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Final Thesis

**The role of linguistic choices and  
stylistic and visual devices in  
constructing representations of the  
Cutro shipwreck:**

*A multimodal analysis of British online news with a focus on headlines*

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# ABSTRACT

The issue of migration has long been a key theme for political debates across many European countries. In 2015, following the culmination of several conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, many chose to move to Europe in search of better living conditions. From that moment on, the European ‘refugee crisis’ was marked by the arrival of over a million migrants through land and sea migratory routes. Within this context, one of the busiest migratory routes was the Central Mediterranean, often crossed on small precarious boats. Henceforth, the increasing number of maritime disasters and deaths at sea gradually became a global concern and was recognised as newsworthy. Given the unprecedented scale of migrant shipwrecks, media has had a prominent role in shaping the public perception of these tragic events. Within this framework, the present research aims at analysing news headlines extracted from four British online newspapers across the political spectrum, namely the right-wing *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, and the center-left *The Guardian* and *BBC News*. In particular, this study focuses on the role of stylistic, linguistic and visual devices in the news construction of the migrant shipwreck off the Italian coast of Steccato di Cutro, which took place on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023. To investigate the interplay between written and visual content, this research relies on Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) and Multimodal News Analysis (MNA).

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# INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the issue of migration has sparked many debates on politics and humanitarian aid among Member States of the European Union. Due to armed conflicts, economic crises or natural calamities, an increasing number of people decided to move to Europe in pursuit of better life opportunities. Within this context, the year 2015 is generally regarded as the beginning of the European ‘refugee crisis’ during which over a million migrants travelled by land and sea to escape wars, persecution or poor living conditions. From that crucial period, the Central Mediterranean route became one of the primary pathways for migrant journeys at sea. Indeed, thousands of migrants embarked on small unstable boats in the hope to reach the Southern coasts of Italy, mainly in the regions of Sicily and Calabria. However, the precarious conditions of those vessels often turned migrant journeys into human tragedies, such as the shipwreck which took place in Steccato di Cutro on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023. Given the large scale of this maritime disaster, many news brands covered its dynamics and tragic implications, eventually affecting readers’ views and attitudes towards the issue of migration. Within this framework, the current research aims at investigating a corpus of news headlines and accompanying images taken from four British online newspapers from across the political spectrum. The present research is structured in four sections which first outline the theoretical framework and general background, which lay the foundations for the subsequent analysis of the news headlines and their accompanying visual material.

The first section addresses media coverage of the migration crisis across European news brands. Indeed, this part gives definitions of the terms ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’, and provides a brief overview on the increase of inward migration in the European context between the years 2015 and 2023. In particular, the focus is on EU Member States’ struggle to manage migratory flows, and specifically, Italy’s crucial role within the debate on migrant journeys at sea, due to the significant number of boat tragedies which took place off Italian coasts in 2023. Moving forward, an insight into news media portrayals of migrants across Europe is provided in order to show how different news brands represented newcomers either with a humanitarian perspective or with a more hostile attitude. Following this general background, this section explores British news media coverage of migration

before and after Brexit, outlining similarities and differences in the approach adopted by newspapers on both the ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’ side of the campaign. Within this framework, this section includes an additional paragraph on British and Italian news media coverage of migration in the South of Italy and focuses on migrant landings at sea. Lastly, a comparison is drawn between news media representations of the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck and the 2023 Pylos boat tragedy to show how these humanitarian disasters affected news media coverage of migrant arrivals by sea.

The second section provides a theoretical background for the analysis of online news headlines and accompanying images. Given that *news* is the result of a decision-making process in which journalists’ linguistic and stylistic choices eventually construct a specific representation of reported facts, this section briefly introduces the language of the news and its ideological implications. One way of detecting news brands’ orientation and perspective is analysing their headlines, whose prominent position makes them important tools to condense news content and attract the readers’ attention. After addressing theory on the power of news headlines, this section explores those features relevant to the subsequent analysis, namely metaphor, alliteration and modality. Indeed, definitions of the rhetorical devices of metaphor and alliteration are provided, together with their main functions in media discourse. Similarly, the linguistic device of modality is outlined and discussed through the distinction between epistemic and deontic modality, and more in general through the role of modal expressions in journalistic style. Moving forward, since online newspapers are characterised by the pervasive presence of visual content, this section includes a paragraph on the use of imagery, which, combined with news texts enhances the impact of news content. Moreover, drawing from Caple and Bednarek’s study on verbal and visual news content, the definition of those ‘news values’ relevant to the multimodal analysis of headlines is provided in the last part of this section. To further outline the multimodal approach to news texts, the final paragraph focuses on the importance to examine the combination between text and image in the analysis on news headlines.

The third section presents the corpus analysed and introduces the methodology adopted for the multimodal analysis of news headlines. Specifically, the corpus includes news titles taken from four British online newspapers with different political affiliations, namely the right-leaning *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, and the center-left *The Guardian* and *BBC News*. The news titles selected cover the migrant boat disaster which took place on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023

on the coast of Steccato di Cutro, in the region of Calabria in the South of Italy. As for the timeframe, the corpus includes articles published online from February 2023 to February 2024. To proceed with the analysis of news headlines and accompanying images, the present research relies on Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) and Multimodal News Analysis (MNA). Within this framework, the use of specific lexical choices, the linguistic and stylistic devices of metaphor, alliteration and modality, together with visual content are meaningful to trace prevalent patterns within the depiction of the Cutro shipwreck.

The fourth section includes results and discussion of the multimodal analysis of news headlines and accompanying images. In particular, the aim of this section is to investigate how the combination between linguistic choices, stylistic and visual devices across the selected online newspapers contributes to constructing the recurrent patterns of ‘migrant deaths’, ‘grief and mourning of the shipwreck victims’, the ‘search for those responsible’, the ‘focus on migrant smugglers’ and the report of individual migrant stories or eyewitnesses’ accounts within the news construction of the Cutro boat tragedy.



# I

## **MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE EUROPEAN MIGRATION CRISIS ACROSS BRITISH AND ITALIAN NEWS BRANDS**

### **1.1 Migration Crisis in the European Context: Data on Recent History (2015-2023)**

Over the past decades, migration has become a salient political and humanitarian issue in many European countries. As a result of political turmoil, financial crises, conflicts and natural disasters, many people have been motivated to reach European countries in search for better life opportunities. The social, political and economic implications of major migratory movements raised debates among EU Member States, who consistently tried to develop a ‘comprehensive immigration policy’ besides border closures (Carlier et al., 2020, p. 34). However, despite the effort to find a shared response to migration based on a voluntary alliance, mechanisms which obstructed people’s mobility revealed a ‘lack of normative and political cohesion in the European migration policy’ (Carlier et al., 2020, p. 40).

In view of this, the scholars Carlier et al. claimed that the causes of the ‘European migration crisis’ of 2015-2016 should be rooted in Europe’s scarce support to migrants who reached its countries after the Syrian civil war in 2011 (2020, p. 42). Between 2012 and 2014,

progressively more people chose irregular migrant pathways in a desperate attempt to reach Europe, a place where they hoped to ‘rebuild their lives and ensure their children’s future’ (Carlier et al., 2020, pp. 42-43). At the end of 2015, the European Union experienced a significant increase of inward migration. Those people who left their country to escape wars, oppression, or poor living conditions may be defined as migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers. The *United Nations (UN)* define the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ as follows (2024):

- **Migrant:** ‘While there is no formal legal definition of an international migrant, most experts agree that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status (...)’.
  
- **Refugee:** ‘Refugees are persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection’.

The *International Organization for Migration (IOM)* defines the term ‘asylum seeker’ as follows (2024):

- **Asylum Seeker:** ‘An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker’.

Data showed that ‘there were 1.8 million irregular border crossings into the EU in 2015’ (Buonanno, 2017, p. 101). Given in per cent, 29% of total asylum applications were from Syria, 14% from Afghanistan, 10% from Iran and 4% from Pakistan (Eurostat, 2016). This migration flow was predominantly accelerated by the concentration of several conflicts which reached their peak in 2015, including the Syrian Civil War, the Afghanistan War and the Iraq Conflict. By the end of the year, more than 1 million migrants travelled by sea: around 800,000 managed to land on the Greek islands, while 600,000 unfortunately died at sea. One of the main migratory routes was the Central Mediterranean, where the Italian

rescue operation *Mare Nostrum* was replaced in 2016 by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, namely Frontex (Clayton, 2020, p. 5).

Those people who applied for asylum in Europe between 2015 and 2016 were mostly ‘irregular’ and asylum-seeking migrants who asked for international protection (Buonanno, 2017, p. 102). Notwithstanding the lack of a globally recognised definition for ‘irregular migrant’, this term should be defined and critically addressed in order to avoid ambiguities. According to the *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, ‘irregular migration’ refers to the ‘movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination’ (2024). Within this framework, different ‘patterns of irregularity’ (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 192) may include refugees, smugglers’ victims, or alone migrant children who flee desperate living conditions and use alternative migration pathways to reach their destination country (IOM, 2024). Moreover, even though irregular migrants may own formal documents such as contracts of employment or identification papers, they still would not obtain the permission to reside in a given country. This not only shows the instability and complexity of irregular migration, but also the flaws of its administration (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 193).

The 2015 refugee reception crisis brought to the surface European States’ need to reinforce ‘border control agents, police, inspection officers, and supporting human services’ (Buonanno, 2017, p. 103) but they had not enough funds to do this. By the end of 2015, more than 1 million migrants crossed the Mediterranean towards ‘the nearby Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, and Samos; and from the North African coast to Lampedusa and the Sicilian ports of Palermo and Catania’ (Clayton, 2020, p. 5). As a consequence, people who lived in ‘Sicily, the Apulian and Calabrian regions of Italy, Spain and Portugal’s Atlantic coasts, Malta, Cyprus, and Greece’ experienced a substantial advancement of the ‘migrant crisis’ they had been facing for years (Buonanno, 2017, p. 103, my inverted commas).

The scholar Zelizer (2015) considered the use of the term ‘crisis’ as an ‘example of institutional response to uncertainty’ (pp. 888-889). Drawing from previous studies, Zelizer observed that the notions of ‘risk, contingency, indeterminacy’ and ‘lack of certitude’ have extensively pervaded our contemporary age (2015, p. 889). In view of this, the word ‘crisis’ itself evokes a sense of ‘suddenness, disruption, urgency, loss and the need for external assistance (...)’ (Zelizer, 2015, p. 890). Given this definition, the expression ‘migration crisis’ juxtaposes a phenomenon with recognizable root causes which develops over time to a concept that ‘upsets a default sense of settledness’ and stability (Zelizer, 2015, p. 893).

This particular collocation, therefore, turns migration into an occurrence with a ‘specific temporal dimension, (...) largely disconnected from previous events and history’ (Ruiz & Ness, 2019, p. 5). Accordingly, migration policies prioritise the reduction of ‘flows to pre-crisis levels’ (Lafleur & Stanek, 2017, p. 4) instead of producing long-term solutions which address the social, political or economic causes of this complex issue. According to Bauman and Bordon (2014), as regards any type of crisis, ‘we convey first the feeling of uncertainty, of our ignorance of the direction to which the affairs are about to turn—and secondly the urge to intervene’ (p. 7). Within this framework, since migration represents one of Europe’s most demanding challenges, the widespread presence of the term ‘crisis’ combined with the term ‘migrants’ offers an insight into the nations’ effort ‘to predict and control’ its implications (Zelizer, 2015, p. 892). Moreover, according to the scholar Almustafa (2022), the expression ‘migration crisis’ should be applied to the prolonged misery many refugees suffer when forced into illegality during their migration journeys (p. 1066). In this perspective, most migrants risked being arrested by border patrol agents and embarked on perilous journeys which often ended in death. Those who managed to arrive at their destination usually became illegal migrants who interfered with national security systems and delayed their integration process (Almustafa, 2022, p. 1066).

Between 2016 and 2019, Europe witnessed a substantial reduction of migration flows due to the Agreement with Turkey concluded in 2016. The deal stipulated that the Turkish Government ‘would accept returned asylum seekers from Greece and other EU states’ (Clayton, 2020, p. 5) and would intensify its coastal security system in exchange for a generous financial contribution. Therefore, migration pressure at the borders of Greece and Turkey substantially decreased, whereas Italy witnessed a 17% increase in the same year (Clayton, 2020, p. 5).

The phenomenon of irregular migration via Libya was characterised by the presence of migrant traffickers on ‘overcrowded and unseaworthy rubber dinghies’ (Frontex, 2017). In addition to this, in 2017 Europe and Libya reached an agreement aimed at reducing the number of people irregularly entering the EU. The Italian and the Libyan Government signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* to address illegal entry of migrants across the borders, and to improve the security system between the Libyan State and the Italian Republic (Nakache & Losier, 2017, p. 2). The result of these agreements was a significant reduction of irregular entries in 2016 and 2017.

Migratory data spread by Frontex shows that in 2018 ‘the number of detections of illegal border-crossings reached its lowest level in five years’ (Frontex, 2019), even though

European external borders still suffered a considerable migratory pressure. ‘Member States reported 150,114 illegal border-crossings in 2018 with a significant increase in document fraud detections’ (Frontex, 2019). When a great number of refugees and migrants reached European borders, the United Nations and The New York Conference were summoned to find international solutions. ‘In December 2018 in Morocco, representatives of 152 countries, including 19 EU Member States, signed The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration’ (Vosyliūtė, 2019, pp. 1-2). The GMC could be considered as a concrete sign of cooperation in the area of migration, which aimed at prioritising equal human and labour rights standards through a firm political commitment (Vosyliūtė, 2019, p. 2). However, the tendency of illegal crossings through the European external borders remained stable, therefore Frontex continued to collect data on irregular migration patterns through the main routes, namely the Western, Central and Eastern Mediterranean ones (Frontex, 2020).

**Table 1.1**

*Illegal border-crossing between BCPs, on entry (Adapted from Frontex, 2020)*

Routes	2016	2017	2018	2019	Share of total	% change on prev. year
<b>Eastern Mediterranean Route</b>	<b>182 277</b>	<b>42 319</b>	<b>56 561</b>	<b>83 333</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Sea</b>	<b>174 605</b>	<b>34 732</b>	<b>34 014</b>	<b>65 963</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>94</b>
Afghanistan	41 775	3 713	9 597	28 273	43	195
Syria	81 570	13 957	8 173	16 707	25	104
Iraq	26 573	6 417	6 029	3 741	5.7	-38
All Other	24 687	10 645	10 215	17 242	26	69
<b>Land</b>	<b>7 672</b>	<b>7 587</b>	<b>22 547</b>	<b>17 370</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>-23</b>
Turkey	190	2 220	7 468	6 619	38	-11
Syria	3 015	2 438	5 733	2 897	17	-49
Pakistan	893	901	1 823	1 556	9	-15
All Other	3 574	2 028	7 523	6 298	36	-16
<b>Western Mediterranean Route</b>	<b>9 990</b>	<b>23 063</b>	<b>56 245</b>	<b>23 969</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>-57</b>
<b>Sea</b>	<b>8 641</b>	<b>21 552</b>	<b>54 820</b>	<b>23 557</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>-57</b>
Unspecified sub-Saharan nationals	0	0	69	12 482	53	n.a.
Morocco	722	4 704	11 881	6 336	27	-47
Algeria	1 693	4 287	4 339	4 007	17	-8
All Other	6 226	12 561	38 531	732	3.1	-98
<b>Land</b>	<b>1 349</b>	<b>1 511</b>	<b>1 425</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>-71</b>
Unspecified sub-Saharan nationals	0	0	0	155	38	n.a.
Mali	33	6	216	102	25	-53
Guinea	604	636	779	76	18	-90
All Other	712	869	430	79	19	-82
<b>Central Mediterranean Route</b>	<b>181 376</b>	<b>118 962</b>	<b>23 485</b>	<b>14 003</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>-40</b>
Tunisia	1 207	6 415	5 182	2 690	19	-48
Sudan	9 406	6 221	2 037	1 764	13	-13
Côte d'Ivoire	12 399	9 509	1 191	1 304	9.3	9.5
All Other	158 364	96 817	15 075	8 245	59	-45

In the first months of 2019, ‘more than 47,500 arrivals were recorded in Greece, mainly in the Aegean islands, which is an increase of 29% compared to the same period in 2018’ (Mezquita, 2023, p. 32). ‘In the second half of the year, arrivals on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea route were the highest since the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement’ (Frontex, 2020). The increased demand coming from Afghan and Syrian migrants encouraged migrant smugglers to organise illegal departures. In view of this, ‘Member States reported an increase in the detection of clandestine entries on both land and sea routes which amounted to 141,846 illegal border-crossings registered in 2019’ (Frontex, 2020).

