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### **Face attack in Italian politics: Beppe Grillo's insulting epithets for other politicians<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The second largest party in the Italian Parliament, the “5-Star Movement” is led by comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo. Grillo is well-known for a distinctive and often inflammatory rhetoric, which includes the regular use of humorous but insulting epithets for other politicians, such as *Psiconano* (“Psychodwarf”) for Silvio Berlusconi. This paper discusses a selection of epithets used by Grillo on his blog between 2008 and 2015 to refer to Berlusconi and three successive centre-left leaders. We account for the functions of the epithets in terms of Spencer-Oatey's (2002, 2008) multi-level model of “face” and of Culpeper's (2011) “entertaining” and “coercive” functions of impoliteness. We suggest that our study has implications for existing models of face and impoliteness and for an understanding of the evolving role of verbal aggression in Italian politics.

#### **1. Introduction**

In the 2013 Italian general election, just under a quarter of the votes went to *Il Movimento Cinque Stelle* (The 5-Star Movement, or M5S) – a new political entity which had been founded four years before by comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo. One of the distinctive characteristics of Grillo's language as leader of M5S is the coinage of humorous but insulting epithets for other politicians. Below is an extract from an online ‘political communiqué’ written by Grillo shortly after the 2008 general election:

I partiti erano uno e bino, psiconano e Topo Gigio. PDL e PD-meno-elle [...].(Grillo, n.d., Communiqué number 13)

“The parties were one and two-in-one, psychodwarf and Gigio Mouse. PDL and PD-minus-L [...].”

As we explain below, *psiconano* (psychodwarf) is a reference to Silvio Berlusconi, then leader of the centre-right party *Il Popolo della Libertà* (“The People of Freedoms”, known as PDL), who had won the 2008 general election. *Topo Gigio* (“Gigio Mouse”) is the name of a well-known puppet mouse in a children's TV show, but is here used to refer to Walter Veltroni, then leader of the centre-left party *Partito Democratico* (“Democratic Party”, known as PD). At the end of the extract above, Grillo also plays with the acronyms of the two parties, which only differ by one letter, in order to convey one of his central messages: that there is no real difference between the centre-left and the centre-right parties that had

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dominated Italian politics since the beginning of the so-called “Second Republic” in the mid-1990s.

In this paper, we discuss the main insulting epithets that Grillo has used on his website (Grillo n.d.) since 2008 to refer to Berlusconi and the main centre-left leaders. Our data are drawn primarily from 53 political communiqués<sup>2</sup> posted on the website between February 2008 and October 2012. We also consider Grillo’s subsequent blog writings on Matteo Renzi, Italy’s centre-left Prime Minister from 2014 to the time of writing (July 2015). We show how Grillo entertains his audience and undermines his political opponents by coining epithets that target a range of sensitive and/or salient personal characteristics of the individuals involved. We account for the functions of the epithets as a particular kind of insults in terms of Spencer-Oatey’s multi-level model of “face” and of Culpeper’s (2011) “entertaining” and “coercive” functions of impoliteness. We point out the relevance of our study for different areas of research. From the perspective of pragmatics, our analysis has implications for existing models of face and impoliteness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Spencer-Oatey 2002, 2008; Culpeper 2011). As far as Spencer-Oatey’s approach is concerned, we suggest that “individual identity face” (or “quality face”) may be usefully subdivided into separate dimensions, particularly in order to distinguish physical traits such as size from personality traits such as honesty (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 2008). As far as Culpeper’s model of impoliteness is concerned, our analysis highlights the importance of considering the presence of both “primary” and “secondary” targets for offence, as well as the interaction between different functions of impoliteness, notably “entertaining” and “coercive” impoliteness. Our data also highlights aspects of coercive impoliteness that are not present in the data considered by Culpeper (2011) and most other studies of impoliteness. Moreover, we introduce the notion of “pragmatic collateral damage” to capture the potential offensive repercussions of Grillo’s epithets for the members of social groups associated with the characteristics he mocks in his political opponents, i.e. for people who are not directly targeted by Grillo, but who may nonetheless be offended by him. From a broader perspective, our analysis has implications for an understanding of the evolving role of verbal aggression in Italian politics. Grillo is a particularly extreme case of a more general blurring of the boundaries between celebrities and politicians (Wodak 2009). His use of verbal aggression both exploits and contributes to a progressive lowering of the threshold of acceptability for verbal aggression in Italian public life (Culpeper 2011, 204; see also Butler 1997).

In Section 2 we introduce Grillo and M5S in more detail, and in Section 3 we outline the theoretical background to our study. The analysis of data follows in Sections 4 and 5: we discuss in detail Grillo’s offensive epithets for Berlusconi and for three successive centre-left leaders: Walter Veltroni, Pierluigi Bersani and Matteo Renzi. We finish by considering an epithet that targets two politicians simultaneously before providing some concluding remarks.

## 2. Grillo, the 5-Star Movement and language

Beppe Grillo rose to fame as a TV stand-up comedian in the late 1970s, and gradually developed a distinctive and often inflammatory brand of political satire. His concern for social and environmental issues in his comedy routines increased over time, and turned into political activism in the early 2000s. After joining forces with web strategist Roberto Casaleggio, Grillo launched an online blog in 2005, which soon became one of the most visited websites in the world (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 108; Miconi, 2015, 1044). Grillo

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<sup>2</sup> The corpus of communiqués contains 22,803 words, divided into 53 documents (ranging from 260 and 808 words)

used the blog not just to spread his ideas via “incendiary political *communiqués*” (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 107; italics in original), but also to mobilise like-minded citizens against what he decried as the failures, inadequacies and corruption of Italy’s political establishment. From 2007, he organised protest events in major city squares known as V-Days, “where ‘v’ stands for victory, for the cult graphic novel V for Vendetta and, more importantly, for the Italian insult *vaffanculo* (‘fuck off’)” (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 108).

The 5-Star Movement was founded in 2009 and started entering its own candidates in local elections from 2010. In the 2013 general election, M5S caused a political earthquake by gaining 23.79% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 21.15% for the Senate. This made the Movement Italy’s second largest party, after the *Partito Democratico*, and the “third pole” in Italian politics, alongside the centre-left and centre-right coalitions. Several studies of voting trends suggested that this was achieved by attracting disaffected voters from both sides of the political spectrum, and by appealing particularly to young and highly educated professionals (Natale 2013).

