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# Populist Islamophobia

## The Australian Refugee Crisis on Twitter

### Abstract

*Over the past twenty years, Australia has been one of the many countries challenged by the escalation of the global migrant crisis. In particular, since the 2012 reimplementing of the Pacific Solution, namely the enactment of the offshore detention policy, media manipulation on the matter has intensified. In this respect, Australian politicians have, in a bipartisan fashion, instrumentalized the asylum seeker issue to foment nationalist and sovereign discourses both offline and online, aiming to create consensus among voters and hostility towards migrants. Focusing on social media's new role as virtual political battlegrounds, this paper explores the so-called Antipodean right-wing populism, and the extent to which it is enacted on Twitter. In the paper, populism is conceptualized as a "cultural-relational performative style," that is, as a geo-historical event, which involves different digital and political actors who share persuasive rhetorical strategies. On this premise, this study aims to analyze narratives constructed around the refugee crisis articulated on Twitter by selected populist leaders in Queensland State. The research relies on a mixed methodology that combines Corpus Linguistics to elicit quantitative data from the Twitter research corpus, and approaches of Critical Stylistics to unveil the ideological substratum underlying the political content of tweets. The outcomes of the study will show how populists in Queensland State are prone to juxtapose, hence equate, Muslim immigration with Islamic terrorism, by employing specific stylistic strategies.*

**Keywords:** *Queensland populism, islamophobia, Critical Stylistics, Corpus Linguistics, Twitter-based analysis*

### 1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, despite occupying a peripheral geopolitical position with respect to today's major conflict areas, Australia has been affected by the steady increase of incoming migratory flows. In order to contain the escalation of the migrant crisis, the implementation of the 2012 Pacific Solution established that asylum seekers, who attempted to reach Australia via sea routes without legal documents, would be settled in the Nauru and Manus Regional Processing Centers, on the homonymous islands of the Pacific Ocean (Karlsen and Phillips 2014). Over the years, the Australian Government enacted legal acts similar to the

Pacific Solution, like the Regional Resettlement Arrangement between Australia and Papua New Guinea or the Malaysia Solution, in order to deter refugees from setting foot on Australian soil. In the meantime, Australian political leaders have instrumentalized the refugee issue to foment nationalist and sovereign discourses with the goal of gaining votes from their constituencies (Devetak 2004).

With the advent of the Digital Era and the development of new media, discourses on the global humanitarian crisis and populisms have spread into virtual settings and trespassed the mere political sphere, becoming online as much as offline phenomena (Engesser et al. 2017). Considering the implications of mediatization and its impact on society, this paper attempts to single out what and how narratives construed around asylum seekers are stylistically articulated within the Twittersphere by selected populist leaders active in Queensland State. Although a considerable amount of research has already been conducted on the representation of refugees on mainstream Australian media, using visual (Bleiker et al. 2013) and discourse-analytical approaches (Lueck, Due and Augoustinos 2015; Nguyen and MacCallum 2016; Cooper et al. 2017), there has been little discussion on the portrayal of asylum seekers on new media platforms, such as Twitter, specifically as depicted by politicians leading minor political parties. In order to contribute to filling the research gap, this investigation relies on a mixed methodology that combines Corpus Linguistics to elicit quantitative data from the Twitter research corpus, together with approaches of Critical Stylistics to unveil the ideological substratum underlying the political content of tweets.

The paper is divided into six different parts. The first introductory part will outline the research background and the aim of the investigation; the second part will provide a literary review of Twitter and the so-called network media logic, scrutinize how populism is articulated within a mediatized space, and explore the features of Australian populism, focusing on the State of Queensland. The third part will describe the research corpus in detail, while the fourth one will offer a thorough account of the methodology. In the fifth section, results of the quantitative and qualitative analysis will be presented and discussed; and, lastly, in the sixth section, conclusions will be drawn.

## **2. Literary review**

### ***2.1 Twitter and the network media logic***

In recent years, within the field of Social Media Studies, ever-growing academic efforts have been devoted to understanding how technologies have radically reshaped the way of doing politics. As Ferretti perspicaciously notices (2019, 127), the relationship between media, publics

and politics does not develop *ex nihilo*, but as an outcome in the making of the complex history of this relationship. As a matter of fact, the behavior of political actors can make sense only when embedded within a pre-existent system of codes and practices shared by a political (virtual) community. Concerning Western political settings, research has increasingly drawn attention to the shift from a *mediated* to a *mediatized* kind of politics (Hjarvard 2013, 17). Whereas *mediation* refers to the mere transmission and communication of messages through diversified media channels, *mediatization* has been described as “the process whereby culture and society become dependent on media and their logic” (Strömbäck and Esser 2014, 376), a phenomenon that seems to go hand in hand with globalization and individualization. Esser, who has prolifically theorized on the concept of media logic, argues that

'media logic' [...] refers to the media-specific rules of selecting, interpreting, and constructing political news messages. The fact that everyone else in society – including politicians, parties, governments – has learnt to adjust and adapt to the media logic as the obligatory way of perceiving and interpreting the world, and acting upon it, has further boosted the media's significance. (Esser 2013, 160)

Taking into account the presuppositions underlying the concept of media logic, the current investigation draws on the theory of *network media logic* (Klinger and Svensson 2015), which is concerned with figuring out the dynamics of new media systems and how they shape interaction and communication among new media users. Inasmuch as digital media and social networks are in constant interdependence and mutual interpenetration, scholars have started to use the notion of *disintermediation* (Bentivegna 2015; Giacomini 2018; Ferretti 2019). The notion refers to the immediacy of media, that is, the absence of an intermediary between the sender and the recipient of a given message, on the one hand; and, on the other, to the feature of horizontality, namely the lack of a clear separation between speakers and audience (or, specifically, between political leaders and voters online). In conjunction with other factors, disintermediation processes are believed to have fostered the spread of populism, which have ultimately and largely been supported by the communicative formats of social media, such as Twitter (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017).

