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Constructing a Crisis by Constructing a Migratory Threat

Elucidating Explicit and Implicit Anti-Migratory Thought Patterns in the Covid-19 Discourse Made by the Right-Wing Populistic Vox and Rassemblement National Parties on Twitter

Resumen: En este estudio se elabora un análisis del discurso populista relacionando la pandemia producida por la COVID-19 con el fenómeno de la migración. Basado en la concepción foucaultiana, que entiende el discurso como una práctica constructiva de sistemas de conocimiento, se analizan los patrones de pensamiento explícitos (análisis argumentativa de *topoi*) e implícitos (estrategias manipulativas del *framing*) en los discursos populistas del partido francés Rassemblement National y del partido español VOX, así como en los de sus líderes durante la pandemia de 2021 en Twitter. Los resultados de ambos corpus evidencian la lógica discursiva populista que consiste en la creación de una dicotomización social acompañada por la construcción del inmigrante como enemigo. En el corpus español se observa un estilo discursivo más agresivo y directo en el nivel lingüístico, igualando a los inmigrantes con criminales mediante coocurrencias y enmarcando metafóricamente el proceso de migración como si fuera una guerra. Además, se opone los españoles a los inmigrantes a través del *topos* comparativo según el cual los inmigrantes tendrían más derechos de libertad que los españoles durante la pandemia, reforzados por patrones semánticos y sintácticos que expresan oposición. En el corpus francés, probablemente a causa de la estrategia de “desdemonización”, se observa un estilo discursivo menos agresivo en el nivel lingüístico, y se intenta lograr la división social más bien a nivel argumentativo. Según estos patrones mentales, parcialmente elementos muy antiguos de los discursos epidémicos, los inmigrantes (“ilegales”) traen la pandemia pasando la frontera y producen una desigualdad social porque reciben, según esta lógica, dinero que se les niega a los ciudadanos franceses.

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1 Introduction

An integral part of populist discursive logic consists of constructing a crisis in the discourse (cf. Issel-Dombert/Wieders-Lohéac 2019, 7–9) in which social, political, and economic problems are spectacularized in order “to propagate the sense of crisis and turn ‘the people’ against a dangerous ‘other’” (Olivas Osuna/Rama 2021, 3). In the right-wing populist discourse, the role of this dangerous “other” is often ascribed to migrating people and serves as a scapegoat for citizens’ problems (see the concept of empty or floating signifiers in Laclau 2004, 107). The present paper thus analyzes the extent and manner in which the Spanish VOX and French Rassemblement National parties – as well as their respective leaders – construct the COVID-19 crisis in their right-wing populist discourses by establishing a connection between the pandemic and migration.

Using Foucault’s conception of discourse, the paper aims to grasp both the implicit and explicit thought patterns of the above-mentioned parties and political actors that relate migration to the pandemic. The implicit patterns – which indicate the mentalities of the discourse community – are analyzed via the core concept of framing, and the explicit patterns are identified via topos analysis, which is a widely used concept from classical argumentation theory. The corpus stems from a screening of all tweets created by the accounts of the aforementioned political parties and actors during the 2021 pandemic year that establish a link between migration and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The paper begins with a theoretical part, which presents both a brief outline of the current situation concerning public opinion on immigration in France and Spain as well as a discussion of the potential impact of the right-wing populist actors in this opinion-formation process. Subsequently, the paper’s conception of populism and discourse are defined, followed by a literature review that summarizes the state of the art concerning the discursive connection between the pandemic crisis and migration. Finally, in the empirical part, the results of the corpus analysis are discussed.

2 Socio-Political Context

2.1 Spain

Although Spain has had the highest level of immigration per capita of all EU member states throughout the past 20 years, several opinion studies have revealed that the country has consistently maintained more open attitudes than the European average toward immigration, with less rejection of and a greater appreciation for

the contributions that migration makes to both society and the economy (cf. González Enríquez/Rinken 2021, 1; Special Eurobarometer 2018, 48). This sentiment can be traced back, for example, to the experiences of Spanish migrants in the 1960s and to the counterreaction against nationalism ignited by the Franco regime. However, a slight increase in negative attitudes toward immigration has recently been noted in Spain, although it is not clear how this change can be attributed to VOX's anti-migratory discourse or to other events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or irregular immigration to the Canary Islands (cf. González Enríquez/Rinken 2021, 1).

VOX was founded as a “liberal-center-right party” (Olivas/Rama 2021, 4) by three former members of the Partido Popular conservative party, including VOX's current leader, Santiago Abascal. Gradually, the party began to adopt more extreme positions in line with other radical right-wing parties (Olivas/Rama 2021, 4). VOX grew very rapidly in a relatively short time, becoming “the newest sta[r] in the European populist radical right firmament” (Mudde 2019, 40). Although VOX's electoral success in the 2018 Andalusian elections as well as in the 2019 European and national elections cannot be ascribed to generalized growth in anti-immigration attitudes among the Spanish population as a whole, the slight hardening of Spanish public opinion toward immigration is undeniable and has shifted the boundaries of what is perceived as thinkable and sayable: “What is clear, however, is the effect VOX is having on polarisation, causing a growing divergence of attitudes towards immigration based on ideological positions. [. . .] This polarisation is concerning because it becomes an obstacle to calm and rational debate on immigration and public policies devoted to manage it” (González Enríquez 2021, 9).

2.2 France

Although positive attitudes toward immigration in France surpassed negative attitudes in 2018 for the first time since surveys began in 2002, immigration remains a hot political topic. The greatest concerns relate to the effective integration of immigrants into French society. Traditionally, French immigration policy has been driven by an assimilationist approach that aims at fully integrating the migrant population into French society (cf. Holloway/Faures/Kumar 2022).

Despite the relatively low percentage of immigrants in France compared with in almost all neighboring states, national identity and integration constitute the principal narrative that divides and dominates public debate. Under Marine le Pen's leadership of the far-right Front National party (which has been called *Rassemblement National* since 2018) beginning in 2011, the party increased in membership, electoral success, and public opinion (cf. Stockemer/Barisione 2017, 2). For example, in the 2014 European Election, the FN won 25% of the votes, thereby

outdistancing the classical, established parties by several percentage points and becoming the most successful radical right-wing party in Europe. On the national level, the party has earned the second-largest number of votes in the first round of the presidential election three times (in 2002, 2017, and 2022).

In contrast to the radicalization of VOX's discourse (cf. Olivas/Rama 2021, 4), a superficially more moderate discourse under Marine Le Pen has been observed – known as “*dédiabolisation*” (“de-demonization”), although the ideology itself has not changed (Stockemer/Barisione 2016, 12–13; Alduy/Wahnich 2015). Under Marine Le Pen's father, immigration had been framed as a matter of security (cf. Stockemer/Barisione 2016, 8), whereas Marine Le Pen links immigration more to economic, social, and cultural elements and connects it with a discourse that criticizes the politics of the European Union (Stockemer/Barisione 2016, 8).

In particular, Marine Le Pen's efforts to rebrand the party have succeeded in modifying the opinion of a significant portion of the French population. Polls have shown a decrease in the number of people who consider the FN a “danger” from 70% in 2002 to 53% in 2012 (Stockemer 2017, 24). Another poll indicates that a slight majority of respondents view the FN as “a party [that is] like the others” (Stockemer 2017, 24).

