

Blending voices: heteroglossia in far-right populist discourse in Greece

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Abstract

This paper explores populist voice in the mediated performances of far-right populist politicians in Greece, with the aim of discovering the micro-linguistic features that make up the hearably unique voices and distinctive performative style(s) of the far-right Golden Dawn (GD) party. While current research has outlined the general characteristics of populist discourse, there is a marked absence of analytical precision when it comes to the performative repertoires of populism. We argue that a discourse-analytic approach can advance our understanding of far-right populist voices, by unveiling the - often heterogeneous - linguistic resources and strategies deployed in the course of populist performances. More specifically, it is shown that a distinctive plurality of voices or, in Bakhtin's term, 'heteroglossia' characterizes the televised performances of GD. Finally, populist voice is shown to be sensitive to the mediated environment at hand, as it is differently enacted across different mediated settings.

Evaluation, style and far-right populist discourse

Political discourse involves acts of stance, in which speakers take on a position vis-à-vis the expressive, referential, interactional, social and political implications of their speech (see Jaffe, ed., 2009a). In this project, we take a sociolinguistic approach to stance and stance-taking (see Jaffe, ed., 2009a; Thompson and Hunston 2000). Thus, we are interested in the ways in which politicians "draw upon sociolinguistic resources and repertoires to signal positionality" (Jaffe 2009b: 10). These resources consist in their lexical and grammatical choices, and the rhetorical devices they draw upon, all of which collaborate to create hearably unique discourse styles. Stance-taking is therefore related to the process of styling, and recurrent linguistic styles emerge out of stance-taking strategies (Johnstone 2009).

Accordingly, stance-taking is closely related to evaluation, as it is enacted through speakers' ongoing evaluation of discourse items and information: "... the stance-

evaluation nexus appears to permeate all aspects of meaning making, all communicative functions, and all levels of linguistic production” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2009: 197). Evaluation encompasses the expressive or interpersonal functions in discourse and can be fruitfully applied to the encoding of politicians’ attitudes and orientations. According to Thomson and Hunston (2000), evaluation is: (1) comparative, (2) subjective, and (3) value laden. It is realized at the levels of lexis, grammar and text; also, evaluation can be used to explore how an array of evaluative assessments are strategically attributed to specific political and social actors (individuals, parties, movements, etc.) in the process of styling.

Speakers’ linguistic choices have a social significance, as they are indexical (and constitutive) of social, political and cultural attitudes, assessments, and values. Invoking, directly or indirectly, systems of value, stance taking is ideological in nature (Jaworski and Thurlow 2009). This approach therefore allows us to draw attention to the inherently ideological significance of stance-taking in far-right populist discourse, as it becomes a powerful tool for the preservation, propagation, or undermining of social positions, systems of value and attributions of political worth (or lack thereof).

This approach to the stylization of far-right populist discourse traces its origins to the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) on multivoicing, as well as to studies on performative language use and performativity (Austin 1961; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Butler 1990). According to Bakhtin, language is always dialogic; namely, it consists of a rich blending and multiplicity of “voices” - or “heteroglossia” - in all spoken and written texts. Drawing on the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and intertextuality (Voloshinov, 1973; Bakhtin, 1981,1986), Kress (1995) refers to the production of social difference in texts. He argues that all text production relies on past or current, identifiable or subtle contributions by co-present or absent speakers and takes place within social structures characterised by the unequal distribution of power (Jaworski and Thurlow 2009: 197).

In this paper, I only concentrate on the evaluation achieved at the level of lexis, involving descriptions of positive or negative, i.e. assessment of the worth or value of an item (see Hunston 1994). Evaluation depends, in part, on the goals of the community within which a text is produced. As will be shown in the discussion of meta-discursive

uses of populism, cultural and political values and goals are also important criteria for the evaluation of actors and items in far-right populist discourse.

Extract 1: The GD party leader refers to mainstream media as ‘channel pimps’ (‘through ly:nching (.) by the channel pimps’, line 3); likewise, in an interview on Kontra channel news of 9 June 2017, Michaloliakos alludes to the media that have excluded GD from interviews and live coverage as ‘the pimps of public life’ (‘unfortunately Mr Papagiannis, () the pimps of public life, do not respe:ct this’).

