COVID-19 and the Notion of 'South-Working' in Italy's Discourse: Origins and Narrative

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate the notion of 'south working' – a word which has been used in Italian discourse during the pandemic – and to explore the origins and different narratives associated with this terminology. To this end, a dataset consisting of newspaper articles was compiled and examined, in order to understand the possible meanings attached to 'south working' and their discursive contexts.

1. Introduction

The effects that COVID-19 has had on our lives are there for all to see. In addition to affecting our social relationships, the new coronavirus has played havoc with labour markets, significantly impacting the world economy. Disruption to production has now spread to supply chains across the world. All businesses, regardless of size, are facing serious challenges, with a real threat of significant declines in revenue, insolvencies and job losses in specific sectors (ILO, 2020). As a result, the health emergency we have experienced is likely to have dire consequences in financial terms.

Against this depressing backdrop, the way language has adapted – and has been used – to depict this new scenario should be given consideration. It has been argued that language users construe interaction contexts based on more general, socio-political knowledge and ideologies, and in-group and out-group relationships (Van Dijk, 2009). Recently, the communicative strategies employed in these interaction contexts have been fine-tuned to frame the emergency situation. It might thus be interesting to investigate how those contextual influences contribute to meaning creation or re-adaptation, due to the fact that language can properly construct

meaning when it is part of a wider social event (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

During the pandemic, language has resorted to a number of mechanisms to characterise novel discursive situations. In some cases, terminology has been borrowed from military discourse to refer to the spread of the virus and attempts to contain it. Examples include the use of 'curfew', 'lockdown', and 'red areas', with military metaphors being employed on a large scale when depicting an ontological, war-like scenario (Aaltola, 2012). In other cases, a shift from a specialised to a non-specialised register has been made in order to inform the public and ensure understanding of information about the pandemic (e.g. from 'coronavirus SARS-CoV-2' to 'COVID-19'). This is widespread practice, particularly when engaging with the general audience on issues of public concern (Pietrucci, 2020). In some other cases, new terms have been coined to define new social facts. In other words, the fundamental nominative function of language is used to document socially-relevant experiences, developed through different forms of nominalisation (Martseva, Snisar, Kobenko, & Girfanova, 2018).

It is precisely this latter aspect that will be examined in this paper, namely how new terms are coined to connote novel facts or situations taking place over a given timeframe. To illustrate, the expression 'south working' (also spelled 'south-working' or 'southworking') will be analysed, along with its usage in Italian discourse. The definition of 'south working' will be looked at, to understand whether or not this terminology falls within the definition of a 'neologism' (Section II). An analysis will be then supplied of a dataset purposely created, casting light on the narrative featuring the different meanings attributed to 'south working' in the Italian context (Section III). Finally, some concluding remarks will summarise the main research findings (Section IV). This research will contribute to understanding the word-creation process and the way new expressions can take on multiple meanings in discourse.

2. What Do We Mean by 'South Working'?

With a view to contextualising the meaning of 'south working', it is necessary to consider the frame of reference in which this expression originated. This is so because, as a social construct, language cannot be divorced or examined separately from the social context in which it is used (Gee, 2010). In the first months of 2020, COVID-19 reared its ugly head in Italy, with northern regions – particularly Lombardy – being hit harder by the pandemic. Following the government's decision to impose a total lockdown throughout Italy, companies made provisions to allow employees to work remotely. As a result, many people from Italy's southern regions who had moved to northern cities for reasons of work, decided to return to their hometown and work from there. This enabled them to save money – e.g. on utilities and rent – spend time with their families and avoid isolation. A new expression was therefore coined to refer to this phenomenon, 'south working', that is working from Italy's southern regions, which traditionally offer fewer job opportunities than northern ones. In order to understand whether or not this terminology can be regarded as a proper neologism, the starting point should be to define what a neologism is. It should be noted at the onset that it is difficult to provide a comprehensive definition of a 'neologism', because most definitions are quite broad, imprecise or circular (Fjeld & Nygaard, 2012). Nevertheless, according to Newmark,