3 Populism as a Discursive Style

Populism has been defined in political science as an ideology, as a form of discursive logic, and as a communicative style (cf. Olivas Osuna/Rama). The conception of populism on which the present paper is based combines the more abstract notion of discursive logic as a type of deep structure within a discourse with the notion of discursive style (cf. Issel-Dombert 2020, 539) as the linguistically realized patterns of this logic in the surface structure of a discourse.

The problem of a mere ideological conception has been widely discussed: Populism arises from different points in the socioeconomic structure, and it is therefore nearly impossible to represent one common ideology. Even distinguishing between left-wing and right-wing populism appears overly difficult. For example, right-wing populism can be hosted by different ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, and conservatism (cf. Wieders-Lohéac 2018, 61), and as Kienpointner (2005, 218) has shown, even right-wing populist discourse differs according to different national contexts. While many authors note that the exclusion/inclusion of social groups appears to be a distinctive feature shared by left-wing and right-wing populism (cf. Wieders-Lohéac 2018, 63, Issel-Dombert/Wieders-Lohéac 2019, 9), other authors consider the exclusionary aspect to constitute populism in total (cf. Sánchez/

Alcántara-Plá 2019, 106; Sullet-Nykander/Bernal/Premat/Roitman 2019, 3). Since populism does not offer a complete worldview, Mudde proposes conceiving it as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde 2004, 544) that considers society to be ultimately divided into two antagonistic and homogenous groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (cf. Mudde 2004, 543).

The dichotomic, antagonistic element of Mudde’s definition is also central to Laclau’s (2004) political-theoretical approach, but Laclau considers this element to be part of an articulatory or discursive *logic* rather than part of an ideology. According to Laclau, using populist discursive logic enables social space to be dichotomized by creating an internal frontier between the people – presented as all having similar, unfulfilled demands – on the one hand and “the power” – conceived as the enemy, “which does not satisfy any of those equivalential demands” – on the other hand. As these demands represent “a highly heterogeneous reality,” they must be discursively homogenized in the form of “empty signifiers” in order to be perceived as similar. Within a populist rhetoric, constructing a common problem can be reduced to constructing a common feeling of disappointment (cf. Sullet-Nylander et al. 2019, 2) or fear (cf. Wieders-Lohéac 2018, 64), which is presented as being ascribable to a dangerous enemy (Wieders-Lohéac 2018, 64). Following this logic, by eliminating the enemy, it is possible to eliminate the problems of all society members (cf. Charaudeau 2011, 108; Ruiz-Sánchez/Alcántara-Plá 2019, 106): “There is no populism without construction of an enemy” (Laclau 2004, 107). The discursive construction of an enemy by attributing to an actor an ethos of immorality serves as an antipode to creating a morally “pure” and honorable group of people. This dichotomic role ascription leads to a decomplexifying perspective of reality. The threefold construction of (1) the threatening enemy, who is held responsible for the source of (2) a catastrophic situation accompanied by (3) a disappointed group of people is the condition *sine qua non* for the populist’s ethos construction of the powerful savior both of national identity and of the people (cf. Charaudeau 2011, 110–112).

Concerning the type of right-wing populism analyzed in this paper, focus is not placed on the construction of the enemy “within the state, within the nation,” but rather on migrants as the enemy “within the state, outside the nation” (cf. Mudde 2007, 65; Moreno Moreno/Rojo Martínez 2021, 9) and as a central element of the right-wing populist logic: “In order to approach European right-wing populism, to capture its essence, to understand its construction of reality and its argumentative strategy, *de facto*, it is not possible to avoid focusing on the migration issue” (cf. Wieders-Lohéac 2018, 64, my translation).

4 The Concept of Discourse

This paper conceives of populism as a specific form of discursive logic that aims at dichotomizing social space by discursively constructing enemies (see Chapter 3) and that is graspable in its surface structure via a linguistically realized discursive style or discursive patterns. The notion of “discursivity” is central because it integrates the constructive potential of language as elaborated by historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, a central figure in so-called critical and descriptive discourse linguistics (cf. Tereick 2016, 22) and on whose conception of discourse this paper is based. According to Foucault, reality cannot be conceived independently of discourse as a practice that systematically generates the objects it discusses (cf. Foucault 1969). Thus, truth and knowledge do not exist as such, but are generated by the discourse community and – when linguistically represented – are always driven by subjective interests and a subjective perspective. Hence, language is not a representational system of signs, but a constructing element. Foucault’s interest lay in capturing thought patterns that limit and direct what is sayable within specific discourse communities, thereby leading to the creation of knowledge structures, or mental models.

Based on this conception of discourse, the present paper aims to grasp both implicit and explicit thought patterns. Implicit patterns – which indicate the mentalities of a discourse community – are analyzed via the core concept of framing, and explicit patterns are identified via argumentation-based topos analysis. Argumentation analysis reveals assumptions that are considered plausible within “everyday argumentation” (Kienpointner 2005, 219) in a specific discourse community. Argumentation is not considered implicit because the hearer is aware that the speaker aims to influence him by seeking to obtain his consent. This is not the case with framing. Instead, framing can also be analyzed in terms of manipulation, which is a field dominantly explored by German and English critical discourse analysts (cf. Reisigl 2018, 163; Van Dijk 2015, 472).

5 State of Research

The discourse on immigration is a common research subject in so-called critical discourse analysis (cf. Van Dijk 2018; Reisigl 2018, 169). For example, van Dijk (2018) refers in his literature review on the migration discourse mostly to studies aimed at uncovering racist discourse, especially in mass media, but immigration is also a topic treated by scholars who explicitly refer to descriptive discourse analysis (e.g., Böke/Jung/Niehr/Wengeler 2000; Wieders-Lohéac 2018; Issel-Dombert/Wieders-Lohéac 2019).

In German Romance linguistics, the migration discourse was recently discussed in Pietrini's anthology (2020), which paid special attention to the migration discourse in Italy. Due to the central role of this topic in right-wing populist discourses, the migration discourse often involves analyses of populist discourse (cf., e.g., Wieders-Lohéac 2018, Issel-Dombert/Wieders-Lohéac 2019, Visser 2018, Pirazzini 2019).

Papers that analyze the discursive interrelationships between COVID-19 and the migration discourse are markedly scarce due to the relative recency of the pandemic. The same applies to analyses of the impact of the pandemic on the populist discourse in general (cf. Olivas Osuna/Rama 2021, 2).

Vega Macías (2021) analyzed whether the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the political discourse on immigration in Europe and the United States based on a "revision" of news taken from newspapers, news agencies, and international organizations from March-September 2020. As Vega Macías claims, the pandemic has strengthened anti-immigration positions, although his approach left pending questions, for example, concerning the methods and concepts used, the corpus size and composition, and the exact measurement of the increase in anti-immigration attitudes. Surprisingly, no examples were given from newspapers; instead, only extracts from political speeches of mostly right-wing politicians were included.

Sociologist Rodríguez Peral investigated the agenda-setting and framing of the informative treatment of immigration by Spanish public television's news programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. She analyzed the totality of the news from January-September 2020 and found that more than two-thirds of the news programs represented migrants negatively. Migrants were framed as a homogeneous and depersonalized mass. Simultaneously, Donald Trump's hate speech was being given space without an alternative, counterbalancing view (e.g., reporting about the experiences of Spanish citizens with migrating people).

