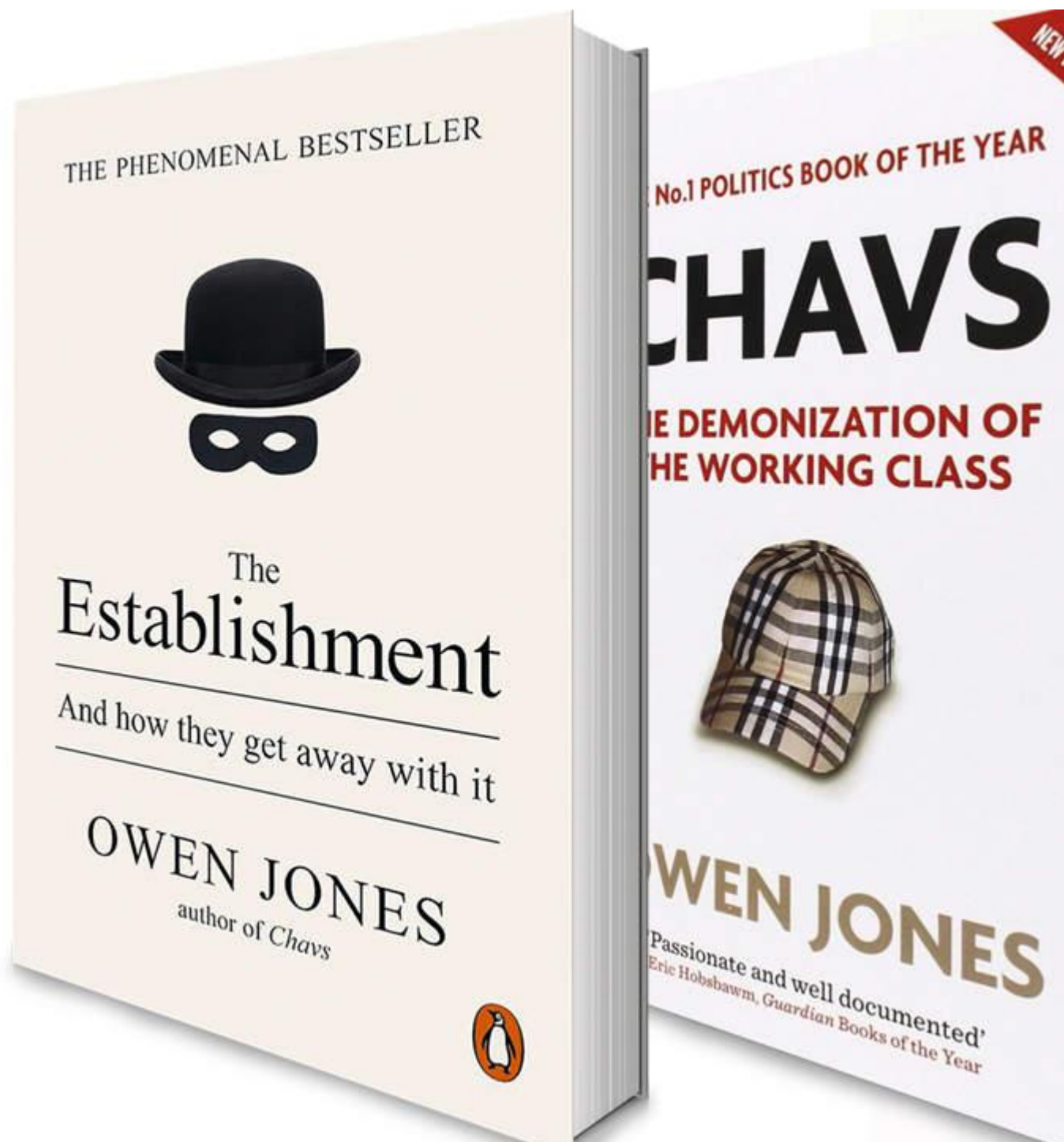


# The Language of Power: Owen Jones

## [C1]

Il giovane britannico, giornalista e opinionista politico, è autore di due importanti saggi in cui analizza il ruolo coesivo del linguaggio nella società al di là della divisione di classe.



The relationship between language and power is a close one. While complicated language was once used to confuse and intimidate, more recently, simpler language is assumed to be the key component in capturing voters. Political scientists, for example, have long believed that populists, from Donald Trump to Marine Le Pen, use easier language to appeal to ordinary people and distance themselves from elites.

## HOW SIMPLE IS IT

However, a study published in Cambridge University Press in 2020 has come to an unexpected conclusion. It compared the language of right-wing populists active in recent years in the United States, France, United Kingdom and Italy to that of their main opponents. Approximately one million words from leaders' speeches were analysed using a series of linguistic measures for evaluating simplicity that included sentence length and structure, as well as [choice](#) of vocabulary.

## LONG MESSAGES

Surprisingly, it was found that the language of Donald Trump was only [slightly](#) simpler than that of Hillary Clinton, and much more complex than that of US President Joe Biden. It found right-wing populist figures Nigel Farage in the UK and Marine Le Pen in France used language that was more difficult than that of their main rivals, with Farage in particular speaking in very long sentences. Italy's Matteo Salvini was a [mixed bag](#): simpler on some measures but not on others. Given these [findings](#), what is it really about such right-wing populists that attracts support? And what is it about the opposition on the left that is failing to [get its message across](#)?

## THE ESTABLISHMENT

The language of power is one area that is examined in Owen Jones' bestselling non-fiction books. Born in Sheffield in the UK, Jones worked as a [trade union](#) and parliamentary researcher before becoming a prominent author, political columnist and podcaster. His books [aim](#) to demystify politics for ordinary Britons. In *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* and the subsequent *The Establishment: And How They Get Away With It*, Jones shows how an elite minority of wealthy people [misuse](#) politics [to hold on](#) to their privilege. While both books were about Britain, they [touched a nerve](#) across Europe and were international successes.

# WHAT IS AUSTERITY?

Jones argues that politicians on the left assume that the public understand issues when they don't. Political [jargon](#) and [buzzwords](#) are ubiquitous in politics and the press but often confuse the public, he says. [In the run-up to](#) the UK elections in 2017, for example, years after the economic crisis occurred, the most googled question in the UK during a televised debate was still "What is austerity?" When Speak Up met with Jones, he began by explaining why accessibility is key to communication. **Owen Jones**(English accent): I think the left is often very bad at communicating and we communicate in a way that only appeals to people who already are on the left. I find the left often communicate in a very abstract theoretical manner. George Lakoff is a political linguist in America and he says the right often use stories when they talk and the left use facts and statistics. But we are human beings and we empathise, we don't think about facts and statistics. So, it's about reaching people who aren't [intellectually-minded](#) middle class [lefties](#). What I'm trying to get across is the ideas of who has power and wealth, who runs society, the injustices that define our societies... to make that easily understood to people.

# PROPAGANDA

Stories, however, need to also be based on fact. Right-wing parties [thrive on](#) divisive narratives designed to convince people that what is good for the rich few is good for them, too. Right-wing media and social media help spread this disinformation, says Jones. **Owen Jones**: The media should be informing people and educating them but often they're just a big tool of propaganda and they are trying to achieve political ends. In Britain, for example, on average people think 27 per cent of social security is lost to fraud, [but in fact] it's only 0.7 per cent. They think there are far more immigrants than there are, they think there are twenty times more teenage pregnancies than there are... We're told we have a free press but instead the media is run by a very small group of very rich people and it's in their interests to defend the status quo. And they ignore people or demonise them or humiliate them and they distort people's perceptions of the world.

# COMMON CAUSE

Most people believe in justice, which is why they [take offence](#) when they read about people who apparently cheat the system. But progressive politics is all about fair play, says Jones. People must realise that whatever differences there are between them and their neighbours, they are a lot smaller than those that separate them from the powerful few. **Owen Jones**: For me it's always been a case of how do you find common cause. And it's about building coalitions, it's about

having debates and discussions where we accept that our strategies and ideas won't always be the same, but that we always find and emphasise the common causes that we have. Whether you see yourself as working class or middle class, you've got the same interests: you want a good job that pays properly, that has good conditions, that has good rights, including a pension. You want good services like education and health. And I think you're [on a collision course](#) with those at the top of society, who concentrate wealth in very few hands. They don't want to pay their taxes. It's in their interests to pay people less, to take away their pensions, to privatise public services and run them for profit. We're all suffering from the [greed](#) of those who are in power.

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# Glossary

- **to hold on** = mantenere
- **lefties** = persone di sinistra
- **take offence** = offendersi
- **intellectually-minded** = con mentalità intellettuale
- **greed** = avidità
- **slightly** = leggermente
- **mixed bag** = caso misto
- **findings** = risultati
- **get its message across** = trasmettere, comunicare
- **buzzwords** = termini di moda
- **choice** = scelta
- **trade union** = sindacato
- **aim** = mirare
- **In the run-up to** = in vista di
- **on a collision course** = verso la collisione
- **Get Away With** = cavarsela, farla franca
- **misuse** = abusare
- **touched a nerve** = toccare un punto sensibile
- **jargon** = gergo
- **thrive on** = prosperare attraverso