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978-0-521-54145-9 - From Words to Numbers: Narrative, Data, and Social Science

Roberto Franzosi

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From Words to Numbers

This book illustrates a set of tools – story grammars, relational data models, and network models – that can be profitably used for the collection, organization, and analysis of narrative data in sociohistorical research. A story grammar, or subject-action-object and their modifiers, is the linguistic tool the author uses to structure narrative for the purpose of collecting data on protest events. Relational database models make such complex data collection schemes practically feasible in a computer environment. Finally, network models are a statistical tool best suited to analyze this type of data. Driven by the metaphors of the journal (from . . . to) and the alchemy (words into numbers), the book leads the reader through a number of paths, from substantive to methodological issues, across time and disciplines: sociology, linguistics, literary criticism, history, statistics, computer science, philosophy, cognitive psychology, and political science. The book mitigates its quest for rigor in the social sciences with a subtle irony for that quest.

Roberto Franzosi obtained an Honors BA in Literature at the University of Genoa (Italy) (1975) and a Ph.D. in Sociology at Johns Hopkins University (1981). After spending a year as a postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan, he taught for several years in the Sociology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Between 1995 and 1999, Franzosi held a lectureship in Sociology at the University of Oxford, with an official fellowship at Trinity College. He took the post of head of the department in Sociology at the University of Reading in 1999. He has served as consulting editor for the *American Journal of Sociology* and is currently a managing editor for the *Journal of Historical Sociology*. The substantive and methodological study of social protest has been at the heart of Franzosi's research agenda with several published articles and the book *The Puzzles of Strikes* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences 22

Mark Granovetter, editor

The *Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences* series presents approaches that explain social behavior and institutions by reference to *relationships* between such concrete entities as persons and organizations. This contrasts with at least four other popular strategies: (1) reductionist attempts at explanation by focusing on individuals alone; (2) explanations stressing the causal primacy of ideas, values, and cognitions; (3) technological and material determinism; (4) explanations using “variables” as the main analytical concept, as in “structural equation” models, where the structure connects variables rather than actual social entities.

An important example of structural analysis is the “social network” approach. However, the series also features social science theory and research that is not framed explicitly in network terms, but stresses the importance of relationships rather than the atomization of reductionism or the determinism of ideas, technology, or material conditions. Such efforts typically deal with the complex balance between structure and agency, increasingly a key issue in the human sciences. Examples of the structural approach are scattered across many disciplines, and it is the goal of the *Structural Analysis* series to expose this very fruitful style of analysis to a wider public by bringing all the approaches together under a single rubric.

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ROBERTO FRANZOSI

University of Reading



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*Andrae patri carissimo, in memoriam.
Sit tibi terra levis.*

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*Non chiederci la parola che squadri da ogni lato
l'animo nostro informe, e a lettere di fuoco
lo dichiari e risplenda come un croco
perduto in mezzo a un polveroso prato.*

*Ah l'uomo che se ne va sicuro,
agli altri ed a se stesso amico,
e l'ombra sua non cura che la canicola
stampi sopra uno scalcinato muro!*

*Non domandarci la formula che mondi possa aprirti,
sì qualche storta sillaba e secca come un ramo.
Codesto solo oggi possiamo dirti,
ciò che non siamo, ciò che non vogliamo.*

Eugenio Montale (from *Ossi di seppia*)

Do not ask us for the word that will square off our shapeless soul from every angle, and proclaim it in characters of fire and shine like a crocus lost in a dusty field. Ah, the man who goes through life with confidence, a friend to others and to himself, unconcerned with his shadow cast by dog days on a flaking wall! Do not ask us for the formula that will open worlds for you, but only some twisted syllables as dry as a branch. Today, we can tell you only this, what we are *not*, what we do *not* want (Montale, 1965).

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Long projects inevitably end up with long lists of accumulated debts to people and institutions. This project is no exception. I developed the ideas at the heart of this book at the Center for Research on Social Organizations at the University of Michigan, where I spent the 1981–82 academic year as a postdoctoral Fellow. Charles Tilly, director of CRSO, and Nancy Horn, a graduate student working on Tilly's Great Britain Study, were very generous with their time in clarifying the inner workings of Tilly's approach to coding text for historical research. Charles Tilly's influence on my work did not stop with the year spent at CRSO; neither did it confine itself to methodological issues. What has lived in me through the years is the legacy of Tilly's passion for historical questions that can be addressed through rigorous methods, an unflinching excitement for the new and the innovative.

