

ON THE POLITICAL USE OF THE REPORTATIVE CONDITIONAL IN ITALIAN NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

The labels *condizionale riportivo* (reportative conditional) or *condizionale citativo* (quotative conditional) are employed to describe certain uses of the conditional mood in Italian, particularly when the conditional marks the non-firsthand nature of a given piece of information. This use of the conditional is particularly frequent in the language of newspapers. However, reportative conditionals may also carry epistemic overtones, and they are used by speakers when they want to stress that they are not committed to the truthfulness of the information reported. Depending on the context, a reportative conditional can be either a purely evidential marker, or an evidential marker with epistemic overtones. Some Italian (trained) speakers exploit this ambiguity as a strategy to play on the two possible interpretations. This strategy is particularly significant in contexts in which the speaker is supposed to be neutral and, as such, must refrain from expressing her/his epistemic stance when recounting events. In this paper, after an analysis of the different sections of newspapers in which reportative conditionals occur, I will discuss one particular use of reportative conditionals in Italian newspapers, i.e. the “political” use of conditionals. To this end, I will carry out a qualitative analysis of some excerpts from newspapers published between the second half of the 19th century and today. In particular, it will be shown that journalists often take advantage of the ambiguities underlying reportative conditionals in Italian, in order to discredit the political position of a person (or group) without overtly questioning it.

KEYWORDS: evidentiality, epistemic modality, reportative evidentials, Italian language, conditional mood, implicit content, language of newspapers.

L'ÚS POLÍTIC DEL CONDICIONAL REPORTATIU EN DIARIS ITALIANS

RESUM

Les etiquetes *condizionale riportivo* (condicional reportatiu) o *condizionale citativo* (condicional quotatiu) s'empren per a descriure alguns usos del mode condicional en italià, particularment quan el condicional codifica que una informació no ha estat testimoniada de primera mà. Aquest ús del condicional és particularment freqüent en el llenguatge periodístic. Tanmateix, el condicional reportatiu també pot incorporar matisos epistèmics, els quals s'usen quan el parlant vol destacar que no es compromet amb la veritat de la informació reportada. Depenent del context, el condicional reportatiu pot ser o bé un marcador evidencial pur o bé un marcador evidencial amb matisos epistèmics. Alguns parlants experts d'italià exploten aquesta ambigüïtat com una estratègia per a jugar amb aquestes dues interpretacions possibles. Aquesta estratègia és particularment significativa en contextos en què el parlant hauria de ser objectiu i, així doncs, cal que s'abstingui d'expressar el seu punt de vista epistèmic (*epistemic stance*) quan narra uns fets. En aquest article, en primer lloc, analitzo les diverses seccions de diaris en què apareix el condicional reportatiu i, tot seguit, em centro a examinar un ús particular del condicional reportatiu en els diaris italians, l'ús polític dels condicionals. Per això, duré a terme una anàlisi

qualitativa d'alguns fragments de diaris publicats entre la segona meitat del segle XIX i avui. En particular, observarem que els periodistes sovint aprofiten les ambigüitats subjacents del condicional reportatiu en italià per desacreditar la posició política d'una persona (o grup) sense qüestionar-lo obertament.

MOTS CLAU: evidencialitat, modalitat epistèmica, evidencials reportatius, llengua italiana, condicional, contingut implícit, llenguatge periodístic.

1. MAIN AIMS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

This paper aims to discuss one particular use of the so-called “reportative conditional” in Italian newspapers, namely its “political use”. To this end, I will investigate both the ambiguity between the epistemic and evidential readings of these conditionals, and the rhetorical advantages that this ambiguity offers to trained speakers, such as journalists. I will thus carry out a qualitative analysis of some excerpts taken from Italian newspapers published between the end of the 19th century and today. The analysis will show that these “political uses” of the reportative conditional can be traced back to at least the very beginning of modern Italian journalism.

This paper is organized as follows: in section 2, a brief overview of the main characteristics of Italian reportative conditionals will be provided; in section 3, I will examine a corpus of conditionals used in contemporary Italian newspapers. I will focus on the different sections of the newspapers in which reportative conditionals are found: they occur primarily in the News section, but also in articles dealing with Italian and foreign politics. In section 4, I will discuss the “political” use of conditionals in Italian newspapers. To this end, I will carry out an analysis of a set of examples coming from newspapers published between the second half of the 19th century and today. In particular, I will show that sometimes journalists take advantage of the ambiguity of reportative conditionals in Italian, in order to discredit the political position of a person (or group) without overtly questioning it.

2. THE REPORTATIVE CONDITIONAL IN ITALIAN: AN INTRODUCTION

The Italian *condizionale riportivo* (reportative conditional) or *condizionale citativo* (quotative conditional) is the label used to describe certain uses of the conditional mood in Italian, particularly when the conditional marks the non-firsthand nature of a given piece of information. This use of the conditional is typical of the language of newspapers:

- (1) Secondo alcune testimonianze, il giovane *avrebbe rotto* il finestrino di un'auto parcheggiata. (*La Repubblica*, 22/12/1988)

'According to some witness reports, the young man smashed [*lit.* would have smashed] the window of a parked car.'

