

Business Literature. *Letteratura aziendale*: a Semiotic Interpretation of the Italian Literature on the Theme of Work spanning 20 years (1995-2015)

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Abstract

This paper proposes a semiotic model for research in the field of Italian literature on the theme of work for the years 1995-2015. Focusing on Greimas' theory of semiotic squares and on the actantial model, I focused on three basic relationships within the labour market: the contrast between stories in the context of the factory and the office, between local and global settings, and between the inclusion and exclusion of the worker-figure. I obtained a general structure of the story comprising a sequence of six events: admission, convocation, trauma (or loosening of work relationships), suspension, rescue (true or false), and inertia.

L'articolo propone un modello semiotico per la ricerca nel settore della narrativa italiana sul tema del lavoro degli anni 1995-2015. Riacciacciandomi alle categorie greimasiane dei quadrati semiotici e del modello attanziale, mi sono concentrato su tre relazioni fondamentali interne al mondo del lavoro: le opposizioni tra racconto di fabbrica e di ufficio, tra ambientazione locale e globale, tra inclusione o esclusione del personaggio-lavoratore. Ne ho ricavato una struttura generale del racconto di sei sequenze: l'ammissione, la convocazione, il trauma (o allentamento del rapporto di lavoro), la sospensione, il soccorso (vero o falso), l'inerzia.

Keywords

business literature, work, factory, office, globalization, semiotics

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1. Semiotic approach

According to critics (Contarini; Chirumbolo), the recent Italian literature on the theme of work is one of the most innovative and interesting proposals of Italian literature over the last twenty years (1995-2015). Several authors have stressed the importance of stories of temporary workers (Contarini, Jansen and Ricciardi) and the role of the crisis of employment (Dupré et al.). Critics have interpreted the Italian literature on the theme of work as a part of the realistic turn of Italian culture after Postmodernism. These authors discussed this point by introducing terms like *ipermoderno* (Donnarumma), return to reality (Somigli), New Italian Realism (Spinazzola), post-reality (Santoro).

It has also been shown that the Italian literature on the theme of work between 1995-2015 is connected to the Italian literature of the 20th century (Chirumbolo). Critics have explained the connection with industrial literature (Bigatti and Lupo), suggesting to pay specific attention to Volponi's *Le mosche del capitale*, since this novel deals with the end of the dream of a modern and equal society in which intellectuals can contribute to the

development of companies. Other than Volponi's novel, I also suggested to consider the contributions of Pontiggia (Ceteroni).

The 20th century idea of work was replaced, at the beginning of the 21st century, by the hegemony of financial power, due to high technologies and globalization. Starting from this premise and piece of evidence, my attempt here is to analyze the literature on the theme of work as a semiotic process. The semiotic approach allows to study the books of authors coming from different backgrounds as a unique piece of work. These works were not organized in a manifesto, but were inspired by a feeling of civic engagement (Chirumbolo 133, 193, 317). The semiotic approach can explain this feeling as a recent cultural stimulus, focusing on the significance that is at the bottom of the common interest of writers and readers.

The first concept that should be analyzed is that of company. Contarini stated that the framework of the 1995-2015 literature on the theme of work is the connection between literature and *azienda*,¹ that in English can be translated as company, business. Moreover, it can also have a historical value, since it came into use mainly during the second half of the 20th century and is considered a keyword of the advanced organization of a business. Contarini argued that the 20th century factories and manufacturing sites lost the primacy in contracts of employment, thus favoring more recent jobs-types, such as call-center operators.

For this reason, I proposed to name the 1995-2015 Italian literature on the theme of work as *letteratura aziendale*, which can be translated as business literature. This branch of literature basically consists of novels, reportages and short stories, but is also open to connections with cinema and poetry (Ventroni; Targhetta; Mellone). The questions I would like to answer are the following: what are the typical features of a worker-figure? How can we recognize him or her? Does the *letteratura aziendale* have a specific purpose?

