



Keeping the Threat Out Trump's Discourse, the Wall and the "Other"

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the discourse strategies used by former US President Donald Trump in the tweets in which he discusses the construction of the wall between the US and Mexico. Border walls play a very important role in today's world in that they characterise discourses of exclusion and othering in geopolitical and cultural terms and indicate a revival of nationalism. By employing Proximization Theory, this paper shows how certain lexico-grammatical features of Trump's tweets contribute to a nationalist and populist discourse which legitimises the construction of the wall on the basis of the threat coming from an "Other".

KEY WORDS: borders, nationalism, populism, proximization, Trump



INTRODUCTION

As one of the defining issues of Donald Trump's presidency, the proposed building of the wall between the United States of America and Mexico provoked controversy, and even scandal, at both a national and international level. While the proposal was allegedly intended to prevent criminals from crossing the US-Mexico border, the wall was soon being defined by many politicians and media pundits as a sign of Trump's racism. Other statements by the former US President—e.g., Mexico sending its “bad hombres”, i.e., rapists, murderers and thieves, to the United States, or his refusal to accept immigrants from “shithole countries”—gave further impetus to these accusations. However, very little has been said on the kind of discourse strategies used by Trump to legitimise the need for the wall and, as a consequence, how the ideology of the exclusion of the “Other” was constructed and became popular among a sizeable share of the US electorate.

This paper attempts to shed light on these issues by analysing a corpus of tweets containing the word “wall” from Trump's Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump). The first section of the paper is devoted to the analysis of the role of border walls in today's world and of their importance in characterising discourses of exclusion and othering. This is done by discussing the recent development of Border Studies, which have addressed the resurgence of border walls as indicative of a revival of nationalism. The second section discusses the paradigm of social media and its importance for populist communication and focuses on the role played by Twitter for Trump in his attempt to legitimise the construction of the wall. The third section discusses Cap's Proximization Theory (PT) (2013, 2017) and its three constitutive aspects (spatial, temporal, axiological) in the light of Kopytowska's MPA (Media Proximization Approach) (2020), which develops Cap's PT in the context of the digital environment of social media. In the fourth section, the corpus of Trump's tweets is analysed by delving into the discourse strategies identified by PT and used by Trump in his repeated calls to build the wall and provide security to American citizens. As discussed in the Conclusions, these strategies are employed by Trump to highlight the threat that the lack of a “strong” wall entails as well as the benefits that a wall would supposedly bring to the security of the nation. It will be argued that social media provide a very apt communication context in which Trump legitimised his proposal.

THE GEOPOLITICAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BORDER WALLS

Building a wall at the US-Mexico border allegedly to prevent the influx of criminals into the United States was one of the main proposals put forward by Donald Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign and would later come to define his presidency. This is certainly not the first wall between nations to be proposed or indeed be built, but the controversy surrounding the “Trump Wall” (as defined by many media and political



observers) raises serious questions about the meaning and function of walls at three related levels: 1) in strictly institutional terms; 2) in, broadly speaking, cultural and political terms, and 3) as an important *topos* in nationalist and often racist discourses within the public sphere.

Defining a border wall is not as straightforward as it may seem. According to a recent and all-encompassing definition, a “wall” in proximity of a border between nations refers to

border infrastructure in the form of barriers/fences/walls: (1) whose foundations are fixed and of masonry (...), (2) that delineate part of the border outside regular points of entry and (3) whose official or unofficial functions are to assert a territorial border/claim and/or prevent the effective passage of persons and goods. (Vallet, *State* 8)

This definition should somehow be complemented by the fact that the wall itself does not literally coincide with the border line between two nations, for it is usually built by one of them within its own territorial confines as a barrier designed to prevent or limit access from the other. For this reason, a wall is the expression of unequal relations of power as it is usually “unilateral and exclusive” (Vallet, *State* 9).

Walls separating nations have been a frequent occurrence throughout history, but their number and length have been increasing at an unprecedented level in recent years. The proliferation of new walls in modern times started after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and accelerated during the financial crisis of 2007-8 (Vallet, *State* 9-12). We are seeing a redefinition of the meaning of borders as we know them: the growing *materialization* of borders, i.e., the tendency to build visible and, to use one of Trump’s favourite words, “strong” borders in the shape of walls and barriers instead of less obtrusive and more “porous” borders, is a response to the growing sense of fear and moral panic developing inside many nations, including the United States. Since the purported function of walls is that of protecting the nation, they are frequently used in nationalist and/or racist discourses to legitimise the exclusion of unwanted strangers such as migrants, refugees or terrorists, three categories often conflated in populist rhetoric. As a matter of fact, in Europe, the recent rise in the number of new walls being planned or built coincides with the growing success of right-wing parties and movements (Benedicto & Brunet 7-8), who often construct their nativist and racist ideology on the basis of fear of alleged threats to the integrity of the homeland and the security of its citizens, threats depicted in the political discourse as caused by outsiders.

