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Persuasive communication on the Facebook account of the “Alternative für Deutschland” Saxony. An example of political populism

1 Introduction

September 2019 was the month when elections to the state parliaments in three Eastern German federal states took place. Some surveys that had been carried out in the months before the elections showed that the acceptance for the political programme of populist parties, such as the “Alternative für Deutschland“ (hereafter AfD), was relatively high amongst the population of these three states, especially in Saxony. Furthermore, the AfD had already been very successful during the municipal elections in Saxony in May 2019, where it won the majority in nine of the 13 rural districts and achieved an overall vote of 25.3% in Saxony (<https://wahlen.sachsen.de/europawahl-2019-wahlergebnisse-6931.php>). This led some political scientists to the hypothesis that the results of the municipal elections might be reproduced in September 2019.¹ Concerning the political situation in Germany at the time of the elections, and the rise of the AfD, especially their harsh criticism of Angela Merkel’s decision in 2015 to open the borders for the refugees coming to Germany, some political scientists were of the opinion that the results of the September elections might have a destabilizing effect on the German government in Berlin. Therefore, it seems relevant to take a closer look at the persuasive discourse, and in this context at the multimodal discourse strategies, of a so-called populist party.

The AfD’s public discourse (both in speeches and face-to-face interactions, as on social media platforms), especially in the context of an election campaign, is similar to that of every populist party, and addresses the fears and concerns of those people who increasingly turn to social media for information about political issues. Here we often speak about a so-called “Facebook bubble”, meaning that instead of users actively choosing the contents they want to receive, algorithms personalize contents for users, exposing them, as a consequence, to a limited range of political ideas (for a detailed discussion on filter bubbles see, for example, Zuiderveen Borgesius et al.,

1 In the end the prediction became true, the AfD was ranked second with 27.5% of the votes in Saxony while the “Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands” (CDU) achieved an overall vote of 32.1% (https://www.wahlen.sachsen.de/LW_19.php).



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2016). Over the last decade in particular, we have been able to observe a general shift of political election campaigns into the digital sphere (cf. Bieber, 2013, 197), and thus the basic structures of social interaction and communication have been modified (cf. Emmer 2013, 138), influencing communication processes in this context (cf. Jakob, 2013, 111). In short, the objective of the populists is to gain the attention of the already convinced (enhancing their conviction and strengthening social cohesion among their supporters), as well as that of potential voters.

The purpose of the present article is to show which multimodal strategies characterize the persuasive discourse of the AfD Saxony on their Facebook account. For this purpose, we conduct a qualitative, multimodal analysis of selected entries uploaded by the AfD Saxony to its Facebook account between November 2018 and March 2019. The discussed examples cover some topics that are central for the (mediatized) populist political discourse, such as the way the government should deal with minorities, especially refugees. In a short theoretical part, three underlying concepts of the research will be defined, namely the notions of persuasive speech, political populism (as the research project combines both concepts), and finally the multimodality of texts, in order to take into account the semiotic complexity of the analysed Facebook accounts. We will then present four selected examples taken from the corpus, in order to show in which way the AfD tries to convince its addressees by the specific multimodal design of the messages. The article closes with a short conclusion and an overview of further research perspectives in the field.

2 Persuasive speech and political populism

As the aim of this article is to describe the persuasive potential of political discourse, it is necessary to attempt to define what is understood by the notion of "persuasion" in the context of the research project. As a starting point, we refer to the fact that we have to deal with a linguistic activity (either spoken or written), with the speaker aiming at convincing his or her audience to accept a certain position. In order to guarantee the acceptance of his or her point of view, the speaker chooses certain visual and verbal strategies in order to make the audience agree to the presented view. We therefore define persuasion, with Scheidel (1976, 1), as

the activity in which the speaker and the listener are conjoined and in which the speaker consciously attempts to influence the behavior of the listener by transmitting audible and visible symbolic. Scheidel (1976, 1)

