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ABSTRACT

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"I am not populist". Mechanisms for the re-negotiation of category membership on Twitter

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Abstract

Situated within studies on discourses about populism (De Cleen et al. 2018), this paper zooms in on the use, meanings, and role of the word populist in contemporary socio-political debates and, more specifically, on social media. This paper examines populist as stigma term (Kranert 2020) and seeks to determine how people negotiate their categorisation as (non-)populist – and hence the meaning of this category – on Twitter. Based on the analysis of 139 tweets including the phrase "I am not populist" in four different languages (Dutch, French, English, Spanish), we propose that two patterns can be identified for the renegotiation of users' identities as populist: denial and self-categorisation. This analysis confirms that populist as a category can refer to a variety of (political) attitudes and orientations and shows the consequences of the polysemous nature of *populist* while proving that, in certain contexts, *populist* refers to some specific and stable categories.

Keywords: Twitter; populism; membership categorisation analysis; sociopolitical keywords; social media; denial; self-categorisation; stigma terms

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an upsurge of studies on populism, focusing mostly on what characterises populist discourse and on the socio-political factors leading to its rise (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2007; Koller et al. 2023:18-23). Another strand of research has looked at the discursive construction of *populism,* particularly on political or media discourse (Brown and Mondon 2021; Herkman 2016; Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020), with a very recent focus on so-called "anti-populist" discourse, studying the derogatory uses of the terms *populism* and *populist* (De Cleen et al. 2018; Nikisianis et al. 2019; Demata et al. 2020). While these studies look at the way politicians or journalists use these terms to name or blame other people, groups or attitudes, there are, to the best of our knowledge, no studies looking at the way people react when they are, or think they might be, called populists nor on how *populism/populist* is used on social media platforms by speakers that are not necessarily well-known politicians or opinion makers.

Given the popularity of the term both on mainstream and social media, we believe that studying how people react to being called *populist* in daily interactions is a way to better understand what is at stake when this term is used. More generally, we consider that looking at the way people negotiate their

categorisation as (non-)populist – and hence their understanding of the meaning of this category – may help us understand the role of this category in contemporary socio-political debates. In particular, this study will contribute to an ongoing strand of research which proposes to approach so-called buzzwords like *multiculturalism* (Schröter *et al.* 2018) or *populism/populist* (Kranert 2020; Shchinova, forthcoming) as "sociopolitical keywords" (the contributions in De Cock *et al.*, forthcoming; Jeffries and Walker 2018).

This paper thus shifts its focus from how politicians – or people in power – use this term to how individuals construe it when negating or contesting being, or acting as, populists. With this aim, we have analysed a corpus of tweets[1] posted in 2019 and including the clause "I am not populist" (henceforth IANP), or variants of it, in four different languages: Dutch, English, French and Spanish. The analysis of the corpus intends to answer two research questions: i. How and why people (re)negotiate their categorisation as (non-)populist and use this category to build up their identity in interactions on social media, and ii. Which role the category *populist* plays in contemporary socio-political discourse.

This study follows previous work on uses of the structure "I am X" in social media (De Cock and Pizarro Pedraza 2018; Pizarro Pedraza and De Cock 2018) and seeks to identify recurrent patterns of use when negation appears in the tweets. Following membership categorisation analysis (Stokoe 2012), social media interactions are treated as conversations in which what constitutes the "populist identity" is negotiated. This analysis can thus help us explain both discursive uses of *populist* and how negation contributes to creating representational meaning and to building interpersonal relations (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2018).

2. State of the art

2.1. On meanings and connotations of populism and populist

Populism is a global phenomenon and is articulated disparately in different parts of the world. Despite the existing disagreements about the meaning of populism, at least two core conceptualisations can be provided. Populism has been conceptualised (*i*) as "a thin-centered" political ideology that views society divided into two groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde 2004: 543), and (*ii*) as a discursive strategy and political communication style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; De Vreese et al. 2018). It has been claimed that "although frequently used by historians, social scientists, and political commentators, the term is exceptionally vague and refers in different contexts to a bewildering variety of phenomena" (Canovan 1999: 3). Recent research has shown that the definitions of *populism* are still contested by scholars and that the way *populism* is used and is interpreted in academic literature depends on the specific contexts and host-ideologies (Hunger & Paxton 2022).

To date, the uses and the meanings of the terms *populism* and *populist* have been mainly examined in newspaper discourse (Bale et al. 2011; Brown and Mondon 2021). The findings from these studies suggest that *populism* is used in a multitude of contexts, not only in reference to politics, and often differently from the academic definitions. In addition, previous research focusing on the use of the term itself in discourse has pointed out the term's mainly negative connotation, as well as its random and pejorative use and its vague meaning (Bale et al. 2011; Stravakakis 2017; Schwörer 2021). Previous

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[1] In spite of Twitter being now called X, we have decided to keep references to tweets and Twitter throughout the article. This reflects the name of the platform both when messages were originally posted and at the time of data compilation.

research on the intersection of populism studies and linguistics has analysed what *populism* means and to whom or what the *populist* label is attributed in discourse (Kranert 2020; Thornborrow at al. 2021). The results of these studies show that specific and consistent semantic elements are attached to the terms *populism* and *populist* in discourse, thus presenting a challenge to the idea of the vagueness of the term. Moreover, the meanings of *populism* and *populist* follow from what Kranert (2020) calls "a semantic struggle", pointing out that (i) the terms can be used to "signify the group's own position" and thus have positive connotations, and (ii) the terms can be used as "a stigma term", thus having negative connotations (Kranert 2020: 34). The negative connotations of the terms are observed in various empirical studies (see Hamo et al. 2019; Goyvaerts and De Cleen 2020; Shchinova 2023).

