A new methodology for analysing NEG prescriptions on healthcare. From counting CSRs to mapping semantic fields

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This is a first draft of the methods and methodological considerations which we drew on in analysing New Economic Governance policy prescriptions in the area of healthcare. The text details the steps we took in defining and analysing my units of analysis as well as the methodological foundation on which these definition and analysis are based.

I.   Creation of the corpus of data

We first created a corpus of 'NEG documents' including:
- MoU documents (for IE, 2010-2012 and RO, 2009-2015) ('MoU') &
- Council Recommendations for the four countries (DE, IT, IE & RO) between 2011 and 2017 ('CSRs')

We then conducted a systematic search in the documents using the keywords:

a) 'health'/'healthcare'/'medical' -> to assemble the corpus of quotes on NEG prescriptions on healthcare

b) 'public'/'public sector'/'public services' -> to assemble the corpus of quotes on NEG prescriptions on resources for public services

This is because healthcare is centrally located in public expenditure and the public sector. Therefore, as a field of policy intervention, healthcare is affected both by policies explicitly mentioning 'healthcare' in their wording, and by policies with impact on resources allocated to public services in general (in terms of expenditure but also of employment levels and wages).

II.   Selection of long quotes

We then made a chronological table of 'long quotes' for each country between 2009 and 2017, for each of the two grand topics:

a) NEG prescriptions on healthcare and

b) NEG prescriptions on resources for public services.

We delimited long quotes as largely as necessary in order to grasp the larger meaning and context of the (generally short) phrases which enunciate the NEG prescriptions on healthcare/public services. This involved selecting the whole sentence rather than solely the shorter phrase enunciating a healthcare/public service prescription; and then selecting the entire series of sentences in a paragraph that are semantically linked to the central healthcare/public service prescription. In addition, this contextual selection of long quotes on NEG prescriptions also involved the inclusion in these quotes of the full reference of the place of the quote in the source document; e.g.

i.   recital (i.e. preamble), or

ii.   condition and its type (e.g. 'structural reform') – for the MoU, or

iii.   CSR and its legal basis (e.g. SGP/CP, MIP, EU2020) – for Council Recommendations

For the resulting data set, see 'Table long quotes NEG prescriptions'.

III. Defining units of analysis ('policy prescriptions') and understanding the synchronic, diachronic and dialogical construction of their meaning

In a third phase, we segmented long quotes into shorter ones, in order to delimit the units of our semantic analysis (i.e. an analysis focused on the meaning of prescriptions). We started from the premise that what MSs (i.e. governments) and trade unions react to are not so much a particular CSR per se, considered as a unitary text, but the segments of the CSR that make sense from a policy point of view in that they apply to (many times related and sometimes overlapping but nevertheless) distinct areas of intervention. We therefore defined my units of analysis as the shortest policy prescription that makes sense from a meaning (semantic) point of view - what we could call 'policy prescriptions'. In this perspective, whole CSRs are not necessarily or always equivalent to units of analysis, as they may contain two or more policy prescriptions. It is these policy prescriptions that we need to analyse and understand, because it is them that lead to specific changes that alter the employment and working conditions of healthcare workers and the conditions of access to health services on the part of citizens.

These policy prescriptions range from very general and vague (e.g. 'increase the cost-efficiency of public spending on healthcare') to very detailed and specific (e.g. 'keep the public wage bill under 3.9 bn euro'). In line with several perspectives from linguistics (de Saussure, Bakhtin), we consider that the meaning of these units is not immediately or unproblematically accessible to the reader, but is rather given by both their content and their context.

The meaning of a semantic unit is constructed like the meaning of a visual unit (a bird, for example) in an illuminated painting of a medieval manuscript (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: What is in a bird?[i]

Source: to be identified

The meaning of the yellow bird in the picture is given by the shape and colour of the bird, but also by the other elements in the picture (branches, leaves) with which the bird enters into semantic relations. This is a bird which is not flying in the sky or sitting on the ground, but one which sits on a leafy branch.