As is well-known, Twitter is as an online microblogging service that enables users to post 280-character messages named tweets. Microblogging “is a form of length-limited (hence ‘micro’) communication using a social networking service” (Zappavigna 2012, 28). As recently reported by social media industry figures, Twitter “currently ranks as one of the leading social networks worldwide based on active users” (Clement 2019). According to one of these statistical reports, in the fourth quarter of 2018, the number of monthly active users amounted to 321 million

globally. In Australia, Twitter is the seventh most used social media platform. Overall, 26% of cybernauts report using the social network, accounting for approximately a fourth of the total amount of internet users in the country (Clement 2019). This figure emphasizes the importance of investigating socio-political phenomena, such as populisms online, as they come to be articulated within digital platforms.

## ***2.2 Populism and mediatization***

Being a highly contested concept within Euro-American academic settings, populism has been defined as “one of the main political buzzwords of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 1). Within the bulk of the literature on the topic, populism has been conceptualized as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde 2007), a type of discourse (Laclau 2005), “a cultural-relational performative style” (Moffitt 2016) as well as a “political strategy” (Barr 2018). However, scholars would agree that the societal opposition between two seemingly homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” accounts for one the main tenets of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6).

The concept of populism tends to shift according to historical and geopolitical factors, which reveals the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon. Mudde’s classification (2019) is here useful to frame right-wing populism within a historical timeline, which has seen the succession of four different populist waves, the fourth of which features the mainstreaming and the consequent normalization of far-right populisms (2000-present). More specifically,

[t]he far right entered a fourth wave in the twenty-first century, electorally and politically profiting from three “crises:” the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (and beyond), the Great Recession of 2008, and the “refugee crisis” of 2015. All the western democracies were affected, albeit in different ways, shaking the national and international political status quo, and giving rise to an unprecedented wave of Islamophobic and populist protest. (Mudde 2019, 52)

In the aftermath of these three socio-economic, political, and humanitarian crises, extremist policies proposed by radical rights, which were previously considered inapplicable in mainstream politics, have started to be debated within the political arena. As a result, far-right parties have been included in the formation of political coalitions of worldwide governments (Mudde 2019, 53). The political pretensions advanced by such conservative parties have often ideologically aligned with nativist, sovereign and authoritarian positions, inflamed by xenophobia “and opposition to ‘do-goodism’ and ‘political correctness,’” also as a consequence of the above-mentioned disintermediation processes.

Focusing more on the discursive nature of populism, Moffitt (2017) theorizes it to be a political phenomenon that involves both political actors and their constituencies that takes place within a given socio-cultural framework through a set of discursive communication strategies. This notion relates to the concept of “styling resources,” developed by Ekström and Morton (2017), according to which communicative styles are performed through “the use of discursive, interactional and visual semiotic resources and anchored in (socio-cultural) sign systems” (2017, 2). In this vein, Mortensen et al. (2017) argue that the styling resources employed for meaning-making require the intervention of technologies to get spread in virtual contexts. In this respect, the penetration of politics within social media platforms has been increasingly problematized, in both the domestic and international spheres (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017). By taking into account the functioning of communication strategies afforded by digital technologies, this study explores Australian populism theoretically, and populism in the State of Queensland empirically, together with the stylistic strategies through which the latter is discursively enacted on Twitter.

### ***2.3 Australian and Queensland populism***

The past decades have witnessed the publication of a considerable number of studies which have investigated populisms worldwide. A seemingly unstoppable populist wave has hit Europe as well as the Americas, which has led scholars to approach populism as a global phenomenon (De Vreese et al. 2018, 424) and speculate about a “populist *Zeitgeist*” (Mudde 2004). Considering the scholarly attention to Euro-American contexts, this investigation tackles specifically the so-called ‘Atlantic bias,’ according to which several regional populisms have been disregarded by scholars by comparison with the more widely investigated European and American ones (Moffitt 2017). When exploring Antipodean populism, according to Moffitt (2017), it should be clarified that it “does not precisely resemble its usual comparator subtypes—Western European or North American populism—but rather should be seen as located between the two, mixing the general ethno-exclusivism and nativist sentiment of European populism with the more rural and protectionist aspects of North American populism” (2017, 121). Given that Australian populism, and particularly populism in the State of Queensland, has not yet been thoroughly explored from a discursive and stylistic perspective, the present study seeks to contribute to filling the gap in the literature.

Populism in Australia displays some specific characteristics that distance it from other Western populisms. Unlike European populism, which is often associated with both right-wing and left-wing populist parties (e.g. *Podemos* in Spain or *Syriza* in Greece), Australian populism exists

on the right-wing spectrum only and does not have a left-wing counterpart (Niño 2017, 5). What is more, it lacks the strong presence of a political party (e.g. Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* in France) as well as a nationally connoted leadership that is predominant at national level, like Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Donald Trump in the USA. On the contrary, Antipodean populism is characterized by ever-growing support for minor parties – such as the ones considered in the present study – which have more protectionist and sovereign views, compared to the major parties' neoliberal attitudes (Charlton and Harris 2016).

