Strategic maneuvering through shifting ideographs in political discourse

A rhetorical analysis of Silvio Berlusconi’s first Liberation Day speech

Pamela Pietrucci
Department of Communication, University of Washington, Seattle

Politicians often need to appeal to a composite audience characterized by heterogeneous values and beliefs. In order to do so, they turn to techniques of ambiguity that make their positions seem broadly applicable. This essay is an analysis of the rhetorical strategy employed by Silvio Berlusconi in his first Liberation Day speech, which illustrates an example of strategic maneuvering through shifting ideographs in political discourse, a rhetor’s persuasion technique that succeeded in manufacturing consent across an ideologically polarized audience.

Strategically shifting ideographs by replacing <Liberation> with <Liberty>, Berlusconi successfully crafted a speech that was received favorably by most of the nation’s political forces. The center-left coalition interpreted the speech positively, describing it as a welcome and unexpected display of bipartisanship because of Berlusconi’s endorsement of the values of the Resistance; the center-right also praised Berlusconi’s speech because they saw it as a historical and partisan revision of Liberation; finally, only the radical extra-parliamentary left harshly critiqued it for what they saw as Berlusconi’s cynical efforts to exploit the celebration.

Keywords: strategic maneuvering, composite audience, ideograph, strategic ambiguity, polysemy

Argumentation and Rhetorical Perspectives: Strategic Manuvering and Strategic Ambiguity in Political Discourse

Regardless of political party affiliation or ideological commitment, politicians commonly face rhetorical situations that require appealing to heterogeneous audiences. Rhetoric and argumentation scholars have studied several techniques
used by speakers attempting to ingratiate a “composite audience,” which Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:21) describe as one of heterogenous, particular sub-publics that constitute the larger audience of a text.

In discussing techniques of persuasion of a composite audience, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca illustrated the use of augmentation and redundancy of argument, namely the lengthening of statements by rephrasing arguments in ways that appeal to the various groups addressed; Michael Leff and Gerald Morhmann described “segmental techniques” (Myers 1999:56), the arrangement of the text in sequences that speak in turn to the different sub-audiences, seeking a positive response from each and every one of them; Wayne Thomson (1979) and David Henry (1988) found that in two cases of successful keynote addresses, speakers were able to adapt rhetorically to dual audiences, by fulfilling dual and conflicting purposes strategically for the former, and by using metaphor as an argumentative technique for the latter. Finally, others have identified techniques which focus on integrating and interweaving the appeal to different audiences by avoiding controversial material and using ambiguous language (Myers 1999:56). In the context of political argumentation, in brief, rhetors who aspire to appeal to a composite audience often turn to strategies of rhetorical ambiguity in order to persuade its members “to interpret the text as being in accord with their own values, regardless of the rhetor’s own values” (Duncan 2011:455).

The use of ambiguity can positively engage a composite audience insofar as it allows for polysemic, multiple readings of the same text. Leah Ceccarelli (Ceccarelli 1998:404) described this technique as “strategic ambiguity,” a kind of polysemic that occurs when a text is rhetorically designed by its author to allow distinct groups in the audience, characterized by diverse ideologies and attitudes, to see different meanings arising from the same text. Each group reads the text as supporting its own beliefs and ideas, yet all of the groups converge in praising it because of their divergent interpretations (Ceccarelli 1998:404). Eric Eisenberg provides a similar definition of strategic ambiguity, explaining how “an insider audience can easily assign their own values to an ‘open’ text while an alienated audience is simultaneously mystified by seeming ambiguity in that same text” (Eisenberg 1984:234 cited in Duncan 2011:456). In both Ceccarelli’s and Eisenberg’s conceptualizations, a strategically ambiguous text can be critically judged by looking at the situation in which it appeared, and at the polysemic readings it inspired. Ceccarelli distinguishes “Aesopian” and “hegemonic” strategic ambiguity by associating the former to polysemic texts which attempt to subvert hegemonic power and the latter to those that reinforce it (Ceccarelli 1998:407).

Analyzing political discourse from an argumentation standpoint, which adopts van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s definition of rhetoric as “the theoretical study of
the potential effectiveness of argumentative discourse in convincing or persuading an audience in actual argumentative practice” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2006: 383), we can consider rhetorical strategic ambiguity as a modality of strategic maneuvering, with the potential to be particularly effective for the heterogeneous audience of political discourse.

Strategic maneuvering, as theorized by van Eemeren and Houtlosser, is a “systematic integration of rhetorical considerations into a dialectical framework of analysis” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 135 cited in Zarefsky 2006: 400), and it is a theoretical concept that aims at bridging the gap between dialectic and rhetoric by analyzing “the efforts arguers make in argumentative discourse to reconcile aiming for rhetorical effectiveness with maintaining dialectical standards of reasonableness” (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2006: 383).

Zarefsky (2006) explains that the pragma-dialectical project aims precisely at incorporating rhetorical perspectives into dialectics through the concept of strategic maneuvering. Furthermore, according to Zarefsky, strategic maneuvering is in no way optional in any argumentative exchange, rather it is inherent in all argumentative discourse. He argues, moreover, that strategic maneuvering is always already present, even when we consider it from a rhetorical perspective:

This means that there is no alternative to persuasion in order to influence the judgment of a specific audience; it is all strategic maneuvering, all the way down…

From a rhetorical perspective, the goal of persuading an audience is not only not a constraint but would seem to encourage whatever strategic maneuvering would be effective; in that sense, strategic maneuvering is all there is (Zarefsky 2006: 400).