With specific regard to persuasion in political discourse, we claim that "political persuasion is an important part of any society where communicators try to convince the





others to change their beliefs or behaviour [...]” (Altikriti, 2016). In ancient Greek, Aristoteles established a link between an appeal by reason, an appeal by ethics, and an emotional (aesthetic) appeal (cf. Altikriti, 2016), with those three modes resulting in a threefold division of styles. Therefore, research concerning persuasion and persuasive speech regularly refers to the three core concepts of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. While *logos* means that a speaker is able to convince the audience based on the logical structure of his or her arguments, thus based on reasoning, and *ethos* refers to the credibility of a person (“persuasion through personality and stance” (Altikriti, 2016)), *pathos* appeals to the emotions of the audience (“arousal of emotions” (Altikriti 2016)). It becomes apparent that *pathos*, understood as emotional appeals, is used in persuasive messages in order to enhance the acceptance of a message by evoking certain feelings within the audience. Our data will show how political, populist messages play with the emotions of the audience. Populist parties often use scare tactics, taking up related topics, such as migration, in order to unsettle (potential) voters and to discredit a government that is (they claim) not able to protect citizens against certain risks. In their messages, populist parties offer simple and easy solutions for complex problems.

When researching on the persuasive political discourse of populist parties, it should be noted how the concepts of persuasive speech and populism can be combined. In a first step, we have to explain what is understood by political populism. One core concept in the field of research about political populism is that of the “interregnum” (cf. Hart, 2012), which is directed towards political leaders who, in the opinion of the populists, are not able to resolve complex problems on the global or national levels. The resulting feeling of dissatisfaction, enhanced by the persuasive discourse strategies of the populist parties, brings about populism as a reaction, with populist parties telling the people to take political matters into their own hands. As the success of populist parties is often closely linked to specific social or societal events, researchers consider these manifestations of populism as the “populist moment” (cf. Mouffe, 2018). Nevertheless, populism must nowadays be considered as a central element of political programmes, while in earlier times it concerned more isolated linguistic phenomena in the field of politics.

Researchers such as Reisinger (2012) or Mudde (2007) ask whether populism should be considered more as a (political) style or underlying ideology. Wodak (2015) and Mudde (2004) are of the opinion that populism should be characterized as a “thin ideology” (cf. Stanley, 2008; Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2004), clearly belittling populism. Moffitt et al. (2014), on the other hand, regard populism as a style and articulation mode, putting it in contrast with other political styles, such as an autocratic or totalitarian style. From a linguistic point of view, populism can be considered as a rhetorical mode of political articulation which manifests itself in particular during a crisis of political representation, which brings us back to the concept of populism as a reaction





(cf. Januszek et al., 2014, 71). By means of linguistic populism, the sender of a political message appeals to the nation that should be represented by the government; at the same time, linguistic populism as a rhetorical mode construes the image of an "enemy" or a scapegoat considered responsible for any existing problems. As the enemy from the inside, this is often the present government that is made responsible for the crisis and blamed for having lost touch with the people. Linguistic populism extends the notion of the "enemy" by including threats from the outside (e.g. religions, migrants, the European Union and its institutions, etc.). The central aim of this strategy is to strengthen the cohesion of the supporters of a political party and to win over voters during the next elections.

With regard to the analysis of the persuasive messages on the Facebook account of the AfD Saxony, it is possible to see it as a manifestation of populism combining both dimensions, an underlying political ideology on the one hand, and on the other a specific communication style which is used in order to convince potential voters of the party's opinions. Consequently, it is intended to discredit both the enemies from the inside and outside, who can only be kept under control with the help of the AfD.

When discussing populism, Reisigl and other researchers in the domain refer to the bisection of populism into vertical populism on the one hand, and horizontal populism on the other. With regard to these two basic antagonisms of populism, vertical populism concerns the tensions between "the elite" and "the people", while horizontal populism highlights the conflict between "the people" and anybody outside the mainstream. In populist discourse, we often find narrations of a crisis which "the elite" is responsible for. Populist language use covers a wide range of verbal, non-verbal and multimodal rhetorical strategies. In this context, a threat is constructed by the visual and verbal design of the message (cf. Taggart, 2002). As a consequence, our central research question is to know how and by which verbal and non-verbal means the crisis and antagonists in the context of vertical and horizontal populism (the elite or other social groups in the role of enemies) are construed.

