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Populist Appeals and Populist Conversations

Abstract: This article sheds light upon the role of the audience in the construction and amendment of populist representative claims that in themselves strengthen representative-represented relationships and simultaneously strengthen ties between the represented who belong to different constituencies. I argue that changes in populist representative claims can be explained by studying the discursive relationship between a populist representative and the audience as a conversation in which both poles give and receive something. From this perspective, populist representative claims, I also argue, can be understood as acts of bonding with the intended effect of constituting 'the people,' and inputs from the audience can be seen as conversational exercitives. Populist appeals therefore may change when the audience enacts new permissibility facts and signals to populist representatives that there is another way to strengthen relationships between several individuals belonging to otherwise-different constituencies.

Keywords: populism; shape-shifting representation; speech acts; Austin; Searle; audience.

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Introduction

It is remarkable how easily populist representatives change their representative claims and jump from one side to another as circumstances demand.[1] All political representatives rethink and correct their representative claims, but it seems that populists can do that with greater facility. The generalizability of this observation should be subject to comprehensive empirical work, but I proceed as if it corresponds with reality. In this way, the question can become: How do populist representative claims change as circumstances demand? To put it another way, taking into account what the literature considers as the defining characteristics of populism, how can one explain the shifts in populist representative claims? This particular standpoint leaves aside controversial issues of causality to focus on theoretical disputes about populism and, more specifically, on an understanding of populist representative claims as speech acts – verbal and nonverbal communicative events that can perform certain actions (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Speech-act theory implies an interconnection between theories of action and theories of language so that a study of the meaning of a sentence addresses how the utterance of that sentence in a certain context constitutes a performance of a distinctive speech act (Searle, 1969: 17-18). According to John Searle,

1 In this article, I use the expressions 'populist representative claims' and 'populist appeals' interchangeably. I consider populist appeals as a kind of representative claims. Representative claims, as defined by Saward (2006: 301-02), are all those claims about themselves and their constituencies that would-be political representatives make in order to portray their constituencies in particular ways.

ISSN: 1835-6842

> Speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on; [...] and, secondly, these acts are in general made possible by and are performed in accordance with certain rules for the use of linguistic elements (1969: 16).

On this view, the unit of linguistic communication is not the sentence as a compound of words and symbols, but rather the sentence as a way to perform an act under certain conditions (Searle, 1969: 16).

To account for shifts in populist representative claims, contemporary political-theoretic literature on populism tends to overemphasise powers of invention and agency of populist representatives. On one side, prominent theoretical paradigms conceive populism as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2007), a style (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014), a discursive frame (Aislandis, 2015), or a strategy of political mobilisation (Canovan, 1998; Taguieff, 1995) in which a populist leader characterises an otherwise-separated set of individuals with different worldviews as components of a fictional entity with some homogeneous features. This entity is called 'the people.' Scholars assert that populist representatives appeal to their 'dudes' and unify them as blue-collar workers who dislike the establishment (Ochoa Espejo, 2017: 94) or as *fellow* community members who start seeing new shops opening in streets that they have known since childhood (Weale, 2018: 11). On the other side, the audience is often depicted as passive, gullible, and manipulated by the interplay between intrusive media and unscrupulous speakers (Urbinati, 2014 2019b; Weale, 2018). Hence, with few exceptions (for example, Moffitt, 2016), scholars tend to equate the agency of the audience with the act of expressing preferences in elections and referenda. And members of the audience are mainly seen as recipients who adapt to the shifts in astutely constructed representative claims (Saward, 2006: 302).[2] It is against this backdrop that I offer an alternative conceptualisation of the relationships between populist representatives and the audience in the construction and amendment of successful representative claims.

Populist representatives and the audience, I claim, can be seen as coparticipants in the construction and amendment of populist representative claims. To be sure, I do not deny the fact that populist representatives construct original and distinctive communication strategies. I just want to show that

2 'Without organized parties or with parties that are "liquid" or merely "digital" or "without organization",' as Urbinati writes, 'electoral democracy risks becoming a plebiscitary strategy for complying with the audience (by in effect shaping it) and for selecting and crowing a leader, who enjoys an exorbitant power thanks to his direct and permanent relation to the public, with no limits beside his success with the audience' (2019c: 1079).

in both commonplace and creative populist appeals, we can find expressions of agency of the audience. From this perspective, the discursive relationship between populist representatives and the audience should be understood (and studied) as a conversation in which both poles give and receive something. On the one side, populist representatives perform acts of bonding. Acts of bonding are expressive speech acts (Norrick, 1978) that establish a relationship with the represented based on shared feelings about a certain state of affairs and that are intended by the populist representative to have the effect of constituting 'the people.' On the other side, the audience, in its relationship with would-be populist representatives, performs a particular type of conversational exercitive. Conversational exercitives are speech acts that enact permissibility facts and, in so doing, indicate how the subsequent speech act ought to be relative to a conversational context (Austin, 1962; Langton, 2015; McGowan, 2004). In this perspective, the audience can signal what is to be considered by the speaker as the appropriate act of bonding, one that has the effect of constituting 'the people.'