If strategic maneuvering is ubiquitous from a rhetorical perspective, as it is necessary to persuade and influence the judgment of a specific audience, we should consider it a key concept particularly when we look at political discourse. According to Zarefsky (2006), strategic maneuvering is essential in political argumentation, where speakers aim at a constructive result in persuading a composite audience. Zarefsky (2006) lists several “means of strategic maneuvering” for political argumentation, including: (1) changing the subject, (2) modifying the relevant audience, (3) appealing to liberal and conservative presumptions, (4) reframing the argument, (5) using condensation symbols, (6) employing the locus of irreparable, and finally (7) using figures and tropes argumentatively. Among these, we can recognize some of the rhetorical techniques of persuasion for a heterogeneous
audience cited above. However, this essay will expand on the discussion about means of strategic maneuvering for political argumentation by identifying a technique of persuasion for a composite audience that consists in switching ideographs associated to the political ideologies of a polarized public. In order to illustrate this particular means of strategic maneuvering, this essay includes a rhetorically grounded case study on Silvio Berlusconi’s first Liberation Day speech.

This case study shows that Berlusconi advanced two hegemonic polysemic readings of his speech by shifting two key ideographs of Italian political discourse. In his first Liberation Day address, Berlusconi substituted the ideograph <Liberation> with the ideograph <Liberty>, thus producing two divergent interpretations of his speech which ultimately converged in cross-partisan appreciation of the text. Silvio Berlusconi’s first Liberation Day speech is a case of strategic maneuvering through hegemonic strategic ambiguity, which allowed Berlusconi to successfully persuade a composite audience characterized by polarized publics.

Most importantly, this analysis of Berlusconi’s speech reveals and exemplifies a novel means of strategic maneuvering: one grounded in the strategic manipulation of ideological terms, which deepens our understanding of political argumentation and enriches the scholarly discussion about rhetor’s techniques of persuasion in dealing with a composite audience.

The context: Berlusconi’s second thoughts about Liberation Day

Many Italian journalists and politicians have described 25 April 2009 as a watershed moment in the history of the second Republic. Liberation Day 2009 seemed to symbolize a turning point for Italian political life. For the first time in fifteen years, controversial Italian Prime Minister and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi participated in the sixty-fourth celebration of Liberation from Nazi-Fascism.

Berlusconi’s participation was a major surprise for the Italian public. In 2008 there had been a heated debate between Berlusconi, leader of Popolo della Libertà (“PdL”), and Walter Veltroni, leader of Partito Democratico (“PD”), about the continued and disrespectful lack of participation of the right wing coalition in Liberation Day celebrations. The controversy centered around Berlusconi’s meeting on Liberation Day with Giuseppe Ciarrapico, a PdL senatorial candidate in the upcoming national elections and a notorious admirer of the Fascist period. Berlusconi’s support of Ciarrapico’s candidacy generated great embarrassment within and outside Berlusconi’s coalition because of Ciarrapico’s nostalgia for Fascism and his open admiration for Benito Mussolini. Berlusconi’s rejection of the invitation to participate in the nation’s Liberation Day and his meeting with
the neo-Fascist had been perceived and interpreted by the DP as an open insult to both democracy and the Liberation from Fascism celebrated on that day.

However, in that occasion Berlusconi dismissed PD’s accusations and foreshadowed his argument about the need for national reconciliation among parties and individuals concerning the Resistance and the Liberation. Berlusconi replied to the accusation of a lack of a serious political conscience saying that his thoughts about Liberation Day were quite clear: It was time for Liberation Day to become a celebration of Liberty for all Italians, a celebration that ought to transcend the mere recognition of the merits of the Resistance movement and become, definitively, a celebration unifying the Italian people around the achieved Liberty of all.

On 25 April 2009, consistent with the previous year’s declarations, Berlusconi joined the Liberation Day celebrations for the first time. This event was remarkable, not only because it was the first time that Berlusconi participated in Liberation Day celebrations, but also because he decided to commemorate the event in Onna, the destroyed town in Abruzzo which was the epicenter of the deadly earthquake that struck the city of L’Aquila just a few weeks earlier. In those painful days for Abruzzo, and for Italy as a whole, Berlusconi capitalized on the rhetorical situation to participate in the celebrations. Onna had been the hometown of a famous Partisan Brigade and had also suffered an attack by Nazis during the Resistance. Its recent destruction by the earthquake, and its history as a place of resistance, provided Berlusconi with an ideal site to attend the celebrations of Liberation Day for the first time. The circumstances of pain and desolation along with the need for national cohesion to face the dire tragedy in Abruzzo provided a perfect exigency to the Prime Minister to present his thoughts about the celebration of Liberation. For Berlusconi, Liberation Day became, as forecasted in 2008, “Liberty Day.”