However, in reality, walls are more often built as a response to internal (real or exaggerated) demands for security than to actual dangers from outside the nation. Indeed, walls may tell us more about the will of the nation to control its own territory, citizens and the symbolic elements associated with them than about actually protecting the nation itself from outside enemies. There are many doubts about the effectiveness of walls, which, in this sense, have a “theatrical performative presence” (Minca and Rijke) and provide a sense of reassurance, as if a barrier guaranteed zero access to the nation which builds it. As argued by Vallet (*Introduction* 3), the decision to build a wall follows a “logic of perception”: the actual effectiveness of a border wall or fortified barrier in



protecting a nation is less important than its visual component and “perceived insecurity” (Vallet *Introduction* 3) in its public sphere. The construction of walls over the last twenty years or so has been viewed as a response by nation states to the waning power of nations over their territories caused by globalisation, in the context of a “globalized world [that] harbours fundamental tensions between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription” (Brown 7). Walls and barriers “restore spectacularly a semblance of control over transnational flows” (Deleixhe *et al.* 642): they lead to a *militarization* of borders and act as visible, tangible artefacts which project a sense of security in the imaginary of the nation, without actually being totally effective instruments of protection. In fact, it may be said that the most important function of walls and fences is that of their being displayed as “facts on the ground”, that is, visible artifacts of a government’s will to put its authority and power on display, beyond their effectiveness in stopping the flow of unwanted strangers (Hassner and Wittenberg 165).

Modern walls are not just a physical construction limiting movement between two nations (usually from one to the other but, given their allegedly defensive scope, rarely vice versa), they are also constructed and experienced symbolically and in discourse. Political borders are “crucially important symbolic spaces because the narratives that legitimise sovereign power are predicated on claiming tight linkages between the territory, the people, and the state” (Jones 25). This is particularly important for those nations which, under the impulse of nativist and nationalist parties and leaders, are planning to build, or are building, walls at their borders as part of “a sharpening of discursive distinctions between the people and places on the inside and the evil, dehumanized, and disorderly others who are kept out” (Jones 25).

Besides its materialised and militarised nature, the border wall becomes the key element of a discursive *topos* around which the right-wing (and racist) concept of the nation is built, that is, “a limited and sovereign community that exists and persists through time and is tied to a specific territory (space), inherently and essentially constructed through an in/out (member/non-member) opposition and its out-groups” (Wodak 76-77). In the context of this scheme, the discursive representation of homogeneity within the in-group is constructed by glossing over internal differences and is termed in opposition to a similarly homogenous out-group, represented as threatening the nation. The distinction between “us” and “them” is the basis of an exclusionary rhetoric which legitimises the construction or the “strengthening” of new borders in order to contain the supposed danger coming from without. It is actually the walled border which serves the purpose, both visibly and discursively, of *creating* the Other, institutionalising difference and exclusion. This exclusionary rhetoric, which leads to the normalization of exclusion in discourse (Wodak 84), is part of Wodak’s own Discourse-Historical Approach, which has been used to explain Trump’s wall rhetoric. According to Demata (*Wall*), the construction of the Trump Wall answers the need for security and is central in the discursive construction of the *topos* of threat or danger, one of the most frequently used *topoi* in Wodak’s own argumentation scheme (Wodak 52-54). Thus, the *materialization* of borders is an important element in the context of the



legitimation strategies used in political and media discourse, and this has become true both in many European nations and in the United States.

