

INTERNATIONAL PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL



I-LanD Journal

Identity, Language and Diversity

Chief Editors: Giuditta Caliendo & Maria Cristina Nisco

SPECIAL ISSUE

**Current Politics and the Printed Media:
Discursive Tensions in the Age of Populism 3.0**

**Prensa y Política: Tensiones Discursivas
en la Era del Populismo 3.0**

Miguel-Ángel Benítez-Castro, Francesca De Cesare, Encarnación Hidalgo Tenorio (Eds)



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I-LanD Journal
peer-reviewed
bi-annual journal
n. 2/2017 - December 2017

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Editoriali srl
via Ugo Palermo 6
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P.IVA 05014040876
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+39 3248382362
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Authorisation n. 60 issued by the Court of Naples on 20/12/2016



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1. Untangling populism: ideology, discourse and the media

Over the past few years, a range of momentous political and historical events have shaken the foundations of a deceptively comfortable status quo, stoking up the uncertainty and malaise that have spread the world over in the last decade. This general sense of socio-political and emotional turmoil has been triggered, among others, by (1) the UK's Brexit victory, leading to a period of profound insecurity as to the subsequent deteriorating relationship between the European Union and Downing Street; (2) the alarming increase in populist and extremist nationalist movements in many European countries; (3) the wave and threat of homegrown terrorist attacks on European soil; and (4) Donald Trump's rise to power after last year's US presidential elections, producing a state of confusion and anxiety that has already started to plague the formerly solid relationships between the US and the rest of the world and that may upset the current international power balance.

In the dawn of a new age, the prevailing logic of times past seems to no longer make sense, as it now needs to contend with the rapid and unstoppable emergence of new types of post-truth, irrational, emotional and xenophobic discourse that may destroy and subsequently reinvent the socio-political spheres of many countries around the globe. In the second issue of the *I-LanD Journal*, we will precisely tap into the discursive tensions generated by the clash between these opposing, though at times complementary, ways of construing the socio-political reality of this new era.

Scholarly research on populism has cast light on its roots and on some of its most significant motivating factors. In this regard, De la Torre (1997) offers illuminating insights into its emergence in times of great economic instability, when, as Decker (2003) argues, the flimsy structure of apparently solid and long-standing democratic institutions is uncovered. The surge in populist sentiment and support in the current political arena may also be explained in terms of: the increasingly convergent boundaries between traditional mass media and the more cutting-edge social media platforms (Moffitt 2016); the



more openly voiced opposition to globalization (Ranieri 2016) and representative democracies (Haskell 2001); and overly simplistic political messages based on demagogic rhetorical styles (Moffitt/Tormey 2014). If analyzed from a psychological perspective, many other contributing factors are brought to the fore, as Dorna (2005) explains. Among them, mention should be made of mankind's lack of a common project to address the challenges of the future; the failure of liberal and communist theories; the monopolistic dominance of neoliberalism in governmental policies; a serious decline in social solidarity; the growing demand for security in a world that is no longer safe; and, on top of all this, people's hankering for highly inspirational and charismatic leaders able to firmly oppose a dire situation that is stifling the silent majority. It is thus little wonder that populism takes root in a context where, as Weyland (1999: 384) posits, party systems are faltering and cracking under the seemingly compelling logic of grass-roots front-runners whose lack of adherence to the establishment makes their discourse extremely appealing and convincing to potential voters who no longer identify with the rigid, conventional and thoroughly discredited structures of mainstream political parties. The collapse of traditional party systems and the resulting growth in populist movements is, according to Perelli (1995: 192), due to the disrepute and crisis into which many of them have fallen; and people's mistrust of traditional leaders, and desperate need to hear hopeful messages and particularly vague proposals from somebody who is often in the spotlight. From the above discussion, populism emerges as a multifarious and complex phenomenon whose causes can only be determined from various approaches, as they are inextricably linked to the political and psychological grounds of a generalized social crisis that has been brought about by corrupt democratic systems, and the failure of reformist parties to deliver on their promises (De Luca 2017: 19).

