

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Crisis Tsunami. Social Representations of the Economic Crisis in the Italian Press

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This research investigates social representations of the Italian economic crisis conveyed by representative Italian newspapers between 2007 and 2013. Its aim is to highlight the content of those representations as well as their objectification through the use of metaphorical language. More than 6,000 headlines were collected from four widely distributed Italian newspapers: *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Giornale*, and *Il Manifesto*. The texts underwent a lexicometric analysis using the TaLTaC<sup>2</sup> software. The results showed that the crisis was represented for the most part as an “illness coming from afar” or as an “inevitable disaster” that was shaped somehow by an “agentic entity”. These interpretations elaborated an event about which little or nothing could be done except for to suffer/endure or to try to stem the rising tide. Implications for personal attitudes and agency are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Economic crisis; Italian newspapers; Social representations; Metaphors; Quali-quantitative methods; Lexicometric analysis

In the beginning of 2007, a series of events linked to the subprime mortgage crunch in the United States triggered an economic meltdown that came to be known as a “crisis”. Not only the United States but also many other European countries are continuing to pay the price of what has been considered the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

With regard to Italy, after a series of attempts to address a situation, which began to be perceived during the first quarter of 2008, the country’s downgrading in 2011 by the most important credit rating agencies, Standard & Poor’s, Moody’s, and Fitch, created further distrust amongst investors. It was a period during which Italy started experiencing its most acute sovereign debt problems. Some statistical indexes painted a less-than-rosy picture of the Italian economy. Istat (2013), the Italian statistical agency, reported a drop in household disposable income as early as 2008. A progressive deterioration of labour market conditions, which were affected by the steady decline in economic activity, was noted in the course of 2012 (Istat, 2013). Although the employment rate did grow in 2014, it remained below the EU average (Istat, 2015).

While the political representatives are called upon to intervene in these types of situations, numerous scholars have illustrated the role played by them in the development of the crisis itself (cf. Gallino, 2011; Fortunato, 2013). The

political system is strictly connected to the economic one, both because it is invested with regulating it and because of the natural overlap that exists between the two entities. In addition, the very policies implemented to promote economic growth have led to notable ecological damage: environmental crisis and economic crisis seem to follow the same basic logic (Osti, 2013, p. 374). It is quite plausible that the global crisis is crossing multiple, interconnected fields.

In the face of this spreading global crisis, several authors set out to investigate its implications from a socio-psychological viewpoint (see, e.g., Mari et al., 2017; Lemoine et al., 2017; Papastamou et al., 2018; Poeschl et al., 2017). Specifically referring to the Greek context, some have focused on the reaction of Greek people to the crisis, considering socio-psychological aspects, such as the sense of grievances and feelings of vulnerability and the emotions they felt towards the crisis (Chrysochoou, Papastamou & Prodromitis, 2013; Prodromitis, Chrysochoou & Papastamou, 2017) and on its consequences on the country’s health care (Kondilis et al., 2013). Sociologists have considered the impact of the crisis on the labour market in the Italian context (Murgia & Poggio, 2013; Negrelli & Zaccaria, 2013), in some cases making reference even to ecological consequences (Osti, 2013).

Social representations of the economic crisis in different social groups located in a variety of European contexts have likewise been examined (Galli et al., 2010). Results of that research showed that the distance from the object “crisis” influences the representation of the phenomenon. Some authors have examined ideological, psychological, and epistemological perspectives on the credit crunch (Lewis, 2010), while others have focused on the lay explanations

of the contemporary social crises (O'Connor, 2012; Leiser, Bourgeois-Gironde & Benita, 2010) or on the rhetoric used by the media and experts (de Rosa, Bocci & Bulgarella, 2010). These authors identify two opposite views depicted by the media: the old good economy associated with the recovery and the new bad finance associated with a slowed down upturn. Other studies conducted in Romania have concentrated on communication and, specifically, how the economic crisis has been treated by the country's media (Abrudan, 2009; Radu & Ștefăniță, 2012).

Meanwhile, those who are not "insiders" aspire to understand and to elaborate a meaning for a state of perennial crisis characterized by uncertainty and oscillations. Forms of mass media, including newspapers in their capacity as privileged informants, are amongst "the actors" who are engaged in constructing a shared meaning of the crisis. By choosing the news items they report on, newspaper editors are selecting what should be highlighted, and, at the same time, they transmit their meaning by the way the information is conveyed (cf. Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992).

The present study aims to explore how representations of the crisis have been depicted in the Italian press. We will be especially interested in the use of metaphors. Moreover, taking into account a wider time span of analysis allows us to highlight variations in how the crisis is described and constructed.

### Crisis as a Social Representation

The social representations (SR) perspective seems the most appropriate theoretical approach (Moscovici, 1961/1976) to investigate the social construction of a polymorphous, turbulent phenomenon (Galli et al., 2010, p. 588). Paraphrasing Palmonari and Emiliani (2009), those social events which in a specific historical moment acquire a particular salience and which become charged with controversial meanings become the object of SRs. According to this approach, the concrete reality of the phenomenon itself is of lesser interest than its construction via the continuous interaction between individuals who are affected by it.

