

Pragmatic functions of *populis** in online political discourse: a case study on the Twitter discourse of Spanish politicians

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This paper discusses online political discourse on populism and examines pragmatic functions of the term *populis** in a corpus of political tweets from Spanish politicians and political parties posted in 2019. More specifically, four forms are analyzed—*populismo/populismos* ('populism'/ 'populisms', singular and plural nouns), *populista/populistas* ('populist'/ 'populists', singular and plural nouns and adjectives)—in the Twitter accounts of five political parties across the political spectrum (UP, PSOE, Cs, PP, VOX), as well as in the Twitter accounts of their leaders. There are several academic definitions of populism; moreover, the term is being used in different ways and its meanings are constructed and negotiated in discourse. Previous studies have examined populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), as a discursive strategy (Charaudeau, 2011) and as a “communication phenomenon” (de Vreese et al., 2018). These studies have shown that the term can be employed in a variety of contexts, it can be used with a positive and negative value, and it can be applied to politicians of different political leanings. Moreover, few empirical studies have analyzed the actual uses of the term in discourse (e.g. Brown & Mondon, 2020; Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020). The study of its uses by politicians can hence shed light on the meanings of the term, as well as on the variety of uses and forms of *populis** in actual discursive practices. Moreover, the analysis of the pragmatic functions of the term in political discourse on Twitter will add to the growing body of research on how politicians use this social media platform to engage in political communication with its audience (Breeze, 2020), and as a tool for political campaigns, as well as for self-expression, self-positioning, and political identity construction (Roginsky & De Cock, 2015; Coesemans & De Cock, 2017). In this study, a corpus of political tweets with at least one token of *populis** posted on the Twitter accounts of Spanish politicians and political parties in 2019 is first

analyzed quantitatively using corpus linguistics tools and methods in order to determine (i) the frequency of occurrence of *populis** by each political party and (ii) the specific use of the term and its linguistic form. Furthermore, political tweets are analyzed qualitatively in order to identify the pragmatic functions of *populis** related to a specific use of the term. The findings from a preliminary study of political tweets reveal different patterns of usage of *populis** and a preference for a specific linguistic form by each political party. Regarding the pragmatic functions of *populis**, politicians employed the term to promote their political party and to disqualify and criticize political opponents.

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