

# UNHEALTHY COVID-19 COMMUNICATION A Morphosyntactic Analysis of German AfD Party's Counter-discourse

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**Abstract** – According to a recent statistic, in Germany 56% of the electors of the right-wing populist political party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) believe in conspiracy theories (Roose, 2020). Moreover, with reference to COVID-19, 25% of the German adult population think that Bill Gates is more powerful than the government in Germany (Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, 2020). Against this background, it does not come as a surprise that the health discourse has been strongly politicized by the AfD party, whose electors are – in a good number – prone to welcome pseudoscientific health information and to oppose all measures which have been taken to stop the COVID-19 pandemic. This contribution investigates to what extent AfD's COVID-19 communication exhibits conspiratorial or misinformative traits and how morphologic and syntactic mechanisms are used to deliver health counter-discourse. The analysis will be carried out on a corpus of official parliamentary speeches given by AfD parliamentarians in the period from March 2020 to April 2021 and on a corpus of *Facebook* posts which appeared in the AfD's profile in the same time span. This makes it possible to draw a diamesic comparison between two different communication channels used by the AfD. It will be shown that the morphological analysis is particularly insightful to explore hostile counter-discourse. The possibilities offered by German affixation and compounding are explored also in a comparative perspective. Moreover, syntactic aspects such as personal deixis, the use of moods and deontic modality, as well as clausal linking will be examined to understand how syntactic mechanisms have been used to deliver pseudo factual narratives and oppose official health discourse.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 communication; AfD; counter-discourse; morphology; syntax.

## 1. Introduction

If something is unhealthy, it is “likely to cause illness or poor health”. If the adjective refers to someone's interests or behaviour, “you do not consider them to be normal” (O'Neill, Summers 2016). Unhealthy communication concerning COVID-19 is both of them: it can be harmful, since “it can result in added difficulty in combating the pandemic situation” (Reddy, Gupta 2020, p. 3793), but it is also far from being normal, as healthy communication is in the common interest. This paper aims to explore

COVID-19 communication by the right-wing German party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) ‘Alternative for Germany’ and in particular to provide a morphosyntactic analysis of the party’s counter-discourse, which opposes official health communication and rejects the measures taken by the German government to constrain the spread of COVID-19. The research will be carried out based on two corpora: a corpus of parliamentary speeches given by AfD’s parliamentarians in the *Bundestag* (i.e. the German parliament) from March 2020 to April 2021 and a corpus of *Facebook* posts belonging to the official AfD’s profile. Before delving into the linguistic analysis of the corpora, the landscape of health rumours and conspiracy theories will be explored (section 2). Special attention will be paid to COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Germany and the AfD will be presented in more detail to explain whether this party can be considered extremist and to what extent the communication on COVID-19 is misinformative or even conspiratorial. To this purpose, the relationship between the AfD and COVID-19 conspiratorial movements will also be dealt with (section 3). Section 4 outlines fine-grained research questions and elaborates on the methodology used to investigate the corpora. Section 5 is fully devoted to the linguistic analysis of the two corpora also in a comparative perspective: after a content overview, a morphological analysis will be carried out, which focuses on the use of derivational affixation and on creative compounding. The syntactic analysis will then consider personal deixis, the use of moods and deontic modality, as well as clausal linking. After having discussed the findings, some final remarks conclude the paper.

## 2. Health rumours and conspiracy theories

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the first months of 2020 has made health one of the most relevant issues dealt with by the media, by politics, and by society in general. The perception of a personal life-risk, the sudden interruption of social life and of social relationships, together with a deep change in the world of work, caused different reactions in the overall population and polarized attitudes towards the phenomenon.

After an initial period, in which – at an international level – the prevailing sentiment was to stay united to stop the spreading of the virus, in the following months some sceptical views started to emerge, which, with different degrees of radicality, questioned the proportionality of the measures taken by the governments, doubted on the seriousness of the illness caused by COVID-19 and on the official number of deaths communicated by the authorities. Some people even denied the existence of the virus, dubbed as a hoax used by alleged conspirators to control the society (Imhoff, Lamberty

2020).

Inaccurate health information and the spread of medical fake news constitute a real threat to public health, as has been shown by Waszak *et al.* (2018). Concrete consequences of deviated information have been reported for Nigeria, where polio cases increased because of a massive vaccination refusal due to a purported link between infertility and the vaccine (Jegede 2007). False and inaccurate medical discourse is therefore not a novel phenomenon and involves a number of infections. However, the spread of fake news in the past used to be limited to interested groups and did not assume the enormous proportions it has been having for COVID-19, with the involvement of many influential social actors able to affect the opinion of millions of people.

During these unprecedented times of pandemic not only did health counter-discourse enormously increase, but it also made use of many different channels of communications, especially social media. Due to their fluidity and immediateness, social networks are a privileged environment for misinformation to get viral. Mechanisms of reports to the authority of inappropriate content function only partially, in that many profiles have been banned on social networks such as *Facebook*. Nonetheless, *Facebook* rules to censor fake news (*Facebook* 2021) do not always manage to block health misinformation and hate speech before the news gets viral.

Setting the boundaries between misinformation and conspiracy theories is not always easy, since they both rely on the spreading of presumably false content, which constitutes in any case a threat to public health. Whether a person trusts misinformation or conspiracy theories about COVID-19 depends on the individual's health literacy and on the perception of the risk. In this sense, illiterate people are considered to be particularly at risk because of implicit biases, which tend to credit the sources they are confronted with, but also because of confirmation bias and the illusory truth effect. To be more precise, the susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 is claimed to correlate negatively with numerical literacy and to lead to "reduced likelihood to comply with health guidance measures" (Roozenbeek *et al.* 2020).

### **3. Covid-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories in Germany**

#### **3.1. Belief in conspiracy theories in Germany: Querdenken**

In April 2020 thousands of people in Germany started to protest against the measures taken by the government to constrain the spread of COVID-19.

This movement, called *Querdenken 711*<sup>1</sup>, meaning “thinking outside the box”, was founded by Michael Ballweg, an entrepreneur from Stuttgart. Initially, it comprised people who generically rejected the official health discourse and initiatives, but it soon assumed an identity based on conspiratorial ideology, pseudo-medical theories, but also far-right extremism, antisemitism, and neo-Nazi positions (Teune 2021). These people organised themselves on the web and integrated pre-existing conspiracy theories into COVID-19 narratives. A personification of the enemy is Bill Gates, whose figure is connected with the alleged “Great Reset” plan; further conspiracies involve an alleged will of the establishment to control every person thanks to 5G technology and the implantation of microchips. Some themes are also borrowed from QAnon’s rhetoric (Keady 2021). What all these conspiracy theories have in common is a purported lack of transparency of the official health discourse and the media, which are claimed to hide the truth to preserve a secret plan to be carried out by the elites against the people (Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen 2021). *Querdenker* refuse to identify themselves with any political parties, since, in their opinion, none of them did their job to protect the people’s rights. Being a loose coalition of groups with different backgrounds, *Querdenker* do not vote monolithically, however, according to a study reported by Jeitler (2021), the majority declared that in September 2021 federal elections, they would vote for non-established parties like *Die Basis* (Grassroots Democratic Party of Germany), which unites “believers in anthroposophy and esotericism with holders of far-right ideologies”. Since April 2021, the German *Verfassungsschutz*, the ‘domestic intelligence agency for the Protection of the Constitution’, has been officially monitoring the movement nationwide after regional monitoring had already begun at the end of 2020. The protests have not been stopped by this close monitoring, although the category under which the threat was labelled is *Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates*, i.e. Delegitimization of the State Relevant to the Protection of the Constitution (Firsova & Eder 2021).

One of the key figures of these self-defined lateral thinkers is COVID rabble-rouser Attila Hildmann, who fled to Turkey in February 2021 to avoid prosecution by the federal authorities. He currently manages a conspiratorial *Telegram* channel followed by more than 120000 people<sup>2</sup>, in which he stirs people up and invites them to use weapons against the state. His theories mix antiscientific positions, right extremism and overt antisemitism.

Although the majority of the German population does not believe in conspiracy theories (Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 2020), the number of people who are willing to consider counter-official discourse as potentially

<sup>1</sup> 711 is the area code of Stuttgart where the protest originated.

<sup>2</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> September 2021 all his channels were blocked by a hacker group called Anonymous.

valid is nonetheless high. According to a survey carried out in June 2020 in Germany, 25% believe that Bill Gates is more powerful than the government in Germany, 16% believe that he wants to implant people with microchips to fight the pandemic, and 12% think he bought the World Health Organization (Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 2020). These percentages vary if disaggregated results are considered. Specifically, there is a noticeable difference if the data are broken down by party. Based on Roose (2020), in Germany 56% of the electors of the right-wing populist party AfD believe in conspiracy theories. Other investigations report an even higher percentage of AfD: 68% according to *Zeit Online* (27.01.2021). The value is the highest of all parliamentary political parties and nearly doubles the average national percentage. Less than 30% of the supporters of other parties (FDP, SPD, CDU, *Die Linke*) are prepared to consider conspiracy theories as true. *Die Grünen* electors lie even under the overall average, since only 20% of them are willing to believe conspiracy claims may be true.

