CHAPTER 7

Decoding implicit hate speech

Italian political discourse on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mattia Retta
University of Helsinki

Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the main linguistic and discursive features of anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant discourse in Italian political debate on social media. I combine a top-down approach, focusing on politicians, and a horizontal approach, which analyses the discourses produced by other social media users. The aims of this study are to identify the implicit levels of hate speech found in the corpus and to describe the intertextual and interdiscursive construction of discriminatory and stereotyping language. Implicitness is a key element of online political discourse, since a politician's goal is to induce the audience to perceive the world in the way the politician wants them to. In the study, the pragmatic analysis shows that some kinds of connectives (contrastive, cor-

relative, and temporal) and certain adverbial phrases emerge as effective structures to convey such implicit messages. The vilification of out-groups takes place mainly through dehumanising and naturalising metaphors, which are more effectively unveiled by the discourse analysis. This level of analysis also confirms previously identified metaphors and stereotypes used for othering migrants; however, some *topoi* seem to be more commonly attributed to specific categories, such as unreliability and brutality being used almost exclusively in relation to the Chinese.

Keywords: implicit hate speech, implicit meanings, online political debate, in-groups and out-groups, discourse analysis, social media, COVID-19

7.1 Introduction

Hate speech, amplified and disseminated more rapidly by social media, serves a dual purpose: direct aggression against individuals and groups, as well as political propaganda (Bianchi 2021). In political settings hate speech is rarely overtly derogatory, rather it is conveyed implicitly and aims to incite discrimination and hate rather than promote direct violence (Baider 2019, 2023; Ferrini and Paris 2019; Faloppa 2020; Parvaresh 2023). An implicit communication is useful to politicians, allowing them to partially deny their responsibility, while their audience is less inclined to question the content of propaganda (Stanley 2015; Lombardi Vallauri 2019).

Hate speech, a well-established communication strategy in democratic societies (Petrilli 2019), constitutes an ordinary *practice* that is based on a supply–demand logic, where speakers fulfil their audience's expectations by attacking social or ethnic groups (Fumagalli 2019). Following the basic conceptualisation in Critical Discourse Analysis of language as a form of social practice that shapes and is shaped by other social practices and institutions (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Titscher et al. 2000), we can conclude that the ordinariness of hate speech can normalise hate and demeaning attitudes towards certain

groups and minorities. Hate speech represents a serious threat to democracies as it can silence its targets, restricting their ability to engage in public debate (Pöyhtäri 2015; Bianchi 2021); in addition, the combination of hate speech and the echo chambers of like-minded people encouraged by social media algorithms fuels political antagonism, polarisation, and the strengthening of in-group norms (Pöyhtäri 2015). Studies, such as that by Miller-Idriss (2018), have shown that the legitimation of right-wing populism and its naturalisation of hate speech has caused other political agents to adopt more conservative and nationalistic standpoints.

In this chapter, I will examine the main linguistic and discursive properties of derogatory speech directed against Chinese people and African migrants in the Italian political debate on Twitter and Facebook during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic (February to July 2020). The health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic led to a rise in hate speech and hate crimes, both in Italy and in other European countries (Caiani, Carlotti, and Padoan 2021; Dipoppa, Grossman, and Zonszein 2023).

By combining a linguistic-pragmatic analysis with the study of the discursive properties of the corpus, I aim to show how:

(i)   Certain linguistic elements, which have no literal meaning of hatred, can convey implicit derogatory messages.

(ii) The meaning of implicit hate speech is co-constructed interdiscursively and generates hatred and discrimination through language that becomes progressively more aggressive in the comment sections.

(iii) Certain discursive and argumentative strategies categorise out-groups and justify the discrimination against them.

I show that the implicit dimension of hate speech is built on two linguistic levels that operate simultaneously. The first level concerns the pragmatic dimension of the implicit meanings related to implicatures, presuppositions, and topicalizations, which are triggered by specific linguistic elements within sentences that 'function as a Trojan horse for the desired meaning' (Ferrini and Paris 2019: 25). The second level deals with the discursive and

argumentative strategies through which the interactants—politicians and other users—construe in- and out-groups, (re)producing or strengthening discriminatory communication. For the sake of simplicity, I will call these the pragmatic and the discourse level, respectively.

The pragmatic level of analysis aims to recognise these linguistic elements by making explicit the implicit messages. The subsequent examination of user comments in response to tweets/posts by politicians (for the composition of the corpus, see Section 7.4) provides tangible evidence of the power of implicit language. The discourse analysis is based on Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis, which understands discourse as a hybrid space and reflects on the interdiscursive construction of identity by detecting specific discursive strategies. In this study, a particular relevance is given to the analysis of argumentation, combining the examination of linguistic forms and the extra-linguistic factors that influence them.

The article is organised as follows. In Section 7.2 I will present the definition of hate speech adopted in this study. Section 7.3 outlines the theoretical basis of the study by defining the pragmatic and discursive dimensions of implicitness investigated here. In Section 7.4 I will briefly present the methodology adopted and will explain the composition of the corpus, also outlining the historical and political background. Section 7.5 presents an analysis of the linguistic elements that function as triggers of implicit meanings, while Section 7.6 explores the discursive and argumentative strategies that categorise out-groups and justify their vilification. Some concluding remarks about the findings and future lines of enquiry will be presented in Section 7.7.

7.2 The definition of hate speech

The very definition of hate speech is problematic, both on a legal and on a linguistic level, because of the difficulty in establishing the limits of free speech (Fish 1994; Määttä 2020) and the excessive importance given to the emotional component (Perry 2001).

Even the academic community has not yet been able to provide an unambiguous definition of this concept (see Brown 2017), and many argue that such search is futile (Anderson and Barnes 2022). Hate speech is best understood as a spectrum or a continuum that involves processes of alienation and social exclusion (Baider 2020; see also Chapter 1, Section 1.3 in this volume). For the identification of derogatory language in the corpus, I adopted the wide-ranging definition by the United Nations, as follows:

> the term hate speech is understood as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive. (United Nations 2019)

7.3 Implicit meanings

7.3.1 Implicatures, presuppositions, and topicalizations

Political tweets and posts are persuasive texts that induce the audience to perceive the world in the way the author of the text intends, often by imposing biased interpretations and questionable content (Lombardi Vallauri 2019). Persuasion through implicitness is particularly effective because meaning is co-constructed by the original speaker/writer and their audience. The original speaker/writer produces a possible set of implicit meanings, while their audience chooses the necessary inferences (Saul 2002; Sbisà 2021). As derogatory speech is mainly implicit in political settings, implicatures, presuppositions, and topicalizations are central elements of this kind of hate speech.

For the purposes of this study, I employ the traditional Gricean view on the cooperativeness of language (Grice [1975] 1989) and a textual-pragmatic distinction between implicatures and presuppositions (Stalnaker 1973, 1999; Sbisà 2007).

An implicature is the act of implying certain things by saying something else (Davis 2019): it is derived by inference from the speaker's speech and consists in an addition or adjustment to what the utterance says explicitly (Sbisà 2007). Following Grice's distinction ([1975] 1989), implicatures are traditionally divided into two main types: conventional and conversational. The former are generated by the stable *conventional* association with certain lexical items, while the latter can only be communicated and successfully understood in a specific conversational context. Implicating a meaning makes it less questionable and more acceptable for the addressees as it escapes full critical attention (Lombardi Vallauri 2019). This study focuses on the pragmatic features of connectives and adverbials and is thus primarily interested in the use of conventional implicatures within the political debate. For the analysis, I follow Sbisà (2001, 2021), who posits that implicatures are based on the intentions that can be attributed to the writer who produces a certain text in order for the text to be understood as intended: in other words, it is accepted as cooperative and appropriate (see also Chapter 9 in this volume). I adopt this view because political propaganda must be cooperative if it wants to succeed; this approach also represents a more manageable tool for discourse analysis (Sbisà 2021: 178). It must be noted that the goal of cooperation in the comment threads is less clear, but social media content often represents a way to signal belonging and affiliation to certain groups or ideologies (see, e.g., Crosset, Tanner, and Campana 2018).