The reactions to Berlusconi’s speech were remarkable as well. Many editorials appeared in the first pages of the most important national newspapers such as Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, La Stampa and others, describing Berlusconi’s participation in Liberation Day celebrations as a “watershed moment,” a “new phase,” a symbolic “page turned,” and a “taboo broken.” Berlusconi’s statement, which acknowledged the “founding value of Resistance” for Italy’s Republic, has been interpreted by members of the center-left as a “revolutionary moment” for Italian political life. Luciano Violante, a PD member and ex-Communist, stated in an interview that Berlusconi “gave a speech that demonstrated a high sense of Institutions.” Eugenio Scalfari, a journalist traditionally harshly critical of Berlusconi’s politics, wrote in the first page of La Repubblica:

We acknowledge that a turning point has happened: in the historical evaluation of Liberation and Resistance, in the acknowledgement of the funding principles of our constitution, in the acknowledgement of the role of the political forces
that contributed to the democratic rebirth of Italy, that have all been remembered in Onna, starting from the Communists, to the Socialists, to the Christian Democrats, to the liberals (however, the proposal of changing the name of the celebration to “Liberty Day” is contrary to its historical memory and seriously weakens the overall value of other Berlusconi’s observations).

Eugenio Scalfari, La Repubblica, 26 April 2009

This passage from La Repubblica exemplifies the audience reaction in the day after the speech. Even Berlusconi’s harshest opponents praised the Prime Minister’s speech and his intentions, criticizing only details such as the proposal of changing the name of the celebration from “Liberation Day” to “Liberty Day.” Those positive reactions by left wing politicians and opinion leaders are quite surprising to the observer of recent Italian political discourse. Italian political rhetoric is, in fact, often characterized by a strong controversial tone and by a harsh and uncompromising argumentative climate, especially between Berlusconi’s party, with its sharp anti-Communist rhetoric, and the left wing opposition, with its bitter anti-Berlusconi attitude.

Therefore, focusing critical attention on Berlusconi’s speech will produce a better understanding of how this unprecedented cross-partisan appreciation was possible in such a divisive political environment. The speech, entitled “25 April: An Honor and a Commitment,” succeeded rhetorically in manufacturing consent between the Italian center-left and the center-right, audiences traditionally polarized and characterized by opposite beliefs and antithetical political rhetorics, and therefore it is suited for the study of strategic maneuvering in political discourse and techniques of persuasion of a composite audience. By critically examining the speech, we can identify a successful strategy to manufacture consent within a heterogeneous audience: Creating ideological ambiguity through the shift of ideographs associated with the beliefs and values of the different sub-publics in the audience.

Reading the speech: From <Liberation> to <Liberty>

Michael McGee (1980) attempted to reconcile two apparently opposing currents of thought: symbolism, or the “philosophy of myth,” as interpreted and practiced by Kenneth Burke, and materialism, or the Marxist concept of ideology. Myth and ideology are not to be considered opposites for McGee, they should instead be considered “supplemental” rather than “alternatives” (McGee 1980). Symbolism and its focus on language and socially constructed realities should be taken into account along with the materialist approach and its focus on the impact of material phenomena that influence the construction of social reality. McGee proposed a theoretical model that accounts for both ideology and myth, a model that links...
rhetoric and its emphasis on language, to ideology and its emphasis on power and political consciousness. McGee introduced the concept of “ideograph” to deconstruct the false dichotomy of symbolism/materialism:

I will suggest that ideology in practice is a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior. Further, the political language which manifests ideology seems characterized by slogans, a vocabulary of ideographs easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy. (McGee, 1980: 6)

Ideographs are therefore to be considered, according to McGee, as the “building blocks of ideology,” a “one term-sum of an orientation” (McGee 1980: 7). They always contain a unique ideological commitment that is expressed in real discourse whenever they are used, so that they function as agents of political consciousness.

Berlusconi, during his years of political activity, shaped an idea of “Liberty” that is unique to his political party and hence ideographic. Understanding Berlusconi’s party reading of <Liberty> is necessary to fully comprehend the different interpretations of Berlusconi’s first Liberation Day oration. We can make sense of the cross-partisan praise of this speech, in fact, by recognizing audience’s level of awareness of the ideological burden carried by the <Liberty> ideograph. The reactions of those who recognized that the term was not neutral, generated a radically different interpretation from that of those who believed, instead, in the neutrality of Berlusconi’s argument for the creation of a new national feeling around the universal and unifying value of Liberty.

The speech Berlusconi delivered in Onna is undoubtedly strategic. On the one hand, Berlusconi finally recognized the “fundamental value of the Resistance for our nation,” and for the Italian Democratic and republican Constitution. This important statement allowed Berlusconi to open up a dialogue with the left wing party during a moment of extreme political division and public discontent. On the other hand, Berlusconi felt the urge to recognize the value “of those who fought for the wrong side” as well, thus balancing his nod to the left wing coalition worldview with one to his own party. Specifically, his recognizing the value of those who fought for the wrong side was a reference to the PdL’s proposal to make Partigiani’s (the Resistance Partisans) and Repubblichini’s (those who fought defending the Fascist Republic of Salò) financial benefits equal under law.

In the introduction of his speech Berlusconi sets up the ideological shift from <Liberazione> (Liberation) to <Libertà> (Liberty). “Liberation” as such was paradoxically mentioned only once in the very first sentence and then subsequently replaced and subsumed by “Liberty,” which was used in Liberation’s place throughout the remainder of the speech. Berlusconi, in his concluding remarks, mentioned Italy, the Republic, and April 25, which he defined as “the celebration
of all Italians who love liberty and want to stay free,” and “the celebration of the reconquest of Liberty.” <Liberazione>, in other words, literally disappeared from the speech, strategically making place for a Berlusconi-friendly idea: <Libertà>. The absence of <Liberazione> in the conclusion of the speech is also meaningful, because it marks its definitive absorption into the idea of <Libertà>.

