

The language of right-wing populism and its perception in public sphere. A linguistic and multimodal analysis of Pegida in German online media.

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This paper presents results of a multimodal linguistic analysis of language usage in online media focusing on the Pegida movement in Germany. In October 2014 in the German city of Dresden the movement called Pegida arose,¹ protesting not only an assumed Islamization of the so called “occident” but also criticizing the political establishment, specific political and societal issues concerning migration and integration. Some demands of Pegida are “the duty to integrate” and a “zero-tolerance policy against delinquent asylum seekers and migrants”². Politicians and media actors were surprised by the large number of protesters which increased in size each week, from 350 participants in October 2014, 15,000 in December 2014 to 25,000 in January 2015.³ Topics such as “political disaffection”, “missing closeness of established politicians to the people” or “a missing interest in the problems of the people” were discussed in order to explain the success of Pegida in such a short time. On the one hand politicians preferred to talk with the Pegida organizers in order to promote a democratic debate. On the other hand there was also a rejection on the political side: “The SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) rejects, in the words of its General Secretary Yasmin Fahimi discussions with the Pegida organizers” (Frankfurter Rundschau, 19.01.15). In January 2015 Pegida officials themselves carried out the dismantling of the movement and its right-wing orientation when one of the Pegida founders Lutz Bachmann “played Hitler” on Facebook (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 21.01.15). But that is only one reason why Pegida become a right-wing populist movement in public perception.

This paper wants to answer following research questions. First it wants to answer how protest is (de-)constructed in public sphere. It is of interest when and why the shift in public discourse/opinion took place in order to show which legitimations for protest are formulated and which statements were formulated to delegitimize. In this context the analysis in this paper will focus on statements made by opinion makers such as key politicians as well as comments in media articles which mark the movement firstly as a citizens’ and later as a right-wing populist movement. Secondly the paper wants to outline what is understood under the term *Volk* (Engl. “people”) and how identity with regard to nation is constructed by language usage as well as images used within the debate of Pegida. The conclusion will outline core features of Pegida on a linguistic and visual level which justify the categorisation as a right-wing populist movement.

The analysis is corpus based and uses discourse linguistics approaches focusing on words, word groups and contexts (cf. Gür-Şeker 2012).

¹ Engl.: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident; German: Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes.

² It is striking that there is no uniform or identical catalog of Pegida goals. There are different versions of goals which were apparently uploaded by Pegida followers or leaders (see for example http://www.tatjanafesterling.de/download/PEGIDA_10_demands_ENG.pdf or <https://de-de.facebook.com/pegidaevdresden/posts/848334451871646>).

³ cf. Geiges/Marg/Walter 2015, 11

The Data Base

The analysis will focus on language data or more precise selected corpus data which can be differentiated into a self-built and online available data bases. The self-built data base consists of following resources:

1. Pegida Facebook comments Corpus (Pegida Facebook Corpus)
2. German online newspapers dealing with Pegida (Pegida News Corpus)
3. one YouTube video showing a Pegida event in April 2015.

The investigation period covers October 2014 until October 2015. The **Pegida Facebook corpus** collected by Gregor Weichbrodt and Hannes Bajohr can be accessed for free on <http://0x0a.li/de/die-sprache-pegidas/>⁴. The Facebook corpus contains around 280,000 comments of anonymized users who are pro and contra Pegida. Additionally a total of 20 media articles have been selected by the author to find out how Pegida, opinions and arguments are reflected in the media debate in detail (in the following called: **Pegida News Corpus**). The news corpus consists of German online newspapers and news websites such as the online newspapers Spiegel Online, Die Welt Online (Welt), Süddeutsche Zeitung (online and paper), Die Zeit (ZEIT), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), Frankfurter Rundschau (FR), Die Tageszeitung (TAZ), Focus Online (Focus), Der Tagesspiegel and the news website tagesthemen.de as well as tagesschau.de. In this news corpus the focus lies on the analysis of images, statements and attitudes about Pegida within the public media discourse, mainly concentrating on key events and politicians. Additionally one YouTube video showing a Pegida event with the Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders will help to widen the analysis. This self-built corpus and its analysis is supplemented by the “Digital Lexicon of German Language” (das Digitale Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache, DWDS) which consists of different digitalised German lexicons and newspapers corpora; the search term used is *Pegida*.⁵

The analysis is using different data resources in order to outline a broad picture of right-wing populism analysis, which is based on language data and visual patterns.