Presuppositions are, on a very general level, truths in the text that must be taken for granted by the interlocutors in order to consider an utterance as appropriate (Bianchi 2003; Sbisà 2007). The presupposed propositions are established and accepted as the *common ground* among the participants to a conversation, their shared common belief (Kadmon 2001; Stalnaker 2002). I will focus on structural presuppositions (Yule 1996), because of the nature of the linguistic elements under investigation here. Structural presuppositions are linked to the use of specific words and linguistic structures that have been proven to be regular presup-

positional triggers, such as certain connectives or iterative expressions (Yule 1996; Sbisà 2007).

Akin to presuppositions, topicalizations are implicit strategies that allude to the fact that the content is already in the mind of the receiver and that the sender is merely reminding them of it (Lombardi Vallauri 2019: 164). 'Topic' is the name assigned to the linguistic codification of old information, while new information is the 'Focus'. A speaker usually begins from old information and only subsequently adds the Focus, which in pragmatic terms we can describe as the realisation of the informative purpose of a message (Lombardi Vallauri 2019).[1] In the context of hate speech, this informative purpose often aims to amplify pre-existing bias and prejudices rather than transmitting new information.

Focality is an essential requirement to draw attention to some content, and it demands a higher degree of cognitive processing. This means, for example, that an utterance with two Foci requires too much effort and two new pieces of information are still generally presented as Topic + Focus instead of Focus + Focus (Lombardi Vallauri and Masia 2015). Introducing information as topical 'gives the impression' that its content is already active in the linguistic context and therefore available in the short-term memory of the receiver, who processes it as knowledge that was already present in the discourse (Chafe 1994; Lombardi Vallauri 2019). The receivers can thus accept questionable topicalized content with low epistemic vigilance, aiding the formation of biased mental representations (Van Dijk 2006; Lombardi Vallauri 2021).

Differently from presuppositions, topicalizations do not appeal to the general knowledge of the interlocutor, but rather to the small set of things the interlocutor is thinking about at that moment (Lombardi Vallauri 2019: 167).

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1   Marked intonations are a known exception to this general rule, but they will not be discussed in this chapter.

7.3.2 Discourse analysis and discourse strategies

The concept of discourse is multifaceted and open to various interpretations, and it has sometimes been criticised for being too vague (see Widdowson 1995). In this chapter, I employ tools of the DHA to Critical Discourse Analysis as developed by Ruth Wodak (2001), which studies linguistic productions in conjunction with extra-linguistic factors, such as the speaker's intention, the historical and political context, and socio-psychological factors (Titscher et al. 2000: 154–163). Wodak (2001: 66) characterises discourse as 'a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens'. The most salient feature of a discourse is having macro-topics, for instance *immigration*, which are open and hybrid (Wodak 2001). During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, political discourse on social media saw a surge in derogatory comments against Chinese people and African migrants. Traumatic events, such as a pandemic, can indeed trigger socially defensive choices and tend to increase the production of hate speech (King and Sutton 2013; Caiani, Carlotti, and Padoan 2021; Della Porta 2022). The discourse analysis has identified several macro-topics: economic relationships between China and Italy, health issues, national security, immigration, and integration policies.

The production of tokens, or *texts*, is influenced by and related to the historical context, the genre, and the field of action. Besides the chronological events, the historical context also includes the geographical position, the institutions involved, and the socio-political situation. A genre is the socially accepted manner of using language in connection with a certain social activity (Fairclough 1995: 14). Lastly, a field of action is the portion of societal reality that creates and shapes the 'frame' of discourse and functions as a starting point for the different topics (Titscher et al. 2000; Wodak 2001). It must be noted that discourses cross over different fields of action and genres. Table 7.1 helps contextualise this study through the lens of DHA.

Table 7.1: Analytical schema of the study material according to DHA.

Historical context	Genres	Fields of action
Early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Feb–Jul 2020)	Online slogans	Political propaganda (top-down)
Online political debate in Italy	Policy announcements	Formation of public opinion (top-down and horizontal)
Government/ Opposition	Online comments	Self-representation (of politicians and other social media users)

Pragmatic and discursive implicitness clearly overlap, but they must be understood differently. Discursive and argumentative strategies can be linguistically explicit, but often work 'in an unconscious, irrational and emotional way' (Titscher et al. 2000: 156). The discourse-linguistic analysis can unearth these 'hidden' strategies, showing their role within a certain historical and political context.

I argue that the construction of the fundamental opposition between a positive and safe *us* and a negative and dangerous *them* is based on four main strategies: categorisation, perspectivation, intensification/mitigation, and argumentation. Firstly, the analysis focuses on how different groups of people are named and categorised, thus creating several out-groups with characteristics that are perceived as incompatible with the in-group's worldview (Russo and Tempesta 2017: 26). While categorisation is a normal cognitive process that allows us to better grasp reality (Cohen and Lefebvre 2005), its application to social groups often result in prejudice and stereotyping (Mazzara 1997; Russo and Tempesta 2017). The linguistic devices related to this strategy are mainly generalising membership categorisation, dehumanising metaphors, and synecdoche.

The other three strategies aim to justify the discrimination and the clear opposition between in- and out-groups. Perspectivation

Table 7.2: Discursive strategies.

Strategy	Aims	Devices
Categorisation	Construction of in- and out-groups	Generalising catego-risation (membership categorisation devices, deictics, etc.)
		Dehumanising meta-phors
		Implicit constructions
		Synecdoche
Perspectivation	Speaker's point of view in relation to others	Reporting/description of discriminatory events
		Quotations
Intensification/ Mitigation	Modifying the epis-temic status of a proposition	Vagueness
		Hyperbolic expressions
Argumentation	Justification of the argument	Use of argumentative *topoi*[*]
		Implicit constructions

[*]   I am aware that, within argumentation strategies, many include the analysis of fallacies as devices that justify the construction of certain arguments (see, e.g., Wodak 2001; Faloppa 2020). However, for reasons of space, in this chapter I decided to focus only on the analysis of *topoi* as effective means for the circula-tion of hateful argumentations online.

refers to how speakers represent perspectives, both theirs and oth-ers', and position themselves in relation to other subjects (Grau-mann and Kallmeyer 2002: 4). Common examples of these verbal practices are reported speech or modality (Zifonun 2002). Inten-sifying and mitigating devices, such as modals, tag questions, hyperboles, and litotes, modify the illocutionary force of an utter-ance, by either overtly expressing a concept or making it vague and opaque (Wodak 2001). I show how indeterminate expressions such as indefinite pronouns can also intensify derogatory content (see). Finally, discrimination is justified by means of *topoi*, explicit or implicit argumentative statements that must be

widely accepted by the participants in order to consider a certain conversation as cooperative and help justify the progress from the arguments to a conclusion (Kienpointner 1992: 194; Wodak 2001).[2] In <u>Table 7.2</u>, I summarise the aims of these strategies and the related linguistic devices.

