PAPER

Exploring populist styles of political discourse in Twitter

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Abstract

In public controversy after the Brexit referendum, social media played a prominent role. In particular, veteran populist anti-EU campaigner Nigel Farage used Twitter as a powerful weapon to further his cause. This paper compares a corpus of Farage's tweets in 2017–2018 with those by four other prominent British politicians (May, Johnson, Corbyn and Starmer). Quantitative corpus linguistics techniques are combined with qualitative analysis to examine how Farage creates a distinctive discursive style that is both down-to-earth and emotive. Various markers of register and affect are identified, and three core aspects of Farage's populist appeal to 'the people' are outlined, including the projection of negative emotions, especially anger/violence; the use of questions to provoke reactions; and the deployment of colloquial expressions and catchphrases to resonate with popular audiences and claim the status of 'common sense'.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of populism and proliferation of social media are two phenomena that are often brought into association. On the one hand, media such as Twitter, Facebook or YouTube enable politicians to reach out to global audiences as never before – or to tune their messages to appeal to specific audiences on a more personal level. On the other hand, even though mass diffusion and audience-focused communications are available to all political movements, certain politicians have been seen to make particularly effective use of them. These are usually politicians with something that can be described as a 'populist style' – a term used rather loosely to mean a particularly provocative way of communicating that promotes radical political solutions, generally on the far right or left. Importantly in all this, we have to understand that such politicians' public appearances are not so much about offering constructive policy proposals, but more about styles of presenting themselves to the public (Ostiguy, 2009, p. 44). The populist style seems to be characterised by performances that project a strong identification with a homogenous 'people', combined with the projection and vilification of internal or external 'enemies of the people' (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). This pattern of 'glorification and denunciation', as Vossen (2010, p. 24) puts it, is heightened by a sense of mounting crisis used to justify radical action (Moffitt & Tormey, 2013). In such performances, the identification with the virtuous people against a treacherous or

exploitative elite is often engineered and intensified by the adoption of what has been termed a 'low style' in politics (Ostiguy, 2009), which is achieved through the (spontaneous or manipulated) exploitation of specific semiotic systems. Thus, populists seek to present an image with which large sectors of 'the people' will identify (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p. 30): this is materialised in their style of dress, the way their lifestyle is presented, and perhaps above all in the kind of language they use.

1.1 | Populists and language

Although populism obviously cannot be defined purely in terms of language, populists' discourse and communication style have emerged as an area of particular interest, and analyses have been conducted to determine what is prominent or special in the way populist politicians communicate. Sociological studies show that the current generation of populist leaders are likely to appeal most strongly to voters without a university education (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p. 27) – voters who are also likely to view complex bureaucratic or academic discourse with suspicion. This trend is consistent with Ostiguy's (2009, p. 5) well known analysis of the 'high' and 'low' in political style, which proposes two contrasting 'ways of being and acting in politics' which cut across political ideologies of right and left: 'High and low have to do with ways of relating to people; as such, they go beyond "discourses" as mere words, and they include issues of accents, level of language, body language, gestures, ways of dressing, etc.'. In broad strokes, 'high' politicians tend to use a rationalist or ethically-oriented discourse, keep their emotions well under control, and may be perceived as educated and polite, or as boring and distant, while 'low' politicians depend more on their personal charisma, are more demonstrative or emotional, ostentatiously exhibit popular tastes, and are more likely to use coarse or popular language. Moreover, as Rensmann (2006) and Breeze (2019) have pointed out, the populist style often deliberately breaches taboos or indulges in use of language that appears to condone or even glorify violence, in ways that are calculated to engage specific sectors of the population.

Recent politics has provided abundant opportunities to study the populist style in discourse. In particular, numerous analyses have centred on Donald Trump: Bhatia and Ross (2019) have studied his repeated use of particular phrases to delegitimise his rivals, McCallum-Bayliss (2019) and Schoor (2020) have both scrutinised his use of conceptual metaphor, while Breeze (2017) has pointed to his effective, habitual use of dichotomies. Outside the US context, Breeze (2019) has analysed appeals to emotion, focusing on the contrast between anger (in populist discourse) and concern (which is more typical of mainstream politics) (Breeze, 2019). Aiezza (2019) has addressed Salvini's performances, discussing his identity-based appeals to the in-group. In the Dutch context, van Leeuwen (2012, 2014) has considered aspects of complementation, and the syntactic role of key signifiers such as 'the people' (van Leeuwen, 2019), to show that the Dutch populist Wilders adopts a more categorical style with less attribution, and tends to represent 'the people' as active agents, while non-populists use various forms of complementation to qualify their statements and place 'the people' as objects or adjuncts.

In all this, it is important to note that the adoption of the 'low' style is far from neutral in ideological terms: it is a deliberate strategy applied both to build complicity with particular sectors of the electorate, and to discredit messages of a more complex kind. Thus Krämer (2014, p. 45) summarises the nature and meaning of the populist style as follows: 'the style is ostentatiously intelligible and plain-spoken while complexity is represented as interest-led obfuscation'. When this happens, pre-existing sociocultural differences, such as class allegiances, can become politicised, and social identities interact with political identities (Ostiguy, 2009, p. 8). As Ostiguy (2009, p. 5) also points out, when socio-cultural identities already exist in a society, 'high and low political appeals and positions allow the voter to recognize a politician as credibly "one of ours"'. In the case of the populist leaders or parties mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is clear that their enactments of representation are gauged to inspire trust and loyalty based on sameness, through a coded understanding. In simple terms, voters identify with a particular politician because he or she speaks their language. At the same time, they are subtly encouraged to reject politicians who do not adopt this strategy, and whose messages make greater demands on the listener. There are strong grounds for maintaining that populists' adept use of pre-existing symbolic resources confers on them a high degree of recognition and even charisma (Krämer, 2014,

p. 45; Schmidt, 2019), which enables them to exert an inordinate influence over the 'symbolically dominated' (Bourdieu, 1994) and thus legitimise their claims to represent 'the people'.

