



In nomine patris: Discursive strategies and ideology in the Cosa Nostra family discourse



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ABSTRACT

The article investigates how Cosa Nostra family discourse is characterized by a series of discursive strategies that give shape to specific ideological structures. By analysing a TV interview to the son of Bernardo Provenzano, boss of Cosa Nostra, it is possible to understand how the criminal values and practices are maintained and reproduced within the father–son relationship. Specifically, we show how the son justifies, legitimises or denies the criminal actions of his father. The ideology of Cosa Nostra seems to be based on the inter-generational cultural continuity of its members, on the family as main locus of adherence, reductionism of its mediatic image, amorality as father–son relational constant and verticalism of the organisation as key framing device.

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1. Introduction

According to van Leeuwen (1993: 193), the relation between social practices and discourse may be referred to through two interdependent dynamics. On the one hand, discourse itself can be seen as a form of social practice, something that people do, an action, but also systems of values; on the other hand, in the Foucaultian sense, discourse is a way to represent and give shape to social practices. If these dynamics can be generally described by far-reaching discourses, his impact on specific fields may certainly produce more evident implications. From these premises, we have decided to analyse how a specific kind of discourse such as the *Cosa Nostra* (the Sicilian mafia) criminal one reveals and characterises certain social practices and values. This paper will be conducted taking Critical Discourse Analysis as a broad and general theoretical reference point (see Wodak and Meyer (2016)), in particular concerning the nature of discourse as an instrument of power and social construction of reality. Specifically, the aims of the current paper will be to try (a) to highlight which strategies the son of a former boss of Cosa Nostra uses to justify, legitimise or deny the criminal actions of his father and (b) to demonstrate how his discourse reveals ideological contents about the ontology and the relationships between Cosa Nostra and society.

2. Discourse: analysis, ideology and criminal perspectives

The idea that discourse reveals and characterises social practices and values is rooted, at least, in the Marxist tradition and the Frankfurt school. The crucial aspects of these perspectives are that discourse is a social phenomenon and that not only single individuals, but also institutions, organisations and social groupings have particular social practices and values that are conveyed through language (Kress, 1990: 84–97). Among the different approaches that have tried to investigate the nature of language as social practice, Critical Discourse Analysis has taken a particular interest in investigating the relation between discourse and ideology (Wodak, 2001: 10). In this regard, ideology has been considered as a central notion that represents how relations of power are established, maintained and legitimised (*ibidem*). The analysis of relation between discourse and ideology is traditionally conducted in corpora of institutional, political, gender and media discourses, such as news reports, political speeches, advertising etc. (*ibidem*: 2) around a series of ideological constructions that reflect asymmetrical relations of power such as nationalism, ethnicism, racism and sexism. Among the variety of ways to discuss how ideology is expressed in media discourse, it is possible to consider the use of *metaphors* (i.e., conceptualising the IMMIGRANTS and the IMMIGRATION in terms of ANIMALS and INFECTED, see Ana (1999)), the use of *narratives* and *stereotypes* (i.e., considering women as more emotional than men, see Lutz (1996)) or the use of forms of *argumentation* and *legitimation strategies*

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(i.e., blaming victims of sexual violence in order to reduce the responsibility of the aggressor, see [Suarez and Gadalla \(2010\)](#)). What has emerged from a series of investigations about the relation between language and ideology is that not every ideology concerns asymmetrical relations of power, but that ideology may be referred to through any “...coherent set of ideas and beliefs that provides an organised and systematic representation of the world about which they can agree” ([Charteris-Black, 2012: 22–21](#)). From this, we can suggest *hedonism* and *consumerism* as two ideologies that do not present any evident relation of power. In fact, while hedonism may be considered as a view based “on the openness to pleasurable experiences” ([Veenhoven, 2003: 437](#)), consumerism represents a set of values and ideas “intended to make people believe that human worth is best ensured and happiness is best achieved in terms of our consumption and possessions” ([Sklair, 2010: 136](#)). If ideologies can present wide varieties of meanings and interpretations, we think that it is crucial to take into account with greater concern not only those ideologies that do not reflect any evident relation of power, but especially those sets of ideas and beliefs that have not received yet a precise definition. Considering that ideology and discourse are reflected in interdependent relations, the choice to investigate undefined ideologies should be combined with the use of specific discourse that non-necessarily goes under the labels of institutional, political, gender and media discourses. For these reasons, we have decided to analyse the criminal discourse as a base for this investigation, in particular the discourse that emerges from the son of a boss of Cosa Nostra, and as ideological content the set of ideas and values that justify, legitimise or deny the ontology and the relationships between Cosa Nostra and society. In particular, considering that the intergenerational relation between sons and father may generate interesting discursive strategies, we have decided to put a particular emphasis on how these strategies are used.

