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# Identity work in conservative political discourse: a cross-cultural comparison

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a cross-cultural study of identity positioning in the political discourse of religious, conservative politicians in Italy and Northern Ireland. Findings point to the use of frames of reference around family, faith, freedom and societal catastrophe. These frames were though amplified through use of self-narratives of suffering in defence of beliefs and traditions. A key driver of the identity positioning work was therefore 'stake inoculation'. That is the use of cues to defend against accusations of bigotry. This move in English is largely 'defensive', whereas in Italian it involves a more combative strategy of 'othering'.

Questo articolo riporta i risultati di uno studio interculturale sul posizionamento dell'identità nel linguaggio politico di politici religiosi e conservatori in Italia e nell'Irlanda del Nord. I risultati indicano l'uso di cornici di riferimento che includono la famiglia, la fede, la libertà e le questioni considerate catastrofi sociali, le quali sono amplificate attraverso auto-narrazioni esplicite a difesa di credi e tradizioni. Un elemento chiave è l'"inoculazione dell'interesse," usando affermazioni riguardanti le presentazioni del sé per respingere accuse di bigottismo. Mentre l'approccio inglese è difensivo, la strategia italiana tende ad essere più combattiva, coinvolgendo una strategia di emarginazione dell'"altro".

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## Introduction

This cross-cultural study compares identity positioning work (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) undertaken by religious, conservative politicians in Northern Ireland and northern Italy. Identity has long been a core concept of study in intercultural communication (Holliday et al., 2021). There are different conceptions of identity (Samovar et al., 2014) and this study uses theory and discourse analysis from the tradition of Discursive Psychology (McLean & Price, 2016). In this tradition, identities are understood as discursively created, flexible and negotiated in interaction (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010). In analysing identity positioning, there is a focus on relationship management through purposive presentations of self (Te Molder, 2015). From an intercultural perspective, how this relational work is accomplished is of interest if it entails quite distinct positioning cues or performances in different language settings.

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This study contrasts identity positioning work done by politicians representing socially-conservative, faith-based parties in Northern Ireland and northern Italy. The policy frames and faith-based commitments of these politicians are broadly cognate (Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 1996). Their identity positioning therefore makes use of similar interpretative repertoires (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), albeit with differences reflecting different national and religious contexts. These politicians also face a shared challenge of representing traditional values in increasingly secular and socially progressive liberal democracies. Their identity positioning work is therefore done in contested contexts reflecting wider ‘culture wars’. What emerged from discourse analysis is very different performances in English and Italian of being socially conservative. Politicians in both language settings have to manage their ‘footing’ (Goffman, 2021) to avoid ‘spoiled identities’ (2009), and both did this through ‘stake inoculation’, and the presentation of self as victims. However, in managing face relations, those from Northern Ireland positioned themselves defensively, using politeness, downplaying emotional displays and emphasising their reasonableness. In contrast, Italian-language positioning is far more aggressive, using emotional displays, impoliteness and ‘othering’ to justify their position.

## Literature review

Within the context of the wider culture wars and references to ‘identity politics’, a range of studies have explored the positioning of conservative individuals, groups and parties. This kind of purposive presentation of self, whether conscious or not, creates rapport with other conservatives and offers positive ‘footing’ (Goffman, 2021) relative to those with more ‘progressive’ views. Recent research into this kind of identity work amongst English and Italian speaking conservatives highlights the centrality of emotional commitment. In the US context, Hanson et al. (2019) argue that conservative self-categorisation is manifested through the identity position adopted. In other words, what matters is that an individual feels that they are a conservative, rather than focussing on particular policies. Participants in their research identified with the kinds of frames of policy positions you would expect (Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 1996). These are national, political positions. In the US, these are around issues such as balancing budgets, gun control and access to abortion. In Italy, these are around education, migration and taxation (Hutter et al., 2018). However, these positions are understood as constituent elements of broader and more foundational ideological values such as limited government, tradition, patriotism and self-reliance. This commitment to ideology and identity over issue politics is also expressed through commitment to the Catholic faith in Italian political belonging on the right (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019).

Identity positioning is purposive in the sense of offering social pay-offs in relation to others. In addition to belonging to a powerful ‘in-group’, this position has positive associations to power, legitimacy and the continuation of past success (Hanson et al., 2019). Graham et al. (2009, p. 1044) found that: ‘... Reverence for the nation was a key component of the conservative ideological identity. This finding is in line with the moral foundations theory of conservatives tending to support group-enhancing morals.’ The rhetorical advantage of ‘owning’ national values is to allow conservatives to position liberals as the un-patriotic outgroup. Catholic lobbies in Italy achieve the same effect by positioning liberal values as un-Italian. The ‘introduction of the term “gender” in the international arena comes as a reaction to the institutionalisation of an “anti-naturalist” position on the policies for regulating gender relations’ (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019, p. 430). Another positive association of conservative identity positioning is a claim to being far-sighted and common-sensical. Expressing conservative identities seems to offer the argument that holding these traditional values is correct in the long term in contrast to liberal change that is presented as short-sighted and lacking in respect for the nation (Hanson et al., 2019; Li & Brewer, 2004). Positioning work of members of the Italian far right and Catholic lobbies identifies conservatives as the last ‘rational’ and ‘normal’ group upholding true Italian values and a ‘natural anthropology’ of life

(Hutter et al., 2018). This creates a sense of togetherness and emotional commitment that is strengthened with every accusation of immorality and homophobia coming from the ‘Left’ (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019).

