

Is a CADS approach useful to empirically measure populism? A comparative analysis of the representation of the French “peuple” and their threats in the discourse of the major political parties in France

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The notion of populism has faced different theoretical and methodological problems in political studies. Some authors define populism as a relatively stable ideology (see Mudde 2007, 2009; Stanley 2008), whereas others conceive it as a political style or strategy more or less frequently adopted by some politicians (Weyland 2001; de la Torre 2010; Moffitt & Torney 2014). Since these main views have been both widely supported and criticised, measuring how populist a politician or a political party is has become one of the central challenges in the specialized literature.

There is some consensus as for the main general features of populism, which Moffitt (2016) summarizes as (1) an appeal to ‘the people’ as opposed to ‘the (corrupt) elite’, (2) bad manners, i.e., the adoption of a provocative and politically incorrect style, and (3) a marked insistence on the idea of ‘crisis’. However, many methodological difficulties have been identified for objectively identifying and measuring populism beyond prior assumptions as to which political parties and leaders are ‘populist’ or ‘mainstream’.

In recent years, discourse has played a major role in empirically evaluating how populist politicians and political parties are. Most of these discursive approaches to populism follow manual content analysis methods: some are based on rubrics designed to assign grades to texts according to different indicators associated to populism (see, for example, Hawkins 2009, 2010; Bruhn 2012), and others focus on the proportion of text devoted to topics and notions traditionally related to populism (Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Reungoat 2011). There have also been some incursions into computer-assisted methods (Armony & Armony 2005; Pauwels 2011; Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011; Rooduijn 2013), but they have been predominantly carried out by specialists in political studies with little knowledge of Corpus Linguistics, and they rely almost exclusively on very simple collocations or on the frequencies of a priori lists of keywords related to populism.

In this paper we advocate more complex computer-based analyses following the methodology of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) as a productive approach to more accurately measure to what extent a politician and his/her discourse are populist with the help of highly valuable and significant quantitative and qualitative data.

This is done here through a case study. We have analyzed how the ‘people’ and the threats they are reportedly facing are represented in the discourse of the three current major political parties in France: two ‘mainstream’ (*Parti Socialiste* and *Les Républicains*, named until 2015 *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* or *UMP*) and one usually labelled as ‘populist’ (*Front National*). The CADS approach has proved to be very productive to show how different social groups, institutions, events and other entities are

represented in many types of discourse: see, for example, the analysis of the representation of Muslims (Baker, Gabrielatos & McEnery 2013), asylum seekers (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008), migrants (Taylor 2014), the European Union (Marchi & Taylor 2009) or the Iraq war (Morley & Barley ed. 2009) in the media that have been carried out with a CADS perspective, to name a few.

We have analyzed three comparable corpora comprising press releases, speeches and other relevant texts published in the *News* section ("Actualités") in the website of the three political parties during one year (September 2015–August 2016). This study focuses on various types of collocations related to the words used to refer to the people and their potential enemies and threats, in line with the queries made in prominent CADS publications.

Since a constant appeal to the people and emphasis on the idea of crisis are two widely accepted distinctive features of populism, very significant differences were expected to be found between the results obtained in the *Front National* corpus, on the one hand, and the *Parti Socialiste* and *Les Républicains* corpora, on the other hand. More specifically, we expected that collocations would uncover an overrepresentation of the French people and some particular groups as directly or indirectly threatened by the elite in the *Front National* discourse. Although this hypothesis is overall confirmed by the quantitative and qualitative data obtained, some queries show that also in the discourse of the so-called French 'mainstream' parties (*Parti Socialiste* and *Les Républicains*) the people is more often than expected portrayed in a 'populist' way, similarly to the *Front National* discourse. This finding seems to favour the conception of populism as a political style rather than a stable ideology. We conclude with some methodological considerations concerning the validity of the data and the orientation of future comparative research to eventually develop reliable automatic tools to detect and evaluate populist texts based on significant empirical data.

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