

Semantics of Sexual Violence: The “Imperfect Victims” in the Italian Media

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Starting from an etymological analysis of rape in the Indo-European language family, we want to trace the historical and semantic roots of this lexeme, in order to review its semantic and pragmatic development in the perception of Italian speakers. Our aim is to read and understand the rape victim socio-cultural stigma in collective imagination. It is therefore possible to reconstruct the lexical, socio-semiotic, and narrative domain anticipating the phenomenology of victim blaming, which characterizes the media narratives of sexual violence. The victimological profile, socially expected and culturally accepted, seems to support the original semantic connotation of the Latin word *stuprum*, that is “corruption of virginity”, “contamination of purity”. Many typical mainstream discourses examined, through special “gender lenses”, provide portraits of imperfect, ambiguous, unreliable victims because they are deemed guilty of not being holy enough.

Keywords: rape culture, Italy, victim blaming, semantics, media studies, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Back to the (Etymological) Roots of Rape: Semantic Evolution and Cultural Practices

For my dissertation, I assume as a starting point, on a preliminary and prerequisite level, an etymological analysis of the Italian lexical unit “stupro” (the equivalent of “rape”), to retrace its semantic evolution starting from the original roots and continuing along the lexicographic experience of the word and the respective notional field, in order to understand and render the social and cultural stigma that follows, to date, in the collective imagination.

The identification of the meaning substrate of this lemma, or rather, of its primitive root, gives it an original semasiological and conceptual saturation, redefining the relationships of signification in light of its constitutive and primordial connotative value. The interest in the evolution of the semantic-lexical networks that have involved, in diachrony, the term “stupro” and many respective corradicals, stems from the observation of the singularity of Italian, among Romance languages, in the use of this signifier in relation to the crime of sexual violence.

Indeed, in the other Neo-Latin languages, the extension of the ancient root *vi-* has prevailed (from where the Latin words *vis*, “strength”, and *vir*, “man”, come) thus, corresponding to Italian “stupro”, we find the following lexical units:

- fr. *viol*, *violeur* (together with the syntagmatic form *agression sexuelle*)
- sp. *violaciòn*, *violado* (in addition to *agresión sexual* and *asalto sexual*)

- pt. *violação, violador* (but *estupro* also appears among the synonymous lexical variants)
- rum. *viol, violare*.

Next, we propose a synoptic table that summarizes the main developments from the Proto-Indo-European root to which the lexeme “rape” can be reasonably traced (see Table 1).

Table 1

I.E. <i>tud, tup, *(s)teu-</i> : ‘to make a strong movement between two points’, ‘to hit’, ‘to push’ (literally and figuratively)			
Sanskrit	Old Indian	Ancient Greek	Latin
			<i>stupeo</i> ‘be hit’
<i>tud, tudati;</i> <i>tup, tupati</i> ‘hit’, ‘push’	<i>tòpati, tupati;</i> <i>tùmpati, tumpàti</i> ‘hit’, ‘hurt’	<i>týptō</i> ‘hit’, ‘beat on’	<i>stupidus</i> ‘struck in the mental faculty’ <i>stupro</i> ‘violate’, ‘desecrate’, ‘dishonor’

OLD (*The Oxford Latin Dictionary*) provides the following definition of the Latin word *stuprare*: “to have illicit sexual intercourse with, violate the chastity of; (transf.) to defile by licentious conduct”, which shows the essential semantic extension of its continuator in Italian.

The Latin noun *stuprum*, beyond the fulfillment of that expressed by the verb *stuprare*, indicates more generically “dishonor”, “shame”, “disgrace”.

In *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, the lemma *stuprum* is explained as “defilement, dishonor, disgrace, violation, outrage, incest, lust”.

Since we have employed the metaphor of the roots to restore, even visually, the scientific-methodological function of rape’s etymological inquiry, we can now proceed along this metaphorical tree-like verticalism, moving on to the “trunk” of the question. Just as in a tree the trunk contains thin channels that carry nourishment from roots to leaves, so dictionaries support and nourish the mental encyclopedia of the speaking community, representing the main vectors of lifeblood for the evergreen “forest of symbols” in a language’s available lexical repertoire.

The examination of some lexicographic items related to the noun “stupro” intends to retrace the evolutionary trajectory of the word, which since the beginning assumes different semasiological declinations according to the context of use, moving along a lexical spectrum that, from the widest and abstract notional items of “shame” and “turpitude”, proceeds towards a clearer and more concrete semantic specialization of “adultery”, “incest”, “corruption of virginity”.

Among the many, we present a brief review of the first definitions of “stupro” provided by the most important historical dictionaries of the Italian language.