3 The multimodality of texts

Multimodal texts are omnipresent in our everyday life, as nowadays nearly all messages are distributed in more than semiotic mode:

Bimediale bzw. multimediale Texte bestimmen unseren kommunikativen Alltag: auf Schritt und Tritt begegnen wir dem Werbe-Text/Bildkommunikat, dem bebilderten oder mit Graphiken bzw. Diagrammen versehenen Zeitungsartikel im modernen Textdesign oder dem allgegenwärtigen Musikvideo,





das neben verbalem und visuellem zusätzlich den akustischen Kanal nutzt. (Stöckl, 1998, 76)²

As the quote illustrates, multimodal texts are texts that are composed of different semiotic codes (or sign systems) such as language, images, and sound. The production as well as the reception and process of decoding these semiotically complex texts require a so-called "multimodal competence". In order to understand a multimodal text, the recipients must be able to combine the different semiotic resources, by taking into account syntactical, semantic and functional aspects (cf. Stöckl, 2010, 43). In linguistic research, three questions are central for the description of multimodal texts:

- How are the different sign systems related on the formal (spatial) level?
- Is one sign system dominant concerning the construction of meaning?
- How are the semiotic codes interrelated on the logical/functional level (visual-verbal rhetoric) (for the multimodal structure of texts, cf. also Holly (2004, 3) and Luginbühl (2007))?

Concerning the corpus which our analysis is based on, we have to state clearly that Facebook messages are designed in such a way that exploits the multimodal potential of the social media platform. In order to fully understand the messages, we therefore have to take into account both the verbal as well as the visual elements of Facebook posts.

4 Discussion of results

In the following section, four selected examples from our database are discussed. Our sample consists of a total of 70 Facebook entries that can be found on the Facebook site of the AfD Saxony (AfD Sachsen) that were collected randomly, following their chronological order of their publication dates, between November 2018 and March 2019. As the posts comprise both verbal and visual elements, an automated analysis, for example by using specific software, did not seem adequate taking into account the characteristics of our data. Therefore, the messages were analysed manually.

A quantification of the results, for example concerning preferences for the use of certain linguistic strategies, was not intended. We conducted, instead, an in-depth analysis of selected posts, allowing us to discuss their form and argumentative structure in detail. The posts that are discussed in this section aim at illustrating in an optimal way the strategies of vertical and horizontal populism, with regard to different

2 Bi- or multimodal texts dominate our everyday life: At every turn, we encounter advertising messages, containing both verbal and visual elements, or newspaper articles composed of charts and graphs following a modern text design. This multimodal design can also be observed for video clips which, besides the verbal and the visual sign channel, make also use of the acoustic channel. [Translation provided by the author of this article]



topics that dominated the discussion at the moment when the posts were collected. In the first step, we assigned each post either to the basic category of horizontal or vertical populism, following the criteria explained above. In the second step, we defined the thematical category of each post, based both on key visual elements and lexical elements occurring in the headlines of the messages. The third step of our analysis consisted in correlating the visual with verbal elements, in order to see which semiotic principles of thematical, logical connexion they follow. Finally, the analysis of the lexical units used in each message helped us to describe the argumentation more in detail.

The first post is an example of vertical populism, concerning the criticism of other political parties (the examples in the corpus were on 7th January, 2019) (see image 1). The AfD is well-known for its harsh criticism of competing political parties. Especially for its general criticism concerning the politics of the head of the government, Angela Merkel. However, as Chancellor Merkel designated Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer as head of the CDU in December 2018, the criticism of the AfD has increasingly shifted towards Kramp's personality.



Image 1: Vertical populism (Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer presented as Chancellor Merkel)

The headline of the visual-verbal texts says “CDU wählt sich neue Merkel” [CDU elects a new Merkel]. In the visual part of the text, we see a portrait of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, showing a similar facial expression as Angela Merkel often does, wearing similar clothes. This visual strategy (to be considered as a visual metaphor) is used in order to highlight the same political orientation of the two protagonists of the CDU, and to underline that for the German people a CDU government will not change anything for the better. But the most important element of this Facebook post is the iconic



hash key gesture that Merkel uses to form with her hands, and which has been imitated many times by the media. By presenting Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer with the same body language as the German Chancellor, the AfD wants to underline the fact that in the CDU no changes are intended, and that the criticized political strategy of Merkel, exposing German voters to different kinds of risks, will continue.

The second example (see image 2) illustrates the way in which horizontal populism, with a focus on refugees and Islam, manifests itself on the AfD Facebook account. As already mentioned, one central message of the AfD is criticism of the government's migration policy and, as a consequence of uncontrolled and unlimited migration, the negative impact Muslims and Islam have on German society. The fear can be focussed on the high risk of engaging in terrorism generally attributed to all Muslims, the loss of Christian values, or on the profits of companies who earn a lot of money by offering "Halal" products. The distribution of products specifically made for Muslims is, in the opinion of the AfD, a danger for the German "Leitkultur", putting at risk German values and convictions.