7.4 Methodology

The qualitative analysis conducted in this study relied on manual investigation due to the inherent nature of political hate speech, which often operates implicitly, with seemingly neutral words carrying hateful messages. The study focuses on material published on Twitter (now X) and Facebook, the two social media platforms that have been an established part of political campaigns and communication since the early 2010s (Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Pietrandrea 2021). Twitter has become the most suitable arena for the strengthening and spread of propagandist content: its structure is open, the content is visible for all, and the militants can easily retweet the leader's comments (Pietrandrea and Battaglia 2022).[3] Facebook, on the other hand, is a more closed system, which allows users to address their followers directly: there is less backlash and negative comments, aiding the creation of militant in-groups.

The corpus of my study is composed of original tweets and Facebook posts by four Italian politicians (Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni, Luca Zaia, and Vincenzo De Luca) published between February and July 2020, and the reaction of other users as seen in their comments. These politicians were chosen according to their representativity, activity on social media, and their main narratives. Salvini and Meloni are the party leaders of the main right-wing parties in Italy, while Zaia and De Luca are two regional administrators who earned great popularity during the pandemic.

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2   For criticism of this definition of *topos*, see Žagar (2010).
3   These characteristics have changed since 2023, after Elon Musk's introduction of new rules on data access and visibility on X.

All four of these politicians are very active on social media and their communication style can be described as direct and, at times, aggressive.

The data were collected between August and October 2021. I used the web scraping application Octoparse 8 to automatically collect a total of 6364 tweets written by the selected politicians.[4] Manual annotation identified 128 posts with implicitly derogatory speech directed at either Chinese people or African migrants. Since Italian politicians tend to post the same content on both Twitter and Facebook, I then retrieved the same derogatory posts from Facebook (if possible). Subsequently, I collected 50 comments for each annotated token, using in the case of Facebook the 'most relevant' comment function. This allowed me to have a balanced and manageable corpus of 11,700 comments; of these, 542 were annotated as containing some degree of hate speech. In the case of Luca Zaia, I also included in the corpus an interview extract posted on a newspaper's Twitter page, because it was one of the first comments on the pandemic made by an important Italian politician (see (27) and (39) in sections 7.6.1 and 7.6.2).

The political affiliations of the politicians included in the study, together with some basic information about their popularity on the relevant social media platforms, are given in Table 7.3. In brackets is the number of tokens containing implicit hate speech collected for each politician.

The temporal frame of the study takes into consideration two important events. February 2020 marked the beginning of the pandemic in Italy, with the first local outbreak recorded in Northern Italy around 21 and 22 February. Meanwhile, in July 2020 Italy registered a rise in migrant landings on the coasts of Southern Italy. Cases of COVID-19 were very low, after a tight lockdown, and there was a widespread fear that African migrants might be responsible for a resurgence of the virus. To the best of

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4   Octoparse (https://www.octoparse.com/) is a Windows-based web scraping tool that converts unstructured website data into a structured dataset without requiring the use of code.

Table 7.3: The politicians and the political context of the corpus

Name	Party and political role	Followers
Matteo Salvini (114)	Lega Nord (Northern League) – Senator	1.4 million on Twitter 5+ million on Facebook
Giorgia Meloni (12)	Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) – Member of Parliament	1.2 million on Twitter 2.3+ million on Facebook
Luca Zaia (2)	Lega Nord – President of Veneto	130K on Twitter 1.1 million on Facebook
Vincenzo De Luca (0)	Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) – President of Campania	125K on Twitter 1.5+ million on Facebook

my knowledge this speculation was exaggerated, and no relevant outbreaks have been traced back to migrants arriving from North Africa.

Data are transcribed here in their original language and form, followed by an English translation. All translations are mine and are meant for non-native speakers of Italian to understand the examples; the analysis, however, is always based on the original texts. Regarding content published by public figures, the author, the account, the date of publication, and the link to each example is given as it was at the time of the analysis. Conversely, the links and accounts of other users will not be provided, in order to ensure a high degree of anonymity. An alphanumeric code is assigned to each post, according to the social media platform (FB = Facebook, TW = Twitter) and in order of appearance in the chapter.

In the next section, the analysis will focus on linguistic triggers of implicit hate messages such as connectives and adverbials. These seemingly neutral elements can be a vehicle for the expression of propositions that reinforce stereotypes or negatively categorise minorities and other vulnerable groups.

7.5 Pragmatic analysis: linguistic triggers

A fundamental part of any political debate is the establishment and propagation of certain shared ideologies between the elected officials, or electoral candidates, and their actual and future following. Ideologies are 'socially shared mental representations of social groups' (Van Dijk 1998) and the debates around them tend to be organised around polarisations and juxtapositions—a positively characterised in-group versus a negatively characterised out-group, a good *us* versus a bad *them* (Van Dijk 1998; Wodak 2001). In this section, the focus on the pragmatic levels aims to show how the use of certain connectives (Section 7.5.1) or adverbials (Section 7.5.2) aids the linguistic construction of out-groups and the circulation of stereotypes. This inevitably overlaps with some discursive strategies, but it is presented here both for clarity and to emphasise the significance of implicit linguistic strategies in the circulation of hate speech.

7.5.1 Connectives

Connectives are, in their most common meaning, invariable linguistic elements that logically connect textual units (Ferrari 2010, 2014). These elements might belong to different morphological classes such as conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, or compound prepositions. Following Ferrari (2014), I will not consider as connectives those grammatical elements that establish a linguistic but not a logical connection. This section is concerned with a pragmatic aspect of the semantic properties of certain connectives: their ability to present a piece of information as given (presupposition) or to convey an implicit meaning to be inferred (implicature) by means of their conventional meaning (for an outline of the semantic and pragmatic use of connectives, see, e.g., Van Dijk 1979).

The following tweets represent an appropriate starting point for our analysis, since on a superficial level they do not seem to contain any derogatory content:

(1)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (28 April 2020).

In diretta da #Lampedusa: italiani chiusi in casa, negozi chiusi, **ma** porti sempre aperti!!!

'Live from #Lampedusa: Italians closed up at home, stores [are] closed, but ports [are] always open!!!'

(2)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (25 July 2020).

I modenesi e tutti gli italiani hanno subìto mesi di sofferenze e di lockdown **ma** ora il governo vanifica tutto attirando clandestini positivi.

'The people of Modena and all Italians have endured months of suffering and lockdowns but now the government thwarts it all by attracting positive illegal immigrants.'

The adversative conjunction *ma* (but) has the primary function of linking two contrasting clauses or propositions. Utterances introduced by 'but' have the pragmatic role of objections, persuading the addressee of the message to accept that the objection has met the necessary conditions to be considered appropriate (Sbisà 2007: 132).

I argue that the adversative conjunction is used to convey a similar implication in all of the examples reported above, which can be formulated as follows: (1) → that the government allows migrants into the country and grants them special liberties, while Italians cannot even work; (2) → that the government welcomes migrants that are potentially infected and this will result in Italians suffering again.[5]

The contrast is further strengthened by various dichotomies: closed stores/open ports (1) and suffering Italians/illegal and infected immigrants (2). Ports have specifically become the

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5   In the analysis of implicit strategies, I will employ the symbol → for 'implicates'.

embodiment of the arrival and welcoming of migrants on to Italian soil and, in the right-wing rhetoric, they must be closed rather than open.

Another widely used adversative conjunction is *invece di* (instead of), which regularly appears in sentence-initial position. The content introduced by *invece di* is topicalized and presented as already given. As a result, the readers find themselves in a situation where the statement is not perceived as Salvini's, but as something they were themselves already thinking about:

(3) Matteo Salvini [salviniofficial] (12 May 2020).