While the meanings of *populism* and *populist* have been mainly concerned with newspaper discourse, research on its use in online platforms is scarce with the exception of some studies exploring its use on Twitter. A quantitative study aimed to determine which political actors use *populism/populist* and to whom the label is attributed in the context of the Western political parties (Schwörer 2021). Findings show that *populism/populist* are mainly used pejoratively by mainstream political parties to label their competitors, and that it is associated with very different meanings. However, the study also pointed out some positive connotations of the term; specifically, in the case when the term is attributed to the self or the political party the person represents. Another study that examines how political actors use the terms *populism* and *populist* on Twitter (Shchinova 2023) has provided a qualitative analysis on the types of uses of the terms and the meanings conveyed by the co-occurrences of *populism/populist*. The findings from this study have shown that *populism/populist* have some concrete implied meanings and concrete uses, such as delegitimising an opponent (not necessarily a populist one) and self-legitimising when positioning oneself against populists (concrete politicians) and populism, presented as either an abstract political phenomenon, or a concrete political party or leaning. To our knowledge, the use of *populism/populist* on social media by actors other than politicians has not been examined. Yet, such analysis can add to our understanding of the uses and meanings of populism/populist as a category, and of the functions of these socio-political keywords in interactions on social media.

2.2. Negotiating, rejecting, or denying a membership categorisation

The focus of this paper is on rejecting the label *populist,* regardless of the meaning with which it was used (cf.2.1). As such, the focus is on the strategies used to negate such categorisation, rather than on the actual meanings ascribed to the label *populist.* In doing so, this paper will also draw on insights from Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) (see Stokoe 2012). The mere fact that tweeters attribute and reject the label *populist* suggests that it somehow seems a relevant identity for the interaction at hand (cf. Fitzgerald 1999), and more so than other membership categorisation devices the tweeter could use, such as their profession, gender, or nationality. This membership categorisation is characterised by indexicality and occasionedness (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998). Indeed, "any utterance (and its constituent parts) comes up indexically, in a here and now and is to be understood so. In other words, a good part of the meaning of an utterance (including, of course, one that ascribes or displays an identity) is to be found in the occasion of its production – in the local state of affairs that was operative at that exact moment of interactional time" (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998: 4). As we will show below, a detailed analysis of the local state of affairs, including the offline state of affairs (e.g. specific political events such as Brexit, elections, government decisions, or other socio-political events), is crucial to interpret the membership categorisation and its possible rejection or negotiation. This frequently requires cultural competence (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998: 10) since it relates to making explicit how something culturally familiar influences communicative interactions, i.e. how the

interpretation of what *populist* means in the data and hence in a particular cultural or geographical context has an impact on the interaction. Identity depends on whether it is made relevant, which also holds for tweets with no previous mention of populist. Indeed, by saying IANP, the label *populist* is made relevant altogether.

Given the very nature of our object of study, we focus on messages where the membership categorisation has been made explicit – if only in its being rejected –, but this does not prevent more implicit "category-resonant descriptions" (Stokoe 2012: 280) from appearing in the interaction and membership negotiation. Indeed, as pointed out by Sacks (1992: 40), categories are "inference-rich" and store "a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society", e.g. the societal knowledge about features associated with populist, such as anti-elitist, right-wing leanings, etc. When looking at our specific case study, the message – or thread of messages – in which IANP is embedded sometimes expands on these features, be it by making them explicit or evoking them in a more implicit way. As shown in Stokoe (2012: 300), "not by 'their nature' but in their empirical use, categories short-cut and package common-sense knowledge about category members and their actions."

The inference-richness of the term *populist* also implies that it can be used without exactly attempting to categorize someone as member of a populist sociopolitical group but rather in a way that we would describe as property-resonant: it is then used to evoke characteristics associated with *populist* by some – such as demagogical, offering simplistic solutions – without necessarily categorizing someone as sociopolitically *populist.*

Membership categorisation has been shown to be the object of negotiation (McKinlay and Dunnett 1998, Berry 2021) or downright resistance (Widdicombe 1998 on punk and goth identities) (cf. example 1 below). This resistance may rely precisely on rejecting inferences that may be associated with the membership categorisation (Widdicombe 1998: 59). In rejecting or attempting to renegotiate such membership categorisation, "speakers acknowledge and undermine such normative cultural assumptions, by rejecting the category-boundedness of particular attributes and transforming their meanings so that they are expressions of personal identity" (Widdicombe 1998: 69). Throughout a sometimes-extended negotiation of the membership categorisation as *populist*, this study illustrates that membership is realised in interaction, rather than a pre-existing membership to be assumed (Widdicombe 1998: 67).

