

6 A multi-layered and complexified linguistic approach to the analysis of discourse on ‘populism’

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1 Introduction

Discourse on populism has triggered many interrogations. Research has highlighted the referents targeted by the use of *populism* or *populist* and has shown that these terms are usually employed negatively to refer to issues, policies or political enemies from different ideologies, rather than to allude to populism as a concept or phenomenon (e.g., Bale *et al.*, 2011, for the study of *populism* in British newspapers), at least until 2014, as shown by Hatakka and Herkman (2022). Current approaches mainly focus on collocation analysis of *populism*, that is, on quantitative corpus analysis of the frequent word combinations of this term. These studies, which have analysed corpora from different countries, have underlined the following patterns in the discourse on populism.

On the one hand, some studies shed light on the concepts and phenomena associated with populism in public discourse, highlighting the negative connotations that contribute to painting a pejorative picture of populism. For example, Santiago-Guervós (2015) observes that Spanish newspapers frequently refer to populism in combination with demagoguery, irresponsibility, anti-democracy, manipulation and fascism, among others. Kitis and Kitis (2015) show that *populism* is coupled with concepts such as extremism, misery, racism, opportunism, poison and terror in the Greek Prime Minister’s discourse, concluding that ‘all instances [...] have a derogatory use *due to their collocations* [emphasis from the authors], and not due to background knowledge’ (Kitis & Kitis, 2015: 23).

Moreover, the analysis of the nouns and verbs that collocate with *populism* points out particular metaphors that participate in the construction of this phenomenon as a negative one. Populism is generally depicted as a threat (Göhring, 2022, for the analysis of French newspapers; Kranert, 2020, for the analysis of British and German press; Shchinova *et al.*, 2024, for the analysis of Belgian newspapers). However, this threat can take different forms, as shown by the analysis of articles from France (Borriello,

2022), Greece, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021): populism can be linked to a battle or war as in *populist attack* (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021: 3), a natural force as in *populist earthquake* (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021: 4) or *populist wind* (Borriello, 2022: 116), or a disease as in *populist plague* (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021: 4) or *populist fever* (Borriello, 2022: 117), among others.

On the other hand, although it has been demonstrated that discourse on populism can refer to a wide range of political actors, movements and ideologies from the whole political spectrum (Bale *et al.*, 2011; Borriello, 2022; Kitis & Kitis, 2015, among others), research on collocation analysis of *populism* highlights that this phenomenon is frequently associated, in different countries, with the right-wing and the far-right. Borriello's (2022) and Göhring's (2022) studies on the use of *populism* and *populist* in French newspapers show, for example, that the associations with right-wing political parties and lexical fields related to the (far) right (e.g., xenophobia, authoritarianism, and nationalism) are much more recurrent than the associations with the left-wing and its related lexical fields. Moreover, the association between populism and (extreme) right-wing politics seems to be increasingly frequent, as pointed out by Kranert's (2020) diachronic study on the uses of *populism* and *populist* by journalists and politicians in British and German press releases between 2012 and 2017. Indeed, the author shows that nationalism, extremism and xenophobia are among the most frequent collocates in both corpora and that the association between populism and nationalism is stronger from 2015 onwards. This is in line with Brown and Mondon's (2021) results on the use of these terms in *The Guardian's* investigative series on populism published in 2018–2019 as well as with Shchinova *et al.*'s (2024) analysis of populism in Belgian French-speaking and Dutch-speaking newspapers.

This non-exhaustive overview of studies on collocation analysis of populism has allowed us to underline some characteristics of the discourse on populism, that is, the negative portrayal of this phenomenon and the frequent association between populism and right-wing politics. However, while this literature provides valuable insights into how populism is presented in public discourse, it does not focus on how speakers try to achieve their communicative goals (other than discussing populism) in discourse. The uses of 'populism' and 'populist' show that these terms are used inconsistently and lack consensual definitions in media and political discourses. This has led several scholars to speak about the vagueness of the terms and present them as 'meaningless buzzword' (Schwörer, 2021: 4) or 'one of the main political buzzwords of the 21st century' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 1). It has yet been demonstrated that the uses are 'far from being random or meaningless' (Shchinova, 2023: 17). For example, in the interaction between the two Belgian politicians Raoul Hedebouw

(PTB-PVDA, far-left party) and Catherine Fonck (cdH, French-speaking Christian-democratic party) in example (1), one may wonder what the use of *populism* by both interlocutors allows them to do in this interaction.

- (1) *Dès le début, vous avez dit que c'était impossible, parce qu'on ne pouvait pas toucher aux douzièmes provisoires et que cela relevait du populisme. Non! C'est de la politique sérieuse que nous pratiquons ici : 402 millions d'euros, c'est très important! [...]*

From the beginning, you said it was impossible, because we couldn't touch the provisional twelfths and that this was **populism**. No! We're doing serious politics here: 402 million euros is a lot of money! [...]

[Raoul Hedebouw, PVDA-PTB, 21 November 2019]

*Promettre à un secteur, avec de la communication à tour de bras, qu'il y aura 20 000 infirmiers en plus, c'est non seulement du **populisme** mais c'est se moquer des infirmiers qui, chaque jour, ont un parcours particulièrement difficile et une charge de plus en plus importante! [...] Monsieur Hedebouw, osez reconnaître qu'il a fallu bétonner votre histoire qui, dans un premier temps, n'était que du vent, et qu'il a fallu dire la vérité! La vérité est que ce ne sont pas 20 000 infirmiers mais aux alentours – je l'espère – de 8 000 infirmiers complémentaires.*

Promising a sector, with communication flying in all directions, that there will be 20,000 more nurses is not only **populism**, but it's also making a mockery of the nurses who, every day, have a particularly difficult journey and an increasingly heavy workload! [...] Mr Hedebouw, dare to admit that your story had to be concreted over – because at first, it was nothing but hot air – and the truth had to be told! The truth is that it's not 20,000 nurses, but around – I hope -8,000 additional nurses.

