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Constructing 'the French people' – On Sarkozy's populism

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Election campaigns represent a particular moment of political practice in democracies where political strategy and political discourse become one activity. Campaigns take effect through the speeches of candidates communicated to the electorate. This article analyses speeches of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaigns in 2007 and 2012. Based on text statistical methods developed in French discourse analysis it examines his political position and his rhetorical techniques. In comparison to other presidents of the Fifth Republic, Sarkozy's discourse seems to be freed from typical party political positions. Whilst favouring direct encounters with the audience and pretending to speak to the whole nation he is embodying a form of populism which bestows his image of a charismatic leader.

Keywords: Political discourse, election campaign, Sarkozy, logometry, populism

1. Introduction

Modern democracies are facing social and economic challenges, such as multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations, globalised and Europeanised economies in 'free' markets. These challenges are contributing to much more complex social and economic structures fostering a change in politics. For a long period privatisation and liberalisation have been the political answer to the economic challenges. Yet, they seem to have led to a widespread political apathy among people and their retreat from activities in political parties – a state which Crouch (2004) describes as post-democratic (see also Balibar 2013). And, according to Laclau (2005a) such political crises are a condition for a populist mobilisation. SYRIZA in Greece, PODEMOS in Spain, Trump in the US, PEGIDA in Germany are all examples for popular movements which are motivated by the promise to overcome

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the practices of the established political class referred to as a political caste and not any longer as representatives of the citizens. The objective of such popular mobilisations is a new politics committed to the interests of the people.

Empirical studies on populism have often concentrated on a polity perspective (e.g. Pappas 2014; Pauwels 2014). Whilst the term 'populism' is often used in order to refer to a political strategy that is corrupting democracy (Abts and Rummens 2007; Taguieff 2007) and which is sometimes associated with extreme ideologies (Wodak 2015; Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013), we take a step back and, in the first instance, try to understand it as a political style that is part of deliberation processes (Canovan 2005; Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004). According to Mény and Surel, we understand populism as a people's ideology comprising the following: an imaginary community within a particular territory mostly in the framework of a nation-state (Anderson 1983); a belief in the sovereignty of this imagined community and a scepticism vis-à-vis the political elites who are suspected of betraying the people's will (cf. Mény and Surel 2000, 177–222; 297–312). A bottom-up perspective of populism has been conceptualised as originating in the people. From this viewpoint, populist politics would be an attempt to translate the people's instinctive attitude into political action (Coussedière 2012). Following this, populism can be understood as a strategy in democracies trying to please the will of the people by means of a particular political discourse aiming to convert the people into voters. By putting forward such a descriptive rather than normative stance we hope to gain a better understanding of populism as a societal phenomenon in modern democracies.

Against this background our study points out that a populist stance is also a successful discursive strategy for candidates of established political parties as has been proven, for instance, by Nicolas Sarkozy in his campaign for the 2007 presidential elections in France. We argue that Sarkozy's strategy as evidenced in his discourse does not aim to persuade party political partisans with arguments but rather tries to express a strong bond with the ordinary people. The characteristics of Sarkozy's discourse show that he appears not as a candidate of a particular party but rather as the spokesperson of the people – an effectual *vox populi*. Hence, he has a populist rhetoric strategy.

In recent years there has been an increased interest in the way political leaders construct their argument in order to convince their electorate of the legitimacy of the political actions they take (Bevitori 2015; Craig 2013; Labbé and Monière 2003; Reyes 2014; Schröter 2014). This article presents results from a larger study analysing the Sarkozy's discourse (Mayaffre 2012a) substantiated by a longer preoccupation with presidential discourses (Mayaffre 2004; 2012b). The term discourse, when used in connection with a particular person, refers for us to the set of semantic, lexical and stylistic characteristics of all communicative acts of this person (written or oral). In the first section we introduce our methodology, the

logometric approach developed in French discourse analysis. In the second part we focus on the construction of the common enemy of 'the French people'. We will see how Sarkozy enacts himself as the solution of all the problems that 'they' caused 'us', the French people. Thereby an affective dimension and rhetorical questions seem to be of importance. The fourth part deepens this analysis by focusing on grammatical structures – in particular on the overuse of certain pronouns in Sarkozy's discourse. The argument in this part is supported by text statistical measurements comparing Sarkozy's discourse with speeches held by all other five presidents of the Fifth Republic.

2. Logometry – a computer assisted approach to discourse

On the methodological level the study presented in this article is based on the logometric approach to discourse which is a corpus-driven methodology developed in French discourse analysis (Mayaffre 2016; Mayaffre and Poudat 2013). This approach aims to measure a discourse in its qualitative and quantitative dimensions – complex statistic methods are combined with a systematic return to the text allowing a conventional reading (full-text, keywords in context or longer text sections). The aim is to identify linguistic regularities and irregularities by calculating the specific vocabulary of a speaker or a period, the co-occurrences of particular words, and by measuring the distances between texts or groups of texts based on the similarity and difference of the vocabulary (multifactor analysis, Benzécri 1980; 1969).

Logometry thus fosters the path of statistical linguistics (Baayen 2001; Bolasco 2013) and the lexicometric approach developed by the Saint-Cloud laboratory between 1980 and 2000 (Lebart, Salem, and Berry 1998; Tournier 1993; 1975). Logometry expands its scope of analysis to all units of the discourse from the letter up to isotopies. It is not restricted to the simple study of lexis but also accounts for ideological elements sometimes identified in overrepresented syntactic structures.