My article contributes to the theoretical literature on populist discourses by studying populist representative claims in terms of speech act theory. To do so, in the next section, I introduce and develop Michael Saward's model of shape-shifting political representation (Saward, 2014). His conceptualisation of political representation accounts for changes in strategies of self-presentation and policy position. In section 3, I study populist representative claims through the lens of speech-act theory. Specifically, I define populist appeals as acts of bonding that aim at (I) strengthening representative-represented relationships and (II*) simultaneously* strengthening ties between the represented who belong to different constituencies. In section 4, I propose the idea of a populist conversation in which populist representatives take inputs from the audience as if they were conversational exercitives. In section 5, I highlight some potential implications of my approach. Section 6 concludes the paper.

One preliminary remark is on point. Saward (2010) and Moffitt (2016) distinguish between constituencies and audiences. Constituencies are made up of those individuals whom the representative claims to speak for, while audiences are much larger sets of people that can include those individuals whom a populist representative speaks to. An audience may include other politicians, journalists, and citizens of other countries. Since I focus on the discursive relationship between different constituencies and would-be populist representatives, I use the terms audiences and constituencies interchangeably. Members of the audience are individuals whom the populist representative claims to speak for.

ISSN: 1835-6842

The Shape-shifting Model of Political Representation

Newcomers and representatives of well-established political parties can change self-presentation strategies and policy positions as an evolving electoral landscape demands. To account for these changes, Michael Saward (2014) advances his theory of shape-shifting representation. The shape-shifting model aims at capturing how political representatives try to position themselves and stabilise relations with their audience and supporters (Saward, 2014: 735).

Saward brings two variables, space and time, into the theoretical study of political representation. Specifically, political representatives, in order to relate with the same group or several groups in different places, can change their representative claims over time or speak in ways that address several constituencies simultaneously. As he writes, political representatives 'often need to be, or at least to appear to be, different things to different people' (Saward, 2014: 723). On this view, a shape-shifter representative is a political actor 'who claims to represent by shaping strategically his person and policy positions for certain constituencies and audiences' (*ibid.*: 727). She adjusts and modifies her claims while monitoring how her words and claims are received and absorbed (*ibid.*: 735). For instance, the former president of Brazil, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, as Saward writes, was a quintessential shape-shifting representative who changed strategies as circumstances demanded. He shifted from radicalism to reformism and shifted his style of self-presentation from co-organiser of the Workers Party, to congressman, to presidential candidate, to two-term president (*ibid.*: 728).[3]

A shape-shifter therefore can be an 'elected politician, a transnational governmental political actor, a social movement leader or dissident, a business or labour leader, or an artistic figure with a public profile' (*ibid.*: 734). As Saward puts it, a shape-shifting representative and her advisers pay attention to how she can appear in different contexts and therefore pay attention to 'modes of mediation of her style and persona, with an eye to strategic advantage for herself and perhaps her party' (*ibid.*: 727). For instance, someone may position herself as a representative acting in pursuit of a common good. Later (or simultaneously) she may want to position herself as a delegate of her constituency. Or she might claim to be playing a representation role for one group and another role for another group simultaneously.

Saward recounts an example of a member of parliament who is in favour of a national green-energy policy. Because in her constituency a campaign against

3 Shape-shifting, as Saward notices (2014: 735), is often regarded as an attitude with a negative connotation. For this reason, a shape-shifting representative should be able to change ways of self-positioning without being judged as untrustworthy, unreliable and manipulative.

the creation of a local wind farm has become popular, she, while campaigning among her constituency, softens the message, saying, for instance, 'the technology might not be right for us here' (Sawad, 2014: 731). The same representative, when campaigning elsewhere, might say that the creation of local wind farms is the right thing to do. Another representative might tell one group of voters one thing while, at the same time, with those same words, encouraging another group, which uptakes the same message in a different way, to believe something else (*ibid.*; see also Fenno, 1978; Goodin and Saward, 2005).

Shape-shifting representation also explains how and why populist representatives change their modes of self-presentation. To explain it, one should identify the different groups of addressees (space) and contextualise a representative claim in a chain of several interconnected representative claims (time). I think that despite its explanatory power, the shape-shifting model of representation leaves the active contribution of the audience underdeveloped. The idea that political representatives can adapt to different audiences also implies that members of the audience can directly or indirectly influence the construction and content of representative claims. Since it describes representative-represented relationships as the result of a continuous and evolving back-and-forth in which the two poles send and receive something, a version of the shape-shifting model of political representation that sheds light on the audience can be particularly useful for approaching political phenomena, such as contemporary populism, in which the relationship between representatives and represented is often described as unmediated (Urbinati, 2019a, 2019b) or as a kind of direct discursive relationship mediated by the new media (Moffitt, 2016).