Invece di assicurare un lavoro ai milioni di italiani disoccupati e ai tanti immigrati regolari e perbene presenti in Italia, il governo pensa a una MAXI-SANATORIA per migliaia di clandestini.

'Rather than guaranteeing a job to the millions of unemployed Italians and to the many legal and respectable immigrants in Italy, the government is considering a MAXI-AMNESTY for thousands of illegal immigrants.'

(4) Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvini] (12 July 2020).

Pazzesco. **Invece di** rinchiudere gli italiani, il governo pensi a chiudere i porti.

'Crazy. Rather than locking up Italians, the government should think about closing the ports.'

In these examples the connective *invece di* is used to criticise the actions of the government, either for what the government should do and does not (3) or for what the government does and should not do (4).

Another connective often employed to convey implicit meanings is the coordinating conjunction *e* (and). This conjunction is not only used to connect two sentences but it also generates parallelisms that implicate a pragmatic relation between the two or

more conjuncts of the parallelism (Lombardi Vallauri 2019; Pietrandrea and Battaglia 2022).

(5)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (14 March 2020).

Gli Italiani non possono uscire di casa, ma accogliamo immigrati **e** mettiamo in pericolo soccorritori e Forze dell'Ordine.

'Italians cannot leave their home, but we welcome immigrants and endanger rescuers and law enforcement.'

(6)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (05 May 2020).

Il governo annuncia una sanatoria per clandestini, e gli sbarchi aumentano (+350%). Stanotte a Lampedusa altri 136 arrivi. Italia campo profughi? NO, grazie.

'The government announces an amnesty for illegal immigrants, and landings increase (+350%). Tonight in Lampedusa another 136 arrivals. Italy refugee camp? NO, thanks.'

(7)   Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni] (29 July 2020).

Non consentiremo al Governo di continuare con la sua furia immigrazionista e rendere vani tutti i sacrifici degli italiani.

'We will not allow the government to continue with its immigrationist fury and to render pointless all the sacrifices of Italians.'

These various parallelisms convey implicatures: (5) → that welcoming the migrants into the ports puts law enforcement workers at risk; (6) → that the government's decision to grant an amnesty to those undocumented migrants who already reside and work in Italy will cause a rise in illegal immigration; (7) → that the

government's lax policy on immigration will render pointless the sacrifices that Italians made during the pandemic.

So far, the focus has been on implicit meanings conveyed by single word connectives. Our focus will now shift to more complex connectives that express logical successions. Correlative connectives, such as 'either … or', 'both … and', 'not only … but also', bind sentences closely to one another. In the following examples the connective *non solo … ma anche* (not only … but also) is used to take the information introduced by the first element for granted:

(8)   Matteo Salvini [Matteo Salvini official] (23 June 2020).

Non solo il virus che ha infettato il mondo, [**ma**] adesso questo nuovo massacro.

'Not only the virus that infected the world, now this new massacre.'

(9)   [FB1] (23 June 2020).

La Cina sta distruggendo **non solo** questi poveri animali indifesi… **Ma** il mondo intero!!!!

'China is destroying not only these poor, defenceless animals… but the whole world!!!'

Salvini's Facebook post in (8) refers to a dog meat eating festival that takes place every June in the city of Yulin in south-eastern China. His short post comes with a link to an article in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* on the same issue and a picture of a seemingly stray dog in a cage.[6]

The content introduced by *non solo* is topicalized and therefore presented as already established information.

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6   The post proved to be extremely popular: as of 25 April 2022, it has 9047 comments and has been shared 6576 times.

Another example of topicalized content is that triggered by the connectives *prima* (first) and *poi* (then) when used in conjunction:

(10)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (26 March 2020).

Prima infettano il mondo, **poi** rischiamo che lo ricomprino.

'First they infect the world, then we risk that they will buy it.'

(11)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (04 May 2020).

Prima lasciano che decine di mafiosi e assassini escano dal carcere, **poi** provano una sanatoria di centinaia di migliaia di clandestini. Abbiamo, tutti insieme, il dovere morale di fermarli.

'First they let tens of mafiosos and murderers leave jail, then they propose an amnesty for thousands of illegal immigrants. We have, all together, the moral obligation to stop them.'

Prima and *poi* are temporal connectives that in (10) and (11) carry a meaning of logical succession. In these examples they not only show a temporal evolution but also establish a consequential relation between the two utterances (for the various functions of *poi* in Italian, see Cruschina and Cognola 2021). Even in this case, the first connective, *prima*, introduces the Topic as the obvious starting point that does not need to be discussed. An explicit assertion such as 'The Chinese infected the world' would have most likely been subject to a larger backlash.

The second connective, *poi*, introduces the logical consequence of the previous proposition, activating implicatures: (10) → that the Chinese intentionally caused the pandemic in order to benefit from it for economic gain; (11) → that illegal immigrants are as

dangerous to Italian society as members of the mafia or murderers.

In the next section, I will conduct a similar pragmatic analysis on another syntactic class, adverbials.

7.5.2 Adverbials

The term 'adverbial' refers to a precise syntactic function that, in Maienborn and Schäfer's (2011: 1391) terms, specifies further the circumstances of the verbal or sentential referent according to limited semantic usage such as time, manner, and place.

Adverbials can be adverbs or adverb phrases ('emotionally', 'properly'), prepositional phrases ('at the restaurant', 'with great care'), or noun/determiner phrases ('the entire year'). This study finds that adverbs and prepositional phrases can be vehicles for implicit language:

(12)   [TW1] (14 April 2020).

Non a caso hanno diffuso il virus. Rischio calcolato.

'It was not by chance they spread the virus. Calculated risk.'

Non a caso is an evaluative adverbial phrase with the meaning of intentionally or deliberately. If we analyse this comment (a reply to a tweet by Salvini) as a single sentence, this is how the information structure looks:

[Non a caso hanno diffuso il virus]$_T$. [Rischio calcolato]$_F$

As in previous examples, the Topic is accepted as having been part of the conversation prior to the comment; the Focus introduces new information that → that the Chinese took a calculated risk in infecting the world with the COVID-19 virus to gain some advantage.

Iterative adverbials, such as 'again' or 'once again', are well attested in the corpus and they are mainly used to add a sense of urgency to the matter at hand. Salvini in particular uses them to both amplify the dangerousness of a perceived migrant emergency and to attack political adversaries:

(13)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (21 June 2020).

Anche la nave Ong tedesca con 211 clandestini a bordo è arrivata in Italia, Sicilia **di nuovo** trasformata nel campo profughi d'Europa.

'The German NGO ship with 211 illegal immigrants on board also arrived in Italy, Sicily is once again transformed into the refugee camp of Europe.'

(14)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (04 July 2020).

VERGOGNOSO. Sicilia trasformata **di nuovo** in un campo profughi, con delinquenti e violenti che vengono in Italia a metterci i piedi in testa.

'Shameful. Sicily is transformed once again into a refugee camp, with thugs and violent people coming to Italy to push us around.'

The tweets in (13) and (14) trigger the presupposition that Sicily had already been Europe's refugee camp in the past, with all the issues and social tensions that this entails. These tweets can be read in two ways. Firstly, they criticise Lega Nord's Italian and European political adversaries, whose lax migration policies have let the situation evolve to a critical point. Secondly, Salvini's tweets attack the migrants and their presence in Sicily. This attack is strengthened in (14) by a discursive characterisation of the migrants as violent criminals (see Section 7.6.1).

