pragmatics (Domaneschi & Bambini 2022). Specifically, (non-)humorous tweets can be used as stimuli in experimental tests (see also Section 5) aimed at measuring the persuasive impact of humorous tweets and the differences, at the persuasive level, of the various functions of humor. Furthermore, experimental tests could investigate the perceptual differences between humorous tweets with and without markers. Finally, studies could measure the level of approval, creativity and acceptability between forms of aggression and impoliteness conveyed humorously (e.g., through mock-impoliteness) and those conveyed in a serious manner.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Dataset

Figure 42 contains the screenshot of the annotated Dataset. The screenshot refers to tweets published by Matteo Salvini (Lega), one of the politicians with the highest number of humorous tweets overall.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
1	Tweet	ID	Age	Gender	Coal	Opp	Office	Party	Hum	Fun 1	Fun 2	Fun 3	Fun twee	Leader	Marker(s	M(1)	M(2)	M (3)	Reply
2	Perfino il pr	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr-def	na	na	aggr-def	yes	yes	punt	na	na	no
3	Benvenuta a	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	aggr	na	aggr	yes	no	na	na	na	no
4	Ops, in Euro	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	int	na	na	no
5	P.S. Caro Ro	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	emoticon+p	na	na	no
6	Dite che orn	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	rq	na	na	no
7	E il premio '	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	punt	na	na	no
8	Mohammed	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	punt+ps	na	na	no
9	In Parlamen	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	mval	na	na	no
10	Manifesti st	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	punt	na	na	no
11	La sinistra ri	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	punt	na	na	no
12	Un altro del	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr-def	aggr	aggr	aggr-def	yes	yes	punt	na	mval	no
13	-24 al voto.	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	punt+ps	na	na	no
14	La moglie di	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	punt	na	na	no
15	Un tele-viro	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	no	na	na	na	no
16	ministro, pri	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr-def	na	na	aggr-def	yes	no	na	na	na	no
17	Su che piane	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	rq	na	na	no
18	Domandarsi	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr-def	na	na	aggr-def	yes	yes	rq	na	na	no
19	5 marzo. Br	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	no	na	na	na	no
20	...costruzion	Salvini	40/50	M	Right	yes	senatore	Lega	yes	aggr	na	na	aggr	yes	yes	reg	na	na	no

Figure 42:Screenshot of the annotated Dataset.

The dataset is structured as described below:

Column A: text of the tweet; **Column B**: name of the politician; **Column C**: gender of the politician; **Column D**: age range of the politician; **Column E**: coalition membership; Column F: membership or not of the opposition; **Column G**: role held by the politician; **Column H**: party membership; **Column I**: humorous or no-humorous tweet (according to GTVH); **Columns J-L**: functions of the first, second, and third instances of humor present; **Column M**: overall function of the tweet (sum of the functions of the individual instances); **Column O**: presence or absence of humor markers (for humorous tweets); **Columns P-R**: typology of markers for each of the instances of humor present; **Column S**: it indicates whether the tweet is a reply tweet or not.

Figure 43 contains the screenshot of the annotated tweets with mock-politeness or with mock-impoliteness. The first column indicates the name of the politician who published the tweet in the second column. The third column indicates the linguistic expressions/super linguistic strategies (Brown & Levinson 1987; Terkourafi 2005) that activate politeness; the fourth column indicates the specific linguistic expressions/super linguistic strategies (e.g., use of imperative forms without attenuators) that convey impoliteness (Culper 2011). Thus, it was possible to account for both the forms of mock-politeness/mock-impoliteness caused by internal mismatch and the forms activated by external mismatch, as described in Section 9.