Students of populism stress that populist verbal and nonverbal communications unify a plurality of demands and constitute a border between insiders and outsiders (for example, Canovan, 2005: 74; Laclau, 2018: 77; Taggart, 2000). Populists, we are told, create and re-create 'the people,' demarcate who is inside and who is outside 'the people,' and therefore identify the relevant audience of their representative claims (Betz and Johnson, 2004). For instance, as an anonymous reviewer observes, 'one reason that targeting immigrants is so powerful is that it uses scapegoating to draw a line that excludes people who mostly can't vote or are a relative minority where they can.'[4] At one of her rallies, Marie Le Pen promised to expel migrants and restrict immigration. As she put it, 'Just watch the interlopers from all over the world come and install themselves in our home. But it's up to the owner to decide who can come in. So, our first act will be to restore France's frontiers' (Nossiter, 2017). At a rally in April

4 Cited from an anonymous review for this paper in Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric.

2019, Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah labelled irregular migrants from Bangladesh as 'termites': 'The illegal immigrants are like termites. They are eating the grain that should go to the poor, they are taking our jobs' (BBC, 2018). In a 2018 radio interview, Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini said: 'Italy and Sicily cannot be Europe's refugee camp [...] The good times for illegals are over – get ready to pack your bags' (Kazmin, 2020). In the face of such appeals, the point of view of the audience could help us to better understand what populist leaders say and the reasons why they choose a particular type of demarcation at a certain moment.

A standard account would argue that populist speakers attack immigrants in order to consolidate certain grievances and create a perception of the otherness of migrants though pejorative designations. Such an account would emphasise the capacity of the speaker to unify, constitute, differentiate, and homogenise. Scholars of populism tend to leave audience members in the background in order to zoom in on the performative and unifying role of populist leaders and speakers (Arditi, 2007; Moffitt, 2016: ch.6; Müller, 2019: 1215; Urbinati, 2015). As Umberto Eco writes, for example,

> A populist identifies his plan with the will of the people and then, if he can manage it (and he often can), he takes a goodly number of citizens – who are so fascinated by this virtual image of themselves that they end up identifying with it – and transforms them into the very people he has invented (2007: 130).

Audience is often studied for how it can receive, accept, and take up populist claims rather than for how it can contribute to the very constitution of such claims.

According to Kazin, Protestants and Catholics, liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans '*used* traditional kinds of expressions, tropes, themes, and images *to convince* large numbers of Americans join their side or to endorse their views on particular issues' (Kazin, 1995: 3, emphasis mine). Laclau argues that leaders *constitute* 'the people' by finding some signifiers that bring similar and dissimilar sets of social claims to a singularity that instils a sense of collective identity (Laclau, 2018: 73, 96, 97, 98). Nevertheless, as Laclau himself admits, democratic grievances do not come out of nowhere (2018: 73-74). They are unsatisfied demands people have, accumulate, and make visible. Looking solely at populist speakers and the changes in their representative claims in isolation cannot account for how different audiences engage with them. It seems therefore important to consider also how the audience can set some constraints on what leaders chain together and how it can respond to leaders in their attempts to create new imaginaries.

Nadia Urbinati (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) stresses the special relationships between leaders and audiences in contemporary populism. Contemporary populism, she writes, promotes a direct relation between the leader and 'the people,' a form of 'direct representation' that exploits structural weaknesses of organised parties. It is against this backdrop that in her view, the populist leader mobilises the media 'to convince the audience that he embodies the people's many forms of discontent' (Urbinati, 2019a: 4). And, thanks to the new media, as she continues, the populist leader can establish a direct relationship with the citizens, persuade them, monitor how claims are received, and, eventually, shape his own audience in his image and likeness (2019c: 1071).

Urbinati still tends to think of the audience mainly as something that populist leaders can model and manipulate. I do not want to deny that this is an important part of the story. In this article, however, I want to explore the intuition that audiences, in their relationships with populist representatives, can also be active claim makers. Once we accept that there might exist an active audience behind fluctuating populist claims, it seems possible to connect different ways of self-positioning and claim making with inputs from the audience. And if we start from the assumption that populist speakers and addressees can be coparticipants in the creation of populist representative claims, then it seems more plausible to conceptualise interactions between populist speakers and audiences as conversations and therefore investigate them as such. This implies that populist appeals are not discrete units of analysis; rather, they are moments in a continuous back-and-forth in which both sides express ideas, thoughts, and feelings and try to do things with their words on the basis of a set of common presuppositions and attitudes.