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly influenced migration tendencies and EU border management. A clear sign of ‘the dramatic impact of the virus was the reduction of passenger flows at the European external borders, which decreased by more than two thirds in comparison with the previous year’ (Frontex, 2021). Despite this, ‘control agents remained cautious, and EU member States introduced internal border controls to reduce cross-border movements’ (Frontex, 2021). Those migrants who managed to arrive at their destination country were sent back or quarantined in unofficial, congested transit sites and provided with inadequate services for their health and survival (Guadagno, 2020, p. 9). In September 2020, the European Commission presented the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which introduced a complete ‘policy for asylum and migration management’ (Frontex, 2021). This pact aimed at promoting trust among EU Member States in order to strengthen solidarity and adopt a more ‘humane approach to migration and asylum’ (Guadagno, 2020, p. 9). Specifically, asylum seekers were registered and screened at the EU borders ‘to establish identity and health and security risks’, and then their asylum application was either accepted or refused (Campesi, 2021, p. 195). Notwithstanding the efforts to reduce the impact of migratory flows during the pandemic, ‘in 2020 illegal border-crossings decreased by a mere 12% compared with 2019’ (Frontex, 2021).

In 2021, due to Covid-19 safety measures, the use of fraudulent documents increased by more than 20% in relation to the previous year and substantially affected EU’s internal security. These artificial papers included all the mandatory documents required to enter through the EU borders, such as counterfeit health and vaccination certificates (Frontex, 2022/2023). Overall, the pandemic effects continued to have an impact on EU border management also in 2021 and 2022, in addition to the consequences of the influx of migrants caused by the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Frontex, 2022/2023). Since the start of the Russian military invasion in February 2022, European countries helped Ukraine

assisting its citizens and providing them asylum. This collective protection allowed Ukrainians to live safely in EU countries without undergoing the time-consuming process of asylum application and related verdict (Gerlach & Ryndzak, 2022, p. 17). ‘According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of people forced to leave their homes from the start of the war till mid-April 2022 was about 12 million, and 5.1 million of them left Ukraine’ (UNHCR Regional Bureau of Europe, 2022). Indeed, the influx of displaced Ukrainians in EU countries such as Poland, Hungary, Moldova and Slovakia, appears to be greater compared to the refugee crisis of 2015/2016 ‘by a factor of 1.5 within a period of four months’ (Brücker, 2022, p. 41).

The refugee migration from Ukraine remained a concern for Europe in 2023, in addition to the issue of maritime boat disasters, which particularly involved Italy. Data shows that ‘more than 152,000 migrants’ reached Italy ‘by small boat’ through the Central Mediterranean route in 2023 (Wallis, 2023). Due to the precarious conditions of those rustic boats, the Italian coast guard and border police had to promptly rescue migrants at sea. Notwithstanding their efforts, a significant number of boat tragedies took place around Italian coasts (Wallis, 2023). ‘In April 2023, the *UN Migration Agency Missing Migrants* project documented 441 deaths, recording the ‘deadliest quarter for migrants in the central Mediterranean since 2017’ (Wallis, 2023). ‘On December 21<sup>st</sup>, the Missing Migrants project had recorded at least 2,271 deaths on the central Mediterranean route since the beginning of January’ (Wallis, 2023). This general background on the European migration crisis provides a solid context for the present section, whose aim is to investigate media treatment of Europe’s migration issue across British and Italian news brands.

## 1.2 News Media Coverage of the European Migration Crisis

After the European migration crisis, the number of migration-related investigations and migratory flow studies substantially increased. Between 2015 and 2018, an extensive news media coverage of the *crisis* contributed to influencing people's attitude towards migration (my emphasis, De Coninck et al., 2020, p. 8). Even though the term 'crisis' stands for a phenomenon with tangible consequences and implications, journalists manage to shape it through words. News media tend to give a precise identity to the 'crisis' discourse through the use of linguistic and stylistic strategies (Zelizer, 2015, p. 892). Therefore, when journalists use terms such as 'crisis' to describe a difficult situation, they frame news subjects in 'simplistic, familiar, and strategically useful ways' (Zelizer, 2015, p. 892). In order to do so, writers usually employ fixed conventions which confer concreteness to the term 'crisis', namely 'time, space and mode of invocation' (Zelizer, 2015, p. 892). In particular, a new temporal order is established by every 'crisis', being the transition between 'past and future' events. As for space, 'crises' are conventionally 'seen in clear and tangible spatial terms' (Zelizer, 2015, p. 893), which isolate the location where the event occurred. Lastly, mode of invocation refers to the negative perception of the crisis itself, which destroys the usual sense of 'routine, stability and stasis' (Zelizer, 2015, p. 893). These three conventional aspects have been used by news media when discussing 'migration crisis', since time, space and mode of invocation help to outline background information despite the usual 'precarious circumstances' of migratory flows (Zelizer, 2015, p. 894).

Concerning the depiction of migrants, the way newcomers were 'described, categorised and represented' (Berry et al., 2015, p. 13) by journalists played a crucial role in shaping the public opinion on European migration policies. In those years, the prominent tendency across Europe was to depict refugees and migrants 'as a potential threat to culture, welfare, security and health systems' (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017, p. 17). According to political communication studies, media emphasis on 'the identification of threat and the activation of feelings of fear' could be a strategy to increase the effectiveness of a message (Figenschou et al., 2015, p. 67). This is even more true when news articles present a biased message which progressively encourages a negative attitude or expectation about a specific issue. In that particular historical period, the use of threatening imagery and labels such as 'illegal' or 'clandestine' gradually justified an anti-immigrant sentiment among readers (Berry et al., 2015, p. 22). Within this context, the spread of a chaotic social fear or anxiety may be defined

as ‘moral panic’, which is usually employed by political elites and media outlets in order to set boundaries between people based on their nationality, ethnic background, religion, gender and so on (Matar, 2017, p. 292). Precisely, news media moral panic ‘mobilises specific compositions of ‘otherness’ by constructing suspicion and criminalising inequality’ (Martins, 2021, p. 1). Given these differentiations, readers may unconsciously accept a distorted image of migration and view migrants almost exclusively as a threat (Matar, 2017, p. 293).

In early 2015, the Cardiff School of Journalism conducted research on migration news in five different European countries, namely Italy, Spain, Germany, Sweden and the UK. Interestingly, this study highlighted ‘major differences (...) in terms of the sources journalists used, the language they employed, the reasons they gave for the rise in refugee flows, and the solutions they suggested’ (Berry et al., 2015, p. 13). These findings showed how German and Swedish newspapers commonly used the terms ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ when they referred to mobile populations. In contrast to other European countries, German news media coverage focused on how a specific city managed the refugee crisis and how citizens responded to local migration policies rather than national ones (Berry et al., 2015, p. 108). In turn, the Swedish press focused on the number of refugees who were supposed to arrive in Sweden after the Syrian and Iraq conflicts in 2015. In addition to this, some Swedish newspapers reported tragic experiences of refugees who suffered during their journey to Sweden and reflected on government policies through a humanitarian perspective (Berry et al., 2015, pp. 123-124). As for the Italian, Spanish and British press, they frequently used the labels ‘migrant’ and ‘immigrant’. In particular, since Italy had a prominent role within the migration policy debate, newspaper articles often mentioned the European Union and its inadequate migration management. As for the Spanish news coverage of migration, there was a strong focus on ‘policy debates, immigration levels, search and rescue operations and the role of trafficking mafias’ (Berry et al., 2015, p. 255), in addition to humanitarian reflections which reduced anti-immigrant sentiments.

Overall, this brief overview of migration news with a focus on the 2015 refugee crisis underlines the range of migrant depictions across different European countries. In particular, the use of specific linguistic choices and the development of a variety of themes either from a humanitarian lens or a more negative perspective eventually construct recognizable patterns which emerge also in the news depiction of migrant boat tragedies, such as the Cutro shipwreck.

### ***1.2.1 Migration Crisis: British News Media Before and After Brexit***

British news media coverage of migration offers an important example to comprehend media portrayals of migrants and their influence on public opinion (Blinder & Allen, 2016, p. 5). Within this context, it may be relevant to analyse major news outlets across the political spectrum in order to investigate media representation of migration before and after the Brexit referendum. Before Brexit happened, the dominant news media narrative saw migration as an issue to be addressed, defined by tabloids as a ‘crisis’ affecting Britain. Those who fled their country to reach Britain were often thought to have an unacceptable and deceitful behaviour and were perceived as a threat to society (Berry et al., 2015, p. 15). This eventually encouraged the idea that the solution to the crisis would be to improve border security in order to repel the ‘enemy’. Otherwise stated, ‘the uncertainty of the unknown is materialised by shared representations about who must enter or leave, in the name of a European identity nationalism’ (Martins, 2021, p. 5).

Among the scholars who studied news about migration in 2015, Crawley et al. conducted research on British media’s portrayal of migration and focused on three recurrent topics, namely ‘the concern about the numbers of migrants entering the UK’, the perspective of the anti-immigrant campaigner Nigel Farage, and the Mediterranean migration crisis (2016, p. 18). The scholars’ findings shed a light on dominant narratives concerning Europe’s migration crisis in 2015, such as the fear of ‘invasion’, the image of migrants as a danger to public security, and Farage’s description of migrants as a ‘direct threat to civilisation’ (Crawley et al., 2016, pp. 21-22). However, Crawley’s analysis of British news media also showed that ‘over two-thirds (68.5%) of the articles on the migration crisis adopted a humanitarian frame’ and an emotive vocabulary to depict life-saving operations (2016, p. 22). Drawing from Entman’s theory (1993) to frame means ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (p. 51).

Another relevant instance of migration news analysis is Carolina Silveira’s study on how migration was represented in the British newspapers *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* between June and July 2015 (Silveira, 2016, p. 5). The scholar noticed that the word choice of news headlines brought to the surface how language was used to portray migrants before Brexit. The terms ‘asylum seeker’, ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ were not used impartially, but

they had political and social implications. Indeed, the label ‘asylum seeker’ was associated to the concept of agency, the term ‘refugee’ was connected to passivity and dependence, whereas the word ‘migrant’ implied a mere ‘freedom of choice’ (Silveira, 2016, p. 5). In particular, the *Daily Mail* entered the debate on legal and illegal migration by writing about ‘illegal migrants’. However, this latter expression should only be associated to ‘specific practices and behaviours in breach of the law (for example, illegal border crossing)’ (Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022, p. 192). Therefore, the newspaper seemed to adopt an approximate and discriminatory perspective on the complex phenomenon of irregular migration. The scholar Silveira noticed another relevant linguistic aspect, namely the representation of refugees as a multitude invading Britain. Generally, readers were inclined to consider migrants as ‘an undifferentiated mass rather than as individual humans’ and ‘a heavy burden for Europe’ (Silveira, 2016, p. 6). This particular tendency may be seen even in the former Prime Minister David Cameron’s words on migrants, which he described as ‘a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean’ (BBC News, 2015). If the expression ‘swarm’ apparently denotes a large group of people, its meaning connected to flying insects significantly dehumanises migrants and suppresses their individuality. Similarly, the *Daily Mail* referred to migrants with the expression ‘tidal wave’, which metaphorically associated them to a devastating mass of water. Therefore, readers were led to perceive migrants as a violent threat and consequently lacked empathy towards their individual stories, which often involved war, poverty and death.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, the UK referendum on Brexit promised ‘more control over the flow of immigrants (...)’ in order to reassure those people who feared for their well-being and quality of life (Wadsworth et al., 2015, p. 2). During the Brexit campaign, migration was a major focus together with economic issues. This is mainly because pro-Brexit national newspapers draw more attention on the topic and employed biased frames to depict immigration levels. In that precise moment in history, British media coverage had a huge impact on how readers perceived immigrants and migration. One of the newspapers on the ‘Leave’ side of the campaign, the *Daily Mail*, explicitly categorised immigrants according to their nationality (Sogelola, 2018, p. 135). This choice substantially contributed to the creation of a gap between British citizens and foreigners, with the implication that the ‘Other’ had a different moral code. The idea of ‘othering’ can be explained as a ‘set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities’ (Powell & Menendian, 2016, p. 17). Moreover, the *Daily Mail* promoted an image of immigrants as an obstacle to British economy, since

they were thought to ‘take resources away from deserving citizens’ in order to obtain a stable employment (Sogelola, 2018, p. 136). These negative frames reiterated long-established stereotypes and resulted in anti-immigrant vote choices (Sogelola, 2018, p. 136).

Corbett’s analysis on the attitude promoted by the ‘Leave’ campaign revealed that working-class people were strongly influenced by national and populist press against multiculturalism (2016, p. 21). As a result, the scholar encountered ‘an increase in hate crime the week before and the week after Brexit by 42%’ (Corbett, 2016, pp. 21-23). Accordingly, after the referendum, Britain had to face accusations of far-right xenophobia and racism. For instance, the pro-Remain newspaper *The Guardian* used the metaphorical expression ‘Racism is spreading like arsenic through the water supply’ to describe that peculiar situation (Schwartz et al., 2021, p. 16). Nevertheless, in a post-referendum phase, anti-immigrant attitudes progressively softened among Leave and Remain supporters. On the one hand, the Brexit outcome promised major border controls and dispelled people’s fears about immigrants, on the other hand, both Leave and Remain voters felt the need to distance themselves from the accusations of racism (Schwartz et al., 2021, p. 16).

More in general, British press narratives on migration remained consistent with newspapers’ political affiliations. Indeed, right-leaning news brands such as the *Daily Mail* tend to adopt a more hostile attitude towards migrants, while left-leaning or center-left newspapers such as *The Guardian* provide a more empathetic perspective on the same subject. Overall, these tendencies are relevant to the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck since they allow a deeper understanding of the different viewpoints British news brands adopt according to their political orientation.

### ***1.2.2 British and Italian News Media Coverage of Migration in the South of Italy***

Migration as a news subject has long been represented through the iconic theme of migrants landing on Italian shores, particularly on the Sicilian coasts and islands (Bruno, 2015, p. 70). Over time, this pattern has led to an ‘over-representation of the moment of entry into Italian territory’ (Bruno, 2015, p. 71), which frequently overshadows migrants’ tragic experiences to the point that little attention is paid to the reasons of their perilous journeys. Accordingly, the leading theme of ‘arrival’ may marginalise the fundamental causes of migration, namely ‘globalization, political crisis, international conflicts, or the critical economic, demographic, food and health plight of significant parts of the planet’ (Bruno, 2015, p. 72).

Within this framework, the scholar Marco Bruno analysed Italian news coverage of migration with particular emphasis on how news media constructs migrant landings at Lampedusa (2015, p. 72). In his findings, Bruno noticed two clear-cut narratives, namely a hostile attitude towards undocumented immigrants, and, less frequently, ‘a pitying attitude’ (Bruno, 2015, p. 72) towards those who escaped because of poor living conditions. From a linguistic point of view, the dominant pattern of ‘the migrant as a threat’ has long been reiterated by news media through the use of inaccurate word choice. Hence, the labels ‘clandestine’ and ‘migrant’ are often used as nouns to define newcomers’ statuses, yet the two terms have very distinct meanings. In particular, the word ‘clandestine’ has been considered as an alternative expression for ‘criminal’, which reinforces a strong connection between delinquency and the issue of illegal migration (Bruno, 2015, p. 74). Such image constructs the stigmatisation of the ‘Other’ and legitimises readers’ perception of immigrants without a legal status as the main cause of social anxiety. In the South of Italy, the ‘clandestine’ embodies the public image of the journey across the Mediterranean Sea, which is perceived both as a physical and symbolic space mainly built by news media (Bruno, 2015, p. 66).

In this perspective, a substantial part of media reports about migrant landings on the Italian coasts is an account of shipwrecks and deaths at sea. From the point of view of visual content, newspapers often use ‘images that portray boats full of people that dock at a quay’ and ‘maps depicting flows reaching and going beyond national borders’ (Bruno, 2016, p. 49). Drawing upon previous studies on media representation of migrant shipwrecks, those who manage to cross the Mediterranean Sea are usually perceived both as threats and victims who

experience a life-and-death scenario. In this light, news media sources often employ object metaphors to describe migrant smuggling as ‘business’ or ‘commerce’ and the trafficked as ‘currency’, which outlines a dehumanising image of migration (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 539). From the point of view of content and language used, the recurrent combination of the words ‘Lampedusa’, ‘emergency’ and ‘alarm’ in news articles shows that the whole narration about migration is expressed through the frame of ‘conquest’ and ‘defence’ of a community (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 539). Going back to Bruno’s research, the scholar also observed the repeated use of the Italian term ‘*extracomunitari*’ in news media discourse. In general, the Italian Press did not use accurate legal terms to define migrants, instead, journalists opted for an expression which underlined their presumed ‘Otherness’ (Bruno, 2015, p. 79).

Another significant tendency in media discourse about migration is the frequent use of numbers and figures. Generally, newspaper articles include numbers to refer to arrivals, repatriations or to quantify migrants in a given location. In the specific case of Lampedusa, when news media reports migrant shipwrecks, it first mentions the number of victims and deaths, probably to enhance newsworthiness and make the article more remarkable (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 539). However, quantitative evidence about migratory flows generally consolidates the image of the ‘Other’ as invader of the host country (Bruno, 2015, p. 77). These overdramatised negative images of migrants and refugees overshadow their rights as human beings, and the real consequences of migration. Consequently, migrants are not only described as ‘extra-communitarian residents’, but they become ‘subjects and objects of fear’ (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017, p. 247).

