

Monika Banaś 

monika.banas@uj.edu.pl

Jagiellonian University

Raúl Sánchez Prieto 

raulsanchez@usal.es

University of Salamanca

LANGUAGE, POPULISM, AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

The Dutch Case¹

ABSTRACT: This paper examines how populism operates through language in contemporary Europe, using the Netherlands as a revealing case and focusing on the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV). We treat populism primarily as a discursive phenomenon: a political practice enacted through lexical choices, symbolic boundarymaking, and recurring oppositions between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’, while drawing on ideational, strategic, and performative perspectives as interpretive cross-checks. Methodologically, the study combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Corpus Linguistics (CL): a dedicated corpus of PVV electoral texts is analyzed in Sketch Engine to identify statistically salient keywords (via frequency and keyness), which are then interpreted through close, context-sensitive CDA. The findings show that PVV discourse is organized around a compact set of lexical anchors (e.g., asylum restriction, border control, regulatory skepticism), which function as condensed ideological signals enabling blame-shifting, moralization, and the naturalization of exclusion. By mapping these mechanisms, the paper offers a replicable framework for studying how populist rhetoric gains coherence, resonance, and political force in an increasingly mediated and algorithmically shaped public sphere.

¹ The publication was funded by the Future Democracy Lab, a flagship project of the POB Society of the Future, under the program “Excellence Initiative – Research University” at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow.

Keywords: populism, political discourse, Netherlands, PVV, critical discourse analysis (CDA), corpus linguistics

INTRODUCTION

The early decades of the 21st century have witnessed a profound transformation in the political landscapes of European societies, marked by the rise and normalization of populist rhetoric. Across the continent, political actors increasingly deploy language as both a tool and a battleground – shaping, contesting, and reimagining the boundaries of national identity, belonging, and democratic legitimacy. This paper explores the intricate relationship between language, political discourse, and the dynamics of populism in contemporary Europe, with a particular focus on the Dutch context as a revealing case study.

Populism, as a multifaceted socio-political and cultural phenomenon, thrives on the strategic use of language. It is through words, narratives, and symbolic acts that populist leaders construct dichotomies between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, mobilize collective emotions, and legitimize exclusionary policies. The effectiveness of such discourse is amplified in an era of rapid technological change, where digital media and algorithmic curation accelerate the spread and normalization of populist messages. As recent scholarship has shown, the study of populism demands an interdisciplinary approach – one that combines the analytical tools of the social sciences and the humanities, and is attentive to both the macro-level structures and the micro-level mechanisms of meaning-making.²

This paper brings together two complementary strands of research. The first, grounded in comparative critical discourse analysis, examines the evolution and internal logic of anti-migrant and populist rhetoric across several European societies, highlighting both common patterns and national specificities. The second strand, drawing on corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, offers a detailed case study of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), mapping the lexical and ideological architecture of its electoral narratives. By integrating these perspectives, we aim to illuminate how language operates as a vehicle for political mobilization, social division, and the reconfiguration of democratic norms.

Our analysis is guided by three central research questions:

1. How do contemporary populist movements in Europe construct and disseminate their political narratives through language?
2. What are the key discursive strategies and symbolic resources employed to legitimize exclusion, mobilise support, and challenge liberal democratic values?

² B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford 2016; T.A. van Dijk, “Politics, Ideology, and Discourse,” in R. Wodak (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd ed., Oxford 2005, pp. 728-740.

3. How does the Dutch case – exemplified by the PVV’s electoral discourse – reflect broader European trends, and in what ways does it diverge due to national context?

By foregrounding the Dutch example, this paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of how populist rhetoric adapts to local conditions while drawing on transnational repertoires of exclusion and belonging. In doing so, we seek to advance the scholarly conversation on the role of language in shaping political realities, the resilience of liberal democracy, and the challenges posed by populist waves in Europe.

CONCEPTUALIZING POPULISM

Populism can be approached in several ways, and each lens highlights something slightly different. In this article, we mainly treat populism as a discursive phenomenon – something that is *done through language* – but we also keep three other perspectives in view to avoid reducing populism to words alone (Fairclough, 1989; Wodak, 1989; van Dijk, 2005).

From a discursive approach, populism is a way of drawing symbolic boundaries, most famously between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’. It works by repeating moral contrasts, assigning blame, and framing contested claims as obvious ‘common sense’, which makes exclusion and polarization easier to justify (van Dijk, 2006; Fairclough, 1989).

The ideational approach treats populism as a ‘thin’ ideology built around a small core: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a moral, Manichean division between good and bad actors. This helps separate what is specifically *populist* in a message from other ideological components that may travel with it (e.g., nationalism, welfare politics) (van Dijk, 2005, 2006).

The strategic approach views populism less as a set of beliefs and more as a political toolkit for mobilization and competition. Leaders use simplified antagonisms, clear enemies, and emotionally salient issues to build support, discipline audiences, and shift what counts as ‘the’ central problem in politics (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018).

Finally, performative (or political-style) approaches emphasize populism as performance: staging authenticity, crisis, and confrontation in ways that fit media logic. Here, personalization, ‘crisis talk’, and conflict-friendly messaging matter because they travel well in mediatized environments and can amplify the sense of urgency and moral struggle (Moffitt, 2016).

