Counterfactual Thinking – Counterfactual Writing

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On April 6, 2009, a tremendous earthquake stroke Abruzzo, a central southern Italian region. In the following days, the earthquake became one of the main issues of political discussion in Italy. On April 30, Antonio Di Pietro, one of the major antagonists of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, stated in a public declaration, among other things: “All these deaths could have been avoided, if only the government had listened to those who warned of the imminent danger”. This statement is an example of counterfactual communication, evidently aimed at attacking the government’s performance.

For some time now, my colleagues and I have been studying how politicians employ counterfactuals in political discourse, comparing what (allegedly) happened with what might (or should) have happened. Our basic assumption is that politicians can use counterfactual communication to promote their own representations of past political events, to defend themselves, to attack their adversaries, and, more generally, to influence citizens’ representation of political reality and of politicians.

In particular, we focus on two main questions: a) What counterfactuals do politicians use in discourse? b) What effects do these counterfactuals have on voters? In addressing these questions, we build on what previous psychological research has shown regarding counterfactual thinking and its relations with other psychological processes, such as causal reasoning, emotional reactions, and decision making. In the two following sections, I will briefly deal with the functions and the activation conditions of counterfactual thinking. Taking these notions as a background, I will then describe the method and the results of two studies aimed at investigating counterfactual communication in the political context, as well as its effects on citizens’ evaluations.
I. The Functions of Counterfactual Thinking

Previous research has shown that counterfactual thinking serves several psychological functions, which may come down to three main ones:

**Affective function.** Counterfactuals influence emotional reactions. For example, after being involved in a car accident, thinking that things might have gone better (an upward counterfactual) is likely to trigger a negative emotion such as discomfort or regret. On the contrary, thinking that things could have gone worse (a downward counterfactual) is likely to trigger a positive emotion like relief. This seems to be due to a “contrast effect”. An outcome, even a negative one, triggers more positive emotions when an even less desirable outcome is made salient to one’s mind. After a negative event, people have been shown to spontaneously generate more upward than downward counterfactuals. However, people may also react to the spontaneous upcoming of upward counterfactuals through intentionally focusing on the generation of downward counterfactuals. Actually, the most frequent generation of downward counterfactuals after an unsuccessful outcome has been shown to distinguish optimistic from pessimistic people.

**Preparatory function.** Besides cognitively restructuring the past, counterfactuals “construct” the future, that is, they can favor the preparation of future actions. Past research has shown that the best way to plan an action consists in mentally simulating both the process (i.e., the various steps) leading to an expected goal and the goal itself. Similarly, counterfactual thinking is a form of “post hoc” simulation, including both the process leading to an expected outcome and the outcome itself. Thus, it may serve as “correction” of an unsuccessful outcome, increasing or decreasing the probability of obtaining a satisfying past outcome, increasing the probability of getting better if one or another element of the counterfactuals stress the negative outcomes they may serve a preparatory function in the future to increase the possibility of the future event’s actors, especially the actor focused on as the person or she had acted differently is optimistic.

**Explanatory function.** Previous being exposed to counterfactual results in terms of the explanation of the event’s actors, especially the actor focused on as the person or she had acted differently is optimistic.

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Counterfactual thinking serves several psychological functions, including the facilitation of emotional reactions. For instance, thinking that things might have been different is likely to trigger a negative emotion (contrary, thinking that things might have been the same is due to a “contrast effect”). More positive emotions when an event has occurred than one’s expectations. After a negative event, people may also react to the potential outcomes through intentionally counterfactuals. Actually, the counterfactuals after an unsuccessful optimistic from pessimistic outcomes.

Structuring the past, counterfactuals favor the preparation of future actions. A way to plan an action consists of the various steps leading to an outcome. Counterfactual thinking is a form of planning process leading to an expected result. A counterfactual serve as “correction” of an unsuccessful outcome.


Counterfactual Thinking and Organizational Accountability after a Close Call”, in: Administrative Science Quarterly, 45, 4, pp. 737-765.


Counterfactuals have been shown to serve a preparatory function better than others. This is the case for upward counterfactuals as compared with downward counterfactuals. In stating that things might have gone better if one or another element of a past event had been different, upward counterfactuals stress the negativity of the actual event, but at the same time they may serve as preparatory function, suggesting what might be done in the future to increase the possibility for similar events to have a better outcome.