Grillo consistently presents M5S as an entirely new political force, which cannot be categorised in terms of the traditional distinction between Left and Right. The name of the movement is inspired by its original concern for five key issues (the five stars): public water, environment, transport, connectivity and development (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 108). Another prominent issue is the reform of the Italian Parliament, for example by limiting MPs to two mandates and banning anyone with a criminal record from standing for election.

An innovative aspect of M5S in Italian politics is Grillo’s use of the Internet and social media to establish and develop the movement. In this sense, M5S is the clearest Italian example of how protest movements can expand the public sphere via computers and mobile phones in a “new communication space” (Castells 2007, 252). The movement’s website is its official “headquarters”, and the Internet is the members’ main locus for protest, interaction and debate, and for experimentation with participatory democracy. For example, M5S’s candidates for the 2013 general election were selected by members via online voting.

Grillo presents himself as a political outsider and a true representative of ordinary citizens; he consistently takes a position of all-out attack against the Italian media and all other Italian political forces, which he describes as essentially the same as one another; he makes regular use of dire predictions for the future and stark oppositions between “good” and “bad”; and he uses inflammatory, provocative language (e.g. Fella and Ruzza 2013; Ruzza and Balbo, 2013). These tendencies are often stigmatized by his detractors as populist tactics to attract “protest” votes, and are indeed among the characteristics that Grillo shares with other politicians who have been associated with a populist style of leadership in contemporary Europe (Wodak et al. 2013). Grillo has also often been accused of hypocrisy for running M5S as a “personal party” and for his lack of tolerance for any form of internal opposition (Biorcio 2013; Diamanti 2013; Bidussa 2014, Miconi 2015). He has, however, so far been faithful to his stated intention not to stand for office himself.<sup>3</sup>

Grillo’s choice of language in particular exploits the opportunities created by his ambivalent role of comedian-turned-politician and by the increased informalisation of Italian political discourse associated with other recent political leaders, such as Umberto Bossi of the Northern League and Silvio Berlusconi himself (Cosenza 2013, 115-16, Natale 2013, Biorcio 2013, 44-45, Bidussa 2014; see also Semino and Masci 1996 and Bolasco et al. 2006). Both Grillo’s speeches and online writing are characterised by the use of swearwords, starkly evaluative vocabulary, insults, references to popular culture, personal anecdotes, and

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<sup>3</sup> As Grillo has a criminal conviction of manslaughter following a road traffic accident, he cannot in principle stand for office, according to M5S’s own rules. We do not wish to speculate, however, on whether he would have stood for office, had his personal circumstances been different.

repetition of words and phrases to the point that they become catch phrases. The use of humour for satirical purposes is pervasive, and impersonations of well-known politicians are not infrequent at the movement's rallies (Cosenza 2013; Bidussa 2014). More specifically, Cosenza (2013, 121) suggests that, for Grillo, verbal aggression is the "norm". He also points out Grillo's use of "nomignoli" ("nicknames") for other politicians as part of a more general strategy to ridicule and demean them. This is achieved by reducing his political opponents to "tratti o difetti fisici" ("physical traits or defects") or by highlighting their "follia, la stupidità, l'età" ("madness, stupidity, age") (Cosenza 2013, 114; see Wodak and Reisigl 2002 for the use of similar nicknames by Jörg Haider in Austria). Although none of Grillo's linguistic strategies are entirely peculiar to him, overall his language use as leader of M5S reflects his unique position in Italian politics as professional comedian turned politician.

Our use of the term "epithet" for expressions such as *Psiconano* follows Wales's (2001, 132) definition of an epithet as a "a descriptive [...] phrase or appellation used to characterize someone", which "may often be abusive". Wales also points out that some epithets can acquire the status of nicknames, as a result of repetition. The epithets we discuss in this paper are representative of a much wider set. In his 53 online political communiqués, Grillo uses similar epithets for 28 politicians (26 from Italy and two from other countries), as well as three business leaders and seven journalists. The same epithets are also widely used in his speeches and other public appearances.

### 3. Face and impoliteness

In this section we outline the theoretical background to our study, focussing particularly on relevant aspects of earlier work on face and impoliteness.

#### 3.1 Face

The concept of face in the study of interaction derives from Goffman's work in sociology (1955, 1967), where it is defined as:

the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes. (Goffman 1967, 5).

In their work on relational communication, Brown and Levinson (1987) make an influential distinction between positive face (the desire to be approved of) and negative face (the desire to be free from imposition), and discuss the politeness strategies that can be used to minimise face threats in interaction. Subsequent studies have questioned the distinction between positive and negative face, and emphasized the dependence of face on cultural, social and interactional factors (e.g. Tracy 2008, Haugh 2009, Culpeper 2011). Moreover, face is increasingly seen as situated within a network of relationships, and is linked to groups as well as individuals (e.g. Haugh, 2009).

Drawing from existing models of identity (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Simon 2004), Spencer-Oatey (2002, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009) has developed Goffman's definition of face into a multi-layered model:

Face is closely related to a person's sense of identity or self-concept: self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity). (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 14-15)

Spencer-Oatey's labels for different aspects of face have changed over time. For the purposes of this paper, we capture her three-way distinction as follows (see also Culpeper et al. 2010):

1. *Individual identity face* (called "Quality face" by Spencer-Oatey 2002 and in Culpeper et al. 2010): "We have a fundamental desire for people to evaluate us positively in terms of our personal qualities; e.g. our competence, abilities, appearance etc." (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 540).

2. *Relational identity face*: "the 'relational self' [...] represents the self-concept derived from connections and role relationships with significant others" (Spencer-Oatey 2007, 641).

3. *Social identity face*: "We have a fundamental desire for people to acknowledge and uphold our social identities or roles, e.g. as group leader, valued customer, close friend. *Social identity face* is concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of social or group roles, and is closely associated with our sense of public worth." (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 540).