Taken together, these lenses clarify our choice: we use CDA and corpus tools to map how populism is built in language, while using ideational, strategic, and performative insights as ‘cross-checks’ for interpreting what those linguistic patterns *do* politically (Fairclough, 1989; Moffitt, 2016).

WHY THE DUTCH CASE?

The Dutch case, and specifically the discourse of the Party for Freedom (PVV), offers a particularly compelling lens through which to examine the intersection of language, populism, and contemporary political dynamics in Europe. Several interrelated factors make the Netherlands and the PVV a special subject for analysis. Here is why.

First, the Netherlands has long been recognized as a ‘laboratory’ for new forms of populist rhetoric and right-wing mobilization in Western Europe. The PVV, under the leadership of Geert Wilders, has pioneered discursive strategies that have subsequently influenced populist actors across the continent. This role makes the Dutch context especially valuable for understanding the evolution and diffusion of populist language.³

Second, the PVV’s electoral narratives are marked by a high degree of lexical precision and thematic focus. The party’s discourse is not only ideologically charged but also carefully engineered to maximize resonance with target audiences making it an ideal case for corpus-driven and critical discourse analysis. This discursive sophistication enables a nuanced exploration of how populist messages are constructed and optimized for impact.⁴

Third, the Dutch context also encapsulates many of the central themes of contemporary European populism: immigration and national identity, resistance to elite-driven policy (including EU regulations), and the mobilization of economic and cultural grievances. The PVV’s discourse provides clear, empirically rich examples of how these themes are constructed, circulated, and normalized in public debate.

Fourth, the Dutch case serves as a bridge between Western European populist traditions and broader continental trends. By situating the PVV’s discourse alongside developments in other well-established European democracies, this study can highlight both the specificities of the Dutch context and the transnational diffusion of populist rhetoric. The persistent electoral viability of the PVV and its impact on dominant political narratives are underscored as indicators of the tangible significance of the party’s discursive strategies. Analysing the PVV thus provides insights not only into the mechanics of populist language but also into its effects on democratic institutions and public attitudes.

³ L. de Jonge, M. Rooduijn, A. Zaslove, “The Evolution of Populism in Dutch Politics,” in S. de Lange, T. Louwerse, P. ’t Hart, C. van Ham (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Dutch Politics*, Oxford 2025, pp. 368-384; M. Leezenberg, “Discursive Violence and Responsibility. Notes on the Pragmatics of Dutch Populism,” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2015), pp. 200-228; B. Verbeek, A. Zaslove, “Waking the Sleeping Populist Giant. The 2024 European Elections and Populism in the Netherlands,” in G. Ivaldi, E. Zankina (eds), *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*, 22 October 2024; Ch. Lamour, “A Radical-Right Populist Definition of Cross-National Regionalism in Europe: Shaping Power Geometries at the Regional Scale beyond State Borders,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2022), pp. 8-25.

⁴ M. Hameleers, L. Bos, C. de Vreese, “Framing Blame. Toward a Better Understanding of the Effects of Populist Communication on Populist Party Preferences,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2018), pp. 380-398; M. Kranert, (ed.), *Discursive Approaches to Populism Across Disciplines. The Return of Populists and the People*, Cham 2020.

For these above-mentioned reasons, the Dutch case offers theoretical depth and practical relevance for the study of language, populism, and democracy in contemporary Europe.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a dual methodological framework, combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Corpus Linguistics (CL) to investigate how populist political narratives are constructed, circulated, and legitimized in the Netherlands, with comparative insights drawn from other European contexts. This integrated approach allows us to examine both the linguistic patterns that characterize populist discourse and the ideological functions these patterns serve.

At the core of our methodology is Critical Discourse Analysis, which provides the theoretical lens through which we interpret political language. CDA is particularly well-suited to the study of populism because it foregrounds the relationship between language, power, and ideology.⁵ It enables us to explore how political actors use language to construct social categories such as ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ and to justify exclusionary policies, mobilize emotions, and reinforce collective identities.

CDA has been applied to the Dutch case to analyze political texts which has been effective while studying cases from inter alia the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden.⁶

A comparative strand allows us to identify recurring discursive features such as binary oppositions, appeals to national sovereignty, and anti-migrant rhetoric, while also attending to national specificities shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. The comparative analysis helps situate Dutch populism within a broader European landscape, revealing both shared strategies and localized adaptations.

CL provides, in turn, tools for systematically analyzing large volumes of text, enabling to identify statistically significant linguistic features that might otherwise go unnoticed. This quantitative foundation strengthens the interpretive work of CDA by grounding it in empirical data.

A specialized corpus was compiled from PVV electoral programs and public communications. Using the Sketch Engine platform, we generated frequency lists and calculated keyness scores, a measure of how often a word appears in the PVV corpus compared to its frequency in a general Dutch reference corpus.⁷ This technique highlights

⁵ N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, London 1989; R. Wodak, *Language, Power and Ideology. Studies in Political Discourse*, Amsterdam 1989; T.A. van Dijk, “Politics, Ideology, and Discourse...,” pp. 728-740; N. Fairclough, R. Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” in T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse Studies. A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, vol. 2, London 1997, pp. 258-284.

