CHAPTER 8

A linguistic analysis of nationality-based hate speech on Facebook

The case of the Italian language

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Abstract

This chapter addresses some linguistic characteristics of hate speech in social media. The research was carried out on the basis of a corpus in Italian comprising posts and comments published on two Facebook groups: Italiani a Cracovia (Italians in Krakow) and Italiani in Polonia (Italians in Poland). These groups have about 26,500 members, mainly Italians who live or plan to come and live or travel in Poland and Poles who for various reasons are linked to Italian culture and/or language. This is an important factor as the heterogeneity of the group has an impact on the

language used within it, which is also varied. The study analysed utterances on different topics in order to understand whether and how the idea of belonging to a given nation (in this particular case, Italy or Poland) can form the basis of hate speech.

The analysis revealed significant variation in the manifestation of hatred that can be expressed through the use of specific words, such as slurs or vulgarisms, but also through grammatical choices, for instance pronominal contrasts. The research also confirmed that not only is hate speech transmitted lexically and grammatically but also through context-dependent irony and cynicism.

Keywords: hate speech, Italian language, social media, Facebook, nationality, in-group versus out-group

8.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to identify and describe some of the characteristics of hate speech (HS) in social media by means of a case study on the role of national identities. It focuses on examining posts and comments in Italian published in two Facebook groups mainly addressed at Italian expatriates in Poland,[1] in order to verify whether they contain elements of HS referring to the two involved nationalities, namely Italians and Poles, as well as to establish the linguistic elements through which this type of HS is manifested. The research question is whether and how the idea of belonging to a given nation (in this particular case, Italy or Poland) can form the basis from which HS develops in the online interactional dynamic of virtual communities. The analysis takes into account the linguistic mechanisms through which HS is expressed towards a group of people or a member of such a group. The category of nationality was chosen because it is an area in which latent

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1   The features of the two groups will be specified in [Section 8.4](). For now, it is important to note that since the early 2010s Poland has become a popular destination for Italians in terms of long-term stays (mainly for work purposes), which is why some virtual communities (such as Facebook groups) have appeared, grouping primarily Italians but also Polish nationals among their members.

(linguistically covert, implicit) HS is particularly insidious. Since designations of nationality, such as nationality adjectives ('Italian', 'Pole'), are neutral *per se*, they do not fall within the markers that guide automatic detection of HS within online social media. Hence, a broader consideration of the context and of the specific linguistic mechanisms adopted is needed in order to single out harmful messages.

Section 8.2 presents the prerequisites of the analysis, by discussing some terminological and conceptual considerations. In Section 8.3 we talk about Facebook and the procedures that the platform implements in order to counter hatred. In Section 8.4 we outline the specific field of investigation, the corpus, and the objectives of the research, after which we move on to the results of the linguistic analysis of the manifestations of HS in Section 8.5. Section 8.6 presents the conclusions and possible extensions of the research, with notes on the relevance of this work for the fields involved in the study of HS.

8.2 Hate speech: general considerations

It is undeniably true that social media has become part of everyday life. It allows us to communicate, to stay informed about current events, to develop our interests, and to exchange opinions, but it also exposes us to HS, as witnesses or even victims. The link between social media and HS is indeed increasingly central to debates on communication that take place with regard to new social media (see, e.g., Daniels 2008; Foxman and Wolf 2013; Baider 2020;[2] Banaji and Bhat 2022). Because of its heterogeneity, the issue is studied from the perspective of a range of disciplines, from politics and social sciences (Van Blarcum 2005; Bleich 2011; Brown and Sinclair 2020), through jurisprudence (Casarosa 2020; Guillén-Nieto 2023), to linguistics and philosophy of language

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2   This contribution is included in a special issue of *Pragmatics and Society* (Baider, Millar, and Assimakopoulos 2020) dedicated to HS that contains further relevant discussion on HS in online communication.

(Bianchi 2014, 2015a,b, 2021; Cepollaro 2015; Brindle 2016; Knoblock 2022; Guillén-Nieto 2023). Although the phenomenon has been the subject of extensive research, it has not yet been possible to arrive at a transdisciplinary definition of HS either at a global or European level. In an attempt to better characterise the subject of our research, we first turned to the legal field and, specifically, to the legislation in force within the European Union.

In 1997 the Council of Europe expressed its opinion on the matter in a Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers (see also Chapter 1):

> the term 'hate speech' shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin. (Council of Europe 1997)

This first definition, which is still very generic, emphasises two elements: namely, different forms of expression—though these are not further specified—and target groups who are defined on the basis of geographical and ethnic origin.

At the European level, the issue was taken up again in 2008, when Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA was published (Council of the European Union 2008). The document specifies the content of the aforementioned Recommendation, and defines hatred, encompassed by the term 'hate speech', as based on prejudices relating to race, colour, religion, ancestry, and national or ethnic origin, which are concepts protected by law. At the same time, all Member States are invited to take the necessary measures to prevent the incitement of hatred expressed towards a group of people or its members.

Subsequently, in 2016 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance published General Policy Recommendation no. 15, which was approved in December 2015 and is devoted entirely to HS. It promotes a definition that encompasses the

assumptions expressed up to then by the community bodies, specifying and expanding them:

> Hate speech … entails the use of one or more particular forms of expression—namely, the advocacy, promotion or incitement of the denigration, hatred or vilification of a person or group of persons, as well any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat of such person or persons and any justification of all these forms of expression—that is based on a non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics or status that includes 'race', colour, language, religion or belief, nationality or national or ethnic origin, as well as descent, age, disability, sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. (Council of Europe 2016)

In fact, while the concepts discussed above are specified in the General Recommendation (forms of expression and target groups), a margin of freedom remains: indeed, the list of characteristics on the basis of which the target groups are defined is to be considered 'non-exhaustive'.

