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Viva la libertà!

On persuasive definitions of “Liberty” within contemporary Italian political discourse

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Few of the central concepts of political discourse are as controversial as “freedom”/“liberty”. However, although “freedom” definitely belongs to the so-called “essentially contested concepts”, even “a contested concept has an uncontested core” (Lakoff 2006: 23–24). This uncontested core can be described as the core meaning of language-specific lexemes such as English *freedom*, *liberty*, German *Freiheit*, French *liberté* or Italian *libertà*. The core meaning can be established as the common ground underlying all more specific controversial uses and definitions.

Within political discourse, the context-specific uses of these lexemes can be described as persuasive definitions, that is, as instances of strategic maneuvering (cf. van Eemeren 2010), which try to establish one’s own use of these words as the politically dominant one and the one most widespread in the media.

With this theoretical background in mind, I would like to provide an overview of how *libertà* is persuasively defined and strategically used within contemporary Italian political discourse. In order to do this, I have compiled a small corpus of party programs, political speeches, interviews, newspaper editorials and posts. From this empirical basis a list of argumentative strategies concerning explicit and implicit definitions of *libertà* will be compiled and critically evaluated.

Keywords: *libertà*, core meaning, argument from definition, persuasive definition, political rhetoric

1. Introduction

The concept of “freedom” is a highly controversial one, and certainly belongs to the “essentially contested concepts”, that is, concepts which are “inherently subject to multiple interpretations, depending on your values, concerns, experiences,

goals, and beliefs” (cf. Lakoff 2006:23). Almost paradoxically, however, the concept of “freedom” is used strategically by all representatives of political parties and ideologies. This has to do with the fact that the terms used to refer to this concept, such as English *freedom/liberty* or Italian *libertà*, have a highly positive connotation. Therefore, they can be effectively used to promote one’s political interests and goals.

For example, when taking a closer look at *libertà*, many Italian parties and alliances of parties across the political spectrum have chosen to have *libertà* as part of their party’s/alliance’s name: From Silvio Berlusconi’s centre-right coalition *Casa delle Libertà* (“House of Liberties”; 2000–2008) and *Il Popolo della Libertà* (“People of Liberty”; 2008–2013), a fusion of Berlusconi’s conservative party *Forza Italia* and Gianfranco Fini’s *Alleanza Nazionale*, a moderate right-wing party, and the earlier center-right alliance led by Berlusconi, *Polo delle Libertà* (“Pole of Liberty”; 1994ff.) to leftist parties such as Francesco Rutelli’s center-left party *Democrazia è Libertà – La Margherita* (“Democracy is Freedom – The Daisy”; 2001–2007) and Nichi Vendola’s left ecological party *Sinistra – Ecologia – Libertà* (“Left – Ecology – Freedom”; 2009–2016), which was also part of the left alliance *Sinistra e Libertà* (formed in 2009 for the European Parliament elections). And almost paradoxically, even the small Fascist party *Movimento Fascismo e Libertà* has *libertà* in its name.

As soon as we proceed to the level of context-specific uses of *libertà*, however, the unanimous appraisal of *libertà* dissolves in competing explicit or implicit definitions and redefinitions of *libertà*. Political groups and movements make strategic use of *libertà* in order to benefit from the positive connotation of this high-value term. Some of these strategic uses will be described and critically analyzed below.

2. The core meaning of *libertà*

The very existence of “core meaning” has been questioned in philosophy and linguistics. Therefore, before I try to describe the core meaning of *libertà*, I have to justify the need for, and the usefulness of, the concept of “core meaning”. In order to do this, I follow Coseriu (1988: 262–264) in distinguishing three dimensions of semantics:

1. Meaning (“Bedeutung”) in the narrow sense is the language-specific core meaning, exclusively based on the relationship between the *signifiant* and the *signifié* of a sign. More specifically, it is the position of the meaning of a sign within a paradigm of semantic oppositions in a given language.

2. Reference (“Bezeichnung”) is the relation between a sign and the extralinguistic object to which it refers. At the sentence level, reference deals with the truth conditions of declarative sentences.
3. Sense (“Sinn”) is the relation between a sign and the context, namely, the contextual variants of the core meaning in relation to a certain speech situation, a verbal context and a social, institutional and cultural context.

How can this semantic trichotomy be justified? This question has to be answered specifically for the concept of “core meaning” because prominent logical and philosophical approaches have tried to demonstrate its lack of clarity, precision and insufficiency (Quine 1971: 20; Putnam 1975: 269). Similarly, text linguists and language philosophers have argued that core meaning does not exist because we can approach language only via the analysis of text/discourse. Therefore, all that we can empirically observe is an unlimited number of senses which are contextually given and constantly changed in text and discourse (Weinrich 1993: 17; Recanati 2004: 146).

However, core meaning cannot be replaced by reference or sense, as the following four main arguments plausibly show (for a more detailed discussion cf. Kienpointner 2008):

1. First of all, only initially do references look like the better alternative to core meaning. This is especially the case when only well-defined concrete entities such as cats, water, or bachelors are given as an example for the reference of words. However, very often the reference of abstract concepts is unclear, vague and the subject of controversial debates or it even belongs to the “essentially contested concepts”, such as “democracy”, “justice”, and, most importantly for this contribution, “freedom”.