⁶ M. Banaś, “Shades of Populism: Anti-Migrant Rhetoric in Political Discourse in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Sweden, 2020-2024,” *Politeja*, vol. 22, no. 3 (97) (2025), pp. 229-251.

⁷ Dutch Web 2020, at <https://www.sketchengine.eu/nltenten-dutch-corpus/>, 17 Maarch 2025.

words that are not just frequent, but statistically marked, revealing the lexical anchors of the party's discourse.⁸

The ten most prominent keywords were extracted and ranked according to their keyness scores. These were then grouped into thematic categories such as immigration, national security, environmental policy, and socioeconomic issues to map the PVV's rhetorical priorities. This step allowed to identify the central motifs around which the party constructed its political narrative.

Building on these quantitative findings, we applied CDA to interpret how the most salient keywords function within the broader discursive context. This involved close reading of selected passages from PVV texts, focusing on how language is used to construct oppositions (e.g., 'us' vs. 'them'), legitimize political proposals, and evoke emotional responses. The analysis draws on established CDA frameworks, with particular attention to mechanisms such as blame-shifting, moral appeals, and the naturalization of exclusionary policies.⁹ For example, keywords related to immigration were often embedded in narratives that portrayed migrants as threats to national identity or security. These narratives relied on emotionally charged language and symbolic binaries that reinforced a sense of crisis and urgency. Similarly, references to national sovereignty were framed in ways that delegitimized supranational institutions and elevated the role of the nation-state as the sole protector of 'the people'.

The case study followed a structured three-stage analytical process:

1. Corpus compilation and keyword extraction using Sketch Engine to generate frequency lists and keyness scores.
2. Contextual analysis of the leading terms within the party's discourse, identifying thematic clusters and rhetorical patterns.
3. Discursive interpretation drawing on CDA to uncover the ideological and symbolic functions of language in the PVV's populist narrative.

The integrated approach enabled us to move beyond surface-level linguistic patterns and uncover deeper ideological structures. It offered a comprehensive framework for analyzing how populist discourse functions, how it persuades, polarizes, and mobilizes, and how it adapts across different national contexts. It also helps demonstrate how language functions as both a tool and a terrain of political struggle, shaping perceptions, constructing identities, and legitimizing power. It also underscores the value of interdisciplinary methods in political linguistics, particularly when addressing complex phenomena such as populism in the age of digital media and algorithmic amplification.

⁸ M. Scott, C. Tribble, *Textual Patterns. Key Words and Corpus Analysis in Language Education*, Amsterdam 2006; P. Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis*, London 2006.

⁹ M. Reisigl, R. Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*, London 2001; T. van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," *Discourse & Communication*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2007), pp. 91-112.

THE PVV'S ELECTORAL NARRATIVES

In the table below, the top ten single words (excluding the very name of the party, PVV) by keyness score reflects the party's ideological priorities and rhetorical strategies in the PVV's electoral program. These single words reveal the central concerns that drive the party's message: immigration, national sovereignty, resistance to elite-driven policy, and protection of the Dutch social fabric.

Table 1. Single words in the PVV's electoral program classified by score

Lemma Dutch/English	Frequency	Frequency/million	Score
Asielstop asylum stop	5	566.64	565.7
Stikstofregels nitrogen regulations	5	566.64	521.2
Schadeafhandeling damage compensation	5	566.64	411.0
Vliegtaks flight tax	4	453.31	375.7
Dierenmishandelaars animal abusers	3	339.98	332.1
Bestaanszekerheid livelihood security	4	453.31	315.9
Ouderenwoningen elderly housing	3	339.98	315.9
Grensbewaking border control	4	453.31	304.1
Asielinstroom asylum influx	3	339.98	292.1
Zedenmisdrijven sexual offenses	3	339.98	288.4

Source: authors' own work

Four of the ten terms are aligned with PVV's central message of sovereignty and law-and-order. At the top of the list is *asielstop*, a call to end asylum admissions, an idea tightly linked to the PVV's views on national identity, cultural clashes, and overcrowding. Closely related are *asielinstroom* and *grensbewaking*, which convey immigration as a constant and uncontrollable flow which can only be stopped with border controls. *Zedenmisdrijven* evokes fears around sexual crimes, often in connection with migration debates, and reinforces the party's law-and-order agenda.

Another four single words are thematically linked to the environmental policy and animals' rights. *Stikstofregels* represents a critique of nitrogen regulations that the party sees as unfairly burdening farmers and obstructing housing development. Similarly, *vliegtaks* stands for opposition to environmental taxes that, in the party's view, punish ordinary people for wanting affordable travel. Both terms reflect the PVV's

resistance to climate-related policies associated with elite agendas and the EU. In contrast, *schadeafhandeling* refers to the slow compensation process for damages in regions like Groningen and Limburg. It serves to position the PVV as a defender of Dutch citizens neglected by bureaucrats in The Hague and Brussels, especially in moments of environmental crisis such as floods or gas extraction damage. *Dierenmishandelaars* signals a strict stance on animal abuse but also touches on the PVV's rejection of practices such as ritual slaughter, thus weaving animal rights into its broader cultural and identity-based critique.

