

# Accumulations of words: Lists in the Italian public discourse

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## ABSTRACT

In written and spoken language, lists are flexible instruments that take on different functions, such as grouping elements in a stable set or suggesting others to come. Umberto Eco perceives lists as a semiotic modality of vertigo-like accumulation, which offers a way to speak of something whose boundaries one does not know and to place a limit upon the entropy of the mass of things (Belknap 2004; Eco 2009). In public discourse, lists are a helpful device to express opinions and slogans in a constrained space (for example, on Twitter) through a cohesive and coherent collection of elements placed on the same level around a semantic area that the recipients must interpret. This article examines how verbal lists exploit two basic textual strategies in Italian public discourse. The first strategy consists of a collection with precise extensional boundaries and no alternative items. The second is an assortment of items that allude to a set of possibilities with nuanced extensional boundaries. Through these two strategies, the recipient can create two textual semiotic modalities due to the inference procedures: lists with a closed textual modality, *closed fabula*, and lists with an open textual modality, *open fabula* (Eco 1979a).

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## 1. A general outlook: putting things in order. Between everything-here lists and etcetera lists

According to Umberto Eco (2009), a way to represent something whose boundaries or limits one does not know is the list. It puts in order, organizes, and makes perceptible what appears as one and indistinct whole in reality. Lists are conceived as devices

employed to place a limit on the entropy of the mass of things in the world; they constitute a formally organized block of information composed of a class of items, forming relationships between each other: “if the items display no obvious relationships, no discernible pattern, the brain will invent relationships, imposing some arbitrary order on the disorderliness of the material” (Belknap 2004: 5). Archives, catalogues, and collections are among the many means by which we try to order our accumulation frenzy, not only of things, but also of data and information, and placing all of these in a list is one way to make this heap accessible and somehow legible (Eco 2009). Therefore, to be known and shared, the accumulation needs to be decoded and ordered: “every archive consists, in fact, of a certain accumulation of materials and requires a spatiality where these materials need to be stored and clustered for the embedding of memory and, therefore, of information” (Voto 2022: 50). Even ideas, concepts and experiences, whether abstract or concrete, need to be ordered and arranged clearly to be shared, so that the complexity of the concepts does not also influence the structures and linguistic forms used to convey the message. Putting in order implies finding coherence between the elements that comprise a list. Searching for a coherent and cohesive pattern builds relations between items linked through attraction forces. As Belknap suggests, “[lists] are plastic flexible structures in which an array of constituent units coheres through specific relations generated by specific forces of attraction” (2004: 2). In example (1),<sup>1</sup> the set leads the recipient to infer the virtual exclusion or inclusion of other possible items within the assembled category, such as drug addicts or homeless people.

- (1) [Thieves], [drug dealers] [or simply people in need of a roof over their heads to sleep]. You can find pretty much anything in the grand hotel of desperation that is via Cuneo.  
 [TorinoToday]

The nature of verbal lists is at once simple and complex. The structural simplicity of a list, ensured by the repetition of elements<sup>2</sup> of the same type, allows the recipient to focus on and interpret the more or less complex relations holding the elements together (Hofstadter 1979). Thus, the sense relations between the conjuncts are maximized, indicating which inferential processes create more or less stable categorizations. To organize the world’s entropy, we need to order, categorize, and archive it.

The recipients try to find the principles underlying the connections between items, recognizing a distinction between two types of lists,<sup>3</sup> the ones with the *everything-here*

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘class’ means any collection of individuals held together based on any criterion (semantic, discursive, metalinguistic or contextual) (Lyons 1977). The items of a class can be both abstract and concrete.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the elements which constitute a list will also be called items or conjuncts.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, every item in bold in a list is enclosed within square brackets [].

poetic (2) and the ones with the *etcetera* poetic (3) (Eco 2009). The former implement a *putting in form*, a confinement of what is said because all one wants to say is expressed fully, defining a referent (cf. Eco 2009:12). The latter, on the other hand, come to our rescue when what we want to say eludes our capacity for classification. Thus, they try to reduce the burden of the inexpressible: “the author tells us he is unable to say, and so he proposes a list very often as a specimen, example, or indication, leaving the reader to imagine the rest” (Eco 2009: 9).

- (2) In the morning, the former minister announces that [Renzi], [Gentiloni] [and Minniti] have accepted his proposal. But the former secretary hits the brakes: “They’re lifting vaccine mandates, and our guys are talking about dining out. That is crazy”. Zingaretti replies by spending the evening at a tavern with [an entrepreneur], [a student], [a professor], [an administrator], [a freelance professional], [a volunteer]. And in the end, even Calenda decides: “There’s no deal.” (Goffredo de Marchis, *La Repubblica*, September 17, 2018, Online article)
- (3) But afterward, Mother Leonora’s voice, composed again and sweet as always, would once more start murmuring beautiful words, like [‘infinity’], [‘blue’], [‘gentle’], [‘celestial’], [‘magnolias’]... How beautiful the names of flowers were: [‘geraniums’], [‘hydrangeas’], [‘jasmine’]...what marvellous sounds! Now, once she wrote the words down on the blank page, in black and white, she would never lose them, never again forget them.  
 [Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*]