[Catherine Fonck, cdH, 21 November 2019]

In this interaction, *populism* is used to categorise and recategorise a debated proposal. Raoul Hedebouw speaks about the implementation of an amendment proposed by PTB-PVDA in the context of a bill to create a 'white coats' budget fund and refers to another context in which the bill was discussed and in which an opponent, Catherine Fonck, categorised their proposal as *populism*. The objection *Non! C'est de la politique sérieuse que nous pratiquons ici* ('No, we're doing serious politics here') in reaction to *vous avez dit que c'était impossible (...) et que cela relevait du populisme* ('you said it was impossible (...) and that this was populism'), linked to the idea of telling the truth in Catherine Fonck's discourse, shows

that her use of *populism* was intended to refer to lying by proposing something favourable to the people but not implementable in reality and, consequently, to disqualify the PTB-PVDA's proposal.

However, given that the PTB-PVDA's proposal is finally approved, the fact that Catherine Fonck's statement is explicitly reported in Raoul Hedebouw's speech undermines the opponent's image while playing positively on the PTB-PVDA's image. On a formal level, Raoul Hedebouw reports his opponent's discourse (*vous avez dit que...* 'you said...') to explicitly deny it (*Non! c'est...* 'No! we're doing...'). Catherine Fonck reaffirms the populist nature of the PTB-PVDA's proposal (*c'est non seulement du populisme mais...* 'is not only populism, but...') by alluding to the fact that the measure will not guarantee exactly what the PTB-PVDA has proposed (*La vérité est que ce ne sont pas 20 000 infirmiers mais aux alentours – je l'espère – de 8 000 infirmiers complémentaires*. 'The truth is that it's not 20,000 nurses, but around – I hope – 8,000 additional nurses'), which affects her opponent's image. Facing this reaffirmation, the PTB's politician does not renegotiate the categorisation as populism.

As shown by this example, referring to populism can serve different purposes, ranging from the disqualification of opponents' proposals and discourse to the renegotiation of populist categorisations. Therefore, we argue that, alongside the strand of research into collocation analysis, the study of specific linguistic or discursive aspects linked to the uses of *populism* and *populist* (hereafter *populis**) in interactional discourse is necessary to grasp the complexity of these uses. As a result, this chapter is aligned with a field of research which investigates, for example, the analysis of newspapers' framing¹ of populism (Herkman, 2016), the argumentative schemes used by intellectuals to support their viewpoints on populism and engage with divergent standpoints in the press (Degano & Sicurella, 2019), and the uses and functions of *populism* and *populist* in mediated political discourse (Hamo *et al.*, 2019) and political discourse on Twitter (Schwörer, 2021). Nevertheless, while the research aforementioned mainly focuses on corpus-based studies of the media, we propose to expand the field of research on discourse on populism by focusing on discursive genres other than the media (parliamentary debates and interactions on Twitter) and by proposing new avenues for their linguistic analysis.

2 Pragmatic mitigation and intensification

As discussed in the introduction, existing research shows that *populism* and *populist* usually carry pejorative connotations, and are consequently employed to qualify opposing ideologies, movements or political figures and to criticise their actions, policies or statements. This leads Kranert (2020) to speak about 'stigma terms', that is, terms that are used to 'discredit policies and rhetoric of political actors, or to name political ideologies and groups

that are not part of the established political centre ground' (Kranert, 2020: 54). Given the threatening nature of the attribution of a populist characteristic to an opponent, derived from its use as a stigma term, the study of *populis** in relation to face and facework in specific interactional contexts can deepen our understanding of the use of this stigma term and the effects it can produce in different types of discourse. Indeed, labelling someone as populist can constitute a face-threatening act, that is, an act that challenges this person's basic wants for respect, approval and positive social valuation by others (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). It is worth mentioning that producing a face-threatening act towards another also affects the speaker's own face, because of the image projected through the interaction. As a result, speakers may take action to ensure that their discourse is consistent with their basic wants and those of their interlocutor (see the concept of *face-work* in Goffman, 1967), for example, by reducing the potential threatening effect of their discursive act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, given the conflicting nature of political discourse, politicians may choose to play with these types of face-threatening act, depending on their goals. For this reason, when interested in studying the uses of *populism* and *populist* in contexts of interactional political discourse, we propose to look at linguistic mitigation and intensification, two rhetorical and pragmatic strategies linked to the face needs and argumentative aims of the participants in interaction.

Mitigation and intensification have been seen as two opposite poles of the same *continuum* (Albelda Marco & Briz Gomez, 2020; Bazzanella & Gilli Favela, 2009; Labov, 1987; Mihatsch & Albelda Marco, 2016). Indeed, they are defined as strategies that are used, respectively, to soften and strengthen the propositional content and/or the speaker's commitment towards it (Albelda Marco & Briz Gómez, 2020). However, the linguistic strategies do not produce these effects *per se*. Rather, mitigation and intensification arise within a concrete communicative context, according to the speaker's communicative goals regarding their argumentation and the faces of the participants in the communication.² In example (2), Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Vivas from the Spanish political centre-right party Ciudadanos takes part in a debate on the creation of new commissions by reacting to an unfavourable position expressed by Iván Espinosa de los Monteros from far-right Vox. His intervention consists in opposing Vox's position and presenting it, as well as their discourse, as an instance of populism.

- (2) *Señor Espinosa de los Monteros, la verdad es que si usted quiere hacer una competición de **populismo** tiene dentro de la Cámara grupos parlamentarios que desde luego vienen haciendo gala de ese **populismo** desde que llegaron a estas instituciones. No me gustaría que fuera su caso, pero desde luego su exposición de hace unos minutos apunta en ese sentido. Este es el peor **populismo** que se puede hacer.*

Mr. Espinosa de los Monteros, the truth is that if you want to engage in a **populism** competition, you have parliamentary groups in this House that have certainly been flaunting that **populism** since they arrived at these institutions. I would not like that to be your case, but your statement from a few minutes ago certainly points in that direction. This is the worst **populism** one can engage in.

[Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Vivas, Ciudadanos, 10 September 2019]

In this intervention, Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Vivas resorts to a series of intensification and mitigation strategies in order to play on the images projected of his opponents and the strength of his discourse. On the one hand, he uses a mitigation strategy when referring to his interlocutor's intention. The conditional structure in *si usted quiere hacer una competición de populismo* ('if you want to engage in a populism competition') allows him to mitigate an assertion that could threaten his interlocutor's face and, as a result, be debated, producing a face-threat directed to himself because of the objection. Consequently, this strategy ultimately appears to protect the speaker's face and to anticipate any threat that may arise, which also contributes indirectly to the strength of his intervention.

On the other hand, he employs different intensification strategies that strengthen the propositional content or his commitment towards it. Through the uses of *desde luego* ('certainly'), he expresses a strong commitment towards the points of view he communicates on some parliamentary groups' behaviour ('you have parliamentary groups in this House that have *certainly* been flaunting that populism') and the interlocutor's previous statement ('your statement from a few minutes ago *certainly* points in that direction'). Moreover, the superlative in *el peor populismo* ('the worst populism') intensifies the populist characteristic attributed to Vox representative's discourse, as well as the negative connotations arising from it, by expressing the greater degree. In addition to that, the structure *la verdad es que* ('the truth is that') can be seen as a marker of argumentative strength in this communication context, as it highlights the expression of the speaker's attitude towards his message. All these intensification strategies affect the expression of the Ciudadanos representative's point of view regarding the Vox representative's discourse. Indeed, in a context where Ciudadanos holds a stance opposed to that of Vox, the association between populism and the opponent's discourse not only affects the opponent's face in the interaction, but also the image that is projected of his position, which delegitimises it. In this context, the intensification strategies strengthen these associations, which reinforce the speaker's argumentation regarding the debate and the effects produced on the opponents' face.

This example shows that the analysis of mitigation and intensification strategies in relation to the uses of *populism* or *populist* sheds light on the

way in which the references to populism and the attribution to a greater or lesser degree of a populist characteristic to an opponent contributes to stance-taking and the management of faces in political discourse or discourse on political topics. Our data from parliamentary debates mainly include the uses of intensification strategies when the political figures position themselves with regards to opponents' statement – as in example (2), when they express their own position on a political proposal (3; see below) or when they defend a proposal they submit for debate (4; see below). In example (3), below, Carlos Rojas, a member of the right-wing Partido Popular, expresses the unfavourable position of his political party regarding a royal decree proposal from the government. He uses the adjective *auténtico* 'authentic' to insist on the noun *populism*, which qualifies the government's conduct in relation to its proposal. In addition to conveying an emphasised pejorative image of the government's conduct, this statement contributes to justifying the unfavourable position of the Partido Popular regarding the debated royal decree. As for example (4), below, Dolors Montserrat, also member of the Partido Popular, presents a bill to restore the criminalisation in the penal code of the call of illegal referendums. She resorts to a superlative sentence (*el populismo más rancio y antidemocrático de Europa* 'the most rancid and antidemocratic populism in Europe') to qualify the instance of populism she attributes to Catalan nationalism, the main target of the bill. Therefore, like in example (3), the intensification strategy used in relation to *populism* simultaneously contributes to justifying the bill proposed by her party and to affecting the image of the opponent that is projected in this context.

- (3) *Hablamos claro y lo que decimos lo hacemos, señorías. Estamos ante un auténtico **POPULISMO** institucional. El Gobierno vuelve a emponzoñar el origen de las normas para dotar de rango jurídico sus prisas electorales.*

We speak clearly and what we say we do, your lordships. This is authentic institutional **populism**. The government is once again contaminating the origin of the rules in order to give legal status to its electoral hastes.

[Carlos Rojas, Partido Popular, 03 April 2019]

- (4) *Señorías, en España el nacionalismo catalán practica el **POPULISMO** más rancio y antidemocrático de Europa [...]*

Your lordships, in Spain, Catalan nationalism practices the most rancid and antidemocratic **populism** in Europe. [...]

[Dolors Montserrat, Partido Popular, 19 February 2019]

These examples show that these strategies and their uses in relation to populism appear in different communicative contexts and play diverse roles depending on the communicative aims of the speaker. They furthermore show how insisting or mitigating a negative characteristic attributed to others – through the notion of *populism* and *populist* – can meet the speaker's goals regarding argumentation and the representation of others.

3 Metaphors

The unfavourable and even threatening characteristics of populism (see above) have led discourse producers to perceive the phenomenon as a 'beast running through' one's nation or a 'virus spreading across' one's nation (de Barros, 2022; Stulik, 2019). Indeed, metaphors are present in everyday communication (Kittay, 1987), and thus in political communication (Perrez *et al.*, 2019). The analysis of metaphors related to populism is particularly relevant because metaphors can shape the public's perception of the phenomenon (Musolff, 2020; Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015).

Indeed, as noted in the Introductory chapter, populism is a highly complex phenomenon, from which many scholarly debates have emerged regarding the definition(s) of the concept (see Bailly *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, metaphors can act as decomplexifying devices through which the concept is represented through the characteristics of a different, more concrete, concept (e.g., a 'beast' or a 'virus'). A metaphor can only be decoded by identifying the two concepts at play: the concrete, familiar concept ('the beast'), is referred to as the source concept, and the complex, unfamiliar concept ('populism'), is referred to as the target concept (Kittay, 1987).

In the context of political discourse, however, this metaphorical concretisation requires further decoding processes. The metaphor helps discourse producers to promote a decomplexified image of the target, which is thereby exclusively perceived through the characteristics it shares with the source concept. Accordingly, a metaphor inevitably conveys a partial and eventually biased image of the target (Augé, 2023; Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2020). In discussions of political concerns, this biased image shapes the target concept in a way that specifically fits the political orientation adopted in discourse.

This metaphorical bias has been widely documented in the existing literature (Charteris-Black, 2011; Musolff, 2020; Perrez *et al.*, 2019). Notably, metaphor scholars demonstrate that a metaphor is particularly persuasive when included within a comprehensive narrative (Hanne *et al.*, 2014) that structures the discourse according to a particular point of view (e.g., populist actors as 'villains' and political discourse producers as 'heroes' of the 'storied world'; Bamberg, 2004).