2. Semiotic squares

In many novels the main figure is employed in innovative fields, such as that of information technologies, or in the financial services. At the same time, stories concerning workers in factories, clerks and farmers are well represented in the literature. Panella showed that, starting from 2005-2006, the topic of temporary jobs has had an increasing attention. The temporary employee is usually a young individual who cannot obtain a stable contract: as a consequence, he/she does not hold a position of respect in the society.

There are two general settings in which a story in the workplace can develop: the factory and the office. I postulate a contrast between the concepts of factory and office according to historical evaluations concerning the progress of Western capitalism, from the primary and secondary sectors of economy (agriculture, mining, fishing, manufacturing) to the tertiary and quaternary ones (professional services, entertainment, information technology, financial planning). Through this opposition my aim is to stress the structural diversity of the economical models concerning the kind of job, the impact of the job-type on the environment, the salary of the employees.

¹ The word *azienda* derives from the Spanish *hacienda*, the Latin *facienda*, the gerundive of Latin *facere*. The meaning of the Italian word *azienda* is organization of goods and people, in order to reach a public or private economic achievement. The adjective *aziendale* means of the company. The noun *aziendalese* is translated into business language.

The factory and the office could shape the binary relationship of a semiotic square (see diagram below). The stories within the factory environment represent the survival of a 20th century idea of work based on manufacturing. The open-spaces of the multinational corporations and the call-centers represent, instead, the post-industrial society and the introduction of the politics of flexible and unstable job-types. The thematic continuity is described by the stories of individuals involved in the struggle for life. Repetitive jobs make workers feel alienated, whether in the factory or office.

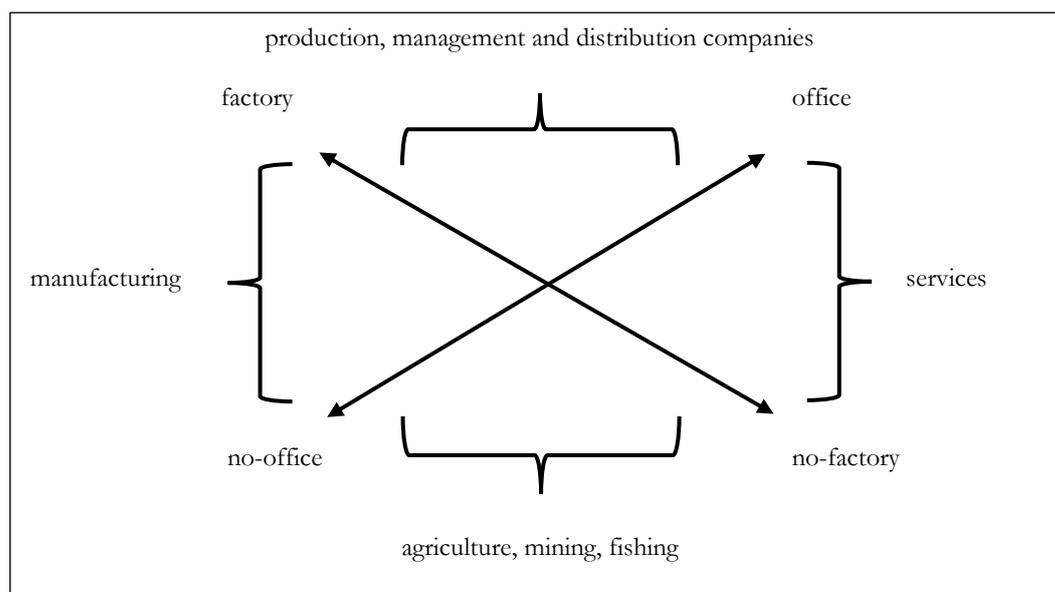


Figure 1

The working class is well-represented on the left side of the square. Innovations, like the opening of work to women as well as the assimilation of immigrants, are proof that the working class is changing (Nelli; Fazzi). The dominant feeling is the danger of recession (Nesi), strengthened by the offshoring of production sites (Rea), the loss of political power (Ferracuti, *Il costo*), and the ineffectiveness of trade unions (Fiore). Thus, the image of workers proposed by the business literature is significantly different from the one we find in the literature of the 20th century.