This idea of suffering for one’s beliefs is another key element of recent studies into conservative identity positioning. Those with conservative views are likely to take on the ‘footing’ of being victims (Goffman, 2021). Discourse from Italian far right parties is of being the ‘silent majority’, a group whose opinions are drowned out by the loud minority and their ‘dictatorship of the politically correct’ (Hutter et al., 2018). In the US context, Kidder (2016) found conservative students in the U.S. described themselves as outnumbered by their classmates and professors. Nonetheless, these students presented themselves as proudly daring to be right despite the consequences. According to Muwakkil (2019, p. 24), conservative students understood freedom of speech as ‘freedom from social stigma for socially abhorrent speech’. Put simply, this is not ‘freedom to’, but ‘freedom from’. This positioning clearly links to the kind of ‘symbolic battles’ that Edelman (1964) identified in the self-narratives of politically committed participants.

## Methodology

### Data

Data came from internet topic searches of public record media texts, speeches, interview transcripts and social media messaging in which politicians from particular political parties addressed the issue of LGBTQ + rights. Sources were combined to create data sets of over 15,000 words for Italian and English language discourse in which politicians presented their positions, their communities, their parties and themselves. The data sets were larger, since they included communication from interlocutors, however, coding focussed on the communication of the chosen politicians. All sources focussed on political discussions of LGBTQ + rights as an issue recorded since 2013. This topic was chosen as it is a challenging issue for social conservatives. This is because the views of social conservatives increasingly differ from the tolerance recorded in polls of the wider population.<sup>1</sup> These politicians therefore face the potential for, and reality of, being framed as bigoted in expressing conservative positions on this issue. This offers a rich context for studying identity positioning work.

### Methodological rationale

English and Italian-language discourse was analysed for similarities and differences in how these religious conservative politicians positioned themselves and their groups. The study used discourse analysis from the discursive psychological tradition (McLean, 2012; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), to contrast the kinds of positioning cues available to, and used by, these politicians. These cues included discursive practices such as self-identification, pronoun choice, frames of reference and addressivity, such as through politeness moves and the use of humour. The study also investigated self-narratives of challenge and choice. Billig (1996) refers to these as ‘ideological dilemmas’. These dilemmas are presentations of self (Goffman, 2021) that are achieved through discussing a choice or challenge that the speaker faces or faced. This discussion of choosing is a common form of self-narrative that presents the speaker as a protagonist with their actions or choices showing the kind of person the speaker is. As mentioned, in his seminal study of political discourse, Edelman (1964) refers to these as ‘symbolic battles’ that speakers wish to be seen to wage. This is particularly relevant in the context of a culture war, and a core purpose of the positioning work analysed was ‘stake inoculation’, or a defence against accusations of negative bias or self-interest. What emerged from the analysis was ways in which this kind of interactional work is done quite differently in English and Italian.

The research into contemporary identity politics outlined above has typically utilised interviews and self-reporting as a method (e.g. Hutter et al., 2018). In addition, studies have used discourse analysis of, for instance, political rhetoric to identify frames (e.g. Haidt, 2012). This study takes as a starting point the notions of identity developed in the field of discursive psychology. This research tradition investigates the psychology of social interaction (Te Molder, 2015). As a result, identity positioning is a central concern of this research literature, with founding contributors such as Potter and Wetherell (1987) critiquing more traditional understandings of identity as fixed and stable. In a discursive psychological understanding, identity is a resource for successful communication and the achievement of social goals, such as rapport. Through presenting ourselves as the holders of particular identity positions, we can negotiate relatedness or reciprocity and broker successful face relations (Spencer-Oatey, 2004). ‘Identity work’ links to Goffman’s (2021, p. 128) concept of ‘footing’, which is ‘the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance’. We position ourselves relative to others to create a positive place to stand, and within conversations may ‘shift’ footing to change our and others’ relatedness or relative positioning. Successful positioning means that others accept us as the holders of particular attributes or roles that are valuable in some way (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). This should offer the ‘sociality rights’ of such a position (Spencer-Oatey, 2004).

An area of particular interest in studying identity positioning in this context is ‘stake inoculation’. This is how those presenting themselves seek to achieve positive ‘footing’ as unbiased people showing goodwill to others (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010). In this study, speakers were particularly interested in rebutting criticisms of bigotry or extremism through positive presentations of self as acting either altruistically or with justification and decency. Through analysis, different dominant communicative strategies for this emerged in the English and Italian language data.