Lastly, a recurring prepositional phrase emerged from the corpus, *alle spese di* (at the expense of). This phrase is so popular and occurs so often that it could be considered an out-and-out motto of right-wing politicians:

(15)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (17 April 2020).

Ospiterà **a spese degli italiani** gli immigrati per la loro quarantena prima di essere sbarcati.

'It will accommodate, at the expense of Italians, migrants for their quarantine before they are disembarked.'

(16)   Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni] (29 July 2020).

Governo pronto a varare una mega nave quarantena per immigrati che sbarcano in Italia: 4,8milioni di € per 92 giorni, per ospitare fino a 400 persone con vitto erogato 'in conformità ai dettami delle diverse religioni'. Un capolavoro politicamente corretto **a spese degli italiani.**

'The government [is] ready to launch a mega-quarantine ship for immigrants landing in Italy: €4.8 million for 92 days, to accommodate up to 400 people with food provided "in accordance with the requirements of the various religions". A masterpiece of political correctness at the expense of Italians.'

The phrase *alle spese di* is by nature ambiguous since it can be interpreted in more than one way. Both (15) and (16) hint at the fact that: a) the Italian government effectively spends its own money (and not, for example, European Union funds); and b) that in doing so, they are taking away resources from Italians. Ambiguity and vagueness (for the difference between these terms, see Machetti 2006) are essential parts of language use. Nevertheless, in textual contexts where the goal is to persuade, being opaque and ambiguous is more in the speaker's interest than being precise and clear (Channell 1994; Bazzanella 2011). I argue that Salvini and Meloni make a deliberate choice of leaving the readers with the 'burden' of interpreting their words. In fact, a more precise assertion might turn out to be either less credible, or less attractive (Lombardi Vallauri 2019: 99). In one of the replies to a post by

Salvini we can find a slightly modified version of the same prepositional phrase, where the ethnic adjective 'Italian' is substituted by the first-person plural possessive *nostre* (our):

(17)   [TW2] (02 May 2020).

> NOI IN QUARANTENA TAPPATI IN CASA, LE NOSTRE AZIENDE CHIUSE, MENTRE I NEGRI SBARCATI CLANDESTINAMENTE IN ITALIA VANNO IN ALBERGO, SERVITI E RIVERITI. **A NOSTRE SPESE.**

> 'We are quarantined and holed up in our homes, our businesses closed, while the negroes who illegally landed in Italy go to hotels, served and revered. At our expense.'

The tone of this comment is openly derogatory and insulting. The use of the possessive does not alter in any way the presupposition at play but rather strengthens it, and it is explained by the whole argumentative structure of the post. The author contrasts what is ours (Italians') and what is theirs (the migrants'), highlighting the waste of resources caused by the migrants' arrival and accommodation. This clear distinction between *us* and *them* will be the main topic of the following section, in which I focus on the discursive and argumentative strategies that categorise out-groups and justify their discrimination.

7.6 Discourse analysis: discursive and argumentative strategies

Social media platforms are, as the name itself indicates, interactive. The politicians (or a social media manager on their behalf) write their statements and other users can either share these posts or comment on them. The discourse analysis focuses on how the politicians and other social media users construe in- and out-groups, interactively and interdiscursively, and discuss issues of cultural belonging, national security, and health crisis. Cyberhate is amplified by the internet and social media, whose communica-

tion is global, participatory, immediate, and partially anonymous (see, e.g., Castaño-Pulgarín et al. 2021). This has introduced new aspects to the spread of online hate speech by increasing its replicability, visibility, searchability, persistence, and instantaneousness, making it more difficult to counter cyberhate compared to offline hate speech (Hrdina 2016; Assimakopoulos, Baider, and Millar 2017; Brown 2018; Faloppa 2020).

In Section 7.6.1 the analysis will focus on discourse strategies that create out-groups and categorise them negatively, thus justifying their defamation and vilification. In Section 7.6.2 the focus will shift to other strategies that help to demean minorities through vague or hyperbolic language (intensification/mitigation), or through the reporting of events from the point of view of in-group members (perspectivation).

7.6.1 Categorisation and argumentation: creating and justifying out-groups

Prejudice, hateful remarks, or, in extreme cases, incitement to violence against any kind of minority can arise from the reduction of their identity to one specific trait or situation that is perceived as threatening (Russo and Tempesta 2017: 28–29). When we look at the comments in response to (10), we can observe how the connection between Chinese people and the virus becomes more explicit:

(18) [TW3] (26 March 2020).

I **nostri** morti li dobbiamo a **loro**, esclusivamente a **loro**.

'Our dead we owe to them, exclusively to them.'

(19) [TW4] (26 March 2020).

Sante parole, ste [sic] **bastardi** cinesi.

'True words, these Chinese bastards.'

The example in (19) is a very explicit case of hate speech, with the use of a common insult, which aims to demean and attack the Chinese. The first comment (18) is interesting because the opposition between *us* and *them* is made quite explicit through the possessive *nostri* (our) and the pronoun *loro* (them). Personal pronouns tend not to be explicitly expressed in Italian and their overt use indicates an *othering* mechanism that discursively groups the subjects into an *us* and a *them* (Faloppa 2020: 169). This opposition had already emerged in the verbal forms chosen by Salvini in (10), which portray the Chinese as aggressors ('they infected'/'they will buy') and the Italians as victims ('we risk'). This *topos* of economic danger posed by the Chinese is extremely common, both in the politicians' rhetoric and in the comment threads (see (10) in <u>Section 7.5.1</u>):

(20) Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (14 April 2020).

Cina, che ha contagiato il mondo, rischia di essere il Paese che cresce di più di tutti Imprenditori italiani chiedono TUTELE.

'China, which infected the world, risks being the country that grows [economically] the most. Italian entrepreneurs request PROTECTIONS.'

(21) [TW5] (14 April 2020).

Chiamiamolo virus **cinese** e non Covid-19.

'Let's call it the Chinese virus and not COVID-19.'

(22) [TW6] (14 April 2020).

#VirusChines *[sic]* chiama @realDonaldTrump e bombardiamoli una volta per tutte!!

'#ChineseVirus Call @realDonaldTrump and let's bomb them once and for all!!'

The argumentative evolution from (20) to (22) shows how a mitigated accusation (20) becomes firstly explicit but still mild (21) and eventually develops into a violent outburst of hate (22). In his tweet, Salvini is taking for granted the active role played by China in the pandemic and presents it as a commonly shared and accepted fact. Meanwhile, (21) and (22) contain much more aggressive language, which relates interdiscursively to the (in)famous characterisation of COVID-19 as the 'Chinese virus' made by Donald Trump, then president of the US. This widespread anti-Asian sentiment translated into a rise in anti-Asian crimes (Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism 2021; Dipoppa, Grossman, and Zonszein 2023) proving once more how these discursive strategies have a real-world impact.

In the example in (8), we saw how Salvini characterised the Chinese as a people that often commit massacres, not only against other human beings but also against innocent animals such as dogs. The comment section on that Facebook post contains a large degree of hate speech, justified by several *topoi*:

(23) [FB2] (23 June 2020).

I cinesi sono persone **subdole, sporche, pericolose, sono da isolare** no come dicono certi politici che dicono 'i nostri amici cimesi [sic]'

'Chinese people are devious, dirty, dangerous, they have to be isolated, not like some politicians say "our Chinese friends".'

(24) [FB3] (23 June 2020).

Questi **se non imparano il minimo dell'igiene**, sarà sempre così.