TRUMP AND TWITTER: A SHORTHAND FOR POLITICAL DISCOURSE

As is widely known, Twitter was Donald Trump's media of preference. A compulsive Twitter user, "the Twitter President," as Trump was often known as, used the microblogging platform to set his political agenda and communicate directly to his electorate (as of September 2020, he had 85,8 million followers).¹ Twitter certainly helped Trump orchestrate his own "media spectacle", that is, media events that disrupt the ordinary flow of events and lure the mass audience into following them (Kellner). Indeed, because of its affordances and modes of use, Twitter was well suited to spreading Trump's simple and emotionally charged messages. Like other social media such as Facebook and Instagram, Twitter is playing an increasingly important role in social and political communication. This is mainly due to the accessibility of social media and their pervasive presence in daily communication. Their interactive nature promotes the exchange of information and erodes the hierarchy of traditional mass media (Herring), in turn fostering larger citizen participation and, crucially, enabling political actors to access citizens' daily lives much more easily than, for example, TV. Twitter, in particular, has become the means by which populist leaders can develop their form of "techno-plebiscitarianism" (Krämer 1299) whereby, behind the apparent inclusiveness and reciprocity typical of the microblogging platform, they can build consensus by inviting the community to share, like or retweet their stances.

The semiotic and technical affordances of Twitter are the perfect breeding ground for populists: as argued by KhosraviNik, "The fact remains that given the nature of populism as a style of communication, the new digital participatory technology is an apt space for construction, promotion and dissemination of such politics" (KhosraviNik 435-36). The suitability of social media for populist politics, especially in its nationalist dimension, can be seen in the users' many-to-many, horizontal participation (or the semblance of it), which constitutes a surrogate public sphere, in which online popularity (e.g., through the number of "likes") is used as a proxy for consensus. Furthermore, social media foster affective communication between users, something that suits populist style and appeal to emotions. Indeed, Twitter itself is characterised by simplicity, impulsivity and incivility (Ott), all features which became typical of Trump's use of social media, and the demand for short messages with a strong affective dimension pre-empts any possibility for reasoned analysis to improve the quality of debate in the public

¹ The real number of followers of Trump's official Twitter page, @realDonaldTrump, was much smaller. According to sparktoro.com, an online resource which measures the composition of an audience on Twitter, 70,2% of Trump's followers, or little more than 60 million, were "fake followers", i.e., "accounts that are unreachable and will not see the account's tweets (either because they're spam, bots, propaganda, etc. or because they're no longer active on Twitter)" (sparktoro.com 2020). Following the Capitol riot on 6 January 2021, Twitter decided to shut down @realDonaldTrump.



sphere. The activities of public personalities on Twitter show that the potentially interactive features of the microblogging service are not conducive to public conversations but instead lead to “calls to action” directed to their followers, making use of imperatives with a much greater frequency than ordinary users (Page). In modern political communication as well as in business, simplicity is velocity, and Twitter, with its user-friendly features and limit in the number of characters allowed for each single “tweet”,² is constructed to be simple in the formulation of messages as well as fast in its delivery. In the context of the increasing personalisation of politics at the expense of party politics taking place in social media (Pain and Chen), Twitter makes it possible to construct online identities.

Twitter has become the digital space where authenticity is performed by the populist leader and “a fertile ground for self-presentation and profile-editing or digital embodiment” (Kissas 272). In his tweets, Trump managed to build a “defiant Twitter persona” (Kissas 270), constantly attacking opponents of all kinds and rarely engaging with traditional or mainstream politics. This aspect was shaped by Trump’s own performance on Twitter: most of his tweets were written by him personally, using a colloquial, first-person singular narrative style and a very direct and spontaneous linguistic register (Enli; Demata, *Twitter*). His colloquial and conversational style communicated the impression of authenticity and emotional proximity to his supporters. Trump therefore constructed an apparently unmediated relationship between the populist leader and the (or *his*) “people.” Thus, he always showed his persona in a straightforward, direct and unmediated way: he wrote emotionally charged, violent, often racist, messages, and employed a confrontational style, with personal insults and attacks on his adversaries (Pain and Chen). Not surprisingly, then, Twitter was also used by Trump to legitimise some of his proposals, including the construction of the wall. As argued by Rivers and Ross, Trump’s personal authority as emerging in his tweets went above and beyond that legally bestowed by the office of the President as the legitimation of the construction of the wall is based on his own personal authority, emotional commitment and evidence-less claims (Rivers and Ross).

METHODOLOGY: PROXIMIZATION THEORY AND MEDIA PROXIMIZATION APPROACH

On Twitter and elsewhere, the topic of the wall was discussed by Trump in connection with border security, crime and migration. Racist, nationalist and nativist discourses on migration have become very common in the current climate of populist politics and have increasingly been the focus of research in Critical Discourse Analysis. Among the various approaches used to analyse Trump’s populist nationalist discourse, Piotr Cap’s Proximization Theory (PT) and Monika Kopytowska’s Media Proximization Approach

² Until 2017, the maximum number of characters of tweets was 140. Since 2017, the maximum number of characters has been 280.



