

3 Qualitative annotation of ‘populism’ as a sociopolitical keyword

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1 Introduction

Populism is one of those catch-all concepts that are heavily mobilised in media and political discourses, even though their meaning generally remains rather vague (see, e.g., Bale *et al.*, 2011; Herkman, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) – with the consequence that some people criticise what is considered the overuse of an empty category (see Schwörer 2021 for the case of populism). This paradox raises questions about both the functioning of sociopolitical discourse and the dynamics of the media and political spheres, which is why we consider an interdisciplinary analysis particularly well-suited to address these questions.

This chapter describes and discusses the analytical approach used in our research project on the uses of the term *populism* in contemporary sociopolitical discourse within several European linguistic and cultural spaces.¹ Through this example, we propose a method and a broader reflection on how to systematically study particular words that play a key role in contemporary discourse.

An important part of research in discourse analysis focusing on pre-selected words of particular theoretical or societal interest is based on quantitative methods and follows a Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies approach (Baker, 2023). Works of this kind often engage with the collocations of the search term in large corpora in order to understand its meaning and, more fundamentally, to characterise the representation that discourse offers of the social reality designated by the keyword under study – see, for example, Alcántara-Plá (2020) on *democracy*, Baker *et al.* (2012) or Alcántara-Plá & Ruiz-Sánchez (2017) on *Muslims*, Schröter *et al.* (2019) on *multiculturalism*, and Taylor (2014) on *migrant*. Identifying the most frequent collocations and grouping them into relevant categories (using various techniques) makes it possible to identify competing representations, their relative frequency, or to situate them on a positive or negative polarity. This type of approach is sometimes supplemented by an analysis

of concordance lines in order to identify regular structural or semantic patterns and thus further clarify the overall trends that emerge from the analysis of collocations. Such an approach has already been applied to *populism* by several authors working on diverse languages (e.g., Göhring, 2022; Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021; Shchinova *et al.*, 2024).

Other authors adopt a qualitative approach based on the systematic coding or annotation of all occurrences of the studied keyword observed in a given corpus (for the case of *populism*, see Bale *et al.*, 2011; Hamo *et al.*, 2019; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Kranert, 2020). The choice of variables that are annotated and the definition of the categories available for each variable vary considerably from one study to another, depending on the authors’ research questions. In the case of studies on *populism*, coding procedures may thus include varying amounts of descriptive information on the context in which the discourse has been produced (e.g., in which newspaper does the occurrence appear? in what discourse genre?) and/or associate each occurrence with more interpretative categories constructed by the researchers and used, for example, to identify whether *populism* refers to a political style or to ideological content (Hatakka & Herkman, 2022) or with a neutral, positive, or pejorative implication (Bale *et al.*, 2011).

Our own approach to the keyword *populism* is inspired by these works and takes over several of their methodological proposals. Yet, as will be shown below, we adapt them to the specificities of our own research and sometimes explore new avenues in order to reach our own research objectives. Although our methodology is consistent with the objectives and characteristics of the TrUMPo project, it is based on general principles that would be valid for other research seeking to study the diversity of uses of any word considered to play a key role in sociopolitical discourse – what we call, following other authors, a ‘sociopolitical keyword’ (see Hambye *et al.*, 2025). Hence, while the codebook has been conceived as a coherent whole, it is undoubtedly possible to restrict oneself to certain subsections depending on the needs pertaining to specific projects.

In what follows, we first present the general principles underlying our approach and our annotation scheme (Section 1). We then describe this annotation scheme in detail, explaining the rationale behind the various choices that have been made (Section 2). Finally, we conclude this chapter with a discussion on the possibilities for transposing our method to other research and the main limitations and difficulties of this type of approach (Section 3).

2 General overview of methodological principles

The general aim of our study of *populism* as a keyword is to understand why the importance, frequency, and circulation of this term have increased in contemporary sociopolitical discourse. We also aim to understand why

and under which conditions this term could play a significant role in this discourse. Our objective is not merely to identify what people say about populism and how they consequently represent this concept – for instance, by using certain terms more frequently than others when talking about it. Rather, we take a broader approach, allowing us not only to answer these questions, but more generally to understand the rationale behind the uses of *populism*.

In order to understand why the word *populism* is so pervasive in contemporary discourse, we argue that it must be studied within the specific contexts in which it is used. We also assume that words like *populism* are used in a variety of ways and hence play different roles in discourse, depending on who uses them (vs. who does not), for what purposes, and in what contexts. Considering *populism* as a sociopolitical keyword implies that we take into account the fact that it can be used in multiple ways, for many different purposes, and hence for different reasons. *Populism* has been described as a highly versatile discursive label, characterised by multiple and variable meanings and functions (see Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume; see also Aulit & De Cock, 2025; Hamo *et al.*, 2019) : it is one thing to use *populism* to describe someone or some group ('the populism of party X'), another to talk about *populism* itself ('Populism is one of the main threats to democracy'), and yet another to refer to others' use of the term ('People call you a populist when you don't agree with them'). Consequently, we are not seeking to identify *the* meaning or function of *populism* as a single, unified, object. Rather, we consider that this word – due to its highly polysemic and evaluative nature, which it shares with other sociopolitical keywords (Hambye *et al.*, 2025), may be used by different people to achieve different purposes in different contexts, depending on different interests and issues at stake. For this reason, it would not have been appropriate to adopt a methodology that conflates all these types of uses or fails to distinguish between them. This would have been the case, for instance, if we had been limiting ourselves to exploring the main semantic fields associated with the term in a large corpus, or qualitatively examining a sample of occurrences in order to identify one or several regular patterns of use, without taking into account the contextual features of each occurrence of the keyword.