	Manifesti arrivati (dai haters, scatenatevi) #il25settembrevotolega	emojis	haters
	Ok poi il 26 vieni a contarli amico	amico	invito diretto| sfida
	@paolacx2 @borghi_claudio Cara Signora, la Ravetto fa campagna elett	cara signora	accusa di attacare le donne
	@paolacx2 @borghi_claudio Un bacione anche a lei da Legnano https:/,	bacione | lei di cortesia	contesto
	Intanto il coraggiosissimo economista ha impedito la visione del suo t	coraggiosissimo	accusa di assenza di coraggio
	@roberto72764315 @Danireport @pameladiverona Io invece di 'annaspa	Lei di cortesia	correzione alle affermazioni dell'utente
	@elleuca_ @Bulbasa54718767 Difetti ne ho parecchi ma non credo la st	emojis	accusa di insultare le donne
	Conti i miei e poi quelli dei tuoi amici di Italiaviva/azione e li confronti	emojis	imperativo
Giovani Donzelli	@leonardo_marras Ciao Leonardo. Per fortuna c'è Letta! E sai che lo dic	emojis | per fortuna c'è Letta	insinuazione | allusione
	@unoscemo @MichelottiF @GiorgiaMeloni Niente da fare! Mi dispiace	Lei di cortesia	sei uno scemo
Licia Ronzulli	Ma quale selfie! Stavo scattando una foto per avvertire il sindaco di Ver	grazie per l'attenzione | cari	odiatori
Luigi di Maio	@CarloCalenda Carlo, non essere sempre superficiale e polemico nelle	nome proprio | cooperazionalità	contesto
Chiara Appendino	Cara Meloni, la politica ha il dovere di parlare in modo chiaro e dire	cara meloni	accusa
	Gli autobus nuovi girano da qualche anno, se intendevi i tram sono p	emoticon	insinua che l'utente ignori l'ovvio
Luigi de Magistris	Ma come caro @GiuseppeConteIT ? Le sanzioni non funzionano ma teni	caro Giuseppe	accusa
	@EnricoLetta Qualcuno può ricordare a Letta per favore che lui e il suo p	cooperazionalità | solidarietà	accusa | domanda retorica
	Ci raccontavano che il migliore Di Maio aveva siglato accordi con diversi	lode al'operato di Luigi di Maio	ritrattazione e negazione della Lode
Mara Carfagna	Caro @peppeprovenzano attento alle sorprese perché in Italia il posto	Caro + nome utente	minaccia implicita
	Ma è surreale che chi ha fatto cadere Draghi ora lo supplichi. Solo per s	lode (siete così bravi)	critica all'operato di FDI

Figure 43: Screenshot of tweets with mock-politeness/mock-impoliteness.

Notably, I decided to import annotated humorous tweets into the INCEpTION platform to improve the graphical visualization of the annotated dataset.[130] This task started by importing the values from the file illustrated in Figure 42. In the future, I consider making the annotated Dataset public through this tool.

Figure 44 shows the INCEpTION's annotation of a humorous tweet published by Carlo Calenda (AIV). This humorous tweet (+ humorous value) presents two forms of humor. For each of these instances, the communicative function (e.g., aggressive) is indicated in the green box; the type of humor (e.g., mock-impoliteness) is in the yellow box, and the humor markers (e.g., repetition), when present, are in the purple box. Naturally, multiple values can be assigned to each portion of text—for example, more than one communicative function, additional types of markers, or other forms of

[130] https://inception-project.github.io/

humor, and so forth. Additionally, it is also possible to import tweets that are not humorous and simply assign them the label "–humorous value".

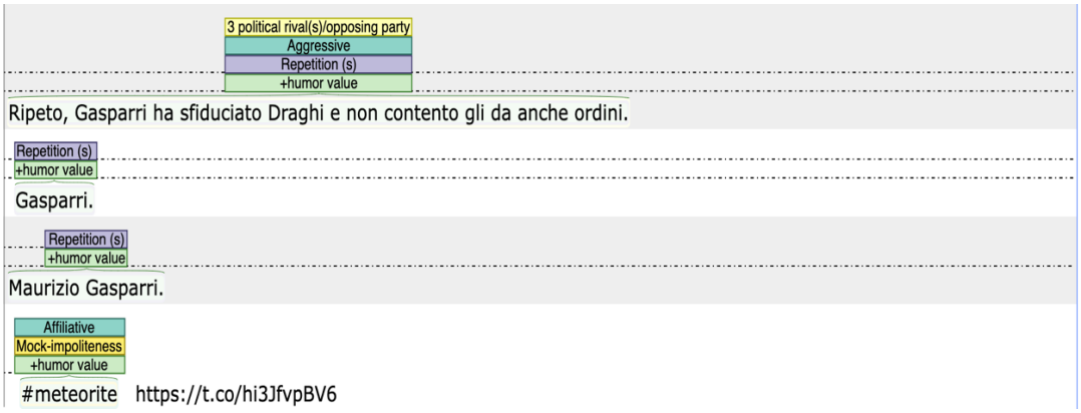

Figure 44: Screenshot of humorous tweet annotated on INCEpTION.

Appendix B

Codebook task 1: Humorous tweets/texts

Definition

- Humor as an "umbrella term" covering a wide range of phenomena, even quite diverse ones;
- Humor "is a property of the stimulus, of the text" (Attardo 2020). At the competence level, this involves discriminating what counts as humor from what does not;
- The theoretical reference model is the GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humor);
- The necessary and sufficient condition for humor to be present is the presence of two factors (neither factor alone is sufficient). The absence of either factor means that the tweet should be considered non-humorous:

1. Script Opposition – the basic mechanism of incongruity.
2. Overlap between the two scripts – "overlap fully or in part in the text" (Raskin 1985).

"The text must be compatible with 2 scripts (overlap) and the 2 scripts must be opposed (opposition)" (Attardo 2020:135).
•What is it a script?

-Ideas, thoughts, meanings;
- (Conceptual) nodes of information;
-They are often activated by lexical entries (lexemes), but it is also possible to activate scripts inferentially (through contextual inferences, presuppositions, implicatures).
-Scripts are embedded in a relational network: some scripts are closer to each other, while others are more distant.