SRs are a form of socially produced and shared knowledge with a practical function that contributes to the construction of a common reality by a social group or entity (Jodelet, 1989, p. 36). According to Moscovici (1976), a social representation is elaborated through two fundamental processes: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring "draws something foreign and disturbing that intrigues us into our particular system of categories and compares it to the paradigm of a category which we think to be suitable" (Moscovici, 1984, p. 29). Objectifying makes a conceptual scheme real, making it possible for an image to materialize (Moscovici, 1976/2011, p. 161). As Wagner et al. (1999, p. 4) suggest, objectification "means to construct an icon, metaphor or trope which comes to stand for the new phenomenon or idea". Therefore, through metaphors, we turn a concept into an object, as various studies have shown.

For example, Wagner et al. (1999) mention Jodelet's (1991) seminal work, which showed how mental illness was objectified through images, such as "curdling" like butter or "souring" like milk, in the discourse of French

laypeople. Wagner, Elejabarrieta, and Lahnsteiner (1995) showed how lay thinking about conception in Austria was based on a sexual metaphor of activity and hardness (referring to the sperm) versus softness and submission (referring to the ovum; cf. also Wagner & Hayes, 2005). More recently, Romaioli and Contarello (2012) conducted a study to explore metaphorical aspects linked with psychotherapeutic knowledge. Results showed that the exponents of each school refer to one or more generative metaphor to orient their clinical practice. Closer to the focus of the present study, Christidou, Dimopoulos, and Koulaidis (2004) analysed techno-scientific articles published in Greek daily newspapers and popular scientific magazines and found different metaphors with a predominance of "an activity that extends the frontiers of knowledge". Besides these studies and although present since the early beginning in the SR literature (Moscovici, 1976) and discussed by various authors along time (Moliner, 1996, 2008; de Rosa & Farr, 2001; Jesuino, 2008; de Rosa, 2014), the use of metaphors in SR research has not been as widespread as we might expect. Yet, the massive literature on metaphors developed in linguistics and related disciplines might offer powerful contributions to a SR perspective.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in particular, metaphorical language is part of our daily life, of how we think and also of how we act. "A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 156). Metaphors themselves are permeating everyday life. It appears that English speakers include about one metaphor in every 10 to 25 words (Geary, 2011; cf. Landau, Robinson & Mayer, 2014). Turning also to metaphors in the study of social representations will help us to deepen our understanding of the construction of meaning in everyday life and of cultural assets which define the enquired SRs. For this purpose, we need to consider metaphors both as products and as means of construction of SRs themselves (cf. Mazzara, 2016) and, more generally, of knowledge (Maasen & Weingart 2000; Mininni, 2009).

### Aims of the Study

In September 2008, the financial crisis began to receive heightened attention from the Italian media (de Rosa et al., 2010) and became an important topic in the discourses they produced. The question we are asking now is how did the means of mass communication contribute to defining the representation of the crisis?

The article intends to examine the SR of the crisis as channelled by Italian newspapers and its evolution over time. It will investigate, in particular, (a) the lexicon most widely utilized with reference to the crisis, highlighting the content of the representation and how it varied over time and across newspapers, and (b) the metaphors describing the phenomenon through "images", indicating how the phenomenon we are studying was objectified and utilized in the periodicals that were considered.

## Method

### *The construction of the corpus to be analysed*

The material was collected from four Italian newspapers: *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Giornale*, and *Il Manifesto*. The first two were chosen because they were the most read newspapers in Italy, according to data collected by Audipress (<http://www.audipress.it>) in the period between January 7 and March 24, 2013. The last two dailies were chosen because of their political orientations: *Il Manifesto* is an Italian-language daily newspaper with communist leanings, while *Il Giornale* is centre-right oriented and owned by the family of Silvio Berlusconi, a controversial Italian political leader, three times prime minister, and media magnate.

The period that was analysed regards six and a half years, beginning in 2007, the year in which signs of the financial crisis started appearing, until June 2013 (52

weeks for every year from 2007 to 2012, and 24 weeks for 2013). Nine salient time spans during that period,<sup>1</sup> that were linked to specific events related to the crisis in the world or to political events in Italy, were selected for analysis. Finally, two weeks for each year<sup>2</sup> were also randomly selected for analysis. The <http://www.random.org> site was used to make that selection. If one of the random weeks had already been selected because it was a salient week, the randomization process was repeated (**Table 1**).

For every period taken into account, we considered a span of time from one week before the day of the event (or the first day of the month in those cases in which only the quarter was indicated) to one week after the same day of the following month. We chose to include two random weeks during each year and a week before an event that was identified as salient to avoid the risk of obtaining material only during periods in which the news was still considered “hot”. According to a study by Lacy, Riffe,