According to Eco (2009), we can define *everything-here* lists through their relation with a possible world; they take on a purely referential function, indicating objects placed in an ordered fashion for practical purposes. In their attempt to make order, lists contribute to building a form, defining a closed and determined set, and obeying contextual pressures regulated by the constituent items. *Etcetera* lists, on the other hand, concern the sense of the inexpressible; they try to enumerate what escapes our control or our mind.<sup>4</sup> A list’s goal, therefore, is to order its elements by placing all of them on the same level so that they share one common property, expressed through the relations between conjuncts weaving ties. The need to describe a possible world is

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, we quote the words of Soren Kierkegaard from his work *Repetition* (1843:223) on the subject of the inexpressible and the use of imagination to find connections between seemingly distant elements: “A wit has said that one might divide humankind into officers, serving-maids, and chimneysweeps. To my mind, this remark is not only witty but profound, and it would require a great speculative talent to devise a better classification. When a classification does not ideally exhaust its object, a haphazard classification is altogether preferable because it sets imagination in motion”.

precisely expressed by the attempt to make a state of things clear and ordinate, and in doing so, one searches for elements that entertain relations of similarity and suggest an internal organization of the set that the list refers to. Due to this, Schiffrin (1994) considers lists as descriptive structures that allow to place distinct items inside a common conceptual space where different elements are placed on the same level. The list, therefore, becomes the linguistic reflex of the coexistence and cohabitation of the same elements in a conceptual space, also given by the repetition of the same structural and syntactic scheme (cf. Schiffrin 1994: 394). Insofar as it is an instrument to order objects, states of things and properties, the list searches for an underlying principle that can bring apparently different and distant elements closer. One could, therefore, conceive the list as the representation of an open structure (Eco 2009), which connects and ties together rather different elements to allow the recipient to attribute new senses and new possible orders. In example (4), taken from Saramago's *Death with Interruptions*, the items of the list cluster internally and describe different categories of individuals bound by blocks of common sense, like religion or justice. The conjuncts of the list do not present distinct and explicit relations with all the other conjuncts, but there is the general shared condition of immortality. Therefore, we can conceive lists as a net, which concatenates different parts, different conjuncts connectable to any other.

- (4) a whole country being given, so to speak, the elixir of eternal life, and not only [the believers], who, as is only logical, might expect to be singled out, but also [atheists], [agnostics], [heretics], [apostates], [unbelievers of every kind], [devotees of other religions], [the good], [the bad] [and the worse], [the virtuous] [and the maphiosi], [executioners] [and victims], [cops] [and robbers], [murderers] [and blood donors], [the mad] [and the sane], all, without exception, were at the same time witnesses and beneficiaries of the greatest marvel ever seen in the whole history of miracles, the eternal life of a body eternally bound to the eternal life of the soul. (José Saramago, *Death with Interruptions*)

Some lists seem like a deliberately chaotic mass of things, devoid of apparent relation, like the case of Borges's infamous Chinese list:

- (5) In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: [(a) belonging to the emperor], [(b) embalmed], [(c) tame], [(d) sucking pigs], [(e) sirens], [(f) fabulous], [(g) stray dogs], [(h) included in the present classification], [(i) frenzied], [(j) innumerable], [(k) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush], [(l) et cetera], [(m) having just broken the water pitcher], [(n) that from a long way off look like flies]. (Jorge Luis Borges, *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*)

Therefore, the main function of lists is to create order within a reality consisting of accumulations, catalogues, and sets. Upon closer observation, though, one can intuit that not all sets are defined by the same forces of attraction and the same objects, and, consequently, not all order-creating instruments follow the same principles (Gass 1985). So, a list can have a dual nature: on the one hand, there are the single conjuncts that compose it; on the other, the relations that surface between them, which make a mere sequence of items into an actual list. As Belknap notes, “lists are personal constructions that invite different interpretations from different readers. The value of lists is that they ask us to make them meaningful” (2004: xv).

Consequently, a list structure can be interpreted both as the sum of its parts, and as a global unity populated by elements simultaneously taken in their individuality and their relation with similar elements. One can, therefore, envision both an associative and a distributive nature, both relational and differential, in a constant fluctuation between the partition in single elements and the inclusion given by the forces that keep the items together (Burke 1979; Belknap 2004). The list reveals an associative and distributive relation; it expresses a unity given by the association of the single elements, which in turn are themselves distributed in a structure that develops linearly and also vertically, where the items can ideally pile onto each other, expressing paradigmatic relations between present and possible<sup>5</sup> elements. Lists, therefore, propose a regulatory principle that unites the various constituent elements, both implicitly and explicitly, in a process that forces the recipient to find the red thread that ties together the items of a set into the expression of a new meaning. We may interpret them as complexes of two or more conceptual entities, which reflect an inferential process that revolves around the processes of construction of the reference and of *ad hoc* categorizations tied to the notions of exhaustivity and non-exhaustivity, roughly corresponding to the *everything-here* lists and *etcetera* lists described by Eco (2009).