Footing is signalled and negotiated through offering and accepting identity positioning cues. Following speech act theory, this is not just a question of ‘what’ is said, but also ‘why’ and particularly ‘how’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2010). In this study, explicit and implicit positioning cues were identified in speakers’ discourse. Explicit cues include discursive choices such as pronoun use, labelling of self and ‘othering’. Implicit cues relate to ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). These repertoires are shared cultural resources for understanding and speaking about topics or ideas (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Within a discourse community, there will be norms and routines for a range of broadly shared understandings of beliefs, values, assumptions and so on (Scollon et al., 2012). This notion is similar to the idea of ‘frames’ common in research into political communication (Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 1996). What is of interest to researchers investigating interpretative repertoires is how these habitual forms of reasoning offer ways of relating the self to others, since a key goal in communication is to negotiate identity positions that help us manage the interactions and social relations in which we participate (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998).

### *Analytical approach*

From an analytical perspective, interpretive repertoires are observable. They are coherent ways of describing people, issues, and things that are common amongst groups. Repertoires are ‘systematically related sets of terms that are often used with stylistic and grammatical coherence and often organised around one or more central metaphors’ (Potter, 1996, p. 131). They are made up of meanings, connotations, associations and framings that are preferred in particular speech settings, or by those in particular discourse communities. In the context of this study, this includes established views on political issues, but also the wider ideological commitments mentioned above (Kidder, 2016). These habits of reasoning and expression can be mapped and shown to differ or coincide (McLean & Price, 2019a). In this study, data came from public record communication from professional politicians of Lega and Fratelli d’Italia in Italy, and from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland. The data gathering identified political communication relating to LGBTQ+ issues, such as same sex marriage. Data analysis was done through coding the politicians’ personal identity positioning cues in the

two languages, with consideration given to linguistic differences such as pronoun use and verb morphology. Coding was iterative with inter-coder discussion of preliminary results followed by coordination of analysis. Once the cues were coded, the staged approach to thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2012) was followed to establish preferences for using particular cues via identifying organising and global themes of the interpretative repertoire.

## Findings

This section is ordered around the global themes of politicians' implicit identity positioning. These four global themes emerged from thematic analysis of interpretative repertoire terms and references and are family, faith, freedom and societal collapse. Each section discusses similarities and differences in overall positioning work in English and Italian, but also incorporates more detailed illustration of how these moves were accomplished. Finally, there is an additional analysis of explicit cues identified in practices such as pronoun use.

The global themes are perhaps unsurprising and chime with the research on conservative identity positioning presented in the literature review. The politicians in this study represent parties that are socially conservative and faith based. Their parties are very open in this regard. For instance, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia actively used the old fascist slogan of 'God, fatherland and family' in their successful 2022 election campaign. What is interesting in terms of a cross-cultural understanding of identity positioning work is how association with these frames or values offers positive footing as politicians present themselves as champions of these traditional values. This is an effect that is amplified by attendant self-narratives of suffering and victimisation while defending these values. However, this work is done quite differently in English and Italian, with the former a more defensive positioning, and the latter more assertive and confrontational.

### Family – interpretative repertoire themes

As an overview of the thematic analysis of the positioning work around this theme, politicians in both contexts presented themselves as conservative by arguing for the importance of family and marriage in its traditional form. Construction metaphors (such as that family is the 'building block' of society) were common. In Italian, this metaphor appears in statements such as: '*La società come famiglia di famiglie*' ('Society as a family of families'). In the Northern Irish data, a similar argument is made with a 'stable' society manifested from 'creating children who in turn create society', and this is presented as the purpose of heterosexual marriage. Northern Irish families are presented as individual units of hardworking families ('busy mother', 'contribute... to our business community'). This links to Kidder (2016), where conservatives identified with a culture of individualism and work ethic. Since families, within the institution of marriage, are the backbone of society, same-sex marriage is presented as its antithesis in the Northern Irish data, an argument that links to another global theme of societal collapse.

While 'marriage' is undoubtedly linked to religion for DUP members, with claims made such as that it 'is instituted by God', 'family' is more commonly described using traditional, society-building concepts, rather than religious references or indeed an expression of love. This differs from Italian political discourse, in which religious terminology and metaphors permeate discourse on the identity of family. Catholicism is presented as the root of Italian culture, and its values are presented as the only truth, juxtaposing this with 'unnatural' same-sex families. This discourse includes frequent references to religious figures: '*La famiglia è anche lo specchio della Trinità, come diceva Giovanni Paolo.*' ('Family is the mirror of the Trinity as Giovanni Paolo used to say.')

The focus on tradition is also evident in Italian discourse, though it is less common than a religious frame of reference. These more secular presentations of the role of traditional family and marriage arrangements cite Italian philosophical figures, such as Cicerone: '*La famiglia [...] seminario della Repubblica*' ('the family [...] seminary of the republic'). By affirming that:

*'Non c'era bisogno di essere cristiani per capire che la famiglia è il luogo dove si impara a vivere in comunità'*  
 ('You don't have to be Christian to understand that the family is the place where we learn how to live in a community')

Italian politicians also went beyond religious connotations to link family to the fabric of the nation, and thus to the danger of societal collapse.