Spencer-Oatey also emphasizes that face is associated with attributes that are "affectively" sensitive in a particular context: "which attributes are face sensitive can vary from person to person and from context to context" (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 14-15).

In our analysis, we adopt Spencer-Oatey's model of face to account for how Grillo's epithets attack different kinds of personal characteristics (cf. individual identity face) in order to undermine his targets as respectable political leaders. Like other social roles, the role of political leader potentially spans both relational identity face and social identity face (see Culpeper et al. 2010). In our analysis, we follow Spencer-Oatey (2002) in treating it as an aspect of social identity face. Moreover, we consider how attacks against individual politicians can also have consequences for the face of members of the groups associated with the characteristics that are being attacked, causing what we will call "pragmatic collateral damage".

### 3.2 *Impoliteness: insults, coercion and entertainment*

Following Brown and Levinson (1983), much work on face in interaction has focused on strategies for minimising face threats in order to maintain social harmony, under the general heading of "politeness" (e.g. see Watts 1989 and Gu 1990; see also Leech 1983, 2014). More recently, a growing body of work has drawn attention to the opposite phenomenon, i.e. ways in which face threats can be maximised, under the labels "face attack" or "impoliteness" (e.g. Bousfield 2008, Tracy 2008, Culpeper 1996, 2011). Culpeper suggests that "[i]mpoliteness often involves seeking to damage and/or damaging a person's identity or identities" (Culpeper 2011, 1), and points out that different definitions of impoliteness share the central notion that an impolite behaviour "is face-aggravating in a particular context" (Culpeper 2011, 19; Locher and Bousfield 2008, 3).

Grillo's epithets qualify as a type of insult according to the definition proposed by Allan and Burrige (2006), and also adopted by Culpeper (2011, 143):

Insults are normally intended to wound the addressee or bring a third party into disrepute, or both. [...] Insults typically pick on and debase a person's physical

appearance, mental ability, character, behaviour, beliefs and/or familial and social relations. (Allan and Burrige 2006, 79)

More specifically, within Culpeper's (2011, 135) four-way classification of insults, our offensive epithets are akin to "personalized negative third-person references" (e.g. "the daft bimbo").

Culpeper (2011) proposes several different functions of impolite behaviours, two of which are particularly relevant to our study. The first is "coercive impoliteness", which "seeks a realignment of values between the producer and the target such that the producer benefits" (Culpeper 2011, 226). This includes causing damage to the target's social identity and reducing the power or status they have. In Grillo's case, the epithets are used to undermine other political leaders and their parties in order to maximise support and votes for M5S. The second relevant function is "entertaining impoliteness", which involves "entertainment at the expense of the target of the impoliteness" (Culpeper 2011, 233). Grillo's epithets are humorous and creative, and therefore have the potential to entertain his audience, in a way that is particularly consistent with Grillo's reputation as a comedian. By entertaining his audience at the expense of his political opponents, Grillo also strengthens his own relationship with his own supporters and the internal cohesion of the movement. The epithets frequently involve what Carter (2004, 102) calls "pattern-reforming choices" which "draw attention to patterns by re-forming and re-shaping them and sometimes by directly and overtly breaking with them". While Carter emphasizes the role of these choices in increasing intimacy and group solidarity, Culpeper (2011, 239-44) has shown how they can also be used to convey impoliteness. Some of the epithets in our data involve additional types of creativity mentioned by Culpeper in the context of impoliteness, such as the contrast between linguistic choices and context.

Accounting for the strength and kind of offence associated with Grillo's epithets is problematic, however. First, we will suggest that each epithet can potentially cause more than one kind of offence, involving different aspects of the target's face. As Culpeper (2011, 43) points out "one type of offence can have secondary effects" for another aspect of face. Second, we take into account the complex influence of the context from which our data are drawn, i.e. the very successful website of a political leader who is also a well-known comedian and holds no office. On the one hand, the public and political nature of this context increases the potential strength and consequences of face attacks. On the other hand, it is expected that both comedians and political leaders will target (other) politicians' weak points in order to achieve their own goals (e.g. see Kienpointner 1997 for "strategic" impoliteness in public discourse). Tracy (2008) uses the notion of "reasonable hostility" for face attacks that are perceived as acceptable by participants in a particular interactional setting. Culpeper (2011: 31) similarly stresses the importance of social norms for what behaviours are perceived as impolite in a particular context. Nonetheless, we will suggest that Grillo's insulting epithets are part of what Kampf (2015) calls "public discourse incivility" and potentially contribute to raising the "impoliteness threshold" (Culpeper 2011, 203ff.) of political communication in Italy.

#### **4. Grillo's offensive epithets for Silvio Berlusconi**

Silvio Berlusconi is the Italian politician for whom Grillo uses the largest number and variety of insulting epithets in our data. We have identified eight different epithets for Berlusconi, for a total of 44 occurrences. This contrasts with 29 occurrences of Berlusconi's surname itself. This is not surprising, as Silvio Berlusconi has dominated Italian politics since he first stood

for office in 1994, and was Prime Minister for most of the time during which the communiqués were written, from 2008 to 2011.

We will show how Grillo's epithets aim to undermine Berlusconi's credibility and trustworthiness as a political leader, which fall primarily under social identity face, by targeting different aspects of Berlusconi's individual identity face: his hair, his size, his age, his intelligence, his sexual morality and his honesty. In addition, some epithets may also indirectly cause offence to the members of groups associated with the characteristics that Berlusconi is criticised for. We introduce the term "pragmatic collateral damage" to capture the offence potentially caused to the face of third parties while directly targeting somebody else's face.

#### 4.1. Frequently used epithets for Berlusconi

Among the eight epithets that Grillo uses for Berlusconi in our data, two occur frequently enough to acquire the status of nicknames: *Testa d'Asfalto* ("Head of Asphalt", 12 occurrences) and *Psiconano* ("Psychodwarf", 22 occurrences). We begin by considering these two epithets in turn.