As is well-known, evidential uses of the conditional can also be found in other Romance languages (such as, for instance, French and Spanish).¹ Yet Italian differs from other Romance languages in that evidential uses of conditionals are restricted to reportative meanings and cannot carry inferential values. Sentences like the one proposed in (2) are not acceptable in (contemporary) Italian (see Squartini 2001: 307):²

- (2) ?? Strano che la luce sia accesa. Si sarebbero dimenticati di spegnerla.
 'It is strange that the light is on. They have forgotten [*lit.* would have forgotten] to turn it out.'

According to Pietrandrea (2004, 2005, 2007), Italian conditionals are purely evidential forms. Yet, the *condizionale riportivo* is also known in Italian as the *condizionale di riserva* or the *condizionale di dissociazione* (*lit.* the 'conditional of doubt' or the 'distancing conditional', respectively) (see for instance Mortara Garavelli 1995). The labels given to this use of the conditional clearly emphasize that modal meanings play a role in the interpretation of at least some of its occurrences. Indeed, the conditional is frequently (but not always) used by speakers to stress that they are not committed to the truthfulness of the information reported (however, Squartini 2001 and 2008 maintains that evidential values are always primary).³

Furthermore, if we consider the interpretation of the French reportative conditional proposed by Dendale (1993), it is clear that, in most cases, the three features that he described (i.e. uncertainty, reportativity, lack of commitment) are all present in Italian conditionals, with the evidential (reportative) value being the fundamental one.

We maintain that, depending on the context, a reportative conditional may be either a purely evidential marker, or an evidential marker with epistemic overtones (the latter feature is common in many reported evidentials, see Aikhenvald 2004: 179-185). More specifically, the evidential value of the reportative conditional, with its "distancing effect" carries a standard presupposition that marks the reported information as non-verified/non-verifiable (or in certain cases, as we shall see in the example 7, even possibly

¹ See for instance Dendale (1993), and, with slightly different interpretations, Abouda (2001), Kronning (2002), Haillet (2002) and Rossari (2009). Rossari (2009) also contains a very useful reappraisal of the values of the French conditional, including a final, new, combined interpretation, to which we subscribe. A comparative overview of the uses of epistemic/evidential conditionals in Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese is provided by Squartini (2001: 305-324 and 2004). A description of the main values carried by the conditional in French, Italian and Spanish is to be found in Kronning (2009).

² However, Squartini (2001: 324-325) has also highlighted that in 19th century Italian, "inferential" uses of the conditional were valid.

³ An interesting account of the characteristics of the reportative conditional in Italian is provided by Miecznikowski (2008), in the framework of a comprehensive description of the values of Italian conditional in spoken discourse.

false). This presupposition, in appropriate contexts, may lead to epistemic overtones being foregrounded. Epistemic overtones may be triggered by specific lexical items (see example 6), but sometimes the sole pragmatic context and/or the common knowledge of the world may be sufficient to trigger them (see example 8).

In particular, when the source of the reported information is provided, epistemic overtones generally lay in the background, but when triggered by an appropriate (lexical and/or pragmatic) context, may be foregrounded. When reportative conditionals appear without an overt reference to the information source, or when it is left unspecified, the addressees are left to their own devices, and they will try to retrieve, or guess, the source from the context. If this operation doesn't allow them to identify a plausible source, the information will be interpreted as hearsay. Therefore, in general, the absence of an explicit source for the reported information fosters a hearsay reading and the "distancing effect" of the conditional is more likely to be foregrounded, triggering an epistemic overtone.

Some Italian (trained) speakers take advantage of this ambiguity, exploiting it as a strategy to play on the two possible interpretations of reportative conditionals (purely evidential or evidential with epistemic overtones). This strategy is particularly significant in contexts in which the speaker either cannot overtly question the truth of certain statements (as in the case of attorneys in criminal trials, see Greco 2018), or is supposed to be neutral and, as such, must refrain from expressing her/his epistemic stance when recounting events (as in the case of journalists).

3. THE DISTRIBUTION OF REPORTATIVE CONDITIONALS IN THE DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF ITALIAN NEWSPAPERS

I will now analyze the distribution of reportative conditionals in the different sections of three major Italian newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale*. In particular, I have analyzed all occurrences of the form *avrebbe* [*she/he/it would have*] in the online versions of these newspapers published between June 1 and June 8, 2018. Data was extracted from the "Timestamped JSI web corpus 2014-2019 Italian" using the online platform Sketchengine.⁴

I found a total of 476 occurrences of the form *avrebbe*. They are divided as follows:

⁴ The corpus is made up of news articles obtained from their RSS feeds. For more information on the corpus see Trampuš & Novak (2012) and the following web pages: <<https://www.sketchengine.eu/jozef-stefan-institute-newsfeed-corpus/>> and <<https://www.sketchengine.eu/timestamped-italian-corpus/>>.