The subtractive versus additive nature of counterfactuals has also been shown to matter with regard to their preparatory function. When we generate a subtractive counterfactual we remove an element which was present in the real scenario. For example: “If the government hadn’t approved that budget, the economic conditions of the country would be better now”. By contrast, when we generate an additive counterfactual we introduce elements that were not present in the real scenario. For example: “If the government had taken special measures to reduce the inflation rate, the economic conditions of the country would be better now”. While subtractive counterfactuals are constrained to what already happened, additive counterfactuals are creative regarding what happened in the past, introducing new elements that were not part of reality in the past but might become real in the future. As such, they have been shown to contribute to preparing future action better than subtractive counterfactuals.

Explanatory function. Previous research has shown that generating and being exposed to counterfactuals regarding a given event may have consequences in terms of the explanation of the event and the perception of the event’s actors, especially the attribution of responsibility and blame. The actor focused on as the person who might have changed the outcome if he or she had acted differently is often considered responsible for the obtained
outcome. For example, after listening to the above-mentioned counterfactual by Antonio Di Pietro, one might think that the government was at least partly responsible for the terrible consequences of the earthquake. In fact, when faced with a negative event, people have been shown to be more likely to attribute counterfactuals to individual actors rather than to external conditions, even when these conditions may have played a relevant role in causing the event. Focusing attention on actors who are perceived as capable of exerting some control on the event, instead of on fortuitous or uncontrollable external circumstances, would well serve the consolatory function of convincing people that the same negative event could be prevented from happening again in the future.

II. Reference to Norms in Counterfactual Thinking

What elements of the real event are more likely to trigger counterfactuals? According to the so-called Norm Theory, elements perceived as "exceptional" are more likely to trigger counterfactual thinking because "normal" alternatives are easily available to the person's mind. But what are "normal" alternatives or, in other words, what norms do we refer to when generating counterfactuals?

Early research on counterfactual thinking was mainly focused on laboratory studies where participants were presented with events in which exceptionality consisted in deviation from routine. For example, a man has a car accident after having changed his usual way back home from work. Faced with this event, participants were likely to generate the counterfactual "If the man had followed his usual route home, the accident would not have happened." More recently, research has been extended to more ecological, that is, less artificial, scenarios and the triggers of counterfactuals may be triggered by societal norms, but also by deviations from expectations regarding the behavior of others.

Let us consider the following example: a man by train decides to go by car for a routine appointment; on the way, he accepts a lift from a male stranger. The non-event, things would have been different: he would be a routine-based or intra-personal event with her own standard behavior. The deviation from this standard is mutual.

However, in a social embeddedness, one may perceive not only as an individual category (for example, a woman's sequence, the actor's behavior may be attributed to norms, but also with social norms to which he belongs to. Thus, faced with the non-event, participants may generate a counterfactual like: "If only she had been different", a stereotype-based or social norm. They perceive the standard behavior of a woman ceasing lifts from strangers. Trying to assess what kind of counterfactuals is especially relevant, they referred to the traditional relationships between cause, norm, and blame. In the above example, "If the woman had not accepted, she would be responsible for what happened, the counterfactual. Some research highlights social norms (such as the one of


is, less artificial, scenarios and this has led to focusing attention on how counterfactuals may be triggered not only by deviations from routine-based norms, but also by deviations from social-based norms, such as stereotypical expectations regarding the behavior of people involved in a given event.

Let us consider the following event. A woman who usually goes to work by train decides to go by car for a change. Her car has a breakdown and she accepts a lift from a male stranger who afterwards rapes her. Faced with this event, a juror might generate a counterfactual like: “If only she had taken the train, things would have been different”. In this case, the reference norm would be a routine-based or intrapersonal norm. The woman’s behavior is compared with her own standard behavior, and the element showing low consistency with this standard is mutated in the counterfactual.13

However, in a socially embedded context the actor of an event may be perceived not only as an individual, but also as a member of a given social category (for example, a woman, an old person, or a gipsy). As a consequence, the actor’s behavior may be compared not only with intrapersonal norms, but also with social norms triggered by the social category the actor belongs to. Thus, faced with the same event, our juror might also generate a counterfactual like: “If only she had not accepted a lift from a stranger, things would have been different”. In this case, the reference norm would be a stereotype-based or social norm. The woman’s behavior is compared with the perceived standard behavior of a (non-raped) woman, which includes not accepting lifts from strangers.14