##### *Testa d'Asfalto* ("Head of Asphalt")

The epithet *Testa d'Asfalto* can be translated literally as "Head of Asphalt". The use of *Testa* ("head") to refer to a person is a synecdoche, or part-for-whole metonymy, where a particular body part stands for the whole person. In Italian, the specific structure *testa di* is the first part of a small set of conventional derogatory epithets, including *testa di cazzo* ("dickhead") and *testa di rapa* ("turnip head", which suggests lack of intelligence). In Carter's terms, *Testa d'Asfalto* is therefore a pattern re-forming choice: Grillo creatively exploits part of a conventional impoliteness formula (Culpeper 2011, 129ff.) by using *Asfalto* ("Asphalt") in the slot normally occupied by one of the two nouns mentioned above. Although the reference to asphalt is potentially ambiguous, it was widely interpreted as an attack on the appearance of Berlusconi's hair (e.g. Sconfini n.d.: <http://bit.ly/1KGGq4U>). Born in 1936, Berlusconi is well known for trying to preserve a youthful appearance. As well as dyeing his hair, he famously had a hair transplant in 2004 to counter his baldness. In other words, the quantity and appearance of his hair is a sensitive part of his individual identity face, and has become salient as a result of the measures he has taken to improve both: his hair transplant was widely reported at the time, and his hair periodically attracts media attention, sometimes as a result of Berlusconi's own comments. Grillo's use of *Asfalto* ("asphalt"), however, suggests that Berlusconi's hair has an unpleasant and unnatural appearance: the reference to asphalt may be perceived as indicating greasiness, excessive darkness, and so on.

By targeting physical appearance in this way, the epithet has implications for two further aspects of Berlusconi's individual identity face. First, it may suggest excessive vanity, especially for an older man and in spite of the cult of appearance associated with Italian culture. This vanity could also prevent Berlusconi from noticing or acknowledging the unnatural appearance of his hair. Second, it may implicitly question Berlusconi's judgement, since it suggests that the time and money he devoted to the improvement of his hair were wasted. This potentially undermines another sensitive and salient aspect of Berlusconi's individual identity face: his reputation for succeeding in whatever he attempts to do.

These further implications are more obvious in two variants of this epithet, which occur once each in our data: *Zucca d'Asfalto* (literally "Pumpkin of Asphalt") and *Icaro-Testa d'Asfalto* ("Icarus-Asphalt head"). The noun *zucca* ("pumpkin") is informally used in Italian to refer to a person's head, but is associated with the suggestion that the person is stubborn or unintelligent. In context, the epithet intensifies the attack on Berlusconi's

individual identity face, and has a general dehumanising effect. The inclusion of Icarus in the second variant of the epithet is an example of Grillo's more general tendency to draw from ancient myth (alongside other domains of culture) in his derogatory descriptions of his political opponents. In this case, the relevant parallel between Icarus and Berlusconi could be that both embarked on a foolhardy and vainglorious enterprise, and both ended up failing publicly. This constitutes a further attack on Berlusconi's individual identity face, and particularly his competence, rationality and ability to succeed.

Overall, therefore, this epithet ridicules Berlusconi both for his physical appearance and for the way he attempts to improve it. Ridicule has a general demeaning effect, especially in political discourse, which is clearly exploited here. In addition, the other aspects of individual identity face that are potentially foregrounded by the epithet (vanity, lack of self-awareness, ineffectiveness) have more significant secondary implications for his social identity face as a capable and trustworthy political leader.

### *Psiconano* ("Psychodwarf")

The epithet *Psiconano* is a neologism resulting from compounding two separate parts: the root *Psico* ("psycho") and the noun *nano* ("dwarf"). As such, this is another instance of a pattern re-forming choice (Carter 2004). In addition, each element of the creative compound constitutes an attack on a different aspect of Berlusconi's individual identity face: mental health and physical size.

The use of *Psico* to suggest insanity is generally offensive, but is particularly sensitive for Berlusconi, as his former wife hinted at a possible mental or sexual disorder in a letter shared with the media in 2009 (Cresto-Dina 2009). The fact that this allegation was made so publicly arguably increased the salience of Berlusconi's mental health, especially given that his sexual encounters, sometimes allegedly involving minors, were at the time the subject of regular media attention. While sanity is a part of individual identity face, the attribution of insanity clearly has considerable secondary implications for social identity face as a political leader. In addition, on one occasion, Grillo uses a variant of this epithet that more clearly attacks Berlusconi's sexual morality: *psiconano che si atpeggia ad extravergine* ("psychodwarf who poses as extra virgin"). Here "extra virgin" can be seen as a pun between a description of a type of olive oil and a description of someone who has never had sex. Berlusconi is therefore implicitly being accused of hypocrisy concerning his sexual activities.

The use of *nano* ("dwarf"), on the other hand, is an attack on a different aspect of individual identity face, namely physical size. Berlusconi is in fact of average height, but is well known to regret not being taller, and to wear concealed heels in order to appear taller. In other words, his height is a sensitive aspect of his individual identity face, which has been made salient by the attention it receives from Berlusconi himself, and from comedians and satirists. As with Berlusconi's hair, his physical size is, strictly speaking, irrelevant to his public role. However, the use of "nano" exposes him to potential ridicule, and may also remind Grillo's audience of behaviours that suggest excessive vanity.

In combination, therefore, the two elements of the compound *Psiconano* constitute a particularly powerful attack on Berlusconi's social identity face as leader of his party and Italy's Prime Minister, via different aspects of his individual identity face. It is therefore not surprising that, with 22 occurrences, this is the epithet that Grillo uses most often for Berlusconi in our data.

More generally, both parts of the compound could also have secondary offensive implications for people who might be described in those terms, namely people with a mentally illness and people with dwarfism. We do not wish to suggest that this is actually intended by Grillo. However, the fact that he uses these terms to attack Berlusconi minimally suggests a disregard for other people who might be hurt or offended by his choice of words



and who therefore potentially become what we call pragmatic collateral damage. Additionally, the fact that no particular objections were raised against Grillo's use of this term indicates that insults involving vulnerable minority groups are perceived to be generally acceptable in Italian political discourse. This is one of the ways in which Grillo's epithets, as well as his general rhetoric, could be seen to reflect a relatively high impoliteness threshold in Italian political discourse and to contribute to raising it further (Culpeper, 2011, 203ff.; see also Kampf, 2015).