The Pegida slogan: “Wir sind das Volk”

Pegida demonstrations but also media articles and Facebook discussions show that Pegida is highly contextualised with the slogan “Wir sind das Volk” (Engl. “We are the People/Volk”). But what does *wir* and *Volk* mean in German language and what does the slogan implies? The lexicon “Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache” (Engl. “Lexicon of German Language”) which is integrated in to the Digital Lexicon of German Language (Digitales Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache, in the following called DWDS) defines the personal pronoun *wir* as a “Designation for more than one person, with one’s own is included”⁶. The noun *Volk* has four different meanings: 1) “Population of a country, all the citizens of a state, nation”, 2) “ethnic community emerged from an association of tribes, nation” 3) “Totality of the laboring part of the society and social groups”, 4) “summarizes a (larger) number of persons to a group of people; People”⁷. How does Pegida uses the term *Volk*? The context analysis, the political

⁴ Retrieved on 22.04.15.

⁵ <http://dwds.de> (retrieved on 17.12.15)

⁶ <http://dwds.de/?view=1&qu=wir> (retrieved on 17.12.15)

⁷ <http://dwds.de/?qu=Volk> (retrieved on 17.12.15)

statements and symbols⁸ that are used by Pegida actors and Pegida itself as an organisation shows that “Wir sind das Volk” (Engl. We are the People) implies that others, which are apparently not followers of Pegida and groups that are offensively criticised such as immigrants, asylum seekers, Muslims but also journalist and politicians are excluded and thus argumentatively not part of the “Volk” (Engl. people). *Volk* is semantically used as an “ethnic community emerged from an association of tribes” – in this context the Volk of Germans. This is not only reflected in language usage but also in the ‘language’ of pictures used in the (social) media discourse. For example an article of the newspaper ZEIT describing posters during a Pegida demonstration, stated that: “On posters was written ‘Islam does not belong to Sachsen’.” (ZEIT, 27.01.15) or key speakers during Pegida demonstrations calling refugees as “invaders” (Spiegel, 27.10.15).

At the same time there is a paradox reflected in the usage of “We are the People”, as Pegida picks up a historical slogan of the German reunification process, which was an expression used to protest against the German Democratic Republic. In the newspaper ‘Der Tagesspiegel’ this issue and the reinterpretation of Pegida by using “We are the people” is described as follows:

“During the GDR resistance **the word ‘people’** was defined vertically, as distinctive of the many down there by the few up there, it is now used in the sense of another distinction. It passes people against people, the German people against other peoples.” (Der Tagesspiegel, 19.01.15; emphasis added)

One ZEIT article from 23.12.14 found in the DWDS Corpus reports of so called “citizens of the GDR” who protest against the use of the slogan that in their point of view “stood in 1989 for freedom, tolerance and cosmopolitanism” (ZEIT, 23.12.14).⁹ The mentioned protest thus implies that the meaning of the slogan in the Pegida discourse does not stand for freedom, tolerance and cosmopolitanism.

The term *Volk* is not only used to emphasise who is understood to be part of the thus conceived Volk, it is also used as a legitimisation of objectives pursued by Pegida actors. Leading to the conclusion: If the Volk demands something, then it only can be right/, then the demand is justified or the demand has to be implemented politically. The analysis in this paper will show how this language usage patterns function within the discourse of Pegida actors as well as in the media and political discourse about Pegida.