In 2016, based on the Framework Decision of 2008, the Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online was developed (European Commission 2016). This was initially an agreement between the European Commission and Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube, with other platforms joining later. Its purpose is 'to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online', while keeping alive the principle of freedom of expression. The internal regulations of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter (now X) can also constitute another source of input for a potential definition of HS. In an interesting attempt at theoretical synthesis, Fortuna and Nunes (2018) analyse the conditions and terms in force on the various platforms, and on the basis of these elements they propose a definition which contains an important reference to 'different linguistic styles, even in subtle forms or when humour is used' (Fortuna and Nunes 2018: 2), which opens the way to considering also irony and sarcasm, which are not susceptible to automatic detection in the same way that concrete words are, for example. In fact, compared to the con-

siderations previously cited, this definition allows the inclusion of different nuances that the language expresses which, as we will see, will be particularly important in the case of the corpus analysed in this chapter. Given the current fast development of social media, however, it seems that even the cited definition needs some further expansion to take into consideration linguistic phenomena concerning HS that can be observed in that environment.

Moving on to the field more directly linked to language, of particular importance is the work of Claudia Bianchi (2014, 2015a,b, 2021), who deals with HS from the perspective of the philosophy of language and emphasises the harmful effect of any HS element.[3] She takes into consideration both the descriptive and performative dimension of the language:

> If in a descriptive perspective language is a simple mirror of society and as such *reflects* phenomena, classifications, hierarchies and social conflicts, in a performative perspective linguistic practices, strictly connected to collective practices, contribute to *creating* and transforming social objects and therefore to building, reinforcing or revoking classifications, hierarchies and conflicts. (Bianchi 2021: 9)[4]

If the object of this research were to be limited to the theoretical considerations mentioned above—which, for obvious reasons, cannot be understood as exhaustive—it could be said that by HS we mean linguistic expressions of any kind that are addressed to groups or individual persons as members of such groups, which

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3   Bianchi is by no means the only scholar to adopt this perspective. Her work constitutes the point of reference for this chapter as it primarily concerns the Italian language.

4   Unless otherwise specified, the translation of Italian sources into English is by the authors. 'Se in una prospettiva descrittiva il linguaggio è semplice specchio della società e come tale *riflette* fenomeni, classificazioni, gerarchie e conflitti sociali, in una prospettiva performativa le pratiche linguistiche, strettamente connesse a pratiche collettive, contribuiscono a *creare* e trasformare gli oggetti sociali e quindi a costruire, rinforzare o revocare classificazioni, gerarchie e conflitti.'

convey contempt, derision, and the like, based on a range of specific factors such as origin, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and so on. To ensure that our study provides a complete picture, however, we must bear in mind that HS is closely linked to the intrinsic characteristics of language. In other words, it is necessary to consider the fact that the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of a speech act is very often not only dependent on the denoting meanings of a given expression, but is based on the context in which it is used.[5] The issue in question is addressed, among others, by Brambilla and Crestani (2021), who adopt the distinction between open and latent HS, where the former is based on statements in which hatred appears as explicit (e.g. *Gli immigrati sono ladri* [The immigrants are thieves][6]), while the latter refers to cases in which hatred is hidden behind irony or sarcasm, or behind a symbol or a graphic form (such as in the replacement of some letters with signs like the asterisk: *n*gro*, *c*zzo*[7]). The coded character of the latent form of HS makes it essential to give it due importance, as content characterised by 'hidden' hatred easily escapes the automatic detection systems on social media and can therefore be visible to users for a long time, hence doing greater damage.

8.3 Facebook and online HS

As already mentioned, one of the most fertile terrains for the development of HS is the online social network environment. For this reason, our research is oriented towards Facebook (henceforth FB). It is one of the signatory platforms of the Code of Conduct and therefore operates according to various rules designed to avoid the dissemination of hateful content. In fact, the community

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5   For the notion of HS from the perspective of speech act theory see Bianchi (2015a, 2021).
6   In this text, examples of hateful expressions are cited in italics. For each expression its English translation is also provided, which is presented in square brackets. If the English equivalent is missing, an approximate translation is reported.
7   The coding refers to the word *negro* [nigger] and *cazzo* [dick].

standards section includes a complex definition that refers to all the documents previously discussed, and in which HS is defined as a direct attack against people on the basis of 'protected characteristics' that are analogous to what we have observed above (race, colour, religion, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation). There is a direct reference to harmful stereotypes, exclusion, and negative comparisons as prohibited mechanisms. In addition to the previous definitions cited, here we also find age as one of the determining factors and, among the protected categories, migration is explicitly mentioned (Facebook 2021).

The document repeats the concept of the target groups defined on the basis of characteristics protected by law. The list is long because it contains not only the consolidated elements that appear frequently in theoretical discussions on HS but also concepts that were rarely mentioned previously, such as sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and serious illness. There is also an attempt to specify the forms of expression that HS takes, such as stereotypes, various types of statements, comparisons, and more.

In 2019 FB published a report on the actions taken by the entities that signed the Code of Conduct in which it declared that it had a global network of about 15,000 employees responsible for the review of the content posted on the site. The document also shows that, on average, 89 per cent of the content reported as offensive is examined within 24 hours and that the removal rate is around 70 per cent (Council of the European Union 2019).[8] However, the question of the impossibility of drawing a clear limit between offensive content and freedom of expression was reiterated.

Even though automatic detection of HS has consistently improved, it still presents some issues: besides the difficulties concerning latent HS, an even broader obstacle is represented by the lack of an international agreement on the definition and classification of HS. We are also witnessing rapid social and linguistic development with the constant extension of which characteristics are considered to define minority groups and as such make them

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8   The data date back to the reporting period in 2019.

worthy of protection. Automatic detection systems hence appear to operate on the basis of unstable rules to determine whether content is marked as HS. The work of the algorithms, based on artificial intelligence, and the work of human moderators can sometimes lead to confusing situations; for example, the phrase 'Irish teenagers are dump' would not automatically be classified as HS while 'Irish women are dump' would be reported as offensive. This is due to the fact that women constitute a protected social category and are thus recognised by the automatic detection system, while adolescents do not constitute such a category (Fortuna and Nunes 2018: 6).