#### 4.2. A selection of other epithets for Berlusconi

The six remaining epithets for Berlusconi are used once each, and involve primarily Berlusconi's age, sexual habits and alleged illegal activities. Here we discuss three of these epithets:<sup>4</sup> *Papi* ("Daddy"), *Vecchio Satiro* ("Old Satyr") and *un oltrasettante incarcato* ("a jailed septuagenarian").

##### *Papi* ("Daddy")

In 2009, Berlusconi was a surprise guest at the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party of Noemi Letizia, who was subsequently rumoured to have been one of his underage sexual partners. It was shortly after this alleged relationship was reported in the media that Berlusconi's wife at the time made public a letter in which she suggests that her husband needs help for some disorder related to this kind of behaviour. Noemi Letizia publicly said at the time that Berlusconi was a family friend, and that she affectionately called him *Papi* ("Daddy"). The use of this form of address further fuelled speculation about the exact nature of the relationship between Berlusconi, Noemi Letizia and her family. While the allegations surrounding this case were never proven, the term *Papi* continued to be associated with accusations of sexual impropriety against Berlusconi, especially in the context of the lascivious *Bunga-Bunga* parties involving young women at Berlusconi's residences.

Grillo's use of *Papi* to refer to Berlusconi can therefore be seen as an intertextual reference to Noemi Letizia's use, and as a metonymic reference to general immorality in the sexual sphere, and specifically the allegation of illegal sexual liaisons with minors. In Culpeper's (2011, 156) terms, this is a case of "implicational impoliteness", as the attack on Berlusconi's face is implied rather than expressed directly. More specifically, in Culpeper's (2011, 241-2) terms, this epithet displays a type of implicational impoliteness that is achieved by "situational deviation", namely, a clash between a linguistic choice (the affectionate diminutive *Papi*) and the context in which it is made (Grillo's public online writing).

##### *Vecchio satiro* ("Old Satyr")

The epithet *Vecchio Satiro* ("Old Satyr") also ridicules Berlusconi with a reference to the sexual sphere. In ancient mythology, satyrs combine human and goat-like features, are associated with drunkenness and lascivious behaviour and are sometimes represented with erect penises. The use of *Vecchio* ("old") as a pre-modifier arguably intensifies the suggestion of impropriety, and also attacks a sensitive aspect of Berlusconi's individual identity face (his age) as explained above. Berlusconi's age is also explicitly mentioned in the final example we consider in this section.

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<sup>4</sup> We do not have the space here to discuss the remaining three epithets for Berlusconi that occur only once in our data. However, they exhibit similar characteristics to the ones analysed in this section: *Travestito da mummia* ("disguised as a mummy"), *La Voce del Popolo* ("The voice of the people") and *Colui che ama* ("He who loves")

*un oltrasettantenne incarcerato* (“a jailed septuagenarian”)

By making an explicit reference to Berlusconi being in his 70s, Grillo once again targets a sensitive aspect of his individual identity face. The focus on Berlusconi’s age can also be seen as part of Grillo’s more general call for a generational change in Italian politics, where the average age of politicians has traditionally been high (Grillo himself is in his 60s). In addition, the use of *oltrasettantenne* (“septuagenarian”) has the potential to cause some pragmatic collateral damage by offending other people over 70, along similar lines to what we suggested earlier in relation to *nano* (“dwarf”) in *Psiconano*. The use of *incarcerato* (“jailed”) concerns a different aspect of Berlusconi’s individual identity face, namely his multiple investigations and trials for various offences, and their consequences for his reputation. In fact, Berlusconi has never been jailed, and had not, at the time, yet been found guilty by a final verdict (this happened only in 2014). However, the use of *incarcerato* draws attention to a salient aspect of Berlusconi’s individual identity face (his approach to the rule of law), which has direct secondary implications for his social identity face as a trustworthy political leader.

#### 4.3 Concluding remarks on Berlusconi’s epithets

We have shown how Grillo uses a variety of offensive epithets to ridicule and delegitimise Berlusconi as a politician and Prime Minister by attacking a number of aspects of his individual identity face. Some of these aspects are sensitive because of the target’s own well-publicised concerns, notably physical appearance, size and age. Others are salient because of Berlusconi’s own behaviour and of attention from the media and the judiciary, notably his sex life, honesty and mental health. This is part of a broader tendency in Grillo’s writing and speeches to present Berlusconi as unfit to hold office, alongside the rest of Italy’s political establishment.

In Culpeper’s (2011) terms, Grillo’s epithets for Berlusconi involve both the entertaining and coercive functions of impoliteness, where the latter is achieved via the former. We return to this point in the final conclusions. The extent to which these attacks are successful, however, is a different matter. Berlusconi himself skilfully manipulates his public image, which includes talking openly about the sensitive and salient aspects of his identity and actions that Grillo, and many others, chastise him for. For example, he regularly jokes about his appearance, boasts about his sexual conquests and presents himself as a victim of politically motivated persecution from the judiciary. The core section of his supporters appear to accept him as he is, and to trust him in spite of any evidence of objectionable or illegal behaviour. This undermines the attempts of political opponents such as Grillo to significantly dent Berlusconi’s popularity: Berlusconi often chooses not to be offended in order to maintain his public image (see Kampf 2015, on ignoring the consequences of politically motivated insults).

### 5. Grillo’s epithets for centre-left leaders

In this section, we analyse the main epithets used by Grillo for three successive leaders of the Italian centre-left party (Democratic Party, PD): Walter Veltroni, Pierluigi Bersani and Matteo Renzi.

#### 5.1. Walter Veltroni

Veltroni was the leader of the left-wing party Democratici di Sinistra from 1998 to 2001 and the first leader of the centre-left Democratic Party from 2007 to 2009. Here we discuss Grillo's most frequently used epithet for Veltroni.

### *Topo Gigio* ("Gigio Mouse")

*Topo Gigio* is the name of a very well known soft-toy puppet character on children television programmes. The puppet's appearance is that of an anthropomorphic mouse, with large ears, an endearingly sweet muzzle, a distinctive child-like voice and a naïve and shy personality. *Topo Gigio* is used 11 times in Grillo's communiqués to refer to Veltroni, and therefore arguably acquires the status of a nickname. On three occasions, the politician's surname is also included: *Topo Gigio Veltroni*.