neologisms can be new coined lexical units, or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense. Importantly, Newmark argues that they usually arise in response to a particular need (Newmark, 1988). 'South working' constitutes a case in point, in that this terminology developed in the context of the pandemic to denote a kind of working arrangement adopted in Italy. The other aspect that needs stressing concerns the word-forming process leading up to the creation of 'south working'. Bearing in mind Newmark's classification of neologisms (1988), it might be argued that 'south working' can be seen as a combination of old words to which new meaning has been assigned. Yet the expression under evaluation here is peculiar for a number of reasons and somewhat escapes the attempt to classify it using Newmark's categories. English has been used to denote a phenomenon that, to the author's knowledge, is specific to Italy. Frequently, terms and concepts are borrowed from English in order to create neologisms in other languages (Haddad & Montero-Martinez, 2020). While this is a widespread practice, it bears emphasising that in some cases, the influence of English to conceptualise country-specific phenomena has attracted criticism, as the inability to create novel terms and ideas using a national language might impoverish country-level conceptual systems (Bourdiet, 2016). The other peculiarity of 'south working' is that its meaning is likely to be opaque to an English native speaker who is not familiar with the Italian context. As noted by Kvaran and Svavarsdòttir (2002), neologisms with no direct formal connection to English are being formed from native stems or affixes to render new terms or concepts. These might include compounds and derivations as well as the attribution of new meanings to existing words.

Neologisms take time to set in. Furthermore, their consolidation is far from linear. Referring to the work of Schmid (2008) and Lipka, Handl and Falkner (2004), Anesa has described the acceptance path as consisting of three main phases. First, there is 'lexicalisation', which is concerned with the structural development of a term or the nonce-form serving to express a new meaning. Then there is 'institutionalisation', which is the integration of an item having a special form or meaning into the existing stock of words as a generally accepted and current lexeme. Finally, 'hypostatisation' takes place, namely the cognitive consolidation of the neologism in speakers' minds. This last stage ensures that a lexical unit becomes part of a mental lexicon (Anesa, 2018). Evidently, the boundaries between these three stages are sometimes blurred and might overlap. However, they are useful to become acquainted with the consolidation path of a new word entering a language. In considering the usage of 'south working' in Italian discourse, it might be argued that this coinage might enter phase II – i.e. institutionalisation – if one considers the classification referred to above.

Significantly, many have linked the expression 'south working' to 'smart working' – as they share the same lexical structure – because it is believed that the former might have been created as a calque of the latter. In Italian discourse, 'smart working' is usually employed to refer to remote working, with this second expression being more widespread than the first in the English language. By way of contrast, in the UK the most widely used term appears to be 'working from home', often in the form of an acronym, WFH. For the sake of clarity, it should be stressed that a difference is usually made between 'smart working' and *telelavoro* ('teleworking' in English) in that the adjective 'smart' also presupposes the opportunity to operate away from the employer's premises, as long as work assignments are complied with.

Consequently, two expressions already exist in Italian discourse to refer to the notion of remote working – 'smart working' and *telelavoro* – though some differences exist between them. For this reason, the question arises as to why 'south working' has entered the language to denote what appears to be the same concept, i.e. working away from the business premises, especially in consideration of the fact that words come into existence to describe *new* phenomena (Gryniuk, 2015, emphasis added). The next section will try to look at this aspect, exploring the narrative featuring the usage of 'south working' in Italian discourse.

