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Communicative Construction of Sardinian Identity and Social Representations in the regional press and on a web-forum

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S.Moscovici: *Rather than motivations, aspirations, cognitive principles and the other factors that are usually put forward, it is our representations which, in the last resort, determine our reactions, and their significance is, thus, of an actual cause (1983:65)*

G.Duveen/B.Lloyd: *...the theory of social representations is not a psychology of cognitions about social life, but rather a theory in which psychological activities are located in social life and social representations. (1990/2005) .*

G.Taylor/S.Spencer: *Identity is a work in progress, a negotiated space between ourselves and others; constantly being re-appraised and very much linked to the circulation of cultural meanings in a society. Furthermore identity is intensely political (2004:*

Michael Billig: *The imagining of a 'country' involves the imagining of a bounded totality beyond immediate experience of place (1995:74)*

M.A.K. Halliday : *language can express ideational and interpersonal meanings only because it can create text. Text is language in operation; and the textual component embodies the semantic systems by means of which text is created (2002:26).*

N.Luhmann: *The economy and the speed of communication always require a reference to complexes of meaning. Any more precise analysis and empirical research in particular will surely have to start from the part of the media which provides the most direct portrayal of reality and is indeed declared and perceived in this way: news and in-depth reporting (2002:77-78)*

G.Bedani-B.Haddock: *The history of nations has a peculiarly close relationship with the history of the media (2000:143)*

F.Braudel: *Sardinia, equally strange and special, is also worth pausing to consider. This is a very curious island, long uninhabited, like its neighbour Corsica. Being larger and even more isolated from the mainland than the latter, it has been perhaps the most conservative region of the whole Mediterranean at every stage in its history. (2002:91)*

Shards of theoretical background 1

Trying to define identity paves the way to a "mare magnum" of imagery translated into words with a high percentage of metaphors about their possible functions. The representation of identity is at the basis of this thesis. Scholars such as Taylor & Spencer (2004) reminds us that identity is a concept which is being socially/culturally/historically constructed. It embodies our uniqueness as both individuals and members of groups sharing a number of values and beliefs. Nowadays, the search for identity is rapidly changing as new forms of hybrid identities are gaining more and more spaces in the social and political arena.

According to Hutchinson (2005) Newspapers, e-journals and magazines together with commercial capitalism are two important factors in mirroring the policies of identification and representations with nation states or territories or historic groups within the nation states.

M. Billig described the role active élites play in the context of argumentation and for this reason the need for logic or "art of witcraft" is considered as deeply intermingled not only with the form of language but also with its contents (1987:133). In addition the contents of common-sense thinking are not "a unitary store of folk wisdom", but instead "..it may provide us with our dilemmas for deliberation and our controversies for argument." (1987:222). Moreover, he holds, "the emergence of a new concept does not always indicate the formulation of a new idea." (1991:57, 58).

M. Billig also adds that: *It is clear that Moscovici originally intended the concept of social representation to be interpreted particularly, rather than universally. He formulated the notion to elucidate the particular problem of how scientific ideas become represented in popular consciousness.* (1991:67).

According to Ellemers, N., Spears, R., Doosje, B. (1999) *The individual is clearly embedded in a social field. Identification with the group, and the need to respond to this field, require that these social processes take into account this social reality, be it stable or shifting.* (1999:61)

Shards of theoretical background 2

The work of Potter and Wetherell maintains that the communicative processes of identity construction and representation draw much on conversation organisation and rhetoric. Wetherell (1996) presents Social Representations as a constructionist theory which is a practical device to make sense of unfamiliar information and turn it into familiar as well as evaluating it.

S. Jovchelovitch (2007) wrote that Social Representations refer both to a theory and to a phenomenon. It is a theory insofar as it provides a set of articulated concepts that seek to give an account of how social knowledge is produced and transformed in processes of communication and social interaction. It is a phenomenon insofar as it refers to a set of empirical regularities comprising the ideas, values and practices of human communities about specific social objects as well as the social and communicative processes that produce and reproduce them.