***Pegida* in the DWDS – ZEIT Corpus (December 2014 – July 2015)**

The Digital Lexicon of German Language not only provides definitions from digitalised lexicons but also includes different media corpora of newspapers such as articles from the newspaper Die Zeit (ZEIT). If you enter the name *Pegida* as search term there are no encyclopaedia entries since the abbreviation *Pegida* is a newly created word and used 2014 for the first time. What we can find is a wide range of articles of the newspaper Die Zeit, which were published in December 2014 until July 2015 with in total 1821¹⁰ hits (or contexts) for the search term *Pegida*. The ZEIT Corpus only lists short contexts¹¹ of the search term without further corpus linguistic information such as collocations, frequency of words or

⁸ E. g. pictures of veiled women crossed out (cf. Spiegel 20.10.15).

⁹ <http://dwds.de/?view=1&qu=wir+sind+das+volk> (retrieved on 18.12.15)

¹⁰ First hit in 01.12.14, last hit in 08.07.15.

¹¹ Usually one to three sentences are shown.

word clusters. Nevertheless the contexts of the search term *Pegida* show not only attitudes of the movement but also media practices of naming a new movement, which are highly controversial. First at all the abbreviation is described and defined in almost every beginning of an article or context, which also can be interpreted as a semanticisation of an unknown word. For example in the next context first the full title of the movement is mentioned followed by its abbreviation: ZEIT, 01.12.14: “‘Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes’ (Pegida).” But which dominant practices of naming Pegida are used in the DWDS – ZEIT Corpus? What perceptions can we find? To begin with the obvious, the abbreviation Pegida is used for naming the new actor. Quite at the beginning of the Pegida media discourse in 2014 neutral terms for naming can be found. Pegida was often described as a *group*, *alliance*, *movement* or more precisely a *protest movement*.¹²

ZEIT, 08.12.14: “Demonstration des **Bündnisses** [Engl. **alliance**] ‘Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes’ (Pegida)”¹³ (emphasis added)

ZEIT, 09.12.14: “Demonstration der **Initiative** [Engl. **initiative**] Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Pegida)”¹⁴ (emphasis added)

Additionally the Wikipedia article regarding Pegida calls it a “citizens’ movement” (Germ. Bürgerbewegung).¹⁵ It should be noted that from December 2014 until July 2015 Pegida is highly associated with critical attitudes towards Islam. We can find composites such as “Anti-Islam-Bewegung ‘Pegida’” (ZEIT, 09.12.14; Engl. Anti-Islam-Movement Pegida), “anti-islamische Pegida” (ZEIT, 08.01.15; Engl. anti-Islamic Pegida), “islamkritische Bewegungen wie Pegida” (ZEIT, 07.01.15; Engl. Islam critic movements such as Pegida), “anti-islamische Protestbewegung Pegida” (ZEIT, 07.01.15; Engl. anti Islamic protest movement) or “islamkritischen Pegida” (ZEIT, 07.06.15; Engl. Pegida which is critical of Islam).¹⁶

The manual reviewing of contexts of the search term *Pegida* in the DWDS – ZEIT Corpus shows that Pegida from December 2014 until July 2015 is strikingly often described or illustrated as a *movement* which has critical attitudes towards Islam mainly reflected in adjectives such as *critically against Islam* or *anti Islamic*. During this time span Pegida was rarely described as “right-wing populist” (ZEIT, 20.06.15), “racist” (ZEIT, 10.02.15), “Islamophobic” (ZEIT, 10.02.15) or “xenophobic” (ZEIT, 02.05.15). A further corpus linguistic analysis with a larger text corpus would be necessary to answer quantitative questions regarding frequency of used words, collocations and patterns in language usage such as word clusters like “We are the People/Volk”.

Pegida in the News Corpus

Besides the naming of Pegida as a *movement* with anti Islamic features it is also important which image of Pegida politicians presented in the media. The analysis of the Pegida News Corpus of 20 media articles show that at the beginning of Pegida there was uncertainty about how to deal with the demands of Pegida demonstrations which articulated apparently existing “fears” and “concerns” (cf. ZEIT, 12.12.14). In this context an image of Pegida as being a civic movement has been used in media. Before the anniversary of Pegida in 2015 this image

¹² <http://dwds.de/?view=1&qu=Pegida> (retrieved on 10.02.16)

¹³ <http://dwds.de/?view=1&qu=Pegida> (retrieved on 10.02.16)

