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Isabella Lamanna, Rosa Scardigno, & Francesca D'Errico

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# THE LANGUAGE OF RACIST VIRALITY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN RACIAL HOAXES

ISABELLA LAMANNA, ROSA SCARDIGNO & FRANCESCA D'ERRICO\*

University of Bari 'Aldo Moro'

\*corresponding author

## ABSTRACT

*Social media allow democratization and immediate access to information. Despite this, a significant disadvantage of these platforms is the dissemination of fake news. Fake news is usually presented in the form of text; therefore, it is relevant to investigate it with linguistic, content-based analysis, to better understand how and why users decide to share the content regardless of its trustworthiness. To this date, few studies have a qualitative approach and most linguistic analyses of fake news often use machine learning or deep learning techniques. To overcome this shortcoming and improve fake news recognition, this research aims at analysing 50 racial hoaxes selected from debunking websites in Italy (Bufale.net, Butac.it), with a quanti-qualitative approach. Hoaxes' titles were collected, classified, organized, and analysed using psycholinguistic methodologies. The study aims to identify the language features that make racial hoaxes engaging and explore their variation across different types of threats. The main results of the study pointed out how racial hoaxes are characterised by the widespread use of provocative emotional content; moreover, more negatively polarised words, more vulgar expressions and in general, a more aggressive connotated language were found in criminality threat hoaxes compared to the others.*

Keywords: fake news ▪ racial hoaxes ▪ content analysis ▪ linguistic analysis ▪ misinformation ▪ virality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Even if covering rather any domain of social life, the wide world of fake news originated in the political sphere. However, recent events such as the “infodemic” (Radu, 2020), highlight the wider extent of the phenomenon and therefore, the necessity of taking into consideration other types of hoaxes. A specific type of fake news that is becoming a popular discursive strategy to mask racism and unleash waves of fake

news and outraged comments on social media is racial hoaxes, meant as a kind of disinformation involving persons or groups based on their ethnicity, nationality, or religion (Papapicco et. al, 2022).

In Europe and Italy, any information on immigrants, refugees, or minorities is likely to cause a series of reactions which, consequently, create an enormous spread of news on social networks (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). In Italy, the UNAR (National agency against racism and discrimination) confirms there is a link between racism and the Internet: 29,2 % of verified cases of discrimination filed by UNAR in 2019, were considered “virtual” as the reports concerned acts of discrimination that were performed on social media. Moreover, considering the perpetrators of the discriminations, in 34,7 % of cases, the author is unknown, or not possible to identify but, in 12,4 % of cases, it is classified as a “Twitter user” (UNAR, 2019).

Being for some aspects a transnational phenomenon (Froio & Ganesh, 2019), the far-right movements have intensified their efforts to create a common opposition against the weakening of nation-states resulting from globalization and European integration, also supported by the Internet, acting as a facilitator for the construction of cross-border collective identities and interpretative frames (Caiani et al., 2012). As a matter of fact, among the transnational issues spread through Twitter, topics concerning anti-immigration and Islamophobia were found (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). Far-right movements can be accompanied by populism (Ernst et al., 2017) and conspiracy theories, such as the ‘Great Replacement’<sup>1</sup> (Ekman, 2022), both arousing affect, such as insecurity and fear, in online communication related to immigrants.

Considering the abovementioned data, we felt the urge to focus on racial hoaxes specifically, both because of the lack of research considering this type of fake news and the repercussions these hoaxes have in Italy. The existing literature, while growing, focuses primarily on recipients’ characteristics (Lyons et al., 2021; Staender et al., 2021), social and political repercussions (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2021), and on the possible strategies to counter misinformation (Abonizio et al., 2020; Basol et al., 2021; Epstein et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2021). However, fake news is primarily text, thus it is crucial to approach it considering its linguistic and content characteristics. Most of the literature on the subject has a quantitative approach and uses automated tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms or natural language processing<sup>2</sup> to investigate fake news’ features (Choudhary & Arora, 2021; Horne & Adali, 2017; Kasseropoulos & Tjortjis, 2021; Paschen, 2019) neglecting the peculiar contents, linguistic, and argumentative aspects. Considering this scarcity,

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1 Usually accounted among the conspiracy theories, the ‘Great Replacement’ claims that ethnically homogeneous populations in European nations are being “replaced” by people of non-European origin.

2 Natural language processing (NLP) is an interdisciplinary perspective, mainly matching the research efforts of computer science and linguistics, primarily aimed to improve the ability of digital tools to support and manipulate human language as well as to make computers capable of “understanding” some features of texts, including the contextual nuances of the language within them. As a consequence, NLP can be applied to the wide world on online misinformation.

this study aims to investigate the linguistic and content characteristics of fake news qualitatively. In this research, content analysis was used as a systematic coding and categorisation approach to determine, patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, and structures of communication (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Given the theoretical background which will be outlined, the overall aim of this work is to deepen how the linguistic features that make fake news engaging, vary across the different types of threats. To explore which linguistic features make racial hoaxes engaging, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Which are the main linguistic and content features in a corpus of recent racial hoaxes (RH)?