The stories of managers and clerks, who have no experience of assembly line, workshops or construction sites, stand on the right side of the square. These individuals are accustomed to working in small teams on a business plan. The profit-driven company policy influences the worker-figure, depending on the position he/she is holding in the corporate ladder. To quote an example, the worker-figure could be asked to fire employees (Lolli, *Volevo solo dormirle addosso*; Bajani) or to challenge his/her competitors (Nata, *Il dipendente*). Sometimes he/she will be forced to argue with a colleague (Carraro, *Il sorvio*) or a supervisor (Celestini), facing problems like downgrading.

The contrast between factory and office is the first step for a semiotic interpretation of the concept of business literature. I shall now focus on the impact of this contrast on the territories. Which are the consequences of the changes in the working class? What

happens when a production site has been dismissed? How does a city change when a multi-national corporation settles in?

It is crucial to understand the link between the company and the city, on one side, and the role of the worker-figure in the company, on the other. Therefore, I propose a first semiotic square describing the geography of the job (the binary relationship, in this case, is the contrast between local and global, see first diagram below for more details) and a second semiotic square for the placement of the worker-figure (the binary relationship, in this case, is the contrast between the inclusion and exclusion of the individual; see second box below for more info).

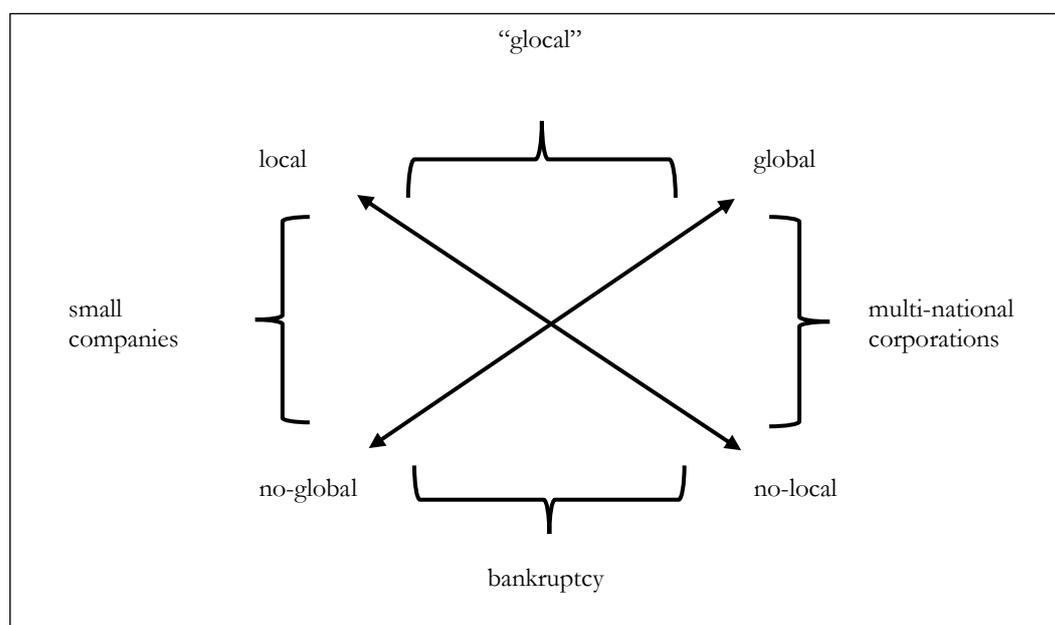


Figure 2

The basic meaning behind a story depends on the combination of three factors: the field of work of the worker-figure (factory/office), the relationship between the job and the town (global/local) and the role of the worker-figure in the company (inclusion/exclusion). Just to give an example, I could choose the “factory + no-office” field of work, the “local + no-global” typology and the “exclusion + no-inclusion” relationship. This combination may describe a metalworker or a miner, who is the first to be fired during recession. Topics connected to this story-type could be the offshoring of production sites, the decline of industrial areas, the loneliness of employees, the power of emerging countries. In this context, we can expect to meet figures like unemployed people, union officers and witnesses of the past splendour.

