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Received: 2.12.2021
Accepted: 17.07.2022
Published: 15.12.2022

Populism in Internet Memes. An Investigation with Analytical Approaches from Discourse Analysis and Multimodality

This article explores if and how populist elements are expressed in Internet memes within German-language political discourses. This is done by conducting a data-based investigation rooted in the discourse historical approach and multimodality theory. Memes with varying political alignments are analysed with regards to how they express either of the following features of populist style: the appeal to the people vs. the elite, the use of bad manners, and the performance of crisis. Special focus is given to the political context as well as the semiotic resources used to convey populist themes. The findings of this study show that in order for populism to be analysed within memes a gradational perspective on populism is necessary. Applying this method, a diverse variety of populist characteristics can be found in memes, revealing the many possibilities of populist expression in this format.

Keywords: populism, populist style, Internet memes, multimodality, discourse

Populismus in Internet-Memes. Eine Untersuchung mit analytischen Ansätzen der Diskursanalyse und Multimodalität

In diesem Artikel soll untersucht werden, ob und wie populistische Elemente in Internet-Memes in deutschsprachigen politischen Diskursen zum Ausdruck kommen. Dazu wird eine datenbasierte Untersuchung durchgeführt, die auf dem diskurshistorischen Ansatz und der Multimodalitätstheorie beruht. Memes unterschiedlicher politischer Ausrichtungen werden daraufhin analysiert, wie sie eines der folgenden Merkmale des populistischen Stils zum Ausdruck bringen: Appell an das Volk vs. die Elite, die Verwendung von schlechten Umgangsformen und die Darstellung von Krisen. Besonderes Augenmerk wird dabei auf den politischen Kontext sowie die semiotischen Ressourcen

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gelegt, die zur Vermittlung populistischer Themen verwendet werden. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie zeigen, dass für die Analyse von Populismus in Memes eine graduelle Perspektive auf Populismus notwendig ist. Mit dieser Methode lässt sich eine große Vielfalt an populistischen Charakteristika in Memes finden, was die große Bandbreite populistischer Äußerungen in diesem Format aufzeigt.

Schlüsselwörter: Populismus, populistischer Stil, Internet-Memes, Multimodalität, Diskurs

Populizm w memach internetowych. Badanie z zastosowaniem metod analizy dyskursu i teorii multimodalności

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie, czy i w jaki sposób elementy populistyczne manifestują się w memach internetowych funkcjonujących w niemieckojęzycznych dyskursach politycznych. Do badania zebranego materiału wykorzystano metody szkoły dyskursywno-historycznej oraz teorii multimodalności. Memy odwołujące się do różnych orientacji politycznych analizowane są pod kątem tego, w jaki sposób wyrażają jedną z następujących cech stylu populistycznego: odwołanie się do ludu vs. elit, stosowanie złych manier oraz kreowanie scenariuszy kryzysów. W analizie memów szczególną uwagę zwraca się na kontekst polityczny, a także na te zasoby semiotyczne, które wykorzystywane są do kreowania tematów populistycznych. Wyniki przeprowadzonych badań pokazują, że do analizy populizmu w memach niezbędna jest zastosowanie stopniowalnego modelu populizmu. Dzięki tej metodzie w memach można znaleźć dużą różnorodność cech populistycznych, co pokazuje szeroki zakres populistycznych wypowiedzi w tym formacie.

Słowa kluczowe: populizm, styl populistyczny, memy internetowe, multimodalność, dyskurs

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a vast amount of linguistic research has come into existence investigating the features and language of populism (Reisigl, Januszek 2015; Spieß, Römer 2019; Wodak 2021; Wodak, Krzyżanowski 2017), often focusing on specific political parties or movements that are labelled as populist. Likewise, a research interest around political Internet memes has come into existence within linguistics, investigating, for example, how and why memes are used to express a political opinion (e.g. Denisova 2019, Grundlingh 2018: 163–165, Shifman 2014) or summarising current linguistic research about the phenomenon (Bülow et al. 2019). Georg Weidacher (2019), for example, acknowledges their significance in the far-right rhetoric. These image-text combinations (Osterroth 2015: 32) are used by many far-right movements and have gained a reputation as being partially responsible for the success of far-right politicians, such as Donald Trump (cf. Dafaure 2020). Several analysts from various fields have noted that memes and populism often co-occur, especially when it comes to far-right movements (e.g. Milner 2016: 97; Roslyng, Larsen 2021: 896). However, the question of how Internet memes employ and express

characteristics ascribed to populist language has yet to be investigated from a linguistic perspective in greater detail, as there currently exists little linguistic research on the way populism is expressed in memes. This study aims to connect the research about populism, populist discourse and Internet memes by investigating how the characteristics of populist style appear in the language of political Internet memes. The investigation is based on the conceptualization of populism as a style, as has been done by Benjamin Moffitt (2016) and others (e.g. Canovan 1999; Jagers, Walgrave 2007; Lüger 2019 et al.), which can be reflected in both visual and written aspects of an Internet meme, that collectively constitute the multimodal language use within the meme.