Scholars interested in populism have significantly focused on the polarising functions of metaphors (de Barros, 2022; Peterssen & Da Silva, 2024; Szabo & Szabo, 2022). For instance, metaphors can help a political party

to promote itself as a ‘barrier’ preventing the spread of the populist threat (Valdivia, 2019; 2020). Studies reveal that metaphors insist on the attribution of populist characteristics to the out-group (‘them’) while suggesting that the in-group (‘us’) is deprived of such unfavourable characteristics (Filardo-Llamas *et al.*, 2022). Metaphorical discourses can also associate concerns of populism with immigration: the discourse producer’s identity is to reflect national characteristics opposed to immigrants’ identities shaped according to a limited description of immigrants’ cultures and traditions (Saíz & Breeze, 2020; Stulik, 2019).

Drawing on these existing findings, one may explore how populism can be conceptualised through metaphors in political discourse. In order to identify and analyse metaphors, the methodological procedures of Critical Metaphor Analysis can be applied: (1) Identification, (2) Interpretation, and (3) Explanation (Charteris-Black, 2011). In the Identification phase, the researcher looks for concrete, alien concepts (i.e., source concepts) characterising *populis**, as a target concept. The Interpretation phase considers the characteristics of the source and target concepts that have been highlighted by discourse producers. In the Explanation phase, the aim is to observe how these characteristics could promote a particular viewpoint on *populis**. By applying these procedures, one can observe that metaphorical conceptualisations of a concept such as populism often rely on a limited set of recurring metaphors. In the case of populism, the following examples illustrate the association of populism with three metaphors: the *body politic* metaphor, the *war* metaphor, and the *organic* metaphor.

- (5) *Il revient désormais à la puissance publique de traiter pleinement cette information, dans le strict respect de la liberté individuelle et des données personnelles, afin de limiter au maximum cette thrombose démocratique que constitue l'évitement fiscal. Les rapporteurs forment le vœu que leurs propositions, certaines pragmatiques et faciles à mettre en œuvre, d'autres plus difficilement réalisables dans un monde d'interdépendance des territoires fiscaux, connaîtront un accueil favorable; elles peuvent toutes agir pour la résorption de ces comportements qui alimentent le POPULISME.*

It is now up to the public authorities to deal fully with this information in order to limit the democratic thrombosis that is tax avoidance. The rapporteurs hope that their proposals will be favourably received; they can all help to curb this behaviour, which feeds POPULISM

[Émilie Cariou and Pierre Cordier, LREM, 25 September 2019]

- (6) *Por eso, señorías, en estos momentos más que nunca, como decía mi compañero Jordi Roca, vamos a combatir el POPULISMO, vamos a combatir el ataque a las instituciones.*

For this reason, your lordships, at this time more than ever, as my colleague Jordi Roca said, we are going to fight POPULISM, we are going to fight against the attack suffered by the institutions

[Carlos Rojas García, Partido Popular, 21 February 2019]

- (7) *Certains diront ou ont déjà dit que cette résolution n'est qu'une goutte dans la Méditerranée alors que d'autres n'hésiteront pas à nous traiter d'irresponsables et à brandir la menace de l'invasion pour, une nouvelle fois, surfer entre POPULISME et popularité. À ces derniers qui nous ont malheureusement quittés, je dis "fake news".*

Some will say or have already said that this resolution is only a drop in the Mediterranean Sea whereas others will not hesitate to call us irresponsible and to brandish the threat of invasion in order, once again, to surf between POPULISM and popularity

[Hervé Rigot, Parti socialiste, 28 November 2019]

In example (5), from French parliamentary discourse, the growth of *populis** is described as a consequence of a 'democratic thrombosis' by two MPs from La République En Marche (centre-right party). This follows a particular metaphorical reasoning (Perrez *et al.*, 2019) according to which tax avoidance acts like a disease within the body politic (Musolff, 2020). The politician refers to a disease that prevents natural blood flows within the body: in the political context, this conceptualisation suggests that tax avoidance prevents the smooth development of democratic procedures (Taylor, 2017). This body-related conceptualisation serves to support the political argument according to which tax avoidance causes the growth of populism: by decomplexifying democratic obstacles as a 'thrombosis', the politician refers to a reality where democratic procedures can take place (i.e., a healthy body politic) opposed to a reality where democratic procedures are prevented (i.e., a body politic affected by thrombosis). It is precisely this limit to democratic procedures that allows for the growth of populism. This causal relation is reinforced by another body-related metaphor ('feeds') which is aimed at warning the audience regarding the urgent need to act upon this democratic obstacle (tax avoidance). *Populis** is thereby conceptualised as a growing body that is presented in opposition to the body politic.

In example (6), from Spanish parliamentary discourse, *populis** is explicitly identified as the enemy of the institutions. The politician insists on his opposition to populism by declaring a metaphorical war against this phenomenon. This war is justified through the repetitive metaphorical references to the political 'fight' that is presented as a mere defence strategy: indeed, this 'war' is not only legitimised by the negative connotations

associated with the concept *populis** (Bailly *et al.*, 2024), but also by the description of a prior metaphorical ‘attack’ performed by a personified version of populism. This example is extracted from a political intervention referring to investigation delays during penal procedures, as alleged by Unidas Podemos (far-left party). Such delays are hereby perceived as ‘an attack’ suffered by institutions. This repetitive metaphor thus serves a hyperbolic function, which is mainly rooted in metaphorical reasoning: the metaphorical ‘attack’ leads to the identification of a metaphorical ‘enemy’.

