

***Parea non servin.*¹ strategies of exploitation and resistance in the caporalato discourse**

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In this article, we analyse the ideological content of the discursive strategies used by a group of migrant workers subjected to ‘caporalato’, a form of illegal hiring and exploitation of farm day workers through an intermediary. Starting from a series of collective open interviews with farm workers, we examine the way in which the dynamics of both exploitation and resistance are reproduced through linguistic and discursive practices. What emerges from the analysis is a complex set of ambivalent experiences and representations. Despite its inherent exploitative and controlling nature, the workers tend to justify, legitimise and deny the negative aspects of caporalato. Nonetheless, they also use linguistic devices of resistance to reconfigure the meanings of, and their role in, caporalato. Interestingly, the analyses show that caporalato is also perceived as a mechanism of social mobility. Only limited attempts at explicitly challenging its criminal nature are strategically expressed.

Keywords: caporalato; discursive strategy; exploitation; gangmaster system; interviews; resistance

Introduction

Linguistic and discursive practices are powerful tools for understanding society and the dynamics of power and resistance that shape social organisation (see van Dijk, 2008). Such dynamics can take different forms and have a profound impact across several different domains. It is therefore crucial for discourse studies to explore and analyse them in contexts that have yet to receive much attention from researchers.

One such a context is *caporalato*. Caporalato is broadly defined as an illegal and exploitative form of mediation and labour organisation. This practice is typical of Mediterranean societies and it has been examined particularly in the Italian and Spanish contexts, but it also plays a key role in contexts where the prevalent agricultural economy is based on large estates (e.g., California, United Kingdom) shaping the organisation of labour relationships (see Krissman 2005; Perrotta, 2015; Rogaly, 2008). Thus, caporalato provides a unique opportunity to examine and analyse the dynamics of exploitation and resistance in the highly relevant social situation of migrations and work relations. In this article, we investigate first how workers exploited by caporalato make sense of the inherently exploitative nature of the system, and second whether

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and how they react to caporalato through resistance and social engagement. We do so by examining workers' discursive strategies, forms of discursive manipulation of reality enacted by social actors in order to achieve a certain goal and, potentially, changes with significant social and material consequences.

In this article we provide an overview of some of the approaches to the study of the caporalato and of the discursive strategies, focusing specifically on how the concepts of exploitation and resistance can be understood ('Theoretical framework'). We then illustrate the methodological approach and the data used in this article. We also describe the social context in which the interviewees live ('Methods'). 'Analysis and results' describes the analysis of the interviews. In this section, we contribute to previous literature by suggesting a distinction between different forms of exploitation and resistance strategies. In the last section, we discuss the findings and draw conclusions aimed at a better understanding of the practice of the caporalato.

Theoretical framework

Caporalato – roughly translated into English as a *gangmaster system* – is a form of illegal hiring and exploitation of farm day workers through an intermediary, and is a key concept towards understanding the labour market and power relations in the Italian agricultural labour system.² The word caporalato comes from the Latin *caporalis*, a derivative of *caput*, 'boss', and, by extension, is used to refer to the abrupt and imperative behaviour of an authoritarian figure (Treccani).³ Caporalato is a system based on outsourcing the employment of farm workers to illegal intermediaries (caporali)⁴ who can easily and quickly find disciplined and cheap workers to satisfy employers' demands (Perrotta 2014). As claimed by Pugliese (2015), the phenomena of caporalato and of illegally hired migrants fit the context of a system of agricultural production and distribution often called the 'Californian model' (see also Krissman 2005; Perrotta 2015). This system is based on the idea of 'cheap food for cheap labour' obtained through the exploitation of 'disposable' people (Bales, 2000; Berlan, 2002; Cristaldi, 2014; Garrapa, 2016), and it is widespread not only in Italy but also throughout the Mediterranean area (Morice and Michalon 2008). As suggested by authors such as Avallone (2017) and Corrado (2017), caporalato – in the sense of a system of exploitation – is the ineluctable result of a structural lack of efficiency and planning in the laws concerning the recruitment of workers. In the Italian context, similarly to other countries where agriculture is based on large estates, there are no well-defined and practical labour policies able to support seasonal workers and to provide them with relevant services such as accommodation and transport. Thus, caporalato occupies an organisational and legislative vacuum contributing to the 'illegality' and exclusion of migrant workers.