There are two main types of wider context that are relevant for a prescription (or, for that matter, a painted bird):
a. the synchronic semantic context, i.e. a prescription's relation to other synchronic prescriptions co-present in the same NEG source document (see Saussurian take on language in modern linguistics) and
b. the diachronic semantic and dialogical context, i.e. a prescription's relation to the whole set of diachronic policy prescriptions present in other NEG documents produced either in the past or for other member states (see etymological explorations of meaning in

philology); this relation is diachronic but also dialogical, i.e. informed by the power relation between the addresser and the addressee (see Bakhtin, Borocz).

In order to assess the meaning of a particular NEG policy prescription (or bird), we considered that the relevant semantic contexts form concentric circles of meaning going from the narrower to wider contexts. The analogy in the illuminate picture would be the concentric surroundings of the bird: from the part of the branch on which it sits, to the whole branch, and then on to the larger tree that sustains the branches and the bird (see picture 2).

In a synchronic perspective, the next larger circle of semantic context for NEG policy prescriptions is formed by the set of NEG prescriptions for a particular country in a particular year. For the bird, its next larger semantic context is whole tree, which the branch on which it sits is a part of, thus including a whole set of smaller and bigger branches, as well as leaves and other birds (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Understanding the bird by looking at the tree

But the meaning of a policy prescription (or illuminated bird) is given not only by its place in and relation to a synchronic set of other prescriptions (or tree) – its synchronic, Saussurean meaning. The meaning of a policy prescription (or illuminated bird) is also given by its place in and relation to a wider set of diachronic sets of semantic units (i.e. prescriptions or trees produced in different locations across a period of time) - or what we could call its diachronic, philological (etymological) meaning. Modern linguistics approaches language from a synchronic perspective focused on the relations between symbols at a particular moment in time; classical philology approached not so much one language, as a set of languages in a diachronic and comparative perspective.

The diachronic philological perspective allows us to widen the circles of semantic contexts both across space and across time. Indeed, classical philology compared a set of languages (e.g.

French, English, Latin, Sanskrit, etc.) set in different locations, but also evolving in time (i.e. from ancient forms to more modern ones). For the bird, its wider diachronic semantic context is formed by all similarly illuminated trees painted in a series of manuscripts produced in different locations and across a specific period of time. For NEG policy prescriptions, their wider diachronic context is formed by the entire set of NEG documents for all EU member states from 2009 up to the present. For the purpose of this study, we approximate this wider diachronic semantic context by the set of NEG prescriptions for the four countries of the study (DE, IT, IE, RO) between 2009 and 2017, most specifically on the topics of healthcare and public services. This is the wider canvass or background of our units of analysis, i.e. policy prescriptions.

The diachronic context is important because it gives us access to the historical dimension in the construction of meaning. This is reflected in the possibility that the wider, meta-meanings of a policy prescription (i.e. 'cost-efficiency of public spending on healthcare') may shift in time (and thus have a transformative potential), but also the fact that this meta-meaning is also constructed in time (and thus are the result of a generative process). Given the size of the period we consider here, 2009-2017 (i.e. barely a decade), the possibility of a shift in meta-meaning (its transformative potential) is low, although it still needs to be examined empirically. What is more certain is that the meaning of policy prescriptions has been constructed in time through a generative process that, as we will see, has its strong roots in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis - the 'MoU years' between 2009 and 2012-3. Like philologists, we look for the historically constructed root of the meaning of symbols: for them, words, for us, policy prescriptions. In doing that, we am, however, attentive to consider NEG prescriptions for different countries as being not so much like distinct (country-specific) paintings of illuminated trees produced independently from one another in country-specific painting traditions, but more like tree paintings the cannons and meanings of which develop in time through a transnational dialogue among those behind their production. NEG prescriptions have to be thus placed in the context not so much of a country-by-country comparison of distinct, atomised EU-MS dialogues, as in the context of a transnational conversation at which all EU MS participate – i.e. by voting in the European Council on the final version of the CSRs or of the MoU/EAPs; but also by being aware of the range of possible meanings NEG prescriptions take in CSRs or MoU/EAPs for other MSs. It is by looking at this transnational conversation and the historical construction of the semantic roots that this conversation operates that we can grasp more fully the meta-meaning of a particular policy prescription.