Political scientists Olivas Osuna and Rama (2021) used content analysis to test whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the populist character of the discourse of VOX and other political parties in Spain by analyzing parliamentary speeches from March-June 2020 and comparing them with earlier discourses from the selected parties. The scientists measured populism using five sometimes-overlapping parameters: the "antagonistic depiction of the polity," "morality" (the superiority of "the people" vs. the inferior moral standards of "others"), the "idealistic construction of the society," "popular sovereignty," and "characteristic leadership." The analysis revealed both a growing density of populist features in Absacal's speeches – which could be linked to an increased intensity of the parameters of "morality" and "antagonism" – and a type of spillover effect onto the other parties in the parliamentary sessions.

As they stem from disciplinary areas other than linguistics, the above-cited research approaches neither conceptualized the discourse nor operationalized it via linguistic concepts. Instead, the analyses were simply based on semantic elements and used content analysis. Concrete language use and linguistic strategies were thus entirely excluded, thereby corroborating the need for a linguistic perspective on this issue.

6 Corpus

In the first step of corpus compilation for the present research, all tweets made by Rassemblement National, Le Pen, VOX, and Asbacal from January-December 2021 that thematized migration were collected. In order to be able to cover all tweets concerning migration, search terms were not used; instead, the content of every tweet was assessed, which yielded 125 tweets by Rassemblement National, 195 by Marine Le Pen, 198 by VOX, and 169 by Santiago Abascal for the chosen period. In the second step, all tweets that related migration to the COVID-19 pandemic were selected, which amounted to 7% (9/125) from the Rassemblement National corpus, 7% from the Le Pen (14/195) corpus, 6% (12/198) from the VOX corpus, and 4% (7/169) from the Abascal corpus. Although the number of tweets in this total corpus is relatively small compared with the overall number of tweets that thematized migration in 2021, the corpus is representative insofar as it comprises all tweets that relate the pandemic to migration. The thought patterns are assessed qualitative-comparatively. Although both Rassemblement National and VOX are considered right-wing populist parties (cf. Chazel 2020; Eklundh 2020), the comparability of both discourses – which is often a problem in comparative corpus studies (cf. Böke/Jung/Niehr/Wengeler 2000, 15–16) – is ensured for several reasons: (1) The pandemic is a common global context parameter that (2) has led to similar effects in Spain and France because the two countries have been the hardest-hit OECD countries on the economic level in terms of loss of BIP (cf. Gern/Hauber 2020, 899). Moreover, (3) both countries have had the highest number of COVID-19 cases out of all European countries (cf. Radtke 2022) and also (4) display comparable patterns concerning cumulative mortality and crude mortality rates, including similar age and sex distribution (cf. Gallo 2021 et al.). The selected corpus covers a period during which both countries experienced their 3rd and 4th waves of the virus as well as a politically imposed state of emergency and lockdown accompanied by restrictions to individual freedoms of actions.

Using Foucault's constructive conception of discourse, this paper aims to uncover the implicit thought patterns behind the discourse by analyzing framing strategies (Chapter 7) and explicit thought patterns via topos analysis (Chapter 8).

Since the present paper focuses on analyzing thought patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic (including argumentative patterns), Twitter is an appropriate social media platform for analysis as it has a strong informative function (cf. Rufai/Bunce 2020, 511). It has also been highly frequented during the pandemic due to its fast-reacting character (cf. Heidenreich et al. 2015, 122) and the increased need for news consumption by the information-seeking population (Haman 2020, 7).

7 Framing

Frames organize speakers' belief systems (cf. Entman 1993, 52) and are thus indicators of these speakers' mental models (cf. Münch 2021), which are subjective cognitive representations of complex situations based on both individual assessments and the individual allocation of attention (cf. Moser 2003, 188). Frames were first introduced to linguistics by Fillmore (1985, 223) as "lexical representatives of some single coherent schematization of experience and knowledge," which laid the foundation for frame semantics as a future branch of research. Frames can be used for strategic actions – that is, so-called "framing," which essentially involves selecting and highlighting features of reality while simultaneously obscuring others (cf. Entman 1993, 52).

Framing refers to how people establish subjective definitions of a situation (cf. Entmann 1993, 54; van Dijk 2015, 471). For example, a demonstration may be defined either as a violation of the social order or as a democratic right of demonstrators. Similarly, a violent attack may be defined as a form of resistance against the abuse of state power or as a form of terrorism (cf. van Dijk 2015, 473).

An affinity exists between framing and manipulation. With manipulation, the speaker intends to dissimulate their pursuit of strategic goals (Fairclough 1994, 2360; Nettel/Roque 2012, 57) and the fact that a situation exists with a potential clash of interests on the part of both the speaker and the hearer. Through this dissimulating behavior, the manipulating speaker aims to avoid the hearer's rational assessment of a contentious issue. Thus, the manipulated hearer is not aware of the speaker's attempt to exert influence over the hearer, or as van Dijk (2015, 467, 472) puts it, of the speaker's attempt to "control the mind": If such discursive control over mental models of recipients is in the best interest of speakers and against the best interest of recipients, we have an instance of discursive power, or manipulation (*ibid.*, 472).

The analysis of framing strategies is measured via the concepts of semantic roles, keywords, co-occurrences, metaphors, and presuppositions.

7.1 Allocution of Semantic Agent Roles

The distribution of semantic roles can help to put reality into perspective. For instance, hiding agent roles by using the syntactic pattern of passivation or the morphological procedure of nominalization can downplay or hide the speaker's responsibility for their own actions that they perceive as unfavorable (cf. Van Dijk 2015, 474; 475). Normally, in the right-wing populist discourse, minorities are not ascribed the semantic role of agent; usually, they are depicted as inanimate objects onto which actions are imposed (cf. Ruiz-Sánchez/Alcántara-Pla 2019, 121) or to which (negative) attributes are ascribed. This observation can be corroborated by the results of the French corpus, in which agent roles are attributed on average in only 11% of the tweets.

The tendency to avoid distributing agent roles to migrants in the French corpus can also be seen in connection with the absolute lower level of the French corpus to use verbal expressions that refer to migrating people. Linguistic expressions that refer to the lexical field of migration verbalizing migrating people are three times less frequent in the French corpus compared to the Spanish.

In the Spanish corpus, on average 77% of the tweets use (negatively connoted) verbs that ascribe agent roles to the migrating people (see Examples 1–2). The high rate of agency attribution in the Spanish corpus correlates with the employed topos that migrants who are in the country “illegally” during the pandemic have more rights than Spaniards (cf. chapter 8.2.1) – that is, that these migrants are allowed to move about freely while Spaniards are condemned to “be imprisoned” at home. In this case, the distribution of the semantic roles creates a discursive dichotomization between migrants as agents who have the right to act on the one hand and Spaniards as inactive patients onto whom negatively connoted actions are imposed on the other hand. In four tweets, this contrast between the semantic roles takes the form of a slogan (see Example 1):

- (1) Españoles encerrados, extranjeros disfrutando. [VOX_21_03_20, VOX_21_03_21, VOX, 21_03_22, VOX, 21_03_24]
 (“Spaniards, locked up; foreigners, enjoying themselves.”)
- (2) Dominan las calles en pleno Estado de alarma, cuando los españoles honrados tienen restringidos sus derechos. [AB_21_02_21]

(“They dominate the streets in the midst of a state of alert while honorable Spaniards have their rights restricted.”)