Negative constructions of ‘value’ in blame allocations

The ‘value’ component of evaluation was examined through analysis of the lexical choices used to assess (the mostly negative) value of political actors and actions other than those of GD. Fierce criticisms of government policies, the political establishment (PASOK, New Democracy) and mainstream media are encoded through use of evaluative lexis and register choices.

Register shifts

As far as lexical choices are concerned, blame attribution is regularly achieved through use of bluntly aggressive or derogatory terms. Often, the speakers’ critique of the government and casting of dominant politics and policies as unpatriotic, corrupt or immoral is highlighted through register shifts to colloquial language. What is more, GD speakers achieve subtle stylistic and expressive effects through the blend of elements from different registers (e.g. archaic, formal, colloquial/slang styles). Thus, elements from disparate registers (e.g. from prototypically formal and everyday styles) are often rhetorically brought together in the same utterance.

Overall, in GD discourse, morality blends with common sense/everyday logic. GD members encode political and social reality in a limited range of items from conversational and colloquial registers, in which assessments of value and the notion of blame are semantically built-in (eg ‘*νταβατζήδες*’ pimps, as in ‘the *pimps* of public life’, extract 2, lines 39-40), ‘*ξεφτυλλίζω*’ to demean, to disgrace, as in ‘the one who *disgraced* the name of his grandfather’, extract 3, lines 8-9; ‘you have *disgraced* the concept of being a Greek’, extract 4, lines 25-26), *μίζες* (payoffs, bribes, as in extract 4, ‘they took payoffs’, lines 32-33; ‘the official German state gave a *payoff* to the

official Greek state’, lines 36-37), ‘ξεπούλημα’ (sellout, as in ‘the *sellout* of the Aegean’, extract 3, line 28) ‘μνημόνιο’ (‘memorandum’, to refer to the – by now four - consecutive financial adjustment programmes imposed since 2010 by Greece’s creditors, as a requirement for securing financial aid, as in ‘have you understood that you are bringing a *memorandum* for fifty years?’, extract 4, lines 15-17). Finally, another derogatory usage that designates (in this case, female) members (or supporters) of the centre-left PASOK party of the political establishment is ‘πασόκα’, and the more recently coined ‘συριζαία’ (female member/supporter of SYRIZA (extract 3, line 35).

A similarly culturally resonant term is ‘διαπλοκή’ ‘entanglement’ (as in ‘the new entanglement’, extract 2, line 41) to refer to the complex synergies between politics, business and the media, also scholarly identified as a ‘triangle of power’ characterizing the Greek media landscape (Iosifidis and Boucas 2015).

These items have acquired a cultural resonance and have a summational force as part of a recognizable public idiom in crisis-stricken Greece, which the audience can easily understand and identify with. They rest on shared assumptions about political misconduct and corruption, austerity and the impoverishment of the Greek lower and middle classes in the years of the financial austerity programmes (memoranda).

Colloquial and idiomatic words and phrases serve an interpretive function, in that they provide an *interpretive* framework for the attribution of political responsibility. At the same time, they offer an *evaluative* framework, i.e. they negatively assess the worth of blamed actors and actions on a scale of morality (or ethos) in an epigrammatic fashion, much like newspaper headlines.

In the extracts examined, elements from diverse registers of Greek are brought together in the same utterance as resources for conveying stance and laying blame on ‘them’ or ‘you’ (corrupt politicians, members of the political establishment that has ruled Greece for more than four decades and have ‘sold out’ the country). Relics of the older language situation of diglossia, namely the existence of an archaic, artificial language form (known as ‘katharevousa’) used in official government documents, in public speaking and education, which was officially resolved in 1976, are present in the discourse of GD; more specifically, in katharevousa and archaic verb endings, the declensional forms of nouns, and in set phrases used by GD members (cf. Scotton 1985 about style-shifting as a property of powerful language – ELABORATE ON THIS).

This is, for instance, the archaic noun ending ‘-iskos’ (meaning ‘little’) in the use of ‘κάποια απίστευτη δημοσιογραφίσκος’ (‘some incredible little female journalist’, extract 3, lines 33-34) in an attempt to belittle the journalist in question for having reportedly distorted the facts. In the same extract, a similar bizarre co-existence is evidenced in the ancient Greek verb ‘δονι’ (is vibrating) in the reported chant of the GD members gathered outside the Greek Parliament in 1996 (‘the slogan scumbags traitors politicians is vibrating the frozen atmosphere’, lines 23-24). Finally, another old-fashioned colloquial usage is ‘cadgers’ (in Greek ‘διακονιάρηδες’) in extract 4 (line 4).