RQ2: Moreover, considering the threats associated to RH, which are their most frequent linguistic and content features?

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Peculiarities of Racial Hoaxes

Racial hoaxes are defined as communicative acts created to propagate distorted information in the form of a threat to our health and safety, in which the protagonist is a person, or a group of people described based on his/her/their ethnicity, nationality or religion (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; D'Errico et al., 2022). They can remain latent for a long time and emerge periodically by widely spreading negative stereotypes; moreover, they foster a discourse of exclusion on refugees and other minorities (Calvert et al., 2018). As an example, while it is widely acknowledged that general anti-Semitism was a precondition for the violent hostility toward Jews throughout Europe as exploded in the Holocaust, the origins of this feeling are less debated. Since a millennium, in the early medieval period, the interaction of social, economic, and religious factors shifted the Jews' images from misguided adherents of an outdated religion to a global dangerous and inhuman threat, leading to gradual Jewish dehumanization (Tuckwood, 2010). More specifically, toxification, that is to conceive the victim group as toxic to the furtherance of human civilization is identified as a warning sign, as it can stimulate two critical emotions, that is fear and survival instinct. Consequently, victims can be portrayed as poisonous deformations or as infectious contagions, accompanied by medical rhetoric, metaphors, and discourse encompassing pathology, diseases, viruses, and so on (Neilsen, 2015). Leaping forward, in the late context of global health crises and uncertainty, increased risk perception has negatively affected attitudes toward members of out-groups and foreign immigrants leading to new waves of xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes (Esses & Hamilton, 2021).

In general, the false information targeting immigrants and refugees does not only result as shocking, but provides stereotypical, biased, and prejudicial falsehoods (Patel, 2018). Indeed, from a psycho-linguistic perspective, racial hoaxes often convey stereotypes and prejudices through the manipulation of language (Papappicco et

al., 2022). D'Errico, Papapicco and Taulè (2022) pointed out for instance how racial hoaxes often contain typical linguistic forms of stereotypes and prejudices aimed at dehumanizing and attributing various types of threats to their protagonists. In this sense, racial hoaxes can be a tool to affect anti-immigrant attitudes.

## 2.2. A Focus on Disinformation

The term “fake news” was born in the United States in the nineteenth century to describe a story fabricated with the intent to harm a person or an institution, usually in the political sphere (Editors of Merriam-Webster, 2017); however, the spread of this expression, took place following the 2016 American election, won against all odds by Donald Trump (Riva, 2018). The advisor to the presidency herself, Kellyanne Conway, introduced the term “alternative facts” (which could be defined as the politically correct version of “lie”) during an interview a few days after the inauguration ceremony of the president. The expression “post-truth” was introduced in the Oxford Dictionary of the English language of 2016, and it denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential than emotional perception and personal beliefs. In the same year, this formula was selected as the word of the year, given its use in many public speeches and presentations. “Post order” was introduced by the Munich Security Report in 2017, to alert individuals to the presence of half-truths, interpretations, conspiracy theories or rumours (Buluc, 2018). In the political scenario, the post-truth era appears as paradoxical: the core issues of democracies are no more related to the neglect of facts; rather, disputes over what counts as “true”, “real”, “false” and “fake” are at stake in political public discourses. These contents accompany the efforts to obtain political dominance by supporting the construction of in-group as the bearer of truth and out-group as enemies (of truth). In other words, the “concept” of fake news has become part of political struggles to hegemonise social reality (Farkas & Schou, 2019).

More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a digital outbreak of disinformation often referred to as “infodemic”: false cures and inadequate prevention methods have also gone viral, causing more confusion, and risking more people’s lives (Radu, 2020). In this sensitive domain, individual perspectives focused on “alternative lifestyle” of subcultural groups in cyberspace and criminological interpretations of social learning behaviours were conjointly applied to explain some features of science denial and medical misinformation (Lavorgna & Myles, 2022).

To understand how it is possible that the mere dissemination of manipulated news can cause such striking results, it is necessary to consider the social environment in which these processes are enabled. The immediate access to the Internet and the habitual use of mobile phones have drastically changed the way information is disseminated. Before the disclosure of the WWW, the only way to get information was through press professionals which meant that news, to have public resonance, had to be reported by journalists via official sources. Social networks instead,

provide a way for misinformation to reach a mass audience (Tandoc, 2020) without journalistic verification (Müller & Denner, 2019). To date, social media, blogs, and social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are some of the primary information resources for individuals (McClain, 2017). The positive consequence is the democratization and immediate consumption of information. The negative one is that in these social environments users can be easily manipulated, due to a lack of control and disintermediation between facts and users. Hence, considering the outcomes of information exposure on these platforms, it is of utmost importance for scholars to focus on the subject in order to find a solution to counteract the effect of fake news.