7.2 Keywords

Keywords can be understood as indicators of frames (Entman 1993, 52) and mental models (Münch 2021, 129) that express the self-concept and ideals of a group (cf. Warnke/Spitzmüller 2008, 26) and influence people’s thoughts, emotions, and behavior (cf. Niehr 2007, 496). Like “tips of icebergs,” they point to “complex lexical objects that represent the shared beliefs and values of a culture” (Griebel/Vollmann 2019, 676) or discourse community. Keywords have argumentative potential and are used with a certain frequency (see Niehr 2014, 89). The keywords “illegals”/“illegal migrants” in both the French and Spanish corpora and “frontier” in the French corpus were identified and are discussed in the following sub-section.

7.2.1 “Illegals”/“Illegal Immigrants”

The discourse in both the French and Spanish corpora focuses on connecting the pandemic to migration and to migrants who stay in a country “illegally” (see Examples 3 and 4), mostly by calling them “illegals” or “illegal migrants,” thereby directing attention to a phenomenon that has little relevance in terms of numbers (cf. Eurobarometer 2018, 14). However, every linguistic reference to a phenomenon has an impact on solidifying the phenomenon in a population’s collective consciousness. The more often a phenomenon is referenced, the more deeply it is perceived (cf. Scharloth 2010, 99; Varga 2019, 330). Repeating the feature of “illegality” renders the phenomenon more salient, which “means making the piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (Entman 1993, 53). In Le Pen’s ironic tweet concerning the increase in financial aid provided to migrants who stay in France irregularly, she frames the target group of this assistance as “illegals”:

- (3) Le poids financier de cette prise en charge réservée aux **clandestins** est mirobolant pour un pays dont le système hospitalier est déjà mal en point.
[21_09_21]
 (“The financial burden of this care reserved for illegals is staggering for a country whose hospital system is already in bad shape.”)

In Spanish Example (4), migrants are globally criminalized as “illegals”:

- (4) Los españoles encerrados y arruinados. Los **ilegales**, que llama y trae el gobierno, ocupando las calles. [21_03_06]
 (“Spaniards, imprisoned and ruined. Illegals, called and brought over by the government, occupying the streets.”)

Denoting migrants as “illegals” creates a division between the legal, morally pure nationals and the morally impure migrants, who violate the law. The term “illegal” leads to the criminalization of the migrating individuals (Stamatinis/Archakis/Tsakona 2021, 348) and frames them as a threat to honorable, “legal citizens.” In this narrative, migrants are not framed as victims in need of protection.

Due to this construction of the “migrant criminal” (ibid.: 348) that connects migrants with criminality, the United Nations General Assembly has urged the organs of the United Nations and their specialized agencies to use the term “non-documented migrant” or “irregular migrant workers” in every official document since 1975. In the same vein, in 2009, the European Parliament called on EU institutions and member states to avoid the term “illegal immigrants” due to its extremely negative connotations and to instead use “irregular/undocumented workers/migrants” (ibid., 349).

Stamatinis/Archakis/Tsakona (2021, 351) demonstrated that the term “illegal migrant” was used in the 2015 Greek Parliamentary sessions exclusively by extreme right-wing parties in the context of their extreme anti-migrant rhetoric.

7.2.2 Frontier

The noun *frontière* (“frontier”) is used in half of the tweets from the French corpus.

Historically, the border between France and Spain occupies a central position in the French populist immigration discourse of Rassemblement National and the former Front National (cf. Varga 2019, 335) and has the symbolic function of a filter that protects the morally pure people and nation from dangerous “others,” who are presented as a threat to the nation’s security, economy, and identity. Marine Le Pen defines the border as follows: “Nous croyons en la frontière qui protège, qui est une saine limite entre la nation et le reste du monde, un filtre économique, financier, migratoire, sanitaire et environnemental” [“We believe in a border that protects, that sets a healthy limit between the nation and the rest of the world, an economic, financial, migratory, health, and environmental filter”] (cf. Alduy/Wahnich 2015, 134).

While the border is traditionally invested with the function of guarding the people against Identitarian loss and insecurity, the discourse on the COVID-19

pandemic has caused an old narrative to reappear that depicts foreigners as importers of disease and plague (cf. Dinges 2004) and frames the frontier as the protecting separation line that filters the sane from the insane.

- (5) Que de temps perdu, par pure idéologie, pour maîtriser nos frontières ! [LP_21_1_14]
 (“How much time has been lost, due to pure ideology, to control our borders!”)
- (6) Que de temps perdu pour se décider finalement, en catastrophe, à la maîtrise des frontières et à des contrôles renforcés. [LP_21_01_29]
 (“So much time wasted to finally decide, in a hurry, to control the borders and to reinforce inspections.”)

The COVID-19 pandemic has been “a window of opportunity” (Olivas Osuna/Rama 2021, 1) for Le Pen and her party to embed the claimed need for border controls in a different context of meaning, thereby connecting the issue with healthcare elements: “The analysis of populist discourses through great events such the COVID-19 pandemic can help [us to] understand how populist leaders adapt their communicative style to take advantage of changing circumstances” (Olivas/Rama 2021, 3; see also Vega Macías 2021, 10).

The argumentative potential of this keyword can be seen in its frequent use in the topos that migrants are a threat because they bring the pandemic (see chapter 8.1).

7.3 Co-occurrences

The immediate co-text can have a framing function by casting the surrounding element (issues or individuals) in a derogatory or uplifting light (see, e.g., the framing of Assad as friend or foe through co-occurrences in German news magazines in Rüdiger 2018, 302). These “semiotic patterns” (Griebel/Vollmann 2019, 677) can be related to the question formulated by Foucault (1981, 47) as to how a specific utterance occurs in a certain place instead of in another.

In one-quarter of the Spanish tweets, the already-criminalized “illegal migrants” are additionally verbally framed as criminals by having their depiction co-occur with lexemes that refer to the concept of “criminality.” Through this type of co-occurrence, migrants are presented as sharing the same core features on the level of semantic intention and as belonging to the same super-category as criminals. Generalization is a well-known “discourse move” (van Dijk 2015, 474) for forming stereotypes and prejudices.

- (7) [. . .] luego aprovechan el estado ilegal de alarma para encerrarnos . . . mientras ilegales y delincuentes se pasean con impunidad. [VOX_21_04_06]
 (“[. . .] then, they take advantage of the illegal state of alarm to lock us up . . . while illegals and criminals walk [free] without being punished.”)
- (8) Les habéis obligado a convivir con bandas, ilegales y okupas. Y además, a muchos les habéis prohibido trabajar. [VOX_21_04_07]
 (“You have forced them to live with gangs, illegals, and squatters. And in addition, you have forbidden many of them to work.”)

In the French corpus, immigration is framed as a threat by the immediate co-text. The negative attributes given by the co-text are presupposed in all cases (cf. chapter 7.5) and have the advantage that the political actors can avoid arguing for the truth of this (highly subjective) worldview since it is presented as common knowledge.