Populist Appeals as Acts of Bonding

Populist leaders, as we have seen, can change modes of self-positioning and try to establish even-more-direct connections with their audience. Attempts at establishing direct connections with the audience largely consist of verbal and nonverbal communicative events. Populist leaders may use a vocal or written address delivered to a more or less wide audience. They may also take standard democratic procedures (such as elections, referenda, policy enactments) to be practices with an essential expressive quality. Both verbal and nonverbal communicative events help to fill the gap in trust between the represented and representatives and between individuals and groups that do not know each other. What is peculiar about such verbal and nonverbal communicative events is that they *simultaneously* operate at two different levels: (I) they strengthen ties between representatives and represented; (II) they strengthen ties between

the represented belonging to different constituencies.[5] Section 2 showed that shape-shifting political representatives try to strengthen the relationship between a representative and different constituencies, either simultaneously or at different moments. If we hold to be true the fundamental idea that populist representatives aim at constituting 'the people' in a context marked by pluralism, the intention to simultaneously strengthen the relationships between members of different constituencies requires the representatives to *say only certain things*.

That a representative claim aims at strengthening ties between representatives and represented should be relatively straightforward. Less obvious is the idea that a populist leader makes representative claims that strengthen ties between the represented who belong to different constituencies. One of the starting factual assumptions of contemporary liberal democratic thought is that individuals have different interests, worldviews, doctrines, and values. Yet populist leaders, as most analytic descriptions of populist parties and movements highlight (Finchelstein, 2017; Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Taggart, 2000; Urbinati, 1998; Wolkenstein, 2018), try to replace the pluralist picture with a portrait of a unitary and homogenous body of citizens. In so doing, they address all addressees collectively as 'the people.'

That populism has a problem with pluralism is not news (for example, Galston, 2018; Ochoa Espejo, 2017; Urbinati, 2014, 2019b; Weale, 2018). Jan-Werner Müller (2016) claims that populists are always antipluralist. Populism is, as he writes, a form of identity politics that posits a morally pure and fully unified people set against elites who are believed to be in some way morally faulty (Müller, 2016: ch.1). On such a view, populism involves a dichotomy between a homogeneous people and a dangerous other that simplifies the pluralist character of political disagreement and advocates strong leadership. Populists, Müller argues, claim that 'they, *and only they*, represent the people' (*ibid.*: 20). They act, therefore, as if members of the community 'could develop a singular judgment, a singular will, and hence a singular, unambiguous mandate' (*ibid.*: 77). William Galston (2018) also stresses the idea that populism defines 'the people' as homogeneous regardless of religion, manners, and customs. The idea that populist representatives claim to represent the entire people is further proof that populist representative claims can be understood also as attempts at strengthening ties between the represented belonging to different constituencies. According to Paulina Ochoa Espejo, a key to understanding populism is its

5 I recognize that the expression 'individuals belonging to different constituencies' is simplistic, as it does not account for the differences within constituencies, for the way a member sees his or her constituency, for the different normative commitments and sources of collective identity. My intention is to emphasise the idea that populist representatives develop strategies for getting support across, and claim to speak for, groups of people with different identities.

attempts at building a collective identity. 'Populism,' she writes, 'puts forward a closed view of the people' (Ochoa Espejo, 2017: 93). Therefore, in a context in which a represented person will never know of most of her fellow represented people, a populist representative, who aims at stressing homogeneity rather than differences, must be able to instil a deep and horizontal feeling of unity as circumstances demand. Seen through this lens, populist representatives adapt to different circumstances to strengthen ties with the represented while, through different communicative events, bringing unity and uniformity to individuals who belong to different constituencies.

In the philosophical literature on populism, much has been written on how populist representatives try to construct 'the people' as a unitary body (for example, Canovan, 2005; Laclau, 2018; Urbinati, 2019b; Müller, 2016) and on the representative-represented relationship (Urbinati, 2014, 2019b). We are also told that populist representative claims, like any speech acts, transform views and identities (Laclau, 2018). Populist representative claims do not just reflect an existing state of affairs but, as an anonymous reviewer points out, performatively construe 'the people' they claim to represent. This sort of argument is intuitively plausible, but it remains difficult to understand the distinctive way in which a speech act can constitute 'the people.'

Nothing has been said about the theoretical characteristics of populist appeals as representative claims that *in themselves* strengthen ties between the represented and representatives and have the function of simultaneously strengthening ties between the represented belonging to different constituencies. This work requires a perspectival shift from an emphasis on representative-represented and represented-represented relationships to a focus on communicative events in themselves as ways of performing actions that shape representative-represented and represented-represented relationships in distinctive ways. It is against this backdrop that I integrate the shape-shifting model of representation with speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In this section, I focus on the populist appeal as a way to perform an act. In the next section, I focus on populist appeals as responses to certain conditions.

When we say that to say something is to do something, we have to specify the group of sense of 'saying something.' In the most common sense, that of communicating propositional content, 'saying something' stands for performing a locutionary act (Austin, 1962: 97-8). In another sense, when we ask questions, give information, make an appointment, announce an intention, or pronounce a sentence, performing the action of asking the questions, giving the information, making the appointment, announcing the intention, or pronouncing the

sentence equates with proffering an utterance in an appropriate context. In this second sense, that of acting through words, 'saying something' stands for performing an illocutionary act (Austin, 1962: 99). Then there are cases in which communicating propositional content, and thereby performing an illocutionary act, causes changes of status and makes the listener perform another action. In this third sense, that of producing certain effects, 'saying something' stands for performing a perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962: 101). Within this framework, we distinguish 'a locutionary act [...] which has a meaning; the illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is the achieving of certain effects by saying something' (Austin, 1962: 121).

