Mobilization and counter-mobilization processes:  
From the “red years” (1919–20) to the “black years” (1921–22) in Italy  

*A new methodological approach to the study of narrative data*

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“One of the consequences of the introduction of quantitative methods [in history] has been the discovery that church records, probate records, tax rolls, and similar sources contain detailed information on a wide variety of human activities stretching far back into time.”¹ These words by Fogel correctly point to the bustling activity of quantitative historians in this century as they spared no effort in their attempt to produce quantitative evidence. But there is another potential source of quantitative evidence that Fogel does not mention: narrative itself, as produced in copious quantities by chroniclers, analysts, policemen, and journalists; their reports, too, provide a wealth of information on human activities. Needless to say, modern historians have made ample use of both police and newspaper reports. Spriano² and Maione,³ just to mention two leading Italian historians who produced some of the seminal work on the period studied in this article, relied mostly on police records and newspapers for evidence. I have argued, however, that this abundant information found in narrative form and typically also used by historians in narrative form can be used in more systematic ways within a quantitative framework.⁴ On this score, social scientists have been generally more daring than historians, producing a number of important studies based on newspapers as sources of historical data.⁵ Within history itself, perhaps Tilly alone has made systematic use of police and newspaper narratives in quantitative fashion.⁶

In this article, following Tilly’s footsteps,⁷ I develop a formal method based on linguistics for the collection of narrative text. I discuss both the advantages and disadvantages that come with the adoption of such a formal approach to content analysis. I illustrate the power of the technique by providing some exploratory analyses of data that I collected from an Italian newspaper on one of the most turbulent periods of

Italian history, between 1919 and 1922, from the end of the First World War to the rise of Fascism. The method should be of particular interest to historians and social scientists who hold a view of history as agency and process, i.e., a view that history unfolds through the actions of social actors organized in the pursuit of their interests and with social interaction among those actors providing the dynamic for social change. After all, the method has at its core the set of actions performed in time and space by a set of social actors.

A formal approach to content analysis based on linguistics

The problem of analyzing text data in statistical ways (that is, the problem of going from words to numbers) has fallen under the heading of content analysis. Typically, content analysis has solved the problem via the use of a coding scheme, a set of categories designed to capture the input text. Unfortunately, content analysis is plagued by a variety of shortcomings. To overcome these shortcomings, I propose an approach to the analysis of text data that radically departs from traditional content analysis. The approach is based on a highly formalized semantic grammar.

Semantic grammars have a long tradition. Their origin can be traced back to the work of the Russian morphologist Vladimir Propp. In his study of the semantic structure of Russian folktales, Propp found that thirty-one functions capture the basic, deep, underlying structure of all Russian folktales. The functions basically correspond to the actions that the hero of the story performs. Greimas later reduced Propp's thirty-one functions to five. These schemes narrowly focus on actions, rather than actors, presumably because the hero is the protagonist of the story. Labov and Waletzky more generally showed that narrative stories are characterized by both actors and actions in a time/space dimension. The very surface structure of narrative stories (i.e., the way they are syntactically organized) is typically patterned after the basic canonical form of the language: subject, action, object, and their modifiers. Similarly, Halliday talked about sentence structures in terms of: 1) actors, 2) processes (or actions) and related instruments, 3) goal or beneficiary (the object), and 4) time and space. Rumelhart and Mandler argued that these story schema can be described by a grammar, a story grammar, similar to a sentence grammar. But, while a sentence grammar specifies a story in terms of syntactic categories, a story grammar specifies the same story in terms of functionally relevant, semantic categories.