3. Analysis and Discussion

In order to examine the way and the extent to which 'south working' is used in the national context, a dataset was compiled consisting of the occurrences found in the material scrutinised. As the expression under evaluation has mostly developed in journalistic discourse, the corpus investigated consists of newspaper articles. From a methodological point of view, the dataset was created considering the period from February 2020 to October 2020. The reason for examining this timeframe lies in the fact that this research is intended to take into account both the first and the second wave of COVID-19. While it is true that 'south working' entered Italian discourse during the first lockdown, this way of organising work was implemented also during the second wave of the pandemic, i.e. from August 2020 onwards. As for the material investigated, the dataset includes articles from the 25 most-read newspapers in Italy (sports dailies were not considered) based on the information retrieved from *Accertamento Diffusione Stampa*, a well-established company providing reliable data on daily newspaper circulation (Table 1). The web-accessible version of each newspaper was consulted. Furthermore, the dataset was compiled by entering 'south working', 'south-working' or 'southworking' in the search engine, situating the terminology under evaluation and collecting relevant online information, i.e. usage and co-textual aspects. Search engines are generally acknowledged as being particularly useful for language scholars, as they lend themselves to different uses (Bergh & Zanchetta, 2008). In our case, the dataset will serve a two-fold purpose. It will help to understand the frequency of this terminology in the timeframe considered. Furthermore, it will provide insights into the narrative behind its usage, i.e. promoting the social construction of this expression in a way that advances a concept and a practice of change (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). We now consider the values and meanings associated with this terminology when examined in context.

Table 1. Italy's daily newspapers, by circulation. Average number of copies sold per month

(as of September 2020)

	Daily	Circulation
1	Corriere della Sera	256,727
2	Repubblica (la)	217,203
3	Stampa (La)	149,365
4	Avvenire	118,810
5	Giornale (Il)	110,751
6	QN-Il Resto del Carlino	106,967
7	Messaggero (Il)	93,538

8	Sole-24 Ore (Il)	89,471
9	Fatto Quotidiano (Il)	79,649
10	Libero	77,093
11	Qn-La Nazione	76,998
12	Verita'(La)	67,942
13	Gazzettino (Il)	54,144
14	Secolo XIX (Il)	43,833
15	Qn-Il Giorno	40,174
16	Tirreno (Il)	40,152
17	Messaggero Veneto	39,548
18	Manifesto (Il)	39,040
19	Dolomiten	38,336
20	Unione Sarda (L')	36,382
21	Mattino (Il)	35,935
22	Eco di Bergamo (L')	32,749
23	Arena (L')	31,188
24	Gazzetta di Parma	30,730
25	Nuova Sardegna (La)	30,700

Source: Accertamento Diffusione Stampa, 2020.

Based on the analysis conducted on the dataset above, the expression 'south working' occurred 59 times. Yet a co-textual analysis, namely the examination of the co-textual surroundings of keywords (Jeffries & Walker, 2019) provides us with further information in relation to the meaning attributed to this terminology in everyday discourse. Table 2 shows the narrative associated with this expression in the dataset examined:

Table 2. 'South working' and its narrative in Italian discourse

	Narrative	Frequency
1	'South working' as a work-related concept	25
2	'South working' as a concept related to urban development	19
3	'South working' as a concept related to social empowerment	15

We now examine in detail the three possible meanings linked to the expression 'south working', bearing in mind that some degree of overlapping might exist between the following distinctions and that this terminology might evoke other mental associations.

3.1 'South Working' as a Work-Related Concept

The first, and perhaps most obvious, usage of 'south working' in the texts examined simply referred to this terminology as a new way of working. In other words, the narrative surrounding this expression refers to changes to work arrangements, i.e. working away from business premises. Due to the pandemic, many workers were given the opportunity to work remotely