Accordingly, we opt for a mainly qualitative approach and for a methodology based on the systematic annotation of a large set of occurrences of *populism* analysed in context. We consider this to be the best way to take into account both information relating to the meaning and function of our keyword and other information concerning interactional situations, so that we can link them together. We believe that such an approach is also consistent with our interdisciplinary approach, which seeks not only to understand how *populism* functions as a word, but also to study how

journalists and politicians, as key actors in public debate, use it, and how this category reflects broader trends of how the current political field and its main divisions are perceived.

In order to provide a valid answer to our research questions, we construct a representative corpus of uses of the word *populism* (and its derivatives, which we refer to as *populis**). This corpus includes all occurrences of *populis** produced during a single year (2019) in three countries and four languages (Belgium (Dutch and French), France (French), and Spain (Spanish)) and appearing in three major areas of sociopolitical communication, what we call ‘arenas of public discussion’ (for a discussion of this concept, see Roginsky & Nuevo Gascó, Chapter 8 in this volume): parliaments, the media, and Twitter (now known as X). Our goal is to annotate this set of occurrences exhaustively. However, for feasibility reasons, we reduce the number of cases analysed in the media and Twitter by randomly constructing a smaller sub-corpus of approximately 500 occurrences for each of these two arenas (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume, for details on corpus construction and selection criteria).

As in any systematic annotation process of this type (see De Cock *et al.*, 2024), our objective is to characterise each occurrence of *populis** in relation to different variables considered relevant to our research questions. The annotation has been carried out in a spreadsheet where each row corresponds to a single occurrence of *populis** and each column to a variable regarded as relevant for the multidimensional analysis of this keyword (see example in Figure 3.1).

In order to account for the diversity of the uses of *populis**, and notably for the diverse meanings and functions it can take in discourse, we seek to identify three key aspects for each occurrence:

- the discursive, communicative, and sociopolitical context of use,
- the meaning and connotations associated with the term, and
- the function of the statement in which *populis** appears and to which it contributes.

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elle communautaire ou institutionnelle, pas de blocage politique mais un focus sur des réformes économiques et sociales." Priorité au climat (pe la Belgique, horizon l'Europe, avec des dossiers chauds en perspective, comme le Brexit ou la montée des populistes. Cela dit pour Charles Michel, la priorité européenne doit être l'urgence climatique: "L'Europe doit être au cœur du changement de paradigme, de la révolution copernicienne. On

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Text occ.	Occurrence	Topic	Gram. category	Related words	Text ID	Date	Arena	Arena type	Arena subtype	Language	Country	Discourse	Speaker ID	Speaker type
1	elle communautaire ou institutionnelle	Charles Michel	Nom défini	la montée des	2012_11_29	22-03-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Récit	ALF	Journaliste / A
2	elle communautaire ou institutionnelle	Radicalisation	Nom défini	tomber dans	2019_03_22	22-03-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Interview	Nicolas Bayge	Expert
3	ad hominem. Une populisme	Interview Ma	Nom défini	la montée	2019_00001	16-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Interview	Adrien de Ma	Journaliste / A
4	ark Eykens (CD&V) populistes	Vol d'un bus à	Epithète	coalition	2019_00_23	22-03-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	AFP	Journaliste / A
5	test sur 50% des v. populistes	Election prési-	Nom défini	de gauche; Smeur	2019_00004	26-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	AFP	Journaliste / A
6	test sur 50% des v. populistes	Retour sur un	Nom défini	de tout bord; exto	2019_00003	16-05-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Laasou	Journaliste / A
7	usé à l'apaisement populistes	Attentat Chi	Nom défini	la montée; gilets	2019_00001	16-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Grignat	Expert
8	tre de tueur à cha populisme	Résultat élec	Nom indéfini	les questions de	2019_07_27	27-07-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Alain Grignat	Expert
9	ean Faniel, politici populisme	Interview Ald	Epithète	partis; de gauche	2019_00000	09-09-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Interview	Alda Grolli	Politique
10	anji. Il en ressort < populistes	Interview Ald	Epithète	partis; de gauche	2019_00000	09-09-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Interview	Alda Grolli	Politique
11	béaux ? Au-delà < populistes	Européennes	Epithète	173 élus/euses	2019_05_25	26-05-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Récit	Alice Dulcizeu	Journaliste / A
12	comme ailleurs < populistes	Elections UE	Nom défini	simplément	2019_06_19	19-06-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Amey Verdon	Expert
13	piratels ou religis populistes	Elections eur	Nom défini	pro-européens	2019_00001	04-03-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Récit	Benjamin Ma	Journaliste / A
14	tt power russe <ur populistes	Conférence <	Epithète	partis	2019_04_19	19-04-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Récit	Benjamin Ma	Journaliste / A
15	Joelents, cette <u populiste	Gilets jaunes	Nom défini	une partie du m	2019_02_16	18-02-19	rdif	Presse	Public	FR	Belgique	Édito/chroni	Benjamin Ver	Journaliste / A
16	e en date : celle <u populisme	gratuite tram	Nom indéfini	cet élan de	2019_00004	30-01-19	la_dh	Presse	Populaire	FR	Belgique	Dépêche/revue	Bianca Debae	Politique
17	le temps long. Set<u populistes	Interview Ben	Nom défini	alimente	2019_05_04	04-05-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Interview	Bernat Scheue	Expert
18	hls dans notre <u populisme	Réforme de l'	Nom défini	le plus bas de g	2019_12_30	30-12-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Récit	Bernard Dem	Journaliste / A
19	et pour deux rats<u populistes	Interview Ber	Epithète	poussée	2019_01_26	26-01-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Interview	Bernard Henr	Personnalité
20	érations se déso<u populisme	Vieillessement	Nom défini	la star autrichien	2019_04_22	22-04-19	la_soir	Presse	Élite	FR	Belgique	Commentaire	Bernhard Ode	Journaliste / A