| Year                         | Period Considered              | Salient Event   | Notes   |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| 2007                         | 31 Jan to 14 March             | New Century, a leading sub-prime mortgage lender, files for bankruptcy. | The financial crisis becomes palpable.  |
| 2007 week 1 and 2007 week 2  | 11–17 June to 13–19 Aug        | RANDOM  |   |
| 2008a                        | 6 Apr to 20 May                | 13–14 April: political elections.                                       | Berlusconi government takes office (8 May).   |
| 2008b                        | 8 Sept to 22 Oct               | Lehman Brothers files bankruptcy (15 Sept).                             | The crisis begins to appear in the Italian media.   |
| 2008 week 1 and 2008 week 2  | 24–30 March and 18–24 Aug      | RANDOM  |   |
| 2009                         | 24 Sept to 8 Nov               | GDP shows signs of recovery.  |   |
| 2009 week 1 and 2009 week 2  | 2–8 March to 25–31 May         | RANDOM  |   |
| 2010                         | 25 March to 8 May              | The crisis explodes in Greece.  | The first country in the Eurozone enters the acute phase of the crisis, drawing quite a bit of media attention. |
| 2010 week 1 and 2010 week 2  | 15–21 Feb to 17–23 May         | RANDOM  |   |
| 2011a                        | 24 June to 8 Aug               | This is the most acute phase of sovereign debt in Italy.                |   |
| 2011b                        | 5 Nov to 19 Dec                | Berlusconi resigns (12 Nov).  | The Monti government takes office (16 Nov).   |
| 2011 vweek 1 and 2011 week 2 | 14–20 Feb to 10–16 Oct         | RANDOM  |   |
| 2012                         | 25 Jan to 8 March 2012         | The spread decreases.   | European cooperation occurs.  |
| 2012 week 1 and 2012 week 2  | 28 May to 3 June and 10–16 Dec | RANDOM  |   |
| 2013                         | 17 Feb to 31 March             | 24–25 Feb 2013: political elections.                                    | The Letta government takes office (28 April).   |
| 2013 week 1 and 2013 week 2  | 28 Jan to 3 Feb and 3–9 June   | RANDOM  |   |

**Table 1:** Outline of Salient Events Taking Place in the Periods Studied.

*Note:* The letter next to the year refers to specific periods, as explained in the text.

Stoddard, Martin, and Chang (2001), approximately ten (two for every year) randomized weeks are necessary for accurate inferences for five years of newspaper content. It was possible to trace material regarding the long period that our investigation assessed using the online database only for *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* newspapers. We consulted the paper versions, which were available through a video support for the other two newspapers.

All the titles (with relative subtitles, taglines, and sub-headings) in the four newspapers considered containing the word “crisis” were registered. When the word referred to a medical context or was used in a gossip column or in the sports pages, the cases were excluded. Titles were used as the starting point for the analysis because they act as guides in interpreting the articles themselves (Eco, 1971; Van Dijk, 1991; Gius, Zamperini & Collini, 1998) and because the information they contain is what is most remembered by the reader (Gius et al., 1998).

It is also true that beyond their role in interpreting news items, titles condense them. If titles are perfectly coined, they give the reader an essential knowledge of the news, regardless of whether excerpts of the article are read. Titles are, moreover, homogeneous from a stylistic point of view, since, unlike the articles, they are drafted by the editor (Papuzzi, 2010, p. 193).

### Analysis Procedure

#### *Quantitative textual analysis using TaLTaC<sup>2</sup> software*

The corpus was initially analysed using the TaLTaC<sup>2</sup> software (Trattamento Automatico Lessicale e Testuale per l'Analisi del Contenuto—Lexical and Textual Automatic Treatment for the Content Analysis) to highlight the content of the representation. The corpus was first normalized (cf. Bolasco, 2010). Then, we obtained a list of repeated

sequences of words from which we selected the most informative ones, according to the Morrone's statistical IS index (Bolasco, Baiocchi & Morrone, 2000) and with a manual control. In this way, we obtained a new list containing multi-words and sequences of words, principally including the word “crisis”, which gain a different meaning if considered as a block (e.g., financial crisis, government crisis, financial storm). The produced list was used for the lexicalization procedure. This means that the sequences of words in the list became textual units. The lexicometric characteristics of the corpus (**Table 2**), which were analysed to evaluate its adequacy, were found acceptable (cf. Tuzzi, 2003).

Using a software procedure based on a hypergeometric model, the characteristic words with respect to the “time” variable (21 modalities) and with respect to the “newspaper” variable (4 modalities) were extracted. As Pauli and Tuzzi (2009) suggest, this means that all words that show a high probability of over-usage in a period or in a newspaper can be considered distinctive to that period/newspaper with respect to the others. The time periods originally considered for analysis were unified to simplify their exposition. They were originally 21 (9 linked to salient events and 14 random weeks). Following unification, they were 9 (**Table 3**).

#### *Identifying metaphors*

To examine how the phenomenon was objectified, words portraying the crisis through images were also individuated manually using a bottom-up procedure. The analysis was carried out by the first author with thorough exchanges with the others as regards criteria and choices for disambiguation. We started from a careful reading of the vocabulary created through the software (list of words), excluding hapax (words appearing only once), and we identified words that in our view might recall a

|                                     |        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| N – Total occurrences               | 188566 |
| V – Different word-types            | 23126  |
| $(V/N)*100$ – Type/Token Ratio      | 12.264 |
| $(V_i/V)*100$ – Percentage of hapax | 51.397 |

**Table 2:** Lexicometric Characteristics.

| Final Outcome | Periods Initially Included        |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| 2007N         | 2007 + 2007 week 1                |
| 2008AN        | 2007 week 2 + 2008 week 1 + 2008a |
| 2008BN        | 2008b + 2008 week 2               |
| 2009N         | 2009 week 1 + 2009 week 2 + 2009  |
| 2010N         | 2010 week 1 + 2010 + 2010 week 2  |
| 2011AN        | 2011 week 1 + 2011a               |
| 2011BN        | 2011b + 2011 week 2               |
| 2012N         | 2012 + 2012 week 1 + 2012 week 2  |
| 2013N         | 2013 + 2013 week 1 + 2013 week 2  |

**Table 3:** Outline of the Unification of the Periods Analysed.

metaphoric language. Then, we connected these words to their context; that is, we re-read the words within the titles. Identified metaphors were thus classified into mutually exclusive categories. Their frequency in the periods examined and across the newspapers analysed was observed.