Moreover S. Jovchelovitch maintains SRS belong to what she calls "*the phenomenology of everyday life*" which focuses on the processes through which people, institutions and communities "*produce knowledge about themselves, others and the multitude of social objects that are relevant to them*"(2007:45). In a way, Jovchelovitch mirrors the ideas expressed by Moscovici(1982)

Shards of theoretical background 3

- **Billig suggests common sense or social representations cannot but be dilemmatic and the researchers should therefore look for argumentations and counter-processes expressed by the "thinking society" (Billig 1991:71-72)**
- **Tajfel and Turner (1979), Turner (1999), pointed out three paramount aspects to be investigated when it comes to social identity theory:**
 - 1) analysing cognitive-emotional processes involved in the production of positive identity**
 - 2) going into in-depth analysis of point 1 by applying it to intergroup-relations in the "real world"**
 - 3) further exploration of interpersonal-intergroup continuum as "Tajfel suggested that social behaviour varied along a continuum from interpersonal to intergroup(the behaviour of two or more individuals towards each other is determined by their membership of different social groups or categories" (Turner 1999,p.9)**

My Theoretical Framework

- **Discursive and Critical Psychology (Billig 1987, 1991; Mazzara, 1997; 2006)**
- **Critical Discourse Analysis (Sociopolitical Discourse Analysis) Van Dijk (1993), Billig (1991) Fairclough (1989-2001: 117)**
- **Social Identity Theory(Tajfel 1978, 1979), Turner (1979, 1999). This part will be developed throughout 2009 in order to strenghten the theoretical part of my project.**
- **Socio-Historical Approach (Smith, 1981, 2007). This was the “firestarter” as I was working in this field since 2004. I decided to abandon this perspective in 2008 as it was not enough related to the field of social representations and it was directly linked to the mainstream of studies on nationalism instead. It must be noticed that M.Billig is one of the few scholars who belong to both socio-historical and CDA-Rhetoric approaches**
- **Social Representation Theory and soft Socio-constructionism perspective trying to avoid the “Boomerang Effect”(de Rosa 2001, 2006)**

Three sections in brief

- **The first and main part of this research examines the representations and communication of Sardinian identity in 717 articles collected in the Sardinian regional Press.**
- **A second part of the study investigates the responses of 75 participants who left 132 posts in a portion of web-space created for that purpose.**
- **A third stage explores the answers of 44 participants who filled-in a semi-structured questionnaire submitted via e-mail. The overall aim of my work was investigating and describing the processes of identity construction and communication of in-group social identity and the way interactions and memberships are represented in the semantic field thus generated.**

Study1: in brief

As far as Study1 is concerned, the articles were analysed over four years. This kind of long-term analysis generated a large amount of data. On the first screening, after two thousand articles had been read, I decided to retain only those articles which contained direct references to the issue of Sardinian identity both in their headlines as well as in their texts. Moreover I eliminated a number of articles which were parts of readers' rubric as they were generally too short (normally few lines) and I kept only those articles which fit the standard requirement (for example as far as *L'Unione Sarda's* policy is concerned, an article to be called an article should be no less than 25 lines X 55 spaces long). For this reason, despite my poor technical skills, I decided to go for computer-assisted analysis by using "T-lab 2". After a first analysis I re-analysed the corpus obtained by re-dividing it into four thematic macroareas related to various aspects of Sardinian identity which were given much space in the regional press. Those "aspects" could be clearly summarized in four thematic areas:

- 1) Ethnic identity
- 2) Identity and Autonomy
- 3) Sardinian language and identity
- 4) Newly landed immigrants and Sardinian identity.
 - Ethnic and cultural identity; (421=58.71%; 1.588kb saved in plain text)
 - Autonomy(154=21.48%; 456kb)
 - Language as vehicle of identity (80 articles=11.16%; 326kb);
 - New Immigrants (62 articles=8.65%; 199kb)

Finding and displaying data

ANALYSIS OF CONTEXT UNITS.

T-Lab, allows the researcher to display a thematic representation of corpus contents and its relationships by using a tool called the “Key Contexts of Thematic Words” which will extract a list of meaningful elementary contexts which will allow the researcher to go into more in-depth analysis of the thematic values of the key words obtained. Thematic Clusters ranges from 3 to 50. T-Lab summarizes results through graphs. This helps researchers evaluating the relationships of **similarity/dissimilarity** (the distance being proportional to the degree of association). There are several ways relationships can be analysed: they can be one-to-one or one-to all (Key contexts of thematic words), or the corpus can be analysed all-together identifying the main themes and its characteristics and exploring their relationships.

Finding and displaying data

- Of course, describing wording and morphology represents only a background level on data analysis. I need to set up a second level of interpretation by shaping semantic universes and by reflecting on semantic and pragmatics and by bridging the theoretical aspects of CDA with SR. Moreover empirical data should be re-thought as they should match with both theories.
- So what I am trying to do by using T-Lab in the first step is descriptive interpretation: recognizing and sorting out words, phrases and sentences. This level provides us with an insight on textual & lexical richness of our data.
- The second level of interpretation consists in assigning meaning to those parts of the texts, either they be single words, chunks or entire paragraphs. In this case the analyst is paramount as he/she is the one that must make sense of the utterances by contextualising them.