Trying to assess what kind of norm violations are more likely to trigger counterfactuals is especially relevant if we take into account the already mentioned relationships between counterfactual thinking, responsibility attribution, and blame. In the above example, a juror generating the counterfactual “If the woman had not accepted the lift …” is more likely to perceive her as responsible for what happened, than a juror who did not generate the same counterfactual. Some research has indeed demonstrated that reference to social norms (such as the one of not accepting lifts from strangers) may in-


fluence jurors’ judgments even if these norms do not have any correspondence in legal norms.\textsuperscript{15}

So far, we have made reference to how single individuals generate counterfactuals, but counterfactuals may also be conveyed through interpersonal and public communication. The dynamics underlying counterfactual communication have not been widely investigated so far.\textsuperscript{16} Our research on counterfactuals in political discourse is aimed at deepening our knowledge of how counterfactuals are employed in communication and what effects they have on receivers.

Our basic assumption is that, through the evocation of given counterfactual scenarios a speaker is likely to enhance the salience of given reference norms to the receiver’s mind, and thus to influence the receiver’s perception of the real scenarios. For example, through the above-mentioned sentence “Things would be better if the government had listened to warnings of danger”, Antonio Di Pietro presumably made the reference norm “a government should listen to warnings of danger” salient to the mind of the citizens. Very likely, he also highlighted that the government did not respect a shared norm, and thus enhanced the likelihood that the government would be held responsible for the negative outcome of the event the counterfactual referred to. In other words, through counterfactuals speakers may communicate that shared expectations or reference norms have been violated. In this way, those norms that might otherwise have gone unnoticed are made more salient to receivers’ minds. For example, when reconstructing past political events, politicians may compare the actual events with a variety of possible alternatives. Very likely, politicians will choose one or another alternative in a way that may be functional to their discursive goals, among which are the defense of a positive image of themselves and their group as well as the attack against their adversaries.\textsuperscript{17} For example, in replying to Di Pietro’s “counterfactual attack” regarding the government’s inadequate reaction to the danger of an earthquake, Berlusconi might employ a “counterfactual defense” by saying something like: “If the opposition had taken care of the interests of


III. Our Research

Our research on counterfactuals in the Social Communication: The Case of the country, they would have

the way, Berlusconi would suggest a shared reference norm according to the interests of the country”, thus shifting the consequences of the event from

Our main aims: a) identifying the discourse patterns more likely to evoke in their perception of the

these counterfactuals may have adopted different research approaches, widely employed in social psychological analyses, and qualitative research approaches in the study of actual political discourses and international relations, and finally we analyze our data through

metrical statistic analyses. Building on our previous research, we develop a series of experimental research setting in which different groups of participants are required to answer questions on the degree of persuasiveness of what the speaker says.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, we will address the questions and the results of the research we have conducted. The framework of our research program was based on the findings of four leaders who were compared: Romano Prodi and Silvio Berlusconi.

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Patrizia Catellani/Venusia Taneschi, Communication: The Case of

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Patrizia Catellani/Mauro Passalacqua, “Political Interviews: The Etiquette Thoughts”, in preparation.
the country, they would have made the government action easier”. In this way, Berlusconi would suggest that the opposition had violated the widely shared reference norm according to which “politicians should act in the interests of the country”, thus shifting the responsibility for the negative consequences of the event from himself to the opposition.

III. Our Research

Our research on counterfactual communication in political discourse has two main aims: a) identifying what types of counterfactuals politicians are more likely to evoke in their political discourses; b) assessing what effects these counterfactuals may have on receivers. To reach these two aims we adopt two different research approaches in an integrated way, both of them widely employed in social psychological research. The first is an ecological and qualitative research approach. We look for counterfactuals embedded in actual political discourses and interviews, we code them according to a series of criteria, and finally we analyze them through the application of non-parametrical statistic analyses. Building on the results of these qualitative studies, we develop a series of experimental studies. They consist in the creation of a research setting in which different versions of fictitious political discourses and interviews, including different types of counterfactuals, are individually submitted to separate groups of participants. After reading the text, participants are required to answer a series of questions in order to assess the degree of persuasiveness of what they have read and their perception of the speaker.

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will briefly outline the research questions and the results of two studies, one for each of the main aims pursued by our research program. The first study consists in the analysis of counterfactuals embedded in a sample of actual political discourses by the two leaders who were competing in the 2006 Italian general election, Romano Prodi and Silvio Berlusconi. The second study consists of an experimental simulation, including fictitious political discourses, and aims at assessing the effects on receivers of counterfactuals employed by politicians.