and decided to do so returning to their hometown. In considering Gee's notion of 'situated meaning' – which arises because particular language forms take on specific or situated meanings in different, specific contexts of use (Gee, 2010) – we might argue that 'south working' was thus originally created to denote a type of remote work carried out from one's place of origin, i.e. southern Italy in our case. In this sense, the meaning of 'south working' and 'smart working' – the other expression used in Italian to refer to remote working – overlap so they are frequently used synonymously. When referring to 'south working' simply as remote work, the narrative dimension accompanying its usage is therefore concerned with the technological or innovative dimension. In this sense, this narrative of change allows people to understand the world in the terms of the discourse and social practices that reproduce this worldview as truth (Doolin, 2003). The dataset includes numerous examples of this kind: a) *South-working, il pc sotto l'ombrellone* (Our translation: 'South working', the laptop under the beach umbrella, *Il Manifesto*, 31 August 2020) b) *'South working', lavorando da casa in videoconferenza con Torino, Yerevan e Quito* (Our translation: 'South working', working from home making conference calls with Turin, Yerevan and Quito, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 June 2020).

3.2 'South Working' as a Concept Related to Development

Analysing the way 'south working' is used in the dataset compiled, it can be noted that – besides being seen as a relatively new working mode – its meaning is also associated with the idea of urban development. Drawing on Shi-xu, Prah, Pardo (2016), the notion of 'development' here is intended as both a cultural-discursive phenomenon and a cultural-communicative event (Shi-xu, Prah & Pardo, 2016). In this sense, two competing narratives emerge concerning city development. On the one hand, the discourse related to northern cities expresses a fear for the economic consequences resulting from people working remotely from their southern hometowns. Accordingly, preoccupation arises with this new state of affairs, e.g. *Effetto south working, le città del Nord si svuotano* (Our translation: "northern cities empty due to south-working", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 27 July 2020) or *south working: I lavoratori abbandonano definitivamente le città* (Our translation: "south working: workers leave cities for good", *Il Manifesto*, 22 June 2020). This is such a relevant issue that people holding a position of authority – e.g. Milan's mayor, Sala – step in to voice concerns with this state of affairs – *Sala: è tempo di tornare a lavorare negli uffici* (Our translation: Sala: "It is time to go back to work in offices", *la Repubblica*, 19 June 2020). Interestingly, this latter example might be seen as illustrative of influential power, whereby speakers attempt to make people behave in a certain way or change their opinions and attitudes, without any imposition (Fairclough, 2014). On the other hand, southerners – who have traditionally suffered from lower levels of growth and development – see this as an opportunity to repopulate the areas in which they live. The narrative is thus different and this phenomenon is viewed positively, e.g. *Il south working produce un fenomeno migratorio alla rovescia* (Our translation: "Southworking is giving rise to a reverse migration process", *Avvenire*, 22 October 2020). The fact that the expression under evaluation might take on both a positive or a negative connotation further confirms Gee's view that, from a discourse-analysis perspective, words do not have general meanings, because meanings are closely linked to and vary across different social and cultural

groups, depending on contexts of use (Gee, 2010).