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In 1986, I started the long and bumpy ride of data collection in Genoa, Italy. If the beginnings were exciting, by the time I finished data collection in 1990, I had run out of steam, amidst financial and operational difficulties. Throughout those years, Giorgio Sola did more than one can reasonably expect of a friend and a colleague. Many students from the University of Genoa worked on the project as coders; they are too numerous for me to thank individually. Alberto Devoto, of the Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare of the University of Cagliari, and Corrado Salvo, of the Department of Physics of the University of Genoa, provided the VAX accounts that made possible computer communications between Madison and Genoa. Between 1995 and 1997, Piero Squillante, Mauro Giorgetti, and Daniela Mariani worked on data cleaning and

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In 1986, I submitted my first manuscript on the methodological approach I had developed to *Sociological Methodology*. The comments I received from one of the reviewers indicated that I should fundamentally change my thoughts, away from artificial intelligence and closer to linguistics. Clifford Clogg, editor of the journal, strongly encouraged me to address the reviewer's recommendations ("a foremost linguist in the country," in Clogg's words). Charles Scott at the University of Wisconsin-Madison guided my first steps through an unfamiliar terrain: linguistics. To that anonymous "foremost linguist" goes my deepest gratitude. Perhaps, s/he may never know how deeply her/his review changed the course of my intellectual and professional trajectory. Thanks to you as well, Clifford Clogg. *Tibi quoque sit terra levis*. Peter Marsden, successor to Clifford Clogg at the helm of *Sociological Methodology*, and J. Scott Long, editor of *Sociological Methods and Research*, were just as supportive with further publications on my method.

Several years were still to pass between the time I submitted a collection of published papers to Cambridge University Press (fall 1992) and the time I submitted the completed manuscript for final review (June 2000). Many things came in between – the writing of *The Puzzle of Strikes*, three successive moves of institutions, houses, and even countries, the birth of our daughter, Anna Giulia, in December 1995, and, more to the point, a change in my intellectual trajectory that forced upon me a slow and painful rethinking of my work along interdisciplinary lines.

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Needless to say, the final product had little to do with the 1992 book proposal. The beginning of that final product goes back to January 1996 when I started writing in the wee hours of the night, in between nightly feeds of Anna Giulia – a labor of serenity and love – born 21-12 (1995) at 21:12 in Oxford (the magic of numbers!). It continued in earnest till 1999, when I took a job as head of department at the University of Reading. The demands of rebuilding a department fallen under receivership took a heavy personal and professional toll. Lazarsfeld assures us that “educational innovations are, by definition, intellectual as well as administrative tasks” (Lazarsfeld, 1993, p. 269). Then, it was

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not in vain. For sure, a free hand in setting up new undergraduate and graduate curricula and to hire several new colleagues forced me to bring into sharp focus what I fundamentally believe sociology to be and how to best convey that view to students and colleagues. Nonetheless, the manuscript laid untouched in my laptop for a few more years. I am grateful to Mark Granovetter, editor of the series “Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences,” who saw the beginning of my journey, for believing in this travel diary, and to Lewis Bateman, the social science editor at Cambridge University Press, for pushing me to finally let the manuscript go. I am also grateful to Richard Laver for his excellent work with the index, Paul Luna for typesetting advice, and Sophie Doyle for checking and rechecking everything in the final stages of production. The camera-ready copy of the book was printed at the University of Trento where, in the fall of 2003, I resumed data collection on the 1919–22 period, with research grants from the University of Reading and the University of Trento.

This journey from words to numbers has been long and difficult. It has been both personally and professionally taxing, with some painfully humiliating moments. Several friends never gave up on me through it all: Alberto Devoto, Mauro La Noce, Alberto Palloni, Giorgio Sola, Charles Tilly, and Erik Wright. Their friendship and belief in my journey was crucial for me to finally reach a safe harbor. From 1997–1998, I increasingly retreated within myself and within the world of this book. Isolation bought me freedom but delivered grief. The family paid a high price for my estrangement. My wife, Svetlana Kropp, has been a constant source of both professional and personal support throughout most of these years, and certainly, throughout the hardest ones. She worked as a supervisor on the project in Genoa in 1990. She read more than her share of my work. She helped with data cleaning. She carried out a great deal of the early statistical analyses. She also did what no other had to do: She put up with me through it all. *Mea culpa*.

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