¹⁴ <http://dwds.de/?view=1&qu=Pegida> (retrieved on 10.02.16)

¹⁵ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pegida> (retrieved on 21.10.15; version of 18.11.14, 20:27)

¹⁶ <http://dwds.de/?view=1&qu=Pegida> (retrieved on 10.02.16)

was supported and as well-constructed by statements of politicians such as Thomas de Maizière or Sigmar Gabriel. For example the newspaper ‘Die Zeit’ in 12.12.14 published an article titled “De Maizière is concerned about Pegida followers.” The paper cited remarks from Thomas De Maizière, German interior minister:

“The federal interior minister calls that **the fears of the anti-Islam protesters to be taken seriously** [...]. Federal Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU) said in the ARD, although there were ‘problematic developments’ in regard to the initiators among the participants of the demonstrations ‘there are quite many who express their concerns prior to the challenges of our time’.”¹⁷

What is understood under “challenges of our time” remains vague in this mentioned ZEIT article. More important is that de Maizière is cited directly referring to results of a survey:

“De Maizière pointed to a study that showed in his view that a part of the **citizens feel foreigners in their own country**. ‘These **concerns**, we must take seriously, we have to deal with that.’”¹⁸

The concerns of the citizens/people are mentioned in different articles of the News Corpus and mostly contextualised with the context of a perceived Islamization of Germany (cf. FAZ, 18.11.14) and concerns regarding perceived increase in crime that is connected to foreigners or non-Germans (cf. FAZ, 25.11.14). And the news website tagesschau.de emphasised in comparison to other anti-Islam movements in Germany that “(c)ompared to the [so called; dgs] Hooligans against the Salafists **‘Pegida’ acts civic**” (tagesschau.de, 01.12.14; Germ. “Im Gegensatz zu den Hooligans gegen Salafisten **treten die ‘Pegida’ bürgerlich auf.**”; emphasis added).

The slogan “We are the People/Volk” in Facebook

In this part of the paper the concordance software AntConc¹⁹ is used to analyse the Pegida Facebook corpus in order to find patterns in language usage regarding the naming of Pegida, its attitudes and positions. In the Pegida Facebook corpus the term Pegida can be found 43.597 times. The slogan “Wir sind das Volk” (We are the People/Volk) is used 1480 times. One user (number 38) said regarding a Pegida demonstration on 10.12.14:

“Am besten ohne große Reden, Rechtfertigungen usw. auftreten. Allein **die Präsenz der Menschen** und die **Fahnen** sind die Botschaft: **Wir sind das Volk** und **wir erheben Anspruch auf unser Land!**” (Engl. “Best without big speeches, justifications etc. The mere **presence of people** and the **flags** are the message: **We are the People** and **we lay claim to our country!**”; emphasis added)

In this user comment the flags are symbolically used for the main statement that the movement is a movement of and for the German country – the flag of the Federal Republic of Germany, thus the colours of black, red and gold dominate almost all Pegida demonstration, becoming a symbol for the identification of space and the soil. By the above cited user the flag is contextualised with the country, the “presence of people” and thus with the slogan “We are the People”. In other contexts “We are the People” is leading to the conclusion that if “We

¹⁷ ZEIT, 12.12.14; emphasis added.

¹⁸ ZEIT, 12.12.14; emphasis added.

¹⁹ <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software.html>

are the People” we are also the “state” (2014-12-12T12:49). Those statements actually reflect the mistrust towards the state and its political representatives, mistrust of the governed towards its legitimately elected representatives. Over time this key feature of mistrusts culminated in the rejection of key politicians such as Chancellor Angela Merkel. This rejection is reflected in the slogan called “Merkel has to leave” (Germ. Merkel muss weg). This rejection can be seen as a key feature of populist movements that oppose established political actors (cf. Priester 2012, 4). This accusation is formulated in the following context: “Wir sind das Volk und der Staat! eine korrupte Regierung kann auch entlassen werden!” (2014-12-12T12:49) (Engl. “We are the People and the state! a corrupt government can be discharged!”). At the same time the slogan “We are the People” is used as a set phrase for marking the end of a statement; it can be interpreted as a discourse pattern placed mostly at the end of comments in order to underline the previous statement like in the following posts:

“2015-01-25T18:01:17+0000

Wie wärs einfach den Ring zu benutzen, und Herrn Jung und die Antifa in der Südvorstadt einfach zu ‘überraschen’?