By referring to Veltroni as *Topo Gigio*, Grillo creates what may be called a striking verbal caricature, and invites his audience to look for similarities between the politician and the puppet. At a physical level, this may draw attention to the fact that Veltroni has slightly prominent ears. This is not known to be a sensitive aspect of Veltroni's individual identity face. However, larger-than-average ears are often the target of teasing in Italy.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, by potentially drawing attention to this trait, Grillo makes Veltroni an object of ridicule. In addition, the use of the epithet may suggest other similarities between Veltroni and the puppet, which could involve an attack on other aspects of Veltroni's individual identity face: he is not just dehumanised, but also implicitly portrayed as sharing some personality characteristics with the soft-toy character, such as being childish, gullible, and overly tentative (e.g. Sconfini n.d.: <http://bit.ly/1KGGq4U>). Overall, therefore, this epithet mocks Veltroni and undermines his status and dignity as a political leader (part of his social identity face) by means of a particular variant of the phenomenon that Wodak (2009) calls the "fictionalisation" of politics, i.e. the use of the name of a fictional character to refer to a politician. Finally, the use of this epithet may also cause some pragmatic collateral damage by offending people who are perceived to have large ears.

### 5.2 Pier Luigi Bersani

Pier Luigi Bersani was leader of the Democratic Party from 2009 to 2013, i.e. for most of the period covered by Grillo's communiqués. Here we consider a particularly complex epithet for Bersani from 2009:

*Bersanetor, l'uomo del CIP6 che toglie all'ambiente per dare ai petrolieri* ("Bersanetor, the man of CIP6 who takes away from the environment to give to oil companies")

The first part of this epithet, *Bersanetor*, is a morphological blend between Bersani's surname and "Terminator" – the name of a destructive cyborg in a series of blockbuster Hollywood disaster films. This allusion is potentially humorous because of the contrast between the Terminator's ruthless effectiveness and Bersani's public image as a meek and unremarkable person. The second part of the epithet, however, spells out the context in which Bersani is accused to have had a destructive effect. "CIP6" stands for a controversial decision

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<sup>5</sup> The negative evaluation of large and protruding ears in Italy can be gleaned, among other things, from the existence and use of the expression 'orecchie a sventola' ('large and protruding ears'). In the 3-billion-word corpus itTenTen, 'sventola' is the third top collocate of 'orecchie' ('ears'). In the same corpus, the phrase 'orecchie a sventola' occurs 396 times. Its top 30 collocates include the following expressions, which suggest a negative semantic prosody: *nasone* ('big nose'), *storti* ('crooked'), *calvo* ('bald'), *correggere* ('correct'), *correzione* ('correction'), *nascondere* ('hide'), *chirurgia* ('surgery'), *enormi* ('enormous'), *brutto* ('ugly') (NB: The itTenTen corpus was accessed via the online tool *Sketch Engine*. Collocates were computed within a window of five words to the left and five words to the right of the search term, and using the logdice measure of statistical significance; <https://the.sketchengine.co.uk/>, accessed August 2015).

of Italy's Price Regulation Body (*Comitato Interministeriale Prezzi*) to allow companies that produce energy from renewable sources to sell it back to the national grid at a higher price than the normal market value. This decision was controversial because it included companies that produce electricity from general waste, which were felt by some to have been inappropriately favoured. Bersani, who was involved with this decision as Minister for Economic Development, is described by Grillo as a kind of antithesis of a Robin Hood figure: he is accused of taking away from the environment in order to favour the interests of oil companies, under the guise of seemingly environmental legislation. Bersani is thus attacked on the level of individual identity face for being hypocritical and false, and this has secondary implications for his social identity face as a minister, since he allegedly harmed the environment and colluded with a powerful economic lobby. While the complete quote above is a one-off in Grillo's online writing, *Bersanetor* has been repeatedly used in other contexts to criticise Bersani's role in Italy's environmental and energy policies.

### 5.3. Matteo Renzi

Matteo Renzi has been leader of the Democratic Party since December 2013 and Italy's Prime Minister from January 2014 to the time of writing (July 2015). In May 2013, while he was the Mayor of Florence and a rising star in his party, he posed in a leather jacket for the gossip magazine *Chi*, which is part of the media company owned by the Berlusconi family. This inspired an epithet that Grillo has since used regularly on his blog and that has also been taken up by the Italian media:

#### *Renzie*

This epithet is a graphological blend between Renzi's surname and the name of the character of "the Fonz" from the *Happy Days* TV sitcom, who is known in Italy as *Fonzie*. Renzi's leather jacket and pose in the photographs for *Chi* magazine are indeed reminiscent of the *Happy Days* character, who is a vain if potentially likeable womaniser. This similarity was widely pointed out and commented on by the Italian media at the time.<sup>6</sup> The parallel with the Fonz highlights some of the negative characteristics that are often attributed to Renzi: vanity, egocentricity, superficiality and what is perceived by some as an excessive concern with youthfulness (Renzi was born in 1975 and strongly advocates a generational change in Italian politics). In other words, Grillo's comparison between Renzi a rather superficial fictional character implicitly attacks various aspects of Renzi's individual identity face, and thus has secondary implications for his social identity face as a serious and respectable political leader.

### 5.4 Some concluding remarks on epithets for centre-left leaders

As in Berlusconi's case, Grillo's insulting epithets for the three centre-left leaders attempt to delegitimise them as worthy leaders by primarily attacking their individual identity face. There is also a similar tendency to describe centre-left leaders by means of allusions to fictional characters. However, whereas Berlusconi is described using references to ancient mythology (e.g. Icarus, a Satyr), the centre-left leaders are related to characters from popular culture (Topo Gigio, Terminator and the Fonz). Not only does this contribute to ridicule, but also implies lack of gravitas, effectiveness and political competence. The coercive function of

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. *Renzi posa come Fonzie per Chi*, "Renzie poses like the Fonz for Chi", in the online version of *Corriere della Sera*: <http://bit.ly/1ChbXaR>

impoliteness is therefore achieved via its entertaining function (Culpeper, 2011), which also contributes to establishing solidarity with blog readers who sympathise with Grillo's views.