Newspaper	Number of occurrences	Occurrences of reportative conditionals	Percentage of occurrences of reportative conditionals
<i>La Repubblica</i>	212	109	51,4 %
<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	75	38	50,7 %
<i>Il Giornale</i>	189	87	46,0 %
Total	476	234	49,2 %

Table 1. *Avrebbe* in the investigated corpus

The data presented in Table 1 clearly show that reportative conditionals are by no means rare in Italian newspapers, representing about a half of all uses of the form *avrebbe* in our corpus.

Table 2 presents the distribution of reportative conditionals across the various sections of the newspapers in our corpus:

Newspaper	News	Italian politics	Foreign politics	Sport	Gossip/Lifestyle	Other
<i>La Repubblica</i>	81	7	4	8	3	6
<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	30	1	1	2	2	2
<i>Il Giornale</i>	49	12	9	7	3	7
Total	160	20	14	17	8	15

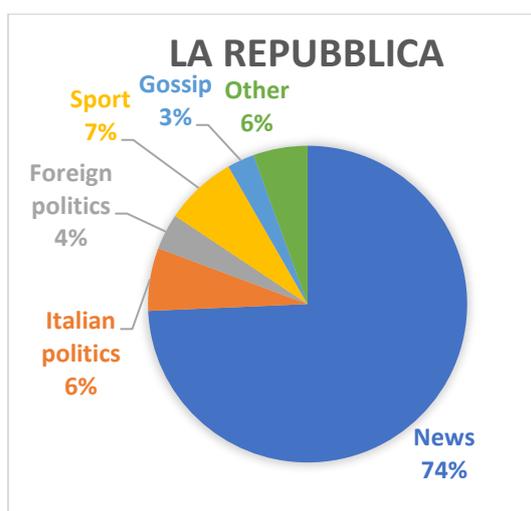
Table 2. Distribution of reportative *avrebbe* in different sections of the newspapers

Table 2 shows that the “News” section (*Cronaca* in Italian) offers by far the most favourable environment for the occurrence of reportative conditionals (68,4 % of them occur in this section, with the second most fertile ground being offered by the “Italian politics” section with only 8,5 % of occurrences). This result was to be expected, to some extent, as accounts of facts are indeed conducive to the occurrence of reportative conditionals:

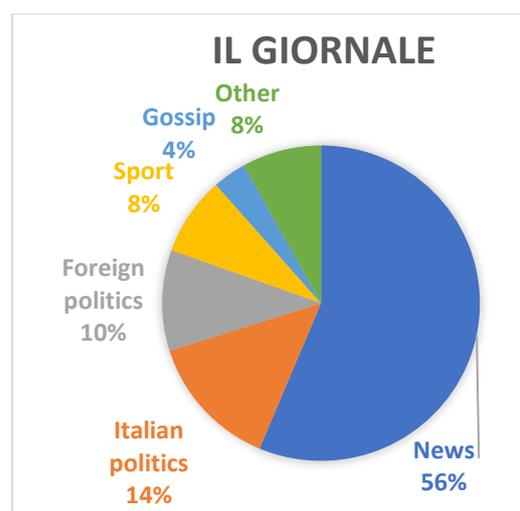
- (3) Secondo le prime informazioni, [...] il ragazzo avrebbe trascorso da amici i giorni in cui si è allontanato da casa. (*La Repubblica*, 01/06/2018)

'According to initial information, the boy spent [*lit.* would have spent] the days that he was away from home at friends' houses.'

A closer look at the data reveals a more varied picture. Notwithstanding the general structural similarity among the three newspapers (they all dedicate significant space to national and international news, and Italian and foreign politics), the distribution of occurrences across the various sections of the newspaper is somewhat different. Let's compare *La Repubblica* and *Il Giornale*:



Graph 1. Reportative *avrebbe* in *Il Giornale*



Graph 2. Reportative *avrebbe* in *La Repubblica*

The majority of reportative conditionals occurs in the News section of each newspaper, but the frequency of their occurrence in Italian and Foreign Politics sections is significantly higher in *Il Giornale* (24 %) than in *La Repubblica* (10 %). The distribution of occurrences of reportative conditionals in *Il Corriere della Sera* (79 % News, 3 % Italian Politics, 3 % Foreign Politics) is closer to that found in *La Repubblica* than in *Il Giornale*.

4. ON THE POLITICAL USE OF REPORTATIVE CONDITIONALS

This section of the paper is devoted to the qualitative analysis of some examples of the "political use" of reportative conditionals in Italian newspapers. Sub-section 4.1 highlights the relationships between implicitness and persuasive discourse, and therefore the relevance of the possible epistemic implicatures of the "distancing effect" of the reportative conditional. Sub-section 4.2 provides an analysis of some examples of the use of reportative conditionals in recent newspaper articles dealing with political issues, showing how the ambiguities that lie behind the use of these conditionals can be exploited for political purposes. Finally, sub-section 4.3 shows that the political use of the reportative conditional is not a recent development of Italian journalism, and can be traced back to at least the very beginning of modern Italian journalism.