In order to shed a light on the dichotomy of victim and threat, the scholar Denise Filmer conducted research on a turning point in the European migration crisis which directly involved the South of Italy, namely the ‘*Diciotti Crisis*’ (2020, p. 171). In August 2018, the coastguard ship *Ubaldo Diciotti* saved 177 migrants in territorial waters close to the Maltese coast. After four days between Malta and Italy, the ship set off to the port of Catania. There, the former Italian Minister for the Interior Matteo Salvini denied entry to those migrants on-board, since, according to him they could have threatened Italian security. Consequently, the passengers were confined on the ship until, after an entire day, women, children and sick men were allowed to disembark (Filmer, 2020, p. 171). The *Diciotti Crisis* caught the attention of international media, not only because of Salvini’s anti-immigrant attitude, but also because that striking situation stirred compassion in those who witnessed it.

Within this framework, Denise Filmer focused on the journalistic translation of this particular event and analysed a corpus of articles from both quality and middle-market

British news brands. Between tabloids and quality press, online newspapers such as the *MailOnline* and the *Express Online* are allegedly right leaning and anti-immigrant (Filmer, 2020, p. 180). Their conservative tendency might be evident when Salvini's name is omitted from news headlines in order to undermine his decisive role and make Italian people appear responsible for his actions (Filmer, 2020, p. 181). Additionally, these middle-market news brands focused more on migrants' sickness on board and triggered a 'mental frame of uncontrollable infection, possibly eliciting fear and repulsion' in readers (Filmer, 2020, p. 182).

As for quality news brands, namely *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Telegraph*, Filmer noticed a contrastive attitude towards migration according to their political leaning (Filmer, 2020, p. 176). What emerges from Filmer's research is that right-leaning newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Telegraph* focused more on Italy's former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini and his will to send migrants back to Libya (Filmer, 2020, pp. 184-185). Conversely, liberal tendencies emerged from *The Guardian*'s articles, in which migrants were depicted as victims who were powerless against Salvini. Moreover, *The Guardian* freelancer who wrote about the *Diciotti* case appeared to be more empathetic by using the term 'refugees' rather than 'migrants', which implies the right to ask for asylum (Filmer, 2020, p. 187). The relevance of words when identifying news subjects has been discussed in previous literature on migration news analysis. Thus,

'It is important not only to use an appropriate terminology but also to look at how the different terms are combined, which aspects are emphasized and which remain unspoken, and more generally the interpretative frameworks used to frame events built precisely from these dynamics of selection and emphasis' (Bruno, 2015, p. 80).

Moreover, Filmer's migration news analysis brought to the surface the omission of the asylum seekers' voice in news articles. In other words, data showed that Salvini's statements were far more reported than those of '137 asylum seekers who were denied their identity, freedom of movement, and fundamental rights' (Filmer, 2020, p. 190). This tendency may lead to a process of passivisation in the media discourses on immigration. For instance, in news articles, asylum seekers become logical subjects only if journalists employ passive verbs, whereas active verbs are used to talk about political authorities or institutions. (Nelken, 2018, p. 50). Thus, through the use of such linguistic patterns, UK news media constructed a multifaceted picture of migration influenced by different political leanings,

which had a significant impact on long-established debates about multiculturalism and national identities (Parker, 2015, p. 15).

### ***1.2.3 News Media Coverage of Migrant Shipwrecks: Comparing Lampedusa and Pylos***

Numerous studies on migration news analysis showed that media portrayals of refugees and asylum seekers are mostly associated with news which carry a negative connotation, such as migrant boat disasters (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 538). The issue of landings at sea has frequently appeared in the representation of migrant arrivals, to the point that it became a metaphor for migration itself. In relation to the theme of landings, the shipwreck topic echoes within crucial events of news media coverage of catastrophic migration journeys (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, pp. 138-140). Within the framework of maritime disasters, media narratives about migration towards European shores predominantly dealt with news about shipwrecks and deaths at sea.

The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck is a key example which caused a dramatic increase in the percentage of immigration media coverage (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 538). On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, about 500 migrants of different nationalities were travelling on a boat towards the coast of Lampedusa. Tragically, the vessel sank close to the coast and 366 people died at sea. Later on, the shipwreck was defined as ‘the worst maritime disaster in the Mediterranean Sea since the Second World War’ (Dines et al., 2014, p. 1) and Lampedusa was associated to migrant deaths and irregular landings (2014, p. 2). This tragic event is broadly similar to a more recent one, namely the 2023 Pylos shipwreck on the Greek coast, in which hundreds of migrants died at sea (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 537). On 14<sup>th</sup> June 2023, about 750 migrants and asylum-seekers were travelling on a ‘fishing trawler’ from Libya to Italy, till the boat sadly overturned close to the Greek coast (2024, p. 537). ‘Europe’s Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, called the migrant boat disaster off the coast of Greece the “worst tragedy ever” in the Mediterranean Sea’ (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 537). With respect to how

these two dramatic shipwrecks affected media coverage of migrants' arrivals by sea, it would be interesting to adopt a comparative perspective in terms of the language used for their news representation.

The day after Lampedusa's tragedy, Italian news headlines focused on the dramatic component and the dimension of human catastrophe through the words 'slaughter' and 'shame' (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 147). The emphasis on the tragic dimension contributed to the passivisation of migrants, since when death was mentioned, it seemed 'detached from the materiality of migrant bodies' (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 147), in particular if compared to the depiction of rescuers and local inhabitants as social agents. From a linguistic point of view, the vocabulary used by the Italian press was pessimistic and emotive when reporting about the tragedy. This tendency can be seen in the headline 'Lampedusa, strage di migranti. Barcone a picco, centinaia di morti' ['Lampedusa migrant tragedy. Boat sinking provokes hundreds of deaths'] taken from the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* (2013, my translation). These terms were likely to trigger negative emotions, namely fear, anxiety and alarm, which could lead readers to the 'search for someone to blame' and for a rapid solution to stop the emergency. Indeed, the 'search for those responsible' is a theme which typically emerges in the media representation of catastrophes (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 148). Therefore, despite much media attention to the dynamics of the shipwreck, Italian newspapers also focused on the political reaction of left and right leaning parties. From a multimodal perspective, also visual content played a crucial role in constructing an image of reality after Lampedusa's tragedy. Indeed, after the shipwreck, pictures of visibly devastated African migrants and videos of 'drowned bodies floating on the sea's surface' were widely used by Italian news media (Dines et al., 2014, p. 10). Instead, those who survived were portrayed 'grabbing at life jackets through the slicks of fuel, disembarking the coast guard launch, queuing for food or simply staring at the sea' (Dines et al., 2014, p. 10).

Similarly to Lampedusa, the Pylos shipwreck provoked great indignation all over Europe and immediately caught global media attention for its dramatic implications. Due to the severity of the tragedy, Greek news outlets mostly depicted migrants as 'victims' of the boat disaster and 'bodies at risk' (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 542). From a linguistic point of view, this tendency is exemplified by emotive expressions used to depict the sea, namely 'tragedy', and metaphors such as 'hell', 'wet grave', and 'floating graveyard' (Kalfeli et al., 2024, pp. 542-543). However, these metaphors may also convey a sense of invasion and threat, together with a 'metaphoric-suggestion of a water-related natural disaster to refer to the arrival of immigrants' (Montagut & Moragas-Fernández, 2020, p. 72). In addition to this,

the Greek press contributed to the dehumanisation of migrants since many news stories instantly emphasised numbers and statistics, presenting migrants as groups of people without a precise identity (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 547).

In this perspective, the scholars Kalfeli et al. examined a corpus of news articles from five major Greek news media outlets, namely 'EfSyn, Ta Nea, I Kathimerini, Proto Thema, and Eleftheros Typos' (2024, p. 541). Drawing from their findings, only 15% of news media coverage of the shipwreck focused on migrants' personal stories, 'presenting them as individuals with feelings, dreams, and hopes' (2024, p. 543). Hereto, what emerges from both Italian and Greek newspapers is the 'underrepresentation of the individuality', even in tragic scenarios where the refugee or migrant's voice should be the main source of information (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 542). Analogously to Lampedusa, the Pylos shipwreck sparked a political debate around the possible solutions to the problem of migrant boat disasters. Within this framework, most right-wing media outlets identified traffickers of migrants as the main cause of the emergency, whereas left-wing newspapers condemned the issue of structural violence, namely 'injustices and inequalities resulting from institutions, laws, and structures (...)' (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 542). Moreover, going back to Kalfeli et al. study, the scholars noticed that only 14.5% of news articles referred to human rights-based solutions, such as safe pathways for migrants (2024, p. 546). This not only reveals an oversimplification of the migration issue in the Greek press regardless of political leanings, but also a more subtle anti-migration media narrative. Overall, the parallelism between Lampedusa and Pylos' dramatic boat disasters may be useful to identify and deconstruct prevalent frames and recurrent lexical choices, which are still relevant to current news representations of migration in terms of 'landings emergency' (Bruno, 2016, p. 15).

# II

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Language in the News

Language, society and public opinion develop and evolve simultaneously. As a matter of fact, what identifies each human being, namely personal information, gender, ethnicity, work and so on, is ‘a social construct (...) within a community of language’ (Conboy, 2007, p. 2). ‘In its use as a social activity, language imbues the world with meaning, and in turn derives meaning, through the interplay among language, thought and experience’ (Dillon, 2010, p. 1). Even though the commonly accepted nature of language lies in deeply rooted social practices, it is simultaneously at the centre of numerous contemporary debates, and the medium through which these debates are discussed (Conboy, 2007, p. 2).

Current linguistic reflections are particularly relevant to the field of journalism, since this practice is responsible for reporting and recording topical events. By definition, *news* is the ultimate result of a ‘mosaic’ process, in which linguistic choices play a crucial role in influencing the public’s perception of reported facts (my emphasis, Reich & Barnoy, 2020, p. 970). Indeed, news texts do not merely reflect the reality of an event, since they are produced by journalists and editors who themselves are part of societies and cultures which embrace specific ideas and customs (Riggs, 2024, p. 162). At the same time, according to Piquer Martí (2015), media in general is expected to assure ‘the right to true, just and contextualized information’ (p. 138) to its readership. Moreover, the scholar states that the

press is not only the most reliable media, but it also stimulates serious and careful thoughts more than other media forms. Notwithstanding this, newspaper articles are naturally shaped by journalists' previous experiences, beliefs and opinions, as well as various external factors such as other information sources, 'the editorial conventions and policies of the media, [...] the expectations of the readership' (Valdeón, 2018, p. 7), 'real world developments, cultural norms, and the political leanings of the newspaper [...]' (Canel, 2012, p. 221). As a matter of fact, it is often the case that newspapers report radically different events relating the same main facts or highlight how specific events are built in similar ways across dissimilar articles (Riggs, 2021, p. 354).

As the media landscape continues to expand in today's digital era, online news is progressively acquiring a predominant role in providing criteria for the interpretation of the world, encouraging people's access to a variety of information through different media platforms. In this context, the ideological implications possessed by journalistic conventions of news reporting amplify their impact on the readers' minds. Particularly relevant to online news analysis and the way its discourse represents different events, cultures and societies, is examining stylistic features of news articles. By definition, style is 'a choice of form ('manner') to express content ('matter')' (Wales, 2001, p. 158), while stylistic features in general are arbitrary choices which mirror the distinctive traits of a journalist's way of expressing himself or herself artistically and creatively (Riggs, 2020, p. 7). Consequently, in media texts stylistic elements have a significant impact on delivering messages to the public sphere. Even though rhetorical devices do not wield the same power across languages, they imply a connotative meaning that might affect socio-cultural representations (Maretha & Kongthai, 2017, p. 103). As Maretha and Kongthai (2017) claimed, the use of stylistic devices

'[...] may optimize the relevance of the news as they can relate the contextual effect and processing effort by looking at a distinct layout and typography, presenting a specific version of truth, reality or world order' (p. 104).

However, with regard to *hard news*, an objective, reliable and detached writing is expected from journalists. This genre is defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as

'a journalistic style [...] that focuses on events or incidents that are considered to be timely and consequential to people locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally.

Traditionally, hard news covers topics such as politics, international affairs, economics, and science' (2023).

In this perspective, pressured by time restrictions and a competitive news media environment, journalists may employ different stylistic and linguistic devices in the attempt to be impartial and present news stories in an objective way. For instance, writers may avoid using personal pronouns and emotional vocabulary when reporting events from multiple points of view. Nevertheless, the particular linguistic devices used to structure objectivity in news articles may be highly significant, since they reveal on the one hand what information journalists prioritise as relevant, on the other hand which news content they remove (Conboy, 2007, p. 13).

More generally, in the process of selection and deselection of information, writers often rely on more than one source to construct news stories, in addition, they may compress, revise, redact, remove, include or recontextualise data (Riggs, 2024, p. 28). The scholar Piquer Martí (2015) listed discursive strategies such as the selection of topics, photographs, rhetorical devices and headlines, employed by journalists in the construction of news texts (p. 145). Through the use of these strategies, journalists convey shared thought patterns even into objective writings in a recognizable way (Conboy, 2007, p. 9). One way of identifying the stylistic and linguistic choices of online newspapers is analysing their *headlines*, whose prominent position first introduces readers to news content.

### ***2.1.1 The Power of Headlines***

Over the years, newspaper headlines went from being a brief summary of content at the beginning of each article, to becoming sophisticated framing devices with appealing layouts and impactful linguistic structures. Zhang (2013, p. 408) claimed that the language of headlines ‘is heavily mediated and recontextualized’ by ‘transeditors’ who ‘translate’ them into a new code (Riggs, 2021, p. 353). The precise language codes of news reporting carry ideological implications with them (Conboy, 2007, p. 13). As a matter of fact, through headlines online newspapers assert their individuality, condensing not only the content but the orientation and the perspective readers should take while reading their articles, in order to avoid a mass-produced product. Despite this, since news headlines are ‘isolated’ and void of any explanation or clarification, their meaning strongly relies on readers’ ability to recognise the field, references, issues, cultural allusions which are fundamental to identify the content of news articles (Isani, 2011, p. 12). Since every human being subjectively possesses in his or her mind a set of assumptions, journalists should manage to employ cultural references strategically in order to create a sense of shared community and collective identity, even across a variety of cultures and languages (Asma, 2023, pp. 82-83).

In order to shed a light on headlines’ main functions, in his research Conboy (2007) outlined three fundamental tasks specific to news titles, namely they serve to briefly introduce the topic explored in the article; they draw the readers’ attention to the aforementioned topic, shaping the first impression on it; and they provide readers with an accurate idea of the style and values of both journalists and editors (p. 13). Moreover, headlines reach an audience that is consistently wider than those who actually read the whole article, since readers of online news will probably give an idle glance at the first words appearing on their screen (Khramchenko, 2023, p. 33).

However, reducing headlines to the definition of ‘attracting devices’ would underestimate the role they play in news articles. For instance, these titles function as ‘selection devices’ for readers, directing each individual to those specific stories which may legitimise a further cognitive effort (Basenko & Radchenko, 2020, p. 34). In this perspective, headlines acquire a significant communicative function which has been defined with the technical notion of *relevance optimizers* of news articles (Finkbeiner, 2020, p. 162). This functional concept confers to news titles the role of textual *negotiators* between the content of the article and its readership. As a matter of fact, an effective headline depends on the combination of the

readers' knowledge, beliefs and expectations, together with an awareness of the facts reported (Ifantidou, 2009, p. 705). According to Shaeda Isani (2011), headlines have a 'dual functionality, to *inform* and to *persuade*':

'[...] On the one hand, the headline should supply the reader with the main information contained in the item. On the other hand, the headline is also the opening and the most important part of the item and it is supposed not only to inform the reader, but also to persuade him/her to read the whole item. However, the editor has space constraints, as well as contextual constraints, which derive from the function of the headline in a newspaper. Hence, newspaper headlines have a special style; they are characterized by density of information and syntactic characteristics of telegraphic speech. They also contain bold expressions, polarization, exaggerations and provocative wording, and appear in bigger print and sometimes in colour' (p. 4).

The common characteristics of headlines have been discussed from various perspectives. For instance, in his research Professor Khramchenko (2023) made a distinction between two main types of headlines based on their main function (p. 37). According to the scholar, headlines with a predominant informative function are characterised by less semantic and structural compression, whereas headlines which mainly realise the function of exerting pragmatic impact are characterised by a more compact and persuading writing style (Khramchenko, 2023, p. 37).

In order to reduce the set of theoretical notions about headlines' communicative and interpretative functions, Sperber and Wilson (1986) theorized that human cognitive processes are predisposed to achieve 'the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest processing effort' (Dor, 2003, p. 699). The two scholars stated that every individual has a set of beliefs, which may include notions on the present physical environment, general cultural knowledge, assumptions about the future and so on. This prior knowledge has a different validity for each human being based on his or her experience of the world, leading to a more subjective interpretation of facts (Dor, 2003, p. 699). Consequently, whenever new information is read or heard by an individual, a mental process of interpretation occurs and leads to a comparison between the novel information and the subset of beliefs rooted in one's long-term memory (Dor, 2003, p. 699). At the end of this cognitive process, individuals acquire an updated and proper context to integrate new data. In other words, the additional information has a '*contextual effect*' on the reader, which involves a certain mental effort in

order to construct a new interpretation. These psychological notions became fundamental to Sperber and Wilson's concept of *relevance* connected to news headlines, since an assumption is considered 'relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to process it optimally is small' (my emphasis, Dor, 2003, p. 701). Otherwise, an ordinary news reader would perceive as less relevant every piece of information which does not carry a contextual effect, or disregard it if the process to interpret a specific information requires an excessive mental effort.

