"Online political discourse on populism: from self-expression to aggression"

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the social acts performed through the use of the notion of populism on the social media platform Twitter and focuses on the use of the term populismo and its derivatives (e.g. populista)—henceforth populis*—in the tweets of Spanish politicians and the received interactions. Since the meaning of populism is still open to debate and it can be considered an "empty signifier" (De Cleen et al., 2018), the aim of this study is to explore different pragmatic and interactional purposes underlying the use of populis* in digital political discourse. The term can be used with a positive and negative value and can be itself the subject of controversy. The study of its use can hence shed light on the forms and functions of the qualification of individuals or events as "populist" and on the way politicians and lay citizens engage in online political communication (Breeze, 2020). We examine a corpus of tweets from Spanish political parties and politicians generated during 2019 in order to determine which political actors refer to the notion of populism in Twitter discourse. Then we generate a dataset of Twitter interactions involving at least one message from a Spanish politician and its reply or replies. In this dataset, we first analyze the linguistic, communicational and socio-political context of each message containing at least one token of populis* in order to (i) determine whether the use of populis* performs such social acts as self-expression and self-positioning (Roginsky & De Cock, 2015), or rather qualification of another person or event, associa...

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This study discusses the social acts performed through the use of the notion of *populism* on the social media platform Twitter and focuses on the use of the term *populismo* and its derivatives (e.g. *populista*)—henceforth *populis**—in the tweets of Spanish politicians and the received interactions. Since the meaning of populism is still open to debate and it can be considered an "empty signifier" (De Cleen et al., 2018), the aim of this study is to explore different pragmatic and interactional purposes underlying the use of *populis** in digital political discourse. The term can be used with a positive and negative value and can be itself the subject of controversy. The study of its use can hence shed light on the forms and functions of the qualification of individuals or events as "populist" and on the way politicians and lay citizens engage in online political communication (Breeze, 2020). We examine a corpus of tweets from Spanish political parties and politicians generated during 2019 in order to determine which political actors refer to the notion of *populism* in Twitter discourse. Then we generate a dataset of Twitter interactions involving at least one message from a Spanish politician and its reply or replies. In this dataset, we first analyze the linguistic, communicational and socio-political context of each message containing at least one token of *populis** in order to (i) determine whether the use of *populis** performs such social acts as self-expression and self-positioning (Roginsky & De Cock, 2015), or rather qualification of another person or event, associated with aggression, and (ii) assess the positive or negative value conveyed by the term. Second, we examine each interaction in order to determine (iii) whether reactions to a tweet with *populis** comment upon the use of the term in that particular message, and (iv) whether these reactions support or reject the initial message (De Cock & Pizarro Pedraza, 2018). Finally, we investigate the link between the tweets containing *populis** and offline events, focusing on whether the use and frequency of tweets with *populis** can be linked to significant political events. We expect that *populis** will be employed mainly for negative qualification. Furthermore, we expect controversies about the use of the term to appear in interactions involving, on the one hand, mainstream politicians who use the term to (dis)qualify other parties or social movements and, on the other hand, other political parties or citizens who contest this (dis)qualification.

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