To this purpose, I conduct a data-based analysis informed by the theoretical concepts from the discourse-historical approach (DHA) and multimodality with a small dataset of memes, which display one or more features of populist style. The analysis provides an illustrative and explorative case study, investigating in what shape or form features of the populist style, as defined by Moffitt (2016), appear in these memes. Such a study contributes relevant information about the role of memes in political communication. Furthermore, it provides an insight into how analytical approaches based on multimodality theory and DHA can be applied to investigate features of the populist style with the help of two research fields, populism and Internet memes, which are combined in an empirical case study. Taking into account the increasing appearance of various forms of political communication in online spaces, this study can contribute to a better understanding of this aspect of online political discourse and the populist elements within it.

The material collected for the analysis includes memes from the three largest German-speaking countries: Austria, Germany and Switzerland. In order to be included in the collection, the memes need to feature at least one of the three key features of populism identified by Moffitt (2016: 45). The memes are collected from various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and reddit. Some are taken from satirical pages, others from political interest groups or they are posted by private individuals in political social media groups and can therefore have different motives for revealing populist traits. To ensure that the collected memes can all be unambiguously defined as memes, the analysed content belongs to the category of *stock image macro*¹ exclusively. In the context of this study, I adhere to Milner's definition of stock image macros as "an image macro used prevalently enough to have a strong personality associated with its

¹ There are a few examples where the identification as stock image macros may be disputed, such as images 5 and 10. However, I would argue that because of their use of semiotic resources, they still communicate a strong personality that is comparable to that of more typical image macros.

subject” (Milner 2016: 28). In contrast to other image macro-definitions, which focus on the format of typical image macros as having an image and two lines of text (Osterroth 2020: 117), this definition centres the content and personality connected to an image macro. Therefore, in this category, which is often seen as archetypical of Internet memes, a meme can safely be assumed to invoke similar associations in all its versions. Most image macro formats are not intrinsically political, which means that attention has to be drawn to how a certain meme format is politicized.

With this approach I broach the question of how populism is expressed in memes and how aspects of populism, as conceptualized by Moffitt and others, are thematized, replicated and problematised in Internet memes. Furthermore, this study aims to deliver some approaches to solving the question of what purposes populism in Internet memes may serve.

2. Memes and Populism: A Brief Theoretical Background

Populism has in recent years become a widely discussed phenomenon with many political events, such as Brexit, the election of former US president Donald Trump or popular European movements like *Cinque Stelli* in Italy or *Podemos* in Spain being associated with populism by news media or in academic texts (e.g. Mouffe 2018). Despite populism not being a new occurrence, these recent political successes renewed the interest of researchers in what populism is and how it manifests itself (Römer, Spieß 2019: 165–66). Chantal Mouffe (2018) identifies the current age as a *populist moment*, stating that “(...) the 2008 economic crisis brought to the fore the contradictions of the neoliberal model and today the neoliberal hegemonic formation is being called into question by a variety of anti-establishment movements, both from the right and from the left.” (Mouffe 2018: 7). In accordance with this, Januschek, and Reisigl (2014) describe populism as a mode of political articulation, which is considered to be an indicator of a crisis of political representation (Januschek, Reisigl 2014: 7–15). Indicators of this populist moment should also be detected in memes, as Milner (2016: 3) argues that “social processes [are] essential to the creation, circulation, and transformation of collective texts” such as memes. Memes are dependent on the discourse surrounding them for production as well as spreading. Roslyng and Larsen also highlight the subversive potential of Internet memes towards the language of power in their investigation of pro- and anti-vaccination memes (Roslyng, Larsen 2021). It can therefore seem unsurprising that there are populist memes, especially in times when populism has been described as more prominent

than ever. One example of a movement classified as populist is Occupy Wallstreet (Mouffe 2018: 19), a left-wing movement that arose from the 2008 financial collapse. Milner states that “(f)rom the inception of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), participatory media played a key role in the movement. Members of the public engaged OWS on sites like Tumblr and reddit. Central to the discussion were Internet memes.” (Milner 2013: 2357).

The second movement from the opposite end of the political spectrum is the so-called alt-right, which researchers consider to be a part of a wider, international right-wing populist uprising (Gaugele 2019, Rae 2020). Memes are considered a vital part of the alt-right’s online communication, especially with regard to the election of former president Donald Trump in 2016, although their actual influence on the election remains contested (Thompson, Hawley 2021). Their communication strategy in this matter is described as follows: “With the help of irony, subversion, and often carefully engineered propaganda-like messages and images, the alt-right, it boasts, “meme’d into office” the Republican candidate.” (Dafaure 2020: 26–27). Both of these movements, despite representing very different ideological values, have thus been ascribed the label of populism and both showcase a significant use of Internet memes in their political communication. There is, therefore, clear evidence that Internet memes can be part of populist discourses no matter the political alignment, since “populism’s reliance on new media technologies” (Moffitt 2016: 4) means that it has played a pioneering role in online political communication in general. This leads to questions about how this populism is expressed in memes regardless of the exact ideology behind them.