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These two studies offer examples of the theoretical and methodological approach adopted by social psychology when studying counterfactual thinking in applied domains.

IV. Counterfactuals in Political Discourse

In the two months preceding the 2006 Italian general elections, we recorded and fully transcribed a number of televised pre-electoral broadcasts with Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi as main guests. Transcribed texts were then analyzed by two independent coders, who looked for the presence of counterfactuals, in either an explicit or an implicit form. Counterfactuals can be expressed in discourse explicitly, through the use of hypothetical periods of unreality. More often, however, counterfactuals are conveyed implicitly, through linguistic indicators alluding to scenarios that have never occurred in reality. Linguistic markers of counterfactuals include, among others, adverbs such as even, at least, without, or besides. In our study, implicit counterfactuals were turned into their explicit form (e.g., the sentence “The euro was introduced too quickly, without taking the necessary precautions” was turned into “If the necessary precautions had been taken, things would have been better”).

After having identified all counterfactuals, the two coders independently classified them according to a series of criteria, the main ones being listed below:

a) The speaker who produces the counterfactual, either the incumbent leader (Silvio Berlusconi) or the challenging leader (Romano Prodi).

b) The target on which the counterfactual antecedent is focused, distinguishing among antecedents focused on the government (e.g., “If the government had checked more strictly the transformation of prices from lire into euro, things would have been better”), the opposition (e.g., “If the opposition had not thwarted the government ...”), and others, including political actors and events of the national or international political/economic context (e.g., “If the terrorist attacks of September 11 had not happened ...”).


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c) The direction of the change in the strategy between upward counterfactuals (e.g., “If I had been made much more quickly”) and imagined how things might have increased minimal pensions, third.

d) The structure of the counterfactual additive counterfactuals, in which the counterfactual scenario (e.g. “If sources to the local authority ...”) is similar to an antecedent of the real scenario, or in a procedural one (e.g., “If the euro had not come out of the target’s control is imaginary financial resources ...”).

All counterfactuals were also classified as whether they appeared in a text written by a journalist or the opposing leader, or in a program instead of another. He used these criteria, because they were both on the frequency and type of counterfactuals.

As already mentioned, both the professors and their classification were carried out to have a high agreement rate for the discussion.

Overall, our analyses showed that Prodi employed a consistent number of counterfactuals (periods including counterfactuals) in the texts analyzed in the explicit (73%) form. Besides, analysis showed that some categories of counterfactuals were more frequent than others, independent of the type of the target. In the newspaper reports, the government was the most frequent target of the opposition and by other political campaigns.
c) The direction of the change imagined in each counterfactual, distinguishing between upward counterfactuals, in which it is imagined how things might have gone better (e.g., “If I had had 51% of the votes, reforms would have been made much more quickly”), and downward counterfactuals, in which it is imagined how things might have gone worse (e.g., “If the government hadn’t increased minimal pensions, things would have been worse”).

d) The structure of the counterfactual antecedents, distinguishing between additive counterfactuals, in which an antecedent is hypothetically added in the counterfactual scenario (e.g. “If the government had given the needed resources to the local authority ...”), and subtractive counterfactuals, in which an antecedent of the real scenario is hypothetically deleted in the counterfactual one (e.g., “If the euro had not been introduced ...”).

e) The controllability of the behavior quoted in the counterfactual antecedent, distinguishing between controllable counterfactuals, in which behavior under the target’s control is imagined (e.g., “If the opposition had voted in favor of this law ...”) and uncontrollable counterfactuals, in which behavior out of the target’s control is imagined (e.g., “If I could have counted on more financial resources ...”).

All counterfactuals were also coded according to other criteria, such as whether they appeared in a text following the intervention of either a journalist or the opposing leader, or whether they were generated during a given program instead of another. Here, however, we will not take into account these further criteria, because they turned out not to have a strong influence on the frequency and type of counterfactuals generated by the two leaders. As already mentioned, both the identification of counterfactuals in the texts and their classification were carried out separately by two coders, who turned out to have a high agreement rate. Any discrepancy was resolved through discussion.

