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Measuring people-centrism in populist political discourse: A linguistic approach

Abstract

In recent years, a growing body of political-scientific literature has focused on the empirical measurement of populism. In such studies, “people-centrism” is one of the most frequently analysed discourse characteristics, i.e. to what extent “the people” are put in the focus of attention in a politician’s discourse. In order to measure people-centrism empirically, it is common practice to use the number of references to the electorate as the only indicator. In this contribution, however, I argue that *the way in which* politicians refer to “the people” should be taken into account as well. By presenting a case study from Dutch politics, in which the populist Geert Wilders plays an important role, I substantiate that analysing the *syntactic position* in which “the people” are presented and the strategic use of *perspective* or *attributed viewpoint* deepens our understanding of how (populist) politicians put “the people” in the centre of attention in their discourse. As such this contribution also aims to demonstrate how a linguistic approach to populism can contribute to the empirical measurement of populism.

People-centrism, measuring populism, linguistic choices, Geert Wilders, Alexander Pechtold

Introduction

A relatively new development in the vast field of studies on populism is the increasing interest of political scientists in the question how populism can be measured empirically (cf. Akkerman et al. 2014:5; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011:1272).¹ In the last fifteen years, political scientists have started using systematic textual analysis to address this question (e.g. Bonikowski and Gidron 2016; Rooduijn et al. 2014; Vossen 2010; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009; Hawkins 2009). Starting point for this type of populism research is the assumption that a systematic analysis of discourse characteristics can reveal empirically to what extent politicians or political parties can be characterized as “populist”.²

One of the discourse characteristics most frequently used for measuring populism empirically, is the characteristic of “people-centrism” (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017:194; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016:114), i.e. to what extent “the people” are put in the focus of attention in a politician’s discourse. This focus on “people-centrism” is a logical one: although there is an ongoing debate in political science on how “populism” should be defined exactly, it is generally acknowledged that people-centrism is a key characteristic of populism (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017:194).³ By

¹ This contribution is a revised version of a part of an article that appeared in Dutch in *Tijdschrift voor Taalbeheersing* 37(1) 2015: 33-78, and of a part of my dissertation (Van Leeuwen 2015). I would like to thank Ton van Haaften, Jaap de Jong, Ninke Stukker, Matthijs Looij, two anonymous reviewers of *Tijdschrift voor Taalbeheersing* and the editors of the current volume for their valuable comments on draft versions.

² In political science, it is still a matter of debate whether “populism” should be conceptualized as a binary category or as a gradational concept (Moffitt 2016:46; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017:194-195; see also Zienkowski and Breeze, this volume). In the former approach it is assumed that politicians or parties can be characterized as either “populist” or “not populist”; in the latter, populism is seen as a gradual phenomenon (i.e. politicians or parties can be characterized as more or less populist). Most studies focusing on the empirical measurement of populism, adopt this “matter of degree” approach.

³ See De Cleen (this volume), Pauwels (2014) and Moffitt (2016) for an overview of various definitions of populism. I will not further address the question how “populism” should be defined precisely – that question is beyond the scope of this contribution.

systematically putting “the people” in the centre of attention, populists suggest that they, more than other politicians, stand up for the interests and will of “the common man” (e.g. Moffitt 2016; Pauwels 2014; Canovan 1981).

In order to measure “people-centrism” in political discourse, it is common practice to use the number of references to the electorate as the only indicator (e.g. Stockemer and Barisione 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Pauwels 2014; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). In other words, the frequency with which such references occur, is used by political scientists to measure the centrality of “the people” in the discourse of a certain politician.⁴ However, in this contribution I will argue that the frequency in which politicians refer to “the people” is not the only relevant measure for assessing people-centrism in (populist) political discourse. By presenting a case study from Dutch politics, I will show that *the way in which* politicians refer to “the people” is of crucial importance as well, by highlighting two linguistic phenomena that in the analysis of populist political discourse have received scant attention so far. On the one hand, I will substantiate that the *syntactic position* in which “the people” are presented should be taken into account when measuring people-centrism: I will argue that politicians can put “the people” more or less in the centre of attention by syntactically referring to them in subject, complement or

However, there is general consensus that “anti-elitism” and “people-centrism” are at the heart of populism (cf. Zienkowski and Breeze, this volume; De Cleen, this volume; see also Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017:194; Moffitt 2016:43). This contribution focuses on one of these key characteristics, and more specifically on its linguistic realization.

⁴ Jagers and Walgrave (2007), whose study has been called “a breakthrough in measuring populism” (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011:1273), formulate the idea that there is a link between people-centrism and the frequency of references to the electorate as follows: Political actors (...) frequently use words such as ‘(the) people’, ‘(the) public’, ‘(the) citizen(s)’, ‘(the) voter(s)’, ‘(the) taxpayer(s)’, ‘(the) resident(s)’, ‘(the) consumer(s)’ and ‘(the) population’. By referring to the people, a political actor claims that he or she cares about the people’s concerns, that he or she primarily wants to defend the interests of the people, that he or she is not alienated from the public but knows what the people really want. The implicit (...) motto is: ‘I listen to you because I talk about you.’ (Jagers and Walgrave 2007:323)

adjunct position. On the other hand, I will substantiate that for measuring people-centrism in political discourse the strategic use of *perspective* or *viewpoint* is of relevance too, by highlighting how this linguistic technique can be used by (populist) politicians in order to create the impression that “the people” play a central role in their discourse.

This chapter aims to contribute to the study of populism in two ways. First, this contribution aims to deepen our understanding of how (populist) politicians can put “the people” in the centre of attention in their discourse. By highlighting two fine-grained linguistic techniques that have infrequently been studied in the analysis of (populist) political discourse, I aim to show how taking these linguistic phenomena into account can enrich the study of “people-centrism”. Second, on a more programmatic level, this contribution also aims to demonstrate how a linguistic approach to populist discourse can contribute to the empirical measurement of populism. Focusing on how the empirical measurement of “people-centrism” can be enriched by linguistic insights is a means to this end.⁵

To make my points, I will present a comparative linguistic analysis of four speeches that were delivered in Dutch parliament by the radical populist Geert Wilders, and by one of his main political critics, named Alexander Pechtold. After introducing the case study in more detail in the next section, I will investigate the centrality of “the people” in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches, not only by looking at the frequency with which both politicians referred to “the people”, but also by investigating to what extent “the people” are placed syntactically in subject, complement or adjunct position and by looking at the way “the people” are attributed their own “perspective”. I will demonstrate that important differences in people-

⁵ De Cleen (this volume) pleads among other things for stronger empirical analyses of how “the people” are constructed in (populist) political discourse. Firstly, this contribution highlights two infrequently studied linguistic tools for doing this. Secondly, this contribution sketches directions for how a linguistic approach can be of help for studying other key characteristics of populist discourse in an empirical way as well (see also the concluding section).

centrism between Wilders and Pechtold would be overlooked if the analysis were to focus on the number of references to “the people” alone. In the conclusion, the main findings will be summarized and their implications for the study of populism will be discussed.