Image 2: Horizontal populism (The refugees and Islam I: The influence of Islamic food patterns and products on German food traditions)

The multimodal text shows a local representative of the AfD, standing in front of a large deep freezer in a supermarket, while in the front a sign says "Halal", including in Arabic script. The statement of the headline ("Großkonzerne verdienen an der Islamisierung"; [Big business makes money out of Islamization] is thus exemplified by the visual text, with the situation in the supermarket intended as a proof from everyday life. Following the argument of the AfD, the influences of the culture of refugees, especially of Muslims, puts German values and traditions at risk.





Example 3 (see image 3) is another one showing horizontal populism, containing a further criticism concerning refugees and Islam.



Image 3: Horizontal populism (The refugees and Islam II: The presentation of Islam as a religion that fosters terrorism)

This example goes in the same direction as the one discussed above. Here, a local representative of the AfD is shown in front of a mosque; the headline says: “BKA (= Bundeskriminalamt): 760 islamistische Gefährder unterwegs – Terroranschläge können jederzeit passieren”) [German Federal Office of Criminal Investigation: 760 potential Islamic terrorists in Germany – terror attacks can happen at any time].

In this entry, the AfD addresses the fear of the German population that uncontrolled migration (ascribed to the Merkel government) leads to reduced public safety in Germany, as no one knows who has entered the country. From the point of view of the AfD, the government cannot guarantee the safety of the German population. Again, the danger is closely linked to Islam, considering all Muslims as potential terrorists. The mosque stands as the central symbol for Islam (visual-verbal synecdoche: generalization > all Muslims are terrorists), as the place where potential terrorists are radicalized. At the same time, the AfD criticizes the building of mosques and thus the visibility of Islam in the public space. The political “strategy” of the AfD, announced in the public space, is a radical: “Send them home and close the borders”. The government is expected to not only control migration, but to keep refugees out of the country.

The last example of horizontal populism highlights the criticism concerning foreign infiltration (image 4):





Image 4: Horizontal populism (Foreign infiltration and exchange of the population due to high birth rates of refugees)

As a result of uncontrolled migration, the AfD fears that the birth rate of refugees will grow much faster than that of the country's indigenous population, which will lead to a so-called "exchange of the population" (see image 4). The AfD pictures a horrific future in which Germans will be the minority in their own country. What can be gathered from this entry are congratulations for the first baby that was born in Germany in 2019: "2019: Erstes Baby Deutschlands heißt Kurt und ist Sachse aus Dresden. Die AfD Sachsen gratuliert von ganzem Herzen!" [2019: The first baby born in Germany is called Kurt and is Saxon, from Dresden. The AfD Saxony sends best wishes from the heart!], with the message expressing the sentiment: "Thank God it is a German – and not only German, but born in Dresden, Saxony".

As we have already mentioned above, we do not intend to quantify our results. Nevertheless, we can observe the tendency that the posts that have been classified as examples of horizontal populism seem to contain more fear appeals than the posts that have been assigned to the category of vertical populism. This observation can probably be explained by the fact that horizontal populism focusses on the outgroup as enemy, with a focus, for the AfD, on migrants as an uncontrollable threat putting German values at risk. Irrespective the classification of the posts to the category of vertical or horizontal populism, concerning the semantic connexion of verbal and visual elements, we identified numerous examples making use of synecdoches and exaggerations, both aiming at enhancing fear and strengthening criticism of the enemy.





5 Conclusion and outlook

The discussion of four selected examples taken from the Facebook account of the AfD Saxony shows that the senders of the persuasive messages make use of the potential of multimodal resources. In order to make people adopt their point of view, the AfD mainly focuses on the notion of "pathos" as one of the three pillars of persuasive speech. It appeals to the fear of people by creating threats, caused by enemies from the inside (the government) as well as from the outside (refugees, Islam, foreign infiltration). Thus, the notion of the enemy, which is a core element of linguistic populism, covers both the internal as well as the external dimension, taking up the differentiation between vertical and horizontal populism. Nevertheless, we can state the slight tendency that the posts classified as examples of horizontal populism focus more on fear appeals than the messages of vertical populism. These enemies are blamed for the "crisis" of the German nation and its "Leitkultur".