In lists, the relation implied between the elements they comprise mainly pertains to extemporary or *ad hoc* categorization (Mauri 2017), defined by the relation between the elements that identify inferential operations, also implemented by the lists. The list creates a coherent unity whose parts remain identifiable, without a complete assimilation between the result of the combinatory and its internal elements. Considering how to utilize a list is a process that allows to create new meanings through an interpretive action that exploits the decoding and inference phenomena. The decoding allows to access stable and conventionalized meanings, which, in practice, are accompanied by inferential phenomena seen as cognitive processes that enable to integrate the various implicit and explicit meanings to formulate hypotheses aimed at resolving ambiguity (Eco 1975, 1979a, 1979b; Recanati

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<sup>5</sup> “Because of their dual nature, lists must, therefore, be looked at from two opposing viewpoints: the individual units that make up a list (what does it hold?) and the function or purpose of the list as a whole (how does it hold together?)” (Belknap 2004: 16).

2002; Prandi 2006; Sbisà 2009; Ferrari 2014). The tight connection between lists and *ad hoc* categorization processes also regards the phenomena of exemplification that are tied to the notion of non-exhaustivity for which the speaker describes the explicit elements, allowing for the implicit to be foreseen (Voghera 2013, 2017; Barotto and Lo Baido 2021). On the contrary, exhaustivity is a fundamental feature in determining categorization processes.

## 2. Accumulations of things and words: grocery lists

When speaking of a list, what immediately comes to mind is a grocery list. According to Eco, we usually compile a shopping list for ourself or somebody else and functions as a memo of what one needs to buy. The grocery list is the maximum expression of *everything here*, its only goal being to provide an aseptic listing of things to buy. However, besides being a well-known and malleable instrument, a list does not only create a *concluded* world. Even shopping lists can be the theater of attractional forces; that is, they can hold together elements that respond to regulatory principles and goals beyond the products we wish to buy at the supermarket, as is shown by the comparison between grocery lists<sup>6</sup> described by Annie Ernaux (Example 6).

(6) Black ballpoint pen shopping list found in a shopping cart:

*puff pastry*  
*flour*  
*ham, bacon*  
*grated parmesan cheese, yogurt*  
*vinegar*

I compared it with my own:

*ricoré*  
*ladyfingers*  
*mascarpone*  
*milk, cream*  
*white bread*  
*cat [moist food and crispy treats]*  
*post-it notes*

There are about 50.000 food items in a hypermarket. Considering that I will use about 100 or so, that leaves 49.900 that I ignore. (Annie Ernaux, *Look at the Lights, My Love*)

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author

Grocery lists have gone from simple memos to entertainment content on social media. An Italian Instagram page called ‘insta\_della\_spesa,’ which translates as ‘shopping\_insta,’ daily publishes posts of grocery lists written by ordinary people. While scrolling through the posts, grocery lists are never simple lists of things to buy but hide worlds of possible sense, specifically created by combining the elements in the list (Figure 1). The cohabitation of the conjuncts does not always indicate *everything-here* lists. The relations between the elements may also indicate that they are *etcetera* lists whose boundaries are unclear (Example 7).

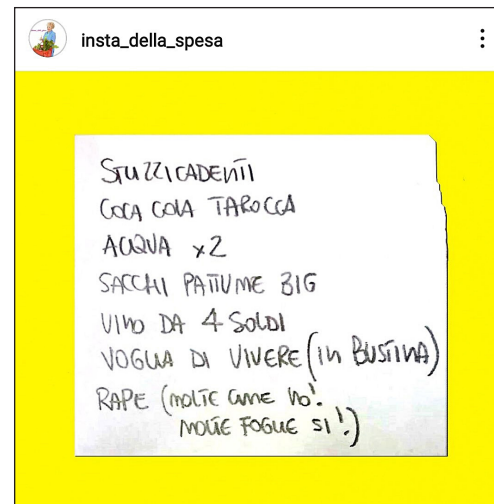


Figure 1. Post on the Instagram page insta\_della\_spesa

- (7) toothpicks  
 knockoff Coca Cola  
 water x2  
 big garbage bags  
 cheap wine  
 will to live (in sachets)  
 Turnips (like a lot!  
 With many leaves yes!)

(insta\_della\_spesa)<sup>7</sup>

Every time two or more elements are tied inside a list, their interpretation does not only go through the individual conjuncts but through the identification of something that holds together heterogeneous things (Lang 1984; Barotto and Mauri 2018; Barotto and Combei 2021). The regulatory principle holding the items together is not univocal but plurivocal. Hence, by uniting different elements, the list can open to endless interpretive paths, thanks to the categorization processes, which are the foundation of list construction. The possibilities that lists express, including grocery lists, cannot but recall the concept of an encyclopedia and, thus, the possibility of considering lists as semiotic devices that open up possible worlds of meaning through endless inferential paths, depending on the issuer and the recipient. The list in example (8), taken from an election campaign slogan, is not just an *everything-here* list (Figure 2).