These elements invest the GD mediated performances with overtones of a learned, official, and now obsolete language form. As Bakhtin, the Russian semiotician and literary theorist observed about the dialogic quality of language as early as in 1929, there is a certain “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin 1981) in the performative style of GD (also evidenced in the shift between narrative and non-narrative modes of discourse in the extracts at hand).

These usages attest to the tactical deployment of Greek speakers’ “interlectal awareness” (Joseph 1992) in the period after the official resolution of diglossia in 1976, as a resource for achieving subtle stylistic and rhetorical effects. In the words of Peter Mackridge, Greeks exhibit “a subtle sense of register, of what linguistic usage is appropriate for which occasion” (Mackridge 1992: 113).

Research Aims

- Blaming (the political establishment, immigration, minority groups, etc.) is a leading speech act in the linguistic enactment of a populist speech style.
- Blaming often takes place in the context of the disruption of the norms of ‘mainstream’ politics and appropriate conduct (‘political etiquette’).
- How is blame allocation related to the ways in which GD speakers *evaluate* political actors and actions in the course of their performances, and, also, how does it feed into overall *rhetoric* of talk?

The Greek Crisis and Golden Dawn

- Since May 2010 and to this day, the deep recession, spending cuts and political turmoil have put the Greek society under severe strain.
- Consecutive economic adjustment programmes imposed by the EU, the ECB, and the IMF as a prerequisite for securing financial assistance (Memorandum I, II, III, and recently IV).
- Particularly the lower and middle classes have seen their income shrink dramatically, while levels of unemployment have soared.
- In the last 3 electoral encounters, Golden Dawn has consolidated its position as third force in the Greek Parliament (starting with the EU elections of 2014 and confirmed in the following two national elections of 2015).

Golden Dawn and the Media

- Golden Dawn was founded in 1983 with a clear neo-Nazi profile according to scholars and the media, although in its official communications it has attempted to downplay this profile.
- In June 2012, the GD spokesperson, Ilias Kasidiaris, slapped a female politician of the Greek communist party and threw water over another live on a daily morning political show.
- Since then, the mainstream television channels have imposed an embargo on GD by excluding them from live interviews and talk show panels.

Research data

- The data are part of a corpus for a joint international project on '*Right-wing Populism in the News Media: A cross-cultural Study of Journalistic Practices*,' funded by the Swedish Research Council.
- They come from 3 different GD performances that took place in 2017:
- A news interview of the GD party leader on Kontra channel, a non-mainstream private Greek channel, following the death of 10 year-old boy from a stray bullet at the Romani populated area of Menidi in Attica (extracts 1 and 2).

- A commemorative event organized by GD on the anniversary of the 1996 military crisis between Greece and Turkey at the islets of Imia in the Aegean Sea (extract 3)
- A parliamentary speech by a GD Member of Parliament (extract 4)

Far-right political discourse and evaluation: a sociolinguistic model

It is important to acknowledge the complex nature of evaluation, as discursive action that is achieved simultaneously on different levels of linguistic structure, namely at the levels of:

- speech acts (type of statement)
- grammar (modality)
- lexis and semantics (evaluative vocabulary, rhetorical patterns),
- interactional and multi-modal resources

Assessing the ‘value’ of political actors/actions in GD performances

- Lexical choices used to assess (the mostly negative) value of political actors and actions other than those of GD:
- *Register shifts*: GD speakers encode political and social reality in a limited range of conversational/colloquial items, in which the notion of blame are semantically built-in.
- These items have acquired a *cultural import*; they rest on shared assumptions as part of a recognizable public idiom in crisis-stricken Greece.
- They offer an *interpretive framework* for attributing political responsibility, and also an *evaluative framework* for blamed actors on a scale of morality (ethos).
- *Blend of elements from disparate registers* (e.g. archaic, formal, colloquial/slang styles) deployed as resources for conveying stance and laying blame on ‘them’ or ‘you’ (corrupt politicians of the establishment / the media)