- (9) [. . .] cette politique d'**immigration massive** fait partie des problèmes qui pèsent sur l'hôpital public. [LP_21_11_22]
 (“[. . .] this **massive immigration** policy is part of the problem that the public hospital is facing.”)
- (10) Nous avons évoqué ensemble, avec le Premier ministre slovène @JJansaSDS, de nombreux sujets sur l'avenir de l'Europe: **crise migratoire**, gestion du Covid, [. . .]. [LP_21_10_22]
 (“Together with the Slovenian Prime Minister, @JJansaSDS, we have discussed many issues concerning the future of Europe: the **migration crisis**, the management of COVID, [. . .].”)

7.4 Metaphors

Metaphors reveal how people process and conceive the world and how they concretize abstract knowledge in mental models (cf. Moser 2003, 191–192; Van Dijk 2015).

A cognitive and thus new conception of metaphors was made popular by Lakoff/Johnson (1980), who went beyond the hitherto widespread conception of metaphors as mere ornamental rhetorical devices (Spieß 2011, 204). Based on Gestalt research, the above-mentioned authors view metaphors as central instruments in creating analogies by transferring primarily sensory experiences of a source domain

to an abstract target domain (Ziem 2015, 53) in order to make the latter more easily comprehensible: “Because we cannot directly experience these concepts – we cannot touch, smell, hear, taste or see the concept of taxation, for instance, [. . .] our minds and our language automatically resort to conceptual metaphors to assign them meaning” (Wehling 2018, 137). Therefore, the complexity of metaphORIZED issues is automatically reduced, simplified, and coarsened (cf. Spieß 2011, 209) since the transfer from the source to the target domain does not comprise all features, but only those that serve the visualization. Metaphors are a powerful framing tool that can be used to direct recipients’ attention and to influence the way they perceive the world because these metaphors highlight some aspects of an issue while simultaneously hiding others. For instance, when immigration is conceived via flood metaphors, experienced negative and threatening elements and emotions are highlighted, while others are omitted (cf. Dargiewicz 2021, 44).

The conceptual metaphor type that is relevant to our corpus analysis is war or fight metaphors, which are frequent in political discourse as a means of demonstrating power, involvement, or commitment (cf. Gauthier 1994). However, it is typical of right-wing parties “to identify migrants with invaders through invasion metaphors” (Stamatinis/Archakis/Tsakona 2021, 356, see also Wodak/Reisigl 2015, 581; van Dijk 2015, 473, Pirazzini 2019, 136). By labeling migration as an invasion, it is conceived as a warlike, aggressive, and massive attack of warriors who violate the territorial integrity of the national state. On a more general level, migration is conceived as war. As this mental model implies that migrants – as invaders – commit the assault, a dichotomic construction of perpetrator and victim is realized, thereby legitimizing the “fight” – that is, the “counter-attack” against this group (Pirazzini 2019, 138–139).

Although Pirazzini demonstrated that invasion metaphors were frequently used by the Front National, the French corpus does not display this feature at all. In contrast, when VOX and its leader frame the COVID-19 discourse as a discourse of migration, migration appears in 60% of the tweets categorized as war tweets.

- (11) Mientras autónomos, trabajadores y hosteleros se arruinan . . . el gobierno usa sus impuestos para promover la **invasión migratoria**.
[AB_21_02_21]
 (“While the self-employed, workers, and hoteliers go bankrupt . . . the government is using their taxes to promote the **migratory invasion**.”)
- (12) Pretenden que los españoles estén encerrados en Semana Santa mientras ven cómo inmigrantes ilegales **asaltan** nuestras fronteras.
[VOX_21_03_24]
 (“They want Spaniards to be locked up during Easter Week while they watch illegal immigrants **assault** our borders.”)

7.5 Presuppositions

Presuppositions represent the knowledge shared by the speaker and the speaker's recipients. When used manipulatively, presuppositions can be used by speakers to present controversial issues as commonplace (cf. van Dijk 2010, 182; 188–192), thereby causing the hearer to believe that the presupposed content is already part of their own experience (Fairclough 2015, 165) even though the speaker is well aware that this is untrue (Sbisà 1999, 500). In this case, speakers exploit presuppositions in order to bluff “insofar as it allows [these] speakers to purport information as given which is in fact new” (Schmid 2001, 1529). Thus, presupposed content is “*imposed* upon the discourse” (Griffiths/de Vries 2014, 43, emphasis in original). When controversial issues are encoded as presuppositions, the speaker does not have to wrestle for the hearer's consent on a given argument because the information is presented as already being shared. Presuppositions can be identified when they “survive” the negation test. They are mostly triggered semantically and syntactically by specific sentence orders (cf. Grewendorf/Hamm/Sternefeld 1989, 433).

In the Spanish corpus, presuppositions are mainly used to denounce the ruling party – an aspect on which the present paper does not focus. For the remainder of the corpus, highly subjective war metaphors (e.g., examples 11–12) are particularly often presupposed when a speaker pretends that this mental model of conceiving of migration as a war is a commonly shared and uncontroversial fact that requires no supporting argumentation. In Examples (11), the use of the definite article encodes the existence of a migratory invasion as an uncontroversial fact. In Example 12, the factive verb *ver* (“to see”) frames the “assault” of the border as uncontroversial common knowledge.

In the French corpus, two patterns of presupposed content are present: first, it is framed as a fact that the border and thus also migration are actually out of control (by demanding that the state has to take control via the use of the verb *maîtriser*, “to master”) and second, it is presented as common ground that immigration is a problem for the already-beleaguered healthcare system, triggered by the semantics of *stopper* (“to stop”) (cf. examples 13 and 14).

- (13) [. . .] il faut stopper l'immigration qui plombe notre système de santé.
 [LP_21_10_22]
 (“[. . .] immigration, which is damaging our healthcare system, must be stopped.”)

- (14) Élue présidente, je mettrai fin à une immigration qui coûte une fortune à notre système de santé. [LP_21_11_6]
 (“As President, I’ll put an end to an immigration that costs our healthcare system a fortune.”)

8 Topos Analysis

Aristotle’s Ancient Rhetoric viewed topoi as belonging to the logos level of persuasion. Topoi thus enable us to reconstruct the collectively shared thought patterns and mentalities of a discourse community (cf. Wengeler 2000, 135; 140). Kienpointner (2017, 189) explicitly relates topoi to Toulmin’s inference warrants (cf. van Eemeren et al. 2014, 204; Wengeler 2020, 651, 654). These warrants – or inference rules – establish a quasi-logical, plausible relationship between the argument/data and the conclusion/claim in everyday speech (Wengeler 2020, 650).

However, in contrast to manipulative informative presuppositions, in which the audience does not recognize that influence has been exerted, with argumentation, the speaker does not primarily hide their intention to influence the hearers and thereby seeks rational acceptance of and consent for a controversial issue (cf. Nettel/Roque 2012, 59). Of course, the speaker aims to persuade the audience that their own worldview is the one and only true view; however, the hearers are well aware of the presence of the controversial issue and the fact that influence is being exerted on them.