## Results

### *Preliminary considerations regarding the quantity of titles*

A total of 6,471 titles were identified: 1,804 in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 768 in *Il Giornale*, 820 in *Il Manifesto*, and 3,079 in *La Repubblica* (Table 4).

As explained above, the study attempted to delineate the evolution of the way the crisis was depicted over time, paying close attention, in particular, to differences between the four newspapers that were considered. Beginning in 2008b (second period considered in the analysis in 2008, coinciding with the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers), a higher number of titles linked to the crisis with respect to precedent periods was noted. Another increment with respect to other periods was noted in period 2011b

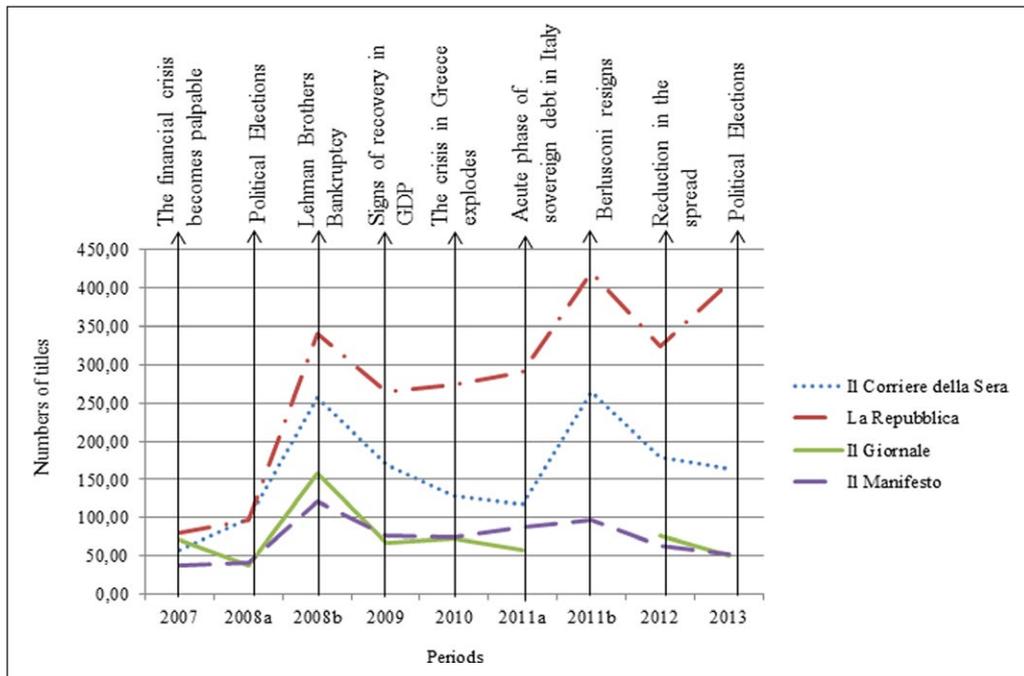
(coinciding with the time of prime minister Berlusconi's party's resignation from the government and the formation by Mario Monti of a new government). Unlike the other newspapers, there was a higher number of titles in *La Repubblica* with respect to precedent periods up to and including 2013, although the quantity fell throughout 2012 (coinciding with a fall in the spread between Italian and German 10-year benchmark bonds).

The number of titles referring to specific salient events was also examined (Figure 1). Figure 1 does not include data for 2011b with regard to *Il Giornale*, as this newspaper for that period was not present in the archive that we utilized. Moreover, it has to be taken into account that the online database was only available for *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, and this influences the quantity of detected titles even if, according to Wurff and Lauf (2005), this does not necessarily influence the contents.

As can be seen in the figure, there are few titles in the first period (which was chosen because of a palpable financial crisis that already existed according to economic indexes). Generally, what stands out is the quantity of titles referring to the crisis that appear not only when

|             | Il Corriere della Sera | La Repubblica | Il Giornale | Il Manifesto | Total |
|-------------|------------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| 2007        | 57                     | 81            | 71          | 38           | 247   |
| 2007 week 1 | 3                      | 9             | 5           | 3            | 20    |
| 2007 week 2 | 12                     | 15            | 13          | 6            | 46    |
| 2008a       | 98                     | 97            | 37          | 42           | 274   |
| 2008b       | 257                    | 340           | 158         | 121          | 876   |
| 2008 week 1 | 17                     | 10            | 8           | 10           | 45    |
| 2008 week 2 | 14                     | 14            | 10          | 5            | 43    |
| 2009        | 170                    | 264           | 67          | 77           | 578   |
| 2009 week 1 | 61                     | 57            | 27          | 27           | 172   |
| 2009 week 2 | 33                     | 54            | 16          | 20           | 123   |
| 2010        | 128                    | 274           | 73          | 74           | 549   |
| 2010 week 1 | 31                     | 24            | 5           | 15           | 75    |
| 2010 week 2 | 26                     | 36            | 21          | 18           | 101   |
| 2011a       | 118                    | 290           | 58          | 88           | 496   |
| 2011b       | 265                    | 420           |             | 97           | 840   |
| 2011 week 1 | 20                     | 35            | 4           | 7            | 66    |
| 2011 week 2 | 37                     | 76            | 12          | 21           | 146   |
| 2012        | 179                    | 324           | 77          | 63           | 643   |
| 2012 week 1 | 42                     | 61            | 15          | 7            | 125   |
| 2012 week 2 | 27                     | 71            | 16          | 11           | 125   |
| 2013        | 163                    | 407           | 51          | 53           | 674   |
| 2013 week 1 | 21                     | 59            | 12          | 13           | 105   |
| 2013 week 2 | 25                     | 61            | 12          | 4            | 102   |