4.1. Theoretical premises

As we saw in the previous section, while the most typical context of occurrence of reportative conditionals is the News section of newspapers, these conditionals occur with some frequency in articles related to Italian and Foreign politics too. As is well-known, frequent recourse to implicitness is a relevant feature in persuasive discourse and a shrewd communicative strategy in political discourse.⁵

The “distancing effect” of the conditional (with its possible epistemic implicatures) is fertile ground for the expression of implicit content. On some occasions, journalists may surreptitiously play on the possible epistemic overtones of the conditional in order to orientate the addressee’s interpretation of the reported information. Of course, this is not the only strategy journalists use to manipulate the interpretation of a given piece of information, but I maintain that reportative conditionals have been extensively used with this purpose in Italian journalism since its very birth to present content implicitly. As we shall see in this section, in particular contexts, journalists, while formally using the conditional just because they are reporting second-hand information, may suggest that the information reported is also uncertain. The use of the conditional in reportative contexts is not obligatory in Italian, and when explicit lexical means, or the pragmatic situation, or general knowledge of the world suggest it, the addressee can be induced to consider the selection of the conditional not only as an evidential marker of reportativity, but also as an epistemic indication of lack of commitment. In other words, we maintain that under certain contextual circumstances, epistemic overtones linked to the distancing effect of the conditional may be foregrounded. And, once foregrounded, they can be exploited for political purposes.

In what follows, I will therefore focus my attention on a set of examples of reportative conditionals occurring in articles devoted to political analysis published in two newspapers: *Il Giornale* and *Il Corriere della Sera*.⁶ The aim of this analysis is to describe some of the rhetorical strategies commonly used in Italian journalistic language in order to exploit for political purposes the ambiguity that lies in the possible epistemic overtones carried by the “distancing effect” of reportative conditionals.

In other words, under certain contextual circumstances, epistemic overtones linked to the distancing effect of the conditional may be foregrounded (and exploited, in the case we are presenting, for political reasons).

⁵ On the relevance of implicit content in persuasive discourse see for instance Lakoff (1982), Sbisà (1999) and Lombardi Vallauri & Masia (2014).

⁶ The examples from *Il Giornale* have been taken from the following issues: 03/01/2018, 07/06/2018, 16/01/2020. The examples from *Il Corriere della Sera* are quoted from the following issues: 06-07/03/1876, 09-10/03/1876, 05/01/1908, 05/01/1969.

4.2. The use of reportative conditionals in political analysis

As we saw in section 3, 24 % of reportative conditionals in *Il Giornale* occur in articles devoted to political analysis, whereas the corresponding sections of *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera* are home to only 10 % and 6 % of reportative conditionals, respectively. This means that political analyses published in *Il Giornale* are comparatively more conducive to the occurrence of reportative conditionals than those published in *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*:

- (4) Ma il *Corriere* oggi riporta anche un altro siparietto particolare. Conte, infatti, avrebbe chiesto al ministro del lavoro: “Questo posso dirlo?” (*Il Giornale*, 07/06/2018)
 ‘But today the *Corriere* [i.e. *Il Corriere della Sera*] also reports another peculiar fact. Conte [i.e. Italian Prime Minister] asked [lit. would have asked] the Minister of Labour: “Can I say this?”’

Many occurrences of reportative conditionals in political analyses published in *Il Giornale* are of the kind highlighted in (4): the conditional is used because some of the facts discussed in the article are taken from another newspaper. This, in our view, is an interesting strategy. It is not unusual for articles published in *Il Giornale* to discuss facts taken from other newspapers. Sometimes, as is the case in (4), the conditional merely indicates that the information provided is quoted from an external source. On other occasions, however, such use of the conditional seems to bear an epistemic overtone, which guides the interpretation of the reader:

- (5) Stando all’interpretazione pubblicata [sul sito del Partito Democratico], Bergoglio avrebbe così “smascherato” quella che viene definita la “retorica gialloverde” (*Il Giornale*, 07/06/2018).
 ‘According to the interpretation published [on the Democratic Party website], Bergoglio has thus “uncovered” [lit. would have uncovered] what is termed the “yellowgreen rhetoric”.’⁷

Il Giornale is a right-wing newspaper, which obviously does not share the viewpoint of the Italian Democratic Party website (i.e. the main centre-left Italian party). The use of the conditional, in this case, evidently bears a non-commitment overtone. The overtone is triggered by the use of quotation marks (not necessary in principle, because the conditional has already introduced the reportative context), and by the expression “quella che viene definita” (‘what is termed’), which is another distancing feature, and a clear hint at the position of the journalist. Further analysis of this article makes it clear that the conditional is used here as part of a mocking strategy, in which the interpretation provided by the Democratic Party website is ridiculed:

⁷ “Yellowgreen” is the name given to the alliance between *La Lega* and the *Movimento 5 Stelle* that governed in Italy between June 1, 2018 and August 20, 2019.