And Lakoff is right in pointing out that “a contested concept has an uncontested core” (2006: 23–24). In philosophy, this uncontested core has often been defined as “positive freedom” vs. “negative freedom”, for example, by Berlin (1969: 169; 178): “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.” (negative freedom); “I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside.” (positive freedom). In the case of the English lexical unit *freedom*, this conceptual core is reflected by definitions such as in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (= LDOCE 2003: 641), where *freedom* is defined as follows:

- (1) freedom:
 1. [...] the right to do what you want without being controlled or restricted by anyone [...]
 2. [...] the state of being free and allowed to do what you want. [...]"

Of course, core meanings are not Platonic ideas and have to be justified on the basis of empirical data (Kienpointner 2008: 92). This can be done by systematically looking at the use of lexemes in texts. If the core meaning underlies all contextually enriched senses of the lexeme, this is a plausible empirical argument for the adequacy of the assumed core meaning. Many context-specific uses of *freedom* can be subsumed under the general definitions given above, for example, *freedom from slavery*, *freedom from torture*, *freedom of expression*, *equal freedom to vote*. At this contextual level, there are endless controversies about how “freedom” can be precisely defined. However, the same examples also show that many senses, that is, contextual variants of core meaning, can be subsumed under the much more general and abstract core meaning of *freedom*, as given in the LDOCE (cf. Coseriu 1988: 188, and Recanati’s (2004: 24) term “enrichment” for this phenomenon).

2. At this point, text linguists and discourse analysts could bring forward another argument against core meaning, namely, that there are also contextual variants of meaning which cannot be subsumed under the core meaning, for instance, metaphorical, metonymic, ironic, hyperbolic contextual variants (cf. Recanati’s (2004: 26) term “transfer” for this phenomenon). This is true, but there is an asymmetry between figurative uses of *freedom* and the core meaning of *freedom*: the former can be derived from the latter via Gricean conversational maxims as conversational implicatures, but not the other way around.

Here is an example. In a letter to James Madison (written on March 2, 1788) George Washington comments on the increasingly revolutionary developments in France. Washington metaphorically characterizes liberty as a rapidly growing plant:

- (2) *Liberty, when it begins to take root, is a plant of rapid growth.*
(<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-06-02-0115>)

Given an appropriate context, one can thus make the inference from *liberty* to *a rapidly growing plant* by noticing the parallels drawn between abstract concepts such as freedom as a powerful political source of energy and the fast increase of political liberty after people have a serious desire to implement it, and concrete concepts such as the rapid growth of a plant with healthy roots. But the reverse does not apply. We do not infer the core meaning of *liberty*

from its contextually given metaphorical meaning of a rapidly growing plant with healthy roots.

3. Furthermore, from a cognitive perspective, the concept of core meaning has come under attack because the theory of prototype semantics (Kleiber 1998) has been used to refute the possibility of assigning necessary and sufficient properties to each member of a category. The empirical results of psycholinguistic experiments have led Rosch and Mervis (1975) to the conclusion that there is no property which is necessarily shared by all members of a category. Moreover, they claim that there are fuzzy borders between any two categories, referring to examples such as the “meaning” of *night* and *day*, *hot* and *cold*, *green* and *blue*.

This is true as far as the reference of these lexemes is concerned, because you can indeed find many fuzzy borderlines between empirical phenomena such as night and day, the color green and the color blue, etc. However, this observation is not true as far as language-specific core meaning is concerned where you have a clear antonymic opposition between English *night* and *day*, or *hot* and *cold* etc. For example, there might be gradual differences between more or less totalitarian and more or less libertarian states within political reality. But this does not disprove the existence of clear semantic oppositions between the core meaning of the antonymous English lexical units of *freedom* and *coercion*, or between *liberty* and *bondage*.

Therefore, “freedom” may be a fluid concept in political reality, but this does not hold for the English lexical unit *freedom*. Amongst other arguments, this can be shown by the empirical fact that semantically paradoxical noun phrases such as *a more totalitarian freedom* and *a more liberal totalitarianism* seem to be empirically nonexistent (zero instances according to a Google test performed on September 6, 2021). This shows that the meanings of the lexemes “freedom” and “totalitarianism” exclude each other and do not overlap.

4. Finally, dynamic approaches to semantics have stressed that the semantic aspects of words are constantly changing in context, a fact which cannot be taken into account by a synchronically fixed concept of core meaning. But one does not need to hold such an inflexible view of semantics.

Following Wilhelm von Humboldt, however, Coseriu has developed a fully dynamic view of semantics, and also claims that language is a creative dialogical activity (1958: 40). Therefore, the semantic system of a language is not a static structure, but the result of the continuous dialogical realization of this structure by its speakers. In this view, the semantic system of a language exists because “it is constantly done” by the speakers and listeners of a speech community (“el sistema existe porque se hace”; Coseriu 1958: 154). The relative stability of the structures of

the language system is due to the fact that most of the time we do not change but reproduce the system, with only small modifications.

With this theoretical background in mind, we can take a look at the core meaning of *libertà* as described in Italian dictionaries. In de Mauro's *Grande Dizionario Italiano* (1999:961), quite similar to the definition of *freedom* in LDOCE, the core meaning of *libertà* and *libero* ("free"; de Mauro 1999:960), from which *libertà* is derived, is given as follows (my English translation):

- (3) 1. *libertà*: "l'essere libero, la condizione di chi è libero" ["being free, the condition of one who is free"]
2. *libero*: "che non è in una condizione di schiavitù o servitù; che gode della libertà di agire e dei diritti legali e politici" ["one who is not in a condition of slavery or bondage; one who enjoys liberty of action and legal and political rights"]

Libertà and *libero* belong to the basic vocabulary of Italian, that is, to the approximately 2000 words which taken together account for 90% of the words used in Italian texts. And they certainly are cultural "key words" in the sense of Wierzbicka (1997:15–16): "are particularly important and revealing in a given culture". That *libertà* belongs to these key words is confirmed both by the rich history of this word in Italian literature and philosophy and its high frequency in the contemporary *Corpus di Italiano Scritto* [Corpus of Written Italian], where *libertà* occurs 19.147 times. Synonyms of *libertà* such as *autonomia* (7731 tokens) or *indipendenza* (3596 tokens) have far lower frequencies in CORIS.

