The Image of Spain in the Eyes of Austrian, Flemish, French, Italian, Polish and Bulgarian Facebook Users

Text-Linguistic Opinion-Mining for Detecting and Analysing National Stereotypes

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Abstract

The empirical analysis of Social Web comments and conversations as mostly intranational interactions prove to be a valuable tool for understanding how stereotypes on European nations are build up and spread. This contribution provides a working tool for evaluating battered national brands during the Eurozone crisis from a linguistic point of view. A text linguistic methodology based on pragmatics, particularly on text functions and text actions, is being proposed and used. It aims at revealing the purpose and text features of the text functions found in Facebook conversations about Spain. The corpus comprises online conversations posted on newspaper pages of two 'Northern European' countries that are not being affected by the crisis (Austria and Belgium), two 'Southern European' ones (Italy and France) and two 'Eastern European' countries that are not part of the Eurozone (Bulgaria and Poland).

1 National Stereotypes, Nation Branding, Social Media and Text Linguistics: An Unusual but Useful Connection

In the Humanities, the study of national stereotyping and othering patterns can be approached from different perspectives. In this contribution, I would like to present a specific one rooted mainly in text linguistics and pragmatics. The text linguistic, pragmatic and media linguistic approach presented here is intended to be a useful, practical and straightforward method for the empirical analysis of national stereotyping. In this respect, this paper's main goal is to provide a working tool for evaluating national stereotypes on social media. Although the practicality of the proposed approach will be tested in a corpus-based study of Northern, Southern and Eastern European Facebook conversations about Spain, it could also be applied to the study of other European

ethnotypes; for example, the characterisation of the Germans in the French press or of the Polish in Austrian internet forums.

In today's globalised world of competing economies, national stereotypes can be a serious hindrance to companies and corporations perceived to be part of a specific nation. As Laamiri and Ouasti tellingly put it, "l'image de l'Autre est construite à travers un discours où le stéréotype règne en maître glorieux";¹ national stereotypes are very hard to erase from a given society and need to be actively opposed.

This is one of the most important reasons countries engage in nation branding. In the case of Southern European countries experiencing economic difficulties, the main objectives pursued by their nation branding strategies clearly involve "helping restore international credibility and investor confidence" and "reverse international ratings downgrades" by fighting negative ethnotypes with positive nation brand advertising.² It therefore seems obvious that the cultural dimension of national stereotyping and the economic aspects of a nation brand are closely related.

Most studies on nation branding are conceptual, with empirical research being very limited.³ When empirical research is conducted, it is based on sociological description models, and takes the form of surveys, questionnaires or interviews on a given country's reputation. A good example is the Pew Research Center report on the reputation of European countries at the peak of the euro crisis.⁴ In the particular case of Spain, several reports have been published in recent years by the Observatory on the Image of Spain, a working group established within the Spanish think tank Elcano Royal Institute. In this regard, the regular reports *Barómetro de la Imagen de España*, published once a year since 2012, are particularly relevant.⁵ This sociological approach can also be observed in an increasing number of mostly short studies concerned with the perception of a nation brand in the digital world.⁶ It seems that social media research is being incorporated into this sociological approach to nation branding and national stereotyping.

1 Laamiri, Ouasti (2001), p. 117.

2 Dinnie (2008), p. 17.

3 See Papadopoulos et al. (2016), p. 459.

4 See Kohut (2012).

5 See RI Elcano (2016).

6 E. g. Pizarro (2014) on the economic image of Spain on *Twitter* or Corvacho Manuel et al. (2014) on the reception of the campaign "I need Spain" on *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*, to quote only two well-known studies related to Spain.

Linguistic studies on national stereotypes are not very common,⁷ but despite this we can distinguish several research streams.⁸ In this respect, most of the linguistic work has been conducted within the framework of two disciplines, Semantics and Critical Discourse Analysis. Ossenberg and Baur provide an insightful review of the most relevant literature on semantic and lexicographic stereotype research.⁹ Critical Discourse Analysis has produced very important work in this respect, particularly (but not only) following the publication of *Prejudice in Discourse* by Van Dijk (1984). In more recent times, the Vienna School of Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Ruth Wodak has been concerned with identity construction and stereotyped images of the Other. As for text and media linguistics, despite the theoretical and empirical work by, for example, Dąbrowska,¹⁰ Pümpel-Mader,¹¹ and others, text linguistic research on national stereotyping has been very scarce to date.

