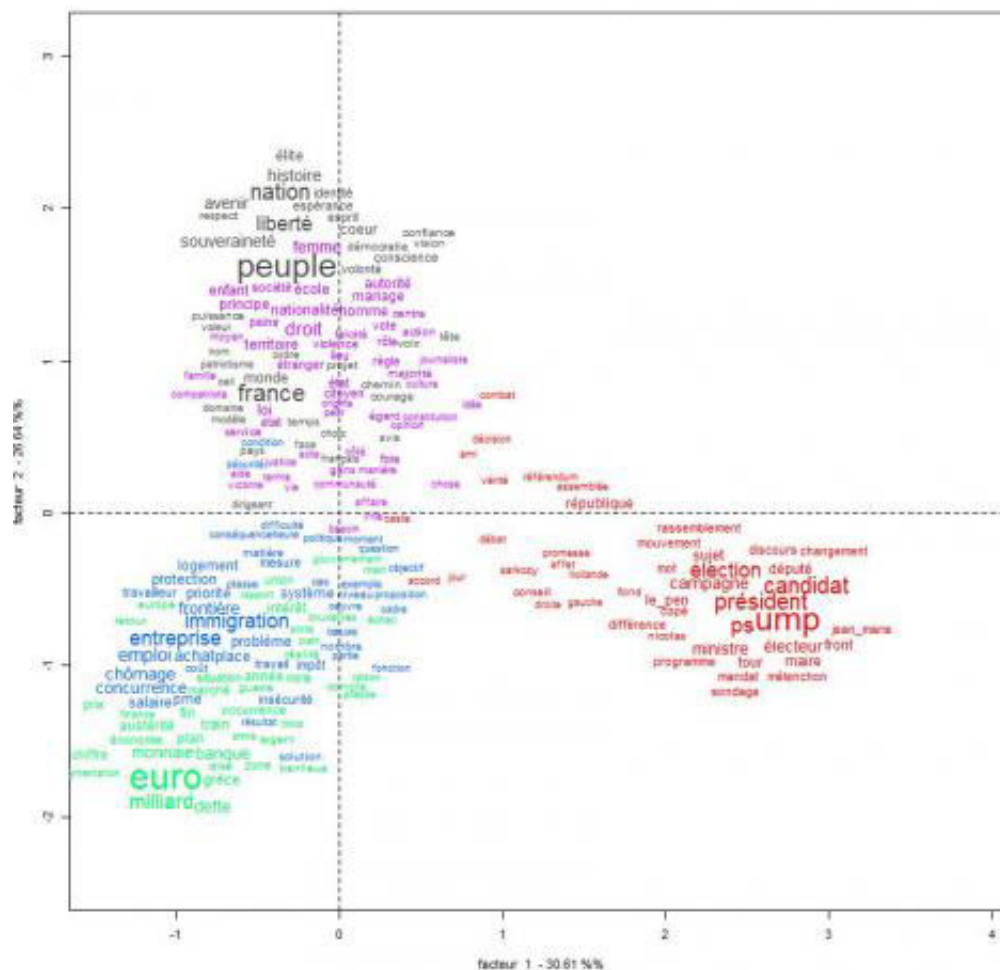


Textual analysis of the rhetoric behind extremist Marine Le Pen's mainstream success

April 17 2015, by Barbara Wilcox



This diagram shows the spatial lay out of Marine Le Pen's discursive universe. Using factorial analysis in Hyperbase, one can create a "map" of all the most used words and how they correlate to one another: the closer they are spatially, the stronger their correlation, or how often they appear together. Credit: Ceceli

Alduy

French politician Marine Le Pen carried her father's right-wing fringe political party to first place in the country's latest elections for European Parliament.

Stanford scholar Cécile Alduy says Le Pen's success at the helm of France's right-wing National Front can be attributed to a combination of sophisticated rebranding and skillfully crafted moderate rhetoric that sells a conservative agenda that borders on extreme.

An associate professor of French at Stanford, Alduy conducted a [qualitative and quantitative analysis](#) of more than 500 speeches by Marine Le Pen and her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, to find out what has made their party surge in the polls.

Alduy's word-for-word analysis of National Front political speeches, published in the book *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots: Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* (Seuil, 2015) has become a flashpoint of political discourse in France.

The resulting research is the first study of Marine Le Pen's discourse, the first to compile a corpus of this magnitude of political speeches by a French political organization.

After sifting through the data and performing extensive close readings of the corpus, Alduy found that the stylistic polish of Marine Le Pen's language conceals ideological and mythological structures that have traditionally disturbed French voters. Her research reveals how radical views can be cloaked in soothing speech.

"Marine Le Pen's language is full of ambiguities, double meanings, silences and allusions," Alduy said.

But in terms of political agenda and ideological content, Alduy said the continuity between the younger and elder Le Pen is striking. "What is different is the words and phrases she uses to express the same agenda," Alduy said.

Alduy, whose research centers on the history and mythology of national and ethnic identities since the European Renaissance, conducted the research with the help of Stanford graduate and undergraduate students and with communication consultant Stéphane Wahnich. Academic technology specialist Michael Widner of Stanford Libraries and the Division of Literatures, Cultures and Languages, provided technical expertise throughout and trained students in the art of indexing the database.