In our opinion, both sentences cited above fall within the definition of HS that we adopt and on which our research is based (linguistic expressions that convey a spectrum of hatred, addressed to groups or individual persons as members of such groups), because they communicate contempt (i.e. a demeaning attitude) and hostility (i.e. an aggressive attitude) against a social group based on national identity. Since, in the examples above, national identity is referred to by means of a nationality adjective that is, in principle, neutral and objective, automatic detection may fail to recognise this form of HS, for which the surrounding context plays a crucial role. For this reason, although we acknowledge that FB has already initiated a number of procedures to counter HS, we have decided to examine a corpus based on statements taken from FB, taking as a starting point the hypothesis that automatic detection and user complaints fail to identify all forms of expression of hatred. Automatic work will never be able to replace human work, since, alongside words and expressions with an evident derogatory potential (e.g. *frocio* [faggot], *crucco* [Kraut]), there are words and expressions that in themselves do not necessarily carry hatred, but become offensive in certain contexts which Bianchi (2021) calls 'denigratory uses'. In effect, the utterance *Si salvano solo i pierogi poi il resto e tutto munnezza* [Only the pierogi are worth saving; the rest is all rubbish] (see (19) below), written by a FB user of Italian descent who lives in Poland, shall be considered HS as the offensive charge increases due to the context of use.

The decision to base the research specifically on the language used on FB was motivated by the nature of the platform itself: FB is a social means of communication that has undergone the fastest development in the social media era and can, at the time of writing, be defined as a multifunctional platform that no longer solely facilitates digital social exchanges between friends. Over time, it has acquired new functions, including doing business, making donations and fundraising, and advertising and promotion. A further possible and very popular function is the creation of virtual communities of people with common interests and/or needs, known as 'groups', which can be public (membership through acceptance by the administrator) or private (membership upon invitation of an administrator or a member). FB users (with personal profiles) must be real individuals who provide some personal data upon registration; once a profile is created, however, it can work with a false name and surname or even a nickname, therefore making it impossible for a general user to establish the true identity of those who choose not to use their real name. This certainly allows and, perhaps, also invites greater freedom of expression compared to face-to-face communication, in which the interlocutors are obviously identifiable. Thus, the specific affordances of the virtual environment (besides potential anonymity, also the facility of reaching a target and the opportunity to find a sympathetic audience in a 'group', leading to attitude reinforcement) may amplify tendencies towards aggression and abuse that exist in the offline world, negatively influencing the production, consumption, and distribution of contents on the social platform and resulting in a polarisation of discourses in online communication (see, e.g., the review by Walther 2022).

8.4 Outline of the field of investigation and the corpus

In our data collection, we assumed that HS always involves reference to a group, understood in the broad sense of the term, and that it is not limited to explicit manifestations, but can assume

latent forms, conditioned by the context. On this understanding, we analyse the phenomenon of HS directed against two nationalities, namely Italians and Poles in the content published on two public FB groups which take nationality as a fundamental defining aspect: Italiani in Polonia [Italians in Poland] and Italiani a Cracovia [Italians in Krakow], which between them, at the beginning of November 2021, had about 26,500 members (17,660 in Italiani in Polonia and 8,836 in Italiani a Cracovia). Both groups had been created with the aim of connecting Italians who live or intend to live in Poland and Krakow, respectively, and to exchange views and help each other in case of doubts or difficulties. Over time, however, many Italians who travel to Poland for short periods for tourism purposes have also joined the groups, as well as those who are only considering relocation, and, finally, numerous Poles who know Italian or for various reasons are linked to Italy.

Given the nature of the two groups, the published content is in Italian, although there is also a strong Polish language influence. In fact, is it linguistically a highly heterogeneous group, particularly with regard to diatopic and diastratic factors, as in both groups there are people who come from different parts of Italy and Poland, of different ages, sexes, and levels of education, and in most cases it is not possible to trace these data since the profile of the person does not provide them (sometimes it is even difficult to tell whether a profile belongs to an Italian or a Pole). It should also be borne in mind that the Poles present in the groups demonstrate a knowledge of the Italian language that varies from the fluency of a native speaker to only fairly basic with deficiencies in written language use. This results in frequent errors at all levels (orthographic, morphosyntactic, lexical, etc.) and in the presence of examples of code mixing (whether deliberate or not) between Italian and Polish.[9] There are of course also errors in the posts and comments published by the Italians, which is related to

9   The examples shown in this work have not been subject to any linguistic correction by the authors and are presented in their original form. They have been analysed in the original language in which they were

the authors' variable literacy competence, as well as to the digital nature of the published texts, to the speed with which posts are written, to the lack of editing. Posts and comments are rarely re-read before being published, differently from other types of digital communication, such as emails. There are in fact a number of characteristics that are typical of online texts, of which we list a few. With regard to Italian, the structural characteristics include a generally reduced use of punctuation: the most frequently used punctuation marks are full stops, question marks, exclamation signs, commas, and ellipses, while the colon and the semicolon are rarer. On the morphosyntactic side, the use of personal pronouns is reduced while that of connectives and discursive signals, employed to create textual cohesion within and across posts and comments, seems to be increased. Differences are also observed on the lexical level, enriched by a vast spectrum of neologisms, including calques, anglicisms, acronyms, and adaptations.[10]

In order to examine and verify the presence of elements of nationality-driven HS referring to Italians and Poles, as well as to establish by which linguistic elements this type of HS is manifested, we identified relevant material dating from a specific period (November 2021 to February 2022). The examination was carried out manually by reading each post, in the original language in which it was composed, with the respective comments, in search of statements that contained negative references to the two nationalities in question. We then moved on to the analysis of HS manifestations based on the concept of nationality.

