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Construals of Us and Them in TERF, COVID-19 Denialist and Far-Right Discourses on Twitter: a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Within the term "extremism," one finds different groups, such as the far-right or, lately, COVID-19 denialism and TERF, all of which currently play a key role in the British social and political scene. While different scholars of critical discourse analysis have studied the characteristics of far-right speech, both COVID-19 denialist and TERF discourses remain to be explored in such depth. In order to do so, this dissertation combined a corpus-oriented, quantitative approach and various qualitative strategies to analyze and interpret a particular discursive trait of these extremist groups: the characterization of the in-group and the out-group through nominal and verbal groups. The results revealed several similarities between far-right, COVID-19 denialist and TERF discourses, such as the lack of agency of the in-group in negative actions, or the emphasis on the negative traits of the out-group, linking the three groups together and opening a door for future research on the field.

Key words: Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar, Extremism, Polarized Discourse, Social Actor, Social Action.

RESUMEN

El término "extremismo" aúna distintos grupos, como la extrema derecha o, últimamente, el negacionismo del COVID-19 y TERF, los cuales ahora dominan el panorama político y social británico. Mientras que, desde el análisis crítico del discurso, ya se han estudiado las características del discurso de la extrema derecha, todavía no se han explorado en tal profundidad los rasgos discursivos del negacionismo del COVID-19 y de TERF. Con tal propósito, esta disertación combina los métodos cuantitativos de la lingüística del corpus con distintas estrategias cualitativas a fin de analizar y de interpretar la caracterización discursiva del endogrupo y del exogrupo que estos grupos extremistas realizan a través de los grupos nominales y verbales. Los resultados demuestran similitudes entre los discursos de la extrema derecha, el negacionismo del COVID-19 y TERF, como la ausencia del endogrupo en acciones negativas, o el énfasis en las características negativas del exogrupo, lo que los conecta y abre nuevas vías de investigación.

Palabras clave: Análisis Crítico del Discurso, Gramática Sistémico Funcional, Extremismo, Discurso Polarizado, Actores Sociales, Acciones Sociales.

Table of content

1. Introduction

In 2020, three events collided in the UK, which led to the further polarization of a population already struck by social unrest. First, the UK officially abandoned the EU on February 1st. Then, the country witnessed the beginning and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and endured a two-month lockdown (Leonel da Silva, 2021). In the meantime, a huge controversy arose around the Gender Recognition Act (GRA), which intended to fully legalize gender self-determination. This proposal was met with a strong transphobic sentiment, which crystallized in the rising popularity of TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism) (Pearce et al., 2020). All these simultaneous phenomena triggered a general sense of tension and discontentment that was specially felt on social media.

This dissertation dives into the aforementioned turmoil, from January to June 2020, and studies the construal of participants in such conflictual events on Twitter, one of the most popular social media platforms (Zappavigna, 2012). In other words, this research intends to unveil the linguistic construction of the self and others and the effects of such characterization. In order to do so, the three extremist groups which starred in each event were selected: the far-right, for the aftermath of the Brexit process; denialism, for the COVID-19 pandemic; and TERF, for the GRA and the responses it evoked.

Various authors have analyzed the characteristics and the consequences of far-right discourse (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Wodak, 2015; Ruiz-Sánchez and Alcántara-Pla, 2019). On the contrary, COVID-19 denialism is new phenomenon which is yet to be fully explored, although some related studies are currently emerging. This is the case of the work of Leonel da Silva (2021) and of other scholars who have already discussed the general features of denialist discourse (Pascal Diethelm, 2009; Hansson, 2017). Lastly, to the best of this author's knowledge, there has not been yet any work on TERF discourse, nor any comparative analysis between TERF and other extremist discourses, even though the ideological and social similarities between TERF and other extremist groups have already been pointed out (Pearce et al., 2020). Hence, this study wishes to fill this gap in the field.

To explain how the discourse of TERF, denialist and far-right groups on Twitter reflects the polarization of society in the UK, dividing it into in-group and out-group, the following questions will be answered:

1. Which strategies does the utterer employ to depict the in-group? Can variation be found depending on the extremist group under study?
2. Which strategies does the utterer employ to depict the out-group? Can variation be found between the different extremist groups?
3. How do the verbs reinforce or diminish the construal of the groups created by the nominal groups? Are there differences in the verbal processes associated to the in-group and the out-group?