Despite the frequent use of the term *populism* in academic literature, defining populism remains a matter of dispute among theorists and will likely evolve alongside the communication devices which convey populist speech. For the purpose of this study, two approaches to classify populism are relevant: the notion of populism as an ideology and the notion of populism as a style. Based on the ideological approach, populism is defined as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2007: 23). Following Ekström et al. (2018: 2), I conceptualize populism as both an ideology in accordance with Mudde’s (2007) definition of it, which focuses on the antagonism between *the elite* and *the people* as well as a style that is conveyed via performance. The latter has been developed into a distinct approach for the analysis of populism by Moffitt (2016: 28). Moffitt

identifies four theoretical approaches to defining populism: “populism as ideology, strategy, discourse and political logic” (Moffitt 2016: 7) but he also adds his own definition, conceptualizing populism as “best thought of as a political style” (Moffitt 2016: 12). Block and Negrine also regard populism fundamentally as “a political communication style in the construction of identity and political power” (Block, Negrine 2017: 179). A political style in general can be defined as “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political” (Moffitt 2016: 50). In this context, politics is conceptualized as performance and populism as one specific type of performance.

In this approach, equal regard is given to the rhetorical and aesthetic aspects of this performance (Moffitt 2016: 38). The conceptualization of populism as a style transmitted through an aesthetically informed performance opens the door for more multifaceted approaches towards analysing populism in memes. Memes are multimodal texts relying heavily on various visual modes (non-verbal as well as verbal) to convey their message, whereby aesthetics is a key feature. By focusing on populism as a style, these features can be explored in greater detail, which enables a multimodal perspective towards investigating populism in Internet memes. This includes numerous aspects, ranging from fashion choices to wording. Instead of creating a dichotomy of populism versus non-populism, Moffitt describes populism as a spectrum, applying a more gradational perspective (Moffitt 2016: 47). The theoretical approach taken in this paper is therefore strongly influenced by Spieß and Weidacher’s (2020: 166) assertion that a multidimensional, interdisciplinary approach towards defining populism, which includes gradual variations, is necessary for a holistic description of the term. This framework allows the investigation of populist texts, such as memes, that do not conform to what typical populist texts are expected to look like.

3. Approaching Populism in Internet Memes

My suggestion towards investigating populism in Internet memes is based on the three distinct traits which determine the populist style according to Moffitt (2016: 45): 1) appeal to the people vs. elite/experts, 2) the use of bad manners, and 3) the performance of crisis (Moffitt 2016: 8). All these traits are informed by the conceptualization of populism as an ideology but offer, alongside other, similar approaches (Ekström, Patrona, Thornborrow 2018), a practical approach to analysing the occurrence of populism. This enables an exploration of less traditional expressions of populism, such as memes, in which populism might not

be as readily recognisable. My study investigates the appearance of these three traits in the combination of visual and written elements of the collected Internet memes and thereby enhances our understanding of how relatively new text forms such as memes can become a vehicle for populist speech.

This is done by conducting a data-based multimodal analysis of a number of memes which display at least one of Moffitt's three features of populist style. The multimodal analysis provides exceedingly useful tools for analysing not only Internet memes but also political language in general. Machin and van Leeuwen (2016: 243) recognise an "urgent need to pay increasing attention to the multimodally mediated discursive implementation and maintenance of these distributed forms of power" in the study of language and politics. Working from the premise that "(t)exts which linguists study create meanings not only through language but also through visual features and elements such as images (...)" (Machin 2013: 347), multimodality enables a holistic analysis of the different elements (image, color, shade, written text etc.) present in the memes. By identifying what semiotic resources appear in the collected memes, it can be pinpointed how elements of populist style appear in memes, without ignoring non-verbal elements vital for the interpretation of the collected memes. Semiotic resources describe the "actions, materials and artefacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically [...] or technologically" (van Leeuwen 2005: 3). Anything can be a semiotic resource as long as there exists a communicative purpose, the so-called meaning potential. My analysis thus focuses on identifying and investigating the semiotic resources that come to use to communicate Moffitt's three key features of populist style (cf. chapter 2). The focus hereby is on investigating which semiotic resources are combined to convey populist style.

Furthermore, the analysed Internet memes are a part of a wider discourse not just of the German-speaking but the worldwide political landscape. This context cannot be ignored in my analysis and requires the inclusion of theoretical concepts of the discourse historical approach. DHA is based on the premise that linguistic utterances are always a part of wider (political) discourses, embedded in verbal and non-verbal contextual frameworks that require knowledge of socio-political, historical and situational contexts in order to be understood (Wodak, Köhler 2010: 35), also called their *situatedness* (Wodak 2015: 51). The discourse historical approach focuses on texts "be they audio, spoken, visual and/or written – as they relate to structured knowledge (*discourses*)" (Wodak 2015: 51). Discourse is in this context defined as "a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts" (Wodak, Meyer 2001: 66) that are thematically linked

via a *macro-topic* (Wodak, Meyer 2001: 66). The following analysis collects memes from different political discourses, while including their situatedness, i.e. the discourse within which they have come to exist.