<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author



**Figure 2.** Campaign slogan by La Lega Salvini Premier. Italian political elections September 25, 2022.

- (8) Zero VAT on  
 Bread, Rice, Milk, Fruit and Vegetables  
 I believe that no Italian should be left behind  
 (Matteo Salvini, Campaign for the Italian political elections of 2022)<sup>8</sup>

This list of staple foods presumably reflects the grocery lists of lower-middle-class people who have to meet their primary nutritional needs. Therefore, the VAT on these products would significantly impact the purchasing power of social classes who have more financial difficulties.

### 3. Lists in public discourse and political communication

Making lists is a widespread strategy in political discourse; they can convey messages (even manipulative ones) in a way that is simple, effective, and easily memorized by the receiver. The list is a very flexible device, extensively used to express not only the order of things but also complex concepts. Not surprisingly, it is widely used in political and journalistic public communication. Conveying one's messages through brief, flexible, and immediate communication is a pervasive tendency in the Italian public debate, where political communication is more about the flow of tweets than issuing official press releases. Social media foster a lighter, more flexible, and more structurally simple communication. The character limits on posts imposed by Twitter are a telling instance of this bias. Space constraints and the need for speedy reactions force those participating in the political debate to use simple and clear linguistic forms

<sup>8</sup> Translated by the author

to deliver effectively condensed content. Lists are handy because, despite their structural simplicity, they can convey even complex content through repeated brief and light syntactic constructs without many relative clauses. Repetition has always been a standard device of political communication. *Ars retorica* always considered repetition to be a powerful means to persuade and convey even complex content through a simple and flexible structure. Repetition can be used consciously by speakers to enhance and intensify their arguments, to make a message more effective and as economically inexpensive as possible, to the detriment of variation in communication.

From a cognitive perspective, therefore, the repetition of any linguistic object is a less challenging device and serves to convey content in the most effective way possible, intending to be understood without excessive cognitive effort (Voghera 2018). A key aspect of repetition is regularity because what is regular is also easily fixable in mind and memorizable (Tannen 1987; Khedair 2016; Voghera 2018; Favilla 2022). In certain circumstances, the repetition of linguistic elements through lists is a valuable and potent tool that can strengthen the content of a message, which acquires more credibility and, thus, a higher truth effect the more it is repeated (Ernst et al. 2017). Therefore, repetition, especially in political communication, is a mechanism used to enhance persuasion and fixate beliefs (Bartels 2006).

By their repetitive character, lists are structurally regular devices. What is iterated is also expected, and the recipient anticipates what will follow, i.e., the production of lexical elements, syntactic or linguistic patterns more or less conventionalized. Given that the list requires a minimal cognitive effort, the recipient focuses not so much on the structure of the message or the syntactic relations of the enunciated but on the possible relations between the conjuncts and their common denominator.

In political communication, from rallies to Twitter, repetition and lists are devices used to convey, enforce, and convince the audience about some issue. Not coincidentally, the list creates a redundancy effect, whereby its content is amplified and emphasized: “[...] to avoid ambiguities of meaning and reference, to facilitate connections between parts of the text that are more or less distant from each other, and therefore to facilitate comprehension of the whole” (Mortara Garavelli 2010: 121).<sup>9</sup>

One of the Italian politicians who has made list-making the signature style of his communication is Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing party La Lega. His rhetorical preference for lists did not go unnoticed. Facebook pages and YouTube channels collect his lists,<sup>10</sup> as shown by the following tweet, posted in response to Salvini’s Valentine’s Day wishes on February 14, 2021 (Figure 3).

<sup>9</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>10</sup> Facebook page “Salvini che elenca cose” (<https://www.facebook.com/SalviniElencaCose123456>), which translates into “Salvini listing things.” A YouTube channel that collects countless long lists by Salvini, which he produced throughout his public political activity ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I\\_2IG4cukhE&t=16s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_2IG4cukhE&t=16s)).



**Figure 3.** Tweet by Matteo Salvini taken from the Italian television programme "Propaganda Live".

- (9) Salvini: «Happy Sunday and happy Valentine's Day to those who love who dream who suffer who fight to change the world who never give up»

Twitter User: «Why do you always have to make a list... Happy Valentine's Day, and That's it»<sup>11</sup>

In the above example, Salvini's list presents a simple repeated syntactic structure, where the nominal part of every item is the only variable portion. Every conjunct of the list represents general classes of people to whom the Valentine's Day wishes are sent. In this case, the conclusion of the list does not complete the set it defines. Despite lacking an explicit etcetera, the list is not defined only by "*those who love who dream who suffer who fight to change the world who never give up.*" Implicitly, Salvini wishes everyone a Happy Valentine's Day and leaves the possibility of including other potential conjuncts to the interpreter. Someone could enrich the message of Salvini's set by adding, for example, '*all stamp collectors*' as potential recipients of his wishes.

Hence, the list allows recipients to keep the boundaries of the listing open. Depending on their beliefs, they can produce potentially endless interpretations of the issuer's intention. Paola Taverna, Senator of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5s) party, wrote a post (see example 10) that references a piece of news regarding the Partito Democratico (PD) party.

- (10) [Dinners], [more dinners], [postponed dinners], [called off dinners], [cancellation of dinners]. If this is how they managed Italy, I finally understand why the country finds itself in its disastrous situation. #SiSonoMangiatiTutto [which translates to "they ate everything up"] (Senator Paola Taverna, Twitter, September 18, 2018).