With a grant from Stanford's Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Alduy and her team transcribed and analyzed more than 500 speeches by Marine and Jean-Marie Le Pen dating from 1987 to 2013.

Alduy's team used text analysis software such as Hyperbase or Voyant Tools to measure precisely how Marine's language differs from that of Jean-Marie.

They found, for example, that Marine Le Pen used the word "immigrants" 40 times in speeches, compared to 330 times for Jean-Marie, or 0.6 percent versus 1.9 percent, respectively. Instead, she used the more impersonal "immigration" or "migration policy" to discuss the issue and present this hot-topic issue as a matter of abstract economic policy rather than an ideological anti-immigration stance.

While Jean-Marie paired "immigrants" or "immigration" with words like

"danger," "threat" or "loss," yielding phrases that scapegoat or even demonize France's large immigrant population, Marine used more technocratic pairings such as "protection," "cost," "euro" or "pay."

The effect, Alduy contended, is a repositioning of immigration from the racial and cultural problem Jean-Marie claimed it was to an economic one. Yet the actual policy agenda changed little from father to daughter, Alduy observed.

New language, same story

Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the National Front in 1972 to unite under the same political banner several extremist groups, from royalists to conservative Catholics nostalgic of the Vichy régime and the colonial Empire.

Since 1987 and his polemical statement about the Holocaust being a "detail" in the history of World War II, Jean-Marie has employed shock value to get media coverage. When asked about his daughter's new "normalization" strategy, which smoothes out the old xenophobic rhetoric in favor of a mainstream lingua, he routinely declares: "Nobody cares about a nice National Front."

But the party polled in the low double digits until Marine Le Pen took the helm in 2011. As she rose in the polls, Alduy began studying her speeches to understand what powered the politician's steady ascent.

In May 2014, Le Pen's National Front stunned the French political establishment by pulling 25 percent of the vote in European parliamentary elections, becoming the top French vote-getter in a multiparty system. President François Hollande's Socialists came in third. Last month, the party equaled that percentage in elections for local councilors. Such results make Marine Le Pen a credible contender for

France's presidency as the country looks ahead to its 2017 presidential cycle.

To demonstrate how Marine Le Pen's language presents formerly unpopular ideas in a new light, Alduy pointed to the party's policy of *préférence nationale* (national preference,) the cornerstone of its platform since the late 1970s. This policy would give priority for jobs, social services and benefits to French citizens, and would strip from children of legally resident noncitizens the family benefits now available to all children in France.

As touted by Jean-Marie Le Pen, however, Alduy noted, "The phrase *préférence nationale* has negative connotations in the French mind."

"'Preference' sounds arbitrary, potentially unfair, and goes against the republican principle of equality in the eye of the law," Alduy noted. "So Marine Le Pen has renamed this measure *priorité nationale* (national priority) or even sometimes *patriotisme social* (social patriotism). Both new phrases sound positive and don't evoke discrimination as the former did.

"'Priority' evokes action, responsibility, leadership – all the qualities one would like an effective chief executive to embody," Alduy said.

"Patriotism is a noncontroversial word that can rally across the political spectrum. Who wants to be called anti-patriotic by opposing 'social patriotism'? Yet both phrases refer to exactly the same measures."

In the same vein, Alduy observed, Marine Le Pen eschews the word "race" while her father stated unequivocally "races are unequal."

"Instead," Alduy said, "Marine Le Pen explains that 'cultures,' 'civilizations' and 'nations' have a right to remain separate and different, or else risk disappearing, overwhelmed by hordes of outsiders with a

different, incompatible culture.

"The word 'race' has disappeared, but the same peoples are the target of this fear of the other."

Listening between the lines

Alduy's findings hint at ways voters everywhere can critically evaluate political thought and make sound political decisions in times of stress.

She observed that other far-right European movements, such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, have similarly rebranded themselves to expand their base.

"Like the National Front, the Party for Freedom now adopts the posture of a champion of Western liberal values and the defense of 'minorities' – gays and women – against the alleged homophobia and misogyny of Islam," Alduy said. "Yet the Party for Freedom is a typical xenophobic, far-right, anti-immigration, anti-Europe party in every other respect.

"I hope that people will start to pay attention to the meaning of words in political speeches and in the media."

In 2015-16, Alduy said, she hopes to convey to students the nuances of political code words such as *laïcité* (secularism), "the Republic" or "immigration" in a Stanford course titled *How to Think About the Charlie Hebdo Attacks: Political, Social and Literary Contexts*.

"We all have to be careful and listen to what is left between the lines," Alduy said.

"When we hear someone speak about equality or democracy, we have to pay attention not just to what we want to hear, or to what we assume

these words mean, but to decipher what they mean in the context of this speaker's worldview.

"The positive or negative connotations of certain words can mislead us to think that we share the same definition of them with the politicians that use them to gain our vote."

More information: Marine Le Pen prise aux mots is currently available only in French. Analyses and graphs taken from the book are available in English on the website www.decodingmarinelepen.stanford.edu.

Provided by Stanford University

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