In the speech, Berlusconi skillfully called for a sentiment of national unification by commemorating Resistance Partisans of all political factions: “Communists and Catholics, Socialists and Liberals, Monarchists and Actionists, facing a common tragedy, wrote, each for their part, a great page of our history.” He also stated that it was necessary to “remove from this celebration the character of opposition that the revolutionary culture gave it in the past and that today divides more than it unifies.” The speech seemed to aim at constituting a new community, united around the reciprocal acknowledgement and appreciation of the values of the Resistance, an important movement of the Italian political heritage. It also tried to create a new unity, by crafting a new communal definition of a democratic nation founded upon the values of the Resistance as opposed to totalitarianism, rather then Fascism. Moreover, the speech generated an understanding of two troubling events: (1) the Nazi attack of Onna associated symbolically with (2) Onna’s recent destruction by the earthquake. Berlusconi claimed that the Italian people could once again overcome the destruction and sorrow of the earthquake catastrophe, just as they did after the catastrophic destruction caused by the Nazi attack in the 1940s. In brief, Berlusconi portrayed the natural catastrophe as an unforeseen event that the Italian people could overcome with solidarity and unity.

By introducing the ideograph <Liberty> in the speech, not only did Berlusconi introduce his political creed, but he also framed it as a force of unification for the nation and as an agent for the creation of a new unitary national feeling. Furthermore, he argued for an ideological shift from anti-Fascism (associated to the Liberation) to anti-totalitarianism (associated to the ideal of Liberty). Berlusconi stated: “A commitment, which needs to enliven us, is the need not to forget what happened here and to remember the horrors of totalitarianisms and of the suppression of Liberty.” Introducing <Liberty> instead of <Liberation> as the counterpart to totalitarianism, and not of Fascism only, is the central ambiguity utilized by Berlusconi in the speech. Towards the end of the address, Berlusconi defined April 25 as “the celebration of the reconquest of Liberty,” and concluded the speech cheering: “Long live Italy! Long live the Republic! Long live the 25 of April, the celebration of all Italians who love Liberty and want to stay free! Long live the 25 of April, celebration of the reconquest of Liberty.”

<Liberation>, and the anti-Fascist connotation associated with it, were replaced with <Liberty> and its ideological association with anti-totalitarianism. At the beginning and at the end of the speech, where the audiences would have
expected to hear the term <Liberation>, they only hear <Liberty>, presented by Berlusconi as the superior value of which Liberation has been only a momentary symptom, important but not to the point of being the focus of the speech.

**Silvio Berlusconi’s rhetoric of <Libertà>**

In order to contextualize the significant differences between the ideological burdens associated to terms liberty and liberation in the Italian political context, it is useful to mention Paul Ginsborg’s (2004) report about Berlusconi’s first televised speech, delivered in 1994, which marked the beginning of his political career. In this excerpt, Berlusconi positioned the rise of his “pole of liberty” in strict opposition to the “left wing cartel”:

> Italy is the country I love. Here I have my roots, my hopes, my horizons. Here I have learned, from my father and from life, how to be an entrepreneur. Here I have acquired my passion for Liberty... Never as in this moment does Italy ... need people with a certain experience, with their heads on their shoulders, able to give the country a helping hand and to make the state function... If the political system is to work, it is essential that there emerges a pole of Liberty in opposition to the left wing cartel, a pole that is capable of attracting to it the best of an Italy that is honest, reasonable, modest.

*Silvio Berlusconi, “Let Us Build a New Miracle”* (Ginsborg 2004:65)

Liberty, in fact, is the leading motif of Berlusconi’s political campaigns. It is not surprising, in fact, to find that liberty is always included in the names of Berlusconi’s parties such as “The Pole of Liberty,” “The House of Liberties,” “the People of Liberty.” Let us also consider the first lines of the statute of Berlusconi’s political Party, *Il Popolo della Libertà*:

> The People of Liberty is a movement of women and men who believe in Liberty, want to maintain their Liberty, and identify themselves in the values of the Party of European People: the dignity of the person, the centrality of family, Liberty and responsibility, equality, justice, legality, solidarity. The People of Liberty was born in Liberty, from Liberty, and for Liberty so that Italy, respectful of its traditions and national unity, could increase its Liberty, justice, prosperity and become truly supportive.

*Silvio Berlusconi, “People of Liberty Statute”* 12

Thus, in Berlusconi’s rhetoric, liberty is not only central to the expression of his political creed, but it also assumes a symbolic value representing the key belief around which all of the politics of the party align. Furthermore, Liberty represents an expression of dissent, disagreement, and distance from the left wing party. Therefore, in the context of Berlusconi’s Liberation Day speech, as in the rest of
his political rhetoric, the term Liberty is not ideologically neutral. <Liberty>, as an ideograph, is undoubtedly the vehicle that brings Berlusconi’s ideology into the speech, also allowing the text to be interpreted differently by its polarized audience.

The use of <Liberty> in Berlusconi’s first Liberation Day speech creates a strategic ambiguity in its aim and scope and it calls for a closer examination of both the text and its reception. It created, in fact, a significant semantic shift from the theme of Liberation enhancing the possibility of persuading groups from different political orientations, and allowing different interpretations to arise.