The senator is referring to the fact that Nicola Zingaretti, the PD's secretary, was not invited to a dinner organized by members of his party. Paola Taverna not only comments

<sup>11</sup> Translated by the author.

on the incident ironically but also takes the opportunity to rail against the work of the previous government, guided by the Partito Democratico, without openly naming it. According to the Senator, the Partito Democratico has ruled Italy the same way it organizes its dinners, namely disastrously. The unsaid in the Tweet makes the recipient responsible for forming a negative judgment, finding information, and reconstructing the facts.

Taverna's list does not aim to underscore the indecisiveness of dinner planning but rather the inadequacy of Italy's previous government. The list, therefore, organizes concepts that refer to an open category, strictly rooted in the co-text that comprises a simple succession of linguistic expressions based on a quite simple formal operation, like syntactic and structural repetition. Here, the senator dismisses the previous government's work more effectively than generic statements like *"The government has proven to be totally incapable and disorganized."*

The persuasive mechanism used by listing is based on its simple and linear structure; the typical repetition of lists may have a rhetorical relevance in persuasion. In particular, whether a list is composed of a series of connotations, the same value expressed by the list is reinforced by the repetition by listing a series of connotations, as in (10), which is related to *different kinds of dinners*. In contrast, a list of denotations, such as a grocery closed list, while having simplicity and linearity in structure, represents less committed and persuasive rhetoric than a list of connotations.

The list, especially in the context of politics and propaganda, uses a straightforward structure to convey evocative and vague content through the mere juxtaposition and cohabitation of conjuncts, creating endless paths of meaning that exploit inferential and categorization mechanisms. Lists can be viewed as a particular instance of linguistic repetition, which helps to maintain textual cohesion and unity in the discourse. Repetition serves to fixate ideas, states of things, information, and concepts in the minds of the recipients. From this viewpoint, repetition aims at intensifying the message and, hence, can be used in persuasive contexts, insofar as the idea one wants to convey is reiterated not only lexically but also using the same structure and the same thematic values, to convince and strengthen the rightfulness of what has been said. In this regard, we can consider lists as a repetition device that recurs frequently, not only in language in general but also in particular persuasive and public situations.

#### 4. Lists as a semiotic device

At the beginning of this work, we defined the list as a device to make order in the world's entropy: a device to create unity, whereby elements form semantic relations of various types. Lists have the function of building the reference through *ad hoc* inferential and categorization processes. The possibility of including conjuncts within a list is given by the existence of extensional mechanisms, which are operations that allow the

attribution of meaning to an expression. One can suppose that the speakers act precisely through these operations, which carve out an encyclopedic portion aligned with the communicative needs and the circumstances of a possible world (Eco 1962; 1979a). The extensional mechanisms evoke individuals, concepts, or even objects with certain properties that allow for their inclusion in a class. Contextual and discursive pressures give the choice to use expressions that carve out certain levels, and also by interpretive frames shared with the other person so that one can find possible outcomes in the repertoire of the already said (cf. Eco 1979b: 34).

At the same time, the speaker *narcotizes* other expressions that are not activated in that circumstance and co-text. The latter, therefore, is no secondary fact and no accessory in the interpretation of lists because it defines which properties to actualize and which, on the other hand, to narcotize. Based on extensional mechanisms, we can classify lists into two groups, which somehow reprise both the opposition of *exhaustive* vs. *non-exhaustive* lists and *everything-here* vs. *etcetera* lists. In other words, some lists have well-defined extensional boundaries that indicate specified areas, enclosing actual and discrete individual elements, and other lists, though, possess less clear extensional boundaries and describe general and continuous spaces built with actual elements and possible ones. The *everything-here* or exhaustive lists belong to the first type, while non-exhaustive *etcetera* lists belong to the second.

Whether a list is exhaustive or non-exhaustive is determined by the semantic relation realized by the conjuncts, which define the class or the set indicated by the list. There can, hence, be sets that indicate defined areas of sense or sets that indicate less defined areas. In this alternation between defined and undefined, without any descriptive claim on our part, we see a recall of Charles Peirce's Theory of Determination,<sup>12</sup> used to describe the semio-linguistic<sup>13</sup> system, where the values determinate and indeterminate are described through two types of sets: collections and multiplicities, in turn reprised by the Cantorian set theories (Cantor 1915).

Collections indicate determined, precise, and thus discreet sets. Conversely, multiplicities describe continuous, undefined, and thus vague sets, which are irreducible to numbers and open to possibilities. Using these terms cautiously, one might think that collection lists are composed of explicit, individual, actual, and determinate elements

<sup>12</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of this semiotic theory cf. Paolucci (2010). We will only state that for Peirce, the pre-logical level is the area in which a positive term and its contrary are held together (extensive value); the logical level, on the other hand, is the striated area where there will be exclusive opposition between terms (intensive value).