## 6. Two politicians in one epithet: *Veltrusconi*

As mentioned above, one of the characteristics of Grillo's rhetoric is the claim that all traditional political parties are essentially the same, i.e. equally incompetent, ineffective, corrupt, and so on. This point is made more frequently in relation to the main centre-right and centre-left parties (PDL and PD respectively), which, as shown in the introduction, are often referred to together by playing with the similarities in their acronyms: *PDL e PD-meno-elle* ("PDL and PD-minus-L"). In contrast, Grillo presents M5S as both an entirely new political entity and as crucial to Italy's future. As part of this general strategy, Grillo also coins the blend *Veltrusconi* to refer to the then leaders of the centre-left and centre-right parties (Veltroni and Berlusconi) as a single entity. This coinage dates from March 2008, when it was predicted that the upcoming elections would produce no clear majority and hence lead to a grand coalition. Overall, this epithet is used 11 times in the communiqués, and mostly treated grammatically as a singular proper name, as in:

*Veltrusconi non vuole la libertà di informazione. Veltrusconi vuole i condannati in Parlamento* (Grillo n.d., Political Communiqué 6)  
 "Veltrusconi does not want freedom of information. Veltrusconi wants convicted criminals in Parliament."

As with previous cases of morphological blends, this epithet is a pattern-reforming choice in Carter's (2004) terms. Moreover, as proposed in Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) cognitive approach to blending, it means more than the sum of its parts. By treating Veltroni and Berlusconi as a single entity, Grillo suggests that they are indistinguishable, and offends one in terms of the other: Veltroni's identity as a person and politician is attacked by suggesting that he is the same as Berlusconi, and the other way round. Grillo's repeated use of this blended epithet, both on his website and in other contexts, inspired a Newsweek cover later in 2008 where two halves of Berlusconi's and Veltroni's faces are merged together in front of a picture of the Coliseum and above the caption "Veltrusconi".

## 7. Conclusions

Our analysis of Grillo's epithets for four prominent Italian political leaders has implications for existing models of face and impoliteness, and for an understanding of the evolving role of face attack in current Italian politics.

Grillo's epithets tend to attack directly different aspects of the individual identity face of the relevant politicians, including physical appearance, age, intelligence, mental health and morality. However, we have argued that the main reason for these attacks are their secondary implications (Culpeper 2011, 43) for each target's social identity face as a political leader. In principle, this would be the case even if Grillo was still a comedian with no political role, as any attack on the personal characteristics of politicians has potential implications for their public role. In this case, however, the secondary implications of the epithets are intensified by Grillo's own standing as comedian-turned-politician and by the public context of his blog. *Ad hominem* attacks are of course expected in politics and constitute part of what Kienpointner (1997) calls "strategic" rudeness in public discourse. More specifically, Grillo's use of

humour and ridicule is part of a general strategy to discredit his opponents and promote M5S and his own influence in Italian politics. The wide appeal of his online writing, and his repeated use of these epithets elsewhere, also gave several of them general currency. This potentially magnifies their effect on the public standing of the targets.

Culpeper (2011, 43), introduced the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” types of offence as a way of accounting for the multiple implications of impolite acts in the process of coding reports of impoliteness events. Our analysis suggests that this distinction has wider applicability, and is particularly important when dealing with offence involving public figures such as politicians. We have also shown how secondary types of offence are very strongly context-dependent: the negative implications of Grillo’s epithets for his targets’ standing as politicians are exacerbated by his own position as the leader of a competing political movement, and by the fact that they are (repeatedly) used on a publicly accessible and widely read blog. Indeed, as we have mentioned, some of these epithets were subsequently adopted as nicknames for the various politicians in the media more generally.

Throughout, we have also pointed out, however, that there are considerable differences between the aspects of individual identity face that constitute the primary target of Grillo’s epithets. There is a difference, for example, between characteristics that the person cannot influence (e.g. age and height) and characteristics that are largely under the person’s control (e.g. sexual morality, honesty, etc.). Crucially, in our data, the secondary implications of the different offensive epithets vary depending on what aspect of individual identity face has been singled out for attack. Physical appearance (e.g. *Topo Gigio* and Veltroni’s ears) is, strictly speaking, irrelevant to one’s role as a political leader. In such cases, the relevant person is ridiculed and demeaned in a general way. When morality is involved, however (e.g. *Papi* for Berlusconi), the secondary implications for the target’s social identity face as a political leader are potentially more serious and damning. All of this suggests that individual identity face could usefully be sub-classified into different dimensions, including particularly “physical”, “mental” and “personality” dimensions, as these seem to contrast especially strongly as targets of offence.

Our analysis has also shown further sources of complexity in the kind of face attack performed by the different offensive epithets. First, there is the personal sensitivity of particular characteristics to the individual politicians. Berlusconi is known to care about his physical appearance, and to take steps to appear good-looking and youthful. In this context, epithets such as *Testa d’Asfalto* (“Head of Asphalt”), may gain additional strength, and also highlight his excessive vanity and the failure of his attempts to improve his appearance. Second, particular offensive epithets may target more than one aspect of individual identity face simultaneously, depending on how they are interpreted. In the case of *Topo Gigio*, for example, the potential focus on Veltroni’s large ears involves a characteristic that is neither particularly sensitive, salient, or relevant to the target’s political role. However, being referred to in terms of *Topo Gigio* also potentially involves other characteristics, such as lack of acumen and effectiveness, which are more directly relevant to Veltroni’s standing as a politician.