A rather encyclopedic, philosophical definition of *libertà* is given in the most comprehensive contemporary Italian dictionary, the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, initiated by Salvatore Battaglia (1975: 21):

- (4) *Libertà*: "Nella filosofia scolastica, e in altre concezioni filosofiche posteriori, capacità dell'uomo (e, in genere, di un essere spirituale) di autodeterminarsi, di essere causa delle proprie azioni (e quindi, capacità o potere di scegliere fra due o più azioni od omissioni egualmente possibili dal punto di vista logico [...])" ["In Scholastic philosophy, and in other later philosophical conceptions, the capacity of man (and, in general, of a spiritual being) to determine oneself, to be the cause of one's own actions (and, therefore, capacity of choosing between two or more actions or omissions which are equally possible from the logical point of view [...])"]

The difference between the two definitions nicely illustrates the difference between core meaning and reference as discussed above. While de Mauro's definition can be assumed to cover all, or at least most, more context-specific uses of *libertà*, and thus can be seen as a plausible definition of the core meaning of *libertà*, Battaglia's definition gives a certain perspective to the reference of *libertà*,

seen from a philosophical position that assumes the possibility of free will. Hence it is an example of a controversial attempt to define the reference of the concept of “liberty”, which, for example, determinists would not accept because they deny the existence of free will.

The core meaning of *libertà* is the common ground for many more specific uses of *libertà*, in collocations such as *libertà religiosa* (“religious freedom”), *libertà politica* (“political freedom”), or *libertà di parola* (“freedom of speech”) (Battaglia 1975: 24; de Mauro 1999: 961). As these examples show, *libertà* seems to be predominantly used in the sense of positive freedom, that is, a condition where you can act in a self-determined and unhindered way.

However, there also seem to be peripheral uses of *libertà* in collocations such as *libertà da X*, which focus on negative freedom. According to de Mauro (1999: 961), who always also provides information about the frequency of words and expressions and the register to which they can be assigned in contemporary Italian, phrases such as *libertà dalla paura* (“freedom from fear”), *libertà dal bisogno* (“freedom from need”) belong to the less used, rather old-fashioned expressions in the Italian language (cf. also Battaglia 1975: 24).

This is also confirmed by a search in CORIS. Here the collocation *libertà da* occurs only 54 times, whereas *libertà di* is much more frequent with 3951 occurrences. Note that not all instances of these collocations refer to negative and positive freedom, but the numerical difference is so striking that it would most probably remain proportionally identical if instances of *libertà di/da*, which do not refer to negative or positive freedom, were eliminated.

It is instructive to compare Italian *libertà* with freedom words in other languages. For example, French *liberté* seems to be even more inclined towards the positive freedom pole of the dichotomy. This is maintained by Wierzbicka (1997: 146) and can be confirmed by a look at the empirical data. As in Italian, there are many collocations in French which refer to positive freedom, such as *liberté de penser*, *liberté de parole*, *liberté de conscience*, which correspond to *freedom of thought / freedom of speech / freedom of consciousness* in English. This characterization of *liberté* is also confirmed by the vast majority of the example sentences in dictionaries (as in the Larousse-article *liberté*, for example, *la liberté de la presse*). Furthermore, these collocations are well attested in the French Mixed Corpus.

Moreover, English collocations such as *freedom from oppression* or *freedom from fear*, which express negative freedom, cannot easily be translated literally into French. Instead, they tend to be translated by morphologically complex, marked French prepositional phrases: *the right to live in freedom from fear* can be translated by *le droit de vivre à l'abri de la peur* (“the right to live protected from

fear”), or with the help of free translations: *freedom from oppression* can be translated with *l’absence d’oppression*.

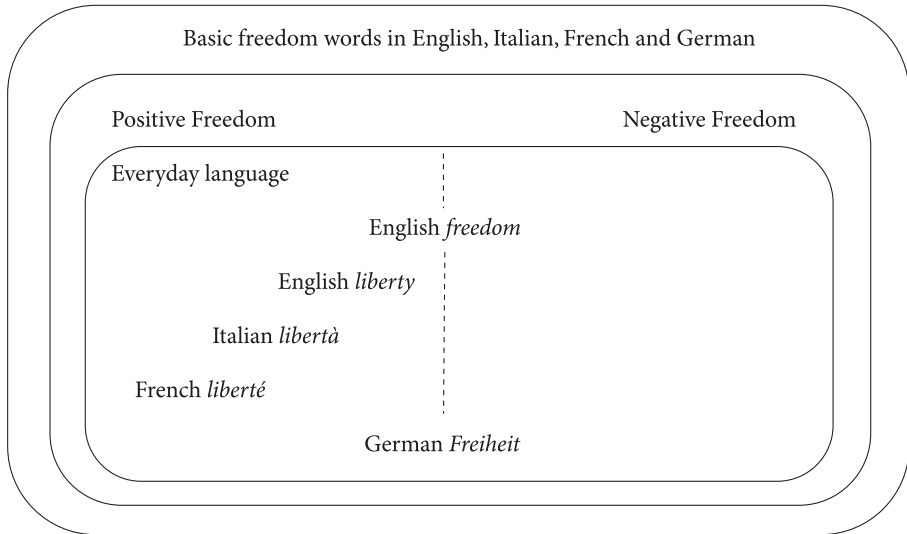


Figure 1.