<sup>13</sup> We cannot discuss this subject comprehensively because of the topic and space limits in this article, but we again refer to Paolucci (2010). The relation between intension and extension, and between defined and undefined areas, has also been studied, as is well known, by Hjelmslev (1935). According to the Danish linguist, the semio-linguistic system is considered an area where precise and vague areas alternate one another, populated by intensive and vague terms. In light of these considerations, Peirce (1976) also defined semio-linguistic systems as a succession of defined and undefined areas. The former mark the space of individuality and the discreet, whereas the latter indicate general and continuous areas.

that create an unambiguous reference. These lists express sets whose extension is known, thanks to the items indicating a class with clear and recognizable boundaries. The contextual pressures guide this differentiation process between what is part of the list and is hence actualized and made explicit and what remains outside and is hence discarded. The fact that a list only includes within itself the explicit conjuncts and has clear extensional boundaries is a matter that not only concerns the encyclopedic cut-out and the communicative intention but also the discursive co-text that guides and gives indexical signals for the interpretation of the list itself (Stalkaner 1976; Lyons 1978; Caffi 2007; Braun 2016).

Multiplicity<sup>14</sup> lists indicate determinate, actual, individual, and explicit elements but also possible and implicit elements. As a result, heterogeneous items blend to form an indeterminate and general set in which the identification of a referent is a little predictable and blurred. In this respect, it is interesting to quote Peirce on the definition of multiplicity. According to him, a mere assemblage of conjuncts does not give a multiple set but only by the relation that connects these conjuncts. We might be tempted to say that continuous multiplicities are incapable of discrimination.

For the nature of the differences between them does not depend upon what multiplicities enter into the denumerable series of discrete multitudes out of which the continuous multiplicity may be compounded; but it depends on the manner in which they are connected. This connection does not spring from the nature of the individual units, but constitutes the mode of existence of the whole. (Peirce, CP 4.219 Cross-Ref:††)

The multiplicity list shows constant openings and possibilities of meaning because it holds both explicit and implicit conjuncts together. Within these lists, hence, actual and explicit conjuncts cohabit with virtual and implicit items; each explicit conjunct brings with itself other implicit ones, which firstly amplify the extension of the list itself, while maintaining an internal coherence, which cannot be separated from the encyclopedic levels and communicative intentions. These paths of meaning allow us to determine which elements to include and exclude.

#### 4.1. Lists with open and closed boundaries: closed and open *fabula*

How can we understand which path of meaning the speaker follows to actualize only certain items while muting others? To answer this question, we can think of verbal lists as devices that generally realize the conditions of actuality and possibility through two narrative mechanisms: closed *fabula* and open *fabula* (Eco 1979a, 1979b). Although we

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<sup>14</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari address the issue of multiplicity as an intrinsic principle of the rhizome: "An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections."

use these two operations to define cooperation mechanisms in narrative texts, they can also help to describe the process of actualizing the conjuncts in a list. In short, story (*fabula*) and plot are two opposed traditional narrative schemes, thematized by the literary criticism of Russian formalists in the XXth century (Propp 1928; Segre 1974). The *fabula* indicates the narrative scheme par excellence and expresses the order and development of actions or, for instance, events in a storyline, which can also revolve around inanimate objects, concepts, or ideas. On the other hand, the plot sheds light on the discursive organization, namely, which narrative schemes are employed at a superficial level to tell a tale. As Eco (1979a) argues, even texts that appear devoid of a narrative structure, such as descriptive texts or elementary linguistic acts like orders or questions, can express a story because these types of text can still expand and narrate worlds. These texts can also build *small stories* (Eco 1979a) starting from superficial discursive structures. In this regard, Eco explains how non-narrative texts can present a narrative construction.

Therefore, we can assume a more flexible notion of story (not so dissimilar from the one proposed by Aristotle's *Poetics*) in which it is enough to isolate an agent (no matter whether human or not), an initial state, a series of time-oriented changes with their causes, a final (even if transitorily so) result. In this sense, there is a story even in the chemical description given by Peirce [...] about the production of lithium. (Eco 1979b: 30)

In this sense, we believe that even verbal lists create narrations despite generally viewed as mere descriptive texts that allow the ordering of states of things and objects with regularity (Schiffrin 1994). From the examples presented and those that follow, we surmise that lists are not only simple descriptions of listings of things but constitute and structure worlds through more or less extended narrations by using a *fabula*. This operation is enabled and realized by the list's conjuncts and co-texts.

The mechanisms of *closed fabula* and *open fabula*, used in narrative texts, are tied to two types of diagrammatic representations that help describe the course of a narrative and the realization of the elements and interpretive backdrops that happen in a story.<sup>15</sup> The *closed fabula* is represented by a linear and serial diagram, structured in a predictable sequence where every expressed element excludes its alternative, thus eliminating the *vertigo of possibilities*. One could think that the *closed fabula* could recall collection lists or *everything-here* lists, composed of conjuncts whose belonging to a class can only be explicated. The *open fabula*, on the other hand, possesses a structure that holds together both actualized and virtual elements. The undefined list could also follow this type of representation because it involves the compresence, or cohabitation,

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<sup>15</sup> To gain insight on the representation of the two types of *fabula* we refer to Eco (1979b:34).

of actual and virtual elements, and therefore both explicit and implicit: “The type of cooperation requested of the reader, the flexibility of the text in validating (or at least in not contradicting) the widest possible range of interpretative proposals – all this characterizes narrative structures as more or less ‘open’” (Eco 1979b: 34).