The objectives of this type of analysis follow the hermeneutic turn in discourse studies and in the Social Sciences and Humanities in general. Thus, we are less preoccupied with 'substantiating' a certain meaning of texts but rather try to use techniques which allow control over the process of interpretation (Angermuller, Mainguenau, and Wodak 2014; Kaal, Maks, and Van Elfrinkhof 2014; Rastier 2011). In other words meaning cannot be proven because it is the result of interpretation. The logometric approach helps to render the interpretation process more transparent by offering the researcher a variety of reproducible heuristic methods.

In the study presented in this article we analysed speeches of the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy which were produced during his election campaigns in

2007 and 2012. The speeches have been retrieved systematically, aiming to capture the broadest possible picture of Sarkozy's rhetoric. Therefore the corpus has been compiled from different text types and genres all addressed to a large audience. That way we were able to avoid genre induced artefacts in the quantitative analysis. With the help of the software *Hyperbase* Sarkozy's speeches have been compared to speeches held under similar conditions by other candidates and previous presidents.[1] Two comparative dimensions have been taken into account: On the one hand, the campaign speeches of 2007 and 2012 (63 speeches – 345,566 tokens) which have been compared to speeches of the other candidates of the presidential elections (96 speeches – 598,045 tokens). On the other hand, speeches like the New Year's addresses, an interview given on the French national holiday, the 14th of July and speeches given in front of crowds in Toulon and Grenoble (51 speeches – 283,248 tokens) have been compared with similar speeches (524 speeches – 2,522,876 tokens) held by all previous French presidents of the Fifth Republic (Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard, Mitterrand and Chirac).

3. Constructing 'the French people'

According to Laclau (2005a; b), one important precondition for populist mobilisation is the construction of an enemy by drawing a line between 'us and them' fostering a collective identity. This identity is based on a particular narrative articulating numerous political demands in a chain of equivalent positions. It is represented by a name – an empty signifier. At the same time, the narrative needs to be charged with a certain affective value in order to be illegible. Along these theoretical lines, we describe in this section how Sarkozy's discourse constructs 'the French people' as part of a populist election campaign. This campaign aims to maximise the number of his electorate above all on the right side of the political spectrum. In his discourse Sarkozy mobilises an opposition against the elites and denounces a one dimensional way of thinking propagated in the media; he praises the good sense of the people and advocates for referendums – while producing at the same time an image of a charismatic leader. In this sense, this study will shed light on the populist strategy that Sarkozy adopts as a political persona.

Sarkozy's strategy has to be placed in context. Since Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme right had a tremendous success in the 2002 presidential elections, Sarkozy, in the 2007 campaign, attempted to reconquer the electorate that his party had previously lost to the *Front National* (D'Allonnes 2007). From 2002, this campaign

1. *Hyperbase* v9.0 – 2013 developed by the French National Research Centre (CNRS) at the University of Nice.

had been prepared meticulously under the direction of Emanuelle Mignon with the help of about 250 experts and intellectuals (Martel and Messika 2007). This work championed a new openness of the political right and the right to proclaim a right-wing opinion publicly. It was the founding work for what was later referred to as "Sarkozism" (Fœssel and Mongin 2007; Mongin, Fœssel, and Padis 2007; Musso 2011). Furthermore, Chirac's last presidency between 2002 and 2007 had suffered from a great deal of political immobility due to various causes such as his age, but also originating in a strong non-parliamentary opposition fighting successfully the implementation of laws favouring the interests of the entrepreneurs. This led French politics into an impasse evidenced by an increasing unemployment rate and a decreasing voter turnout. Furthermore, Sarkozy's strategy can also be understood as a symptom of a broader political crisis, in which the electorate turns to the rather extreme parties because it is disappointed in the political performance of mainstream parties (Badiou 2010). The origin of this performance flow has been explained by the predominant neoliberalist politics prioritising the needs of multinational corporations (Crouch 2004). Even if this crisis had been developing since the 1980's, Sarkozy was the first in his party to apply a right-wing populist strategy.

3.1 'Us' (the people) against 'them' (the elites)

In this section we will see that Sarkozy's discourse to a large extent relies on the construction of an enemy which often serves as a scapegoat for the problems enacted skilfully. Besides the stylistic characteristics that we will outline later, it is also in this sense that Sarkozy's discourse takes on populist overtones (Mayaffre 2013). Such enemies can be welfare beneficiaries, chronic offenders, but also rogue bosses and bankers. Thus, there does not seem to be a preferred group which Sarkozy targets as the enemy of the people. However, when looking more carefully at his discourse his main adversary seems to be the elites which are suspected of hijacking popular aspirations and gagging the people. As illustrated in the following example intermediary groups, like parties or unions, are accused of betraying the collective interest.

(1) For five years I had the occasion to measure the power of the various groups mediating between the people and the head of state. These groups often pretend to speak on behalf of the French but in reality they frequently hijack what the French people want to say… I want to return to the French people the power of having their say… I have heard the cries of those who think that approaching the people is populism. Deep inside themselves they no doubt think that the people are not sensible enough, that the people are not intelligent enough … (Sarkozy, 19 February 2012, Marseille)

The reader will have noticed the vaguely explicit use of those which constructs an 'us and them opposition' enabling the speaker in the next rhetoric move to allocate particular negative characteristics to 'them'. As readers, we don't know who the demonstrative pronoun those specifically refers to. We can presume, though, that Sarkozy means 'the Parisian elites' and in particular journalists, the intelligentsia and the left. This passage is particularly interesting from the point of view of its rhetoric. By allocating the accusation of populism to the opponent this claim loses a substantial part of its credibility because it is them that 'we' have previously identified as not trustworthy.

