



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

Shchinova, Nadezda ; De Cock, Barbara ; Hambye, Philippe ; Nuevo Gascó, Raúl ; Roginsky, Sandrine

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...

CITE THIS VERSION

Shchinova, Nadezda ; De Cock, Barbara ; Hambye, Philippe ; Nuevo Gascó, Raúl ; Roginsky, Sandrine. *Online political discourse on populism: from self-expression to aggression*. 17th International Pragmatics Conference (Winterthur, Switzerland - en ligne, du 27/06/2021 au 02/07/2021). <http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/249048>

Le dépôt institutionnel DIAL est destiné au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques émanant des membres de l'UCLouvain. Toute utilisation de ce document à des fins lucratives ou commerciales est strictement interdite. L'utilisateur s'engage à respecter les droits d'auteur liés à ce document, principalement le droit à l'intégrité de l'œuvre et le droit à la paternité. La politique complète de copyright est disponible sur la page [Copyright policy](#)

DIAL is an institutional repository for the deposit and dissemination of scientific documents from UCLouvain members. Usage of this document for profit or commercial purposes is strictly prohibited. User agrees to respect copyright about this document, mainly text integrity and source mention. Full content of copyright policy is available at [Copyright policy](#)

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

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.

References

- Breeze, R. (2020). Exploring populist styles of political discourse in Twitter. *World Englishes*, 39(4), 550-567. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12496>
- De Cleen, B., Glynos, J., & Mondon, A. (2018). Critical research on populism: Nine rules of engagement. *Organization*, 25(5), 649–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418768053>

De Cock, B. & Pizarro Pedraza, A. (2018). From expressing solidarity to mocking on Twitter: Pragmatic functions of hashtags starting with #jesuis across languages. *Language in Society*. 47(2). 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404518000052>

Roginsky, S., & De Cock, B. (2015). Faire campagne sur Twitter. *Les Cahiers du numérique*, 11(4), 119-144.
<https://www.cairn.info/revue-les-cahiers-du-numerique-2015-4-page-119.htm>