In his typology, Kienpointner (1992a) distinguishes between three major classes of abstract argumentation schemes that are used to influence the plausibility of everyday speech: The first type uses warrants, the second type establishes warrants via inductive or illustrating examples, and the third type neither uses nor establishes warrants (such as *argumentum ad verecundiam* (argument from authority) or *argumentum per analogiam* (argument by analogy)). Wengeler (2000) concentrates on the first category and introduces a topos analysis to German descriptive discourse analysis by establishing and comparing the thought patterns of immigration discourse in German-language journal articles from 1970s Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. His approach has had significant influence in German discourse analysis, including in the recent topos analysis in Romance Linguistics in Germany (cf. Issel-Dombert/Wieders-Lohéac 2019). The third type of scheme is mostly used in critical discourse analysis to uncover fallacies in the sense of common errors in logical reasoning (cf. Reisigl/Wodak 2001).

The first type of scheme comprises four types of semantic relationships that aim at a plausible transition from premises to conclusions (i.e., subsuming schemes,

comparative schemes, causal schemes, and opposing schemes, cf. Kienpointner 1992a, 246; Kienpointner 1992b, 182). This type is of particular interest to the present paper for its ability to systematize the knowledge patterns of the chosen radical right-wing discourse communities. Figure 1 schematizes the findings explained below.

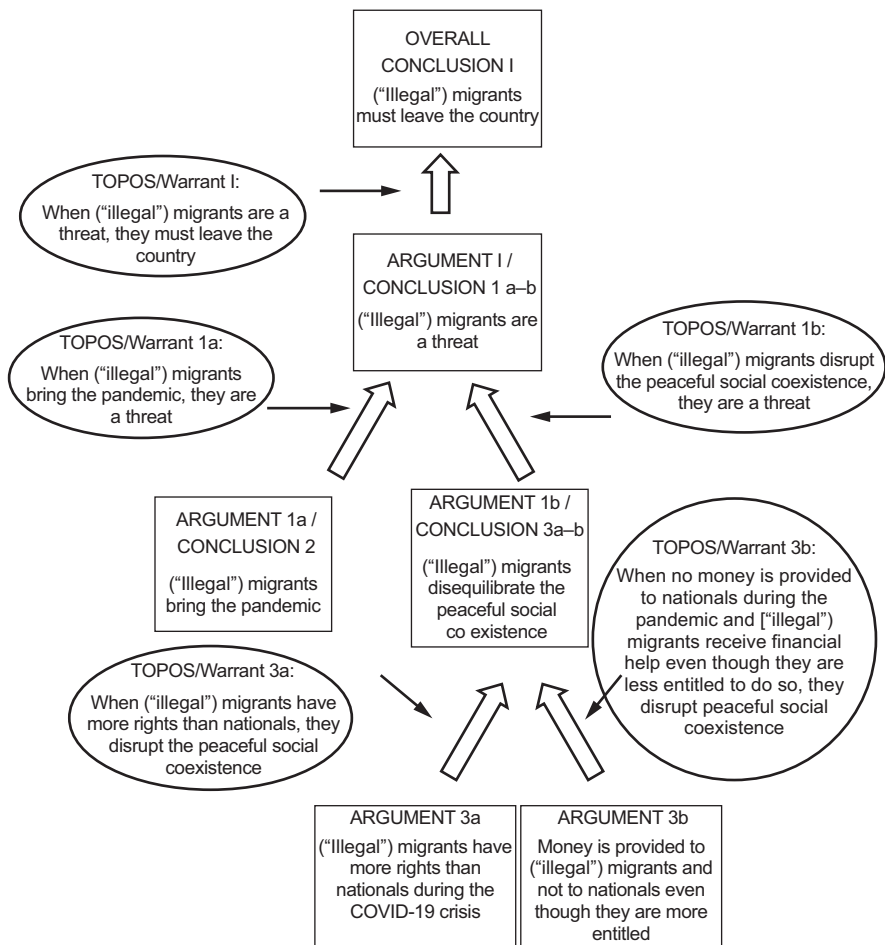


Figure 1: Topoi patterns in the COVID-19 migration discourse.

In both the French and Spanish corpora, the overall conclusion (Conclusion I in Figure 1) of all argumentation patterns is the deontic, normative (mostly unverbalized) thesis that migrants who stay in a country irregularly must leave because

they represent a threat during (the already-burdensome) times of COVID-19 (Argument 1). This argument – itself a controversial claim on the next hierarchical level (Conclusion 1a-b) – is supported in both corpora by two types of arguments: first, by the causal argument that “illegal” migrants bring the pandemic (Argument 1a), and second, by the causal argument that migrants who stay in a country irregularly disrupt the state of peaceful social coexistence during times of COVID-19 (Argument 1b). The latter argument is again a controversial conclusion (Conclusion 3a-b) on the next-lower hierarchical level and is supported on the one hand by the comparative argument that undocumented migrants are granted more rights than nationals during times of COVID-19 (Argument 1a) and on the other hand by the comparative, *a maiore* argument (cf. Kienpointner 1992a, 285; Kienpointner 1992b, 163; Wengeler 2020, 651) that migrants receive financial support while nationals – who should have priority – do not (Argument 1b).

Figure 2 displays the frequency distribution of Topoi 1a and 1b in both corpora.

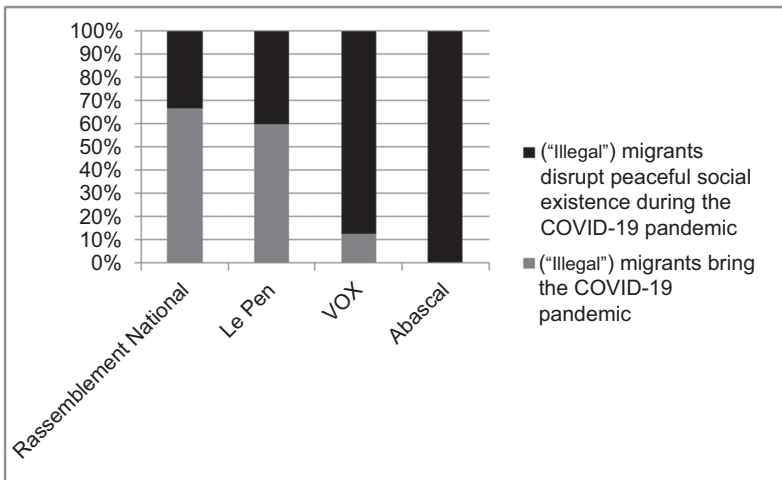


Figure 2: Frequency distribution of Topoi 1a and 1b.

As evident in Figure 2 the topoi that migrants who stay in a country irregularly are a threat because they bring the COVID-19 pandemic (topos 1a) is widespread in the French corpus despite being almost absent in the Spanish corpus. The thought pattern that undocumented migrants are a threat because they disrupt peaceful social existence during the COVID-19 pandemic (topos 1b) is dominant in the Spanish corpus and is also measurable – albeit to a lesser extent – in the French corpus.

Concerning the claim that migrants who stay in a country irregularly lead to social de-stabilization (Conclusion 3), two arguments (Arguments 1a and 3b) can be detected that stand in a comparative semantic relationship with the above-mentioned conclusion. In both cases, migrants are compared with nationals, are represented as being privileged over nationals, and are thus treated unjustly by the executive power of the country either by having more rights (argument 1a) or by receiving financial aid that nationals are denied even though nationals are presupposed to be more entitled to receive this aid in the *a maiore* scheme (argument 1b).

Figure 3 reveals that the argument that migrants have more rights than nationals during the pandemic is by far the most characteristic argument of the comparative topos in the Spanish corpus, which stands in contrast to the French corpus, in which the argument of unequal financial treatment dominates.