Drawing upon these considerations, populist appeals can be seen as illocutionary acts that have a specific effect. Populist appeals, like other types of representative claims, can be seen as acts of bonding. That is, in uttering something, populist representatives establish a relationship with the represented based on shared feelings about a certain state of affairs. If understood in this way, bonding can count as a type of expressive illocutionary act. Expressives, as Neal Norrick writes are,

> distinguished from other kinds of illocutionary acts by virtue of the types of psychological conditions they express. Expressives do not express beliefs or intentions, but emotions. Further, they express not emotions directed at future states [...], but emotions which arise in response to given states of affairs (1978: 279).

The state of affairs is judged to have,

> positive or negative value for some person, the *patient*, brought about by a person, the *agent* (who may be identical with the patient), and, just in case either the agent or patient role is not filled or both are filled by the same individual, an additional person, the *observer* (Norrick, 1978: 283, emphasis mine).

In acts of bonding, the addressees fill the role of patient. The agent role can be filled by the speaker, the addressees, or another person. The role of observer can be filled by the speaker, who must evaluate the relevant state of affairs in the same way as the addressees. Thus, a speaker, whether or not she feels directly affected by a state, may perform an act of bonding by expressing what the addressees feel about the state. Acts of bonding, like all other expressive illocutionary acts, do not backfire when speakers do not feel the psychological conditions they express (Norrick, 1978: 279). While promises imply the execution of an action, and assertions commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition,

expressive illocutionary acts require only that emotions be appropriate to the circumstances surrounding the act (*ibid.*: 279-81). This indicates that a consideration of the genuine empathy between populist representatives and their addressees expressed by an act of bonding may play a secondary role in determining the force of such acts. Their force is determined by the capacity of the populist representative to display psychological conditions as the expectations of the addressees demand. Therefore, successful acts of bonding, if uttered by a person with the authority to be a represented person, can constitute *in themselves* a relationship between representatives and represented.

I have said that populist appeals are distinctive because, by expressing a shared feeling about a state of affairs, they intend to strengthen simultaneously ties between the represented belonging to different constituencies. To capture this second element, we need to recall the idea that by saying something, one can produce certain effects. Seen through this lens, an act of bonding expresses certain feelings to some end. And, in the case of populist appeals, populist speakers perform acts of bonding with the intention of simultaneously strengthening ties between the represented belonging to different constituencies. When the speaker knows her addressees, and when addressees know each other, performing acts of bonding in ways that produce the intended effects might be easier. In that situation, addressees may signal what kind of emotion they consider as the most appropriate response to a certain state of affairs and thereby enable speakers to employ highly consequential acts of bonding.

The problem is that, as we have seen earlier, populist speakers do not know much about their addressees, and addressees do not know much about each other. The problem is also that populist representative claims, which aim at being representative of all addressees considered collectively, are successful when they strengthen the relationship between a sufficiently large number of represented people belonging to different constituencies (Taggart, 2000). Numbers confer greater legitimacy on populist representatives and show that however different the constituencies might be, feelings about certain state of affairs remain in accord (*ibid.*: 92).

As an anonymous reviewer pertinently observes, it is not necessarily the case that a populist representative makes a pitch to the entire population or to a majority. My claim is that populist representatives address several constituencies at the same time in a way that simultaneously strengthens represented-representative relationships and the relationship between members of otherwise-different, perhaps conflicting, yet scarcely contradictory, constituencies. This leaves open the plausible observation that at a certain moment, certain constituencies

might remain out of reach of populist representative claims. The most intuitive example is that in which including new constituencies, which requires populist representatives to express bizarre emotions about a certain state of affairs, leads towards the disenfranchisement of other constituencies that are already within the reach of populist representatives. In light of this observation, it is safer to maintain that at a certain moment, populist representatives aim at constituting 'the people' across a large, yet limited, set of constituencies.

If strengthening the relationship between the represented belonging to different constituencies is the intended effect of acts of bonding that constitute representative relationships between populist leaders and their addressees, the perlocutionary force of a populist representative claim connects with the ability of the speaker to identify what addressees considered collectively feel about a state of affairs. For this reason, it becomes important to look at the addressees and their potential role in the construction of populist representative appeals. Addressees can place populist representatives in a position to pick up on the correct psychological conditions and give what is needed to make a claim that strengthens relationships between the represented who belong to different constituencies.

Populist Conversations and Conversational Exercitives

The core argument of this article is that within a shape-shifting model of political representation, the discursive relationship between populist representatives and the audience can be understood as a type of conversation in which two poles give and receive something but one pole, the audience, can enact rules for the other, the populist representative. The model of shape-shifting representation suggests that political representatives adjust their representative claims as the audience demands. By studying populist representative claims within the context of a conversation between representatives and the audience, I also want to show how the audience can affect the content of representative claims of populist representatives.