This particular case is an anomaly in reception of Berlusconi’s speeches because the reactions of public opinion were surprisingly unified and cross-partisan between the center-left and the center-right, with the only exception being the reaction of the extra-parliamentary Communist Party, which positioned itself in radical opposition to both the right and the center-left. Overall, the composite audience appreciated Berlusconi’s speech but that appreciation revolved around different interpretations of Berlusconi’s statements about Liberation Day. The center-left surprisingly praised Berlusconi’s oration, but not for the same reasons of the center-right. The analysis of how the speech was received shows that the interpretations of the speech by these two groups in Berlusconi’s audience were quite different, but at the same time they converged in bipartisan praise of the text. The shift from the use of <Liberation> to the use of <Liberty> is the main rhetorical strategy that enhanced the strategic ambiguity of the text, and Berlusconi put this strategy in practice by introducing his partisan ideology in the Liberation Day speech, and yet nevertheless manufactured consent by providing different paths of interpretations to the various ideologically oriented groups in the audience.

<Liberazione> and the Resistance Movement

<Liberation> is an ideograph in direct opposition to <Liberty> in the Italian political landscape, in which the former is associated with a left wing ideology and the latter with the right wing one, specifically the Berlusconismo. The leftist connotation of <Liberation> goes back to the anti-Fascist Resistance movement, made up of people from different political orientations united around the common opposition to Fascism and Nazism in the early 1940s. A political force of great relevance for the Resistance was the Communist group. Inside the Brigate Partigiane (Resistance Brigades) there were Communists along with Christian-Democrats, Socialists, Liberals, Anarchists, Monarchists, and Actionists, and all these people fought together with the Allies against Fascism, invasion and oppression. The revolutionary and mythic character of the Liberation represented an important cultural background for the left wing and the radical left that regularly celebrate the anniversary of the Liberation and the sacrifices and merit of the Partigiani. Over
time, the consistent right wing absence in the commemoration of Liberation confirmed and reinforced the leftist connotation associated with it. A symptom of this association is, for instance, the fact that the official national newspaper aligned with the Communist Party in Italy is called precisely “Liberazione” (Liberation). In contrast, as a counterpart to the newspaper Liberazione, Italians also have a national newspaper called “Libero” (meaning “free”) that is openly aligned with Berlusconi’s PdL and with his neo-liberal political orientation.13

The absence of <Liberation> from Berlusconi’s Liberation Day speech, and its replacement with <Liberty> is therefore quite significant. Berlusconi crafted a speech centered around his political ideology. In addition, with the careful avoidance of any mention of <Liberation>, Berlusconi also dismissed the leftist ideology typically associated with the recurrence. Moreover, the appreciation from the center-left is surprising not only because of the absence of the idea of Liberation in the speech, but also because of many controversial statements in Berlusconi’s address that risked jeopardizing the appeal to the left wing because of their particular ideological character. For instance, linking the Resistance tradition to Italy’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan is one of the themes that was surprisingly overlooked by the center-left audience, and received positively by the right wing one:

Today the young generation is facing new challenges: to defend the Liberty conquered by their fathers and to broaden it always more, being aware of the fact that without Liberty there is no peace, no justice, no well-being. Some of these challenges are planetary, and we are committed, together with other free countries, to the fight against terrorism, the fight against fanatic fundamentalism, the fight against racism. For Liberty, dignity, and peace are rights of every human being, everywhere in the world. This is why I want to remember the soldiers in the missions of peace abroad, and in particular all those who died during those noble missions. There is an ideal continuity among them, and all of the heroes who sacrificed their life more than sixty years ago to give us back our Liberty in security and in peace.

In this passage Berlusconi suggested a moral continuity between Resistance partisans and those soldiers supporting the “missions of peace” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Berlusconi’s military support had been granted to the US despite the strong opposition of Italy’s left wing coalition. Associating those soldiers with the Partigiani who fought for the Italian Liberation was therefore risky as this parallelism could have resulted in a very controversial response depending on the ideology of the spectators. However, it did not produce conflict because of the ambiguous ideological frame created by the shift of ideographs and their politics.

Shifting ideographs, for Berlusconi, ultimately produced a rhetorical success in persuading a polarized, diverse audience. The speech, in fact, only generated minor concerns such as the disagreement about the change of the traditional name
of the celebration from some of PD’s politicians. However, there is a significant exception to this widespread positive reception that is worth analyzing: the harsh critique of the extra parliamentary Communist Party, which expressed its dissent through the newspaper *Liberazione*, and clearly recognized and denounced the ideological strategic ambiguity of Berlusconi’s speech. The remaining of this essay is an account of three polysemic interpretations of the speech: the center-right’s one, the center-left’s one, and finally the Communist’s one.

**Reading the reception: Manufacturing bipartisan consent**

In order to understand the effects of a polysemic text, a critic needs to analyze its reception within the audience. For the study of this speech, a thorough research was conducted among the discussions that arose on the day of the speech and that produced many editorials in the Italian national press on 26 April 2009. An even number of the most read and well-known newspapers aligned with both Italian political coalitions were analyzed, including: *Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, Il Giornale, Libero, La Stampa, Il Manifesto, L’Unità*, and *Liberazione*.