'These, if they don't learn a minimum of hygiene, it will always be like this.'

(25)   [FB4] (23 June 2020).

Non gli *[sic]* ho mai potuto vedere **avari e furbi** che **mangiano tutto quello che cammina che striscia che vola e che nuota** ci manca solo che si mangiano tra di loro un altro po'.

'I have never been able to bear them, they are stingy and cunning, eating everything that walks, crawls, flies, and swims, probably they could even eat each other.'

(26)   [FB5] (23 June 2020).

Perché in Italia **nei loro ristoranti cosa credete di mangiare? Nutrie e gatti come minimo.**

'Why, in Italy in their restaurants, what do you think you eat? Nutrias and cats at the very least.'

In the comments listed above, the attacks on Chinese people are justified through a negative characterisation or through stereotypical actions that are used to label the whole population. The negative characterisation emerges through the use of qualitative adjectives, as in (23) and (25), or by explaining what they do wrong, as in (24). On the other hand, we observe in (25) and (26) the reiteration of the negative stereotype of Chinese people who eat everything, regardless of the appropriateness of certain ingredients for human consumption. This same stereotype was also employed by Luca Zaia, president of the Veneto Region:

(27)   Luca Zaia [interview reposted by @Corriere on Twitter] (28 February 2020).

La Cina ha pagato un grande conto di questa epidemia che ha avuto **perché li abbiamo visti mangiare tutti topi vivi.**

'This pandemic they had has cost China a lot, because we have all seen them eating live rats.'

Stereotypes are not simply a phenomenon of commonly shared superficial ideas, but they are in constant evolution in various discourses (Ivanou 2017). Widespread stereotypes or argumentative *topoi* can hold a great deal of power over minorities or vulnerable communities. There are numerous examples of stereotypes that were initially perceived as harmless but gradually became the justification for discriminating against certain groups and later led to widespread hate crimes, as in the case of the Rwandan genocide (Ivanou 2017; Määttä 2020).

Even in the comment section analysed here, the *topoi* of threat, barbarity, and incivility develop to the point of utter dehumanisation:

(28) [FB6] (23 June 2020).

Cina ma che nazione è? Che gente È? **Chiamarla gente è un'offesa al genere umano.**

'China, what kind of nation is it? What kind of people? Calling them people is an insult to humankind.'

(29) [FB7] (23 June 2020).

Un orrore da vomitare. **Non sono umani.**

'A horror that makes you throw up. They are not human.'

If the categorisation of Chinese people as an out-group has emerged in close relation to the pandemic, migrants (and particularly African migrants) have been consistently discriminated against and perceived as a threat to Italian society. Many of the *topoi* used in the anti-Chinese discourse are replicated in the categorisation of migrants, albeit with different stereotypical generalisations. As seen in (11), Salvini equated undocumented migrants to members of the mafia and murderers in terms of dangerousness. This *topos* of danger and threat is easily traceable in the replies to that tweet:

(30)   [TW7] (04 May 2020).

Non sappiamo se siano stupratori assassini, rapinatori
… non sappiamo nulla di loro, però li regolarizziamo.

'We do not know whether they are rapists, murder-
ers, robbers … we know nothing about them, but we
regularise them.'

(31)   [TW8] (04 May 2020).

Altri tempi non eravamo pieni di **gentaglia** cosi..poi se a
voi piace ok va bene

'In other times we weren't full of such riffraff..then if you
like it, it's fine.'

(32)   [TW9] (04 May 2020).

Sti cazzo di **zulù spacciatori, papponi e nullafacenti**
fuori dalle balle!

'These fucking drug-dealing, pimping, do-nothing Zulus
should get out the hell out!'

In the comments listed above, migrants are lexically character-
ised as criminals, in (30) and (32), or generally as less valuable
people who are not to be trusted, in (31). The word *gentaglia* is
a pejorative of *gente* (people) and reflects a demeaning view of
the attacked group (for the role of morphological derivation in
hate speech, see Faloppa 2020). The opposition between in- and
out-group is made clear in (30) and (31) by the verbal forms on
one side ('we know', 'we regularise', 'we weren't'), and the personal
or object pronouns on the other ('about them', 'regularise them').
The relatively low infection rate in the summer of 2020 and the
perceived risk brought by newcomers strengthened the nega-
tive categorisation of the migrants. We witnessed a shift in the
stereotypical role of 'virus spreaders' that at the beginning of the

pandemic was attributed to the Chinese. It is the African migrants coming from the sea that might now bring the virus back to Italy and infect the Italians:

(33) Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi]. (22 July 2020).

#Salvini: I pescatori tunisini vengono a pescare nel nostro mare e in cambio fanno arrivare da noi **clandestini col virus…**

'#Salvini: Tunisian fishermen come to fish in our sea and in return they bring us illegal immigrants with the virus…'

(34) Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (30 July 2020).

Immigrati mandati a Treviso, ben 129 trovati positivi al Virus! **Se tornerà l'epidemia, sappiamo chi ne sarà colpevole.**

'Immigrants sent to Treviso, as many as 129 found positive for the virus! If the epidemic returns, we know whose fault it will be.'

In the examples listed above, the migrants are described as illegal and infected. The language in (34) is purposely vague. Salvini is apparently criticising the government's decision to welcome multiple migrants in the north-eastern city of Treviso, but the proximity of the two sentences creates the effect of a parallelism in which the reader is prone to consider the migrants as the guilty party in a possible resurgence of the disease.

Another very common *topos* in anti-migrant discourses is that of burden—migrants are described as slackers who avoid being active members of society and will forever be a burden on Italy's finances. The adverbial 'at the expense of Italians' in (16) and (17), which underlines a perceived waste of resources on the immigrants, has already been discussed. In (32) the user employs the adjective *nullafacenti* (do-nothings) in his very derogatory comment about African migrants. This discriminatory depiction

of migrants as a threat and a burden is well attested by previous research (see, among others, Assimakopoulos, Baider, and Millar 2017; Strani and Szczepaniak-Kozak 2018; Määttä, Suomalainen, and Tuomarla 2021; Bonhomme and Alfaro 2022).

In the following examples we see a very common metaphor that reinforces the prejudice of migrants as economic burden, widely employed by Matteo Salvini and many other users. It consists in labelling migrants as 'tourists':

(35)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (23 July 2020).

Ennesimi clandestini in arrivo a spese degli Italiani, mentre **i turisti veri** cancellano le vacanze su questa splendida isola.

'Yet more illegal immigrants arrive at the expense of Italians, while real tourists cancel their holidays on this beautiful island.'

(36)   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (29 July 2020).

Solo questa notte e solo a Lampedusa altri 314 **'turisti per sempre'** in fuga dalla famosa 'guerra di Tunisia'…!

'Tonight alone and in Lampedusa alone another 314 "eternal tourists" fleeing the famous "Tunisian war"…!'

(37)   [TW10] (29 July 2020).

2020, gli italiani non hanno soldi per fare 1 vacanza, ma **i migranti clandestini li mandiamo in Crociera** nel Mediterraneo??

'2020, Italians have no money to take 1 holiday, but we send the illegal migrants on a Mediterranean cruise?'