To better understand what we have argued before, we quote two examples from the speeches of the Italian politicians Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini. The first example refers to the speech delivered by the leader of the Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) during the rally of her party in 2019 in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. The speech replicated, simply and potently, her party's political and cultural manifesto with an argumentative style that utilized, among other things, repetition. Moreover, the second list in example (11) became Giorgia Meloni's values manifesto. The list of simple words has defined the calling card of the FdI leader, made up of single elements that exclude and silence other possible ones.

- (11) That right here is the play of one-track thinking: they want to take away from us all that we are, because when we have no identity left and no more roots, we will be left without awareness and incapable of defending our rights. That is their game. They want us to be Parent 1, Parent 2, LGBT gender, Citizens X, just codes. But we are not codes, we are people, and we will defend our identity. [I am Giorgia] [I am a woman] [I am a mother] [I am Italian] [I am a Christian]. You will not take that from me! You will not take that from me!

Hence, the list in question describes a well-defined path that takes on rhetorical power thanks to the presence of those specific elements and not others. One can argue that the list (11) is a collection list that follows a textual modality typical of closed stories because the sequence of conjuncts describes the only possible adaptable path in that co-text. Considering the circumstances, no expressions allow us to include other possible items: Giorgia, Italian, or woman, exclude other virtual elements, thus defining a case of closed fabula in which the narrative and descriptive path is univocal and built as the conjuncts follow. Of course, there are always other possible elements, but only if we do not respect the list's primary intention. For example:

- (11a) [I am Giorgia] [I am a politician] [I am from Rome] [I am a Roma football club fan] [I am a forty-year-old]

The conjuncts on the list (11a) do not recall other alternatives and do not amplify the extensional boundaries of the set. Instead, they limit the list, defining a precise foreseeable path of meaning composed of determined individual elements belonging to a specific encyclopedic level, selected and actualized by communicative intentions and contextual pressures.

Clearly, Meloni intends to describe herself through traits of a distinctive value. In this communicative context, the list's extension is firmly bounded, inhibiting the addition of any other possible elements. The list creates a class with the elements sharing the properties: *distinctive and relevant qualities and values of Giorgia Meloni that set her apart from other Italian politicians*. In the same speech by Giorgia Meloni, we find another list, which appears to follow a path with an *open fabula*, which opens to a list of possible conjuncts as the *etcetera* list pattern (11b).

(11b) That right here is the play of one-track thinking: they want to take away from us all that we are, because when we have no identity left and no more roots, we will be left without awareness and incapable of defending our rights. That is their game. They want us to be [Parent 1], [Parent 2], [LGBT gender], [Citizens X], [just codes]. But we are not codes, we are people, and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia I am a woman I am a mother I am Italian I am a Christian. You will not take that from me! You will not take that from me!

Example (11c) is a nominal list, negatively characterized by the issuer, and it describes a rather vague ad hoc category, which indicates the identity outlooks for Italian society by the Italian progressive movements and parties. Due to the vagueness expressed by the category, the list offers the possibility to add elements that remained implicit and have not been silenced by the actualized conjuncts. In this regard, we note that it is not obligatory to construct an *etcetera* as a vague set. In this sense, an *etcetera* list may indicate only some elements, leaving others implicit. The implicitness expressed by an *etcetera* list is not necessarily related to vagueness. The vagueness of the lists may be dealt with in two different ways. Some lists are vague as such, having fuzzy boundaries; others, though, are composed of vague elements. In the first case, the category constructed by the list is vague, while in the second case, the boundaries of the list are determined, but the elements it comprises are vague.<sup>16</sup> The interpreter can insert other elements, like [intersectional feminists] or [third-worldists]. The actual and explicit items<sup>17</sup> on the list, hence, do not exclude the virtual and possible items. Therefore, as in an open fabula, there could be

<sup>16</sup> As reviewers highlighted, which we thank them for, there is a difference in terms of vagueness between such as the list of the example (12c) and a closed shopping list in which one may find any vague elements as "a handful of salt" or "a few dozen eggs."

<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Peirce distinguishes between what is vague and possible and what is general [cf. CP 5.505]. In our article, we do not focus on this distinction, but it is interesting to introduce the topic as a hint to reflection in the future. A sign is vague and possible when someone is "leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination [...]. The vague might be defined as that to which the principle of contradiction does not apply." On the contrary, a sign is general when someone is "leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself." In this latter case, the principle of the excluded third does not apply.

a hypothetical coexistence and cohabitation of different conjuncts like [Parent 1] [Parent 2] and [rainbow families], [Citizens X], and, for instance, [surrogate motherhood] (11c).

(11c) That right here is the play of one-track thinking: they want to take away from us all that we are, because when we have no identity left and no more roots, we will be left without awareness and incapable of defending our rights. That is their game. They want us to be [rainbow families], [Parent 1], [Parent 2], [children of surrogate motherhood], [third world-ists], [numbers]. But we are not codes, we are people, and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia I am a woman I am a mother I am Italian I am a Christian. You will not take that from me! You will not take that from me!