Figure 3.1 Example of a set of occurrences of *populis** in the coding grid

These three analytical dimensions have also been studied in previous qualitative works on *populism* based on annotation procedures (see above). Yet, most of these studies do not combine all three dimensions (but only one or two of them) and generally focus on the question of the meaning of *populism* at the expense of analysing the role of this keyword in discourse and in the particular interactional situations in which it appears. Furthermore, they generally address each of these dimensions less comprehensively, using only one or two variables, whereas our approach is more ambitious and seeks to integrate a greater number of factors in order to understand what motivates the use of our keyword. Finally, our approach is often more data-driven than the one adopted in existing research: for instance, when studying the function of *populis**, other scholars only focus on a small set of predefined functions – self-, other-, and third-party ‘positioning’ for Hamo *et al.* (2019); to ‘discredit’ and to ‘name’ for Kranert (2020) – while our inductive identification of potential functions leads us to distinguish between five possibilities (see Section 2.3).

As a consequence, three main groups of variables are defined. As detailed below, each group includes several variables selected because they can provide relevant information about one of these three dimensions. Some of these variables are open-ended, while others are closed and allow only a limited set of predefined values. In the latter case, the accepted responses for a given variable are defined either a priori, based on relevant categories proposed in the scientific literature, or inductively by constructing categories ourselves on the basis of the analysis of an initial random sample of 100 occurrences. This procedure ensures that the categories developed can account for all the cases observed in our data, including the least frequent ones.

The final coding grid that has been used is the result of a collective and iterative process of elaboration. We have created a first version of the grid, with a certain number of variables and possible values for each of them and then we have started applying it to a sub-part of our sample (20 occurrences). Each member of our research team has recorded the difficulties they have faced during this first stage of the analysis, for example, need to add missing values for certain variables, difficulty to distinguish between two predefined responses/categories for a given variable, feeling that some observation related to a specific occurrence deserves to be taken into account but that none of the existing variables allows to capture it. Analytical disagreements between coders have also been taken into account and used to improve the coding grid and the codebook that has been elaborated simultaneously in order to give instructions as explicit as possible about the way each variable (and each available value for closed variables) should be understood (see Rondiat *et al.*, Chapter 4 in this volume). Six

rounds of test and revision have been needed to stabilise the coding grid and provide a version of the codebook which is reasonably transparent and accurate.

3 Rationale behind the selection of variables and the coding scheme

3.1 Context-related variables

In the spreadsheet we use, each occurrence of our keyword appears first in the exact form in which it appears in the source text (e.g., the plural noun *populistes* in French or the singular adjective *populistisch* in Dutch). The second column displays (a part of) the text in which the occurrence appears: for press or parliamentary data, it is presented in its close textual environment (the sentence including the keyword along with the preceding and following sentences); for tweets, the full content of the tweet is included.

On the right of the text comprising the occurrence, several columns provide metadata extracted from the source documents when the database was built up (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume): date, name of the source (e.g. Twitter, name of the newspaper where the source appeared), URL of the message for tweets or name of the source file in our corpus, language, and country of the source. It should be noted that our media corpus has been compiled by selecting four online news sites per country, corresponding to different types of media: public-owned media, so-called ‘elite media’ and ‘serious-popular’ media, and finally, media websites offering free full access to their content (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume for more details). Accordingly, for media occurrences, our data indicate both the specific outlet and the broader media category it belongs to. For tweets, additional information is available: the possible location of the account that posted the tweet, the number of retweets of the tweet analysed, the number of likes associated with the tweet, and finally the list of hashtags and other accounts mentioned in the tweet.

This concrete and easily identifiable information is supplemented by three types of annotation that also provide insight into the material context of the discourse analysed. For newspaper articles, we indicate the type of discourse to which each source article belongs, distinguishing between seven categories²: (1) news dispatch/short article, (2) narrative, (3) report, (4) commentary/analysis, (5) editorial/column, (6) interview, and (7) opinion piece/open letter. In constructing these categories, we draw on several typologies available in the literature (Marchetti, 2022; Ringoot, 2014), selecting the criteria most relevant to our research purposes. Thus, we contrast genres in which a member of the editorial staff of the newspaper is

responsible for the discourse (categories 2–5) with those where this responsibility is assumed by (or shared with) a person outside the editorial staff (categories 1 and 6–7). We also distinguish between discourse that is primarily descriptive or informative (categories 1–3), which involves minimal subjectivity, interpretation, or evaluation, and discourse that aims to offer a particular point of view, analysis, interpretation, or evaluation (categories 4–7). Finally, within informative discourse, we distinguish between short, strictly factual articles (category 1) and those that offer a more comprehensive description focused either on events (category 2) or on places, people, or institutions (category 3). Taking into account the journalistic genre where *populis** appears is relevant since these genres serve quite different ends: this may help explain the different uses of populism found in the news (e.g., strictly descriptive uses in news briefs vs. uses where the term is used to evaluate policies in editorials).