[1] TLIO (*Treasure of the Italian Language of Origin*)

1. Sexual intercourse with a virgin consumed outside of marriage.

1.1 Incest.

1.2 Sexual intercourse carried out under threat or violence.

[2] GDLI (*Grand Dictionary of the Italian Language*)

1. Act of sexual violence; carnal intercourse obtained and committed by violence or threat against an adult person or committed against children and the mentally infirm. In particular: according to medieval Christian

mores and in ancient law, sexual intercourse with a virgin woman outside of marriage, especially if against her will.

2. Extens. Sinful and lascivious sexual intercourse; fornication; adultery.

[3] *Tommaseo-Bellini Dictionary*

1. Corruption of virginity; criminal act of violating a maiden.

Furthermore, in the digitized lexicographic corpus, obtained from the five editions of the *Crusca* vocabulary, “stupro” appears on 34 occasions, in relation to the notions of “deflowering”, so “corrupting the flower of virginity”.

The excursus among Italian language dictionaries has shown how the notion of infraction and corruption has long resisted and prevailed in the definition of rape.

If we also retrieve the ancestral notion of “to hit”, inherent in the Indo-European root from which *stuprum*, we can say that the female victim is certainly “stupid”, that is literally “hit”.

The adjective *stupidus* is a deverbal of *stupeo*, which can be translated as “to be stunned”, “to be struck”, therefore “to be astonished”, “to admire”, “to look at with amazement”. On the other hand, even the nominal equivalent *stupor* has the double meaning of “daze”, “numbness”, “insensitivity”, but also “wonder”, “amazement”.

At this time, it is reasonable to wonder whether the same semantic ambiguity applies to *stuprum*, according to the double meaning of the original root.

In this regard, it is instructive to mention M. Morello about rape in the Romanistic legal system:

Sexual violence can be considered not just as an aggression against the person who has suffered it, but also and above all, in a first case, as an insult to her honor, virginity, chastity, and in a second case, to her family, marriage, widowhood. [...] In order for rape to be deemed violent, it was necessary for the woman to offer physical, active, and recognizable resistance: that is, she would have to scream so loudly that she could be heard. Her resistance had to be firm, unequivocal, and constant, before, during, and after the violence. [...]

For a prostitute, the injury is thought to be diminished because she only offends sexual freedom and not shame, and even the intent seems to be mitigated by the assumption that the resistance of those in the habit of lending themselves to the others desires, is not strict and effective. (Morello, 2013, p. 101)

Therefore, it is possible to glimpse a semantic relationship that links *stupor* and *stuprum*: the victim of sexual violence has the burden of expressing unequivocally and demonstrating with certain evidence her strenuous resistance to carnal union. Otherwise, a margin of reasonable doubt creeps in, undermining her credibility as a victim. Actually, if she proves to be “stupid”, that is, struck, astonished, inert, stunned, and therefore not sufficiently tough in her opposition to the rapist, then it is legitimate to suspect that she is not “struck”, but “guilty”.

Here then that the victim is not only “stupid”, but *stupens*, therefore presumably proponent of an active involvement in carnal pleasure, in that etymological “strong movement between two points”, amazed, fascinated, seduced ... corrupted.

The concept of damage, shattering, naturally implies a whole, perfect, compact precedent. An action, in order to be corruptive, must be launched on something intact, whole, therefore “virgin”. Moreover, the strong correlation between virginity and rape is evident in the phraseme “territorial rape”, used exactly to stigmatize human activities of pollution and contamination of lush, healthy natural landscapes, not yet perturbed by anthropic interference.

We are going to analyze, in the actual linguistic-communicative behaviors of speakers, the perceptual phenomenology of rape, when the victim does not meet the requirements of integrity and perfection, socially, culturally, and historically codified. The aim is to identify some representative traits of the socio-semiotic and media narrative of sexual violence against women, who are already considered corrupt, spoiled, not illibate and free from emotional, family and marital ties.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Social Practices in Mass Media Narratives

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was born and developed with the aim of describing, analyzing, understanding, and eventually dealing with socially relevant events, questions, or problems, integrating a socio-cognitive approach to the more strictly linguistic-communicative one. Discourses reproduce and reflect a community system of values, beliefs, and attitudes towards facts and situations with a particular social relevance, therefore they consist of a plastic set of semantic macro-structures, to which are implied mental models that legitimize nature and existence itself.

Media discourses, like all others, are first and foremost social practices or, rather, places of representation and reshaping of other social practices.

The analysis of television thus becomes an attractive research ground for pragmatic semiotics and the sociology of culture, which offers useful critical tools to decode the role of mediology in the construction of the community identity. In this case, the objective is to identify the explaining and representative practices of a court case of rape against young victims.