**Table 4:** The Number of Titles Regarding the Crisis Found in the Newspapers Analysed in the Periods Considered.



**Figure 1:** The Number of Titles Containing the Word “Crisis” Appearing in the Different Newspapers at the Times of Specific Events.

the more acute phase of sovereign debt in Italy began, but also when the Berlusconi government resigned and the Monti government took office.<sup>3</sup> A reduction in the quantity of titles was nevertheless registered during that period in *Il Corriere della Sera* with respect to precedent periods.

#### **Distinctive lexicon of the periods considered**

Besides the number of titles, we also studied how their content changed over time and from newspaper to newspaper. The lexicon that was characteristic of the different periods studied ( $\alpha \leq 0.025$ ) was identified. A synthesis of the results of this analysis is outlined below.

In the first two periods (2007 and 2007 week 1), lexical items refer to political topics such as *government crisis* (*crisi di governo*). Beginning in 2007 week 2, lexical items make reference to the American context, the stock market, and subprime mortgages. The word *anticrisis* (*anticrisi*), as can be seen, becomes characteristic before the word *crisis* alone. During the period coinciding with the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy, the lexicon that was utilized revolves around that particular situation and frequently referred to the name of that specific firm, the names of banks, economic aspects, and the names of American politicians. During that same period, words linked to preoccupation, such as *fears*, *storm*, *financial blizzard*, and so on (*timori*, *tempesta*, *bufera finanziaria*, ecc.), became commonplace.

In the following period (which includes much of 2009), words connected to the workplace, the construction industry, and the family frequently appeared. Words with negative connotations, such as *precarious*, *bankruptcy*, *layoffs*, *tension*, *unemployment* (*precari*, *bancarotta*, *licenziamenti*, *tensione*, *disoccupazione*), alternate with terms that allude to a positive outcome, such as *beat the crisis*, *solidarity*, *the*

*end of the crisis*, *resisting* (*battere la crisi*, *solidarietà*, *uscita dalla crisi*, *resistono*).

During 2010, the terms frequently found refer to the situation in Greece and were linked to rating agencies and industries and include phrases alluding to a new “fall” (*it’s not over yet*, *new crisis*, *collapse—non è finita*, *nuova crisi*, *crolla*) as well as those evoking a recovery (*recovery*, *solution*, *beyond the crisis—ripresa*, *soluzione*, *oltre la crisi*). Words evoking European topics (*Merkel*, *the Euro*, *Portugal—Merkel*, *Euro*, *Portogallo*) were also commonplace. During the last part of 2010 (2010 week 2), other lexical items connected to “countermeasures” against the crisis, such as *manoeuvre*, *measures*, *rigor*, *stability*, *austerity* (*manovra*, *misura*, *rigore*, *stabilità*, *austerità*), began to emerge. Beginning in 2011 week 1 and throughout 2011a (the first salient period considered in 2011), the names of Italian politicians and terms such as *preoccupation*, *emergency*, *decline*, *debt*, *contagion* (*preoccupazione*, *emergenza*, *declino*, *debito*, *contagion*) became frequent. Words linked to Europe, such as *Eurogroup*, *European crisis* (*eurogruppo*, *crisi europea*), continued to appear frequently. It should be remembered that while that period was chosen because it was the beginning of the most acute period of sovereign debt in Italy, it was also characterized by tensions in the government of the time.

The following period (2011 week 2) was characterized by lexical items regarding action and protests, such as *indignant*, *manifestation*, *take to the streets*, *demonstration*, *to act* (*indignati*, *manifestazione*, *in piazza*, *protesta*, *corteo*, *agire*). In 2011b, other terms regarding Europe, such as *Europe*, *Euro*, *Eurozone*, *Bruxelles*, *Berlin* (*Europa*, *Euro*, *Eurozona*, *Bruxelles*, *Berlino*), were frequently found, and the name Monti surfaced for the first time, as did the *Italian crisis* (*crisi italiana*).

During 2012, the lexical items used once again concentrated on the crisis (*there is crisis, at the time of the crisis—c'è la crisi, ai tempi della crisi*) and were concerned with various sectors (*employment, young people, work—occupazione, giovani, lavoro*), explanations (*behind the crisis, explain, background—dietro la crisi, spiega, retroscena*), and countermeasures (*we can, sacrifices, beyond the crisis—possiamo, sacrifici, oltre la crisi*). In the period before 2013, lexical items describing actions carried out by the crisis (*the crisis' fault—colpa della crisi*) were frequent, as were crisis-related words (*strikes, closed, problems, they fear—colpisce, chiusi, problemi, temono*). The terms frequently seen were more diversified with respect to a precedent period (*trade, business, university, schools, construction industry, firms, planet, pensioners, social—commercio, imprese, università, scuole, edilizia, aziende, pianeta, pensionati, sociale*). Names linked to Italian politics (*Brunetta and Letta*) were mentioned frequently, probably because the specific time span was an election period.