By analogy, the meta-meaning of the bird has its root in the first illuminate manuscripts that built the cannon of painting birds of particular types sitting on particular trees, and giving them not only the first-order, apparent meaning of x type of birds in y types of trees but also their second-order, symbolic meaning of, let's say, 'enchanted birds in the Paradise tree' (and thus telling us not only the story of birds in trees, but the whole cosmic story of the origins of humanity). The challenge is therefore to also decode the second-level, symbolic meaning of NEG policy prescriptions on healthcare and public services. They may not be telling us (or Member States) of solely Paradise or solely Hell, but rather of the promise to getting to Paradise (in the form of economic growth or good ratings by financial markets) through hellish amputations and metamorphoses (financial discipline).

Situating policy prescriptions in a larger chronology is important because their temporal location in the larger diachronic set of prescriptions allows us to grasp their meaning. Thus, in order to build their semantic roots, prescriptions at the beginning of the NEG needed to be very specific as well as situated in a densely populated and highly connected synchronic set of prescriptions. As we will see, this was exactly the role of MoU prescriptions, which were indeed both very specific and offered rich synchronic semantic contexts for NEG policy prescriptions on healthcare and public services.

By contrast, policy prescriptions closer to the present and further away from the start of the NEG process do not need to be as specific or densely connected. Their meaning has already been established in past NEG documents pertaining either to same or other member states than the one to which they are addressed. And indeed, since 2015 (check), CSRs got shorter and fewer in number, getting to be expressed in sometimes cryptic formulations that can only be understood with reference to past NEG pronouncements. As they 'grow older', policy prescriptions get 'thinner', albeit without necessarily getting semantically 'thinner', or indeed 'nicer' or more 'social'. Thus, in time, the bird may even sometimes fly a bit away from the tree. We may though still understand by looking at previous pictures that this is a bird that sat on a branch in a tree. The empirical question remains if new types of birds (i.e. new meanings for policy prescriptions) are flown in (rather than out of) the tree in the later stages of the NEG process. This implies, at a methodological level, that we need to be able to distinguish between a bird that is flying in from the tree (i.e. it is new and potentially comes from a different tree) and one that is flying out (i.e. it is one of the birds we already know from our reading of the same tree).

The diachronic dimension of policy prescriptions brings to our attention the fact that the meaning of a prescription is constructed neither solely inside synchronic sets of prescriptions through relations to other synchronic prescriptions (the modern Saussurian linguistics' 'arbitrary systems of symbols'), nor only by adding to this its construction in time through relations to other diachronic texts and prescriptions (the classical philology's etymologies), but also by considering the historically constructed contexts of prescription involving differently situated addresser and addressee (what we could term Bakhtin's dialogical meaning). The meaning of the bird is given neither solely by its relation to the tree in the particular illuminated picture found in a particular medieval manuscript, nor only by adding to that its relation to past birds, trees, and illuminated pictures found in medieval manuscripts from other locations and times, but also by taking into account that the meaning of the bird involved the material and semantic production of manuscripts by painters, their commissioners and the person to which the manuscript was to be given as a gift. The relation between the addressers (the painter and the commissioner) and the addressee (the gift receiver) was dialogical, involving unequal power positions.

In the case of NEG policy prescriptions, their meaning is thus also given by the relation between, on the one hand, the set of actors in the European Commission and the European Council that are involved in the actual writing and adoption by the Council of NEG documents (the addressers), and, on the other, the set of government actors inside Member States and the Member State themselves as actors situated in a transnational but geo-politically uneven field of power (the EU, the world), which are in fact the recipients of the NEG document (the addressees). It is important to consider this relation as involving not just one addresser (the European Commission or the European Council as a unit) and one addressee (the Member State, which a specific NEG document is directed to), but as a set of addresses and a set of addresser. Even considering one NEG document for one country in one particular year, there are more guests at the table than simply the European Commission (or even simply the European Council) and the country. The conversation is multi-logical rather than simply di (two) logical (logos, languages).