However, the meaning changes drastically if I modify the associated values. By combining “office + no-factory”, “global” and “inclusion + exclusion”, I obtain the story of a manager of a multi-national corporation. The main character of *Nata, Il dipendente* belongs to this group: he is a bank employee who sacrifices his family and his health for the company. Finally, it is important to stress that the “inclusion + exclusion” relationship offers many kinds of temporary employees in both factory and office work environments (Dezio; Celestini).

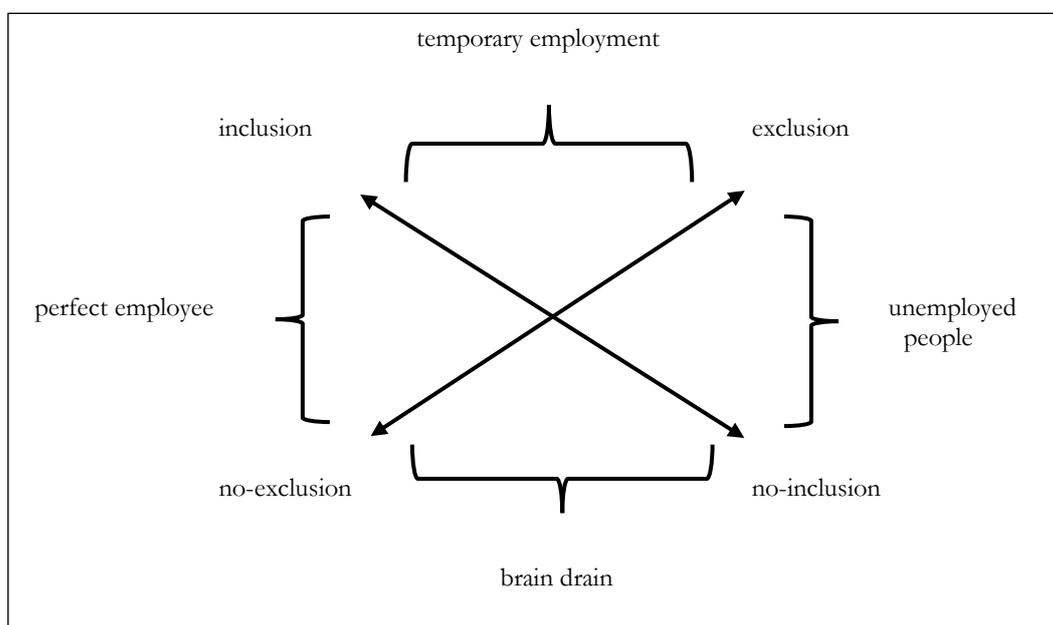


Figure 3

3. A narrative model

The relationship between the worker-figure and the company in which he/she works for may be described as a need of inclusion in the society, because the social survival of the worker-figure is the result of his/her salary. Moreover, the worker-figure wants to realize his/her potential in the society, because he/she often has an institutional identity. To give an example, he/she could be a recent graduate waiting for a contract of employment (Targhetta) or a young employee still living with his/her parents (Culicchia).

According to the actantial model of Greimas, this relationship can be classified in the three axes of communication, participation and desire. The worker-figure is the subject of the axis of the desire and the receiver of the axis of communication. In the above-described example, the worker-figure can be identified as young and temporary workers wishing to find a job opportunity. The sender is the person who gives them this opportunity. To this end, a job announcement can also perform the function of sender. The worker-figure, finally, may also be the sender himself/herself, such as when he/she applies to companies by sending the *curriculum vitae*.