Geert Wilders and Alexander Pechtold and the General Debates of 2008 and 2009

According to political scientists, the Dutch politician Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), can be seen as “textbook example” of populism (Pauwels 2014:118; Vossen 2016). In the last decade, Wilders has, for instance, systematically pointed at a dichotomic division between “the people” and “the elite” in his parliamentary contributions, thereby attacking his fellow politicians fiercely for ignoring major problems that “the people” are facing, and suggesting time and again that he, as no other politician in the Netherlands, voices “the people’s” concerns. In his discourse, Wilders suggests that the neglected problems that “the people” are facing are to an important extent causally linked to what he calls the “Islamification of the Netherlands”. Wilders has fiercely been criticized for this, as well as for the “folksy” and “vulgar” way (Vossen 2011:185) in which he often presents his political ideas.

The politician who has opposed Wilders most systematically and fiercely in Dutch parliament in the last ten years, is Alexander Pechtold. Between 2006 and 2018, Pechtold was the leader of D66 (a progressive liberal party). During this period, he has frequently declared himself openly against populism, stressing that it is important that the Dutch political system is an *indirect* democracy, in which politicians get a mandate from the electorate to make decisions autonomously. Pechtold has argued various times that there should be a certain distance between members of parliament and the

electorate: according to him, politicians should not act as a mouthpiece of “the people”, but should try to convince “the people” of the rightness of autonomously made political decisions (Van Leeuwen 2015:97-98).

The case study that I will be analysing, consists of the speeches that Wilders and Pechtold delivered during the so called “General Debates” of 2008 and 2009. The General Debate is a debate that is held annually at the start of the parliamentary year. It receives a lot of media attention; as such it is pre-eminently a debate that is used by the leaders of the various political parties to present their political position(s) – they try to present their political profile for a broad public. A systematic analysis of media judgments that appeared after the General Debates of 2008 and 2009 indicates that Wilders’ and Pechtold’s positioning in these debates was in line with their overall political image sketched above: Wilders came across as a “populist” who positioned himself emphatically as an anti-elitist and as a “spokesman of the people”, while Pechtold came across as a more elitist politician, who kept a certain distance to “the man in the street” (Van Leeuwen 2015:93-99).

Based on this different positioning, it can be expected that in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches a difference in people-centrism can be observed: one would expect “the people” to be put more in the centre of attention in Wilders’ speeches than in Pechtold’s addresses.

In order to measure empirically whether this is the case, I will investigate in the next section *the frequency* in which both politicians refer to “the people”. However, unlike previous studies, this frequency analysis will not be used as the only indicator for people-centrism: I will also investigate *the way in which* Wilders and Pechtold refer to “the people” by looking at two linguistic phenomena that have thus far received scant attention in the analysis of (populist) political discourse. I will argue that studying these linguistic phenomena quantitatively and qualitatively enriches the measurement of people-centrism in (populist) political discourse in important ways.

Referring to “the people” or not

Starting from the intersubjective impressions indicating that Wilders, more than Pechtold, presented himself as a “spokesman of the people”, and from the idea that a politician can put “the people” in the centre of attention by frequently referring to the electorate, one would expect that in Wilders’ speeches more references to the electorate can be found than in Pechtold’s speeches. In order to investigate whether this is the case, all references to “the people” in the four speeches were counted. These references included: references to people or groups of people in society (see examples (1) to (3)),⁶ references to *the Netherlands* when used metonymically to stand in for Dutch citizens (cf. (4)), and impersonal pronouns like *everyone* or *nobody* when the context indicates that these words refer to citizens (cf. (5)).

- (1) You are misleading *people*, prime minister. (P08.92)⁷
- (2) (...) when TomTom had 60 vacancies for engineers, *no Dutchman* put in an application. (P08.126)
- (3) We would have been able to arrange a private room for *all elderly people in nursing homes* (...). (W08.140)
- (4) *All of the Netherlands* is very welcome to contribute their ideas. (W09.120)

⁶ An exception was made for negative references to the electorate, i.e. references in which it is clear from the context that Wilders and Pechtold talk about (parts of) the electorate in a negative way: such instances are not part of the type of references to the electorate as meant by Jagers and Walgrave (2007) (cf. footnote 4). Thus, an example as (i) has not been taken into account: (i) Madam Chairman, *the scum* who is grabbed by the scruff of the neck also has to receive real penalties, (...). (W09.171)

⁷ The abbreviations in brackets indicate the speaker and the year the excerpt is taken from, followed by the specific line in the speech. In other words, “P08.92” indicates that excerpt (1) is sentence 92 from Pechtold’s speech during the General Debate of 2008. All examples are translated from Dutch by the author; the Dutch equivalents can be found in Van Leeuwen (2015).

- (5) (...) It will be possible for *everyone* to participate via the new website that we will launch in the near future: www.whatdoesmassimmigrationcost.nl. (W09.121)

The results of the quantitative analysis can be found in Table 1.

Speaker	2008	2009
Geert Wilders	72 (2.5)	48 (1.5)
Alexander Pechtold	32 (1.6)	34 (1.8)

Table 1: Number of references to “the people” in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches: absolute numbers and per 100 words (in brackets).

Statistical analysis⁸ reveals that Wilders in his 2008 speech refers significantly more often to “the people” than Pechtold – which is in line with what was expected.⁹ However, during the General Debate of 2009, there is no significant difference between the two politicians.¹⁰ These results suggest that Wilders during the General Debate of 2008 put voters more in the centre of attention than Pechtold; for the General Debate of 2009, such a conclusion cannot be drawn.

However, if the measurement of people-centrism in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches stopped here, important differences between the speeches of both politicians would be overlooked. In the next sections, I will show that the differences in people-centrism between Wilders and Pechtold are actually bigger than the frequencies in Table 1 suggest. On the one hand, I will focus

⁸ The statistical analyses have been carried out by using the “Log-likelihood and effect size calculator” (<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>, last accessed on March 14, 2017) – unless mentioned differently (cf. footnote 14). A log-likelihood test enables a comparison between frequencies in corpora, even if the investigated phenomena are relatively rare (Vis et al. 2012:98). Abbreviations in the quantified data (see following footnotes) must be read as follows: GD = General Debate; 08 = 2008; 09 = 2009; W = Wilders; P = Pechtold; w = number of words.

