

## **Interpreting web-based populism in Italy: a corpus-based analysis of selected Keywords in Beppe Grillo's blog**

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Populism in Italy has been inscribed for a long time in the right-wing political tradition. However, in recent years, a new form of populism has emerged, one that somehow overcomes the long-established binary opposition between right and left. Indeed, next to a more conventional form of Italian populism, such as the one envisaged and promoted by the Lega Nord party, the Italian "Movimento 5 Stelle" (5 Star Movement - M5S henceforth) defies and challenges the status quo of the Italian political scene, which traditionally revolved around a bipolar, yet fragmented, rationale.

In 2009, when many European countries saw the rising of far right-wing populist parties, the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo and the web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio started the M5S, which rapidly gained consensus among the electorate. From its outset, M5S attracted voters from very different social categories, creating in this way a wide web-based core of followers, using the blog as the main hub for their claims.

In 2013 general elections, M5S managed to be represented in Parliament as opposing party. Finally, in 2016 local elections the Movement won two important urban centres (Rome and Turin), securing the opportunity of full institutionalisation and entering the establishment, which M5S has always tried to demystify and challenge.

The most peculiar characteristic of M5S populism is precisely its ability of bringing together people from different social and professional categories, whose positions would have been at opposite poles in the tradition of Italian politics.

Since the blog is M5S' main method of addressing the electorate, we built a corpus of texts from [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) and analysed the ways this new kind of populism addresses its own electorate. The M5S corpus gathers blog posts by activists and political representatives of the Movement from April to July 2016, comprising 521 texts and approximately 240,000 words. Our goal with reference to the M5S corpus is to analyse the Movement's approach and definition of both its own identity as a political entity and its relationship with (prospective) voters. Following the corpus-based approach within the CADS framework (Partington et al., 2013), we looked at collocates and concordance lines of words<sup>1</sup> such as *noi* (we), *cittadin\** (citizen\*), *popolo/gente/person\** (people), in order to see how M5S relates to these entities and how, consequently, negotiates its identity and political influence.

Our first findings showed a certain inconsistency on the part of M5S in building and negotiating its political identity, which is defined mainly through three different and recurring communicative strategies.

Firstly, we observed M5S' tendency to define itself, i.e. the ingroup (van Dijk, 1998), as a political movement by means of opposition to and negation of "traditional" political and social forces, i.e. the outgroup (van Dijk, 1998). Indeed, the negative adverb *non* (not) occurs among the top collocates of both the pronoun *noi* (we) and

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<sup>1</sup> Sorted by T-score, word span -/+5 words.

the verb *siamo* (to be, indicative, present, first person plural). This seems to hint at its need of denying an already existing system (Italian political establishment) to strengthen and affirm its political self.

Secondly, looking at the concordance lines and collocates of the word *cittadin\** (citizen\*), we identified two recurring patterns. The first one is the polarized relationship between *cittadin\** and the establishment (banks, politicians, government etc.), where the latter is a negative force upon society, and citizens are framed as good and honest. The second pattern represents citizens as weary of this status quo, and calls for them to take an active stance. In this context M5S' representatives, while carefully detaching themselves from traditional politics, allineate themselves with citizens through the frequent pattern *noi cittadini siamo* (we [as] citizens are) and addressing their audience with compassionate and paternalistic terms. Therefore, to the eyes of its followers, M5S represents the only political and social force that lets citizens regain an active role in society and empower themselves against the establishment, which is depriving them of their fundamental rights (proper income, house, retirement, etc.).

Thirdly, we looked at three words (*gente*, *popolo*, *persone*) that can be conveyed by the English word "people", thus expressing a collective meaning. In particular, *persone* is used in two main ways. On the one hand, it has a factual meaning when collocating with numbers. On the other hand, *persone* has an evaluative function, which emerges also in the word *gente*, with which it shares some collocates. These collocational patterns shared by *gente* and *persone* point at two different and opposing attitudes towards people: again, a paternalistic attitude conceivably referring to those who are part of M5S' ingroup (party members, followers and voters), this attitude is expressed through the adjectives *brava/e* (good), *povera/e* (poor); and an attitude of detachment (e.g. *certa/e* - certain, some) employed ironically or argumentatively to refer to people outside the movement who support or are part of the establishment, that is the outgroup. Finally, *popolo* is mostly followed by adjectives describing a geographic/national provenience (*italiano* - Italian, *ucraino* - Ukrainian, *turco* - Turkish) or a status (*sovrano* - sovereign, *sovranità del* - sovereignty of, *governo legittimato dal* - Government deriving legitimacy from). The *popolo* ideally identifies with M5S followers and is depicted as victim of some (mainly establishment-related) perpetrators.

The trends we observed in the M5S corpus seemed to highlight some basic traits that M5S shares with more conventional populist parties, i.e. criticism towards traditional politics, seen as threatening to people's rights and as reducing citizen's sovereignty (Biorcio, 2014). Moreover, following Spiessen and Van Poucke (2016: 323), and van Dijk (1998), we agree that social groups represent themselves through ideology, using "self-serving" schemata that establish a conflict between in- and outgroups, between "us" and "them", in fact:

The very general polarization schema defined by the opposition between Us and Them suggests that groups and group conflicts are involved, and that groups build an ideological image of themselves and others, in such a way that (generally) We are represented positively, and They come out negatively. Positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation seems to be a fundamental property of ideologies. Associated with such polarized representations about Us and Them, are representations of social arrangements, that is, the kinds of things we find better

(equality, a clean environment) or those which we believe others stand for (inequality, a polluted environment, a free market). (van Dijk, 1998: 69)

These “polarized representations” seem to be confirmed by our observations about the M5S corpus. In particular, we believe that the opposition between ingroup (*good*) and outgroup (*bad*) is well reflected by Grillo’s populist discourse. From our observations, we were able to suggest that M5S’ identity still relies heavily on establishment’s stigmatization rather than promoting and building their own political identity and agenda.

## References

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