Another feature is the *exclusive* nature of populist discourses in Australia, which “exclude ‘others’ along material, political, and symbolic dimensions” (Moffitt 2017, 131). More specifically, the Other here identifies with a three-headed enemy. Firstly, it is embodied by the élite; secondly, by the immigrant and/or the refugee/asylum seeker; and, lastly, by Indigenous people. Another noteworthy characteristic is that the populist notion of the people is epitomized by rural communities as well as blue-collar workers, inevitably white, who have been abandoned and forgotten by the political establishment. Finally, populism “is informed by Australia and New Zealand's status as settler-colonial states and as geographically isolated islands” (Moffitt 2017, 131-132). This constitutes the core of the nationalistic and paranoid anxiety Australian populists foment citizens with when prophesizing an envisaged invasion by immigrants or asylum seekers (Hage 2003).

Within this broad national picture, there are nevertheless sub-regional differences. More specifically, it has been argued that the State of Queensland accounts for “the cradle of contemporary Australian populism,” considering the presence of a number of right-wing parties pursuing a conservative political agenda (Moffitt 2017, 123). Among these, the *One Nation Party*, founded in 1997 and headed by Pauline Hanson, accounts for one of those far-right parties which have remarkably affected the Australian political landscape. Hanson was first elected in 1996 as a Member of the House of Representatives, when she stood out for the enactment of an overtly nativist and ultra-nationalist policy, and then again in 2016 to the Senate, at a time when racist policies have been normalized within the Australian political culture (Jose 2019). In this respect, Sengul (2020) has recently investigated the discursive strategies employed by Pauline Hanson in her 2016-2018 senate speeches and, more specifically, her 2016 maiden speech (Sengul 2019), shedding light on how political communication is manipulated to serve the party leader's populist agenda. Whilst the *One Nation Party* has received substantial academic attention over the years, less visibility has been given to minor parties that have also contributed to the abovementioned “political exceptionality” of Queensland (Moffitt 2017, 123).

Among the right-wing parties selected for this study, on the center-right of the political spectrum stands the liberal-conservative *Liberal National Party of Queensland*, which was founded in 2008 from the merging of the *National Party* and the *Liberal Party* (LNP Constitution). Currently representing the division of Dawson as a member of the LNP of Queensland in the House of Representatives, George Christensen has been a prominent politician in Queensland politics over the past decade. Presenting himself as “a committed advocate for traditional Australian values and culture,” Christensen has been engaged with issues related to property rights, infrastructures, job and national security in Queensland (LNP Christensen). His conservative and radical right stances have often been disputed within the public arena, especially with regards to his scathing anti-Islam positions and denialism of human-made climate change (Bourke 2014). In more than one occasion, in an anti-elitist fashion, Christensen has downplayed environmentalist associations, e.g. likening climate change to science fiction, and advocated for burqa bans and other restrictive measures for Muslim communities living in Australia (Bourke and Aston 2014).

Another of the parties selected is the *United Australia Party (UAP)*, founded in 2013 by Clive Palmer, a mining magnate well-known for his entrepreneurial enterprise in the coal mining sector (Smee 2019). According to Moffitt, “Palmer’s populism is neither anti-immigrant nor rural, but rather explicitly anti-major party” (2017, 125), and therefore he is mainly regarded as an anti-establishment populist. If, on the one hand, in the lead-up to past years’ Australian Federal Elections, Christensen, Hanson and other *One Nation* members have adopted virulent nativist rhetoric with the goal of appealing to the people on the basis of racial supremacy, Palmer’s nativism was less racially connoted and more anti-government oriented. However, as will be shown in the following sections, these ideological differences will not emerge from the research corpus under analysis since, according to the research data, Palmer’s anti-racist positions do not stand out as statistically significant.

Despite having partial visibility on a national scale, by gaining consensus and votes in Queensland, these parties contested the 2019 Australian Federal Election and, contrarily to the predictions of the opinion poll, prevented the *Labor* opposition party from gaining a majority, thus impacting crucially on the overall election result (Cockburn and Kontominas 2019; Horn 2019). In light of the above, it is evident that the growing influence of minor parties has been underrated within academic and political contexts and needs urgent reconsideration.

### 3. Corpus design

The corpus under analysis is a specialized *ad-hoc* corpus, titled Queensland Populists Twitter Corpus (QPTC), and comprises a total of 312 tweets that were manually collected by the researcher during April-May 2019. Drawing on Herring's (2004, 351-354) and Androutsopoulos's (2013, 238-239) data sampling framework, this research study relies on a selection based on the criteria of *theme*, *time* and *individuals*. According to their classification, *sampling by theme* is used to collect online data that are thematically organized, for instance, through keywords or hashtags, and therefore develop around a particular theme. *Sampling by time* is generally considered when a time reference is needed, e.g. when conducting a longitudinal study, while *sampling by individuals*, is based on participants' socio-demographic features. The combination of these three selection criteria was adopted to build the QPTC *ad-hoc* research corpus.