1.2 | Twitter and language

The special relationship between populists and Twitter has been a particular research focus in recent years. Again, in the context of Trump, both Bhatia and Ross (2019) and Schmidt (2019) illustrate Trump's repeated use of specific phrases to build a virtual community of supporters. Bennett (2019) has looked in depth at tweets in the Brexit campaign, illustrating how the possibilities and limitations of Twitter make it an appropriate medium for fomenting in/out and up/down antagonism. Using data from Italy and the USA, Aiezza (2019) has shown how the combination of words, images and emoticons in Twitter serves to heighten tension, directing strong emotions against particular social groups. However, although many of these studies provide fascinating insights into the populists' tweeting styles, they sometimes fail to take into consideration the extent to which this 'populist' style genuinely differs from that used by other politicians who, though not identified as populists, often do make use of similar strategies in their social media communications. All politicians appeal to the people from time to time, many draw on the emotions, and few are complementary about their political rivals. In particular, many politicians adopt an informal, familiar style in Twitter, perhaps reflecting their (or their communications department's) belief that Twitter requires a more relaxed, spontaneous, personal approach.

With this in mind, it is worth devoting a few lines to the nature of Twitter as a medium, considering the conditions that it imposes on users, and the affordances it gives them for engaging others. First, I will look at the conditions that Twitter imposes, and briefly sketch some of the linguistic conventions that have arisen in this context. Twitter is a microblogging medium which allows a maximum of 280 characters (pre-2017, 140), but permits photos and videos to be embedded. It is widely conceptualised as a way of airing opinions and/or feelings to a wide audience. Concerning the type of language used, when Twitter first appeared, it was thought to induce a proliferation of 'incorrect' language uses, partly as a result of the need for brevity, which led people to use abbreviated forms, and partly because of its perceived role in communicating affect, materialised in the widespread use of taboo forms and onomatopoeic spellings, often accompanied by emoticons or images. The presence of these features has led some researchers to conclude that the register used in Twitter reflects aspects of orality, as well as traits found in other informal online media such as SMS and online chat. However, research also shows that Twitter also tends to mimic the practices of traditional media. For example, Hu, Talamadupula, and Kambhampati (2013) found that Twitter used more first and second person pronouns and intensifiers than traditional media, thus resembling informal spoken language more. They also found that tweets convey a higher degree of certainty, and lower tentativeness, than traditional media (Hu et al., 2013). On the other hand, they noted that tweets contained more complex lexis than SMS or chat, and had a higher lexical density. Interestingly, Twitter also tended to be used more to convey positive affect than email, chat or SMS, a result that the researchers attribute to its status as a public broadcast medium (Hu et al., 2013).

Second, concerning engagement with audiences, we should note that like other forms of digital communication, Twitter poses a challenge to those who wish to build relationships, bond with like-minded users, and create virtual communities. In the absence of the contextual cues that normally help people form impressions and gauge the extent to which they can identify with others, Twitter users have to work harder to create group identities (Yus, 2011, p. 36). Identities – including politicians' identities – are partly shaped by the sharing of images or through other multimodal affordances, but the use of written language also plays an essential role in this. Online, as offline, one of the main sources of identity is the speech community (Yus, 2011, p. 23), in which the use of specific registers or linguistic codes plays a part. In particular, certain 'discursive forms define one's virtual identity' (Yus, 2011, p. 37), and like other social identities elsewhere, these virtual identities are 'anchored' in groups. From the earliest days of the Internet, users have exhibited the tendency to coalesce into groups that are recognisable through particular uses of language, including informal register and dialect (Nguyen, Gravel, Trieschnigg, & Meder, 2013), but also more specific features such as in-group jargon (Donath, 1999) or acronyms and abbreviations only understood within a small circle

of initiates (Thomsen, Straubhaar, & Bolyard, 1998). Recent research is bringing out the importance of 'e-sociolects' on a micro-level: for example, communities of Trump supporters on Reddit evolved a striking in-group vocabulary with a range of positive and negative terms that would be incomprehensible to outsiders (Schmidt, 2019).

If this process of identity signalling is important in Internet communications in general, this is likely to be all the more significant in the case of Twitter, which involves the dissemination of very short, decontextualised texts where there is a major need for reference assignment and disambiguation (Yus, 2011, pp. 135, 143). In political contexts, where the main aim on Twitter is to attract attention and gather followers, the general human tendency to build groups of like-minded people who 'speak the same language' takes on a new importance – it is no longer a spontaneous tendency to accommodate, but rather a deliberate strategy designed to appeal and attract. Politicians use a range of linguistic and multimodal resources to project a clear identity focused in such a way as to resonate with particular target audiences. These resources could include informal language in general, but may also involve the use of particular dialects, soci-olects, and registers. For example, it may contain the use of buzz words or 'in' expressions that are particularly impor-tant in signalling group identity and group attitudes to specific entities or issues (Bhatia & Ross, 2019). It probably also regulates the 'temperature' of what is said (conveyed principally through emotional lexis and through linguistic devices such as boosting or hedging) to match with the target audiences' supposed attitudes, or to inflame their emotions to new levels (Breeze, 2019). As a working hypothesis for this study, then, we can assume that the tweets sent out by pop-ulist politicians – whether they originate with the politician him/herself or with his/her communications team – may have a different style from the tweets published by more conventional politicians and their teams. Since the essence of populism lies in style and performance, analysis of populists' tweets is likely to reveal further details about the way populism is performed.

2 | THE AIMS AND DESIGN OF THIS STUDY

Against this background, this paper investigates the language used in Twitter by UK far-right populist politician Nigel Farage, formerly leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and for many years the main campaigner against EU membership. He is often credited with being the driving force behind the Eurosceptic movement that led to the Brexit referendum. Although he started from a marginal position, his strategies to gain huge media attention and engage with popular audiences brought him and his anti-EU stance to the forefront of public attention, with incalcula-ble consequences (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015). His approach to communication in social media can thus be examined as an example of a successful populist style. The methodology used to analyse his discursive style, and the overall design of the study, are explained below.

3 | METHODOLOGY

From a methodological point of view, as it is only possible to 'both uncover and evaluate the features of a particular discourse type by comparing it with others' (Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013, p. 12), I will pursue this analysis of Farage's populist tweeting style by contrasting a corpus of Farage's tweets with four other corpora of tweets by promi-nent contemporary British politicians (two Conservative, Theresa May and Boris Johnson, and two Labour, Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer) from the same period (2017–2019). This choice was motivated by the need to compare tweets by high profile politicians with different political leanings. Although Johnson has sporadically exhibited marked populist tendencies in other areas of communication (Schoor, 2020), his tweets in the period 2017–2018 were rather moderate, probably because he (or his press team) was cultivating a statesman-like voice befitting his role as Foreign Minister. Corbyn has also been described elsewhere as a populist, although his performance has a markedly different style (Breeze, 2019; Diamond, 2016). The present study was operationalised in two stages: an initial corpus-based

procedure in which I quantified various features that might potentially distinguish populist from non-populist tweets; and a second stage based on a qualitative reading of the tweets, in which I identified particular recurring stylistic features that seemed to be particularly characteristic of Farage's tweets.

