



# A Life in Style

In Honour of Donna R. Miller

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edited by ANTONELLA LUPORINI, MARINA MANFREDI,  
MONICA TURCI, JANE HELEN JOHNSON,  
SABRINA FUSARI, CINZIA BEVITORI



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# Ideology and identity representation in the British fascist press of the 1930s

Cinzia Spinzi

## 1. Introduction

According to the American scholar Larry Diamond (2022), the critical future of Western democracies, which are losing faith in their traditional values, is becoming an increasingly common narrative. The result, according to Diamond, is that fertile ground is being created for the rise of populist challengers to liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> We are thus witnessing a general remodelling of political discourse and a coexistence of the right and the far-right, which makes the study of political ideologies such as populism all the more remarkable. Although the relevant role that the press plays in the success of populist parties has been recognised, research on populist political communication still appears to be limited (Aalberg, de Vreese 2017, p. 4).

This paper aims to investigate patterns of identity construction and ideological discursive practises of far-right parties that can also be found in populist communication. In particular, I will focus on the British fascist communication of the 1930s, best represented by the British Union of Fascists (BUF), founded by Oswald Mosley, to examine its distinctive features and commonalities with continental fascism (Sinatra 2015). The underlying assumption of this study is that British fascism, like other totalitarian nationalist languages, represents a type of populist communication characterised by an antagonistic rhetoric (*us vs. them*) and an exaggerated anti-elitism, i.e., a rejection of the existing system that leads to the exclusion of the out-group (Reinemann *et al.* 2017).

This study finds its *raison d'être* in the fact that individual and collective memories are a tool to shed light on events and dynamics that resurface

1. <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/we-have-entered-new-historic-era-larry-diamond-addresses-future-democracy>.



selectively to shape a country's present and are therefore relevant to the discursive construction of national identity.

In order to pursue the stated objectives, this research is set within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA; Fairclough 1995), which embraces the heuristic view of ideologies as models of social cognition, shared by members belonging to a group and consisting of socio-cultural values organised into identity-relevant ideological schemes. In this context, the Systemic Functional Grammar (henceforth SFG) as developed by Michael Halliday (1995) provides a valuable analytical framework.

## 2. Ideology and populism

Although ideology has been defined very differently and broadly, a common understanding seems to be that it has the potential to create different worldviews. Modern research has identified two main tendencies of ideology: one considers it to be a misrepresentation of reality (Marxist tradition), the other sees it as part of all thought and action (Van Dijk 2000). We will place our work in the latter tradition, which is informed by both Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach (2000) and Fairclough's (1995) view that language is socially and historically situated and has a dialectical relationship with other aspects of social life. In other words, ideologies are expressed in discourse and, therefore, their deconstruction leads to an understanding of how discourses themselves are articulated in order to maintain power. Basically, all kinds of discourse are ideologically non-neutral, even those that fit into specialised communication and that are supposedly subjectively free or fully "referential" (cf. Garzone, Sarangi 2007, pp. 22-30). This point can be illustrated by looking at the bulk of research (Poncini 2004 for business discourse; Miller 2002a for political discourse) that aims to explore the way in which the speaker's stance towards the topic under discussion is encoded by examining the linguistic devices that encode opinions and judgements in professional communication.

In this chapter on ideologies and identity, it is important to note that the term populism encompasses a variety of movements, each with its own characteristics and political goals. Populist leaders can differ in their stance on issues such as nationalism, immigration, economic policy and democratic institutions. Due to its adaptability and contextual nature, scholars continue to struggle with the definition of populism (cf. Jones 2019). Academically speaking, the most popular definition is given by Mudde (2004,

p. 543) for whom populism is a “thin-centred ideology” which considers society to be based on an exaggerated antagonism between two groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” whereas politics is seen as an expression of the general will of the people. However, this general will which is first and foremost a desire for the continuance of one’s own life (Mosley, B/33/2/1/4)<sup>2</sup> is a lost truth, a value betrayed since the war by a government that is democratic in name only.

### 3. Data and methodology

In an attempt to move beyond the empirical approach of early studies of British fascism, Gottlieb and Linehan (2004) adopt a culturally informed perspective and view the BUF as a movement with its own language and symbols of self-representation. Thanks to his strong rhetorical skills and Keynesian vision of the economic state, Mosley chose fascism as the only lifeline for the financial crisis of the time, but fell victim to the narrative of the total conspiracy that the writing itself projected in its practice of association between corrupt politicians, capitalists, the press and Jews on the one hand and the people succumbing in the face of deception by the others on the other hand (cf. Webb 2012). The data for the qualitative analysis come from the BUF’s press and, more specifically, 20 articles come from the weekly newspaper *the Blackshirt*, which dated back to 1933, and 20 articles from the weekly newspaper *Action*, which was published from 1936 until 1940 as the paper of Mosley’s proto-fascist New Party.