3. Data and Method

3.1. Data

In order to carry out this analysis, we automatically compiled a corpus of tweets using the phrase "I am not (a) populist" in four languages - Dutch, English, French and Spanish - via the "Tweet Downloader" tool. This was formerly available on Twitter for academic research purposes and disappeared in February 2023. Data was collected during July 2022 following these search criteria: First, 2019 was selected as the search time span to align with research on other genres being done by some members of this group of researchers within a wider project. Second, for similar reasons, four languages where included. Given the pluricentric nature of the languages involved, even if written in the same language (e.g. Spanish), tweets could come from different contexts (e.g. different Latin American countries or Spain). For each language, variations of the phrase "I am not populist" were searched (see figure 1). These variations included the use (or not) of an article before the word populist, as *populist* can be used as a predicative adjective or a categorising noun (c.f. Hidalgo-Downing

et al., 2024). While different in grammatical form, both function as referential strategies and contribute to categorising users as non-members of a social group (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Hart 2010). The use of the phrase "I am not" allows us not only to analyse how the category *populism* is discursively constructed but also how users show resistance to being affiliated to this category (Widdicombe 1998). The verb "to be" in the phrase performs a relational function (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014) and allows users to characterise and identify themselves as non-members of this particular social group or as not sharing the *populist* feature. Likewise, the use of the negation "not" can be considered a stance marker (Martin and White 2005; Dancygier 2012; Hidalgo-Downing 2021) inasmuch as it helps users to overtly show how they position themselves and how they disalign with other subjects with respect to the category *populist* (cf. Du Bois 2007). The phrase "I am not populist" thus contributes to (re)negotiating users' self-positioning while interacting on Twitter. It shall be noted that the searches performed only allowed for the phrase "(a) populist" to follow directly the verb *to be*. This means that cases where *populist* might appear in coordination with other adjectives or nouns where not present in the corpus. For instance, posts indicating "no soy populista" (I am not populist) were automatically collected, but posts where the phrasing was "no soy chavista ni populista" (I am neither Chavist nor populist) are not included in our dataset.

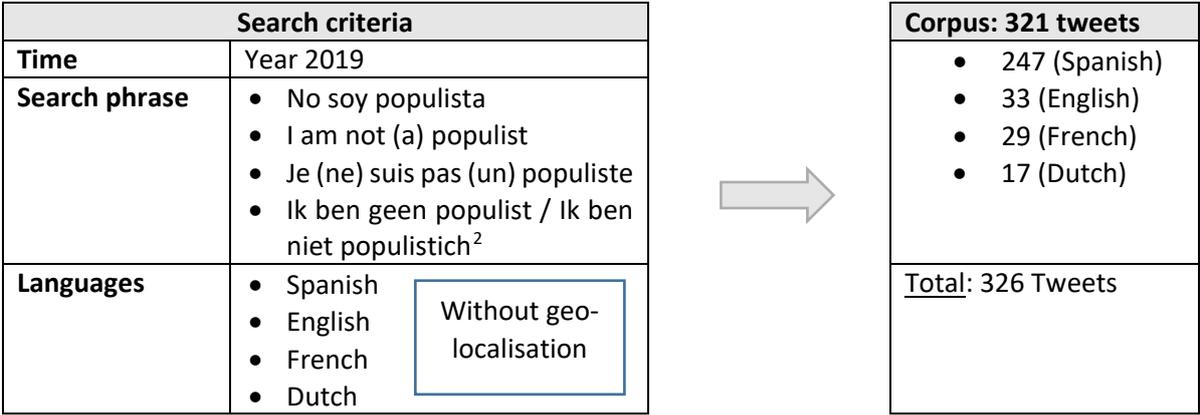| Search criteria		Corpus: 321 tweets
Time	Year 2019	• 247 (Spanish)
Search phrase	• No soy populista • I am not (a) populist • Je (ne) suis pas (un) populiste • Ik ben geen populist / Ik ben niet populistich[2]	• 33 (English) • 29 (French) • 17 (Dutch)
Languages	• Spanish • English Without geo- • French localisation • Dutch	Total: 326 Tweets

Figure 1. Data collection criteria.

Once the search was performed, Tweet Downloader generated four .csv files (one per language) which were manually cleaned, discarding tweets which were not legible and/or which were incomplete. Likewise, since this paper seeks to analyse how users' construct their own identity, tweets including IANP in reported speech were also deleted. All the other remaining tweets were stored in an Excel database which became the corpus for the analysis. In total, the corpus consists of 326 tweets which were distributed as follows: 247 in Spanish, 33 in English, 29 in French, and 17 in Dutch. Given the much higher frequency of Spanish tweets if compared to other languages in the dataset, we analysed a random sample of 60 Spanish tweets; for the other languages, all available tweets were analysed. Thus, the total amount of analysed messages is 139. It shall be noted that the limited size of the dataset does not allow for generalising conclusions about how the category *populist* is negotiated in social media. It does, however, allow for a detailed and qualitative analysis of all the data with the aim of identifying strategies for the renegotiation of membership categorisation.