3.1 | Corpus-based procedure

To assemble the corpora, I used the rtweet package in R to collect all public tweets available on 26 December 2018 from the Twitter accounts of Nigel Farage (UKIP/Brexit Party); Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer (Labour); and Theresa May and Boris Johnson (Conservative). The sizes of the corpora calculated in words by SketchEngine were as follows (number of tweets in each case is provided in brackets): Farage 33,514 (2,191); Corbyn 89,269 (599); Starmer 59,440 (1,726); May 34,608 (777); Johnson 37,317 (966). Although the size of the corpora is unequal, it is not clear what the criteria for comparability would be in the case of Twitter data (number of tweets, number of words, tweets that are retweeted, etc.), so the criterion of 'all available' appears reasonable, as long as all frequencies are normalised. The csv files obtained using rtweet were cleaned, duplicates and retweets were removed, and the text of the tweets was prepared for uploading to the platforms for processing (see below). I also exported the tweets into excel for manual processing.

For the purposes of the first stage of analysis, on the basis of Ostiguy's definition of the 'low style', and the features of populist communication explained above, I assumed that the areas of (1) register, and (2) interpersonality, would be of primary importance. Briefly, for register, the quantitative analysis focused on grammatical and lexical markers of formality/informality (Biber, 2006). For interpersonality (Breeze, Gotti, & Sancho, 2014), I quantified several markers of pragmatic strategies designed to engage the target audience and foster group identity (personal pronouns, questions, boosters and maximisers, appeal to emotions, black and white judgements). To conduct the quantitative comparisons between the five corpora I used word frequency and POS frequency tools available in Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014), lexical complexity counts based on BNC/COCA for Big Text available in VocabProfile (Cobb, 2008), and the USAS semantic tagging facility available in Wmatrix4 (Rayson, 2008). Each of the tools used and processes followed in each platform is described in more detail below, in the relevant sections.

3.1.1 | Register

The register analysis centred on grammatical features, namely contractions, truncated forms, and overall part of speech composition, and on lexical aspects. One standard marker of informal register in English is the use of contracted forms (*we don't want*). By conducting a search for each individual form in Sketch Engine, I calculated the normalised frequency per 10,000 words of the commonest contracted forms found in these corpora, namely: *I'm, we're, won't, you're, don't, doesn't, can't, isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't, he's, she's, isn't* and *aren't*. Another feature of informal register frequent in tweets is the use of truncated forms with null subject (*had a good time yesterday, shocked to hear the news, sad to see this*), which is associated with informality in both spoken and written English (Napoli, 1982). I therefore also used manual analysis to quantify the number of tweets that started with specific truncated forms, including subject omission (*enjoyed a beer*) and subject/verb omission (*great to see so many people*). In this case, since this is a sentence-level phenomenon, I calculated the percentage of tweets that included such forms. One further potential marker of informality is the proportion of different parts of speech in a text: according to Biber (2006, pp. 215–217), verbs, modal verbs, adverbs and pronouns are more prominent in spoken registers, and nouns and adjectives are more frequent in written registers. There are major differences between genres in the distribution of parts of speech, but since all the tweets belonged to the same genre, this comparison could be expected primarily to bring out differences in register. I therefore used Sketch Engine to conduct an automatic Part of Speech (POS) analysis on the five corpora to determine the frequency per million words of the following: verbs, modal verbs, nouns, pronouns, adverbs and adjectives.

Regarding lexical features, I concentrated on lexical complexity and use of simple connectors. I first calculated the lexical profile of the texts. Lexical complexity was calculated as the percentage of words with different frequency levels in each corpus, measured using the tool BNC/COCA for Big Text (Cobb, 2008). Briefly, this calculates the percentage

of lexical items within a corpus that are very frequent in everyday usage, belonging to the 1,000 most frequent words in English, the percentage belonging to the next 1,000, and so on, using the frequency levels of these items in the BNC/COCA corpus. I then calculated the frequency of three simple connectors: *and*, *but* and *so*. These are among the most frequent words in English, but they have been found to be less frequent in formal written registers, where writers tend to use a wider variety of more explicit connectors associated with a more formal register, such as *moreover, however* and *therefore*. According to Biber (2006, p. 66) and Giménez Moreno and Skorczynska (2013, p. 406), the discourse marker *so* is particularly common in informal and interactive spoken registers. Sketch Engine was used to calculate the frequency of these items in all the corpora, and the results were calculated as a percentage of running words.

3.1.2 | Interpersonality

Interaction with readers is generally achieved or simulated through the use of specific linguistic features that are 'interactional' (Hyland, 2005), and which are more frequent in spoken language. Outstanding among these are the use of first- and second-person pronouns (I, we and you) (Hyland, 2001, 2005) and the use of direct questions (Hyland, 2001), which have been quantified as 50 times more frequent in conversation than in academic discourse (Biber, Johannson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, p. 211). Other features that have been associated with interaction in the context of populist politics are emotive language, especially the expression of negative emotions (Aiezza, 2019; Breeze, 2019), as well as the use of boosters and maximisers, and the expression of black-and-white judgements (Breeze, 2017; Schmidt, 2019). Since these elements cannot easily be measured using standard corpus tools, I used the UCAS semantic tagger in Wmatrix4 (Rayson, 2008) to identify lexis associated with negative and positive emotions, and to quantify boosters, maximisers and related resources. Examination of the corpus data also suggested that Farage often expressed black-and-white judgements using the adjectives *right*, *wrong* and *true*, and so these lemmas were also quantified in Sketch Engine, using manual examination of concordance lines to distinguish between different meanings of the adjective *right*.

3.2 | Qualitative analysis

In a second stage, a hermeneutic discourse analytical approach was applied, in which a close reading of the tweets was used to identify more elusive features that seemed to contribute to the 'low style' and 'populist performance'. This was then supported by quantitative techniques in the spirit of Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) (Partington et al., 2013). The methodology used is thus eclectic, involving engagement with the text in a variety of ways including close reading, but also the calculation of frequencies and collocations, in order to uncover patterns that might not be obvious to other, wholly qualitative or quantitative, approaches to discourse analysis, and to test intuitions arising from the close reading of the text. For my qualitative examples illustrating the contrast between populist and non-populist tweets, I focus on the corpora of tweets by Nigel Farage, providing contrasting examples from the other corpora where relevant.