Metadata was elicited together with the tweet content and comprised username, date and time when the tweet was posted as well as the associated geolocation and hashtags. Given the different foci of public discussions taking place in Australia over the time being and the recurrent terms through which online public discourse on the Australian refugee crisis has been framed, the neutrally-connoted words selected for data collection were: *Manus*, *Nauru*, that is the names of the two Pacific Islands on which the Australian government has opened the Regional Processing Centers to locate asylum seekers, and then, *refug\**, *asylumseeker\**, *immigr\**, *migr\**. The search queries for data gathering functioned both as hashtags and keywords and were used to retrieve tweets that were associated with each search word directly from the politicians' Twitter profile. Once the Twitter server retrieved the corresponding posts, these were copy-pasted into a working file and analyzed through quantitative and qualitative approaches of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Stylistics, respectively.

The temporal range considered for the collection spanned from May 5, 2012, when the Australian Government resumed the debate on the *Migration Legislation Amendment (Offshore Processing and Other Measures) Bill 2012*, up to May 18, 2019, the day of the latest Australian Federal Elections. Considering the peculiarity of Queensland's major political affiliation, the geolocation of tweets was also a discriminating factor. Consistently, the politicians whose tweets have been gathered for the analysis have tweeted mainly from the following cities located in the State of Queensland: Brisbane, in the case of Pauline Hanson and Malcolm Roberts (*One Nation*); Mackay, for George Christensen (*Liberal National Party*) and Townsville, for Clive Palmer (*United Australia*); with the only exception of Charles Smith, a *One Nation* member who did not tweet from Queensland, but from Western Australia, included for his exceptionally



active presence on Twitter and his political affiliation with the other *One Nation* members considered for the study. Only unique user-generated tweets, published in English, were considered for the study, while retweets and replies to tweets were excluded from data collection.

#### 4. Methodology

A mixed methodology was applied in this small-scale study, which was based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches. The research relies on Corpus Linguistics to elicit quantitative data from the *ad-hoc* built QPTC corpus, and approaches of Critical Stylistics (CS) to gain qualitative insights into the text and unveil the ideological substratum underlying the political content of the tweets. Specifically, the investigation aims to analyze, from a discursive-stylistic perspective, narratives construed on asylum seekers on Twitter by selected populist leaders operating in the State of Queensland and accounting for minor parties' members. Bearing in mind the goals of the research, the following research questions were formulated:

- What are the dominant narratives articulated on asylum seekers within the Queensland Populists Twitter Corpus (QPTC)?
- How are these dominant narratives stylistically construed?

##### 4.1 Corpus linguistics

With regards to Corpus Linguistics, the tools offered by the software AntConc (Laurence 2019) were used to obtain quantitative data, which allowed the extraction of features like the type/token ratio (TTR), word frequency lists, keywords, concordances and collocates, among others. *Word frequency lists* are “lists showing the number of occurrences (raw frequency) of each word in the corpus” (McEnery and Hardie 2012, 45). Wordlists also comprise the total number of running words, which are referred to as *tokens* as well as the number of word forms, that is *types*. Measuring the ratio between these two features is useful to obtain statistical information, which accounts for the lexical variation of the corpus, as will be shown in the next section.

Concordance lines were also analyzed. They are described as “chunks of text that show the node word in context” (McEnery and Hardie 2012, 48). *Concordance* is crucial when conducting a qualitative type of analysis, for instance, a close nonlinear reading of the text, and particularly

of the node word and its surroundings. Concordance lines are also the starting point for analyzing collocations. This study focuses, in particular, on the so-called *empirical collocations* (McEnery and Hardie 2012, 49), a term that refers to the co-occurrence of some given words in a specific linguistic environment.

Another important feature that could be elicited from a corpus is *keyness*, which is expressed in the form of keywords. In Corpus Linguistics, keywords are “usually obtained by comparing the wordlist of the corpus under investigation with the wordlist of a suitable reference corpus; any word of the given corpus whose frequency is found to be outstanding with respect to the reference corpus is considered a keyword” (McEnery and Hardie 2012, 47). In other words, keywords signal what is linguistically abnormal in the corpus under analysis, by means of comparison between the researcher’s and the reference corpus data. For the current research project, the Political Twitter Discourse Corpus (PTDC) (Ross and Rivers 2018) was chosen as reference corpus due to its politically connoted content, and because it was explicitly compiled for use as a reference corpus tool for political discourse on Twitter. The corpus consists of “the most recent original tweets of all serving US state governors, members of congress and senators as of October 2017.” The PTDC comprises 205,303 tweets and 4,659,381 words.

#### **4.2 Critical stylistics analysis**

As previously mentioned, quantitative data, elicited through Corpus Linguistics analytical tools, were complemented qualitatively by the application of Critical Stylistics (CS). CS is an approach proposed by Jeffries (2010) and focuses on the stylistic choices made by text-producers by combining Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1994), Critical Linguistics (Simpson 1993), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1989; Fowler 1991; Van Dijk 1996). At the core of CS lies the assumption that

[l]anguage is essentially a finely balanced combination of rules and broken rules, where the fact that there is no one-to-one form-function relationship is the key to many of the most-useful and life-enhancing aspects of language, such as the writing of poetry and the use of metaphor in daily life, as well as of the more negative aspects, such as lying and manipulation. (Jeffries 2010, 44)

By using language, users have the potential to produce texts that are ideology-laden. As critical-discourse analysts argue, when ideologies come to be naturalized (e.g. Fairclough 1989; Fowler 1991), the peril is that text-producers may not be aware of confirming and reproducing them through usage (Jeffries 2010, 12). However, in some other contexts, there is a precise intention to manipulate and persuade the recipient of a message, for instance in political settings, where

politicians tend to provide a distorted version of reality to manipulate their constituencies and gain political support (Nesbitt-Larking 2007, 89).

