

Do we think populists actually do something? A discursive analysis of populists as agents or patients in French, Spanish and Belgian tweets

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In this presentation, I will look into how the term populists is used in a comparable corpus of French, Spanish and Dutch tweets. This research is part of the broader project Tracking the uses of populism in media and political discourse (TrUMPo) (<https://www.discourseonpopulism-uclouvain.com/>), which adopts an interdisciplinary perspective to the analysis of discourse on populism (as opposed to discourse by politicians considered as populists). The data collected concern Spain, France and Belgium (both the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parts) during 2019, a year of European and local elections in the countries involved. Though not all parts of society are equally represented on Twitter, it does offer a wider variety of contributors than studying political or media discourses, making it particularly relevant to analyze discourse on a

phenomenon of broader societal and political relevance.

I will focus more specifically on what kind of actions are typically attributed to populists through a combination of corpus linguistics methods, agentivity analysis and discourse analysis. Indeed, analyses of the representation of other collectives have shown that presenting a certain group as agentive or not, as well as the type of action associated with them, have an impact on the conceptualization of this group (De Cock & Michaud 2014, Van Leeuwen 2015). This analysis then reveals whether the populists are presented as agents or patients of an action, and the type of actions with which they are associated.

The contrastive analysis will take into account both linguistic specificities and information concerning the political and electoral context. Indeed, in terms of contrastive linguistics, the languages included display differences as to the morphosyntactic behavior of *populistas*, *populistes*, *populisten*, which can be both adjective and noun in Spanish and French, but only a noun in Dutch. Moreover, for all data involved, constructional features such as modifier or article

use may contribute to an interpretation as more specific or more generic. Also the construction of agentivity is subject to language-specific features, especially in the domain of depersonalizing constructions. The findings from the comparable corpus study will be presented against the background of the on-going government coalition, the electoral campaign and the position of parties considered by some as populist in the countries involved in this study.

Through this analysis, I will then show whether populists are presented in tweets as acting intentionally, as well as what kind of behavior is associated with them, focusing on how linguistic and contextual specificities influence the representation in the different comparable corpora involved. At a broader methodological level, I will point at routes for carrying out comparable corpora studies in interaction with interdisciplinary approaches to the political context in which the discourse has been produced.

References

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