The answer to these research questions aims at shedding some light on the multifaceted nature of extremism, for it appears in many different groups, and the process of polarization, which is unfolding not only in the UK, but in other countries too (Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019). The comprehension of these current topics, if anything, raises awareness about the strategies and the devices of these discourses, and grants the reader an insight of their effects, to critically engage with such content.

Thus this dissertation is structured as follows: the second section will provide a literature review of the fields involved in this research. Then, the third section will explain the process of data collection and organization, as well as the method used for its study. The fourth section will present the results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. The fifth section will discuss the possible consequences of the results from the previous section. The last and sixth section will close with some conclusions and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

In this section, the theoretical background underlying the present study will be developed in further detail. This revision will encompass various areas as divergent, yet as complementary, as communication studies, corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, ideology studies, cognitive and functional grammars, and sociolinguistics, in an attempt to explain their convergence in this dissertation.

The ever-growing relevance of social media in contemporary society has attracted the attention of different fields, among them linguistics. In the evolution from Web 1.0. to Web 2.0., social media bestowed the Internet of an interpersonal function, for users now turn to the Internet not only to search for information, but also to bond and to develop relationships (Zappavigna, 2012; Tagg, 2012). Thus, social media opens a window

through which linguists may observe a "previously not easily viewed" usage of language in the construction of human identities and relationships (Zappavigna, 2012, p.7).

Since the beginning of the study of social media from a communicative angle, around 1996 (Zappavigna, 2012, p.15), several authors have stepped into the digital world. For instance, Tagg (2012) analyzes the language of Short Message Service (SMS) and the creation of identity in such messages. In her research, Tagg (2012) debunks many negative stereotypes around SMS, as she demonstrates that social media "encourage[s] language play and inventiveness" and enriches and expands "existing social practices" (p.18). Similar ideas can be found in Zappavigna (2012), who focuses on the link between textual and social relations on Twitter, through an analysis of "memes, slang, humor and political discourse in microblogging" (Zappavigna, 2012, p.13).

Both Tagg (2012) and Zappavigna (2012) share an analogous approach to the study of discourse on social media: a combination of corpus linguistics (CL) and qualitative strategies, which, albeit akin to those sometimes employed in critical discourse analysis (CDA), are not labelled as such by these authors. While not explicitly related to the study of social media, the combination of CL and CDA has been previously proved fruitful and successful by other authors, such as Baker et al. (2008), who have written about the many benefits of the synergy of the quantitative methods of CL and the qualitative procedures of CDA. Neither CL nor CDA entail one single method of analysis, as both disciplines involve a great variety of strategies. In fact, CDA may be defined as "an academic movement, a way of doing discourse analysis from a critical perspective, which often focuses on concepts such as power, ideology and domination. […] it adopts any method that is adequate to realize the aims of specific CDA-inspired research" (Baker et al., 2008, p.273). In this methodological flexibility of CDA, Baker et al. (2008, p.277) insert the quantitative and statistical tests of CL, which "enable the researcher to approach the texts […] relatively free from any preconceived or existing notions regarding their linguistic or semantic/pragmatic content." As a result, CL supports the qualitative strategies of CDA with objective data, while CDA brings a greater degree of detail to the quantitative analysis of CL (Baker et al., 2008).

In their study of social media, some authors (Tagg, 2012; Zappavigna, 2012) have likewise addressed the possible issues that may arise from the intersection of quantitative and qualitative procedures. Among them, they point at the compromised notion of

representativeness, i.e., "the extent to which a sample reflects the patterns in a larger population" (Zappavigna, 2012, p.16). Due to the qualitative and manual nature of CDA studies, the range of texts collected in CDA research may appear insufficient in comparison to the large number of words of some CL corpora. This contrast seems to contradict representativeness, one of the pillars of CL. However, as Tagg (2012) reflects in relation to her own work, the number of texts does not possess such relevance, for absolute representativeness is almost impossible to achieve. Actually, more attention should be paid to the selection of texts, as "what is important is that the data […] is carefully documented and that care should be taken not to over-generalize in your interpretations of it" (Tagg, 2012, p.32). She also claims that "[…] what is also important is *how* you decide *what* to look at […]" (Tagg, 2012, p.30). Other authors, such as Page et al. (2014), hold a similar position, since they consider that the benefits of the combination of CL and CDA outweigh any possible drawback.