As investments in technical innovation are very limited, landowners derive profit from lowering the wages of the pickers and from increasing their work schedule, violating national and international labour laws (Oliveri 2012). As claimed by Corrado (2017, 6), caporalato represents the only available solution for small and medium farmers and food processors because of 'the inefficiency of the supply chain organization, pressure by retailers, and lack of investment in the mechanization of harvesting operations'. In such a context, caporali manage several activities, including transporting migrants to the fields and organising the production and payment of farm workers. In return for 'offering' these 'services', caporali take a portion of workers' salaries (Corrado, de Castro and Perrotta 2016).

Caporali are social and political figures mediating between farm workers looking for a job, and employers looking for cheap and disciplined workers (Corrado 2011; Avallone 2014). These workers are often under pressure due to restrictive migration laws and the weakness of public

employment services. Importantly, whereas the relationship of caporali with farmers is stable, their relationship with workers is characterised by contradictions. On the one hand, caporali sell a resource to workers that they do not have, privatising the labour market and exploiting them (Corrado, de Castro and Perrotta 2016). On the other, they enable workers to access work they could not access on their own, thus creating an ambivalent feeling of gratitude.

Although there are previous studies analysing the phenomenon of caporalato from the perspective of the workers (e.g. with the use of interviews; see Leogrande 2008; Perrotta 2015), what remains to be examined from a linguistic point of view is the workers' processes of self-definition, as well as their definition of the situation. In this article, we aim to investigate how workers subjected to caporalato (i) experience and make sense of the inherently exploitative nature of the system, and (ii) react to caporalato through resistance and rebellion against it. We do so by examining workers' discursive practices.

In the context of discourse studies, the caporalato phenomenon has been interpreted in terms of 'exploitation' and 'modern slavery' discourses (Davidson 2010; Gray 2002), as well as a 'resistance discourse' (Putnam, Grant, Michelson and Cutcher 2005). Whereas the conditions of exploitation and slavery are embedded within caporalato itself,⁵ the dynamics of resistance can assume at least two different forms. First, workers' resistance has resulted in forms of social mobilisations such as strikes and attempts at self-management (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2012; 2014). Second, other forms of protests have been described in terms of a symbolic reinterpretation of caporalato. Thus, the discourse around the practice of caporalato does not automatically imply an acceptance of the system but may contain important aspirations for the improvement of the worker's own personal condition and status in society.

Caporali are often formerly exploited workers that have 'made a career' within the system. Thus, the symbolic reinterpretation of caporalato may consist in reconstructing the phenomenon as a possible means of social mobility (Montagna 2013; Avallone 2014). As claimed by Bourdieu (2002 [1977], 179), a person's role (including in marginalised contexts) mainly depends on their ability to gain cultural power, that is, their ability to achieve and demonstrate their distinctness through an accumulation of 'a capital of honor and prestige' (Poppi and Castelli Gattinara 2018). This cultural power is created through symbolic practices – for instance linguistically driven processes of understanding reality and self-definition – since they enable an individual to communicate about, and frame relationships through, the expression of values, ideas and attitudes, the reinterpretation of past and current events, and the description of future scenarios. As argued by De Fina (2008, 437) '[t]hrough the construction of positive images of themselves, social groups can accumulate symbolic power and ultimately achieve changes in their position'.

One of the main difficulties with defining 'discourse' concerns the plurality of meanings the term can assume. In general terms, discourse can be reduced to a series of fundamental features, including the fact that it refers to 'linguistic units which generally exceed the limits of a single sentence' (Thompson 1988, 368), the characteristic of being identified 'in textual and verbal communications and located in wider social structures' (Lupton 1992, 145) and the capacity to give a 'structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about' (Kress 1985, 7). Because of this complexity, the choice of the analytical methods to study discourse should take into account not only what type of discourse one is dealing with, but also the context in which it develops.

As caporalato may refer simultaneously to the dynamics of exploitation and resistance, it is crucial to emphasise those processes that help to understand how such practices can be enacted and reproduced through linguistic and discursive strategies. However, these practices cannot be reduced to the mere combination of a plurality of statements that describe and explain the

caporalato experience. It is instead important to identify and analyse particular linguistic processes that work together to reveal patterns of representation that lead to the formation of shared views (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak 2014). For this purpose, discursive strategies represent an ideal framework for analysing these aspects.