#### **Distinctive lexicon of the newspapers considered**

The lexicon of the four newspapers considered was analysed to identify differences. A lexicon specific to the economic sphere (*stock markets, trend, finances, etc.—mercati, trend, finanza, ecc.*) was found in *Il Corriere della Sera* but less so in *La Repubblica*. A lexicon regarding different subjects linked to the crisis (*stores, families, etc.—negozi, famiglie, ecc.*) was found in *La Repubblica* and to a lesser extent in the other three newspapers. *Il Manifesto* and *Il Giornale* were filled with terms referring to political subjects. Consistent with its declared political leanings, *Il Manifesto* was characterized by terminology regarding action and protest (*rights, general strike, etc.—diritti, sciopero generale, ecc.*).

Lexical items referring to work were commonplace both in *La Repubblica* and in *Il Manifesto*. There were numerous references to foreign problems in all the newspapers studied, with the exception of *La Repubblica*, which contained fewer allusions. Unlike *Il Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale*, in which only names of countries belonging to the Eurozone were mentioned, *Il Manifesto* made reference to a wider context (*global crisis—crisi globale*). Specific terminology referring to actions that could be carried out to counter the crisis situation was found in all of the newspapers, but preponderantly so in *Il Corriere della Sera*.

It was interesting to note how terminology having negative connotations was utilized by the different newspapers: *Il Corriere della Sera* alluded to *contagion (contagio)*, while *La Repubblica* referred to a crisis that “bites” (*morde*) or “strikes” (*colpisce*). *Il Giornale* commented on the *abyss (baratro)* or *threats (minacce)*, and *Il Manifesto* made mention to *victims (vittime)*. *La Repubblica* used the word *crisis (crisi)* in a variety of phrases charged with different meanings (*in crisis, against the crisis, it knows no crisis, at the time of the crisis, to exit from the crisis, there is crisis, the fault of the crisis—in crisi, contro la crisi, non conosce crisi, ai tempi della crisi, uscire dalla crisi, c'è la crisi, colpa della crisi, and so on*).

#### **Metaphors**

Consistent with the study's second aim, words describing the crisis using images were also examined. As mentioned above, expressing concepts through images is part of the objectifying process in constructing SR (Moscovici, 1976; Wagner et al., 1999). Five metaphors referring to the “crisis” were identified:

- The crisis was described as an “illness”, for example: “The crisis of the marketplace. Solidarity and counter contagion measures. That is how Europe can be given new force”<sup>4</sup> (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 05/08/2011).
- It was invested with the characteristics of an “active agent”. “Commerce. The crisis takes its toll on Christmas shopping emptying the malls. More curiosity than buying in megastores. Only the cell phone continues to be a hot item. But paid in instalments” (*La Repubblica*, 12/12/2011).
- It was represented as “catastrophic events” taking place in nature. “These are the new policies needed to exit from the tsunami financial crisis” (*La Repubblica*, 26/04/2010).
- It was compared to “objects”. “The price of the crisis” (*Il Manifesto*, 29/06/2011).
- It was described using images evoking a “fall”. “Crisis. The United States on the edge of an abyss. Obama: ‘default unacceptable’. Negotiations with the Republicans continue ‘it will not be a temporary agreement’. Difficulty. The opposing party does not want to cut tax relief for the rich. Deficit. National debt has tripled since Clinton's time” (*Il Giornale*, 12/07/2011).

We then examined how these metaphors were used over time during the various periods analysed (**Figure 2**) and in the different newspapers considered (**Figure 3**, in which, to facilitate reading, percentages are reported). It was noted that image-making language became noticeable beginning in the second half of 2008 (2008BN), which coincided with the time the crisis appeared preponderantly in newspapers despite the fact that it was present even earlier. In the second half of 2008, metaphors used with reference to the crisis, such as “fall”, were frequent, while in a later period, metaphors treating the crisis as an agent became more commonplace. In subsequent periods, these two metaphors remained the most frequently found.

As far as their occurrence in the different newspapers, metaphors linked to illness were more commonly used by *Il Corriere della Sera* in comparison to the others. With the exception of *La Repubblica*, where the most used metaphor depicted the crisis as an active agent, the most widely used set of metaphors referred to “fall”.

With regard to a lexical analysis of image-making language during the 2011a period, *Il Corriere della Sera* frequently made reference to *contagion (contagio)*. During that same period, the image of *abyss (baratro)* was frequently used in *Il Giornale*. Reference was often made to images referring to a *storm and blizzard (tempesta and bufera)* in 2008 week 2 and 2008b.