As mentioned above, much CDA research aims at unveiling the linguistic construction and realization of ideology and power (Baker et al., 2008). Consequently, several approaches within CDA are intertwined with ideology studies, like the work of van Dijk (2000) demonstrates. First van Dijk defines "ideology" as "the 'axiomatic' basis of the shared social representations of a group;" i.e., the conditions that determine who appertains and who does not appertain to the group, among which one finds "activities, goals, norms and values" (2000, p.121). Then, he proposes the concept of the "ideological square" (2000, p.267). On the basis of this notion, van Dijk explains that, in the characterization of the self and the other, members of any group will often recur to "positive self-presentation" and "negative other-presentation" (2000, p.267), turning to different discourse strategies to do so. This process, which he calls the "ideological square," is rooted in the polarizing essence of any ideology, for "identification, access and inclusion of (new) members, may be intimately linked to the exclusion of others, thus defining power abuse and domination" (2000, p.161). In a world in which the political scene and, consequently, society are becoming increasingly polarized (Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019), there exists a growing necessity to comprehend the circumstances and the effects of such polarization (i.e., the clash between an "in-group" and an "out-group," with divergent beliefs, in which the "out-group" is depicted as the irreconcilable

enemy of the "in-group") (Nelson, 2003, p.454, cit. in Filardo-Llamas and Morales-López, 2022).

Polarization, as a characteristic of populist discourse, is frequently produced and supported by language, as Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. (2019, p.3) and Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, cit. Kopytowska, 2022, p.150) explain. For this reason, much CDA research in the last decade has focused on the topic of populism, understood as "a rhetorical system used to revert the people's subjection to the oligarchy, whichever this may be" (Hidalgo Tenorio et al., 2019, p.3) or, in other words, "a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people. These political actors can be politicians and political parties, but also movement leaders, interest group leaders and journalists" (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p.322). Although populism may be considered from two other angles (as an ideology and as a strategy) (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013, cit. in Hidalgo Tenorio et al., 2019, p.3), this concept of populism as "a language" (Kazin, 1998, cit. in Hidalgo Tenorio et al., 2019, p.2), "a communication frame" (Taggart, 2000, cit. in Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, p.322) or a "discursive style" (Hidalgo Tenorio et al., 2019, p.2) has been used in previous CDA analyses, for it emphasizes the relevance of language in the construction of reality.

This understanding of language as a tool which does not only articulate how the speakers view reality, but also shapes the representation of reality itself, connects with the principles of systemic functional grammar, particularly with the theory of transitivity (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004), and with cognitive grammar (Langacker, 2002; Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018). These two linguistic theories, along with the sociolinguistic concepts of "social actors" and "social actions" and the techniques employed in their representation on the text, have served before as a framework for other CDA studies (van Leeuwen, 2008). As an instance, Mayr and Machin (2013) combine notions and concepts taken from Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), and van Leeuwen (2008) in their approach to CDA. Even though Mayr and Machin (2013) do not turn to the ideas of cognitive grammar in their analysis, it can be argued that the mixture of sociolinguistics, cognitive and functional grammars only enriches any method. Both functional and cognitive grammars revolve around the relation between the usage of language and the experiences of the speaker, and the manner in which the linguistic choices of the speaker reveal those perceptions (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004;

Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018). Lastly, van Leeuwen (2008) brings a much-needed human and social dimension to these interpretations.

In brief, the study of discourse on social media has greatly evolved during the last couple of decades to slowly embrace as many disciplines as possible, for a multidisciplinary approach allows a deeper comprehension of the complexity of the phenomenon of populist extremist discourse on social media (van Dijk, 2000). Under these circumstances, this dissertation dives into the linguistic construction of identity of British TERFs, COVID-19 deniers and far-right politicians on Twitter. This phenomenon will be studied relying on a combination of ideas and methods based on some of the theories revised here: studies of communication and of polarization in radical discourse, cognitive and functional grammars, CL, CDA and sociolinguistics, in order to explore the "ideological square" (van Dijk, 2000), underlying the discourse of such groups.

3. Theoretical aspects

The following two subsections will provide a description of the material compiled for the study, organized in a corpus and a database, and an explanation of the method then employed to analyze the aforementioned material.