Given the fact that Sarkozy was seen as trailing behind his opponent in the polls at the time when this speech was given, he might have overemphasised his usual rhetoric at this point. Nevertheless, the appeal to the people of France against the elite (judiciary, political parties, universities, journalists, etc.) already existed throughout the 2007 campaign and remains a constant element in his discourse during his presidency:

(2) You are here because you have had enough of intellectual conformity. You are here because you have had enough of one-sided argumentations, and because you have had enough of being told what to do, what to say, what to think. I want to give you back your freedom. Your freedom of choice. Your freedom of speech. Your freedom of thought.
(Sarkozy, 20 March 2007, Villebon-sur-Yvette)

And in 2012 he repeats:

(3) I want to be the French people's candidate. I will not be the candidate of a small elite against the people. (Sarkozy, 19 February 2012, Marseille)

He is the straight talking ordinary person whereas the elite complicates, betrays and censures.

Sarkozy continuously presents himself as the liberator who frees the people from its inhibitions:

(4) You have had enough of a one-sided thinking and political correctness.

(5) You have had enough of not being allowed to say a rogue is a rogue. You have had enough of not being allowed to speak of the idea of a nation without being accused of nationalism. […] You have had enough of not being allowed to condemn over-evaluation of the euro without being accused of anti-Europeanism. You have had enough of not being allowed to mention the suffering of France without being immediately accused of populism. […] You have had enough and I understand you. I want to finish with this one-sided thinking which is the meeting point of all this

renunciation, all this sectarianism, all this arrogance.

(Sarkozy, 13 Avril 2007, Meaux)

This rather explicit strategy is accompanied by an implicit construction of 'the people's' enemy. Figure 1, like the other three figures, is based on a corpus of speeches of all presidents of the Fifth Republic which were held in similar situations. The corpus is divided into partitions, each of which contains all texts of a particular president. With the help of this partition, the vocabulary of each president can be analysed using contrasting algorithms. For example, the z-score that we used to produce Figure 1 is based on the frequency of a particular type (here the question mark) in one part of the corpus and takes into account the length of the corpus part (number of tokens in this part) and the length of the total corpus (total number of tokens). Based on these variables, a probabilistic algorithm determines a standard value of the expected frequency of the type under scrutiny in all corpus parts. If the observed frequency of this type is above the standard value then the type is overrepresented in this part of the corpus; if it is below, it is underrepresented; and if it coincides with the expected standard, then it is normally distributed in this part of the corpus. Figure 1 shows a substantial increase in the number of questions posed in Sarkozy's speeches when compared to those of his predecessors.

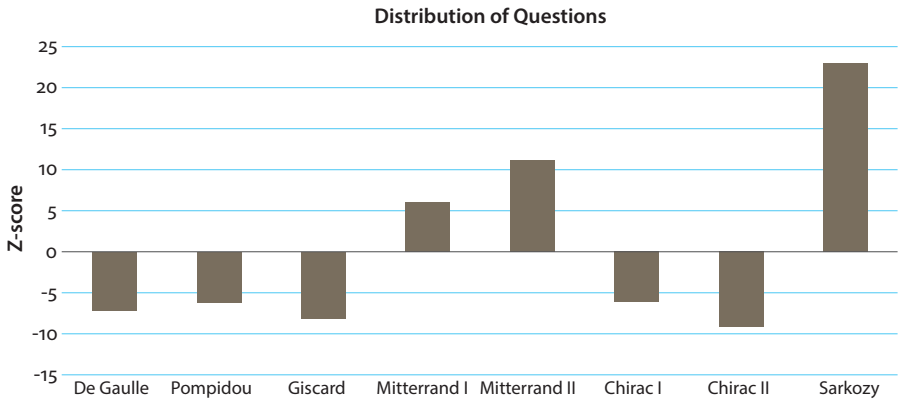

Figure 1. Distribution of questions in presidential speeches (1958–2012)

Most of the questions Sarkozy poses are rhetorical questions, which he poses himself or seems to pose to the journalists who interview him. These questions have various functions (Mayaffre 2012b: 236–262) but their overall objective is to reverse the burden of his presidential responsibilities. Rather than being the person being questioned, Sarkozy becomes the questioner. In this role there seems to be no need to defend his politics and policies. Moreover, he becomes the prosecutor of the politics of his opponents. The following example, one of thousands in

the corpus, illustrates how Sarkozy turns the journalist's question into a counter-attack, here on the Woerth-Bettencourt affair regarding the computer hacking of a *Le Monde* journalist:

(6) Going further into your question, do you imagine it was me who organised the hacking of the computer of one of your colleagues? Is that what you think? … Pardon me, but there is only one single case in French history where the president of the Republic has made tap journalists. It wasn't me as you know. It comes from the Left. Yes or no? Yes or no?
(Sarkozy, 16 October 2010, television interview (*TF1*, *France 2*, *Canal +*))

It is as if responsibilities are reversed: where usually the President is held accountable to the public by the media, it is now the President who seems to hold the journalist and the Left accountable for the accusation made. Technically, this is a winning strategy because journalists are not used to answer questions. It is also a winning strategy in terms of the content because most people will be convinced by the scenario he paints: A president elected by a people is betrayed by its elite. He is the only spokesperson for an outraged nation, outraged especially due to the fact that its top representative is under suspicion. Therefore it is only just if this representative dismisses the intermediary groups, in this case journalists and often political parties.