Regarding data from parliaments, two variables are used to characterise the nature of the discourse in which *populis** occurs. On the one hand, we take into account the type of document containing the occurrence, as mentioned in the document itself. The texts archived on the websites of the various parliaments generally indicate whether it is the text of a bill, the minutes of a plenary debate, or the minutes of a question period to the government. This information is useful for better contextualising the excerpt and understanding whether the term *populis** is used, for instance, to support the argument in favour of a law presented to the Parliament as a whole or rather in the context of a debate in which one politician addresses another directly. On the other hand, we annotate information about the circumstances in which the intervention containing *populis** has been made. Specifically, we record whether it is communicated to deputies in a written form prior to a parliamentary session (e.g., submission of a bill or written question), or delivered orally during a session. In the latter case, we further distinguish between interventions that are spontaneous (occurring outside any procedural right to speak) and those that are prepared.

Finally, for all three types of sources studied, we attempt to situate each message within its interactional context. Thus, we indicate whether the message studied refers to or comments on another message, and therefore responds to it in some way, specifying whether or not this previous message itself contains the term *populist** and whether it constitutes a question or an interpellation inviting a response. For example, excerpt (1) below contains the term *populist* and reacts to a previous message in which the term also appears. We also specify whether the message analysed is explicitly addressed to another person (e.g., with an @XXX mention for tweets) to which person it is addressed, and, in the case of parliamentary debates, whether it prompts or elicits a spontaneous reaction directly related to the occurrence of *populis**.

Another essential set of variables for understanding the context of the messages studied concerns the identification of the speaker responsible for each occurrence. We systematically identify the individual, group, or organisation that plays this role: for tweets, our database contains the account names automatically extracted during data collection, while for media and parliamentary discourse, we manually retrieve information concerning the speaker from the text associated with each occurrence. Although identifying the speaker may seem straightforward, it is rendered difficult when considering all the cases where the term *populis** appears within a quotation or a report of someone else’s speech. This situation arises frequently in parliamentary debates, where one speaker may use the term *populis** in response to its prior use by another speaker, as in the following example:

- (1) *Cela me révolte d’entendre ici que la suppression de la taxe d’habitation est une mesure populiste et populaire, alors qu’il s’agit seulement de baisser la pression fiscale des ménages, qui a augmenté de façon irresponsable et particulièrement drastique pendant le quinquennat précédent.*

It revolts me to hear here that the abolition of the housing tax is a populist and popular measure, when it is simply a matter of reducing the tax burden on households, which increased irresponsibly and particularly drastically during the previous five-year term.

(Oral statement by Laurent Saint-Martin, LREM deputy in the French National Assembly, 09 October 2019)

In this excerpt, the speaker refers to another deputy’s (from another party) use of the term *populist* and, in doing so, reuses the term in his own speech. In such a case, the rationale for using the term *populist* partly differs from that of a speaker who uses it independently, without reacting to a previous mention. Yet this too constitutes a use of *populis**, with its own specific motivation. Since our objective is to understand the meaning and functions of the uses of *populis**, we therefore consider it necessary to identify cases in which it appears in reported speech (see Holt, 2009; Rosier, 1999) by associating them with a specific category (‘reported speech’). For these cases, we indicate both the name of the speaker who produces the analysed occurrence and, whenever possible, the name of the speaker who previously used the term *populis**. Reported speech can be marked very clearly (as in ‘You said in an interview that our program was ‘populist’) or sometimes more indirectly, as in example (1). We consider as reported speech any occurrence of *populis** that is marked in some way as being taken from someone else’s speech, thereby indicating that the term is not entirely chosen by the speaker responsible for the analysed message. For

instance, in the excerpt ‘He regularly makes statements that are described as populist’ the mere presence of the passive verbal form *are described* is sufficient, in our view, to indicate the presence of reported speech, even when no specific source can be identified, since it suggests that the speaker is not responsible (or at least only co-responsible) for the labelling of the ‘statements’ as ‘populist’.

In the various cases of reported speech mentioned so far, the author of the message remains responsible for choosing to use the term *populis**, even when quoting someone else, insofar as they could have chosen not to reproduce that portion of speech or not to include the term at all. The situation is different, however, in another type of reported speech that is very common in our corpus, namely, when a journalist reports the words of a public figure, for example, in an interview. In such cases, although there is formally reported speech, the choice to use the term *populis** belongs entirely to the person being interviewed, whose words the journalist is expected to reproduce faithfully. We have therefore chosen to clearly identify these specific cases of verbatim quotation, but also to consider that only the interviewee is responsible for the use of *populis** in these cases. Accordingly, the interviewee is annotated as the ‘speaker’, as they are the ‘author’ of the quoted words, even if they are not the ‘presenter’ of the message in Goffman’s (1981) sense.