3.1. Data collection and organization

This subsection will explain how the data under analysis was collected and classified. As it will be explained below, the information was organized into two different formats: a database and a corpus, divided into three subcorpora.

Some criteria were defined in order to extract the data studied in this dissertation. First, given the growing importance of social media in political communication, a social platform was chosen for extracting the data: Twitter. After its foundation in 2006, Twitter has undergone an exponential growth of millions of users and has become one of the most popular social media sites (Zappavigna, 2012), which makes it the perfect choice for this research, as proven by the wide interest it has arisen among political discourse studies (Ruiz-Sánchez and Alcántara-Pla, 2019). A geographical area – the United Kingdom – and a time span were also established – from January to June 2020, a period in which the finalization of the Brexit process and the COVID-19 pandemic, among other events, coincided, accentuating the polarization of British society.

Then, three groups which fell within the phenomenon of populist extremism and which covered current British social concerns were selected: TERF (feminism and GRA),

COVID-19 denialism (the pandemic) and the far-right (nationalism and Brexit). These three groups display the traits frequently associated to populism as described by Jagers and Walgrave (2007, p.323): an emphasis on "the people" as a collective; a strong "anti-establishment" (or "anti-elitist") sentiment, and a defense of an exclusionist "homogeneity." These features also fall in the line of extremism, as explained by Bötticher (2017). The three groups divide society into two polarized groups: the in-group, and the out-group. The out-group is formed by any individual who does not share their principles and, particularly, by trans and non-binary people for TERF (Pearce et al., 2020), the government and science for COVID-19 denialism (Hansson, 2017; Leonel da Silva, 2021), and any outsider to the homogeneous, native nation for the far-right (Wodak, 2015). Likewise, TERF, COVID-19 denialism and the far-right demonstrate other extremist characteristics (Bötticher, 2017), such as their view of politics as a fight between the in-group and the out-group in which only one can prevail (e.g., TERF associations consider trans rights to be an attack to cis women; COVID-19 deniers judge any safety measure to be an infringement of their rights) (Pearce et al., 2020; Leonel da Silva, 2021), their (attempted or achieved) violation of human rights or their willingness to resort to violence as a form of militancy (e.g., COVID-19 denialist attacks to hospitals or the aggressive far-right response to the Black Lives Matter movement) (Turner-Cohen, 2021; Brown, 2021; Campbell, 2020). All in all, certain ideological parallelisms can be established between these three groups.

Besides their possible characterization as populist, extremist groups, their selection was also determined by their growing relevance in British society (Wodak, 2015; Pearce et al., 2020; Leonel da Silva, 2021) and their interconnections. Leonel da Silva (2021) points out how far-right groups and COVID-19 deniers share certain ideas, such as the advocacy for the decrease or the erasure of safety measures at the beginning of the pandemic (e.g., social distance); Hansson (2017) also remarks how, generally speaking, denialism is tied to right-wing politics. Pearce et al. (2020, p.680) mention that "a wider trans-exclusionary political climate with international dimensions" has brought together TERF and the far-right in the last few years. Albeit not directly stated by any of the previous authors, a skeptic and sometimes anti-scientific attitude can be found at the core of both COVID-19 denialism (Leonel da Silva, 2021), when it comes to the present pandemic, and TERF, in relation to human biology (Pearce et al., 2020). In brief, TERF,

COVID-19 denialism and the far-right converge in several aspects, hence justifying the hypothesis that similar discursive strategies can be used by members of these groups.

After defining these criteria, the data was manually compiled with the help of the advanced search tool of Twitter, which allows the retrieval of publications from particular dates or time periods. First, a set of participants from each extremist group was selected: political parties and politicians, in the case of the far-right; organizations and their representatives, for TERF and COVID-19 denialism. Thus, fifteen accounts were closely examined – i.e., five Twitter accounts were picked for each group, considering their number of followers, as well as their amount of interaction[1]. Once the accounts were chosen, the content of each of them was searched through in two-week spans, from January to June (e.g., from January 1st to January 15th). The first tweet that emerged in this search was extracted, provided that it constituted a sentence (e.g., tweets which contained interjections were rejected) and it had not been already collected. In order to achieve a diverse array of instances of discourse in the three target groups, it was decided that, from each account, ten tweets would be gathered, which would amass a total sum of 150 tweets. Based on the division into two-week spans, the six-month period resulted in twelve spans (two per month). One tweet was picked per two-week span, until ten tweets of the same user were gathered. If any of the tweets which appeared in the search between January and May did not meet the aforementioned requirements, then they were discarded, and the search was spread to June, until ten adequate tweets were found.

