# THE WORDS OF COVID-19: Italy

## war
## (guerra)

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**Abstract:**

**Italiano**. *Il contributo analizza una parola che ha profondamente e ripetutamente segnato l**a narrazione** della pandemia Covid-19 in Italia e nel mondo. Questa riflessione si articola intorno a **due principali domande**: perché è stata utilizzata proprio la parola **'guerra'** per definire una **pandemia**? quali portati **politici**, **storici**, ma anche **retorici** ed **emotivi** implica l'uso della parola 'guerra'? La discussione analizza in **chiave comparativa** quali possono essere le **somiglianze** tra una **pandemia** e una **guerra,** per poi delineare quali sono le **sostanziali differenze**. L'analisi critica prosegue facendo riferimento al **saggio di Susan Sontag** "Illness as Metaphor" [La malattia come metafora] che mette in evidenza come **l'uso improprio di metafore** segnala la nostra incapacità di relazionarci sia con i problemi strutturali delle nostre società, sia con le nostre fragilità. Il saggio di Sontag dimostra come le metafore contribuiscono a creare una certa rappresentazione e narrazione della realtà, e mette pertanto in guardia rispetto alla **responsabilità morale ed etica** di un loro uso scorretto. Su queste basi, l'**analisi critica** continua attraverso i vari **corollari retorici** legati all'uso della **metafora militare** che, dal **2020 al 2021**, hanno segnato il discorso sulla pandemia in Italia: gli '**eroi**' e le '**vittime**' (dottori e infermiere/i e le/i malati), '**il combattimento in prima linea**', le '**munizioni**' (i vaccini), la **campagna vaccinale** come **campagna militare** (affidata, non a caso, un generale). La discussione segnala infine come **movimenti pacifisti**, gruppi di **attivisti**, e **intellettuali** abbiano più volte denunciato l'**uso eticamente errato e politicamente orientato** della metafora della guerra per definire una pandemia, proponendo **altre soluzioni comunicative**, come ad esempio quella di 'cura'.*

This contribution examines a word that has deeply and repeatedly affected the **narration** of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. This reflection revolves around **two main questions**: why has the word '**war**' been used to define a **pandemic**? which are the **political**, **historica**l, but also **emotional** effects of utilzing such a word?

**Etymology:**

*Guerra,* from Proto-germanic *werro* and High old Germanic *werra*: confusion, turmoil, quarrel and, later, conflict and armed conflict between two groups

**Problematization:**

"***Siamo in guerra***" [We are at war], "*Dobbiamo combattere questa guerra*" [We must fight this war], "*Il nemico è arrivato in un paese disarmato*" [The enemy arrived in an unarmed country], "*Stiamo combattendo in trincea*" [We are battling in the trenches], "*Vinceremo questa guerra*" [We will win this war].

These have been the most recurring expressions used in the media and in public discourse to name the pandemic of Covid-19, at its start (in Italy it was late February 2020) and throughout its course. Yet, the same expressions were the most frequently used all over the world, indicating that a **common rhetoric construction** was in act.

These expressions bring along a **series of corollaries** connected to the semantic area of 'war' such as 'front-line', 'kill the virus', 'counterattack the infection', 'our heroes (doctors and nurses; see the entry: (new) heroes), and 'our victims' (the patients). Within such a framework, the Covid-19 daily report made by the Italian governmental task force sounded like a war bulletin, particularly in some periods (mid-March/early April 2020) when the death rate was dramatically rising in the country.

Though **some similarities** can be found between a global pandemic and a war, the recurrent use of military metaphors signals the enactment of deliberate communicative strategies meant to serve the political purpose of

*narrating* the pandemic as a war *tout court*.

According to the WHO (World Health Organization) a **pandemic** is 'the worldwide spread of a new disease'; according to OUD (Oxford University Dictionary), **war** is 'a state of armed conflict between two different countries or different groups within the same country'.

So, how is it that a '**disease**' has been narrated as an '**armed conflict**'?

The following notes explore **some of the observable similarities** between 'pandemic' and 'war', discuss the communicative strategies that underlie the use of these two words as equivalent, but most of all present **the radical differences between the two concepts**, and the ethical considerations that the choice of such a deliberate semantic correlation foregrounds.

Similarities:

- from a general point of view, the health emergency of Covid-19 soon became an all-encompassing event, since its global, rapid, and ferocious spread impacted on social, political, and economic domains, as well as on individual liberties;
- from a collective point of view, though there are some recurring patterns in the mode of transmission and contagion of Covid-19, the randomness of the casualties of the virus recalls the randomness of the war casualties, where anyone can turn from being ‘a soldier’ into becoming ‘a victim’: therefore, getting the virus and going to war are both possibly fatal events;
- from an individual point of view, the pandemic has foregrounded what have long being cornered as disturbing and invisible particularly in Western societies, that is illness and death. Such a sudden awakening to suffering and to a common destiny of impermanence made emerge diffused sentiments of fear and uncertainty.

**Communication strategies:**

Communication strategies. The communicative management of the pandemic impacts on how we conceive (or are led to conceive) the idea of individual freedom, community, and common good:

- from the point of view of individual freedom, the recurring metaphor of ‘war’ served to delineate a state of exception (a ‘state of war’) in order to facilitate the people’s acceptance of several restrictive measures to their individual liberties. Though Article 16 of the Italian Constitution includes the enactment of restrictive measures of individual liberties for reasons of common health and security, there is no doubt that the repeated use of the word ‘war’ contributed to the domestication of people into subordinated subjects and deflected scrutiny from governmental decisions;
- from a collective point of view, the recurring use of expressions connected to a ‘state of war’ represented an explicit appeal to the sentiment of national pride. Italian people are usually quite desensitized to the sirens of national pride - e.g., the national flag is seen only when the national football team is playing. Conversely, in the worst period of the pandemic (mid-March/early April 2020), Italian flags appeared on almost every balcony and window, and the Italian anthem was very often resounding in the empty streets as well as in TV commercials. Besides the call upon national pride, the use of warlike expressions more generally appealed to individual responsibility and was meant to install a sentiment of unity against a common enemy.

**Subversion:**

Differences. It is indeed this last point which reveals one of the substantial differences between a pandemic and a war:

- by definition, war implies enemies who fight each other from two opposite sides. Yet, in the case of Covid-19 we are all on the *same* side. Covid-19 has shrunk the concepts of ‘enemy’, ‘borders’, ‘invasion’ to our own bodies:

the body has become the new territory of potential invasion and, literally, the border with the external world;
- as a consequence, if we conceptualize disease as war, where is the enemy? The virus is invisible and is inside us, not outside. Therefore, the action of 'fighting against' is moved from the outside to the inside, with a series of rather risky implications and repercussions;
- indeed, does the use of the metaphor ‘war’ empower or disempower us? In her essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1997), Susan Sontag widely discusses how diseases have been metaphoricized throughout history. After a historical and literary survey of the punitive notions of disease, she discusses the military metaphors in medicine addressing in particular the cases of tuberculosis and cancer. She sustains that such metaphors hide a fundamental moral and ethical trap: transforming the patient (passive subject) into a soldier (active agent) puts a double weight on her/his shoulder: that of the illness, and that of the metaphor. If illness is war, the patients are soldiers, and they risk being ‘victimized’ (if not blamed) as if they chose illness or did not fight enough to contrast it;
- here comes the last and most relevant structural difference between a war and a pandemic: war is always a choice, as it is the result of a deliberate political decision, while getting sick is never a choice. Therefore, the use of the metaphor 'war' to define a disease maliciously functions at a double level: implying that disease is like war, it also suggests that war is like disease, that is something which is not chosen but that it rather happens as one of the natural incidents of human condition. This is where the vicious circle closes and reveals one of its main purposes: culturalize disease and naturalize war.

Though referring to cancer, in the final sentence of her essay Sontag reveals how improper mystifications are symptoms of our own incapability to deal with the structural problems of our societies as well as with our own frailties. But it is also another demonstration of how the more or less deliberate **misuse of words** and **metaphors** contribute, for good or bad, **to shape our reality**, and how it is therefore our responsibility to be aware of the substantial **moral** and **ethical** weight of the words and metaphors that we use.

> *Since the interest of the metaphor is precisely that it refers to a disease so overlaid with mystification, so charged with the fantasy of inescapable fatality. Since our views about cancer, and the metaphors we have imposed on it, are so much a vehicle for the large insufficiencies of this culture, for our shallow attitude toward death, for our anxieties about feeling, for our reckless improvident responses to our real "problems of growth," for our inability to construct an advanced industrial society which properly regulates consumption, and for our justified fears of the increasingly violent course of history.* (Sontag 1997:87-88).

**Discussion:**

Notwithstanding several pleas from **anti-war movements**, demanding to **stop using the military vocabulary** to define the Covid-19 pandemic, the **pervasiveness of the war-metaphor** has remained a constant in Italian political and public discourse throughout 2020 and 2021.

It actually reached its momentum on March 1st, 2021, when the new Italian Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, appointed a general, General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo as Extraordinary Covid-19 Emergency Commissioner with the special task of managing the **vaccine logistics**. Figliuolo’s figure, with his uniform wallpapered with medals and insignia, thus became **the visual embodiment** of the war-metaphor connected to the pandemic: to fight a war, it takes a General. A further piece of war-like rhetoric was also added to the public discourse: the war against the **virus** will be won only if the war of the **vaccines** is won.

In late April 2021, a **further element** was added to the warlike rhetoric. Denouncing the shortage of the vaccine supplying, several media reported the cry of the Regional Governors - those who are encharged of organizing the administration of doses: "*Le nostre scorte sono agli sgoccioli. Abbiamo bisogno di munizioni*" [Our stocks are running low. We need munitions]. **Vaccines** are defined as '**munitions**'. A **vaccine** is a **bullet** inside our **body**, which becomes the **battlefield** of an invisible fight against an invisible enemy. At both a physical and symbolic level, what kind of **impact** can such a crude and improper image have on individuals? Here, we can hear again Sontag's resolute **warning** against the harmful misuse of metaphors.

But the **militaristic turn** took another direction, too.

According to the *Rete Italiana Pace e Disarmo* [Italian Peace and Disarmament Network] a part of the *Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza* (PNRR) [The National Recovery and Resilience Plan] would get the green light for **military investments** (the PNRR is the investment programme that Italy has to present to the European Commission in the framework of the Next Generation EU, the instrument to respond to the pandemic crisis caused by Covid-19). The statement issued by the Italian Peace and Disarmament Network on April 1, 2021, reads: "*Una parte dei fondi del Recovery Plan verrebbe destinata per rinnovare la capacità e i sistemi d'arma a disposizione dello strumento militare. Un tentativo di greenwashing, di lavaggio verde, dell'industria delle armi che la Rete Italiana Pace e Disarmo stigmatizza e rigetta*" [Part of the Recovery Plan funds would be used to renew the capacity and weapon systems available to the military. This is an attempt at **greenwashing the arms industry**, which the Italian Peace and Disarmament Network stigmatizes and rejects], (www.retepacedisarmo.org).

And on April 7, 2021, here is the visual comment appeared on *Il Manifesto*, the Italian left-wing newspaper, by the Italian cartoonist Danilo Maramotti:




Danilo Maramotti, *Il Manifesto,* April 7, 2021

[The two soldiers comment: "Even the General says that this against Covid is a war: let's wait for the PNRR", and the other responds: "If we don't get the vaccines, let's buy a lot of weapons!"]

From all these considerations, it is evident that the **rhetoric of war** applied to a pandemic (or, better, a syndemic) is hard to eradicate, since, as we have seen in this discussion, it functions at several communicative and manipulative levels.

Yet, instead of the metaphor of 'war', we could more appropriately and functionally use that of '**cure**/**care**'. Such a conceptual shift would move our **representations** and **energies** towards something ***for*** and not *against,* bringing along a series of conceptualizations from the semantic area of 'protection', 'attentiveness', 'healing', 'aid', 'assistance', 'solidarity', and thus pointing to mutual collaboration between individuals rather than to the confrontation against an invisible enemy.

The University of Lancaster has also launched a Call for alternative ways of talking about Covid-19:

https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/linguistics/news/beyond-the-battle-far-from-the-frontline-a-call-for-alternative-ways-of-talking-about-covid-19

Can you think of any other word, metaphor, or image that can be used to represent a pandemic in a way that it refers to solidarity and mutual collaboration?

**References/Further Readings:**

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