The results presented in the next section must be understood in purely qualitative terms, as it was not possible to establish a precise number of utterances in the corpus due to the fact that it would have been too challenging to transfer the linguistic mate-

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published. The English translations are only working translations meant to make the content accessible to a broader audience.

10 Studies on the language used on the web are already numerous. To deepen the issue, by way of example, see Fiorentino (2007), Prada (2003), Rossi (2010), Miłkowska-Samul (2019).

rial into a file that would allow us to proceed with quantitative analysis. The process of reading the posts and comments lasted several days during which the corpus was repeatedly modified by the users of the two groups, who could always delete and modify all posts and comments (the content was read directly from FB). In fact, some comments were deleted or suppressed, and others were added. In addition, users who publish comments often 'divide' them into several parts, posting them separately even if they constitute a single message. We do not therefore have the necessary information to carry out a quantitative analysis. This limitation, however, does not impact significantly on our results, given the way in which we frame our research question: our aim is to demonstrate that, despite the work of the automatic detection systems implemented by digital platforms, the utterances that convey HS can still appear on social media as HS is not limited to a set of words and/or expressions that can be captured by algorithmic formulae. Nationality-driven HS makes this particularly clear. We have thus focused on the qualitative side, to discover what escapes the automatic tools and is not reported by users or is not classified as offensive by FB staff.

The idea of nation, namely 'a large group of people of the same race who share the same language, traditions, and history, but who might not all live in one area',[11] is strongly present in the corpus. This is inevitable given that the discussions under analysis are between the representatives of two different peoples who are describing, comparing, and evaluating life in two different states (which implies contact between two cultures).[12] In an environment in which two peoples clash, situations that underline the contrast between the two nations often arise, creating a fertile ground for HS. When the utterances in which we noticed the presence of

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11 Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. 'nation (*n*)', accessed 20 May 2022, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nation.

12 The contrast between two cultures represented by two nations points inevitably to the idea of the stereotype. The perspective adopted in this contribution is linguistic, but it is worth mentioning studies such as Tajfel (1982), Yzerbyt and Demoulin (2010), Fiske (2017).

hatred based on the idea of belonging to a nation were identified, we proceeded with the analysis in order to categorise the expressions of HS with respect to the linguistic features in which we are interested.

The linguistic material collected for the purposes of this research includes utterances selected on the basis of the presence of linguistic elements that can denote HS with reference to Italian and Polish nationality. Within the meaning of HS we shall include: i) a reference to the group, and ii) some offensive content against the group itself.[13] In the first (manual) phase of analysis, we began by identifying expressions of nationality, attempting to reveal in this way the discourses that genuinely referred to the nationalities in question. We consequently identified: i) nationality adjectives and state names used as metonymies (Alfonzetti 2019: 75), in which the concept of nation/nationality is transferred to the names of states (Italians → Italy; Poles → Poland); ii) personal pronouns and place adverbs referring to the two nations and states; and iii) cultural traits characteristic of a nation and used to describe the entire concept of nation/nationality. Having identified the ways in which reference is made to the Italian and Polish nations respectively, we moved on to identifying those statements that include expressions of hatred towards the nationalities in question. We found examples of various linguistic mechanisms used for this purpose, such as negative evaluation, direct contrast between two or more nationalities,[14] pronominal contrast *noi* [we] versus *voi* [you], but also *qui* [here] versus *là* [there], offensive criticism against cultural traits, use of hate words such as vulgar and derogatory terms, and so on.[15] In what follows, we present and comment on the examples of HS found in the corpus, divided by mechanism of reference to nationality.

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13 For the components of slurs, see Cepollaro (2015: 155).

14 For a more in-depth account of the in-group and out-group dimension, see Russo and Tempesta (2017).

15 HS can manifest itself through very different linguistic mechanisms that can be classified as various speech acts, of which the most productive seems to be that of the insult. See in this regard Bazzanella (2020).

8.5 Analysis

8.5.1 'Gli italiani sono...': nationality adjectives and state names

We begin with constructions that use adjectives of nationality, in our case *italiani* [Italians] and *polacchi* [Poles], also expressed through the use of metonymies such as *Italia* and *Polonia*. In this section we want to show that the situation within the groups is not one-sided or one-directional—in other words, it is not only Italians who offend Poles or vice versa. The examples selected for this section show that Italy or Poland, Italians or Poles may and do become the object of offence by any member of the group. The nationality of the interlocutors is considered relevant here, and is expressed in square brackets, using the abbreviations IT for Italian and PL for Polish. The cases in which we do not know the speaker's origin are accompanied by a question mark. We also note whether the sentences refer to people (in general) from one of the two nations [of] or are addressed to a person who belongs to one of the two nations [to].

We shall consider the following examples:

(1)   **italiani** sempre sono pronti a criticare tutto che non é come sono abituati loro. [PL of IT]

'**Italians** are always ready to criticise everything that differs from what they are used to.'

(2)   **Italia** e 30 anni in dietro con tutto!!! Topi giganti X le strade, sporcizia dapertutto, criminalità. governo mafioso…….. però loro si vantano tanto poi 80/ della popolazione non conosce bene loro lingua e sapete cosa dichiarato ué settimana scorsa???? Che in Europa più ignorante popolo e **ITALIANI**. [PL of IT]

'**Italy** is 30 years behind with everything!!! Giant rats on the streets, dirt everywhere, crime, mafia government …….. but they brag a lot, then 80% of the population

does not know their language well and you know what the EU declared last week? That in Europe the most ignorant people are **ITALIANS**.'

