From irony to exclusion: Blends and related word-formation processes in Italian political discourse

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The present paper concentrates on the semantics and socio-pragmatic effects of naming and appellative (van Langendonck 2008) blends (Thornton 2004; Beliaeva 2019) as well as complex words formed with secreted elements that are used in Italian political discourse and are mediated through the press and social media. Among the former, consider: *Berluscotti*, Name (< *Silvio Berlusconi*, Name, politician + *Fausto Bertinotti*, Name, politician), *gretino*, Noun (< *Greta Thurnberg*, Name, environmental activist + *cretino* 'idiot'); *accoglione*, Noun (< *accoglienza*, Noun 'reception system for refugees and asylum seekers' + *coglione*, Noun 'idiot'), or hybrids such as *Berlustrash*, Noun (< *Silvio Berlusconi*, Name, politician + *trash*). For the latter, consider *Batmangate*, Name (< *Batman's (cave) / Batman* + *-gate* 'scandal'), or *Berlusconistan*, Name (< *Silvio Berlusconi*, Name$_1$, politician + *Kazakhstan*, Name$_2$ / *-stan* 'place characterized by Name$_1$'), *Melonomics* (< *Giorgia Meloni*, Name, politician + *-nomics* 'economic policies').

More than 70 items were gathered from references including encyclopaedic dictionaries (e.g. Nuovo Devoto-Oli 2024), encyclopaedias (e.g. Enciclopedia Treccani, n.d.) and online word lists (e.g., *Neologismi della settimana Treccani*, n.d.), others were extracted from the Italian Timestamped corpus (Bušta *et al*. 2017) using Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al*. 2014). They comprise borrowings, as well as pseudo-Anglicisms (Görlach 2001), English-Italian hybrids (Iacobini 2015) and native word formations.

For the semantics and cognitive motivation of word-formations, we take a broadly cognitive-functional perspective, and combine insights from research on blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), conceptual metaphor and metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), as integrated in Benczes (2006). For complex words as names and/or formed on names, our primary references are van Langendonck (2008) and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2013).

Qualitative data analysis shows a strong preference in Italian politics for highly context-dependent word formations that deliberately realize aggressive types of verbal irony (e.g. sarcasm) for exclusion, with socio-pragmatic effects (Colston 2015) such as the expression of negativity – primarily disagreement and derision – towards the target. In particular, they are formed to enhance complicity and inclusion of like-minded addressees. The other way round, they indicate outgroup exclusion and challenge and ridicule in various ways the outgroup's values, actions and beliefs that are accessed through the referent.

For instance, in the creative (Benczes 2006) blend *gretino* and in *accoglione*, aggression is used to highlight criticism of the target (*cretino*, *coglione*), environmental activists being accessed metonymically via *Greta*, and immigration activists via *accoglienza*. Or, for one example of naming blends that metonymically refer to coalitions, views and values that are at odds with the speaker and his/her ingroup's beliefs, the target of *Berluscotti* is what the speaker sees as the unfortunate or despicable maneouvres of the leader of the Communist Party, *Fausto Bertinotti*, in that he effectively toppled the ruling coalition (while representing a minority party in it), and paved the way for the Berlusconi government (while not being a member of it).

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