In example (7), the Belgian MP Hervé Rigot – a member of the French-speaking socialist party – identifies three groups (‘some’, ‘us’, and ‘others’) pertaining to three reactions regarding a political resolution. This resolution aims to establish a mechanism that would split the number of asylum seekers among different EU member states. The different reactions regarding this resolution are distinguished through the extended organic water-related metaphor. This metaphor has been selected to echo the main theme (asylum seekers) of the resolution: the politician does not generally refer to a ‘Sea’ concept, but to the ‘Mediterranean Sea’, which migrants are required to cross to reach Europe (Porto, 2022). This specific metaphorical expression thus represents an instance of topic-triggering (Silaski, 2009). As the politician exclusively focuses on particular reactions (‘some’ and ‘others’) regarding the resolution, he exploits the source concept ‘Mediterranean Sea’ to refer to organic elements that compose this ‘Sea’, that is, ‘drop’. At the conceptual level, the politician refers to a hierarchical scale according to which a ‘drop’ only constitutes a minor ingredient comprised within the concept ‘Mediterranean Sea’. Thus, following ‘some’s’ reactions, the resolution does not represent a significant change in asylum policies, just like adding a drop to the Sea will not alter its current. This reaction (by ‘some’) therefore aims at delegitimising the scopes of this resolution. The reference to such reactions eventually anticipates prospective criticism from opponents. Another instance of the organic metaphor appears in the description of ‘others’ who are ‘surfing between populism and popularity’. The metaphor suggests that criticising the resolution (‘brandishing the threat of invasion’) eventually enables ‘others’ to shape their own path within the Sea (like surfing in-between waves). On the one hand, the prospective political discussion regarding the resolution is allegedly perceived as an opportunity for political opponents (‘others’) to strengthen their own political images (‘brandish’, ‘opportunity’). On the other hand, following the discourse producer’s viewpoint, this political image is associated with an implicit image of a ‘populist wave’. This suggests that populism is a concept that is being progressively built up by a multitude of similar political reactions to asylum policies (perceived as a threat). Eventually, political opponents may rely on these political reactions to receive public attention.

The three metaphors aforementioned suggest that, in parliamentary discourses, *populis** is represented as a political threat. However, through the use of metaphors, this populist threat can be attributed various characteristics. First, the examples analysed in this section echo existing findings on populist metaphors (de Barros, 2022; Peterssen & Da Silva, 2024; Szabo & Szabo, 2022): the populist threat may be decoded through the use of particular source concepts that denote explicitly negative processes, such as disease or war-invasion. Accordingly, the metaphors strengthen the negative connotations attributed to *populis** by referring to the public's experiential knowledge (i.e., disease) and/or dichotomous conceptualisations of political actors (i.e., the identification of 'allies' and 'enemies'). Second, this threatening image may also rely on complex exploitations of metaphors, which require further contextual investigation: for instance, the organic metaphor may refer to an ever-growing phenomenon (e.g., like a plant or a wave) that is perceived negatively following the argumentative exploitations of the metaphor in the political interventions. Third, the metaphors of populism may also be analysed through the lens of political narratives (Hanne *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, the populist metaphors discussed in this section can, respectively, fulfil specific functions (Schubert, 2010) that represent the defining features of political narratives: they can describe political polarisations (e.g., the body politic vs. the populist body; populism as an enemy), they can serve integrating functions, that is, the emphasis on the values of the nation-political party (e.g., populism as an unnatural political development), they can fulfil exemplifying functions (e.g., an 'attack' justifying the 'war' on populism), and they can serve personalising function (e.g., by making political actors stand out from the populist realm).

This leads us to conclude that, through the use of negatively connoted source concepts, through argumentative exploitations, and through the production of political narratives, populist metaphors can effectively promote a biased description of politics and political actors. This biased description can eventually produce a persuasive, yet incomplete, image that may guide the public's perception of current political debates.

4 Agentivity

As shown above, the analysis of metaphors related to *populis** highlights the representation of populism as a threat. In addition, collocational analyses of *populis** have shown similar results (Shchinova *et al.*, 2024), and this threatening depiction has been described as a feature of antipopulist discourse (Goyvaerts & De Cleen, 2020). Based on this research, one would expect *populist(s)* to be typically represented as agents of intentionally harmful actions.

Focussing on the semantic role associated with certain actors has proven to be an important aspect of analysing the representation of a certain group

in other types of discourses. Thus, in his analysis of the representation of the people in populist discourse in the Netherlands, Van Leeuwen (2015, 2019) has shown that it is important to not only look into the frequency with which a certain term appears, but also the syntactic function with which a certain term appears. Van Leeuwen shows that the main difference between a populist politician (Wilders) and a non-populist politician (Pechtold) is not necessarily the frequency with which they refer to the people, but draws on a variety of stylistic choices. Wilders often presents the people as the subject of an utterance, and as the subject of a verb expressing cognition, perception, or emotion. In doing so, he constructs a discourse where the perspective of the people has a much more central position than in Pechtold's discourse where, moreover, (Wilders suggests that) his party represents the ideas of the people.

Building on this insight, De Cock (in press) has looked into how *populist(s)* are represented in tweets, namely, whether or not *populist(s)* are presented as the agents of intentionally harmful acts, which would be expected given their frequent association with the idea of threat. This approach then proposes to go beyond the mere collocation with nouns or verbs referring to the idea of threat and to look into which semantic role *populist(s)* are given with respect to menacing or harming behaviour. For this analysis, the agent will be considered as the cause or instigator of an action (Palmer, 1994: 25). The patient is the entity affected by the action. The recipient is indirectly affected. However, in this analysis patient and recipient are considered together in that they are both at the receiving end of the agent's actions. Intentionality will be understood as the 'the degree of the Agent's involvement' (Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2012: 137). Considering intentionality in this analysis is important because it helps to understand the extent to which *populist(s)* are represented as intentionally harmful, that is, as carrying out harmful actions on purpose.

Drawing on a study of comparable corpora of 200 tweets in Dutch, French, and Spanish, De Cock (in press) shows that the representation of *populist(s)* as agents of intentionally negative actions is not as pervasive as one might expect based on collocational analyses. Indeed, *populist(s)* are frequently presented as such, for example, (8) as attacking democratic institutions.