3.2 Compassion and affect

A shift from reason to emotion had been noticeable already in Chirac's discourse (Mayaffre 2012a), but it was less systematic. However, in Sarkozy's discourse compassion becomes a major basis for his argument and a principle of government. According to Revault d'Allonnes, Sarkozy draws his political legitimacy from his capacity to suffer with the people (Revault d'Allonnes 2008). In this sense the image of him during the 2007 candidacy founding his political legitimacy was built on his willingness to publicly share with the French people the most intimate and ordinary emotions of everyday life. Of course, by emphasising the emotional level, Sarkozy evades the rational judgement of his politics and enters the psychological and individual level of sentiments (happiness, pain, desire, etc.). In fact, he agitates, sometimes in a brazen manner, fears, anxieties, fantasies, as if he wanted to govern more by fear than by reason.

Yet, if his discourse had not developed further Sarkozy would appear only as a demagogue, and his political career would have ended long before his presidency. Sarkozy's power therefore resides not only in this "compassionate zeal" but also in the pretension he puts forward in his discourse by providing a political, technical and legislative answer to primary emotions. Furthermore, by encouraging the

defiance of his contemporaries regarding public affairs he puts politics on hold and favours immediate and effective answers to the most sincere emotions approved by the people. In other words, Sarkozy's discourse, by conviction or by strategy, redefines the role of politics to a point which has no precedent at the presidential level.

In 2010, halfway through his contested five-year term, Sarkozy wished to relaunch his presidency and establish a road map for the next two years. Amid much publicity, he presented the "the old-age dependence project" around Alzheimer's disease as a major new axis of his politics and explained himself on prime time television. During the 2012 campaign, he made this one of his major themes. The introduction to this issue was eloquent:

(7) Will these people have the means to remain at home with somebody to look after them, when they are dependent? When one is not autonomous, one is not less human. One suffers, one has consciousness. And it is not because one has to be washed or cared for that one is not human […] because when you live in 60 square metres, how do you deal with taking in your old mother or your old father who can't stay on their own, can't wash, can't eat? What does one do? My answer? I want, and I take the responsibility for it, the creation of a new risk [group], a new branch in social security, the fifth risk [group] for the first time since the Liberation.
(Sarkozy, 16 October 2010, television interview (*TF1*, *France 2*, *Canal+*))

In this passage all the characteristics of Sarkozy's discourse are concentrated. It concludes with compassion and this paves the way in a concrete manner to an ambitious political proposal. In fact, in this extract we find the inclusive French word on *[translated as 'one']* frequently used in informal French in which everyone may or may not recognise themselves: the word on is used nine times, and explicitly in the idea of *suffering* [together] (see above). Rhetorical questions can be found which draw the listener into his discourse either by sharing a clear answer (is one still human when one is dependent?) or by admitting that one does not have an answer when faced with the gravity of the question posed. Four questions in total of which a typical one is: What has one to do? (see above). We can recognise, emanating from the suffering and wailing nature of the speech, the presidential 'I' which resolves the enigma and brings comfort: What are we to do? followed by: My answer…; Will these people have the means…? followed by: I want; I take responsibility for it (see above).

In particular, compassion has a key role in the rhetoric of this passage. Contrasting old age and childhood and evoking the necessity to protect old fathers or old mothers must have touched a large number of people by mobilising patronising feelings when referring to the discourse on family ties. Moreover, the verbs care for, eat and even more to wash, repeated twice, draws the listener in towards

what is most intimate (the intimate hygiene of elderly people) and leaves behind politics in the traditional sense of the term. In this context, it becomes pointless to discuss Sarkozy's winning strategy in detail: bringing up disease, health, dependence, senility or death is always poignant and effective, particularly with regards to an ageing French audience, and especially with regards to the elderly electorate to which Sarkozy owed his election in the previous campaign in 2007. Let us recall the electoral sociological data of 2007: it was the older electorate which turned the election on its head. If the electorate over the age of 65 years had not come out to vote, Ségolène Royal would have been elected (Jérôme Jaffré, "L'indiscutable défaite de Ségolène Royal", *Le Monde*, 8 juin 2007).

However, the rhetorical strength of this passage lies in its articulation of sentimental effusion and political decision. Sarkozy succeeds in giving a very powerful political response to the collective emotion he is manipulating. Because everybody knows that the creation of a fifth risk group within the French welfare system is far from being banal they will recognise that Sarkozy's political response is adequate to the emotions raised. In practice the discursive machinery leading from the emotional to the political decision often clashes. Thus, the creation of a fifth risk group, as a concrete response to the emotions stirred up by this speech, never saw the light of day and remained in the state of a promise or verbal action.

In Sarkozy's discourse, compassion is especially prevalent when he speaks about security issues – a topic which was at the heart of the 2007 campaign, and to a lesser extent in the 2012 campaign. When Sarkozy, in his discourse, claims insecurity for a large part of society he manipulates fear and ensures that suffering is shared by a large proportion of the French people. This is why terrifying passages – particularly about rape – occur in several interviews broadcasted on prime time television. And, more than elsewhere, this kind of affective talk is connected to political decisions which Sarkozy presents as the only right political solutions to the problem that he just has created. For example, in the following extract Sarkozy implicitly proposes a precautionary law against re-offenders. Surprisingly, this proposal questions the non-retrospective nature of laws in general, a position which he is ready to take to the constitutional council:

(8) What I do not accept is when it is said: this is for the future, this does not apply to the past. This would mean that a serial rapist condemned six months ago and who leaves prison in twenty years' time will not see the law applied on him. He can rape again whereas a serial rapist who rapes after the law is adopted will not have the right to leave prison. We therefore have two categories of serial rapists: the one who will be released because he was sentenced just before the law came into power while the other will not have the right to leave prison because he was sentenced just after. Imagine it

were your daughter. Would you accept this? I do not want this retrospective principle to be of benefit to the most dangerous criminals.