All argumentation patterns create a dichotomization of society with the claim that migrants are a threat to nationals on a health, social, and economic level. This Manichean worldview becomes even more evident with the comparative schemes that directly oppose both the in-group and the out-group by contrasting the (alleged) benefits that migrants have with the disadvantages that already-suffering nationals have during the pandemic.

In nearly all cases, these comparison schemes based on dissimilarity metrics also have the effect of causing the ruling party to be blamed for (constructed) unfair conditions.

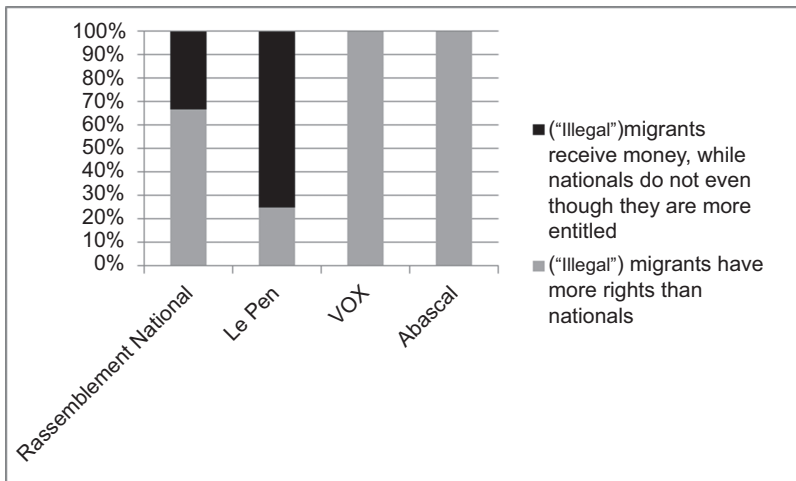


Figure 3: Frequency distribution of Arguments 3a and 3b.

Next, the arguments are discussed in greater depth and illustrated with examples.

8.1 Causal Argument: (“Illegal”) Migrants bring the Pandemic

Before bacterial revolution began to change our understanding of disease at the end of 19th century, people were forced to find their own explanations for the emergence of epidemics. In one of the earliest epidemic discourses – namely Thucydides’ description of the Plague of Athens in 430 BC (cf. Dinges 2004, 82) – the epidemic is depicted as coming from outside, from a foreign land (cf. *ibid.*, 82), which correlates with an initial representation of the hometown as a peaceful and sheltered space until foreigners arrive with a threatening epidemic. Additionally, these foreigners are often described as ill-intentioned. Such pandemic discourses perceive of contagions as a type of social phenomenon that can lead to the stabilization of the in-group by excluding and constructing others as the out-group (cf. *ibid.*, 85). Isolation and control of the frontier – framed as a filter that separates the “healthy impure” from the “healthy pure” – is presented as the means of effectively stopping the pandemic. Le Pen and Rassemblement National thus use classical topoi from epidemic discourses that were commonplace before the modern, scientific understanding of epidemics came about. In so doing, they aim to provide evidence of the causal thought pattern by invoking either scientific experts or other, more successful countries (Wengeler 2021). Referring to scientists has become especially popular in the COVID-19 discourse among all parties of the political spectrum even though referring to an authority alone does not mean that the argument is true *per se* (see Wengeler 2021 for different quality criteria for judging arguments from authority). In only one case did a tweet integrate an article by Le Figaro in which a concrete epidemiologist is named in order to back the argument that “experts confirm” Le Pen’s logic.

- (15) Les experts en épidémiologie confirment ce que je dis depuis le début de la crise sanitaire: la maîtrise des frontières est absolument fondamentale pour contrôler l’épidémie. [LP_21_01_20]
 (“The epidemiologic experts confirm what I have been saying from the beginning of the healthcare crisis: Border control is absolutely fundamental to controlling the epidemic.”)
- (16) @ljacobelli: “Il y a un an, @MLP_officiel demandait le contrôle des frontières. Aujourd’hui, autant le gouvernement que les comités scientifiques reconnaissent que nous avons raison !” [RN_21_1_26]

(“@ljacobelli: ‘One year ago, @MLP_officiel called for border control. Today, both the government and the scientific committees recognize that we were right!’”)

This topos is not representative of the Spanish corpus. The only evidence that we could find uses an inductive scheme (cf. Kienpointner 1992a: 365) that generalizes on the basis of one example that (all) migrants who stay in a country irregularly bring the pandemic.

- (17) Un policía malagueño muere por Covid tras custodiar a inmigrantes ilegales, alguno de ellos contagiados, en Canarias. [VOX_21_01_04]
 (“A police officer from Málaga dies from COVID after supervising illegal immigrants, some of them infected, in the Canary Islands.”)

This topos shows how selective and uncomplex mental models can be by omitting the fact that the virus can be propagated by all human beings, including by the allegedly sacrosanct nationals. Although this topos is not representative of the corpus, it has been uttered in public speeches (cf. Olivas/Rama 2021, 4; Vega Macías 2021, 13).

8.2 Comparative Topoi

Comparative schemes directly oppose both the in-group and the out-group by contrasting the benefits that migrants have with the disadvantages that “suffering” nationals have in times of the pandemic.

8.2.1 (“Illegal”) Migrants Have More Rights than Nationals during the COVID-19 Crisis

The Spanish corpus is dominated by the argument that migrants have more rights than nationals – namely that they are allowed to not follow quarantine rules while Spaniards must obey and suffer from restrictions to their freedoms (see Examples 18–19).

- (18) Para este gobierno criminal los ilegales están siempre antes que los españoles. [AB_21_02_10]
 (“For this criminal government, illegals always come before Spaniards.”)

- (19) ¡Para tener menos derechos que nadie en España tienes que ser español! Si eres un ilegal o un turista podrás circular por todo el país sin atender a cierres perimetrales. [AB_21_03_20]
 (“In order to have less rights than anyone else in Spain, you have to be Spanish! If you are an illegal or a tourist, you will be able to travel throughout the entire country without having to respect lockdowns.”)

The dichotomization of social space between allegedly favored migrants and allegedly unjustly treated nationals is reinforced by grammatical and semantic patterns that signal oppositeness, such as negation vs. non-negation (Examples 20 and 21) and semantic opposition (Example 22; for the opposite semantic roles, see Chapter 7.1).

- (20) Si eres inmigrante ilegal te pagan hasta un hotel en Canarias.
 Si eres español y tienes unos días libres en Semana Santa, **no** puedes salir de tu perímetro.
 (“ If you are an illegal immigrant, you get a paid hotel room on the Canary Islands.
 If you are a Spaniard and have some free time during Holy Week, you **cannot** leave your surroundings.”)
- (21) Toros **no**, Ramadán **sí**.
 (“Bulls, no; Ramadan, yes.”)
- (22) **Libertad** de movimiento para los turistas extranjeros e inmigrantes ilegales. Españoles **presos** en sus Comunidades Autónomas.
 (“**Freedom** of movement for foreign tourists and illegal migrants. Spaniards **detained** in their autonomous regions.”)