⁹ GD08: W: 72/2909w vs. P: 32/2000w; LL = 4.43; $p < 0.05$.

¹⁰ GD09: W: 47/3163w vs. P: 34/1928w; LL = 0.44; $p > 0.05$.

on the question how Wilders and Pechtold refer syntactically to “the people” in subject, complement or adjunct position; on the other hand, Wilders’ and Pechtold’s use of “perspective” or “attributed viewpoint” will be highlighted. The analyses of these infrequently studied linguistic choices will show that Wilders and Pechtold put “the people” in the centre of attention to a different extent – not only in the General Debate of 2008, but in the General Debate of 2009 *as well*.

Presenting “the people” in subject, complement or adjunct position

Syntactic position and prominence of information

Viewed from a functional-syntactic perspective, a Dutch (or English) “sentence” consists of at least of a predicate (i.e. the main verb and any auxiliaries that accompany it) and a subject (cf. “John was laughing”). In addition to this, dependent on the meaning of the main verb, often one or more *complements* are evoked, i.e. constituents whose presence is required by the meaning of the main verb (Hasereyn et al. 2002: section 19.1.2). Usually, these complements are objects. For instance, transitive verbs require the presence of a direct object (cf. (6)); ditransitive verbs presuppose the presence of a direct and indirect object (cf. (7)).¹¹

(6) Carl beat Thomas.

¹¹ The fact that verbs, dependent on their meaning, presuppose the presence of certain complements does not mean that these complements are necessarily *explicitly* present in the sentence (cf. Hasereyn et al. 2002: section 19.1.2). In some cases, complements are obligatory to make the sentence grammatical (cf. the direct objects “Thomas” and “photo album” in (6)/(8) and (7)/(9) respectively), but this is not always the case. For instance, the indirect object “Trudy” in (7)/(9) could be left out of the sentence. However, if a complement does not appear in a sentence explicitly, its presence is still implied: the sentence “Hanna gave a photo album” implies that there was a receiver.

(7) Hanna gave Trudy a photo album.

The predicate, the subject and any complements arising from the main verb constitute the core of a sentence: the state or event that is represented in a sentence is described primarily with reference to these constituents. In addition to this “core”, a sentence often has one or more *adjuncts*: constituents whose presence is *not* evoked by the meaning of the main verb (Hasereyn et al. 2002: section 19.1.2) – cf. examples (8)-(9):

(8) Carl *finally* beat Thomas *during the cycling championship*.

(9) Hanna gave Trudy a photo album *on behalf of everyone*.

The information given in adjuncts is of an additional or specifying nature: adjuncts give additional information about what is expressed in the core of the sentence. Viewed this way, adjuncts have a relatively peripheral status compared to complements – which is also shown by the fact that adjuncts normally can be removed from a sentence without making the sentence ungrammatical (Hasereyn et al. 2002: section 19.1.2). It must be stressed that this distinction between complements and adjuncts does not say anything about the *newsworthiness* of the information presented in complements or adjuncts. It is well possible that it is primarily the information presented in adjuncts that is new to a reader or listener, while the information presented in the core of the sentence was already known. Adjuncts are “peripheral” in the sense that the state or event which is being talked about is primarily expressed in the core of the sentence.

In the light of the idea that politicians can put “the people” more or less in the centre of attention by referring more or less to “the people”, it is not only interesting to count the absolute number of references to the electorate,

but also to look at the *syntactic* position in which references to “the people” are presented. Given the functional-syntactic distinction between complements and adjuncts, a politician who refers to “the people” in complement position, presents “the people” more as “that what he is talking about”, i.e. more “in focus” than when “the people” are presented in adjunct position. This idea can be illustrated with examples (10) to (12), taken from Alexander Pechtold’s speeches.¹²

(10) There will be tax reductions for *citizens and companies*. (P08.38)

(11) What is needed now, is an optimistic view, a reform agenda with as its starting point equal chances *for insiders and outsiders, for singles and couples, for young and old people, and for present and future generations*. (P09.89)

(12) That is my prospect: a country with equal chances *for each individual* (...). (P09.131)

The references to “the people” in examples (10) to (12) are put in a relatively peripheral syntactic position: Pechtold places the references in adjunct position. As such, these references are presented as additional information to “tax reductions” (10), “a reform agenda” (11), and “a country with equal chances” (12) respectively, and could have been left out of the sentences without making them ungrammatical. In other words, Pechtold’s primary focus in (10) to (12) is not so much on “the people” he represents, but on abstract matters of policy. This is a linguistic choice, as is indicated by the possible alternative formulations in (13)-(15). Pechtold could have composed sentences (10) to (12) in such a way that the references to “the people” appear in the core of the sentence, namely in from the verb ensuing complement position of indirect object:

¹² More examples illustrating the phenomenon can be found in the next subsection.

- (13) The cabinet will give *citizens and companies* tax reductions.
- (14) What is needed now, is that we give *insiders and outsiders, singles and couples, young and old people, and present and future generations* equal chances through an optimistic view, a reform agenda taking this as its starting point.
- (15) That is my prospect: a country in which we give *each individual* equal chances.

In (13)-(15), the references to “the people” are placed in the core of the sentence. As a result, “the people” are not presented as additional information to abstract matters of policy (cf. (10)-(12)), but as a part of Pechtold’s central focus of attention.

However, it is possible to put “the people” even more in the centre of attention than is the case in examples (13) to (15). Cognitive and functional linguists have argued that there is also variation *within* the core of a sentence with regard to prominence of information. More precisely, it has been argued that information presented in the subject position of a clause is placed in the centre of attention most – more than when that same information would be presented in the complement position of direct or indirect object.¹³ This is the case for examples (13)-(15) indeed: when they are reformulated in such a way that the references to “the people” are put in subject position, “the people” are brought even closer to the centre of attention – cf. (16) to (18):

- (16) *Citizens and companies* will get tax reductions.

¹³ See the literature overview in Van Krieken et al. (2015:222) and Cornelis (2003:172-176). The idea that information in subject position is presented as the most prominent information in a sentence is also supported by experimental evidence (Tomlin 1997).

- (17) What is needed now, is that *insiders and outsiders, singles and couples, young and old people, and present and future generations* get equal chances, through an optimistic view, a reform agenda taking this as its starting point.
- (18) That is my prospect: a country in which *each individual* gets equal chances.