All the information contained in each tweet was collected and appropriately classified in an Excel database, in the corresponding sheet for its extremist group, following the modified proposal of Erguix and Gallardo-Paúls (2016: 74) included in Filardo-Llamas (2023, in press). The content of the tweet was divided into four categories: its identification (the date of publication, a link to the tweet, and its code within the database), its textual elements (the text of the tweet itself, and the included hashtags), its multimodal elements (images, videos, and emojis) and the number of inter-tweet relations (retweets and comments). For this specific study, the responses to the tweets from other users were disregarded, as it focused on the production of the utterers without any further prompt. All forms of multimodal content were downloaded and saved, and the tweets

[1] For ethical reasons, neither the username nor any other identifying element of these accounts is provided in this section and throughout the work. These have been anonymized following the standard procedures in social media studies.

were screenshot and organized in folders according to their extremist group (TERF, denialism or the far-right), so as to prevent any loss of information. Lastly, each tweet was assigned a particular code, which consisted of a letter identifying its uttering group (T for TERF, D for COVID-19 denialism, and F for the far-right), followed by a number chosen to preserve the anonymity of the account (e.g., the denier "@madeup_user" is randomly assigned the number one and, therefore, the code of their tweets in the database will be headed by "D1"), and closed by a number referring to the position of the tweet within its Excel sheet in the database (e.g., the first tweet of the sheet of COVID-19 denialism was posted by @madeup_user and, consequently, it will be labeled as "D1001").

Once the database was completed, the compilation of the corpus began. The text of the tweets was brought from the database to several txt files which then formed the corpus. To facilitate the later identification of the authorship of the tweets in the corpus-management software, each user was appointed a particular txt file, which was named after the code previously attributed to its user (e.g., the file including all the tweets by @madeup_user will be then nominated "D1"). Fifteen txt files were obtained, which were distributed between three subcorpora (one subcorpus per uttering group) and put together in a general corpus. Once the three subcorpora were assembled and formatted, the corpus was finished and prepared to be analyzed.

To sum up, following the theoretical considerations mentioned above, the data used in the present work was collected and arranged into two different forms – a database, to accurately register the information and to prevent its future loss, and a corpus, to later on analyze and interpret the discourse of the three extremist groups under study.

3.2. Method

The method used in the analysis of the data comprises two opposed, yet complementary, approaches. First, a preliminary quantitative analysis was done, following the principles of CL, which was later completed with a qualitative analysis of some of the strategies frequently explored within CDA.

As it has already been mentioned, this combination of methods has been demonstrated to be useful in previous studies (Baker et al., 2008; Page et al., 2014). Providing some initial filtering steps in the examination of the corpus, CL presents a variety of procedures which "[…] enable the researcher to approach the texts […]

relatively free from any preconceived or existing notions regarding their linguistic or semantic/pragmatic content" and "provide a general "pattern map" of the data, mainly in terms of frequencies […]" (Baker et al., 2008, pp. 277 and 296), from which the qualitative analysis will depart. A similar view is shared by Page et al. (2014, p.87), who explain that "mixed methods […] select subsets of your data for further analysis […] and strengthen the validity and reliability […] of your research." Therefore the first examination of the content of the corpus was rooted in the principles of CL, with the intention of preserving a certain degree of objectivity.

Thus the corpus was first scanned with the software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Its tool "Wordlist" allows the elaboration of a list of the most frequent words in the corpus, which helps to discern patterns on the account of their frequency. This search could be limited by prior factors, such as word class, or number of instances. As the following qualitative analysis intended to focus on the representation of social actors in populist extremist discourse on social media, a list of the most repeated nouns was generated, for social actors are usually associated to nominal groups (van Leeuwen, 2008). Since the corpus is divided into three subcorpora, this process was carried out four times. First, the most frequent nouns of each subcorpus were individually enumerated and collected and, then, the most frequent nouns of the general corpus were highlighted and gathered, in order to compare the particular and the global results. Out of these noun lists, the ten first nouns were picked, as they usually presented several occurrences, which guaranteed the selection of the most common nominal groups. Moreover, when a noun only emerged once or twice, it often stood as a mark of style of the author (i.e., only one Twitter account used such word). Finally, with the "Concordance" tool, all the instances of these nouns, both in the subcorpora and in the corpus, were retrieved in their particular co-text (i.e., in their concordance line) and organized in another Excel file. These two steps served as a guide to begin the qualitative analysis.