All the downloaded tweets were automatically anonymised by the tool. Following ethical concerns on research on social media (Page et al. 2014) only tweets which were public have been analysed, and the

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[2] While both forms were used in Dutch, only 3 results were gathered from the second phrase used in the search.

anonymity of Twitter users will be kept in the article. This explains how examples and Twitter users are referred to in the analysis section: via the code tweets assigned on the Excel database, indicating the language in which they are produced and their number in the corpus (e.g. EN01 – standing for tweet number 1 in the English sub-corpus). For similar ethical reasons, complete tweets will not be quoted, and slight changes might be made, if necessary, to prevent the author's identity being found.

3.2. Method

The process of analysing users' renegotiation of their identity has involved a thorough annotation process which was inductively designed, revised, tested and applied by the four researchers writing this article. The annotation process described below is the result of four test annotation rounds in which the annotation protocol was tested with the aim of confirming shared understanding of the categories for analysis and seeking interrater agreement. While the latter was eventually not particularly high, the discussions held during each annotation round were useful for confirming that situatedness and knowledge about offline affairs influenced each researcher's interpretation of the use of the word *populist* (cf. 2.2 above and Antaki and Widdicombe 1998). Discussions also contributed to enhancing the validity of the parameters used in our analysis. Indeed, as also pointed out by Hober, Dixon and Larsson (2023: 254), the contribution of interrater reliability tests hinges also on its being a starting point to identify and discuss cases of disagreement in order to refine the coding system. We therefore consider that the discussions concerning the disagreements we observed when calculating the interrater reliability are an important heuristic tool and shall be considered part of the methodology. This aligns with similar claims in other protocols where the researchers' interpretation could influence the annotation process (see Pragglejaz 2007 for arguments in favour of incorporating discussions when annotating metaphor uses).

The annotation protocol was organized along four dimensions: content of *populist* as a category, purpose of using IANP in context, interactional dimension and formal features (see table 1 for a summary). The first dimension – identifying the features users ascribe to the category "populist" when resisting being affiliated to it – seeks to identify the knowledge that users activate when using this word and which inferential processes are triggered by it (see Sacks 1992 and Stokoe 2012). Different features have been considered in the analysis. First, the action or statement in interaction which triggered the need to resist the users' affiliation with populist as an identity marker (e.g. support of Brexit). Second, the defining features of populism users misalign with. As *populism* is frequently used as a vague concept, this can help us explain how users understand the term. Finally, we have also annotated those socio-political features users align with, usually in contrast to *populist* or as a means of redefining what populism is. It is important to mention here that features defining the semantic scope of populist as an identity marker were not always found in the tweet under analysis, but sometimes they appeared in the interaction context (i.e. in the preceding or following tweets). This means that while the tweets were automatically extracted, for each of them we did a manual search on Twitter (using the advanced search tool) in order to locate it in its broader online context, though this search was not always with success.

ANNOTATION PROTOCOL		
Dimension in the analysis	**Rationale justifying this dimension**	**Items to be considered**
Dimension 1: Populist as a category	Identification of profiled features in the negotiation	- Action triggering the renegotiation of the

	of *populist* as an identity which is resisted by users.	identity or justified by IANP - Misalignment with features of populism - Alignment with features of other identity
Dimension 2: Use of IANP in context	Pattern followed by users when resisting to their being categorized as populist.	- Pattern 1: Denial [and sub-patterns within it] - Pattern 2: Assessment
Dimension 3: Interactional context	Features of interaction which explain the contextual renegotiation of affiliation with populist as an identity category.	- Twitter-determined interaction: new post, reply or comment - Function of tweet: supporting or contesting previous tweet
Dimension 4: Formal features	Description of formal features which can help in the identification of strategies for the renegotiation of identity.	- Position of IANP in the tweet: initial, medial, final. - Specific formal features: conjunctions, inverted commas, capital letters, etc. - Other interesting aspects.

Table 1. Dimensions in the annotation protocol.

The second dimension in the protocol involved looking at how IANP is used in context. After three of the rounds of analysis mentioned above, two main patterns were inductively identified. When following pattern 1 – denial – users say they are not populist because they have previously said something that could make one think they actually *are* populist. Pattern 2 – assessment – appears when the function of IANP is not to *deny a potential assimilation* with populism but rather to *claim an opposition to populism* in relation with another statement. It is frequent for this pattern to be followed by a (more or less explicit) justification of such opposition.