- (6) Scrivendo al patriarca Bartolomeo [...] il Santo Padre si riferirebbe all'esecutivo guidato dal professor Giuseppe Conte. Una rappresentazione abbastanza curiosa delle ragioni alla base delle parole del pontefice argentino. [...] Il Papa, in definitiva, sembrerebbe essere stato inserito in un nuovo elenco: quello contenente coloro che contestano Matteo Salvini. (*Il Giornale*, 07/06/2018)

'Writing to the Patriarch Bartholomew, the Holy Father referred [*lit.* would refer] to the Government led by Professor Giuseppe Conte. A slightly curious representation of the intentions of the Argentinian Pope. [...] The Pope, ultimately, seems [*lit.* would seem] to have been added to a new list: that of those who argue with Matteo Salvini.'

The continuous recourse to the conditional in this section of the article, together with the implicitly paradoxical framing of the interpretation provided by the Democratic Party website (the underlying suggestion being that the Pope would be unlikely to discuss Italian politics while writing to the Archbishop of Constantinople) and the distancing (and mocking) expression "una rappresentazione abbastanza curiosa" ('a slightly curious representation'), suggest that the journalist intends to deride the position of the Democratic Party website.

These examples show that reportative conditionals can carry different values and be exploited to achieve various communicative aims.

In the following example, meanwhile, unlike in (4), the reportative conditional and quotation of the source are followed by a rejection of the information provided by the quoted newspaper:

- (7) Il Sole 24 Ore in un articolo sulle promesse elettorali senza copertura sostiene che la flat tax proposta da Berlusconi avrebbe una aliquota base del 20 % e darebbe una perdita di gettito di 40 miliardi. Ma la flat tax berlusconiana, ha una aliquota base del 25 % e non del 20. (*Il Giornale*, 03/01/2018)

'In an article on electoral promises without economic coverage, *Il Sole 24 Ore* [an Italian newspaper specializing in economic matters] maintains that the flat tax proposed by Berlusconi has [*lit.* would have] a basic rate of 20 % and will result [*lit.* would result] in a loss of 40 billion in State income. But the basic rate of the Berlusconi flat tax is 25 %, not 20 %.'

In (7), recourse to the conditional lays the foundation for the subsequent rejection of the information provided in the source. The "distancing effect" goes as far as to provide information that is subsequently marked as simply false.

Journalists can also play on the ambiguity of the values of reportative conditionals. Indeed, while in (5) and (6) the communicative aim and associated mocking strategy is clear, the epistemic attitude of the journalist is often less explicit (though not necessarily less clear-cut). See, for instance, the cases presented in (8) and (9):

- (8) Mary Wagner sarà processata per "intralcio all'aborto". L'attivista pro life canadese, infatti, avrebbe violato la norma che vieta di pregare o parlare con le persone presenti nelle cliniche o nei centri abortisti. L'8 dicembre scorso –come ha riportato

In Terris– Mary Wagner era entrata [...] in una clinica abortista di Toronto con lo scopo di convincere le donne presenti ad evitare la pratica dell'aborto. [...] Ma la "dimostrazione", secondo quanto riferito da *Lifesite News*, è stata intercettata da due poliziotti, che hanno condotto la Wagner e la sua amica fuori dalla clinica. [...] La Wagner, in ogni caso, avrebbe anche una prescrizione personale che le vieterebbe di avvicinarsi a strutture di questo tipo. (*Il Giornale*, 03/01/2018)

'Mary Wagner will be prosecuted for "hindrance to abortion". The Canadian pro-life activist violated [*lit. would have violated*] the law that prohibits praying or speaking to people at clinics or abortion centers. On December 8 last, as has been reported by *In Terris*, Mary Wagner entered an abortion clinic in Toronto with the aim of convincing the women there to avoid abortion. [...] But, according to reports by the *Lifesite News*, the "demonstration" was blocked by two policemen, who led Wagner out of the clinic. However, Wagner also has [*lit. would have*] a personal restriction in place that forbids [*lit. would forbid*] her from approaching facilities of this kind.'

