

## Populist Strategies in the Political Advertising Discourse of the French National Front

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the discourse of the French right-wing political party National Front (FN) through a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis approach examining their electoral campaign material from 2011 until 2017. The findings reveal that the FN adopts typical populist tropes and strategies to broaden its electoral base and win popular support. At the core of their discourse lie binary conceptualisations constructing an in-group (the FN, the people) and an out-group (political individuals and entities, immigrants) in a scheme of opposition, typically attributing positive qualities to the former and negative values to the latter. The linguistic construction of the Self and the Other was achieved through the use of metaphor and speech acts, in addition to other discursive strategies involving the appeal to negative emotions. In accordance with van Dijk's ideological square, metaphors reveal a sharp polarisation in the depiction of the Self and the Other, mainly through the FN's positive self-presentation in terms of benevolent and optimistic metaphors. In contrast, the Other is mainly portrayed through war metaphors. Similarly, through the use of speech acts, the FN blames, accuses and criticises the Other, holding it accountable for the French people's grievances, while the Self (in the person of the FN's leader Marine Le Pen) is assertive, firm and determined in its defence of the nation and the people. Linguistic strategies are ultimately reinforced through semiotic representations, enhancing the us/them dichotomy.



### 1. Introduction

One of the most debated topics in current world affairs revolves around the electoral success of populist parties in established democracies during the past decade. The trend came to the foreground with the rise of Trump and his victory in the 2016 US presidential elections, in parallel with the outcome of the Brexit referendum in the UK and the advance of far-right political parties to the forefront of the political scene in many countries globally including Holland, Italy, Hungary, Austria, Poland and Brazil. While populism is a fluid concept, it is essentially based on the antagonistic relationship between the 'people' on the one hand and a perceived 'elite' involving elected officials, politicians in power, or larger ruling bodies that are believed to be usurping the privileges due to the people (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Curini, 2018).

In *The Politics of Fear*, Wodak (2015) outlines the emergence and increasing prominence of right-wing populist parties in Europe, pointing out their considerable current involvement and growing

influence in mainstream political life. As noted by van Dijk (1997), "Virtually all topics and issues relevant in current political science ... seem to have a prominent discursive dimension" (p. 43). Studies on language and power have indeed demonstrated that various social "institutions *construct* a representation of the world, rather than reflect an objective reality" (Mayr, 2008, p. 139; Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1993; Chilton, 2004) and that specific linguistic and discursive strategies have been established to maintain power and privilege.

What motivated this study was thus an interest in investigating the populist phenomenon in modern democracies from a linguistic perspective, mainly as it was observed that far-right parties often tend to rely on emotional campaigns exploiting the fears of the public. This appeal to negative emotions has been noted by Nai and Maier (2018), who argue that "anxious citizens are likely to pay more attention to information and campaigns ... which makes them easier targets for persuasion" (pp. 4-5).

The case of a progressive western European country such as France, historically renowned for its liberal values, is particularly interesting. Although many studies have been conducted on the ideology of the French far-right political party the National Front (Le Front National) under the mandate of its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen (Marcus, 1995; Davies, 1999; Jamin, 2009), little attention has been paid to the evolution of the party's political stances and discourse since the takeover of his daughter Marine Le Pen who has manifestly attempted to soften up the radical image associated with her father, notably by dismissing him, and more recently by rebranding the party as the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*) in a further attempt at dissociating the new direction it has taken under her leadership from its controversial origins. This paper aims to examine the discourse of the National Front (henceforth referred to as FN) under Marine Le Pen's current leadership, as evident in their electoral campaign material. In light of the considerable advances achieved by the FN and which brought it to the forefront of the French political scene in recent years, the main concern of this study involves the discursive construction of a dichotomised opposition between the self and the other in the party's discourse through particular linguistic strategies typical of right-wing populist discourse. The questions that drive the analysis, in particular, revolve around the use of metaphors and speech acts as persuasive devices holding the potential to impact considerably the formation of public opinion.

### 1.1 Political Discourse

Like many other types of institutional discourse, political discourse is a complex human activity that deserves to be the subject of a critical investigation, particularly by virtue of the central place it occupies in the organisation and management of society (Chilton, 2004). In their various forms, most political activities, including political speeches, interviews, advertising and electoral campaigning, are essentially discursive in nature (van Dijk, 1997).

The importance of political campaigns has recently come to the foreground, given their potential to attract the public's attention, influence their beliefs and opinions, and mobilise them to take action (Curini, 2018). The persuasive function of political discourse, in particular, has specifically received much attention (Chilton, 2004; Cap, 2006; van Dijk, 2006; Mayr, 2008). According to Sornig (1989), the purpose of political language indeed "is not so much to inform as to make people believe, and in the end, to act upon their beliefs, [thus] he/she who sounds like one of us is the one we most easily trust" (p. 109).

### 1.2 Populism

As pointed out earlier, the last decade has witnessed the rise of right-wing populist movements which are achieving remarkable electoral success at local and national levels in Europe and the rest of the

world. While this new reality must be acknowledged, some have described the evolution of these movements as a "worrying development" (Oudenampsen, 2011, p. 117). Following Mouffe, Oudenampsen argues that late 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in Europe gave right-wing populists the opportunity to redefine and reshape the political landscape along new cultural lines in addition to the existing socio-economic and ideological ones.

In their study of the 2016 US presidential elections, social scientists Oliver and Rahn (2016) highlight the populist appeal of Trump's rhetoric, particularly in terms of the 'Manichean' and 'apprehensive' outlook he promoted and which served to gain him extraordinary electoral support. Their findings align with Wodak's (2015) study of the *Politics of Fear* which outlines the ways in which populist right-wing politicians exploit the public's anxiety and insecurities to subvert the status quo.