Another example of a list with an *open fabula* mechanism is taken from an interview by Matteo Salvini at a rally for the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna in November 2019. Example (12) presents two lists: the first, [and Fascism] [and Nazism] [and racism] [and the gut] [and populism] [and sovereignism], has a polysyndetic structure which in itself conveys a sense of continuity, suggesting that the realized set of conjuncts also includes virtual items, which have not been expressed but can still be added. The second list, on the other hand, does not present the conjunction and is composed of four elements [a different president], [a different attitude], [a different team], [a different future].

(12) if on a November Thursday evening many many people meet up to build something great that is clearly not: [and Fascism] [and Nazism] [and racism] [and the gut] [and populism] [and sovereignism], it is the future we are convinced that after fifty years the people of Emilia can choose [a different president] [a different attitude] [a different team] [a different future]. (RadioCast-it\_EN\_141119\_L1)

To evaluate the sense of continuation expressed by the list, we can try to perform a test in this case as well and add more conjuncts to the list, with similar properties as the ones in (12) and evaluate if the sense of the whole list changes. The list in –isms (along with the gut) refers to the *ad hoc category: right-wing political movements, thoughts, and attitudes*. We will now substitute part of the conjuncts with others with a similar<sup>18</sup> intension. The result is the following:

(12a) [and Fascism] [and Nazism] [and racism] [and xenophobia] [and the gut]  
 [and qualunquismo] [and nationalism]

<sup>18</sup> On the relation between synonymy, extension, intension and context we refer to Basile (2023).

We feel that the sense of the list does not change, and the conjuncts made explicit in (12) do not exclude further possible alternative terms like the ones in (12a), namely nationalism, xenophobia or qualunquismo. In fact, as the number of conjuncts rises, so do the possible realizable alternative items, which, despite remaining virtual, still contribute to the list's function and sense. The extensional boundaries of the set do not appear as stable and well defined: every conjunct made explicit moves the extensional boundaries of the list, building new potential relations on the considered encyclopedic levels. The conjuncts create a unity of the relations between explicit and implicit conjuncts, which is not exhausted with the explicit and actual elements, as in examples (12 and 12a). The second list, included in the same example (12), despite not being a polysyndeton, presents a similar mechanism. Each conjunct repeats the same element, the different modifier, and this continuous iteration conveys a sense of continuity, ensuring that the set identified by the list is not exhausted with the actually appearing conjuncts. The realized ad hoc category seems to want to express novelties in the political and institutional assets of Emilia-Romagna that the citizens feel a need for. We will now propose another list composed of both the conjuncts that are made explicit and the possible alternative and potentially realizable conjuncts (12b).

(12b) [a different president], [a different attitude],[a different administration],  
 [a different perspective], [a different regional health care system], [a different regional counsel].

In this case, the sense of the entire list does not vary, and every conjunct allows for the broadening of the extensional boundaries of the construction, which in turn keeps together both the actual and the possible elements. Concerning this, the first conjunct – 'president' (12) (12b) – represents the actual and individual office because it does not allow many other alternatives and excludes other possibilities.<sup>19</sup> From the second item on, the explicit and possible elements cohabit in the list in the process of opening that holds together the virtual members we can include. In example (12b), only specific potential alternatives are made explicit. In contrast, others are not mentioned, like, for instance, *a different system of public procurement* or even *a different attitude or way of doing*.

## 5. Conclusions

This work has highlighted how verbal lists, both written and spoken, are pervasive and widely used in many fields of public and political communication. Their frequent use is primarily due to their flexible nature, which, thanks to elementary structures realized

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<sup>19</sup> We can think of terminological variants such as maybe *governor*.

by repeated conjuncts placed on the same level, one can build inferential and categorization paths that express interpretive textual modalities with closed or open *fabula*. These semiotic textual modalities make a list a construction of possibility. It can define sets with closed boundaries and be well delimited from an extensional standpoint, which excludes and silences some possible items; in this way, linear and schematic interpretive paths are created that do not give much freedom to the recipient. On the contrary, lists can describe sets with vague and extensionally open boundaries, composed of virtual elements, not concretely made explicit in the text but distributed on the same encyclopedic level indicated by the list. The conjuncts of a list present themselves like actually realizable possibilities that the interpreter must simply understand; this interpretive freedom and, therefore, creates tortuous paths that are not univocal: “the list as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements [...] to baste the representation of something whose identity we do not yet know but wish to catalog first and sort later” (Paolucci 2023:16).<sup>20</sup>

Lists seen in public contexts are an instrument which, compared to the textual modality of *open fabula* leaves the recipient the responsibility and the task to build, relative to the messages and the contents that are received, paths of meaning and interpretation that are themselves vague and undefined, but not therefore ineffective or not persuasive. Hence, lists are flexible structures we can represent through free and open schemes. This possibility, generated by the multitude of virtual elements, reflects the tendency of the list to look at that entropy of infinity hinted at in the beginning as an attempt to order it without forcing and confining it within too narrow boundaries.

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<sup>20</sup> Translated by the author. For a distinction between cataloguing and ordering we refer to Paolucci (2023).

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