Especially in the context of digital news consumption, 'users often engage with content in a state of low involvement due to the abundance of information and the brief, fragmented nature of online reading' (Feng, 2024, p. 157). Within this context, newspaper headlines play a crucial role in enhancing news relevance. Notwithstanding their conciseness, news titles preserve a significant subset of the contextual effect belonging to the story reported in the article, while minimizing the processing effort required to interpret the new information (Finkbeiner, 2020, p. 162). However, in order to optimize the reading process and enhance news relevance, the right material should be chosen for headlines, according to the editorial style of the newspaper.

Since headlines production cannot be compared to an exact science, editors rely on their creativity and choose among a range of different journalistic approaches, namely summarizing the story, highlighting captivating aspects of news content, using quotations and so on (Finkbeiner, 2020, p. 162). Specifically, the decision-making process leading to the choice of an appropriate headline is a negotiation between experienced editors who determine which parts of the story related in the article should be excluded from the title in order to reduce the reading effort (Finkbeiner, 2020, p. 162). However, the formulating-process of a headline should not be reduced to a restricted selection of short, simple sentences which introduce the topic of the article to follow, instead, headlines have the challenging task to frame the story and to properly optimize news relevance (Finkbeiner, 2020, pp. 162-163).

Within this framework, Dor (2003) made a list of properties an effective newspaper headline should have, not to provide a theoretical framework, but to describe a set of professional intuitions shared by news editors concerning the process to write a good headline (p. 708). Among these properties, clearness and lack of ambiguity of headlines are mentioned, in order to avoid vagueness and readers' doubts on the event the article is about to present. Moreover, according to Dor, headlines should contain new information, meaning that editors are expected to estimate their readers' current understanding of the news topic in order to bring

new implications and contextual effects, otherwise the news title would be perceived as irrelevant (Dor, 2003, p. 708). Concurrently, headlines should not presuppose information unknown to readers; instead, they should make every presupposition in the title already accessible within readers' context of interpretation. In addition, headlines should relate the story not only to previously known facts and events, but also to subjective mental representations which readers may have on the relevant topic. As far as a headline connects to its readership's previous expectations and assumptions, it manages to provide a 'context for interpretation in which more contextual effects will be deduced' (Dor, 2003, pp. 714-715). Having said that, the debate on headlines production is generally relevance-oriented and it mainly focuses on stylistic and linguistic choices.

The impact of news titles on readers is presumed to be sharper because certain stylistic and linguistic features make them noteworthy and persuasive. Put otherwise, headlines' lexical and stylistic elements are particularly effective to enhance readership's comprehension and evaluation of news subjects, regardless of their brevity (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, p. 185). Accordingly, the use of language in headlines is strongly connected to the socio-cultural context of a certain society, performing a persuasive function for readers, who are influenced by verbal rhetorical devices (Maretha & Kongthai, 2017, p. 109).

From a structural point of view, due to spatial restrictions and institutional conventionalization, headlines are usually condensed in descriptive noun phrases such as 'spotlight on migrant smugglers', where a short sequence of words briefly expands upon a noun (Conboy, 2007, p. 15). Indeed, 'syntax and vocabulary are both compressed into an intense concentration of communicative form' (Conboy, 2007, p. 15). As Bednarek and Caple (2012) pointed out in their research, the language of headlines has a specific style which differs from other styles typical of news discourse. For instance, instead of function words, headlines often include repeated nominalizations, premodifications, untensed phrases, frequent adverbs of manner, marked, emotional and evaluative vocabulary, as well as proverbs, idioms and puns (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, pp. 180-181). Consequently, readers may 'disregard standard norms such as length, clarity, and information as long as headlines rivet their attention in terms of creative style (...)' (Ifantidou, 2009, p. 699). All things considered, the analysis of stylistic and linguistic features such as metaphors, alliteration, modality and so on, becomes of great relevance since these devices employed in news headlines increase their powerful impact within this 'microcosm' (Riggs, 2021, p. 356).

### 2.1.2 *Metaphors in Online News*

Stylistic features of news headlines have been thoroughly investigated by both media studies and discourse studies for their linguistic structure and potential to frame events and trigger different interpretations, and for their role in catching the readers' attention. Among the stylistic and linguistic tools employed by journalists to compress meaning in news headlines, the use of metaphors may be particularly relevant as an advanced strategy to make news titles more remarkable. In general, 'a metaphor is described as a stylistic device that consists in presenting one entity by associating it with the qualities of a different entity, mainly to impress recipients' (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014, p. 153). In the early 1960s, the American philosopher and literary theorist Philip Wheelwright (1964) distinguished between the 'vehicle' and 'tenor' of a metaphor, respectively a first well-known concept and a second part which should be processed. In recent years, Professors Arrese and Vara-Miguel (2016) introduced the terms 'source domain' and 'target domain' to indicate the same components of a metaphor (p. 134). Indeed, the target domain is defined as the concept area to which the metaphor is applied, while the source domain is the concept area from which the metaphor is drawn (Petersson & Kainz, 2017, p. 38).

If in literary texts metaphors are widely used to shape impressions and interpretations in a sophisticated way, when employed in news headlines, these stylistic elements serve not only to improve the reading experience, but they also function as effective triggers of ideologically charged thoughts. The linguist Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska (2014) conducted a quantitative and qualitative research on metaphors from a corpus of 400 headlines taken from the English newspaper site *Daily Mail*. The scholar's analysis is relevant since metaphors are useful to shape collectively shared mental models. The coercive function of metaphors in media discourse refers to the use of these rhetorical devices to convey a specific construction of current social reality in line with the interests of news outlets (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014, p. 150). The presence of metaphors in headlines 'activates marked imagery to make comparisons' and generates 'an almost visual, and likely strong, impression' on readers (Riggs, 2021, p. 356). These stylistic devices are not employed to the same degree across languages, therefore, each language has its own metaphors established in the lexicon and phraseology, mostly deriving from human sensory perceptions, orientation in space, experiences of movement and so on (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014, p. 153). Consequently, the interpretation of a metaphorical expression strongly relies

on the context in which it is used and the readers' background knowledge, which varies significantly across cultures.

Within this framework, cognitive linguistics paid particular attention to the impact of *conventionalised metaphors*, which function as meaning-compression devices (Boeynaems et al., 2017, p. 2862). Technically speaking, a metaphor becomes conventional when the concept it comes from is repeatedly used figuratively by the population, which becomes accustomed to the meaning of the metaphor itself. According to Bowdle and Gentner (2005), these stylistic elements provoke a shift in the mode of processing from comparison to categorization, since their meaning is already known to the reader (p. 193). As a matter of fact, unlike novel or poetic metaphorical patterns, conventionalised metaphors are more likely to be processed quickly and easily by readers, therefore they are used by journalists to achieve a wider resonance.

Overall, whether a metaphorical expression is perceived as relevant or not by readers in a given context, research on this topic demonstrates that metaphors used in news headlines serve to shape readers' thoughts and actions (Petersson & Kainz, 2017, p. 45). In this perspective, the analysis of metaphors in news headlines may be significant since these stylistic devices are perceived as essential mechanisms of the mind that build mental representations of abstract notions (Shie, 2011, p. 1318).

### ***2.1.3 Alliteration in Online News***

The stylistic device of alliteration plays a significant role when employed in news headlines. Even though further research should be conducted on the role of journalistic style in portraying events and cultures, its impact should not be undervalued, particularly when effective rhetorical strategies such as alliteration are involved (Riggs, 2021, p. 7). In this perspective, this stylistic feature contributes to shaping a first impression on a reported event and increases the emotional impact on readers.

Within this framework, Professor Molek-Kozakowska (2013) conducted a study on UK tabloid headlines and provided a definition of alliteration as one of the ‘contrived textual devices fitted into headlines to increase the attractiveness of the article’ (p. 192). This stylistic technique makes the content to which it is related more outstanding, meaning that alliteration in headlines highlights some of the words readers encounter, making them impressive (Riggs, 2021, p. 356). Otherwise stated, alliterations enhance the appeal of the news article and contribute to fulfilling the second function of headlines, namely catching the readers’ attention, which may influence their views (Riggs, 2021, p. 360). More in general, in the English language style, the use of alliteration is meant to produce a certain sound effect. Accordingly, ‘the essence of this technique is the repetition of the same sounds or combinations of sounds at a relatively close distance from each other’ (Nizomova, 2021, p. 246). In this view, the rhyming sound of alliterations reduces readers’ reading effort because of the repetition of certain letters, while making salient elements of interest.

That said, rhetorical devices such as alliterations are employed by journalists not only to provide their headlines with harmony and significance, but also to ‘emphasise a major message or phrase and fix it in the audience’s mind’ (Laongpol, 2021, p. 53).

### 2.1.4 *Modality in Online News*

Out of all the stylistic and linguistic features journalists employ when writing a headline in order to report and portray different stories, modality plays a role of special importance, since it contributes to shaping readers' belief and confidence in the information received. Technically speaking, modality 'expresses the mode within which the propositional content of a sentence is presented, either as certain, reliable or obligatory, functioning to regulate interpersonal relations' (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 175). Specifically, different linguistic strategies such as modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs, evaluative adjectives, reporting verbs and generic phrases can be found both in news texts and in news headlines. Editorial writers use modality as a linguistic property to establish their *evaluation* throughout the text, affecting their readers' view on facts (my emphasis, Bonyadi, 2011, p. 1). The term 'evaluation' refers to the expression of a speaker or writer's subjective opinion on a specific topic, an event or someone's behaviour.

One of the meaningful reasons to focus on this device when analysing news articles from a linguistic perspective is its multifunctionality. In particular, the language of the news may convey an evaluative stance, an ideological or political position of journalists which contribute to establishing relationships with readers and help to define news values (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 138). Within this framework, Thompson and Hunston (2000) theorised different *parameters of evaluation* or *evaluative parameters*, namely standard norms and values according to which individuals evaluate the world through language (p. 22). In the scholars' research on evaluation, Bednarek and Caple (2012) investigated different types of parameters frequently found in British print news discourse, showing their function in the journalistic code (p. 146). Accordingly, the *parameter of In/comprehensibility* is applied to compensate for vagueness when news discourse reports on events before all details are verified. Another example worth mentioning is the *parameter of Reliability*, which is recurrently used in the news to express hypotheses along with predictions and conjectures about future events. More precisely, the assumptions made using evaluations of reliability may be a conventional way of writing about the possible consequences of a specific event (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 146). Generally speaking, the language of journalism implements these evaluative parameters through the use of modality, creating a close connection between the two.

In discussing modality as a linguistic tool for journalists, the conceptual distinction between *epistemic* and *deontic* modality should be mentioned. Bednarek and Caple (2012) connect epistemic modality to evaluations of reliability, namely estimations on the probability of occurrence of future events (p. 146). This modal expression is usually employed by journalists to assume or predict occurrences and to speculate on upcoming events. Moreover, epistemic modality is advantageous when the development of a news story implies pieces of evidence about possible consequences of an issue. As regards deontic modality, instead, Bednarek and Caple (2012) connect this modal expression to obligation and permission, often related to issues of predilection, authorization, necessity and responsibility (Riggs, 2021, p. 9). Therefore, deontic modality denotes whether a proposition is imperative, appropriate or acceptable according to some standard, norm or rule (Bonyadi, 2011, p. 3).

Drawing upon Halliday's research (2002) on language and its properties, further studies on modality claimed that this device 'operates within the interpersonal function of language' (p. 200). This function refers to the way individuals represent themselves and others by expressing a value judgement based on previous knowledge and experience. Given the significant role of modality in influencing social reality, journalists usually employ epistemic modals such as *may*, *might*, *can* or *could*, to express a lower degree of certitude and adherence with respect to the truth of a proposition (Bonyadi, 2011, p. 3). In this perspective, newspapers' ideological point of view towards a certain topic is often revealed through modality, which is frequently used in news articles in general, and in particular in news headlines, to increase or reduce the strength of an affirmation (Bonyadi, 2001, p. 4). Based on that, a strong correlation between modality and point of view has been established, the latter being defined as 'a speaker's or writer's particular style of conceptualizing a worldview' (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 178).

Drawing upon Simpson's technical terms (1993), the researcher Iwamoto distinguishes between 'positive, negative, and neutral shadings' connected to a particular journalistic style (Iwamoto, 2007, pp. 180-181). Indeed, in positive shading news, deontic modal auxiliaries such as 'must' and 'should' are frequently used to convey 'obligation or injunction' towards news subjects (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 193). Moreover, journalists may employ quotation marks and 'objective references' to people's names in order to confer an 'external tone to the discourse' (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 194). Opposed to this type of stories, negative shading ones are marked by the use of epistemic modality and by words which suggest detachment and uncertainty, creating weaker connotations in media discourse (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 181). Within this framework, the expressions 'it may be that' or 'it is said that' are called 'quotative

explanation' and convey different 'degrees of uncertainty or commitment (...) when the writer is uncertain or cynical about the propositional content of the report' (Iwamoto, 2007, pp. 184-188). Lastly, neutral shading stories are characterised by the lack of modality or modal judgement, meaning that the use of evaluative language is restrained, resulting in an uncommitted and more impartial connotation (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 181). In particular, neutral shading writings are free of 'direct description and analysis' of emotions, therefore, this is considered the ideal journalistic style 'in terms of its factuality and objective approach' (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 185).

Even though newspapers should report facts unbiasedly, it is improbable that a piece of written work is entirely objective, neutral or value-free. In addition to this, in writing a headline for an online newspaper, writers or editors often make use of modal verbs to entice readers to click and read the article, occasionally emphasizing the possible consequences of a reported event (Montejo & Adriano, 2018, p. 76). In relation to the effective function of modality, Oxford Professor Catherine Wallace (1999) emphasised the value of a more critical awareness towards the analysis of news language, claiming that readers should question the ideological assumptions and propositional knowledge implied in written texts such as newspaper articles. In this perspective, the development of a general understanding of the relationship between 'ideology' and 'power' by means of modality in newspaper articles would be a good starting point (p. 106).

## 2.2 Imagery in Online News

The process of communicating is generally believed to be based on language since written or spoken texts seem to have the most informative content. However, it is often the case that viewing an image carries as much communicative meaning as reading or hearing about a certain topic. Over the last three decades, the use of images has progressively increased, producing a ‘visual turn’ where writing had been extensively employed before. This development was not only caused by technological progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it can also be viewed as a response to a social change concerning people’s approach to graphic content (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 16). Within this perspective, news texts are a leading example of communication strongly based on visual mode to create meaning.

As regards the online format, visual content is pervasive and diversified, having a significant impact on readers’ perception of news items (Riggs, 2021, p. 357). Unlike written texts, images have a particular emotive effect on viewers which may be assimilated in an unmediated manner. Moreover, pictures often aim at verifying the accuracy of verbal content by providing a visual ‘reality’ to news texts (Wu et al., 2018, p. 2). Among the peculiarities of online newspapers there is the presence of image galleries, namely a sequence of photographs employed in some articles, which include multiple shots taken from an event, offering additional interpretations to news content and an immersive interaction for readers (Caple & Knox, 2012, p. 208). In multimodal research, photography has been generally considered as a mode, since images are able to portray as well as symbolise in an analogue manner to the mode of language. On the one hand, symbols indirectly denote a concept or an idea and may carry multiple meanings, whereas images directly portray objects, situations or ideas through visual representations (Machin, 2016, p. 327).

The view on photographs as mirrors of reality developed with the introduction of visual studies, leading to a more specific analysis of how pictures are able to create meaning. In news reports, photographs are commonly employed as a strategy to clarify a point made in the article, or as an embellishment to the layout. Nonetheless, pictures have the undeniable ability to enhance the impact news content has on readers and influence their perception of issues, potentially conveying content interpretations which are not present in the text (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 111). As regards the notion of ‘text’, scholars have long problematised its ‘boundaries’ in terms of verbal and visual content (El Refaie, 2003, p. 92). The present research aligns with Professor Riggs (2024), who adopts the ‘image/journalistic

text combination' in her study, where the scholar highlights the importance to examine images in relation to news headlines and English language in general (p. 32).

News subjects are generally depicted by typical and noteworthy pictures consistent with current news values and public understanding (Machin, 2016, p. 328). Consequently, humans have become able to approach complex issues by looking at standard types of images in the news. For instance, even though catastrophic scenarios such as shipwrecks or natural disasters may seem distant from people's everyday life, pictures of death and humanitarian crises became part of our collective consciousness. In this perspective, the meaning of images should be investigated by multiple researchers, who not only observe the depicted scene, but also take a social approach which includes people's perception of visual material (Machin, 2016, p. 329).

While analysing news values, namely the 'set of criteria that help to determine the likelihood of an event being reported as news' (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 436), Caple and Bednarek (2016) delved into an analysis of both verbal constructions and on the contribution of images in the production of meaning. The scholars 'propose two perspectives from which to analyse how news values are discursively constructed in imagery' (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 445), namely *content* and *camera technique*. Indeed, content refers to what is portrayed in the image, including participants, their actions and the situation they are pictured in. As regards camera technique, this term refers to technical considerations around an image, such as composition, perspective, angle, image frame and so on (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 445). This last point is particularly revealing in terms of power relations between the image participant and the viewer. As a matter of fact, a high camera angle, looking down on the image participant, creates an unbalanced power relation, where the viewer is in a dominant position. Conversely, the use of a low angle puts the image participant in the more powerful position, reversing this 'hierarchy' (my inverted commas, Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 113). Notwithstanding this, news values are predominantly conveyed through the content of images and to a lesser degree through how the image is technically achieved.