One relevant concept closely related to DHA and other discourse-theoretical approaches is *recontextualization*. Recontextualization describes the embedding of utterances into new contexts (Androutsopoulos 2016: 338) and occurs when an element is taken out of one discursive context (i.e. de-contextualized) and then inserted into a new one (Reisigl, Wodak 2009: 90). Its relevance for various digital texts is currently getting increased academic attention and it has been shown to provide valuable insight into how memes operate (Androutsopoulos 2014, Marx 2019: 14). For example, Osterroth (2015: 28) describes memes as based on recontextualized images from pop culture, politics or everyday life, thus making recontextualization one of the defining features of Internet memes. It is therefore important to take into account how recontextualization contributes to the display of populist features. The following analysis takes into account the discursive context from which the memes have been de-contextualized and how it relates to the new context within which they have been embedded as well as how this is connected to the appearance of populist features in them. Using a discourse-historical approach when investigating the collected memes can contribute to gaining a more well-rounded and holistic understanding of populist style in Internet memes. The analysis will therefore pay attention to the larger context within which these memes have come into existence and continue to exist. However, of equal importance for the analysis is what can be found on the micro level, in the choice of wording or visual material.

To analyse populism in Internet memes I, therefore, identify and investigate the semiotic resources used to convey populist features in the analysed memes. The findings are then investigated further using DHA in order to find out how recontextualization is used to perform populist style in the collected memes and how they are connected to the larger discursive context.

4. Men in Suits and Other Visual Representations of the Elites

The construction of a dichotomy of the people versus the elites is named one of the key features of populism in most literature published on the topic (e.g. Moffitt 2016; Mouffe 2018; Mudde 2007; Ruzza, Pejovic 2019; Weidacher 2020). Populism frames *the people* as those that should be the true holders of sovereignty and puts them in opposition to the elites, those who actually are in ruling positions.

The people are the ones populist style is attempting to appeal to. The elites, on the other hand, are conceptualized as the antagonistic, repressive enemy (Moffitt 2016: 43–44). Several semiotic resources are used in the investigated Internet memes to indicate the status of certain groups as antagonistic elites. Depicted below are two such examples.



Img. 1: Translation: ‘And then I told them, we’re liberating women with this.’ (punctuation added). Source: <https://www.facebook.com/operationlibero/photos/5065286220212972> (28.12.21)



Img. 2: Translation: ‘And then Mrs Merkel said ‘we can do it’’. Source: <https://imgflip.com/i/xkchh> (23.12.21)

In both of them, we see images of groups of rich men drinking alcohol while seemingly attending an exclusive party as indicators of wealth and conspiratorial power. The semiotic resources applied to convey this impression are the black and white suits the men are wearing, their formal hairstyle as well as the bottle and glasses, apparently containing alcoholic drinks. None of the depicted figures seem aware of the camera but are focused on laughing, even guffawing, with each other. Img. 1 shows a commonly used stock image macro of Ronald Reagan, George Bush Sr. and other high-level US-American politicians laughing. Img. 2 also shows laughing men, this time in a film still from Martin Scorsese’s Mafia-movie *Goodfellas*. In both cases, however, the images have been de-contextualized. Only through the written text above and below the image, it is revealed within which discursive context the images have been recontextualized. The text in img. 1, which translates to “and then I told them we’re liberating women with this” refers to the political campaign around the ban of face-covering clothing, especially the Niqab, in Switzerland in 2020. The proponents’ suggestion that this ban is about liberating women is framed as nothing more than a joke, causing everyone visible in the meme to laugh at the statement. The message of the meme thus goes against a political idea (a ban of certain religious garments) that many far-right or right-wing populist parties endorse and it could therefore be classified

as anti-populist, if only the content of the written text was taken into account. However, this does not negate the fact that many elements of the image can be defined as populist: It is the typical constellation for the “and then I told them”-meme (alternatively also called “and then I said”-meme), where the idea of elites laughing behind closed doors is conveyed.

Img. 2 relies on rich mobsters, instead of politicians, but the framework remains the same: several white men in suits, a Champagne bottle placed half out of frame in the bottom of the image, laughing scornfully over a false statement they made to the public. In this case, the verbal text translates to “and then I told them ‘we can do it’”, referencing German chancellor Angela Merkel’s famous statement “we can do it” with regard to the refugee situation in 2015. The interpretation of img. 2 remains a bit more open as the text retells what Merkel said without the more classical allusion to her being the one making the statement. Nevertheless, Merkel’s statement is framed as ridiculous and delusional. Many “and then I said”-memes allude to a secretive, powerful elite laughing about the lies they have been telling those less powerful. Implicitly, img. 2 also invokes a second enemy concept, namely that of the *outsiders* (often immigrants), who are also constructed as adversaries to *the people* (Weidacher 2020: 233). The meme thus connects to a larger narrative: that a political elite is putting the needs of foreigners (mainly refugees and immigrants) ahead of *the people*, which are separate from both foreigners and the political class (cf. e.g. Weidacher 2020). Img. 2 thus reiterates a common right-wing populist idea, which often culminates in the Great Replacement Theory, a far-right conspiracy theory, predicting the replacement of the so-called white race with Muslim immigrants, engineered by technocratic elites (Cosentino 2020: 74–75). Images 1 and 2 thus have two very different purposes within their populist format: one uses populist imagery to make a non-populist point (i.e. opposing a ban on Burqas), while the other expresses a well-known populist narrative. This shows that it is possible to use populist visual elements while the content of the written text can be classified as non- or even anti-populist.