In (35) migrants are implicitly described as fake tourists: unlike real tourists, Salvini sees them as a liability and not as a resource. Similarly, 'eternal tourists' in (36), a widespread right-wing motto,

ironically underlines a perceived unwillingness to integrate into Italian society (Retta 2023). It is interesting to note how Salvini uses inverted commas in *'guerra di Tunisia'* to hint at the lack of prerequisites for these migrants to obtain political asylum. The commenter in (37) goes one step further and, using a similar metaphor, attacks both the migrants and the government, which is accused of gifting the migrants a holiday while Italians can no longer afford one. In anti-migrant discourses, hate speech is often directed not only at out-groups but also at those members of the in-group who support more open migration policies, for instance, or who simply reject aggressive approaches:

(38)   [TW11] (29 July 2020).

Facciamo qualcosa per **fermare questi coglioni che svendono il paese a negri, islamici e zingari. La feccia dell'umanità**.

'Let's do something to stop these assholes selling out the country to niggers, Islamists, and gypsies. The scum of humanity.'

Here, hate speech is addressed not so much to its victims, but rather to political adversaries and to like-minded people as a means of engagement and hate group forming. Online hate speech manages to connect people who would not have otherwise been in contact with each other, thereby reinforcing the creation of in-groups and cementing intra-group community (Brown 2018; Baider and Constantinou 2020; Caiani, Carlotti, and Padoan 2021).

In this section the analysis focused on how the out-groups are created and the arguments employed to justify their discrimination. In the following section the focus will move to two other strategies that help to demean minorities: perspectivation and intensification/mitigation.

7.6.2 Perspectivation and intensification/mitigation

Speakers/writers use perspectivation strategies to position themselves in relation to others and to give their own account or explanation of other people's behaviour, opinions, and events (Faloppa 2020: 171). Perspectivation creates a distance between the ingroup of the speaker and the attacked out-group, setting boundaries and contrasting elements between the two groups.

The following example is taken from an interview with Luca Zaia that was reposted on Twitter by the *Corriere della Sera* at the very beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. A small excerpt of the interview was previously analysed in (27).

(39)   Luca Zaia [interview reposted by @Corriere on Twitter] (28 February 2020).

La mentalità che ha il nostro popolo a livello di igiene è quella di farsi la doccia, di lavarsi spesso le mani. L'alimentazione, il frigorifero, le scadenze degli alimenti **sono un fatto culturale**. La Cina ha pagato un grande conto di questa epidemia che ha avuto perché **li abbiamo visti tutti mangiare i topi vivi**.

'The mentality that our people have in terms of hygiene is to shower, to wash their hands often. Eating, the refrigerator, food expiry dates are a cultural fact. This pandemic they had has cost China a lot, because we have all seen them eating live rats.'

On 28 February 2020 the pandemic had not yet gained a foothold in Italy, and Zaia hence seems to consider it as an issue that concerns only the Chinese. He positions himself as someone who is commenting from the standpoint of an Italian, judging and blaming the pandemic on Chinese cultural habits. Expressions such as *il nostro popolo* (our people) and the use of the first-person plural in the verbal form *li abbiamo visti* (we saw them) underline this standpoint and reinforce the distance between the positive *us* and the negative *them*. Italians are described as hygienic people who

regularly wash themselves: storing and conserving food properly is part of their culture, *un fatto culturale* (a cultural fact). The negative perspective towards the Chinese is reinforced by his final statement: speaking once more on the behalf of all Italians, he claims that *we* all (Italians) have seen *them* (Chinese people) eating live rats. There is no truth to this generalising statement in real life, and it plays on a crude stereotype. This claim can also be seen as a dehumanising image, since the consumption of rats is normally associated with wild beasts. Images of bestiality or incivility are employed in other examples of perspectivation strategies in some of the replies to (8) (see Section 7.5.1):

(40)   [FB8] (23 June 2020).

   Quando passeggio con la mia cucciolona **i cinesi la guardano con certi occhi…**e' cosi bella che se la mangiano con gli occhi! **Loro sono cosi**, mandano al macello i cani e anche ogni genere che striscia!

   'When I walk with my puppy, the Chinese look at her in a certain way… she is so beautiful that they eat her with their eyes! They are like that, they send dogs to the slaughter and also anything that crawls!'

(41)   [FB9] (23 June 2020).

   Ho visto video di cani scuoiati vivi solo per un collo di pelliccia. Ho visto immagini che non dimenticherò mai. Questo è l'Oriente.

   'I have seen videos of dogs skinned alive just for a fur collar. I have seen images I will never forget. This is the Orient.'

The comment in (40) reiterates the stereotype that the Chinese consume all sorts of meat. The author reports a personal anecdote about Chinese people coveting their dog. 'Eating somebody with one's own eyes' is a common figure of speech in Italian to express

lust and desire. Here the figure of speech works as a double entendre: the Chinese people look at the dog not only because it is beautiful but also because they want to eat it. Using an anecdote creates engagement in the readers who already believe in the incivility of the Chinese, so much so that the commenter does not need to justify their position. They simply claim that Chinese people 'are like that'. The comment in (41) is also linked to a personal experience highlighted by the repeated use of the verbal form *ho visto* (I saw). This commenter first vaguely reports something seen in the past as a way of proving the brutality and incivility of Chinese people and then reduces them to this single prejudicial trait by using the demonstrative *questo* (this). The overlap between China and the whole concept of the Orient should also be noted here.

Intensification and mitigation are strategies employed to exaggerate certain derogatory concepts or to mitigate the seriousness of particularly egregious expressions and accusations. Intensification strategies are often linked to the use of certain adverbs or adjectives:

(42) [FB10] (23 June 2020).

Ogni virus viene da quel paese perché **mangiano di tutto senza nessuna regola** come è accaduto con la malattia dell'aviara.

'Every virus comes from that country because they eat everything without any rules, as happened with the bird flu.'

(43) [FB11] (23 June 2020).

I cinesi oltre che crudeli fanno **solo** danni.

'The Chinese, besides being cruel, only do harm.'

The linguistic markers of intensification in the examples above are the indefinite adjectives and adverbs in (42) and the degree adverb *solo* (only) in (43), which emphasise once more a perceived cruelty and incivility that is attributed to the Chinese (for the role

played by indeterminacy in language and its pragmatic relevance, see, e.g., Cutting 2007; Bazzanella 2011; Lombardi Vallauri 2019).[7]

The use of certain metaphors can also be seen as an intensification strategy. One of the most common metaphors employed against both Chinese people and migrants arriving from Africa is that of invasion. This is linked to the so-called white replacement theory, a widespread conspiracy theory in white ethnonationalist networks, which claims that global elites are trying to replace ethnically white populations with people coming from the Global South (Cosentino 2020). Here are a few examples:

(44) Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (29 July 2020).

Lampedusa. **L'invasione organizzata continua**, giorno e notte. Conte-Lamorgese, sveglia! Sveglia!

'Lampedusa. The organised invasion continues, day and night. Conte-Lamorgese, wake up! Wake up!'

(45) [TW12] (12 May 2020).

Questa sostituzione etnica spinta dal Vaticano e dai sinistri verranno sul groppone degli italiani vogliono essere mantenuti bighellonando e aspettando il pranzo nel tempo libero poi si spaccia droga ai nostri giovani!!!

'This ethnic substitution pushed by the Vatican and the left will come on the backs of Italians[;] they [the immigrants] want to be supported while they're loitering and waiting for lunch in their spare time then dealing drugs to our youth!!!'

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7 This argumentation of incivility could also be explained through the concept of explicature—that is, what is explicitly communicated. The author of (42), for example, does not want to convey the idea that the Chinese literally eat everything, but rather directly communicates that they eat things that should not be eaten (for a reflection on the implicature/explicature distinction, see Carston and Hall 2012).