- (9) Nel bersaglio della rete è ora finito il conduttore, reo di aver pronunciato –a detta di alcuni– "frasi sessiste" nei confronti di Francesca Sofia Novello [...]. Nel mirino le dichiarazioni che Amadeus avrebbe rilasciato durante la conferenza stampa di presentazione [...]. A intercettare le sue parole sono stati i sempre attenti utenti della rete, che hanno immediatamente accusato Amadeus di avere una visione sessista e anacronistica della donna. "Sarò affiancato da Francesca Sofia Novello, scelta per essere la fidanzata di Valentino Rossi e perché ha la capacità di stare accanto a un grande uomo rimanendo un passo indietro", avrebbe detto il direttore artistico e conduttore. (*Il Giornale*, 16/01/2020)

'The TV host [*of the Festival di Sanremo*] is now being targeted by the web, guilty –according to some– of having made "sexist comments" about Francesca Sofia Novello [...]. The comments in the crossfire are those Amadeus [*The TV host of the Festival di Sanremo*] pronounced [*lit. would have pronounced*] during the presentation press conference [...]. Intercepting his words were the ever-attentive web users, who immediately accused Amadeus of having a sexist and anachronistic view of women. The artistic director and TV host said [*lit. would have said*] "I will be joined by Francesca Sofia Novello, chosen because she is Valentino Rossi's fiancée, and because she is able to stand beside a great man, staying one step behind him".'

Neither of these examples occur in the "Politics" section of the newspapers, but both discuss matters pertaining to political issues: abortion (8), and sexism (9).

The passage in (8) is remarkable for the alternation between indicative and conditional, that follows an interesting pattern.

The indicative form of the verb is used in cases where it is specifically indicated that the information has been taken from two different sources. (Reportative) conditionals are used, instead, in sentences with no explicit source. Interestingly, the sentences with overt reference to sources are those that describe the facts leading to Mary Wagner's arrest (in the indicative), while the conditional form is used in sentences containing information on Wagner's previous encounters with the law.

The first instance of the conditional (*avrebbe violato*) occurs in a fairly typical context for reportative conditionals, namely a description of charges against someone who has not yet been tried. The use of the second conditional (*avrebbe*) occurs in a peculiar context. All of the preceding information is reported with the verb in the indicative and has an explicit source. The piece of information introduced by *avrebbe* (which is also reported) has no explicit source, and is informatively backgrounded by the expression *in ogni caso* ('having said that' / 'however'). The information is therefore implicitly presented as less relevant and possibly unverified: in other words, the absence of an explicit or contextually retrievable source fosters an interpretation of the conditional that is more oriented toward the pole of hearsay, while the overall context invites an epistemic interpretation that leads to the information being regarded as uncertain.

The value of the third conditional (*vieterebbe*) is different still. The absence of an overt and/or retrievable source calls for a hearsay-oriented interpretation of this informative content too. Yet, the overall interpretation of the last part of the passage seems to lie somewhere between the reportative/epistemic and the hypothetical (the latter interpretation would be justified by the fact that Wagner has actually violated the restriction).

It seems plausible that the different treatment of information is intended to foreground the fact that Mary Wagner was arrested because she was protesting at an abortion center (reported information, with an explicit source, and the verb in the indicative), while at the same time backgrounding the woman's previous encounters with the law, and presenting them as somewhat imprecise or uncertain (reported/hearsay information, without an explicit source, and the verb in the conditional). In light of this framework, the value of the first conditional (*avrebbe violato*) might also be reconsidered, as presenting one of the charges against Wagner as unverified.

From this perspective, Mary Wagner is presented more like the victim of an unjust system than someone who broke the law. The epistemic overtone of the conditional here would appear to be consistent with the overall rhetorical construction of the article.

As is clear from the above, the communicative aim achieved through use of the conditional in (7) and (8) goes beyond mere identification of the information as reported. The evidential/reportative function, while still presented as fundamental, appears to serve primarily as the foundation for the more prominent and significant epistemic value.

Passage (9) takes us a step further into this framework, representing an extreme case of the "political use" of the conditional, in an article with a distinctive rhetorical structure. The article, published in *Il Giornale*, provides an account of a recent episode. During the press conference on the 2020 edition of

the *Festival di Sanremo*,⁸ Amadeus, the festival host, made a sexist comment, intending to compliment Valentino Rossi's fiancée on the fact that she always stays "one step behind her man". The story drew extensive media coverage, with many influential artists publicly expressing their views on the matter.

The article has an interesting rhetorical structure. Though the perspective of the journalist is not made explicit, the piece is clearly in defense of the TV host. The communicative aim is achieved through use of metaphors drawn from the semantic field of war and espionage. The TV host is "targeted by the web", his words are "in the crossfire" of the "ever-attentive" users of the web who "intercepted" them. The effect is to depict the TV host as surrounded by hostile people always poised to attack. In this context, the use of reportative conditionals is particularly relevant to creating a sense of incertitude regarding what happened. The information is presented as second-hand and the source as generic and completely unreliable (*a detta di alcuni*, 'according to some', and *I sempre attenti utenti dalla rete* 'the ever-attentive web users'). The "distancing effect" of the conditional is foregrounded, suggesting that the account given is unverified and might be unreliable.