It can be useful to know the specific identity of each speaker. However, in many cases, what matters is not who the individual speaker is, but rather what type of speaker they represent: a journalist or a politician, for example. Therefore, each speaker is associated with one or more ‘speaker (sub) types’ in our spreadsheet. Given the nature of our corpus, we have initially distinguished the following types: politicians, journalists (or press agencies when credited as the author of messages), columnists (external personalities regularly invited to express their views in the media), experts (people with epistemic authority due to their status or experience and occasionally called upon to comment in the media), other public figures (e.g., artists, athletes, celebrities), and finally, ordinary citizens. In the latter case, the speaker information has been anonymised (see De Cock *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume). For political figures, two additional variables have been annotated to further characterise the type of speaker. We systematically indicate the political party to which the individual belongs, as well as any position held within a particular political institution. Specifically, we note whether the person is an elected representative of an assembly, a member of an executive body, a party leader, a head of an executive body, or a head of state, and at what level (e.g., local, regional, national, European). This information has not been coded at the time of analysis of each individual occurrence of *populis**, but rather at a later stage, based on the information in the ‘speaker’ column of our database, which has been filled

out during the annotation of each occurrence. This makes it possible to group all occurrences by speaker and to complete the information on each speaker once, rather than repeating it for every occurrence. This approach also makes it possible to isolate certain parts of the annotation work that are best done independently of the others: in general, it is more efficient to annotate the data occurrence by occurrence, completing all relevant variables for each message in one go (rather than completing the information for one variable for all occurrences before moving on to the next variable), since it requires reading and understanding the message and its context – a time-consuming task best done once per message. Conversely, secondary information about the speaker does not depend on contextual understanding but sometimes requires online research about the people in question, making it more practical to add this information retrospectively for each speaker.

Finally, the theme of the discourse is the last piece of contextual information included in the annotation scheme. This variable is open-ended and thus leaves room for more subjective and variable coding. As a result, occurrences sharing a similar topic can be associated with slightly different labels (e.g., 'European economy' and 'Economy of the EU' or the name of a party and the name of its president, since both can be the topic of the same message). Such variation can however complicate the subsequent identification of messages addressing the same topic. We could have defined a closed list of topics (economy, society, Europe, etc.) beforehand, but this would have been of limited use: the resulting categories would have been broad and non-exclusive, with many messages fitting into several topics at once. Information about topics can then be seen as too fuzzy to be worth including in the database. Yet, it is often very useful to have an indication of the theme of a given message when exploiting the database, for instance, when searching for good examples of particular uses of the keyword. For this reason, we have chosen to keep this variable in our scheme. Besides, the annotations of topics can later serve as a basis for constructing a closed list of macro-topics inductively, by grouping together recurring themes that emerge from the data. Then, this list of macro-topics can be used to reannotate the data and provide a quantitative foundation for examining whether certain macro-topics are more frequently associated with certain types of use of *populis**.

It thus appears that the contextual information annotated in our database is much more detailed than in other studies on keywords. This is directly related to our specific research objectives. This contextual information is useful in that it allows us to filter our data in various ways – for instance, to identify occurrences produced during a particular period, within a particular source, or by a given type of speaker. This then allows us to explore possible statistical correlations between variables and examine, for example, whether, in the press, the use of *populis** is more frequent

in the speech of journalists or in that of politicians, whether directly interviewed or quoted by the media. It also allows for the qualitative analysis of specific subsets of data in order to identify patterns that are particularly recurrent in specific contexts of use. In collocation studies (e.g., Göhring, 2022; Shchinova *et al.*, 2024; Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021), where the focus is on the general meaning of the searched term and where there is no strong interest for the function of the keyword in a specific interactional context, contextual information may not be taken into account at all or limited to one or two accessible variables (e.g., date of the occurrence or source where it appears when several newspapers are contrasted). In other studies on *populism* based on qualitative annotation (see Bale *et al.*, 2011; Hamo *et al.*, 2019; Hatakka & Herkman, 2022; Kranert, 2020), contextual information may be less detailed and extensive than in our own project which offers a comprehensive view on the factors that can explain differences in the ways *populis** is used in discourse.

3.2 *Variables related to meaning and connotations*

The second set of variables concerns the meanings associated with the term *populis**. The first of these variables – called ‘object’ – aims to identify the reality associated with *populis**: this may refer to a political measure or a person described as populist, statements presented as ‘close to populism’, or even an event or social phenomenon, such as social networks accused of ‘fueling populism’. This is again an open variable, for which each annotator formulates a response that is often specific to the message, using wording that may naturally vary from one individual to another. For instance, if a press article discusses the ‘victory of populists’ in the United States in 2016, the associated ‘object’ could be noted as the ‘Republican Party’, ‘Trump’, or ‘Donald Trump’. To facilitate the systematic processing of this information, each specific ‘object’ is also classified into one of four broader categories, depending on whether the object refers to a specific individual, a clearly defined group (e.g., ‘the parties of the current Belgian government’), a group that is not clearly identifiable (‘the parties of the European nationalist right that play the populism card’), or actions or facts (behaviour, statements, measures, events, etc.).

This information allows us to observe which people, decisions, practices, and attitudes are frequently associated with *populis** and, hence, to understand, often by inference, what characteristics these realities share that justify their association with *populis** – and, therefore, what characterises populism itself in the mind of the speakers. In order to systematise the identification of the conception of populism that emerges from the use of *populis**, we identify, for each message, the main concept(s) at the heart of the conception of populism conveyed by the message. This therefore constitutes a second variable to analyse the meaning. To do so, we have developed a

list of possible conceptual categories, based both on the existing scientific literature on populism (among others, Mudde, 2004; Stavrakakis, 2014; Urbinati, 2019) and, inductively, on observations made on an initial sample of our data during the development of the annotation scheme. This process leads us to use the following categories: 'demagoguery', 'anti-system/anti-elite', 'nationalism/sovereignty/nativism/racism', 'extremism/radicalism', 'conservatism/traditionalism', 'popular' (in the sense of popularity), 'lies/dishonesty', 'autocracy', and 'based on popular sovereignty'.