(Sarkozy, 26 February 2008, interview with readers of the daily journal *Le Parisien*)

One can measure the effect of repeating the terms serial rapist or rapist and even more the power of involving the audience in such a painful question (Imagine it were your daughter. Would you accept this?) and retain only that Sarkozy does not hesitate to play with the feelings of the public against a constitutional text, to play with the emotions shared between him and the people against the law.[2]

In fact on this thorny issue of reoffending and this attempt to force the issue of the law being non-retrospective, Sarkozy attacks the judiciary system in general, suspected of misconduct and threatened with penalties. The following passage is typical for his choice of words and the macabre scenes it can enact:

(9) For me, the last straw is this young Laëtitia, raped by a re-offender, killed by a re-offender, cut into pieces by the same re-offender if it is found that it is actually him. The charges brought against him are extremely serious. You see, for me, I am more shocked by this than by anything else. How does this happen? […] When the Laëtitia affair occurred, like every French person I was horrified. Since 2002 when I was minister of the interior, I have tried to do one thing, which is to meet the parents of victims if they requested it. Can you imagine? Laëtitia's adoptive mother and father came to see me. They were extremely calm. They are people who I don't know. They asked me two things "You are president of the Republic, what didn't work? […] Give me your word of honour that, if there has been a dysfunction, a mistake, that it will be punished." They asked me a second thing: "At least let the murder and rape of our daughter serve some purpose and make sure this never happens again." […] Oh I know very well, people say: "Why did he meet the parents of victims?" It is just about emotion!

(Sarkozy, 25 January 2010, television program (*TF1*, *21 heures*))

2. Article 8 of the Declaration of Human and Citizen Rights of 1789 should be remembered: "The law ought only to establish penalties that are strict and obviously necessary, and no one can be punished except in virtue of a law established and promulgated prior to the offense and legally applied." One of the people who drafted the French Civil Code presenting article 2 of the Legislature in 1803 is often quoted: "It is a general principle that laws have no retrospective operation. […] The role of the law is to ordain for the future; the past is not within its power. Were retrospective law to be permitted, not only personal safety but also its shadow would no longer exist. […] What would become of civil liberty if the citizen were to fear that after a blow he could be exposed to the danger of being pursued for his actions or disturbed in his given rights by a subsequent law?"

With the final exclamation, Sarkozy shows that he is aware of the criticism his emotional speech can give rise to. But he does not care. Far from being a flaw, the compassion displayed and advocated is presented as a president's duty, and the protection of victims as a top presidential prerogative. Sarkozy concludes his demonstration by redefining his presidential duties with the same turns of phrase, unimaginable from the lips of Pompidou or de Gaulle (Mayaffre 2012b; 2004):

(10) My duty is to ensure that these women, these little girls and little boys do not fall into the hands of a rapist or paedophile who has already been sentenced and who is about to be released. It is my duty as president of the Republic to protect the most vulnerable. […] We have forgotten the victims for too long. I promised to place them at the heart of my agenda; this is what I am doing.
(Sarkozy, March 6, 2008, interview *Le Figaro*)

A final extract merits to be mentioned as it illustrates better than anything else the importance of pathos (provoking fear, pity, indignation in the general public) in the edifice of Sarkozy's speeches. When visiting the Saint-Nazaire naval shipyard, with an entourage of ministers and the Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy decided to make a major speech to the workers on the national and international economic situation. On the agenda were the economic crisis, industrial delocalisation and employment. The introduction to the speech, reproduced here *in extensor*, no doubt surprised the audience:

(11) Deputy Prime Minister Setchine, ladies and gentlemen the ministers, ladies and gentlemen the presidents, ladies and gentlemen,
First of all, please allow me to express my deep emotion and great compassion for Laëtitia Perrais's family who today is in pain and in anguish. My thoughts, like the thoughts of all the French, are with this young girl who disappeared in Pornic under circumstances that the judiciary need to clarify, but alas, leave us today fear the unspeakable.
Such a drama cannot be left without resolution, such criminal acts, if the investigations confirm this, cannot remain unpunished. I want the law to work very quickly, very effectively, so that the whole truth is known.
I will receive the family as soon as I return but I want to say to you that criminal recidivism is not a foregone conclusion and I will not be happy with just an investigation without further action. I say it very serenely but there will not be yet another investigation where we tell the French people that everything is perfect, except for a little girl who wanted only to live but who disappeared. It's not possible. We will have to wait and see but it's unacceptable, decisions are needed and not think-tanks. There have been too many cases like this and of course I will receive this family. Pardon me for talking about this before talking about you but it also concerns you.

> In any case, I could not come here, a few kilometres from Pornic, and not talk about it because it is a drama that has distressed you, distressed me, and it's no longer admissible. It is quite simply no longer admissible, it is unacceptable. (Sarkozy, 25 January 2011, Saint-Nazaire)

With regards to the populist appeal in Sarkozy's discourse we want to highlight especially the last few lines containing the demonstrative pronoun 'ce' translated as 'it': it's a drama, it's no longer admissible, it is quite simply no longer admissible, it's unacceptable. This particular use of the pronoun has been shown, in a speech, to set in motion engagement with the *vox populi*. However, we only have to retain the essentials: even when dealing with an important subject – and perhaps especially when he does this – in order to capture the public's attention (*captatio benevolentiae*) Sarkozy resorts to emotion, explicitly shows compassion (to express my great compassion). Sarkozy's ability to suffer alongside the French in emotional proximity to the public is obvious. And, it's this rhetoric on which the speaker's ethos is constructed giving him power and legitimacy to express himself. Only twice in the passage cited above, and more frequently in the corpus, he stresses that he will receive the families of the victims at the presidential palace. By promising this the political merges with personal drama and politics with *condolence*. In fact, prioritising the matter of rape and murder, by evoking it before the matter of unemployment and de-industrialisation, effects the conceptualisation of the latter. The economic and social suffering of 'you workers' cannot be compared with the physical, psychological, individual suffering of 'you individuals, fathers of families' endangered by seeing their daughter disappear. Emphasising *vital suffering* in his speech allows Sarkozy to relegate *social suffering* onto second order: Pathos abolishes class struggle.