Overall, our analyses showed that both Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi employed a consistent number of counterfactuals in their discourses (periods including counterfactuals amounted to 6% of the global number of periods in the texts analyzed), in either an explicit (27%) or an implicit (73%) form. Besides, analyses carried out separately on each coding criterion showed that some categories of counterfactuals were more frequent than others, independent of the speaker who generated them. First of all, the government was the most frequent target of the counterfactuals, followed by the opposition and by other political actors. This is not surprising, since the performance of the incumbent government is usually one of the main issues on which both politicians’ and citizens’ attention is focused during electoral campaigns.
As to the other coding criteria, upward counterfactuals prevailed over downward counterfactuals, additive counterfactuals over subtractive counterfactuals, and counterfactuals focused on controllable behaviors over counterfactuals focused on uncontrollable ones. These results are consistent with what was found by previous research as regards the categories of counterfactuals that tend to prevail in spontaneous counterfactual generation.21

Moreover, more refined analyses of our data (the application of hierarchical log-linear models) allowed us to take into account several coding criteria at the same time (target, direction, controllability, etc.) and to compare the characteristics of counterfactuals employed by the two leaders. Results showed that some combinations of criteria were more frequent than others and that there were significant differences in the counterfactuals employed by the incumbent leader as compared to the challenging leader.

First of all, each leader showed a marked tendency to employ upward controllable counterfactuals that targeted his adversary. For example, Berlusconi stated that “If Prodi had defended Italy’s interests, things would have been better” (March 8, 2006). Conversely, Prodi stated that “If Berlusconi had carried out reforms in the country’s general interest, the process of growth wouldn’t have been arrested” (March 7, 2006). As mentioned above, previous research has shown that the targets of upward controllable counterfactuals are more likely to be perceived as responsible of negative events.22 Evidently, the two leaders employed these types of counterfactuals as a way of charging their adversary with the responsibility for what was wrong in the country.

Conversely, both leaders employed more upward uncontrollable counterfactuals that targeted themselves (and not their adversary). In this case, it is as if the two leaders said that “getting better results was simply impossible for them”. For example, Berlusconi said: “If the government had been able to counter the negative actions of the Left, things would be better now” (March 8, 2006). In his turn, Prodi said: “If our party had had the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as we had proposed, we would have a common foreign politics within Parliament now” (March 7, 2006). Downward controllable


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counterfactuals were also more likely to be used on themselves than on their adversary. What is striking is that most of the counterfactuals reported by the leaders were of the type which we described as “them, rather than us” (i.e., people other than the speaker or target, not were any other leaders as regards the frequency of these types of counterfactuals having other actors as targets).

To conclude, this study of the Italian political context and the role of politicians in the construction of counterfactuals showed that politicians prefer to employ slogans and slogans as their adversary (upward controllable, acting as target) or to defend themselves (downward controllable counterfactuals having themselves in the past).

V. The Effects of Counterfactuals

Starting from the results of qualitative analysis reported above, we have designed a series of questionnaires to explore the effects of counterfactuals in the social context. The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 500 people divided into four different groups of participants. Each participant was presented with a specific counterfactual and was asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with it, as well as indicating whether they believed that the politician employing it had a good or bad reason for sharing or not sharing the idea.

It should be mentioned that the sample of participants was divided into four groups, each group receiving a different counterfactual communication. This was because only a few independent variables could be taken into account in a single study at the same time. In this case, participants were presented with an excerpt from a speech of a politician. In the interview, a person...
Counterfactuals prevailed over actuals over subtractive counterfactual behaviors over counterfactuals. These results are consistent with the categories of counterfactual generation.21 Counterfactuals are also more frequently focused on the speakers themselves than on their adversary. In this case, it is as if the politician said something like: “Had I acted in a different way, things would have been worse”. For example, Silvio Berlusconi stated: “If we hadn’t intervened on tax evasion with the Budget, the tax system would be worse now” (April 3, 2006).

Other characteristics of counterfactuals, such as their additive or subtractive structure, did not significantly differ as a function of the counterfactual speaker or target, nor were any significant differences found between the leaders as regards the frequency and the characteristics of counterfactuals having other actors as targets.

To conclude, this study offered an overview of how politicians employ counterfactual communication. We found that counterfactuals show up frequently in politicians’ discourse (in either an implicit or an explicit form) and that some types of counterfactuals are generally more frequent than others. Most importantly, however, we also found that the two politicians preferably employed specific types of counterfactuals to either attack their adversary (upward controllable counterfactuals having their adversaries as target) or to defend themselves (upward uncontrollable or downward controllable counterfactuals having themselves as targets).