Finding and displaying data

- **Thus even though a software helps us to de-construct and re-construct semantic fields by combining word-meaning and grammatical information and “work out implicit meanings to arrive at meanings for whole propositions” (Fairclough 2001:120) it is clear that the importance of the analyst and the knowledge of the written corpus over the years will be much useful if the research would shift to talk-analysis (focus-groups) or other text analysis (forums)**
- **At this stage I can say a preliminary analysis of the data found in Sardinian media reflects not only the growing awareness of and interest in the different issue of Sardinian contemporary society, but also the dense political and rhetoric discourse present in the Sardinian media. Describing this discourse for each narrative would be quite interesting *per se* but in for a more in-depth study, it would be even more interesting at the end of the thesis work, to compare what the rhetoric discourse of the media is with what Sardinian people think or say they think. All the narratives are interesting. The most recent one, describes newly landed immigrants (especially from Northern Africa) in Sardinia where migration took its toll over the decades for those Sardinians who had to migrate and who, from distant lands, re-shaped and spread back, often through the new media, their sense of Sardinian identity. Also, methods such as Cluster Analysis will help me to understand if clearly different types of identity within the same subset or narrative are working. Again, it will be the analyst that must interpret the data magically stemmed from the computer aided analysis and tell what the “story” is about.**

Finding and displaying data

- **Preliminary Analysis of Corpus provided by the macroarea "Autonomy"**
- **The articles associated to this area are 421 (58.71% of all articles)**
- **Variable chosen: newspapers ("L'UnioneSarda"; "LaNuovaSardegna", "ISardegna")**
- **T-Lab is a tool that divides its analysis in six main steps which run from text gathering to report editing.**
- **Any of the tools can be used in any order**
- **Generally speaking all the settings for the analysis can be saved and re-used for further analyses. I decided to go for automatic lemmatization which provides with a significant and often complex amount of data to be analysed with a set of different methods.**

Further research was conducted by creating a forum of discussion on Sardinian identity. Back in 2004 I took part into a Unesco project led by the University of Aston. I was in charge of detecting Sardinian websites, their authors, the views they expressed and the language used. That past project gave me some knowledge in the vast sea of independent authored internet. At that time the messages found presented a strong one-way and asynchronous communication and there was hardly any interaction. But paraphrasing as Bauer-Gaskell point out (1999:166)

throwing a stone into a pond creates ripples that may be interesting to analyse stimuli and its consequences.



Study 1-2-3 Summarizing methodology

- **(Study1) On the basis of the first results of the analysis on 717 articles published on the 3 main Sardinian newspapers (“Unione Sarda”, “Il Sardegna” and “La Nuova Sardegna”) I singled out 4 macro-narratives related to Social Identity. Some of those articles showed a number of lines which re-define Sardinian identity as part of but also in competition with Italian and European identities. Many articles focused on representing Sardinian as possessing a unique culture; A number of articles focus on the polemic relationships between Sardinian identity and Italian one over revenues and territory. More articles focused on Sardinian language standardisation and several focused on newly landed immigrants from European and non-European countries.**
- **(Study2) A forum on Sardinian identity was opened in order to collect the contributions of any surfer willing to express his/her opinions on what Sardinian identity is. The posts were collected between April and June 2007. 478 KEYWORDS (elementary contexts) stemming from the forum**
- **(Study3) Later on, all participants were contacted via mail and asked to fill-in a questionnaire based (but only to a certain extent) on “Associative Network”. The technique was developed over the 1990s by de Rosa and others (1993b, 1995, 1996). That method merged free associations starting from a set of stimulus words proposed to the participants and the participants’ actions in writing down connections between the words elicited. Thus, the participant him/herself could build a clearly structured semantic field. Of course I only used a limited version of de Rosa’s tool as my respondents were not asked to draw anything.**

Data Collection: a tool

Multimethod questionnaire integrating projective and demi-structured tools. It has been divided into four different sections.

In the first section (Questions 1, 2, 3) of the questionnaire a verbal association technique is proposed. This is largely inspired on projective technique known as “associative network” developed by A.S. de Rosa (de Rosa, 1995, 2002): I've developed this part by submitting three stimula-words: Sardinians, Italians and Europeans. Starting from the three valences (negative, positive, neutral) associated by the participants to each word, polarity index (P) has been calculated (n° of positive words associated minus n° of negative words divided by the N° of then whole words associated by each participant).