Even without considering the demagogic nature of his calls for attention to the individual suffering that becomes everybody's suffering, Sarkozy's statements indicate a new way of defining the role of politics. This new politics has lost track with intermediary political bodies, with constituted social classes and antagonistic economic interests. It pretends to take personal charge of individual psychological suffering which is detached from any established political party or body. That this direct dialogue with the French populace takes precedence over programmatic or partisan ideology is also evidenced by the fact that, for the 2012 presidential elections, he presented his manifesto only 17 days before the first round of elections.

4. Typical grammatical forms

In the previous section we have examined textual examples of Sarkozy's discourse. The typical use of popular language, in the etymological sense of *vulgum pecus*, has emerged. Far from being constructed along the lines of a party manifesto or a conference resolution, Sarkozy's discourse imitates popular language in form as well as in content. In certain ways it appears like a form of conversation. The following section will underpin our observations with the help of quantitative methods in order to identify contrastively the use of some lexical characteristics of Sarkozy's discourse in a corpus containing speeches of all French presidents of the Fifth Republic until 2012.

One distinctive aspect of Sarkozy's discourse is his frequent use of demonstrative pronouns, especially the indefinite demonstrative pronoun in its loose or popular form *ça*/'this'.[3] This constitutes an important characteristic of Sarkozy's discourse when compared logometrically methods to the speeches of his predecessors. We therefore propose that phrases like 'it's not possible', 'this can't go on any longer' and 'that's enough of this' have allowed Sarkozy to ignore any political agenda and rely on tacit communication with the people. In 2012 in a speech held in Paris at the Place de la Concorde, Sarkozy seemed to automatically assume he was acting as the voice of the people when declared: 'The people of France say 'enough of THIS!' (Sarkozy, 15 April 2012, Paris, Place de la Concorde). This passage echoes the 2007 campaign where the candidate allowed himself to get carried away with lengthy rhetorical anaphors repeated at several gatherings: 'this can't go on any longer…, this can't go on any longer…, this can't go on any longer…' (e.g. Sarkozy, 23 February 2007, Perpignan). Sarkozy thus seems to ride the wave of popular discontent without having to be very precise about the exact reason for dissatisfaction, while the people appear to have found a spokesperson to express a diffuse anger without reference to any political agenda.

We want to argue that the way in which Sarkozy uses pronouns underpins the enactment of a trial speech scene in which political discourse is vulgarised at the same time. In this scene the speaker, Sarkozy, judges in the name of the people. He does not point the finger but rather points words ('this', 'those', 'these') whereby the issues and persons in question are not explicitly mentioned but implied, or related to *doxa*. For example, in 2012 Sarkozy ridiculed the positions of his socialist rivals, and ended his comments on each candidate by referring to them with an indirect and implicit generally disparaging judgement:

3. The French word *cela*, or *ce*, elided into *c'* before a vowel, is almost always shortened in popular oral language as *ça*, and translated into English as 'this', 'that' or 'it'.

(12) *Et ça veut gouverner la France / Et ça veut diriger la France.*
'And THIS wants to govern France / and THIS wants to lead France.'
(Sarkozy, 30 March 2012, Besançon)

The terms of content this form indicates a more populist discourse (see below).

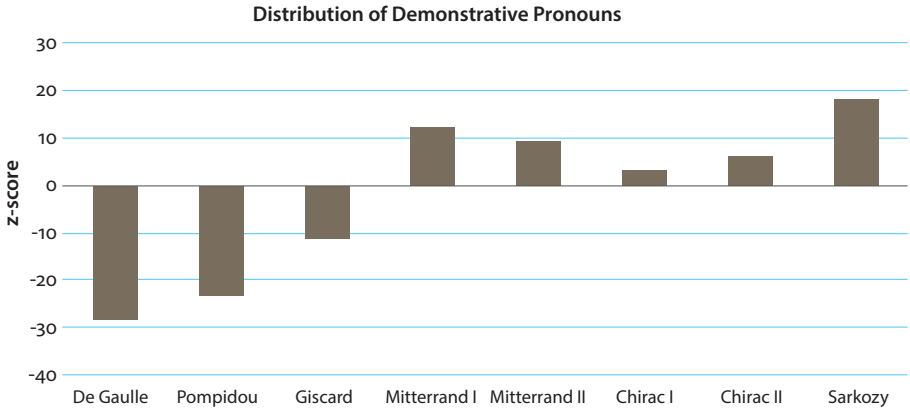

Figure 2. Distribution of demonstrative pronouns used as sentence subject in speeches of French presidents (1958–2012)

But *ça* is only the most salient example of general overrepresentation of demonstrative pronouns. Figure 2 illustrates that, when compared to his predecessors, Sarkozy's speeches show a predominant use of demonstrative pronouns as subject of the sentence. The following text sequence – sampled from around a thousand instances, illustrates a typical example of how Sarkozy uses demonstrative pronouns. Here, the capitalisation indicates emphasis in his speech:

(13) *Je me souviens de CEUX qui voulaient séparer les hommes et les femmes dans les piscines municipales.*
'I remember THOSE who wanted to separate men and women in public swimming pools.' (Sarkozy, 19 February 2012, Marseille)

In this sequence it is not clear who the demonstrative pronoun *CEUX*/'THOSE' refers to. However, Sarkozy seems to be referring to a particular political group which we suspect is from the left. With some contextual knowledge we can infer that Sarkozy seems to target Martine Aubry, or perhaps François Hollande, whose municipality authorised a preferential time slot for obese women in 2009. And what seems to be implied through the use of the demonstrative pronoun (here those): Once again the 'enemies of the people' are judged and the punishment through Sarkozy, their spokesman, seems to be imminent.

In other words, these demonstrative pronouns are verbal gestures appealing to the people by pointing to evidences that do not need to be explained. In the

Aristotelian sense this encompasses *topoï* or *doxa*, i.e. accepted ideas that no longer need to be justified. In a performative posture, he who has the power vested in him to show everyone what they want to see becomes the *de facto* voice of the people or the people's tribune.

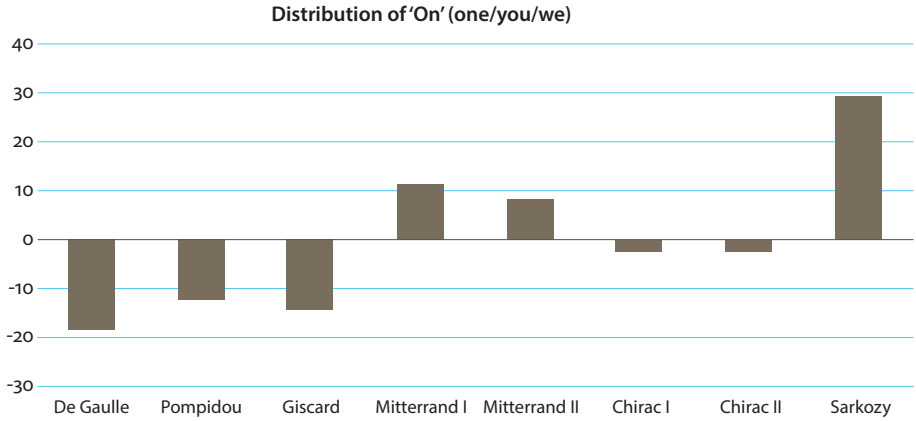

Figure 3. Distribution of 'on' (pronoun) in speeches of French presidents (1958–2012)

While *ça*/'this' is the primary characteristic of Sarkozy's discourse, the second most specific word is 'on' (one). Figure 3 represents the degree of specificity of 'on' in Sarkozy's speeches when compared to those of his predecessors. The pronoun *on* is a more colloquial form of 'we', which refers to everyone and no-one at the same time. The word *on* has been subject to some extensive studies (e.g. Fløttum, Jonasson, and Norén 2007). In English it is often translated as 'one'. However, linguists hesitate to classify this supernumerary pronoun as singular or plural, definite or indefinite, personal or impersonal. It is sometimes inclusive (similar to 'we') and sometimes exclusive (similar to 'you' or 'he'), etc.

In order to decode the "illusionist *on*" (Atlani 1984), as it is also used in Sarkozy's discourse, there has to be a certain collusion between the speaker and listener: the word *on*, just like the word *ça*, reclaims and builds a complicit communion between the speaker (Sarkozy) and the listener (the people). To some extent we can understand the overuse of 'one' as a discursive counterstrategy of the extreme left, for which the use of 'we' is most typical (Geffroy 1985). The following example is taken from a speech held on television during the 2007 campaign:

(14) No-one is obliged, I repeat, to live in France but when ONE lives in France, ONE respects the rules, that it to say ONE is not polygamous […]. ONE does not practice female circumcision, ONE does not sacrifice sheep in a flat and ONE respects the rules of the republic.

(Sarkozy, 5 February 2007, television interview (*TF1*))

The 'one' in the sequence refers to the French people – and even beyond – to those who identify themselves with to what one is put into co-text. The rhetorical trick here is that 'one' opens up a division between those who identify with it and those who do not. In this sense populations who fall outside the idea of 'one' are incorporated negatively. Thus, implicitly, Muslims (the religious Eid festival) or certain Africans (female circumcision) are blacklisted. No-one is actually named but the listener can easily glimpse the image of the foreigner as hinted at by Sarkozy.

The 'one' in Sarkozy's speeches is akin to the idea of 'we' in the communist discourse (Benoit 1985; Groupe "Droites" 1985; Habert and Lefèvre 1985; Labbé 1985). Whereas the 'we', in the form of reflexive pronoun appositions such as 'we, the workers', or 'we, the communists', serves to firmly construct a class consciousness or a leftist partisan identity, the indefinite 'one' does not express explicitly the idea of a belonging to a group. Rather it triggers the idea of a community that is temporarily limited to certain actions or states with which the addressee identifies himself or to which he allocates other. The idea that this community as a group has a coherent continuity beyond the action or state to which it is linked to is undermined. Therefore this is a community with which each and everyone can identify themselves with or exclude themselves from – and subsequently, can become involved in or withdraw from. 'One' is sometimes a vague threat which weighs on the shoulders of the endangered nation which Sarkozy defends; and sometimes on the other hand it is the Holy Grail that the voter is trying to reach. 'One' is vague and can be either the negative figure of the other or that of a faceless people with whom Sarkozy communicates across the television screen.