Examples like (16)-(18) raise the question whether Geert Wilders and Alexander Pechtold differ in the way in which they, syntactically speaking, referred to “the people”. Did Wilders and Pechtold differ in the frequencies in which they presented “the people” syntactically as subject, complement and adjunct in their speeches during the General Debates of 2008 and 2009? This question will be answered next.

Syntactic position of “the people” in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches

In order to investigate whether Wilders and Pechtold referred syntactically speaking in different ways to “the people”, all references to “the people” (cf. Table 1) were analysed for syntactic position. In other words, for all references to the electorate it was analysed whether these references were in subject, complement or adjunct position. Table 2 (General Debate 2008) and Table 3 (General Debate 2009) show the results of this analysis.

Syntactic position of “the people”	Geert Wilders	Alexander Pechtold
Subject	38 (52.8%)	12 (37.5%)
Complement	26 (36.1%)	13 (40.6%)
Adjunct	8 (11.1%)	7 (21.9%)

Table 2: References to “the people” broken down to syntactic position in the General Debate of 2008: absolute numbers and in percentages (in brackets).

Syntactic position of “the people”	Geert Wilders	Alexander Pechtold
Subject	26 (54.2%)	10 (29.4%)
Complement	14 (29.1%)	6 (17.6%)
Adjunct	8 (16.7%)	18 (47.1%)

Table 3: References to “the people” broken down to syntactic position in the General Debate of 2009: absolute numbers and in percentages (in brackets).

From Table 2 it can be deduced that during the General Debate of 2008, Wilders put references to “the people” more often in subject position than in complement or adjunct position. A similar pattern can be observed in the General Debate of 2009 (cf. Table 3): in Wilders’ speech, most references to “the people” have the status of subject; Wilders refers to “the people” in adjunct position least frequently. This also becomes clear from Figure 1, in which Wilders’ way of referring to “the people” is visualized (cf. Tables 1 and 2):

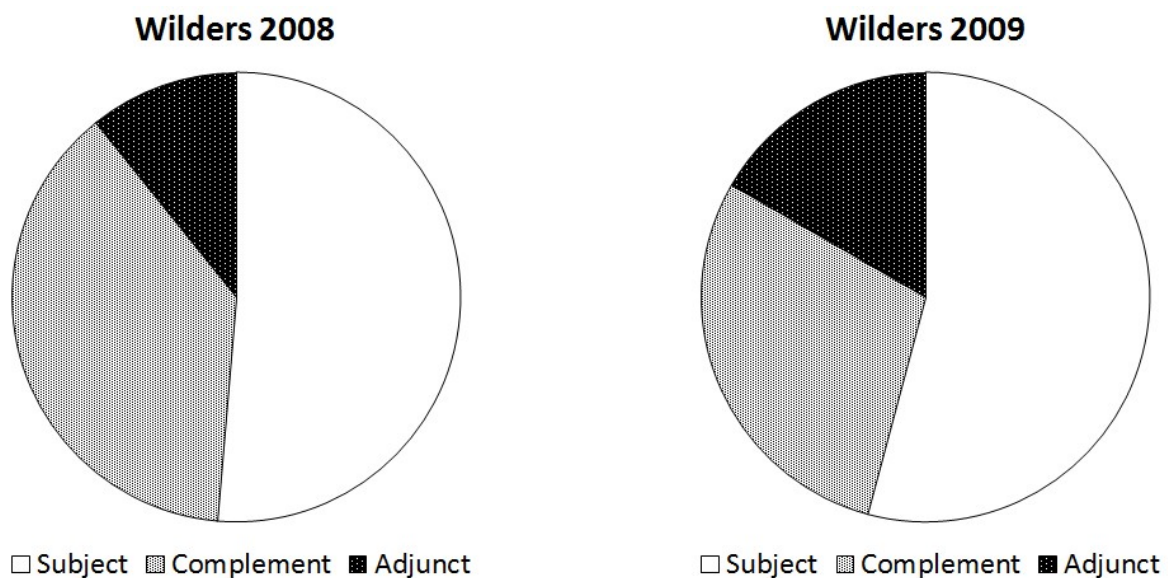


Figure 1: Visualization of the proportions in which Wilders referred to “the people” in subject, complement and adjunct position in his speeches during the General Debates of 2008 and 2009.

Figure 1 indicates that in both of Wilders’ speeches, the references to “the people” are asymmetrically distributed among the three syntactic positions. Statistical analysis reveals that this asymmetry deviates significantly from what can be expected by chance.¹⁴ In other words, both of Wilders’ speeches show a clear *pattern* in the way references to “the people” are distributed among the three syntactic categories. Further statistical analysis shows that Wilders refers significantly more often to “the people” in subject position than in adjunct position in both years; in 2008, the number of references in complement position significantly outnumber the number of references in adjunct position as well.¹⁵

A similar analysis for Alexander Pechtold reveals interesting differences with Wilders’ speeches. Figure 2 visualizes the frequencies in which Pechtold refers to “the people” in subject, complement and adjunct position.

¹⁴ GD 2008: $\chi^2(2) = 19.000$, $p < 0.01$; GD 2009: $\chi^2(2) = 10.500$, $p < 0.01$. For the statistical analyses discussed in relation to Figures 1 and 2, chi-square tests have been used instead of log-likelihood (cf. footnote 8). The log-likelihood calculator can be used for matrixes that consist of two rows and two columns, while the matrixes that were used here, consist of *three* rows (cf. Tables 2 and 3). Therefore, the statistical analyses for syntactic position have been carried out with SPSS; in this program, log-likelihood is not a standard option, while this is the case for Chi Square. A chi-square test is not fundamentally different from log-likelihood: both can be used for nominal data.

¹⁵ For this follow-up analysis various chi-square tests were carried out, in which two syntactic positions were compared each time. Results GD 2008: subject vs. adjunct position: $\chi^2(1) = 19.565$, $p < 0.01$; complement vs. adjunct position: $\chi^2(1) = 9.529$, $p < 0.01$; subject vs. complement position: $\chi^2(1) = 2.250$, $p > 0.05$. Results GD 2009: subject vs. adjunct position: $\chi^2(2) = 9.529$, $p < 0.01$, complement vs. adjunct position: $\chi^2(1) = 1.636$, $p > 0.05$; subject vs. complement position: $\chi^2(1) = 3.600$, $p > 0.05$. Carrying out multiple chi-square tests increases the chance of getting significant differences. To compensate for this, the Bonferroni correction was applied, i.e. to determine the significance level, a p-value of .05 was divided by the number of chi-square tests carried out (in each case $n = 3$; $p = 0.017$) and was subsequently set at $p < 0.05$.

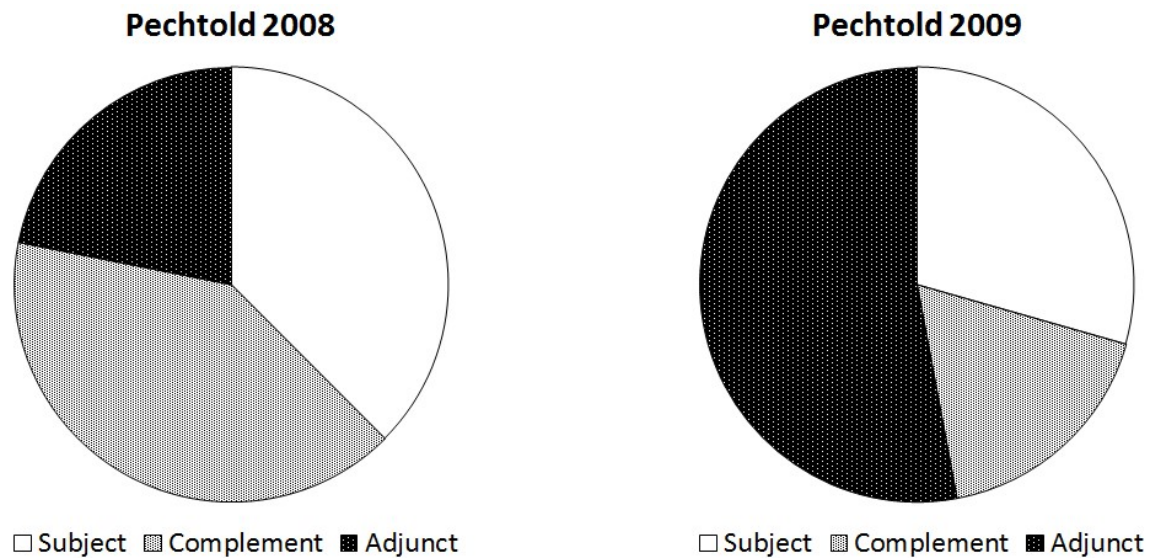


Figure 2: Visualization of the proportions in which Pechtold referred to “the people” in subject, complement and adjunct position in his speeches during the General Debates of 2008 and 2009.

For Pechtold’s 2008 speech, it turns out that the proportions in which “the people” are presented in the three syntactic positions, does not deviate significantly from what can be expected by chance.¹⁶ In other words, whereas Wilders in his 2008 speech refers to “the people” systematically in the most prominent syntactic position (i.e. in subject position), such a clear pattern is lacking in Pechtold’s speech. This difference is relevant: it is an indication that Wilders in his 2008 speech puts “the people” more in the centre of attention than Pechtold.

A comparison between Wilders’ and Pechtold’s 2009 speeches brings to light relevant differences as well. Similar to Wilders, in Pechtold’s 2009 speech, the distribution of references to “the people” does significantly deviate from what can be expected by chance.¹⁷ In other words, the way in which Pechtold refers to “the people” in 2009, exhibits a clear pattern – just like in Wilders’ case. However, *the nature* of this pattern is different: the number of references to “the people” in adjunct position are significantly

¹⁶ $\chi^2(2) = 1.938, p > 0.05$.

¹⁷ $\chi^2(2) = 6.588, p < 0.05$.

higher than the number of references in complement position, with the number of references to “the people” in subject position in between.¹⁸ In other words, whereas Wilders puts references to “the people” mostly in subject position in 2009, Pechtold seems to have a preference for the least prominent syntactic position. This, again, can be seen as an indication that Wilders puts “the people” more in the centre of attention than Pechtold.

An example that illustrates how Wilders puts “the people” in the centre of attention by making syntactic choices can be found in sentences (19)-(21). The formulations in (19) and (20) are possible alternative formulations for (21), which is taken from Wilders’ speech during the General Debate of 2009:

- (19) In 2010 already there will be more money in the wallets of *many people*, as a result of the fact that we will decrease the tariffs in the second tax bracket.
- (20) In 2010 already we will give *many people* more money in their wallets, as a result of the fact that we will decrease the tariffs in the second tax bracket.
- (21) In 2010 already *many people* will get more money in their pockets, as a result of the fact that we will decrease the tariffs in the second tax bracket. (W09.145)

The formulation in (19) is comparable to examples (10) to (12). The reference to “the people” is presented in adjunct position, as additional information for “wallets”; a financial issue (“money”) is the primary focus. In the alternative formulation in (20), “the people” are presented as indirect

¹⁸ Complement vs. adjunct position: $\chi^2 (2) = 6.00$, $p < 0.05$; complement vs. subject position: $\chi^2 (1) = 1.00$, $p > 0.05$; subject vs. adjunct position: $\chi^2 (1) = 2.286$, $p > 0.05$. To compensate for an increased chance of significant results, the Bonferroni correction was applied (cf. footnote 15).

object, i.e. in complement position, as part of the core of the sentence – but not as the subject. As a result “the people” are put more in focus than in sentence (19). In (21), i.e. the sentence that Wilders actually used, “the people” are placed in subject position, the result being that “the people” are put relatively most in the centre of attention.

A further illustration can be found in sentences (22) to (24) below. When discussing his tax cuts plans, Wilders could have chosen for the following text (for the sake of convenience, internal numbering has been added):

- (22) [We spend billions on tax cuts.] [1] Our plans mean 3 billion euros of tax reduction in one year *for the people at home*. [2] Our plans will yield hundreds of millions of euros for *postmen, police officers, schoolteachers and many others*. [3] The purchasing power of *people with a small pension*, which does not get better in the cabinet’s plans, improves in our plans with hundreds of euros too.

In (22), “the people” are put in adjunct position. They are not presented in constituents that make up the core of the sentence; the text’s primary focus is on policy issues (“tax reduction”, “hundreds of millions of euros”, “purchasing power”). The alternative formulation in (23) illustrates that it would be possible to refer to “the people” in the more central position of complement as well: in [1] the reference to “the people” appears as a modifier that has the status of a complement; in [2] and [3], “the people” are presented in the position of indirect object.

- (23) [We spend billions on tax cuts.] [1] More than 3 billion euros of tax reduction in one year goes to *the people at home*. [2] Our plans will give *postmen, police officers, schoolteachers and many others*

hundreds of millions of euros in tax cuts. [3] They give *people with a small pension* an improvement in purchasing power (which does not improve in the cabinet's plans) of hundreds of euros too.