- (8) *Wat een goed verhelderend stuk v @michelvanbaal. Populisten vallen democratische instituties (bv wetenschap en journalistiek) aan gaan zelf in slachtofferrol zitten. Creëert een catch-22 voor media. <https://t.co/BiDbUPTuKM> ([link to text in De Volkskrant]*

What a good enlightening piece by @michelvanbaal. Populists **attack democratic institutions** (e.g. science and journalism), and install themselves in the role of victim. Creates a catch-22 for media. <https://t.co/BiDbUPTuKM> ([link to text in De Volkskrant]

However, in the Spanish Twitter data, they are more often presented as the patient or recipient of intentional actions than as the agent, and in the French and Dutch data, patient/recipient uses represent slightly less than half of the uses of *populist(s)* with international actions. These representations trigger one's attention to the ways other parties or actors behave towards populists. In the French tweets, these cases represent *populist(s)* as the ones against whom others are or should be fighting.

- (9) @alainjuppe @FranceInsoumise @RNational_off @DLF_Officiel @laurentwauquiez... *Il faut un rapprochement et relancer les réformes et aussi **barrer le chemin aux populistes**. Si vous doutez qu'il y a des dingues dans ce pays lisez les commentaires que votre tweet a suscité.*

@alainjuppe @FranceInsoumise @RNational_off @DLF_Officiel @laurentwauquiez... A rapprochement is needed, as well as launching reforms and also **blocking the road to the populists**. If you hesitate whether there are crazy people in this country, read the comments that your tweet has elicited.

This representation is also present in the Dutch and Spanish tweets, but is complemented by another one, namely, one where other actors try to form a coalition with *populist(s)*. This can be explained by the 2019 political situation, when a coalition with a party considered populist by some members of society could have been a possibility both in Spain and in Belgium. One can note that tweets commenting on forming coalitions with populists do not necessarily applaud this. A similar discourse with a similar use of *populistas* is to be found in Spanish parliamentary debate.

- (10) #InvestiduraRTVE. @sanchezcastejon. *Por qué quieren gobernar con nacionalistas populistas independentistas o sea #LaBandadeSánchez*

#InvestitureRTVE. @sanchezcastejon Why do they want to govern with nationalists populists independentists in other words #TheGangofSánchez

A considerable number of tweets do not associate *populist(s)* with intentional actions, but with a simple label, that is, simply labelling someone as populist (11) or engaging in discussions concerning who is labelling whom as populist (12). In the latter case, the use of the term by Peter De Roover is contested by a Twitter user who considers that De Roover does not know the real meaning of populist.

- (11) @wbeke Wouter Beke dit is een groteske schandalige uitspraak van een zeer laag niveau. Schrap de C maar dringend uit de naam van de CD&V. Zielig ventje. Degoutante populist.

@wbeke Wouter Beke [chairman of the Christian-Democrat party] this is a grotesk scandalous quote of a very low level. Remove urgently the C from the name of the CD&V [Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams – Flemish Christian-Democrat party]. Pathetic little man. Disgusting populist.

- (12) @PeterDeRoover1 @destandaard Uw probleem is dat je de definitie niet kent van ‘populisten’. Vreemd eigenlijk want je bent er zelf één.

@PeterDeRoover1 [federal MP for the N-VA Flemish regionalist party] @destandaard [Belgian Dutch-speaking newspaper] Your problem is that you don’t know the definition of ‘populists’. Weird actually since you’re one yourself.

These uses are in line with other research in this volume that reflects on the on-going debate about the meaning of *populist*. They are significantly more frequent in the Dutch data than in the Spanish and French data. This can be explained by two elements. On the one hand, there is a strong debate on the legitimacy of far-right parties both in the Netherlands and in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, which often leads to discussions on whom is populist and what populist really means. On the other hand, in our data *populist* is also frequently used in discussions concerning the 2019 youth climate marches, following the example of Greta Thunberg’s school strike for climate. In this context, (adult) supporters of those marches are often labelled *green populists*. These marches represent a much more frequent phenomenon in Belgium than in France and Spain, naturally leading to them being the subject of societal debate.

This approach focused on the semantic roles of *populist(s)* has proven a useful contribution to a richer and more nuanced view of how *populist(s)* are represented in a small corpus of tweets. This approach could be further upscaled. It could indeed be applied to a larger corpus and /or to other types of public discourses.

5 Argumentation

Another productive direction for expanding the study of how *populis** operates in discourse is to examine its role in argumentative processes. To this end, approaching *populis** as a sociopolitical keyword (hereafter SPKW; see Hambye *et al.*, 2025) proves particularly useful. This label – like alternative ones such as ‘discourse keywords’ (Schröter & Veniard, 2016) – refers to words that are ‘socio-politically significant’ (Jeffries & Walker, 2017: 4) and play a ‘key role’ in discourse due to their specific features.³ Words like *populism*, *wokism* and *terrorism*, but also *democracy*, *integration* or

freedom, have all been studied as sociopolitical/discourse keywords. As SPKWs, they are understood to possess several properties that enable them to fulfil multiple discursive functions, especially in argumentation.

Three properties of SPKW generate a particular argumentative force. First, SPKWs are imbued with strong evaluative dimensions, either positive or negative. This evaluative weight of SPKW may stem from broadly shared social values, grounded in ‘widely held beliefs’ (Rigotti & Rocci, 2005: 907), or it may be highly polarised, indexing conflicting meanings across social groups. For instance, terms like *diversity* or *anti-racism* may evoke positive associations for some while carrying pejorative implications for others. In either case, the evaluative weight of SPKW is transferred to the realities related to them. In other words, when a reality is discursively categorised through the use of an SPKW, it becomes associated with (or opposed to) the negative or positive connotations the term carries for its audience. Thus, when a particular political orientation, along with its proponents, is labelled as populist, as in example (4) (‘Catalan nationalism’), it is framed as illegitimate, reflecting the negative public perception of the term (see above). This framing, however, relies on the assumption that the categorisation achieved through the SPKW – in example (4) the labelling of Catalan nationalists as populists – is regarded as warranted instead of disputable. However, such categorisations are often difficult to contest precisely because of the two remaining features that endow SPKWs with their distinctive argumentative force. Second, SPKWs are often polysemic, related to a variety of meanings, because they condense diverse ideas, values or political issues. This semantic density, evident in *populis** (see, e.g., Shchinova *et al.*, 2024), produces vagueness, making it difficult to contest such categorisations, since there is neither a settled definition nor a stable referent to anchor disagreement. Third, because SPKWs like *populis** are commonly used in sociopolitical discourse (Hambye *et al.*, 2025), their use to label a given reality may become normalised rather than something that raises suspicion or attention. This ‘effect of obviousness’ (Krieg-Planque, 2010: 19) makes the use of terms like *populis** appears ubiquitous and uncontroversial, thereby covering the categorised reality with an obviously and undeniably positive or negative value. Because of this ‘effect of obviousness’, a SPKW like *populis** appears to play a key role in argumentation, as statements containing *populis** can serve as effective arguments to support a given standpoint. It can indeed be used strategically following different argumentative patterns to harness its argumentative force.