KEINE GEWALT -WIR SIND DAS VOLK [end of comment; dgs]”

“2015-01-19T09:43:06+0000

Sehr gut. ... auf geht’s. .. friedlich, gewaltfrei aber entschlossen. ... WIR SIND DAS VOLK! !!! [end of comment; dgs]”

Within the cited Facebook comments the slogan ‘We are the People’ is written in large letters, which again underlines the previous statement but also highlights a perceived or assumed core attitude of the movement.

The shift in public opinion: Sigmar Gabriel and Thomas de Maizière

In this part of the paper I want to outline why and how the supposed civic movement become right-wing populism. I will do this by looking at two main political actors and their changing political statements regarding Pegida over time. Data basis of this part of the analysis is the self-built News Corpus. The analysis deals with a key feature of the Pegida discourse which is at all levels highly marked through intertextuality and intermediality phenomena (cf. ZEIT, 12.12.14; FAZ, 21.01.15; SZ, 04.02.15).

Despite of the “Hitler” picture of the Pegida leader Lutz Bachmann that was found in January 2015 in Facebook Sigmar Gabriel, Vice-Chancellor, Minister of Economic Affairs and chairman of the SPD, decided to visit a Pegida discussion. His role during the visit was explicitly defined and limited: 1. He is visiting Pegida as a so-called “private person” or citizen; 2. He only speaks with the “citizens” not with the organizers. This seems to be in line with the argumentation of his political party SPD since the “Social Democratic Party of Germany rejects in the words of its General Secretary Yasmin Fahimi discussions with the Pegida **organizers**.”²⁰ Sigmar Gabriel justifies his visit as follows “... of course you have to **talk with the people** who go there and **have concerns** and who are **angry about the politics**. I mean, what other means do we have in a democracy except to speak with each other?”²¹ His

²⁰ FR, 19.01.15; emphasis added.

²¹ Tagesthemen, 24.01.15: <http://mediathek.daserste.de/Tagesthemen/tagesthemen/Das-Erste/Video?documentId=26067270> (from minute 00:07:43) [emphasis added].

participation is interpreted as a “breaking of a taboo”²², as it also was in Gabriel’s party: “Two weeks ago Fahimi [the General Secretary] had made it clear: She believes it is ‘a wrong signal’, when Social Democrats lend an ear to supporters of the Pegida movement” (ZEIT, 27.01.15).

In February 2015 the newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung reported Gabriel’s statement which he had uttered in an interview with the German magazine Stern: he had said that Pegida “obviously” belongs to Germany. Gabriel statements in the Stern are cited directly saying: “There is a democratic right to be a German national” and that there is “[e]ven a right to distribute stupidities as the alleged Islamization of Germany.”²³ Two months later the Dutch right-wing populist Geerd Wilders was a “Ehrengast”²⁴ (*guest of honor*) at a Pegida event in Dresden. Speaking in the German language and addressing Chancellor Angela Merkel, he said “Ms Merkel, the majority of your people is of the opinion that Islam does not belong to Germany” (Geerd Wilders, 13.04.15)²⁵. Wilders participation and the fact that he has been invited not only as a speaker but a so-called “guest of honor” can be seen as an important feature leading to a shift in public opinion regarding Pegida. But the invitation is also a signal to right-wing populists in Europe saying: we have the same enemies, we have the same goals. In an interview Interior Minister of Saxony, Markus Ulbig commented on Wilders participation: “Jetzt ist aus meiner Sicht die Grenze überschritten. Der bekannteste Rechtspopulist Geerd Wilders ist eingeladen worden [...]”²⁶ (Engl. “Now in my view the border/a red line has been crossed. The most well-known right-wing populist Geerd Wilders has been invited ...”). Before the Pegida anniversary in October 2015, which would take place in Dresden, the German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière underlined explicitly his position regarding Pegida in German Television ARD (it was also cited by the newspaper ZEIT on 18.01.15 – also an example for intermediality):