Two additional single words can be grouped under the theme 'welfare for the native population'. *Bestaanszekerheid* addresses rising concerns over the cost of living, inflation, and general economic insecurity. With this term, the PVV presents itself as the advocate of the ordinary Dutch household. This focus on economic stability is complemented by *ouderenwoningen*, which points to the party's attention to the needs of elderly citizens, advocating for accessible housing and care provisions.

These top ten single words reveal how the PVV constructs a narrative centered on immigration and identity, opposition to elite environmental and EU policies, economic protection of Dutch families, and a tough stance on crime and cultural practices perceived as incompatible with Dutch values. Taken together, these words form more than a list, they shape a narrative of a country under pressure, where the PVV promises to protect Dutch culture, economic stability, and public safety against both external and internal threats.

In the following lines, the first five single words from the PVV's electoral manifesto will be analyzed in greater depth using the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach allows us to explore how language is strategically employed in the PVV's discourse to construct, legitimize, and normalize an ideology, in our case the PVV's stance related to immigration, national identity, and power dynamics.

Asielstop

Statistically, *asielstop* appears five times in the PVV's corpus of 8,824 tokens, resulting in a frequency of 566.64 per million tokens and comprising 0.05666% of the total corpus. Although this may seem a small percentage, its keyness score is very high, and the repetition of the term in ideologically loaded contexts amplifies its discursive impact in a small corpus like ours. In (1) *asielstop* is embedded within a list of promised actions the party claims to take 'for you', directly addressing the voter. The syntax presents it as a rational, even benevolent measure, aligned with a restrictive immigration policy. There is a strong performative dimension in this phrase: the PVV does not merely suggest a policy preference but pledges to enact it on behalf of the public. This aligns with the model of populist discourse, where 'the people' are constructed as victims of elite inaction and the party as their only authentic representative.

(1) *De PVV wil voor u (...) asielstop en algeheel restrictief immigratiebeleid.*

A second example reveals more ideological layering. Example (2) opens with a stark dichotomy between the failing asylum/immigration policy (*vreemdelingenbeleid*) and

common sense, which the PVV claims to restore. The word *zegevieren* (to triumph) positions the PVV's view not just as sensible but victorious, morally correct, and inevitable. The phrase *Nederland zit propvol* (The Netherlands is full to the brim) functions as a naturalizing metaphor. It suggests a physical limit has been reached, as if asylum capacity is akin to the maximum fill level of a container. This metaphor depersonalizes asylum seekers and reframes the issue as one of logistics, not human rights:

(2) *De PVV laat op het falende vreemdelingenbeleid het gezonde verstand weer zegevieren. Hier hebben wij de beste ideeën voor, zoals een algehele asielstop. Want Nederland zit propvol.*

Also interesting is example (3), where *asielstop* is explicitly tied to religious and cultural exclusion. The PVV does not merely oppose 'immigration' in general but specifically non-Western immigration, equating the presence of Islam with societal decline. This statement draws heavily on a clash of civilizations framework, presenting Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Dutch values. The reference to less Islam suggests not just a critique of religion but of cultural pluralism itself. The language echoes van Dijk's findings¹⁰ on the role of ingroup/outgroup polarization in discriminatory discourse: Dutch citizens are the ingroup to be defended; Muslims and asylum seekers are the outgroup threatening the moral and cultural order.

(3) *We willen minder islam in Nederland en dat bereiken d.m.v. minder niet-westerse immigratie en de introductie van een algehele asielstop.*

One of the most complex examples is (4). In the first part of the excerpt, populist rhetoric is used to portray native Dutch citizens as discriminated against and asylum seekers as the beneficiaries of an unfair system. By asserting to put Dutch people first, the PVV implies that current policies favor others (namely migrants). The word *substantiële* (substantial) adds a sense of urgency and seriousness. *Asielstop* is framed here as a necessary corrective to a moral imbalance, reinforcing the narrative of injustice toward the native population. The rhetorical structure of this passage transforms a controversial policy into a moral obligation. The last part of the paragraph offers a geopolitical angle, framing wealthy Muslim countries as irresponsible for not taking in Muslim refugees. The expression *voor het oprapen liggen* (are there ready for being taken) trivializes the asylum process in the Netherlands, implying that it is too easy and exploited. There is also a strategic redirection of blame towards foreign governments, the EU, and asylum seekers themselves. This move effectively shifts responsibility away from Dutch institutions. This discursive procedure is typical of blame-shifting discourse, a hallmark of right-wing populism, in which responsibility for systemic issues is projected onto external agents:

¹⁰ T.A. van Dijk, "Ideology and Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2006), pp. 115-140.

- (4) *De PVV kiest wél voor Nederland en maakt een einde aan de discriminatie van Nederlanders. Wij zetten Nederlanders op 1! Dat kan alleen met substantiële maatregelen. Zoals het invoeren van een asielstop. Echte vluchtelingen kunnen in veilige landen in de eigen regio worden opgevangen. Steenrijke landen als Koeweit, de Verenigde Arabische Emiraten, of Saoedi-Arabië hoeven nu niets te doen, omdat de verblijfsvergunningen in Nederland voor het oprapen liggen.*

Asielstop presents the highest score in the corpus. It functions as a central ideological keyword in the PVV's discourse. It condenses multiple layers of meaning: national protectionism, anti-globalism, cultural purity, and populist anti-elitism. It is always placed in emotionally charged, evaluative contexts, often alongside words like *falend*, *substantiële*, *discriminatie*, and *gezond verstand*. Discursively, it serves to legitimize exclusionary policies through appeals to common sense, fairness, and national survival. Its repeated appearance, despite being just 0.05666% of the corpus, shows that its symbolic power far outweighs its statistical weight. It is not just a word: it is a condensed ideological statement.