English *liberty*, a loanword from French *liberté*, also has a strong tendency to be used for positive freedom: In COCA (*Corpus of Contemporary American English*), the collocation *liberty to* occurs 1365 times, whereas *liberty from* has only 85 occurrences. But as there are quite a few contemporary uses of *liberty from* in the sense of negative freedom, *liberty* is perhaps somewhat less inclined to positive freedom than Italian *libertà*, let alone French *liberté*.

Finally, English *freedom* and German *Freiheit* are quite generally applied both for expressions of positive and negative freedom (cf. the frequent English and German collocations *freedom to X/freedom from X*; *Freiheit von X/Freiheit zu X*).

The findings of this detailed look at the core meaning of *libertà* and some other freedom words in genetically related languages can be briefly summarized as in Figure 1 (cf. above).

3. Definitions and argumentative discourse

The core meaning of words and expressions in everyday language is almost never the issue of argumentative discussions. This holds at least for native speakers. They take it for granted, and the participants of a debate use it as a common

ground. Problems arise when definitions contain elements which do not belong to this common ground.

This holds true for many examples of Arguments from Definition given within the Topical tradition. As is well known, Aristotle recommends the definition by genus and difference (*Topics*, 6.4., 141b 25–28). Following the Topical tradition established by Aristotle (2004), medieval philosophers have provided explicit formats of Arguments from Definition. For example, the following *locus* is one of the *loci a definitione* distinguished by Abelard (1956: 271, 331–332, 338) in his *Dialectica*, with a standard example of its use for drawing inferences:

- (5) *De quocumque praedicatur definitio, et definitum.*
 (“Whatever the definition is predicated of, the thing defined is also predicated of”)
- (6) *Socrates est animal rationale mortale. → Socrates est homo.*
 (“Socrates is a rational mortal animal. → Socrates is a man”)

However, Abelard already challenged the view that a definition by genus and specific difference can exhaust all the characteristic properties of an entity, and he considered all loser forms of definition, such as definitions by description and by etymology, as inconclusive forms of argumentation. Furthermore, delimitation problems easily come into mind: If all human beings are rational, what about mentally ill people? (Kienpointner 1992: 67–68). And the emerging field of human animal studies has pointed out the problems of finding essential differences between *homo sapiens* and some of their highly intelligent relatives in the animal kingdom (Zechmann 2018).

Therefore, it is more realistic to assume that definitions in general are defeasible forms of argument, which presuppose that certain facts and values are widely accepted within a speech community, but are subject to exceptions (Walton 2005: 174–176; Macagno and Walton 2014: 81). Moreover, definitions can be followed by counter-definitions, which try to refute the earlier ones (Ilie 2009).

However, this is not to say that arguments based on definitions are arbitrary forms of argumentation which cannot be assessed as to their quality and plausibility. For example, argument schemes based on definition such as the following one, which is closely related to Abelard’s *locus a definitione* mentioned above, can be checked by sets of critical questions (Aristotle, *Topics*, 6.2–6.3, 139b 19 – 141a 22; Walton 2005: 175; Walton et al. 2008: 319; Macagno and Walton 2014: 83):

Whatever the defined thing is predicated of, the definition is also predicated of, and vice versa.

The thing defined is predicated of X.

Therefore: The definition is predicated of X.

First of all, definitions which do not have the classical Aristotelian/scholastic format of a genus-difference definition, namely, *Definitio fit per genus proximum et differentiam specificam* (“A definition is made by the next higher genus and a specific difference”), such as definitions by description or definitions by parts and especially definitions by etymology, have inherent weaknesses. They often do not uniquely fit the defined thing. Moreover, definition and defined thing are not convertible in these forms of definition. For example, a house can be defined by its parts (a roof, walls, windows, and doors), but an arbitrary collection of these parts is not necessarily a house (Macagno and Walton 2014: 104).

Even worse, definitions which are obscure and unclear, which is often the case when they contain metaphors, can be criticized as not properly fulfilling their function of classifying and identifying entities. For example, Aristotle criticized the use of metaphor in definitions (*Topics*, 6.2, 139b 32–35; for a more positive view of metaphorical definitions cf. Ilie 2009: 44).

Furthermore, circular definitions, where the defined thing reappears in the definition, are deficient and tautological. Obviously circular definitions are rare, but sometimes the circularity is hidden by using synonymic words or expressions, or by exploiting the hearer’s willingness to accept dubious, that is, only seemingly shared presuppositions (Aristotle, *Topics*, 6.4., 141a 34–142b 6).

Finally, and most importantly for the analysis of political rhetoric, implicit (re-)definitions, which presuppose a controversial semantic concept instead of explicitly defining it, can be used as strong manipulative means of persuasion. If the opponent/the audience does not detect the hidden assumptions, because they are presupposed and not declared, the speakers can successfully put through their own use of language without argumentatively justifying it and thus shift the burden of proof (Macagno and Walton 2014: 146; 149; Zarefsky 2006: 413).

What is most important for the issue of this paper, is that this strategy of implicit (re-)definition is most effective when essentially contested concepts such as *freedom* come into play (Macagno and Walton 2014: 193). Implicit (re-)definitions are a potentially manipulative and fallacious use of definitions because they exploit the cooperative tendency of hearers to infer meaningful explicit definitions from what is only presupposed. They can be used to fabricate evidence, to enhance the weight of evidence or for implicit character attacks.