From the standpoint of communication and social identity, populism rests on a deliberate attempt to influence and reinforce people's bitter perception and understanding of social reality. By addressing the people directly, populist leaders manage to make each and every citizen feel an integral part of a wider community where all their fears and insecurities about their future will be heard and, hopefully, even dispelled. In Elchardus and Spruyt's (2016) opinion, people are drawn to populism not because they feel emotionally vulnerable and economically disadvantaged; they come to agree with populist ideas through the way populist discourse gives vent to their outrage at the glaring inequalities of society, thereby realizing that the situation they find themselves in is a perfect example of that generalized unfairness. The deep sense of social injustice evident in populist discourse is construed as a reaction to the worrying and dramatic changes of a more and more globalized world, where politicians' subservience to the interests of banks, large corporations and media companies leads the common people to feel in the margins of society. People's sense of socio-economic deprivation, as caused by the corrupt ruling elite (or caste), is reflected in the way populist discourse dichotomizes society: *us* (the people) vs. *them* (the enemy, that is, the 'Other').



This state of affairs provides fertile ground for people's gradual veering towards populist ideas. Any critical stance on society's tottering foundations, however, does not emerge solely from personal beliefs and opinions, but quite significantly also from the media's active shaping of these attitudes through their often partisan and partial construal of social reality. The combination of these two forces certainly contributes to the heightened and pervasive sense of outrage, bitterness and discontent upon which populist agendas rest in their aim of echoing people's nostalgia for a perfect, egalitarian world. The politically- and media-driven discourse of populism, therefore, offers people apparently simple and hopeful (though untested) solutions to the endemic problems of modern society: global terrorism, the disputed status and redrawing of formerly unquestioned national borders, and the growing distrust of the EU's monetary union and single market, to name but a few. In this special issue of *I-LanD*, we aim to delve into and capture the wide-ranging manifestations of this kind of discourse in the international media, focusing particularly on the press, with the intention of investigating how these ideologies relate to the specific socio-political contexts where they happen to emerge.

The media sphere constitutes a metaphorical space whereby we define an imaginary that helps us to describe what reality 'is' or what it 'should ideally be'. Ideological representations are not exclusively products of domination and social inequality. Their influence is also evident in everyday life, as they articulate the relationship between actions and shared opinions in the social practices in which individuals are involved. Thus, the discourses of power (understood as access to, and a voice in, political and journalistic communication) contribute to creating the public space and, more or less explicitly, to revealing already-existing ideological tendencies. Ideologies may be manifested through the topical content of texts, on which a clear standpoint is generally expected or required; through the media that often generate controversy; and through the individuals who are claimed to be legitimized to take the floor and give their opinion. With this in mind, in this issue, we wonder who is allowed access to the use of discursive structures and who is not, who controls public discourse and who is controlled by it; in other words, what can be spoken or written about and what cannot, and which institutions or which individuals can set the limits to what anyone can discursively express.

The analysis of the argumentative and persuasive strategies underlying linguistic ideologies helps to reveal how addressers influence their addressees, and how they manage their credibility and legitimacy when conveying their messages. As is well-known, discourse is typically linked to action, and, as such, it may have multiple effects: ideological, interpersonal or a combination of both. Mass media, and particularly the printed press, play a paramount role in the articulation of these effects, by institutionalizing and promoting certain discourses at the expense of others. The current international political arena is a fertile ground for the study of the relationship between language use and ideology, especially as present in newspapers.



2. Content and structure of this special issue

This special themed issue of the *Identity, Language and Diversity Journal* revolves around a very hot and significant phenomenon that, in some sense, concerns a vast number of governments in the world at the present time. Populism per se and the discourse construal of populism deserve a closer look that allows readers to go beyond the anecdote of some well-known social actors' eccentric and strident public displays claimed to be on behalf of the common people.