The idea that *populis** is principally used as a ‘stigma term’ (Kranert, 2020) may suggest that it mainly serves to *directly* criticise or discredit political opponents and their behaviour or decisions. While this is indeed a frequent pattern, observations show that *populis** can be used for many other, sometimes more complex, purposes. In the following example, for

instance, *populis** is used not so much to directly discredit the group labelled populist – the Spanish far-left party *Podemos*, referred to here by the term *populistas* ‘populists’ – but rather to contest the legitimacy of another party (the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party, PSOE) through its association with *Podemos*.

- (13) *Estos PGE son dañinos y tramposos, y, por ello, doblemente dañinos, para nuestro país. Reflejan la debilidad de un gobierno respaldado por un grupo con 84 diputados de los 350 que tiene el Congreso y las concesiones a sus potenciales socios. El PSOE, con su intento de contentar a independentistas y a populistas, está poniendo en riesgo la recuperación económica, la creación de empleo y la prosperidad de las familias españolas con el único objetivo de mantener unos meses más en la Moncloa a Pedro Sánchez.*

The General State Budget is harmful and deceitful, and therefore doubly harmful, for our country. It reflects the weakness of a government backed by a group with 84 MPs out of 350 in Congress and concessions to its potential partners. The PSOE, with its attempt to please pro-independence and populist supporters, is jeopardising economic recovery, job creation and the prosperity of Spanish families with the sole aim of keeping Pedro Sánchez in the Moncloa for a few more months.

[Juan Carlos Girauta Vidal, Ciudadanos, 14 January 2019]

In this case, the frequent characterisation of *Podemos* as a populist party in Spain (De Cock, 2023; Shchinova, 2023) renders the label seemingly unmarked, which is presented as self-evident and requiring no further justification. This taken-for-granted association of *Podemos* with populism functions as an argument that supports an implicit dual standpoint: (i) the PSOE, which seeks to please *Podemos*, is not a reliable or legitimate political actor; (ii) due to the PSOE’s acquaintance with populists, the General State Budget they propose is detrimental. Indeed, framing the PSOE’s budgetary measures as driven solely by their desire to appease its political allies in order to retain power implicitly delegitimises both the party and its policies. This argument, however, relies on two interlinked assumptions: that *Podemos* is inherently populist,⁴ and that populism is inherently undesirable. This illustrates the specific ‘persuasive power’ of keywords in argumentation, as described by Rigotti & Rocci (2005: 904–905), who argue that such terms possess the capacity ‘to supplement an adequate unstated premise, which is presupposed to be shared by the speaker and the hearer’, without ‘any need of further motivating [the] value judgement’ that constitutes this premise.

In example (2), we observe another instance where the categorisation of a reality with populism is used indirectly to discredit a political opponent by associating him with this ‘populist’ reality. In this case, the argumentative strength of the statement including *populis** does not primarily derive from the conventional usage of or habitual association with the term, but rather from its vagueness (as mentioned above) and the weakly articulated link between populism and the targeted opponent. Instead of directly accusing Espinosa de los Monteros (Vox, far-right party) of ‘being populist’ – a claim that could be very threatening and would likely require substantial justification – the speaker merely suggests that his statement aligns with or approximates *populist* discourse. Crucially, no clarification is provided regarding what populism entails or why the statement should be categorised as such. The strength of the argument thus lies in its vagueness. The latter makes it difficult to counter-argue effectively or to prove that the statement is actually *not* populist, therefore the argument remains plausible. As a result, an implicit conclusion is suggested: the targeted opponent’s behaviour is inappropriate. Once the opponent’s discourse is framed as populist, the framing extends its negative evaluative load not only to the speech act, but also to the speaker himself. Here again, *populis** functions as a vehicle of devaluation, drawing on its entrenched negative evaluative load.

*Populis** also appears in argumentative patterns where the categorisation of a given reality as populist is not presented as self-evident, but rather as the conclusion of an argumentative intervention. In the following example, the Belgian Minister of Justice Koen Geens (CD&V, Flemish Christian-democratic party) reacts to a criticism by Annick Lambrecht (SPA, Flemish Socialist party) about the prosecution of offenders involved in child trafficking.

- (14) *Verwijt ons dus niet dat wij op dat vlak niets doen. Verklaar ook niet publiekelijk dat er straffeloosheid is. Dat is immers niet waar. Het ging hier niet om een recidivist. Het was de eerste keer. Hij heeft tweeënhalf jaar van de uitgesproken zes jaar effectief uitgezeten en is een jaar via een enkelband van zijn vrijheid beroofd. Voor de minste fout die hij nog zal maken, gaat hij opnieuw de gevangenis in. Wees over het dossier dus niet te populistisch.*

So don’t accuse us of doing nothing on that front. Also, don’t publicly declare impunity. After all, that is not true. This was not a repeat offender. It was the first time. He effectively served two-and-a-half years of the pronounced six years and was deprived of liberty for a year via an ankle bracelet. For the slightest mistake he will make again, he will go to jail. So don’t be too populist about the case.