The metaphorical use of language is not, naturally, a relevant indicator in the context of hate speech detection. Certain metaphors (and other figures of speech) are nonetheless cognitive instruments that can activate a transfer that disconnects the production of discourse from reality, making us perceive an unsettling and alternative reality that generates distrust, hostility, and hatred (Faloppa 2020: 174–175). White replacement theory has been one of the motivations behind several racist terrorist attacks since the mid-2010s, such as the mass murder of Black churchgoers in Charleston (South Carolina) in 2015 or the massacre of Muslims in Christchurch (New Zealand) in 2019.

There is a third intensifying strategy that is extremely common in right-wing rhetoric: the improper use of quantifiers, numbers, and statistics. This 'rhetorical number game' (Van Dijk and Wodak 2000: 75) aims to catch readers' attention and persuade them that the author is reliable. In the following examples we see how large numbers are used either to discredit the government that is causing the suffering of countless Italians or to underline the threat of an immigrant invasion:

(6')   Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (05 May 2020).

Il governo annuncia una sanatoria per clandestini, e gli sbarchi aumentano (+**350%**). Stanotte a Lampedusa **altri 136** arrivi. Italia campo profughi? NO, grazie.

'The government announces an amnesty for illegal immigrants, and landings increase (+350%). Tonight in Lampedusa another 136 arrivals. Italy refugee camp? NO, thanks.'

(46)   Giorgia Meloni [@giorgiameloni] (12 May 2020).

Ma vi sembra normale che mentre **milioni di italiani ancora attendono i soldi promessi** per arrivare alla fine del mese, il governo abbia come priorità **regolarizzare centinaia di migliaia di clandestini**?

> 'Does it seem normal to you that while millions of Italians are still waiting for the promised money to make ends meet, the government's priority is to regularise hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants?'

All the numbers presented in the tweets above are difficult to prove but also to rebut. No source or reference is presented for these statistics: for example, in (6) the 350 per cent increase in migrant arrivals could potentially be credible, but we have no means of knowing where it comes from or to what it actually refers. The only precise number presented here is the number of migrants, 136, who landed in Lampedusa on 5 May 2020. The number is preceded by *altri* (another), underlining that this quantity must be considered as the 'tip of the iceberg'—in other words, that it is still remarkable even if it seems like a small number. When introducing precise numbers, Salvini often uses a similar expression, the adverb *ben* (as many as), in order to express urgency and dangerousness:

(34') Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi] (30-07-2020).

Immigrati mandati a Treviso, **ben 129** trovati positivi al Virus! Se tornerà l'epidemia, sappiamo chi ne sarà colpevole.

'Immigrants sent to Treviso, as many as 129 found positive for the virus! If the epidemic returns, we know whose fault it will be.'

Mitigating strategies appear to be rarer in the corpus and mostly relate to the rhetorical device of preterition or apophasis, which consists in the author bringing up a subject by professing to omit it. This strategy is very common in derogatory comments in sentences such as 'I am not racist, but…' or 'I am not homophobic, but…'. The following comments are both related to the Yulin dog meat eating festival:

(47)   [FB12] (23 June 2020).

Non voglio essere cattivo, ma i cinesi sono il popolo che non sarebbero dovuti nascere su questa terra.

'I don't want to be mean, but the Chinese are people who should not have been born on this earth.'

(48)   [FB13] (23 June 2020).

Sono la rovina del mondo… spero vivamente che tutto quello che faranno a quei poveri cani venga fatto anche a loro… **vorrei dire molto di peggio ma** non mi voglio abbassare a quel "popolo" se si può chiamare così.

'They are the ruin of the world… I sincerely hope that whatever they do to those poor dogs will be done to them too… I would like to say a lot worse but I don't want to lower myself to those "people" if you can call them that.'

Preterition is used to mitigate the very strong accusations presented by the authors, who deny their will to insult and say 'worse things', but nevertheless use derogatory language against the Chinese.

After the empirical description of discourse strategies in sections 7.6.1 and 7.6.2, we can move on to the concluding remarks, in which I summarise the main results of the study and its implications for further studies in linguistics and other disciplines.

7.7 Conclusions

The structural characteristics of social media shape and guide the way users produce content and mediate their interaction (for the concept of *affordances*, see Biri 2023 and references therein). As moderation tools become more sophisticated, implicitness turns into a key feature of online political discourse, and in certain contexts it can lead to forms of hate speech. In this study, the analysis was performed on two interconnected levels: pragmatic

and discursive. The pragmatic analysis focused on the activation of implicit meanings by specific connectives, such as *ma* (but), *invece di* (instead of), *e* (and), *non solo … ma anche* (not only … but also), *prima … poi* (first … then). These words that do not possess a literal meaning of hatred provide politicians with the means to incite discriminatory discourses among their followers while adhering to the rules of conduct on social media. Similarly, adverbials such as *non a caso* (not by chance) or *alle spese di* (at the expense of) can also convey implicit messages: the latter, in its longer form of *alle spese degli italiani* (at the expense of Italians) has become a particularly widespread right-wing motto.

A search for implicit messages is an important instrument for further inquiries into the regulation and moderation of online hate speech. Internet platforms are better equipped to counter cyberhate than governmental agencies and institutions (Brown 2018: 310). While automated moderation will improve, algorithms struggle to recognise irony, misspelt words, neologisms, or implicit constructions. A linguistic approach to the digital education of moderators and users can provide valuable tools to decipher and prevent hate speech, reducing the risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of propaganda and discrimination.

The discourse analysis recognised the main discursive strategies that create out-groups and justify their vilification. The two out-groups that emerged from the corpus—Chinese people and African migrants—are predominantly discriminated against by dehumanising metaphors and prevalent *topoi* in racist discourses, such as those of dirtiness, disease, burden, threat, and incivility. Although the arguments were similar, the stereotypical imagery used was different. On the one hand, the Chinese were perceived as the cause of the pandemic and as a threat to the physical and economic well-being of the world. This perceived incivility is mostly underlined by comments on their eating habits, which are seen as unfit for modern civilisations. African migrants, on the other hand, are mainly categorised as physical threats or as a burden. The discrimination against them is also justified by perceived laziness and unwillingness to integrate, exemplified by the

common metaphor of 'eternal tourists'. Intensifying or mitigating strategies are employed to exaggerate the threatening attitudes of the out-groups in a derogatory way, or to mitigate the seriousness of particularly egregious expressions and accusations. Discourse analysis shows how hate speech goes beyond personal offence, and derogatory discursive and argumentative strategies naturalise and normalise discriminating attitudes.

The study and its methodology are not without limitations. First, implicit forms of hate speech have by nature a lower degree of intensity than explicitly conveyed hate speech. This means that, within different definitions of this concept, some of the comments presented in the study might be considered merely opinions—albeit distasteful and hostile—rather than expressions of hatred. Secondly, the analysis of the social media contents of only four politicians makes it difficult to generalise the observations in terms of how widespread implicit hate speech is within political discourses. Nonetheless, this choice is justified in terms of feasibility of the study, representativity of the chosen politicians, and relevance of the results. The main contribution of this chapter is specifically to show how the concept of implicitness can be applied to the detection and countering of hate speech, complementing previous works in different contexts worldwide (Baider 2019, 2023; Baider and Constantinou 2020; Parvaresh 2023).

Hate speech relates primarily to language use, which always constructs reality. An adequate linguistic and discursive definition is an essential step towards a better definition of what we can and cannot consider hate speech. This research represents an additional step in finding educational and normative tools to fight hate speech and is part of a growing multidisciplinary approach to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on political propaganda, hate speech, and online abuse.

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