(3)   a) ma i polacchi non sono cretini e falsi come **gli italiani**. Si sono venduti per 4 denari. [IT of PL and IT]

'but **the Poles** are not stupid and false like **the Italians**. They sold themselves for pennies.'

b) chi si è venduto??? il popolo non si è venduto……la classe politica è allo sbando più completo, forse a loro ti riferisci……lascia perdere **i polacchi**……si vede che **la Polonia** la conosci poco……. [IT of PL and IT]

'who sold themselves? the people did not sell themselves……the political class is in complete disarray, maybe you are referring to them……forget **the Poles**…… it is evident that you know little about **Poland**……'

(4)   **i Polacchi** sempre a difendere tutto pure il 'lekktor' per voi e stupendo. [PL of PL]

'**the Poles** always defend everything, even the "lekktor" for you is wonderful.'

(5)   **i polacchi** sono culturalmente più indietro, mangiano e bevono da schifo, altro che noi che sappiamo mangiare. [IT of PL]

'**the Poles** are culturally behind, they eat and drink disgusting stuff, unlike us who know how to eat.'

(6)   solita cazzuta feminista è intollerante come tutte **le Polacche**. [IT of PL]

'she is the usual stupid feminist and is intolerant like all **Polish women**.'

(7)   Ti assicuro che in Italia è pieno di **donne polacche** che si prostituiscono, mi spieghi come mai **le nostre donne** non vengono in Polonia a prostituirsi? Vedete di fare meno i fenomeni. Mi spieghi te come mai **le vostre donne** si mettono insieme a italiani se **i vostri signori polachi** sono tutti ricchi e vivono in un paese meraviglioso? […] Dimenticavo **le nostre** hanno delle difficoltà a mettersi con un uomo più vecchio di 20 anni. **Le donne polacche** di mettono volentieri con un uomo più vecchio basta che ho il portafoglio più largo. [IT of PL]

'I assure you that Italy is full of **Polish women** who prostitute themselves, can you explain to me why **our women** don't come to Poland to prostitute themselves? Try to reduce the phenomena. Can you explain to me why **your women** get together with Italians if **your Polish gentlemen** are all rich and live in a wonderful country? […] I forgot that **our women** have a hard time dating a man 20 years older. **Polish women** happily get together with an older man as long as he has a big wallet.'

(8)   poi non e che **qua in Polonia** la gente sia specialmente intelligente… [IT of PL]

'then it's not that **here in Poland** people are especially intelligent…'

(9)   Aspettative, sogni, ambizioni… cosa ha da offrire a un quindicenne **l'anonima Polonia** rispetto alle mille possibilita' di una grande citta' statunitense come per esempio New York? E poi vuoi metter l'inglese con il polacco? daaaai Disegnino? [IT of PL]

'Expectations, dreams, ambitions… what does the **anonymous Poland** have to offer compared to the thousand possibilities of a big American city like New York for example to a fifteen-year-old? And then you want to put English with Polish? Come onnnn Disegnino?'

In (1) and (3a)–(7), nationality adjectives have been used directly, while in (8) we see a periphrasis, *la gente in Polonia* [people in Poland]; in (2), (3b), and (9), instead, there are metonymies. The examples considered have different syntactic structures (Alfonzetti 2019: 76), but the most frequent is presented as '*x* is/are (not) O', in which *x* is the subject to which HS is addressed (*italiani/Italia* [Italians/Italy]; *polacchi/Polonia* [Poles/Poland]) and O is the offensive expression in question. For this phenomenon, consider examples (1) and (2) as well as (3a), (5), (7), and (8). In the remaining sentences, either the verb *essere* [to be] is omitted, as in (4) and (6), or some different linguistic elements are used, such as other verbs as in (7) or descriptive adjectives as in (9).

The offensive expressions against Italians relate to culture and temperament (*cretini* [cretins], *falsi* [fake people]), while the basis for contempt towards the Poles is spread across cultural traits, as in (4) and (5), stereotypes about Polish women, as in (6) and (7), reference to intelligence, as in (8), and the characteristics of the country itself, as in (9).[16]

8.5.2 Adverbs of place and personal pronouns

Moving on to the presence of adverbs of place and pronouns, we must start from the concept of these parts of speech as they are used in Italian. Treccani reports that 'Adverbs of place are used to specify the place of an action, the location of a person or object in space and the distance of a person or object from the speaker or listener',[17] whereas for pronouns—and in our case, subject pronouns in particular—it should be noted that, 'Unlike other languages (such as English and French), in Italian the expression of the personal pronoun subject is almost always optional

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16 For a more specific lexical analysis, see Dyda and Paleta (2023).

17 Treccani (2012), s.v. 'luogo, avverbi di' [adverbs of place], https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/avverbi-di-luogo_%28La-grammatica-italiana%29/: 'Gli avverbi di luogo servono a specificare il luogo di un'azione, la collocazione di una persona o di un oggetto nello spazio e la distanza di una persona o di un oggetto rispetto a chi parla o ascolta.'

and not mandatory. It is indispensable, however, when it serves to avoid ambiguities, or in emphatic expressions'.[18] Two essential facts emerge from these definitions: first, adverbs can denote the distance between the speaker and the interlocutor or object to which they refer, and second, the presence of subject pronouns is optional and has an emphatic function, particularly with regard to the idea of the contrast between me/us and you/them.[19] Consider the following examples:

(10) **qui** i divorzi partono dai 18 anni in su, fanno i figli quando sono ubriachi e il giorno dopo non si ricordano neanche come si chiamava quello che le ha farcite qualche ora prima e il gioco è fatto, si lasciano e tutti vissero felici e contenti. [IT of PL]

'**here** they start getting divorced at 18, they have children when they are drunk and the next day they don't even remember the name of the one who "filled" them a few hours before and that's it, they break up and everyone lived happily ever after.'