### **3.2. Alternative für Deutschland and health counter-discourse**

#### **3.2.1. Alternative für Deutschland: a far-right party**

The German political party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), ‘Alternative for Germany’ was founded in April 2013 but did not manage to sit in the parliament following that year’s elections. In 2017 it became the third largest party sitting in the German national parliament and the biggest opposition party. In 2021 it lost its status as main opposition, but performed strongly in Eastern Germany, where it came first (Bundeswahlleiter 2021). It initially originated as a euro sceptical party, but since 2017 it has shifted its focus to nationalism, immigration, and Islam. Moreover, it has been embracing far-right policies and rhetoric (Havertz 2021). Many of its leaders expressed xenophobic and antisemitic positions over the years, although the party refuses to consider itself as racist. AfD has direct contacts with PEGIDA (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*, meaning ‘Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West’), an extra-parliamentary far-right group, which is claimed to be “the societal bridgehead of the party” (Grabow 2016). The movement fights a *Kulturkampf* ‘cultural fight’ to protect Germans against the risk of an *Umvolkung*, i.e. an ‘ethnic redeployment’ (Grabow 2016). Even though AfD does not officially acknowledge antisemitic positions, it is claimed to be radicalizing from a right-wing conservative party to right-wing extremism, with 55% of its supporters believing the Jews still have too much influence in the world (Salzborn 2018). In 2019 the fringe *Flügel* of the party, which later dissolved, was declared to be anti-constitutional by the *Bundesamt für*

*Verfassungsschutz* ‘the office for the protection of the constitution’ because of antisemitism, right extremism, racism and anti-Islamism (Pley 2019). More recently, on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021, the German agency for domestic intelligence declared the whole AfD party a case for surveillance over potential ties to far-right extremism. However, two days later, the decision was suspended by the Cologne administrative court to prevent interferences with the federal elections, which would renew the parliament in Germany on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

### 3.2.2. Alternative für Deutschland *and its relationship with COVID-19 conspiracy theory spreaders*

When the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Germany, they were mostly downplayed by the media, which compared the new virus to the seasonal flu. When the seriousness of the disease became evident, there was initial consent among German parties concerning the necessity to take measures to stop the virus. The AfD was very cautious, some AfD-lawmakers even accused the government not to take enough care of public health. However, the substantial consent by the AfD to the restrictions came at a cost for the right-wing party, since it caused the loss of its prototypical supporters, which the incapability to appeal moderate electors did not manage to counterbalance. As a consequence, there was a turn in the AfD’s political strategy, beginning at the end of spring 2020. When the AfD slumped in the polls, new voters were to be found especially among those who embraced health counter-narrative. The party began to overtly fight against the restrictions imposed by the government and to boost anti-lockdown sentiment to reach outraged citizens, who did not feel well represented by the official health policies and refused all containment measures. Accordingly, the official communication was discarded, as mainstream media were claimed to hide the truth and manipulate public opinion. The rapprochement to this sentiment contributed to speed up the organization’s shift towards extremism (Sauerbrey 12.03.2021).

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the AfD party organised a conference on COVID-19<sup>3</sup> and invited alleged experts who maintained that the data on COVID-19 had been exaggerated and falsified and that the virus did not constitute a real threat to public health. COVID-19 was defined as a *Panik-Strategie* (panic strategy) and a psychological pandemic. In November 2020 some AfD parliamentarians took impressive initiatives to downplay COVID-19: one of

<sup>3</sup> The title of the conference is: *Corona-Symposium im Bundestag - Kommt ein U-Ausschuss zum bisher größten Schwindel des 21. Jahrhunderts?*, meaning: ‘First symposium on Covid-19 in the German parliament - Are we going to see a board of inquiry concerning the biggest lie of 21st century?’

the most striking actions was taken by the party member Thomas Seitz, who sat in the parliament wearing a mask riddled with holes (ZDF heute 20.11.2020).

Journalistic investigations carried out by the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Schröder, Tausche 14.12.2020) in the *Telegram* chats concerning COVID-19 seem to find a direct link between the spread of conspiracy theories over social media and parliamentary politicians of the AfD party. One of the AfD's representatives, Johannes Huber, reposted in the *Telegram* channel *Corona Rebellen Freising* the news by a conspiracy theorist, Gerhard Wisnewski, according to which the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is claimed to ask for the children to be implanted with microchips. After having been asked whether he really believed in the news he had shared, Huber said he did not and left the *Telegram* channel. He argued that he was not aware of the contents which were published online and maintained that he had entered these *Telegram*-chats just to observe what was going on. Six more AfD politicians are still claimed to be part of the same *Telegram* channel. According to *Der Spiegel* (26.11.2020), Huber was also a member of the *Telegram* group of the conspiracy theorist Attila Hildmann, in which he expressed himself against the pandemic state of emergency declared by the government. Moreover, many AfD politicians have supported the demonstrations by the *Querdenken*-movement by inviting people to join these groups in support of professed freedom.

## 4. Research aims and methodology

### 4.1. Research aims and hypotheses

This research focuses on the linguistic analysis of AfD's communication concerning COVID-19 both in the institutional context of parliamentary discourse and in the social network *Facebook*. The preliminary step of the investigation is to test the hypothesis that AfD's COVID-19 communication exhibits mis/disinformative traits or even conspiratorial features. Typical categories of extremism, as are described in previous literature, will be looked for as potential areas in which COVID-19 disinformation can find its place in both communicative contexts:

- “cherry-picking data” and arbitrary correlation of unrelated phenomena (Hohlfeld 2020);
- the expression of hostility towards mainstream media, science, and the political establishment (Krämer *et al.* 2021);

- the idea that the establishment has very well-kept secrets and is moved by negative intentions (Pfahl-Traughber 2002);
- science is on the side of the elites (Hohlfeld 2020).

Starting from these core themes, a linguistic analysis will be conducted in order to understand how the language is bent to express counter-narrative and opposition to the official health discourse. In doing so, two levels of analysis will be considered: morphology and syntax. The ultimate goal is to explore which morphosyntactic patterns are recurrently used by the AfD to build health counter-discourse and to check if significant diamesic variation can be observed between the two different communicative channels.

Despite connections with *Querdenken*-movements, COVID deniers and anti-lockdown protesters, which are maintained especially over *Telegram* (Jarynowski *et al.* 2020), it is not to be expected that overt conspiracy theories can be easily found in parliamentary speeches and on the AfD's official *Facebook* profile<sup>4</sup>. On the one hand, the parliament is not the place where fake news can be most effectively spread; on the other hand, posts on conspiracy theories and hate speech must be blocked according to Facebook's guidelines (Facebook 2021). In addition, Germany has one of the most restrictive laws to contrast hate speech. The law, known in Germany as *NetzDG* (*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*), 'Network Enforcement Act', is meant to combat hate speech, extremism, and fake news on the internet. It came into force on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2017 and was further tightened in July 2021. Based on this rule, providers have to deal with complaints about illegal content and remove it within seven days at the latest and possibly within 24 hours. Moreover, they have to submit a six-monthly report to prove how illegal contents and complaints have been dealt with. Violations of this law are severely punished (Bundesministerium der Justiz und Verbraucherschutz 2021). Parties like the AfD, but also the social media platforms involved, heavily criticized the law which was claimed to be a limit to the freedom of expression, a control and censorship tool, a *Maulkorb* ('muzzle') as many people in Germany called it, interestingly using a term that is also uttered to polemically refer to face masks.

Due to such strict regulation and to the risk of losing the votes coming from those who are not prepared to declare themselves COVID-19 deniers or belonging to conspiratorial ideologies, it can be hypothesised that AfD only rarely goes into the realm of clamorous conspiracies such as microchips or Bill Gates. The hypothesis which will be checked is that AfD COVID-19 communication uses subtler morphosyntactic strategies, to avoid being

<sup>4</sup> Previous research has already shown that conspiracy ideologies on COVID-19 expressed by representatives of populist parties are more likely to be used on *Telegram* than on *Facebook* (Silva *et al.* 2017, Spieß *et al.* 2020).



censored on *Facebook* and to be in a position to officially reject being labelled as a conspiratorial party.

## 4.2. Methods

In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative analysis (Hasko 2021) will be carried out on the basis of two distinct corpora: a corpus of parliamentary speeches by AfD members and a *Facebook* corpus. The first corpus contains 50 speeches (56003 tokens) given in the German parliament between March 2020 and April 2021 by AfD politicians. The speeches have been selected by using the keyword *Corona* 'coronavirus'. The source from which the texts were collected, in form of official transcriptions, is the website of the German parliament (*Bundestag*), under the section *Protokolle*.<sup>5</sup> To ensure that the dataset was representative for the ideology of the whole party, 24 party members have been considered. The *Facebook* corpus comprises all the posts containing the keyword *Corona* which appeared on the public official *Facebook* AfD profile in the same time span. Although the corpus contains all the posts devoted to the topic, it is much smaller than the parliamentary speech corpus: it contains 37 posts (2178 tokens). The disproportion in the size of the two corpora is expected, based on the textual characteristics of the two text-types and on the different frequency of parliamentary interventions and *Facebook* postings.