V. The Effects of Counterfactuals Employed by Politicians

Starting from the results of qualitative studies such as the one presented above, we have designed a series of experimental studies in which different versions of fictitious political discourses and interviews are submitted to different groups of participants. These texts vary as to the types of counterfactuals embedded in them in order to assess whether and how far the use of specific counterfactuals may influence the receivers’ perception of the politician employing them. It may well be the case that some types of counterfactuals are more effective than others. Besides, counterfactuals may have a differential influence according to some characteristics of the citizens who are exposed to them, such as their degree of political sophistication or their sharing or not sharing the ideology of the speaker.

It should be mentioned that an in-depth investigation of the effects of counterfactual communication requires a number of experimental studies, because only a few independent variables may be taken into account in one single study at the same time. In one of these studies, 203 university students were presented with an excerpt of an interview of a hypothetical incumbent politician. In the interview, a journalist told the politician that he had not...
done enough to improve the bad financial conditions of the country. The intervention of the journalist ended with the following sentence: “Voters are skeptical regarding your intervention on public expenses. Many of them think you could have done much more”. In his reply, the politician employed some counterfactuals, such as: “Surely, the situation would be better if I had firmly stated my position within the coalition and if I had insisted in putting forward my ideas”. Four different versions of the politician’s reply were prepared, differing according to the target (either the politician or the adversary) and the direction (either upward or downward) of the counterfactuals embedded in it. For example, the sentences quoted above are examples of politician-focused upward counterfactuals. But we also employed examples of politician-focused downward counterfactuals such as: “Sure, but the situation would be worse if I had hesitated in stating my position within the coalition and if I had given up my ideas”. The remaining versions included adversary-focused upward counterfactuals and adversary-focused downward counterfactuals. The four versions of the politician’s reply were submitted to four different subgroups of participants.

After reading the interview, all participants were asked to evaluate the politician according to a number of criteria in order to assess whether the evaluations would vary as a function of the characteristics of the counterfactuals employed by the politician. First of all, participants rated the politician with regard to a series of personality traits that past research has shown to be crucial in voters’ judgment of political leaders. These traits can be linked back to two larger dimensions: the leadership dimension, measured through personality traits such as “dynamic”, “energetic”, and “decided”, and the morality dimension, measured through personality traits such as “honest”, “loyal”, and “sincere”. Results showed that participants attributed different traits to the politician according to the different characteristics of the counterfactuals he employed in his reply to the journalist. The politician employing downward counterfactuals having himself as target (“the situation would be worse if I…”) was perceived as more energetic than the politician employing upward counterfactuals still having himself as target (“the situation would be better if I…”). In both cases the politician was perceived as fairly moral. By contrast, the politician was perceived as less moral, but still very energetic, when he employed upward counterfactuals having the opposition as target (“the situation would be better if they…”).

Overall, evaluations of the politician were significantly more positive when the politician’s reply included downward counterfactuals than when it included upward counterfactuals. These results suggest that politicians, when required to account for a negative outcome of their performance, may successfully preserve their credibility, even if things have been worse than they actually have been. Politicians could have done to get a better outcome than things “went bad, but could have been even worse if they had not done the things they did”. By employing counterfactuals, they can overestimate their performance, compared to what they might have done, which can help them in gaining the trust of the public.

If the study described above is indeed an indication of how counterfactuals can influence citizens’ judgments, it may have important implications for the way politicians use counterfactuals in their discourses. For example, we observed that additive counterfactuals are perceived as more likely to be true and, therefore, serving more trust than political leaders. As mentioned above, additive counterfactuals are perceived as more plausible than subtractive ones. In fact, subtractive counterfactuals are perceived as less likely to serve the politician’s action. Interestingly, people who claim to be more sensitive to the use of counterfactuals, as compared with people less sensitive, are more likely to employ additive counterfactuals. This suggests that politicians employing subtractive counterfactuals may probably be ascribed to the politician being less likely to prefer politicians who appear to be inconsistent in their discourse.