In 2019, UNESCO published a dossier to raise awareness of the media to address the issue of violence with the right language, in a balanced and ethical way. UNESCO appealed to journalists to pay attention to the mediatic practice of “victim blaming”: dealing with gender-based violence means investigating prejudices and stereotypes and breaking the silence to bring violence out of the private sphere. “Media are our windows to the world” (the dossier states), but equally they are fed by our cultural and cognitive semantic parameters.

Already in Italy the “Manifesto of journalists for respect and gender equality in information” was signed and approved. In this document, it is considered a priority to include mandatory deontological training on the appropriate language in cases of violence against women. In the more general obligation of a correct and conscious use of language, it is necessary to avoid expressions that are disrespectful, denigrating, harmful or degrading of women’s identity and dignity; misleading terms such as “love”, “raptus”, “madness”, “jealousy”, “passion” combined with crimes dictated by the will of possession and annihilation; the use of stereotyped images and signs or that reduce the woman to a mere “sexual attraction” or “object of desire” (FNSI, 2017).

The Rape Culture in Italian Infosphere: Is Rape Still “Violation of a Virgin”?

By the syntagm “rape culture” we mean a culture supportive of rape, historically validated and corroborated by a range of linguistic and socio-cultural practices. Specifically,

It is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It occurs in a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself and both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable as death or taxes. (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993)

So if rape is, to say the least, acceptable, the victim who decides to report it publically immediately becomes a defendant. The stereotype that women exaggerate, dramatize events to attract attention or notoriety

is so strong that it distorts the common perception of facts: it follows that “being raped” becomes “having sex” with an ardent man you couldn’t resist (Di Nicola, 2018, p. 169).

The victim blaming practices that occur in courtrooms are nothing more than a mirror of the toxic narratives of sexual violence, which rest on the “double standard” paradigm by which each woman is evaluated “either pure and virginal or promiscuous and easy” (Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 13).

According to the principle that only that which is inherently intact and chaste can be violated, the perfect (therefore credible) rape victim has the burden of proving her purity, of providing evidence of her holiness. If not, she will merely be “one who asked for it”.

This bias is just partially disproved by rape narratives that contemplate Italian victims and foreign rapists, African immigrants in particular. Indeed, in such cases we witness a strident intersectional idiosyncrasy, in which the matrix of racial hatred overcomes sexist and misogynistic stereotypes.

Here are just a few headlines that are part of the political and communicative manipulation of rape in aid of national sovereignty and anti-migration plans:

- “Effects of Conte’s policies: immigrant rapes elderly woman on train” (*Il Pomeridiano*, 8/12/2020)
- “Milan, Egyptian immigrant rapes San Raffaele hospital employee” (*Liberio*, 29/08/2021)
- “Padua, Pakistani immigrant rapes 30-year-old woman in a store” (*Secolo d’Italia*, 8/12/2021)
- “The shocking tale of the woman raped in the elevator by the illegal immigrant” (*Il Giornale*, 18/01/2022)
- “Punched and raped by an immigrant: the horror of a 60-year-old woman in Cesena” (*Il Primato Nazionale*, 14/02/2022).

But what happens when the rapist is Italian, young, rich, powerful and charming? At this point a literal narrative and iconographic redefinition of the victims takes place, in function of a diegetic development of the media case that promptly digresses the news boundaries to reach the mainstream narrative domain of infotainment.

Along these lines is one of the most emblematic media cases of the Italian “rape culture” of the last decade, that of the businessman Alberto Genovese, arrested in November 2020 on charges of rape against a girl, who had been previously narcotized and kidnapped for twenty-four hours in a Milan loft during a party organized by him.

The court case quickly became a matter of record and soon, from newspapers and news programs, it bounced into the main TV talk shows and began to appear and to dominate the programming outline of well-known programs of generalist TV networks.

On the first morning of November 9, 2020, the national daily newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* published an article that seemed to be an eulogy of the alleged rapist, who was described as “a volcano of ideas and projects that, for the moment, has been extinguished”. The journalist continues: “Alberto Genovese, 43 years old, businessman (...), after graduating in Economics at the Bocconi University of Milan, has not stopped for a moment. Now he will be forced to stop (...) waiting for the judicial developments (...)”.

“Micro-machist” narratives immediately create a semantic and notional field that ends up edifying and sublimating the suspect.

Alba Parietti, a popular TV pundit, spoke this way in the TV program *Storie Italiane*:

I know him and I attended him for a couple of dinners, he was not a rich man but very rich, considered by his friends as a God, with a delirium of omnipotence and a series of consequent behaviors: he had a court disposable, this gentleman paid for everyone, he had an enormous largesse towards the court, both women and men, he was adored and worshipped.