Generally analysed within an organisational and communication context (Klinke and Renn 2001; Marchetti 1994; Poncini 2004), discursive strategies are defined by Carvalho (2006, 3), as ‘forms of (discursive) manipulation of “reality” by social actors in order to achieve a certain goal’. Discursive strategies refer to the (more or less) intentional use of discursive processes that are influenced by habitus and internalised dispositions (see Bourdieu 1979). Following Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 44–45), the essence of discursive strategies can be found in the aim of achieving a particular social, political, contextual, psychological, or linguistic objective. The use of discursive strategies is therefore a goal-directed behaviour used by the agent to leverage knowledge and communicate persuasively (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak 2014; Wodak 2007). In this sense, the impact of discursive strategies on social contexts depends on how people use them to enact a change with significant social and material consequences (Vaara and Tienari 2008, 991). A discursive strategy is, in this sense, a transformative discursive move involving the semantic redefinition of an object (or an actor). The intervention and its aim can be more or less consciously pursued. In this paper, we examine the discursive strategies that workers express in relation to exploitation and resistance.

Regarding exploitation, the strategies of justification, legitimisation and denial are apt to reflect the logic of acceptance and control that caporalato conveys. Such strategies are especially relevant in contexts where individuals or organisations engage in crimes or other types of stigmatised actions (Poppi and Di Piazza 2017; Poppi, Travaglino and Di Piazza 2018; Poppi and Campani, forthcoming). Specifically, justification strategies assert a connection between the agent and a negative situation, but at the same time develop a frame through which delinquent and transgressing actions are justified as being due to external factors or perpetrators’ attributes (Sykes and Matza 1957). Conversely, legitimisation strategies not only establish a connection between the agent and the situation but also try to legitimate it by linking the situation to an authority (e.g. tradition, custom), to the utility of institutionalised social actions or to a specific value system (for an overview, see van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). Finally, as it has been shown in analyses about corporate discourse (Coombs 2007, 171), denial strategies are strategies that try to establish a certain frame in which the agent (e.g. an organisation) tries to remove any connection between itself and the situation (e.g. a crisis).

The theoretical distinction between justification, legitimisation and denial strategies has several different aspects, but one of the most important is that while denial and legitimisation strategies are usually related to organisations (e.g. multinational corporations), justification strategies concern more explicitly the actions of isolated individuals (e.g. those affected by domestic violence or bullying). Although these three discursive strategies often reflect and provide a frame for the role of perpetrators, they can also be discussed in relation to the victims. As argued by Wetherell and Potter (1993), the legitimisation of exploitation may operate through strategies that reflect how the victims invoke forms of self-blaming for and acceptance of the exploitative situation (see also Berns 2001).

Concerning resistance discourse and the dynamics of social mobilisation and symbolic reinterpretation mentioned earlier, in this article we focus on two main discursive strategies that we label as *struggle strategies* and *resymbolisation strategies*. As claimed by Putnam, Grant, Michelson and Cutcher (2005, 7–8), discourse analysis has yet to try to understand the resistance dynamics rooted in labour processes (see also Mulholland 2004). But how can resistance be defined in the context of caporalato practices?

Individuals may express their dissent against the status quo in several different ways, including direct mobilisation or protest (Travaglini 2017a). There are circumstances in which such forms of direct engagement are unwarranted, dangerous or impossible. For instance, individuals may not possess the necessary intellectual, social or material capital to engage in a social movement. Factors such as large differences in power between dominant and subordinate groups, or the (perceived or real) inability to express one's political grievances may limit one's capacity to take part in the political process (Travaglini 2017b). Such circumstances are present in caporalato, given the strong inequality between the dominant and subordinate groups, and the hardships experienced by exploited workers and the very low bargaining power those workers have.

Yet this does not mean that individuals accept their marginalisation passively. Instead, they may engage in alternative forms of dissent, the most important of which concerns altering the meanings of their disadvantage and their lower status (Leach and Livingstone 2015). This form of *psychological resistance* is extremely important because it enables individuals to put forward systems of values and meanings alternative to those used by the dominant groups, to build new identities and ultimately achieve social change (Gramsci 1971; Leach and Livingstone 2015; Scott 1990; Travaglini 2017b).

Critical-cultural approaches have considered resistance as a process largely embedded in historically based struggles, where the discursive practices of the subjects involved have received far less attention compared to those of the dominant groups (Jermier, Knights and Nord 1994). However, discourse plays a particularly important role in endowing situations, identities and contexts with new meanings that promote and facilitate *psychological resistance* against dominant groups.

Here, we label as *struggle strategies* those attempts to question the way in which caporalato operates, and its exploitative nature, indicating forms of struggle within routine labour activities. In addition, those discursive strategies that aim at reframing and reinterpreting the identity of the workers, and their expressions of values, ideas and attitudes towards caporalato, have been labelled as *resymbolisation strategies*. Resymbolisation strategies may have the function of reconciliation talk (Cameron 2007), because they enable us to understand how groups and individuals in contraposition perceive each other. Specifically, the use of these strategies indicates the 'renegotiation of identities, the rehumanisation of self and Other, and the development of empathy between people who previously perceived each other as enemies' (Cameron 2007, 198).