The comment in question was in fact made during a press conference that was broadcasted publicly, and that is easily accessible on YouTube. Thus, it cannot possibly be second-hand information, as the direct source is accessible to all. Nevertheless, it is presented as such. The journalist could have presented the sexist interpretation of the statements as second-hand, using the conditional to question this interpretation of the words, but he goes as far as to implicitly present the facts themselves as unverified. Using the conditional to describe the facts, however, as though they were second-hand, is clearly misleading (though absolutely consistent with the picture and communicative aim described above). There is therefore a shift in the use of the conditional from the interpretation (which can be second-hand and questionable) to the facts (which, in this case, cannot be second-hand).

Finally, the implicit content carried by the interaction between the use of reportative conditionals (with generic/unreliable sources) and of war and espionage metaphors creates a sort of misleading short circuit between facts and interpretation.

4.3. The political use of reportative conditionals: not a recent development

The previous section discussed the use of reportative conditionals in the context of political analysis, and with "political" values, in some passages taken from contemporary newspapers. This section will show that this peculiar use of the

⁸ The Festival di Sanremo is probably the most important music contest in Italy. It was founded in 1951 and, from its inception, has always been broadcast by RAI (Italian national and public broadcasting corporation). It is one of the most watched and influential TV shows in Italy.

reportative conditional is by no means a recent development in Italian journalistic language.

Reportative conditionals are an iconic feature of the language of Italian newspapers, and their use was already common in the second half of the 19th century, when modern Italian journalism was born. Between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, reportative conditionals chiefly occurred in the sections of newspapers where external sources were essential, i.e. news and foreign politics:

- (10) Egli [*Jean Casimir-Perier*] è stato ricevuto dal maresciallo presidente, col quale –se è vero quanto dice il *Temps*– ha stabilito un accordo [...]. Secondo altri giornali, l'accordo non sarebbe completo ancora, anzi la questione della composizione del Gabinetto, sarebbe stata causa di rottura. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 06-07/03/1876)

'He [*Jean Casimir-Perier*] met the Marshall President, with whom –if what the *Temps* says is true– he reached an agreement [...]. According to other newspapers, the agreement is not [*lit.* would not be] yet completed. On the contrary, questions concerning the composition of the Cabinet have been [*lit.* would have been] the cause of a breakdown.'

- (11) Dalle prime notizie raccolte all'ospedale si è appreso che in un'osteria della località Sette Camini un carabiniere impazzito avrebbe sparato vari colpi di rivoltella. (*Corriere della Sera*, 05/01/1908)

'Based on initial information gathered at the hospital, it has been learned that in a tavern in the village of Sette Camini, a policeman has gone mad and has fired [*lit.* would have fired] multiple gunshots.'

Passage (11) contains a typical example of a reportative conditional in the news section of a newspaper, with predominant evidential value, and few (if any) epistemic overtones.

Example (10) is noteworthy due to both its date of publication and its structure. It is the very first reportative conditional that appears in *Il Corriere della Sera*, featuring in the second issue of the newspaper, which began publication the day before on 5 March 1876. This passage is also significant, however, because the interaction between the epistemic and evidential values of the conditional comes explicitly to the surface. The expression "if what the *Temps* says is true" is followed by an indicative. Opinions on the same matter in other newspapers, meanwhile, are expressed using the conditional. As such, the alternation of indicative and conditional in this example seems to relate to the epistemic overtone of the conditional. In the same reportative context, information preceded by a lexical expression of the journalist's lack of commitment to the truthfulness of the report takes the indicative, whereas the uncertain nature of the reported information is subsequently only highlighted by the conditional.

In (10) and (11), the epistemic stance of the journalist is not a prominent feature, and the "distancing effect" of the conditional is, in a way, ideologically neuter.

Even in these early cases, however, it is possible to find examples of the reportative conditional being used to obtain a distancing effect that clearly indicates the journalist's reluctance to vouch for the reported news based on an ideological prejudice. The following example is particularly significant in this context. Here, the conditional mainly conveys the epistemic stance of the journalist, while the reportative context appears to be merely the pragmatic condition that enables use of the conditional:

- (12) Il principe Bismark avrebbe dichiarato a un membro della Camera dei deputati prussiana che il governo è deciso a scioglierla [...]. È la socialista Gazzetta di Francoforte che dà tale notizia, quindi va accolta con riserva. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 09-10/03/1876)

'Prince Bismark declared [*lit.* would have declared] to a member of the Prussian Deputy Chamber that the Government has decided to dissolve Parliament [...]. The news is provided by the socialist Frankfurt Gazette, and therefore must be accepted with reservation.'

In (12), the ideological prejudice of *Il Corriere della Sera* (a conservative newspaper) toward news reported by a socialist source is clearly central to the use of the conditional, the epistemic value of which is foregrounded here.

This interpretation is also fostered by the approach taken in the rest of the article. Most of the information comes from other external sources, mainly (non-socialist) foreign newspapers, and is reported using the indicative. The only reportative conditional used in the article is that presented in (12), which refers to the only piece of information taken from a socialist source.