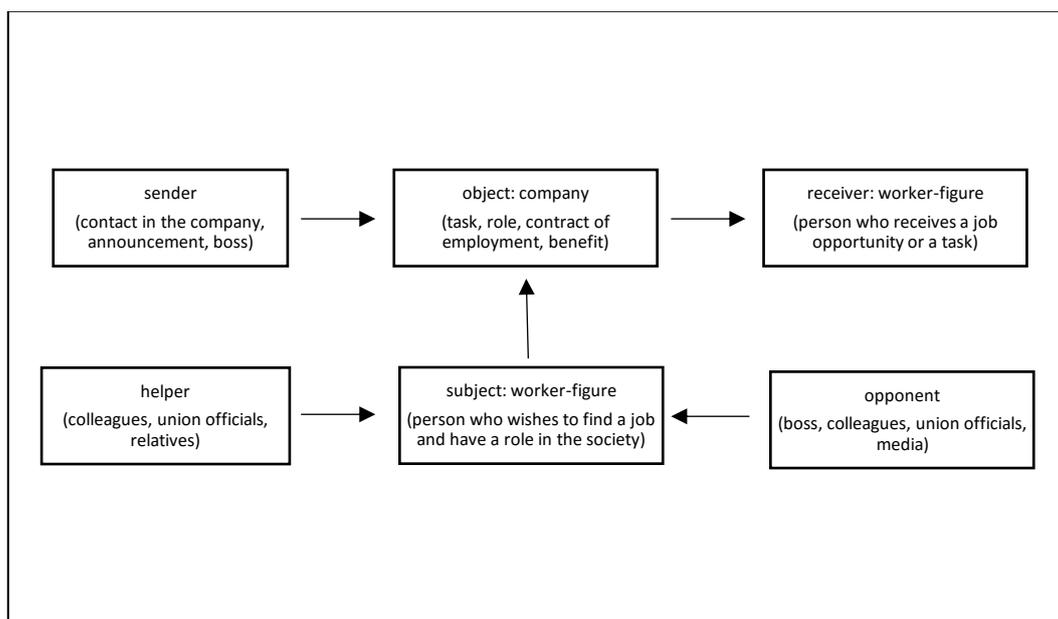


Figure 4

Sometimes colleagues help the worker-figure take advantage of a job opportunity, but more often than not colleagues are opponents. Relatives and friends appear to be distant, thus being, only rarely, valid helpers (Carraro, *Non c'è più tempo*; Piersanti; Celestini). The feeling of loneliness of the worker-figure is enhanced by the ineffectiveness of the union officials. Nesi *L'età dell'oro*, in particular, shows the mistakes made by the trade unions starting from 1980, when they focused only on the opposition between businessmen and blue-collars underestimating the danger of precariousness. As a result, young workers lost their faith in both the trade unions and in political parties (Frascella).

However, the main opponent of the worker-figure is the boss. In local contexts the boss is usually also the owner of the firm. Here the violence of the boss can physically affect the worker-figure. As an example, Fazzi writes about a boss who molested a female worker in the changing room of a factory. In the context of multi-national corporations, instead, the boss is an executive elected by the capital market (Nata; Loli).

The role of the boss suggests that writers believe that class struggle still exists today. I believe that the dialectics between master and slave is an essential resource to explain the meaning of business literature: the actantial model is indeed the core of dialectics between the worker-figure and power. It is important to stress that the search for jobs and the struggle for life are going to continue even if the application for jobs fails and the individual considers himself/herself a loser since the need of social inclusion is not bound to end. Thus, in this perspective, the manager will be loyal to the company even though he/she is stressed and under pressure and the temporary worker will accept a job renewal even if it does not protect his/her rights. This makes workers subject to be exploited and discriminated. In this context, I deduced a narrative model composed of six events:

1. Admission. At this stage the worker-figure begins to work for the company. His/her story usually begins with a narrative signal, such as a job interview. A good

result may depend on a reference, while the curriculum vitae is often a useless convention. The individual may apply to recruitment halls.