Methods

Participants

To understand the discursive dynamics related to the experience of caporalato, we interviewed simultaneously ten West African workers (six males, four females) aged between 22 and 34. We conducted collective interviews at three different times with a variable number of participants.

The participants for this study were selected with the help of volunteer workers' associations in Italy. They were selected according to two criteria. First of all, we preferred to interview participants who had a good command of Italian, in order to facilitate the interaction with the researchers; second, we interviewed only those participants who claimed to have had a direct and prolonged experience of caporalato (two years minimum). The participants said they were from Senegal (4), Nigeria (3), Ghana (2) and Liberia (1). At the time the interviews were held, the participants were located in the CARA (*Centro Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo* – Reception centre for asylum seekers) in Borgo Mezzanone, a small village close to Foggia, in southern Italy.⁶ The decision to use

collective interviews was based both on practical and analytical reasons. Since the criminal context to which the participants were subjected did not allow us to organise individual interviews, we managed to arrange three different group interviews. This was the result of negotiation between the participants and other agents (volunteer workers at the CARA), which allowed us to organise the present study. Despite the possible limitations of this method, collective interviews have made it possible to create an ideal context where discursive strategies, as an expression of shared views, can be easily identified and collected (Kwon, Clarke and Wodak 2014).⁷

Setting and procedure

The collective interviews were conducted in public spaces (e.g. squares or public parks). The three interview sessions lasted approximately 420 minutes in total and were organised around a series of questions. Although it was made clear to the participants that they were free not to reply to questions or to interrupt the interview at any time, none of the participants refused to answer. Each participant received a small sum (5 euros) and a soft drink in return for their participation in the study. Because some of the participants did not have residence permits to stay in Italy legally, we did not ask them to reveal personal details (name, surname, occupation, etc.), with the exception of age and nationality.

We focused on fragments that included explanatory and representational processes of exploitation and resistance. The identification of discursive strategies was based on analysing responses produced through open collective interview questions (see Appendix). The answers were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were then coded manually by the first author, and the second author reviewed the three interviews and the coding process. In the transcriptions, the presence of overlapping voices is represented with the use of different types of bracket (round (), square [] and curly { }) for different voices. The contribution of the researcher appears in italics within curly brackets. Specific fragments were selected when they matched the discursive strategies mentioned above. Only those extracts that were interpreted by both authors as matching these strategies were included in the analysis.

The interviews present a wide number of references to events and characters that may not be familiar to the reader. So we also provide a brief description of the contexts to understand the setting in which the discursive strategies were enacted.

Analysis and results⁸

Justification strategies

- **Extract 1:**

The people here are shit and the caporale has to be like that, too (being like that's normal), because some people here is difficult { *What do you mean, 'the people are shit'; who are you talking about?* } I mean the people is bad, they not good people { *What, like criminals?* } People that was criminals before they arrive here and after, too.

Justification strategies are generally used to explain the reasons behind a negative situation. In Extract 1 the workers seem to condone the caporali by emphasising some alleged features of the workers themselves. The caporali's exploitative behaviour is connected to the wicked morality of some workers, described as having a criminal background, in what seems to be a form of self-blaming. Similarly, authors such as Soysal (1994) and Bhugra and Jones (2001) have discussed

how migrants in contexts of exploitation tend to develop forms of self-blaming that affect the perception and moral evaluation of their in-group. The exploitative and controlling nature of the caporali is justified as an attempt to cope with 'difficult people'. This is in line with psychological theories suggesting that individuals have a set of assumptions and beliefs that characterise the world as a just place in which people 'get what they deserve and deserve what they get' (Lerner 1980). These assumptions provide individuals with a sense of control and understanding of the world. Yet they also reduce the likelihood that they will question the system.

- **Extract 2:**

Lot of us want to be the caporale, because the caporale has car, too (a car and a van), plus he got good food (he got a good life and he can do anything he want), he does loads of things and that not easy (he knows a lot of us want his job). [He got a good life and we don't, but it's a hard thing to do and that why he's the caporale].

Another justification strategy is represented in Extract 2 and reflects the challenging role of being a caporale. Within a practice of reframing, caporali are described as people performing a very difficult task and their life standards are somehow proportional with their role. In this case, the exploitative dynamics are considered as the result of expertise and competence that, as Extract 1 suggests, also depends on the difficult people that are subjected to caporalato. Self-blaming and reframing combine to relativise the figure of the caporale and to bring into play a less negative interpretation of his exploitative role.