The approach which has been adopted is qualitative, exploratory and inductive and it is embedded in the field of discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; Fidler, Cvrček 2019 a.o.). As a first step a content analysis was carried out, in order to verify whether mis/disinformative contents could be identified in each of the two corpora and in what proportion. After having considered the presence or absence of such contents, an empirically based study analysed how the morphological and syntactic structures found in the two corpora interact with the purposes of COVID-19 counter-discourse. The qualitative approach has allowed for a descriptive analysis of the forms which have been used and for a broader contextualisation, since the data were manually pulled (CASP 2018).

An automatic detection of misinformative or conspiratorial markers in the two corpora would not be fruitful because of the above-mentioned German law against hate speech (*NetzDG*) on *Facebook* and because of the institutional context in which the speeches are given for the parliamentary corpus. Moreover, the initial inconsistency of the party towards the management of the pandemic, the intensification of *Facebook* posting activity in the period before regional and national elections and the inconsistent evolution of the disease would have made a quantitative analysis

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/protokolle> (30.09.2021)

biased on many levels (Rasinger 2013, Galdas 2017) and would have not allowed in any case to guarantee for statistical reliability. Apparently neutral forms or morphosyntactic devices which cannot be considered *stricto sensu* derogatory or conspiratorial can actually contribute to fuel slander in the comments in the case of *Facebook* and to negatively orient the public opinion in both contexts.

## 5. Morphosyntactic analysis of AfD's Covid-19 counter-discourse

### 5.1. A content overview of the two corpora: misinformation and conspiratorial contents

The first step of the analysis deals with the detection of contents in the two corpora, which can be considered mis/disinformative – or even conspiratorial – along the lines of typical populist narrative, as outlined in section 4.1. The investigation of the two corpora provides two different results in this respect and shows interesting asymmetries.

#### 5.1.1. Corpus of parliamentary speeches

In the corpus on parliamentary speeches the discourse mainly addresses – though very critically – the measures taken by the government to stop the spreading of the virus especially with an attention for the consequences on the economy. The government is accused to be inadequate to face the pandemic situation because of dilettantism and not to take into account scientific evidence, especially with reference to the deprivation the society is undergoing due to (purported unnecessary) restrictions. Interestingly, typical criticism to the AfD, accused of being a conspiratorial party is systematically rejected and reversed, as if the antiscientific attitude was to be imputed to the government and not to them. As for “cherry-picking data” and hostility towards science, the party responds as follows:

- (1) (to Angela Merkel, accused of selecting meaningless data for her decision making) „Hört auf die Wissenschaft“, so lautet Ihr Mantra. Sie aber hören nur auf die Stimmen, die Sie hören wollen und die Ihre Vorurteile bestätigen. (A. Weidel, 16.04.2021)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The name indicates the parliamentarian who gave the speech and is accompanied by the day. The direct link to the speech will be provided for each example of the corpus of parliamentary speeches. All links were last accessed on 30.09.2021. <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19222.pdf#P.28103>.

*“Listen to science” is your mantra. But you just listen to the voices you want to listen to and which confirm your prejudices.*

Also the accusation against AfD to spread conspiracy theories and not to rely on scientific grounds is overtly rejected by its parliamentarians and, in the latter case, reversed:

- (2) Widerspruch tun Sie dagegen als Verschwörungstheorie ab. (A. Weidel, 16.04.2021)  
*You dismiss dissent as conspiracy theory.*
- (3) All diese Pläne verfolgt die Regierung auf Basis einer unsoliden wissenschaftlichen Grundlage (M. Espendiller, 03.03.2021)<sup>7</sup>  
*The government pursues all these plans on unsolid scientific grounds.*

Beside redirecting blame away from its party, in the parliament AfD systematically downplays the seriousness of COVID-19 and the reliability of acknowledged diagnostics such as PCR-tests. It associates COVID-19 with a normal seasonal flu, which can be managed without severe restrictions if the citizens are trusted. These contents are uncontroversially misinformative.

- (4) Die Infektionszahlen, mit denen die Öffentlichkeit jeden Tag bombardiert wird, sind wenig aussagekräftig. Was der PCR-Test genau misst, ist umstritten. Die meisten Infizierten bemerken überhaupt nicht, dass sie angesteckt wurden. Unserem Kollegen Norbert Kleinwächter geht es übrigens gut. Er sagt, Corona sei seine bislang leichteste Grippe gewesen. (A. Gauland, 30.09.2020)<sup>8</sup>  
*The numbers of infections with which the public is bombarded every day are not very meaningful. What exactly the PCR test measures is controversial. Most infected people do not even notice that they have been infected. By the way, our colleague Norbert Kleinwächter is doing fine. He says COVID-19 was his lightest flu to date.*
- (5) Behandeln Sie die Bürger dieses Landes nicht wie unmündige Kinder, bei denen Sie nach Belieben die Zügel anziehen oder brachial durchgreifen! Geben Sie Freiheit und Eigenverantwortung der Bürger wieder. (A. Weidel, 30.09.2020)<sup>9</sup>  
*Do not treat the citizens of this country like underage children, with whom you pull the reins at will or take brute force! Give back the citizens' freedom and personal responsibility.*

In this corpus, however, there is no overt cue of the government having hidden secrets and plans to control the society. Alleged disproportionated restrictions are claimed to be due to dilettantism and inadequacy to manage the pandemic, with heavy consequences on the society. Science is not

<sup>7</sup> <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19214.pdf#P.26951>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btp/19/19179.pdf#P.22519>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btp/19/19179.pdf#P.22519>.

addressed as part of the elites deliberately manipulating the data. Nevertheless, the reliability of the government's experts is questioned and the AfD invokes alternative views which contest the official position and are pseudoscientific.

### 5.1.2. Facebook corpus

Despite the *NetzDG* law and the provider's policy, *Facebook* still hosts some conspiratorial cues and some features of extreme ideology as described in section 4.1. *Facebook*'s mode has been labelled as a "genre of possibilities" because of its complexity, dynamicity, and multiple types of sources, which let users come across potentially controversial and unacceptable texts (Hlatshwayo, Gumbo 2021). Although the content of parliamentary speeches is provocative and also questions facts, the targeted audience and the goals of *Facebook* AfD-communication are definitely more extreme, as a narrow content- and linguistic analysis will show. It must be noted that the AfD official *Facebook* profile has 515.406 followers<sup>10</sup>, who are mostly sympathetic with the ideology of the party and offer no place for an actual debate (Ennser-Jedenastik *et al.* 2021). The aim of the *Facebook* profile is not just to express protest or opposition but rather to fuel indignation and to reach outraged citizens, whose comments are in most cases more extreme than the posts. The *Facebook* corpus displays all the four parameters which have been outlined as typical for misinformative contents. Arbitrary correlation of unrelated phenomena, such as COVID-19 and migration or Islam are a case in point, as shown in (6):

- (6) ++ Danke, Peter Altmaier: Corona-Hilfen gingen an Islamisten! ++ (FB, 15.03.2021)<sup>11</sup>  
*Thank you, Peter Altmaier: Covid aids went to Islamists*

Mainstream media are claimed to be corrupt and connive and should therefore be distrusted, as their news is propaganda, as can be observed in (7). Implicit is in this assumption that all information is potentially biased and false.

- (7) ++ Vorsicht Propaganda! FAZ fordert den Corona-App-Untertan! ++  
 Wieviel haben Merkel-Regierung und Bundespresseamt dafür bezahlt?  
 Das ist die erste Frage, die einem durch den Kopf schießt, wenn man den  
 Artikel der FAZ liest. (FB, 19.06.2020)

<sup>10</sup> The number refers to 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021.

<sup>11</sup> FB indicates that the example belongs to the *Facebook* corpus and the date refers to the day in which the post appeared on the official AfD-profile <https://www.facebook.com/alternativfuerde>. As Facebook links are often considered unsafe, no direct link to the single post will be given, but the source is easily retrievable under a date search.

++ *Attention propaganda! FAZ calls for people to be subject to the Corona app! ++*  
*How much did the Merkel government and the federal press office pay for it? That is the first question that comes to mind when reading the FAZ article.*

The government is alleged to betray the citizens and deliberately spread fake news to panic people. Science institutes as the *Robert Koch Institut*, which provide scientific advice, are also accused of distributing false numbers to serve the government's obscure goals. AfD dissociates themselves from these "old parties", who are claimed to plan a "revolution from above" and warns the citizens against these purported risks and offers alternative views, as exemplified from (8) to (10).

