

# Introduction

## From 'Post-Democracy' to 'Post-Truth' in Political Language

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The term “post-democracy” was coined by Colin Crouch in 2004 to describe a coming age where democratic institutions in Western countries seemed strong, but where power was subtly being transferred to an oligarchic politico-economic elite. According to Crouch’s pessimistic model, elections gave the veneer of democratic control by changing governments, but did not actually change the fundamental substance of politics, which was shaped in private through exclusive dialogue between governments, and globalised business and corporate elites. For Crouch, political debate in a post-democracy is a controlled spectacle, managed by communication experts and professional spin doctors, revolving around a prescribed set of issues debated within a narrow ‘Overton window’ by increasingly similar and ideology-free political parties. Voters would consequently become disinterested and apathetic, leading to declining turnout in elections and decreased membership of political parties, while fostering a deep mistrust in politicians and the stage-managed nature of politics. In the domain of political communication, Crouch posited that a gulf would emerge between the increasingly complex and bureaucratic language of political documents, negotiations, and legislation on one hand, and the increasingly simplistic language of politicians’ carefully calibrated soundbite-driven and ‘personal’ appeals to the electorate on the other. In short, Crouch feared that the romantic post-war vision of vibrant participatory democracy fuelled by vigorous and meaningful political debate would be replaced by a widespread feeling that

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ideology was dead, all politicians were the same, and that this was simply an inevitable and irreversible consequence of globalisation and modernity.

In 2018, we can certainly point to numerous aspects of Crouch's vision which appear to have come true. Widespread disillusionment with politics, growing cynicism about the motives of politicians to effect real change (or their power to do so in the era of globalisation) are arguably more central to today's political landscape in the Western world than they were in 2004. The same could be said of the growing sophistication of political communication as a fine-grained science, and (until very recently) the ubiquity of politicians who deliberately espoused a language of relentless centrism, looking to build moderate coalitions around what Tony Blair (himself an embodiment of this philosophy) famously called his 'big tent'. But yet recent events – notably the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America, the recent decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in a referendum, and the rise of 'populism' throughout Europe (Italy's *Movimento 5 Stelle*, Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*, and France's *Front National* to name but three) – appear to provide clear evidence that the apathy, managed elite control, and clustering of language and ideology around the political centre that were key to Crouch's model are being formidably challenged.

The responses we received to our original wide-ranging call for papers (which was titled 'Aspects of political language in the age of "post-democracy" and beyond') very much reflected both the continued salience of aspects of Crouch's 'post-democracy' model, but also ways in which political language had recently moved beyond it in ways he did not foresee in 2004. The authors of the seven papers we present (as well as those of many of the excellent submissions we unfortunately had to decline) were clearly inspired by very recent political events, especially the election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the referendum campaign preceding it, and the ever-increasing salience of immigration as a political issue across the western world, not least in the USA and Britain. In some respects, this is not surprising: it is almost a statement of the obvious that the use of language by politicians, in the press, and on social media, are attracting unprecedented societal commentary outside of academic circles. Notions of 'fake news' and 'alternative

facts', political pundits talking about 'shaping the narrative' and 'promoting discourses', as well as the interest in 'echo chambers', 'bubbles', and 'safe spaces' imply a widespread public recognition of the power of language to actively shape political reality. And also that the new power players in the political language game – be they Donald Trump, Brexiteers, and 'alt-right news' outlets on the right – or fourth wave feminists and social-media savvy social justice activists on the left – have more power than ever before to challenge longstanding hegemonies. This heightened public consciousness – of the power of political language and its increasing disconnect from fact and evidence – was reflected by the *Oxford English Dictionary's* choice of 'post-truth' as the word of year for 2016. Whether a 'post-truth' politics and political language pose a sustained challenge to Crouch's longstanding 'post-democracy' model, or represent merely a temporary aberration to it, only time will tell. But given the theme of papers we present in this special issue, it seemed an appropriate title for this introduction.

The increasing public discussion of the linguistic aspects of the world of politics has deeper disciplinary and scholarly implications. Perhaps the most substantial is that academic expertise in this field no longer confines us to the ivory tower of scholarly obscurity, but renders our work both relevant and live. As well as encouraging increasing interdisciplinarity (embodied – we like to think – in this special issue which is co-edited by a Linguist and a Historian) it also has deeper implications, which inspire the reflective preamble by Emilia Di Martino. She argues that researchers writing on current events – whether they are Linguists, Historians, Political Scientists, or Philosophers – are not simply detached expert commentators, but in fact active participants in political practice. Indeed, she makes the point that universities have entered debates about politics and language whether we like it or not. On the one hand this arises from a new wave of campus activism: for example campaigns for the introduction of safe spaces and trigger warnings to protect certain minorities from offensive or upsetting words, awareness of gender pronouns, and the iconoclasm of renaming buildings or removing monuments associated with unfashionable historical figures or institutions. On the other, it arises from the association (primarily by the populist right) of academic expert commentary and opinion with a supposedly disconnected and self-serving liberal metropolitan

elite that do not understand ordinary people. This was famously reflected in Britain by a comment from Michael Gove (a leading Brexiteer) that ‘the British people have had enough of experts’ and widespread recent pessimism in the academic community that its contribution to public debate was being derided, leading Nobel prize-winning geneticist Sir Paul Nurse to complain that experts ‘are being derided and pushed back’.