In order to study the discursive practice of identity construction a comprehensive approach of SFG and CDA was employed. If SFG provides the tools to explore the systemic patterns of language use, CDA provides the critical lens necessary to interpret these patterns in the broader context of social power dynamics. The analysis starts with the study of the experiential metafunction, that is how both the outside world and the inner world of consciousness are encoded in the texts. In other words, these meanings primarily refer to how language represents experiences, events and states and are realised through the transitivity system. This system includes participants, processes (i.e., acts, events, feelings, beings) and

2. To make it easier for the reader to recognise the source of the data, the following formulation was chosen: the first letter of the name of the British newspaper (e.g., B for *the Blackshirt* and A for *Action*), immediately followed by the year, month and day and the number of the magazine if more than one issue was published.

circumstances, i.e., peripheral elements that usually appear in the form of adverbs and prepositional phrases. The experiential function is important insofar as the analysis of the participants (primarily the qualitative analysis of the lemma “fascism” and its word forms) and the labels used to categorise them constitute a strategic device employed by the author to express his position vis-à-vis what he is saying. As Matheson notes (2005, p. 24), labelling a person or a group of people or things indicates how members of society understand or judge an individual’s actions and allows them to make generalisations. In the construction of a nominal group, epithets are crucial for evaluation while classifiers are crucial for the process of categorisation.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. *Processes*

On perusal of the articles, the propagandistic character of the newspapers is immediately apparent, resulting from the logical argumentation of cause and effect and the powerful rhetorical devices used in the articles: i.e., emotive language, metaphors and rhetorical questions. The illocutionary force of the language is enriched by the numerous nationalist slogans such as “Britain First”; “Mind Britain’s Business!” and the ubiquitous catchy phrase “We Fight for Freedom and for Bread”, which exhorts the restoration of democratic values in the fight against the arch-enemy, i.e., poverty. The language of the BUF press, like that of other totalitarian magazines, can be described as “identity-based” because it is constitutive and creative, and has not only an interpretative, but also an evocative and legitimising function (Di Gesù 2015, p. 426).

The transitivity analysis reveals the presence of numerous relational processes of the identifying type that describe fascism as the panacea of all evils and the only movement capable of fighting the enemy, as in the two following examples:

1. The enemy of Fascism is confusion of old-world politics which reduces civilisation to chaos (B/33/6/8/1).
2. The objective of Fascism is the building of a new world order in the majestic image of Fascist peace (B/33/6/8/1).

The larger number of relational processes is motivated by what the writer sees the job of the identity description to be: specifying what fascism encompasses, namely objective virtues such as courage, honesty, love, hope, faith, discipline in contrast to objective vices such as cowardice, dishonesty, selfishness, defeatism and hatred. Without these moral foundations, “ruin and relapse into barbarism awaits the human race” (B/33/5/6/4). But “fascism is also the architect of peace” (B/33/7/11/1); it is the solution to general chaos and economic in particular, a confusion represented by the use of numerous negative lexemes (“collapse”, “anarchy”, “depression”, “confusion”, “paralysis”, “darkness”, “lethargy”). The result is an apocalyptic discourse in which “Fascism is [relational process] the only salvation of nations in the chaos of the modern world” (B/33/7/11/1).

Lexicalisation is the most important domain of ideological expression and persuasion, and thus different labels can be used for the same person or group or social issues depending on the different discourse genres, social and cultural contexts. Interestingly, there are numerous religious allusions in the identity construction of fascism (“rotten apple”; “Grab what you can and the devil take the hindmost”; “salvation”; “Satan”; B/33/7/11/1) to glorify an irreversible situation, that is rotten from within and, therefore, only fascism, as a “clean and wholesome movement”, will be able to stop this degeneration. The relational process in “Fascism is the policy of Youth” (B/33/7/11/3) once again has the function of associating fascism with youths representing innovation and the driving force behind the rise of fascism. The rhetoric of the youth, almost a super hero, is certainly not specific to British fascism, but the emphasis on physicality and the glorification of physical exercise is a particular feature represented by the frequent use of the “athlete”, a visual expression of physical and mental health and the obsession with physical activity in schools. This physical well-being is epitomised by the leader himself, who is seen as synonymous with an orderly nation that has risen from the ashes of economic chaos and cultural decadence.

The use of material processes has the primary function of identifying fascism as a movement of action, explicitly visible through the repetition of the verbs “build” and “fight” as in “Alone in the Empire Fascism fights [material process] for the interests of the producer as against the foreigner, and for the establishment of a self-contained Empire” (B/33/7/11/3).