As we have shown, Grillo’s epithets tend to be creative, humorous and strongly irreverent. Creativity often involves what Carter (2004) calls pattern re-forming choices, including compounding (e.g. *Psiconano*, “Psychodwarf”) and blending (e.g. *Bersanetor*, *Veltrusconi*). In other cases, creativity involves the re-contextualisation of an existing term of address (e.g. *Papi*) or proper name (e.g. *Topo Gigio*). In some cases, the result is what we have referred to as a verbal caricature (e.g. *Topo Gigio*, *Renzie*). We have also pointed out that Grillo draws from a variety of sources that he assumes are known to his audience, including ancient mythology (e.g. *Vecchio Satiro* “Old Satyr” for Berlusconi) and various types of popular culture, such as Italian television shows (e.g. *Topo Gigio*), American sitcoms

(e.g. *Renzie*) and American blockbuster films (e.g. *Bersanetor*). This tendency can be seen as a particular variant of the wider phenomenon of the “fictionalisation” of politics, i.e. a tendency to blur the boundary between politics and fiction (Wodak 2011). As a professional entertainer, Grillo is of course particularly well-positioned to blur this line further. While Wodak uses the term “fictionalisation” of politics for the increased popularity of fictional films or TV series inspired by contemporary politics (such as *The West Wing*), we have extended it to the description of “real” politicians in terms of fictional characters, whether from myth or current popular culture.

We have also pointed out how Grillo’s epithets can be attributed to more than one of Culpeper’s (2011) functions of impoliteness, both because of his role of comedian-turned-politician, and because of the different audiences that his website can reach. Grillo’s use of creativity and humour in coining the epithets results in what Culpeper (2011) calls “entertaining impoliteness”, particularly for those sections of his audiences that agree with him, or that, at any rate disapprove of the politicians in question. This is consistent with Grillo’s skills as a comedian, and also relates to the solidarity-enhancing functions that have been attributed both to creativity (Carter 2004) and humour (Chafe 2007). The use of impoliteness to strengthen solidarity and in-group cohesion has also already been noticed (Culpeper 2011, 207-215). Because of Grillo’s role as a political leader, however, the epithets also involve the “coercive” function of impoliteness, where “coercion” involves altering the balance of power in favour of the speaker through a “re-alignment of values” (Culpeper 2011, 226). Culpeper’s (2011, 225-33) discussion of this function focuses on contexts where the perpetrator and target of impoliteness are interacting directly, and where exercising power primarily involves restricting somebody else’s freedom of action. The notion of coercive impoliteness can, however, be applied to Grillo’s case in the context of Italian politics by adopting a different definition of “power”, i.e. influence over opinions and voting preferences, ultimately leading to changes in who holds legislative and executive power in a particular country. This constitutes a departure from the kind of power that is generally considered in research on (im)politeness, but is consistent with Culpeper’s (2011, 225) reference to Fairclough’s (2001) definition of “power behind discourse” as concerning “the constitution of social institutions and societies through power relations” (Culpeper 2011, 225). Moreover, as we have already pointed out, Grillo’s epithets attempt to realise the coercive function of impoliteness via the entertaining function. As such, they can potentially be defended as harmless jokes when Grillo himself is criticised for the intensity of his use of verbal aggression. While Culpeper (2011) does not consider the possibility of interaction between different functions of impoliteness, this is likely to be relevant beyond our data.

Whether the offensive epithets achieve the goal of offending the targets and altering the electorate’s views and voting behaviours is a different matter, of course. As far as Berlusconi is concerned, we have mentioned that even attacks on sensitive aspects of face can be potentially laughed off, and that a politician’s supporters could in fact forgive, or even admire, the characteristics that others regard as inexcusable and delegitimising (e.g. Berlusconi’s sex life) (see Kampf 2015, on “choosing not to be insulted” as a reaction to public incivility).

While Grillo’s attacks on the individual and social faces of the various politicians can be safely described as intentional, we have suggested that his insults may also cause offence to others, whether or not Grillo is aware of this. For example, targeting Berlusconi’s advanced age and (relatively) short size can offend people of a similar age, and people whose short size is a salient and sensitive feature. This is likely to be the case particularly when Grillo uses terms such as *nano* (“dwarf”), which are associated with the stigmatisation of particular groups on the basis of their physical characteristics. This phenomenon, which we have called “pragmatic collateral damage”, is a type of offence that has not been explicitly

discussed in previous work, but that is likely to apply to other kinds of data. It contrasts with the above-mentioned “primary” and “secondary” types of offence in that it involves people *other than* the main target, rather than different *aspects* of the target. It also contrasts with other types of offence in that it is normally likely to be interpreted as unintentional. However, the degree of offence that is experienced by members of the groups in question may actually be increased by the fact that Grillo, in this case, does not seem aware of the wider offensive potential of using labels such as *oltrasettantenne* (“septuagenarian”) as insults.

This observation leads us to the relationship between Grillo’s epithets and the relevant social norms in Italian politics. As we have mentioned, Grillo arguably exploits the latitude afforded by his ambivalent role: he got into politics via showbusiness; he does not have a formal political role himself; he does not stand for election; and his online writings are not part of any formal type of political communication. Personal attacks against opponents are also of course a staple of political discourse in Italy and around the world (e.g. Kienpointner 1997). In Tracy’s (2008) terms, a certain level of “hostility” in political interaction could be perceived as “reasonable”. In addition, swearwords, jokes and sexual innuendos had been recently adopted as part of their public personas by other Italian politicians, such as Bossi and Berlusconi. There are also parallels in this respect between Grillo and other European populist leaders (e.g. Wodak et al. 2013). Nonetheless, Grillo’s insulting epithets, and his rhetoric more generally, would be regarded as inappropriate and reprehensible for a political leader in many other democratic countries, and contribute to further lowering the impoliteness threshold (Culpeper 2011, 203ff.) in Italian political discourse. As Kampf (2015) notes, offenses are best seen as cultural and political practices produced in specific contexts. Grillo has been criticised, in a few cases, for the wider offence caused by some of his epithets, as when he referred to Romano Prodi as *Alzheimer* (e.g. Cosenza 2013, 115; Il Sole24 Ore 2007). His tactics also undermine him among some sections of the Italian public, and occasionally embarrass his own supporters. Nonetheless, his success and that of M5S suggest that personal characteristics such as one’s age, physical appearance and size are fair game in Italian public discourse, regardless of the scope and nature of the offence that may be caused. In this sense, our study shows how strategies for offence in the public arena can both reflect and contribute to broader tendencies and changes in social norms and attitudes.

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