Against this background, it is no wonder that social media have been neglected in text linguistic research concerning national stereotyping. This is not the case with other linguistic subfields, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, where there is an ongoing discussion on how to approach social media data.¹²

However, as Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites are the new “digital public sphere”,¹³ the empirical analysis of social media comments and conversations as mostly intranational textual interactions could be vital for understanding how stereotypes on any particular European nation are built up and spread. Today, the perception of the other is shaped by the media only to a certain extent. Text linguists studying national stereotyping also need to consider online comments: internet users increasingly form their opinions about other nations by reading and examining online content posted by other users, some of whom are veritable opinion-makers.

In the end, therefore, social media conversations about crisis nations may prove essential to the empirical study of national stereotyping. These nations should be aware of their image at a microscale, not least for improving and adapting their nation branding strategies.

7 See Quasthoff, Hallsteindóttir (2016), p. 347.

8 See Viliñahova (2014) for an overview.

9 See Ossenberg, Baur (2016).

10 See Dąbrowska (1999).

11 See Pümpel-Mader (2010).

12 See Unger, Wodak, KhosraviNik (2016).

13 See Valtysson (2012), p. 77.

2 An Empirical Approach to Text Linguistic Opinion Mining for Detecting and Analysing National Stereotypes

The proposed approach builds on previous research on the communicative macrostructure, particularly on text actions. The description of the actions displayed in online conversations about a given nation will not simply reveal the textual intentions of the commenting user. Far more interesting in our case will be to ascertain which topics related to a given nation they comment on, and how the users elaborate on these topics and characterise this nation. This approach, which is a purely text linguistic one, will be adapted to incorporate polarity in the way this concept is understood in sentiment analysis research. An exploration of the collocational behaviour of terms that refer directly to the nation brand in the text actions will complete the analysis.

2.1 *Text Actions and Sentiment Analysis*

In line with Rothkegel,¹⁴ I consider text actions (or text acts) to be the main structuring element in texts. Rothkegel's theory of text action, which is based on previous work by Rehbein, Gülich, Brandt/Rosengren and other authors,¹⁵ describes the interaction between writer and reader as a thematic means of structuring a text. Rothkegel's text actions are obviously modelled on Speech Act Theory.

However, contrary to speech acts and similarly to Geis' Dynamic Speech Act Theory, text acts cannot be associated "with the use of particular linguistic constructions".¹⁶ They should instead be understood as communicative actions that constitute the text's thematic structure.¹⁷

Of the different theoretical and practical approaches proposed for text acts,¹⁸ Von der Lage-Müller's "Handlungsmodell" may be the most suitable one for detecting and categorising text actions related to national stereotyping.¹⁹ This eminently descriptive model will be adapted here to suit our practical needs concerning social media comments about nations.

Three different hierarchical levels of internal organisation for text actions will be identified:

1. The sender's overall textual intent is denoted by the main text action of a given text, which in our case will be 'commenting on Spain (or any other nation)'.

¹⁴ See Rothkegel (1992), p. 675.

¹⁵ See Rehbein (1977); Gülich (1986); Brandt, Rosengren (1992).

¹⁶ Geis (1995), p. 12.

¹⁷ See Rothkegel (1984), pp. 240–242.

¹⁸ See Czachur (2007), pp. 66–77 for an overview.

¹⁹ See Von der Lage-Müller (1995), pp. 50–77.

2. The main text action is specified by secondary text actions that articulate the general topic of a textual unit of meaning. For example, 'assessing the working ethos of the Spanish' could be a secondary text action to the main one 'commenting on Spain'.
3. Every secondary text action is effectively realised by an additional third level of text actions, which will be called 'partial secondary text actions'. Continuing with our example on assessing the working ethos of the Spanish, an Austrian Facebook user could, for example, describe the Spanish as being either hard-working or lazy.

Similar approaches based on Von der Lage-Müller have been employed in recent studies on text linguistics,²⁰ but no serious attempt has so far been made to link text actions with sentiment analysis.

Sentiment analysis can be broadly defined as the "task of identifying positive or negative opinions, emotions and evaluations".²¹ Its main purpose is "to determine the contextual polarity of a given sentiment".²²

While computational linguistics in its attempt to automatically determine the sentiment contained in a text has done most of the research in this respect,²³ sentiment analysis can also be applied to other linguistic subfields. In fact, "polarity" is a common concept in imagology and contrastive literature.²⁴

Sentiment analysis will be used here to determine the polarity of secondary text actions, which will be broken down into positive and negative partial ones. This method will allow us firstly to determine the national stereotypes social media users comment on, and, secondly, to establish the polarity of those comments. Thus, in this paper national stereotypes will be detected and analysed in conjunction with the text actions they shape and their polarity.