Given that identity is renegotiated in interaction, this dimension was also considered in the protocol. To do so, we took into account two aspects: the specific configuration of interactions on Twitter and the function of the tweet in relation to prior tweets in the interaction. Thus, we identified whether the tweet in which IANP appeared was a comment – of a tweet including populism or not -, a reply – to a tweet including *populism/populist* or not –, or just a new tweet. When reacting to interactions with other users, we also annotated whether the tweet supported or contested claims made in the previous tweet(s).

The final dimension in the protocol related to formal features. While this was originally not considered, after the initial annotation rounds, we noticed that some of them helped us justify annotation decisions taken by individual researchers. Hence, aspects such as the position of IANP in the tweet (as the first or last sentence or in medial position), typographical marks such as inverted commas or capital letters, or the use of specific conjunctions (such as *but* or *because*) were also incorporated to our annotation protocol. Space was also given for researchers to make free comments on their interpretation of IANP or other aspects which could be relevant for the specific case under analysis.

In a first step, a sample was coded by the four co-authors independently. This resulted in low interrater reliability values for the identification of the pattern (Krippendorf's Alpha of 0.223) but higher for other variables such as the position in the tweet (0.871) and whether the tweet replied to a tweet with/without mention of *populist* (0.75), which can be considered an acceptable agreement. However, multiple discussion rounds concerning the patterns allowed to obtain a Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.49 only for pattern identification, which is considered too low (Krippendorff 2006).

In a second step, each tweet was annotated by one of the co-authors and this annotation was revised by a second member of the team, taking into account the authors' linguistic and cultural competence of the different datasets involved. Divergent annotations were then discussed and either resolved (in case of agreement on a single choice for each variable) or tagged as ambiguous cases. Non-convergence issues are almost invariably related to vagueness, which may be due to a lack of context, be it offline context (related to the importance of cultural competence, cf. Antaki and Widdicombe 1998: 10) or online context (notably when other tweets in the interaction have disappeared). Recognising this vagueness is, in our view, a valid position as a researcher, in line with Stokoe (2012: 282) that "it is not the job of analysts to be more specific about categorization practices or, more generally, about *designedly ambiguous* descriptions and actions, than members themselves are".

4. Results

The objective of this paper is to explain how online users (re)negotiate their identity as populist and the influence of context in activating different understandings of the term. Our analysis of the 139 tweets allowed us to inductively identify two main patterns of IANP use (with several variants). These patterns are found in the four languages of our corpus. However, given that our main aim is to highlight and describe these general patterns, we decided not to get into the specificities we observed in certain languages of the corpus and present examples mainly in English and French. While it lies outside the scope of this paper to identify the semantic configuration of *populist* and the meanings ascribed to it by users, some common patterns have been identified. Users tend to disalign with properties such as demagogic or anti-elite and with particular ideological and political positions (e.g. kirchnerism, Peronism, the (radical) left-wing). Opposite to this, alignment relates to properties such as democratic, patriot, realistic or saying the truth. Users also align with some ideological and political positions such as the (far) right, republican or politicians such as Mauricio Macri (Argentina). It shall be noted that these patterns are contextually dependent and thus meaning is dynamically constructed in relation to events taking place in 2019, such as Brexit, elections or specific political decisions.

4.1. Rejecting a categorisation: IANP as a denial

A first purpose of IANP is to allow the speaker to reject their categorisation as populist, usually because something in the interaction could potentially lead to inferences related to s/he being qualified as such. This pattern, which we have called *denial*, occurs when the speaker has been explicitly qualified as populist and subsequently rejects this labelling, as in (1).

> (1) It is convenient for you to suggest "populism". I am not a populist. Europeans stole the wealth from Africa now it is stealing its people. To create a new modern sub proletarian class. In case you didn't know that's pure Marx!" (EN10)

This message is a reply to another tweet which itself comments on a previous tweet by [EN10] stating that NGOs which rescue migrants in Libya's territorial waters "facilitate people trafficking". In the

comment, the author of the first post says that s/he should write a paper about "the relationship between social media spread disinformation about NGOs and migrants, transnational nativist pressure groups, and the rise of anti-migrant populist parties", thus suggesting that [EN10]'s message spreads disinformation about NGOs and feeds populist parties characterized as anti-migrant.

In the answer, [EN10] denies being populist. Rejection of this categorisation is perceived as necessary because being populist is inferentially understood by both interlocutors as illegitimate. If s/he would have accepted this label, [EN10] would have been excluded from the range of legitimate participants to the discussion. The use of the word "convenient" in (1) shows how categorising interlocutors as *populist* is perceived by users as a rhetorical move aimed at minimizing the validity of their opinions. Hence the need to deny such categorisation as a means of regaining legitimacy[3]. This is a feature that often appears with IANP: speakers do not only reject the categorisation as populists, but they also reject the relevance and "fairness" of the interlocutors' strategy to discredit them and their opinion with this labelling.