At the microphones of another TV show, Genovese's girlfriend talks about him saying: "we had a normal life, like normal lovers (...) with me he was never violent, he was caring, protective and generous".

The writer and journalist Gabriele Parpiglia in an interview defines Alberto Genovese "a naked king" and "fallen king", repeating and exasperating the magnificent self-portrait of Genovese, telling the "decadence of a myth".

The diegetic character of Genovese reaches the sensationalistic acme in the editorial of *Liberio* journalist Vittorio Feltri. We reproduce some key passages of the article, which effectively trace and exemplify the cognitive and imaginative script that unfolds in public opinion for the chronicles of rape.

I understand that Genovese (...) habitually pushes the accelerator on the road to pleasure. No one would condemn him for these digressions. Of course, he liked women and I don't think he struggled to get them in quantity. What need did he have to resort to rape to take possession of a beautiful and young girl, after having drugged her with exciting substances? This is logically incomprehensible.

Personally, I have found that it is difficult to fuck a girl who gives it to you willingly. They say that Genovese went on all night long to rape Michela... which seems to be the third time that she went to the house of our fucking "hero". (...) After having penetrated the girl you are not satisfied? Go ahead and do it until dawn. What a strength! Are you a man or a hedgehog? Agreed that Genovese was aroused by the cocaine, but that doesn't justify so much overkill on the pussy.

These are instead the words that the journalist gives to Michela, the young victim of the rape.

As for poor Michela, I wonder: when she went into the resident's bedroom, what did she think she was going to do, pray the rosary? Didn't she suspect that at some point she would have to take off her panties without knowing when she would be ready to put them back on? To the victim we grant the general extenuating circumstances, to his parents we box the ears.

These last assertions open a spiral of hate speeches that hit the girls who have accused Alberto Genovese of sexual violence and against whom a real media "shitstorm" of victim blaming is unleashed.

In February 2021, *Mow.mag* magazine published a photo of two young victims on its cover, writing that they "have made a mistake".

In the infotainment program *Ore 14*, broadcast in the day-time of Rai2, appear cover titles such as "Beautiful life and easy money, young people without rules", "Beautiful girls among sex, drugs and private jets", "Alleged victims agree", "Drugs and violence, the sad good life of girls".

The anchorman himself states that these girls are "all very young, with a certain orientation, a certain desire to have fun, in a certain way" so "such serious facts are consumed", and adds: "the group of girls who arrive at Genovese's house are not a group of shy girls".

In the same program, the lawyer Annamaria Bernardini De Pace declares what follows.

The girls are not just victims, there are infinite nuances between one thing and another. Certainly (...) the girls knew where they were going, they knew what was going on, they knew there were drugs, they knew they could get them for free or by exchanging themselves for drugs. We can't pretend that they are madonnas, we can't sanctify them just because in hypothesis there is a victim, in hypothesis.

"They are not madonnas", "we cannot sanctify them": for such reasons it is licit to doubt, therefore to investigate the private profile of the girls, scanning the range of the "infinite nuances" to which the lawyer refers, or perhaps, more properly, we should talk about infinite "cracks" from which it is possible to inspect the imperfection of the victims.

To evoke the Marian icon means, implicitly, to polarize the notion of femininity on opposite sides, the “immaculate virgin” on one side, the prostitute on the other, suggesting, once again, the ideological relation between rape, understood as an act of contamination and violation, and the illibate victim, starting from the assumption that it is not possible to break what is already broken or to contaminate what is already corrupted.

Conclusions

Concerning the perception of rape, the National Institute of Statistics on November 25, 2019 published data, updated to the year 2018, on the subject of prejudices of the Italian population on sexual violence, from which the following graph is derived (see Table 2).

Table 2

Prejudices about sexual violence (ISTAT 2018 - percentage values)	
Women who don't want intercourse are able to avoid it	39.3
Women can trigger sexual assault with their clothing	23.9
If a woman is raped while intoxicated or drugged, she is at least partially responsible for	15.1
Sexual assault allegations are often false	10.3

The media, like all forms of communication, live of languages, have a performative and creative power of reality. They have the power to feed, pass on, and reinforce these sociocultural biases through misleading narratives of gender-based violence.

Through the blending of slut shaming and victim blaming, the media are not only justifying sexual violence, but, implicitly, asking women to avoid being raped.

I quote in conclusion, the words of the Italian judge and writer, Paola Di Nicola: “it is unfortunate a people who need female saints to punish a rapist, abuser or molester”.

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