Through an analysis of Berlusconi’s Liberation Day speech’s reception, this essay illustrates how the use of strategic ambiguity allowed him to appeal to heterogeneous publics, for different reasons, thus succeeding in appealing to the composite audience of the polarized Italian political audience. The following sections describe the three audience’s interpretations and the reasons that generated them in distinct sub-publics.

*The epic of the struggle for liberty: The right wing’s interpretation*

The right wing coalition, even in its most extreme fringes, appreciated Berlusconi’s speech despite the passages that had been considered as an opening to the leftist values of the Liberation. PdL’s appreciation, as we note in the commentary appeared on Italian national newspapers, revolved around an interpretation of the speech that identified <Liberty> as an ideologically-laden term associated to Berlusconi’s party ideology.

The right wing interpreted <Liberty> as a non-neutral term, namely an ideograph, which allowed Berlusconi to assert a historical revision of Liberation. It understood this speech as a revision that recognizes “all of the fallen,” even the Fascists, and de-legitimizes the appropriation of the celebration by one political side, namely the left wing one. Let us consider for instance this passage from *Il Giornale*, the seventh most read newspaper in Italy, owned by the Berlusconi family:
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Berlusconi brings April 25 beyond the twentieth century

Berlusconi’s task was not easy, because it was necessary to change the political thesis upon which the left wing had built its hegemony in the reading of the Italian history, even at an institutional level. This story was built on the binomial Resistance-Constitution…The Resistance movement was interpreted as a revolution, and the Constitution as a revolutionary act, namely a start marking a new beginning, not only as far as the Fascist regime is concerned, but also regarding the history of the country… Berlusconi could accept April 25 only by re-interpreting it. And he did so by replacing the concept of the Resistance of a minority with that of a choice for the Liberty of the people and of the Italian nation… By doing so he offers a new basis of legitimacy to April 25, removing the revolutionary character from the celebration and reinterpreting it as a movement of the nation and of the people towards a fundamental value: that of Liberty.14

This interpretation frames the Liberation as an episode in the Italian history, which can be contextualized within a broader “epic” of a human universal struggle towards an ideal of freedom, or <Liberty>. Liberation Day could finally be legitimized by Berlusconi’s presence, whom corrected the misleading idea that the Liberation should have remained a “tool in the hand of the leftists,” bringing it “beyond the twentieth century.” Another example of this interpretation can be found in an article by Augusto Minzolini from La Stampa, the fourth most read Italian national newspaper:

This is one of the inventions through which the Cavaliere (i.e., Berlusconi) overcomes impasse and contradictions, making a step forward, a jump in the future. In his first Liberation Day, the Cavaliere wants April 25 to become the celebration of Liberty. This is a way to call it a day with the past, and looking at the future… Berlusconi has always considered Liberation as a people’s movement to win back a natural right: the right to Liberty. A people’s movement similar to the one that today has pushed Italians towards a competition of solidarity to help the survivors of the earthquake in Abruzzo… The Prime Minister gave his original interpretation of Liberation, and he acknowledged and understood everyone’s point of view… And his suggestion of transforming the Liberation Day into the celebration of Liberty comes from the idea of updating that important movement, making it more fit for the present, overcoming the “anti-Fascist” character which defined its ideological substratum in a wider concept, which contains the antibiotics to face all of the tragedies of the last century, and also those that are still present in today’s world, that is “anti-totalitarianism.”15

The right wing public arrived at this understanding of the speech by stressing the importance of those passages that politicize it, while overlooking and underestimating the passages which are, in contrast, read as revolutionary acknowledgments by the center-left. A careful scan of the pages from Libero, Il Giornale, or
La Stampa reveals that the expressions Repubblichini, “unitary national feeling,” “missions of peace” were cited often. The names of the Communist and Socialist Partigiani that Berlusconi invoked in his speech, on the contrary, were often neglected along with the statement that acknowledged the Resistance as the “found-ing value of our nation.”

A turning point that legitimizes constitutional values: The left wing’s interpretation

A different interpretation stood out from the editorials in the moderate opposition’s newspapers. Despite the doubts about the proposed name-change for the celebration, the moderate left wing applauded Berlusconi’s radical turn in his attitude towards Liberation. The leftist reading of the speech on the one hand picks up on those important statements that the right wing neglected, and on the other hand, did not recognize the heavy ideological burden that Berlusconi’s “rhetoric of Liberty” brought into the Liberation Day address.

The left wing considered Liberty as a neutral, constitutional value, precisely as that universal value the Partigiani had been fighting for and that is at the foundation of Italy’s republican Constitution as “liberated from” Fascism. In Berlusconi’s words:

The Resistance movement is, along with the Risorgimento, one of the founding values of our nation. It is a return to a tradition of Liberty. Liberty is a right that comes before the laws and before the State, for it is a neutral right that belongs to us as human beings.

Berlusconi, during his oration, also asserted that people from different parties and ideologies fought together setting their differences aside in order to achieve “the dream of Liberty,” which materialized subsequently in the Italian republican Constitution and in the Liberation from Fascism. In this context Liberty is associated with constitutional and universal values that are not linked to political parties or politics, reinforcing the interpretation of a genuine change and opening toward Liberation on the part of Berlusconi.