Legitimation strategies

- **Extract 3:**

I know none of this right, but the caporale has to do things right, he got to do things that work, do everything properly [otherwise no one know what's going on]. (The caporale keeps order so the one with land can go and get other workers.) [He has to do that.]

The first example of legitimation was in line with the use of higher term constructions such as specific value systems. In Extract 3, the lack of justice that characterises caporalato is legitimised in the name of the need for the 'order' that such a system provides. Caporalato is (perhaps idealistically) regarded as a way of making things work and its exploitative and controlling dynamics are seen as functional to it. Individuals involved in caporalato perceive the system as difficult and the caporale's perceived competence and ability to deal with the system becomes one of the bases for their granting it legitimacy.

- **Extract 4:**

This illegal work in the fields is shit, (it's a shit system, but) maybe that's just how things have to be. (If we say) If we get pay more the caporale might (might find other people that want less money). That how you work here.

Beyond the order that it brings, Extract 4 shows that caporalato is conceived as ineluctable, a system that could not be different from the way it is. This example shows how often legitimation is

articulated in terms of customs and traditions, two constructions that are considered as immutable and fixed. The fact that workers can hardly conceive of a different way of expressing and representing their work relationships seems to be one of the most effective legitimisation strategies operating in this context.

- **Extract 5:**

(Even if it's hard), [nothing easy in life, that's how it is]. Everyone has a hard life, even the caporale has hard life because if he do something stupid they make someone else caporale [I seen loads of caporali. Every so often one disappear and new one arrive in his place.] I understand that.

Extract 5 justifies the caporalato in terms of a sort of competition dynamics that occur among caporali. Workers are aware of the fact that caporali obey the logic of profit and productivity and their criminal behaviours are condoned as part of the precariousness of their profession. Despite the way they wield power over the workers, caporali are justified because if they had a different attitude or different behaviours they would be replaced. An interesting implication that emerges from this justification strategy is the understanding of the caporale's productivity in terms of exploitative and controlling behaviours.

- **Extract 6:**

We here to work and we know it's illegal and against the law in Italy {*this system?*} Yes, this system, but otherwise, how can you do anything else when everything illegal here? (This thing's important because if it isn't, how can you understand?)

Similarly to Extract 4, this example shows how legitimisation often works in relation to situations which can hardly be conceived in different ways. Workers know that caporalato is an illegal system for outsourcing employment, but they are also aware that if it did not exist, they would not have any chance of finding a job. In this sense, caporalato is legitimised because it is regarded as the only way for workers to be employed.

- **Extract 7:**

We even against other workers here who want to do the same thing, and the caporale is in on it (is like me against you) and you can't stop for a moment ... (because otherwise you out) {*what does 'you out' mean?*} (It mean another caporale come along with other people and you get sent away.) {*Who sends you away? The caporale?*} The one who got the land.

As Extract 7 shows, the logic of profit and productivity is also projected on to the workers. The conditions of exploitation and control that characterise caporalato seem to be justified by the ease with which the workers can be replaced with other workers. People subjected to the power of the caporali are willing to accept hard work conditions and poor pay because of the awareness that other workers would otherwise take their jobs. The acquiescence to radical forms of profit and productivity is one of the key aspects that seem to justify the functioning of caporalato.

Denial strategies● **Extract 8:**

I work because I have to. Otherwise what I going to do? It's not too bad here because I know my family and my brothers is much worse off. This is my life and I not hurting anyone.

Denial strategies aim to remove any connection between the agent and the situation. However, the oppressive nature of caporalato seems not to afford this opportunity. Yet the interviews reveal that the workers deny some of the connotations associated with their role. In Extract 8, the worker denies some of the negative features of caporalato by claiming how his family, for example, live in worse conditions and how his work in the fields does not hurt anybody. While in contexts of exploitation, the family is used as an element of threat and fear (Shelley 2007), in the caporalato discourse the family is used as a moral reference for embracing a difficult life and hard work. This form of reductionism and relativisation helps the workers to negate (at least partially) the exploitative and oppressive nature of caporalato.

● **Extract 9:**

I get pick up and take to the field. That's how the day start. It's hard and I don't get much money but that's my job. (There's nothing here, no water, it's hot and really hard). I have to keep my mouth shut and not make trouble but I'm not a slave [even if you think that we ...] I'm a slave? I can't be slave because a slave work for no money.