In order to avoid the discredit of being called populist, [EN10] gives here "evidence" for the fact that s/he is not populist, providing an explanation for the statement which had triggered the qualification as populist: s/he criticized NGOs not because s/he's anti-migrant and hence populist, but because s/he endorses what s/he sees as a Marxist viewpoint and because s/he thinks NGOs do participate in some brain drain from Africa to Europe. Here, the fact that [EN10] states s/he adheres to Marxism comes to support the denial of being populist since Marxism (and its internationalism) can be viewed as strongly opposed to populism (usually associated with nationalism or rejection of migration). Rejection of membership categorisation in (1) is thus not based on a renegotiation of the meaning of the category, populist, but on evidence which shows why the user cannot be qualified as such.

Membership categorization is not only rejected in reply to a direct qualification as populist but also when users align with sociopolitical groups which are accused of being populist. While not explicitly addressed, in example (2), the speaker reacts to Tony Blair's qualification of Jeremy Corbin and the Labour party as populist, using IANP to disaffiliate from populists while reiterating his/her affiliation with the party and his/her support of the Labour leader:

(2) As a Labour party member I am offended by Mr Blair's comments. I am not a populist and not anti-semitic. I fully support the Labour leadership. #ForTheMany (EN26)

While in example (1), [EN10]'s first message has triggered an explicit qualification as populist from another speaker, hence provoking a denial by [EN10], in other cases, as in (3), the speaker denies being populist to a potential categorisation. [EN31] seems to be aware that calling someone "populist" is a frequent (and efficient) way of challenging the legitimacy of an opponent in a controversy, and so they try to shirk this blame by anticipation. This shows a relatively high degree of awareness of the *possibility* of being discredited by an interlocutor using the label *populist* as a stigma term.

(3) New York Times: Kushner likely paid almost no federal income taxes for years I am not a socialist. I am not a populist. I would consider myself socially liberal and economically moderate but this is why higher marginal tax rates are needed for the 1%. [followed by a link to an article from CNN's website referring to an article from *The New York Times*] (EN31)

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[3] A similar use can be seen in the following example in Spanish: "Jajajajajajajajjajajaja no soy populista, no me estoy postulando a ni un cargo. Digo la verdad." (SP43). The textual indication of laughing via "jajaja" shows not only the rejection of such categorization but also of using it in such context.

In this message, [EN31] comments on an article from *The New York Times* about the low-income taxes paid by Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. S/he calls for higher taxes rates for the richer Americans, a measure which could be regarded by some as socialist and populist – in the sense of being against the elite. In this case, [EN31] seems eager to avoid such a potential categorisation, as it is assumed that populist views might lack legitimacy. A comparison can be established between this example and the one in (1). In the latter, [EN10] was trying to clarify her/his opinion by stating IANP, whereas here what is at stake is the legitimacy of supporting particular policies – such as taxing richer citizens – without the user's identity being categorized as populist (or socialist) in spite of how such policies are socially evaluated. In other words, what is important here is to clarify the user's affiliation while maintaining a statement that (some) populists could agree with in order to avoid carrying the stigma of being populist (or socialist). This is thus a rejection of membership categorization which does not necessarily imply a rejection of some of the attributes and beliefs associated to the populist identity.

The examples above have shed light on common strategies related to denial as a strategy for membership categorisation and on the rhetorical function of such denial as a means of maintaining the user's legitimacy in the interaction. This denial could appear on its own or it could be supported by other statements, which usually appear after IANP (though they could occasionally appear before), and which function as evidence for such rejection. This could be seen in examples (1) and (3).

Another strategy to support the denial is to recategorize oneself (and one's stance) as something other than populist. In (4) below, [EN20] reacts to an explicit qualification as populist, which follows the pro-Brexit statements made in a previous message. After having used IANP as a denial, [EN20] does not present oneself as someone opposed to populism, but rather reframes such categorisation as the result of being an economist, hence giving an alternative explanation for her/his statement and contesting the inferences made by her/his interlocutor: while the latter suggests [EN20]'s support of Brexit indicates s/he is populist, s/he proposes to understand this opinion as a consequence of her/his knowledge. This does not only foreground [EN20]'s capacity to "understand" what Brexit is about, but once again the rejection of the populist label endows his/her opinion with legitimacy.

> (4) Sorry I am not a populist, more of an economist who thinks getting back 38% of what we give away is insanity. [Followed by a picture of a table showing each EU countries return on investment in EU budget, ordered from the one which gets the more to the lesser, UK closing the list] '(EN20)

In cases like the ones above, speakers contest the very understanding of their attitude as a form of populism: they do not negotiate the commonsensical meaning of populism, but rather the idea that their stance necessarily indexes populism, and so they disaffiliate from populists as a social group by giving evidence of being opposed to populism (see (1) and (3)) above) or by providing an alternative explanation for their stance (see (4)). In different – yet formally similar – cases, speakers using IANP do not seem to contest that their opinion indexes their adherence to a certain set of values and attitudes often associated with populism – e.g. radical nationalist, anti-migration, or anti-elite stance – but what they challenge is the categorisation of this stance as "populist", as can be observed in (5).