• Example1: The exemplar doctor's wife joke (Raskin 1985)

"Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.
"NO", the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply, but "Come right in".

1) The script related to a MEDICAL VISIT is activated (doctors visit at home, a sigh indicates illness, the wife can perform secretarial functions).

2) Based on a series of inferences drawn from textual elements (the woman's beauty, the doctor's absence, the sighing tone, the invitation to enter), the script ADULTERY /SEX is activated.

3)The two scripts are clearly in opposition but also overlap; for instance, asking whether the doctor is at home, the sighing tone, and knocking on the door to make a visit are compatible with both scripts.

•Example 2: Humorous Tweets

Carlo Calenda: *Oggi si conclude una delle peggiori campagne elettorali di sempre. Nessun dibattito, promesse, allarmi democratici, coalizioni al collasso, Peppa Pig.*
'Today marks the end of one of the worst election campaigns ever. No debate, no promises, no democratic warnings, collapsing coalitions, Peppa Pig.'

1) promises, coalitions, alarms, election campaign POLITICAL ISSUES
2) Peppa Pig CARTOON/NON-POLITICAL ISSUES.

POLITICAL ISSUES vs. CARTOON/NON-POLITICAL ISSUES (i.e., NORMAL vs. ABNORMAL)

Appendix C

Codebook task 2: Humor markers

Description of the communicative functions of humor

- Self-Deprecating Humor (self-mockery):

The target of humor should be the politician himself (or, more generally, the political group/party to which he belongs) who humorously references his own flaws, errors, faults, and shortcomings (real, presumed, or stereotypical). It is a form of humor that the speaker, at least superficially, engages in to his own detriment and expense (Martin et al. 2003). Publicly exposing the flaws attributed and/or actually accepted as such to diminish their relevance and render them less credible (Stewart 2011, Greengross&Miller 2008). The purpose is to strengthen the social prestige of the speaker.

(1) Andrea Orlando: *@utente Bisogna difendere Blair? Ho sbagliato anche stavolta! Sorry!*
@user Should I defend Blair? I was wrong again! Sorry!

(2) Eleonora Evi: *@utente1 @utente1 Ah dunque il fatto che oggi la procura apra una inchiesta grazie al nostro esposto su extraprofitti è infantile. Ciao dalla "infantile fuori dal mondo"*
'@user1 @user2 Ah, so the fact that the prosecutor's office is opening an investigation today based on our complaint about extra profits is childish. Bye from the "childish outsider"'

- Aggressive Humor:

All humorous tweets that attempt to attack/ridicule/denigrate/mock a person, idea, political party, or group. This form of humor is used to make the writer appear more intelligent, powerful, and possess greater leadership/social prestige. It always has a target, be it a person, an idea, or something else.

(3) Nicola Fratoianni: *il governo reintroduca #tettostipendi pubblici. E per rispetto per tutti gli italiani che stanno soffrendo in questi mesi di difficoltà, individui prima del #25settembre il genio che ha scritto questa norma e lo metta a fare cose meno dannose*
'The government should reintroduce public sector wage caps. And out of respect for all Italians who are suffering during these difficult months, identify the genius who wrote this law before September 25th and put him to work on less harmful measures.'

(4) Matteo Salvini: *E il premio "Sciocchezza del giorno" va a… Complimenti*
'And the "Nonsense of the Day" award goes to… Congratulations'

In (4) it is clear that these are insincere compliments, inappropriate to the electoral context which sees people involved in rivalry with each other. The function, in this case, is to appear superior: by denigrating the Other and ridiculing his choices, decisions and activities.

- (Self-)Enhancing Humor:

Tweets must make a clear reference to the positive characteristics/qualities/skills of the author of the tweet, of his parties, of the leaders of his parties, as in (5) and (6):

(5) Licia Ronzulli: *Il leone ha ruggito ancora!! #forzaitalia #forzaPresidenteBerlusconi*
'The lion has roared again!! #forzaitalia #forzaPresidenteBerlusconi'

(6) Laura Ravetto: *@utente Neanche un po'. Rassegnati, sono bona*
'@user Not even a little bit. Get over it, I am hot'

- Defensive Humor:

The defensive function of humor aims to comically and humorously discredit a position or an attack carried out by a political opponent or rival party against the writing politician or against a figure or (political) institution they support. It can also involve expressing humorous solidarity with a party or

politician who has been unfairly attacked. There is no element of self-blame, feigned admission of guilt, or self-admission of flaws (cf. self-deprecating humor).

