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Metaphor, Politics and Gender: a Case Study from Italy

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3.1 Introduction

In this chapter we apply the theoretical and analytical framework introduced in Chapter 2 to a corpus containing a selection of speeches and interviews by two contemporary Italian politicians, Silvio Berlusconi and Emma Bonino. As in the previous chapter, we combine the main tenets of conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2002) with a social constructivist view of gender (Sunderland 2004) in order to consider the rhetorical functions and ideological implications of metaphor use (see also Koller 2004, Semino 2008). More specifically, we attempt to explain the differences and similarities in the metaphoric choices made by a male and female politician in terms of a range of sources of variation, including political orientation, topics, concerns, goals and audiences (see also Kövecses 2005). These factors help us to interpret the particular ways in which each individual politician performs femininity and masculinity in their public discourse.

We begin with a brief introduction to the political careers and identities of Berlusconi and Bonino. We then describe our data and methodology, and present some of the results of our analysis.

3.2 Silvio Berlusconi and Emma Bonino in the Italian political scene

Italy has never had a woman as prime minister, or, more precisely, as ‘Presidente del Consiglio’ [President of the Council of Ministers]. We cannot therefore replicate for Italy the comparison that we have made in the previous chapter between Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel, respectively the former and current German chancellors. Our decision
to focus on Berlusconi and Bonino is due to the prominent, if different, roles they have played (and continue to play) in Italian politics.

3.2.1 Silvio Berlusconi

Silvio Berlusconi was born in 1936 and is currently Italy’s richest man, thanks to a business empire that started with construction, and grew to include financial services, sports (notably, the football club AC Milan), publishing, cinema and television (notably, three nationwide television channels). Berlusconi’s brother, Paolo, owns one of Italy’s main daily newspapers, Il Giornale.

Berlusconi entertained strong political connections throughout his entrepreneurial career (for example Veltri and Travaglio 2001). In 1994, however, he became directly involved in politics by founding his own political party, Forza Italia (which translates as ‘Come on Italy’), and forming a coalition with other existing centre-right or right-wing parties, which he named Il Polo delle Libertà [The Pole of Freedoms]. This coalition was later renamed La Casa delle Libertà [The House of Freedoms]. Berlusconi led his party and coalition to electoral successes in 1994 and 2001, and was Italy’s prime minister in 1994–96 and 2001–6. In both 1996 and 2006, he was defeated by a centre-left coalition led by Romano Prodi. In 2008 he returned to power as leader of a new, broader centre-right party, the Partito del Popolo delle Libertà [Party of the People of Freedoms].

Berlusconi has had two children with his first wife, and three with his current wife, former actress Veronica Lario. He cultivates a ram-pantly heterosexual image, both by publicly boasting about his popularity with women, and by ostentatiously flirting with young, attractive women at social and political events. It has also been noted that Berlusconi adopts a particularly didactic, condescending and flirtatious tone when addressing female audiences, and tends to describe the role of women in his movement as limited to supportive activities, such as fund-raising (see Bolasco et al. 2006: 121–34). In January 2007, his wife (who usually keeps a low profile) stunned Italian public opinion by complaining about Berlusconi’s womanising in a letter to Italy’s left-wing newspaper La Repubblica, and by demanding an apology. Berlusconi was forced to apologise equally publicly, but dismissed his verbal advances to other women as the result of his playful, self-ironic and irreverent personality. Berlusconi has openly acknowledged undergoing cosmetic surgery to his face, as well as two hair transplant operations. It is also well known that he routinely uses make-up and has his hair dyed. Although these behaviours can be described as