### 2.3. The Virality of Fake News: Linguistic and stylistic features

Baptista and Gradim (2020) present five main characteristics that make fake news viral: emotional content, heuristic persuasion, imitation of the journalistic format, clickbait, and images. In this paper the focus is on the content of such texts, thus we will not consider the influence of images (for a complete overview see Dan et al., 2021).<sup>3</sup>

If we look at these characteristics, their manipulation aims at leading users to read and or share fake news with two objectives: to generate advertising revenue and / or obtain ideological gain (Lazer et al., 2018). However, each of these features concurs differently to the achievement of the same purpose. Namely, imitation of the journalistic format consists in using false legitimacy and manipulating credibility (Baptista & Gradim, 2020): multiple studies indeed state that fake news contains at least one veracity element (Müller & Denner, 2019; Scardigno & Mininni, 2019) which complicates the distinction between true and fabricated facts and credibility assessment. Moreover, considering that true news often features an individual's full name, preceded with the name of their position (or the name of the institution) followed by a statement (Marquardt, 2019), we could argue that some fake news might be formulated using this structure, indeed, to resemble journalistic writing and thus, to result as more credible. Heuristic persuasion is defined as the use of pretentious, simple, persuasive, and informal language (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Ali & Zain-ul-Abdin, 2021): specifically fake news' titles contain simpler words in length and technicality, they are composed of more capitalized words, significantly more proper nouns, and verb phrases (Horne & Adali, 2017). This implies that fake news requires less effort and attention: the interpretation of the reader may be less logical and based only on the titles' packed content and exaggeration (Horne & Adali, 2017). Moreover, the emotional response also explains why this type of information is processed heuristically rather than systematically (Meinert et al., 2018).

Emotional content is defined as the use of language that evokes strong feelings

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3 Even if the dissemination and manipulation of images can have a sensitive impact on racial hoaxes (Bharali & Goswami, 2018), visual fake news has a specific configuration, related to its specific features, such as analogical quality, indexicality, and propositional syntax (D'Errico et al., 2022). In addition, in the selected corpus several hoaxes were not accompanied by images. As a consequence, only texts were included in our analysis.

either positive or negative, the report of bizarre, impressive, or shocking events and crimes and exaggerated and dramatic stories (Baptista & Gradim, 2020; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019; Scardigno et al., 2024). Literature on the subject points out that the emotional response (specifically anger, see Chuai & Zhao, 2020; Fan et al., 2014; Müller & Denner, 2019; Wardle, 2017) provoked in readers by manipulated news is the key factor for its spread. In fact, emotional arousal does not only drive recipients to process information heuristically, but content that encourages strong feelings is also more likely to be shared (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Chuai & Zhao, 2020; Harber & Cohen, 2005; Valenzuela et al., 2017). On this matter, Basol, Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2020) included the use of emotional content in the most commonly used misinformation strategies: in this study the authors draw on an inoculation metaphor, where pre-emptively exposing people with the strategies used in the production of fake news helps confer cognitive immunity when exposed to real misinformation; they designed an online game in which players take on the role of a fake news producer and learn to master six common misinformation techniques used in the production of misinformation: use of emotional content, polarisation, spreading conspiracy theories, trolling people online and impersonating fake accounts. With this study the authors provided evidence that people's ability to spot and resist misinformation improves after gameplay, irrespective of education, age, political ideology, and cognitive style (Basol et al., 2020). The emotional response is also obtained through the narration of particularly alarming events: clickbait consists of titles manipulated to attract and arouse curiosity, especially with the use of sensationalism (Baptista & Gradim, 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Fake news topics comprise crimes, sexual crimes, fraudulent acts, and political inventions. These topics are not country related (Baptista & Gradim, 2020); nevertheless, in an analysis of the fact-checkers in the USA, United Kingdom, Germany and Austria, Humprecht (2019) found that online disinformation in English-speaking countries tends to target political actors, whereas, in German-speaking countries, the main focus is immigrants, holding them responsible for current political, economic or social situations. As previously stated, immigration seems to be a pivotal topic in Italy too, thus the choice of investigating this subject.

To date, there are only a few studies considering racial hoaxes specifically (Bourgade et al., 2023; D'Errico et al., 2023; D'Errico et al., 2022; Papapicco et al., 2022). For this research, we considered a relevant study on how racial hoaxes develop within media hypes and the comparison of their dynamics (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). Here, hoaxes were classified according to their topic: "health threat", "economic threat" and "criminal threat". In the study, the authors presented three case studies each of

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4 As for this last point, it should be specified that even if fake news is considered a blending genre, combining elements of traditional news with features that are exogenous to normative professional journalism (such as misinformation, sensationalism, clickbait, and bias) (Mourão & Robertson, 2019), a sensational approach to news construction penetrated the history of news (Brown et al., 2018), not being automatically and at all identifiable with fake contents.

them belonging to one of the above-mentioned topics. The analysis found that risk and security were often used as trigger factors to foment media hype. In other cases, the risk was used as a threat posed against natives' welfare (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). For our study, media hype was not investigated; instead, the focus here was on detecting the possible differences in language use among the different types of threats to investigate which linguistic features make racial hoaxes engaging. Therefore, the classification of the different types of racial hoaxes was maintained. Investigating how a threat is conveyed linguistically in these types of hoaxes seems important to understand how and why this factor may foment media hype.

### 3. METHOD

This is an exploratory research aimed at developing a possible method of linguistic analysis of racial hoaxes. Fifty racial hoaxes were collected from debunking websites from 2018 to March 2020. In addition, an automatic procedure enabled us to collect their corresponding comments on Twitter over the same period.