In the particular case of Spain, the *Sixth Report on the Image of Spain* by the Royal Elcano Institute provides a useful list of national stereotypes,²⁵ which can be readily adapted to our needs. Based on this list, 14 secondary text actions will be identified for our search. Four of them evaluate Spanish society, describing Spanish society and assessing the Spanish in terms of trustworthiness, amicability and tolerance. Another four are related to the Spanish economy,

20 See, for example Schröder (2003); Janich (2005); Golonka (2009); Ortner (2014); Sánchez Prieto (2017).

21 Stock, Stock (2013), p. 435.

22 Hollander et al. (2016), p. 8.

23 See Taboada (2016) for an overview.

24 For example Leerssen (2007), p. 344.

25 RI Elcano (2016), p. 29.

assessing the state of the Spanish economy, commenting on corruption, and assessing the working ethos of the Spanish and the affluence and material prosperity in Spain. Three more text actions assess Spanish politics, describing the Spanish political system and its political parties, commenting on regional nationalism, and another three are linked to other topics such as commenting on Spanish tourist destinations, Spanish culture, and other topics.

Since computational linguistics has been developing analytical tools for natural language processing for some time now, I was hoping to find a feasible method for automatically recognising and classifying text acts. A computer linguist carried out an evaluation of the performance of some of the existing speech act classifiers, respectively feeding the corresponding tools with one hundred randomly extracted French corpus comments on Spain. The same comments were also manually broken down into text actions. The accuracy obtained with these computational linguistic tools (*Maximum Entropy Model*, *Support Vector Machines* and *Naïve Bayes* classifiers) never exceeded 60%, and was far below the accuracy figures reported by the authors proposing or exploring the given tools. The accuracy of sentiment analysis tools such as *SentiWordNet* and *Taboada's Semantic Orientation Calculator* was also considered insufficient for our descriptive needs,²⁶ and they were hence discarded.

These disappointing results are consistent and may be due to the fact that the applicability of these tools is limited to the subject domains they were designed for.²⁷ Besides, there is not always a clear relation between speech or text act and their morphosyntactic and semantic surface.

The lack of a suitable speech or text act classifier forced us to adopt a partly manual, partly automatic, procedure. Each corpus was automatically broken down into units of meaning by adding sentence boundaries to the compiled corpus with the help of *Python Natural Language Toolkit*. The automatic segmentation was then manually revised and corrected. The units of meaning were then categorised into one of the secondary text actions considered, and their polarity determined.

2.2 Collocational Behaviour of Key Words Referring Directly to the Nation Brand

Studying the collocational behaviour of key words that refer directly to the nation brand could also shed some light on the use of national stereotypes on

²⁶ See Taboada (2011).

²⁷ See Ortiz, Hernández (2013), p. 98.

social media. Collocations are understood here as the recurrent co-occurrence of words; that is, the “tendency for words to occur together repeatedly”.²⁸ The study of collocation patterns is widely used in Critical Discourse Analysis,²⁹ and may help reveal stereotyping schemes in a text linguistic study such as ours.

However, as large bodies of text are generally needed to obtain significant results, the study of collocational patterns may not be relevant for us.

3 Spain in the Eyes of Northern, Southern and Eastern European Facebook Users

3.1 *Corpus Description*

The practicality of the proposed analytical method has been tested in a corpus-based study of Facebook conversations about Spain. *Facebook* is by far the most popular social media platform, and the third most visited site on the internet.³⁰ It is thus an ideal platform to extract information about what European internet users think about a given nation. Since reading news items on Spain clearly prompts people to comment on this nation and its citizens, the compiled corpus comprises Facebook conversations posted on the corresponding pages of different newspapers across Europe. I searched the Facebook page of each newspaper for stories containing the terms “Spain” and “Spanish” in the respective language over the period June to December 2016 (six months). Sports and show business news were not considered. All the comments in conversation threads in which Spain was their main topic were extracted. In other words, in order to meet the criteria for inclusion in the corpus, the comments had to appear in Spain-related threads published beneath Facebook posts about Spain.

For each country, one right- and one left-leaning newspaper with the highest circulation in each case were selected. This figure was provided by the national audit bureau of circulation: the *Österreichische Auflagenkontrolle* in Austria, the *Centrum voor Informatie over de Media* in Belgium, the *Alliance pour les Chiffres de la Presse et des Médias* in France, the *Federazione Italiana Editori Giornali* in Italy, and the *Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy* in Poland. The Bulgarian figures were provided by the National Statistical Institute.

