

A pragmatic analysis of *populis** in French and Spanish parliamentary debates

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This comparative study analyses quantitatively and qualitatively the occurrences of the term *populis**—i.e., *populism(s)*, *populist(s)*—in two datasets containing parliamentary debates that took place in 2019 in the French National Assembly and the Spanish Congress of Deputies. The study investigates *populism* as a keyword in discourse (Kranert, 2020; Schröter et al., 2019; Williams, 1985) and aims to determine the uses, the meanings, and the pragmatic functions of this widely employed polysemic term claimed to be the “main political buzzword of the 21st century” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 1). The token *populis** is a search word that allows for a comparative analysis of the following terms: *populisme(s)/populiste(s)* in French and *populismo(s)/populistas(s)* in Spanish. First, I examine the discursive contexts in which *populis** occurs in order to determine the frequency of occurrence and the collocations of *populis** in each dataset. Second, I focus on a sample of concordance lines and examine who labels whom as populist and what is the pragmatic function of this label. The study shows that in both datasets, the term has a variety of uses and meanings. However, there are some differences regarding the choice of the linguistic form of *populis** and the collocations in French and Spanish parliamentary debates. In both datasets, the terms are mainly employed with a negative value linked to different pragmatic functions. Used with a negative connotation, discourses containing *populis** disqualify political opponents, but not necessarily label political actors that are classified as populist in academia. Moreover, discourses disqualifying and stigmatising “populism” or “populists” are linked to other concepts, such as *nationalism*, *terrorism*, *communism*, which differ depending on the political leanings of a political actor. In addition, self-legitimation occurs in discourses that, on the one hand, target an opponent and, on the other hand, self-position as an anti-populist response. However, there are instances of *populis** with a positive value in discourses concerning different conceptions of democracy. Used with a positive implied meaning, instances of *populis** appear together with references to “the people” and contain metalinguistic comments on the definition and the use of both “populism” and “democracy”.

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