In order to unravel the ideological packaging of discourse, Jeffries (2010) proposes a set of analytical tools to understand “what a text is doing” in terms of a) naming and describing, b) representing actions/events/states, c) equating and contrasting d) exemplifying and enumerating, e) prioritizing, f) assuming and implying, g) negating, h) hypothesizing, i) presenting the speech and thoughts of other participants, and lastly, l) representing time, space and society. As will be shown in the following sections, some of these analytical dimensions will be applied for the current investigation. Particular attention will be given to naming and describing, assuming and implying and hypothesizing.

## 5. Analysis and discussion

### 5.1 *Dominant narratives in the QPTC*

As a first analytical step, the corpus lexical variety was measured to assess how diversified the language used by the populist leaders under analysis is. To determine vocabulary variation, the type-token-ratio (TTR) was calculated, namely the quotient between the total number of tokens and the number types. In brief, the higher the percentage value, the greater the variety of vocabulary used in a text (Kettunen 2014). The QPTC corpus comprises 6,708 tokens and 1,792 different types. The TTR provided the result of 0,267144 (rounded off to 27%). This figure<sup>1</sup> shows that the politicians’ tweeting style is poorly constructed in terms of lexical variety and may confirm the theory that populists tend to simplify political discourses in order to reach “the people” (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 387). At a more general level, the figure reflects the repetitive nature of the Twitter language and possibly the sensationalistic intent behind it, as will be shown later in the paper.

As a second step, a Word Frequency List (Table 1), as well as a Keyword List (Table 2), were obtained to single out the most recurrent words and the most significant keywords in the Queensland Populists Twitter Corpus (QPTC). The aim was also to gain an initial insight into

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<sup>1</sup> In order to verify the validity of the claim, a sample of a similar size was extracted from the PTDC reference corpus, comprising 312 tweets, 6266-word tokens and 1560-word types. The Type/Token Ratio was applied to measure the lexical variety of the PTDC subset, providing the result of 0,248962, rounded off to 25%. This figure points to an analogue ratio in terms of lexical variety with respect to the QPTC research corpus. It would be interesting to investigate whether it is the Twitter format that contributes to the resulting poor lexical variety of the tweets, in general, or if this is to be attributed to the style of political tweets as a genre, in particular. Nevertheless, in both cases the TTR highlights a lexical simplification in the transmission of political messages on Twitter.

the dominant narratives in the dataset. The tables below exclude the search queries that were used to retrieve the tweets (*manus, nauru, refug\*, asylumseeker\*, immigr\*, migr\**). From a first reading, it seems that there are lexical items which can be clustered into semantically similar thematic patterns, recurring in the corpus with a statistically significant frequency.

Consistently with the typical populist rhetoric briefly illustrated above, it emerges that there is a clear discursive insistence on the construction and reinforcement of a homogenous and cohesive national identity, through the tokens *Australia* (n. 68) and a monolithic, almost ossified, *homo nationalis* (Wodak et al. 2009, 186), i.e. *we* (n. 46), *our* (n. 28), *Australians* (n. 21), *Australian* (n. 16) and *Aussies* (n. 8). However, considering the small scale of the investigation, the study focuses on strategies of othering rather than self-representation. As is visible from both tables, the Other is mainly embodied by the opposition parties, i.e. *Labor* (n. 44) and *Greens* (n. 21), which also aligns with the precepts of populism, whereby populist leaders enact anti-establishment discourses and put the blame on selected culprits usually operating in the government in charge. Within populist discourse, another recurrent scapegoat is the *illegal* (n. 21) asylum seeker/refugee, around whom discourses of national *security* (n. 10), *citizenship* (n. 10) and protection of *borders* (n. 15) are articulated. From a first reading, Table 1 and 2 provide a clue about the negative conceptualizations of refugees. Another occurring narrative seems to be related to the *intake* issue (n. 13), in that these *boatpeople* (n. 5) come in *high* (n. 15) *numbers* (n. 9), or even *massively* (n. 4), to threaten the integrity of the *nation* (n. 17).

Moreover, what also seems to be relevant is that asylum seekers are culturally and religiously connoted, as is shown by the tokens *Muslim* (n. 16) and *Islamic* (n. 15) as well as *Islam* (n. 4). To give consistency to this preliminary interpretation and understand how this assumption is stylistically articulated, the collocates of these words were also analyzed together with their discursive context, through the Concordance function and the analytical tools of Critical Stylistics. Considering the limited scope of the article, the research will focus more in depth on understanding how asylum seekers are discursively portrayed by the populist leaders on Twitter, with particular reference to their apparently uniform cultural and religious background.