### Family – identity positioning work

A key difference in use of cues lies on the way the English language discourse is more defensive in its use of stake inoculation. This work is principally done through rapport building moves that include positive and negative politeness strategies and stake inoculation through narratives of victimhood. As an illustration of this positioning, the excerpts below came from an interview between Arlene Foster, then DUP leader, and the Guardian journalist Owen Jones.<sup>2</sup> The interview was spontaneous and took place in a corridor during the Conservative Party Conference in 2018. The recorded element of the interview lasts 1 min and 49 s. Identity positioning, and rapport management, were particularly relevant in this interaction because Owen Jones is both gay and openly critical of the DUP's position on LGBTQ+ issues. Arlene Foster was therefore speaking directly to a political opponent. Another important contextual factor was that at that time, the DUP's votes were important to the Conservative-led government. However, the Conservative's reliance on the DUP was controversial, with members of the parliamentary party openly questioning the DUP's record and position on LGBTQ+ related topics. Arlene Foster was therefore speaking to Owen Jones directly, but also to a wider audience in offering identity positioning cues. What is notable is the extent of politeness moves that she used.

The filmed interaction takes place after Owen Jones has brokered Arlene Foster's agreement to be interviewed. This appears to have happened immediately before as the setting of the interview is a corridor, the participants are standing, and they appear to have simply turned to the camera ready for the first question. Foster appears uncomfortable during the interview. This impression comes from body language cues such as her fixed compressed smile, extended eye closing and repeated hair adjustment. The interview opens with questions from Owen Jones that position the DUP's opposition to equal marriage as denying gay people rights, fairness and also as democratically unjust. In response, Arlene Foster uses a number of strategies to offer a more sympathetic presentation of self:

1. Owen      gay people fall in love (.)  
                 just like straight people =
2. Arlene     = they do, that's right
3. Owen      don't you think  
                 they should have the right to express their love (.)  
                 for their partners  
                 just in the way you have the right to express your love (.)  
                 by getting married =
4. Arlene     = they do have the right to express their love (.)  
                 nobody's talking about anybody  
                 not being able to love another person
5. Owen      but to get married  
                 to get married =
6. Arlene     = but of c[...] (.)  
                 I believe that marriage is between a man and woman
7. Owen      most people in Northern Ireland disagree with you
8. Arlene     that could well be the case
9. Owen      so why defy the majority of Northern Ireland  
                 by refusing to allow gay people  
                 to have the same civil rights  
                 as straight people =

10. Arlene = well (.) Owen  
 as you know (.)  
 this is a matter for the assembly (.)  
 if the assembly was back  
 and I want the assembly back  
 as quickly as possible (.)  
 I'm quite sure it will come to the floor of the assembly  
 and then I think people should wait and see =  
 ((*OJ attempts to interject, AF continues quickly*))  
 = because of course  
 the composition of the assembly has changed  
 since the last time  
 uh and (.)  
 the petition of concern is no longer available  
 uh to us as a party  
 because we don't have 30 members (.)  
 because as you know the assembly has shrunk  
 from 108 members to 90 members (.)  
 and therefore (.)  
 I think we need to allow the assembly  
 to have its space to debate this ((*stops, smiles and nods, yielding the conversational turn*))

Arlene Foster's responses can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it is striking how many politeness moves she makes. In this short extract, it is possible to play politeness maxim 'bingo' (Leech, 1983): tact ('*That could well be the case*'); generosity ('*I want the Assembly back as quickly as possible*'); approbation ('*Nobody's talking about anybody not being able to love another person*'); modesty ('*We don't have 30 members*'); agreement ('*That's right*') and sympathy ('*Well, Owen ...*'). In addition to verbal cues, Foster offers non-verbal moves, in particular smile, eye-contact, forward movement, head tilt and, as shown below, physical contact. This is a presentation of self that utilises positive politeness extensively.

A second observation is on the use of narrative. While Foster is clear on her own views, she uses the long conversational turn on the Assembly to diffuse Owen Jones' questions and line of attack. She neutralises Jones' focus on the majority position by being the one talking at length about the democratically elected Assembly. She also seizes the initiative in the interview, interrupting Jones' flow of questions and control of the content. Instead of responding to Jones' framing therefore, Foster can present herself, since she is a protagonist in this story of the Assembly, as a member of a minority group which will respect the will of the Assembly. Her story thus characterises her role, and that of the DUP, as servants of the state and democrats at heart.