To determine the main concept(s) associated with *populis**, we rely on the nature of the object identified in the message, but also on two linguistic characteristics of each occurrence of *populis**, which often help to clarify the meaning of the term. First, we systematically identify words that are directly linked syntactically to the term *populis**, such as verbs taking it as a complement (e.g., 'feed populism'), nouns/adjectives it qualifies or that qualify it (e.g., 'right-wing populism', 'populist far-right'), or coordinated terms (e.g., 'populism and extremism'). The grammatical category (noun vs. adjective) and the singular or plural form are also annotated information that can help clarify the meaning of the term, as these distinctions can point to semantic nuances (e.g., the noun systematically refers to people ('populists'), while the corresponding adjective has more varied uses, as in 'populist measures' vs. 'populist parties').

Although central to our approach, this endeavour to identify the concept associated with each occurrence of *populis** has significant limitations. Frequently, the term *populis**, like other sociopolitical keywords, is used not to refer to someone or something associated with populism, but directly to talk about populism itself. As illustrated by the following two examples, in such cases *populis** is self-referential, referring not to something that is populist, but to populism itself.

- (2) *Aujourd'hui, nos industries sont affaiblies, des milliers d'emplois sont détruits, et c'est l'Europe qui, par son impuissance complice, fait le lit des nationalismes et des populismes.*

Today, our industries are weakened, thousands of jobs have been destroyed, and it is Europe which, through its complicit impotence, has paved the way for nationalism and populism.

(Oral statement by Jean-Paul Lecoq, PCF deputy in the French National Assembly, 07 March 2019)

- (3) *J'ai toujours considéré qu'il ne fallait pas avoir peur du peuple et la meilleure réponse au nationalisme, au populisme que l'on dénonce ici ou là tient à la force des réponses que l'on apporte aux problèmes que rencontrent les gens, et le courage de donner la parole au peuple.*

I have always believed that we should not be afraid of the people, and that the best response to the nationalism and populism that we denounce here and there lies in the strength of the solutions we provide to the problems people face, and the courage to give the people a voice.

(Comments by Bruno Le Maire, member of the French government, reported by *France Info*, 03 January 2019)

In these self-referential uses, the meaning of *populis** is often difficult to identify. In example (2), and even more so in example (3), it may be tempting to associate the word *populis** with the concept of nationalism, given the cooccurrence of the two terms and their frequent association in political discourse. However, this interpretation remains debatable: one could just as well argue that in example (2), *populisms* and *nationalisms* are mentioned together precisely because they are distinct phenomena that should not be conflated. This is even clearer in the following example, taken from our Spanish corpus. Acknowledging the Spanish political context, it appears that the term *populistas* ('populists') refers specifically to a political group, namely, the Podemos party, which is not the same as the ones designated by the other two terms, *nacionalistas* ('nationalists') and *independentistas* ('independence supporters').

- (4) *En definitiva, la estrategia seguida por el Gobierno socialista, apoyado por populistas, nacionalistas e independentistas, y que en un sector regulado como el energético posee una importancia capital porque es el encargado de determinar el marco en el que se debe operar, no ha hecho sino muy complicado que Endesa apueste por llevar a cabo la inversión.*

In short, the strategy pursued by the socialist government, supported by populists, nationalists, and independentists, and that in a regulated sector such as energy is of paramount importance because it [the government] is responsible for determining the framework in which the sector must operate, has only made it very difficult for Endesa to commit to the investment.

(Oral statement by Dolors Montserrat Montserrat, PP deputy in the Spanish Parliament, 03 July 2019)

In example (4), as in example (1) where *populist* can be associated with the notions of 'demagoguery' and 'popular', the fact that *populis** refers to an identifiable reality facilitates the identification of the conception of populism. Yet, very often, the term remains polysemic and sometimes

completely vague. For this reason, as with several other variables, we have decided to indicate ‘unknown’ when we feel unable to choose any of the options available. To make the annotation process more transparent and systematic, annotators also have to indicate the specific elements on which their coding is based for this variable – whether it is the object associated with *populis**, the theme of the message (e.g., the measure being discussed even if not explicitly mentioned), or particular terms in the message and associated with the term *populis**. In some cases, there is no solid evidence to support the interpretation; in others, the interpretation necessarily relies on inference and on the annotator’s (relative) knowledge of the communication and sociopolitical context. Consequently, the results obtained through this variable must be treated with appropriate caution.

Through the variable ‘conception’, we try to obtain, by qualitative means, information that may seem similar to what corpus linguists look for when they use collocation analysis to identify the ‘semantic preference’ of a given word, that is, the semantic fields that are part of its regular environment (see Schröter *et al.*, 2019). Yet, while corpus linguistics tools aim at examining how the lexical environment of a word shapes its meaning, understood as the whole set of semantic traits typically associated with this word in general, our objective is instead to identify the specific conceptual content of a given occurrence of our keyword in a single message. This is key in our perspective because it allows us to articulate information about context, meaning, and function and, hence, to understand more precisely how and why *populis** is used in discourse.