The expression 'news value' has been applied to different aspects of the news process regarding visible qualities of events or people, including Negativity, Impact, Proximity, Eliteness, Positivity, Aesthetic Appeal, Personalisation, Superlativeness and Consonance. Concerning Negativity, as the term itself suggests, it refers to negative aspects of an event or situation; visually, this news value is exemplified by 'negative events, emotions, their effects/aftermath shown' (Caple et al., 2020, pp. 11-13); Impact refers to 'the high significance of an event or issue in terms of its effects and consequences' (Caple & Bednarek,

2016, p. 439); visually, this news value shows ‘the after-effects (often negative) of events’, or ‘emotions caused by an event’ (Caple et al., 2020, p. 11); Proximity relates to the geographical or cultural closeness of an event or an issue; from a visual point of view, this news value involves ‘well-known or iconic landmarks’ or ‘cultural symbols’ (2020, pp. 14-15); Eliteness regards the elevated position of participants, organizations or nations implicated in an event or issue; in pictures, this news value shows ‘widely recognisable people, people in uniform or official regalia, and/or with the specialist equipment associated with elite professions’ (2020, pp. 10-11); Positivity visually shows ‘people experiencing positive emotions’ (2020, p. 14); Aesthetic Appeal is an exclusively visual news value which refers to the appealing aspects of an occurrence or subject; Personalisation refers to ‘the personal or “human” face of an event or issue, including eyewitness reports’ (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 439); from a visual point of view, this news value involves ‘ordinary individuals’ (Caple et al., 2020, p. 13); Superlativeness is ‘the large scope or scale of an event’ (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 439); from a visual perspective, this news value is exemplified by the use of a ‘very wide angle’ to highlight ‘size/space contrasts’ or ‘magnification’ (Caple et al., 2020, p. 15); lastly, Consonance makes reference to ‘the stereotypical aspects of an event or issue’ (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 439); visually, this news value corresponds to ‘depictions that fit with [...] stereotypical imagery’ or ‘typical activities associated with a person/group/nation’ (Caple et al., 2020, p. 10). Each of these news values may be telling for a multimodal analysis of news headlines and accompanying images and may lay the groundwork for the analysis of news content.

Text and image are two strongly connected elements, however, the growing dominance of visual forms over time resulted in an increased straightforwardness and tangibility in the representational quality of images. As a consequence of this strong relationship, text-image combinations evoke concepts that already exist in the readers’ memory, namely background knowledge, beliefs, deeply rooted patterns, which exert a substantial influence on the individual’s judgment on facts (Gibson & Zillman, 2000, p. 357). Therefore, the use of images equals to additional storytelling that newspapers may or may not be aware of when editors, writers or journalists select photographs to accompany news stories (Gibson & Zillman, 2000, p. 357). Consequently, more research should be conducted on the influence of visual elements in news articles due to their influence on readership’s perception of news content.

### ***2.2.1 Multimodal Analysis and the Visual Mode***

Research on journalistic language and style long marginalised the study of images and photographic reproduction regardless of their extensive presence in online news articles. Within this perspective, Bednarek and Caple (2014) claimed that ‘an analysis of how news values are discursively constructed in texts should be both ‘manual’ and ‘multimodal’ (p. 140). The two scholars conducted a multimodal analysis of two case studies of a 70.000-word corpus taken from British news, in order to illustrate how English-language news discourse constructs newsworthiness through different resources. As stated by Van Leeuwen (2015), multimodality ‘indicates that different semiotic modes are combined and integrated in a given instance of discourse (...); written discourse integrates language with typographic expression and increasingly also with illustration, layout, and colour’ (p. 447).

Multimodal analysis developed from the consideration that many types of texts do not communicate exclusively by means of written content, but also via visual material (Riggs, 2021, p. 356). Given that ‘news is multimodal’ (Riggs, 2024, p. 164), the interplay between text and image in news articles became even more significant in the digital era because of its role in the meaning-making process. Indeed, exclusively through close examination of news texts linguists may determine what values are highlighted, scarce or missing, and by means of multimodal analysis scholars may investigate how different semiotic systems build news values, and how they engage with linguistic resources (Bednarek & Caple, 2014, p. 140). Within this framework, verbal and visual elements should be analysed in a complementary way, since their combination may enhance the impact of news content and emphasise certain news values (Mai & Jocuns, 2023, p. 5). Generally speaking, a multimodal approach to news articles includes semiotic strategies applied to different modes such as images, sounds and language, together with the technology used in media discourse (Luca, 2020, p. 75).

As regards online news texts, the combination of words, colours, movements and symbols has an influential power on readers’ perception of reported events, thereby a multimodal perspective of analysis enables a more exhaustive interpretation of news content. Nevertheless, scholars of multimodal news analysis acknowledged the fact that most critical linguists attentively focused on the analysis of language in the news, without considering visual elements as part of the text. This last concept has been defined by Halliday as ‘extension’, namely when one mode contributes to adding more content to the one conveyed

in another mode (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006, p. 212). Delving into multimodal analysis, Halliday also theorised the concept of ‘elaboration’, which again serves to specify the relation between written and visual modes. Specifically, the term ‘elaboration’ refers to the content first realised in one mode and then reiterated through another mode, providing an additional explanation or a summary (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006, p. 212). This last concept is similar to Roland Barthes’s restricted notion of ‘anchorage’, which focuses on the way words may make the content of images more specific (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 77).

According to Barthes (1977), images and written words may be considered as ‘complementary fragments of a more general syntagm’ (p. 41). In view of this, the scholar perceived images as more polysemic and subject to plural interpretations compared to language (Barthes, 1977, p. 41). As a matter of fact, visual material appears to be a straightforward and powerful tool, whereas the verbal one is perceived as an indirect statement rather than a direct call for attention. However, language is hardly ever used, whether in writing, speech or gesture, without elaborate and multiple connections with visual experiences.

With the rapid spread of digitised media, the choices of available modes to use in meaning-making increased, and most representations became multimodal (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 267). To begin with, an online news headline presents a hook which functions as an enticement to capture readers’ interest on a particular news item. In this perspective, there are several instances of visually realised enticements using images which stimulate people’s curiosity to proceed reading the entire article. The visual mode progressively became one of the major resources for creating meanings, since images never occur in isolation, but constantly interact with more than one communicative mode (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020, p. 14). The choice between visual and verbal realisations may depend on a number of technical or cultural factors, even though nowadays most newspapers opt for a blend between the two modes. Indeed, in newspaper articles the two modes usually combine into a single appeal that is at the same time direct and indirect (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 79).

The multimodal theoretical framework is of great significance in the study of news discourse in general, and in particular in a multimodal approach to news headlines. Delving into this last aspect, visual communication and multimodal research face a number of issues and challenges concerning both the *production* and *reception* of images. On the one hand, production regards the interaction between different modes, their influence on the content of the message conveyed in order to achieve a specific effect. On the other hand, reception is strongly connected to readers’ ability to select, pay attention to and process information

according to personal choices of taste and area of interest. In this perspective, 'recipients play an active role in the interaction with multimodal messages' (Holsanova, 2012, p. 252). Specifically, different individuals may look at the same visual content and attribute multiple meanings to it, creating a dynamic interaction with multimodal texts. Therefore, when examining news headlines, it may be significant to analyse not only the language used, but also accompanying images to achieve a complete overview of news texts.

# III

## CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims at defining the data gathered for the following research and explaining the analytical tools used for the multimodal analysis of news headlines.

### 3.1 The Corpus

The present research is a corpus-based study of multimodal news texts. Specifically, the corpus includes online articles from four British newspapers across the political spectrum, namely the center-left *BBC news*, the right-leaning *Daily Mail*, the center-left *Guardian* and the right-leaning *Telegraph* (Filmer & Riggs, 2023, p. 3). The data selected and analysed in this study consists of online news headlines concerning the migrant boat disaster which took place on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023 on the coast of Steccato di Cutro, in the region of Calabria in the South of Italy. In particular, the corpus comprises articles published online from February 2023 to February 2024. This timeframe shows a crucial progression from the moment the tragic event of the shipwreck unfolded to the following year, a period during which British media focused on this maritime disaster and its tragic implications. This corpus choice may be meaningful since it widely influenced the audience's view on the reported event and could be a preliminary step for increasing consciousness on the impact of written and visual

devices employed in news headlines. Within this framework, table 3.1 gives an overview of the corpus size and the newspapers' political affiliations.

**Table 3.1**

*Number and political affiliation of articles by online news brand*

<b>News brand</b>	<b>Political Affiliation</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>
The Daily Mail	Right, conservative	8
The Guardian	Center-left	6
The Telegraph	Right, conservative	6
BBC News	Center-left	5

### **3.2 Limitations**

One of the limitations of this multimodal analysis of headlines is the small size of the corpus selected, which includes news titles and accompanying images taken from four online British newspapers across the political spectrum. In view of this, despite the sample size of the present research, the data collected provides valuable results which fulfil the aim of this investigation, namely, to trace recurrent patterns within the news depiction of the Cutro shipwreck through the analysis of specific linguistic choices, and stylistic and visual devices.

### **3.3 Methodology**

After an attentive reading of the corpus, the present study points at the analysis of linguistic, stylistic and visual devices employed in news headlines within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck across the selected news brands. Accordingly, the aim of this research is to trace recurrent patterns within the depiction of the boat tragedy through the analysis of rhetorical devices such as metaphor and alliteration, relevant lexical choices such as modal

expressions and negative language, in addition to the visual material which accompanies news titles.

The focus on metaphors is relevant to the present study since the journalists' use of 'marked and noticeable language' contributes to conveying a specific construction of the Cutro shipwreck and generates 'an almost visual, and likely strong, impression' on readers (Riggs, 2021, p. 356). Moving forward with stylistic features, within the news coverage of the shipwreck alliterations frequently draw connections between the headlines' key elements and make news content more outstanding (Riggs, 2021, p. 356). As for modality, this linguistic tool 'expresses the mode within which the propositional content of a sentence is presented, either as certain, reliable or obligatory, functioning to regulate interpersonal relations' (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 175). In this perspective, modal expressions may be employed in news headlines about the Cutro boat tragedy to suggest detachment towards an uncertain information.

Peculiar to online newspapers, the pervasive use of visual material combined with linguistic and stylistic tools may provide readers with an immersive interaction and enhance their emotional response towards the shipwreck (Caple & Knox, 2012, p. 208). To examine the relationship between text and image in newspaper headlines, this study relies on both Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) and Multimodal News Analysis (MNA). A multimodal approach to news analysis refers to the complementary examination of verbal and visual elements that engage to enhance the impact of news content (Mai & Jocuns, 2023, p. 5). In addition to that, Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) examines the reasons why a specific event has been selected for publication through the study of relevant news values (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 436). Given the combination between news headlines written and visual content, and the news values emerged from the analysis, these two approaches provide a solid background for the identification of recurrent patterns within the news construction of the Cutro boat tragedy.

Among the news values categorised by Bednarek and Caple (2016), previously outlined in the theoretical framework, the most useful for this study are Negativity, which is mainly exemplified through negative language such as 'deadly', 'disaster' or 'victims', while visually it is frequently associated to images of coffins or boat wreckages; Impact, which is enhanced by the use of sensationalist language and the choice of visual material showing the after-effects of the Cutro shipwreck; Eliteness, which can be found in both written and visual content through the presence of Italian politicians, such as the Premier Giorgia Meloni. Moreover, the positive accounts of those migrants who survived the shipwreck are labelled

as Positivity; then, the news value of Aesthetic Appeal, which is exclusively visual, refers to the colour contrast typical of emblematic images of the beach near Cutro; Personalisation, which is ‘the personal or “human” face of an event or issue’, refers to the victims’ relatives or the accounts of local inhabitants (Caple & Bednarek, 2016, p. 439); from a visual point of view, this news value involves the presence of average individuals (Caple et al., 2020, p. 13); Superlativeness enhances the tragic scale of the shipwreck through the use of intensifiers and negatively charged words; from a visual perspective, this news value is exemplified by the use of a ‘very wide angle’ which sometimes emphasises the sense of ‘invasion’ connected to migrant arrivals at sea (Caple et al., 2020, p. 15); lastly, Consonance visually makes reference to stereotypical elements associated to migrant boat disasters, such as life vests, huge dinghies and the background of the sea.

The present research extrapolates these specific news values from the linguistic, stylistic and visual devices employed in news headlines to detect topics and patterns commonly used by journalists within the coverage of the Cutro shipwreck. However, given that this particular investigation is conducted from a subjective perspective, it would benefit from further research to confirm or refute the application of these news values.

# IV

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Results and Discussion

The next section discusses findings connected to salient content of the headlines examined, namely the *occurrences* of ‘Italy’, ‘shipwreck’, ‘smugglers’, and the themes of ‘migrant deaths’, ‘grief and mourning of the shipwreck victims’, the ‘search for those responsible’, in addition to individual migrant stories or local inhabitants’ accounts. As for *stylistic features*, the present research focuses on the devices of metaphor, alliteration and modality, in addition to *visual material* accompanying headlines. Overall, the present study investigates these linguistic, stylistic and visual aspects because they play a crucial role in shaping readers’ perception of news content. Moreover, their employment in news headlines contributes to enhancing specific news values.

#### 4.1.1 *The Daily Mail*

The *Daily Mail* is a British right-leaning news brand whose headlines often include rhetorical devices and a sensationalist word choice in the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck. In addition to that, the conservative newspaper shows tendencies in line with its political affiliation, such as the identification of migrant smugglers as the main cause of the boat tragedy (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 542), which backgrounds the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni’s responsibilities. Moreover, the *Daily Mail* offers instances of dehumanisation and passivation of migrants who are sometimes reduced to numbers and figures (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 147).

A first example of this latter trend can be found in the headline ‘Death toll in Italy migrant tragedy rises to 63, with dozens missing’ (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2023). This news title is linguistically relevant because of the negatively charged words ‘death’ and ‘tragedy’ used to draw attention to Italy as the country where the shipwreck happened, and to the number of migrant deaths (Negativity, Proximity, Impact, Superlativeness). Generally, reports about migrant boat disasters immediately include quantitative evidence of deaths, presumably in the attempt to enhance newsworthiness (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 539). Within this context, the use of numbers and figures may convey the ‘impression of neutrality and factual truth’ (Sindoni, 2018, p. 277). However, the report of exact data may also result in a process of ‘dehumanisation’ of migrants, since their individual stories are consistently omitted. Accordingly, readers may lack empathy towards the victims and may perceive them as an indistinct mass rather than individuals. As for the main themes of the headline, the topic of ‘migrant deaths’ is evoked by the use of negative language. Throughout the whole *Daily Mail* corpus, the emphasis on the tragic dynamics of the Cutro shipwreck and its fatal consequences has become a generally recognizable pattern which ‘coheres with ideas and understanding of the news frame of’ migrant boat disasters (Sindoni, 2018, p. 281). This trend contributes to demonstrating how much news coverage of the shipwreck conveys negative content through specific lexical choices and selection of information (Riggs, 2024, p. 167).

Two days after the Cutro shipwreck, the *Daily Mail* published the headline ‘Child victims of the ‘voyage of death’: Heart-breaking pictures show small white coffins among rows of caskets in sports hall morgue as death toll from Italian migrant ship disaster reaches 65’ (28<sup>th</sup> February, 2023). Here, the alliteration of the sound ‘v’ (‘victims of the ‘voyage of death’’) draws a connection between those migrants who died after the shipwreck and their fatal journey. Notably, this alliterated content enhances the news value of Negativity and emphasises the sense of concern evoked by the journalist’s word choice. In addition to that, the expression ‘voyage of death’ may be considered as a conventionalised metaphor since in people’s collective imagery life is figurately perceived as a ‘journey’ whose final destination is the realm of the dead (Superlativeness). Therefore, the use of this metaphor in the headline is likely to trigger negative emotions, such as fear, anguish, and sadness. Additionally, this strategy may produce a powerful impression on readers since they visualise migrants’ tragic experience through the use of emotive vocabulary (Negativity). As the preceding headline, the theme of ‘migrant deaths’ is suggested by different words and expressions, namely

‘victims’, ‘voyage of death’, ‘heart-breaking’, ‘white coffins’, ‘death toll’ and ‘migrant ship disaster’ (Impact). However, this headline differs from the previous one since here the newspaper seems to encourage an empathetic attitude towards the shipwreck victims. Moreover, this news title fulfils one of the main functions of headlines since it contributes to shaping readers’ emotional impression on the news subject (Conboy, 2007, p. 13), and raises awareness on the number of children who died in the shipwreck. The emphasis on children is relevant because they are the emblem of innocence and tenderness, regardless of their nationality, and the mention of ‘white coffins’ gives concreteness to their tragic death. Within the *Daily Mail* news construction of the Cutro shipwreck, the available visual material mainly includes emotionally charged images which interact with written content to enhance the newsworthiness of the tragic event. In this view, figure 4.1 depicts a *Palasport* in Crotone where coffins containing the bodies of migrants who died in the shipwreck are distributed in four rows.