28 Saeed (2009), p. 60.

29 See Fairclough (2003), p. 131.

30 See <http://www.alexa.com/topsites> [accessed 20.02.2017].

The selected newspapers are as follows:

- For Austria: the centre-right *Die Presse* and the centre-left weekly *Der Standard*.
- For Flanders: the centrist *De Standaard* and the centre-left *De Morgen*.
- For France: the centre-right *Le Figaro* and the centre-left *Le Monde*.
- For Italy: the centre-right *Il Corriere della Sera* and centre-left *La Repubblica*.
- For Poland: the centre-right *Rzeczpospolita* (the largest daily in terms of circulation, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, had just two news items on Spain and very few comments) and the left-leaning weekly *Polytika* (there are no relevant centre-left or left daily newspapers in Poland).
- For Bulgaria: the centre-right weekly *Kapital* and the centre-left daily *Trud*. Like all the other Bulgarian dailies, *Trud* is a hybrid tabloid, so the Bulgarian subcorpus is not fully comparable with the other ones.

This constitutes an appropriate selection of relevant newspapers from two Northern European countries (Flanders and Austria), two Southern European ones (Italy and France), and two Eastern European countries outside the Eurozone (Poland and Bulgaria).

The number of tokens and total units of meaning in each subcorpus is stated in Table 11.1. The units of meaning coincide with the text actions. Despite the design of the corpus, it is striking that not even half the text actions refer to Spain.

TABLE 11.1 Corpus description

Country	Tokens	Units of meaning (total)	Units of meaning referring to Spain
Austria	5948	398	140 (35.2%)
Flanders	4274	297	124 (41.8%)
France	29671	1393	571 (41%)
Italy	28672	1596	803 (50.3%)
Poland	1918	114	83 (72.8%)
Bulgaria	92	8	8 (100%)
Total	70575	3806	1729 (45.4%)

3.2 *Text Actions in the Corpus: Results*

The evaluation of the six sets of corpus data according to this description model sheds interesting light on the nature of the text actions referring to

TABLE 11.2 Secondary text actions (STAs) assessing Spain in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
STAs describing Spanish society	7,9% (n = 11)	6,5% (n = 8)	13,2% (n = 77)	13,1% (n = 105)	4,8% (n = 4)	0%
STAs assessing the Spanish economy	27,1% (n = 38)	33,9% (n = 42)	24,7% (n = 142)	22,2% (n = 179)	0%	0%
STAs assessing Spanish politics	44,3% (n = 62)	43,5% (n = 54)	54,8% (n = 310)	29,2% (n = 234)	41% (n = 34)	88% (n = 7)
STAs on other topics related to Spain	20,7% (n = 29)	16,1% (n = 20)	7,3% (n = 42)	35,5% (n = 285)	54,2% (n = 45)	12% (n = 1)
Total	100% (n = 140)	100% (n = 124)	100% (n = 571)	100% (n = 803)	100% (n = 83)	100% (n = 8)

Spain. Politics seems to be the most relevant topic for Austrian, Flemish, French and Bulgarian Facebook users involved in conversations about Spain (see Table 11.2). In contrast, secondary text actions (STAs) “describing other topics related to Spain” in the Italian and Polish subcorpora record the highest percentage. Tellingly, only Western Europeans are apparently interested in assessing the Spanish economy: 22–34% of all Spain-related STAs in the Austrian, Flemish, French and Italian subcorpora do so. As these results are only partially influenced by the range of news topics and news items posted by each newspaper on Facebook, these findings are very striking. The Spanish economic crisis does not appear to be a hot topic in Poland or Bulgaria, at least not on Facebook.

3.2.1 *Assessing Spanish Society*

The number of occurrences or number of secondary text actions assessing Spanish society is very low or non-existent in the Eastern European corpora and low in the Northern European ones. The results that can be extracted from the corpus (Table 11.3) are therefore only truly relevant in the case of the Italian and French datasets.

In the Austrian and Flemish corpora, Spanish society is described as being more traditional than modern: 77,7% of all Austrian partial secondary text actions (PSTAs) and 100% of all Flemish ones assessing Spanish society describe Spain as a traditional country. The French seem to have a completely

TABLE 11.3 STAs and PSTAs assessing Spanish society in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
STAs describing Spanish society	81,8% (n = 9)	50% (n = 4)	26% (n = 20)	22,8% (n = 24)	0	0
characterising Spain as a modern country	0	0	50% (n = 10)	45,8% (n = 11)		
characterising Spain as a traditional country	77,7% (n = 7)	100% (n = 4)	35% (n = 7)	45,8% (n = 11)		
neutral	22,3% (n = 2)	0	15% (n = 3)	8,4% (n = 2)		
STAs assessing the Spanish on trustworthiness	18,2% (n = 2)	50% (n = 4)	28,6% (n = 22)	64,8% (n = 68)	100% (n = 4)	0
stating that the Spanish are trustworthy	0	0	45,4% (n = 10)	7,4% (n = 5)	75% (n = 3)	
stating that the Spanish are not to be trusted	100% (n = 2)	100% (n = 4)	54,6% (n = 12)	70,6% (n = 48)	25% (n = 1)	
neutral	0	0	0	22% (n = 15)	0	
STAs assessing the Spanish on amicability	0	0	28,6% (n = 22)	10,5% (n = 11)	0	0
expressing that the Spanish are friendly			68,2% (n = 15)	45,4% (n = 5)		
describing the Spanish as unfriendly			18,2% (n = 4)	54,6% (n = 6)		

TABLE 11.3 STAs and PSTAs assessing Spanish society in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain (*cont.*)

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
neutral			13,6% (n = 3)	0		0
STAs assessing the Spanish on tolerance	0	0	16,8% (n = 13)	1,9% (n = 2)	0	0
describing Spanish society as tolerant			76,9% (n = 10)	50% (n = 1)		
describing Spanish society as intolerant			23,1% (n = 3)	50% (n = 1)		
neutral			0	0		
Total	100% (n = 11, 7.9% from total STAs)	100% (n = 8, 6.5% from total STAs)	100% (n = 77, 13.2% from total STAs)	100% (n = 105, 13.1% from total STAs)	100% (n = 4, 4.8% from total STAs)	100% (n = 0)

different opinion in this respect: 50% of the partial secondary text actions have a positive polarity (that is, Spain is a modern country), while only 35% have a negative polarity. The Italians seem to be divided on this matter. The following Austrian example, which condemns bullfighting, is a telling example:

(1) “Spanien sollte lieber die tierquäler bestrafen, die stierkämpfe abschaffen und die toten windhunde von den bäumen schneiden, auf denen die spanischen jäger sie am saisonende aufknüpfen” (A-STANDARD 52)³¹

The secondary text action “assessing the Spanish on trustworthiness” is designed to address the typical stereotype of the untrustworthiness and

31 Examples are referenced with country abbreviation–name of the newspaper–Facebook comment number in each corpus.

unreliability of the Spanish. This national stereotype seems to be deeply ingrained in Western Europe, particularly in Austria and Flanders, but also in France. At the other extreme, the Polish are the most positive ones about the Spanish. The Italian data should be viewed with caution, as three-quarters of these negative text actions are related to a single news item on a Spanish court decision finding a bus driver not guilty of negligent homicide after a coach crash in Spain involving Italian students. In the next example, a Facebook user is implicitly describing Spanish justice as untrustworthy:

(2) “La giustizia spagnola, peggiore della nostra, se possibile [...]”
(I-CORRIERE 42)

Only the French and Italians assess the Spanish on friendliness and tolerance. In the French corpus, Spain is mostly seen as a friendly and tolerant nation, and in some cases is described as more so than France, as in these two units of meaning:

(3) “Je trouve que l’Espagne est un pays beaucoup plus tolérant avec l’homosexualité que la France. J’ai vécu à Madrid et personne ne m’a jamais insulté pour embrasser un garçon dans le métro où me balader main dans la main avec lui dans la rue de n’importe quel quartier. JAMAIS.”
(F-LE MONDE 119)

In contrast, the percentage of partial secondary text actions in the Italian corpus describing the Spanish as unfriendly and not to be trusted amounts to nearly 55% and 71%, respectively.

3.2.2 *Assessing the Spanish Economy*

About a quarter of all Western European text actions assess the Spanish economy. As the empirical data from Table 11.4 suggest, Spain is mostly perceived as a country in economic regression.

The secondary text action “assessing the shape of the Spanish economy” is the most important one in terms of occurrences in all relevant data sets. In their corpora, the Austrians, the Flemish and the French overwhelmingly describe the Spanish economy as particularly weak, as in (4):

(4) “Ein Land, in dem Arbeitslosigkeit, Schulden und sinkende Löhne einen Linksruck bringt [...]” (A-PRESSE 46)

In the Italian corpus, a sizable percentage of partial text actions surprisingly describe the economic situation as strong (26%), or neither weak nor strong

TABLE 11.4 STAs and PSTAs assessing the Spanish economy in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
STAs assessing the state of the Spanish economy	47.4% (n = 18)	33.3% (n = 14)	55% (n = 78)	68.8% (n = 123)	o	o
describing the Spanish economy as strong	5.6% (n = 1)	o	7.7% (n = 6)	26% (n = 32)		
describing the Spanish economy as weak	94.4% (n = 17)	85.7% (n = 12)	83.3% (n = 65)	58.5% (n = 72)		
neutral	o	14.3% (n = 2)	9% (n = 7)	15.5% (n = 19)		
Assessing the working ethos of the Spanish	10.5% (n = 4)	11.9% (n = 5)	4.9% (n = 7)	o	o	o
describing the Spanish as hard-working	o	o	28.6% (n = 2)			
describing the Spanish as lazy	100% (n = 4)	100% (n = 5)	57.2% (n = 4)			
neutral	o	o	14.2% (n = 1)			
Commenting on corruption in Spain	26.3% (n = 10)	28.6% (n = 12)	4.2% (n = 6)	10% (n = 18)	o	o
characterising the Spanish as honest	o	8.3% (n = 1)	33.3% (n = 2)	33.3% (n = 6)		
characterising the Spanish as corrupt	80% (n = 8)	83.4% (n = 10)	67.7% (n = 4)	67.7% (n = 12)		
neutral	20% (n = 2)	8.3% (n = 1)	o	o		
Assessing affluence and material prosperity in Spain	15.8% (n = 6)	26.2% (n = 11)	35.9% (n = 51)	21.2% (n = 38)	o	o

This stereotype is thus still very much alive. In most of the STAs studied, Spain is seen as an impoverished country in decline. This has been the traditional view of Northern and Western Europeans towards Spain for decades, as in the following Flemish example:

(7) “Hij heeft, en nog, de Spanjaarden uitgemolken en de slechte resultaten zijn er, 22,8 % werklozen, 28,6 % vd bevolking is arm, 50 % vd jongeren hebben geen werk.” (BE-DM 4)

However, even Northern European *Facebook* users recognize that Spain is in the main a developed country, as in the following Flemish comment, where Brussels and Madrid are compared and the Belgian infrastructure deficits are acknowledged:

(8) “Waar wachten jullie nog op, Brussel en de Vlaamse rand, om net als rond Madrid vier concentrische ringwegen aan te leggen!” (BE-STAN 39)

3.2.3 *Assessing Spanish Politics*

Spanish politics is assessed in a high percentage of Western, Southern and Eastern European comments (see Table 11.5 for an overview and below for the discussion). This may be due to the fact that a good deal of Spain-related news posted on *Facebook* falls into the realm of politics.

Judging from the results, Spain is not considered a particularly stable democracy by the Austrian, the Flemish, the French and the Polish. In contrast, the Italians overwhelmingly state that Spain is a stable democracy.

Most text actions referring to Spanish politics focus on Spanish political parties. The vast majority of Northern and Southern European text actions reveal a negative polarity in this respect. The Austrians and the Flemish seem to be particularly sceptical about Spanish politicians, often even being hostile when they describe them as corrupt and damaging to the Spanish people, as in (9) and (10):

(9) “De man die Spanje kapotbespaarde, wordt nu de premier van een minderheidsregering [...]” (BE-DM 32)

(10) “Sie [Die Spanier] sind empört über die Günstlingswirtschaft und Korruption in den beiden großen Volksparteien.” (A-PRESSE 45)

The Polish and Bulgarians have a much more positive opinion of Spanish politicians. In most cases, this is the result of comparing their own political system

TABLE 11.5 STA and PSTAs assessing Spanish politics in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
Describing the Spanish political system	8.1% (n = 5)	13% (n = 7)	11.6% (n = 36)	5.2% (n = 12)	11.8% (n = 4)	0
stating that Spain is a stable democracy	40% (n = 2)	28.6% (n = 2)	41.7% (n = 15)	66.7% (n = 8)	25% (n = 1)	
commenting on the lack of democracy in Spain	60% (n = 3)	57.1% (n = 4)	58.3% (n = 21)	25% (n = 3)	75% (n = 3)	
neutral	0	14.3% (n = 1)	0	8.3% (n = 1)	0	
Describing Spanish political parties	80.6% (n = 50)	64.8% (n = 35)	72.3% (n = 22)	88% (n = 206)	17.6% (n = 6)	100% (n = 7)
in a positive manner	10% (n = 5)	5.7% (n = 2)	18.3% (n = 41)	11.7% (n = 24)	50% (n = 3)	71.4% (n = 5)
in a negative manner	82% (n = 41)	85.7% (n = 30)	65.2% (n = 146)	62.1% (n = 128)	16.6% (n = 1)	28.6% (n = 2)
neutral	8% (n = 4)	8.6% (n = 3)	16.5% (n = 37)	26.2% (n = 54)	33.4% (n = 2)	0
Commenting on regional nationalism	11.3% (n = 7)	22.2% (n = 12)	16.1% (n = 50)	6.8% (n = 16)	70.6% (n = 24)	0
aligning him or herself with Spanish constitutionalism	42.9% (n = 3)	25% (n = 3)	50% (n = 25)	56.2% (n = 9)	75% (n = 18)	
aligning him or herself with regional nationalism	57.1% (n = 4)	75% (n = 9)	30% (n = 15)	43.8% (n = 7)	8.3% (n = 2)	

TABLE 11.5 STA sand PSTAs assessing Spanish politics in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain (*cont.*)

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
neutral	0	0	20% (n = 10)	0	16.7% (n = 4)	
Total	100% (n = 62, 44.3% from total STAs)	100% (n = 54, 43.5% from total STAs)	100% (n = 310, 54.8% from all STAs)	100% (n = 234, 29.2% from all STAs)	100% (n = 34, 41% from all STAs)	100% (n = 7, 88% from all STAs)

with the Spanish one. A good example may be (11): a Bulgarian internet user thanks the Spanish minister of economic affairs for using plain language to talk about straightforward (economic) facts:

(11) “Най-после, някой да го каже на ‘ясен български!’” (BG-KAPITAL 1)

In the Flemish, French, Italian and Polish corpora, a significant number of text actions comment on the Catalan question and on regional nationalism. The French and the Italians seem to align themselves with Spanish constitutionalism rather than with regional nationalism. In contrast, the Flemish (as well as the Austrians) tend to welcome Catalan separatism (see example 12). The Polish react very differently and stress in their comments that they do not understand Catalan separatism, as in (13), where all separatists are labelled “idiots”:

(12) “Catalonië onafhankelijk!” (BE-DM 4)

(13) “Debiły! Wszyscy separatyscy są debiłami” (PL- RZECZPOSPOLITA 15)

3.2.4 Assessing the Spanish on Other Topics

Spain is still seen as an attractive tourist destination. The positive polarity is high in the Austrian, Flemish and Polish text actions. It is, however, mainly negative in the French and Italian corpora. Only the Austrians, the French, the Italians and the Polish assess Spanish culture. The opinions expressed in the

French and Polish corpora are overwhelmingly positive, whereas in the Italian case they are mainly negative or neutral.

The last secondary text action, “commenting on other topics”, is extremely interesting. When commenting on other Spain-related topics, the Flemish and French appear to do so in a mainly positive manner, while the Polish adopt a neutral tone. The results for the Italian corpus are misleading, as over three quarters of the Italian partial secondary text actions are assessments of the Franco period (see Table 11.6 for more details).

TABLE 11.6 STAs and PSTAs assessing the Spanish on other topics in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
Commenting on Spanish tourist destinations	34.5% (n = 10)	35% (n = 7)	16.6% (n = 7)	8.8% (n = 25)	15.6% (n = 7)	0
making a positive comment on a tourist destination	80% (n = 8)	42.8% (n = 3)	28.6% (n = 2)	36% (n = 9)	100% (n = 7)	
making a negative comment on a tourist destination	20% (n = 2)	28.6% (n = 2)	42.8% (n = 3)	52% (n = 13)	0	
neutral	0	28.6% (n = 2)	28.6% (n = 2)	12% (n = 3)	0	
Commenting on Spanish culture	10.3% (n = 3)	0	7.2% (n = 3)	11.2% (n = 32)	35.6% (n = 16)	0
making a positive comment on Spanish culture	66.7% (n = 2)		100% (n = 3)	9.4% (n = 3)	75% (n = 12)	
making a negative comment on Spanish culture	33.3% (n = 1)		0	40.6% (n = 13)	12.5% (n = 2)	
neutral			0	50% (n = 16)	12.5% (n = 2)	
Commenting on other topics	55.2% (n = 16)	65% (n = 13)	76.2% (n = 32)	80% (n = 228)	48.8% (n = 22)	12% (n = 1)

TABLE 11.6 STAs and PSTAs assessing the Spanish on other topics in Northern, Southern and Eastern European comments about Spain (*cont.*)

	Austrian	Flemish	French	Italian	Polish	Bulgarian
making a positive comment	43.7% (n = 7)	38.4% (n = 5)	65.6% (n = 21)	25.4% (n = 58)	9.1 (n = 2)	0
making a negative comment	43.7% (n = 7)	30.8% (n = 4)	15.6% (n = 5)	50% (n = 114)	13.6% (n = 3)	100% (n = 1)
neutral	12.6% (n = 2)	30.8 (n = 4)	18.8% (n = 6)	24.6% (n = 56)	77.3% (n = 17)	0
Total	100% (n = 29,	100% (n = 20,		100% (n = 285,	100% 54.2% (n = 45,	100% (n = 1, 12%
	20.7% from all STAs)	16.1% from all STAs)	7.3% (n = 42)	35.5% from all STAs)	54.2% from all STAs)	from all STAs)

3.3 Collocations in the Corpus: Results

As expected, the results obtained by exploring the collocational patterns of the corpus comments are neither representative nor relevant. Lexical approaches are thus only of limited applicability if the data set is small. In our case, almost no collocates for the key term “Spain” could be found in the Austrian, Flemish, Polish and Bulgarian data sets. Table 11.7 shows the few collocates found in the French and Italian corpus by counting the co-occurrences with the key term “Spain”. The analysis has been carried out with the help of the Sketch Engine lexical corpus manager and analysis software.

TABLE 11.7 Collocation candidates (terms) by co-occurrence count: Spain

French	Italian
Portugal (10)	Governo (12)
Pays (10)	Guerra (7)
France (3)	Franco (5)
	Italia (5)
	Paese (5)

TABLE 11.8 Top 10 key words (terms) of the subcorpora in Spain-related contexts (minimal word frequency: five, stop word excluded)

French	Italian
Espagne (87)	Spagna (197)
UE (51)	Spagnoli (54)
Podemos (41)	Podemos (31)
Espagnols (38)	Spagnola (28)
Brexit (20)	Dittatura (21)
Sanctionner (20)	PSOE (20)
Austérité (18)	Gibilterra (19)
Nationalistes (14)	Catalani (14)
Catalogne (13)	Dittatore (12)
Rajoy (10)	Rajoy (10)

The extraction of the most common key words in the French and Italian corpora, as shown in Table 11.8, reveals that most key words are related to Spanish politics. Very few of them are linked to the economic crisis (as French “sanctionner” and “austérité”).

4 **Conclusions**

This paper has presented a practical text-linguistic approach to the analysis of national stereotypes on social media. Since lexical approaches are only of limited applicability with *small data*, the approach outlined here is rooted in text actions and sentiment analysis. It distinguishes three hierarchical levels of internal organisation for text actions: main text action (what or who are we talking about?), secondary text actions (which topics related to this object/reality/person are we talking about?) and partial secondary text actions (how do we characterise this object/reality/ person in terms of polarity?).

The proposed approach has been tested in a corpus-based study of Northern, Southern and Eastern European *Facebook* conversations that include Austrian, Flemish, French, Italian, Polish and Bulgarian comments about Spain. The thorough analysis of the Spain-related text actions in the six corpora has not revealed any surprising results. For the Austrian and the Flemish Spain is a rather traditional country in a heavy economic crisis and Spaniards and their politicians are not trustworthy and lazy. However, the Austrians do appreciate

the Spanish culture and for both the Austrians and the Flemish Spain seems to remain an attractive tourist destination. The French have a more positive opinion of Spain. For them, Spain is a modern country and the Spanish are friendly and tolerant. Nevertheless, they are not always trustworthy and Spain, which is not considered a particularly stable democracy, is in a deep economic crisis. Spanish culture is viewed in a positive light. The Italians are divided in their opinions about the Spanish regarding the modernity of the country and the friendliness of its population. For most Italian *Facebook* users the Spanish are not trustworthy and the economic situation in Spain is as bad as in Italy. They also have a rather negative view of Spain as a tourist destination. However, for them Spain is a stable democracy. The very few Polish and Bulgarian comments about Spain cast a rather positive light on Spain and the Spaniards as a people.

Despite its problems and limitations, the analytical method explained in this paper will hopefully enable linguists to break down conversational threads about a given nation into text actions, and so draw conclusions about the presence and actional nature of national stereotypes in text corpora.

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