[Koen Geens, CD&V, 10 January 2019]

In his rebuttal, Geens counters Lambrecht's criticism by asserting that she has provided inaccurate information regarding the specific case in question. His closing remark ('so don't be too populist about this case') only makes sense if one infers that Lambrecht's dissemination of incorrect information serves as evidence of a populist stance. Once again, the semantic vagueness of *populis** enables various inferences⁵ and hinders direct contestation of the connection between false information and populism. The argumentative move culminates in a conclusive statement that presupposes Lambrecht *has already engaged in a populist attitude* and demands to limit this presupposed populist stance. This implicit framing ultimately supports the implicit conclusion presented in the previous examples: Lambrecht's behaviour is illegitimate. A similar pattern appears in example (3) above, where 'authentic populism' derives its meaning from the accusation that the government manipulates legal procedures for electoral gain. The vagueness of *populis** hinders contestation, allowing the term to implicitly frame the government as acting in bad faith and thus lacking legitimacy.

In both examples (3) and (14), the use of *populis** has a dual effect: it serves to delegitimise political opponents while simultaneously reinforcing the speaker's own legitimacy. In (14), the term is used defensively to undermine the credibility of prior criticism and thus restore the speaker's legitimacy. In (3), the juxtaposition between 'we speak clearly and what we say we do' and the accusation of populism constructs a contrast between political honesty (claimed by the speaker) and manipulation (ascribed to the government), thereby suggesting that the government's actions are illegitimate while the speaker represents principled politics.

Similarly, *populis** is used argumentatively in contexts where the primary aim is not to directly attack or delegitimise political opponents, but rather to bolster the speaker's own legitimacy by contrasting themselves with populism. Example (15) clearly illustrates this dynamic. José Javier Lasarte Iribarren (PSOE, left-wing party), for instance, does not engage in direct criticism of populist actors or parties. Instead, populism is depicted as symptomatic of deeper social inequalities produced by ineffective neoliberal policies. In this framing, Lasarte positions himself as a responsible alternative to both elitist neoliberalism and populist backlash. Here, *populis** functions as a discursive tool that helps to shape a moral and political ethos: the politician's credibility and competence are affirmed through opposition to the destabilising consequences (the rise of populism) that arise when the progressive, equitable values he claims to defend are ignored.

- (15) *No es una casualidad, no son resultados casuales, son la consecuencia de la aplicación de unas políticas económicas y presupuestarias con marcado sesgo ideológico elitista, de derechas. Yo todavía no*

lo entiendo, porque eran las políticas de PP y Ciudadanos, pero son políticas que priman la supuesta búsqueda de la eficiencia en detrimento de la equidad, persiguen reducir el Estado y bajar impuestos a los más pudientes y tienen como corolario el aumento de la desigualdad social que alimenta la crisis de legitimidad de las instituciones y el alza de los movimientos políticos de corte populista.

They [i.e., rising inequality, youth poverty, and social exclusion] are not a coincidence, they are not casual results, they are the consequence of the application of economic and budgetary policies with a markedly right-wing, elitist ideological bias. I still don't understand it, because they were the policies of PP and Ciudadanos, but they are policies that prioritise the supposed search for efficiency to the detriment of equity, they seek to reduce the state and lower taxes for the wealthiest and have as a corollary the increase in social inequality that feeds the crisis of legitimacy of institutions and the rise of populist political movements.

[José Javier Lasarte Iribarren, PSOE, 28 January 2019]

Ultimately, these examples illustrate how categorising a reality in relation (or in opposition) to populism can serve a variety of purposes depending on the contexts. They emphasise that the discursive importance of such a keyword lies in the range of actions it enables to perform in discourse.

Examining the argumentative role of *populis** and the argumentative patterns in which it appears thus offers a promising avenue for research into the uses of this keyword across various discursive contexts. As demonstrated here, the function of *populis** in argumentation is shaped by several variables. The association, or opposition, between populism and a given reality may be conventional and presented as self-evident, or relatively novel yet difficult to dispute due to the semantic vagueness of the term and/or the presence of supporting arguments. The relations between the statement containing *populis** and the conclusion it supports – typically the (de)legitimisation of political actors or policies – can also vary in its degree of explicitness and argumentative complexity. Finally, *populis** may serve a range of rhetorical purposes across different discursive settings (see Aulit & De Cock, 2025).

6 Conclusion

Existing literature on discourse on populism has mainly focused on how populism is presented in public discourse – based on collocation analysis in media corpus. This chapter proposes new avenues for linguistic research: the analysis of how references to populism are used to achieve speakers' communicative goals in different interactional contexts. To this end, we present a complexified approach including different perspectives such as the study of pragmatic

mitigation and intensification, metaphors, agentivity, and argumentation. The analysis of pragmatic phenomena used in relation to the act of labelling someone or something as *populist* allows us to investigate the realisation of face-threatening acts and their (secondary) effects on argumentation. The study of *populism* as a sociopolitical keyword highlights how such keywords can be employed in argumentative patterns. Moreover, we show that approaching metaphors on populism through the lens of political narratives deepens our understanding of the different functions these metaphors can fulfil in political and public discourses, and that the study of agentivity is necessary to get a comprehensive understanding of how populism and populist are presented in society, according to the actions they undertake or deal with. By complexifying the analysis of discourse on populism through these approaches, we argue that we can improve our understanding of the representations associated with this phenomenon in contemporary society.

Notes

- 1 Defined as the ‘strategies, practices and techniques by which the media or journalism bring meanings to the fore and the way certain aspects of reality are stressed and others are deemphasised’ (Herkman, 2016: 152).
- 2 See Aulit (2023) for a detailed list of potential mitigation and intensification strategies.
- 3 SPKW should not be conflated with statistical keywords, which are defined on the basis of relative frequency (Baker, 2023).
- 4 An assumption that seems all the more obvious in this context that the leader of the PSOE (Pedro Sanchez) had himself labelled Podemos as populist when he was rejecting an alliance between this party and his own.
- 5 For instance: Lambrecht has conveyed false information, hence, she is populist, since populists are known to spread fake news; Lambrecht has conveyed false information to suggest that the Justice is not severe enough with sexual criminals, supporting demagogically that more severe convictions are needed, hence being populist (in the sense of demagogic).

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