#### Figure 4.1

*Coffins containing people who died in a migrant shipwreck, lie in state at Palasport in Crotone, Italy, February 28, 2023*



Within the image composition, the first row on the left-side catches the viewers' attention since it consists of five small white coffins which stand out compared to adult-sized ones (Negativity, Superlativeness). In particular, the white coffins contain the bodies of those children victims of the boat disaster. Within this framework, the colour white may symbolise children's purity and innocence in contrast to the dark colour of adult coffins placed behind the white ones. Accordingly, the image chosen for this article has a powerful emotive effect on viewers, who are forced to face the harsh reality of migrant tragedies and their tangible consequences (Impact). More in general, pictures of coffins where migrant bodies lay to rest gradually became emblematic in the visual depiction of the Cutro boat disaster. Concerning technical aspects, the picture is taken from a high-angle perspective and shows a wide location with empty bleachers which may convey a sense of compassion towards the victims. This feeling is further reinforced by the fact that viewers can only look powerlessly at that desolate scenario.

The headline "‘I was unable to save them’ mourns fisherman after Italian migrant shipwreck" (2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2023) reports the individual account of a local inhabitant who witnessed the boat tragedy in Cutro. In particular, this news title provides the statement of a fisherman who found himself where the shipwreck happened and tried to pull migrants' bodies out of the sea (Personalisation). Within this framework, the direct quote of this local inhabitant may be used as a strategy to enhance newsworthiness and increase readers' engagement. Since this headline includes an eyewitness's report on the fatal event, it displays the human aspect of the tragedy and evokes the theme of 'compassion' and 'mourning of the victims' (Negativity, Impact). Within this framework, the fisherman's words combined with the verb 'mourns' express his frustration and impotence towards the inevitable tragedy, since he could not rescue the victims. Here, migrants may be perceived as anonymous passive figures since they are not directly mentioned but grouped under the pronoun 'them'. Moreover, the victims' *passivisation* is further reinforced by the fisherman's depiction as a social agent who at least had the possibility to take action (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 147).

The right-leaning tendencies of the *Daily Mail* may be detected in the headline 'Spotlight on ruthless smugglers, rescue failures after Italy migrant disaster' (7<sup>th</sup> March, 2023). As for stylistic features, in the phrase 'Spotlight on ruthless smugglers' the alliteration of the sound 's' and the repeated pattern of the sound 'l' ('spotlight on ruthless smugglers') give rhythm to the news title and draw attention to migrant smuggling. Accordingly, like the majority of

right-wing news brands, the *Daily Mail* tends to put the blame on migrant traffickers for the boat disaster instead of questioning the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni's government. Within this framework, the metaphorical expression 'Spotlight on ruthless smugglers' may be both stylistically and linguistically relevant. The 'spotlight' metaphor is likely to lead readers to perceive smugglers as the main perpetrators and leave out Italian inadequate migration policies (Superlativeness, Impact). Moreover, the use of a highly negative-charged adjective, namely 'ruthless', combined with the word 'smugglers' may further vent people's wrath on them. As for the headline's themes, the recurrent topic of 'migrant deaths' is evoked by the expressions 'migrant disaster' and 'rescue failures' (Negativity). These terms usually convey negative news content and cause feelings of indignation and anger for migrants' fatal destiny. Moreover, in this headline the theme of the 'search for someone to blame' is present through the mention of migrant traffickers, which diverts attention from the political debate between right and left-leaning parties (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 148).

Another instance of the *Daily Mail* focus on migrant smugglers can be found in the headline 'Italy to raise penalties for smugglers after migrant tragedy' (9<sup>th</sup> March, 2023). Here, the personification of Italy as a nation combined with the verb 'to raise' has a positive connotation since the country is taking concrete decisions to stop illegal migration. Therefore, the mention of 'Italy' in the headline amplifies the relevance of Italian politicians' legal measures and eventually enhances newsworthiness (Superlativeness). One of the main themes is the 'shipwreck as a tragedy', which stresses the catastrophic scale of the event and the condemnation of human trafficking through serious sanctions (Negativity). This latter topic shows another occurrence of the focus on smugglers as the main cause of the shipwreck, while the attention should be put on the Italian government failures regarding migration management. As for visual material accompanying the headline, figure 4.2 is a picture of the beach near Cutro where the shipwreck took place.

## Figure 4.2

*Flowers are left where the wreckage of a capsized boat washed ashore at a beach near Cutro, southern Italy, Thursday, March 9, 2023. Over 70 people died in last week's shipwreck on Italy's Calabrian coast. The tragedy highlighted a lesser-known migration route from Turkey to Italy for which smugglers charge around 8,000 euros per person. (Ronny Gasbarri/LaPresse via AP)*



If on the one hand Italy is raising penalties for smugglers after the shipwreck, on the other hand the image shows the wreckage of the capsized boat which still lays on the Cutro seashore (Proximity, Impact). In the foreground, viewers may notice relevant details such as a few coloured balloons and mourning flowers brought to pay tribute to the victims of the disaster. Here, the bright colour of the balloons sharply contrasts with the greenish, rough sea and the dull colours of the surrounding landscape. This colour contrast produces an opposition between the joyful emotions evoked by the vivid yellow balloons and the melancholic atmosphere evoked by the sea. Within the news construction of migration, wreckage photos gradually became iconic and emblematic visual proofs of boat tragedies. Here, the image interacts with the article since it shows a desolate beach which clearly conveys the theme of ‘migrant deaths’ (Negativity). Moreover, on a catastrophic

background, the presence of balloons and mourning flowers communicates a sense of solidarity and compassion towards the misfortunates.

Moving forward with the analysis of headlines taken from the *Daily Mail*, the title ‘Italy rejects any blame for deadly migrant shipwreck’ (7<sup>th</sup> March, 2023) offers another example of the conservative attitude of the British news brand. From a stylistic point of view, the rhythm of the headline emphasises the connection between the key words ‘Italy’, ‘blame’ and the extremely negatively charged adjective ‘deadly’ (Negativity). Throughout the selected corpus, the repeated reference to Italy as a nation carries different implications. Here, ‘Italy’ is the grammatical subject of the sentence and is personified as an individual who possesses the agency to ‘reject any blame’ for the tragedy. Moreover, the nation stands for the collective identity of Italian people and conveys the large scale of the tragic event, thus enhancing the news value of Superlativeness. The use of these rhetorical devices may convey the message that Italy is a victim of unfair accusations about the Cutro boat disaster, whereas the real causes should be rooted elsewhere. In addition to this, the absence of references to the Italian Premier does not clearly define her responsibilities within the shipwreck issue. However, the use of ‘Italy’ as the grammatical subject of the headline may be also interpreted as an indirect reference to Giorgia Meloni, who seems to detach herself from the faults of her government in terms of migration management. More in general, this headline highlights the tragic aspect of the shipwreck through the adjective ‘deadly’, which evokes the theme of ‘migrant deaths’ and enhances emotivity. Another major topic is the ‘search for those responsible’ exemplified through the personification of Italy (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 148). Concerning visual material, the headline is accompanied by figure 4.3, a picture of the Italian Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi during a session of the lower Chamber in Rome.

### Figure 4.3

*Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi gestures after reporting on the recent shipwreck of a migrant boat that killed at least 70 people, during a session of the lower Chamber, in Rome, Tuesday, March 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)*



Figure 4.3 portrays the moment after the reporting of the Cutro shipwreck and puts particular attention on the leader's gesture and facial expression (Eliteness). The Interior Minister, who is an authoritative representative of the Italian government, has an agonized expression on his face, partially covered by his left hand which seems to communicate his desperation (Impact). Together with the written content, the choice of this visual material may further reinforce the perception of Italy as a victim and its uncomfortable position within the debate on migration.

The focus on migrant smugglers frequently appears across the *Daily Mail* when talking about the Cutro boat disaster. For instance, in the headline 'Suspected smuggler in deadly shipwreck sent back to Italy' (28<sup>th</sup> April, 2023), the rhetorical device of alliteration is combined with a modal expression which conveys the probability of an assumption. Indeed, the musicality of the alliteration of the sound 's' ('suspected smuggler') draws attention to the key words of the headline and enables readers to remember them more easily. In addition, the modal expression 'suspected smuggler' is probably used by the journalist to express the

uncertainty of the information reported, but also to assume its possibility. Therefore, this headline may be included within the category of ‘negative shading stories’ (Iwamoto, 2007, p. 181). Here, the focus of the headline is the migrant trafficker who had been arrested and now has to go back to Italy. This shows that the *Daily Mail* records the progress of the shipwreck investigations, with particular emphasis on the topic of smugglers’ guilt rather than questioning the Italian government responsibilities. Moreover, the many occurrences of the negative-charged adjective ‘deadly’ within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck consistently underline the impact of its death toll (Negativity, Impact). The headline’s accompanying image, figure 4.4, shows the far-right Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni as she replies to journalists’ questions at an EU Summit.

#### **Figure 4.4**

*FILE - Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni speaks with the media as she arrives for an EU summit at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, March 23, 2023. The Italian Coast Guard said Monday, April 24 some 1,200 migrants have arrived since Sunday on the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa. Although far-right Premier Giorgia Meloni has led a crackdown both on smugglers and on the charity vessels, migrants keep risking dangerous voyages in the Central Mediterranean - departing from Tunisia, Libya and Turkey - in hopes of finding work or relatives in Europe. (AP Photo/Geert Vanden Wijngaert, file)*



The picture is a close-up of Giorgia Meloni's face which apparently expresses concern and distress while talking about migrant landings at sea (Eliteness, Impact). The journalist probably chose this image to prove that the Italian Premier's government is not indifferent to the complex issue of irregular migration and that it is putting forward solutions to reduce illegal entries. In this view, the *Daily Mail* choice to visually show the leader's bothered expression, which seems to convey a pitying attitude towards migrants, appears to contrast with the newspaper's conservative views.

Another occurrence of the *Daily Mail* attention to migrant smuggling and the Italian government can be found in the headline 'Italy's Meloni urged EU to do more to halt people smuggling after tragedy' (1<sup>st</sup> March, 2023). As for stylistic devices, the alliteration of the sound 'l' in the phrase 'Italy's Meloni' draws attention to the headline's news subject. In particular, this alliteration together with the English possessive creates a close connection between the country and its Premier (Eliteness). Similarly to previous headlines, here the personification of Italy turns into a metaphor, however, in this case the rhetorical device contributes to reinforcing Giorgia Meloni's relation to the nation. Moreover, in this particular headline the Italian Premier pressures Europe to act against irregular migration. Within this framework, the insistence on Europe's need for action may imply that it is not in Giorgia Meloni's power to intervene after the Cutro boat disaster. As for the main themes, the recurrent pattern of the 'search for someone to blame' connected to migrant traffickers is exemplified by the expression 'people smuggling' (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 148). In lexical terms, this latter expression may be significant since the journalist's choice to use the word 'people' instead of 'migrants' diverges from the general tendency of conservative newspapers. Here, the more neutral term 'people' connected to smuggling networks seems to discourage migrants' perception as 'the Other' within journalistic discourse (Bruno, 2015, p. 79). In addition to that, the dramatic component of the shipwreck is evoked by the negatively charged word 'tragedy', which usually denotes negative content (Negativity).

### 4.1.2 *The Guardian*

Proceeding with the analysis of news headlines, the present research examines a corpus of news titles and accompanying images taken from the center-left newspaper *The Guardian*. Compared to the right-wing *Daily Mail*, this news brand has a fairly different approach to the construction of the Cutro shipwreck since it offers a more liberal and progressive perspective. For instance, unlike the conservative newspaper which mainly put the blame on migrant traffickers, *The Guardian* seems to underline the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni's decisive role within the context of the boat tragedy. On top of that, the center-left newspaper draws more attention to ordinary individuals such as Cutro's local inhabitants and the shipwreck victims' relatives. However, the results of the present analysis show that, notwithstanding the different political affiliations, both *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* employ similar linguistic and stylistic tools to enhance newsworthiness when reporting about migrant boat tragedies.

The headline '62 people are dead off the coast of Italy. How many more will anti-migrant policies kill?' (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2023) provides an instance of *The Guardian* progressive tendencies opposed to the right-wing newspaper *Daily Mail*. The stylistic device of alliteration of the sound 'm' ('**m**any **m**ore will anti-**m**igrant') draws attention to the number of migrant victims and to anti-migrant policies adopted by the right-wing Italian government. The journalist chose to open the headline with the number of migrants who were found dead after the boat disaster (Negativity, Impact). This tendency, shared also by the *Daily Mail*, is used as a strategy to enhance newsworthiness, even though the emphasis on numbers and figures may ultimately dehumanise and anonymise migrants (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 147). However, here the journalist refers to the shipwreck victims with the more neutral term 'people' instead of 'migrants', probably to avoid a categorisation which relegates their individual stories to the background of migration. In addition to this, the reporter's use of an open question in the headline increases the readers' engagement since it pushes them to reflect about the failures of Italian migration management. In this view, the expression 'anti-migrant policies' subtly remarks the flaws of Giorgia Meloni's government which disregarded migrants' precarious conditions after their landing off the coasts of Italy. As for the themes, here the recurrent topic of the 'search for those responsible' is present, but the implications diverge from the previous newspaper. Indeed, unlike the *Daily Mail*, who

portrayed the Italian Premier as a politician who blames Europe's inadequate migration management and mainly condemns migrant smugglers, *The Guardian* seems to put the blame on the Italian government. As for visual content, figure 4.5 shows Italian authorities at the scene of the shipwreck, standing around the victims' coffins.

**Figure 4.5**

*Italian authorities at the scene of the shipwreck in Steccato di Cutro, Calabria, on 26 February 2023. Photograph: Alessandro Serranò/AGF/REX/Shutterstock*



This image shows figures of policemen which connect Italy to authoritarianism (Filmer & Riggs, 2023, p. 4) and may reinforce the message that the Cutro boat disaster is a national concern for Italy (Eliteness). Similarly to the *Daily Mail*, here *The Guardian* employs emblematic elements connected to the theme of death, which fill the entire picture. Indeed, the presence of coffins underlines the fatal consequences of the shipwreck and creates a sombre atmosphere (Negativity, Impact, Superlativeness). However, the man who holds a coffin lid at the center of the image is an unusual element within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck (Novelty), since newspapers mainly show pictures of closed coffins where migrant bodies rest. More in general, this image has a significant impact on viewers' emotions since it triggers compassion towards the victims. In addition to that, the combination between the image and the headline's word choice related to death reinforces

the tragic dimension of the shipwreck and portrays Italy as a country who has to deal with its repercussions.

The second headline from *The Guardian* ‘The beach is like a cemetery’: Italian village grapples with shipwreck aftermath’ (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2023) is both linguistically and stylistically relevant. This news title puts the focus on the Italian village’s need to deal with the after-effects of the shipwreck. As for stylistic devices, this headline opens with the simile ‘The beach is like a cemetery’, which compares Cutro’s seashore to the place which, in the collective imaginary symbolises death (Negativity, Impact). Moreover, this expression also underlines the high numbers of victims and enhances the depiction of negative content. Moving forward with the analysis, the metaphorical expression ‘Italian village grapples with’ refers to the community of local inhabitants who had to face the consequences of the boat tragedy (Personalisation). In particular, the verb ‘grapples with’ contributes to the depiction of Italian people as social agents in opposition to migrants, who may be perceived as passive figures since they are not directly mentioned, but their presence is evoked by the words ‘cemetery’ and ‘shipwreck’. Within this framework, the highly negatively charged words ‘cemetery’ and ‘shipwreck aftermath’ convey the theme of ‘migrant deaths’ and reinforce the perception of the boat disaster as an emergency (Negativity, Impact). In addition, in contrast to the *Daily Mail* conservative tendency to portray the Italian government as a victim of irregular migration and smugglers, here the focus is on ordinary individuals who witnessed and faced the catastrophic effects of the shipwreck. Among the images chosen to accompany this headline, figure 4.6 may be particularly significant for its visual impact.

#### Figure 4.6

*Search and rescue teams at work on the Steccato di Cutro beach. Photograph: Roberto Salomone/The Guardian*



The photo captures the rescue teams who searched the Italian coastline after the shipwreck in Steccato di Cutro. Within this framework, this visual content conveys the news values of Negativity, Impact and Eliteness since the image shows one of the shipwreck after-effects from a high-camera angle, and portrays people in a recognisable uniform (Riggs, 2021, p. 358). Moreover, the details of the rough sea and the storm clouds create a threatening atmosphere which may lead viewers to empathise with the migrants who experienced the shipwreck (Aesthetic Appeal). The picture outlines the dynamics of rescue operations and puts the focus on the team who promptly worked to help survivors and pull dead bodies out of the sea. Overall, there is a discordance in the text-image combination since the depiction of the dynamic rescue teams contrasts with the static portrayal of the Cutro beach which emerges from the simile ‘The beach is like a cemetery’ found in the headline.