(11) a) Fanno la fila per delle schifezze. Poi **qua** tutti fanno le stesse cose. Uno fa una cosa e tutti a fare lo stesso. Sembrano dei robot che eseguono gli stessi comandi. [IT of PL]

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18 Treccani (2012), s.v. 'personali, pronomi' [personal pronouns], https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pronomi-personali_%28La-grammatica-italiana%29/: 'A differenza di altre lingue (come l'inglese e il francese), in italiano l'espressione del pronome personale soggetto è quasi sempre facoltativa e non obbligatoria. È indispensabile, però, quando serve a evitare le ambiguità, oppure in espressioni enfatiche.'

19 The pronominal contrast is one of the techniques exploited by HS to differentiate between two groups—a belonging group and the other reference group. To receive the same contrast effect, adverbs of place are used to differentiate two places and to create a distinction between two realities, thus referring to the peoples or people who live there. On the subject of pronouns used as a reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudices, see Cruschina (2020).

'They line up for some crap. Then everyone **here** does the same things. One does one thing and everyone does the same. They look like robots executing the same commands.'

b) esatto, come le scimmie delle multinazionali. Ma dopotutto, dopo Trieste in poi tipo a Cracovia c'è un alto livello di disperati… La Polonia come anche gli altri Paesi dell'est stanno ripulendo l'Italia per fortuna. [IT of PL and IT]

'that's right, they're like corporate monkeys. But after all, from Trieste onwards, like in Krakow there is a high level of desperate people… Poland as well as the other Eastern countries are cleaning up Italy thankfully.'

(12)   le **vostre** fanno le corne con un vicino non hanno nemmeno vergogna. [IT of PL to PL]

'**your** [women] cheat on you with a neighbour, they are not even ashamed.'

(13)   e già.. la 'vodka' **li** avrà bruciato il cervello. [PL of PL]

'and yes.. the "vodka" will have burnt **their** brains.'

(14)   scusa so che se la volpe non arriva all'uva dice che è acerba(se non sai cosa vuol dire acerba poi te lo spiego) ma **voi** ancora usate il filo rigido per fare gli impianti elettrici, facendo murandolo al muro, sperò che tu sappia che da **noi** sono 40 anni che non esiste più. [IT of PL to PL]

'sorry, I know that the fox said that the grapes were sour when he could not reach them (if you don't know what sour means then I'll explain it to you) but **you** still use the rigid wire to make electrical systems, chasing the wire

into the wall. I hope you know that this system has not existed **here** for 40 years.'

(15) Godete**vi** la Polonia, le sue belle città e soprattutto la cortesia e l'educazione dei suoi cittadini, a casa **nostra** merce sempre più rara. In alternativa tornate**ve**ne al paesello a mangiare la parmigiana di mammà e lasciate spazio a chi vive all'estero, con curiosità intellettuale e senza cercare di rinchiudersi nel proprio ghetto mentale. [IT to IT]

'Enjoy Poland, its beautiful cities and above all the courtesy and education of its citizens, an increasingly rare commodity in **our** home. Alternatively, go home to eat mama's parmigiana and leave space for those who live abroad, with intellectual curiosity and without trying to lock themselves up in their own mental ghetto.'

(16) **Io** da italiano dico che **gli italiani** sono una brutta razza specialmente chi sta fuori casa sono i peggiori non fanno altro che criticare si credono che stanno in Italia che si siedono a tavolino e parlano male di uno e di un altro. [IT of IT]

'As an Italian, **I** say that **Italians** are a bad breed, especially those who are away from home. They are the worst, they only criticise, they believe they are in Italy where they sit at a table and speak badly of one and another.'

In (10) and (11a), sentences produced by Italians who already live in Poland, reference is made to Poland through the use of the adverbs of place *qui* and *qua* [here]. In (11b), as a response to the statement (11a), the implied subject refers directly to Poles. In all cases, discussing both Italy and Poland, the third person is used, which means that the HS employed refers to a third party, and not directly to the interlocutor. For the use of adverbs of place, we shall consider example (8), which is strengthened by the direct reference to the state.

Moving on to the use of pronouns in the examples we have identified, it can be assumed that their function is primarily to highlight and give particular emphasis to the subject within the sentence. In (14) and (15) the pronouns are used to identify the subject, which would remain unidentifiable without the context. In (12) *le vostre* [your] refers to Polish women, while in (13) the pronoun refers to all Poles. Pronouns, in addition, play a very significant role in the particular type of HS that is manifested under the guise of pronominal contrasts. In (14) we see the opposition between *voi* [you] and *noi* [we]—where 'you' refers to Poles and is opposed to 'us', Italians. In (15) we see a particular situation in which the contrast between *loro* [they] and *noi* [we] is emphasised, but direct contempt is pronounced towards the second-person plural, namely *voi* [you]. Pronominal contrasts also can serve to express a distancing from a group (*io* vs *loro* [I vs they]), as in (16).

Moreover, it is not uncommon to see mixed situations in which both nationality adjectives and pronouns are used—this is the case of the strengthening function of the pronoun. A similar case is observed in (2), where next to Italy, reference is made to *loro* [they], meaning Italians.

It should consequently be noted that the pronominal contrast not only constitutes a method in itself but is also used together with other HS elements in order to emphasise the message, further attracting the reader's attention. It can reinforce, for example, the use of adjectives of nationality and other references to subjects, as in (7), where we see the contrast between *le nostre donne* [our women] and *le vostre donne* [your women]. Example (5), using both the adjective of nationality (*polacchi* [Poles]) and the pronoun (*noi* [we], meaning Italians) strongly emphasises the contrast that the speaker assigns to *loro polacchi* [they, the Poles] and *noi italiani* [we Italians]. In this case, the contrast could also be motivated by the idea behind the FB group itself, in that it was created by Italians for Italians (us) and all the others are considered as third parties (them).