VI. Conclusion

Our studies have demonstrated how politicians use counterfactuals in their discourses. When asked to account for the performance, politicians forgo the opportunity to disavow blame (or not/should not) have done. The possibility of counterfactuals suggests that different possible alternatives are made in a competitive environment, and this suggests that different possible goals are made in a competitive environment.
Counterfactuals in the Social Context

Patrizia Catellani

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been worse than they actually have been, rather than focusing on what they

could have done to get a better outcome. Figuring out a scenario where

things “went bad, but could have been worse” seems more rewarding for the

incumbent politician than openly recognizing the presence of a negative out-

come and figuring out a better scenario. Also, shifting responsibility from

themselves to the adversary seems, at least from the point of view of leader-

ship evaluations, a rewarding defensive strategy for a politician.

If the study described above has shown the effects of counterfactual di-

rection on citizens’ judgments, other studies of ours have investigated the ef-

fects of other characteristics of the counterfactuals employed by politicians.

For example, we observed that politicians employing additive counterfactuals

are perceived as more likely to act successfully in the future and as des-

erving more trust than politicians employing subtractive counterfactuals.

As mentioned above, additive counterfactuals serve a preparatory function

better than subtractive ones. It is therefore likely that politicians employing

additive counterfactuals are perceived as more inclined to prepare future

action. Interestingly, people with a high degree of political sophistication

appear to be more sensitive to the additive versus subtractive structure of

counterfactuals, as compared with people with a lower degree of political

sophistication. High sophisticates give a better evaluation of politicians em-

ploying additive counterfactuals (e.g., “Certainly, if I had imposed my ideas

and my proposals, some decisions would have been made more easily”) than

of politicians employing subtractive counterfactuals (e.g., “Certainly, if I had

not given up my ideas and my proposals, some decisions would have been

made more easily”). Such a difference between high and low sophisticates

may probably be ascribed to the fact that high sophisticates are more in-

clined to make plans for future political activity, and are therefore more likely

to prefer politicians who appear to be doing the same.

VI. Conclusion

Our studies have demonstrated that politicians make wide use of counterfactuals in their discourses. When publicly accounting for political events and their performance, politicians focus not only on what they, or other political actors, actually did, but also on what they (or others) could/should (or could not/should not) have done. These comparisons between reality and its possible alternatives are made in a way that is consistent with politicians’ discursive goals, specifically the ones of presenting a positive image of themselves
and their party and a negative image of their adversaries. Accordingly, opposing politicians differ with regard to the characteristics of the counterfactuals they employ in discourse, mainly in terms of their target, direction, and controllability.

Our studies have also shown that counterfactual communication may influence citizens' perception of politicians. Some types of counterfactuals seem to be more powerful than others in influencing the citizen in favor of the politician who is using them, while the positive influence of other types of counterfactuals seems to vary according to some characteristics of the citizens, first of all their degree of political sophistication. Interestingly, exposure to counterfactual communication has been shown to influence not only citizens' evaluations of what the politician did in the past, but also their expectations regarding what the politician may do in the future. This is consistent with the fact that counterfactual thinking has been shown to serve not only the psychological function of explaining the past but also that of preparing the future.

What is left to do in order to fully investigate the effects of counterfactual communication in the political context? Quite a lot. For example, exploring of the effects of counterfactuals employed by journalists when they interview politicians. Nowadays, interviews are the most frequent form through which politicians communicate with citizens, and what journalists say or ask (including their use of counterfactuals) is very likely to influence citizens' perceptions of both the journalist and the politician.

We hope this line of research on counterfactual communication in politics may turn out to be useful both on a scientific and on a more applied level. On a scientific level, it might help our understanding of how counterfactuals are conveyed in discourse, as well as of their effects on people who are exposed to them. On a more applied level, it might help politicians, but also citizens, to become more aware of the dynamics underlying political communication, and thus to develop a critical consciousness about it.

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A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective on Counterfactuality

I. Introduction

This paper aims to broaden the cognitive linguistic perspective of counterfactuality as meaning and work model that captures short of a satisfactory character- etical concepts of cognitive lin- tual integration. The main of counterfactuality is not an exotic explained and exemplified, the tual reasoning are not only at tuality, but also in a multitude of ways.

This paper is organized as follows: Section II explains how cognitive linguistics explains the analysis of counterfactuals, Section II concludes by offering a conclusion that the proposed approach can contribute to other disciplines other than linguistics.

II. What is Cognitive Linguistics?

Cognitive linguistics is a discipline that is an alternative to formal generative grammar, the study of non-literal meaning, and the work does in fact encompass semantics, phonology, morphology, and syntax.

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