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The Bodily Performance of Right-wing Populism

The body is an important semiotic resource that appears to be more manifestly exploited in (right-wing) populist compared to traditional forms of political communication, representing a break with the usual habitus of political performance. Yet, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Cienki 2004; Lempert 2011; Streeck 2008), the bodily performance of politicians remains an understudied aspect of political communication. Gesture studies within cognitive linguistics (e.g. Müller et al. 2013) provides a framework for analysing the multimodal enactment of rhetorical strategies in the situated performances of politicians (Hart & Winter 2021; Hart 2024, forthcoming). In this talk, I present two case studies. In the first, I focus on a range of hand gestures used by Nigel Farage as part of rhetorical moves aimed at legitimating anti-immigration policies. These include pragmatic gestures used to justify immigration as a topic of primary concern and to deny that a preoccupation with immigration is extreme. It also includes referential gestures used as part of quantification and aspectising strategies to construct immigration as a significant and perennial problem. In the second case study, I focus on one particular gestural form, namely pointing, and explore its functions in the spoken performances of Donald Trump. Outward, inward, upward and downward points are shown to occur in different speech contexts as part of multimodal rhetorical moves associated with right-wing populism. Through pointing, Trump is able to engage directly with his audience in a manner characteristic of live entertainment, to position himself as distinct from mainstream politicians, and to align himself instead with the audience as a man of the people. The talk highlights the significance of gesture as a semiotic mode and shows how it can be analysed as part of multimodal critical discourse analysis.

References

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