From the critical remarks made above the following list of critical questions concerning Arguments from Definition can be deduced (Macagno and Walton 2014: 84; 107; Copi et al. 2014: 100–102):

- CQ1: Are the semantic properties of genus, species, difference or other defining elements acceptable according to the core meaning of the involved words and expressions, and according to shared encyclopaedic facts and values?
- CQ2: Is the definition explicit?
- CQ3: Is the definition formulated clearly and unambiguously?
- CQ4: Does the definition contain metaphors?
- CQ5: Does the definition involve circularity?
- CQ6: Does an implicit definition presuppose meanings which are not shared by the hearer/the reader/the audience?
- CQ7: Is the definition supported by further arguments?

Definitions which do not fulfil the criteria established by some or all the critical questions listed above can be considered as dubious or even fallacious.

A final problem that has to be addressed here is the question whether all so-called “persuasive definitions” should also be described as fallacious. The term “persuasive definition” was introduced by Stevenson (1938: 331; Zarefsky 2006: 404–405; Macagno and Walton 2014: 31–32):

A ‘persuasive’ definition is one which gives a new conceptual meaning to a familiar word without substantially changing its emotive meaning, and which is used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing, by this means, the direction of people’s interests.

The strong positive connotation connected with words such as *Freiheit*, *freedom/liberty* or *libertà* can thus be used for promoting one’s own political standpoint by redefining “freedom” in a way which comes close to one’s own political ideology. In this way, achieving a close connection of values, emotions and motivations to act politically, for example, to vote for a political party, can be seen as an instance of strategic maneuvering.

In classical introductions to formal logic, persuasive definitions have been assessed negatively (e.g. Copi et al. 2014: 90). However, the use of persuasive definitions need not be a fallacious move, as long as one’s persuasive definition follows certain standards of plausibility (Macagno and Walton 2014: 109).

4. Persuasive definitions of *libertà* in contemporary Italian political discourse

The theoretical background developed in the previous sections will now be applied to a small corpus of spoken and written argumentative texts. This sample includes the party programs of five of the major Italian parties, which are all now represented in the Italian parliament (in alphabetical order):

- *Forza Italia* (“Forward Italy”, a centre-right, liberal-conservative party first founded by Silvio Berlusconi (*1936) in 1994, then re-founded in 2013);
- *Fratelli d’Italia* (“Brothers of Italy”, a national-conservative, right-wing populist party, founded in 2012 as a successor of *Alleanza Nazionale*, which was a successor of the post-Fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, led by Giorgia Meloni (*1977));
- *Italia Viva* (“Italy Alive”, a liberal, reformist party, founded in 2019 and led by Matteo Renzi (*1975), after a split from the *Partito Democratico*);
- *Lega per Premier Salvini* (“League for Salvini Premier”, a federalist, right-wing populist party, founded in 2017 and led by Matteo Salvini (*1977); sister party of *Lega Nord* (“Northern League”), a federalist right-wing populist party);
- *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (“Five Stars Movement”, a left-wing populist party asking for direct democracy and ecologically sustainable politics, now led by Giuseppe Conte (*1964); co-founded by comedian, blogger and political activist Beppe Grillo (*1948));
- *Partito Democratico* (“Democratic Party”, a social-democratic party, founded in 2007 as a fusion of older social-democratic, and left-wing Christian democratic parties, led by Enrico Letta (*1966)).

Moreover, the corpus includes public speeches, interviews and social media messages by leading Italian politicians, most of them mentioned above as party leaders. Finally, the corpus also contains editorial articles in Italian newspapers. Of course, the small size of the corpus (ca. 83,000 words) and the heterogeneity of its texts and genres (for example, the party programs differ greatly as to their length; the speeches were held on completely different occasions) do not allow strong generalizations. But still, they can provide some interesting insights as to the strategic use of the definitions of *libertà* in contemporary Italian political rhetoric.

I would like to begin with a few passages in this corpus where the writers/speakers provide explicit, relatively complete definitions, which sometimes also fit the genus/difference-format of definitions. After that, I would like to take a look at the more frequent case of implicit definitions, where the noun *libertà* or its synonyms are used to presuppose a certain concept of freedom.

The first definition is given by Sergio Mattarella, the current president of the Italian Republic.

During a conversation with the Greek president Katerina Sakellariopoulou at the President's palace in 2020, Mattarella gave the following definition of *libertà* in the context of the threat of an emerging wave of the COVID pandemic (taken from an article in the newspaper *Liberò Quotidiano*, October 9, 2020):

- (7) *La libertà non è un fatto esclusivamente individuale, ma si realizza insieme agli altri, richiedendo responsabilità e collaborazione.*

[“Liberty is not an exclusively individual fact, but is made real together with other people, and asks for responsibility and cooperation”]

What is problematic about the first part of this definition is its negative character. Unless you exclude all existing species of a genus but one, using a negative definition you do have not defined the involved entity clearly and unambiguously (Aristotle, *Topics*, 6.6, 143b 11–13; Ilie 2009: 42; Macagno and Walton 2014: 99). However, Mattarella adds another defining clause, this time, an affirmative one, which resumes the old principle that we cannot responsibly try to achieve our individual liberty unless we respect the freedom of others and take into account the political liberties of other citizens. This classical principle of liberalism has already been formulated by John Stuart Mill (1946: 8).