Extract 9 shows how, after attempting to deny some negative aspects of caporalato, workers reject its exploitative and controlling nature by denying that it is slavery ('I am not a slave') and by attempting to normalise the practice ('that's my job'). This extract shows how the workers can admit the hard conditions which they suffer, but at the same time reject with pride any interpretation that could affect their dignity.

Struggle strategies● **Extract 10:**

Every now and then we steal some fruit or tomato and take it back to where we staying. So even if we not got much money we got plenty to eat. That's what we do (that's what you got to do because we're the only ones in the fields).'

As we have discussed earlier, resistance strategies are attempts to challenge the functioning of caporalato. In this regard, Extract 10 shows how the workers take advantage of some flaws in the system of exploitation and control of caporalato, stealing some of the products that they are employed to harvest. Although the loot certainly has only a small economic value, it may be construed as a form of rebellion against the poor salaries the workers receive (Travaglino 2017b). The migrants involved in the harvest see it as justifiable to take away something for themselves. This demonstrates that they are well aware of the unfairness of the conditions in which they are asked to work.

- **Extract 11:**

Some people leave as soon as they can and try to get to France or some other place where life is more easy and even if the caporale don't want them to {*why doesn't the caporale want them to?*} Because he want to control the people who go to work for him. Then supposing someone was bad and go to the police? (so some people leave without say nothing and try for a more good life).

Another form of resistance strategy is represented by the prospect of escaping (exit). As stated in Extract 11, workers oppose the control exercised by the caporali by migrating (or expressing the desire to migrate) towards other places, where life is supposed to be easier. In line with this perspective, the idea of planning an escape – despite the power of the caporali to thwart similar attempts – is one of the most common ways of evading dynamics of exploitation and control. Similarly to other forms of resistance described here, (the dream of) escaping is not a way to challenge the system, protest an unjust situation or seek social change. Yet it enables migrants to signal their awareness of their dire conditions, and their aspiration to a better, perhaps fairer life.

- **Extract 12**

People have try to go against the caporale and the landowner but nothing ever come of it because they afraid (they afraid because they might not get no more work).[I know that if everyone that works the land stop picking the fruit and tomatoes everything will go wrong and then people understand what we do here.

More in line with organised forms of dissent, Extract 12 shows how some workers are aware of the fact that more structured and direct forms of struggle would have a positive effect against caporalato. Here, the workers claim that a potential mass strike would make the system collapse because it would block the entire chain of the harvest. A crucial aspect of this resistance strategy seems to be the necessity of creating awareness among people. Awareness of injustice and of the individual's ability to effectively act against the status quo may play a key role in the formation of new shared identities, and in the creation of an 'us' with shared goals and objectives. Those identities may in turn facilitate mobilisation and more overt forms of dissent (Thomas, Mavor and McGarty 2012).

Resymbolisation strategies

- **Extract 13:**

You eat fruit and tomatoes thanks to us. Otherwise, who harvest the crops and work the land? (Italians can't be racist because we the ones that work here and without my work you don't have anything to eat.)

While struggle strategies are used to challenge caporalato in terms of actions, resymbolisation strategies enable processes of reconceptualisation and meaning negotiation. Extract 13 shows how the workers reaffirm their condition by claiming the importance of their work. In this case, subordination is reinterpreted to deny the racism that the workers seem to experience. According to recent studies, this discursive strategy can be interpreted as a concrete attempt to challenge the racial discrimination workers are subjected to, and to reposition the workers more favourably in

Italian society (Fox, Moroşanu and Szilassy 2015). The central idea expressed in this extract is that the workers cannot be discriminated against because – in spite of caporalato – their role is fundamental to the existence of the food market.

- **Extract 14:**

The caporale is the one with power and money and you afraid of him (he's important; I wish I was the caporale because it's something really important.). The caporale is like businessman, someone with money. I'd like to be caporale [it would be better like that!]

In line with Extract 2, in this example a positive perspective of the caporali emerges. Using a perspective of resymbolisation, the workers conceive the caporale as a figure they can aspire to become. This strategy helps to overcome the condition of exploitation and control represented by the caporali and to reconceptualise them as something desirable and positive. Interestingly, a conceptualisation of the caporale as a business-oriented figure is also used in academic contexts, as for instance in Krissman (2005) and Perrotta (2014, 16) where they are referred to as 'brokers'.

- **Extract 15:**

What we do in the fields is really hard and I sure a lot of Italians can't do what we do (it's hot and it hurt your) {*your back? Back here?*} (everything, here too, your hands, your head, it's hot) we're strong, I know that, you can't complain about us if you can't do what we do, that's right, no?