After the shipwreck, *The Guardian* featured an article on the homage paid to the victims at a sports hall in Crotona titled ‘Relatives of shipwreck victims travel to Italy to pay their respects’ (1<sup>st</sup> March, 2023). This headline focuses on the relation between the shipwreck

victims and their relatives, who travelled to Crotona to commemorate them (Personalisation). A comparison with the *Daily Mail* can be drawn since the two newspapers adopt a different approach in the news construction of the same event. In particular, the conservative news brand wrote a longer headline to describe the sports hall filled with migrants' coffins and employed a more sensationalist word choice, such as the metaphorical expression 'voyage of death', the adjective 'heart-breaking' or the term 'morgue'. Instead, this headline from *The Guardian* uses a more concise language and, instead of describing the event location, it focuses on the people who travelled to Italy to honour their deceased loved ones. Within this framework, the liberal newspaper emphasises the affective relationship between the victims and their families, probably to enhance readers' emotional engagement (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, pp. 180-181). As for the themes, the expression 'to pay their respects' evokes the topic of 'grief and mourning of the victims' which, in addition to the words 'shipwreck' and 'victims', emphasises the recurrent pattern of 'migrant deaths' within the news construction of the Cutro boat tragedy (Negativity).

The headline from *The Guardian* 'Protests as Meloni cabinet meets near scene of deadly shipwreck' (9<sup>th</sup> March, 2023) offers an instance of the newspaper's left-leaning tendencies. As for stylistic features, the rhythm given by the phrase 'meets near scene' enhances the musicality of the news title and draws attention to the Italian cabinet meeting. Unlike the conservative *Daily Mail*, which often backgrounded Giorgia Meloni's name within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck, the more liberal newspaper puts the focus not only on the Italian Premier but mainly on the protests against her anti-migrant policies. Moreover, if the right-wing newspaper commonly depicted people traffickers as the main offenders and highlighted the Italian government legal measures against them, here *The Guardian*'s choice to give visibility to protesters may lead to question the Italian Premier's legislative response to irregular migration (Punzo & Scaglione, 2024, p. 7). As for the themes, the dramatic aspect of the shipwreck is evoked by the negatively charged adjective 'deadly', which is a recurrent lexical choice within the depiction of this migrant catastrophe (Negativity, Impact). Concerning visual material, the center-left newspaper chose two significant images to accompany this news title, namely figure 4.7 and figure 4.8.

**Figure 4.7**

*Giorgia Meloni with the deputy prime ministers Antonio Tajani (left) and Matteo Salvini at a press conference in Cutro. Photograph: Carmelo Imbesi/EPA*



**Figure 4.8**

*Protesters hold a banner reading 'Not in our name'. Photograph: Carmelo Imbesi/Ansa/Zuma/Rex/Shutterstock*



The first picture shows three main representatives of the Italian Government, namely the Premier Giorgia Meloni and the deputy prime ministers Antonio Tajani and Matteo Salvini at a press conference in Cutro (Eliteness). The Italian politicians' dynamic pose, in addition to the contrast between the natural light and the dark colours of their suits enhance the news value of Aesthetic Appeal. The second picture, instead, shows protesters who appear from behind a banner they are holding on the background, while in the foreground some cuddly toys are thrown on the street (Personalisation). The combination between the two images may be significant for their contrastive focus. In particular, the first image brings Italian politicians into the foreground and emphasises their serious expressions while talking about the Cutro shipwreck. In opposition, the second picture, which is taken from a low camera angle perspective, shows the concrete reaction to the Italian Premier political measures after the boat tragedy. Moreover, the demonstration picture is more likely to trigger an emotional response due to the presence of children toys abandoned on the street. This detail may symbolise those children victims of the Cutro boat disaster and may suggest the Italian government's disregard for their tragic epilogue. In addition to this, compared to the *Daily Mail* visual material, which frequently omits the protests photos, the liberal *The Guardian* gives visibility to Cutro's local inhabitants who witnessed the tragic after-effects of the shipwreck. Overall, these two images interact with the headline to strengthen the connection between the Italian right-wing government, the shipwreck and the protests in Cutro.

At the end of 2023, the significant number of migrant arrivals off Italian coasts was at the center of many political debates. In this view, the headline 'Giorgia Meloni: I won't allow Italy to become Europe's refugee camp' (20<sup>th</sup> September, 2023) draws attention to the words of the Italian Premier on the challenging issue of migration in Italy within an international context. Here, the stylistic device of alliteration of the sound 'r' ('Europe's refugee') gives rhythm to the headline and highlights the key words 'Europe' and 'refugee'. In addition to that, the Italian Premier's metaphorical expression 'Europe's refugee camp' may be significant if viewed within the debate on 'asylum and distribution mechanisms' (Kriegmair et al., 2021, p. 1154). Indeed, Giorgia Meloni seems to negatively connote the place where migrants are provided with 'immediate protection and assistance' as they cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe (UNHCR, Regional Bureau of Europe, 2022) in order to underline Italy's struggle against the increasing number of migrant arrivals. Moreover, *The Guardian's* choice to include the leader's words in the headline may suggest the Italian Premier's intention to shift the blame onto Europe and accuse international organizations of

‘not listening to the country’s necessities’ (Urso, 2018, p. 367) regarding the substantial number of migrant arrivals. As for the themes, compared to previous headlines where the liberal newspaper conveyed a pitying attitude towards the shipwreck victims, here, the focus on the Italian far-right Premier’s reported speech backgrounds the boat tragedy and portrays Italy as a victim of European migration management. As for visual content, the headline’s accompanying image shows the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on the left side and the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni on the right side.

**Figure 4.9**

*The European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen (left), and the Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, in Lampedusa last weekend. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*



Figure 4.9 is a close-up of the two political leaders who display a faint smile on their faces (Eliteness, Positivity). The choice of this particular picture may not be casual since both the Italian Premier and the European Commission President play a major role within the political debate on migration. In this framework, the image shows the juxtaposition of Ursula von der Leyen and Giorgia Meloni who seem to look in the same direction, therefore, their apparent connection may be interpreted as a sign of collaboration between Italy and Europe in response to the issue of irregular migration. However, the visual and written material seems

to contrast, since the headline conveys a subtle hostility between Italy and Europe, due to Europe's indifference towards the Italian struggle against inward migration.

One year after the shipwreck, *The Guardian* published the headline “The scar is reopening’: relatives return to site of Italian shipwreck’ (25<sup>th</sup> February, 2024). In this news title, the use of the alliteration of the sound ‘r’ (‘relatives return’) draws attention to the relatives of the shipwreck victims who came back to Italy one year on after the Cutro boat tragedy. As for rhetorical devices, the expression ‘The scar is reopening’ may be considered as a conventionalised metaphor which generally recalls the comeback of a strong grief (Negativity, Impact). Accordingly, the sufferings of the victims’ families are associated to a permanent physical mark, since these people continue to fight for justice and peace even a year after the boat disaster. Moreover, since the word ‘scar’ immediately evokes the sphere of physical and emotional pain in the readers’ minds, this metaphorical expression may be used strategically by the journalist to achieve a wider resonance and make the written content more vivid (Boeynaems et al., 2017, p. 2864). As for the main themes, within the dramatic context of the Cutro shipwreck, the short phrases ‘the scar is reopening’ and ‘relatives return to site’ add a sense of bitterness and melancholy which results from the long sufferings experienced by the victims’ relatives. As for visual material, figure 4.10 is a moving picture which shows a memorial for the shipwreck victims on a beach near Cutro.

#### **Figure 4.10**

*A memorial on a beach near Cutro. Some people are still missing a year on from the tragedy. Photograph: Tiziana Fabi/AFP/Getty Images*



The close-up shot of the victims' memorial draws attention to a heap of flowers and objects which presumably belonged to the migrants who died after the shipwreck (Negativity, Aesthetic Appeal). In particular, the pair of shoes laying on the sand may symbolise migrants' hopeful journey towards better living conditions, which instead tragically ended after the boat disaster. The image evokes the theme of 'grief and mourning of the victims' through the presence of a wooden cross and flowers placed on the sand. Accordingly, the Christian symbol of the cross may exemplify local inhabitants' solidarity and respect towards the deceased, regardless of their religion or nationality (Consonance). Moreover, the desolate background around the memorial conveys a sense of isolation and stillness which recalls the relatives' intense sufferings one year after the boat tragedy. Overall, the combination between visual and written content reminds readers of the tangible consequences of the shipwreck, which still have resonance for those people who lost their family members.

### 4.1.3 *The Telegraph*

The British right-leaning news brand *The Telegraph* shares the same political affiliation as the *Daily Mail*, therefore these online newspapers employ similar patterns in the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck. Accordingly, *The Telegraph* often puts the blame on migrant traffickers instead of questioning the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni's migration management. In this perspective, the right-wing newspaper tends to depict migrant arrivals as a mass invasion, thus reinforcing their perception as a threat to society (Berry et al., 2015, p. 15). On top of that, similarly to the aforementioned newspapers, *The Telegraph* provides quantitative evidence about migrant deaths after the shipwreck. However, the present analysis also observed a less recurrent trend within the news construction of the Cutro boat tragedy, namely the report of individual migrant stories.

A first occurrence of the newspaper's conservative tendency can be observed in the headline 'Over 60 migrants killed in Italy's deadliest shipwreck in a decade' (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2023). Here, the updated number of migrant deaths after the boat catastrophe immediately exemplifies the disastrous scale of the Cutro shipwreck and enhances the headline's newsworthiness. As for stylistic devices, the alliteration of the sound 'd' ('**dead**liest; in a **decade**') gives rhythm to the news title and puts the focus on negative language. As for lexical choices, the use of the participle 'killed' and the superlative 'deadliest' conveys a sense of emergency and enhances the news values of Negativity and Impact. In particular, the journalist's use of the negatively charged verb 'killed' instead of 'died' may suggest migrants' violent death (Filmer & Riggs, 2023, p. 4) and emphasise the tragic nature of the shipwreck. In addition to that, the expression 'deadliest shipwreck in a decade' alludes to another major maritime disaster which took place exactly ten years before off the coast of Lampedusa. Overall, the headline's stylistic and linguistic features mainly evoke the theme of 'migrant deaths', which, combined with figure 4.11, constructs an emblematic image of the Cutro shipwreck as a catastrophic event.

**Figure 4.11**

*Debris of a shipwreck washed ashore in Steccato di Cutro Credit: ALESSANDRO SERRANO*



Similarly to the previous news brands, *The Telegraph* chooses emblematic visual material to accompany its headlines about the Cutro boat disaster. This photo seems to have been taken shortly after the tragedy since it shows what is left of the migrant boat. In this view, this visual material conveys a sense of immediacy and enhances the article's newsworthiness (Negativity, Impact). In particular, the picture focuses on the rough sea, the pieces of wood left from the boat and a conventional life preserver. This latter element, which stands out for its bright colour (Aesthetic Appeal), may symbolise Italy's failed attempt to rescue migrants after the shipwreck. In addition, all the components of the image convey a sense of destruction and abandonment which, combined with the written content, emphasise the tragic after-effects of the boat tragedy and its catastrophic scale.

In contrast to the previous news title, the headline 'Italy shipwreck: Pakistan hockey player died 'wanting better life in Europe for her son'' (2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2023) provides an instance of a less recurrent pattern within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck, namely the individual account of one of the victims. In particular, the phrase 'Pakistan hockey player died' puts the focus on the salient identity of the headline's news subject and enhances the news value of Personalisation. Here, the right-leaning *The Telegraph* gives voice to one of the shipwreck victims through the account of her hopes and failed expectations to live a better life in Italy. Within the news construction of boat disasters, the general tendency is to

omit individual migrant stories to provide readers with a more generalised perspective on migrant deaths. This trend often results in the ‘underrepresentation of individuality’, which turns migrants into anonymous and passive figures detached from their tragic experience (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 543). In this headline, instead, the Pakistan hockey player’s dreams and hopes become the main source of information and enhance the headline’s newsworthiness. In addition to this, the journalist’s choice to mention the victim’s nationality gives her a recognisable cultural identity. As for linguistic features, the use of negative language such as the term ‘shipwreck’ and the verb ‘died’ enhances the news value of Negativity and conveys the theme of ‘migrant deaths’. The headline’s accompanying image, figure 4.12 shows the Pakistan hockey player Shahida Raza who tragically died after the Cutro shipwreck.

**Figure 4.12**

*Shahida Raza was said to have been desperate to carve a better life for her disabled three-year-old son before tragedy struck Credit: Pakistan Hockey Federation via AP*



This close-up shot, which seems to be taken from an identification document, shows the Pakistan hockey player with an upright posture and a faint smile (Personalisation, Aesthetic Appeal). Unlike the visual material chosen by the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*, which mainly showed emblematic pictures of the desolate beach in Cutro with boat wreckages, rows of migrants’ coffins or memorials, here *The Telegraph* chooses the photo of an ordinary

individual who unfortunately died after the shipwreck. Overall, combined with the written content this picture gives an identity to the headline's news subject and presumably reinforces the viewers' empathetic attitude towards her tragic story.

Another headline which presents readers with a personal migrant story is 'Miracle survivor: Afghan refugee escapes from collapsed Turkish prison - and Italian migrant boat tragedy' (3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2023). As for stylistic devices, the opening metaphorical expression 'Miracle survivor' puts the focus on the main topic of the headline and attracts the readers' attention. Regardless of its religious connotation, this expression refers to the unexpected survival story of one of the migrants who experienced the Cutro boat tragedy (Impact, Novelty). Within this framework, the word 'miracle' may be a meaningful lexical choice since it emphasises the exceptionality of the event within the tragic context of the shipwreck. Unlike the recurrent trend observed across previous news brands, which sometimes anonymised migrants and focused on the catastrophic consequences of the shipwreck, here *The Telegraph* offers a different perspective through the personal experience of someone who survived the boat disaster (Personalisation). In this view, the conservative newspaper seems to convey the message that not all migrant rescue operations failed, therefore this individual story shows a more positive outcome within the disastrous background of the Cutro boat tragedy. As for the themes, the topic of 'survival' is not frequently employed in the news construction of maritime boat disasters, instead, news brands tend to report the number of migrant deaths to emphasise the sense of emergency and enhance newsworthiness. As for the headline's word choice, the expressions 'miracle survivor' and 'collapsed Turkish prison' may be considered as sensationalist language since they make the news title more remarkable and catch the readers' attention (Negativity, Impact). The headline's accompanying image, figure 4.13, diverges from the written material since it shows some of the victims' relatives while digging in the sand to find remains of their deceased loved ones on the beach near Cutro.

**Figure 4.13**

*Family members, who drove from Germany, search for remains of their relatives in the debris of the shipwreck off the coast of Italy Credit: Getty*



The picture shows a group of six men who energetically dig into the sand with huge wooden sticks by the seashore in Cutro (Personalisation). The dynamic composition of the image, together with the visual contrast between the sunlight and the participants' shadows convey the news value of Aesthetic Appeal. Compared to the previous news title from *The Telegraph*, whose visual content gave an identity to the Pakistan hockey player mentioned in the headline, here the accompanying image deviates from the written content. However, even though the picture does not show the face of the Afghan survivor, it still constructs a humanised representation of the tragic event since it portrays the victims' relatives desperate search for their loved ones' remains (Impact). Therefore, the choice of this particular visual content combined with the headline contributes to offering a more human perspective of the Cutro shipwreck.

The headline 'Giorgia Meloni warns Italy faces summer 'invasion' of migrants and refugees' (18<sup>th</sup> March, 2023) provides an instance of *The Telegraph* conservative views within the political debate on migration. As for rhetorical devices, the metaphorical expression

“invasion’ of migrants and refugees’ is particularly relevant from a linguistic and stylistic point of view. In particular, the negatively charged term ‘invasion’ refers to an assault of a large number of people who violently enters a country (Negativity, Impact). Therefore, the association between this word and ‘migrants and refugees’ may trigger feelings of fear and concern towards newcomers, who are represented as a threat to society (Berry et al., 2015, p. 15). Within this framework, right-leaning newspapers seem to commonly depict migrants as invaders who affect their host country ‘culture, welfare, security and health systems’ (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017, p. 17). Moreover, the journalist’s mention of the Italian Premier’s anti-migrant words further strengthens the perception of migrant arrivals as a mass invasion. Within Giorgia Meloni’s reported sentence, the verb ‘warns’ may be strategically used to convey a sense of emergency and danger which negatively influences readers’ perception of migration. Overall, unlike previous headlines who mainly conveyed a pitying attitude towards shipwreck victims, here the combination between stylistic and linguistic elements constructs a negative image of migrants which may evoke hostile sentiments towards them. As for visual content, figure 4.14 is complementary to the headline since it provides evidence of one of the many migrant arrivals in Reggio Calabria.

#### **Figure 4.14**

*Migrants wait to board buses after getting off the Diciotti Italian Coast Guard ship in Reggio Calabria, southern Italy, earlier this week Credit: AP/Valeria Ferraro*



The headline's accompanying image portrays a group of migrants waiting to board buses after their arrival in the Calabrian province of Reggio Calabria (Personalisation). In particular, the picture shows migrants in line while talking to Italian authorities (Eliteness), probably to examine the formal documents required to regularly enter the country. As for the image composition, the choice of a central perspective may reinforce the viewers' perception of migrants as an innumerable multitude, since the image does not show the end of the line (Superlativeness). In view of this, the combination between the headline and this visual content may emphasise the perception of migrant arrivals in the South of Italy as an 'invasion' which should be regulated by the presence of police and security forces.

