

INTRODUCTION

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Abstract – “The Languages and Anti-Languages of Health Communication in the Age of Conspiracy Theories, Mis/Disinformation and Hate Speech” aims at analysing the languages of discourse of health communication, specifically health message design, addressing COVID-19 in both institutional and non-institutional media settings. The purpose of this special issue is to explore the “anti-languages” and counter-discourses endorsing (mis/dis-)information, and conspiracy theories which are in direct opposition to official discourses and challenge social and political hegemony. The discourse approach to health communication featured in the papers of this special issue will help understanding social responses to sickness and belief related to health.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; COVID-19; disinformation; hate speech; health communication; misinformation.

This special issue of *Lingue e Linguaggi* on “The Languages and Anti-Languages of Health Communication in the Age of Conspiracy Theories, Mis/Disinformation and Hate Speech” focuses on health communication in both institutional and non-institutional media settings and explores its relation to mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories. Mis/disinformation, conspiracy theories and hostile communication are reportedly on the rise and are beginning to receive significant attention among linguists and discourse scholars because of the alternative discourses which are generated through them (e.g. Demata *et al.* forthcoming; Knoblock 2020; Zummo 2017, 2018). With the growing popularity of online social networks and their (mis)information propagation potential, the ability to assess the credibility of information has become crucial. These phenomena have always existed but have gained stronger traction recently also thanks to the growing influence of social media in the public sphere (Demata, Heaney & Herring 2018; Zummo 2017). One of the consequences of this influence is that the communication of unofficial or alternative health discourse, often in opposition to that of “official” media and science, has become very difficult to challenge. Furthermore, the narratives supporting alternative health discourses have increasingly become part of the growing consensus for populist parties and leaders in many parts of the world, as distrust in the official science feeds into

the typically populist drive against establishment politics (Bergmann 2018).

During the last three decades or so, health discourse has been particularly exposed to mis/disinformation and fake news. Conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation about AIDS have been followed by those about the supposed damage brought by vaccines (Archer 2015; Kata 2010). A long tradition of studying public health communication and the impact on individuals' health beliefs, behaviours and attitudes has produced increasing attention to the elaboration of the message and risk of emotive amplification. In fact, tension arises between medical science looking out for the collective well-being and groups being concerned with their individual health. As an example of this, many studies have analysed the linguistic constructions and discourses on the correlation between the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism, that are based on individual information regarding immunization, with the medical community encouraging individuals to vaccinate and large sectors of the public who exhibit hesitancy due to varying personal concerns or beliefs with regard to vaccine efficacy and safety. Such exchanges have developed in anti-vaccination discourses, with (mainly online) fora working as echo chambers. More recently, the coronavirus outbreak has provided evidence of how the spread of disinformation and conspiracy thinking has reached beyond the narrow confines of individual or group narratives for believers. As noted by the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 outbreak and response was accompanied by a massive infodemic: an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that made it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (PAHO 2020).

The importance of quality information in the healthcare domain is impossible to overestimate since erroneous or useless/irrelevant materials may imperil people's lives. This is amplified at times of epidemics because of the potential to harm a high number of people. While all health-related mis/disinformation is dangerous, some of it might originate without malicious intent, while some other may be a result of deliberate distortions called to conform to political, ideological or other dogmatic positions. A thorough analysis of the threat, as well as careful studies of the best ways to counter it, are necessary. Finding a solution is not an easy task. It has been demonstrated that addressing conspiracy theories with only corrective information is often ineffective, and crafting successful counter-narratives needs to take into account psychological, socio-political, and cultural reasons behind the urge to spread false information (Lazić & Žeželj 2021).

In such circumstances, a linguistic approach to health communication can help understanding social response thanks to the analysis of interactions, or by examining ideological representations of sickness and belief related to healthy life. It is therefore the purpose of this special issue to explore the

“anti-languages” (Halliday 1976) at the basis of the counter-discourses endorsing (mis/dis)information and conspiracy theories in direct opposition to official discourses and challenging social and political hegemony (Terdiman 1985; Van Dijk 1997). The collection of new and original research presented here focuses on the languages of health communication in both institutional and non-institutional media settings. It addresses a range of aspects related to genre and discourse as well as morphosyntactic characteristics of health communication in the current age, with the ultimate goal to gain insights and tackle misinformation about health.

Specifically, **Maria Ivana Lorenzetti** examines the rhetorical response to the COVID-19 pandemic of two right-wing populist leaders, former US President Donald J. Trump and current UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The study exposes the two leaders’ attempts to exploit the emergency in the typical populist style to serve their political interests. In his trademark style, Trump used the pandemic as a stage to call out and blame multiple enemies both at home (the US Congress, the media) and abroad (China). On the other hand, Johnson, who, unlike Trump, did not lend an ear to conspiratorial thinking but still initially minimised the extent of the danger, framed the pandemic as the fight of a nation “walking alone” in a nationalist sense.

Focusing on the British side of the health communication used during the pandemic, **Carlotta Fiammenghi** explores the discourses of and about anti-vaccination conspiracy theories in two national British newspapers, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail*. The study focuses on the frequency and usage of the lemma ‘conspiracy’ in articles dealing with the controversy surrounding the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine in the UK. The phrases ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ are used with a strong negative connotation, mainly as insults, and conversations on Facebook which contain such phrases are markedly antagonistic. The interlocutors’ only aim appears to defend their pre-existing point of view from the other side’s attacks, and the discourses of and about anti-vaccination conspiracy theories express strong ideological positionings rather than truth-seeking.

Anna Anselmo focuses on blogs written by British conspiracy theorist Martin Geddes, available on his personal website. The blogs were written from March to December 2020 and represent an early testimony of COVID-19 scepticism. The article aims to analyse Geddes’ conspirational counter-narrative of the coronavirus syndemic by focusing on four elements: the generic characteristics of the corpus, Geddes’ construal of ethos, his texts’ connection to the theoretical framework of science-related populism, and, lastly, the representation of select social actors in the corpus and how such representation sustains Geddes’ conspirational arguments. These elements provide insight into the idiom of conspiracy theorists and their construction of counter-information and counter-knowledge.

Moving to the USA, **Jacqueline Aiello**'s article investigates anti-mask discourses in the US. They were propagated by different actors using different media, i.e. conservative radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh, users who signed an online petition against school mask mandates, and anti-mask activists speaking at school board meetings. The analysis explicates the processes involved in the delegitimization of scientific, political, and mediatic authority. It records the development and perpetuation of alternative truths by casting doubt on the interests served by key political and scientific figures and by questioning the veracity of the information coming from left-leaning news networks, government institutions, and the scientific community.

Virginia Zorzi analyzes the notorious Plandemic video interview by Judy Mikovits, a former National Cancer Institute scientist, who claimed that US public health institutions planned and profited from the pandemic. The study meticulously compares the video with the interview of ex-FDA Associate Director of Drug Safety David Graham, who became a whistleblower instrumental in uncovering serious and sometimes fatal health risks of painkiller Vioxx, withdrawn in 2004. The article catalogues linguistic and textual features used by Mikovits and Graham to convey ideological messages, such as lexical choices, actor representation, recurring themes, coherence and evidentiality. The analysis reveals both similarities and differences and raises questions concerning how close and credible the two interviews may be perceived by recipients who do not engage in fact-checking.

Stefania D'Avanzo investigates the institutional communication produced by the WHO Director General during the initial period of the pandemic, March - May 2020. At that time, WHO represented the most reliable institution committed to deliver the correct information about the COVID-19 pandemic. However, uncertainty and insecurity have characterized the news about the virus since its outbreak and resulted in distortion of information. The paper highlights the processes and the representations of the roles played by both WHO and China institutions in WHO Director 'speeches, in order to understand the legitimation strategies and possible manipulative intentions covered in such communication concerning the pandemic.

Margaret Rasulo explores the workings of "conspiratorial" platforms, and provides evidence of how they support and intensify the infodemic phenomenon by acting as "*seed sources*", or primary online providers of (mis)information. These platforms have direct access to secondary sources such as social media accounts and other knowledge-sharing platforms that trigger the infodemic system of communication. She shows that conspirators follow a specific pattern to disseminate their claims, starting by establishing

their legitimate position among the scientific community, setting up a narrative of an alleged secret plot, presenting supporting evidence, and advocating logical and even historically-grounded explanations behind their suspicions.

Focusing specifically on Twitter, **Claudia Roberta Combei** highlights the recent proliferation of online discussions on the COVID-19 vaccines and traces the evolution of this debate by analysing an ad hoc corpus of tweets (over 5.5 million words) collected from March 15th to April 14th, 2021. By employing sentiment, emotion, and emoji analysis to uncover the users' affective states, perceptions, and reactions regarding the COVID-19 vaccination, the author proves a connection between vaccine sentiment and real-time news and by other information circulating on the Internet. The analysis highlights the polarizing effect of input toward the negative and the positive extremities of the sentiment scale. At the same time, it stresses that the infodemic relies primarily on strong negative emotions, such as fear, anger, and disgust.

Again on Twitter, the multiple ways to name the virus that causes COVID-19 are examined by **Ewelina Prazmo** and **Rafal Agustyn**. Some of the labels of the pathogen, SARS-CoV-2, stress the Asian origin of the virus. Such names, as Asian virus, Chinese virus, Sinovirus or Wuhan virus are discouraged by the scientific community but remain in frequent use in various COVID-19-related discourses. While they may be purely referential, they are, nonetheless, marked with accusatory or downright racist overtones. The analysis demonstrates the intentional use of the potentially harmful names and describes blatant cases of defamatory and accusatory language targeting the Chinese, which could be linked to anti-Asian violence, especially in the US.

The issue carries on the investigation of conspiracies and health communication from non-specifically anglophone perspectives. Distinctively, **Nataša Raschi**'s article offers discursive and argumentative reflections on the differences between Diderot and D'Alembert on the question of inoculation, one of the most important subjects of their time. The polemic is articulated around several axes: pragmatic, when it focuses on the modalities of experimentation; epistemological, when it attacks the intellectualism that antecedes mathematical axioms to their benefits for society; personal, with direct accusations against the opponent.

The study of the right-wing German political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) by **Sabrina Bertollo** zeroes in on the politicization of the health discourse. It investigates official speeches of AfD parliamentarians to see how AfD's Covid-19 communication exhibits conspiratorial or misinformative traits and relates them to Facebook posts which appeared in the AfD's profile in the same time span. The comparison of morphosyntactic

features used by AfD in the two communication channels demonstrates the populists' manipulation of affixation and compounding, personal deixis, moods and deontic modality, as well as clausal linking to deliver pseudo-factual narratives and oppose official health discourse.

The issue of adapting information from a specialized field to fit the linguistic competence of the general population is addressed by **Vince Liégeois** and **Jolien Mathysen**. They look at the discursive representation of 5 terms (coronavirus, virus, COVID-19, epidemic, pandemic) in a (Dutch) corpus of Belgian government communications from a cognitive semantic point of view. They single out the frames in which these terms resurface, attribute specific functions and formal features to these frames and seek to connect them with possible communication strategies used by the Belgian government.

Giulia Adriana Pennisi investigates the discourse of the European Commission on disinformation in order to achieve institutional legitimation through the linguistic and discursive construction of 'trustworthiness', 'credibility', and 'transparency'. The results reveal the EU discursive process of conceptualising 'verifiably false or misleading information' as 'public harm', while distancing it from the EU's fight against disinformation' that is discursively constructed as 'the protection of the EU values'. In particular, the investigation will show how the lexical and phraseological interaction discursively removes the harmful potential of conspiracy theories activists, legitimises massive control measures as the most effective way to guarantee freedom of expression and pluralistic democratic debate, and empowers the EU's image as the shield protecting the European citizens' awareness and societal resilience.

The comparative approach is employed by **Litiane Barbosa Macedo** and **Bernadette Hofer-Bonfim**, who describe discursive patterns and arguments of anti-vax campaigns posted on Twitter in Brazilian Portuguese and in German in January 2021 under the hashtags #vacina and #impfung. The application of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies methodology (KhosraviNik 2018) and the Transitivity System proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, 2014) with the help of corpus-linguistic software identified recurrent themes and textual patterns in anti-vax campaigns. The comparative analysis underscored the formative role of the socio-political context for anti-vax Tweets while highlighting similarities in the discursive patterns of anti-vax arguments.

All in all, this special issue shows the extent to which health discourse can be remodelled and reshaped following diverging political agendas, and how political agendas themselves nowadays routinely include health discourse (official or "manipulated") in order to both respond to and shape communication and society.

Bionotes: Massimiliano Demata is Associate Professor of English at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin. He was a Fulbright scholar in Yale (1999) and Indiana University (2014) and has taught as Visiting Professor at Saarland University (2020), Sciences Po Lyon (2021), and OTH Regensburg (2022). He is the co-editor of the *Journal of Language and Discrimination* and has published *Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA. A Discourse-Historical Analysis* (Routledge 2022) as well as books, papers and book chapters on populist discourse, Trump's rhetoric, metaphors of the nation and social media discourse.

Natalia Knoblock is an Associate Professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan, USA. Her research interests lie mostly in political and cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and corpus-assisted discourse analysis. Some of her queries focused on the US presidential debates, xenophobia and hostility in online communication, and the cognitive processes involved in verbal aggression and propaganda.

Her articles were published in such journals as *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, *Discourse and Society*, and *Pragmatics and Cognition*. She edited the collected volumes *Language of Conflict: The Discourses of the Ukrainian Crisis* (2020) and *The Grammar of Hate: Morphosyntactic Features of Hateful, Aggressive, and Dehumanizing Discourse* (forthcoming 2022).

Marianna Lya Zummo is Associate Professor at the University of Palermo. Her interests cover issues in sociolinguistics, authenticity in discourses, communication dynamics in health communication and exchanges, studies on the dimension of modality and evidentiality. Her research is primarily related to issues in health communication in online contexts. Recent publications include: *Social Media and Crowd Diagnosis*, (2022); "Isn't It so Heartbreaking to See Our Loved Ones Decline Right before Our eyes": Exploring Posts As Illness Stories (2021); "The war is over". Militarizing the language and framing the Nation in post-Brexit discourse (2021); *Performing Authenticity on a Digital Political Stage: Politainment as Interactive Practice and (Populist?) Performance* (2020); *Seniors' social image: the representation of ageing in electoral campaigns* (2019).

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