While the narrative offers an indirect positioning move, Foster does also use explicit identity positioning:

15. Owen ((*Speaks over Arlene*)) Don't you think  
 you should go down in history  
 as somebody who confronted their own party  
 and said let gay people have the right  
 to get married (.)  
 and share their love  
 just as I do
16. Arlene I think (.)  
 Owen (.)  
 the important thing is that  
 as a politician (.)  
 you have to have principles (.)  
 and if you believe in something (.)  
 I think you should be allowed to articulate that view =
17. Owen ((*interrupts*)) = is that a principle (.)  
 not for gay people



18. Arlene
- to get married  
 what principle is that =  
 = no no  
 if you ah  
 if you have a belief (.)  
 I think you should be allowed to have a belief  
 otherwise we would live in a very intolerant world  
wouldn't we ((*head tilt, exaggerated smile with eye-closure, Arlene steps forward and touches Owen's upper arm*))  
 good to see you ((*Steps back, smiling and aide intervenes to usher Arlene away*))

Foster's explicit identity positioning here is of that rarest of things, an honest politician. Her self-presentation focusses on her own principles and faith, and the threat she feels in being denied her right to confessional freedoms. She has turned Owen Jones' initial positioning work back on itself, adopting the position of the principled but persecuted, and her positive politeness cues reinforce her presentation of moral decency.

In contrast, identity work in comparable Italian language settings is done very differently. In the Italian data, the use of politeness is largely absent. Instead, speakers follow a strategy of rapport neglect with those who disagree with them (Spencer-Oatey, 2004). A good illustration of this comes from a broadly matching setting to the Arlene Foster interview. This interview is with Giorgia Meloni, the leader of Fratelli d'Italia, just as Arlene Foster was then the leader of the DUP. The length of the excerpt (2 min and 29 s) is similar to the interview described above and comes from a television debate on the Congress of the Family in 2019.<sup>3</sup> The debate was chaired by Lilli Gruber, a well-known political journalist, and the panel included two other guests representing more progressive positions. In contrast to Arlene Foster's media persona, what characterises Giorgia Meloni's identity positioning in this excerpt is impoliteness.

Throughout the 2.29-min excerpt of the wider panel discussion, there are multiple moments of impoliteness. One is simply that Meloni speaks throughout, refusing to yield the conversational turn and shouting over the other speakers when they try to interrupt. At 0:18, when asked by the host to be quick, Meloni dismissively replies:

*'No, rapida no, rapida no perché io devo rispondere visto che mi avete detto delle cose completamente false per ora.'* ('No, not quick, not quick, because I have to answer since you've told me completely false things for now.')

Further instances include Meloni talking over the host (0:22) and asserting that what the host and other speakers were saying is '*falso*' at 0:33, stating:

*'Quello che si dice su questo congresso è falso, che si dica a me che io voglio andare a un congresso dove vogliamo convincere che le donne devono stare a casa a stirare, signori vi comunico ufficialmente che qui l'unico segretario di un partito donna in Italia si chiama Giorgia Meloni.'* ('What they say about this Congress is false, to say that I want to go to a Congress where we want to convince people that women should stay at home and iron, gentlemen, I officially inform you, that here the only woman secretary of a party in Italy is called Giorgia Meloni).')

Meloni's behaviour includes shouting at 0:47, talking over people and again not yielding the conversational turn at 0:51, and again dismissing a request to take a conversational turn at 1:05, saying: '*Però fatemi finire*' ('But let me finish'). This is a politeness move she does not offer the other speakers or the Chair. She also shouts her retort at the other speaker's attempted interruption (1:26-28), disregards the host's attempts to intervene (1:38) and at 1:55, when the interviewer expresses offence at being included in Meloni's generalisation, Meloni dismisses her by stating: '*Io dico quello che voglio*' ('I say what I want'). At 2:04, Meloni accuses the host of lacking impartiality:

*'Voi mi avete fatto tre domande uguali e quindi la pensate ugualmente.'* ('You asked me three questions that are the same [as the guests'] and therefore you think the same').

Meloni then shouts down her opponents again at 2:11, saying:

*'Non la penso come voi, non avete argomenti su questo tema della famiglia.'* ('I don't think like you, you have no arguments on this family issue.')

The overall exchange highlights the confrontational dynamics, with Meloni's assertiveness and lack of politeness contrasting with the behaviour of both the other guests, who accept the host's requests for quiet and to avoid interruptions. Meloni's identity work is based on a kind of righteous anger, positioning that is explored further below in the context of the global theme of 'freedom'.

### Freedom – interpretative repertoire themes

The concept of 'freedom' is a core dilemma in Italian and Northern Irish far-right discourse regarding LGBTQ + rights. In both languages, politicians argue that LGBTQ + supporters are intent on denying them the freedom to think for themselves and to express their views. This positioning work presents conservative voices as actively being silenced through vilification. In Italian, this is presented as the Left imposing a *'dittatura del politicamente corretto'* ('a dictatorship of the politically correct'). DUP references often refer to volume, such as Foster's use of the term 'megaphone diplomacy'.