The headline 'Stop the grim trade of the people traffickers' (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2023) offers an instance of *The Telegraph* focus on migrant smugglers. As for stylistic features, the alliteration of the sound 'tr' ('**t**rade of the people **t**raffickers') enhances the rhythm of the headline. Compared to previous news titles, this headline is particularly brief and concise, however, it conveys the demand to put an end to smuggling networks. Moreover, the journalist's choice to use the word 'stop' and the negatively charged expression 'grim trade' reinforces the general sense of emergency evoked by the headline (Negativity, Impact). This latter expression can be considered as a metaphor which compares migrant smuggling to a commercial operation. Therefore, migrants' individual identities may be further dehumanised since they are perceived as passive figures and treated as marketing products (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 539). In addition to that, here *The Telegraph* seems to share the conservative perspective of the *Daily Mail*, which often puts the blame on people traffickers and backgrounds the Italian Government's responsibilities. As for visual material, figure 4.15 shows a group of migrants reaching the beach shore while, on the foreground, some of them are dragging a huge black dinghy.

**Figure 4.15**

*Telegraph View*



This is a particularly emblematic picture of the phenomenon of migrant arrivals off Italian coasts. Against the backdrop of a cloudy sky, the dynamic composition of the image, in addition to the colour contrast between the bright orange of migrants' life vests and their dark figures and dinghy enhance the news value of Aesthetic Appeal. Within this framework, this image includes the typical elements associated to migrant journeys, namely a large group of migrants, life vests, a huge dinghy, and the backdrop of the sea (Consonance). As for the image composition, the picture is taken from a wide-angle perspective which may convey a sense of 'invasion' and 'threat' due to the great number of migrants on the background who are advancing towards the seashore (Superlativeness, Impact). Overall, the combination between the written content and the image reinforces the urgency of the headline's request to put an end to migrant smuggling.

Another occurrence of *The Telegraph* conservative tendency to put the focus on migrant smugglers can be found in the headline 'Italy people smugglers could face up to 30 years in jail' (10<sup>th</sup> March, 2023). Similarly to the previous headline, here migrant smugglers are portrayed as the main perpetrators and Italy may be perceived as the agent which condemns them after the tragic shipwreck. Moreover, the mention of the exact years migrant traffickers

could be sentenced to puts the focus on the severity of the penalty, thus enhancing newsworthiness (Superlativeness). In contrast to the liberal *The Guardian*, whose headlines about the after-effects of the shipwreck mainly feature the Italian Premier's name, here the conservative news brand puts particular emphasis on smugglers' guilt and consequently marginalises Giorgia Meloni's responsibilities within the issue of migration management. As for visual material, the headline's accompanying image figure 4.16 shows the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni while she is probably talking about migrant smugglers within the context of the Cutro shipwreck (Eliteness).

**Figure 4.16**

*Giorgia Meloni says people traffickers were responsible for the tragedy on Calabria's coast Credit: TIZIANA FABI/AFP*



The picture is a close-up shot of Giorgia Meloni's serious expression and pose while she is probably discussing the Cutro boat tragedy after-effects. The dynamic pose of the leader and the colour contrast between her illuminated face and the dark background convey the news value of Aesthetic Appeal. In particular, the Italian Premier is pointing a finger up with her left-hand, while her right-hand holds a phone showing the image of a boat. Overall, combined with the written content, Giorgia Meloni's decisive attitude in the image reinforces a positive perception of the Italian Government who is actively taking action against migrant smugglers. In this perspective, the choice to show pictures of major Italian politicians is a

recurrent pattern across conservative news brands, such as the *Daily Mail*, who want to draw attention to Italy's political commitment within the debate on migration.

#### **4.1.4 BBC News**

Moving forward with the analysis of news headlines, the present study examines news titles and accompanying images taken from the British center-left newspaper *BBC News*. Given its political affiliation, this news brand seems to share the liberal and progressive perspective of *The Guardian*, therefore both newspapers adopt similar patterns in the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck. In particular, the *BBC News* focuses on migrants' individuality and provides the personal story of one of the victims within the tragic circumstances of the boat disaster. In addition to that, the center-left news brand also alludes to the Italian government failed migration management instead of putting the spotlight on migrant smugglers.

The headline 'Dreams of space that ended in shipwreck off Italy' (20<sup>th</sup> March, 2023) offers and instance of the *BBC News* focus on the human side of the shipwreck, since it gives voice to the individual story of one of the victims. In particular, this news title opens with the expression 'Dreams of space' which probably refers to the desires and hopes of one of the migrants who tragically died after the shipwreck. The latter expression may be open to multiple interpretations since the word 'space' not only alludes to the longing for better life conditions and future possibilities in a new unexplored country, but it also refers to the victims' dream to be sent into space. In this context, the journalist's choice to juxtapose the verb 'ended' to the positively connoted word 'dreams' further underlines the irreversibility of the shipwreck victim destiny, therefore enhancing the news value of Negativity. More in general, this headline reverses the usual trend to suppress migrants' individuality in favour of a generalised perspective on the tragic boat disaster. Indeed, in this particular case the *BBC News* chose to represent the shipwreck victims 'as individuals with feelings, dreams,

and hopes' (Kalfeli et al., 2024, p. 543). Despite this, like the aforementioned *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*, also this center-left newspaper employs the widely recognizable pattern of 'migrant deaths' evoked by the negative words 'ended' and 'shipwreck'. As for visual material, among the images which accompany this headline, figure 4.17 is particularly relevant to the written content since the picture shows a young shipwreck victim.

**Figure 4.17**

*Maeda Hussaini wanted to follow her dreams despite all the dangers*



This image is a close up of Maeda Hussaini, a teenager victim of the Cutro shipwreck who faced the dangerous journey at sea in the hope to achieve her dreams in Italy. Consistent with her young age, this picture may be a selfie the young girl took when she was still in her home country. In particular, her joyful expression and wide smile convey the light-heartedness which is typical of healthy and energetic youngsters full of hopes and dreams (Positivity, Aesthetic Appeal, Personalisation). Combined with the headline, this close-up shot gives an identity to the victim of the boat tragedy whose 'dreams of space' tragically broke after the shipwreck. Overall, this image brings to the surface the individuality of migrant stories in opposition to emblematic visual content of migrant landings which reinforces their perception as an anonymous and undifferentiated mass.

The second headline from the *BBC News* ‘Italy migrant boat crash highlights decades of failed policy’ (2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2023) shows the liberal tendencies of the news brand. Here, the center-left newspaper employs meaningful expressions such as ‘boat crash’, ‘highlights’, ‘decades’, ‘failed policy’ to attract the readers’ curiosity in a brief news title (Negativity, Impact) and draw attention to Italy’s ineffective migration management over the years. In this perspective, the phrase ‘highlights decades of failed policy’ seems to be a strong criticism towards Italian migration policies and, in particular, towards the Italian far-right Premier Giorgia Meloni who notoriously supports anti-migrant laws. In addition to that, the word ‘decades’, which may allude to previous major migrant boat tragedies such as Lampedusa shipwreck in 2013, underlines the long-term failures of Italian migration policies. More in general, the tendency to question the efficacy of the Italian government instead of drawing attention to migrant smugglers is frequently observed in left-leaning newspapers, such as the *BBC News* or *The Guardian*. In contrast, conservative news brands such as the *Daily Mail* or *The Telegraph* tend to put the blame exclusively on people traffickers and overshadow Giorgia Meloni’s decisive role within the debate on migration. Among the range of visual material which accompanies this news title, figure 4.18 may be significant within the context of irregular migration and boat catastrophes.

#### **Figure 4.18**

*A coast guard boat carrying bodies arrives in port after the shipwreck*



This image shows a coast guard boat and a group of volunteers carrying migrants' bodies wrapped in a black sack after the Cutro shipwreck. The picture puts the focus on the collaboration between local inhabitants and Red Cross volunteers who are forced to face the tragic after-effects of the boat disaster (Negativity, Personalisation). In this context, the presence of migrants' corpses at the center of the image may have a strong emotional impact on viewers, since it concretely shows the victims' tragic destiny in anonymous black sacks. The opposition between the ordinary individuals portrayed as social agents and the victims' bodies wrapped in indistinguishable black sacks strengthens migrants' dehumanisation and suppressed individuality. Moreover, the absence of Italian authorities in this catastrophic scenario combined with the headline's criticism towards the government's failed policies, emphasises Italy's general disregard towards a proper regulation of migrant landings at sea.

Moving forward with the analysis of headlines taken from the *BBC News*, the news title 'Italy migrant boat shipwreck: Nearly 60 killed off Calabria coast' (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2023) offers an instance of the tendency to provide quantitative evidence of migrant deaths shortly after the boat tragedy. Here, the stylistic device of alliteration of the sound 'c' ('killed off Calabria coast') sets a dramatic tone and gives rhythm to the headline. Despite its liberal tendencies, here the *BBC News* adopts the same approach of the conservative *The Telegraph* since both newspapers chose to report migrant death toll immediately after the Cutro boat disaster in order to provide readers with concrete data. On the one hand, this tendency enhances the headline's newsworthiness and raises awareness on the tragic scale of the shipwreck, on the other hand the use of numbers and figures may contribute to the dehumanisation of migrants since they are reduced to mere statistics (Binotto & Bruno, 2018, p. 147). As for linguistic features, the center-left newspaper employs the negatively charged verb 'killed' probably to suggest migrants' brutal death and consequently imply the presence of a perpetrator (Negativity, Impact). Moreover, this is a lexical choice shared also by the right-leaning *The Telegraph* in one of the previous headlines analysed. Accordingly, despite their different political affiliation, the two news brands sometimes seem to employ similar linguistic and stylistic patterns within the news construction of the shipwreck. As for the themes, the topic of 'migrant deaths' pervades the whole headline since the straightforward information about the shipwreck location and the exact number of deaths conveys immediacy and a sense of urgency. As for visual material, among the images which accompany the headline, figure 4.19 shows a group of migrants who survived the shipwreck sitting on the grass.

**Figure 4.19**

*Dozens of people managed to survive the boat's sinking*



This picture shows dozens of migrants wrapped in blankets who sit on the grass, probably waiting for assistance. On the background, viewers may notice some buildings, an ambulance and a Red Cross tent used to provide first aid to those people who survived the shipwreck (Negativity, Personalisation, Impact). This particular image diverges from the written content which focuses on migrant death toll, since it depicts those people who survived the boat tragedy and shows a positive outcome of the catastrophe. However, migrants' precarious conditions reveal that the Italian reception system is still unable to manage the increasing number of migrant arrivals by sea. Despite the contrastive focus, both visual and written materials suggest the necessity to face the issue of irregular migration and fix inadequate Italian migrant policies.

The headline 'Italy migrant boat shipwreck: Police arrest three for alleged smuggling' (1<sup>st</sup> March, 2023) is an occurrence of the *BBC News* focus on migrant traffickers. This news title concisely informs its readers about the development of the Cutro shipwreck investigations. Here, the modal expression 'alleged smuggling' may be significant since it reduces the strength of the information reported and expresses a lower degree of certitude and adherence with respect to the truth of the proposition (Bonyadi, 2011, p. 3). More in general, journalists

usually employ modals to arouse the readers' curiosity for possible future developments of an ongoing event. In particular, this news title puts the focus on the arrest of those smugglers who may be responsible for the Cutro boat tragedy. Compared to conservative newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* which mainly referred to migrant smugglers as the main cause of the shipwreck, here the liberal newspaper adopts a more cautious perspective on the same issue since, through the use of modality, the journalist does not express an absolute certainty about smugglers' guilt. As for the themes, the mention of migrant smugglers evokes the topic of the 'search for someone to blame', while the expression 'migrant boat shipwreck' opens the headline and evokes the topic of 'migrant deaths' enhancing the news value of Negativity.

The headline 'Europe migrant crisis: Italian state of emergency to tackle migrant boats' (12<sup>th</sup> April, 2023) is about Italy's position within the international debate on irregular migration and migrant landings at sea. In particular, this news title puts the focus on the country's urgent need to face the increasing number of migrant boat landings off Italian coasts in 2023. Within this framework, the headline's opening phrase 'Europe migrant crisis' extends the issue of migration to a European level and may suggest that Italy's migration management strongly relies on Europe's aid and solidarity. As for lexical choices, the expressions 'Europe migrant crisis' and 'Italian state of emergency' both convey a feeling of uncertainty and the urge to intervene, above all after the tragic maritime disasters which took place at the beginning of the year, such as the Cutro boat tragedy (Negativity, Impact) (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014, p. 7). Moreover, the extensive use of the word 'crisis' combined with the term 'migrants' within the news construction of boat disasters may be relevant since it suggests the precarious conditions of migrants' perilous journeys at sea, and therefore enhances the headline's newsworthiness. As for the themes, here Italy is portrayed as a nation who struggles against the issue of irregular migrant boat landings which should be urgently tackled. As for visual content, figure 4.20 shows the Italian coastguard approaching a migrant boat offshore.

**Figure 4.20**

*The Italian coastguard approaches a boat carrying migrants in the Ionian Sea on 10 April*



On the foreground, this image shows a huge boat full of migrants which stands near some Italian coastguard vessels. This picture seems to be a fragment torn from a surveillance camera since at its edges there are series of numbers and codes, probably to identify the boat's exact coordinates. As for visual composition, the high angle perspective allows viewers to have a dominant view on the scene, but also raises awareness on the precarious conditions of migrants crammed on a small boat throughout their journey at sea (Negativity). Accordingly, this image combines with the headline to convey the Italian state of emergency regarding irregular migrant boat landings and the Italian coastguard struggle to manage the increasing number of migrant arrivals.

## LIMITATIONS

Following the results and findings of the current analysis of news headlines and accompanying images, its limitations and challenges should be acknowledged. In particular, the data selected was limited to a small corpus of news headlines and accompanying visual material taken from four British online news brands with different political affiliations, namely the right-leaning *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* and the center-left *The Guardian* and *BBC News*. The sample size of this analysis may limit the generalizability of its findings. Within this framework, another challenge posed by the analysis of visual content was the choice of relevant pictures taken from image galleries often included in online articles. Accordingly, the subjective selection of data may represent a limitation within the analysis of news headlines and accompanying images, since it may not correspond to readers' individual perception and interpretation of the photos chosen. Nevertheless, the collected news content provided relevant results in line with the aim of the present research, namely, to detect specific stylistic, linguistic and visual devices which produce recurrent patterns within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck. In addition to that, the methodological approach adopted for this analysis has been limited to Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) and Multimodal News Analysis (MNA). In this context, the focus on the stylistic devices of metaphor and alliteration, the linguistic strategy of modality, and the specific word choice of negative and emotive language together with visual devices may have limited the relevance of results and findings for broader contexts. Having said that, the current research was conducted using professionally approved methods which gave structure and guidance to the investigation of online news headlines and accompanying images.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

Having outlined a general background on the European ‘migration crisis’ and a theoretical framework on the language of the news with a particular focus on news headlines and specific stylistic, linguistic and visual devices, the present research then demonstrated how the interplay between these features produces recognizable patterns within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck, which took place on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2023. Specifically, this research investigated a corpus of news headlines taken from four British online newspapers with different political affiliations, namely the right-leaning *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, and the center-left *The Guardian* and *BBC News*.

Within this framework, the rhetorical devices of alliteration and metaphor, the linguistic tool of modality and specific lexical choices such as emotive and negative language in addition to visual content, appeared to be relevant to identify the recurrent patterns of ‘migrant deaths’, ‘grief and mourning of the shipwreck victims’, the ‘search for those responsible’, the ‘focus on migrant smugglers’, and the report of individual migrant stories or eyewitnesses’ accounts. Moreover, to examine the relation between written and visual content, the present research drew upon Discursive News Values Analysis (DNVA) and Multimodal News Analysis (MNA). From the corpus analysed, it emerged that the right-leaning newspapers *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* showed tendencies in line with their conservative views. Accordingly, these news brands mainly identified migrant smugglers as the primary cause of the Cutro shipwreck, consequently marginalising the Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni’s responsibilities. In addition to that, both newspapers provided quantitative evidence about migrant deaths, and therefore offered a more dehumanised and passive perspective of migrants. Generally speaking, these conservative news brands adopted a sensationalist language to describe the dynamics of the tragic event in order to attract the readers’ attention and make the news content more remarkable. Conversely, the center-left newspapers *The Guardian* and *BBC News* adopted a more liberal and progressive viewpoint since they focused more on the Italian Premier’s decisive role within the issue of the Cutro shipwreck and emphasised the human aspect of the boat catastrophe through the personal account of ordinary individuals. Despite this, the results of the present analysis revealed that similar stylistic, linguistic and visual devices which construct recognizable patterns were

employed by conservative and liberal newspapers alike in the depiction of the Cutro shipwreck.

Based on the results and findings of the present research, several suggestions for further investigations are provided. Accordingly, while this study analysed a small corpus of online news headlines taken from four British newspapers, future research might examine a larger corpus in order to expand the relevance of the results and findings for broader contexts. Within this context, given the limitations of the present research, further studies could broaden the analysis of headlines' accompanying images through the investigation of image galleries sometimes included in the articles. In addition to that, future studies could adopt different methodological approaches with a focus on additional linguistic choices and stylistic devices which might reveal either similar or different patterns within the news construction of the Cutro shipwreck. To conclude, it could be relevant to conduct a reception study of online news headlines which cover this specific maritime boat disaster to further examine the impact that recurrent news portrayals of migration might have on readers.

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