Both images rely heavily on the written text as well as wider discursive knowledge for the creation of meaning. It is only through the written elements of the memes that the readers understand within which discourse the image has been recontextualized, confirming Roslyng and Larsen’s observation that the text in memes serves as “an anchorage of the meaning” (Roslyng, Larsen 2021: 10). In “and then I said”-memes, the written text also constructs the reason for why the people depicted are laughing. However, the image part contributes significantly to the image of a malevolent elite, as often seen in populist texts. In the paragraphs

above, I have identified several semiotic resources used to signify wealth and mark the figure in the image as part of the elite: for one, the formal attire of the men depicted, the champagne visible in both images and the fact that they are laughing among each other, paying no mind to the camera recording them. The combination of these resources conveys the image of a powerful (white) gentlemen's club, laughing in closed spaces unattainable to what populism constructs as *the people*. These *people*, on the other hand, are absent, outside the frame, referenced only implicitly in the verbal texts, for instance, as addressees of the lies told by the elites. This can also be observed in the written text of the meme below referring to the commoners as *Pöbel*, a German word roughly the equivalent of the English expression *plebs* or *commoners*.



Img. 3: Translated: ‘Traveling like the plebs. Being on the dole like plebs.’ Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/Austria/comments/nuyq50/geht_ab_wie_schmids_katze/ (10.09.21)

Pöbel, uttered by now-resigned Austrian politician Thomas Schmid², can be categorized as a *stigma word* (cf. Spitzmüller, Warnke 2011). Stigma words, first described by Fritz Hermanns as words that stigmatize its object in some way (Hermanns 1994: 20), “are used by (...) a group in order to pejoratively assess others” (Spitzmüller, Warnke 2011: 83). It was used in one of Schmid’s leaked private emails in which he stated that, without his diplomatic passport, he was forced to travel with those he called the *Pöbel*. This caused an outrage among parts of the population, which, along with other reasons, led to his resignation. Schmid’s image is cropped onto the body of Drake, a rapper and a millionaire who is depicted wearing his emblematic orange Moncler jacket³ on this “Don’t Like/Like” stock character macro⁴, symbolizing how Schmid, having formerly

² For context: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/oebag-chef-tritt-nach-chats-ueber-poebel-und-fluechtlinge-zurueck-17378925.html> (10.09.21).

³ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/10/drake-hotline-bling-moncler-jacket> (21.09.22).

⁴ For other examples can be found here: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/drakeposting> (20.09.21).

disapproved of travelling like the plebs, now needs to apply for unemployment money like the plebs. The image expresses a certain *schadenfreude* over the penalization of a government official after having expressed elitist attitudes. Indirectly, this meme thus also connects to the populist idea of a malevolent elite ruling politics that conceives itself as above *the people* and needs punishment.

A different conceptualization of the elite is shown in the following example from the satirical Facebook channel Heute Show.



Img. 4: Translated: ‘Today, the parliamentary summer break starts. Finally, more time for extra income.’ Source: <https://www.facebook.com/heuteshow/photos/a.302789020985/10158138229920986/> (28.12.21)

Once again, the image presents a white man, an omnipresent symbol of power and wealth, this time, however, by showing only the lower part of his body, so no facial expression can be seen. In this example, the allusion to wealth is very explicit: two suitcases filled with Euro notes represent the money parliamentary politicians make on the side of their parliamentary duties. A striking difference can be found in the clothing, however: the figure is dressed in shorts and white socks in sandals specifying the German context, as this attire is considered to be stereotypically German⁵. Apart from the money, the depicted figure is thus barely discernible from common Germans, undermining the populist elite vs. people-dichotomy. So, while the meme plays into the populist narrative of an evil elite hoarding wealth for themselves (as shown by the suitcases of money politicians wrongfully earn on the side), in other ways it presents politicians as not visibly discernible from *the people*. It does, however, still play into the populist narrative of politicians using their positions of power to enrich themselves even more.

⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/germans-socks-and-sandals-an-exploration-of-the-cliche/a-49689654> (14.9.21)

Certain clothing items, requisites such as money suitcases and champagne glasses as well as gender and ethnicity can thus be considered semiotic resources identified in the examples analysed. These semiotic choices are made not only to visually construct an elite but also to depict this elite as evil and adversary to the common people, who are not depicted and only sparsely mentioned in the text. All these resources can be considered requisites for the performance of populist style.

5. Bad Manners: Showing the Unshowable, Saying the Unsayable

Bad manners, described by Moffitt as “a coarsening of political rhetoric, and a disregard for ‘appropriate’ modes of acting in the political realm” (Moffitt 2016: 44) are the second feature of populist style. Weidacher (2020: 234) describes it as a violation of previously valid communication rules, which can be manifested in aggressive wording or the breaking of moral norms within language use. It also includes features such as the usage of slang, political incorrectness or swearing. Bad manners stand in contrast to the technocratic style, which appeals to good manners, expertise and emotional neutrality (Moffitt 2016, 46). Going against what is societally accepted as appropriate speech has been observed as a key feature of populist expression. Especially for right-wing populism, anti-political correctness has become a key feature of their political discourse (Schröter 2019: 44). Römer and Spieß, for example, have observed that right-wing populism shifts the boundary of what is acceptable, sayable, to utter in society (Römer, Spieß 2019: 8). Often, these populists present themselves as antagonists to an autocratic society, where political correctness has limited what can be said in public. Bad manners can thus be understood as the conscious crossing of certain boundaries of what can or cannot be said in the public discourse of a particular cultural context (Moffitt 2016: 44). Bad manners have also been recognized as a common feature in Internet memes: Milner has observed the frequent usage of racist and sexist jokes as well as general impoliteness and antagonization in memes (Milner 2016: 145–147). While bad manners and political incorrectness, in general, are often analysed in spoken or written language (cf. Schröter 2019), images also offer a wide range of semiotic resources that push the boundaries of what is acceptable. In many cases, the inappropriateness of memetic communication is conveyed via inappropriate images. Sex and nudity are examples of this, as shown in the image below.