(7) Deborah Bergamini: *@LauraPausini si è sempre espressa con grande coraggio sul tema dei diritti civili e delle donne, e trovo francamente assurda questa reazione nei suoi confronti. "Come fai, sbagli". Magari può essere il titolo per una nuova canzone.*

(8) Andrea Orlando: *@utente Per la verità non fui esattamente tra i propugnatori*
'To be honest, I was not exactly among the proponents'

In (8) Orlando uses litotes (affirming something by denying it), minimizing the position of the user who accuses him of being the supporter of an unjust law, to protect himself from criticism.

- Affiliative Humor:

Martineau (1972): "to raise the moral of group members, enhance group cohesiveness and identity, create an atmosphere of enjoyment, reinforce group norms, and so on". The tweets must convey an affiliative, conciliatory, and well-intentioned stance toward voters and readers. The tone and stylistic register are generally more informal, friendly, and relaxed. Any trace of aggressiveness, when present, is merely simulated or instrumentalized to approach the Other, demonstrate reciprocity, and foster a sense of group spirit. The intentions are lighthearted, and the tone is informal and relaxed.

(9) Laura Ravetto: *@utente AH e non mi ha chiesto scusa? scherzo eh!*
'@user AH and he didn't apologize to me? I'm kidding!'

In (9) the impoliteness and tone of the attack is only simulated and also marked by various devices (e.g., !)

(10) Licia Ronzulli: *Chiaro, no? # Il 25 settembre si vota e fai votare Forza Italia!* 🖊
'Clear, right? # On September 25th we vote and make people vote for Forza Italia!'

Multiple functions in one text (?)

There are tweets in which humor/forms of humor serve multiple (non-equal) functions. In particular, the defensive function is very often associated with humorous aggression. The order of the functions is irrelevant, meaning there's no need to identify which function is more prevalent at the textual level. Here are some examples where different humor functions are present in the same tweet:

(11) Guido Crosetto: *È colpa sua (cfr.della Meloni) che rifiuta di farsi processare dalla Santa Inquisizione ed accettare il rogo che le spetta!*
'It's her fault (cf. Meloni) that she refuses to be tried by the Holy Inquisition and accept the stake that awaits her!
(Aggressive-defensive humor)

Context: *PiazzaPulita* (a television program on La7) had criticized Meloni's decision to refuse the interview and participation in the show.

In (11), aggressive humor is directed at the editorial line of *PiazzaPulita* (compared to the Holy Inquisition), while also defending Meloni, who is being attacked and blamed in a manner that is not bona fide

How to annotate the functions of Humor?
1) The Excel file has a drop-down list with the functions described above. A function (NA) is used to indicate the absence of a value (see below). There are three columns to indicate the function: if humor serves multiple functions in a tweet;
2) When multiple functions are present in a single tweet: fill in the different columns with the different functions found. If there are two forms of humor with the same function in the same tweet, the columns can be filled by entering the same function multiple times;
3) An NA label has been inserted for tweets that should not be annotated because humor is absent (these are distractors);
4) In Excel sheet 2, you will find the examples presented here, already annotated;
5) I have also included the author of the Tweet and a short commentary text describing the context/some textual references in the Excel file.

Caveat:
Fictitious Example: Everyone appreciated my superb, superheroic lecture! Yours yesterday was horrendous and shameful for the University!
The first part of the message is characterized by self-enhancing humor. Not focus on the second part of the tweet: there, the aggression is explicit, direct, and not at all humorous. This is explicit rudeness (not a humorous statement).

Appendix D

Codebook task 3: Humor marker(s)

Definitions:

- Humor Markers: "signals of humorous devices" (Attardo 2017:385)
- They facilitate the interpretation/reading of a given statement/text as humorous
- These markers are not essential, see Gibbs (1994:381): "readers don't simply establish ironic intentions by recognizing certain textual features that mark irony".

Types of humor markers:

- **Emoticon/emojis**

(1) It is a great idea **;-)**

(2) Laura Ravetto: E comunque adoro che ci siano disturbati che mi mettono in schermo gigante 😂😂😂😂
'And anyway I love that there are crazy people, that put me on a giant screen 😂😂😂😂'

- **Typefaces/typographical aspects** (typ)

→ bold, small caps, elongated words, italics as a form of highlighting)

(3) That is a greaaaaaaaaaaaat idea

(4) That is a **great** idea

- **Punctuation marks** (punt)

→ exclamation points, ellipsis, inferential punctuation [?!; !!?], quotation marks

(5) Matteo Salvini: Sì, fate con calma lì a Bruxelles, tanto non c'è fretta**……**

(6) It is a **"**great**"** idea

→ For the quotation marks ("") keep in mind that, in some cases, they are used to report a speech (not necessarily with a humorous and/or ironic evaluative purpose)

- **Interjections/Discourse markers** (int)

(7) Well, it'a great idea

(8) Silvio Berlusconi: **Ops** […]https://t.co/lCHHp01SFw

(9) That is a great idea, haha → onomatopoeic reproduction of laughter

- **Repetition** (rep)

(10) Carlo Calenda: *Il Governatore del @pdnetwork applaudito da Letta chiede il voto utile per i 5S per fermare il ritorno del Duce! Nientemeno. Il Duce.*
'The Governor of the @pdnetwork, applauded by Letta, asks for a vote for the 5S to stop the return of the Duce! No less. The Duce.'

- **Register Clash** (register)

-Use of a change of register, which means that the speaker starts employing words from a different stylistic register within the utterance to draw the reader's attention" (Attardo 2017: 388–389). For example, the author may suddenly shift to a highly formal and elaborate register (e.g., using legal or procedural terminology when addressing a platform user).

-Attention should also be paid to the use of dialectal expressions or regional varieties of Italian. Indeed, Apte (ibid.: 191) notes that "certain dialects or languages are perceived as more suitable media for humor than others".

(11) Carlo Calenda: *E te credo. Voti Conte*

'And I believe you. Vote for Conte.'

- **Evaluatative Morphology** (emval)

Diminutivi: (-etto, -ino, -ello, -uccio, -uzzo, -iccio, -iccetto, -iccino, -iccello, -attolo, -iciattolo, -ottolo, -uncolo, -ottolo, -uolo, -olino);

Accrescitivi: (augumentative adjectives, augumentative evaluative morphology-one; -rona/e; prefixes: extra-, maxi-, mega-);

Peggiorativi: (pejorative evaluative morphology; -azz- (*sbevazzare*); --iccio- (*gialliccio, sudaticcio*); -occio-; -ozzo-; -eccio)

Keep this label separate from register changes, even though the use of the diminutive may lead to an overlap with, for example, baby talk. Augmentatives (e.g., bacissimi, bacioni, bacione) should be marked with this label (although they may be classified as hyperbole).

(14) Gianluigi Paragone: *In Parlamento giravano tutti in tondo ed il più fessacchi**otto** è stato Salvini.*
'In Parliament everyone was going round in circles and the biggest idiot was Salvini.'

- **Adjectives/Adverbs** (adj/adv)

-evidential adverbs/adjectives (*chiaro, chiaramente, letteralmente*)

-extreme adjectives (*totale, assoluto*)

-modal or epistemic adverbs (possibly distinguished depending on whether the speaker's commitment to the truth of the statement is weak, as in the case of *probabilmente*, *forse*, *presumibilmente*, *possibilmente*, *verosimilmente*, o forte, come nel casodi *sicuramente*, *assolutamente*, *certamente*, *indubbiamente*, *innegabilmente*, *provatamente*, *cert o*, *davvero* and equivalent adverbial phrases such as *senza dubbio*, *di sicuro*, *senz'altro*)

(15) Giorgia Meloni: *ma veramente dopo che hai tentato di spiegarmi come devo fare la destra ora vuoi tentare di spiegarmi cosa significhi essere una donna?*
'but really, after you tried to explain to me how I have to do the right, now you want to try to explain to me what it means to be a woman?'

(16) What a powerful move! (Said to someone who makes a serious mistake)

- **Understatement** (und)

- Understatement consists in the minimization of a concept, often also through the denial of the opposite. *Hedges* such as *quasi, tipo, forse, piuttosto*. In some cases, this rhetorical figure is used to (dissimulate) express *politeness*.

(16) Pierlugi Marattin: *Per un motivo molto semplice: allora non c'era il Var. Adesso si, e sentirsi dire "vabbè ma quella telecamera non l'avevamo" è piuttosto interessante come risposta.*
'For a very simple reason: back then there wasn't VAR. Now there is, and hearing people say "well, but we didn't have that camera" is a rather interesting response.'

(17) I'm feeling *a little hungry*: maybe it's because I have not eaten in two days!

This category also includes forms of "reluctance to use a word may be lexically conveyed by such metalingual tags as *"direi", "per così dire", "diciamo", "si potrebbe quasi dire".*

- **Hyperbole** (hyper)

- Rhetorical figure consisting of exaggerating by excess or defect, violation of the maxim of quantity (e.g., It's been more than a century since I've seen you);

- Kreuz&Roberts (1995) argue that hyperbolic constructions, which include adverbs such as "absolutely," "really," "truly," "simply," and "certainly" followed by an adjective with an extremely positive valence (e.g., brilliant, fantastic, grand, wonderful), can serve as indicators of ironic intent.

(18) Carlo Calenda: *@luigidimaio è protetto nell'uninominale. Sostenuto peraltro da De Luca, con grande coerenza di entrambi.*
'@luigidimaio is protected in the single-member constituency. He's also supported by De Luca, with great consistency from both sides.'

In (19) the hyperbole serves to mark/signal that the statement is ironic (cf. ironic praise, i.e., that it is not at all a significant example of coherence)

- Muecke (1978) specifically notes the use of hyperbolic adjectives as a marker of ironic utterances: "the **glorious** world of discrete particles, where it would be his **inestimable** prerogative...".