(MPA) have been chosen for this paper because they offer very effective analytical tools to account for Trump's legitimising strategies for his highly contentious proposal of a border wall in the context of the affective communication of social media.

According to PT, legitimation for certain political actions is justified by the way certain threats are represented as looming over a Discourse Space (DS) and generate fear. Proximisation is "a discourse strategy of presenting the apparently remote events and ideologies as increasingly consequential to the speaker and her addressee" (Cap, *Language* 15). It is a construction of a conceptual opposition between a home-group and a remote group, or Other. Through proximisation, the external threat is given negative attributes and is represented in discourse as encroaching upon "our" space, or what Chilton (2004) calls the deictic centre, a spatial dimension inhabited by "us" and outside of which lies a threat. The Other—or the "outside-deictic-centre" entities (ODCs)—is represented discursively as a threatening presence moving towards "us", the central entities, or "inside-the-deictic-centre" entities (IDCs), represented spatially as the centre. The Other is often represented as a foreign group, capable of a wide range of dangerous acts, and can range from a foreign army or illegitimate warring group threatening the nation to migrants crossing the nation's borders or landing on its shores. Proximisation is ultimately employed by those in power to invoke and justify specific actions and policies in response to the threatening Other and as part of what Cap calls "interventionist discourse", that is,

a state governance discourse whose function is to sanction and enact policies aimed at neutralizing, whether legislatively or by force, often military force, external threats to the society or a socio-political group (including the global international community) which the political actor/speaker represents (or aspires to represent) and rules over or otherwise "leads" (or usurps a moral right to do so). (Cap, *Proximisation* 66)

In its construction of an external (real, exaggerated or imaginary) threat, interventionist discourse relies on proximisation and engages with the threat by employing a set of lexical and deictic strategies. Cap identifies three dimensions of PT through which it is possible to categorise the lexical elements construing proximisation: 1) Spatial proximisation includes all those discursive elements which conceptualise the threatening "arrival" of the ODCs and their movement toward the centre in physical, even geographical terms. The impact of the ODCs is represented as inevitable and potentially tragic, unless immediate action is taken; 2) Temporal proximisation emphasises the temporal closeness of the threat and, often, its projection in a historical dimension through comparison with other past events and possible events or consequences in the future. Having the present as its central axis, temporal proximisation requires certain linguistic instruments conflating the actual events of the past and the likely ones in the future. 3) Axiological proximisation constructs the clash between "us" and the Other along a moral or ideological dimension. It is



a forced construal of a gathering ideological conflict between the “home values” of the DS central entities, IDCs, and the “alien”, antagonistic values of the ODCs, which occupy the conceptual periphery of the DS. The IDC-ODC conflict either will, or (at least) may, lead to a physical clash, that is the materialization of the ODC ideological threat within the IDC space. (Cap, *Proximization* 94).

These three dimensions are made evident in discourse through specific deictic expressions and lexico-grammatical choices that speakers use to communicate the distance between us/here/good and them/there/evil. Crucially, in a text or a corpus of texts identified for analysis these three dimensions may not be lexicalised in equal measure, and the degree to which each dimension is represented depends on how the discourse develops and on the type of demands made on the speaker by the particular circumstances and context. Furthermore, these three dimensions may also overlap, in that, for example, lexical elements denoting spatial proximization may also contain certain time markers (e.g., different verb tenses) which may act as elements of temporal proximization. The combination of all these elements visualises the imminent clash between ODCs and IDCs and its possible effects on the Deictic Centre, thus providing the fear appeal which is used to legitimise preventive measures to protect “our space” and to, as Trump would say in his trademark slogan, “Make America Great Again.”

Cap’s PT accounts for the way distance reduction of certain legitimising (and de-legitimising) discourses takes place mainly through language. However, the legitimisation strategies used by the populist nationalist discourse gain a distinctive salience in the context the new media environment, and especially in social media. According to Kopytowska’s Media Proximization Approach (MPA) (2020), the technological affordances of social media play a very important role in manipulating the way the distance from the self is perceived in political communication. Distance reduction is part and parcel of the process itself of the new globalised, user-generated forms of mediatization which populism exploits. A higher capacity to be persuasive on the basis of new (i.e., reduced) distance dynamics results in the “salience enhancement” of certain issues: social media remove spatio-temporal boundaries and, by aligning like-minded users through algorithms, enhances affective communication as well as extreme polarization between in-groups and out-groups, or “us” and “them”. In this context, the discourse strategies identified by PT need to be analysed by taking into account a new kind of textuality, one which differs from traditional forms of political discourse in that it manages to establish a more direct channel of communication.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The corpus of tweets analysed in this paper includes all of Trump’s tweets in which the word “wall” is mentioned. The tweets were downloaded from TrumpTwitterArchive.com, a searchable database containing all the tweets published in Trump’s official Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump. The corpus thus obtained was cleaned of all