Similarly to Extract 13, which presented a form of workers' reaffirmation of their dignity, Extract 15 conceptualises the workers as figures who give a vital contribution, perhaps who are able to do something that Italian people cannot do. While in 13 the main goal was to overcome racism, here the workers state how their contribution to Italian society is not only fundamental but could not be replaced. Through this strategy, the workers symbolically overturn their role as exploited and describe themselves in terms of better individuals.

Discussion and conclusions

In this contribution we have identified and analysed the discursive strategies of exploitation and resistance used by a group of migrant farm workers subjected to caporalato. Caporalato is an extremely exploitative practice due to the harsh work conditions and degree of control experienced by the workers, as well as the poor pay. While strategies of justification, legitimisation and denial are generally explored from the point of view of the perpetrators of negative actions, we have here interpreted these strategies as part of the linguistic and discursive practices that reproduce but also contest the exploitative nature of caporalato.

As it emerges from the empirical analysis of the interviews, the workers seem to justify, legitimate and deny some of caporalato's most illegal aspects, employing beliefs such as *self-blaming* (Extract 1), *idealisation* (Extract 3), *reductionism* and *relativisation* (Extract 8). The exploitative and controlling practices of the caporali are construed as being the the only possible means for regulating and managing this exploitative system. In the workers' discourse, the workers' and caporalato's moral dimensions are deliberately distorted. The workers are portrayed

negatively so that caporalato may be conceived as something different from slavery. The caporale is represented as a person who can deal with hard-to-manage workers, and who gives them the job opportunity they could not otherwise have. In this sense, the caporale is indeed a negative character, but a character endowed with expertise and competence. The caporale must affirm his power within a professionally precarious context based on profit and productivity.

Whereas the caporale's criminal actions are condoned as part of his professional background, some strategies of resistance see him as an ideal figure to aspire to. Extracts 2, 13 and 14 show that the caporale is perceived as a successful person and that this idealisation is part of a resymbolisation that characterises the caporalato system. Interestingly, workers' negative self-evaluation refers only to their role within the caporalato system. Outside this role, their self-evaluation becomes largely positive. The workers compare themselves with the local Italian population, emphasise their good qualities as workers and place themselves at a higher level than Italians, in terms of their physical resistance and moral ethos.

The discursive strategies used show how every aspect of the caporalato system is subject to two contrasting appraisals. For instance, the Italian context is directly responsible for the existence of caporalato. Nonetheless, the workers who suffer from this system perceive the Italians as inferior in some respects. Similarly, the portrayal of the caporale oscillates between a figure of exploitation and control, and an attractive figure of power and economic success.

One of the reasons why the caporalato system is represented with such contradictions may depend on its inherently ambiguous nature. As has been argued by other researchers (Avallone 2014; 2017; Perrotta 2015), caporalato is a criminal system without an effective legal alternative. In the Italian context, for instance, landowners seem to have no other way to employ labourers. The lack of structural and organisational processes for outsourcing labour makes caporalato an effective (despite its exploitative nature) employment system, the only system migrant workers can rely on (Garrapa 2016; Leogrande 2008; Perrotta 2014). This feature of caporalato, together with the lack of other concrete legal employment opportunities, makes it one of the few mechanisms of social mobility workers can use to improve their position in society. The role of the caporale – often a former farm worker who achieves a position of power – becomes then a concrete opportunity for social and economical development.

Thus, the limited presence of struggle strategies in the interview may depend on the symbolic and economic capital that the caporale seems to hold. We have identified three discursive strategies that attempt to challenge the caporalato. Yet only one sequence (Extract 12) presents a concrete scenario of social mobilisation. While Extract 11 and Extract 13 describe two modalities of struggle that aim to exploit flaws in the control of workers, only Extract 12 considers the idea of replacing the caporalato.

The other discursive strategies of resistance employed by workers suggest that they are engaged in redefining the meanings of their identity and worth in the context of an oppressive system. These attempts to change the meanings associated with oppression are nonetheless important because they show how individuals may use different channels to make sense of, and ultimately resist, a system that may be seen (objectively or subjectively) as ineluctable. In circumstances in which direct engagement in protest is difficult, actions such as stealing fruit and vegetables, prospecting the opportunity of exiting the system and redefining the physical and moral qualities of the people involved, may provide important psychological tools to create more cohesive identities, thus providing the opportunity for social change.