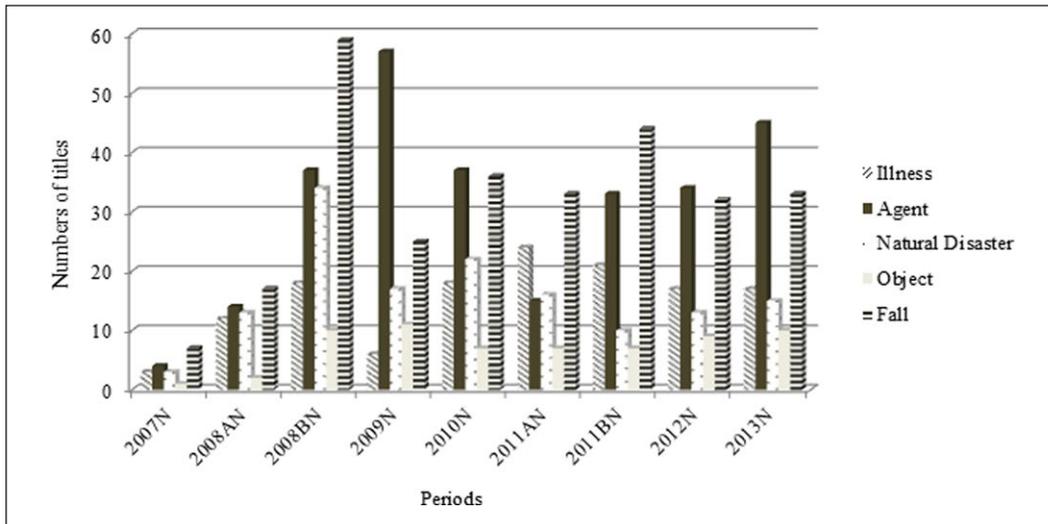


Figure 2: The Use of Metaphors During the Period Studied.

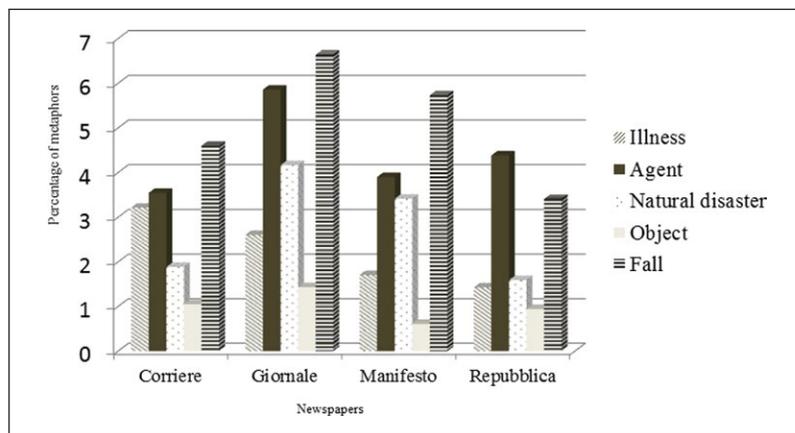


Figure 3: The Use of Metaphors in the Four Newspapers Studied.

**Discussion and Conclusive Remarks**

When an event or phenomenon appears on the horizon, some kind of meaning is usually ascribed to it to render it familiar, or, in other words, it becomes necessary to construct systems of beliefs that give order to reality (Palmonari & Emiliani, 2009, p. 48). The global financial crisis is a phenomenon that has been debated for several years now, and numerous scholars have already attempted to analyse its causes and its implications. The current research examined how the Italian crisis was constructed by the mass media from a psychosocial point of view. The temporal evolution of the current Italian economic crisis as portrayed by several newspapers has been presented. This was done by examining the phenomenon in terms of the frequency of titles dedicated to it and the distinctive lexical items used along time and across newspapers. As has been noted in the literature, much attention was dedicated to the crisis by newspapers beginning in the fall of 2008 (cf. de Rosa et al., 2010).

In accordance with studies (cf. Abrudan, 2009; López & Llopis, 2010) carried out in other countries, greater or lesser attention was dedicated to the phenomenon, depending on events taking place in the political arena.

On the one hand, this study has made it possible to use diverse methods to confirm some results already presented in the literature, and, on the other, it has provided new data in the light of the long period of time that has been analysed.

Briefly said, an analysis of the words (lexical units) used to delineate the crisis over a period of time in the newspapers considered conveys the impression that it was “moving further away” or “getting closer”. During the first period, the phenomenon was described using specific words, such as *anticrisis* or *American crisis* (*anticrisi* or *crisi americana*), apparently indicating that at the beginning it was thought that a situation defined in negative terms (*fall*, *trouble*, *fears—caduta*, *guai*, *timori*) could be kept at bay. The storm thus seemed distant and of interest primarily to the American economy. Over time, the situation seemed to come nearer geographically, becoming “European”; in fact, some words specifically refer to that context. Then the *contagion* (*contagio*) took place; the metaphor gives the impression that the crisis could be transmitted in the same way as a virus. It was thus communicated to the Italian economy, and it became “Italian” during the last periods considered.

There is no doubt that the financial crisis was triggered, according to many scholars, by the inappropriate use of subprime mortgages and, more generally, to some economic factors regarding the American economy. But in a globalized world-society (Gallino, 2011), where it is not clear where borders begin and end, we may legitimately wonder how much a “crisis that comes from afar” is real or amplified by certain information rhetoric.

In the attempt to observe whether and how the crisis was objectified, the language articulating the phenomenon through images was identified. As was outlined earlier, the results highlighted refer to a “disease”, and the possible “remedies” that were proposed were often explained in terms of *therapy (terapia)* or remedies (*aspirin–aspirina*). Other metaphors referred to an “entity that acts” being able, for example, to *bite* and *devour (morde and divora)* and against which we must *fight* and *resist (combattere and resistere)*. The crisis, which was naturalised, acquired its own autonomy.

There were also many images comparing the crisis to a natural catastrophe, all high-impact metaphors evoking a representation of an event that, like a storm, we can only wait out and hope for the best. Even though with different objectives and in different contexts with respect to the Italian ones, similar metaphors were identified by López and Llopis (2010). In their study, the crisis was portrayed in Spanish and English newspapers as a force of nature or with the characteristics of an agent. Strong support for the present results also comes from just published analysis of a wider array of Italian newspapers (Leone & Mazzara, 2016).

The etymology of the word “crisis”, from the Greek κρίσις (*krisis*), can be traced to “decision”, “choice”, a word that assumes different meanings depending on its context. As a turning point or as a transition period, a crisis can be seen as an opportunity for change and transformation, but the metaphors identified here, linked to illness and natural disasters, evoked events against which we are helpless. An examination of the lexicon described above seems to bear out this interpretation of the crisis as an autonomous phenomenon that has fallen upon the society, an inevitable disaster arriving from afar. SRs are strictly correlated to practices that condition and in turn are conditioned by how we move and act in our everyday interactions (Jovchelovitch, 1996). A representation of a crisis that evokes passivity and only the possibility of “seeking shelter from the storm” precludes any possibility of responding proactively to the situation. A perception of a lack of *agency* can affect both people’s actions and attitudes, making them lose the will to change, as the very etymology of the word itself would suggest.

A study conducted by Kondilis et al. (2013) in Greece illustrated that the perception of the crisis can have important reverberations on the decision to engage or to persist in risky behaviours (such as substance abuse or even suicide). In general, a rhetorical construction and, consequently, the perception that is generated of an event can be instrumental in the decision to respond to it in an active rather than in a disheartened way. Reinterpreting events from a non-paralysing perspective could contribute to an individual’s or a society’s endurance capacity.

Differences between the newspapers considered appeared to be linked to each newspaper’s role or political orientation. For example, in *La Repubblica*, a newspaper that is considered close to its readers (Calabrese & Violi, 1984), we found lexical items referring to different aspects affected by the crisis. The lexicon of *Il Corriere della Sera* was largely associated to economic aspects. This is in line with data from precedent studies considering that the newspaper explicitly engaged in offering a privileged point of view and an “objective non-partial” perspective (Calabrese & Violi, 1984). *Il Giornale* often used the crisis for policy-making, in fact in this newspaper the most distinctive lexicon concerns politics. In *Il Manifesto*, differently from *Il Corriere della Sera* in which terminology concerning action referred to policies against the crisis, there is a call for action in terms of protest.

Nevertheless, it seems that the different detected rhetorical strategies converge, conveying messages which change over time and imply—contributing to co-construct them—different attitudes and views by people in everyday life. First the crisis appears to refer to a distant context, suggesting indifference by citizens. Later the metaphor of contagion seems to involve individuals, but leaving them unprepared and stunned. Lastly, the overwhelming crisis raises feelings of helplessness. In each of these cases, the metaphorical layout selected and diffused by the media does not make it possible to devise some form of proactive attitude, severely limiting individuals’ degrees of freedom in their effort to cope with a situation as complex and problematic as that of the crisis.

As a word of caution, we have to take into account that our kind of analysis, focused on the lexicon, does not permit to identify some rhetorical devices and semantic nuances intrinsic to communication, such as irony. Different analyses could highlight these aspects, possibly pointing out major differences among the newspapers. For example, different modes of discourse production and organization (Moscovici, 1961/1976) could be specified. From this viewpoint, it would be useful to also examine stylistic differences between press and online news in the daily press in depth. Furthermore, although we focused on titles considering that their stylistic and content characteristics fit better with our purpose of analysis, we acknowledge that taking into account the entire text of the articles could highlight further nuances.

Finally, we raise the importance of reflecting on the risk of an uncritical use of metaphors in Italian newspapers. These metaphors are probably selected for their sensationalistic stance, but they are rarely analysed with respect to their implications on individuals’ lived experience and agency capabilities. If a naïve approach to writing implies a description of reality exactly as reality is, awareness of the performative power of language allows a critical/ethical control on journalists’ words, monitoring their consequences at a socio-cultural level (and this is relevant especially when those words are amplified through powerful megaphones, as media are). Indeed, the metaphors highlighted by our study can be considered a kind of iatrogenic communication *tout court*. Once these forms of language are hosted and shared within everyday thinking

as ways to organize the understanding of events and to respond to them, negative self-fulfilling prophecies risk to be generated. Therefore, a vicious circle might negatively affect several levels: (1) increasing feelings of helplessness among individuals; (2) reducing the collective capability to manage and respond to problems; and (3) inducing people to adopt cautious and defensive stances which, via their social and economic implications, may co-produce the crisis itself.

If this scenario is the one which the rhetoric conveyed by media leads to, pragmatic psychosocial inquiries should also identify whether and how people succeed in challenging these constructions in their daily lives, expanding possible counter narratives. This research was focused on the SR of crisis as depicted and constructed in and by daily newspapers. Further studies could explore the SR of the economic crisis in everyday discourses, thus expanding our knowledge on the issue in relation to and possibly in contrast with the voice of media.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The year of each is specified, and they are marked with a or b if there were two such time spans in the same year.
- <sup>2</sup> The year of each is specified, and they are marked with week 1 or week 2.
- <sup>3</sup> The technocratic, nonpartisan government that was formed to head off the crisis.
- <sup>4</sup> The Italian excerpts are available from the authors upon request.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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