It is obvious that populism is much more than discourse, but, clearly enough, it is mainly through discourse that this is enacted. Such a political and sociological hurricane can be performed and articulated through various discursive modes like the deceptively simple election campaign speeches, slogans and advertisements voters have lately become used to. Simultaneously, the mass media, especially the printed press, take various sides in their portrayal of populist mechanisms and communication strategies, critically assessing its pros and cons with a view to influencing a broad section of the population.

Undoubtedly, the media play a key role in disseminating how populists conceive of the world order; what they feel politics is and should become; their disapproval of what they regard as anachronistic, elitist institutions only pursuing self-interest; and their conviction that the politician's function is to distort the status quo in their belief that it will always be for good. Likewise, the media can more or less subtly shape the citizenry's perception of the proposals of populism. It actually does so by ascribing it to a generally ideology-free movement that originates in the framework of a worldwide identity crisis; a movement which is opposed to, and fascinated by, the risks of globalization; and whose urgent demand of justice from the State is explained on the grounds of their annoyance with the endemic corruption allowed to flourish in public sectors by the fossilized structure of the administration.

The seven papers we have collected are an example of outstanding scholarly research reflecting a thorough understanding of some key aspects intimately connected with the topic of this issue. On the one hand, some of the contributions analyze the representation of populism in the press as a reaction to the financial crisis hitting especially the nations of the West; in particular, the authors discuss how some American, British and Spanish media depict populism in an attempt either to conceal or bring to the fore its power and social impact.

On the other hand, the issue includes four other papers which deal with different ways of making populism mainstream; many right-wing and left-wing populist leaders like Donald Trump and Rafael Correa, respectively, in their self-imposed capacity as guardians of the truth, resort to different communication channels to spread their own agenda and propaganda. In their rallies, during TV interviews, in the newspapers as well as on social media like Twitter, the most conservative ones have the chance to indoctrinate their aggrieved, resentful fellow countrymen and countrywomen into anti-immigration, xenophobia and anti-welfarism (Shalev 2007: 189); conversely, those who stand for left-wing populism endorse egalitarianism, wealth



redistribution and social justice; all in all, both of them are two divergent modalities of anti-systemism and economic protectionism. As it stands, it is not simply that politicians have surrendered to populism, but that populism has become an unstoppable wave informing the policy-making in towns, cities and countries. As a consequence, political leaders have metaphorically phagocytized or appropriated the language of the man and the woman in the street. And at the same time, the people who observe this change day by day are also influenced by populist themes, rhetoric, patterns, and modes of expression, as evidenced, for example, in the online commentaries written by newspapers' readers in reply to news items or someone else's previous opinion on any matter of their concern.

Once the general structure of the issue has been outlined, below we summarize the most relevant ideas of each individual paper. We will start by considering Margaret Rasulo's. In her contribution, the author presents a precise picture of the context that engenders populism. In a very fragile and unfair economic setting (Inglehart/Norris 2016), people's political disaffection leads to an anti-Establishment feeling that encourages their action in the streets and their rejection of oligarchies' nauseating systematic dishonesty; as a result, citizens gradually reach a sense of self-empowerment. As the majority of the papers in this issue, in this case, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are combined to produce a fine-grained discourse analysis of the corpus, in particular, van Leeuwen's (1996) Social Actors Network, Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory, and Sentiment Analysis (Pang/Lee 2008). Its main focus lies on how journalists represent the political programs of European and North-American populists, especially in relation to the strategies they choose to refer to economic matters during the Brexit campaign and the US presidential election. Key ingredients in this paper are newsworthiness and framing (De Nies *et al.* 2012).