Token	Hits	Rank
#auspol	84	9
Australia	68	12
we	47	15
Labor	44	18
policy	36	23
will	31	29
our	29	34
government	23	42
Australians	21	46
illegal	21	48
Greens	21	47
population	20	52
they	19	55
@paulinehansonoz	18	60
nation	17	64
people	17	68
mass	16	67
Muslim	16	68
borders	15	74
high	15	76
Islamic	15	77
intake	13	82
stop	12	89
security	10	109

**Tab. 1:** List of words sorted by frequency in the QPTC

Token	QPTC (Hits)	PTDC (Hits)	Keyness	Rank
Australia	68	795	+396.27	3
#auspol	84	2016	+376.89	4
@paulinehansonoz	18	21	+213.03	9
Labor	44	1663	+159.74	11
population	20	151	+138.48	14
policy	36	360	+133.14	16
intake	13	18	+124.18	18
Shorten	17	16	+121.05	19
Greens	21	261	+120.02	20
Muslim	16	84	+117.01	22
illegal	21	282	+116.96	23
Australians	21	311	+113.08	25
Islamic	15	95	+104.56	26
mass	16	158	+98.34	27
boatpeople	5	1	+83.51	30
borders	15	237	+78.93	33
plebiscite	10	27	+73.44	35
citizenship	10	73	+67.08	37
Aussies	8	30	+63.31	41
Australian	16	534	+61.72	42
massively	4	3	+41.61	56
numbers	9	286	+35.53	71
Islam	4	10	+34.44	72

**Tab. 2:** List of words sorted by keyness in the QPTC and PTDC

## 5.2 Islamophobia in the QPTC

With the purpose of narrowing down the research goal, the instances where the tokens *Muslim*, *Islamic* and *Islam* appeared were gathered separately and then carefully analyzed, using a Critical Stylistic Approach. A more attentive look at concordance lines revealed that the adjective *Islamic* consistently collocates with the words *immigration*, *extremis\** and *terror\** (Figure 1 below). Especially the abundant pre-modification with these last two tokens (*extremis\** and *terror\**) has the ideological effect of consolidating a way of naming an entity, that is migrants, which would be otherwise neutrally connoted, by loading it with a pejorative connotation as well as packaging up information that is assumed to be constitutive of asylum seekers.

In other words, the signifier *migrant* conflates into being *Islamic*, and the equation comes to be neutralized by populists' rhetorical maneuvers. In doing so, populist leaders use sentence constructions that place asylum seekers in syntactic positions – may it be Subject or Object position – that portray them as wrongdoers, and Australia as the potential victim in the passive Recipient position. Australia should, in fact, be made “safe from Islamic terrorism” which has already invaded the UK (@MRobertsQLD 04/06/2017) and protected from the horrors “committed by Islamic terrorist [today] in Europe” (@PaulineHansonOz, 19/12/2016). However, because it is capable of contrasting this menace that threatens the integrity of the country, Australia is not always represented as the helpless victim.

As is visible from the following tweets, Australia has recovered Agency (i.e. occupying the Subject position), in that it is willful to enact Intentional Material Actions (Jeffries 2010, 40) to ban Muslim immigration (examples 1 and 2) or at least restrict it “from countries where Islamic extremism is rife” (example 3) (i.e. reach the Goals of the action). The use of the present tense (e.g. *we want*, *we don't want*, *can*, *have*, *is*) in the sentences below hint at the assertiveness and urgency of the political actors' statements and account for the *status quo*, according to their vision.

- (1) We don't want words we want action. Ban Muslim immigration until we can figure out how to make [Australia] safe from Islamic terrorism. (@MRobertsQLD, 01/01/2017)
- (2) You only have to look at the horrors being committed by Islamic terrorists today in Europe to understand why we must ban Muslim immigration. (@PaulineHansonOz, 19/01/2016)
- (3) @SoniaKruger is partly right: let's restrict immigration from countries where Islamic extremism is rife #soniakruger (@GChristensenMP, 19/07/2016)

Concordance		
Concordance Plot	File View	Clusters/N-Grams Collocates Word List Keyword List
Concordance Hits 15		
Hit	KWIC	File
1	e & integrate Uncontrolled immigration has let an Islamic army into the #UK \x93#Britain now	sec.txt
2	: let's restrict immigration from countries where Islamic extremism is rife #soniakruger https://www.facebo	sec.txt
3	igration department @PMOnAir @chriskkeny Another Islamic extremist stopped from killing Australians Now li	sec.txt
4	an attack on Christianity by a fundamentalist Islamic group. -PH The UN does not get	sec.txt
5	, It's time to speak honestly about Islamic Immigration and its many problems. #auspol Good	sec.txt
6	to label criticism of open borders or Islamic immigration as a hate crime UN Secretary-	sec.txt
7	.au/policies/immigration\xA0\x85 #auspol Stop Islamic immigration before it is too late. #auspol	sec.txt
8	of the Socialist International from 1999 to 2005 Islamic leaders choose not to stand with Australians	sec.txt
9	on aid & refugees. Good question Reports of Islamic State terrorists posing as refugees is more	sec.txt
10	Lanka reminds us the threat of radical Islamic terror is still very real. One Nation	sec.txt
11	going to see more honest coverage of Islamic terrorism at the ABC now? Or is	sec.txt
12	ABC now? Or is the whole noticing Islamic terrorism = "Islamophobia", "scapegoating refugee	sec.txt
13	Morrison finally does the right thing & denounces Islamic terrorism Our govt must tighten immigration, ensu	sec.txt
14	out how to make [Australia] safe from Islamic terrorism. 100% \x93Millionaire Dick Smith claims	sec.txt
15	look at the horrors being committed by Islamic terrorists today in Europe to understand why	sec.txt