Stikstofregels

Statistically, *stikstofregels* appears five times in the corpus, which corresponds to a frequency of 566.64 per million tokens and 0.05666% of the total corpus. While its frequency mirrors that of *asielstop*, its discursive function differs: it is not used to mark a cultural threat but rather to deconstruct environmental policy as an obstacle to national economic well-being and personal freedom.

In example (1), *stikstofregels* is grouped with other causes of stagnation in the housing sectors, such as falling consumer confidence and local bureaucracy, but is singled out as particularly obstructive. The phrasing *dwarszittende stikstofregels* (obstructive nitrogen rules) uses evaluative language that presents current legislation as a physical block to progress. This sets up a natural dichotomy between productive citizens (i.e. farmers) and paralyzing environmental regulations. The call to 'scrap all restrictive rules, starting with nitrogen regulations' creates urgency and frames deregulation as common-sense reform:

- (1) *Terwijl de woningnood toeneemt, daalt het aantal afgegeven bouwvergunningen en worden er steeds minder woningen bijgebouwd: door het gedaalde consumentenvertrouwen, door dwarszittende stikstofregels, door de focus op binnenstedelijke bouw, door allerlei lokale eisen etc. Daarom: schrap alle belemmerende regels, om te beginnen de stikstofregels. Bouw in steden en dorpen 'een straatje erbij'; dat kan relatief snel en goedkoop. Maar bouw ook zeker buiten de stad. Gemeenten moeten sneller vergunningen verstrekken.*

In further examples (2) and (3), the PVV presents itself as the defender of farmers and rural communities. The PVV's narrative is both populist and symbolic, as it

positions traditional Dutch agricultural life as under siege by top-down environmentalist agendas. The repetition of verbs such as *schrappen* (scrap) and *versoepelen* (ease) emphasizes the party's commitment to deregulation as liberation:

- (2) *De PVV is glashelder: de stikstofregels moeten worden geschrapt, op z'n minst versoepeld, zodat de boeren kunnen blijven boeren.*
 (3) *De PVV wilt voor u (...) stikstofregels schrappen, op z'n minst versoepelen.*

Discursively, *stikstofregels* functions as a condensed critique of the green transition and its bureaucratic instruments, which the PVV associates with the EU's Agenda 2030 and Dutch elites. Measures like reduced highway speed limits or protein restrictions in animal food are not framed as environmental necessities but as intrusions into the daily lives of drivers and the autonomy of farmers. The party's discourse reframes climate policy as a form of state overreach, delegitimizing it by focusing on its economic costs rather than its ecological goals. In this context, *stikstofregels* becomes a trigger word, not just for climate skepticism but for broader anti-elitist, pro-sovereignty sentiments. Like *asielstop*, it is deployed in emotionally charged contexts and is associated with action verbs and populist appeals. It signals not simply environmental regulation but an entire model of governance the PVV seeks to challenge, one which they argue prioritizes abstract climate objectives set by elites over the economic interests of ordinary Dutch citizens.

Schadeafhandeling

The term also appears five times in the corpus, with a frequency of 566.64 per million tokens (0.05666% of the total). While its occurrence is modest, its weight in the party's discourse is significant, as it connects directly to tangible, emotionally charged issues like earthquake damage in Groningen and flooding in Limburg.

In example (1), the PVV criticizes the slow pace of compensation and housing reinforcement in Groningen due to gas extraction procedures. The party highlights government inaction and neglect of citizens affected by gas extraction:

- (1) *Het is goed dat de gaswinning in Groningen wordt gestopt. Nu moet de ereschuld aan de Groningers worden ingelost; de schadeafhandeling en versterking gaan nog altijd veel te traag.*

This criticism is accompanied by the proposal of populist solutions, as in (2), where the party directly appeals to the voter and promises faster damage compensation and thus presenting itself as a practical and responsive alternative to an unresponsive state:

- (2) *De PVV wilt voor u (...) snellere schadeafhandeling en versterking van huizen in Groningen.*

Example (3) illustrates how the PVV employs direct, imperative language – *trek de portemonnee* (open the wallet) – to construct a relationship of obligation between the state and its citizens. This phrasing frames the government not as a neutral administrator, but as a debtor that has failed in its duty. This supports the party’s call for financial compensation. The use of the imperative reinforces a populist dynamic in which the PVV speaks on behalf of the people and positions itself as the voice of those neglected by distant and unresponsive elites:

(3) *Trek de portemonnee voor schadeafhandeling in Limburg!*

Discursively, *schadeafhandeling* allows the PVV to criticize government inefficiency while adopting the role of defender of neglected regions. It fits the party’s selective environmental stance: it supports compensation and practical solutions while rejecting abstract, EU-driven climate measures. The term links thus local suffering to national injustice, and turns technical compensation into a symbol of political failure and a call for direct state responsibility.