> (5) @CCastaner et après on parle pas de grand remplacement. Votre amateurisme et votre esprit pro migratoire coure à notre perte d identité. Un jour vous et vos confrères répondront devant les juges pour collaboration avec l ennemi. Non je ne suis pas populiste je suis patriote. (FR6)

[and then we don't talk about great replacement. Your amateurism and your pro-migratory spirit lead to the loss of our identity. One day you and your colleagues will answer to the judges for collaborating with the enemy. No, I'm not populist, I'm a patriot.]

In this message, [FR6] reacts to a tweet by the French Minister for home security Christophe Castaner, who announced that France would welcome 40 migrants rescued in the Mediterranean Sea. S/he clearly adopts an anti-migrant stance and criticizes the pro-migration spirit of the Minister and hence presents an attitude which could be assimilated with populism, understood as some form of nativist nationalism. Anticipating the blame, [FR6] uses IANP as a rejection and then proposes an alternative and – at least in his view– more positively regarded self-categorisation as "patriot". Unlike in previous examples, (5) is different in that the rejection only concerns the categorisation, not the stance itself. In other words, [FR6] does not really reject the categorisation in the group of people often called populists, but we can rather see a renegotiation of the label itself, probably to avoid its role as a stigma term which unavoidably marks someone who bears it as a non-legitimate participant in the public conversation.

It is worth mentioning that cases of denial using IANP often come with specific formal features. For instance, speakers often write "populist" between quotation marks to distance themselves from such label and highlight the fact that its use can be the subject of discussion. They also often emphasise their rejection of this categorisation by starting their sentence with "No" (No, I am not populist), adding an exclamation mark after IANP, or using capital letters for IANP, or at least for the word "not".

4.2. Negation and self-categorisation: IANP as an assessment

We observed a second pattern where the function of IANP is not to reject a (potential) categorisation as populist by someone else but rather to spontaneously self-categorise as non-populist by means of negation. The author then asserts an opposition to populism, in relation with other statements s/he makes in the same or preceding tweets. This can be seen in (6):

(6) We are a violent nation. Reasoning takes knowledge and patience- that's just toooo hard for many Americans. I believe in democratic processes for those willing to make an effort in understanding the problem. I am not a populist looking to whip up a mob (EN12)

This tweet is a reply to another tweet criticising Trump's supporters for not caring for his lies. [EN12] supports this idea by arguing that democracy is made for people who want to make an effort to rely on reasoning and knowledge. A rather elitist vision of democracy is expressed, and this view is supported by a final sentence where [EN12] negates being populist. The use of IANP seeks to strengthen the stance displayed in the statement preceding this phrase. In other words, in cases like this, speakers say they are not populist in order to emphasise that they are the opposite of what populists are deemed to be according to them. In this case, the property associated with *populist* and which the author has in mind is even made explicit, namely someone who looks to whip up a mob, rather than to make a decision through democratic processes and reasoning.

IANP as an assessment can more generally be seen as an argument supporting another statement made by the speaker. It then functions as an explanation or justification for that statement, as in the following thread:

(7) EN17: Call me a liberal, but I am actually a former Republican, in fact was a local committeeman for many years. I will not vote Republican again until the Republican Party purges itself of Trumpers.

XX: So your a liberal. You can phrase it any way you want.

EN17: I am not a populist

In this example, IANP comes to explain why [EN17] still claims to be a Republican (and not a liberal) while refusing to support Trump and the Republican party at the time of writing. By claiming to be opposed to populism – here associated with Trumpists – s/he justifies his previous statement. In (6) and (7), IANP appears in the conclusion of the tweet, but we also find cases where this assessment is the first statement and is followed by a second statement presented as a consequence of the first, as in (8). This statement moreover clarifies the property associated with *populist,* namely seeking easy success through retweets or likes.

(8) I am not a populist politician in fact I'm very conservative. I do not tweet for retweet or likes but rather to state my point regardless (EN19)

While the denial pattern is mainly observed in oppositional or controversial interactions, this self-categorisation pattern also appears in discussions where interlocutors agree with one another, as in (9), where [EN23] shows agreement with the preceding statement in the interaction. This again shows that in such cases the author self-categorises as "not populist" rather than rejecting a category established by someone else.

(9) XX: Populists LOVE totalitarianism if its at the hands of their own cult leader.

[EN23]: This. Why I am not populist. (EN23)

More generally, we see with the last example that IANP is not only used to explain a position or stance which would be the core of the message but can also function as the main idea conveyed by a tweet. In this vein, IANP is used as a positionality statement that the speaker uses to situate oneself in the political field, for example to clarify one's position, as in (10):

(10) I am not a globalist. I believe in decentralisation of government and local solutions. But I am not a populist or protectionist. Innovation can come in all shapes: a great marketing campaign, a better product, use of the skills that you already have in other industries/products. (EN28)

Like in many other cases, the message this tweet is responding to is unfortunately unavailable because the account which posted it has been suspended.[4] Yet, the context helps us infer that [EN28] is responding to a categorisation as "globalist". Actually, this message concludes a discussion initiated by a message by [EN28] commenting on a video where Canadian former PM St. Harper is categorised as *populist*. In the discussion we see [EN28] develop this idea by criticizing protectionism and supporting free trade. This is probably why [EN28]'s interlocutor categorizes him/her as "globalist", which is rejected by [EN28]. Having said this, s/he insists again on his/her opposition to populism and protectionism. In this case IANP is a statement that clarifies the speaker's attitude and helps to situate him/her both in opposition to globalism and to populism.