2. Convocation. The boss can ask the worker-figure to come in his/her office. This is a personal convocation if the individual is summoned alone, such as when he/she receives a disciplinary report. It is a common call when the company is planning a team action, such as a training course or an awards ceremony.

3. Trauma and/or loosening of work relationships. In many cases reported the worker-figure has a shock in the planning of his/her career. There are several examples of trauma. The trauma can be personal or in common with other colleagues, and can be of physical, psychological or economical nature. For example, an injury that happens at work is a personal physical trauma with psychological and economical consequences. In contrast, the exposure to asbestos is a physical trauma, in common with other workers, that affects the whole town and the environment; also a resizing plan of the staff can be considered an economical and psychological trauma not affecting the single individual but the working community as a whole. The narrative importance of trauma is that it upsets the lifestyle of the individual. There is a life before the trauma, and a life after. As a result of a trauma, the worker-figure may not take care of himself/herself anymore. He/she may be subject to alcohol addiction, panic attacks and family troubles. However, the worker-figure may also leave the company in a non-traumatic way or may keep the job position after the trauma. Sometimes the dismissal is foreseen: for example, the trainee knows when the temporary contract will expire. In any case, the worker-figure perceives the crisis. The loosening of work relationships describes the crises that are less traumatic, which the reader can recognize as the individual becomes hesitant and uncertain. Writers usually link loosening and trauma: at first they show the job position becoming weak, then they describe the trauma and at the end they talk about the conclusion of the work experience.

4. Suspension. This is the ratification of the end of the work experience. It includes formal and informal factors, such as legal actions, dismissal letters, severance packages, farewell toasts and speeches.

5. Rescue (true or false). Actions of the helpers of the worker-figure.

6. Inertia. Trauma and loosening of work relationships make the worker-figure prisoner of the "here and now". He/she is involved in a condition of alienation with no idea of his/her future ahead. Both workers who manage to keep their job position and those who are fired are affected by inertia, since the crisis changes the lifestyle of the individual in any case, which proves how difficult it is to integrate into post-industrial society.

4. Development lines

Business Literature investigates specific aspects of Italian history and society, such as recession and temporary employment. Considering the derivation from the Italian 20th century tradition of industrial novel and the link to the Hypermodernity (Donnarumma), business literature appears to be a proposal, which is typical of the Italian culture. However, Houellebecq, Beigbeder, Zelter prove that the literature on the theme of work is a recent tendency of Western culture, dictated maybe by the need to understand globalization. Writers have described the process, which enable financial and investment markets to operate internationally, discovering new topics such as the multi-national corporations and call-centers.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the proposal of a literature on the theme of work was not fully developed. It only became popular from 2006 and now Italian culture has adopted concepts like temporary employment and post-industrial economy. Precursors like Pennacchi and Ferracuti, as well as novice writers like Avallone and Fiore, have condemned Italian media, claiming that television and press have given a false representation of Italian society and of young people. Thus, *letteratura aziendale* has succeeded in letting readers feel that sense of alienation of temporary workers and unemployed people, collecting the many cases reported that revolve around the labour market in an analytical storytelling of the post-industrial society.

In conclusion, business literature can be considered the Italian proposal of a worldwide field of research on the theme of work, spanning 20 years. The actantial model can also be applied to cinema for the analysis of narrative structures of film adaptations, like *Tutti giù per terra*, *Volevo solo dormire addosso*, *Tutta la vita davanti*, *Generazione mille euro*, as well as movies about temporary work and industrial crisis, such as *Mi piace lavorare - Mobbing*, *L'industriale*, *L'intrepido*, *Storie sospese*, *Sole cuore amore*.

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