Vliegtaks

The notion of tax appears four times in the corpus with a frequency of 453.31 per million tokens and accounting for 0.04533% of the total corpus. Its discursive placement reveals important ideological patterns in the PVV’s critique of environmental taxation and its broader populist-economic agenda.

A good example is (1), where *vliegtaks* is contrasted with *vleestaks* (meat tax), suggesting a broader opposition to green taxation as a whole. As in example (2), the party rejects both forms of taxation as unfair burdens on ordinary people and links the removal of green taxes to national and economic sovereignty. Abolishing these taxes is presented as a rational step that will boost employment and strengthen competitiveness. The same is true for (3), where *vliegtak* appears within a broader plan for lowering the cost of living. The party’s commitment to scrapping the flight tax is framed as part of a comprehensive effort to ‘give people breathing space’ and help them ‘keep more money in their pockets’. Together, these examples communicate a clear populist message: the PVV stands with the people, not with climate elites seeking to impose lifestyle restrictions from above:

(1) *De PVV wilt voor u (...) een vliegtaks, geen vleestaks.*

(2) *De Nederlandse luchtvaart is onmisbaar voor ons vestigingsklimaat, onze economie, industrie, internationale handels- en exportpositie en versterkt de Nederlandse strategische autonomie. Mainport Schiphol is een prachtige luchthaven; daar zijn we trots op Schiphol mag dus blijven groeien. Nederlanders moeten ook betaalbaar kunnen blijven vliegen vanaf onze eigen Nederlandse luchthavens. Daarom schrappen we de vliegtaks.*

(3) *We schaffen ook de vliegtaks af en verlagen we de belasting op energie en de accijns op benzine.*

This single word keyword functions as a node where critiques of green policy, economic populism, and national pride converge. It allows the PVV to reject climate initiatives associated with Agenda 2030 while positioning itself as a defender of both national economic autonomy and the everyday consumer. The tax is framed not as an environmental necessity, but as an unjust burden that limits freedom of movement and weakens Dutch competitiveness. In this way, *vliegtaks* becomes a symbolic rejection of what the party portrays as top-down, elite-driven climate governance.

Dierenmishandelaars

The aspect related to treatment of animals appears only three times in the PVV's corpus, resulting in a frequency of 339.98 per million tokens and comprising 0.03400% of the total. Although less frequent than other key terms, it carries significant ideological weight in the party's discourse. The term functions as a marker of moral positioning and is used to show the PVV as a party that not only defends national interests but also stands up for the vulnerable, in this case, animals. At the same time, it opens a space for cultural critique that indirectly targets certain minority practices, particularly Islamic ritual slaughter.

This keyword allows the party to present itself as a defender of animal welfare, suggesting that the rights of animals have been overlooked or neglected by the mainstream political establishment:

(1) *Dierenmishandelaars verdienen een keiharde aanpak: hoge boetes, gevangenisstraf, een (levenslang) houdverbod voor recidivisten en een beroepsverbod voor dierenmishandelaars om nog langer met dieren te werken.*

The second part of the message (2) introduces a deeper ideological layer. The PVV calls for a ban on ritual slaughter. While not naming specific groups, this statement targets practices associated with Islamic communities. This indirect reference allows the party to merge an animal welfare agenda with criticism of Islamic migration. This is a classic example of coded discourse, where seemingly neutral or widely supported concerns (in this case, animal protection) are used to challenge the legitimacy of minority traditions without overtly breaking anti-discrimination norms:

(2) *De PVV wil dat dieren onomkeerbaar bedwemeld zijn vóórdát ze worden aangesneden of opengereten. Er komt een verbod op ritueel slachten.*

Discursively, *dierenmishandelaars* plays thus a dual role. On the surface, it enables the PVV to appear caring, protective, and morally upright, especially toward animals who cannot speak for themselves. Beneath the surface, it allows the party to mobilize cultural anxieties and reinforce nationalist narratives without directly naming the

outgroup. The word operates within a broader populist strategy that claims to speak for both ‘the people’ and ‘the voiceless’, while subtly reaffirming who does or does not belong to the imagined national community. In this sense, *dierenmishandelaars* is not just a reference to animal abuse. It becomes a symbolic boundary marker used to distinguish the ‘civilised’ values of the native Dutch population from the allegedly incompatible practices of certain immigrant communities.

Critical Discourse Analysis of the PVV Corpus

The discourse of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) offers a paradigmatic example of how contemporary populist rhetoric is constructed, circulated, and normalized through language. Drawing on the corpus-driven findings generated via Sketch Engine, this section applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret the ideological and symbolic functions of the PVV’s most salient keywords and discursive patterns.

Dichotomy and Boundary-Making

A defining feature of the PVV’s language is the systematic construction of a dichotomy between the in-group (the Dutch people) and various out-groups, most notably asylum seekers, non-Western immigrants, and political or bureaucratic elites. This boundary-making is achieved through the frequent use of keywords such as *asielstop* (asylum stop), *grensbewaking* (border control), and *minder islam* (less Islam). These terms do not merely denote policy preferences; they function as powerful markers of identity and belonging, naturalizing the idea of a threatened national community.