Several studies have been recently conducted on the populist zeitgeist, examining the various manifestations of populism and the recurrent leitmotifs and common argumentative and rhetorical strategies adopted by populist parties across the globe. Stoica (2017) discusses the political myths typically used in populist discourse, which rely on the creation of narratives enabling the public to conceptualise complex messages in an accessible way, outlining specifically the notions of unity, the saviour, the golden age, in addition to the conspiracy myth. Kaya and Tecmen's (2019) study investigates the existential crisis amplified by populist discourse in Europe, capitalising on the issue of "civilisational identity" by pitting the European culture against Islam.

Other studies have examined the discursive strategies employed by populist parties in various geographical and political contexts. Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) explore the discourse of US presidential campaigns, including both Democrat and Republican candidates from a sociological perspective, while Sengul (2019) studies right-wing populist discourse in Australia from a political communication approach.

Several research studies have further been dedicated to the populist phenomenon in the European context. Cervi et al. (2020) explore the construction of the other in the discourse of Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini by creating an anti-immigrant narrative. Bos and Brants (2014) examine the relationship between populist political rhetoric and media representations in the Netherlands. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) define populism as a political communication style by studying the discourse of six political parties in Belgium. Salgado (2019) investigates the role of social media in disseminating populist discourse and communication styles in Portugal.

With the broad attention populism has received in international scholarship, nevertheless, no study has to our knowledge specifically attempted to explore the discursive strategies employed by the French FN political party in their electoral campaigns, particularly over the past decade.

### 1.3 The French National Front

The National Rally (RN), known as the National Front (FN) until June 2018, is a French political party founded in 1972 and chaired by Jean-Marie Le Pen until the takeover of his daughter Marine Le Pen in January 2011. The FN emerged in the French political landscape in the 1980s and distinguished itself for its populist appeal (Williams, 2006). While initially a marginal far-right party, it gradually achieved critical electoral successes, culminating in Marine Le Pen's qualification for the final round of the 2017 presidential elections in which she obtained 33.90% of the votes against Emmanuel Macron.

Under Marine's leadership, the party has attempted to distance itself from its fascist origins as she undertook to present a softer, more modern image and broaden the party's base. This strategy was met with success as it increased the FN's popularity and led to several electoral advances and victories.

Drawing on Moffitt's (2016) definition of populism as a "political style", this study proposes to investigate the elements that constitute the FN's political campaigning style in terms of linguistic and discursive strategies, shedding light on the implications of the use of such strategies and the potential repercussions they could have on public opinion.

## 2. Method

This research adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective to study the discourse of political advertising. CDA is a multidisciplinary approach that views language as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1989, 1995). One of the main concerns of this approach revolves around the potential of language to manipulate users' perceptions, leading to the formation of certain world views, thus its significance for the study of political discourse. Within CDA, the socio-cognitive approach propounded by van Dijk (1998) is relevant to this research since it views discourse use and production in terms of mental models carrying and promoting specific representations of social beliefs and knowledge. In particular, van Dijk's (1997) notion of the ideological square will form the core of the analysis in terms of binary conceptualisations that construct a 'us' vs 'them' dichotomy, typically emphasising 'our' qualities and good deeds as opposed to 'their' negative attributes and actions.

As noted by Wodak (2009b), this "binarity serves important functions in politics by including some and

excluding others ('Othering') and/or by defining a distinct group of victims and a group of perpetrators who can be blamed for something ('Scapegoating')" (p. 585). Most importantly, what needs to be underlined is that the influence that can be achieved through such polarisation is "first of all a control of the mind, that is, of the beliefs of recipients, and indirectly a control of the actions of recipients based on such manipulated beliefs." (van Dijk, 2006, p. 362).

### 2.1 Theoretical framework

The binary collective representations underlying the ideological square can be realised at various linguistic and discursive levels, including lexicosemantic choices, rhetorical strategies, pragmatic devices and semiotic techniques (van Dijk, 2006; Wodak, 2009b). The main dimensions that will be investigated in this study are metaphors at the rhetorical level, and speech acts at the pragmatic level. The choice of the metaphorical dimension was motivated by the ability of metaphors to frame social phenomena and events, as well as their persuasive potential. As for speech acts, they are also particularly relevant to the study of political discourse by virtue of the various functions they can perform, namely, cautionary, promissory, accusatory, etc., all of which can also be exploited to influence public opinion and guide the electorate's actions and decisions.

Another strand of CDA will also inform a section of the analysis, drawing on the discourse-historical approach of Wodak et al. (2009), which is concerned with a contextualisation of discourse within broader historical contexts. In particular, this paper will draw on the notion of *topoi* employed in the discursive construction of national identity. Additionally, and since the data mainly consists of election campaign posters, this study will also examine semiotic representations since, "Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 2) and can "express (ideological) meanings and contribute to the overall meaning of texts" (Mayr, 2008, 10). It is important to note that while the main focus of this study is not centred on semiotic representations, visual elements will be discussed where they are seen to contribute to the message being communicated.

### 2.2 The Data

In her work on right-wing populist discourse, Wodak (2015) outlines the vital role of performance in right-wing populist parties' public strategies, making considerable use of mainstream media and social media platforms. In an earlier study of the FN's evolution under the mandate of its original founder, Davies (1999) had already noted the party's "modern" outlook: "It was the first French political party to have its Internet web site, and its output of publicity material is not only unremitting but impressive in its

scope and production quality" (p. 6). Davies argues that this could be a residue of the party's earlier days when it was cast out as a racist and fascist movement, thus "publicity, advertising and propaganda are important concerns for the FN – a political formation devoid of favourable media coverage and thus forced to rely on posters, slogans" (p. 224).