irrelevant results (e.g., “Wall Street Journal” or “paywall”) and was analysed first manually and then, once the most important lexical features were identified by the author, using Wordsmith Tools (Scott). The final corpus includes the texts of 382 tweets discussing the US-Mexico border wall, starting from 5 August 2014, when Trump first tweeted about the wall (“SECURE THE BORDER! BUILD A WALL!”), to 19 August 2020. The corpus of 382 tweets contains 13971 tokens and 2238 types, or distinct words.

PT faces certain methodological challenges when employed to analyse tweets and their unique discursive features. As discussed above, tweets are very short messages (e.g., slogans) and, unlike speeches, cannot contain lengthy texts with complex discursive structures. Consequently, a single tweet rarely contains a high number of lexical elements expressing proximization, which typically requires longer stretches of language than just those elements which can be formulated in up to 280 characters. Speeches or corpora containing longer texts do not have these problems. For example, in his analysis of the White House corpus, Cap (2013) takes into account only those lexical items whose total number reaches the 0.1% threshold. This principle could not be followed here, as Trump often mentions the wall not just to discuss the wall in and of itself, but also, for example, to endorse candidates for Senate, Congress or State legislatures who support building the wall. For this reason, PT had to be slightly adapted to the uniqueness of the corpus in question by employing some complementary analytical tools to more completely account for the centrality of the wall in Trump’s discourse. Indeed, PT can only be used and understood if seen in the context of MPA, which accounts for the “salience enhancement” of certain issues by considering the distance reduction which is implicit in the design of social media and which shapes the structure of discourse. MPA can also be used in the context of the mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches chosen for this paper, as the cumulative effect of discourse in legitimising certain political measures (Fairclough) can be assessed by looking at the pervasiveness of certain choices in discourse over long periods of time.

The analysis of Trump’s tweets highlights the frequent occurrence of lexical items defining the spatial proximization framework. Specifically, as shown in the findings (Table 1), there is a wide range of ODCs, that is, those elements constructed outside the deictic centre of the DS.

<i>CATEGORY</i>	<i>KEY ITEMS</i>
1. (NOUN PHRASES (NPs) CONSTRUED AS ELEMENTS OF THE DEICTIC CENTRE OF THE DS (IDCs))	['We']; ['the (great) people of our country']; ['our country']; ['USA', 'United States of America', 'America']; ['a strong military']; ['our jobs economy and our safety']
2. (NPs CONSTRUED AS ELEMENTS OUTSIDE THE DEICTIC CENTRE OF THE DS (ODCs))	['ISIS']; ['13 Syrian refugees', 'Eight Syrians']; ['cartels and terrorists']; ['enemy combatants']; ['illegals', 'illegal aliens', 'illegal immigrants'] ['42 million Latin Americans']; ['tremendous numbers of people'] ['criminals', 'dangerous criminals', 'criminal elements']; ['(large) Caravans (of



3. (VERB PHRASES (VPS) OF MOTION AND DIRECTIONALITY CONSTRUED AS MARKERS OF MOVEMENT OF ODCS TOWARDS THE DEICTIC CENTRE)	people)]; ['drugs', 'drug flow', 'big drug and people flows', 'massive inflow of drugs', 'heroin and other drugs']; [drugs (poison) and enemy combatants']; ['people and drugs']; [Drugs Human Traffickers & Criminals of all shapes and sizes', 'Crime Human Trafficking Gangs and Drugs', 'Human trafficking gang members and criminals', 'Gangs Drugs and Crime', 'drugs criminals (including human traffickers) and illegals']
4. (VPS OF ACTION CONSTRUED AS MARKERS OF IMPACT OF ODCS UPON IDCs)	['come/are coming into'/'trying to come into']; ['crossing[s]']; ['can enter']; ['marching']; ['headed our way']; ['flow/(are) flowing into']; ['pour/(are) pouring into']; [are heading here']; ['(is) being invaded'] ['committing crimes']; ['this tragic murder has taken place']
5. (NPS DENOTING ABSTRACT CONCEPTS CONSTRUED AS ANTICIPATIONS OF IMPACT OF ODCS UPON IDCs)	['threat']; ['danger' 'Big danger'] ['dangerous']; ['invasion'] ['under siege'] [a State of Emergency]
6. (NPS DENOTING ABSTRACT CONCEPTS CONSTRUED AS EFFECTS OF IMPACT OF ODCS UPON IDCs)	['disaster']