Example (12) shares some similarities with the "political use" of reportative conditionals discussed in the previous section. It is therefore clear that journalists in the political field have been exploiting the ambiguity in the interplay between evidential and epistemic values of reportative conditionals since at least the second half of the 19th century.

In other cases, this strategy is less overtly signposted to the reader. By using the conditional, journalists can surreptitiously question ideas or facts, purporting simply to report information while also suggesting that it is uncertain or hardly credible. The political value of such a strategy is clear. See the following example, also taken from *Il Corriere della Sera*:

- (13) «Potere operaio» sostiene che la forza pubblica avrebbe sparato "anche in aria, ma non solo in aria" [...] dopo la seconda carica della polizia, che si sarebbe svolta circa alle undici della sera di San Silvestro. [...] A sentire «Potere operaio» i manifestanti si sarebbero limitati, almeno all'inizio, a gridare slogans [...]. Tutto questo contrasta decisamente con la realtà dei fatti. Persone presenti alle Focette quella notte, anzi persone aggredite, ci hanno descritto gli atti vandalici, le botte [...] che i clienti del night hanno dovuto subire, mentre la forza pubblica non si muoveva. (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 05/01/1969)

'«Potere operaio» [*a Maoist Italian organization*] maintains that the police fired [*lit.* would have fired] "also in the air, but not only in the air" [...] following the second

charge by the police, which took place [*lit.* would have taken place] at 11 p.m. on New Year's Eve. According to «Potere operaio», at least at the beginning, the protesters limited themselves [*lit.* would have limited themselves] to shouting slogans [...]. All of this contrasts strongly with the actual facts. People who were at the Focette [*the place where the riot took place*] that night, or rather people who were assaulted, told us of the acts of vandalism, the beating [...] that the customers of the nightclub had to endure, while the police did not intervene.'

In this example, the journalist reports two different accounts of a riot, one provided by a radical left-wing organization and the other given by a number of bystander witnesses.

The two sources are treated differently: the version of the protesters (who are identified with the radical left-wing organization *Potere Operaio*) is considered just an account of the events; the version of the customers of the nightclub (who are presented as "the witnesses", or rather "the assaulted witnesses") is considered as "the actual facts". The implicit content is clear: one of the accounts is not even a version of the facts, it is just what happened. Therefore, the other version is false.

Interestingly, in the first part of the passage (containing the left-wing account) all verbs are inflected in the conditional, while in the second part (reporting the witnesses' version) the verbs are in the indicative. This change appears to convey the point of view of the journalist. Unlike in passage (12), however, the journalist does not explicate his stance, and limits himself to establishing a clear opposition between the first account and "the actual facts", i.e. the bystanders' version of events.

The conditionals of this passage, in principle, could be purely evidential reportative conditionals. Yet, the overall context clearly fosters an epistemic reading of their (strong) distancing effect, which contributes to surreptitiously conveying the epistemic stance of the journalist. In this passage, it is clear that the journalist does not endorse the version outlined by the first source, and presents it as downright unreliable. This example is not far removed from the uses described at the end of the previous section.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Reportative conditionals are very common in Italian newspapers. They may combine evidential (reportative) and epistemic (non-commitment) values, with evidential ones forming the base layer.

This article analyzed the frequency of occurrence of reportative conditionals compared to the overall number of conditionals in three major contemporary Italian newspapers, before analyzing the distribution of occurrences of reportative conditionals in the various sections of those newspapers. The News section proved to be the most suitable context for the use of reportative conditionals, followed by the Italian and foreign politics section. The article also

investigated a specific use of this iconic feature of the language of Italian newspapers, i.e. its “political use”. In certain contexts, conditionals may play a role (together with other strategies) in implicitly conveying the epistemic stance of the journalist.

A qualitative analysis of some occurrences of reportative conditionals has shown that, in some cases, journalists do play on the interactions between the epistemic and the evidential values of reportative conditionals to convey their position in a non-explicit (though extremely clear) way. This is a shrewd strategy, because though “officially” the conditional simply warns the reader that the information is reported, the context clearly fosters an interpretation of uncertainty, unreliability, or at least of lack of commitment. When the conditional is used for this purpose, then, the reader is not overtly advised that the text presents the epistemic stance of the journalist, but is surreptitiously led to accept the information as uncertain, while the journalist purports to simply report the facts.⁹ This same strategy has been found in the language of attorneys, when they are not allowed to overtly question the statements of a witness in court (see Greco 2018: 132-134).

The examples analyzed in section 4 are taken from newspapers published between 1876 and 2020. Occurrences of the “political use” of the reportative conditional can be traced as far back as the 19th century. Italian journalists have therefore played on the interactions between the evidential and epistemic values of reportative conditionals for political purposes since the very birth of modern Italian journalism, and continue to hone this rhetorical strategy today.

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⁹ For a discussion on the advantages of implicitness in persuasive discourse, see Lombardi Vallauri & Masia (2014).

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