The data under study comprises material from the FN's political advertising campaigns, mainly 61 pre-election posters and brochures, including campaign slogans and conference posters. The material was obtained from the FN's Facebook account. It involves the period since Marine Le Pen's takeover in January 2011 up until the last French presidential elections in 2017, with a specific focus on pre-election material (namely, the 2012 Presidential elections, the March 2015 Departmental elections, the December 2015 Regional elections, and the 2017 Presidential elections). All the items posted on the FN's social media platform within this time frame were included in this study, with the exception of a few that did not incorporate a linguistic component and only consisted of visual elements. The dates provided for each item figure as they were posted. Unless otherwise indicated, the researcher has emphasised the data to highlight relevant lexical choices<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

This study adopts van Dijk's (1997) framework for the analysis of the FN's political advertising material, particularly regarding strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. As specified earlier, this paper will investigate the use of metaphor and speech acts, in addition to the use of rhetorical topoi, which serve to induce a sense of fear.

Oliver and Rahn (2016) offer a valuable overview of the central premises of populist movements:

*"Populists in established democracies claim they speak for the 'silent majority' of 'ordinary, decent people' whose interests and opinions are (they claim) regularly overridden by arrogant elites, corrupt politicians, and strident minorities" (Canovan 1999, 5). Populism also defines the "people" by appeals to economic and social nationalism (Gerteis and Goolsby 2005; Jansen 2011). Here, the nation, or "heartland," is the primordial basis for a shared identity (Taggart 2000). This construction of a "we" is also facilitated by the invocation of the people's enemies, both internal and external. (p. 191)*

<sup>1</sup> The acronyms used in the posters refer to rival political parties, namely PS (Parti Socialiste), UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), and UMPS (a term coined by FN politicians in reference to the UMP and the PS to denounce their alleged interchangeability).

An examination of the FN's political advertising material does indeed reveal a dichotomised opposition between the 'us/we' and the 'other'.

#### 'Us': the people, the nation.

One of the central premises of populism revolves around a "commitment to the 'people'" (Taggart, 2000, p. 91). This strategy has been noted in relation to the FN, whose main concern since its inception has consistently involved the welfare of the French nation and people (Davies, 1999). The focus on the people in FN campaign discourse is quite evident:

- a) The **people** first (*Le peuple d'abord*, 1 May 2013)
- b) Our 7650 candidates are women and men of the **people** (*Nos 7650 candidats sont des femmes et des hommes du peuple* (11 March 2015)
- c) The closing statement of the lead paragraph of the FN's charter of political engagement is a direct echo of Lincoln's famous pledge: 'government of the **people**, by the **people**, for the **people**' (*gouvernement du Peuple, par le Peuple et pour le Peuple*, 1 April 2015)

More specifically, the populist claim to be "the Will (or the Voice) of the People (the Vox Populi argument of democratic discourse)" (van Dijk, 1997, p. 29) is reflected in the FN electoral discourse:

- a) The **voice of the people**, the spirit of France (*La voix du Peuple, l'esprit de la France*, Conference slogan ahead of Presidential elections, February 2012)
- b) In contrast with the 'chaos' brought forth by the ruling parties, The FN presents itself as "an alternative voice: that of common sense and the interest of the French **people**" (*une autre voix: celle du bon sens et de l'intérêt du Peuple français*, 6 March 2015).
- c) The FN's charter's final clause offers their pledge to 'consult the **population** on all important matters' (*consulter la population ... sur tous les sujets importants*, 1 April 2015), thus giving power and a voice to the people.
- d) Ultimately an electoral slogan prior to the presidential elections claims the FN speaks 'In the name of the **people**' (*Au nom du Peuple*, 7 December 2016, 8 April 2017)

The other component of the 'us' construct is the nation. The concept of a nation has been defined as an "imagined political community" (Anderson, 2006), a mental construct which is communicated through discourse, "predominantly in narratives of national culture. National identity is thus the product of discourse" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 22). The notion of the 'nation' as a 'heartland' that must be protected against dangerous outsiders has been identified as the main concern for right-wing populists (Wodak, 2015). This typically leads to scenarios where the others ('Them', who could be strangers either from within society or outside) threaten the homeland ('We').

It is significant to make the connection in this context between the nation as a family and the concept of patriotism. In his brief account of the *Metaphor of the Nation as Family*, Lakoff outlines the image of a 'patriot' (from Latin *pater*, 'father') who loves his fatherland (as cited in Musolff, 2016, p. 28). This takes particular significance with the frequent references to patriotism and the 'patriots' in FN electoral material. Following her election as President of the FN, Marine Le Pen immediately delineates her outlook as a 'patriotic revolution' (*Révolution patriotique*, 14 January 2011). Similar associations are evident through FN members' self-reference as 'les patriotes' and 'les candidats patriotes' (11 March 2015), in addition to the predication 'the patriots in power' in the run-up to the presidential elections (*Les patriotes au pouvoir*, 8 July 2016). Finally, the FN's proposal to save French manufacturer Alstom relies on the appeal to 'economic patriotism' (*Sauver Alstom grâce au patriotisme économique*, 26 Sept 2016).

The pivotal position the 'nation' occupies in FN discourse is quite evident in the lead paragraph of the 'Charte d'engagement politique' which encapsulates the central notions essential for the survival of the nation: sovereignty and independence (*Le FN défend la souveraineté Nationale et l'indépendance de la nation*, 1 April 2015). As for the last post before the 2017 presidential elections, it offers a simple, brief, three-word slogan in monochrome text, against a blank background: 'Choose France' (*Choisir la France*, 5 May 2017), with 'La France' graphologically foregrounded in bold font.

As noted by Davies (1999) in his study of the FN, "The party's emphasis on the nation as a key ideological tenet dates from its formation in 1972" (p. 66). In this context, it is significant to remember that while the party has undergone a rebranding process as of June 2018 (from *Front National* to *Rassemblement National*), it is quite revealing that the 'National' element remained the constant that ensured the continuity between the two directions.

### **'The other': political opponents, the EU, immigrants**

A central feature of populism is its divisive nature (Oudenampsen, 2011, p. 124) as it characteristically creates an "antagonism of 'us versus them'" (Greven, 2016, p. 1). Discussing the discursive strategies employed in right-wing populist rhetoric, Wodak (2015) highlights the characteristic campaigning strategies that rely on creating fundamental dichotomies based on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

While the self ('us/we') is thus set in binary opposition to the 'other', otherness can be multi-dimensional. As outlined by Hoheneder (2011):

*The extreme right reinvented community by exclusion, by igniting nationalist feelings and*

*directing them against everything alien: against immigrants and asylum seekers, against the political elite and European integration. ... The argument worked because it offered an explanation for almost every problem on earth. For shrinking welfare budgets (lazy immigrants), for rising costs of housing and food (the European currency) and unpopular politics (corrupt politicians). (pp. 166-7)*

An examination of the data reveals that the 'Other' in FN political discourse essentially takes three main forms, along the lines laid out by Hoheneder: political opponents, the European Union, and the immigrant population in France.

A universal strategy adopted by politicians to win electoral support relies on attempts at discrediting the opposing party to minimise their chances of achieving victory (Cabrejas-Peñuelas & Díez-Prados, 2014). This can be accomplished in various ways, though typical strategies essentially include highlighting other parties' perceived failures, such as economic inefficiency, weak stances against crime or terrorism, and corruption (Curini, 2018).

Apart from denouncing opponents' policies on issues such as unemployment, unsuccessful financial policies, laxity towards immigration (e.g. 6 March 2015; 18 April 2016), FN discourse often relies on argumentation *ad hominem*, i.e. discrediting opponents through an attack on their character or personal attributes (Wodak, 2015). This is evident in the following posters: accusing the UMP (7 March 2015) and former president Sarkozy (19 July 2016) of mendacity and hypocrisy; levelling charges of racism against PS members (11 March 2015); and presenting an unflattering semiotic depiction of presidents Sarkozy and Hollande as zombie-like figures (21 April 2015). All of these examples do indeed confirm the tendency of right-wing populists to vilify the 'others' and undermine their credibility (Wodak, 2015).

While the FN's relationship with Europe has been ambivalent since the early days of Jean-Marie Le Pen (Davies, 1999), evidence from election campaign posters produced over the past decade suggests that the FN's hostile attitude towards the European Union has far from subsided. Indeed, in the FN's discursive construction of the harmful 'other', the EU figures predominantly as a malicious, abusive and ultimately toxic entity as the following posters reveal:

- a) the EU is semiotically portrayed as a patronising figure, abusing its power over a seemingly subservient and defenceless France (28 October 2014)
- b) France is depicted as incurring major financial losses due to the EU's plans to support the Euro (21 April 2015)
- c) The headline 'How the European Union is wrecking you' provides alarming figures

(*Comment l'Union Européenne Vous ruine*, 6 April 2016)

d) The EU is described as 'poisoning us' (*L'Union Européenne nous empoisonne*, 18 April 2016)

Traditionally the most easily constructed category of 'other', immigrants inherently pose a challenge by virtue of their difference. While this makes them an easy target for wariness and suspicion in relation to native populations, "populists often use emotionally exciting language, for example, hyperbolic exaggerations or metaphors to arouse the emotions of their audience and to raise prejudices against immigrants" (Kienpointner, 2005, p. 226).

In his study on conservative elite discourse and racism, van Dijk (1993) notes how the consequences of immigration are often "portrayed in terms of social, economic, and cultural catastrophe, and hence as a fundamental threat to white society." (p. 90) This is confirmed by Rydgren (2007) who argues that,

*For the radical right, immigrants are a threat to ethnonational identity; second, they are a major cause of criminality and other kinds of social insecurity; third, they are a cause of unemployment; and fourth, they are abusers of the generosity of the welfare states of Western democracies, which results in fewer state subsidies, etc., for natives. (p. 242)*

Consequently, immigrant groups typically receive more attention for potentially negative practices and their repercussions than for any positive contributions they may offer to society. Hence, particularly in a populist context, "negative portrayals highlight those negative consequences that provoke strong popular resentment and scapegoating" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 85). An overview of some key FN posters and slogans indeed reveals recurrent patterns in relation to the issue of immigration which is depicted respectively as a heavy financial burden (21 April 2015); an explosive device (24 April 2015); and a source of 'tension', associated with 'exorbitant costs', 'unprecedented regression', 'violence' against women (namely assault, rape and harassment), 'criminal networks' that are exploiting migrant children in Europe (child trafficking, forced labour and prostitution), and ultimately 'terrorism' and the Islamist 'threat' (18 March 2016).

### 3.1 Topoi

One of the most common strategies adopted in constructing the 'other' involves appealing to negative emotions by tapping into feelings of insecurity and social unease. Discussing the centrality of fear to modern societies, Wodak (2015) draws on the work of sociologist and media expert Dick Pels who identifies a broad range of social and political concerns that appeal to the voters. These include the fear of unemployment, loss of cultural values, threats to national security, suspicion towards immigrants,

disillusionment with the ruling class, etc. While the reasons behind various types of crises are manifestly diverse, Wodak notes the nearly uniform response of right-wing populist parties which tend to provide simplistic answers typically through the framing of 'others' as being responsible for all the grievances of the 'people', arguing that such strategies lead to a "normalisation" of discriminatory rhetoric which is conducive to a climate of fear (Wodak, 2015). As emphasised by Reyes (2011), "Fear is perhaps the most effective emotion to trigger a response" and "is often developed in political discourse by a process of demonisation of the enemy, and that process is linguistically realised by attributes (such as negative moral attitudes)" (p. 790).

In her study of the discursive strategies employed in right-wing populist rhetoric, Wodak (2015) discusses the use of topoi such as the topos of threat, the topos of urgency, the topos of saviour, etc. in the process of constructing the fearful other. The following section will investigate the common topoi found in FN electoral discourse, namely in terms of recurrent "leitmotifs" (Wodak, 2009a, p. 119) that operate as ready-made statements typically used as basic arguments not requiring justification (van Dijk, 2013).

#### 3.1.1 Topos of danger

While Wodak (2015) demonstrates that the topos of threat is frequently employed in the context of migration in order to intensify the idea of the dangerous 'Other', an investigation of FN campaign material reveals that the topoi of danger and threat are evoked frequently in relation to various 'threats'.

At the lexical level, this is achieved through the use of terms such as *chaos*, the *explosion* of unemployment, *attacks* against the family policy, increased *insecurity*, the Islamist *threat* (6 March 2015); the *explosion* of immigration (24 April 2015); health in *danger*, the UMPS *harms* health severely (19 March 2016); the EU is *poisoning* us (18 April 2016).

At the semiotic level, immigration is graphically depicted as a time bomb (24 April 2015, above), while a genetically modified corn ear is held by a person dressed in a protective suit with gloves and goggles as if exposed to a hazardous substance (18 April 2016, above).

Such depictions resonate with earlier studies on the discourse of the FN and its core values. According to Davies (1999), "the focus has remained the structure of party discourse: the emphasis on the nation and on the threats that, in the FN's view, jeopardise national integrity" (p. 221).

#### 3.1.2 Topos of numbers

In addition to the topos of threat, van Dijk (1993) highlights another strategy which he terms the 'numbers game' and which is typically used in the

negative representation of immigrants: “This rhetorical use of quasi-objective figures, convincingly suggesting how many “come in” every day, week, month, or year, is one of the most compelling scare tactics in the formation of public opinion.” (p. 107).

As noted by Davies (1999), the founder of the FN Jean-Marie Le Pen knew well how to exploit figures: “From nothing more than a set of complex official statistics, the FN leader [was] able to create an ambience of fear and unease” (p. 158). A cursory examination of the FN data reveals that Marine Le Pen adopts a similar strategy as she conveniently selects and presents alarming figures about unemployment (18 March 2016), the economy (21 April 2015), the European Union (6 April 2016), immigration (18 March 2016), and the Islamist threat (2 July 2015). Interestingly, these posters reveal that the topos of numbers no longer revolves exclusively around immigration as the scope of perceived threats has been ostensibly expanded.

### 3.1.3 *Topos of saviour*

With the overwhelming existence of perceived dangers and threats, the need for a 'rescue narrative' becomes urgent. Thus, the topos of the saviour protecting 'us' against 'them' is another feature commonly found in right-wing populist discourse (Wodak, 2015). Wodak notes that the saviour figure often takes the shape of a 'charismatic leader' who employs 'aggressive rhetoric'. While it is common for politicians to adopt theatrical elements in their political performance and communications (Greven, 2016), an examination of the FN electoral advertising material reveals a recurrent semiotic representation featuring a powerful and evocative image of the FN's leader.

Prior to the regional elections of 2015, the FN published a poster of Marine Le Pen, confident, radiating positivity and optimism, with the buoyant predication 'Force for the future' (*Force d'avenir*, 5 June 2015). With the promise of a better future and the implication of salvation from 'chaos' and the multiple threats facing the French nation, Marine is indeed presented as a saviour endowed with redeeming powers. Other posters present Marine in a similar light, alternatively glorious, authoritative, protective, welcoming, but suggestively, always in a Christ-like posture with her arms wide open (17 October 2014, 8 July 2016).

Drawing on Butterwegge's study of right-wing populist and extremist movements which successfully gathered electoral support by depicting themselves as taking an anti-establishment stance, Wodak (2015) notes the construction of the leaders' image “as saviours, saving ‘the people’ from threat and danger (mostly from ‘outside’), and as saving the welfare state for ‘Us’.” (p. 28). Evidence of this feature was also found in a poster published prior to the 2017 presidential elections and referred to earlier in this

study, proposing to ‘save Alstom thanks to economic patriotism’ (*Sauver Alstom grâce au patriotisme économique*, 26 September 2016).

These findings are aligned with Stoica's (2017) discussion of the ethos of populism and the rhetorical strategies it relies on in a bid to communicate messages that can be effortlessly grasped by drawing on recognisable narratives that appeal to the public.

## 3.2 Metaphors

In conceptual metaphor studies, a metaphor is framed as a cognitive operation that involves a transfer of meanings from one experiential domain to another, the source domain being typically familiar from personal or social experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2002). Metaphors are a crucial element of human life as they enable us to understand and interpret the world. More importantly, metaphors “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 159). While Chilton (2004) identifies metaphorical reasoning as a central feature of political discourse, van Dijk (2000) further highlights the critical potential of metaphors to manipulate meaning and influence the construction of social representations of in- and out-groups. Discussing the significance of the use of metaphor in political discourse, Musolff (2016) argues that far from simply creating associations by referring to certain concepts, metaphors have an additional function that can serve “to make an emotional and persuasive appeal, and/or to reassure the public that a perceived threat or problem fits into familiar experience patterns and can be dealt with by familiar problem-solving strategies” (p. 4).

The following section will discuss the use of metaphor in the FN's political advertising discourse by identifying two broad categories frequently employed in the data under investigation.

### 3.2.1 *Positive metaphors*

An examination of the metaphorical element in FN discourse reveals a general trend towards positive self-presentation, with predominant themes such as *hope*, *spring*, *revolution*, *awakening* variously associated with its leader, individual members or the party at large.

In the first poster issued following Marine's appointment as President of the FN, the inauguration of her era is hailed as being no less than a 'patriotic revolution' (*Vers la révolution patriotique*, 14 January 2011). For labour day celebrations a few months later, another hopeful slogan was selected to promote further the idea of a dramatic change and a revival, indeed, a 'social spring' (*Avec Marine, pour un Printemps social*, 8 April 2011). Along the same lines, a conference organised by the FN ahead of the 2012 French presidential elections bore the sanguine title of 'Cape Hope' (*Cap Espérance*, February 2012). As for the youth wing of the FN, they unequivocally declared

themselves, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, to be the embodiment of 'French awakening' (Jeunesse FN: *Nous sommes le réveil français*, 25 April 2013).

It is significant to note the distinctively positive mood during the first few years of Marine Le Pen's mandate (2011-2013), which subsequently undergoes a dramatic shift as the focus is transposed to the topos of threat, thus the need for *defence* and *protection*. Indeed, as the data below reveals, from 2015 onwards, positive Self metaphors are often presented in direct opposition to negative ones depicting the Other. A poster presented in a letter format as a direct address to the French citizen foregrounds the sense of immediacy and highlights the message's urgency (6 March 2015). Faced with the 'chaos' generated by the ruling political parties, the FN proposes in the personal 'letter' to 'transform the legitimate revolt of the French into **hope**' (*transformer la légitime révolte des français en espoir*), presenting itself as 'the **wind of renewal**' (*le vent du renouveau*) and offering an 'alternative **voice**' (*une autre voix*) representing the interests of the French people. Similarly, following the constant threats posed by the allegedly disastrous policies of the UMPS and the rising threat of immigration highlighted previously, a compelling poster referred to earlier features Marine Le Pen as a '**force** for the future' (*force d'avenir*), arms wide open in a Christ-like posture, with a confident smile, simultaneously protective and full of promise (5 June 2015). In the same seemingly redemptive vein, Le Pen proposes in another poster a list of steps designed to lead France on 'the **path** towards national recovery' (*le chemin du redressement national*, 19 March 2016). This metaphor resonates with previous literature on political metaphor, suggesting a conceptualisation of political leadership and action through movement or journey metaphors (Chilton, 2004, p. 52).

Ultimately, a powerful visual metaphor is presented in a poster issued in the wake of the 2016 British referendum, depicting chained hands breaking free in juxtaposition to the words: 'Brexit, and now France!' (24 June 2016). The metaphorical associations are clear: following the Brexit vote, a new hope was restored with the promise of '**freedom**' from the shackles imposed by the European Union.

### 3.2.2 Negative metaphors

Studies of manipulation in political discourse have pointed out the tendency towards the use of metaphors drawing on the topos of danger and disaster, often with detrimental effects. As highlighted by Kienpointner (2005), "politicians in general, and especially right-wing populists, can often be accused of using metaphors to arouse dangerous emotions such as fear and hate in the population." (p. 229).

An analysis of the data reveals that the most prominent metaphorical field evident in the FN's discourse relates to the metaphors of war, aggression, fighting and destruction. In a campaign poster

immediately preceding the departmental elections of 2012, all political parties in France are depicted as being united in their motion 'to **fight** the FN' (*lutter contre le Front National*), a message dramatically rendered as a list of 13 points (all including the item above repeated consecutively) exclusively targeting the FN (2 March 2015).

Furthermore, in stark contrast to the positive tone of the FN's proposal discussed above (6 March 2015) promising to lead the dissatisfied French population to a better place ('hope', 'wind of renewal'), the second half of the poster is dedicated to the UMPS who are attributed extremely negative values linking the outcomes of their policies to '**chaos**' (repeated twice) and accusing them of 'complete failure' (*en échec total*). A list of items follows, outlining the failings of the previous and current administrations in highly metaphorical terms: rising unemployment levels are rendered as an '**explosion**' (*explosion du chômage*); economically, a decrease in purchasing power is depicted as a '**collapse**' (*effondrement du pouvoir d'achat*); socially, family policy is perceived to be under '**attack**' (*attaques contre la politique familiale*); a sense of increasing '**insecurity**' (*augmentation de l'insécurité*) conjures up feelings of vulnerability to potential threats and the absence of protection, as the nation is portrayed in a state of passive 'submission' to the European Union (*soumission à l'Europe de Bruxelles*) and also in a critically 'weak' position in relation to immigration and the 'Islamist **threat**' (*faiblesse face à l'immigration et à la menace islamiste*).

A subsequent poster issued in the following month and referred to earlier develops the last point further, linking the UMP and the PS to an existential threat facing the French nation (24 April 2015). Under their auspices, the poster implies that the immigration process (visually represented as a **time bomb** with the fuse ignited by both parties) will explode and blow up the Hexagon (symbolically depicted by its map). This resonates with the findings of van Dijk's (1993) study of the representation of immigration as being "out of control" with the concomitant image of the "explosion of a demographic time bomb that must be feared" (p. 108).

Finally, the metaphor of the Nation as a Person (Musolff, 2016) is evident in the poster proposing "to give France back its freedom" (19 March 2016), offering a poignant depiction of a country forcefully held prisoner: 'European conventions are **imprisoning** our country' (*les traités européens emprisonnent notre pays*) and 'France cannot remain a **prisoner** to ancient European treaties that **harm** our country' (*la France ne peut rester prisonnière aux anciens Traités européens qui font du mal à notre pays*).

Thus, the predominance of war metaphors relating to aggression (fight, attack), danger (threat, explosion,

time bomb), destruction (collapse, chaos), and the consequences and repercussions of war (insecurity, imprisonment) serves to construct a permanent threat albeit in various guises (political opponents, the EU, immigrants, Islam...). This corresponds with the findings of previous studies on populist discourse, namely that “right-wing populists strategically and tactically use negativity in political communication”, including reference to “violent metaphors” (Greven, 2016, p. 1).

In conclusion, this examination of the data provides substantial evidence that FN political discourse does rely on the strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation reflecting van Dijk’s (1997) ideological square where “we, our people and our actions and properties will tend to be described in metaphorical meanings that derive from conceptual fields with positive associations, whereas the opposite is true for the description of our political opponents or enemies” (p. 36).

These findings resonate with Kaya and Tecmen’s (2019) discussion of the process of othering which populists engage in by capitalising on fear as a tool to mobilise the public and gain support. They also correspond with Cervi et al.’s (2020) findings concerning the communicative force of right-wing populist politicians’ discourse and the dichotomous representations they resort to in order to legitimise their anti-immigrant stances.

### 3.3 Speech Acts

Speech Act Theory attempts to account for how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and is thus of particular relevance in the context of political discourse where, in the process of what Fairclough terms the “manufacture of *consent*” (1989, p. 4), politicians constantly strive to influence opinion, promote their agenda and persuade voters to support them in the electoral process. For this purpose, they commonly resort to making promises, issuing warnings, making accusations, discrediting opponents, etc. However, all of these are often achieved by means of indirect speech acts. In their discussion of the pragmatic dimension of discourse, Chilton and Schäffner (2002) note that many of the speech acts produced in political discourse are not performed explicitly but rather communicated as implicit accusations, blame and criticism of others.

The analytical framework adopted in this paper is based on Searle’s (1979) speech act classification, particularly in terms of:

- a) **Assertives** which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition.
- b) **Directives** whose purpose is to get the hearer to perform an action.
- c) **Commissives** that commit the speaker to a future course of action.

In his analysis of *The Language of Fear*, Cap (2006) notes the “complex directive force” of speech acts of assertion, which in addition to indicating the speakers’ firm commitment to the truth of their claims, can also function as a crucial persuasive device (p. 28).

The following section investigates the speech acts most commonly used in the FN’s electoral campaign material, particularly in terms of slogans. A ‘petition’ launched by the FN questioning France’s financial contribution to the European Union is based on an **assertive** speech act challenging the latter’s authority: ‘It is not up to the European Commission to decide for us!’ (*Ce n’est pas à la commission européenne de décider pour nous!*, 28 October 2014).

Subsequently, the campaign for the 2015 French departmental elections (6 March 2015) provides substantial evidence of **directives**: first, through an exhortation: ‘Let us defend social justice, sovereignty, the identity of France and the unity of the Republic!’ (*Défendons la justice sociale, la souveraineté, l’identité de la France et l’unité de la République!*); followed by a prohibitive: ‘no abstention!’ (*pas d’abstention!*); and an ultimate appeal inciting people to take action: ‘vote!’ (*votez!*). The argument concludes with a **commissive** offering the promise that the people will have ‘elected representatives’ (*Vous aurez des élus!*) rather than an unwanted class of political figures imposed on them, provided they vote for the FN.

In the run-up to the regional elections of December 2015, the FN draws on the topos of danger discussed earlier, highlighting the perceived threat of immigration (24 April 2015). The semiotic representation of immigration as a time bomb is accompanied by a double speech act involving simultaneously an **assertive** (warning about an imminent ‘explosion’) and a **directive** highlighting the urgency of taking immediate action, reinforced through the use of graphological foregrounding (*il est URGENT d’agir*).

Another poster is designed to attract further electoral support based on a **directive** in the form of an invitation to join the FN (*adhérez!*), reinforced at the semiotic level by the accompanying photo discussed earlier, presenting a smiling Marine in a welcoming posture with her arms wide open (5 June 2015).

The topos of threat emerges again in an alarmist poster (2 July 2015) about the growing number of Salafi mosques in France, followed by a call for action through a double **directive**: ‘sign the petition to demand their closure’ (*Signez la pétition pour exiger leur fermeture*).

A few months ahead of the regional elections of December 2015, the FN issues another forceful call for voters to actively participate by reminding them of the need to register for the forthcoming elections (22

July 2015). The message, communicated through the use of **directives**, is brief but clear: although formulated in the infinitive form, it presents an indirect speech act with the illocutionary force of exhortation, urging voters ‘to stop enduring, to act!’ (*Cesser de subir, agir!*); in other words, actively taking matters into one’s hands (implicitly, by voting FN) rather than passively suffering the repercussions resulting from the outcome of the elections. While this echoes an earlier message communicated during the departmental elections campaign (6 March 2015), this slogan is all the more effective due to the juxtaposition of the antithetical verbs ‘subir’ and ‘agir’.

Finally, an appeal to voters for the 2017 presidential elections is presented in an engaging

question/answer format, the answer obviously consisting of a **directive** inciting voters to ‘support’ Marine (*Convaincus par le discours de vérité de Marine? Soutenez-la!*). The claim about the candidate’s discourse being the ‘truth’ is semiotically reinforced by the accompanying picture of Marine in an assertive posture, with a direct gaze, commanding and confidence-inspiring (9 February, 22 June 2016).

Another dimension of speech acts evident in FN campaign slogans relies on the use of binaries formulated in terms of strong categorical assertions (*YES/NO for...*) capitalised for emphasis and affirming unequivocal support for France while rejecting the ‘other’ in its various manifestations (political opponents and their policies, the European Union and its multinational initiatives, Islamism, etc.)