While in the last section I focussed on populist appeals, here I focus on the audience. I argue that from the standpoint of populist representatives, the audience's inputs can operate as conversational exercitives, a type of speech act (McGowan, 2004). An exercitive 'is the giving of a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action' (Austin, 1962: 154). Exercitives enact permissibility facts and, in so doing, indicate how the subsequent speech act ought to be relative to a context. Success conditions may be formal and related to a distinctive procedure, but they may also involve informal elements, such as a hearer's recognition of the speaker's authority or practices and norms that are

already established within the relevant social context (Kukla, 2018; McGowan, 2019).

Even if populist representatives change the propositional content of their representative claims, their claims maintain two properties. Like other types of representative claims, populist representative claims strengthen ties between the representative and the represented. Unlike other types of representative claims, populist representative claims aim at simultaneously strengthening ties between the represented belonging to many different constituencies. In the last section, I explained how populist representative claims, by communicating propositional content and thereby performing an act of bonding, can produce the effect of constituting 'the people.' To have that effect, I argued, populist representatives must respond to certain states of affairs by means of expressions that replicate what seems to be the general feeling of the audience across many different constituencies. This indicates that there might be a general feeling across the represented belonging to different constituencies, that the audience can communicate that general feeling, that populist representatives are familiar with the feelings and expectations of the audience, and that populist representatives are ready to amend their representative claims when such feelings, and the relevant expectations, change. My view also suggests that the audience can change the bounds of conversational permissibility. In the conversation between populist representatives and the represented, representatives speak within the frame allowed by the audience, which, given populism's emphasis on 'the people' as a homogeneous and inclusive whole, has the authority to compel the would-be populist representatives to express themselves in certain ways. The central idea is therefore that inputs from the audience, typically indirect and unstructured, can be understood as a kind of speech act that regulates the range of appropriate representative claims.

To clarify the force of the audience's speech acts, one should consider the rules governing conversations. David Lewis (1979) argues that conversations look a lot like baseball games. In baseball games, the score changes in relation to players' behaviours, what counts as a correct play depends on the score, players behave in such a way that their play is correct, and players try to make the score evolve in certain directions (Lewis, 1979: 342). In other words, baseball games are activities governed by formal and informal rules. In the same way, conversations can be said to have a score. The conversational score records what is pertinent to the progress of the conversation. It includes, as Mary Kate McGowan writes, 'among other things, the relevant topics, presuppositions and the appropriate standards of descriptive accuracy' (2004: 97). However, unlike baseball, in which rules are rigid, the rules governing conversation accommodate

the behaviour of participants, provided that 'what is said is said by the master to the slave' (Lewis, 1979: 347). Such rules are, in Lewis's words, 'rules of accommodation' (1979: 346). For instance, a conversational contribution may bring into existence a series of presuppositions that affect the conversational score. Likewise, a conversational contribution may make explicit the standards of accuracy in the conversation.

The conversational score regulates the range of correct plays. Rules of accommodation justify adjustments to the score so that a conversational contribution counts as correct play. Therefore, changing the score or invoking a rule of accommodation can alter the limits of conversational possibility. For this reason, McGowan argues that 'any conversational contribution that invokes a rule of accommodation is an exercitive speech act in virtue of changing what is permissible in that conversation' (2004: 99).

Lewis (1979) is interested in truth and conversation as exchanges of information. Yet the rules of accommodation constitute a general scheme with wide application (Lewis, 1979: 339; see also Langton, 2015: 10). As Rae Langton aptly summarises, such a general scheme says that (I) if at time *t* something is said, and (II) a score component is required to be a certain way for what is said to be a correct play, and, (III) provided certain conditions hold, (IV) the component was not that way before, then (V) at *t* the score component is that certain way such that it enables what is said to be a correct play (Langton, 2015: 10). Following Langton (2015: 10-12), I adapt this scheme to speech acts so that correct play includes felicity conditions and score component stands for *what is permissible to say at a certain* time *t*.

The general framework from speech acts to conversational norms correlates with variations in authority, an important felicity condition for exercitives. Authority can be pre-established or acquired through accommodation, can be practical or epistemic, and can be claimed for the speaker or outsourced (Langton, 2015: 6). Because the audience has the authority to form the most appropriate opinion or conclusion about a certain state of affairs, it has a pre-established practical and epistemic authority within the context of populist conversations. The audience, in other words, begins the conversation with the authority to direct populist representatives and can create new permissibility facts for the populist representatives. This point can be better understood when we interpret the interaction between the populist representative and the represented as a series of non-random acts. In order to perform successful and inclusive acts of bonding, populist representatives need to know what are generally seen as the most appropriate responses to a certain state of affairs. And what is common

to the represented belonging to different constituencies determines what a populist representative can say to constitute a credible account of 'the people.' The audience can make certain views and issues more salient than others and define these views and issues in one specific way instead of some other way.