4 | QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The following sections set out the results from the quantitative exploration of informal register and interpersonality/emotion.

4.1 | Informal register

Figure 1 shows the frequency per 10,000 words of contracted forms and the percentage of tweets starting with truncated forms overall, compared across the five corpora. The figure shows that the use of contracted and truncated forms varied across the five corpora, but their use/non-use did not appear to be characteristic of a populist/non-populist style.
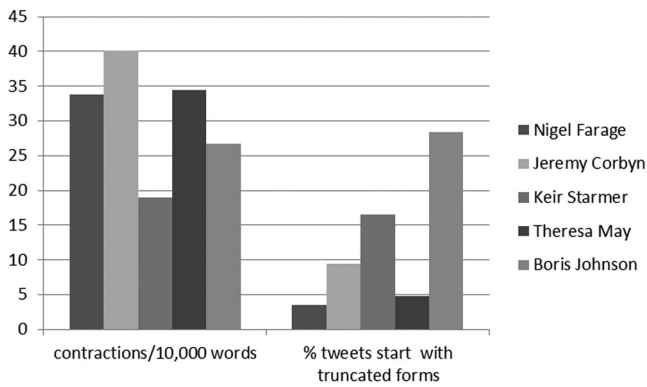
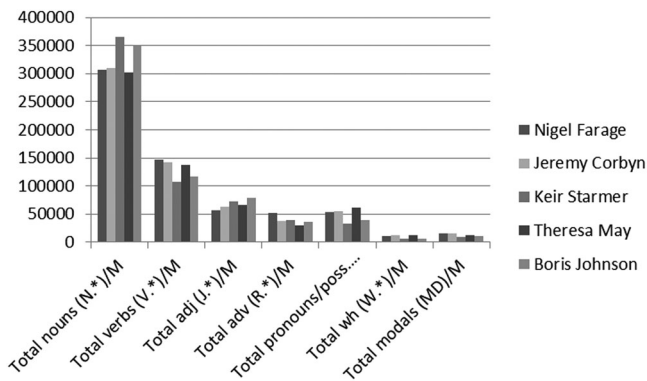**FIGURE 1**   Contracted and truncated forms

FIGURE 2   Parts of speech (SketchEngine), frequency per M

Figure 2 shows that Starmer and Johnson had a slightly higher proportion of nouns and adjectives, while Farage, Corbyn and May had a style that was slightly more verb-driven, with more pronouns. In consonance with Biber's (2006) general principles, Farage, Corbyn and May thus appeared to adopt a slightly more 'spoken' style, while Starmer and Johnson produced tweets that were somewhat closer to the 'written' pole and accordingly more formal. However, it should be noted that the differences identified are very small, and none of these grammatical markers could be viewed as sufficient to characterise a populist style.

Regarding lexical complexity, the differences identified between the five corpora were small, but within these, a certain commonality again seems to be present between Farage, Corbyn and May (see Figure 3), with a higher presence of vocabulary from the thousand most frequent words in English, and therefore a simpler and more restricted lexical range.

Figure 4 shows that the frequency of *and* varies considerably: Corbyn and May make much greater use of it, suggesting that their style favours the connection of coordinate clauses, or frequent lists of nouns. *So* is slightly more frequent in Corbyn than in the other corpora, while *but* is similar throughout.

4.2 | Interpersonality

The results for markers of interpersonality and emotion brought a varied picture to light.

As Figure 5 shows, although Farage made marginally greater use of *you/your* than the other politicians here, the differences were negligible. He used *we/our* less than Corbyn and Johnson, and *I/my* less than May. Taken together
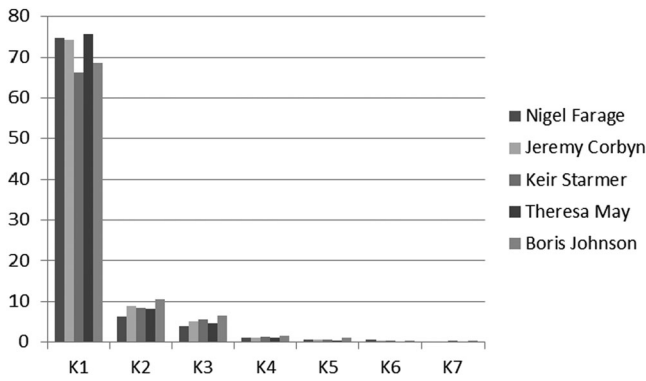
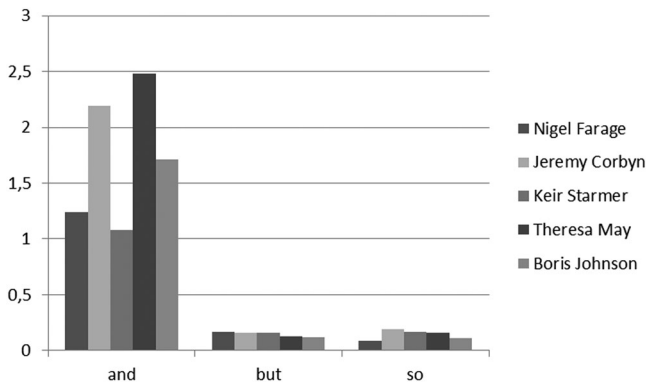**FIGURE 3** Lexical complexity (% of items in each BNC/COCA frequency level)

FIGURE 4 Simple connectors *and*, *but*, *so* (% of running words)
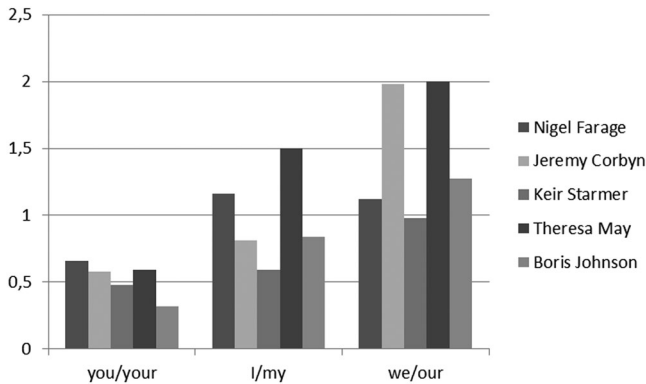

FIGURE 5 First- and second-person pronouns and possessives (% of all words)

this suggests that Farage's tweets were not more 'personal', and only slightly more 'you-directed', than those of his counterparts.