IV.   Classifying policy prescriptions by degrees of constraint

The relation between the addressers and addressees is an asymmetrical power relation. This power relation manifests itself more concretely in NEG disciplinary procedures (Financial Assistance, EDP, SDP, ExIMB). These disciplinary procedures display various degrees of constraining power on MSs, going from very strong (Financial Assistance), to strong (EDP,

SDP, ExIMB) and finally weak (none of them). This constraining power is translated in NEG policy prescriptions. While the latter may be classified in terms of the degree of their legal constraint (going from the weakest, i.e. recitals and EU2020, to the strongest, i.e. SGP and MIP), its full power is realised only if enacted in disciplinary procedures. We therefore measured the degree of constraint attached to a policy prescription by combining the degree of constraint attached to disciplinary procedures with that attached to the legal basis of the prescription (see Table 1). This is an 'external' constraint' in as much as it is external to the prescription, being given by its context rather than content.

Table 1. Degrees of external constraint in NEG policy prescriptions

Legal status of policy prescription/MS status in NEG constraining procedures	Degree of external constraint	Symbol
Very binding Condition & Recital attached to it, for MSs under EAP/MoU	*Very strong*	**V**
Binding SGP/MIP CSR/Recital attached to it, for MSs under EDP/SDP/ExIMB/MoU	*Strong*	**S**
Non-binding EU2020 CSR & Recital attached to it for all MSs, or SGP/MIP CSR for MSs outside EDP/ SDP/ExIMB/MoU	*Weak*	**W**

The temporal location of a NEG policy prescription in the chronology of the NEG process is connected to both its degree of constraint and its meaning and form. It is as if the high degree of the constraint (or pressure) found at the beginning of the NEG process, in 'the MoU years', served as a revelator, or rather a builder, of the meaning of NEG policy prescriptions. Indeed pressure translated at the semantic level in a filigree of very detailed, specific prescriptions linked in a highly dense and highly connected network of prescriptions. In contrast, when in later years the pressure diminished, prescriptions became more general and less dense. However we have to be aware that this does not necessarily mean that their meaning change or 'lighten', but only that it allows for increased rhetorical ambivalence providing legitimation for continuing EU's NEG interventions.

But policy prescriptions not only are attached to an 'external constraint' (given by the combination of legal basis and the status of the MS in NEG disciplinary procedures), they are also imbued with a (potential) 'internal constraint' linked to their degree of precision. Indeed, we expect a more precise policy prescription (e.g. 'cut/streamline public expenses for healthcare') to be more constraining than more general and vague ones (e.g. 'improve efficiency of public expenses for healthcare') as the aim and means of policy changes are more clearly defined in the first case. More precise prescriptions allow the Commission to better monitor MS's compliance with the prescription and thereafter to invoke non-compliance in eventual sanctions. The constraining power of precision is heightened even more if prescriptions include quantitative targets (e.g. 'keep the public wage bill under 3.9 bn euro'). We may therefore combine the criteria of precision and presence of targets and arrive to the following three degrees of 'internal constraint' (see Table 2).

Table 2. Degrees of internal constraint

Degree of precision of policy prescription	Internal constraint
Precise & targeted	*Very strong*
Precise but no target	*Strong*
Unprecise/general	*Weak*

Finally, we could combine internal and external constraints and arrive at the following degrees of overall constraint (see Table 3).

Table 3. Degrees of overall constraint in NEG policy prescriptions

External constraint	Degree of precision of policy prescription	Degree of internal constraint	Degree of overall constraint	Symbol
Very binding (EAP/MoU condition) *Very strong*	**Precise & targeted**	*Very strong*	Strength 9	**V9**
	Precise but no target	*Strong*	Strength 8	**V8**
	Unprecise/general	*Weak*	Strength 7	**V7**
Binding (SGP/MIP CSR during EDP/ SDP/ExIMB/MoU) *Strong*	**Precise & targeted**	*Very strong*	Strength 6	**S6**
	Precise but no target	*Strong*	Strength 5	**S5**
	Unprecise/general	*Weak*	Strength 4	**S4**
Non-binding (EU2020 CSR or SGP/MIP CSR outside EDP/ SDP/ExIMB/MoU) *Weak*	**Precise & targeted**	*Very strong*	Strength 3	**W3**
	Precise but no target	*Strong*	Strength 2	**W2**
	Unprecise/general	*Weak*	Strength 1	**W1**

Finally, we need to take into account that recitals may be of two kinds:
a) prescriptive (i.e. using language very similar to CSRs, e.g. 'should') or
b) descriptive (using a more vague and indirect language, i.e. 'could').
If the language of a recital is prescriptive, then, in terms of its degree of internal constraint, the recital is closer to the CSRs and MoU conditions. If it's descriptive, then the recital's indirect language gives way to a wider range of interpretations and its degree of internal constraint is lower than that of its corresponding CSR or condition. Recitals formulated in indirect language have been marked with R(i) and figure at the periphery of a circle of constraint in Picture 3.