Img. 5. Source: <https://twitter.com/Raupin2/status/1413111090632921092> (11.12.21)

The text recontextualises the image and assigns the depicted figure its roles in the meme: the woman thus symbolising the taxpayer in whose lap a monkey, titled ÖVP (the political party currently leading Austria) copulates with another monkey who is representing democracy. The act depicted in the image is still framed as inappropriate, as indicated by the disgusted look of the woman in the image making the crossing of boundaries apparent. It is not denied that showcasing the act depicted crosses certain societal norms, made to bring across the point that the ÖVP is harming democracy. Another example of this can be seen in the image below, which is a commentary on the 2021 national elections in Germany, where the candidate Armin Laschet is represented by a nude man running after a boar, representing his political opponent Olaf Scholz, and the clothes in the boar's mouth, which in turn represent Scholz' favourable polling.



Img. 6. Source: <https://twitter.com/oermemes/status/1430194123135492099> (30.09.21)

While the meme can be read as merely a political commentary rather than representing a certain ideology, Laschet is depicted in an unfavourable and vulgar way that would be unacceptable in conventional political media. Other ways politicians are depicted in Memes is in edited images, as shown in img. 3

or the example below (img. 7), or in unfavourable poses or facial expressions such as the recently gone viral Meme of Merkel feeding and being attacked by a number of tropical birds (img. 8). While img. 8 is merely an unflattering picture of a high-profile politician, img. 7 has some deeper implications. It shows a recontextualization of an image of former chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock into the Trojan horse from Greek mythology, which is being welcomed inside the fortified city, its inhabitants unaware of the danger hidden inside. Inside the Horse, symbols of the Soviet Union, Antifa and Extinction Rebellion – semiotic resources used to represent what can be perceived as far-left ideology. Baerbock is thus portrayed as a secret endorser of these ideologies, invoking the topos⁶ of the danger of a far-left takeover (c.f. Chapter 6).



Img. 7. Translation: ‘Chancellor’s position’, <https://twitter.com/csumemes/status/1384104593194319873> (28.12.21)



Img. 8. Translation: ‘Still all hands full!’ Source: <https://www.facebook.com/dw.german/posts/10158680060417956> (30.09.2021)

⁶ Topoi can be defined as patterns of argumentation, recurring argumentations in political speech (Girnth 2015: 36). Wodak (2015: 53) has compiled a list of content-related topoi in right-wing populist rhetoric, some of which can be recognized in this analysis.

Other memes also make use of violent imagery, such as the example below cropping the face of German politician Armin Laschet (representing his entire party) on the face of an armed man pointing a machine gun towards the viewer of the meme. It was published by a meme favourable to Laschet’s party meaning that the meme is expressing a favourable opinion on the actions depicted. Here, *calculated ambivalence* comes into play, a “rhetorical principle” (Reisigl 2020: 204), which occurs “when a controversial visual text conveys ambiguous messages and thus becomes open to multiple readings that can subsequently be used to reject any responsibility for a misunderstood message” (Wagner, Schwarzenegger: 325, i.e. Engel, Wodak 2012). It is left ambiguous how serious the message of the image is to be taken and whether it is supposed to express sympathies for the depicted Laschet. However, since it was published by a meme page favourable of Laschet’s party, the meme likely expresses a favourable opinion of the actions depicted.



Img. 9: Translation: ‘The Union (German parties CDU and CSU) when leftists want to expropriate property.’ Source: <https://twitter.com/csumemes/status/1437752630382632963> (30.09.21)

Regardless of the political opinions voiced in the memes, their communication style in these memes is far-removed from the technocratic style. Depicting sex, nudity, and violence as well as cropping images or showing politicians in unfavourable situations can be deemed as bad manners in the context of the political discourse. The memes exhibited above represent a wide range of political positions with some of them being ambiguous in their political expression, showing that bad manners as described by Moffitt (2016) or Weidacher (2020) are not reserved for right-wing populism when it comes to Internet memes.

In this usage of bad manners in Internet memes, we see a certain overlap with satirical texts in general, which use aggression and attack, often in the form of vulgar imagery or text, to make a political critique (Caufield 2012: 7 ff). Satirical outlets have in some cases also been investigated for their usage of Internet memes as a new form of satirical expression (Morger 2020; Wagner, Schwarzenegger 2020). Wagner and Schwarzenegger confirm the close linkage of populism with political humour in general and satire in specific. Hereby, satire is not bound to a specific political agenda “and right-wing activists and other alternative groups can easily mobilize satirical strategies to articulate their political messages and slogans” (Wagner, Schwarzenegger 2020: 317). Satirical humour is furthermore often used to cloak populist talking points potentially too offensive for the mainstream political discourse. Wagner and Schwarzenegger describe the process of calculated ambivalence as a strategy that “allows discrediting any criticism as an oversensitive reaction by all too-politically correct nitpickers who won’t let a harmless joke be just that: a joke” (Wagner, Schwarzenegger 2020: 314). Bad manners can therefore be seen not only as characteristic of populism but of several forms of political expression not in line with the more mainstream, technocratic style and satire and political humour used within populism as “combustive agents and lubricants of populist communication” (Wagner, Schwarzenegger 2020: 323).