The argument that migrants have more rights than Spaniards during the pandemic, however, has been proven to be “fake news” by the independent agency NEWTRAL (cf. García 2021). In nearly half of the tweets on this topic, VOX and Abascal try to provide evidence of this invented “data” via an argument from authority, mainly by linking or re-tweeting journal articles. However, none of these articles or re-tweets focuses on or even mentions migrants. For example, in three journal articles, some French tourists are reported to have circumvented COVID-19 rules (cf. AB_21_03_20; VOX_21_03_20; VOX_21_03_21). Other articles report an upcoming lockdown during Holy Week (again, without any mention of migrants) (cf. VOX_21_03_24) or declare that Muslims are allowed to use the Palos de la Frontera bull arena for Muslim rituals during the lockdown period (cf. VOX_21_05_14). Concerning the latter example, it

is VOX that creates the opposition between “Muslims” and “Spaniards” while entirely omitting the fact that Muslims can, of course, also be Spaniards. Another article speaks of the formation of “little, violent” protests after the imprisonment of rapper Pablo Hásel in Barcelona, whereas VOX changes the wording to “bandas organizadas de terrorismo callejero” (“organized terroristic street gangs”) in order to dramatize the situation (AB_21_02_21). Furthermore, it is Abascal who adds that these gangs recruit “illegal migrants” even though the article does not refer to migrants at all.

The French corpus uses this topos to a far lesser extent and far more generally but follows the same dichotomic logic: Either innocent French people face harsh regulations during the pandemic while migrants who enter the country “illegally” are left unimpeded (see 27), or unvaccinated French people are treated harshly while “illegal migrants” are treated with complacency (see 28). Videos are linked in which the spokesperson of the party – Sébastien Chenu – is interviewed on a TV channel. Even from the videos, it is not clear which examples he uses to inductively generalize this topos.

- (23) @sebchenu: « Si vous êtes un migrant qui veut entrer en France clandestinement, pas de problème, mais le gouvernement va envoyer la police contrôler les Français qui veulent boire un café en terrasse? »
 (“@sebchenu: ‘If you are a migrant who wants to enter France illegally, no problem, but the government will send the police to regulate French people who want to drink coffee on a terrace?’”)
- (24) @ljacobelli: « Ce gouvernement est ferme voire inhumain envers les soignants ou les enfants non vaccinés, mais complaisant avec des clandestins. Il est temps d’appliquer nos lois: quand on entre illégalement sur le sol français, on doit être expulsé. » @CNEWS. [RN_21_7_30]
 (“@ljacobelli: ‘This government is harsh, even inhumane toward caregivers or unvaccinated children, but complacent toward illegal immigrants. It is time to apply our laws: When someone enters onto French soil illegally, they must be expelled.’ @CNEWS.”)

8.2.2 (“Illegal”) Migrants Receive Money that Nationals are Denied

The comparative pattern that dominates in the French corpus focuses on unequal treatment on the economical level. Le Pen’s logic lies in opposing austerity measures that concern public hospitals and thus also in the money denied to French people but that is provided to migrating people. This is a typical *a maiore* scheme: If even nationals do not receive any money and migrants are less entitled to receive

money but do receive it, it is morally reprehensible/a greater threat to peaceful social coexistence when money is provided to migrants:

- (25) Plutôt que supprimer 5700 lits hospitaliers en pleine crise sanitaire pour faire des économies, il faut stopper l’immigration qui plombe notre système de santé. [LP_21_11_04]
 (“Instead of eliminating 5,700 hospital beds in the midst of a health crisis in order to save money, we must stop immigration, which is undermining our healthcare system.”)
- (26) Âgée de 96 ans, elle a attendu 30h aux urgences avant d’être prise en charge . . . Nous ne sommes même plus capables de soigner nos aînés, mais nos hôpitaux devraient continuer d’accueillir la misère du monde ? [LP_21_11_05]
 (“96 years old, she waited for 30 hours in the ICU before being treated . . . We are not even capable of taking care of our elderly anymore, but our hospitals are supposed to continue to welcome the misery of the world?”)

9 Conclusion

Using Foucault’s conception of discourse as a constructive practice of knowledge systems, the aim of the present paper was to uncover and systematize the implicit and explicit thought patterns found in French and Spanish right-wing populist discourse that relate the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic to the phenomenon of migration and thereby construct a healthcare crisis. Implicit thought patterns in the form of framing strategies mask the controversial and subjective character of the mental models involved, whereas explicit thought patterns can be identified as controversial, plausibility-seeking argumentation schemes via topos analysis. Linguistic means of expression are more relevant in the case of framing than in the more content-oriented topos. In this context, we aimed to see whether and how the concept of “the dangerous other” is used as a scapegoat to cast the healthcare crisis as a migration problem. The compiled corpus comprised all tweets posted during the 2021 pandemic year by the French Rassemblement National and the Spanish VOX parties as well as by their respective leaders, Marine Le Pen and Santiago Abascal. Generally, due to the total number of tweets concerning migration that were posted in 2021, the proportion of tweets that related the pandemic to migration was relatively small (i.e., under 10% in all corpora).

All corpora follow populist discursive logic by dichotomizing social space. However, despite undeniable parallels between both discursive styles (e.g., framing migrants as “illegals” or presenting a highly subjective worldview as uncontroversially factual via presupposition), the qualitative assessment of the data revealed interesting differences between both right-wing populist discourses, thereby confirming Kienpointner’s (2005, 218) finding that “there is no unique discourse of right-wing populism.”

The Spanish discursive style is more radical on the lexical-semantic level and applies manipulative framing strategies to a greater extent than the French populist style, for example, by directly referring to migrating people and framing them as criminals via co-occurrences and by metaphorically displaying the phenomenon of migration and the action of migrating as war and warlike actions. The argumentation schemes found in the Spanish corpus are dominated by the topos of establishing a causal relationship between the migration threat and the de-stabilization of society during the pandemic by opposing Spaniards and migrants with regard to their rights. In this comparative topos, VOX and Abascal present the alleged “data” that immigrating people have more rights than the Spanish population. This opposition is reinforced by the distribution of opposite semantic roles (i.e., migrants are presented as freely moving actors vs. Spaniards as passive patients to whom restrictions apply), by the use of opposite semantic concepts, and by the use of binary semantic-syntactical structures of negation vs. non-negation of positively connoted actions. However, the argument that migrants allegedly have more rights was proven to be “fake news” despite attempts to make it factual via the use of authoritative schemes that involved linking or retweeting news articles.

The dichotomization realized by Rassemblement National and Le Pen is less aggressive and less graspable on the level of the linguistic means of expressions that it uses but is measurable on the level of content-related topoi, which is likely related to the party’s strategy of “de-demonization” (*dédiabolisation*) (in contrast to the radicalization of VOX). The predominant causal topos of the French corpus corresponds to a classical pre-scientific thought pattern that identifies migrants as the cause of diseases and epidemics. This topos is closely connected to the keyword *frontière* (“frontier”), which is framed as a symbolic filter that separates the healthy and morally pure from the unhealthy and morally impure. Concerning the comparative scheme of the French corpus, economic elements are highlighted in this corpus in order to place migrants in opposition to the French. In a nutshell, migrants receive money, whereas the French – who, following this logic, would be more entitled to receive it – are left without anything.

As we have seen, implicit and explicit thought patterns should be analyzed in combination in order to uncover polarizing mentalities in right-wing populist discourse.

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