Figure 6 points to a rather greater use of negatively charged lexis tagged in the category 'violent/angry' in Wmatrix4 by Farage and Johnson. Closer inspection of the concordance lines generated brought to light a major contrast between the two politicians. Although Farage often used items tagged in the category violent/angry' (angry,
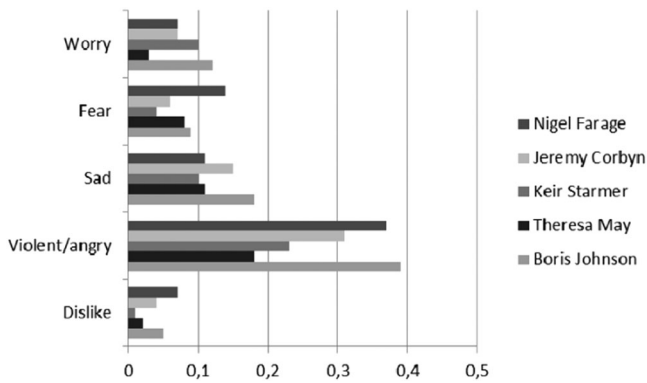
FIGURE 6 Lexical items in each corpus tagged with negative emotional meaning (calculated using Wmatrix4 as % of all running words)
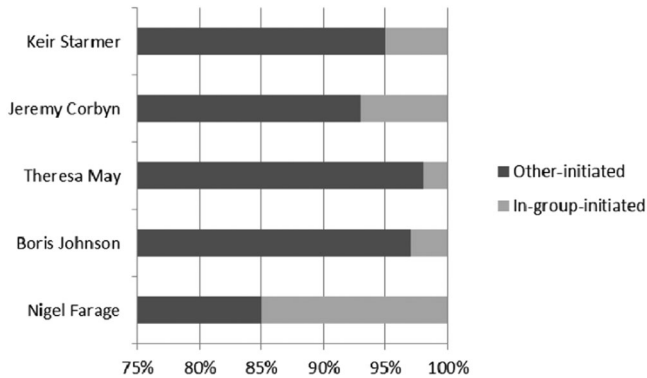

FIGURE 7 In-group-initiated and other-initiated violence (%)

fight, combat, attack) to condemn violence, he also used them to express feelings and actions attributed to his own supporters, or groups that had his approval. On the other hand, Johnson, who was Foreign Minister for much of the period in which these tweets were sent, almost invariably used lexical items of this type in the context of condemning attacks and aggression in other countries (see qualitative analysis).

Figure 7 shows the percentage of acts of violence in this category envisaged as in-group initiated and other-initiated, across the five corpora. Clearly, Farage's tweets included more mentions of violent feelings and acts on the part of his own followers/supporters and other groups that enjoyed his explicit approval (such as Salvini, Trump, Catalan nationalists). For further discussion of this, see below (qualitative analysis).

Figure 8 shows that the two Conservative politicians used more lexical items that were tagged positively than did the other three politicians. In particular, Theresa May and Boris Johnson used more lexis in the categories happy and content. Since the Conservative party was in power, it is not surprising that these two politicians should have wished to transmit happiness and satisfaction, or that the three politicians in opposition parties should have used less vocabulary in this range.

Although Farage used slightly more maximisers and minimisers than his counterparts (Figure 9), in terms of boosters and other related resources his language did not differ quantitatively from that of the other politicians in this study.

Figure 10 illustrates how Farage's discourse contained notably more instances of the black-and-white terms *right*, *wrong* and *true* than that of any of his counterparts (all instances of *right* used as an adjective to refer to a political tendency were excluded from this comparison).
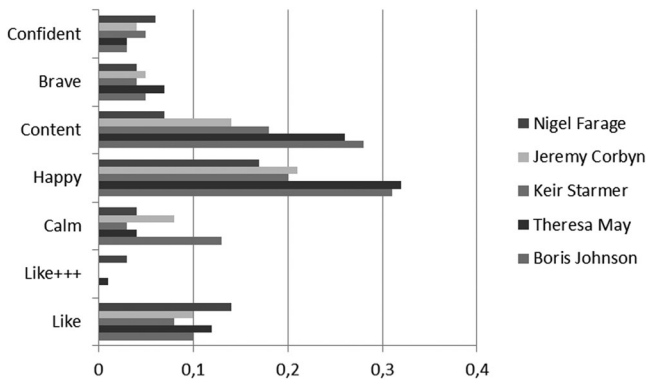
FIGURE 8 Lexical items in each corpus tagged with categories indicating positive emotions (calculated using Wmatrix4 as % of all running words)
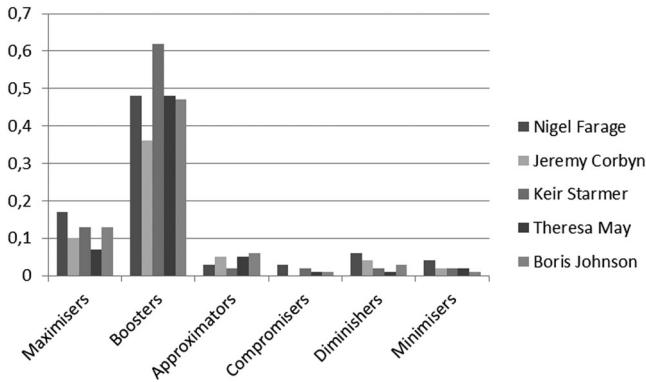

FIGURE 9 Maximisers, boosters, etc. (calculated using Wmatrix4 as % of all running words)
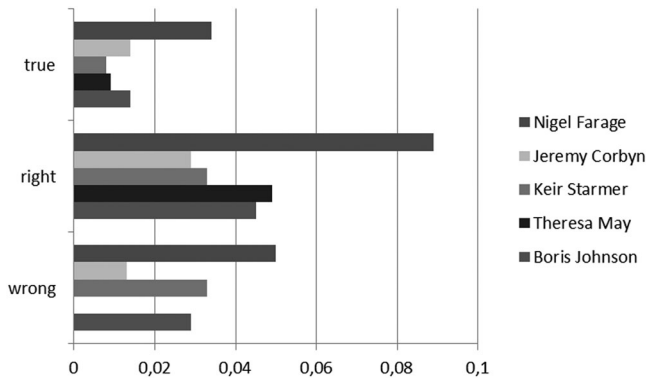

FIGURE 10 Frequency of lemmas *true*, *right* and *wrong* (% of running words)