As a result of the different sentence structure in (23), “the people” are placed more in the centre of attention. However, this is even more the case in the excerpt that Wilders actually used – see (24). Here, “the people” are not only presented as part of the core of the sentences, but in [2] and [3] even in subject position:

(24) [We spend billions on tax cuts.] More than 3 billion euros in one year goes to *the people at home*. [2] *Postmen, police officers, schoolteachers and many others* will receive hundreds of millions of euros in tax cuts. [3] *People with a small pension*, who didn't get any improvement in purchasing power from the cabinet (...) profit financially with hundreds of euros too. (W08.163-165)

Moreover, in (24) it is striking that in sentence [3] “the people” are not only presented as the subject of the main clause, but also as the subject of the non-restrictive relative clause (“who didn't ... the cabinet”). Wilders could have presented “the people” in the position of indirect object as well (“to whom the cabinet didn't give any improvement in purchasing power”). In other words, in (24) Wilders does not only put “the people” in focus on the level of the main clause, but also on the level of the subordinate clause.

Examples that are characteristic for the way in which Alexander Pechtold's refers to “the people”, can be found in (25) to (27).¹⁹

¹⁹ See for other examples the discussion of excerpts (10)-(12).

- (25) [Modernization] also means a modern law governing dismissal which liberates *elderly people* from their golden cages and offers *young people* perspective. (P09.101)
- (26) [In addition,] we opt for (...) a higher short-term unemployment benefit which helps *people* from job to job. (P09.102)
- (27) My society opts for (...) an Old Age Pensions Act that helps *people* to keep their work (...). (P09.97)

On the level of the main clause, the pattern that can be observed in (25) to (27) is the same as in (10) to (12). The references to “the people” are presented in constituents that have the status of adjuncts; they give additional information about policy issues that are presented in the core of the sentence. The non-restrictive relative clauses “which liberates ... perspective” (25) and “which helps ... job to job” (26) function as adjuncts for “a modern law governing dismissal” and “a higher short term unemployment benefit” respectively. As such, the primary focus is on policy issues here, and not on “the people”.

Excerpt (27) is a bit of a special case. The reference to “the people” is part of a restrictive relative clause here. This restrictive relative clause is a necessary part of the complement (“an Old Age Pensions Act that ... work”); in other words, strictly speaking this reference does not have the status of adjunct. Nevertheless, in Table 3 this instance has been included in the category of adjuncts, since restrictive relative clauses in a way serve a similar function as adjuncts: one characteristic of restrictive relative clauses is that they give additional information for the identification of a phenomenon mentioned previously in the sentence (cf. Verhagen 2001). In (27), this phenomenon is “an Old Age Pensions Act”. Pechtold refers to “the people” when specifying this policy issue; it is this policy issue that gets centre stage.

On a side note, it should be observed that in (25) to (27) the references to “the people” are not only put in a relatively peripheral sentence position on the level of the main clause. Looking at the subordinate clauses, it is striking that “the people” are presented in object position, while it would have been possible to put them in subject position as well. This becomes clear when these clauses are presented without context:

- (28) ... which liberates *elderly people* from their golden cages and offers *young people* perspective.
- (29) ... which helps *people* from job to job.
- (30) ... that helps *people* to keep their work (...).

In (28) to (30) Pechtold could have presented “the people” in subject position. Particularly for (28), in which “young people” are in indirect object position, this would put these “young people” more in the centre of attention:

- (31) ... which makes that *elderly people* get liberated from their golden cages and *young people* get perspective.
- (32) ... which makes that *people* get helped from job to job.
- (33) ... that makes that *people* keep their work (...).

The alternative formulations (31) to (33) indicate that Pechtold in excerpts (25) to (27) could have placed references to “the people” more in the centre of attention in his subordinate clauses as well.

All in all, the data presented in this section indicate that Wilders more than Pechtold puts “the people” in the centre of attention, by systematically making different syntactic choices. The way in which Wilders refers syntactically to “the people”, shows a clear pattern: Wilders refers to “the

people” relatively often in subject position, and relatively little in adjunct position. Such a pattern is absent in Pechtold’s speeches. In his 2008 address, no clear pattern can be detected; in 2009, “the people” are primarily placed in the relatively peripheral syntactic position of adjunct. Although the absolute number of references to “the people” in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s 2009 speeches does not differ significantly, the syntactic analysis presented above indicates that there *are* differences between Wilders and Pechtold that indicate that Wilders puts “the people” more in the centre of attention in his 2009 speech as well. As such, the findings illustrate that it is important to use not only the absolute *number* of references to “the people” as a measure for “people-centrism” in political discourse, as is standard practice in studies on populism, but to take the syntactic position of these references into account as well.

The use of perspective

Texts often do not only contain the viewpoint of the speaker or writer: often, the viewpoints of other people come to the fore as well. There exists a lot of (cognitive) linguistic research on Speech and Thought Representation (STR), showing that the viewpoints of other people in a text can be presented with a variety of linguistic techniques.²⁰ One of these techniques is the use of verbs of cognition (“to know”, “to hope”, “to be of the opinion that...”, etc.) verbs of perception (“to see”, “to discover”, etc.) or verbs of emotion (“to fear”, “to be pleased”, etc.). Such verbs indicate the

²⁰ See for instance Dancygier and Sweetser (2012), Sanders and Redeker (1996) and Simpson (1993). In the analysis of political discourse, relatively little attention has been paid to the question how politicians employ viewpoint techniques strategically in their speeches (cf. Van Leeuwen 2015: 121-122). See for recent exceptions, however, Van Leeuwen & Van Vliet (to appear), Fetzer and Weisman (2018), and Guilbealt (2017).

consciousness of the person who is presented in subject position (cf. Sanders 2009:3).

In Wilders' and Pechtold's speeches, "the people" are presented as the subject of a verb of cognition, perception or emotion several times (cf. Table 4).

Speaker	2008	2009
Geert Wilders	8 (0.8)	9 (0.3)
Alexander Pechtold	9 (0.5)	1 (0.05)

Table 4. Number of times that Wilders' and Pechtold refer to "the people" as the subject of a verb of cognition, perception or emotion: absolute numbers and per 100 words (in brackets).