The following article from La Repubblica, the second most read newspaper in Italy, starts by giving credit to Berlusconi for having accepted Franceschini’s (Pd’s leader) invitation to join the Liberation celebrations, finally abolishing the metaphorical “wall” that has separated left wing from right wing for years in their views of Liberation and the Resistance:

Yesterday, April 25, celebration of Liberation from Nazi-Fascism and of the Resistance that allowed the democratic rebirth of our country, the wall that hitherto separated the celebration from becoming a shared day by all Italians has been demolished. The merit of this result is Silvio Berlusconi’s, but also of his speech,
and of Dario Franceschini, who pressed the Prime Minister to make such an important event possible.

The article continues describing the three options then available to the Prime Minister. The first would have been that of ignoring Liberation Day, an option that Berlusconi had chosen for several years before 2009. The second would have involved participating in the celebrations, supporting the idea that Repubblichini and Partigiani deserved the same respect and the same financial benefits because they both fought in good faith for Italy. The third, would have been the option of acknowledging the founding value of Liberation and the Resistance for the Italian Constitution. The moderate left’s interpretation identified in this third option Berlusconi’s choice, and thus interpreted his speech as an attempt of reconciliation with the history of Liberation and Resistance:

Berlusconi had three alternatives in front of him: to ignore Franceschini’s invitation; to participate in order to stress his idea of the celebration in his own way by equalizing the Resistance with those who were fighting for the Fascist regime of Salò, both united by the love for the country; or, finally to acknowledge that Liberation and Resistance are a unicum from which our Republican Constitution was born, with the due respect for all of the fallen, even those who fought for the wrong cause. In his speech, Berlusconi chose that last resolution, and we must acknowledge it.

For the center-left, the only skepticism about Berlusconi’s oration concerned the proposal of renaming the celebration. The rest of the speech, including the part in which Berlusconi surprisingly mentions names of Communist Partigiani, one of the rare occasions in which he used the word “Communist” giving it a connotation that is not of mockery or of disgust, represented for the left wing a confirmation of Berlusconi’s good faith in his act of reconciliation with Liberation. Berlusconi’s speech in Onna was a turning point according to the moderate left, and it marked a symbolic moment of hope for reconciliation in an Italian political landscape characterized by division and controversy:

We could also analyze the reasons that pushed him towards this choice, but it would be reductive. We, as the opposition, acknowledge that a turning point has happened, both in the historical evaluation of Liberation and Resistance, and in the acknowledgement of the principles upon which the Constitution has been written… A turning point happened in any case, now we have to see if the following actions will be up to this new start and in the meantime be happy about this beginning.16

The leftists failed to recognize the layers of Berlusconi’s speech and they read it, with a few minor objections, as an attempt to remedy for the Prime Minister’s past mistakes. They pointed out that renaming the celebration was contrary to the historical memory of Liberation, nonetheless they seemed inclined to forgive
Berlusconi’s extravagance as long as he finally demonstrated a clear commitment to the fundamental importance of the Liberation.

Although it seems apparently naïve, the center-left reacted positively to Berlusconi’s Liberation Day speech because it surely represented an anomaly in the Prime Minister’s political rhetoric, usually characterized by highly controversial statements, and no common ground between right wing’s and left wing’s worldviews, as well as by the demonization of the adversaries by naming them “Communists.” Therefore, it is not difficult to understand the reasons that made the surprised center-left seriously consider Berlusconi’s statements, especially after his fifteen years of rejections of Resistance and Liberation history.

Resisting the appropriation: The Communists’s interpretation

The radical left’s interpretation was the exception to Berlusconi’s success in persuading the opposition about the genuineness of his second thoughts about Resistance and Liberation. Symbolically, this resistive reading came out of the newspaper Liberazione. This reading refused Berlusconi’s suggestion that Liberation Day could become the celebration of everyone. In their editorials, journalists of Liberazione argued against Berlusconi’s ostensible sincerity, and against what they defined a “post-Fascist” and “populist” revisionism of Resistance and Liberation.

Their reading completely rejected Berlusconi’s attempt to embrace the celebrations of Resistance and considered his embrace of Liberation to be a sham. Communists, furthermore, criticized not only Berlusconi, but also the center-left. The comments retrievable on Liberazione exemplify the Communists’s stance and express a harsh critique of the Italian political forces in their totality. The author, Paolo Ferrero, judged the right wing as being ideologically neo-Fascist or Fascist-friendly, and because of this he rejected the idea that Berlusconi’s second thoughts about Liberation Day could be sincere, thus resisting his attempt of appropriating the celebration. Ferrero’s response to Berlusconi’s speech was clear and straightforward — it stressed the idea that April 25 is the celebration of Liberation and could not become the celebration of <Liberty>, precisely because it celebrates the victory of anti-Fascism over Fascism, which allowed Italy to become a Republic with a democratic Constitution:

April 25 is not the celebration of everyone

April 25 is a national celebration, the basis for the birth of the Republican Constitution, precisely because it celebrates the victory of anti-Fascism over Fascism. The celebration of April 25 has become in Italy a partisan celebration because most of the politicians that are governing the country today do not identify with the values of anti-Fascism. The right wing, and markedly Berlusconi, have always refused to declare themselves anti-Fascist because they are politically and
morally on a continuum with Fascism; or at best they’re equidistant between the two. In the fight for Liberation, the majority of the PdL would have been aligned with Salò or would have sat at the window to see how it would have ended. To suggest that April 25 can be the celebration of everyone, including La Russa and Berlusconi, who today are ruling the country, has the meaning of betraying April 25, depriving it of its anti-Fascist essence in order to transform it in the celebration of the political class in the actual Parliament.