Finally, Figure 11 shows the percentage of tweets from each corpus in which a direct question was used. This strategy clearly was used almost exclusively by Farage, and could be associated with the desire to provoke reactions and generate further activity in Twitter.
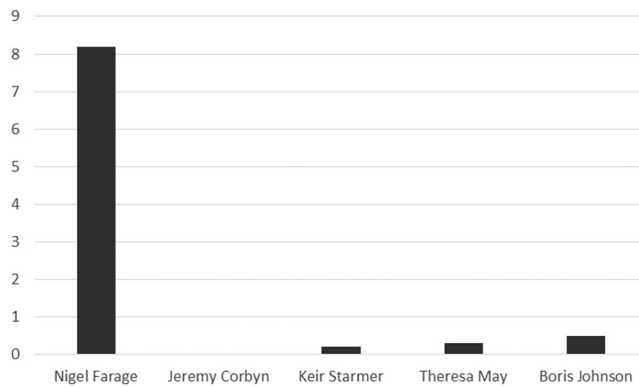
FIGURE 11 Percentage of tweets containing a direct question

4.3 | Overview of quantitative results

In conclusion, the foregoing quantitative results draw our attention to the ways in which Farage's tweets both resemble and differ from those by the other politicians in this study. First, let us consider the areas in which Farage's tweets appeared not to differ greatly from those of his counterparts. Although Farage's tweets are among those with a more verb-driven style and with simpler lexis, these traits are shared by the tweets sent by May and Corbyn, and cannot therefore be regarded as strongly indicative of a populist style. The use of contractions, truncated forms and simple connectors also seems not be of relevance: Farage actually uses these markers of informality less than the other politicians. He also makes less use of personal pronouns and possessives than do the others in this sample. In the percentages of maximisers, boosters, and so on, he also fails to differ from the rest of the set. Second, we can identify some areas where Farage was indeed the outlier: (1) he used more lexis with negative associations, particularly in the area of violence/anger, and less positively connoted lexis, than any of the other politicians; (2) he used the adjectives *true, right* and *wrong* more than any of the other politicians, suggesting a tendency to make judgemental statements containing categorical opinions; and (3) his use of direct questions was clearly very different from that of the other politicians, pointing to a desire to provoke a reaction and generate responses on Twitter, and contrasting with the monologic approach of the other four.

5 | QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Qualitative reading of the tweets in the five corpora brought out various aspects of the way in which Farage's style differed from those of the other politicians, complementing and extending the quantitative exploration. In what follows, I address two of the issues identified as salient in the quantitative analysis, namely the presence of anger/violence and the use of direct questions. I also look in more depth at the question of informality/orality from a qualitative perspective by examining the frequent use Farage makes of colloquial phrases and sayings, a feature that is absent from the other politicians' tweets. Finally, I scrutinise Farage's use of political catchphrases: although other politicians also use these (as in May's use of 'strong and stable'), Farage's catchphrases have a particular resonance in that they use colloquial language to conjure up a particular scenification of anger/violence that simplifies complex situations and offers a compelling, strongly justified subject position to his supporters.

5.1 | Perspectives on anger/violence

As noted above (Figures 6 and 7), Farage's and Johnson's tweets are outstanding in their use of lexical items tagged as denoting violence and anger. Boris Johnson's role as Foreign Minister meant that he had to comment on acts of

terrorism and war in other countries, and almost all his uses of lexis in the category violent/angry reflect this. Farage, on the other hand, occasionally comments on terrorist acts (mainly those in the UK), but manages a wide range of expressions to indicate acts of violence that he would like to see/commit (1):

(1) She [Theresa May] has refused our repeated offers to slap down Rudd [Amber Rudd, government minister] (Farage, 2019) (all tweets are identified by surname of tweeter and year of publication only)

He also envisages other groups (the *gilets jaunes*, Catalan nationalists, Polish anti-EU protesters) as justified in participating in violent actions (2):

(2) Now these riots in France happened because ordinary people want to feel they have some power over their own futures (Farage, 2018)

Moreover, he indulges in what we might call 'scenifications', in which perceived disagreements or limitations are metaphorically represented as acts of violence. In the following two examples, the entities that back Remain are depicted as carrying out a physical attack on the referendum outcome (*bashing the decision of the British people*) (3), while cuts to the military budget are envisaged as delivering a *kick in the teeth* to the armed forces (4):

(3) Billionaire global elites bashing the decision of the British people (Farage, 2017)

(4) Another kick in the teeth for our great Armed Forces (Farage, 2017)

In such cases, the acts of anger and violence represent an escalation in which political disagreements or personal feelings are rescenified as acts of physical violence.

This contrasts sharply with the use made by all the other politicians in this study (see Figures 6 and 7 for overall frequencies). Taking the example of Boris Johnson, we see that although he uses lexis in the category violent/angry as frequently as Farage, his examples are almost all associated with the condemnation of acts of violence elsewhere (5):

(5) Appalled by al-Shabaab attack in #Mogadishu. More innocent lives lost so soon after 14 October atrocities. UK stands with #Somalia (Johnson, 2017)

The difference in the writer's position is quite clear: far from feeling the impulse to commit acts of violence, condoning violence, or using metaphors involving physical violence to describe political actions, Johnson is adopting the standpoint of the horrified onlooker (*appalled*), sympathising with the victims (*innocent lives*) and assuming a position of solidarity with the victims of this violent attack (*UK stands with #Somalia*).

5.2 | Direct questions

Farage's use of direct questions seems to be particularly designed to provoke responses – whether in agreement or disagreement. Rather like the sort of questions people toss into an argument to prompt debate, Farage's questions are calculated to create heated exchange and thus generate interest on Twitter, with the corresponding boost in responses and retweets. Many of his questions are specifically anchored in the politics of the day (6), and phrased to provoke strong responses (6), (7):

(6) Do you trust parliament with a veto on the final Brexit deal? (Farage, 2017)

(7) Are the @Conservatives still the party of law and order? (Farage, 2018)

Of these, some seem to be designed as an open invitation to attack his political rivals (8):

(8) Do you think @BorisJohnson is fit to be PM? (Farage, 2018)

A further category simply homes in on controversial issues and poses questions that are calculated to spark controversy (and thereby generate a flurry of responses on Twitter that will boost his media presence) (9), (10):

(9) Is the UK justice system being fair to @JulianAssange? (Farage, 2018)

(10) Should cannabis be legalised for recreational use in the UK? (Farage, 2018)