A content analysis was performed. Finding its roots in Lasswell's classic communication process (1948), this method offers a realist perspective since it works through a systematic coding and categorization approach for exploring and interpreting textual data (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020). We adopted an unobtrusive pathway to outline patterns of words, frequency, relationships, and structures of communication in a less subjective way than other analytical procedures, such as discourse analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

The categorization was based on multiple criteria extracted from previous research on the subject (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; D'Errico et al., 2022; D'Errico et al., 2023; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019; Scardigno & Mininni, 2019; Scardigno et al., 2023). From these works, three crucial categories, which respectively focus on linguistic, argumentative manoeuvres, and content aspects, were obtained corresponding to: "thick lexicon", "misinformation strategies", and "threat type". For each of the elements of these categories, we used the pre-existing definitions already given by the authors. In such a manner, we obtained the categories and rules for the translation of the text into code. As reported by Scardigno and Mininni (2019), the category "thick lexicon" is composed of the following criteria: "polarised words" which are described as terms recalling extreme positive or negative scenarios; "connoted words" which evoke cultural frames (such as 'fascist'); "generalising words" an expression used to broaden the domain; "common sense words and expressions" which comprise idioms, figures of speech, common sayings, etc. From these definitions, a higher frequency of "polarised words" was considered an indicator of the presence of either emotional content or clickbait (or both), and a more frequent presence of either "connoted words", "generalising words" or "common sense words and expressions" as an indicator of the formulation of the title to stimulate a heuristic persuasion.



As for the argumentative side, we focused on the theorization of Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019), presenting six common “misinformation strategies”, whose definitions are summarized in Tab. 1.

*Table 1: Common misinformation strategies in line with theorization proposed by Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019). (This source was created by authors).*

Type of misinformation strategy	Definition
Impersonation	Deception in the form of impersonating online accounts
Provocative emotional content	Creation of content that deliberately plays into basic emotions to frame an issue in a specific way
Group polarisation	Artificial amplification of already existing tensions between different groups in society
Conspiracy theories	Creation or strengthening alternative explanations which assume that events are controlled by a small, secret elite group of people
Discrediting opponents	Shifting the attention away from accusations by discrediting the source of the criticism
Trolling	Deliberate incitation of a reaction from an audience by using bait or a combination of the abovementioned strategies

Furthermore, to better assess the features of these hoaxes’ titles, in-group and out-group elements were categorised as well as the presence of the veracity element. Lastly, the category “threat type” was obtained by Cerase and Santoro (2018), in which the authors analyse a case study and displayed three types of threat present in racial hoaxes: “public health” hoaxes in which immigrants are portrayed as a threat and a risk for public health; in hoaxes presenting an “economic” threat, immigrants are considered as an economic threat (for immigration costs) and as undeserving recipients of the country’s economic prosperity; in “criminality” threat hoaxes, immigrants are represented as criminals and thus considered a criminal threat.

To answer RQ1, fifty hoaxes’ titles were randomly selected from the Italian fact-checking websites Bufale.net (<https://www.bufale.net>) and Butac.it<sup>5</sup> (<https://www.butac.it>) following purposive sampling strategies, whose aim is to make sure that specific kinds of cases that could be included are part of the final sample (Campbell et al., 2020). The hoaxes’ titles were picked based on their content: only racial hoaxes were selected for this corpus (freely available on the project Sterheotypes website<sup>6</sup>). The selection was obtained by inserting in the search bar of

5 Bufale.net and Butac.it are two accredited Italian realities fighting against disinformation and specialized in fake news detection and fact-checking. Their work starts with readers’ alerts through social media (WhatsApp, email, Facebook, and Instagram) or emails. These warnings are forwarded to staff members, who analyze each case by comparing contents with official sources, institutional websites, and security forces. After these checks, news is rewritten, and “fake” contents are explained. Internet users consider these services particularly useful since they can help discern reliable and authentic information, thus avoiding increasing misinformation.

6 <https://www.irrit.fr/sterheotypes/home/objectives/>

the websites, the following keywords: “racism”, “immigrants” and “Salvini” (former Italian Minister for Internal Affairs, renowned for his criticism towards the immigrant’s reception policy carried out by the centre-left governments, see Cervi et al., 2020). Out of fifty racial hoaxes, thirty-eight had a textual format (usually articles published on websites), seven were images reporting a sentence, four were social media posts and one was a politician’s statement.