Ferrero vehemently attacked the center-left and the center-right alike. According to the radical left, the Pd was equally made up of trasformisti (two-faced people), who gave up their political ideals and betrayed their political tradition through a constant forgetting of their roots in favor of an idea of national unity. According to Ferrero this forgetting caused a political amnesia in the Pd, allowing their “shameful” uncritical acceptance of Berlusconi’s statements:

> It would be a sort of national unity of trasformisti. It is not a coincidence that the Pd invited Berlusconi. The center-left in these last 20 years has been characterized by the constant eradication of its roots, carried on by replacing anti-Fascism with the idea of national unity. The right wing has re-invented its tradition by refusing to cut ties to the Fascist period. The center-left instead has been actively working in destroying its memory. Against this shameful bipartisan embrace, against the moderate left’s trasformismo, we reclaim today, once again, that April 25 is the celebration of anti-Fascism and therefore it cannot be a shared one.17

This last and radical reading is interesting precisely because it was the only one to reject Berlusconi’s rhetorical construct outright, representing a derailment of Berlusconi’s strategic maneuvering. This reading exposed and harshly critiqued a very strategic point that contributed to the success of the speech, namely the shift from anti-Fascism to anti-totalitarianism. The right wing embraced Berlusconi’s strategic choice while the moderate left failed to identify it. Replacing the anti-Fascist character of Liberation with a universal “anti-totalitarianism” conception was instrumental to Berlusconi’s attempt to re-design, appropriate, and conduct a historical revision of Liberation Day. The shift from anti-Fascism to anti-totalitarianism was possible, rhetorically, by shifting from the use of the ideograph <Liberation> to the use of <Liberty>, and this technique worked strategically as a helping hand to expand Berlusconi’s hegemony on Italian political life.

Conclusion: The “Watershed Moment” revisited

By understanding how Berlusconi’s Liberation Day speech works rhetorically, this analysis explains how and why a highly controversial text had been applauded...
by Berlusconi’s followers, and even more surprisingly by some of his opponents. Participating in the Liberation Day celebrations had been a risky undertaking for the Prime Minister, on the one hand because his participation could have potentially been interpreted as an inappropriate celebration of the left by the leader of the right, and on the other hand because it could have been interpreted by the left as an appropriation of the celebration by the right.

The analysis of this text from a rhetorical perspective provides an explanation of the uncommon reactions to Berlusconi’s speech and it also discloses the stratified meanings enmeshed within it that have been able to produce different interpretations for a heterogeneous audience, characterized by polarized ideological commitments and worldviews. Specifically, this analysis makes sense of the oddly favorable PD’s reaction to Berlusconi’s attempt to appropriate the Liberation for his partisan aims, it explains why the center-left did not recognize this attempt, and it acknowledges the motivations behind every interpretation of the text. This essay also explores Berlusconi’s alleged step towards embracing the Liberation celebration: PdL’s opening was indeed possible only insofar as Berlusconi would negotiate carefully between a partisan historical revisionism and a partial opening to the values and figures of the left.

Most notably, in conclusion, the analysis of Berlusconi’s address from a rhetorical perspective reveals the use of a particular means of strategic maneuvering in political argumentation: the shift of ideographic terms associated with opposite ideological parties, in this case <Liberation> and <Liberty>, that succeeded in manufacturing bipartisan consent in the heterogeneous audience present during his first Liberation Day speech. Identifying this means of strategic maneuvering is important to clarify the aim of the text and its audience reception, but its scope is not to be considered limited to the analysis of this text only. Recognizing this arguer/orator’s strategy of ideological ambiguity not only helps us to better understand specific instances of successful political rhetoric, but it also provides a new analytical tool for critics interested in analyzing controversial political discourse and composite audience.

Defining the ideographic shift as a rhetor’s means of strategic maneuvering in political argumentation, and as a way of strategically negotiating among audience’s divergent worldviews and ideological commitments, this essay provides the critic with a new conceptual lens to interpret ambiguous texts in the contexts of public address specifically, and political rhetoric more broadly.
Notes


2. The symbols “< >” identify the ideographs throughout this article, following McGee’s (1980) convention for identification of ideographs in a text.

3. PdL is an acronym for *Popolo della Libertà*, the name of Berlusconi’s Party. I translate it in English as “People of Liberty.” Pd is the acronym for *Partito Democratico*, the name of the main Party in the opposition’s coalition, in English “Democratic Party.”


7. *Il Corriere Online*

8. *La Repubblica Online*

N. d. A. All translations from the Italian throughout this article are mine. I report the passages in translation throughout the essay, and I provide for each a reference or a digital hyperlynk to access the original text.

10. It is important here to consider the problematic context around the Prime Minister’s persona: the sex/divorce scandal is about to explode publicly, the controversy with the press and the tension with the opposition are already high while the country is facing an unexpected catastrophe a few months before the G8 Summit is scheduled to take place in Italy.

11. I translate *Partigiani* with “partisans.” In this context partisan does not have a connotation of bias, it is just the name given to the Resistance patriots.


References


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Author’s address

Department of Communication
University of Washington
Seattle
USA
pamelap@u.washington.edu