Figure 3 NEG prescriptions and concentric circles of constraint
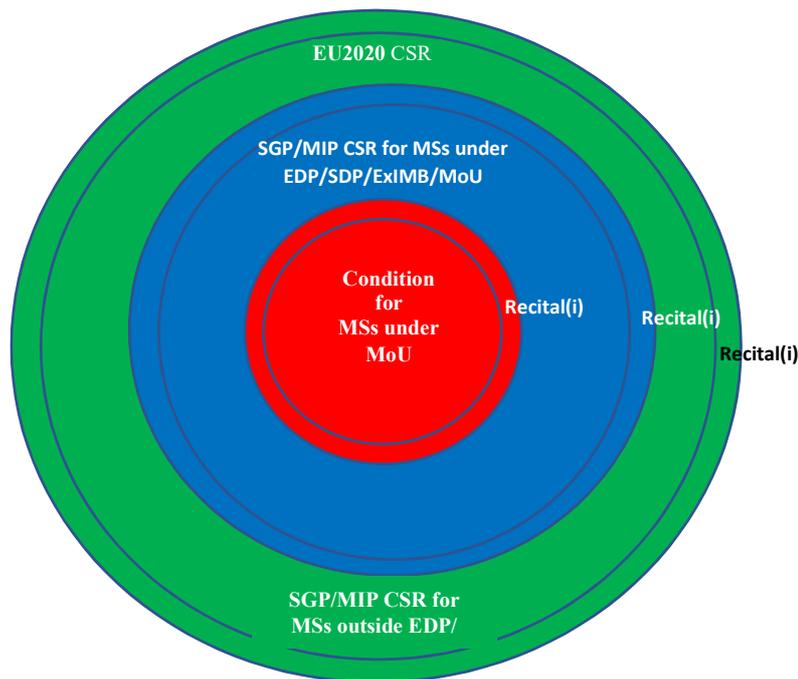
V. Unearthing the 'semantic field' of policy themes, topics and values

After segmenting long quotes into short quotes corresponding to our units of policy prescriptions, we classified them according to a set of 'policy themes' which we identified as recurrent across years and sometimes several MSs. A 'policy theme' is the common, synthetic formulation of a series of homonymous (i.e. having the same meaning) policy prescriptions. This allowed us to diminish the extreme variety of individual policy prescriptions (and hence number of units to be analysed) by grouping them by (immediately accessible) meaning and discarding marginal variation in the exact wording of prescriptions under a theme. For example, we classified under the same policy theme policy prescriptions such as 'increase the efficacy of public spending on healthcare' and 'increase the (cost-)efficiency of public spending in healthcare'.

We then grouped policy themes in *5 areas*:
1) Change in public sector/services expenditure
2) Change healthcare expenditure/ funding
3) Change hospital expenditure/funding
4) Change inpatient-outpatient mix in funding/services;
5) Change private-public mix in the funding/payment of health services; &
6) Change in accessibility

and assessed their contribution to *3 big topics* relevant to our analytic framework:

1) Public sector expenditure, wage and employment levels;
2) Scope of resources for public healthcare services & their mode of allocation;
3) Scope and mode of allocation of rights of access to public health services.

The classification of themes under topics involved a further search for the exact meaning of each theme. While many policy themes are very precise in their formulation ('keep public wage bill under 3.9 bn'), some are quite general (i.e. 'increase the (cost-)efficiency of public spending in healthcare') - indicating, in a first (de-contextualised) reading of the policy theme, an apparently ambiguous meaning. However, following the semantic perspective described at point III, we argue that the meaning of all themes (including apparently ambiguous

ones) may be assessed by looking at the semantic relation between a particular theme and other themes present in NEG documents. These relations are not only indirect (between a particular policy theme and the general policy background formed by all policy prescriptions made for all MSs and for all years during the NEG process), but also more direct, due to the close juxtapositions of several policy themes in a particular NEG document, and even a particular section and paragraph of a particular NEG document. The closest relations (links or connections) are established when several policy themes are explicitly linked on a semantic level in the same sentence (e.g.).