The mental processes also fulfil a very specific function, namely that of presenting fascism as philosophically justified. Fascism is an idea, and the basis of this idea is that “RIGHT is right” (original emphasis). The most frequent anaphoric construct is of the perceptual type (e.g., “Fascism sees”;

“it intends”) that gives fascism a characterisation of extreme philosophical rationality. Among the mental processes found in the analysis, many adopt an incongruent formulation (consideration, conception, interest). These nominalisations construe epistemic statements, i.e., it is assumed that the information provided does not need to be defended or verified.

The peripheral elements of the clause also represent fascism as the only means by which the world can be almost revived (“Only Fascism can advance [mental process] such a policy, because it is [relational process] the only movement which stands for the Empire” B/33/7/10/1). The glorification of “Merry England” and the return to the imperial age, together with the ideology of insularity (cf. Spinzi 2015), constitute the traditional and cultural elements that Mosley uses to give his fascism a purely British characterisation and to legitimise his political action. Although they are considered peripheral elements of the clause, circumstances are exploited by fascist writing to reinforce and instrumentalise fascism. The lemma under investigation is often part of a circumstance of place “Fascism in Britain”, deliberately used by the writer to distinguish his own movement from the continental ones.

#### 4.2. *The participants*

Given the prevailing ideological pattern of the in-group *vs.* the out-group that characterises fascist discourse in general (Wodak, Richardson 2013), the principal participant role is “we”, evidently including fellow-members and sympathisers of the movement, in order to appeal to young people frustrated by the consequences of war and embittered by the loss of their loved ones. This suasive intention to accompany the reader in the collective re-enactment of past experiences in order to accept the proposed argumentation is visible in pervasive formulations like “we know from experience what this means”.

The use of “us” is most evident in the widely used engaging construction “let us” (e.g., “let us be clear”; “let us see what this means”; B/33/3/2) which creates an atmosphere of shared activity and politely involves the addressee in the activity without being intrusive. Through the use of politeness, however, the writer is actually trying to persuade the reader, for it is noticeable that the authoritative tone is never completely absent. This is reflected in the transitivity system, in which the verbs that frequently follow the phrase are of the mental and verbal type, such as “examine”, “tell”, “analyse”. They construct the image of an omniscient writer who seems to take the reader by the hand to convince him of the validity of his assertions. A hierarchy

is thus created that is a source of power and authority and that aims to emphasise the intellectual superiority of the fascist against the non-fascist, as can be read from the first page of *the Blackshirt*, where Mosley, in his attempt to define his newspaper's position on continental fascism, states "This paper will work for the Fascist revolution [...]. Let our position be clear. We seek our ends by legal and institutional means" (B/33/2/1/1).

The potential fascist reader is portrayed as someone who knows nothing but is eager to learn something. This provides the fascist author with a strategic opportunity to demarcate the boundaries of British fascism from continental fascism. *The Blackshirt* magazine's self-definition as a "patriotic working-class newspaper" points to the readers' identification with the working class. The investigation of the data suggests that although the unemployed, proletariat and bourgeoisie are more strongly represented, the fascist writings appeal to a rather heterogeneous target group that sympathised with the BUF for a wide variety of reasons.

#### 4.2.1. The representation of the out-group and victimisation of the in-group

Table 1 clearly shows how fascist writing polarises social actors, including fascists and Britons on the one hand and communists, Bolsheviks, Jews, internationalists, capitalists and the British press on the other<sup>3</sup>.

These data show that the labels chosen to categorise the participants refer both to a broad, general and a-historical classification of political parties and to a more specific and circumstantial and thus historically situated meaning of political parties. In this elementary dynamic we find the crucial dialectic of political experience: that between association and dissociation, between unity and disunity, between friends and foes, between integration and conflict.

According to the CDA perspective, language is exploited by speakers/writers to achieve a specific purpose, and the use of precise linguistic expressions has an ideological function, as in the case of the most frequent among the expressions in Table 1, i.e., "Old Gang". This phrase serves as a pre-modifier in longer nominal groups (e.g., "old gang governments", "old gang press", "old gang parties", "the whole humbug of the old gang of democratic government") and refers to the political elite consisting of bankers, politicians and members of the press or to anyone who did not show

3. Table 1 is available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hSwoMMoAbmjQBgGipT1UXMOHFd-dVbxVb/view>.

sympathy for Mosley's fascism. The negative connotation of "gang", which conveys the idea of a conspiracy, the use of the classifier "old" and the considerable frequency in the corpus all contribute to repeating the image of an enemy that is old as well as an evildoer. Hence the contrast with the image of the young and virile fascist is implicitly stated. "Old Gang" is also the right and left press, without distinction, for they spread untrue facts, especially in reports on fascist meetings, as in "Nonetheless, in their reports on the meeting, the Old Gang press of left and right united in an orgy of lies" (B/33/3/1). In this example, the metaphorical use of the term "orgy" in connection with already unfavourable lies lends a negative quality by conveying the idea of secret rites and pornography.

Moreover, fascist writing traces the weaknesses of the ruling politicians, who are incapable of dealing with reality, and who are so blurred that they are unable to distinguish black from white. The semantic use of colour contrasts concretises the opposition between fascism and current movements, between masculinity and effeminacy, between corporeality and weakness, intelligence and insensitivity, and in the latent confusion "all that glimmers through the darkness is the pale light of 'intellectualism'" (A/36/7/23/1).

According to the "Labelling Theory", originating from American social psychology studies (Kidder, Stewart 1975), a label distorts perceptions and creates those attributes that result from the label itself. This strategy aims to create the image of the enemy as a source of confusion and corruption, an intention that in the BUF's press is supported by the use of other epithets such as "conspirators", "speculators", "parasitic gamblers" and so on. The final aim is to legitimise the philosophy of fascism as an anchor of salvation from the existing rot determined by the stated participants: Communists, often labelled with the classifier "the reds", but also as mentally unfit ("moron") and cowards, in short "human scum", are the target of an attack based on emotion rather than on logic. This critique involves and overwhelms all governments which, now obsolete and conspiratorial, paradoxically are not afraid of an "ineffective and cowardly Communism", but of a movement, the fascist one, which on the contrary presents itself as disciplined and organised and as such attracts vitality and virility (B/33/3/1). The stigmatisation of violence by the communists automatically turns the fascists into martyrs, as highlighted in the following narrative:

3. They determine to break up our meetings by means of interruption; and if this fails, by hurling broken bottles at our speakers. The method

is this: a Communist man, his wife arrive at one of our meetings. The man holds the baby (so we can't harm him) while his wife hurls the broken bottles and being a woman we can't harm her either (B/33/6/10/1).

The enemy, determined in planned actions, actor of material processes ("hurl", "arrive", "hold"), imposes himself by unauthorised means of coercion ("broken bottles"), using with cowardice the female figure who is of great prestige for the fascist. What becomes evident is the construction of the narrative that anaesthetises violence through the brutality enacted on the street (Gottlieb 2004).

#### *4.3. Another enemy: the Jews*

Although Mosley did not initially include the Jews in the dense ranks of the enemy ("Anti-Semitism is not the main feature of Fascism" B/37/1/194/4), anti-Semitism instead became an integral part of fascist propaganda from 1936 onwards (cf. Tilles 2011). From the sin of being in favour of war and wanting to pull Britain over to Germany's side (A/33/11/2/4), the Jews then became the great financial conspirators.

Like the red enemy, the Jews are accused of cowardice and of opportunism because they have created a state within a state and because they are the fundamental component of international finance, i.e., "the one which gives it its distinctive character" (B/37/194/1/4). In an article entitled "Locusts of Humanity", the journalist rails against the Jews in terms of "horde of locusts sweeping over deserts, over the mountains" (B/37/3/203/5). The starting frame is the "Jews are pests" to the point of being compared to locusts that invade and contaminate without knowledge of borders, dehumanised ("inhuman") and tenacious ("persistent"), while only the British Union remains uncontaminated. It is only a short step here from the accusation of loathing, and in a later article we read that the Jewish businesses flourish not because "they work harder or because they are any cleverer, than Englishmen", but because they are "cunning and slimy in their business practices" (B/37/208/4/3).

## 5. Conclusion

Fascism in Britain, which shares the prevalent ideology of populism of people *vs.* the corrupted elite, is an indispensable means of achieving peace and progress, and the BUF press uses all the means at its disposal to repeat this



concept in an exaggerated manner: through the relational processes values and enemies of fascism are identified; the mental processes represent the rational and far-sighted characters; finally, the material processes glorify the sense of action.

The BUF's propaganda, like that of *Legiones y Falanges* (Di Gesù 2015), uses the powerful tools of rhetoric by making simple, emotive and forceful arguments: the polarisation of self and other is crucial as an ideological template for the enemy's identity representation and for the development and interweaving of different types of discourse (religious/apocalyptic, medical, sporting, etc.). The choice of precise lexemes, repeated through synonymy, ties in with prevailing cognitive patterns (e.g., the nation is a body; the community is an atom), which appeal to the reader on a rational level, but above all on an emotional level due to the numerous evaluative epithets.