It is against this backdrop that if the audience says something (I), to borrow Lewis' (1979) and Langton's (2015) master-slave scheme, that requires a new norm to come into being – namely, the norm that (II) the populist representative is obliged to express *x* about *y* – and (III) the populist representative wants to strengthen represented-representative ties and ties between the represented who belong to different constituencies, then (IV) a new norm in the conversation between the populist representative and the audience comes into being and (V) the populist representative is obliged to express *x* about *y*. Because (IV) the new conversational norm was not that way before, the conversational score adjusts in that certain way such that the populist representative is obliged to express *x* about *y*, enabling the audience's conversational exercitive to count as correct play. To put the point another way, depending on what the audience does at a certain point in the conversation, at that point the permissibility facts are different from what they would otherwise have been.

As I said, populist representatives treat the audience's inputs as conversational exercitives. This indicates that such inputs might not actually be conversational exercitives. Nevertheless, when a populist representative treats them as such, we are in a position to identify recursively the inputs' successful conditions. Yet, exercitives can be defective (Austin, 1962), and a speech act with a fatal defect misfires (the illocutionary act is not performed). If we read Austin literally, the illocutionary force of exercitives correlates with speakers' illocutionary and locutionary intention. At the level of illocutionary intention, speakers do not merely express opinions but intend to be enacting new permissibility facts (McGowan, 2004: 104-05). At the level of locutionary intention, a speaker's intention must go with the content. If I intend to prohibit an action but my propositional content fails to adequately specify that action, my exercitive misfires. Austinian exercitives are also sensitive to hearer recognition. For an exercitive to be uncorrupted, hearers must be able to recognise the speaker's illocutionary and locutionary intention. Unlike Austinian exercitives, McGowan argues, 'conversational exercitives do not depend on either speaker intention or hearer recognition' (2004: 105). On her view, because conversations are already shaped by certain rules of accommodation, it is irrelevant to exercitive force whether speakers intend to change the bounds of conversational permissibility (*ibid.*: 105-106). The fact that the speakers' locutionary intentions do not match the content of the permissibility fact 'is simply irrelevant' (*ibid.*: 106). Moreover,

as McGowan continues, conversational exercitives cannot be sensitive to the hearer's recognition (*ibid.*: 106). If one does not consciously recognise the change in the limits of conversational permissibility, it does not mean that such bounds have not changed. As she puts it, 'since the analogous speaker intentions are absent in the case of conversational exercitives, no issue regarding the hearer's recognition of them can arise' (*ibid.*: 106).

My usage of the expression 'conversational exercitives' is between Austin's and McGowan's usage of it. Within the context of populist conversations, conversational exercitives do not depend on the audience's intention to change permissibility facts, but they do depend on the match between locutionary intentions and permissibility facts. In order not to misfire, the content of conversational exercitives, however imprecise and elusive such content might be, should match what members of the audience consider as a desirable reaction to a certain state of affairs. In the same way, conversational exercitives are sensible to populist representatives' recognition. Without the recognition of the populist representative, conversational exercitives misfire. This may occur when inputs are too ambiguous and mixed or when the populist representative does not recognise the authority of a certain audience.

Another remark is on point. The media is a key actor that affects both poles of the conversation (Esser et al., 2016). I therefore cannot neglect that media can shape the discursive relationship between representatives and the audience. It can align citizen preferences and media use; it can function as a key connector between political actors and the public; it can orient political agendas and transform mass communication into a kind of interpersonal exchange (*ibid.*, 2016). Against this backdrop, as Keane puts it, populism seems particularly suited to the changing aspects of the new media galaxy (Keane, 2013, cited by Moffit, 2016). On the side of the audience, social media may help to create in-group identity among otherwise-dispersed individuals (De Vreese et al., 2018) and give this group visibility. As Mazzoleni puts it, 'The media, intentionally or not, may serve as powerful mobilization tools for populist causes' (2008: 50). Moreover, the media themselves can play a role in opinion formation. For instance, references to the centrality of 'the people' and critical attitudes towards power holders may affect the spirit of the time and therefore the expectations and feelings of citizens towards certain state of affairs (Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2019). On the side of the populist representatives, social media give all political actors the opportunity to monitor patterns. Then, through image management and adaptation of the media logic, speakers can prioritise certain issues and harsh rhetoric to ensure media coverage and the attention of citizens.

Some Potential Implications

The populist conversation is a model of discursive interaction in which the imperative to strengthen ties among individuals belonging to different constituencies is so compelling as to put the audience in control of what is permissible in that context. The idea that inputs from the audience can be read as conversational exercitives has significance for the way we think of populist shape shifting. As I said in section 2, scholarship on contemporary populism tends to stress the creativity and exceptionality of populist representatives and their direct relationship with the audience. Section 3 and section 4 argued that students of populism should also consider what populist representatives try to do by expressing specific emotions about a certain state of affairs in a certain context. Populist representatives, I argued, perform acts of bonding with the aim of strengthening ties across a large number of addressees and therefore discursively constituting 'the people.' For populist representatives to do so, it seems very important for them to replicate the audience's general feeling about the relevant state of affairs and to grasp what is generally considered by the audience as a relevant state of affairs. For this reason, inputs from the audience about what is appropriate to say about something can be treated as conversational exercitives.