In the paper by Victor Ellis and Ana Roldán-Riejos, it is the term 'populism' itself that is paid very close attention to, especially in connection with four allegedly populist European parties that do not hesitate to reject this label (i.e. Greek *Syriza*, Spanish *Podemos*, Dutch *PVV*, and French *Front National*). Firstly, the authors make reference to the background where the term first emerged (i.e. the defense of ordinary people's rights in American politics), to then move on to the present negative associations it often conveys, as well as to its various functions either as ideology, style or strategy. Subsequently, they explore the figures of thought, and the most common collocations and colligations of this word in European newspapers, websites, blogs and radio stations. Their analysis reveals that writers' ideological positioning along with the specific country and the political party being discussed in the texts seem to influence the way 'populism' is construed discursively. Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk 1988) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004) are jointly used to produce a corpus-informed paper that provides a neat picture of the present historical moment.

Ana Pano Alamán writes one of the two contributions in Spanish selected for this issue, where the author applies a corpus-based



methodology while combining two complementary approaches such as Scheufele's (2000) Framing Analysis and van Dijk's (2010) Socio-cognitive Discourse Analysis. A substantial number of headlines taken from several Spanish national newspapers are analyzed in order to detect how journalists present, distribute, and sometimes omit, the lemmas 'populism' and 'populist' to portray American and European politics. Her detailed and meticulous observation of the data proves that the phenomenon is most typically associated with negative contexts and negative agents leading to risk and danger.

The remaining papers concentrate on the actual articulation of populist discourse in very interesting contexts. Paolo Donadio compares Donald Trump's campaign speeches to his opponent's, Hillary Clinton. In this quantitative and qualitative analysis inspired by Lakoff's (2002) Framing Theory, the author focuses on some of the most outstanding communication strategies of the Republican candidate that most likely helped him to become the President of the United States. His anti-elite sentiments, for example, are easily recognized thanks to the naming strategies, the use of tenses and pronoun distribution in the corpus. Surprisingly, despite his ranting and raving (perhaps, precisely because of his unorthodox form of making politics and his self-imposed role as American people's savior), a billionaire well known for his sexist and xenophobic remarks won the election against the Establishment's candidate.

If the previous research examines the discourse of right-wing populism, the paper by Palmira Chavero, which happens to be written in Spanish, covers the most salient features of a left-wing South-American populist leader, Ecuador's former President, Rafael Correa. Due to his disregard of more traditional political media, Correa kept a close connection or rapport with his fellow citizens through a weekly TV program for government accountability and transparency. During the three or more hours of *Enlace Ciudadano*, or 'Citizen Link', Correa also attacked the private media companies on the basis of manipulation. In this contribution, Chavero compares the President's reports to the two national newspapers in the last term of 2015, and draws special attention to the notions of people and leader. For such a purpose, van Dijk's (2009) approach fits perfectly well with the proposals of Laclau (2005), De la Torre (2012), and Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999).

In Fabio Carrella's corpus-based study, the focus lies on four European right-wing political parties, namely the UKIP, *Front National*, *Lega Nord*, and *Movimento 5 Stelle*. Based on the hypothesis that Twitter has transformed political communication (Spina 2012) into a resource politicians draw on more and more often, the author compares the keywords and collocations (Baker 2009) found in the tweets of the leaders of these parties to those by parliamentarians belonging to other parties. After applying Appraisal Theory (Martin/White 2005) to the analysis of the data, the author is able to show that microblogging is a useful site for judgment and expression of emotion allowing the politician to bond themselves with their voters.

To conclude, "Resistance through Discourse in Right-Wing Online Commentary" by Sean Sutherland exemplifies how online newspaper comment forums become an effective tool to counterattack politically



correct inclusive discourse. The corpus, taken from the British *Daily Mail Online* newspaper, stands for a radically opposite view of the mainstream. The qualitative nature of this analysis sheds light on the commenters' obvious tendency to use some strategies that characterize this genre; for instance, implicature (Grice 1975), and misspelling or respelling of inappropriate ideologically loaded words are likely to assist right-wing newspaper readership to avoid the profanity filter; as a consequence, it is possible for them to express anonymously (Reader 2012) their open disgust at some minority groups such as gay people and migrants, whilst apparently their discourse of exclusion gains legitimacy (van Leeuwen 2008).

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