Fig. 1: Collocates of the adjective “Islamic” as shown in the Concordance tab of AntConc (Laurence 2019)<sup>2</sup>

Concordance		
Concordance Plot	File View	Clusters/N-Grams Collocates Word List Keyword List
Concordance Hits 16		
Hit	KWIC	File
1	't want words we want action. Ban Muslim immigration until we can figure out how	sec.txt
2	ort: We discussed climate alarmism, Agenda 21 and Muslim immigration Starts at 5m http://ow.ly/	sec.txt
3	. What a joke the Greens are. VIDEO: Muslim Immigration To Australia Laid Bare http://ow.	sec.txt
4	" @PaulineHansonOz May 10, 2018. @AuSenate VIDEO: Muslim Immigration To Australia Laid Bare http://ow.	sec.txt
5	you support or oppose a ban on Muslim immigration to Australia? #EssentialPoll #auspol	sec.txt
6	because 48% of Australian want a ban on Muslim immigration. VIDEO: Muslim Immigration To Austral	sec.txt
7	30s 48% of Australians support a ban on Muslim immigration. Dance dance dance These so called "	sec.txt
8	continue to push for a ban on Muslim immigration & a crackdown on #halalcert. #MerryCh	sec.txt
9	want a ban on Muslim immigration. VIDEO: Muslim Immigration To Australia Laid Bare http://ow.	sec.txt
10	terrorist threat is being bought in by muslim immigration? "One Nation calls on the government	sec.txt
11	only you know the right information on muslim immigration? Agreed. Plenty of shockers. But our	sec.txt
12	needs to be protected from Islam. Stop Muslim immigration Think global warming, immigration, re	sec.txt
13	Europe to understand why we must ban Muslim immigration. #AngelaMerkel calls for a #burqaban.	sec.txt
14	honestly at the problem of 2nd generation Muslim radicalisation Peter Dutton's Merry Christmas upr	sec.txt
15	Peluzzos dismissal of legitimate questions about muslim immigration 2m30s 48% of Australians support a	sec.txt
16	! -PH #Manchester bomber was the son of Muslim refugees. We must look honestly at the	sec.txt

Fig. 2: Collocates of the adjective “Muslim,” as shown in the Concordance tab of AntConc, (Laurence 2019)<sup>3</sup>

Despite being a typical feature of political discourse in general (David 2014, 168), in the above excerpts (ex. 1, 2, 3), agentive *we* is employed reiteratively by populist leaders, either explicitly or implicitly, to depict themselves as the saviors of the country through the application of

<sup>2</sup> Kwic Sort options are set up to show terms until Level 3 on the right side from the node *Islamic*. The data analyzed here refer to the Queensland Populists Twitter Corpus (QPTC).

<sup>3</sup> Kwic Sort options are set up to show terms until Level 2 on the left side from the node *Muslim*. The data analyzed here refer to the Queensland Populists Twitter Corpus (QPTC).

restrictive policies that could extinguish the peril of an imagined invasion of terrorists (Devetak 2004). This interpretation is also supported by the recurrence of the lexeme *ban* (n. 7 in the corpus), which is a) accompanied, as can be seen in Figure 2 above, by different volitive verbs, such as *want*, *support*, *push for*, when functioning as a noun, and b) preceded by the modal verb *must* in one instance (the verbal expression “let’s restrict” in (3) is semantically similar), or c) used in the infinite/imperative form in (1).

Overall, the insistent populist use of deontic verbal forms may appear as vital to the recipient in order to avoid what other countries in Europe have already experienced (example 2). What is more, considering that political leaders enjoy political authority and tend to establish themselves as the only source of truth, this alarmist rhetoric may have the effect of producing “hypothetical situations which may affect the reader/hearer,” given that they are presented in a sensationalist fashion and therefore feared (Jeffries 2010, 116).

In his last book, *Is racism an environmental threat?* (2017), the Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues that what generates panic, in reaction to the dreaded arrival of asylum seekers, is its “ungovernability,” which is expressed in terms of exaggerated figures – often unsupported by references (see for instance example 4 below) – as well as the potential terrorist nature assumed to be intrinsic to worshippers of Islam. When doing critical stylistics, another of the features that stylisticians analyze is how ideologies are embedded into texts in the form of assumptions and implications, so much so that they appear to be common sense for the reader/hearer (Jeffries 2010, 93). The three tweets below (examples 4 - 6) contain presuppositions and exemplify this tendency, which seems to be a recurrent discursive strategy of the selected populist politicians. Following the analytical tools proposed by Jeffries (2010), presuppositions “refer to assumptions that are built into the text;” yet “they are not encoded directly by the text, but are the background on which it is built” (Jeffries 2010, 94).

- (4) Australian government currently importing 12,000 'refugees' from Syria. Australia needs to be protected from Islam. Stop Muslim immigration (@MRobertsQLD, 19/12/2016)
- (5) #Manchester bomber was the son of Muslim refugees. We must look honestly at the problem of 2nd generation Muslim radicalization (@PaulineHansonOz, 23/05/2017)
- (6) Islamic leaders choose not to stand with Australians. PM Scott Morrison finally does the right thing & denounces Islamic terrorism. Our govt must tighten immigration, ensuring only people from societies compatible with Australian values & civilized societies are allowed entry. (@MRobertsQLD 20/11/2018)



Example 4 is an interesting instance, in that the three propositions that comprise the tweet might be interpreted as different sentences and thought of as semantically unlinked since they all have different subjects and do not contain anaphoric references in the text. However, it is clear how the recipient of the message already possesses a preexisting knowledge and, especially when sharing similar populist beliefs, is unlikely to question the truthfulness of the whole message. Although it is not overtly mentioned, it is assumed that “importing 12’000 ‘refugees’” implies being exposed to a threat from which “Australia needs to be protected.” (see example 4 above). It is also presupposed that the entirety of these “12’000 ‘refugees’ from Syria” professes the Islamic faith, which explains why Australia is tackling a Muslim-type of immigration. This perception is reiterated throughout the corpus, as can be seen from the concordance function above (Figure 2), where the token *Muslim* correlates in almost all instances with the word *immigration*, reducing refugees to monolithic entities and flattening them onto a single dimension (i.e. cultural/religious). Through these representational schemata, asylum seekers come to be discursively constructed as a homogeneous group sharing similar characteristics and are as a result depersonalized and dehumanized (KhosraviNik 2010, 13).

In example 5, this derogatory attitude is represented through an existential presupposition – expressed in the form of a definite noun phrase –, which seems to presuppose that for the very fact of being “the son of Muslim refugees” the person turned into “the Manchester bomber.” Example 6 ultimately proposes the solution to the problem, which consists in tightening immigration and allowing entry only to those people whose values are compatible with the Australians’ ones and therefore proceed from other civilized societies; thus inferring that migrants belonging to the Islamic faith are uncivilized and incapable of adapting to the values of the Australian society.

Hage (2017, 7) elaborates on the concept of Islamophobia, which he defines as a neo-colonial form of racism that targets a “Muslim otherly mix,” an indefinite racial category which goes under the label of “Muslim.” According to his theorization, migrants can morph without distinction into the asylum seeker shape or the Isis-looking-like terrorists, depending on the socio-historical event in which they are showcased. More than often, as can also be seen from the tweets analyzed, the boundary between the two categories gets blurred, and this reveals the intrinsic “vagueness of the racist thought” (Hage 2017, 7). Consistently, the analysis showed that asylum seekers are portrayed as people who belong *en masse* to the Islamic faith and for this very reason are terrorists or extremists. This syllogistic equivalence (i.e. they are asylum seekers; hence they are terrorists) may strengthen the cognitive link between the two concepts

and, eventually, between the discursive and the socio-political structure of reality (Van Dijk 2006).

## 6. Conclusion

This research article aimed to offer insights into the dominant narratives produced on the refugee crisis in Australia, as propagated on Twitter by a selected group of Australian populist leaders operating in Queensland State. The methodological approach taken in this small-scale study was a mixed methodology based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches. The research relied on Corpus Linguistics, to elicit quantitative data from the *ad-hoc* built research corpus, the Queensland Populists Twitter Corpus (QPTC), and approaches of Critical Stylistics (CS), to gain qualitative insights into the text and unveil the ideological substratum underlying the political content of tweets.

Among the different thematic patterns that emerged from the populist discourse online, the investigation focused on how asylum seekers come to be simplistically associated with a uniform religious and cultural background (i.e. Islamic) and on the discursive and ideological implications of this link. The main findings show that asylum seekers are predominantly portrayed as worshippers of Islam who massively come to Australia to disseminate terror, thus unveiling an Islamophobic attitude towards migrants. In other words, the tweets analyzed demonstrate how Queensland State populists on Twitter are prone to juxtapose, and hence equate, Muslim immigration with Islamic terrorism, by employing specific stylistic strategies. In this respect, the research aspires to contribute to the literature investigating Islamophobia within populist discourse on social media.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that there are no major differences in the way the political actors selected for the study tweet about asylum seekers. As a matter of fact, with respect to the tweets analyzed, the stylistic strategies used by populists occurred recurrently in the corpus and, when analyzed closely, confirmed the homogenous stylistic nature of the posts. As mentioned in section 2.3, the only exception is Clive Palmer, founder of the *United Australia Party*, whose tweets were more inclined to consider anti-racist positions with regards to the refugee crisis in Australia. However, considering the small scope of the research paper, Clive Palmer's tweets were not further investigated, as they did not emerge as statistically significant from the corpus under analysis. What is also important to highlight is that the politicians belong to relatively minor parties in Australia, but their political and rhetorical maneuvers do have an impact on the Australian political culture as a whole, as the outcomes of the 2019 Federal Elections demonstrated. This aspect should not be underestimated, and more scholarly

attention should be devoted to the study of minor national parties, their discursive political strategies and broader impact on national politics.

Some of the limitations of the investigation feature the small-scale nature of the study and the fact that the collection of tweets was restricted to a precise geographical and political collocation on the spectrum of Australian politics. The populists selected have been mainly active in Queensland over the past years and belong solely to right-wing parties. Further research could be conducted in order to expand these two variables, by including more politicians and/or political parties and investigate their online discursive practices, as articulated on different media outlets, in order to have a more comprehensive and representative dataset. For instance, it would be interesting to assess whether and to what extent asylum seekers are represented through the same Islamophobic ideologies by parties that are positioned on the left wing of the Australian political spectrum. The ultimate scope of these studies should be to encourage social media users to beware the manipulative discursive practices circulating online and their consequences on today's society.

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