The contributions to this special issue touch upon the political language of the elite, the press, and social media. As well as representing fascinating contributions to the scholarship of their respective topics and suggesting a move from a ‘post-democratic’ to ‘post-truth’ landscape of political language, they also represent an important contribution to the still emerging subfield of ‘political linguistics’, and as such will attract keen interest from political scientists and historians of contemporary political communication. Our first two contributions are about Donald Trump and the American presidential election campaign of 2016. The first paper, by **Massimiliano Demata**, is titled “‘I think that maybe I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Twitter’”. Donald Trump’s Populist Style on Twitter’, and is a thematic and lexico-grammatical analysis of Trump’s use of Twitter. Demata begins with a contemporary analysis of the reception of the tweets – with their insults, swearing, and bad manners – by the largely critical conventional media. He then moves to a comparative analysis of Trump’s tweets during and immediately after the campaign with that of his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, who in fact produced twice his volume of twitter activity. Demata identifies Trump’s much greater use of hashtags as a key difference, which gave him approximately a fivefold advantage in network diffusion over Clinton. His partisan and metaphorical hashtags (such as ‘#DrainTheSwap’, ‘#CrookedHillary’, and ‘#MakeAmericaGreatAgain’) also represented a sharp contrast with Clinton’s more conventional use of Twitter as a publicity and amplification tool. Demata concludes that Trump’s use of Twitter enabled him to seem ‘both of, and beyond the people’ as outlined in Benjamin Moffit’s model of a populist leader.

Continuing the Trump theme, our second contribution, by **Antonella Napolitano** and **Maria Cristina Aiezza**, provides a different perspective on the presidential campaign. Their paper is titled ‘The Press War in the Post-Truth Era: A Corpus-Assisted

CDA of the Discourse of US Political Analysts on Trump's Figure and Policy'. They focus not on the language of Trump himself, but his representation by political analysts in the media, using a combination of computational corpus analysis followed by critical discourse analysis. The authors construct two corpora of analysts' responses to Trump's tweets: the first in sources he has defined as promulgators of 'fake news' (for example the New York Times, CNN, the Washington Post) and the second in those defined as 'real news' outlets (such as Breitbart and Fox). The authors compare the sharply contrasting presentation of various campaign stories (such as the FBI investigation into potential Russian interference with the election, and Trump's reactions to releases from Wikileaks) in the 'real news' and 'fake news corpora' respectively. The authors argue that Trump's division of the media into friends and enemies through the binary of 'real' and 'fake' has allowed him to effectively challenge widely accepted norms of morality and truth, providing a masterclass in Gramscian hegemonic theory.

Our third and fourth contributions focus primarily on Brexit and Euroscepticism. **Matilde Zuccato** and **Alan Partington's** paper 'Brexit: Before and After, a Corpus-assisted Study of the Referendum Campaigns and the Immediate Aftermath' is the most heavily computational paper in this special issue. The authors have assembled a 2.5 million word corpus of newspaper coverage for three months prior, and three months after, the date of Britain's referendum decision to leave the European Union. They use concordances, wordlists, and keyword analysis to compare the language of the pro- and anti-Brexit press utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies using *Wordsmith Tools*. The paper investigates many fascinating aspects of the representation of Brexit, for example the keywords 'fear' and 'doom', as well the respective presentation of 'immigration' and 'anti-immigration'. While it discovers, as might be expected, that certain terms were relatively reliable indicators of the pro- or anti-Brexit stance of particular newspapers, it also teases out less intuitively obvious nuances, such as the finding that certain (clearly defined) immigrant groups were presented in favourable terms by the pro-Brexit press, and certain (again, clearly defined) economic benefits of the decision to leave the EU were acknowledged by pro-Remain publications. Nonetheless, the effect of these apparent concessions was arguably to render these

newspaper's respective partisan positions on unfavourable aspects of immigration, and the economic problems caused by Brexit, more intense.

Our next contribution, by **Douglas Mark Ponton** and **Rossana Sampugnaro**, is titled 'The Rigid Club Rules: Discourse-historical Perspectives on British and Italian Eurocriticism'. The authors take a quite different approach from Zuccato and Partington's, and provide a close-reading analysis of speeches by Theresa May and Matteo Renzi on Britain and Italy's respective futures in the European Union. They focus on May and Renzi's choice of topics, discursive strategies, and linguistic means to compare two very different presentations of Euroscepticism (or Eurocriticism) by these two key contemporary European leaders. They are concerned with understanding the socio-political factors that have conditioned the respective presentations of British and Italian Euroscepticism, and the role played by deeply-rooted historical factors in influencing leaders' discourse and behaviour. Their close reading – and detailed reconstruction of the historical and political context surrounding May and Renzi's speeches – allows them to tease out and contextualise aspects of the contemporary national languages of Euroenthusiasm, Euroscepticism, Eurorejectionism, and Europragmatism in Britain and Italy, as well as to enhance our understanding of the political roles of May and Renzi as operators in contemporary European politics.