6. This Is (Not) Fine: How Memes Construe Crises in Image and Text

The third characteristic of populism is the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat, and “evocation of emergency” (Moffitt 2016: 45), which Weidacher calls *the dramatization of the crisis-like* (Weidacher 2020: 234). The crisis is created via performance, for example via the usage of certain vocabulary such as *a flood of refugees* to describe people fleeing to European countries, as has been done extensively by right-wing populists (Weidacher 2020: 234). This coincides with Wodak’s conceptualization of the topos of threat or danger, applied in right-wing populist discourses (Wodak 2015: 53). Wodak identifies fear as the main fuel of this rhetoric: “fear of change, of globalization, of loss of welfare [...]”; in principle, almost anything can be constructed as a threat to ‘Us’ [...]”. The analysed memes, while not necessarily disseminating far-right rhetoric, still perform a crisis connected to political events in German-speaking countries. The following image is one example of a stock character performing a crisis in an Austrian political discourse.



Img 10. Translation: ‘Yesterday afternoon in parliament’. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/COK1ilOi3AV/> (1.10.21)

Img. 10 shows a variation of the so-called “this is fine”-meme, a meme commonly used to comment on disturbing news or crises. We see a drawing of a dog with a speech bubble stating “this is fine” cropped into a photograph of stacked boxes. The image of the dog and the speech bubble are essential parts of the original “this is fine”-meme, which is derived from the comic strip below:



Img. 11. Source: <http://gunshowcomic.com/648> (1.10.2021)

The meme made out of this comic strip is used to express distraughtness at the seeming obliviousness to an ongoing crisis (as in the house burning down while you are sitting inside), as shown in the example below (img. 12), where the image has been kept while the speech bubble has been altered, in order to comment on the government reopening the economy during the Corona-pandemic.



Img. 12. Source: <https://couriernewsroom.com/2020/06/26/best-coronavirus-memes-on-the-internet-right-now/> (28.12.21)

By replacing the written element of the meme, img. 12 thus expresses concern at the government's plan to reopen the economy, framing it as oblivious to an ongoing crisis (in this case the pandemic). In the aforementioned img. 10, a recontextualization has also occurred, this time a visual recontextualization: the flames in the background of the original meme have been replaced by mountains of boxes with files concerning an Austrian political scandal (the Ibiza-affair)⁷. These files have been classified as 'secret' by the current government, potentially hindering a further investigation into the scandal⁸. The many boxes with classified files are thus presented as threatening, equalling the flames of the original meme. The striking feature of this meme, however, remains: the stark contrast between the calm smile and declaration "this is fine" and the actual situation surrounding the main character, namely that everything around it is, symbolically, on fire, thus pointing out how the situation is, in truth, not fine. The memes thus present the Ibiza-affair as a serious crisis happening in the Austrian parliament. The smiling dog in the comic strip can thus be decontextualised in different crisis situations. Inserting the dog and its speech bubble into the press photograph of secret government files, img. 10, frames the situation as disturbing and a crisis.

⁷ The Ibiza-Affair concerns a secretly recorded video from 2019 of two high-level Austrian politicians attempting to buy a positive news coverage from a supposed Russian oligarch. This led to the collapse of the government and subsequent early elections. More information: <https://www.thelocal.at/20190526/what-you-need-to-know-about-austrias-ibiza-gate-video/> (4.11.22).

⁸ More can be found here: <https://www.tt.com/artikel/30791823/nach-debatte-um-aktenberge-bluemel-stufte-dokumente-nun-doch-herab> (1.10.2021).

The second example, shown in img. 13, also uses a range of stock characters commonly used in Internet memes.



Img. 13. Translation: 2020. “Lol those stupid Americans have to decide between Trump and sleepy Joe.” – “Both are crap, this could never happen in our political system. xD” 2021. “So, are we going to vote for Scholz or Baerbock to prevent Laschet?” – “Please kill me.” (capitalization and punctuation mine). Source: <https://twitter.com/erdkadse/status/1429461293665247236?lang=ar-x-fm> (28.12.21)

The first line, titled 2020, shows two so-called yes-chads⁹. *Chad* is a term that stems from Incel¹⁰ vocabulary and is used to describe the so-called “alpha males of jock culture” (Ging 2019, 650), who are considered sexually attractive and desired by women (Gothard et al. 2021: 2–3). A yes-chad can therefore be seen as a man living up to societal standards of masculinity, embodying desirability and success. The second line implies that the characters are the same, just a year later, when the situation has drastically changed: instead of deriding US-Americans for having to choose the lesser of two evils, the two are now trying to decide who to vote for in the German 2021-election, even contemplating death to avoid the choices available. In this second line, the characters are no longer represented by yes-chads but rather two Wojack meme characters. Wojack meme characters are

⁹ Cf.: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/yes-chad> (2.12.2021).