- **Rhetorical Questions** (RQs)

Schaffer (2005) provides the following definition: ''A rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser's commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee's mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity'' (p. 128). Additionally, "RQs either lack an explicit answer or, on the contrary, require a specific and obvious answer".

(20) Matteo Renzi: *Loro promettono leggi che noi abbiamo già fatto: bello, no?*
'They promise laws that we have already made: nice, huh?'

General Remarks:

- Notably, different types of markers can coexist in the same instance of humor (there is no one-to-one correspondence between the form of humor and markers).

(21) Guido Crosetto: *Ho specificato per "garantismo"* 😉
'I specified for "garantismo"😉'

In (21), both the emoticon and distancing quotation marks are present to signal the parodic intent of the utterance.

- A single tweet can contain multiple instances of humor, and each instance may display different marker(s). In this regard, consider tweet (2).
- It should be noted that there are cases in which all instances of humor lack markers, as well as cases in which only one of the two instances displays one or more markers.

(22) *Il Conte ha perso il suo castello. Che splendido uomo politico :) ahahhaha*
'Conte lost his castle. What a splendid politician :) hahahaha'

In (23), there are two forms of humor, both serving an aggressive/denigratory function. The first form is a wordplay [Giuseppe Conte vs. Conte = holder of a noble title], which is not marked by linguistic, typographic, or other elements. In contrast, the second utterance—a case of mock-politeness—contains at least two markers: a smiling emoticon and the onomatopoeic reproduction of laughter ("ahahahah").

Note1: In the Excel file, I have also included the communicative functions associated with the humor forms present. And, to make it easier to identify the humor forms, I've also highlighted the different instances.
Note2: When only one humor form is present, only the boxes related to that form need to be filled in.
Note3: When only one marker is present, leave the other boxes blank (I have left more boxes blank for cases with multiple markers).

Appendix F [131]

Inter-Annotator agreement and Confusion MatrixesTask1 (Humor vs. Non-Humor):

```
library(readr)
library(dplyr)
library(caret)
library(lattice)
library(readr)
library(reshape2)
library(irr)
library(ggplot2)
# sub-data frame
annot <- Task1[, c("Ann1","Ann2","Ann3")]
annot[] <- lapply(annot, function(x) {
  x <- tolower(trimws(x))
  factor(x, levels = c("non-humor","humor"))
})
# %agreement
acc_12 <- mean(annot$Ann1 == annot$Ann2, na.rm = TRUE)
acc_32 <- mean(annot$Ann3 == annot$Ann2, na.rm = TRUE)
cat("Percent agreement Ann1 vs Ann2:", round(acc_12,3), "\n")
cat("Percent agreement Ann3 vs Ann2:", round(acc_32,3), "\n\n")
# Ann1 vs Ann2
kappa_12 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann1","Ann2")])
cat("Cohen's kappa Ann1 vs Ann2:\n")
print(kappa_12)
# Ann3 vs Ann2
kappa_32 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann3","Ann2")])
cat("\nCohen's kappa Ann3 vs Ann2:\n")
print(kappa_32)
kappa_31 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann3","Ann1")])
cat("\nCohen's kappa Ann3 vs Ann1:\n")
print(kappa_31)
# Fleiss' kappa
fleiss <- kappam.fleiss(as.matrix(annot3))
print(fleiss)
# % agreement
all_agree <- mean(apply(annot, 1, function(x) length(unique(x)) == 1))
cat("%agreement", round(all_agree,3), "\n")
# Function to create heatmap from confusion matrix
create_heatmap <- function(pred, ref, title){
  # Confusion matrix
  cm <- confusionMatrix(pred, ref, positive = "humor")
  print(cm)
    cm_table <- as.table(cm$table)
  cm_melt <- melt(cm_table)
  colnames(cm_melt) <- c("Prediction", "Reference", "Count")
  # heatmap
  ggplot(data = cm_melt, aes(x = Reference, y = Prediction, fill = Count)) +
    geom_tile(color = "white") +
    geom_text(aes(label = Count), color = "black", size = 6) +
    scale_fill_gradient(low = "lightblue", high = "steelblue") +
    theme_minimal() +
    labs(title = title, x = "Benchmark", y = "Annotator")
}
# Heatmap: Ann1 vs Ann2
annot_clean1 <- annot[, c("Ann1", "Ann2")]
annot_clean1 <- annot_clean1[complete.cases(annot_clean1), ]
heat_12 <- create_heatmap(annot_clean1$Ann1, annot_clean1$Ann2, "Confusion Matrix: Ann1 vs
Ann2")
# Heatmap: Ann3 vs Ann2
annot_clean2 <- annot[, c("Ann3", "Ann2")]
annot_clean2 <- annot_clean2[complete.cases(annot_clean2), ]
cm2 <- confusionMatrix(annot_clean2$Ann3, annot_clean2$Ann2, positive = "humor")
print(cm2)
```