While the contribution of most more precise themes to particular topics was easily accessible and intelligible, the contribution of the more general ones was more difficult. In classifying the latter under particular topics, we therefore looked at their links to other, more precise themes (either present in NEG documents or theoretically assessed by us). This also led to several themes being present under two or more topics, indicating their potential for cross-fertilising several topics. Otherwise said, their potential to kill two or three rabbits with the same bullet: contribute to change the scope of public services, but also to change their mode of allocation, and sometimes even to change the scope and mode of allocation of rights of access to services.

Moreover, we also assessed the 'value' of each policy theme under each topic, i.e. their contribution to bringing either of the 4 topics more towards the commodification, or alternatively, the de-commodification pole. Once again, the value of some policy themes was immediately accessible (e.g. 'reduce the public wage bill under 3.9 bn euro' contributes to reduce the scope of resources for public services and thus to increase the space for potential private involvement in healthcare, i.e. for their potential commodification). Nonetheless, assessing the value of the more vague and general policy themes needed recourse to the analysis of their semantic links to more precise policy themes. For example, the explicit and direct links made in some NEG documents between 'increase the (cost-)efficiency of public spending in healthcare' (1), on the one hand, and 'contain/reduce health expenditure/cost increases/spent overrun in healthcare' (2), 'reduce hospital services/expenditure' (3) and 'curb informal payments in medical services' (4) allowed me, in a first step, to see that the meaning of (1) contains/encompasses the meaning of (2), (3) and (4), and hence its value is equivalent with the value of the more precise (2) and (3), which is commodification. This is turn allowed us to also assess the meaning of (4), another vague and ambiguous policy theme, as also being encompassed by the meaning of (2) and (3); which also imprint their 'commodification' value on this theme. For the classification of policy themes in areas and topics (our 'overarching semantic field', please see attached 'Table themes and topics'.

VI.   Using 'short quotes' to code policy prescriptions across countries and years

By drawing on this 'semantic field', we rearranged policy prescriptions in 4 new tables, one for each larger topic. Each topic-specific table regrouped policy prescriptions for our 4 member states (DE, IT, IE and RO) and our 9 years (2009 to 2017) under various the policy themes identified for each country and year. For the resulting data sets, see 'Table short quotes NEG prescriptions' attached. By drawing on Table 3, we then coded all our units of analysis, the short quotes standing for our individual policy prescriptions (with common themes being listed in the second column in the table of short quotes).

In a second stage, we simplified the data in the tables present in the document 'Tables short quotes NEG prescriptions' by deleting the quote and leaving only its code (e.g. V8, S4 etc.). For resulting data sets, see 'Table coding degrees of constraint'.

References

Bakhtin, M. 1988. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Notes:

[i] https://www.google.ie/search?q=medieval+manuscript+tree+bird&tbm=isch&tbs=rimg:CTn8e4QVqZzHIjhkNE HmFaRf6gjTUcfLkQQv3qIcrsyBbjc6OphQvamDmY4m6njhXxfG1IW-mE-RuLhyYt2_1Qu1s_1yoSCWQ0QeYVpF_1qEV0ti71ti1TlKhIJCNNRx8uRBC8R0OjQQBBuCP0qEgneohyuzIFuNxHH4 QGszkHvxSoSCTo6mFC9qYOZEeJ1piHxusM-KhIJjibqeOFfF8YRaRq0vuBXDkkqEgnUhb6YT5G4uBF-ZAJT48A7ZSoSCXJi3b9C7Wz_1EfjV_1KWO4kCn&tbo=u&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjGvOftuJ7dAhWjzYUKHcrACyQQ9 C96BAgBEBs&biw=1280&bih=615&dpr=1.5#imgrc=cmLdv0LtbP-AzM: