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Special Section

Populism and Its Languages
Il populismo e le sue lingue

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Introduction to the Special Section "Populism and Its Languages"

Populism has undoubtedly become one of the buzzwords of the present time. In the last few years, a wide range of different political outlets and politicians across the globe have been attributed the populist label. Not only has the phenomenon of populism received enormous mediatic attention with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America in 2016 but in Europe, in the last two decades, many different populist forces have emerged from niche parties to the national forefront, propelling significant changes in society. What is the connection between such diverse political actors as Trump, *Podemos* in Spain, or Bernie Sanders? And why is the beginning of the 21st century such a favourable moment for populism to the point that Cas Mudde, one of the leading scholars in the field, talked about "a populist zeitgeist" (Mudde 2004)?

Populist leaders and parties tend to present themselves as 'game changers.' However, this is a strategic move to which a variety of politicians resort when trying to maximise their electoral consensus. What really sets these political actors apart is the fact that they turn the political arena into a battlefield of sharply polarised confrontation, between 'the people' and some enemy. This enemy may either be represented by the power oligarchs who exploit and betray the people, depriving them of their sovereignty, or some outsiders jeopardising an alleged unity of the nation. The populist label is often applied to design bottom-up grassroots movements, like the *Indignados* in Spain, *Occupy Wall Street* in the USA, anti-establishment parties and movements like *Podemos* in Spain, and the *Five Star Movement* in Italy or even politicians like Bernie Sanders, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These political actors aim at empowering 'the people' and bringing them back at the centre of the political scene, focusing on equality and justice for all, even for those with less economic resources.

However, at the same time, even right-wing politicians such as Trump, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or parties like *UKIP* in the United Kingdom, the *League* in Italy, or *Rassemblement National* in France, with their focus on nativist ideologies and the perceived danger represented by immigration and the contact with 'the foreigner' as alien, are often called populist. This causes terminological confusion, since despite a common dichotomous view of society, left-wing populism (exemplified by Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez, or *Podemos* among

others) and right-wing populism, which can be associated with Trump, the *League*, *UKIP*, *Brexit Party*, or *One Nation* in Australia, have diverging value systems and ethics.

Populism is a highly complex concept, and an adequate terminological differentiation between left-wing populism and right-wing populism is vital to prevent damaging false equivalences between movements with distinct visions of politics and society. Conflating diverging actors under the same 'umbrella term' leads to a process of euphemisation and consequent legitimisation, whereby far-right parties are described less negatively, allowing their ideas to spread more easily into mainstream discourse. Mudde (2007) argues that the label 'populist radical right' to describe right-wing forms of populism is more appropriate than 'radical right populists,' since the latter would put an emphasis on populism, a secondary characteristic in the case of these political forces, and away from 'radical right,' which is the core of the ideology. De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) share this criticism and argue that what in many contexts is erroneously called populism, or right-wing populism, should instead be properly termed nationalism, on the ground of a preferential selection of 'the people-as-the nation' sense over 'the people-as-class.' This confusion, they argue, stems from the fact that the nation-state is the primary context for democratic debate, and both populists and nationalists focus on the sovereignty of the people.

Populism has been historically found to thrive in moments of crisis (Kazin 1995; Taggart 2000), and the turn of the century saw the critical juncture of a growing general disaffection of citizens towards politics and traditional parties viewed as outdated and incapable of dealing with people's everyday problems and increasing economic inequalities. The global economic recession of 2008 highlighted deep social and economic divides, while the humanitarian crisis culminated in Europe with the so-called 'refugee crisis' around 2013, visible also in other regions across the globe, exacerbated the perceived 'threat' of 'enemies at the gates' (Bauman 2016).

The growing electoral consensus of populist forces at the expense of mainstream parties in many countries raises a set of questions as to how these emerging political actors have managed to present themselves as more credible alternatives in the eyes of the electorate. There are two connected areas in which populists may be seen to diverge entirely from their political rivals and are more successful: communication and language. In terms of communication, the success of populists has been seen by many as a consequence of their social-media-savvy communication skills. Facebook, Twitter, and the other social media are characterised by their participative and interactive features and user-generated contents. Populists have exploited these features to mimic the direct, interpersonal communication that they claim to have with the 'virtuous' people, bypassing traditional mass media, seen as part of the 'elite,' and their gate-keepers. It

has been argued that, in the relationship between populism and social media, "the medium fits the message" (Bartlett 2014, 93). Indeed, the highly emotional and personalised aspects of populist politics has found its ideal conduit in a digital technology which constantly foregrounds emotions (often negative ones, such as anger and hatred against 'the enemy,' be it the elite or migrants) over reason. It is also through social media that populists can display their (seemingly) authentic personal, social, and political identities. One of the tenets of populism is exactly this pretence of authenticity, of being 'one of the people' or perfectly attuned to them. Social media are instrumental in constructing such an illusion, making users (including politicians) appear as 'real people.' Interestingly, the rise of modern populism has coincided with the growing success of social media, wholly constructed on the illusion of authentic social relations:

> In a time when communication technology and online interaction is no longer separated from our offline reality, we seem to have become even more oriented towards preserving authenticity in human connection and of ourselves. Accordingly, digital mediated communication is seemingly more dependent on authenticity illusions and a negotiated authenticity contract than face-to-face communication. (Enli 2015, 89)

Authenticity is a staged communication process, and its degree depends on the "symbolic negotiations between the main participants in the communication" (Enli 2015, 3). Specifically, these negotiations concern aspects of trustworthiness, originality, and spontaneity. These three aspects are semioticised in digital mediated communication through the linguistic and multimodal affordances of social media, and it is through these three aspects that populists can present an image of themselves with which people can sympathise and identify. Social media favour the formation of 'like-minded crowds' through 'homophily' (Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson 2014). These mechanisms enable populist leaders to build their political communities and shape a vision of the world where complex issues are simplified into dichotomies, like 'us' *versus* 'them,' or 'friend' *versus* 'foe.'

While populism cannot be really distinguished *only* in terms of language (Breeze 2020, 2), it is language, both on social media and other media, which has become one of the most distinctive features of populist politics and communication. Both right-wing and left-wing populism seem to deliberately infringe the traditional style of mainstream politics by using colloquialisms, swearing, and slang, and its style "breaches taboos or indulges in use of language that appears to condone or even glorify violence" (Breeze 2020, 2). This kind of language is part of what Moffitt calls the "bad style" (2016, 44) of populism, a strategy used by populists to appear close to their electorate and defy the elite's proper manners, communicative style and values

explicitly. The stylistically belligerent stance of populists can be interpreted along Ostiguy's axis of "high" and "low" (2017), whereby the populism/anti-populism division is articulated in sociocultural and sociopolitical terms. The 'low' is identified with the populist tendency to personalism and coarseness, while the 'high' is represented by traditional parties, which claim to support official institutions and proper manners, including propriety in language. Not surprisingly, populists use a plain-spoken style, with clear and straightforward language dense with emotional overtones (e.g. anger, hate), thus inviting a certain kind of voters to identify with them. Such deliberately coarse language crusading against political correctness sometimes conceals more subtle dangers, like an exclusionary ideology.

Taking its cue from the crucial role of language in populist communication, this special section of *Iperstoria* on "Populism and Its Languages" aims at exploring the various discursive dimensions of populist leaders and parties, mostly taking place in the digital environment. This special section opens with a paper by Massimiliano Demata, Michelangelo Conoscenti, and Yannis Stavrakakis on the construction of the concepts of populism and anti-populism and their metaphorical realisations in the British press in 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum and Trump's victory, a crucial moment not only for British politics but also for the EU and populist discourse worldwide. Adopting both the methodology offered by Corpus Linguistics and the Corpus Approach to Critical Metaphor Analysis, the authors emphasise the critical role that metaphors play in orienting the public perception of populism based on shared modes of understanding social and political life. Following on from Brexit-related discourse, in the second paper, Michael Boyd proposes a fine-grained critical analytical study of an article in a British mid-market newspaper with a pro-Brexit stance, highlighting the discursive and multimodal strategies employed to negatively represent both the Remain-supporters and the judiciary, while stressing the positive presentation of Leavers and the newspaper role as the 'voice of the people.'