Table 1. Key lexico-grammatical items of the spatial proximization framework

There are three main classes of ODCs used to define the threat to the Deictic Centre: 1) *terrorists*, or potential terrorists, such as those individuals coming from Syria or groups affiliated with ISIS; 2) *immigrants*, often pre-modified by *illegal*; and 3) criminals of all kinds, in particular those related to drugs and *human trafficking*. These groups are often characterised by overlexicalization, as in, for example, *Drugs Human Traffickers & Criminals of all shapes and sizes* and *Human trafficking gang members and criminals*. All ODCs are human, except *drugs/drug flow/massive inflow of drugs*, or, on a few occasions, phrases made up of a mixture of human and non-human agents, e.g., *big drug and people flows, drugs (poison) and enemy combatants', people and drugs*. The ODC elements change in the corpus depending on the context and the circumstances leading Trump to tweet. For example, the so-called Caravan, i.e., the groups of people who were slowly moving towards the US-Mexico border in January 2019, are only featured in Trump's tweets from 15 to 31 January 2019 and then completely disappear. All the diverse ODC elements mentioned in Trump's tweets are somehow aligned in his discourse because of their common movement towards the Deictic Centre as part of proximization and because of the common measure which, according to Trump, should be taken against their movement, i.e., the construction of the wall. Indeed, all the lexical elements constituting spatial proximization aim at communicating a sense of moral panic which makes the building of the wall an absolute necessity and constitutes an appeal for its approval from Trump's audience.



Some of the lexical items expressing category 3, i.e., verb phrases of motion and directionality denoting the movement of ODCs towards the deictic centre, point to a metaphorization of the outside threat. *Flow/flowing* and *pour/pouring into* liken migrants and other ODCs to a dangerous liquid that threatens to burst the nation-container's seams. The use of the flood or liquid metaphor, in which the nation acts as a "container" and the outside elements are potentially disruptive fluids, is well-established in racist discourse (Charteris-Black; Musolff). Another metaphor is constituted by the use of *marching* and *invaded*, which recall a military discourse through which the arrival of the Other (migrants) is compared to an army threatening the Deictic Centre (Santa Ana 260; Musolff). Both metaphors reinforce the sense of fear which permeates Trump's discourse and which the wall is supposed to contain.

The technical limitations of the messages posted on Twitter demand condensation in both length and content. Accordingly, the construction of extended accounts expressing elements of spatial, temporal and axiological proximization related to the threat of the ODCs rarely occurs in the same tweet. The narrative construed around Trump's wall discourse is dispersed over many tweets, which encapsulate either the need to prevent certain social actors from reaching the Deictic Centre or the urgent need for the wall. There are a few exceptions, such as some mini-narratives constituted by single tweets, each of which containing elements of proximization:

The fight against ISIS starts at our border. 'At least' 10 ISIS have been caught crossing the Mexico border. Build a wall! (8 October 2014)

ISIS is operating a training camp 8 miles outside our Southern border <http://t.co/P8arBnc00A>

We need a wall. Deduct costs from Mexico! (17 April 2015)

Again illegal immigrant is charged with the fatal bludgeoning of a wonderful and loved 64 year old woman. Get them out and build a WALL! (10 August 2015)

The Kate Steinle killer came back and back over the weakly protected Obama border always committing crimes and being violent and yet this info was not used in court. His exoneration is a complete travesty of justice. BUILD THE WALL! (12 January 2017)

The above mini-narratives constitute coherent wholes and reiterate the same points with the prospect of an imminent danger based on past events (the illegal immigrants charged with crimes or the "10 ISIS... caught crossing the Mexico border"), whose authors come from outside the Deictic Centre or are threatening to do so (as in the training camp of ISIS). A fuller and more organic narrative occurs in January 2019, when the Caravan of hundreds of migrants from Central America was approaching the US-Mexico borders (Phillips). Trump responded with a series of tweets outlining the imminent threat:

A big new Caravan is heading up to our Southern Border from Honduras. Tell Nancy and Chuck that a drone flying around will not stop them. Only a Wall will work. Only a Wall or Steel Barrier will keep our Country safe! Stop playing political games and end the Shutdown! (15 January 2019)

Mexico is doing NOTHING to stop the Caravan which is now fully formed and heading to the United States. We stopped the last two - many are still in Mexico but can't get through our Wall but it takes a lot of Border Agents if there is no Wall. Not easy! (19 January 2019)



Four people in Nevada viciously robbed and killed by an illegal immigrant who should not have been in our Country. 26 people killed on the Border in a drug and gang related fight. Two large Caravans from Honduras broke into Mexico and are headed our way. We need a powerful Wall! (21 January 2019)

We have turned away at great expense two major Caravans but a big one has now formed and is coming. At least 8000 people! If we had a powerful Wall they wouldn't even try to make the long and dangerous journey. Build the Wall and Crime will Fall! (26 January 2019)

More troops being sent to the Southern Border to stop the attempted Invasion of Illegals through large Caravans into our Country. We have stopped the previous Caravans and we will stop these also. With a Wall it would be soooo much easier and less expensive. Being Built! (31 January 2019)

The temporal proximity of the ODCs is construed along a timeline construed in three phases: past events of a similar nature, imminent danger, and the need to build the wall to prevent the current danger (Table 2).

<i>PAST EVENTS</i>	<i>IMMINENT THREAT</i>	<i>MEASURES TO BE TAKEN</i>
---	A big new Caravan is heading up to our Southern Border from Honduras.	Only a Wall will work. Only a Wall or Steel Barrier will keep our Country safe!
We stopped the last two	Mexico is doing NOTHING to stop the Caravan which is now fully formed and heading to the United States.	---
Four people in Nevada viciously robbed and killed by an illegal immigrant who should not have been in our Country. 26 people killed on the Border in a drug and gang related fight.	Two large Caravans from Honduras broke into Mexico and are headed our way.	We need a powerful Wall!
We have turned away at great expense two major Caravans	but a big one has now formed and is coming. At least 8000 people!	Build the Wall and Crime will Fall!
We have stopped the previous Caravans	the attempted Invasion of Illegals through large Caravans	More troops being sent (...) ...and we will stop these also. With a Wall it would be soooo much easier and less expensive

Table 2. Temporal proximization of the Caravan narrative



In this last set of mini-narratives, temporal continuity is used to advocate pre-emptive policies to avoid the apparent inevitability of the clash and the impending physical threat that the members of the ODCs pose to the IDCs. The need to build the wall arises from (and is justified by) the memory of those ODCs who caused certain past events and the imminent arrival of people belonging to the same categories, namely immigrants belonging to the Caravan and murderers, two separate categories which are somehow conflated in Trump's discourse. The spatio-temporal proximization strategies used in these mini-narratives, consisting of proximization of near history and imminent future threat perpetrated by ODCs approaching the Deictic Centre, suggest the direct physical threat that the United States is facing – hence the necessity of a wall.

Conversely, the danger of “open borders” which, according to Trump, are supported by Democrats, is also used as an element of proximization. The lack of a wall brings crime and drugs to the United States, and Democrats are continually associated with open borders, thus implicitly blaming them for the threats to the Deictic Centre brought by elements of the ODCs.

We will stop heroin and other drugs from coming into New Hampshire from our open southern border. We will build a WALL and have security. (9 February 2016)

“Border Patrol Agents want the Wall.” Democrat's [sic] say they don't want the Wall (even though they know it is really needed) and they don't want ICE. They don't have much to campaign on do they? An Open Southern Border and the large-scale crime that comes with such stupidity! (27 December 2018)

I look forward to VETOING the just passed Democrat inspired Resolution which would OPEN BORDERS while increasing Crime Drugs and Trafficking in our Country. I thank all of the Strong Republicans who voted to support Border Security and our desperately needed WALL! (14 March 2019)

Too bad the Dems in Congress won't do anything at all about Border Security. They want Open Borders which means crime. But we are getting it done including building the Wall! More people than ever before are coming because the USA Economy is so good the best in history. (26 June 2019)

Wall is moving fast in Texas Arizona New Mexico and California. Great numbers at the Southern Border. Dems want people to just flow in. They want very dangerous open Borders! <https://t.co/gGuYzpTa9t> (6 July 2020)

Democrats want Open Borders and Crime! So dangerous for our Country. But we are building a big beautiful NEW Wall! I will protect America the Dems don't know where to start! <https://t.co/D0APaAxvVm> (19 August 2019)