The qualitative analysis was based on two different analytic proposals: the sociolinguistic classification of social actors and social actions proposed by van Leeuwen (2008) and the theory of transitivity formulated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). The present work revolves around the characterization of the in-group ("Us") and the out-group ("Them") in populist extremist discourse on Twitter. As commented by van Leeuwen (2008, p. 32), this dichotomy is frequently reflected in the discursive production

of any ideological group, even though the representation of these social actors in a text might not match the perception the reader holds of those group. Likewise, van Leeuwen (2008, p. 33) explains that social actors may be characterized through transitivity, pre-modification (i.e., articles, determiners and adjectives), and post-modification (i.e., prepositional phrases and relative clauses). For reasons of space, only transitivity has been considered in this dissertation.

This second part of the study required a manual and thorough analysis of the extracted data, which was feasible thanks to the small size of the corpus. The need for a correlation between the size of the corpus and the degree of detail of the analysis, as well as the complexity of the collection and the processing of the data, has already been pointed out by other authors like Page et al. (2014, pp. 85-86) who argue that "it is important that the dataset is suitable for the research questions and methods at hand, but also that it is feasible to collect, process and analyze it in the time available for the research project." Therefore, once the concordance lines were gathered in an Excel file, the sentences were broken down into smaller units in separated columns, following the functional linguistic principle of the clause as the essential paradigm in the analysis (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 169). The nominal groups which contained the key words were highlighted within their co-text. The different components of those nominal groups (e.g., determiners, nouns, and modifiers) were analyzed separately in order to determine the particular representative strategy of the social actor, as defined by van Leeuwen (2008) (e.g. personalization, individualization or anonymization, among others) (also in Machin and Mayr, 2013).

In the study of social actors, transitivity also adds another dimension to their characterization (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.33), for this system "[…] construes the world of experience into a manageable set of PROCESS TYPES" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p.170). Therefore, the verbs which appeared within the sentence, which served as co-text, were labelled according to the classification of verbal processes: "material," "mental," "behavioral," "verbal," "relational" and "existential" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p.174) (also in Machin and Mayr, 2013). As Halliday and Matthiessen emphasize, "[e]ach process type provides its own model or schema for construing a particular domain of experience as a figure of a particular kind – […]" and "[c]lauses of different process types thus make distinctive contributions to the construal of experience

in the text" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p.174), hence the relevance of analyzing not only the nominal, but also the verbal groups, in order to comprehend how utterers conceptualize the world. The categorization of the verbal units was followed by the distinction of the role the participants played in relation to the type of verb, for "[t]he nature of the participants will vary according to the type of process […]" (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p.176). Finally, these verbs were scrutinized in order to retrieve the strategies of depiction of social actions established by van Leeuwen (2008). Lastly, the presence of other social actors in the same sentence was considered too, in order to understand how the relationships between actors were construed.

To sum up, the method combines the quantitative procedures of CL, carried out with the software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014), and the qualitative strategies typical of CDA, rooted in van Leeuwen's (2008) classification of social actors and actions and its combination with Matthiessen and Halliday's (2004) transitivity system. This methodological mixture results in a profound and detailed analysis of the characterization of the participants in populist extremist discourse on Twitter.

4. Analysis

In this section a summary of the findings of the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data is provided. Thus, this section is divided into two different subsections: first, the quantitative analysis and, then, the qualitative analysis. The latter, at the same time, is further organized into four parts, reflecting the findings in each subcorpus and in the general corpus.

4.1. Quantitative analysis

The outline of the quantitative data presented in this subsection has been first obtained and organized with the corpus-management software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) and, then, with the manual examination and classification of the concordance lines. The ten most frequent nouns of each subcorpus, as well as those of the general corpus, were first extracted with the *Word List* tool provided by *Sketch Engine*, so as to pinpoint particular areas of quantitative interest from which to start the analysis. The results of such search are reflected in table (1).

