Political Catchwords in Our Time: Texts and Contexts

A workshop of the Language, Literature and Politics (LLP) Group of The Open University, UK

Dates: 2 and 3 June 2023
Venue: Elm Grove Conference Centre, Roehampton University, London SW15 5PH

Political catchwords and catchphrases are used pervasively, continuously, and in all major languages, and form the crux of exchanges in news media, social networks, policy documents, bureaucratic notices, academic and creative texts, everyday conversations/messages, etc. Examples of the moment include: 'new normal', 'austerity' and 'sustainability', 'cost-of-living crisis', 'free speech'/'hate speech', 'me too', 'Black Lives Matter', 'alt-right' and 'woke', 'climate emergency', 'greenwashing'. Some of these appear to be produced, so to speak, from above (as campaign slogans, names for alignments, etc.) and some from below (to signify complex concerns succinctly, as collective *nom de guerre,* etc.). They are relevant to understanding some of the principal concerns of our time: digital mediation/manipulation in political communication, populism and ideological polarization, mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories, differences and uniformity in local and global information circulations and so on.

As rules of thumb, political catchwords/phrases have the following features:
1. These are words/phrases which have acquired distinctive connotations or are neologisms;
2. Their origin as such can be traced to a specific social juncture;
3. From the juncture of origin, they are increasingly used extensively (across contexts) and intensively (frequently);
4. Such usage may involve adaption across various contexts by shifting or enriching connotations or by meaningful modifications;
5. These are not produced for the purpose of marketing commercial products;
6. Such words/phrases are likely to be associated with other words/phrases which are regarded as political;
7. These may eventually lose their distinctiveness and growing purchase to enter ordinary-language usage or to have diminished purchase as clichés.

The workshop will consist of short presentations (20-25 mins) with generous space for discussion. Presentations and participation are by invitation only. There would be no more than 20 participants. Presentations will be made by scholars from The University of Sofia, Bulgaria; Arab Open University, Kuwait and Jordan; Jamia Millia Islamia University, India; The Catholic University of Murcia, Spain; and from the UK – The Open University, University of Westminster, University of Bradford, University of Middlesex, Goldsmiths University of London, University of Bristol, Roehampton University.

In this instance, presentations and discussions will focus on three areas, and sessions will be divided up accordingly:

1. Case-studies of specific current political catchwords/phrases or thematic clusters of political catchwords/phrases in different languages and geopolitical domains;
2. Methods for eliciting and analysing data from digital sources on the circulation and spread of political catchwords/phrases;
3. Professional and activist experience of using political catchwords/phrases.

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The Language, Literature and Politics (LLP) research group at The Open University (https://fass.open.ac.uk/research/groups/llp) is a cross-faculty initiative, bringing together researchers from different disciplines with the aim of investigating the relationship between language, literature (literary criticism and creative writing) and politics in the widest variety of contexts.