Example (4) is of great relevance and interest. It is produced by a Pole against other Poles, where the sender firstly speaks of Poles as *loro* [they] (i.e. *i Polacchi*, 'the Poles' in the text), and then refers to his compatriots with the pronoun *voi* [you], thus creating a strong distancing effect between *io* [I] and *loro/voi* [they/you]. This distancing, as well as the comparison with others, constitutes the basis for HS as they presuppose the existence of something that is better and something that is worse, as in the example in (14), where life in Poland and in Italy is expressly compared, giving great prevalence to the latter.

8.5.3 Cultural traits

Cultural traits that are characteristic of a certain nation and that are used to describe it as a whole constitute another means of referring to the group that has been identified in the corpus.[20] These references, through offensive and critical words, form part of the HS phenomenon. The following examples may be considered:

(17) A riguardo mangiare e naturale che se vuoi paragonarlo al cibo italiano è una Schifezza. [IT to PL]

'As far as eating is concerned, it is natural that if you want to compare it to Italian food it is rubbish.'

(18) sono le foto della mensa della Caritas? [IT of PL]

'Are these photos from the Caritas canteen?'

(19) Si salvano solo i pierogi poi il resto e tutto munnezza. [IT of PL]

'Only the pierogi are worth saving; the rest is all rubbish.'

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20 By cultural traits we mean what is referred to in translation studies as culture-specific items (Snell-Hornby 1988: 1–2; Aixelà 1997: 56–57) or cultural words (Newmark 1988: 4).

(20)   Continuate a votare PIS per un paese sempre più vio-
lento, razzista ed omofobo. Alla fine PIS è anche una
rappresentazione abbastanza indicativa di come sono
la maggioranza dei polacchi. Sennò questo partito non
sarebbe al governo. [IT of PL]

'Continue to vote PiS for an increasingly violent, racist
and homophobic country. In the end, PiS is also a fairly
indicative representation of what the majority of Poles
are like. Otherwise this party would not be in govern-
ment.'

(21)   Popolo di paraculi. [IT? of PL]

'A population of opportunists.'

(22)   in italia sti fenomeni votano lega e fratelli d'Italia, stati-
sticamente abbiamo meno imbecilli. [IT to PL]

'in Italy these phenomena vote Lega and Fratelli d'Italia,
statistically we have fewer idiots.'

(23)   Ma quanto fanno schifo quegli italiani che, pur di difen-
dere PiS che nessuno ha tirato in ballo, arrivano quasi ad
esaltare il pestaggio di loro connazionali? Geni, per PiS
voi siete stranieri quanto un musulmano o un africano…
[IT of IT]

'But how disgusting are those Italians who, in order to
defend PiS that no one has mentioned, almost come to
exalt the beating of their compatriots? You are geniuses,
for PiS you are as foreign as a Muslim or an African…'

In (17)–(19) HS is manifested through the criticism of Polish cui-
sine, which is compared to its Italian counterpart (17), and again
demonstrates the concept of the contrast between two nations as a
carrier of hatred; in other examples, such as (18) and (19) it is crit-
icised without any reference to other cultures. Example (11a) is

also linked to cuisine, as the term *schifezze* [rubbish] refers to the sausages that are sold in Krakow from a travelling van. Sentences (20)–(23) refer, in turn, to the political sphere: (20)–(22) refer to Polish politics, while (23) refers to Italian politics. An interesting example can be found in (22) as it first criticises some Italians, namely, those who vote for Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, and on the basis of this negative assessment it then goes further, criticising Polish people. It should also be noted that there is a strong contextual bond between (18) and (21) in which it would be quite difficult to identify the object of the utterances. Example (18) refers to a photograph that shows some typical Polish products, such as *pierogi* (a kind of traditional dumpling) and sausages, while in example (21) the speaker talks about the behaviour of Poles with regard to the war in Ukraine.

The variety of uses analysed confirmed that HS can manifest in very different ways. Not only can a nation be insulted by direct reference to the state or to the nation itself, as in (1)–(9) or (16), but the contempt can be also conveyed through various less direct elements, such as pronominal contrasts or cultural traits. HS can therefore manifest itself through the lexicon and syntactic structures, thanks to which the utterances acquire an offensive power, expressing judgement or derision, but it can also be hidden in the context, appearing through irony or cynicism, as for instance in (18).

8.5.4 The idea of belonging to a group

Taking up the concept of group belonging, which in the present study refers to a social group defined by nationality, an important consideration is how the speaker identifies themselves. The fact of belonging to a social group does not determine a real mental identification with this group. It is possible for a speaker to identify themselves with the nation to which they belong, while at the same time maintaining a distance from it by placing themselves in

the position of an external observer/commenter.[21] Given the binational character of the two FB groups (Italian/Polish), the phenomenon was observed from two perspectives, Italian and Polish. We have seen situations in which Italians speak of other Italians and Poles, and there are similarly Poles who make comments about other Poles and Italians. Starting from the Italian perspective—i.e., from the utterances posted by Italians—we observed that both Italians and Poles are described by other Italians either in the third-person plural (*loro* [they], as in (16) for Italians and (3a) for Poles and (3b) for both nations), or in the second-person plural, (*voi* [you], which can be seen in (15) referring to Italians while in (14) and (20) it appears to refer to Poles). It is not surprising that an Italian should use the second- or third-person plural towards Poles, since it is a people to which the speaker does not belong, so they put themselves in the position of a third party. It is interesting, however, when the distancing is created by an Italian who speaks of other Italians in the third-person plural as in (16) and (22).

Turning to the Polish perspective, we observed that when speaking of Italians, the reference is often made using generalisations (Italian = Italy) and *loro*, as in (2). An interesting case is again those Poles who, speaking of their compatriots, create a distancing effect by referring to them through the third-person plural, as in (4) and (13). In those cases in which the third-person plural is used towards the speaker's compatriots, it would be interesting to know whether the speakers are only distancing themselves from their group of origin, or if they are identifying themselves more closely with the other nation (perhaps due to the fact that the speakers already live abroad).