“Unusually **clear** German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere warned against Pegida. ‘**Meanwhile**, it is completely obvious. Those who organize this are hard right-wing extremists’, he said in the ARD. (...) They call asylum seekers as criminals, all politicians as traitors. This is far away from any democratic consensus. (...) Stay away from those who inject this hatred, this poison in our country.” (ZEIT, 18.10.15; emphasis added)

In the mentioned ZEIT article the Interior Minister is cited by using clear and explicit markers to underline the development – in this case reflected by the phrases “unaccustomed clear”, “completely obvious” and “hard right-wing extremists”. By using the metaphor of injecting poison into the country the third sentence emphasizes the importance of not going to the demonstration (the anniversary). Shortly before and after the anniversary date we can find a change in media descriptions of Pegida that seem connected to a changing perception of the movement. Mainly the image of concerned citizens vanishes. Pegida is “die rassistische Bewegung” (ZEIT, 18.10.15; Engl. “a racist movement”), “harte Rechtsextremisten” (ZEIT, 18.10.15; Engl. “hard right-wing extremists”); “islamfeindlichen Pegida-Bewegung” (Spiegel, 27.10.15; Engl. “islamophobic Pegida movement”), “eine weithin als rechtspopulistisch klassifizierte Organisation” (Wikipedia.de, 21.10.15; Engl. “a widely as right-wing populist

²² Tagesthemen, 24.01.15: <http://mediathek.daserste.de/Tagesthemen/tagesthemen/Das-Erste/Video?documentId=26067270> (from minute 00:07:43).

²³ SZ, 04.02.15

²⁴ Welt, 13.04.15

²⁵ YouTube Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3_xA50rZAg (retrieved on 18.12.15)

²⁶ Welt, 13.04.15

classified organisation”)²⁷ or “Das islam- und fremdenfeindliche Pegida-Bündnis” (Focus, 26.10.15; Engl. “the islamophobic and xenophobic Pegida alliance”).

Conclusion

The subject of investigation Pegida requires a methodologically wide approach which is not only focusing on language level but also has to include image analysis as well as a heterogeneous database which combines encyclopaedia entries, etymological information, media articles and social media discourses.

The media analysis shows that media and politicians were apparently surprised by the success of Pegida. In various contexts the increasing number of participants has been interpreted as a legitimisation for the existing fear(s) and anger of ‘the People/Volk’. Where as the reports about the increasing number apparently influenced the public perception regarding the importance of the movement. After October 2015 there is a detectable shift of public attitudes towards the movement that explicitly marks Pegida a right-wing populist movement. Also the contribution could show that not only on a linguistic but also visual level there were very early signs that Pegida was a right-wing populist movement. Further more key politicians failed to position themselves in an early stage of the movement. Two core features of right-wing populism could have been shown. First feature of right-wing populist movements: Pegida is opposing immigration, the rising ethnic and cultural diversity not only reflected in the used slogans and demands regarding immigration issues but also reflected in posters used and shown during demonstrations by Pegida participants (posters on which minarets or women with veils are crossed out, posters against refugees which are ‘not welcome’). At the same time the analysis could show an anti-establishment strategy²⁸, which is reflected in slogans and visual strategies against key political actors such as chancellor Angela Merkel. In conclusion the analysis of Pegida not only requires linguistic but also political science knowledge combining the analysis of language usage and visual analysis. Further analysis on the basis of generated corpora which include a large and diverse amount of data are necessary to determine quantitative features of the language usage.

The results presented in this paper can be seen as a first linguistic approach analysing a new development of arising right-wing populist actors in Germany – further linguistic analysis with a multimodal corpus covering a wider time of investigation will be necessary.

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²⁷ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pegida> (retrieved on 21.10.15; version of 21.10.15, 00:35)

²⁸ Goodwin 2011, p. X

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