In both datasets, this position of being silenced offers conservatives 'footing' as being justified in speaking out, and in Meloni's case, shouting. There is also 'stake inoculation' in presenting themselves as victims of discrimination, or coercion. This positioning disarms accusations of their own bigotry or discrimination and this accords with other studies (e.g. Kidder, 2016). As with Arlene Foster's interview above, DUP self-narratives frequently reiterate how conservatives now have 'an unpopular opinion', and that as a result 'we are vilified for that now', and 'we're to be scared'. By also implying their position is correct, being based on a legitimate, centuries-old tradition, DUP politicians present themselves as a sane minority, against a world that has turned away from reason, or perhaps from faith.

This element of positioning is contradictory to another commonly used frame, which is that these politicians also identify their position as one held by the majority of every day, normal people. An example is the claim made by the DUP's Ian Paisley that he had 'postbags' of letters asking him to vote against gay marriage – in his words: 'It's how the majority of my constituents feel'. These contradictory positions are resolvable through arguing that conservative opinion is one of a 'silent majority'. Those who speak for this majority do so in the face of what is only seemingly 'popular' opinion, but that is in fact, a very vocal, minority view, hence references to 'megaphone diplomacy'.

In Italian, this positioning work around freedom has an additional element of 'othering' that is more implicit in DUP statements. The language used by politicians revolves around the idea that 'the Left', (foreign) academics, and LGBTQ + lobbies intend to create a 'regime' by spreading propaganda to radically change social structures, and particularly the education of children. The Left then silences 'divergent voices' by accusing them of homophobia:

*'Ci devono togliere tutto quello che siamo perché quando non avremo identità e radici noi saremo privi di consapevolezza e incapaci di difendere i nostri diritti.'* ('They want to take away all that we are, because when we won't have identity and roots, we will be deprived of awareness and incapable of defending our rights.')

There is an idea that an 'LGBTQ + enemy' and the 'Left' want 'fake freedom', claiming that the choice to simply do whatever one wants with their body and lifestyle is a *'malintesa libertà'* ('misunderstood freedom'). In addition to having their freedom constrained, right-wing politicians also claim to be protecting and respecting others' freedom themselves: *'pieno rispetto delle scelte individuali di ciascuno.'* ('Full respect of everybody's individual choices'). Therefore, Italian politicians' discourse uses hyperbolic speech, such as 'regime', to indicate and exaggerate a need to act against pro LGBTQ + parties and voices. These are also presented as a foreign force. Italian politicians, for instance, use English terms such as *'ideologia gender'* to make LGBTQ + ideas seem confusing, foreign, and incompatible with Italian culture.

In contrast, the DUP politicians tend to associate freedom more tightly with freedom of expression. Positioning work claims that they are the ones representing freedom: 'I always thought

tolerance was when you disagreed with somebody, but you respected their right to have a different position.’ In response to being challenged for espousing unpopular views, Foster remarks that ‘no one should have to abandon their faith’, positioning conservatives as passive, and progressive politicians as the instigators of current difficulties. There are multiple references to freedom of speech being attacked: ‘I will be accused of being a dinosaur ... I’ll be accused of being close to being racist, and everything that is nasty and bad in the world’. However, there is very little identification of an ‘enemy’ as there is explicitly in the Italian data, with its accompanying confrontational interpersonal communication. In the Northern Irish data, common positioning cues are implicit, such as repetition of verbs like ‘accused’ and passive voice to suggest that traditional views are purposely misrepresented in the media and by largely unspecified opponents.

### Societal catastrophe – interpretative repertoire themes

The last global theme identified by thematic analysis across these politicians’ positioning work on LGBTQ + issues is that of societal catastrophe. A key idea is that if the LGBTQ + lobbies win, or if the ‘Left’ takes power and backs laws in support of LGBTQ + rights, this will lead to a collapse of society. In Italy, this sentiment echoes in somewhat Darwinian statements such as:

*‘I gay sono una sciagura per la riproduzione e la conservazione della specie.’* (‘Gays are a disaster for the reproduction and conservation of the species.’)

This is akin to the more emotionally neutral positioning work from DUP politicians, which also stresses that marriage is for creating children. Italian politicians also stress how advances in LGBTQ + rights harm others:

*‘Se noi stabiliamo per legge che quello che io sono indipende da quello che io sento di essere, [...] sono finite tutte le leggi che aiutano le donne.’* (‘If we establish by law that what I am is independent of what I feel I am, [...] all the laws that help women are finished.’)

Most vividly, there is a fear of the indoctrination and corruption of children:

*‘Raccontare solamente questo aspetto delle inclinazioni e dei gusti diventi in realtà una esaltazione di uno specifico fenomeno. Non diventa questo indottrinamento? Perché io temo che questo sia.’* (‘Telling only this aspect of inclinations and tastes actually becomes an exaltation of a specific phenomenon. Doesn’t this become indoctrination? Because I fear it does.’)

DUP positioning also refers to the detriment to children, tying this to the construction metaphor of family:

‘... when that marriage breaks down, when marriage as a societal building block breaks down, children are more likely to be neglected, more likely to be cast aside and abused ... [and that] ... you tamper with marriage at your peril.’