There are several potential implications of my argument. My view adds to the shape-shifting model of political representation. To recall Saward's terminology, political representatives may change their ways of self-positioning and claim making across different constituencies and across time. In light of my analysis, a populist representative is a particular kind of shape-shifting political representative: she makes the same representative claim to different constituencies in a way that can strengthen relationships between members of such constituencies. Her shifts, therefore, are not in space but in time. In other words, populist representative claims change as the general feeling of the audience evolves from one side of an issue to another.

Connected to the last point, there is an implication for the way we attach the label 'populist' to this or that political representative. It connects with ongoing empirical work on differences and similarities between populist and non-populist representatives. My argument entails that the reference to 'the people' follows verbal and nonverbal communicative events. For this reason, it is perhaps more accurate to speak in terms of frequent deployment of populist representative claims, rather than in terms of essential populist features. I cannot develop this idea at length here. However, I can say that the main intuition is that all political representatives, in their search for consensus, may end up engaging with the audience as if they were in a populist conversation. Against this backdrop, the

distinction between populists and non-populists is not ontological but a matter of degree. Populist representatives are representatives who *systematically* and *frequently* treat audience inputs as conversational exercitives. This does not exclude the possibility that other representatives do the same as circumstances demand.

My approach also appears to have promising implications for the study of variations in representative claims made by the same populist representative. Over the years, populist representatives have made racist and anti-immigration appeals, called for genuine rule by the people, advocated justice for the many, and challenged asymmetrical power relations at the global level. I have argued that populist representative claims can also be seen as a repetition of what audience considers as the most appropriate reaction to a certain state of affairs. From this it follows that populist appeals are rarely a result of uncontaminated ideological affiliation or other normative pre-commitments (or at least we should presume that to be the case). And, even in those contexts in which populist appeals sound ideologically loaded, if they are populist appeals, then they can reflect the general feeling of the population and strengthen ties across individuals belonging to different constituencies. Against this backdrop, jumping from anti-immigration appeals to claims for fairer international economic policies is therefore coherent with the intention to constitute 'the people' through multiple acts of bonding.

The study of representative claims as contributions to a continuous back-and-forth between public speakers and the audience has wider implications for the study of public verbal and nonverbal communicative events. This perspective allows scholars with an interest in the study of public claim making to see populist appeals as instrumental to learning about the communities in which we live and socialise. Seen through this lens, populist appeals also help external observers to recognise the most widespread dispositions about certain states of affairs. Perhaps other forms of public speech, such as public racist speech, have the power to make evident what is otherwise hidden, ignored, or out of sight. In this sense, populist appeals and other public communicative events addressing a sufficiently large audience can be revelatory. They, like a critical juncture, can uncover what the audience is truly disposed to accept.

Conclusion

In this article, I casted lights upon the role of the audience in the construction and amendment of populist representative claims. Specifically, I argued that changes in populist representative claims can be explained by studying the discursive relationship between a populist representative and the audience as

a conversation in which both poles give and receive something and, perhaps counterintuitively, a conversation in which the audience acts as the speaker and the populist representative acts as the hearer. From this perspective, populist representative claims can be understood as acts of bonding with the intended effect of constituting 'the people,' and inputs from the audience can be seen as conversational exercitives. Populist appeals therefore may change when the audience enacts new permissibility facts and signals to populist representatives that there is another way to strengthen relationships between several individuals belonging to otherwise-different constituencies.

To make the argument, I adopted the assumptions and key claims of the shape-shifting model of political representation. Within this framework, I stressed the potential contribution of speech-act theory. In contemporary literature on the political theory of populism, it is possible to find occasional references to the work of Austin, but much more can be done to combine this perspective with the research on populist representation. As Canovan argues, 'All forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to "the people"' (1981: 294). Yet we are still short of studies explaining how verbal and nonverbal communicative events *in themselves* can constitute 'the people' or adapt to circumstances in order to continue constituting 'the people' over time. Populist representative claims, I claimed, are expressive speech acts (acts of bonding) whose intended perlocutionary effect is to constitute 'the people.' To be successful in causing the intended perlocutionary effect, populist speakers, I also argued, should take seriously what their addressees think of a certain state of affairs.[6]

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6 For very insightful reports, I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers, and Miriam Ronzoni and Tiziana Torresi. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 'Global Justice and Populism' Workshop, and the University of Pavia. I wish to thank the audiences at these events for their comments and questions. I am particularly grateful to Enrico Biale, Ian Carter, Flavio Chiapponi, Emanuela Ceva, Giulia Bistagnino, Valeria Ottonelli, and the students of my Fall 2019 course 'People and Populism: constructions, discourse and critique.'

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