In the examples above, Trump highlights the importance that a wall would have in reducing crime and drugs in general, without mentioning any specific human actor. Open borders are linked to the dangers that may be brought to the IDCs in the US by certain large categories (crime and drugs) which are dangerous and are therefore constructed as elements of axiological proximization. The sense of moral urgency and threat turns these tangible, physical threats into ideological ones, as the ODCs threaten the social fabric of the United States and therefore need to be stopped physically and visibly. In this sense, Trump's wall rhetoric and the mention of drugs and crime index the traditional conservative agenda based on law and order, including Ronald Reagan's



“war on drugs”. Trump’s discourse is in line with political state discourse, which is usually characterised by dichotomous representations of the ideologically negative values of the ODCs and the positive values of the IDCs. An example is the war discourse of George W. Bush, whose rhetoric consisted in the construction of an external threat (terrorists) in opposition to a set of values (freedom, peace, justice, progress) embodied and supported by the citizens and leaders of the US, a construction which has been interpreted through PT (*Cap, Proximization; Cap, Language* 20-27). In Trump’s tweets, the wall is used as a powerful physical artefact as well as a symbolic barrier against non-Americans which enables a physical opposition to the Other, but Trump does so without providing a set of signifiers clearly expressing the values of the IDCs. The need for the wall, expressed by deontic modality in modal verbs and imperatives, arises exclusively from the purported need for physical *security* and lacks extensive ideological motivations. Indeed, none of the words which typically appear as ideological signposts of American values (e.g., the aforementioned *freedom, peace, justice, progress*) appears in the corpus under examination. In most tweets, Trump simply stresses the need to build the wall or reports on its progress, and the mere mention of the wall in the tweets recalls the salience of the threat of the Other routinely evoked over the last few years both in Trump’s tweets and his in many speeches, interviews, and public statements on the topic.

Trump’s tweets about the wall and the proximization strategies he employs in them prove that the textual limitations of tweets in terms of length constitute an asset for populist politics: tweets can encapsulate short and emotionally charged messages which play well in the polarised politics of populism and its highly affective and simplified communication. The large number of human actors defining the ODCs and their presence in condensed messages makes their presence salient and their threat cognitively accessible. Trump’s wall campaign makes the proximity of the physical threat of the Other even more tangible by employing the participatory, unmediated and affective affordances of social media.

CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of Trump’s tweets it emerges that the materialization and militarization of borders, communicated by the notion itself of the wall, is circulated and legitimised in public discourses through strategies of proximization, which are central in Trump’s “interventionist discourse”. Trump identifies certain social agents outside the Deictic Centre, which is constituted by the United States of America, and portrays these agents as a physical threat moving towards (and threatening) this centre. The wall is central in establishing Trump’s spatial proximization, as it projects the *material* importance of a spatial delimitation preventing the movements of these outside entities towards the nation. The use of Twitter further increases the polarization and simplification of the political space as it accrues the “logic of perception” without any deeper ideological elaboration of the IDCs other than that one based on exclusion.



In this sense, Trump's plan to build a wall was not just based on the (supposedly urgent) need for security and protection: the Trump Wall is part of a wider agenda which responds to fears stemming from globalisation and which uses nationalism as the ideological backdrop for discursively constructing the need for the wall. The progressive shift from a "globalised" world with open (or no) borders to one in which the new populist politics has led to a new rise of nationalism and nativism has found its geopolitical catalyst in the planning or construction of new border walls and in the tightening of border security. The creation of an "othering" discourse, in which the political, linguistic and visual distance between "us" and "them", is summed up in the material presence of the wall itself: the prevalence of lexical items related to spatial proximity derives from the fact that, at the cognitive level, the tangible and physical nature of Trump's border wall is predominant. Indeed, besides their questionable effectiveness, walls communicate a sense of a security for a (supposedly) endangered homeland to its citizens by being a visible, physical barrier, in an ostentatious show of protecting the "insiders" from the threatening Other. Crucially, this new "border regime", based on walls or other seemingly impenetrable barriers allegedly aiming to exclude unwanted foreigners, supports a sense of national cohesion and unity which is based on the aspirations of uniformity and sameness in terms of identity. This aspiration consists in the continuous reassurance provided by "walling" in terms of both the narrative of security and the narrative of the nation (Jones 24-25), as the projected need for security vicariously strengthens the legitimation of a nation's sovereign power.

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