For example, the recurring phrase *Nederland zit propvol* (The Netherlands is full to the brim) frames migration as a logistical crisis, depersonalizing asylum seekers and legitimizing exclusionary policies as matters of necessity and common sense. This metaphorical language transforms complex social issues into seemingly objective, quantifiable problems, making exclusion appear as a rational response rather than a political choice.

Legitimization of Exclusion and Populist Representation

The PVV’s discourse further legitimizes restrictive measures through rhetorical strategies that present them as rational, protective, and morally justified. Policy proposals such as a comprehensive *asielstop* are embedded in lists of promised actions ‘for you’, directly addressing the voter and positioning the party as the authentic representative of the people’s interests. The performative language (*wil voor u*) constructs the PVV as an agent of decisive action, while exclusionary policies are reframed as benevolent acts of defense.

This is reinforced using emotionally charged adjectives and metaphors, such as *substantiële maatregelen* (‘substantial measures’) and *gezond verstand* (‘common sense’),

which serve to naturalize the party's stance and present it as both urgent and self-evident. The PVV's rhetoric thus transforms controversial policies into moral obligations, framing them as necessary correctives to a system that allegedly discriminates against native Dutch citizens.

Blame-Shifting and Attribution of Responsibility

Blame-shifting is another prominent mechanism in the PVV's narrative architecture. Social and economic challenges are frequently attributed to external actors, whether the European Union, foreign governments, or asylum seekers themselves. Loaded terms and causal attributions serve to redirect responsibility away from Dutch institutions, reinforcing a narrative of injustice toward the native population. For instance, statements suggesting that *real refugees can be accommodated in safe countries in their own region* and that *wealthy countries like Kuwait, the UAE, or Saudi Arabia don't have to do anything now, because residence permits in the Netherlands are there for the taking* strategically shift the locus of blame and foster a sense of unfair burden. This discursive move not only externalizes the problem but also positions the PVV as the only actor willing to defend Dutch interests against both internal and external threats.

NATURALIZATION OF POPULIST CLAIMS AND ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES

The naturalization of populist claims is further evident in the PVV's treatment of environmental and economic issues. Keywords such as *stikstofregels* ('nitrogen rules'), *vliegtaks* ('flight tax'), and *bestaanszekerheid* ('livelihood security') are deployed to frame government regulation as elite-driven burdens on ordinary people. The party's discourse aligns itself with traditional livelihoods and everyday concerns, positioning opposition to regulation as a matter of common sense and aligning the PVV with 'the real Dutch'.

For example, the phrase *de stikstofregels moeten worden geschrapt, op z'n minst versoepeld, zodat de boeren kunnen blijven boeren* (*the nitrogen rules must be scrapped, or at least relaxed, so that farmers can keep farming*) not only critiques environmental policy but also constructs a narrative of rural resilience and national tradition under siege. The PVV's opposition to green taxes, such as the *vliegtaks*, is framed as a defense of consumer freedom and economic autonomy, reinforcing the party's populist credentials.

SYMBOLIC AND CODED LANGUAGE: ANIMAL WELFARE AND CULTURAL EXCLUSION

Symbolic and coded language also plays a crucial role in the PVV's strategy. Terms like *dierenmishandelaars* (animal abusers) ostensibly express concern for animal welfare but also serve as indirect references to minority practices, such as ritual slaughter. By invoking animal rights, the PVV can challenge cultural pluralism and reinforce nationalist narratives without overtly violating anti-discrimination norms.

The call for a ban on ritual slaughter, for example, is framed as a universal ethical stance but operates as a coded critique of Islamic and Jewish practices, thus reinforcing boundaries of cultural belonging. This dual function of language allows the party to appeal to broad moral values while subtly targeting specific out-groups.

LEXICAL ENGINEERING, THEMATIC FOCUS, AND EMOTIONAL RESONANCE

The PVV's discourse is characterized by a high degree of lexical engineering and thematic focus. The repetition of key terms and the strategic clustering of related concepts (e.g., immigration, security, sovereignty) create a sense of coherence and urgency. This discursive architecture is not only ideologically charged but also carefully optimized for resonance with target audiences, making it particularly amenable to both computational and critical analysis.

The party's language is emotionally charged, with frequent use of evaluative adjectives and metaphors that heighten the sense of crisis and urgency. Words like *falend* (failing), *discriminatie* (discrimination), and *gezond verstand* (common sense) are strategically deployed to frame the PVV's positions as both morally righteous and pragmatically necessary.

Discursive Strategies in Practice: Illustrative Examples

- On Immigration and National Identity:

De PVV wil voor u (...) asielstop en algeheel restrictief immigratiebeleid.

(The PVV wants for you (...) an asylum stop and a completely restrictive immigration policy.)

- On Cultural Exclusion:

We willen minder islam in Nederland en dat bereiken d.m.v. minder niet-westerse immigratie en de introductie van een algehele asielstop.

(We want less Islam in the Netherlands and achieve that by less non-Western immigration and the introduction of a complete asylum stop.)

- On Economic Grievances:

De PVV is glashelder: de stikstofregels moeten worden geschrapt, op z'n minst versoepeld, zodat de boeren kunnen blijven boeren.