5. Conclusion

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[4] Though there are no official numbers concerning the amount of accounts suspended or closed down, a tentative estimate can be based on the 3 million accounts followed by Bot Sentinel. They found that 0.59% of the accounts were closed or suspended in the week following the take-over of Twitter by Elon Musk, which is the triple of what had been seen in the preceding weeks (Stokel-Walker 2022).

With the aim of further advancing on how stigma terms are used to categorise someone's identity, in this paper we have analysed a corpus of more than hundred tokens of the utterance *I am not populist* in different languages. As explained throughout the analysis, we have identified recurrent patterns of use with the aim of understanding the discursive functions of IANP when users negotiate their categorisation as (non-)*populist* in social media. We have identified two main patterns, which reflect the main reasons why users negate their identity as *populists.*

First, we have observed cases of denial, where the statement IANP is generally preceded by another statement[5] to which the user reacts. This first statement actually triggers or could trigger a categorisation of the speaker (or her/his group) as populist. In these cases, IANP appears as a response to this labelling and seeks to minimise – if not counteract completely - its discrediting effect.

These uses of IANP as denial confirm the idea that the label *populist* functions as a stigma term (Kranert 2020), not only amongst politicians and journalists but also with the general public. Indeed, it is because they want to distance themselves from the negative connotations of the term (Shchinova 2023) that speakers avoid being assimilated to or categorised as *populist* – even when they do not seem to reject the defining attributes commonly associated with populism. Assuming that *populist* is socially understood as a discrediting category, people who are (or fear to be) categorised as such seem to consider their denial of this categorisation as necessary to maintain their legitimacy. In order to support this denial, they often provide evidence of their opposition to populism and/or put forward an alternative (political) identity.

Interestingly, we see here the consequences of the polysemous nature of populism as a category which is used to refer to quite diverse (and sometimes opposite) political parties and attitudes. On the one hand, *populism/populist* has a very wide meaning and functions as an overly encompassing category which may be used to refer to *any* political group that is perceived as too radical or any idea that seems hard to implement in a short term. Hence, calling someone *populist* seems an easy way to reject alternative/non-mainstream political views even when they come from people who do not affiliate with usually called populist movements and parties or even oppose populism in the sense of a simplistic, anti-elite, demagogic approach to politics.

On the other hand, *populism/populist* is also used in a more specific way, when people refer to demagogic and even more often "racist" or "nationalist" ideas or parties. Twitter users who support *populist* views in this sense are often blamed to be populist, yet they also reject this identity because they want to avoid the stigma that comes with it. In this case, even though the categorisation as populist may seem more relevant, since it is more specific, its rejection may still appear as well-founded, precisely because of the ambiguity of the term which makes this categorisation always open for debate. As a consequence, *populist* is a categorisation that can be used to discredit anybody, but that can also be contested and rejected by anybody, even by those most people would agree to qualify as such.

A second pattern of uses of IANP has been also identified. Even if IANP is still a negative sentence formally, it functions as a positive statement: Twitter users do not deny being populist in reaction to someone else's claim, but they spontaneously identify and position themselves as "non-populists". This statement has the discursive function of self-categorisation. These uses of IANP show that the term *populism* is nowadays a sociopolitical category available for speakers to build up their social identity in their daily interactions on social networks like Twitter. Even though populist is polysemous and vague, in certain contexts it can clearly refer to political movements – e.g. Trumpists in the US or

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[5] Sometimes in the same tweet but also often in a preceding tweet.

radical left-wing parties in certain Latin American countries – or attitudes – e.g. demagogy. Hence, the self-categorisation as non-populist is used to explain and justify the attitudes people support in their messages and/or to situate themselves in the political landscape

This paper is part of the growing area of research on how socio-political keywords are used on social media and how they function in the construction of identities. However, it has been only devised as an initial approach to the identification of recurrent patterns for the renegotiation of identity. As such, the study has not addressed a number of questions related to the study of populism, such as the identification of the attributes which users most frequently ascribe to the category *populist* and how these relate to contemporary understandings of populism in the scientific literature. In spite of the data being multilingual, the paper has not addressed either cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences and similarities between languages. This is due to two main reasons: data for some of the languages was scarce and no contextual variables were taken into account in the compilation process. Given the situated nature of membership categorisation, such contextual knowledge is of particular importance. Finally, the main aim of the paper was to identify discursive patterns for the renegotiation of identity, but further knowledge could be gained about this process by exploring how denial and self-categorisation function in specific interactional contexts. All these aspects are mentioned here as future research avenues which could contribute to advancing knowledge on how identity is negotiated in the online context.

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