All these analogies have in common a sense of the corruption of nature and the natural order of society. In Italy, these analogies are supported by framing foreign philosophers and academics such as Engels, Haraway and Butler, as having unnatural ideologies that are dangerous and foreign. These are then juxtaposed to ‘natural’ Italian, Christian values. The Italian language itself, with its gender-binary grammar, is used to connect to the natural state of culture, and how anything that opposes it is a corruption of nature itself:

*‘I generi sono due, come nella lingua italiana, visto che parlavamo di linguaggio, la lingua italiana, a differenza di altre, non ha nemmeno il neutro, perché ha il femminile, ed ha il maschile. Ed uguale per noi esseri umani, chi ha il pisello è un uomo, chi ha la vulva è una femmina, punto. E di lì partiamo perché questa cultura gender sta mistificando quella che è la nostra natura di valori non negoziabili.’* (‘There are two genders, as in the Italian language, since we were talking about language, the Italian language, unlike others, does not even have the neutral, because it has the feminine, it has the masculine, and the same goes for us human beings, who has the penis is a man, who has a vulva is a female, full stop. That’s where we start because this gender culture is mystifying our nature of non-negotiable values.’)

As mentioned, DUP members tended not to explicitly ‘other’ or attack gay rights advocates or particular lobbies. Nonetheless, both English and Italian discourses stress the harm these social perspectives could cause and this is a positioning move that casts conservatives as defenders of the vulnerable.

In this Northern Irish positioning work, ‘the Troubles’ are a reference point for societal collapse, or regression to a worse time. As an example, a powerful self-narrative from Arlene Foster recalled how ‘the IRA detonated a bomb on the school bus’, that she ‘can still see the injured’, an event which was ‘life-shaping’. She used this anecdote to stress that she looks upon everyone, regardless of sexuality, as ‘my fellow citizens’. Apart from creating a sympathetic ‘footing’ for herself, this move is an example of ‘stake inoculation’ by minimising the importance of the then current LGBTQ + debate in contrast to conflict. Foster then notes that this horrific event ‘is often ignored by the rest of the world’ and that people are forgetting this history. As a resolution that positions her views as inclusive and progressive, she argues that the people of Northern Ireland need to ‘find common values to keep Northern Ireland moving forward’. This implies that issues that are not commonly agreed upon, such as gay marriage, are preventing the country ‘moving forward’ from the politically violent era of ‘the Troubles’.

### Explicit identity poisoning through self-identification and ‘othering’

In both languages, speakers also use other cues to achieve stake inoculation. An interesting strategy for this is shifting footing through use of different pronouns. The Italian politicians most often use the first-person plural (*noi*), to refer to themselves within the group they represent. In doing this, they tend to refer to the group as rational and cultured in their beliefs, inclusive, and normal, which then logically also applies to themselves. Specific examples of this move to offer reflected glory include referring to patriotic Italians as *l’ultimo baluardo* (‘the last bastion’) in the battle for society. Other key reference points are as Christians, as originating from Greco-Roman culture, as being people with a family and as being part of the family that is society. In this way, their group, and thus themselves, are presented as the ‘mirror of the Trinity’, and the base of society. *Noi* is also used with religious language and terminology: ‘We have to get up to affirm the truth’, or ‘We are called to give testimony’. This type of language use offers connotations of a crusade, and therefore transforms them into fighters for the common good, and perhaps even as warriors of God.

The Italian politicians included in this study also referred to themselves using first person singular (*io*), normally to claim victimhood, for example as unfairly defined as homophobic, old fashioned, or ‘from the Middle Ages’. Sometimes *io* is also used to declare identity within the group, for example ‘I am mother, woman, Italian, Christian’, or ‘I represent Italians’. Finally, in Italian, it is not always mandatory to put a subject before the main verb. Rhetorically, these politicians use the absence of a definite subject to create the impression of an invisible enemy, making this enemy seem bigger than in reality, as well as dangerous and threatening:

*‘Ci devono togliere tutto quello che siamo.’* (‘They must [want to] take away all that we are.’); *‘Tutto quello che ci definisce per loro è un nemico.’* (‘Everything that defines us is their enemy.’)

Humour is also an important ‘stake inoculation’ cue used by these Italian politicians, something that was not present in the Northern Irish data analysed. Humour is used by the Italian socially conservative parties to create a narrative of ‘othering’ by ridiculing the ideology of the ‘other’, for example by saying that children will be taught that there are 58 genders and will change genders along with the weather. As mentioned, this humour also uses hyperbole, such as saying that little boys are forced to wear makeup. By belittling their opponents’ good sense, they undermine criticisms these opponents might make. In fact, in a world where society and mainstream culture as a whole is seen as *‘impazzita’* (‘gone crazy’), laughter is presented as a valid response for sensible, normal people.