The same difference holds for another variable, named ‘value’, which captures whether a negative, neutral, or positive value is associated with the notion of populism through the use of *populis**. In corpus linguistics, ‘semantic prosody’ refers to the positive or negative attitudes or evaluations conveyed by the collocates of a given word (Schröter *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, a word which is itself neutral may acquire a rather negative semantic prosody because of the words it is frequently associated with. In our approach, we only focus on the value of the term *populis** itself within a single occurrence. As for the variable aforementioned, our coding scheme requires that annotators explicitly identify the objective elements supporting the selection of a certain value for each occurrence of the keyword (whenever possible). This may be based on the presence of words with a clear evaluative load that is transferred to *populis** – as in examples (2) and (3) where the verbs *fait le lit de* (‘pave the way for’) and *dénonce* (‘denounce’) indicate a negative value, since, in French, they are only used with negatively loaded complements – or on the association of *populis** with a person or group that is clearly presented negatively from the speaker’s point of view, as in example (4) with Podemos.

Finally, given that sociopolitical keywords are often the object of metalinguistic comments (Hambye *et al.*, 2025; Kranert, 2020; Schröter, 2008), we systematically indicate whether the use of *populis** is marked metalinguistically, that is, whether the speaker signals that the meaning or the use of this word is not obvious, requires justification or explanation or is not totally endorsed by the speaker (through the use of quotation marks, for example). In excerpt (5), for instance, the speaker tries to clarify the meaning of *populism* through an explicit equivalence with nationalism in the Belgian context.

- (5) *Le néo-libéralisme n'est pas une solution mais un échec, qui mène au populisme, en Belgique, on appellera ça 'nationalisme'.*

Neoliberalism is not a solution but a failure, which leads to populism. In Belgium, we call it 'nationalism'

(Interview with Didier Gosuin, member of the government of the Brussels Region, in *Le Soir*, 07 January 2019)

3.3 *Variables related to the function of *populis***

The last set of variables aims to clarify the function of the uses of *populis** in the various messages that are analysed. By function, we refer to what this sociopolitical keyword achieves in the discourse due to its characteristics and specific added value, and therefore to what seems to motivate the use of this term (see Hambye *et al.*, 2025). In other words: why is it useful and relevant to use the term? What does it bring to the discourse that another word would not?

To shed light on this dimension of the uses of *populis**, we rely on two variables. The first identifies the general 'purpose' of the statement containing *populis**. Inductively, we define five main categories corresponding to recurring purposes observed in our data:

- 'Descriptive', when the statement aims to describe or even simply refer to a given reality (a person, an event, etc.) and the use of *populis** serves to identify that reality (e.g., 'The leader of Italy's populist party *Five Star Movement* addressed the press yesterday').
- 'Critical', when the statement includes an evaluative dimension and raises a question, concern, or even criticism towards a given reality associated in some way with populism – thereby implying that a negative value is attributed to populism. This category is subdivided into three subcategories according to the nature of what is being criticised: a general and abstract social phenomenon (as in examples (3) and (5) above); a specific and isolated measure or behaviour (as in the message

to which example (1) responds); or a person, group, or institution as a whole (as in examples (2) and (4)).

- ‘Denial’, when the statement uses *populis** to reject the association between a given reality (e.g., the speaker himself or a measure he has defended) and populism, as in example (1) – it therefore only concerns statements responding somehow to a previous discourse.
- ‘Legitimation by opposition’, when the statement asserts that a reality should not be associated with populism or is opposed to it, thereby legitimising that reality in contrast to populism (which is assumed to carry a negative connotation). The following example illustrates this type of usage:

(6) *Op de website van Renew Europe is te lezen dat de fractie zich uitdrukkelijk tegen populisme en nationalisme wil afzetten.*

The Renew Europe website states that the group is explicitly opposed to populism and nationalism.

(Website of the European political group Renew Europe
quoted in De Standaard, 12 June 2019)

- ‘Legitimation by association’, when the statement asserts that a reality must be associated with populism, presented in this case with a positive value, and thus gives a favourable image of this reality. Such cases are relatively rare in our corpus. Example (7) illustrates this type of use, where the term *populist* carries a positive value and is associated (according to the broader context) with closeness to the people or attachment to popular sovereignty.

(7) *Je ne suis pas sûr qu’il y ait un clivage à LFI entre populistes et de gauche. Moi je suis populiste de gauche.*

I’m not sure there is a divide in LFI between populists and the left.
I am a left-wing populist.

(François Ruffin, LFI deputy in the French National Assembly,
interviewed on France Inter and quoted on France
Info’s Twitter account, 12 June 2019)

The second variable that helps to define the function of *populis** refers to the person or group that may be ‘targeted’ or attacked by the message containing the keyword. Even when the statement containing *populis** is simply descriptive, the message that includes this statement, as a whole, may still serve to criticise a particular person or group. This is even more evident when the statement itself is critical. However, as shown in excerpt

(4), those criticised as populists and those targeted by the message are not necessarily the same. In that example, it is Pedro Sanchez's socialist government that is being attacked by the message, although the government itself is not labelled 'populist'. This provides a more complex understanding of the reasons why the concept of populism is mobilised in sociopolitical discourse. Our annotation system therefore systematically indicates whether a target is identifiable in each message and, if so, records the person or group concerned, assigning them to a category (according to the same principles as for each 'speaker', see Section 2).