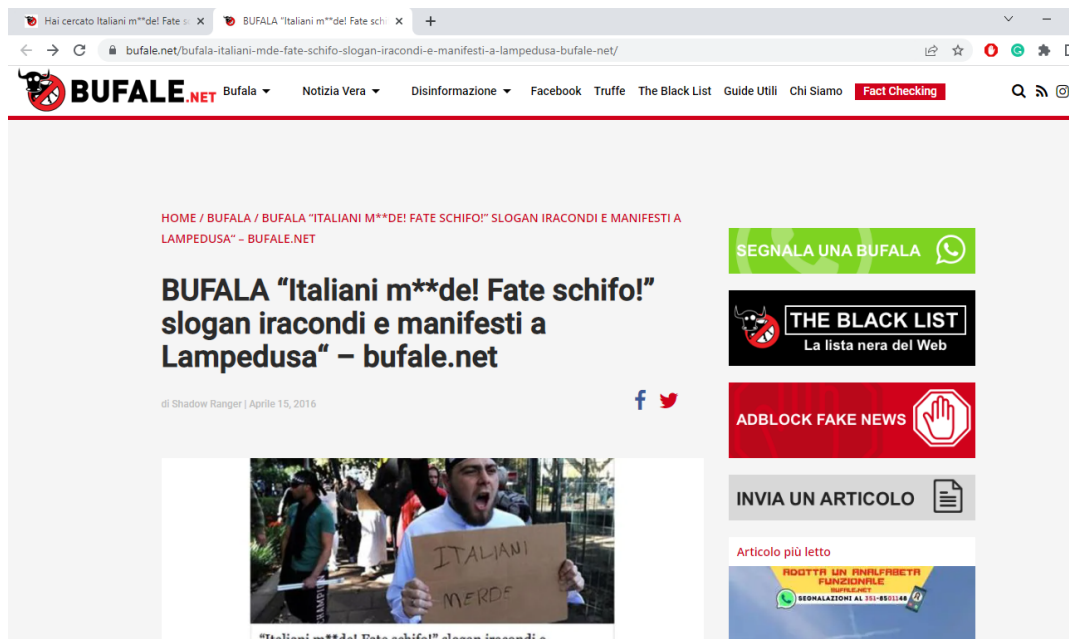


Figure 1. Example of racial hoax taken from Bufale.net

To make the analysis more accurate, two researchers performed the analysis separately on the same titles data set and with the same criteria, reaching a good inter-coder agreement (K Cohen=0.68) and then compared the results. Each element of each criterion was detectable in each hoax’s title: before the analysis, it was assumed the possibility to find more than one “thick lexicon” word or “disinformation strategy” or “threat type” in just one title. The titles were selected from fact-checking websites both to ensure their mendacity and to verify the presence of veracity elements. Moreover, considering the analytical nature of this study, it seemed appropriate to select authentic fake news, in order to produce a more realistic analysis of the factors influencing racial hoaxes spread. As Pennycook and colleagues argue (2021), creating fake news headlines results in the impossibility of knowing whether that sort of content would actually spread on social media, even though there might be good theoretical reasons to believe it would; moreover, many false headlines found on the internet are rarely shared, whereas the headlines analysed from fact-checking websites are those that already spread sufficiently widely and thus, do inevitably have the characteristics that facilitate content’s spread.

To answer RQ2, threat type was employed to categorise the titles based on the conveyed threat, and “thick lexicon” was used to investigate the language variation among the different types of hoaxes detected with the “threat type” category. Specifically, a random egalitarian selection of seven titles was performed among three groups of threat type. The translation from Italian to English was carried out by the author. The analysis was carried on two levels: on a structural level, we distinguished between positive action/concept and negative action/concept, between the presence or absence of in-group and out-group identifiers, and we analysed how the subject of the sentence is related to his/her action. The purpose of this distinction was to understand whether, on a syntactic level, there are differences in how racial hoaxes’ protagonists and their actions are presented to the reader. The second level of analysis focused on the variation of thick lexicon use among the three types of threat, to investigate linguistic variation and thus produce an answer for RQ2.

Table 2: Methodological design. (This source was created by authors).

Phase 1: racial hoaxes collection	Phase 2: corpus classification	Phase 3: linguistic qualitative analysis
Fifty racial hoaxes were collected from debunking websites	Hoaxes were classified using existing literature. Thick lexicon, disinformation strategies, and threat type criteria and their elements were used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Thick lexicon: polarised words, generalising words, common sense words and expressions, connoted words</li> <li>▪ Misinformation strategies: impersonation, provocative emotional content, group polarisation, conspiracy theories, discrediting opponent and trolling</li> <li>▪ Threat type: public health, economic and criminality</li> </ul>	Random egalitarian selection of seven hoaxes’ titles to perform the analysis of the linguistic variation among threat type: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ positive/negative action or concept</li> <li>▪ presence/absence of in-group or out-group identifiers</li> </ul>

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tables report the results of the classification. The percentage frequencies illustrated in the tables were calculated by dividing the absolute frequencies of each criterion for the total amount of frequencies of the “threat type” category and multiplying for 100. The (N) in the tables stands for the total amount of occurrences of the category and can be used to calculate the occurrence of each criterion in the corpus. Data were processed this way to better read the incidence of each criterion on the overall distribution and on the other criteria.

Table 3: Frequency distribution of the “threat type” category. (This source was created by authors.)

Type of threat	Percentage frequency	Examples
Criminality	39 %	Sicily: Islamic extremist kills his girlfriend’s dog for sniffing the Koran.
Realistic conflict	25 %	Prenestina, the nursery will be shut down: it will become an immigrant housing centre.
National identity	23 %	The prayer of the Alpine troops was censored so as not to offend immigrants.
Economic	11 %	Boldrini: “Immigrants have no money and it is not fair”.
Public health	2 %	91 % of immigrants who land in Italy are affected by Onan’s disease.
Tot (N)	100 % (61)	

Table 4: Frequency distribution of the “misinformation strategies” category. (This source was created by authors.)