¹⁰ Incel, short for involuntary celibate, refers to “an online community of men who bear antipathy towards themselves, women, and society-at-large for their perceived inability to find and maintain sexual relationships” (Gothard et al. 2021).

commonly used to indicate sadness, melancholy or loneliness (Dafaure 2020: 12), often commenting on the dystopian state of a late capitalist society¹¹, with the shrivelled Wojack in the bottom-left corner being the personification of complete hopelessness and doom. These meme characters are therefore used as semiotic resources to make a statement regarding the German elections, which are framed as an impossible choice between (almost) equally disliked politicians. Not only does it express discontent about the perceived dilemma but, by using the Wojack characters, the situation is framed as downright dystopian and hopeless. It also feeds into a common populist narrative of political crisis with a corrupt political elite that has nothing in common with the people. Both analysed examples make use of stock character macros which are commonly used to frame a situation as a crisis. It can therefore be argued that these memes inherently carry this characteristic of populist style.

7. Populist Memes or Memes with Populism?

The analysis of examples of memes that carry traits of populist style (drawing on Moffitt 2016), has revealed that certain meme formats can be considered particularly well-suited for distributing populist messages. Imgs. 1 and 2 tend to represent an antagonistic elite regardless of the context in which they are put; the dog in img. 10 as well as the Wojack memes in img. 13 work because they generally represent crisis or dystopianism. This, therefore, raises the question if certain memes are predisposed to be populist when used in political contexts. Agreeing with the conceptualization of Moffitt to view populist style as a spectrum rather than a binary, there is a good case that certain memes are populist simply because the semiotic resources they provide are particularly well-suited for populist messages. This is especially true for stock character macros which have certain moods or character trades connected to them.

To classify memes as populist remains problematic, however, as they often do not fit neatly in the conventional categories of populist discourse, being very densified multimodal texts with little to no written language. Therefore, they often do not exhibit certain indicators of populist style, while still keeping other significant features of populism. Definitively classifying a meme as populist

¹¹ An example of this is the “healthcare pls”-meme commonly used during the 2020 US-primary elections (<https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/healthcare-pls-meme-leftism> (1.10.21)) or the following compilation of Wojack-memes (<https://twitter.com/TeefaAnt/status/1441002699164725250> (1.10.21)). Another example contrasting a yes-chad with a Wojack meme can be found here: <https://twitter.com/DFSRants/status/1443391750635065345> (1.10.21).

remains therefore problematic as their form can exclude them from some definitions of populism. One of the memes (img. 1) even contains an anti-populist message in the written text by arguing against a common populist idea of banning certain religious clothing items, while still making use of the visual aesthetic of a malevolent elite typical of populist style. However, I argue that Moffitt's gradational perspective on populism allows for the analysed memes to be placed somewhere on the populist spectrum. Therefore, the examples presented in this study show that it is possible to identify and discuss certain key features of populism in Internet memes, also taking into account their multimodality.

8. Concluding Remarks

Due to the heterogeneous material investigated, very diverse expressions of populism with differing purposes were investigated, exposing that populist expression in memes can take a wide variety of shapes. While some expressed populist opinions in favour of or against a specific party or politician, others express political commentary or criticize the political class as a whole in a populist manner. All of them, however, represent certain features of populist style. Certain stock image macros are particularly well-suited for populist expression: the image of high-profile US politicians lends itself to depictions of an antagonistic elite of any kind. And the dog sitting in the middle of a house on flames is commonly used to indicate a dramatic crisis.

No attempt has been made to investigate whether all three characteristics of populist style can be represented in a singular meme, even though it could be argued that some of the analysed memes display more than one characteristic of populism. If populist style is viewed as a spectrum rather than a binary of populism and non-populism, many political memes can be described as populist, regardless of whether all features appear. Numerous semiotic resources are used to convey these populist features, ranging from certain clothing items and colours to image backgrounds as well as image manipulation such as cropping.

While this study does not give any quantification of how widespread memes addressing populism are, it shows that memes can indeed be a vehicle for populist discourse and reveals how they relate to the wider public discourse and what semiotic resources are applied within them. An explanation for their existence can be that memes represent a certain shift in media towards the so-called *new audience* (Mandiberg 2012), which is more user-generated, and bottom-up, as opposed to the more conventional audience of television and newspapers. My

findings thus confirm Roslyng and Larsen's observation that digital media provide a space where counter-hegemonic positions can develop. And as memes become a more common tool for politicians as well as politically engaged Internet users to comment on political issues, further investigations into how memes and populism are connected become necessary.

Since populism has become a prominent phenomenon in large parts of the politically-aware population, its representation within bottom-up phenomena like memes can be seen as inevitable. Therefore, my findings represent an approach to the overarching question of why memes resonate with new audiences and their political impact – even though the extent of this political impact remains uncertain. Ultimately understanding the populist features of memes can help not only in understanding the dynamics of social movements on social media but might also help identify and combat misinformation of ill-intended actors such as in the case of Fake News and social media campaigns meant to disrupt democratic elections.

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