In the English language data, ‘stake inoculation’ moves are more commonly made through shifting ‘footing’ by shifting pronouns. In the data, pronouns understandably differ depending on the interactive context: more singular first-person pronouns for interviews, first-person plural for speeches etc. However, taking this pattern into account, mapping pronoun use across the data showed that the DUP speakers tend to use first-person plural pronouns (*‘we’*) to group together commonly held, and correct views. Interestingly though, this use of the plural form is used for ‘stake inoculation’ by shifting blame. As an example from Arlene Foster, her use of ‘whilst we disagree’ offers a much more neutral formulation than would be accomplished with ‘whilst I disagree’. This use of the plural takes collective responsibility for unpopular views, while also shifting the ‘blame’ for differences of opinion onto both sides. It is a politeness move to minimise disagreement (Leech, 1983). By claiming that Foster is part of a larger group that are disagreeing, this formulation also makes any unpopular view seem more mainstream. This effect is amplified by frequent use of phrases such as ‘our faith communities’ and ‘our beliefs’, as well as of ‘our Assembly’ and ‘our constitution’ to add a sense of legitimacy to their viewpoints.

The DUP speakers tended to use first-person singular pronouns to present themselves as personally more tolerant than their wider community, or as a victim:

‘I want to acknowledge the contribution of the LGBT community.’

‘I am not opposed to homosexuals.’

‘I have seen things said about people from faith communities that have been hurtful.’

The clearest stake inoculation moves combine first person singular and plural pronouns. Singular pronouns attend cues to show that the individual themselves is personally open-minded. Then the plural form positions unpopular views with the wider community that these politicians serve, and then even wider traditions that they respect. An example from a parliamentary response on the issue of gay marriage demonstrates this ‘footing’ shift:

‘[It is] ... not because I oppose anyone [LGBTQ + people] on how they choose to live their lives but because we support something, and what we support Mr. Speaker, is the institution of marriage.’

This footing shift, combined with politeness moves such as formal address, offer a much more conciliatory presentation of self than is found in the Italian data.

## Conclusion

This study analysed the identity positioning work done in the discourse of conservative politicians from Northern Ireland and Northern Italy, providing a cross-cultural perspective on this kind of *phatic* communication. In common with other studies on conservative identity politics (e.g. Hanson et al., 2019; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019), this study provides further evidence of ways in which speakers make identity claims based on their political commitments. As mentioned above, thematic analysis in this study also found membership of a political tribe being signalled through adopting particular frames and lenses on social issues (Haidt, 2012; Kidder, 2016; Lakoff, 1996). However, there is much more to identity politics than political debate over policy choices or government intervention (Luttig, 2013).

This study also found evidence of how belonging as a conservative may relate more to self-definition than personal economic interests (McAdams et al., 2008). Claiming the position of conservative is a move that allows a person to also claim to be a particular kind of person with a particular (valued) life story (Brooks & Manza, 2013). In this study, this was linked to faith in both English and Italian data. So, while discourse may well focus on speakers positioning themselves around significant issues (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019), this positioning is also a presentation of self as a particular kind of individual (Hanson et al., 2019). This is particularly the case when self-narratives about suffering for these causes amplify the positive effect of associating with them. In the

identity work analysed in this study, associating with suffering to defend conservative political positions offers individuals access to valuable positions of being faithful, self-reliant, successful and far-sighted (Gross et al., 2011).

In this study, a key driver of identity positioning work was ‘stake inoculation’. Throughout cues and claims offered, the presentations of self consistently relate to defence against accusations of bigotry and other pejorative claims. This study identified four main strategies for stake inoculation. The first of these is associated with particular frames, or values, of family, faith, freedom and societal collapse. These moves occurred frequently in both language datasets. This strategy was amplified by a second strategy of the narratives of suffering and victimhood mentioned above. Additionally, positioning of self was done through ‘othering’ opponents, a move that is much more evident and aggressive in the Italian data and involves active impoliteness. The English language data, in contrast, is filled with politeness moves. Some represent positive politeness moves, as with the interview with Arlene Foster. There are also many negative politeness cues focussed on respecting others’ freedom of speech and conscience. In addition to this very distinct use (or not) of politeness, personal positioning moves were also accomplished through shifting footing through pronoun use and the use of humour to disarm potential criticism.

What was distinct between identity positioning moves in English and Italian was the regular use of oppositional ‘othering’ in Italian. In these moves, opponents were explicitly characterised as pernicious, and indeed insane. Italian conservative politicians thus cast themselves as heroic through aggressively opposing such people or groups. In contrast, this move was rare in the English-language data. Instead, focus was on using politeness to show reason and being long-suffering while genuinely representing their community. This seems an example of how identity positioning resources and habits differ in different cultural and linguistic settings. This difference shows that successful positioning work in the two languages requires somewhat different interpretative repertoire themes and quite different communicative strategies in building positive face relations.

## Notes

1. For instance, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx>.
2. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0AHRK1MyO4>.
3. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BC5oSJO3NnE>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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