[131] The author used GPT-4o to revise the R scripts. Additional scripts will be made available on GitHub.

```
heat_32 <- create_heatmap(annot_clean2$Ann3, annot_clean2$Ann2, "Confusion Matrix: Ann3 vs
Ann2")
# Heatmap: Ann3 vs Ann1
annot_clean31 <- annot[, c("Ann3", "Ann1")]
annot_clean31 <- annot_clean31[complete.cases(annot_clean31), ]
heat_31 <- create_heatmap(annot_clean31$Ann3, annot_clean31$Ann1, "Confusion Matrix: Ann3
vs Ann1")
# Display heatmaps
heat_12
heat_32
heat_31
```

Inter-Annotator agreement and Confusion Matrixes Task2 (Humor Functions):

```
library(readr)
library(dplyr)
library(irr)
library(caret)
library(lattice)
library(readr)
library(reshape2)
library(ggplot2)

annot <- task2[, c("Ann1", "Ann2", "Ann3")]
annot[] <- lapply(annot, function(x) factor(trimws(tolower(x)),
                                            levels = c("aggr","sen","def","sdp","aff")))
annot <- annot[complete.cases(annot), ]
# Fleiss' kappa
fleiss_result <- kappam.fleiss(annot)
print(fleiss_result)
#Cohen's Kappa
kappa_12 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann1", "Ann2")])
kappa_13 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann1", "Ann3")])
kappa_23 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann2", "Ann3")])
print(kappa_12)
print(kappa_13)
print(kappa_23)
# Function to create heatmap from confusion matrix
create_heatmap <- function(pred, ref, title){
  # Confusion matrix
  cm <- confusionMatrix(pred, ref)
  print(cm)
  cm_table <- as.table(cm$table)
  cm_melt <- melt(cm_table)
  colnames(cm_melt) <- c("Prediction","Reference","Count")
  #heatmap
  ggplot(data = cm_melt, aes(x = Reference, y = Prediction, fill = Count)) +
    geom_tile(color = "white") +
    geom_text(aes(label = Count), color = "black", size = 6) +
    scale_fill_gradient(low = "lightblue", high = "steelblue") +
    theme_minimal() +
    labs(title = title, x = "Reference", y = "Prediction", fill = "Count")
}
# Generate heatmaps for all annotator pairs
heat_12 <- create_heatmap(annot$Ann1, annot$Ann2, "Confusion Matrix: Ann1 vs Ann2")
heat_13 <- create_heatmap(annot$Ann1, annot$Ann3, "Confusion Matrix: Ann1 vs Ann3")
heat_23 <- create_heatmap(annot$Ann2, annot$Ann3, "Confusion Matrix: Ann2 vs Ann3")
# Display heatmaps
heat_12
heat_13
heat_23
```

Inter-Annotator Agreement Task3 (Humor Markers)

```
library(readr)
library(dplyr)
library(caret)
library(lattice)
library(readr)
library(reshape2)
library(irr)
library(ggplot2)
annot <- Task3[, c("Ann1", "Ann2", "Ann3")]
annot[] <- lapply(annot, function(x) factor(trimws(tolower(x))))
annot <- annot[complete.cases(annot), ]
# Fleiss Kappa
fleiss_result <- kappam.fleiss(annot)
print(fleiss_result)
# Cohen's Kappa for all annotator pairs
kappa_12 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann1", "Ann2")])
kappa_13 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann1", "Ann3")])
kappa_23 <- kappa2(annot[, c("Ann2", "Ann3")])
print(kappa_12)
print(kappa_13)
print(kappa_23)
```

Generalized Linear Mixed-effects Model (GLMM; Section 8.4.6.2)

$marker_binij_{ij} \sim Bernoulli(p_{ij}),\ logit(p_{ij}) = \beta_0 + u_j,\ u_j \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{ID})$

i = observation (tweet);
j = author (ID);
β_0= fixed intercept representing the average probability of using a humorous marker;
$u_j \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{ID})$ = random intercept for each author, capturing variability between authors
p_{ij} = probability that tweet (i) by author (j) contains a humorous marker

R Script:

```
library(lme4)
library(performance)
library(lattice)

model_author <- glmer(marker_bin ~ 1 + (1 | ID),
                      family = binomial,
                      data = dataset)
summary(model_author)

model_obs <- glmer(marker_bin ~ 1 + (1 | obs),
                   family = binomial,
                   data = dataset)
summary(model_obs)

anova(model_obs, model_author, test = "Chisq")
AIC(model_obs, model_author)

icc(model_author)
```

Author-level Binomial GLM (Section 8.4.6.2)

$y_i \sim Binomial(n_i, p_i), logit(p_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(HumorousTweets_i)$

i = number of humorous tweets containing a marker
n_i= total number of humorous tweets
p_i= probability that a humorous tweet by author *i* is marked
β_0= the intercept
β_1= the continuous effect of humorous productivity (i.e., the total number of humorous tweets authored)