In 2009, there is a significant difference between both politicians:²¹ Wilders significantly more often than Pechtold presents "the people" as a so called "subject of consciousness" (Verhagen 2005), i.e. as an agency with its own will, its own views and opinions. This difference is relevant: it is an indication that Wilders puts "the people" more than Pechtold in the centre of attention by creating the suggestion that "the people" are involved in the discussion.²²

In Wilders' and Pechtold's speeches in the General Debate of 2008, no significant difference can be observed in the *number* of references to "the people" in combination with a perspectivising verb (cf. Table 4).²³ However, a qualitative analysis of the *moments* in which Wilders and Pechtold give "the people" their own viewpoint, reveals that these moments are strikingly different. Wilders presents the voters' perspective systematically at moments that he is presenting his *own* political ideas – cf. examples (34) to (36):

²¹ W: 9/3163w vs. P: 1/1928w; LL = 4,01; p = 0.05.

²² Formulated in Clark's (1996) framework of participant roles: Wilders creates, more than Pechtold the impression that "the people" are not "overhearers" who are standing on the sideline, but actual "participants" in the debate (cf. Van Leeuwen 2011).

²³ W: 8/2909w vs. P: 9/2000w; LL = 1,96; p > 0,05.

- (34) The differences between what *the Dutch people* think and what the elite thinks, are nowhere more clear than with regard to the mass-immigration. *Almost 60% of the population* sees Islam as the biggest threat to our identity. In addition, *almost 60%* believes mass immigration is the biggest mistake since World War II. (W08.44-45)
- (35) Greying is called “silvering” by this cabinet. (...) But *many elderly* know that reality is different. *They* know that “silvering” is incorrect. *They* know that it is about withering, becoming lonely, becoming filthy, dehumiliation. (W08.144-148)
- (36) *They* [i.e. the common people] are yearning for nothing else than the preservation of their own land and their freedom, their safety, a reasonable salary and a better future for their children. (W08.188)

The standpoints presented in (34) to (36) are Geert Wilders’ political views. The idea that a massive arrival of immigrants will cause the Netherlands harm (34) is one of Wilders’ spearheads. Likewise, the Party for Freedom has systematically argued in parliament that the care for the elderly is inferior (35), and it leads a campaign in favour of “the preservation of the Netherlands” (i.e. free of the assumed dangers of Islam) in which “the common people” can live safely, with a reasonable salary and a better future for their children (36). However, Wilders presents these political standpoints as if they are the standpoints of “the common man”, by presenting citizens in subject position combined with a perspectivising verb. This is a linguistic choice: Wilders could also have presented himself in subject position (by using “I”), or the Party for Freedom. By presenting his own political views as standpoints of “the people”, Wilders suggests that he and “the people” subscribe to the *same* viewpoints. This reinforces the impression that

Wilders is “a man of the people”; he positions himself as a mouthpiece of the people’s desires, needs, etc.²⁴

In Pechtold’s speeches, such a clear (suggested) overlap in viewpoints is largely absent. The only excerpt in which overlap exists, can be found in (37). A point of criticism that Pechtold has often put forward in parliament is that a clear vision is lacking in the cabinet’s policy. In (37), this criticism is formulated as Pechtold’s standpoint, but as something that is in the mind of “the people”:

(37) Don’t you see that *people* want a vision? To curry favour with the people is not what *they* want. (P08.58-59).

All other moments in which Pechtold is attributing viewpoints to “the people”, are moments in which these viewpoints do not necessarily overlap with Pechtold’s own opinions, as in (38)-(39):

(38) Society is democratized. *People are more critical* towards authorities who have to earn their legitimacy. However, the democracy is not maintained. Democracy is not: you ask, we deliver. This promise of malleability cannot be fulfilled and I don’t want to fulfil this. (P08.141-145)

(39) *People are more cynical* about The Hague – not always unjust. We sometimes cause it: hysteria about spending power, McCarthy like debates about the Eighties and a witch hunt against foreign aid organisations. (P08.135-136)

²⁴ At the same time, this way of presenting his political standpoints serves for Wilders as a justification for these standpoints: Wilders suggests that the standpoints of the PVV should be adopted because these are the ideas of “the people in the country”.

In (38), Pechtold claims that people have become more critical towards “The Hague”, which metonymically stands for the Dutch parliament here.²⁵ However, the context does not indicate that Pechtold is agreeing with this more critical stance. On the contrary: Pechtold makes a contrast between “society”/“people” on the one hand, and “authorities”/“politics” on the other;²⁶ the choice for the personal pronoun “I” in the final sentence of the excerpt makes that Pechtold positions himself not on the side of “the people”, but on the side of the authorities. In (39) there is a discrepancy between the people’s views and Pechtold’s opinion as well: Pechtold indicates that he has a more nuanced view on the matter than the viewpoint that is attributed to “the people”. The elliptical clause “not always unjust” makes clear that Pechtold is agreeing partly with the people’s cynicism, but not completely: Pechtold keeps a certain distance. This distance is further strengthened by Pechtold’s use of “we” in the next sentence: in this “we”, Pechtold is including himself and his fellow politicians, and excluding “the people” in the country.²⁷

The fact that in Pechtold’s speeches, apart from (37), the viewpoints of “the people” do not coincide with Pechtold’s views, means that Pechtold presents standpoints of D66 as his *own* standpoints. In the General Debate of 2009 this is extra emphasized by Pechtold’s use of the personal pronoun “I”, which makes that large parts of Pechtold’s speech are formulated *explicitly* from Pechtold’s point of view, e.g.:

(40) Prime Minister, *I* am gradually having three problems with you.
You are putting issues on the agenda without executing them. *I*
mention the Knowledge Agenda. (...) *I* even mention the norms and

²⁵ Dutch parliament is situated in the city of The Hague.

²⁶ “Politics” is not mentioned explicitly, but is implied via the metonymical use of “The Hague” (cf footnote 25).

²⁷ In Wilders’ speeches instead, an opposite use of “we” can be found, in which “the people” are included and fellow politicians are excluded (see Van Leeuwen 2015:146-148).

values. (...) *My* second problem is that you pick up responsibilities without being able to cope with them. *I* mention the war in Iraq (...). *My* third problem is that you have a ministerial and fraternal responsibility that is not given shape. *I* mention the monarchy, (...). *I* mention ministers, (...). *I* mention officials, (...). (P09.36-49)

Whereas Wilders suggests that “the people” know what the problems are (cf. (34) to (36)), Pechtold emphasizes by using “I” that *he* is the person who has certain problems with the prime minister. In other words, different from Wilders, who positions himself primarily as a mouthpiece of “the people”, Pechtold is presenting emphatically his *own* agenda, instead of suggesting that this is the agenda of “the people” in the country. This is also evidenced at the end of the speech where he explicitly indicates that the vision sketched is *his* vision:²⁸

(41) That is *my* prospect: a country with equal chances for each individual, for people who see their own interests linked up with the interests of others. (P09.131)

Conclusions

In this contribution, I have argued that the frequency in which politicians refer to “the people” is not the only relevant measure for assessing people-centrism in (populist) political discourse – as is suggested in much of the political-scientific literature. For measuring people-centrism it is also

²⁸ In addition, in (41) it is striking that Pechtold in the first part of the sentence refers to the electorate in a relatively peripheral syntactic position (cf. the discussion of example (12)).

important to look at the way *in which* politicians give shape to these references.