The index must range between -1 and +1. We also used an index of neutrality (N) (n° of neutral words – n° of positive words = n° of negative words divided by n° of total words associated.) Later on they are used as indicators of the participants' attitude towards each object being represented. A further section (question $n^{\circ}4$) comprises three ten-step scales on which participants ranked their level of identification in turn with Sardinia, Italy and Europe. A third section (questions 5, 6, 7, 8) is dedicated to demi-structured questions which aimed at investigating participants' opinions on autonomistic policies and independentist ones plus their party leaning/voting intention. The fourth section (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16) of the questionnaire comprises a semi-structured set of questions on what are perceived as the most “caring” institutions, economic, cultural and environment resources together with the symbols and the historical events related to Sardinian identity. At the very beginning of the questionnaire participants are asked a number of questions to obtain some economic and socio-demographic data.

Preliminary results:

The main set of data was obtained from a sample of 717 newspapers articles focusing on four macronarratives of identity construction: Cultural/Ethnic, Autonomy, Language, New Immigrations. The articles were collected manually, day by day, between 2004 and 2007 and the three most widely read Sardinian newspapers were included in this study (I chose those newspapers as they were the only ones that were distributed in more than 80.000 copies per day in all eight provinces).

There was evidence of the steady importance the theme of ethnic identification had in the Sardinian press as well as among the small group of Sardinians who took part in my study. Despite the lack of organised Sardinian political and industrial elites willing to take actual steps to obtain more administrative autonomy, it is clear that a strong emphasis on Sardinian cultural richness and ethnicity is being played by the media even if there appear to be no effects on real-life relations between Sardinian and Italian institutions. But, by shaping a re-shaping a set of core representations of Sardinian ethnic identity, Sardinian press elicit a set of social representations of identity.

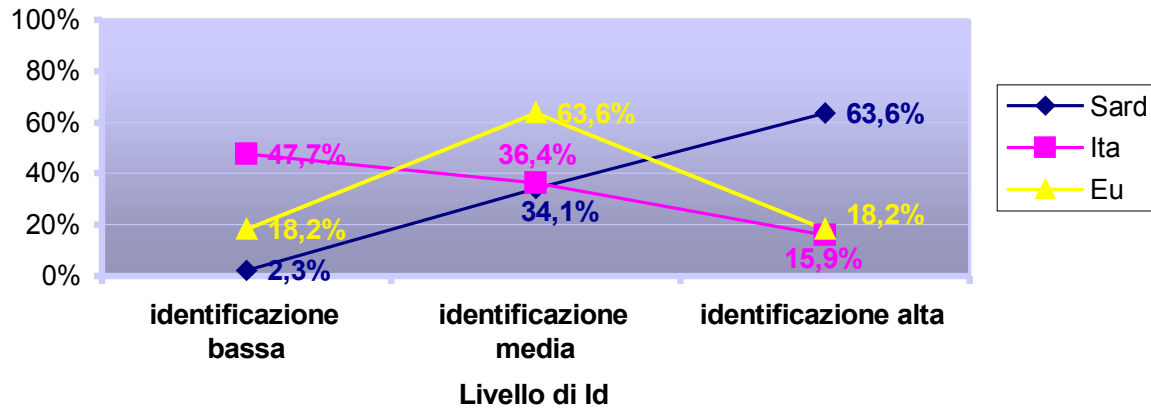
Study1 gave me the opportunity to single out macro-thematic areas which may generate a number of different social representations both anchored and in progress(the latter especially as far as the process of integrating newly landed immigrants is concerned).

Study2, was intended as an attempt to trace the ways a small group of intellectual activists made sense of their social identity.

Study3 aimed at trying to single out more specific representations, especially those linked to the generation and sharing of ethnic symbolism related to Sardinian identity and its relations with other memberships: Italian and European ones. I was also interested in finding out something more about the relations between citizens and social-political institutions. This small group of participants showed high level of identification with Sardinia, medium with Europe and low with Italy. Of course, as de Rosa pointed out: *in any case, it should be stressed that representations always have a contextual and situated position in a relational meaning system, including the context of the setting where the test is administered* (2002,pp.182-184)

Images and symbols were elicited When asked to elicit any Sardinian symbol contributing to the building of Sardinian identity, the subjects had few doubts. The first object elicited after the stimulus phrase “Sardinian symbol” was given was “SardinianFlag” which was the most elicited object over the three turns which were taken into consideration. The second most elicited symbol was the “Nuraghe”. Nuragic age was also frequently elicited as one of the main historical facts responsible for the development of Sardinian identity. Participants showed a positive attitude towards Sardinian autonomy but none of them voted for any independist/nationalist party.

Identificazione Sardegna Italia Europa



Sardinia

Italy

Europe

2.3%

47.7%

18.2%

34.1%

36.4%

6.6%

63.6%

15.9%

18.2%

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- **THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!**
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