

# **The Falange Armata Letters: Authorship Profiling of Linguistic Markers of Style and Ideology in Italian Terrorist Communication**

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In 2014, 20 years after the last incidents of political terrorism marking Italy, Antimafia Judge Di Matteo received a threatening letter signed by the mysterious terrorist organisation Falange Armata. This name authored more than 1500 letters and phone calls from 1990 to 1994. Falange Armata alleged to be a terrorist organisation with a right-wing orientation whose main purpose was initially to call for better treatment of political prisoners by using threats of a future danger or, more frequently, claiming responsibility for recent episodes of crime and murders. Its targets were firstly prison operators and directors in cities across Italy. Later the focus switched to politicians, judges and journalists. Threats had been spread using media such as prison switchboards, newspapers, TV offices and press agencies. Investigations conducted by the head of police and the antiterrorism commission in 1994 had brought to trial only a single prison psychologist, Carmelo Scalone, who was later found not guilty.

This study, by examining the keywords, discourse and stance markers of the anonymous texts of Falange Armata through the corpus included in a legal report, collected by an unknown police officer under request of the Antimafia department, aims to analyse the stylistic and discursive constructions of this communication. The focus is on the analysis of key lexical and grammar features characterising the authors' potential cultural background and their trends over time. The outcomes will help detect and profile the authorial style of this anonymous terrorist communication and to account for variation over a 4-year period.

Despite the lack of research on linguistic strategies and authorship profiling of forensic text types, specifically in the Italian context, it's still possible to rely on the rising research framework coming from corpus based studies on genre and style (Biber, 1998, 2006), and discourse analysis on terrorist communication (Benedetti, 2002; Matusitz, 2012) and threats (Gales, 2011).

In the context of the only legal trial concerning Falange Armata, the investigative Antimafia department asked an unknown police officer to provide a report, locating and analysing a corpus collected by investigators under the name of the organisation. This report, which is the source of the study, divides the texts in 2 groups, consisting in the two 'moments' of the organisation, the "prison phase", when the channel and targets are prison switchboards and prison operators and the "political phase", when the channels are newspapers and press agencies and the targets are politicians and journalists. The report specifically talks about mythomaniacs, with a low educational level, without a purpose or a precise strategy, mocking more famous organisations such as Red Brigades and Ordine Nuovo. The author of the report also doesn't show any intention to provide a method that could help understanding how these statements are backed up. After many years, within the ongoing trial on a supposed negotiation between organised crime and government, some witnesses started releasing statements regarding the involvement of highly regarded members of the State within the organisation, with the purpose of promoting a climate of political destabilisation, the so-called strategy of tension. This led the judges in charge

of the trial to reopen the case to find out more regarding the authorship of these texts, which had remained controversial and mysterious ever since.

The attorney general of Palermo asked the author, in quality of linguistic consultant, to reanalyse the available data, especially in consideration of the outcomes of that report, which potentially affected the results of the trial and had an impact on the level of attention dedicated to the organisation in the 20 years before.

The research questions arising from this case study concern 2 aspects of these communications: How can we better profile the authorial style of Falange Armata texts using corpus based techniques? What information can linguistic data give us about the authorship's cultural background?

The study combines the use of classic corpus linguistic tools with manual, computer-aided annotation and discourse analysis techniques, with a focus on stylistic preferences and lexical and grammar markers of stance. It aims to provide evidence that may confirm or disprove the anecdotal observations previously made on the nature of communication of Falange Armata and their authors. At the same time, it allows to experiment on the applicability of corpus based methods to Italian organised crime data for authorship profiling.

The corpus has been compiled by selecting and digitising 356 texts, totalling around 33,000 words out of the 519 of the report, excluding repeated messages and fragments. The decision to analyse such a small corpus was deliberate, as it allows for the combining of quantitative and qualitative corpus analytical techniques. It is partly speech tagged and lemmatized using TextPro (Pianta, Zanoli et al. 2008) and indexed with the Corpus WorkBench. Metadata encoded with the corpus include situational characteristics such as date, time, recipient details, target, delivery type (phonecall, letter, mixed), topic, text aims/moves.

To analyse the features characterising the communicative purpose of the texts, 4 different moves or genre markers have been identified and manually compiled and their occurrence and distribution have been calculated: threat, COR (claim of responsibility) *communiqué* and *id* (identification/signature). This approach to the texts, influenced by previous studies of move analysis and genres, was used to detect, on a discourse level, what the most predominant purposes of the message of Falange were.

Subsequently, a corpus lexical analysis of the texts was carried by using a combination of tools: AntConc to create a wordlist of the most frequent words in the corpus, Wordsmith to retrieve text by text information on lexical density and distribution, and Sketch Engine to extract a keyword list, detecting unusually frequent words and POS in the texts against the Ten Ten reference corpus Italian Web 2010 (POS tagged). Words and multiwords have been classified according to topics, keyness score and as register markers, i.e. specific to certain varieties of Italian language. This analysis allows to understand what the most salient lexical and grammar features characterising the texts are and how these features change over time.

Moving from the small to a larger-scale focus on the rhetorical and ideological construction of Falange Armata, the study carries on with the analysis of the authorial markers of stance (Biber, 1999). Some of the linguistic elements generally expressing or denoting involvement and interaction in general and specialised registers (Biber, 1988; Gale, 2012; Aull, 2014) were analysed. The features are: nouns, adjectives, pronouns, predicative verbs (agentive verbs, performative verbs, private verbs, public verbs), verbs introducing 'that' clauses and modal verbs. This approach appears to be

a suitable theoretical framework for interpreting author's positioning towards his statements in threatening communication (Gale, 2010, 2012). Specifically, it accounts for the way in which the organisation represents itself, its targets and its strategies. The results have been integrated with a rhetorical analysis of idiomatic phrases and figures of speech in context.

The texts were divided, later in the analysis, into 2 subcorpora as they are distinguishable for situational characteristics (i.e. recipients, target, topics), stylistic choices and text metrics (such as TTR, word length and sentence length), to find how the two types compare.

The analysis offers an insight into ideology, style and variation in this terrorist discourse. The picture emerging is of a specific ideological construction expressed through the lexical and grammar choices, mostly coming from specialised registers, and highly polarised markers of stance, with distribution and conceptual domains changing over time.

The corpus based stylistic analysis of the keywords and collocations shows how the vocabulary features, registers and collocations included in the corpus address the authorial style profiling to a highly-educated military, legal, technical/bureaucracy background. A contrastive comparison between the 2 different subcorpora outlines a progressive trend into bigger lexical, density and variation in grammar usage and discourse conventions.

The results will be used by legal experts in ongoing trials on organised crime and terrorism, to frame, assess the style and authenticity of anonymous threatening and terrorist letters and aim to establish a corpus based tradition of studies along this line on organised crime and terrorist communication.

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