Given the complexity of the topic, it is important to note some issues concerning the methodology and the limitations of the study. Discursive strategies present a wide range of contents and implications, and they are largely shared among workers. This is not at odds with a view of

caporalato as a multidimensional phenomenon that triggers various and even contrasting interpretations. Nonetheless, perspectives about caporalato are remarkably similar within the group. This is because while caporalato is characterised by multiple and contradictory symbolic meanings, all the workers seem to agree about this ambivalence. At the base of the workers' evaluations, there is the inherent violence that characterises many caporalato dynamics. As Sandberg, Tutenges and Copes (2015, 4) discuss, in controversial issues such as the use of violence or the representation of violent systems, the contrasting nature of the discursive processes play a crucial role because it allows us to break 'binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification'. In line with Frank (2010) and Polletta (2006), violent systems such as caporalato trigger dialogical processes that always consider multiple voices and the negotiation of points of view and are hence ambiguous.

One of the limitations of this contribution is that it deals with a limited number of participants. It uses a qualitative in-depth analysis to reveal the structural ambiguity of the caporalato, which may be perceived as a phenomenon simultaneously of exploitation and of potential social and symbolic mobility. However, as we have discussed, workers are subjected to such an invasive and oppressive reality that conducting more sophisticated analysis is difficult. For instance, although we have tried to guarantee workers freedom of expression during the interview and to protect them from potential external pressures, we cannot exclude that some of the less negative interpretations about caporalato may have been affected by a kind of direct or indirect concern about their condition (the interviewers could have been seen as 'a friend/spy of a caporale' and workers could have feared that the content of the study could be communicated to the caporale). We believe there is enough information in this study to avoid this interpretation. Workers seemed to express themselves with genuine frankness and they seemed interested in communicating their concerns about their conditions, as well as their aspirations and hopes. Future research should devise alternative strategies to examine workers' perception of and ideas about caporalato, perhaps using quantitative anonymous surveys or enabling workers to express their ideas in more anonymised form.

Appendix

How does caporalato work? (*Come funziona il caporalato?*)

What does caporalato mean to you? (*Cosa rappresenta il caporalato secondo te?*)

Who are the caporali? (*Chi sono i caporali?*)

What is the caporale, what does he do? (*Che cos'è il Caporale, cosa fa?*)

Would you ever become a caporale? (*Diventeresti mai un Caporale?*)

What do you think about this area, Foggia and the Italians in general? (*Cosa ne pensi di questa zona, di Foggia e degli Italiani in generale?*)

Cosa significa per te sfruttamento? (*What does exploitation mean to to you?*)

Cosa significa per te resistenza? (*What does resistance mean to you?*)

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Notes

1. Latin: 'I obey but not as a slave'.
2. For a discussion regarding the legal aspects of caporalato, see Piva 2017.
3. <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/caporale/>
4. It should be noted that in Italian *caporali* is the plural form of *caporale*.
5. The extreme conditions to which migrants are subjected, including blackmail and violence, have also been analysed in the context of the Ragusano area in Sicily by Palumbo and Sciarba (2015) and Corrado, de Castro and Perrotta (2016). For journalistic reports on the situation, see also Lorenzo Tondo and Annie Kelly, 'Raped, beaten, exploited: the 21st-century slavery propping up Sicilian farming', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2017.
6. For a discussion regarding the role of the caporalato in the area of Foggia, see Curci 2008.
7. For a justification of interviews in natural contexts see De Fina and Perrino 2011.
8. The extracts are quoted verbatim in the same form as they occurred during the interviews. The translations are meant to reflect the original in Italian, including their stylistic imperfections.

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Italian summary

In questo articolo, analizziamo il contenuto ideologico delle strategie discorsive usate da un gruppo di lavoratori migranti soggetti a 'caporalato', una forma illegale di reclutamento e di sfruttamento del lavoro dei braccianti agricoli mediante l'operato di un intermediario. Partendo da una serie di interviste aperte di tipo collettivo con un alcuni braccianti, si esamina il modo con il quale le dinamiche di sfruttamento e resistenza siano riprodotte attraverso pratiche linguistiche e discorsive. Ciò che emerge, è un complesso ed ambivalente sistema di esperienze e rappresentazioni. Nonostante l'intrinseca natura di sfruttamento e controllo, i lavoratori sembrano giustificare, legittimare e perfino negare gli aspetti più critici del caporalato. Pur tuttavia, i braccianti si servono anche di strumenti linguistici di resistenza con l'obiettivo di riconfigurare i significati ed i ruoli del caporalato stesso. Tra questi, si evince come tale fenomeno possa essere altresì percepito come un meccanismo di mobilità sociale. In ultima analisi, l'analisi riflette su come solo esigui tentativi siano strategicamente messi in atto dai braccianti per denunciare la nature criminale del caporalato.