Misinformation strategies	Percentage frequencies	Examples
Provocative emotional content	37 %	Venice, veiled women spit at the crucifix.
Trolling	27 %	Saviano: “Honestly, I prefer to save refugees and my clandestine brothers than to help some whining and spoiled Italian earthquake victim”.
Group polarization	20 %	Free dentist to immigrants: slap in the face to poor Italians.
Impersonation	10 %	Italy. The first illegal immigrant mayor elected: “This is how I will change Italian politics”.
Conspiracy theories	5 %	This is madness: in Agrigento free buses to immigrants to avoid violence and aggression.
Discrediting opponents	1 %	Ventimiglia collapses, policemen accuse: “Gone Salvini, Macron sends us back 100 immigrants per day”.
Tot (N)	100 % (136)	

Table 5: Frequency distribution of the “thick lexicon” category. (This source was created by authors.)

Thick lexicon	Percentage frequencies	Examples
Polarised words	34 %	“violent”, “illegal”, “save”
Generalising words	33 %	“immigrants”, “refugees”, “north African”
Connoted words	23 %	“Alpine”, “veiled women”, “earthquake victims”
Common sense words	10 %	“This is madness”, “lands the card”
Tot (N)	100 % (113)	

Regarding RQ1, the results of the analysis are in line with pre-existing data on the pivotal role of emotional content in making fake news viral: the selected corpus presents frequently elements and structures that provoke strong emotional responses. Specifically, the presence of such content was verified with the use of the “disinformation strategy” and the “thick lexicon” categories: the most frequent disinformation strategy used is that of “provocative emotional content” with an incidence of 37 % in the corpus, confirming the frequent use of structures and strategies that provoke emotional reactions in recipients (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Berger & Milkman, 2011; Guo et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2009; Sivek, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018); the most frequent element of the “thick lexicon” category are “polarised words” confirming the use of inflammatory (Guo et al., 2019) and dividing language in this type of content. Lastly, in thirty-six out of fifty titles there was at least one element of veracity, confirming the usual presence of at least one fact in this type of content (Müller & Denner, 2019); this indicates that, although the presence of emotional content seems the most important feature, our racial hoaxes’ corpus is also characterised by the consistent presence of emotional and veracity elements.

The second most frequent disinformation strategy is “trolling”, indicating both the use of “clickbait” and a combination of more than two of the disinformation strategies in just one title. Lastly, the second most frequent “thick lexicon” criterion is “generalising word” indicating the use of a simpler (Baptista & Gradim, 2020) and less technical language (Horne & Adali, 2017) in order to be easily understood, thus inducing a heuristic processing.

Considering RQ2, the analysis has demonstrated the need to include new types of threats to better detect the characteristics of the corpus: “national identity” defines a threat to a symbol of the Italian national identity (for example a cultural symbol such as a member of the Italian Alpine troops); “realistic conflict” threat is specific to those titles in which two social groups contend for the same good, thus causing conflict. Furthermore, subtypes of the criminality threat were added: “c. for aggression”, “for theft”, “for murder”, “for insurrection”, “for illegal acts” and “sexual”.

To consider the titles’ virality, we retrieved through automatic procedure their corresponding comments on Twitter over a period that goes from 2018 to March 2020 . The total amount corresponds to 21714 comments. Six titles received considerably more replies if compared to the others (see Tab. 6):

Table 6: Type of threat and number of comments concerning the most replied titles. (This source was created by authors.)

RH number	Type of threat	Number of comments
1	criminality and national identity	546
2	national identity	912
3	criminality	968
4	realistic conflict	1816
5	criminality	3080
6	criminality and national identity	3804

The recurrent presence of the criminality threat in the most replied titles in the analysed corpus, further suggests a connection between shocking events and crimes and emotional activation and highlights the pivotal role of emotional content in making fake news viral. A linguistic analysis was performed on twenty-one titles selected from a total of fifty hoaxes’ titles. Seven were selected for each of economic (ETH), realistic conflict (RCTH) and criminality threats (CTH).

Table 7: Percentages of in-group, out-group, positive and negative actions/concepts observed in the selected corpus. (This source was created by authors).

Type of threat	Ingroup %	Outgroup %	Positive action/concept %	Negative action/concept %
Economic	20	33	29	26
Realistic conflict	20	40	42	27
Criminality	60	27	29	57
Tot	100 (10)	100 (27)	100 (14)	100 (23)

For what concerns positive/negative actions/concepts, results show that in CTH, negative actions/concepts are more frequent; moreover, whereas in RCTH and ETH negativity is expressed equally with both actions and concepts, in CTH it is mostly expressed through negative actions (Jiang & Erez, 2018).