**Table 3.1.** Yes/No assertives in FN political posters

YES	NO
<i>OUI la France!</i> (4 April 2012, French presidential elections 2012)	<i>NON à l’Islamisme</i> (15 January 2011)
<i>Dites OUI à la France!</i> (23 April 2014, EU elections)	
<i>OUI au patriotisme!</i> <i>OUI aux départements!</i>	<i>NON à Valls et aux mensonges de l’UMP!</i> (20 March 2015, French departmental elections)
	<i>Pour nous, c’est NON!</i> (Loi el-Khomri, 27 February 2016 and 10 March 2016)
	<i>Je dis NON au chômage en masse</i>
	<i>Je dis NON à la justice des multinationales</i>
	<i>Je dis NON à la ruine de l’agriculture française</i>
	<i>Je dis NON au boeuf aux hormones</i>
	<i>Je dis NON aux OGM</i> (26 October 2016)

The data above reveals the significant predominance of **assertives** in FN political campaigning discourse, contesting existing policies, warning about their potential repercussions, and offering a categorical rejection of the status quo along with a strong affirmation of the FN’s devotion and commitment to the nation. Significantly, Le Pen’s speech act of rejection acquired particular prominence at the start of her active political involvement in the departmental and regional elections of 2015, where she initiated a distinctive tradition setting herself up against the various parties in power and depicting herself as the voice of the opposition as evident for instance in the poster referred to below.

As Cap (2006) argues, "Assertion (strong, undeniable) is an indispensable element of the "us and them" rhetoric" (p. 19), primarily as it serves to reinforce the speaker's credibility and encourage the audience’s active engagement. Thus, in addition to the use of **directives** that propose a course of action aiming to ‘redress’ the balance (*le chemin du redressement national*, 9 March 2016), the use of **assertives** adds a further directive force enhancing Le Pen's appeal.

Finally, these strategies were complemented by the presence of **commissives** offering a pledge to serve and ‘protect’ the people if elected.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the discourse of the FN through an investigation of their electoral campaign material. What has emerged from this study is that the FN adopts typical populist tropes and strategies to broaden its electoral base and win popular support. Common themes revolve around the people (central pivot, vox populi argument, etc.), the nation (a core notion at the heart of populist discourse) and most importantly, the other (a complex construct that is a necessary component of populist discourse and that may involve any perceived threat that poses a challenge to the integrity of the people and the nation).

A crucial strategy at the core of FN discourse involves the linguistic and discursive construction of the self and the other through the use of strategies typical of right-wing populist discourse involving the appeal to emotions (particularly the feelings of fear and insecurity). While the 'self' refers primarily to the FN, who claims to be the people's representative and the nation's defender, the *people* occupy a predominant position as it is with their best interests in mind that the FN proposes to fight the 'other'. As for the *other*, it variously takes the form of political opponents (the PS, the UMP, and most recently president Macron since his election), the European Union, which is perceived to be a nefarious entity detrimental to the wellbeing of the French nation, as well as the overall process of immigration (invariably depicted as a threat, with primary associations to terrorism).

The study of the FN's use of metaphor reveals a sharp polarisation in the depiction of the Self and the Other, in accordance with the ideological square, largely through the FN's positive self-presentation through benevolent and optimistic metaphors. In contrast, the Other is portrayed chiefly through the use of war metaphors. Similarly, through the use of speech acts, the FN blames, accuses and criticises the Other, holding it accountable for the ills befalling the nation. At the same time, the Self (in the person of Le Pen) is assertive, firm, and determined in its defence of the nation and the people. Finally, both linguistic strategies are reinforced through semiotic representations enhancing the *us/them* dichotomy.

Overall, the FN consistently promotes itself as the 'resistance', indeed "a Front of refusal" (Davies, 1999, p. 135) as evident in the poster published following the outcome of the last presidential elections and promoting the FN as the 'sole opposition' (*contre le gouvernement Macron... la seule opposition*, 25 July 2017). In that sense, Marine Le Pen can be seen to continue the tradition established by her father in her unwavering emphasis on the nation, its people and values, and the need to protect and defend them. However, what has also emerged is that the FN is taking a slightly different direction under her leadership. As evident from her recent initiative to

rename the party the 'National Rally' (June 2018), in the process of offering a more modern outlook and appealing to a broader base, Le Pen has significantly distanced herself from the radical image of the old FN. Apart from the bold move that led to the suspension of her father's membership to the FN, the party he founded, she has also adopted different stances, for instance, towards immigration. Indeed, while Le Pen clearly shares her father's aversion to this phenomenon, she has nevertheless approached the matter from a different perspective. Jean-Marie Le Pen's rejection of the 'foreigner' was largely based on ethnic grounds, bringing him broad accusations of racism and fascism. Nevertheless, Marine's own objection focuses instead on the social and economic repercussions of uncontrolled immigration, such as unemployment, reduced welfare, and the threat of terrorism.

Whether due to Marine Le Pen's charismatic presence or the reforms she has brought about since her appointment in 2011, the FN has evolved from being the most unpopular political party in France to becoming one of the main political forces in the country, enjoying great popularity notably among the French youth. What remains an important point of contention that deserves consideration nevertheless are the implications of the growing influence of a political party based on polarisation and driven by an exclusionary agenda, especially in the eventuality of Marine Le Pen achieving victory in the next French presidential elections.

Finally, the new direction the party has taken under Le Pen's leadership certainly offers promising prospects for future research on the evolution of the FN and its discourse. Subsequent studies can be conducted to explore the impact of the use of social media in political campaigning on the French electorate. On a broader scale, while the European political scene has received much attention, further research deserves to be dedicated to the investigation of the populist phenomenon in different contexts, expanding the scope to include South American and Asian nations.

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