Besides 'one', Sarkozy uses extensively the first-person pronoun *je*/'I'. Figure 4 illustrates that in particular the syntagm *je veux*/'I want' is overrepresented in Sarkozy's speeches when compared to his predecessors. Whether during the inaugural addresses of the party he presides, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP, now named *Les Republicains*/'The Republicans'), or in the short speeches he gives during his rallies, Sarkozy nearly always expresses himself in the first person, and this demonstrates his personal ambition to be a charismatic leader. In other words, both during his campaign and during his presidency Sarkozy does not speak in the name of a party, but rather in his own name.

In addition to the characteristics of Sarkozy's populist discourse above mentioned, we also want to add that the sentences he uses are considerable shorter than those of his political competitors. For instance, during his election meetings a sentence he pronounced would contain on average twenty words, whereas sentences of his rivals from the Socialist Party consisted of thirty-one words (Ségolène Royal, 2007) or twenty-eight words (François Hollande, 2012). As has been demonstrated throughout this section we understand this as further evidence for Sarkozy populist discursive strategy. As with the emotional rhetoric we have examined above,

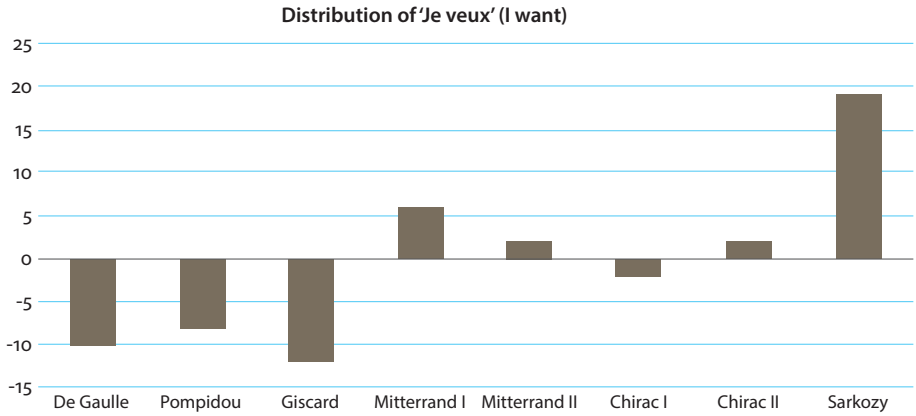

Figure 4. Distribution of "I want" in speeches of French presidents (1958–2012)

he does not care to repeat long and more complex party positions, but prefers to evoke affective impulses for which he presents a compassionate response in order to create a popular front as opposed to the elite political caste.

5. Conclusion

In this article we have analysed the characteristics of Nicolas Sarkozy's discourse compared to his five predecessors in the Fifth Republic. Whereas previously particular party politics would prevail in the speeches of the presidents, Sarkozy's discourse has become primarily phatic in order to construct a direct fusion link between the Head of State and 'the French people'. However, this discursive change does not remain without repercussions on the linguistic level. Whereas the presidential discourse in the 1960s and 1970s was based on nouns, here it is dominated from pronouns and adverbs. Furthermore, declarative and modal verbs in the first person such as 'I think', 'I say to you', 'I want' have replaced names, concepts and ideas (Mayaffre 2012b).

There is certainly a multiplicity of reasons why these changes have taken place. There is a changed media landscape using new techniques and turning political figures into celebrities to the detriment of their party identity. We could also interpret this phenomenon as the fruit of a Bonapartist political system that has now reached maturity, conceptualised by de Gaulle as a regime "preventing the republic, the State, being, as it used to be, at the discretion of the parties" (De Gaulle, radio and television interview, 16 December 1965). Fifty years later, the General's wish seems to have come true: The overall number of members in political parties in France has never been lower before: 450,000 people, which represent 1% of

the adult population (Bréchon 2001). This is less than the number of Communist Party members alone after the war.

Moreover, we would argue that the rise in populist rhetoric is also a result of the limited creativity of politics in late-capitalism – an era in which the interests of multinational cooperations dominate over any other societal demands in politics (Crouch 2004). Laclau's discourse theory, which considers such a political crisis as a precondition for a populist mobilisation helps us to understand Sarkozy's dismantled discourse material in terms of a societal theory on mass mobilisation. In this sense we have been able to identify populist features in Sarkozy's discourse. Focusing on the 'us' and 'them' narrative and the affective dimension in Sarkozy's discourse has highlighted how the different demands in society are aligned under one name: 'the president of the French people'.

Furthermore, Laclau's theory also helps us to classify what we have observed: populist discourse rewarded by an electoral success does not mean that we are witnessing a popular mobilisation. Occupying as many popular demands as possible is just the beginning of the hegemonic struggle which always provokes counter hegemonic actions. Hegemonic endeavours can also be limited by institutional boundaries or temporal constraints that block the perpetuation of a narrative of equivalent positions and lead to a change in the discursive strategy. So far, in Sarkozy's discourse, we can only observe an alignment of positions to an opposition between 'us' and 'them' on an emotional level. No explicit, rational political positions have been involved at this level of populist activation; thus there is no political action, and hence no counter-action (Laclau 2005a, 157–199). Moreover, in Sarkozy's discourse, we are witnessing a popular seduction which is lacking any traces of a 'return of the people' (Stavrakakis and Angelopoulos 2013) in the sense of populist mobilisation. And, this seduction seems to be based on the desire of the people addressed to simplify the complexity of the world to a politics led by gut feelings and emotional impulses rather than reason and reflection.

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