3. Discourse, ideology and context

Cosa Nostra (“our thing”) is the name with which the affiliates themselves refer to the criminal syndicate based in Sicily, Italy. The structure of Cosa Nostra remained substantially unknown until the early 1980s when the first *pentiti* (turncoats) started to reveal dynamics and activities of the organisation, but also values and codes of conduct ([Lupo, 2004](#)). Among the most important members of Cosa Nostra, Bernardo Provenzano was considered to be the head of the entire Sicilian Mafia until his arrest in 2006. If we wanted to analyse the discursive practices and the consequent sets of ideas and values of criminals of this kind, we would encounter a series of problems, since his lifestyle did not permit any public presence (Provenzano had been on the run for 43 years) and because, since his arrest under hard prison regime serving a series of life sentences, they cannot have any interaction with the outside world.¹ In this regard, a potential solution that may be functional to analyse the discursive practices and the ideology of Cosa Nostra comes from a TV interview to Angelo Provenzano, son of Bernardo Provenzano, released to a major TV show in 2012. Although it is legitimate to assume that the son of a leading exponent of Cosa Nostra is foreign to the discourse and the values that his father may express, there are two reasons for which we might consider the son of the former head of Cosa Nostra in cultural and discursive continuity with his father. First of all, during

the first years of life, Angelo has experienced the condition of being on the run with his father, sharing therefore a criminal and deviating condition. Second, although Angelo Provenzano has a clean record and despite his actual job as entrepreneur, he has never distanced himself or denied his father's criminal activities.²

4. Denial, justification and legitimization strategies

Both as cultural and criminal phenomenon, the existence of Cosa Nostra has been denied for decades by its affiliated members, but also by the *omertà* of the local populations and even by some members of the institutions, according to the old claim that “mafia does not exist”. In addition, as some scholars have claimed (see [Barbagallo \(1988\)](#), [Sciarrone \(1998\)](#), [Lupo \(2004\)](#), [Paoli \(2008\)](#)), the identity of the affiliated members is also perceived in terms of who offers services (i.e., protection) or who gives job to unemployed people thanks to his economic activities ([Gambetta, 1996](#)). Therefore, we would expect to find in some expressions of the criminal discourse of Cosa Nostra a series of discursive strategies that in different ways deny, justify or legitimate criminal actions, connecting them with a specific identity model to shape and share ([Dino, 2002](#); [Di Piazza, 2010](#)). Critical analyses of language have widely discussed how similar strategies are used in relation to different kinds of discourse. For instance, as analyses about corporate discourse have shown (see [Coombs \(2007\): 171](#)), *denial strategies* are strategies that try to establish a certain frame in which the agent (i.e. an organisation) tries to remove any connection between itself and a negative situation (i.e. a crisis). Conversely, *justification strategies* admit a connect between the agent and the negative situation, but develop a frame with which delinquent and transgressing agents justify his reprehensible behavior, as attributing his responsibilities to external factors, blaming the victims or putting blame on victims' attributes, condemning the condemners (see [Sykes and Matza \(1957\)](#)). Finally, *legitimation strategies* that not only establish a connection between the agent and the situation also try to legitimate it by referring the situation to an authority (i.e., tradition, custom), to the utility of institutionalized social actions or to a specific value system (see [van Leeuwen and Wodak \(1999\)](#) for a detailed overview). The theoretical distinction of denial, justification and legitimization strategies may be described also in different ways,³ but it is worth mentioning that while the denial and legitimization strategies are usually referred to organisations (i.e., multinational corporations), the justification strategies concern more explicitly the actions of single individuals (i.e., domestic violence, bullying). In this regard, the use of similar strategies in relation to members of criminal syndicates may represent an interesting exception. As [Giordano and Lo Verso \(2013: 22\)](#) have claimed:

Blind and total obedience to familiar precepts is reciprocated by mafia families with a strong identity. The identities of the *uomini d'onore* (“men of honor”, an appellation for the affiliated members) seems to be built right through a complete identification with the mafia family. And in exchange for protection and assistance, members of the mafia families swear allegiance

¹ The only “linguistic” testimony by Bernardo Provenzano is represented by the *pizzini* (small pieces of paper) written to communicate with the other members of Cosa Nostra. For an analysis of these *pizzini* and interesting reflections on the specificity of written communication in Cosa Nostra see [Santoro \(2007\)](#) and [Catanzaro and Santoro \(2009\)](#).

² It should be obvious, but it is important to specify that when we talk of “cultural and discursive continuity” between Angelo Provenzano and his father, we do not obviously refer to the whole linguistic universe of Provenzano junior, but just to some specific communicative contexts explicitly concerning the topic of mafia, as the one we are going to analyse.

³ See for instance [Coombs \(2007: 170\)](#) that uses “Justification” as a sub-strategy of “Deny” or [Sykes and Matza \(1957\)](#) that consider as “justification” strategy some elements (i.e., “appeal to higher loyalties”) that can be referred to as “legitimation” strategies.

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