Specifically:

- In ETH, there are two negative concepts expressed by actions (e.g. “puts him in the hospital”) and four negative concepts expressed in other terms (e.g. “without money”, “it is not fair”).
- In RCTH, two negative subjects are conveyed by actions (e.g. “nursery school closed”) and two negative concepts expressed by adjectives (“fascist” and “six nuns become pregnant”).
- In CTH, there are nine negative elements expressed by actions (e.g. “I killed many people”, “you suck”, “arrested”, “rapes”, and “destroys him”) and four negative concepts expressed by nouns and adjectives (e.g. “weapons depot” and “harassments”).

Considering positive actions/concepts, no notable differences were found. For what

concerns the presence of in-group or out-group terms in CTH, four in-group occurrences were found compared to the two found in the other two hoaxes. RCTH was the one with the highest occurrence of out-group terms (eleven occurrences in seven sentences), followed by ETH (nine occurrences in seven sentences), and lastly CTH (seven occurrences in seven sentences).

Regarding the words designating the in-group, two were found in RCTH and two more in ETH. Interestingly, we can observe that in three out of four cases, terms are correlated to Italian culture and nation (“earthquake victims”, “Italy” and “monastery”). Concerning CTH, there are seven occurrences of in-group terms, most of which conveying a strong emotional meaning, such as “father”, “girl”, and “daughter”.

Concerning the out-group, many terms referring to this category were found in RCTH. Specifically, most of times the common members of the out-group (for example “immigrants”, “refugees” etc.) are followed by other members that might be considered as part of another out-group: namely, Macron, Renzi, “Zuckerberg” and Boldrini. The strategy of using prominent political or world-renown people or institutions is used twice also in ETH (“Boldrini” and “UE”) and none in CTH. This strategy may be seen as an attempt to imitate the journalistic format given the use in true news of an individual’s full name (or the name of the institution) followed by a statement (Marquardt, 2019).

Lastly, considering how subjects and their actions are presented:

- In ETH, in four sentences out of seven, the out-group members are the objects of a positive action/concept (e.g. “can withdraw up to 37 euros”, “thanks to 500 euros bonus”).
- In RCTH, the out-group causes three unpleasant situations (numbers 8, 9 and 13 of Appendix A) and in three other cases exploits a resource (10, 11, 12). When an in-group member is presented, he is the victim of a situation caused by the out-group (“Italy” in number 8 and “monastery” or “nuns” in number 13).
- In CTH, the out-group causes the negative situation and is a perpetrator of aggressive actions. The in-group is either the victim of these aggressive actions, or acts in defence of the aggression committed by the outgroup. These data concur to strengthen the perceptions of immigrants as a criminal threat and the related negative affect (Baranauskas & Stowell, 2022)

For the lexical investigation of the linguistic analysis and considering polarised terms, we observed a clear difference between the groups.

Table 8: Percentages of thick lexicon in the selected corpus. (This source was created by authors).

Thick lexicon	ETH %	RCTH %	CTH %
Polarised	38	35	54
Generalising	38	40	25
Connotated	12	25	17
Common words	12	0	4
Tot (N)	100 (16)	100 (20)	100 (24)

For CTH 54 % of the “thick lexicon” occurrences were “polarised words” compared to 35 % of RCTH and 38 % of ETH. Moreover, in CTH “polarised words” all have negative value and all convey a negative action or an aggressive scenario; in ETH, most of the words have negative value; in RCTH, all the words have positive value if considered separately (as in “free”, “deserves” or “pregnant”), but their negative value is conveyed by the context (as in “Six nuns become pregnant”). Generalising words are almost equally distributed in all three groups, confirming the extensive use of less technical words (Horne & Adali, 2017). However, it is possible to point out that “connoted words evoking cultural frames” are mostly concentrated in RCTH; we can assume that these words are used strategically to reinforce hostility between the groups and confirm pre-existing attitudes to stimulate heuristic persuasion. “Common sense words and expressions” have few occurrences. In CTH, it is a vulgar expression (“cuts his balls”), whereas the two observed in ETH are a pun or wordplay and an idiom (“travesty of justice”).

The RCTH and the ETH have multiple similarities: here, negative actions or concepts are more frequently conveyed by concepts than by actions; the presence of the out-group seems to be very important and is often modulated by the presence of members, often renowned people or institutions; in-group is mostly depicted as related to Italian culture. Concerning the relationship between subject and action, in these hoaxes, the out-group enjoys actions carried out by members of the in-group. They also have privileges, use resources, and ultimately cause unpleasant situations. As for the lexical part, “polarised words” assume a negative value when related to the context; “connoted words evoking a cultural frame” are linked to politics, economy, culture, and religion; finally, the “words of common use” are rather expressions, popular idioms, and figures of speech. The language used in these two groups of titles is more neutral than in the CTH, but because of this, RCTH and ETH can be more difficult to identify. A recent study (Hameleers et al., 2023) suggests that it is the seemingly harmless contents that pose the largest threats: the authors state that decontextualized information can disarm important defence mechanisms among recipients because, by staying close to the truth, it is hard to assess their credibility. Moreover, this type of fake news is often impossible to identify because of it being composed of verifiable facts, in a misleading way (Ibid). CTH, on the other hand, are characterized by the presence of frequent negative concepts and actions,



usually expressed by actions. Ingroup members are usually portrayed as the victims of aggression by the members of the out-group; these last ones are designated as perpetrators of aggressive actions (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). Finally, these hoaxes are characterized by the presence of extreme language, conveyed by polarised words stating again aggressive actions or negative scenarios (Maneri, 2016).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the linguistic features that make racial hoaxes engaging and their variation among different threats. Firstly, data point out the widespread use of emotional content (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Berger, Milkman, 2011; Guo et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2009; Sivek, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018), especially through the highest presence of “provocative emotional content” for the “disinformation strategy” category and “polarised words” for the “thick lexicon” category.