Moreover, Mattarella asks for cooperation with other citizens in relation to the goal of liberty for all. In a way, this definition requests the cooperative integration of positive and negative liberty. It may still be criticized that this definition does not clearly specify *libertà* and leaves open many more specific questions. But this can be justified by the fact that Mattarella in his role as a president has to remain as impartial as possible. Instead of taking sides with political parties, the president has to try to reconcile the parties' more specific notions of liberty, in order to find a commonly accepted formula for difficult political decisions in times of a pandemic. Mattarella's argument can be reconstructed as an instance of an argument scheme which underlies many Arguments from Definition (Kienpointner 1992: 251):

If concept C can be plausibly defined by definition D, certain political acts A are acceptable.

C can be plausibly defined by D.

Therefore: Certain political acts A are acceptable.

On the basis of this argument scheme, Mattarella's context-specific instance of an Argument from Definition can be reconstructed as follows:

If liberty is not an exclusively individual fact, but something which is realized together and asks for responsibility and cooperation, restricted civil rights in times of a pandemic for the benefit of all citizens are acceptable.

Liberty is not an exclusively individual fact, but something which is realized together and asks for responsibility and cooperation.

Therefore: Restricted civil rights in times of a pandemic for the benefit of all citizens are acceptable.

Another definition is given by the Italian journalist and author Paolo Fallai (in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*, April 22, 2020) by combining the issues of the COVID pandemic and the liberation of Italy from Fascism towards the end of World War II, on April 25, 1945:

- (8) *Quel 25 aprile ha un significato che non può essere piegato a nessun interesse di parte. La parola stessa Liberazione ha una potenza straordinaria. Porta con sé la fine di ogni schiavitù. È l'affermazione della libertà, cioè del diritto di ogni individuo di disporre liberamente della propria persona.*

[“That April 25 has a meaning which cannot be bent towards any party interest. The word Liberation itself has an extraordinary force. It implies the end of all slavery. It is the affirmation of liberty, that is, the right of any individual to dispose freely of the own personality”]

Fallai’s definition can be rendered in a more standardized form: “La libertà è il diritto di ogni individuo di disporre liberamente della propria persona” (“Liberty is the right of any individual to dispose freely over their own personality”). It is inclined towards Berlin’s positive freedom. This may also have to do with the core meaning of the Italian word *libertà*, which focusses on positive freedom, as we have seen. The main weakness of Fallai’s definition is the quasi-circular use of *liberamente*. As both *libertà* and *liberamente* are derived from the adjective *libero*, any definition of *libertà* by a *definiens* containing *libero/-a* is circular (In my English translation the circularity is more hidden than avoided) (Aristotle, *Topics*, 6.3., 140b 27–31).

Here are a few definitions of *libertà* given by Italian political parties in their programs, in other programmatic texts, and speeches. At first glance, the definitions given in the *Carta dei valori* (“Charter of values” Forza Italia 2014) of Berlusconi’s liberal-conservative *Forza Italia* and in the *Carta dei valori* (2021) of Renzi’s liberal-reformist *Italia Viva* appear to be very similar:

- (9) Forza Italia: *Noi crediamo che la vera libertà significhi autonomia congiunta con la responsabilità, non irresponsabile indipendenza.*

[“We believe that true liberty means autonomy connected with responsibility, not irresponsible independence”]

- (10) Italia Viva: *La libertà di autodeterminarsi è un diritto fondamentale delle persone: a essa va sempre associata la responsabilità personale.*

[“The liberty of self-determination is a fundamental right of all persons: It will always be combined with personal responsibility”]

Both definitions are close to the positive pole of the continuum of positive and negative liberty (cf. the noun *autonomia* and the verb *autodeterminarsi*, respectively). Note that in the definition given by Forza Italia the positive connotation of *libertà* is further enhanced by the adjective *vera* (“true”): *la vera libertà*: “(the) true liberty” (on this strategy of graduation cf. Antelmi and Santulli 2002). But at the same time, both definitions constrain liberty, inducing an element of social responsibility. What this means in detail is not made explicit in the definitions and thus has to be inferred from other passages of the two *Charters of Value* (cf. below).

How can this similarity be explained, given the fact that *Viva Italia* is a party situated clearly further to the left of *Forza Italia*? Part of an explanation can certainly be Berlusconi’s strategy of portraying *Forza Italia* as a guarantor of individual freedom against the alleged authoritarian collectivism of the Italian left. This strategic maneuvering concerning verbal presentation is also highlighted by the enthusiastic praise of the libertarian nature of *Forza Italia*, which is presented in its *Secular Creed* (the lexeme *libertà* appears 22 times in this *Secular Creed*!) and the following passage of the *Charter of Values*:

- (11) Forza Italia, Carta dei valori (The same sentence also appears in the *Secular Creed*): “*Forza Italia*” è nata dalla libertà, nella libertà e per la libertà, perché l’Italia sia sempre più moderna, libera, giusta, prospera, autenticamente solidale.

[““Forza Italia” has been born from liberty, within liberty and for liberty, so that Italy may be more and more modern, free, just, prosperous and authentically solidaric”]

Now the question is why Berlusconi always looked for right-wing coalition partners if his party is a truly libertarian one. Answers can be found by taking a close look at the context of the definition of *vera libertà*. Immediately before the “libertarian” definition, the *Charter of Values* includes the following sentence:

- (12) *Senza legge e ordine non ci può essere libertà.*

[“Without law and order there cannot be liberty”]

Moreover, the *Charter of Values* also contains passages which easily go together with the politics of national identity so typical for right-wing parties:

- (13) *Noi pensiamo che si debba aggiungere alla libertà un altro valore, ad essa complementare: la sicurezza della nostra identità davanti all'immigrazione.*

[“We think that we have to add another value to freedom, which is complementary to it: the security of our identity in view of immigration.”]