5.3 | Colloquial phrases

One of the features of Farage's tweets in comparison with those of the other politicians that is most noticeable on an initial reading is his predilection for colloquial phrases, many of which function in practice as boosters to emphasise his feelings or opinions. Such phrases are common in tabloid newspapers where they are used to build complicity with readers (Conboy, 2002), but tend to be much less frequent in the serious media, where they are generally regarded as clichés. Given the wealth of such expressions found in Farage's tweets, it seemed useful to examine the patterns in which they appear. Much of the colloquial phraseology offered by Farage falls into the following six categories:

1. Expression of (own or in-group) shock or protest: *come as a bombshell, I'll be damned, I'm sick to death.*

2. Defiance by in-group towards out-group: *two fingers up to Westminster, bite his hand off, put my hat in the ring, show who's boss, actions speak louder than words, pass the point of no return, there must be no backsliding, time to stand up for ourselves, people who aren't afraid to speak their minds, slap down, there's no turning back, get a grip, hold their nerve.*

3. Defeat of out-group: *holed below the waterline, car crash, caught red handed, scraping the barrel, scream blue murder.*

4. Humiliation of in-group by out-group: *we're being taken for mugs, total sell-out, total stitch-up, play cat and mouse with the UK.*

5. Deception of in-group by out-group: *showing his true colours, let the cat out of the bag, the elephant in the room, turning a blind eye, burying their heads in the sands.*

6. Insults against out-group: *puffed-up bureaucrats, double trouble, good riddance, has the cat got your tongue?, made a complete fool of himself, lost the plot, last-minute grab for votes, a little creep, hand-wringing.*

The function of these well-known phrases and expressions, which are already naturalised in everyday colloquial language, is not just to add an informal 'tone' to the tweets to build an atmosphere of familiarity and informality. They have an additional significant function, which is precisely to make Farage's ideas and remarks seem 'commonsensical' (Krämer, 2014, p. 55). Proverbs are, in fact, a kind of 'echoic utterance' that has gained currency over the centuries: they are attributable not to any specific source but to people in general (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, pp. 238–239). In many cultures, proverbs or sayings are regarded as repositories of collective wisdom, and are frequently deployed by politicians to tap into popular culture (Ochieng Orwenjo, 2009). As Mieder points out (2008, p. 24), with certain speakers, proverbs can become 'dangerous verbal weapons': their accepted status as folk wisdom may lead people to follow them blindly, which makes them a powerful aspect of political rhetoric. In UK politics, leaders with a more populist approach, such as Winston Churchill or Margaret Thatcher (Mieder, 2008, p. 24), often used popular sayings in their speeches to persuade listeners. Such phrases and proverbs may then gain currency in the debates surrounding particular issues and shape the ways these are habitually framed in public discourse, as well as inspiring satirical readings (Musolff, 2016). Expressions that are not strictly proverbs, but which are none the less enshrined in the phraseology of the language (*to bury one's head in the sand, to turn a blind eye*), seem to have a similar function: when delivered with conviction, they evoke a vivid image, encouraging listeners to draw on shared experiences to understand the situation that is being discussed. Farage's use of proverbs (*actions speak louder than words, we've passed the point of no return*) and familiar metaphorical catchphrases (*the elephant in the room, caught red-handed*) in these tweets thus creates a sense that the ideas being expressed are obvious to everyone – they are common sense – and so if someone refuses to accept

them, or explicitly tries to refute them, he or she is clearly trying to mystify people, or to overcomplicate the issue for some dubious reason.

To these phrases, we should also add a range of colloquial lexis in two specific categories that contributes to the robust yet intimate flavour of Farage's tweets: phrasal verbs used to express graphically the idea of expelling his adversaries; and nouns and adjectives used to ridicule them:

- Ridicule the out-group: *laughable, bonkers, looks rather silly, stupid, ridiculous, charade, fantasy, hoax.*
- Eliminate or expel elements that do not serve the in-group's interests: *get rid of, chuck, drive out, ditch, kick out, kill off.*

Colourful informal language of this kind used to express negative views of political opponents or visualise what one would like to happen to them helps to create the sensation that these tweets are a spontaneous, heartfelt reaction, not a carefully thought-out message. In some sense, these tweets are the linguistic correlate of the ubiquitous image – used frequently on social media and in party propaganda videos – of Farage standing in the pub with a pint of beer. They signal his target identity in linguistic terms, supporting his populist performance as the 'man of the people'.

5.4 | Political catchphrases

Farage's tweets are also peppered with set phrases that he himself has popularised, or which had acquired a strong association with the pro-Brexit side in the referendum campaign and the ensuing controversies. It has been observed that the media contribute to the naturalisation of categories, styles and opinions by referring back to themselves, leading to the creation of 'feedback loops' in which something is repeated so often that its truth-status is taken for granted (Krämer, 2014, p. 55). This must also be the case with certain political notions that may originate with particular parties, but which then enter into wider circulation and are used to justify or refute arguments ('the will of the people'), or to propose solutions ('build a wall') (Bhatia & Ross, 2019). In Farage's tweets, the following recurring multiword units could be considered to act as catchphrases in this way: *fake news* (8); *dangerous fantasy* (4); *the will of* (11); *the will of the people* (7); *the British people* (13); *worst deal in history* (7); *great Brexit betrayal* (7). In particular, two repeated formulae (*the will of* (11) and *the British people* (13)) are combined with other elements, in examples such as *the will of voters* or *be straight with the British people*, to draw out a range of different aspects from what are essentially always the same two, interrelated themes: people versus parliament, and UK versus EU.

(11) 13.5 m voted Conservative to take us out of the single market & reduce net migration. Stop backsliding and carry out the will of the people. (Farage, 2017)

On this subject, it is particularly important to devote some attention to two of the most frequent types of catchphrase found in Farage's tweets: those which involve the words *control* and *bully*. In terms of frequency, the most prominent of these is the range of expressions centring on the word *control* (both noun and verb). *Control* occurs 36 times in this corpus (887/M), and if we contrast this with its frequency in the other corpora, this comparison nicely illustrates how the frequency of the word *control* serves as an index of the degree to which the tweeter supports Brexit: Johnson (747/M), May (318/M), Corbyn (288/M), and Starmer (82/M). Examples (12), (13) and (14) from Farage show how *control* is used both to proclaim Farage's own goals and to criticise his adversaries within a narrative of betrayal:

(12) Unless we take back full ownership and control of our waters Brexit will have been betrayed. (Farage, 2018)

(13) We didn't vote Brexit for a 'compromise' on sovereignty. We voted to take back full control. (Farage, 2017)

(14) We've got somebody negotiating Brexit who is weak and won't *control* our borders time to get behind @LeaveMnsLeave. (Farage, 2018)

Thus *control* is legitimised as materialising the popular will (*we voted to take back full control*), which means that politicians who fail to exert control are not just weak but guilty of betrayal.