Maria Ivana Lorenzetti's study compares right-wing populist discourses on migration in the national contexts of the USA and Italy, unveiling how the joint contribution of language and other semiotic modes is strategically exploited on social media by prominent right-wing populist leaders, such as Donald Trump and Italian *League* leader Matteo Salvini in the othering and exclusion of ethnic minorities. The study, adopting a critical multimodal analytical perspective, reveals that the two leaders employ comparable strategies. Web 2.0 affordances are crucial for both Trump and Salvini to enact the rhetorical exclusion of minorities while constructing their role as leaders and "build their people." The social media domain is also the focus of the next contribution, in which Marianna Lya Zummo investigates how politicians employ social media

platforms to enhance authenticity and boost their connection with 'the people.' Within the framework of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik 2017), and adopting tools from multimodal discourse analysis, Zummo highlights how politicians of different orientation, i.e. American Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Italian right-wing leader Salvini, exploit social media affordances, and in particular live-streamed videos, creating a new politainment genre for the strategic performance of their authenticity.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is also the focus of the next two contributions. Applying a methodological framework that combines the resources of qualitative approaches, such as transitivity, appraisal and multimodal critical discourse analysis, Margaret Rasulo explores the identity-populism nexus in a corpus of AOC's tweets containing verbal and non-verbal instantiations of self-representational strategies. Based on the analysis, the communication style adopted by the politician emerges as the result of a blend of identities and life experiences, correspondingly sharpened by the presence of populist behaviour. Such a nexus allows AOC to intensify her self-presentation and build her political *persona*. By exploring the mechanisms that govern the presentation, interpretation, and framing of the antagonistic opponent *via* the analysis of delegitimisation strategies, recontextualising principles, and (re)framing processes, Jacqueline Aiello's study analyses the coverage of AOC by a political commentator with a right-wing populist ideological orientation. Her findings suggest that the delegitimisation of the antagonist occurs primarily by recontextualisation, whereby the antagonist's viewpoints are systematically concealed, ridiculed, or the target of personal attacks, underscoring covert and overt sexism and racism.

Racism and its subtle connection with right-wing populism are evident in the next paper by Philip Limerick. Focusing on the case of the Central Park Five, a criminal case involving the wrongful conviction of four African-Americans and one Latino, the paper investigates the covert and overt racist discourse by Trump. Applying a critical discourse analytical perspective to a corpus of diversified sources, the author unveils Trump's discursive construction of African-Americans as 'the others' through fearmongering, delegitimisation, and evasion, emblematic in his 'law and order' ideology, also shedding light on resistance discourse by the Central Park Five members.

Antipodean populism is investigated in the next two papers. Combining a corpus linguistics perspective with critical stylistic analysis, Arianna Grasso investigates narratives constructed around the refugee crisis articulated on Twitter by selected right-populist leaders in Queensland State. The analysis unveils a predominantly Islamophobic ideology through the frequent association of asylum seekers with Islamic terrorism. In the last contribution to this special

section, Antonella Napolitano analyses the discursive strategies employed by Pauline Hanson, the founder of Australian *One Nation Party*, and leading right-wing exponent of Antipodean populism. Critical discourse analysis applied to a corpus of the leader's most controversial speeches within the time span of twenty years uncovers the unfolding of the right-populist prototypical division between 'the pure people' and the 'outsiders,' here primarily represented by the Australian Aboriginals but also by Asian and Islamic communities at large. 'The corrupt elite,' as in many right-wing populist discourses promoting a nativist ideology (Wodak 2015), is accused of conspiring with 'the dangerous others' damaging 'the legitimate people.'

The papers published in this special section on "Populism and Its languages" cover an impressive range of approaches to a variety of populist actors, both left-wing and right-wing, and in different national contexts. All contributions show, each in its own way, the importance of populist language and its emphasis on authenticity and emotions. The papers have revealed that a full understanding of populism can only be possible through close scrutiny of its discursive realisations and the different modes (verbal, visual, etc.) in which it is codified.

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