One cannot accuse Berlusconi of manipulation through these passages because the political standpoint of *Forza Italia* concerning law and order and national identity vs. immigration is made perfectly clear. However, the internal consistency of the definitions of *libertà* in the *Charter of Values* can be legitimately doubted: If I have to follow traditional values in order to “live liberty”, my autonomy is seriously constrained. And in the definition given in Example (9), taken from the *Charter of Values*, *libertà* is explicitly constrained by moral responsibility, not by cultural traditions and national identity.

Moreover, it can be doubted whether a party leader and billionaire such as Berlusconi, who owns Mondadori, the biggest book and newspaper publishing house in Italy, together with several nationwide TV networks, can sincerely claim to stand up for freedom of thought and expression (*libertà di pensiero, libertà di espressione*). In fact, Berlusconi managed to make his *Mediaset* (founded in 1978), a division of his corporation *Fininvest*, the biggest player on the Italian media market, which for a long time actually created a “duopoly” together with the national TV network RAI: “In 2010, Mediaset commanded 56.8% of all television advertising revenue and RAI 22.1%” (Padovani 2015: 43).

In this way, Berlusconi significantly contributed to the phenomenon of media concentration and the marginalization of dissident opinion which has been severely criticized as “manufacturing consent” by Herman and Chomsky (1988).

In the meantime, the power of *Mediaset* has diminished because in the last few years the Italian media landscape has become more diverse, due to the appearance and growth of *La7* and *Sky Italia* on the TV market (Padovani 2015: 46–47). However, during his years as Prime Minister of Italy (1994, 2001–2006, 2008–2011) Berlusconi managed to seriously diminish and systematically damage the liberty of expression in Italy.

What about the definition of *libertà di Italia Viva*? A closer look at other passages of the *Carta dei valori* shows that its overall liberal orientation is constrained somewhat: *Italia Viva*, too, maintains that there is no liberty without security: *Senza sicurezza, internazionale e interna, non può esserci libertà* [“Without security, international and internal, liberty cannot exist”]. But differently from *Forza Italia*, *Italia Viva* sees the cultural other as a rich resource and distances itself from any kind of nationalism.

The definition of *libertà* given by Giorgia Meloni in her speech at the Piazza San Giovanni in Rome on October 19, 2019 follows the nationalist priorities of her

right-wing party *Fratelli d'Italia* (Interestingly, the word *libertà* does not appear in the party's 2018 program):

- (14) *Libertà e sovranità sono i principi che da sempre ci uniscono. La libertà di crescere i propri figli in sicurezza e benessere, di lavorare e vedere riconosciuto quel lavoro. E l'orgoglio di farlo anche per la nostra Patria, non solo per noi stessi.*

[“Liberty and sovereignty are the principles which have always united us. The liberty to raise one’s own children in safety and well-being, to work and also see that work recognized. And the pride to also do this for our homeland, not only for ourselves”]

This definition of *libertà* is perhaps the most unorthodox of all the definitions presented so far. The self-determined individual plays no major role in it, different from most other definitions of *libertà* (cf. above). To be able to raise one’s children safely and in good social conditions, to work and see one’s work recognized are two specific effects of liberty within a society providing social security and appreciating work. What Meloni mentions as properties of *libertà* here is actually only a small selection of properties which a free society should possess. There is no focus on self-determination or on individual autonomy in this definition. Moreover, the connection of liberty and national sovereignty (*sovranità*) gives this definition of freedom a strong nationalistic touch.

What really makes this definition dubious is provided by taking a close look at other passages from her speeches and the party program of *Fratelli d'Italia*. Again, this is not to accuse Meloni of manipulation, because her political stance becomes quite clear looking at these other (passages of) texts. But her weak definitional account of *libertà* can be explained as the outcome of a hypocritical, even dangerous attitude concerning democratic liberties when placed it in its verbal and historical context.

In a tweet from July 12, 2018, Meloni asked for a more severe punishment for those who attack members of the Italian police, and also urged a change in the law on torture, allowing the police a wider scope for “alternative ways of interrogation” (cf. *La Repubblica* July 12, 2018; https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/07/12/news/meloni_tortura_fratelli_d_italia-2015843_03/; this suggestion is also part of *Fratelli d'Italia*'s party program of 2018):

- (15) *Fratelli d'Italia ha presentato due proposte di legge per aumentare le pene a chi aggredisce un pubblico ufficiale e per modificare il reato di #tortura che, così com'è codificato oggi, impedisce alle forze dell'ordine di svolgere il proprio lavoro. Difendiamo chi ci difende!*

[“*Fratelli d'Italia* has presented two legislative proposals for increasing the punishment for those who attack a public official and for changing the offense

of #torture, which in the way it is codified today prevents law enforcers from doing their job. Let's defend those who defends us!"]

I would like to assess Meloni's strategic maneuvering as a bold and dangerous attempt to change the common usage and definition of *libertà*, by eliminating the individual aspects of *libertà* and replacing them with the alleged collective interests of "the people", "the nation", "Italy as a whole".