Concerning the connexion of verbal and visual elements in our sample, their semiotic relationship is often based on the rhetorical figures of synecdoches and exaggerations, aimed at enhancing fear by concretizing a certain threat, and at underlining the criticism of the enemy.

Furthermore, the analysis shows typical strategies of election campaigns (cf. Jakubowski, 1998, 408), such as the positive self-presentation of the political party, strategies of polarization (underlining differences concerning aims and values), the degradation of the political opponent, exposure of weaknesses concerning the current government, linguistic and multimodal strategies of personalization, positive image construction and the highlighting of continuity as a measure that is able to secure the future.

It should be noted that this study is limited to one small part of the communication strategy of the AfD, realized on the social media, and specifically Facebook.³ It would be interesting to conduct further studies in order to compare strategies of the persuasive speech of the AfD in different communicative channels (face-to-face, speeches on the TV and the radio, etc.).

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3 In an ongoing research project, we analyse the persuasive discourse strategies of the populist Italian party *Lega* on its Facebook account.



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Facebook entries

Image 1: Vertical populism (Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer presented as chancellor Merkel) [<https://de-de.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/>; Accessed 7 Jan. 2019]



Image 2: Horizontal populism (The refugees and Islam I: The Influence of Islamic food patterns and products on German food traditions) [<https://de-de.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/>; Accessed 7 Jan. 2019]

Image 3: Horizontal populism (The refugees and Islam II: The presentation of the Islam as a religion that fosters terrorism) [<https://de-de.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/>; Accessed 7 Jan. 2019]

Image 4: Horizontal populism (Foreign infiltration and exchange of the population due to high birth rates of refugees) [<https://de-de.facebook.com/AfD.Sachsen/>; Accessed 7 Jan. 2019]

Nadine Rentel

Persuasive communication on the Facebook account of the "Alternative für Deutschland" Saxony. An example of political populism

Key words: Facebook communication, political populism, horizontal and vertical populism, persuasive speech, filter bubble

Recent surveys and political research have shown that the acceptance of the political programmes of populist parties, such as the "Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)", is relatively high amongst the population of the three eastern German federal states, especially in Saxony, where the AfD won nine of the 13 rural districts during the local elections in May 2019. Thus, it seems relevant to take a closer look at the persuasive discourse of a so-called populist party. In its public discourse, the AfD responds to the fears and concerns of those people who tend to use social media platforms to gain information when making political decisions. The aim of the article is to show which verbal and visual resources characterize the persuasive discourse of the AfD Saxony on their Facebook account. For this purpose, we propose a qualitative, multimodal analysis of selected entries which the party uploaded on its Facebook account between November 2018 and March 2019.

Nadine Rentel

Prepričevalni diskurz na Facebook profilu pri stranki Alternativa za Nemčijo – primer političnega populizma

Ključne besede: Facebook, politični populizem, horizontalni in vertikalni populizem, prepričevalni govor, informacijski mehurček

Nedavne ankete in politične raziskave so pokazale, da je sprejemljivost za politični program populističnih strank, kot je Alternativa za Nemčijo (Alternative für Deutschland – AfD),





razmeroma visoka med prebivalstvom treh vzhodnonemških zveznih dežel, še zlasti na Saškem, kjer je na lokalnih volitvah maja 2019 AfD zmagala v 9 od 13 podeželskih okrožij. Zato se zdi primerno podrobneje preučiti prepričevalni diskurz te tako imenovane populistične stranke. AfD se v javnem diskurzu odziva na strahove in pomisleke ljudi, ki za sprejemanje političnih odločitev pogosto uporabljajo platforme družbenih medijev. Cilj članka je pokazati, kateri verbalni in vizualni viri so značilni za prepričevalni diskurz saške AfD na njenem Facebook profilu. V njem podajamo kvalitativno, multimodalno analizo izbranih vnosov, ki jih je stranka med novembrom 2018 in marcem 2019 naložila na svoj Facebook profil.

O avtorici

Nadine Rentel je profesorica za romanske jezike na Univerzi za aplikativne znanosti v Zwickau. Njena raziskovalna dejavnost posega na področja komunikacijskih procesov na socialnih omrežjih, politične komunikacije, zdravstvene komunikacije na spletu ter kontrastivne analize različnih besedilnih vrst (nemščina-francoščina).

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