3.3 'South Working' as a Concept Related to Social Empowerment

At a higher level of abstraction, 'south working' is frequently used to refer to what can be defined as 'social empowerment' for Italy's southern regions. In other words, the fact that highly educated professionals return to their hometown in the south to work remotely might also provide the opportunity to deal with the economic and social inequalities existing between Italy's southern and northern regions. To many, this might be the starting point to foster development in remote areas, with the help especially of young graduates possessing high levels of expertise who might contribute to the local economy in a number of ways. This function of language is well known from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, in that it helps to analyse the ideological and asymmetrical power imbalances that impede social-political and cultural processes (Bhatia, 2017). The narrative accompanying the use of 'south working' serving this purpose in the texts examined is characterised by hope and emotional resonance: a) *South-working: Bentornati al Sud, con un posto al Nord* (Our translation: "South-working: Welcome back to the south, with a job in the north", *la Repubblica*, 6 November 2020) b) *South-working, un'occasione per il Mezzogiorno* (Our translation: "South-working, an opportunity for the *Mezzogiorno*", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 13 October 2020) c) *il South working rimette in moto attività spazzate via dalla emarginazione delle zone interne* (Our translation: "South-working will breathe new life into those businesses swept away by the marginalisation of internal areas", *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, 10 September 2020). Consequently, the discourse revolving around the use of 'south working' seems to instil new hope in southerners. This usage shows how discursive events can have a co-constitutive relationship with the social and institutional contexts within which they take place, as they are also socially conditioned by the local and macro contexts in which they occur (Bhatia, 2011). Related to the aspects discussed above is the fact that the texts examined might also perform a promotional function – as a way to attract human capital and possible resources – exemplifying what has been termed 'genre colonisation' (Bhatia, 2004), i.e. in our case, the intertwining of the promotional and the journalistic genre. The persuasive character of these texts is evident considering that two further expressions have been created out of 'south working' highlighting the benefits of working from southern areas: 'sea working' and 'holiday working'. They are both concerned with the opportunity to enjoy fine weather and spectacular views while working, without having to deal with traffic jams and other stressful conditions: a) *Sea Working: Un ufficio vista mare per attrarre i nomadi digitali* (Our translation: "Sea working: an office with a sea view to attract digital nomads", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 5 September 2020) b) *Cura anti-Covid con esperienze virtuali e holiday working* (Our translation: "Virtual experiences and holiday working against COVID-19", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 5 October 2020). It remains to be seen whether these expressions will consolidate in Italian. However, from a discursive perspective, it is interesting to note that because of the specific nature of the product, this terminology aims to rationally appeal to the professional needs of the target audience as well as their emotions (Gesuato, 2011).

4. Conclusions

This paper attempted to fulfil two objectives. On the one hand, the aim was to illustrate the origins of 'south working', a coinage used in Italian at the height of the pandemic. On the other hand, the paper also examined the narrative featuring the expression when examined in context, i.e. the possible meanings attributed to this terminology.

In relation to the origins of 'south working', it can be noted that this expression came into use during the first lockdown. As a response to the public health emergency, the opportunity was given to employees to work from home. Accordingly, those who were originally from southern regions decided to return there temporarily and work from their hometown. In considering language in terms of social interaction, neologisms are intended to connote novel situations. In this regard, 'south working' well exemplifies how language use is shaped by and evolves with social change. However, we saw that 'south working' cannot be regarded as a proper neologism. It is not a new expression – i.e. it constitutes a calque of 'smart working', which in Italy refers to remote work – and does not denote a completely new situation. The meaning of 'south working' and 'smart working' thus overlaps when referring to working away from the employer's premises. So, if south working is another way of referring to remote work, why has this expression become so popular during the pandemic? The answer to this question can be found by considering the term at a higher level of abstraction, looking at the narrative characterising the usage of 'south working' in the dataset examined. The novel character of 'south working' lies in the fact that work can be carried out from one's place of origin, mostly from the south. Unlike remote work – and its Italian cousin 'smart-working' – 'south working' is charged with further meaning related to two additional aspects, i.e. city development and social empowerment. 'South working' denotes an opportunity for growth as people repopulate southern areas. A larger number of people living in these cities foster development in different sectors, benefitting from the many advantages from living there – e.g. the low cost of living, proximity to family, and less traffic, to name but a few. The 'development' theme is closely related to the 'empowerment' one. Bringing educated citizens back to the south through what has been termed 'reverse drain brain' might finally help poorer and less developed areas to reduce the gap with more developed regions. Consequently, most texts analysed constituted an attempt to legitimise the return to the hometown, stressing enthusiastically the reasons why employees should 'go back home'. Examining the narrative surrounding the use of this terminology, it might be argued that the novel character of 'south working' can be found not so much in describing a way of organising work, but rather in encouraging workers to return to the south. This legitimation is evident when investigating the relations between the usage of 'south working' and the broader social context, for this link is not always visible and explicit. And this can only be evident when discourse is seen not as a product but as a practice, which is performed through language itself (Doudaki, 2020).

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