The final example of a definition of *libertà* I would like to look at is Salvini's definition. It appears in his program for his candidacy as Secretary General of the Northern League from the year 2013. Apart from his federalist stance, his political position does not differ much from that of Giorgia Meloni. However, his definition of *libertà* puts the individual at its centre, proceeds to characterize the properties of a free individual personality, and thus looks considerably more liberal than Meloni's definition:

- (16) *L'individuo che forma la comunità fatta di esperienze diverse, esaltate in ampi spazi di autogoverno, che non teme il diverso, ma non rinuncia alla sua libertà, ai suoi diritti, alle sue tradizioni. Un uomo libero, libero di quella libertà che, diceva Oriana Fallaci: "non è un diritto, è un dovere."*

[“The individual who forms the community, which is established by different experiences, exalted in wide spaces of self-government, who does not fear that which is different, but does not renounce his liberty, his rights, his traditions. A free man, free in the sense of that liberty which, according to Oriana Fallaci, “is not a right but a duty.” (Note that given Salvini's political stance, I use generic masculine in my translation)]

This definition sounds relatively liberal, and the opposition between right and duty could be translated into some earlier definitions as the opposition between self-determination and responsibility. There is only one problem: Salvini tries to support his definition by using an Argument from Authority, quoting the famous Italian journalist and author Oriana Fallaci (1929–2006), but his quotation is false. And this falsity is clearly motivated by a fallacious instance of strategic maneuvering, namely, Salvini probably intentionally distorted the definition in a way which would transform liberty into a duty concerning one's own culture, region and nation, a definition thus serving Salvini's political goals.

In her widely acclaimed book *Un uomo* (“A Man”; first published in 1979) about the Greek resistance activist Alexandros Panagoulis (1939–1976), Fallaci (who was, as her father, a member of the Italian resistance against Mussolini), claims that liberty is a duty *before* it becomes a right, that you have to do something for liberty in order to insure individual liberties (Fallaci 1979: 2):

- (17) [...] *lottate, ragionate col vostro cervello, ricordate che ciascuno è qualcuno, un individuo prezioso, responsabile, artefice di se stesso, difendetelo il vostro io, nocciolo di ogni libertà, la libertà è un dovere, prima che un diritto è un dovere.*

[“Fight, reason with your brain, remember that everybody is somebody, a precious individual, responsible, architect of themselves, defend your own self, the core of every liberty, liberty is a duty, before being a right it is a duty”]

One can only wonder why a right-wing politician such as Salvini, who repeatedly verbally and visually flirted with symbols of Mussolini’s politics, would quote a feminist, radically liberal person and former resistance activist opposed to all sorts of authoritarian regimes, such as Oriana Fallaci, as an authority. The reason was probably Fallaci’s devastating criticism of all forms of Islam in her later years, which was most welcome for a right-wing populist politician such as Salvini.

I would like to finish this section with a few examples of the use of implicit (re-)definitions of *libertà* in my corpus. Differently from explicit definitions, their persuasive impact often comes from “the introduction of a semantic ambiguity, consisting in disguising the new definition as if it were a commonly accepted one” (Macagno and Walton 2014: 146). For instance, in the following passage from their *Charter of Values*, both *Forza Italia* and, similarly, Matteo Salvini in his Facebook message from December 31, 2019, use the positively connotated word *libertà* to suggest a positive future for Italy:

- (18) *Noi proponiamo agli italiani una società fatta di libertà, di sviluppo economico, di solidarietà.* (Forza Italia, Carta dei valori)

[“We suggest a society made of liberty, economic development, solidarity to the Italian people”]

- (19) *Noi portiamo avanti i valori di libertà che guardano al futuro* (Matteo Salvini, Facebook message, December 31, 2019)

[“We carry forward the values of liberty which look towards the future”]

Whatever *Forza Italia* suggests to the Italians or *Lega* wants to carry forward, these statements both presuppose that the kind of liberty they are talking about is a common ground for all Italian people. In this way, they do not have to argue for their specific kind of liberty, the burden of proof is shifted to their readers/listeners, who have to be attentive so as not to erroneously accept the implicit definition of *libertà* of *Forza Italia/Lega* as their own.

For example, not all Italians would accept the capitalist premises concerning the freedom of the market spelled out in some passages of the *Secular Creed* of *Forza Italia*, or in the same *Facebook* message sent by Salvini, respectively.

Implicit (re-)definitions can also be used strategically for implicit face attacks:

- (20) *Chiediamo il sostegno di tutti gli italiani, di tutte le donne e di tutti gli uomini che amano la libertà e che vogliono restare liberi.* (Forza Italia, *Carta dei valori*)
 [“We ask for the support of all Italians, of all women and men who love liberty and who want to remain free”]

In this example, *Forza Italia* asks for the support of all Italians who love liberty and who want to remain free. Of course, this presupposes that only Italians who love liberty and want to be free can be asked to support *Forza Italia*, and this implies that all Italians who do not want to support *Forza Italia* do not love liberty. This, in turn, implies that they are people who want to be enslaved by the left parties in Italy, which is not very flattering for these people.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to support the following three main conclusions:

1. The core meaning of the Italian word *libertà* can be established on the basis of dictionary definitions and empirical data from computer corpora as being inclined towards “positive freedom” in the sense of Berlin (1969), that is, to be able to act in a self-determined way, following one’s own aims and goals. Amongst other evidence, this is confirmed by the much greater frequency of the collocation *libertà di* (freedom to”) in comparison to *libertà da* (“freedom from”).
2. The persuasive definitions based on more specific meanings of *libertà*, which are given by various protagonists in contemporary Italian politics, vary greatly. Describing these persuasive definitions and applying sets of critical questions to some of these definitions reveals differences of scope and quality which can be assessed following standards of plausible argumentation. Some of these definitions can be considered as fallacious, that is, as derailed instances of strategic maneuvering.
3. Maybe the most effective act of defining is the implicit definition. I have tried to show with the help of a few examples taken from my corpus of Italian political discourse that this is indeed a plausible assumption and that implicit (re-) definitions serve as persuasive means for differing strategic goals.

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