R script:

```
library(dplyr)
# Build aggregated dataset per author
aggregated <- dataset_annotato_totale %>%
  filter(hum == "yes") %>%
  group_by(ID) %>%
  summarise(
    total_hum = n(),
    marked = sum(`Marker(s)` == "yes")
  )
# Fit binomial GLM
glm_mod <- glm(
  cbind(marked, total_hum - marked) ~ total_hum,
  data = aggregated,
  family = binomial
)
summary(glm_mod)
```

Tweet-level Binomial Mixed-effects Model (Section 8.4.6.2)

$y_{ij} \sim \text{Bernoulli}(p_{ij})$, $\text{logit}(p_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Mid}_i + \beta_2 \text{High}_i + u_i \sim N(0, \sigma^2_u)$

y_{ij}= 1 if the tweet contains a marker; 0 otherwise
p_{ij} =the probability that tweet *j* is marked
β_0=baseline log-odds of using a marker for authors in the *low* humorous-productivity group
β_1=difference in log-odds between *mid* and *low* groups (reference level),
β_2=difference in log-odds between *high* and *low* groups,
u_i= is a random intercept associated with author *i*

R script:

```
library(dplyr)
library(lme4)
library(lmerTest)
# Select humorous tweets and create binary marker variable
humor <- dataset_annotato_totale %>%
  filter(hum == "yes") %>%
  mutate(
    marker_bin = ifelse(`Marker(s)` == "yes", 1, 0),
    marker_bin = as.factor(marker_bin),
    ID = as.factor(ID)
  )
# Count humorous tweets per author
humor_count <- humor %>%
  group_by(ID) %>%
  summarise(n_humor = n())
# Create humor_use categories
humor_use_classes <- humor_count %>%
  mutate(
    humor_use = case_when(
      n_humor <= 10 ~ "low",
      n_humor > 10 & n_humor <= 30 ~ "mid",
      n_humor > 30 ~ "high"
)
  )
# Merge category into tweet-level dataset
humor <- humor %>%
  left_join(humor_use_classes, by = "ID") %>%
  mutate(humor_use = factor(humor_use, levels = c("low", "mid", "high")))
# Fit full mixed-effects model
mod_full <- glmer(marker_bin ~ humor_use + (1 | ID),
                  data = humor,
                  family = binomial)
summary(mod_full)
# Fit null model
mod_null <- glmer(marker_bin ~ 1 + (1 | ID),
                  data = humor,
                  family = binomial)
```

```
# Likelihood-ratio test
anova(mod_null, mod_full, test = "Chisq")
```

Generalized linear model (GLM) with a quasi- Poisson distribution and Mutual Information analysis (section 8.4.7)

$Y_i \sim \text{quasi-Poisson}(\mu_i, \phi)$

$\log(\mu_i) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Typographic}_i + \beta 2 \text{Schematic}_i + \beta 3 \text{Trope}_i$

$+ \gamma_1 \text{Affiliative}_i + \gamma_2 \text{SelfEnhancing}_i + \gamma_3 \text{SelfDeprecating}_i + \gamma_4 \text{Defensive}_i$

$+ \delta_{11} (\text{Typographic}_k \times \text{Affiliative}_j)_i + \delta_{12} (\text{Typographic}_k \times \text{SelfEnhancing}_j)_i + \delta_{13} (\text{Typographic}_k \times \text{SelfDeprecating}_j)_i \ldots$

$+ \log(\text{TotalMarkers}_i)$

R script:

```
library(emmeans)
library(multcomp)
library(dplyr)

dataset$marker_type <- factor(dataset$marker_type)
dataset$function    <- factor(dataset$function)
dataset$marker_type <- relevel(dataset$marker_type, ref = "morphosyntactic")

model <- glm(
  count ~ marker_type * function + offset(log(total_markers)),
  family = quasipoisson(link = "log"),
  data   = dataset
)
summary(model)

#Post-hoc tests
emm_marker <- emmeans(model, pairwise ~ marker_type)
emm_marker

emm_function <- emmeans(model, pairwise ~ function)
emm_function

emm_inter <- emmeans(model, pairwise ~ marker_type | function)
emm_inter

#Check overdispersion
overdispersion <- sum(residuals(model, type = "pearson")^2) / model$df.residual
overdispersion

# Fisher's exact test for local associations
tab <- table(dataset$marker_type, dataset$function)
fisher.test(tab)

# Mutual Information
mutual_info <- function(tab) {
  jt <- tab / sum(tab)
  r  <- rowSums(jt)
  c  <- colSums(jt)
  mi <- sum(jt * log(jt / outer(r, c)), na.rm = TRUE)
  return(mi)
}
MI <- mutual_info(tab)
MI
```