Second, the variation of the linguistic features among threats is conveyed by two main “strategies”: on the one hand, provocative emotional content is used to incite negative emotions such as outrage or indignation. This is the case of CTH, in which the language used is extreme, vulgar, and violent (D’Errico et al., 2012; Poggi et al., 2013); the in-group is often designated with emotionally connoted words (such as “father” or “daughter”), whereas the out-group is depicted as the perpetrator of violence. These features concur to construct negative frames in the same way as far-right movements (Froio & Ganesh, 2019), populism (Ernst et al., 2017), and conspiracy theories (Ekman, 2022), all engaging emotional arousal and a threatening climate.

On the other hand, a combination of different strategies is adopted to cause conflict and to induce the reader to feel like a victim of injustice. This is the case of ETH and RCTH in which language is less extreme and resembles journalistic writing; the in-group is designated as victims of unfair treatment whereas the out-group is portrayed as beneficiaries of privileges. The similarity between these types of titles and journalistic writing might increase the difficulty of discernment between hoaxes and true news (Hameleers et al., 2023), thus offering new insights for a critical research field about what is really “at stake” when fake news is under investigation. As made explicit especially in the political domain, the real challenge concerns not only what defines “truthfulness” or “falsehood”, rather identifying “fake news” as a discursive signifier that is part of political struggles (Farkas & Schou, 2019). Even if substantially confirming the types of threats proposed by Cerase & Santoro (2018), additional ones were found, including “national identity”, “realistic conflict” and subtypes of the criminality threat. However, these specific pathways are in line with the Italian political scenario: as Italy is a focal point for maritime arrivals due to its geographical position, some populist parties, such as Lega, capitalised on the fears and the threats related to immigration, thus becoming a political entrepreneur of xenophobia (Avanza, 2010) and pointing to set as an “emergency populism” (Cervi et

al., 2020). As for this domain, an international comparison could be enlightening to emphasize contextual and specific types of threat in line with the rhetoric and argumentations proposed by local far-right and populist movements.

Overall, results emphasize the importance of considering a qualitative, linguistic approach in favour of detecting which kind of lexicon and structures elicit which type of emotional responses. Further investigating linguistic dynamics among different types of hoaxes and the relation between language and emotions would enable researchers to better understand this phenomenon as well as to refine the methods used to distinguish between truthful and fabricated content.

Lastly, even though this study highlights the use of different strategies to make racial hoaxes engaging, most titles present a combination of “misinformation strategies” (which also explains the high occurrence of the criterion “trolling”), “thick lexicon” words, and may even convey multiple threats. As a consequence, the importance of making use of a systematic coding activity, typical of content analysis, can be outlined to match results from thematic issues (the type of threat and the misinformation strategy), linguistic and stylistic cues (the several declinations of thick lexicon) and more objective index (e.g., the number of comments).

This study presents some limitations. First off, the limited extension of the analysed corpus: we classified a total of fifty titles. However, this research is exploratory and aims at developing a possible method of linguistic analysis of racial hoaxes; therefore, we decided to focus on a small cluster of titles and detect the linguistic indicators. Future research should validate the method through the analysis of a broader cluster of racial hoaxes, thus offering data for a wider generalisability.

Secondly, regarding the methodology, both analyses are inherently reductive since only some parts of the titles were observed. Further research on the linguistic features of fake news might be useful to uncover the linguistic mechanisms underlying this type of content, by also monitoring the potential users' reaction.

Future research could compare the linguistic elements of racial hoaxes and real news, considering the engagement that these types of content generate (D'Errico et al. 2022); moreover, considering the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perception of travellers and immigrants, an interesting analysis could focus on the different type of perceived threat: supposedly, pandemic period racial hoaxes might focus more on the health threat, portraying immigrants as disease and viruses carriers.

**Isabella Lamanna** is scholar in psycholinguistic processes associated with disinformation. She graduated in Cognitive Sciences at the University of RomaTre.

**Rosa Scardigno** is an assistant professor in social psychology at the University of Bari 'Aldo Moro', where she teaches social psychology of communication and psychology of digital marketing and advertising. Her main research interests focus on

the continuum between communication and discommunication in several domains of social life.

**Francesca D'Errico** is an Associate Professor in Social Psychology at the University of Bari 'Aldo Moro' where she teaches social psychology of communication and new media psychology. Her main research interests concern persuasive strategies in political and ethical communication by deepening the role played by socio-cognitive processes within classic and new media.

E-mail: francesca.derrico@uniba.it

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<https://www.irit.fr/sterheotypes>

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