**Cinzia Bevitori's** paper 'Crossing Boundaries: Investigating 'Fair' in British Parliamentary Debates on Im/migration' is our fifth contribution. It adds to the voluminous academic debate about the political language of immigration since 2010, using both computational and critical discourse analyses. Rather than looking at representations of migrants and asylum seekers in the media as most previous studies have done, Bevitori analyses the language of Parliament, constructing a diachronic corpus of debates on immigration by searching Millbank System's *Hansard Parliamentary Debates Corpus* (the digitised proceedings of the UK Parliament) for defined terms. She then examines the presentation of 'rightness' and 'fairness' by Members of Parliament (MPs) using Roget's Thesaurus to taxonomise these key values, before performing a variety of computational analyses, including clustering, augmenting this with close readings guided by collocation. Bevitori sheds particularly

interesting light on the ways in which the language of ‘fairness’ is presented by left and right wing parties in respect to immigration, with the former emphasising clusters such as ‘fair share’ and the latter prioritising ‘is fair to’. Moreover, this provides further evidence that the language of fairness (while often intuitively associated with left wing or liberal parties) remains fiercely contested rhetorical terrain in contemporary British politics.

Our sixth contribution is **Geoffrey Gray’s** paper “‘She’s just this sort of bigoted woman”: the Mediatisation of a Political Gaffe in British Broadsheet Newspapers’. This is a fascinating analysis of broadsheet newspaper’s reporting of a much-discussed episode in the UK general election campaign of 2010, where the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown forgot to switch off a lapel-microphone after a prearranged interview with Gillian Duffy, a voter. After the interview was finished, Brown was heard to describe her comments about migrants as ‘bigoted’. Gray’s paper is based on a 100,000 word corpus of broadsheet newspaper articles which covered the incident from Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat supporting broadsheets. His analysis has three principle strands. He first investigates linguistic markers of sensory perception (for example concordance analyses of ‘watch’ and ‘look’) contending that audiences were encouraged to think of themselves as voyeurs bearing witness to the inner thoughts of the Prime Minister, which were seemingly so at odds with the public persona he was attempting to present. Gray’s second avenue of enquiry concerns the ways in which Duffy’s comments were used by journalists, who extensively paraphrased, reworded, and incorporated selected words to build her up as a spokesperson for the concerns of ‘ordinary people’ regarding the issue of immigration. Finally, Gray provides an assessment of how the press provided evidence for the veracity of their depictions of Brown and Duffy. While this incident occurred as early as 2010, before the recent rise of populism which has inspired so many of our contributors, Gray posits that this episode – where concerns of ordinary voters on immigration were juxtaposed with politicians’ desires to sideline or ignore them – in many respects foreshadowed the media’s handling of the issue of Brexit six years later.

Our seventh and final contribution is by **Marianna Lya Zummo**, and is titled ‘Posting for Consensus, Sharing Consensus. The Case

of Migrants on Facebook, Ideological Views and Echo Chambers'. This paper is unique amongst our contributions in that it does not concern politicians or the conventional written media, but examines the often unconscious construction of echo-chambers in the domain of mass-participative social media platforms where contributors can interact extensively. Like Gray, Zummo focuses on one quite focussed episode, in this case the 572 comments which followed the posting of a video on the official Facebook supporter's page of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which showed the then-leader Paul Nuttall defending himself against accusations of stoking anti-migrant sentiment. Zummo uses proximation theory to investigate how the posters (both pro- and anti-UKIP) sought legitimacy through their presentation of virtual external threats (such as migrants and racial hatred) and thereby built mutually reinforcing personal confirmation niches. This led to posters talking past each other, the privilege of anecdotal evidence acquired through personal experience and feelings, and swift and aggressive retribution against users who posted dissenting opinions. Zummo concludes the setup of mass participatory social media platforms such as Facebook provides a system which facilitates the manufacture of affirmation of consensus positions. It might be argued that this strengthens the potential for bottom-up populism, giving even disparate individuals without strong leadership or formal organisation an opportunity to obtain to foster a strong *esprit de corps*.

To briefly conclude by returning to the overarching theme of this special issue, it might be said that whatever our private feelings about recent events, academic expert commentary has yet to find a stable role in public discourse in the emerging 'post truth' age. But we can say with certainty that scholarly study of the intersection between language and politics has seldom been so germane to unfolding world events, and the academic community seldom so prominently positioned in the public eye to comment on it. This clearly presents great challenges as well as opportunities. We believe that these seven excellent contributions which comprise this special issue of *Textus* exemplify the signature scholarly tools of analytical rigour, empirical and inductive analysis, appreciation of philosophical approaches, contextualised by detailed reconstruction of linguistic and historical contexts. Whether we are in the age of 'post-truth'

or 'post-democracy' – or perhaps somewhere in between – these scholarly tools retain their power, and their products' true place lies not beyond the game board of politics, nor even at its hinterland—but at its heart.