4 Advantages and limitations of sociopolitical keyword analysis through annotation

One of the advantages of the annotation approach we propose is that it is reproducible and transferable to the analysis of other keywords. The general principle of distinguishing between three groups of variables, as well as the choice of most of the variables described above, applies equally well to the analysis of other words, since these dimensions derive directly from the characteristics generally associated with sociopolitical keywords (see Hambye *et al.*, 2025; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume).

Adaptations may of course be necessary depending on the cases studied or the objectives of the research. These may involve defining new analytical criteria or other categories within the same variables. Another keyword could be associated with other concepts and would therefore require the development of a tailored list of potential concepts. More generally, other context-related variables could be considered relevant: we could have indicated the gender of all speakers (where known), the status of journalists within their editorial teams (editor-in-chief, head of the economics department, etc.), or the areas of specialisation of journalists and experts. Similarly, depending on the research objectives, research could integrate other linguistic characteristics of the use of the keyword (e.g., whether it is used as a topic or as a focus; Cruschina, 2022) into the annotation, or other ways of capturing the function of the keyword in discourse, for example, at the argumentative level, by specifying its place in argumentative structures (see Aulit & De Cock, 2025; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume).

The systematic nature of the annotation process is one of its main strengths. It allows analysts to focus on a variety of phenomena and to identify them even in their less explicit or expected forms. For example, systematically indicating whether the analysed message 'targets' a particular person or group (as in (4)) or whether the use of *populis** is accompanied by a metalinguistic marker (as in (5)) forces us to question, for each occurrence of the keyword, the presence of these particular characteristics – and thus to detect them even when they take more implicit forms.

More generally, as noted earlier, the systematic annotation of multiple dimensions makes it possible to establish descriptive statistics on the frequency and distribution of different types of occurrences of our keyword (according to the speaker, the form used, the meaning associated with the term, etc.) and to identify recurring patterns – for example, people in group 1 tend to use *populis** with the meaning X, in utterances aiming at Y (for instance, criticising political adversaries), within the context Z. In addition, the resulting database can then be easily queried to select and group occurrences sharing given characteristics (e.g., all 'critical' occurrences of *populis** produced by journalists; see Roginsky, Chapter 7 in this volume) and then to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of these subsets of data.

The downside is that this approach is very costly, both in terms of the preliminary work it requires and the time needed for systematic annotation. Preparing a complex annotation scheme for an interdisciplinary project such as ours involves extensive discussion and reflection upstream, as well as constant revisions at the beginning of the project due to the confrontation between ideas and proposals borrowed from theoretical sources and those emerging from the exploratory analyses of empirical material. Moreover, this work is never entirely achieved, as certain choices made in defining the annotation system could always be questioned. Regarding certain variables, such as the one concerning the 'conception' of *populis** or the 'purpose' of the statement containing the keyword, the list of categories proposed could be subject to discussion. We may aim to merge some of them, considering that it is difficult to distinguish them clearly, or, conversely, some may wish to subdivide them or add new categories that have not been considered.

For a corpus as large as ours (more than 3,000 occurrences), such systematic annotation work can only be carried out by a team of annotators. This inevitably introduces variation in how the data is annotated, both due to individual differences in interpreting the message and to possible ambiguities in the coding instructions themselves. Even variables that at first glance appeared factual (such as the discourse genre or the presence/absence of reported speech) can be challenging to code consistently, since real examples often resist neat classification, even when categories are defined as precisely as possible. In order to limit interpretive differences as much as possible and achieve a reasonable degree of inter-annotator agreement (see Rondiat *et al.*, Chapter 4 in this volume), it is necessary to provide a comprehensive and detailed coding guide, which includes appropriate examples to illustrate each category. This coding guide must undergo several rounds of revision, in successive versions. This can make it more precise and explicit by drawing on the differences or errors observed in the preliminary stages of the annotation work. This can also help to

identify where the guide is ambiguous or incomplete. Such iterative work is inevitable and inherent to the type of qualitative and interpretive analysis proposed here. However, this means that the balance between the costs and benefits of such a procedure for a given project must be taken into account before undertaking a project of this scope.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown why it is relevant, in the study of ‘sociopolitical keywords’, to use an analytical method based on the systematic annotation of occurrences of that keyword. Such an approach is appropriate when the research aims to capture the keyword in its context, in all its diverse uses and to understand the importance it takes in contemporary discourse and the reasons for its use and circulation (why is it used? by what type of speaker? in what context? for what purpose? etc.).

In this sense, the method presented aims to analyse ‘sociopolitical keywords’ by taking into account the characteristics regularly identified in the literature and by adapting the analytical dimensions to its characteristics. This method therefore aims to shed light on three main dimensions of analysis, each operationalised through a group of systematically annotated variables: the discursive, communicative, and sociopolitical context of each use of the keyword; the meaning and connotations associated with this term; the function of the statement in which the keyword appears.

In this chapter, we have detailed the different variables used and, for closed variables, the different categories or values considered for each variable, explaining the rationale behind the various choices made. This leads us to highlight both the advantages and the weaknesses or limitations of an annotation-based analysis approach as presented here, with the aim to inspire researchers and enable them to replicate and improve our annotation scheme.

Notes

- 1 This research is part of the ARC project 20/25–109 ‘Discourse, populism and democracy – Tracking the uses of ‘populism’ in media and political discourse’ (TrUMPo), funded by the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*.
- 2 Plus a category, ‘other’, to accommodate the rare messages that do not fall into any of the other categories provided.

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