More specifically, I have highlighted two linguistic phenomena that in the analysis of (populist) political discourse have received scant attention so far. By presenting a case study from Dutch politics, I have argued that politicians can put “the people” more or less in the spotlight by making certain *syntactic choices*. Firstly, it makes a difference whether “the people” are presented grammatically in subject, complement or adjunct position. Secondly, I have argued that it is valuable to investigate whether “the people” get attributed their own perspective, and on what moments this happens. By giving “the people” in the country their own viewpoint, politicians can suggest that “the people” are actually involved in the discussion. The suggestion of “closeness to the people”, which is a key characteristic of populist discourse, is especially strong when a politician presents his *own* political ideas linguistically as the people’s perspective on political issues.

Paying attention to the question how politicians make use of these subtle, more or less hidden techniques can yield interesting results – as I have illustrated with my quantitative and qualitative analysis of Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches. If only *the number* of references to the electorate in Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches had been analysed to measure to what extent both politicians put “the people” in the centre of attention, important differences between both speakers would have been overlooked. In the case of Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches during the General Debate of 2009, the conclusion would have even been that there *is* no difference in people-centrism between both politicians, while the syntactic analysis of references to “the people” in subject, complement or adjunct position and the analysis of viewpoint indicate otherwise: an in-depth, quantitative and qualitative analysis of these phenomena suggests that Wilders’ and Pechtold’s speeches actually *did* differ in the extent in which “the people” were given

prominence in their discourse. As such, this paper is a plea to pay more systematic attention to these fine-grained linguistic choices when measuring people-centrism in political discourse: the empirical measurement of people-centrism should be enriched by taking into account these linguistic phenomena, which have scarcely been studied in the analysis of (populist) political discourse so far.

It should be stressed that the two linguistic phenomena highlighted in this contribution are not the only ones that deserve more attention when measuring people-centrism in political discourse. I have claimed that the linguistic differences between Wilders and Pechtold “*indicate*” that “the people” are put more or less in the centre of attention by both politicians respectively. The choice of the word “*indicate*” was a deliberate one: to draw firmer conclusions, other linguistic choices should be taken into account as well. For instance, it should be noted that placing information in subject, complement or adjunct position is not the only grammatical factor influencing the centrality of information. Another factor is *word order* (cf. Hasereyn et al. 2002: section 21.1.2; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014:88-133). The way in which Dutch word order affects the presentation of information as more or less prominent is complex (cf. Jansen and Wijnands 2004); this phenomenon, and its interaction with the grammatical position of information is an interesting point for further research. Similarly, it would be interesting to investigate what kind of *semantic roles* (cf. Dixon 2005; Jackendoff 1987) (populist) politicians attribute to “the people”. Are “the people” for instance mainly depicted as victims of political policies, by presenting them primarily in the semantic role of *patient* instead of other semantic roles such as *agent* or *receiver*? Further, the analysis of perspective was in the current case study limited to “perspectivising verbs” (i.e. verbs of cognition, emotion and perception); it would be interesting to take other forms of “speech and thought representation” into account as well (see Van Leeuwen and Van Vliet (2019) for a concrete illustration).

Finally, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent politicians make use of *pronominal references* to refer to “the people”. As cognitive linguists have argued, referring to someone by using pronouns instead of nouns is an indication that the person referred to is the focus of attention (cf. Van Krieken et al. (2015:223) and the references mentioned there). The fact that besides the two linguistic phenomena highlighted in this contribution there are various other linguistic choices that are relevant for studying the centrality of “the people” in political discourse, further endorses the claim that the frequency of references to “the people” should not be used as the only measure for assessing the centrality of “the people” in political discourse, as is currently the standard practice. As De Cleen (this volume) rightly observes, “language is key” in how “the people” are constructed in political discourse; in the end, people-centrism is realized linguistically by the joint use of *various* linguistic phenomena, and by the *interplay* between these devices.

As mentioned in the introduction, this contribution did not only aim to show how the measurement of “people-centrism” can be enriched by taking into account some infrequently studied linguistic phenomena. On a more programmatic level, this contribution also aimed to illustrate in a broader sense how a linguistic approach to populist discourse can contribute to the empirical measurement of populism. Namely, a linguistic approach cannot only provide concrete tools for measuring “people-centrism” in an in-depth way, but has the potential to offer concrete tools for measuring other characteristics of populism as well. For instance, two other discourse characteristics that in political-scientific literature are regularly mentioned as typical of populist discourse are the use of “accessible, everyday language” (e.g. Hameleers et al. 2017:143; Vossen 2010:25) and the appeal to a “threat” or “crisis” (cf. Moffitt 2016:45). Obviously, before the extent to which such characteristics are present in a politician’s discourse can be empirically measured, such notions need to be operationalized. A linguistic

approach can offer concrete tools for this: linguistic analyses of political discourse have shown that the use of “accessible, everyday language” is associated with, among other linguistic techniques, the use of certain specific syntactic structures, concrete words, quotations, narratives, etc. (cf. Van Leeuwen (2015:45-151) and Cienki and Giansante (2014) for details), while the appeal to a “threat” or “crisis” seems to be interrelated with, for instance, the use of hyperbolic language and the use of certain metaphors (cf. Kalkhoven 2016). Similarly, the observation by political scientists that populists often employ “bad manners” (cf. Moffitt 2016:44) by using “adversarial, offensive language” (e.g. Albertazzi and MacDonnell 2008:7) can also be linked to concrete linguistic choices, such as the use of verbs with pejorative connotations, diminutives, etc. (cf. Van Leeuwen 2016). All in all, language is a key factor in constructing a populist discourse (cf. De Cleen, this volume). A linguistic approach to populism can provide valuable insights in the *concrete building blocks* that cause a politician’s discourse to be more or less “people-centred”, “accessible”, “adversarial”, etc. As such, a linguistic approach can offer concrete tools for measuring populism empirically: by counting the frequency with which politicians make use of such linguistic techniques, it becomes possible to measure populism in an empirical, in-depth and nuanced way.

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