The second of these is the term *bully*, a word which occurs 16 times in Farage's tweets (394/M), and is also familiar from his speeches in the European Parliament and his Brexit campaign communications, particularly in the combination *bully boys from Brussels* and its multiple variations. On the one hand, the notion of bullying takes us immediately to the world of playground violence or street fights. It thus fits well into the narrative of violent conflict noted above, where it plays the important role of justifying any anger or resistance among the in-group in the name of self-defence against an aggressive out-group (the *bully boys*). To bring out the essence of Farage's discourse in this sense, let us consider some examples of the way he uses *bully*, in examples (15) and (16).

(15) After Brexit we will be free of unelected arrogant bullies like you and run our own country. (Farage, 2019)

(16) The bully boys in Brussels want to take away their (the Polish people's) democratic rights within the EU. (Farage, 2017)

The phrase *the bully boys of/in Brussels* itself occurs 6 times, while *EU bullies* occurs 3 times: these insulting naming practices help to discredit Farage's target, and importantly they gain strength through repetition. Moreover, it is worth examining the details here: the use of the definite article *the bully boy* has a particular ideological role: as van Leeuwen (2012) points out in the context of Dutch far right discourse, use of the definite article indicates that the entity in question has already been named, and builds a kind of collusion with listeners in which speaker and listener accept that some entity has been pre-classified. It is also significant that the generic plural here provides a useful way of lumping all possible EU protagonists together – and triggering negative affect in relation to them. Combined with repeated references to *EU thuggery and bullying, bullying tactics* and *unelected bullies*, this catchphrase serves rather as Trump's 'Crooked Hillary' did in his pre-election Twitter campaign, as an insult that discredits his target, but also reinforces in-group convictions and builds solidarity and collusion among supporters (Bhatia & Ross, 2019). More light can be shed on this by examining the (rare) uses of the word *bully* by the other politicians in their tweets. On the one hand, Corbyn's declaration that *in the Labour party we stand up to bullies* sounds prim rather than belligerent, and the absence of the definite article tells us that we are talking about a vague and general adversary rather than a real, pre-defined one. On the other, although Johnson's statement that the *EU deal is merely licence for the EU to bully and blackmail us* seems to bear some resemblance to Farage's tweets, on closer inspection we can see that it sounds more like debating-club rhetoric (for example, the highly formal expression *merely licence for*) than rabble-rousing passive-aggression.

6 | CONCLUSION

The research reported here sheds light on populist language in social media, showing how one user's linguistic choices boost his populist performance to resonate with particular audiences. Farage's tweets manage an informal register spiced with numerous colloquial expressions that imbue his opinions with both strong feeling and an air of common sense. The underlying rationale for this can be sought in the principle noted by Ostiguy (2009, p. 39), that 'there is a terrain – a set of usable dichotomies, which have resonance for the local population' (and for the leader), which are defined largely in high-low terms. In his words, these seem 'to play a role as a sort of structural precondition or, to use a different metaphor, as a fertile terrain, for the rise of high-low cleavages in politics' (Ostiguy, 2009, p. 39). If, as Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) have convincingly argued, large swathes of British society that have lost out in processes of globalisation have become disaffected, distrustful of the establishment, and simultaneously disaligned from traditional two-party politics, it is unsurprising that politicians like Farage should seek to exploit this situation through performances intended to reconnect with *the* people on a different level. By cultivating the image of the 'man in the pub' and 'speaking his language', that is, signalling identification with this speech community (Yus, 2011, p. 23), Farage transmits approval of a popular 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1994). As Ostiguy (2009, p. 10) notes, to do this successfully, a politician has to know how to log into the registers and identities that already exist in a society: 'On the culturally

popular low pole, specific expressions and practices can only be taken from a particular, culturally bounded repertoire' that is replete with 'localist traits' or rather, in the specific case of social media, discursive forms that 'define one's virtual identity' (Yus, 2011, p. 37). As we have seen, the popular register so characteristic of Farage's tweets does not rely on the more superficial features of informality – for example, our exploration of informal register markers revealed few differences between his tweets and those of other leading politicians. Rather, it operates on both a phraseological and an emotional level. On the one hand, through the use of local vernacular expressions, catchphrases and proverbs, Farage manages a discourse that is both familiar to his readers and classifiable as 'common sense'. On the other hand, Farage's discourse is characterised by scenifications of violence, in which he himself, his supporters, and the groups with which he sympathises, occupy roles both as victim and as perpetrators of violent acts. For many supporters, this doubtless offers an outlet to anger and indignation, giving a name to their ill-defined disaffection and providing concrete adversaries against whom their rage can be directed. The repetitive nature of his discourse tends to lend it strength: through his unvarying verbal and visual narratives of people versus politicians and Britain versus the EU, he creates his own feedback loops to reinforce his image of 'the man of the people'. In this, Farage's style meshes perfectly with the 'media populism' described by Krämer (2014), in which tabloids and popular television generate a communication style that flatters its audiences, and builds collusion with them while confirming their prejudices.

A study of Farage's tweets cannot conclude without commenting on the political effects that his discourse is likely to have. In the context of contemporary populism elsewhere, Bhatia and Ross (2019) explain how recontextualisations of events, particularly through regular discursive action such as repeated use of particular terms or metaphors, help to categorise social groups and individual people, consolidating a particular representation in people's minds which may have little grounding in reality (hence their term 'discursive illusion'; Bhatia, 2015). Reminding us that people organise their moral positions and commitments around specific category identities, they show how Trump uses exactly these strategies to brand Hillary Clinton as morally repugnant and therefore unsuitable for office. In particular, his repeated use of the epithet 'crooked Hillary' serves to conjure up a villain responsible for what is wrong with America, running parallel to a narrative of moral purification encapsulated in the catchphrase 'drain the swamp'. Similarly, in these tweets, Farage paints a fantastic landscape in which the caricatured figures of *the bully boys in Brussels* have seized control from the deserving people, while weak and treacherous politicians defy *the will of the people* by refusing to take back control. Such narratives have the appeal of simplicity and emotional clarity, and may become the dominant representation of events, resisting attempts by politicians of a different calibre to introduce greater complexity to public debate. Arguably, the discursive strategies analysed here, with their heavy reliance on emotion, familiarity and popular expressions, work in combination to anchor just such a narrative in people's hearts and minds.

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