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Awareness-raising measures on single-use plastics: comparing communicative strategies in EC websites and social media

Single-use plastics have been listed by the European Commission as the ten plastic products responsible for half of all marine litter. This form of pollution has proved highly detrimental, not only to the ecosystem but potentially, by entering the food chain, also to human health. In the “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment” of 28 May 2018 new EU rules were introduced to ban single-use plastics or, when alternative solutions are not available, to regulate production, labelling requirements and collection targets. Among the directions, there is also the obligation for Member States to “raise consumers’ awareness about the environmental impact of littering of single-use plastics.”

The Proposal directly refers to “A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy” issued on 1 January 2018, but also to a long series of previous EC decisions concerning waste management. The first Directive to set rules on the production, use and disposal of containers dates to 1985 (Directive 85/339/EEC), but national measures were harmonised among Member States in the “Directive concerning packaging and packaging waste” almost a decade later (94/62EC). Since then, several amendments (both derogations and extensions) have been adopted by the EC and the Council until the final Directive issued on 30 May 2018 (2018/852EC). There are some relevant differences between the first Directive and subsequent amendments. First, although the principle of a circular economy has firmly been maintained, focus has gradually shifted from waste management and recycling to waste prevention. Second, the identification of key players has slowly veered from state and regional authorities within the EU to producers and consumers, thus implying the need to extend awareness-raising measures to a wider range of stakeholders. Third, the contextualization of the problem has progressively stepped beyond the borders of the European Union, stressing the need to act on a global basis to contrast plastic pollution. Directive 2018/852EC (subparagraph 29) also claims the importance of finding “an appropriate means of ensuring readability” in accordance with the Interinstitutional Agreement of 28 November 2001, since this would put an end to “the proliferation of isolated amending acts which often make legal acts difficult to understand.”

The Proposal of 28 May 2018 should be read against this composite legislative background. Not only because of the topic, since most of the above decisions refer to packaging and packaging waste in general “regardless of material” while this proposal specifically deals with single-use plastics, but because it is the outcome of the ideological, ethical and linguistic/discursive evolution undergone by the texts over the years. In fact, it highlights the existence of a wider audience of producers and consumers to be addressed than mere governmental ones and hence the necessity of encouraging awareness campaigns, with the aim of “better informing the consumers and making the producers financially responsible of the consequences on the environment.”

The scope of this study is to investigate linguistic and discursive practices used in the Proposal and related webpages designed to raise awareness on single-use plastics and the need to prevent plastic waste. The texts that will be analysed include the official brochure, the Fact Sheet and the linked press release. The goal is to verify whether these campaigns, aimed not only at a “coherent and comprehensive policy approach” at the institutional level but at affecting “individual behaviour and social trends” present points of contact with similar campaigns made through social media. Indeed, as reported by Caliendo and Magistro (2009: 176), “the informative material made available to the general public by the European Union […] notably draw from a variety of different genres and discursive practices to appeal to their audience.” The analysis will particularly deal with the language and infographics used in the EC webpages to explain the necessity of setting up a Directive by May 2019, while confronting it with pictures and captions posted on social networks (especially Instagram) to raise awareness on and find solutions to the impact of single-use plastics.

After some preliminary remarks on text-image relation from a multimodal perspective, the study will be carried out with the tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Attention will be focussed on Appraisal patterns, attitude, affect and judgment, particularly on the System of Engagement revealed by the ways that “position the speaker/writer with respect to the value position being advanced and with respect to potential responses to that value position» (Martin and White 2005: 36). A relevant area of research will be the semantic fields involved in the construction of Appraisal Patterns explored with an ecolinguistic approach (Stibbe 2015), which may also shed light on how economic, political, environmental and social aspects are condensed in metonymical and metaphorical representations of the issue.

**Keywords**: single-use plastics, EC Directives and Proposal, institutional vs. social media communication, Appraisal Patterns

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