(*The PVV is crystal clear: the nitrogen rules must be scrapped, or at least relaxed, so that farmers can keep farming.*)

- On Animal Welfare as Cultural Critique:

De PVV wil dat dieren onomkeerbaar bedwelmd zijn vóóordat ze worden aangesneden of opengereten. Er komt een verbod op ritueel slachten.

(*The PVV wants animals to be irreversibly stunned before they are cut or ripped open. There will be a ban on ritual slaughter.*)

In sum, the CDA of the PVV corpus reveals a highly strategic use of language to construct social boundaries, legitimize exclusion, and mobilize support through appeals to common sense, morality, and national identity. The discursive patterns identified through both corpus linguistics and qualitative interpretation exemplify the mechanisms by which populist narratives are constructed and normalized in contemporary Dutch political discourse.

This analysis underscores the importance of integrating quantitative keyword mapping with critical, context-sensitive interpretation to fully understand the ideological work performed by populist language. Ultimately, the PVV's discourse not only reflects but actively shapes the contours of political debate in the Netherlands, contributing to the broader European trend of algorithmically legible, emotionally charged populist communication.

Table 2. CDA Patterns in the PVV Corpus

Discursive Strategy	Keyword(s) in Dutch	CDA Interpretation
Us/Them Dichotomy	asielstop, grensbewaking	Constructs boundaries, legitimizes exclusion, appeals to national identity
Legitimization of Exclusion	asielstop, bestaanszekerheid	Frames restrictive policies as rational, necessary, and protective
Blame-Shifting	asielinstroom, EU, elites	Redirects responsibility, constructs out-groups as threats or burdens
Naturalization of Populist Claims	stikstofregels, vliegtaks	Frames opposition to regulation as common sense, aligns with 'ordinary people'
Symbolic/Coded Language	dierenmishandelaars	Uses moral language to indirectly target minority practices and reinforce in-group norms

Source: authors' own work

To connect discursive patterns with political effects, we interpret keyword salience not only as a linguistic phenomenon but as a proxy for agenda-setting priorities. The recurrence and clustering of lexical items such as *asielstop* and *grensbewaking* indicate a portable frame that can travel from party programs to media discourse and, ultimately, to policy debates.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that populist discourse in the Dutch context is not simply a mirror of political preferences, but a deliberate linguistic strategy designed to shape identities, legitimize exclusion, and mobilize emotions. By integrating corpus linguistics with critical discourse analysis, we demonstrate how keywords such as *asielstop* and *stikstof-regels* operate as condensed ideological markers, embedding narratives of sovereignty, cultural purity, and economic grievance. The PVV's language illustrates how populist rhetoric adapts to national settings while drawing on transnational repertoires of exclusion and belonging. These findings highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches for understanding the discursive mechanisms that sustain populism and challenge liberal democratic norms in Europe.

Our combined methodology enabled us to move beyond surface-level lexical patterns and uncover the ideological architecture of populist discourse. The Dutch case revealed how populist language works through boundary-making, blame-shifting, and coded moral appeals, transforming controversial policies into common-sense imperatives. By mapping these strategies quantitatively and interpreting them qualitatively, we show that populist rhetoric is neither accidental nor neutral but algorithmically legible and emotionally optimized for resonance. This approach provides a replicable framework for future research on the linguistic dimensions of populism in an era of digital amplification.

The analysis of PVV's discourse further demonstrated how language functions both as a tool and as a terrain of political struggle. Through lexical engineering and symbolic framing, populist actors may construct narratives that polarize, persuade, and normalise exclusionary policies. These discursive practices do not remain at the margins; they shape mainstream political debate and influence democratic governance. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for assessing the resilience of liberal democracy and for developing strategies to counteract the divisive effects of populist communication in Europe, especially in an era when algorithms co-shape the political landscape. Algorithms do more than disseminate content; they actively structure patterns of visibility and virality, thereby amplifying narratives that polarize and normalize exclusion. This dynamic was evident in the 2025 Dutch parliamentary elections, where the PVV secured 26 seats, equal to the centrist-liberal D66, making it one of the two largest parties in the House of Representatives.¹¹ These outcomes demonstrate the extent to which algorithmically mediated discourse can sustain electoral competitiveness even in the absence of outright majorities.

¹¹ E. Hartog, H. Cokelaere, K. Verhelst, P. Haeck, "Dutch Election 2025: Winners and Losers – Rob Jetten, Geert Wilders, Frans Timmermans," *Politico*, 30 October 2025, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-election-2025-winners-losers-rob-jetten-geert-wilders-frans-timmermans/>, 3 November 2025.

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Monika BANAS – Associate Professor at the Institute of Intercultural Studies, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Jagiellonian University in Krakow/Poland. Her research interests include migration and integration processes, mutual dependences of politics, economy and culture, cultural dimension in welfare state design, and political communication. She holds a PhD degree in American Studies and a post-doctoral degree (doctor habilitus) in political science.

Raúl Sánchez PRIETO – Associate Professor (Profesor Titular) of German and Dutch linguistics in the Department of Modern Philology at the University of Salamanca. He earned his PhD at Salamanca with a dissertation on temporal relations in Spanish and German. His research focuses on contrastive linguistics (Spanish-German and Dutch), text and discourse analysis, media linguistics, and language conflict. He previously served as Head of the Department of Modern Philology and, since 2023, has been Vice-Rector for Internationalization and Cooperation.