- (8) Referent des Innenministeriums enthüllt: Regierung könnte größter Fake-News-Produzent der Krise sein. [...] Es handele sich bei der Panikmache aus fachlicher Sicht um einen „Fehlalarm“ und quasi um staatliche Fake-News. (FB, 11.05.2020)  
*Home Office advisor reveals: Government could be the biggest fake news producer in the crisis. [...] From a technical point of view, the scare tactics are a "false alarm" and, so to speak, state fake news.*
- (9) ++ „Lockdown“ ohne Grundlage: RKI-Todeszahlen sind „im Durchschnitt über drei Wochen alt“! Eigentlich müsste diese Nachricht ein mediales Beben auslösen: Sämtliche Todeszahlen des Robert-Koch-Instituts (RKI), mit denen der „Lockdown“ begründet wird, sind für die Beurteilung der tagesaktuellen Lage vollkommen unbrauchbar! (FB, 20.01.2021)  
++ *"Lockdown" without a basis: RKI death numbers are "on average over three weeks old"! Actually, this news should trigger a media tremor: all deaths of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), with which the lockdown is justified, are completely useless for the assessment of the current situation!*
- (10) Die Altparteien nutzen die Corona-Krise im Sinne einer "Revolution von oben". Kein Grund, den Kopf in den Sand zu stecken! Altparteien gegen Souveränität, Grundrechte und Freiheit! (FB, 27.08.2020)  
*The old parties are using the corona crisis in the sense of a "revolution from above". No need to bury your head in the sand! Old parties against sovereignty, fundamental rights and freedom!*

At the basis of AfD's COVID-19 counter-discourse both in the parliament and on *Facebook* is that the seriousness of the coronavirus is overestimated and therefore all measures are not proportionate. Whether this is ascribed to dilettantism or to unveiled purposes of control and deliberate deprivation of freedom depends on the medium (incapacity: parliamentary speeches; political will to control the people: *Facebook*). The downplaying of the disease belongs in any case to conspiracy beliefs which risk undermining the containment of the pandemic.

## 5.2. Morphological analysis

In what follows a morphological analysis of the two corpora will be carried out in order to detect patterns which contribute to create a counter-narrative. Evidently, morphology alone cannot be predictive of mis-/disinformation, however the systematic use of certain word formation strategies in the domains of both the derivational morphology and compounding can be significant to better understand how the German language is used by the AfD to steer unhealthy communication.

### 5.2.1. Derivational morphology: nominal and verbal affixation

Together with compounding, derivation is one of the most productive and creative word formation strategies in German. The analysis of derivational affixes which are extensively used can help shed some light on the morphological patterns which are used to systematically oppose official health discourse. One strategy aimed at discarding the official narrative is using negative language: opposition can be carried out either through words which are intrinsically negatively connotated or through negation (Taboada *et al.* 2017).

In the adjectival domain, affixes such as *un-*, *-los*, are preferred over inherently negative forms or to syntactic negation. The subjacent strategy is to employ derogatory language, which not only opposes the official discourse but is offensive without making any actual proposal apart from invoking alleged experts who (seemingly) contradict the official narrative. Paradigmatic examples of this kind of affixation can be found in both corpora, although to a higher degree in *Facebook*, where the medium imposes to be more direct and concise. Some of the affixed forms that can be repeatedly found in both corpora and are aimed at triggering indignation are listed in (11):

- (11) unsinnig, unverantwortlich, unlogische (Corona-Maßnahmen),  
 unredlich, unfassbar, unglaublich, unverschämt  
*senseless, irresponsible, illogical (coronavirus measures), dishonest,*  
*incomprehensible, unbelievable, outrageous*

Forms such as *schamlos* ‘unashamed’ and *planlos* ‘without a plan’ where the suffix *-los* indicates lack of something can be found but to a lesser degree with respect to the prefix *un-*.

If adjective affixation through *un-* (and its allomorphs) and *-los*<sup>12</sup> is not something which differentiates German from other languages, something

<sup>12</sup> *-los* can find a direct equivalent in the English suffix ‘-less’.

which is peculiar to German is the use of verbal prefixes, which allow for the meaning of the base verb to be shifted towards a range of different nuances, which directly involve semantics but also aspect. In this context, abstract prefixes such as *ver-*, *ent-*, *zer-* are interestingly used to discard the actions and the measures taken by the government also insinuating the idea of secrets and lack of transparency, which the AfD argues to unveil. The message of failure and destruction of the social tissue are conveyed through verbal prefixes as well. As has been observed by Dwell (2015) the prefixed verb construction contrasts with unprefixed and particle verb constructions, thanks to the fact that the prefix has a meaning in and of itself. These characteristics are exploited by the AfD to build counter-discourse.

Specifically, the prefix *ver-* contributes to the linguistic creation of a setting in which errors, incapacity, but also unmotivated overruling and alleged alteration of the truth find their place. Based on Brinkmann (1962)'s observation that *ver-* verbs denote some "deviation from what is normal and expected", it can be also postulated that they indicate displacement, hiding. Moreover, *ver-* verbs are perfective with respect to the alteration of the setting Dwell (2015). In the case of the pandemic, it is allegedly the government measures (not COVID-19 itself) that negatively affects the society. Here (see 12 and 13) are some interesting examples to be found in each corpus. The agent of all these actions is the establishment.

- (12) verschleiern, Verschwendung (von kostbarer Zeit), Verharmlosung der Coronapandemie/ des Oster-Arrests, verstreichen, (dafür wurde sie von den etablierten Parteien) verlacht, Regierungsversagen, verachten, verschämen, verschwindeln, verstoßen, vernichtend, vernebeln... (FB corpus)  
*veil, waste (of precious time), trivialization of the corona pandemic / Easter arrest, elapse, ridiculed (by the established parties), government failure, despise, shame, swindle, offend, annihilating, obscure...*
- (13) verstecken, vernachlässigen, verschlimmern, versäumen, verletzen, verunsichern, verhindern, verbieten, ... (corpus of parliamentary speeches)  
*hide, neglect, aggravate, fail, injure, unsettle, prevent, prohibit, ...*

In AfD's counter-narrative the deverbal adjective *vermeintlich* 'alleged' deserves closer attention, since it is recurrently used in the *Facebook* corpus to address all the experts named by the government. The same form is also used adverbially to label as false what these experts or the government say, in a sort of purported debunking by the AfD. The base verb *meinen* means simply 'argue', while the prefix adds the idea to argue something false. Example (14) is insightful in this respect, since the adverb *vermeintlich* lets people assume that the lockdown extension was already (secretly) planned, and Angela Merkel was therefore allegedly in bad faith.

- (14) Kaum jemand zählt noch, wie oft sie nach angekündigten „Lockerungen“ immer wieder neue Vorwände und Kriterien aus dem Hut gezaubert hat, um eine vermeintlich noch nicht beschlossene „Lockdown“-Verlängerung zu rechtfertigen. (FB, 11.03.21)  
*Hardly anyone still counts the number of times she has repeatedly conjured up new pretexts and criteria out of her hat after the announced “relaxations” in order to justify a supposedly not yet resolved “lockdown” extension.*

Significantly, no single attestation of *vermeintlich* can be found in the corpus of parliamentary speeches, as AfD is not in a position to officially prove that the government advisors are actually no experts or that the decision-making process was untransparent.

Another interesting verbal prefix, which is sagaciously used to build counter-narrative is *ent-*. As explained by Dwell (2015), this verbal prefix indicates separation and encodes two possible meanings, i.e. it can either denote escaping, also with inchoative aspect, therefore it means that something is punctually released, or it can have a privative value: something is deprived (or gets rid) of something. Especially this second class is frequently used by the AfD both in the parliament and on *Facebook*. The privative value, however, assumes enantiosemic meanings with respect to the negativity or positivity of the deprivation depending on the verbal base it combines with. On one side, *ent-* designates the unveiling and unmasking action undertaken by the AfD, which claims to be the sole political party which uncovers the truth allegedly hidden by the establishment and by mainstream media; on the other side *ent-* is used by the party to state that the citizens have been deprived of their freedom and even of their dignity because of the supposedly disproportionate measures taken by the government to stop the spreading of the pandemic and should now be also financially relieved. Examples to be found in both corpora are:

- (15) entlarven, enthüllen, entblößen, entdecken, entfernen, entlasten, entschädigen, Entwürdigung, ...  
*unmask, reveal, expose, discover, detach, remove, relieve, compensate, degradation, ...*

The financial aspect and therefore the verb *entlasten* ‘relieve’ is very frequent in the parliamentary corpus, while the unveiling of the truth, *entlarven*, is more typical although not exclusive to *Facebook*, as the following examples show:



- (16) Doch der Shutdown hat diese Behauptung als das entlarvt, was sie ist: kompletter Unsinn. (M. Bernhard, 18.06.2020)<sup>13</sup>  
*But the shutdown has unmasked this claim for what it is: complete nonsense.*
- (17) Entlarvend und peinlich ist nun auch der Gleichklang ihrer Worte. (FB, 11.03.2021)  
*Also the consonance of her words is now revealing and embarrassing.*

The unveiling of the truth expressed by prefixed verbs such as *entlarven* is often allegedly resulting from self-contradiction of the establishment, which unmasks that they are allegedly lying. Finally, the narrative on the disaster going on, due to the supposedly catastrophic management of the pandemic by the government is conveyed by the verbal prefix *zer-* whose transparent meaning indicates decomposition, fragmentation and decay (Dwell 2015).

- (18) zerstören, zerfallen, zerschlagen, (die Gesellschaft) zersplittern, ...  
*destroy, disintegrate, smash, split up (the society), ...*

An interesting use of *zer-* is to be found on *Facebook* concerning the CDU party, which is claimed to be tearing itself apart (*sich zerfleischen*) in a sort of cannibalism because of the scandals of masks<sup>14</sup> and the COVID failure. This is alleged to be a further cue of the establishment being corrupt, so that even within the CDU-party someone is rebelling.

- (19) CDU stürzt auf 26 Prozent und zerfleischt sich! ++ Masken-Skandale, Corona-Versagen und die Verharmlosung des Oster-Arrests als „Ruhephase“. (FB, 24.03.2021).  
*CDU falls to 26 percent and tears itself apart! ++ Mask scandals, corona failure and the trivialization of the Easter arrest as a "resting phase".*

### 5.2.2. Compounding and the use of neologisms

German is well-known for its productive nominal compounding (Olsen 2015). As revealed by a project by the *Institut für Deutsche Sprache* (2020) devoted to the emerging language of COVID-19 in Germany, the so-called *Coronasprache*, most neologisms belonging to this semantic area are actually compounds.

Compounding can be particularly effective in packing much information in one word, which is useful in contexts such as social networks, where conciseness is a key factor for the post to reach many people.

<sup>13</sup> <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19166.pdf#P.20642>.

<sup>14</sup> The reference is to the German Health Minister Spahn, who was caught up in a mask scandal and was accused of fraud in March 2021.

Compounding also allows for the creativity of the language to be fully expressed, since the juxtaposition of free word forms overcomes subcategorization problems, which are typical of derivation. Moreover, unexpected combinations can give rise to surprising effects. The inventive blending of different concepts also serves the purpose to designate something which is novel to the society in a provocative way that interprets the rage of the citizens against the elites and stir them up. The purpose which compounding serves in COVID counter-discourse is therefore clear. Its effect is not as subtle as is the use of affixation, but rather immediate and disruptive. It is the domain in which derogatory language and the creation of a state of alarm in the citizens, allegedly threatened by the risk of being deprived of their freedom and controlled by a new dictatorship can be most creatively used.

The parliament embodies an institutional context, in which, apart from excesses carried out to call for the attention of the public opinion, the speech must deal with one specific issue on the agenda. The language can be (and in the case of AfD is) very aggressive, but the ultimate goal is not to stir people up and let them think there is a conspiracy going on, but rather to systematically oppose the measures which are bound to be taken and to stonewall the government. Conversely, *Facebook* is the place where no technical issue is discussed and where the language has to be impressive, to express scandal, reprobation and be exaggerated to be easily understood also by an audience of non-experts.

An analysis of the two corpora actually reveals a strong asymmetry in this respect. The compounds which can be found in the corpus of parliamentary speech are not indicative of dis-/misinformative contents nor do they have – at least in most cases – connoted meanings. Some of them, which cannot be found in the *Facebook* corpus belong to the technical language and pertain to the same semantic sphere as compounds used by the parliamentarians of other parties, with special attention to the financial aspects of COVID-19. Frequent compounds with purely denotative meaning, possibly modified by disapproval adjectives which underline the sceptical position with respect to the seriousness of the COVID disease, are listed below in (20).

- (20) Coronabekämpfung, Arbeitsplätze, Krisenzeiten, Mitarbeiter,  
Förderprogramm, Tourismuswirtschaft, Willkommenspolitik,  
Reisewarnung, Coronapolitik, Oppositionsforderungen,  
Sicherheitskonzepte, sogenannte Coronatote, Konjunkturpaket,  
Infektionsgeschwindigkeit, Maskenzwang, Abstandpflicht, ...  
*Fight against COVID-19, jobs, times of crisis, employees, funding  
program, tourism industry, welcome policy, travel warning, COVID-19  
policy, opposition requests, security concepts, so-called COVID-19-*

*deaths, economic stimulus package, infection speed, compulsory mask,  
distance obligation, ...*

Some exceptions to the substantially neutral use of compounding in parliamentary speeches, though not quantitatively relevant, can be temporally related to the infelicitous word unexpectedly uttered by Angela Merkel on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020. She built the neologism *Öffnungsdiskussionsorgien*, literally 'reopening discussion orgies', to stigmatize the debate on the loosening of lockdown restrictions. The reaction by all oppositional parties was very lively and triggered replies in which the head of the compound (*Orgien* 'orgies') was maintained, while the modifier was different. A case in point was *Verbotsorgie* 'orgy of bans' which was then abundantly used by the AfD party.

The creativity expressed in the form of new compound-building on *Facebook* to discard the government and its policies instead is not something exceptional, but it is rather systematic. Specifically, many of the compounds which can be found in the *Facebook* corpus are rooted in the semantic area of fear, which is allegedly not caused by COVID-19, but is claimed to be deliberately triggered by the government and the establishment in general (also by scientific advisors) to control people and limit their freedom.

As can be seen from the examples in (21), all coming from the *Facebook* corpus, the neologisms are sharp and clear and are sometimes inserted in slogans. Compounds rooted in fear and terror allegedly caused by the government are the following:

- (21) Coronajäger (referring to the establishment), Oster-Hausarrest, Angstmacherei, Vernunft statt Dauerpanik (as a slogan), Panik-Papier, Horrorpognosen, "German Angst" (as a fixed-expression to refer to the perception people have abroad), Panikmache, Rettungswahn, gesundheitsgefährdend (referred to the health minister), menschenverachtend, Corona-Leine, Corona-Hysterie, ...  
*Corona hunters (referring to the establishment), Easter house arrest, fear-mongering, reason instead of permanent panic (as a slogan), panic paper, horror forecasts, "German fear" (as a fixed-expression to refer to the perception people have abroad), panic-fostering, health-threatening (referring to the health minister), inhuman, covid-leash, covid-hysteria, ...*

A second core topic for which provocative compounds are used is the failure of the establishment, which is claimed to be not only inadequate but also corrupt, unreliable and willing to control people's life and restrain their freedom. The press and the media are complicit and spread propaganda. The dangerous idea that is conveyed is that the citizens should not strictly abide by the containment rules, they should instead autonomously decide what is

best for them (*Eigenverantwortung*, i.e. ‘personal responsibility’ is a recurrent word<sup>15</sup>), as if the containment measures were not a matter of public health, but an intrusion into the sphere of personal freedom and self-determination.

The passage reported in (22) contains significant compounds used with the aim of alarming people concerning the supposed risk that the society is running. Compounds alone are sufficient to design a threatening picture: *Selbsternannte Volksumerzieher* ‘self-proclaimed people re-educators’, *linksradikale Gesellschaftsklempner* ‘left radical social plumbers’, *Bevormundungssystem* ‘paternalism system’, *Pseudo-Eliten* ‘pseudo elites’.

- (22) Corona wird zum Vorwand für linksgrüne Umerziehung. Ich sage es klipp und klar: Das einzige, was hier wirklich pfui ist, sind diese moralisierenden, sauertöpfischen, selbsternannten, totalitären Volksumerzieher [...]. Das Ergebnis ist das gleiche: Eine sich im Besitz der moralischen Überlegenheit dünkende, pseudoelitäre und leider von den Medien unterstützte Gruppe linksradikaler Gesellschaftsklempner baut ein Bevormundungssystem auf. [...] Was wollen wir sein? Freie selbstbestimmte Bürger oder von sozialistischen Pseudo-Eliten geknechtete Untertanen? (FB, 23.03.2021)  
*COVID-19 is becoming a pretext for the Greens to re-education. I'll put it bluntly: the only thing that is really ugly here are these moralizing, sour, self-proclaimed, totalitarian people re-educators [...]. The result is the same: A pseudo-elitist group of radical left-wing social plumbers, who think themselves to be in possession of moral superiority, and unfortunately supported by the media, is building up a system of paternalism. [...] What do we want to be? Free self-determined citizens or subjects enslaved by socialist pseudo-elites?*

In example (23), recurring compounds which are used in the *Facebook* corpus to convey similar conspiratorial thoughts are listed:

- (23) Masken-Skandale, Corona-Versagen, Politikversagen, Irrweg, fanatische Corona-Ideologie, Kontroll-Illusion, (idiotische) Inzidenz-Fixiertheit, Verbotspartei, Bürokratiemonster, halbblinde Mainstream-Medien, Falschnachrichten, regierungstreue Propaganda, Testbetrug, Corona-Soforthilfen-Betrüger, Zombieökonomie, Absurdistan Deutschland, Verbotskultur...  
*Mask scandals, corona failure, political failure, wrong track, fanatical coronavirus ideology, control illusion, (idiotic) fixation on incidence, prohibition party, bureaucratic monsters, semi-blind mainstream media, fake news, pro-government propaganda, test fraud, COVID emergency*

<sup>15</sup>Notice that the word is used also in the corpus of parliamentary speeches. If decontextualized, the word has no negative connotation for itself, on the contrary it could instead seem that the AfD invites the citizens to be cautious and responsible, which is not the case.

*aid fraudsters, zombie-economy, Absurdistan Germany, prohibition culture, ...*

Some compounds used as hapax-legomena concern the use of a COVID app, which is alleged to be a way to directly control the people.

- (24) Corona-Datenspende-App (als) Spitzel- und Überwachungs-App, Corona-Appidemie  
*COVID data donation app (as) spy and surveillance app, COVID-appidemic*

As can be noticed from the examples above, if the hapax-legomena are excluded, the new compounds are not highly recursive, since they normally contain two members. The language is vivid, but no complex metaphor is used. The compounds are regularly head-internal, as is normally the case for German and the first member of the compound has either attributive value or it holds a subordinate relation to the head. Most compounds are newly-built nouns, which is expected on the basis of the productivity of this word formation strategy. Significantly, apart from *German Angst* ‘German fear’, which is used with a mocking intent, the AfD deliberately avoids using words of foreign origin, no anglicism is in fact to be found in the corpus if a German alternative exists. Even the word “Lockdown” which has no real autochthonous equivalent, being a necessary loanword, is comparatively infrequent.

After having analysed the compounds in both corpora, special attention is also given to self-censored words on the AfD-*Facebook* profile, i.e. words which one would expect to find in the corpus, but which actually do not appear. A case in point is the word used to refer to the face mask. The protection device was initially called by AfD-members *Maulkorb*, literally mouth-band, i.e. ‘muzzle’, and the term is still regularly used in *Querdenker* demonstrations and by anti-lockdown people (Friedrich 2021). Contrary to expectations, only two entries (25-26) can be found in the entire *Facebook* corpus, probably because the term is considered a keyword to identify COVID deniers. Its use could be intercepted by automatic hate speech detection and trigger the risk of being reported according to the *NetzDG* law provisions.

- (25) Eine Regierung, die den eigenen Bürgern die sehr weitreichende und das persönliche Leben zum Teil stark einschränkende Pflicht zum Tragen einer Gesichtsmaske (oder eines Maulkorbs, ganz wie man es nimmt) auferlegt [...], das ist ein erschreckender Befund für unser einstmalig freiheitsliebendes Vaterland. (FB, 12.09.2020)  
*A government that imposes on its own citizens the very far-reaching and in some cases severely restrictive duty to wear a face mask (or a muzzle,*

*however you choose) [...], that is a terrifying finding for our former freedom-loving fatherland.*

- (26) Die Maske! Der moderne Maulkorb. Hat der etwas im Parlament zu suchen? Die AfD-Fraktion im Bundestag sagt einstimmig Nein. (FB, 11.10.2020)

*The mask! The modern muzzle. Does it have something to do with Parliament? The AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag unanimously says no.*

The same holds also for compounds containing the word *Diktatur* ‘dictatorship’ associated with COVID-19, which never appear on the AfD *Facebook* page. Many denier groups on *Facebook* that used the name *Coronadiktatur* were removed, the term being a strong cue for the automatic detection of potential conspiratorial contents which were then found in the pages.

### 5.3. Syntactic analysis

After having considered the most relevant morphological features on which the construction of health counter-discourse is based and which have outlined a difference between the two corpora, it is worth considering what the main syntactic characteristics of the AfD’s narrative are and to what extent they contribute to model its health communication. To do so, four parameters will be investigated: personal deixis, the use of moods, deontic modality, and clausal linking.

#### 5.3.1. Personal deixis

Personal deixis refers to “the identity of the interlocutors in a communication situation” (Fillmore 1997, pp. 61-62). It allows to determine the relationship between the speaker and the addressee by creating situatedness and therefore inclusion and exclusion, closeness or separateness. Personal deixis can be particularly relevant in the counter-discourse construction, since in this context it can range from persuasive to manipulative (Adetunji 2006, p. 181). In the political discourse two personal pronouns are particularly relevant<sup>16</sup>: *Sie* (the third person plural, which is used as a courtesy form<sup>17</sup>) and *wir* ‘we’, which can either be inclusive or exclusive (Petersoo 2007). The pronominal choices will be tested in the two corpora and are shown to display relevant asymmetries.

<sup>16</sup>In contrast to other languages such as Italian, in which the personal pronoun can be dropped or overtly expressed for pragmatic reasons, it must be recalled that in German and English the subject pronoun is always compulsory.

<sup>17</sup>In formal contexts or when addressing people you do not personally know, it is common to use the courtesy form *Sie* in German.

In the corpus of parliamentary speeches there is a clear predominance of the exclusive formal pronoun *Sie*, which is used to directly address the colleagues, but also to call on those who are directly responsible for all the events and the restrictions from which the AfD wants to set itself apart. The establishment is the culprit for reportedly catastrophic management of the pandemic whose nefarious course was allegedly not unstoppable. Due to her role as a Chancellor, Angela Merkel is the preferred target of the AfD's accusation, and she is vehemently asked to take action as the AfD requires. An example for the typical use of deictic *Sie* is (27):

- (27) Handeln Sie bitte im Interesse dieses Landes und seiner Bürger, Frau Bundeskanzlerin, und verstecken Sie sich nicht länger hinter ideologisch aufgeladener Phrasendrescherei, wie Sie es leider in Ihrer Rede heute getan haben. (A. Weidel, 18.06.2020)<sup>18</sup>  
*Please act in the interests of this country and its citizens, Madam Chancellor, and do no longer hide behind ideologically charged thrashing discourse, as you unfortunately did in your speech today.*

As can be interestingly noticed in the example above, the politician refers to *dieses Land[es] und seine[r] Bürger* 'this country and its citizens' using a third person singular possessive pronoun which agrees with the possessor *Land*. Using this form of possessive is indicative of the will to avoid using the third person plural possessive *Ihr* which would imply that the German citizens have a direct relation with Angela Merkel excluding the AfD's. Moreover, the first person plural possessive *unser* is avoided as well, since it could be used with an inclusive meaning and would therefore convey the message, that the establishment and the AfD build a community, or, alternatively, that the AfD wants to pursue its personal interest and not the citizens', if the interpretation is exclusive. If the frequency of use of the possessive *unser* in AfD's speeches is tested against its frequency in parliamentary speeches given by the government, this trend becomes even clearer, since the number of attestations of the first person plural possessive in government discourse nearly triples the occurrences of *unser* found in the AfD's parliamentary debates. Moreover, the investigation of the whole AfD corpus confirms that the possessive *unser* is more rarely used than other deictics. When it is, it directly refers to the terrible situation the German society is experiencing, with which the AfD wants to be sympathetic as in (28).

- (28) Dank Ihrer anfänglichen Untätigkeit und dem dann verhängten Shutdown ist das Coronavirus mittlerweile zu einer Gefahr für unsere Wirtschaft und für unsere Gesellschaft geworden, die unser Land in die

<sup>18</sup> <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19166.pdf#P.20642>.

größte Wirtschaftskrise stürzen wird, die wir je erlebt haben. (S. Münzenmaier, 23.04.2020)<sup>19</sup>

*Thanks to your initial inactivity and the shutdown that was then imposed, the coronavirus has now become a threat to our economy and to our society, which will plunge our country into the greatest economic crisis we have ever experienced.*

As can be seen in (28) the AfD presents *Ihrer anfänglichen Untätigkeit...* ‘your initial inactivity...’ (addressing Merkel) as the cause for the *Gefahr für unsere Wirtschaft und unsere Gesellschaft* ‘threat to our economy and our society’, creating a dichotomy ‘your’ (the government’s) vs. ‘our’ (the society and economy represented by the AfD).

The use of deixis radically changes if the *Facebook* corpus is observed. The direct addressees are no more the parliamentarians of other political parties, but potential voters and supporters. The goal pursued by a conscious use of deixis is twofold: on the one hand the party wants to prove sympathetic with the needs of the followers; on the other hand the AfD wants to create a clear contrast between them (the AfD) and the others (*die Altparteien* ‘the old parties’, as they are often called).

The first objective is attained by using the inclusive first person plural: whoever follows the AfD’s *Facebook* page is part of a community who potentially shares the same ideals for which it is ready to fight (29).

- (29) Wir lassen uns unsere Grundrechte nicht nehmen! (FB, 16.11.2020)  
*We will not let our fundamental rights be taken away from us!*

The latter goal is pursued by reporting alleged scandals, chaotic management of the pandemic, freedom restrictions, which are counterbalanced by the assurance by the AfD (in first person plural) that they will strenuously engage to stop all purported abuses. A common slogan is *nicht mit uns* ‘not with us’ as can be seen in the following example.

- (30) Freiheitsrechte einschränken? NICHT MIT UNS! (FB, 27.12.2020)  
*Restrict freedoms? NOT WITH US!*

The alleged culprit of the COVID-19 disaster is nearly always expressed by name: *die Regierung*, ‘the government’, *die Altparteien* ‘the old parties’, *die Presse* ‘the press’. The outraged citizens have to identify a precise target of their discontent and perceive a sense of “we” against the elites (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008).

A striking difference from the corpus of parliamentary speeches is that the most often used pronoun is still the formal *Sie*, but this time it has a

<sup>19</sup> <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19156.pdf#P.19313>.



positive connotation and refers to the supporters. *Sie* is no more the target of accusations, but the community of the supporters, with whom they feel close. Supporters are directly invited to cooperate with the party, to distrust official communication and share the AfD posts. They are also called upon to take part in a discussion by means of questions which concern sensitive issues such as wearing masks, as happens in the following example:

- (31) Zweifelnd auch Sie am Sinn der allgegenwärtigen Maskenpflicht? Dann sind Sie in bester Gesellschaft. (FB, 12.09.2020)  
*Do you also doubt the sense of the omnipresent mask requirement? Then you are in best company.*

### 5.3.2. The use of moods

The analysis of the moods used in the two corpora can contribute to shed light on the type of communication the AfD carries out, and specifically whether it is linguistically grounded on alleged facts, which are therefore reported in the realis mood, or if the scepticism is expressed by means of unrealis moods. Moreover, it is significant to detect whether the imperative mood is used as a strategy to strongly invite the supporters to take action – in the case of *Facebook* – or to ask the government to fulfil the requests by the AfD, for the parliamentary speeches.

As expected, the preferred mood in both corpora is the indicative, which is the only “realis mood” in German<sup>20</sup>, the mood of factuality (Palmer 2012). Millikan (2005, p. 157) argues that “a proper function of the indicative mood is to induce belief in the proposition expressed”. No doubt should emerge concerning the theme which is being discussed and the AfD’s vision is presented as if it were the only possible one, even though what is being uttered is contradicted by facts, as the following example from the parliamentary corpus highlights.

- (32) Regiert wurde Deutschland de facto von der Bundeskanzlerin und den Ministerpräsidenten auf dem Verordnungswege ohne echte parlamentarische Kontrolle. Das Grundgesetz kennt einen solchen Notstand nur für den Verteidigungsfall, nicht für den Fall einer Epidemie. Für den Coronausnahmestand mit einer so weitreichenden Außerkraftsetzung der Grundrechte gibt es in der Verfassung keine Grundlage. (B. Von Storch, 07.05.2020)<sup>21</sup>  
*Germany was de facto governed by the Federal Chancellor and the Prime Minister by ordinance without real parliamentary control. The constitution only recognizes such an emergency in the event of a defense,*

<sup>20</sup> Consider that apart from conditionals, in contemporary German the indicative mood is used also for subordinate clauses.

<sup>21</sup> <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19158.pdf#P.19551>.

*not in the event of an epidemic. There is no basis in the constitution for the exceptional state with such a far-reaching suspension of fundamental rights.*

The fact that the state of emergency violates the constitution is definitely questionable, since there is evidence that it was declared to protect public health, as allowed by the constitution under these circumstances. Nevertheless, the parliamentarian states the contrary in the indicative mood, as if it were an absolute truth.

Similarly, all *Facebook* posts which are aimed at denouncing the current situation and unveiling the alleged truth by providing the reader with an alternative source of information use the same linguistic strategy. The indicative as factual mood is used.

- (33) Was verharmlosend als „Lockdown light“ bezeichnet wird, bedeutet erneute massive Grundrechts-Einschränkungen und die Vernichtung unzähliger Existenzen! [...] Die Maßnahmen sind vollkommen unverhältnismäßig und verursachen als „Kollateralschäden“ furchtbares Leid und auch Tote! (FB, 02.11.2020)  
*What is belittled as "lockdown light" means renewed massive restrictions on fundamental rights and the destruction of countless lives! [...] The measures are completely disproportionate and cause, as "collateral damage", terrible suffering and deaths!*

Also in this case, the truth is reversed: the restrictive measures are purportedly disproportionate, and they are causing suffering and deaths. The post claims that the real problem is limitations and not COVID-19 against which restrictions are imposed.

Aside from building counter-discourse, the AfD wants to present itself as a party of pragmatism and of action. Both the government and the citizens supporting the AfD are called upon to act. In the parliamentary speeches the AfD makes use of the imperative mood to directly address the Chancellor and the Ministers. In the *Facebook* corpus, instead, the imperative is used when the supporters are to be directly addressed. For instance, many posts in the period of the electoral campaign end with a direct invitation to vote for the AfD: *wählen Sie AfD* ‘vote for AfD’. Differently from the parliamentary corpus where the conative function is expressed by the imperative mood, on *Facebook* a concurring form that is frequently used is the infinitive, which serves the same objective to call people upon action, but in a subtler way, impersonally, through slogans with which the supporters of the AfD can identify themselves.

- (34) Corona Panik-mache wird wirklich teuer. Bürger ent- statt belasten! (FB, 27.11.2020)

*COVID panic is really expensive. Relieve instead of burdening citizens!*  
(35) Virus nicht für bürgerfeindliche Politik missbrauchen! (FB, 28.08.2020)  
*Do not abuse the virus for anti-citizen politics!*

Interestingly, the second person plural imperative is only used with derogatory intent, to call on people who do not deserve respect from the party. The informal pronoun *ihr* is never used to address the followers, who are respectfully addressed with *Sie*.

(36) Stoppt die Appidemie! Nein zur App-Pflicht! (FB, 12.05.2020)  
*Stop the appidemic! No to compulsory app!*

The relationship between the use of imperative forms and misinformative contents is only indirect, since the AfD slogans contribute to fuelling discontent and to the spreading of fake news, rather than creating them. On *Facebook*, the imperative and imperative-like forms are used as a multiplier of followers (and therefore potential voters), who are looking for immediate content. Counter-discourse *stricto sensu* is instead built by means of the indicative used for alleged factual reporting, which reverses official narrative.

### 5.3.3. Deontic modality<sup>22</sup>

According to Han (1998) imperatives are deontic modals in disguise. Christmann (2010) defines deontic modality as “a kind of modality which has to do with what is necessary or possible”. In the case of AfD’s health communication the focus is on what needs to be done by the establishment and on alleged self-evident necessities which are disregarded or violated. To shed some light on AfD’s counter-discourse, it is useful to investigate how and to what extent modals are used to express obligation, alarm and urgency to change the course of things.

German splits the area of deontic modality of necessity into two, depending on the inherent modal force and on the ordering source (Kratzer 1977): on the one hand, the verb *müssen* is used to express factual necessity which should be intersubjectively acknowledged; on the other hand *sollen* expresses an obligation which is the result of someone else’s volition and is not subject internal. It is therefore relevant to investigate which modal verbs are chosen and the kind of subject with which they are associated.

In both corpora the deontic modal verb which is more frequently used is *müssen*. The number of attestations for the other modal verbs is definitely lower, as the main aim in both corpora is to highlight alleged uncontroversial

<sup>22</sup> Only modal verbs will be considered in this section, although other markers such as negative adjectives, which have been discussed in the previous paragraphs (*unsagbar, unfassbar, ...* ‘unspeakable, incomprehensible’, ...) could be considered expressions of deontic modality.

necessity and urgency, which shifts the focus from the COVID-19 health threat to the negative social conditions, which are claimed to be riskier than the disease (37). Unrelated issues such as internal security are also mentioned as necessities, especially in the *Facebook* corpus, to detract from the health issue (38).

- (37) [Es] müssen heute schon die sozialen Folgen bedacht werden. Es ergibt keinen Sinn, die Anzahl der Coronatoten auf Kosten möglicher Suizidopfer zu senken. (A. Gauland, 25.03.2020)<sup>23</sup>

*The social consequences must already be considered today. It makes no sense to reduce the number of corona deaths at the expense of possible suicide victims.*

- (38) Wir sagen: Innere Sicherheit muss auch unter Corona Bestand haben! (FB, 26.03.2020)

*We say: internal security must also endure under COVID-19!*

In both corpora, the subject of the deontic modal *müssen* is nearly always inanimate. When using the deontic modal, the focus must be on the (allegedly deprived) rights, freedom, social conditions which must be restored regardless of who will do it. The alleged culprits are then identified on the basis of pseudo-factual narrative in which lexical verbs in the indicative mood are used.

Despite the fact that the use of deontic modality is consistent in the two corpora, with *sollen* being only sparingly used, there is an asymmetry in the two corpora with respect to the use of the volitional modal *wollen* ‘will/want’, which is rarely used in the corpus of parliamentary speeches (less than *können*, i.e. ‘can’ and *sollen*), while it is the second most frequent modal in the *Facebook* corpus. This difference is expected if we consider that the parliament is not the context in which the AfD conjectures on alleged secret plans by the establishment. On the other hand, on *Facebook* there is a need to communicate alarm, to inform the supporters about alleged risks which could become concrete, if the plans of the opposers were fulfilled. All measures are in fact alleged to be resulting from the will of the establishment and not from necessity.

- (39) SPD will auch dich enteignen? SPD-Chefin Esken [...] verlangt nun auch eine Corona-Sonderabgabe für Deutsche. Dafür wollen die Sozis wohl mal wieder am Grundgesetz herumbiegen. Nicht mit uns! (FB, 01.04.2020)

*SPD wants to expropriate you too? SPD leader Esken [...] is now demanding a special COVID-19 levy for Germans. To do this, the socialists want to subvert the constitution again. Not with us!*

<sup>23</sup> <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19154.pdf#P.19121>.

#### 5.3.4. Clausal linking

The analysis of clausal linking can be insightful to cast light on the linguistic expression of the logical relationship which holds between the clauses and the speech acts of which counter-discourse is made. Causal relations, conditional clauses, concessives and finality can be made explicit in a text thanks to adverbial subordination. By definition, adjuncts are not essential for the main clause to be syntactically and semantically complete. However, logically robust reasoning is often linguistically supported by syntactic linkers which make the relationship between one clause and another overt. The hierarchical relationship between clauses, and therefore embeddedness or dependencies, can be explicitly marked. A line of reasoning in which the cause-and-effect relationships are clearly stated can be more easily falsified in normal science dialectics. Pseudoscientific reasoning and deliberate deception are based on emotions, irrationality, anger, bias and their components are not necessarily logically related. In this kind of communication sentences are usually arranged in paratactic structures, the clauses are juxtaposed or connected at the same level by means of semantically vacuous conjunctions such as ‘and’, this gives equal weight to each textual element and amplifies the rhetorical work (Easterbrook 2021). These aspects seem to be borne out in AfD’s health counter-discourse.

- (40) Wir betonen: Die Corona-Maßnahmen müssen zu jedem Zeitpunkt verhältnismäßig sein! Grundrechte müssen erhalten bleiben! (FB, 01.12.2020)

*We emphasize: The corona measures must be proportionate at all times!  
Fundamental rights must be preserved!*

An analysis of the *Facebook* corpus clearly shows that in AfD’s counter-discourse adverbial subordination is nearly absent and also complement clauses are limited, as the choice of a colon instead of the subjunctor *dass* ‘that’ in (40) confirms. The preferred coordinator is actually *und* ‘and’, but many clauses are asyndetically juxtaposed. The corpus of parliamentary speeches exhibits more complex clausal structure, especially complement clauses, but adverbial clauses are not frequently found.

- (41) Die Kanzlerin sagte vor Kurzem zu Recht, dass wir uns in einer Krise historischen Ausmaßes befinden. Inzwischen fragen sich aber immer mehr Menschen, ob diese Krise durch das Virus oder durch das Nichthandeln bzw. die falschen Handlungen und Entscheidungen der Regierung verursacht worden ist. (G. Frömmling, 07.05.2020)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btp/19/19158.pdf#P.19535>.

*The Chancellor rightly said recently that we are in a crisis of historic proportions. Meanwhile, however, more and more people are wondering whether this crisis was caused by the virus or by inaction or the wrong actions and decisions of the government.*

Among the adverbial subjunctors, the most frequent in the corpus of parliamentary speeches is *wenn* ‘when/if’ followed by *weil* ‘because’. In the *Facebook* corpus, where adverbial subordination is poorer, the causal connector is scarcer and final conjunctions such as *um zu/damit* are slightly preferred especially when the alleged goals of the establishment are dealt with.

The stacking of independent clauses is a strategy to rhetorically give the same value to each of them and present their content as factual, even though it is not. Not only are independent declarative clauses used, but also questions are employed as a tool to highlight core issues and focus the addressee’s attention on them. The latter mechanism is typical for *Facebook*, in which engagement is particularly important to increase the number of users and the success of the post.

- (42) Mal ehrlich: Wer hat eigentlich gerade noch den Überblick, was man in welchem Bundesland derzeit noch darf und was nicht? Und was dann an Weihnachten gelten soll? Und was danach? (FB, 09.12.2020)  
*Let's be honest: who actually still has an overview of what is currently still allowed in which region and what is not? And what should apply to Christmas? And what then?*

#### **5.4. Discussion of the findings**

The linguistic analysis of the two corpora has proceeded from morphology to syntax in order to detect the strategies which the AfD party uses to pursue its communicative goals. Moreover, the question has been addressed whether diamesic variation can be found between the two different modes of communication.

As for morphology, a tendency to use negatively connotated affixes has emerged in both corpora. Beside adjectival negative affixes, the use of the verbal prefixes *ver-* *ent-* and *zer-* has proved to be particularly effective to convey the core ideas of hiding/unveiling the truth and the destruction of the social tissue negatively affected by allegedly deliberate disproportional restrictions. While this linguistic strategy is common to both corpora, the creative use of provocative compounds and neologisms to express outrage, indignation and refusal for all containment measures is much more accentuated in the *Facebook* corpus in which vivid language is a tool to trigger emotional reactions. On the contrary, the corpus of parliamentary speeches makes spare use of unexpected compounds: compounding is still

very frequent but is mainly used in neutral or technical contexts which require high information density.

The syntactic analysis has focused on language mechanisms which can be easily manipulated to sway public opinion and let people think that biased communication is instead factual: personal deixis, the use of moods and deontic modality, but also clausal linking. Due to the different target groups, the use of personal deixis is not identical in the two corpora. The pronoun which is most frequently used in both corpora is formal *Sie*. However, while in the parliamentary speeches it is used negatively to directly identify a culprit from whom the AfD wants to set apart, *Sie* is used in the *Facebook* corpus to respectfully address the supporters. While in the parliamentary speeches *wir* 'we' denotes a dichotomy 'us' vs 'them', the pronoun is instead fully inclusive on *Facebook* to convey the idea of a community who fights against the deprivation of personal freedom. As expected, in both corpora the mood which is most frequently used is the indicative to give the impression that the delivered contents are factual and uncontroversial, nonetheless the imperative with conative function can also be found. Deontic modality goes into the same direction: the modal verb *müssen* designates absolute necessity and contributes to create (pseudo) factuality. This same goal is strongly pursued also by the consistent use of simple parataxis in both corpora. The clauses are asyndetically juxtaposed or, in most cases, the conjunction *und* 'and' is used. The lack of adverbial subordination on *Facebook* speaks for the will to be immediate and to reach a wide audience, but it also functional to the building of a discourse in which apodictical truths are stated, which (seemingly) do not require any argumentation.

## 6. Conclusion

Healthy health communication has proven to be crucial in these unprecedented times of pandemic and infodemic (Reddy, Gupta 2020). Health conspiratorial theories and disinformation are definitely not a novel phenomenon, however the spreading of health misinformation and downplaying constitute a severe threat to public health, especially if the source or the spreader of manipulated and manipulative health information is a parliamentary party. The aim of this contribution was to linguistically analyse AfD's counter-discourse. To attain this goal, after some preliminary remarks, the first question was whether the far-right German party AfD can be considered extremist and potentially spread conspiratorial contents. Secondly, the landscape of German lateral thinking, such as the *Querdenker* movement, and some of its major players such as Attila Hildmann were briefly illustrated to understand to what extent conspiratorial beliefs have

found fertile ground in Germany. It was then verified whether the German AfD holds some relations with COVID deniers and could have an interest in finding supporters also among those who are willing to believe in COVID conspiracy theories. In order to test the hypothesis that the AfD delivers unhealthy COVID-19 communication and counter-narrative which ranges from misinformative content to conspiracy theories, and to check whether this happens irrespective of the medium used, two corpora were analysed: one corpus of parliamentary speeches given by AfD members in the period from March 2020 to April 2021 and another corpus of *Facebook* posts which appeared on the official AfD's profile over the same period of time. AfD's COVID communication is characterized by "cherry-picking data", downplaying seriousness and correlation of unrelated phenomena in both corpora. However, overt hostility towards mainstream media and the political establishment, science distrust and the idea that the restrictions result from a will of the establishment and not from medical necessity are typical for *Facebook*. After having proved that AfD's counter-discourse concerning COVID-19 is at best misinformative in parliamentary speeches and exhibits even some conspiratorial traits on *Facebook*, a qualitative morphosyntactic analysis was carried out, to understand how the language is bent to achieve the desired communicative outcome and to test whether diamesic variation between the two corpora can be observed.

The obtained results point to the fact that the morphosyntax is (c)overtly manipulated to attain different communicative outcomes depending on the target groups and on the different modes. The emerging picture is far from being trivial, since it highlights how also potentially neutral language, which would hardly be identified as conspiratorial by automatic machine detection of hate speech, is actually severely dangerous for large parts of the population. The language manipulation technique both in the Parliament and on *Facebook* is rooted in people's discontent and fear and, especially on *Facebook*, the doubt is consistently insinuated that a hidden enemy is trying to deprive one's freedom and to impoverish the society on many levels. The subtler the tools which are used in unhealthy communication (affixation, compounding, deixis, modality, moods and clausal linking), the higher is the risk to underestimate the phenomenon and not to effectively react to it, leaving people vulnerable to false beliefs (Ecker *et al.* 2022).

As shown by Roozenbeek *et al.* (2020), susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 negatively correlates with illiteracy. However, if one considers that in the national elections on 26<sup>th</sup> September 2021 in parts of Eastern Germany the AfD became the first party, reaching nearly 25% of the votes in Thuringia and Saxony (*Zeit Online* 27.09.2021), there is reason to believe that antiscientific positions and extremism are



bound to become a major issue in the next years.

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