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21 At this point we could open a parenthesis about belonging to the group and social identity. For reasons of space this issue will not be developed here but a more in-depth treatment of the topic can be found in Speltini and Palmonari (2007) and Bertani and Manetti (2007).

8.5.5 Themes and topics

Over the course of the analysis, a question arose regarding whether there are any issues that can spark HS in a particular way. Hot topics such as migration, gender issues, and ethnic minorities undoubtedly come into play. However, these issues are not often discussed in the groups that form the basis of this corpus; there are, however, some other subjects that are particularly fertile in terms of HS, leading to some intense exchanges of views, such as when Italian and Polish cuisine and politics were compared in our examples above. The analysis also highlighted that HS can arise from any type of conversation, regardless of its theme. Moreover, it often manifests itself in the chain situation in which an offensive comment engenders further comments of this kind, heightening the emotional charge.

Where the lexical field is concerned, it is worth noting that there are some words that underline the offensive nature of the utterances and these play a very important role in the identification of HS. Slurs such as *negro* [nigger], *frocio* [faggot], and *puttana* [bitch] are very significant in this field (Bianchi 2015b: 285). However, in the FB content that was analysed, these epithets were not used, and had we limited ourselves only to the presence of slurs, the results would have been negative. Nevertheless, in the examples presented there are some derogatory words and expressions that—in the contexts in which they appeared—were used towards the entire group (nation): *cretini* [idiot], *imbecilli* [stupid], *essere indietro* [to be backward], *essere poco intelligente* [to be unintelligent]. As can be seen from the examples, these are all terms that refer to limited mental capacity. Another lexical field comprises words that express disgust or that describe and object as rubbish, such as *schifo* [disgust] (also in the expression *far schifo* [to be disgusting]) and its derivatives *schifezze* [disgusting things] or *monnezza* [rubbish] (written as *munnezza* in the comment). There were also some vulgarisms such as *cazzuto* [badass] and references to ethnicity: *brutta razza* [bad breed].

Most of the offensive content present in the corpus was based, however, on irony and cynicism, for example: *sono dei robot* [they're robots]; *scimmie delle multinazionali* [corporate monkeys]—expressions used to describe Poles. In situations where it is more the context and the sensitivity of the interlocutors that carries the offence (in other words, in situations where terms of pure hatred, such as derogatory epithets, are not present), it is very difficult to establish the boundary between neutral content (freedom of expression) and HS content, pointing inevitably to the limitations of the automatic detection system.

8.6 Conclusions

As we have seen, the penetration of hostility connected to nationality is visible in various aspects of the content published on FB. This hostility can refer to an individual person or to a single person by virtue of their belonging to a certain social group. It is often difficult to establish whether a statement should be considered HS, due to the lack of a uniform definition of HS, and the contextual nature of HS itself, which has been highlighted in the analysis of the corpus presented in Section 8.5. In our study, we have attempted to identify the manifestations of HS that refer to a group of people on the basis of their nationality—Italian or Polish—as the corpus includes posts and comments that come from two public FB groups with both Italian and Polish members. Taking into consideration the content posted, we focused on the conversations that refer to the idea of the nation in a broad sense of the concept and that carry some offensiveness towards it. We have identified i) nationality adjectives and state names used as metonymies; ii) adverbs of place and personal pronouns referring to both nationalities in question; and iii) cultural traits characteristic of a nation that may reflect it as a whole. When accompanied by offensive content and, in some cases, contrasted one with another (e.g. pronominal contrasts), all these elements acquire offensive power by embodying contempt, judgement, or derision, thereby constituting HS. It should be borne in mind that such HS reduces

individuals to a single dimension, characterising them only on the basis of belonging to a group—in our case, the social identity derived from belonging to a nation. At the same time, however, it should be emphasised that the offensive content based on belonging to the Italian and/or Polish nation in the analysed corpus does not originate with the clear intention of calling on Italians to leave Poland, for example, which would suggest that they (Italians) are a hated native group. Instead, the topic of nation, as one of the topics triggering HS and recurring in its definitions, seems to fuel discussions about where a person lives best and why someone decided to emigrate. It still holds true that this topic easily leads to the escalation of differences of opinion within conversations.

It is clear, then, that discussing insults and hatred expressed online is essential, since such speech not only reflects our reality but also contributes to creating it in a certain way, inciting a greater aggression and offensiveness of language. It could be said that we are dealing with a 'chain reaction', in which an insulting post or comment constitutes a trigger for other even more offensive utterances. Furthermore, it is often the case that the initial post is absolutely neutral in terms of offensiveness but nonetheless immediately provokes insulting reactions towards the author or other commenters.

The study presented here must therefore be considered as just one of the voices in a discussion that must be further developed from the perspectives of disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy of language, psychology, and jurisprudence. The identification of existing manifestations of HS is only the first step along the arduous and complex road to the ultimate goal, namely the minimisation of HS content in social media. By minimisation we mean increasing user awareness about offensive content and the damage caused by this content, inviting mutual moderation in conversations that take place on the platforms; however, minimisation also requires engagement from the managers of the platforms themselves, given the weaknesses that have been revealed in the anti-hate systems currently in place.

However, it should also be noted that this type of study is not free of limitations. In addition to the impossibility of conducting an accurate quantitative analysis, it must be considered that the two authors of the present chapter are native speakers of Polish, of Polish nationality, and, therefore, the subjectivity of the point of view cannot be excluded. Furthermore, due to the nature of data collection and the impossibility of archiving material from FB, it is also possible that during the process of reading the linguistic material not all utterances that included elements of HS were detected.

The study also found some possible extensions of the research. For example, it would be interesting to analyse which linguistic mechanisms incite other expressions of insult/hatred, leading to the intensification of the emotional charge. It would similarly be interesting to verify whether, within the content identified for the purposes of this and similar studies, it is possible to observe interventions made by the users themselves aimed at mitigating the negative content that has been already published.

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