General Corpus	TERF Subcorpus	DEN Subcorpus	FAR Subcorpus
Child (25)	**Sex** (21)	***Child*** (13)	**Brexit** (8)
Right (23)	**Woman** (21)	*Lockdown* (8)	*EU* (7)
Woman (22)	***Right*** (17)	***People*** (7)	Time (5)
Sex (21)	*Gender* (16)	Death (7)	**Britain** (5)
People (20)	***Child*** (11)	*Distancing* (6)	*Parliament* (4)
Gender (16)	***People*** (10)	*School* (5)	**UKIP** (4)
Time (10)	*Male* (8)	Way (5)	*Elite* (4)
Lockdown (9)	**Girl** (7)	*Mask* (5)	*Scandal* (3)
Britain (9)	*Identity* (7)	**Freedom** (5)	*Labour* (3)
Government (8)	*Self-id* (6)	*Government* (4)	***Population*** (3)

Table 1: Ten most frequent nouns of each subcorpus and the general corpus.

Table (1) shows which participants are profiled as members of the in-group and the out-group. This configuration will be further explored below, considering the principles and the beliefs of each extremist group. The nouns in bold letters belong to the in-group; the nouns in italics appertain to the out-group. Nouns in both bold and italic letters shift in nature depending on the context. Lastly, the nouns in plain letters do not index any participant, although their concordance lines were also studied as access points to other participants and processes.

In order to distinguish the role of these nouns as participants within their respective clauses, the concordance lines in which they appeared were collected and analyzed in an Excel file. The verbs of the clauses were then classified in a set of process types following Matthiessen and Halliday's theory of transitivity (2004). They propose six different types of processes: "material" (or deeds which occur, are carried out or prompted by the subject of the clause), "mental" (or any process related to the emotions, the perception or the cognitive capacities of the subject), "relational" (the characterization of the subject through qualities they may be or properties they may have) "verbal" (any act which is related to the use of language to communicate), "behavioural" (the outer expression of any mental process) and "existential" (the mere act of existing, usually connected to the pronoun "there" and the verb "be") (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 169-171). The frequency of occurrence of such processes is included in tables (2), (3), (4) and (5).

Tables (2), (3), (4) and (5) also gather the participants which are involved in each process, as defined by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, pp.179-258). In material clauses, there are "actors" (i.e., the participant who carries out the action), "goals" (i.e., the participant directly affected by the action), "recipients" (i.e., the participant which benefits from the action) and "scopes" (i.e., the area of action of the material process). In relational clauses, two participants appear: the "attributed" (i.e., the one who is characterized by the relational clause) and the "attribute" (i.e., that which characterizes the attributed). Verbal clauses present the "sayer" (i.e. the participant who articulates the linguistic content), the "verbiage" (i.e., the words said by the sayer), the "receiver" (the participant who listens to the verbiage) and the "target" (the participant around whom the verbiage revolves). In mental clauses, the "senser" (i.e., the participant who experiences or goes through the mental process) and the "phenomenon" (the feeling, the experience or the cognitive process which is undergone by the senser) emerge. "Behaver" (i.e., the participant who reacts to or externally manifests their emotions and their feelings) and "behaviour" (the external expression of the mental process of the behaver) compose behavioural clauses. Finally, existential clauses only possess one participant, the "existent," or that entity which just exists.

General Corpus	
Type of process	*Participants*
Material (100)	Actor (26)
	Goal (26)
	Recipient (16)
	Scope (13)
Relational (43)	Attributed (17)
	Attribute (26)
Mental (20)	Senser (6)
	Phenomenon (14)
Verbal (11)	Target (4)
	Sayer (3)
	Receiver (1)
	Verbiage (3)
Existential (5)	Existent (5)

Behavioural (2)	Behaver (2)
	Behaviour (1)

Table 2: Frequency of each type of process within the general corpus.

DEN Subcorpus	
Type of process	*Participants*
Material (38)	Actor (9)
	Goal (15)
	Recipient (6)
	Scope (8)
Relational (12)	Attributed (9)
	Attribute (3)
Mental (10)	Senser (3)
	Phenomenon (7)
Verbal (2)	Target (1)
	Receiver (1)
Behavioural (2)	Behaver (2)
	Behaviour (0)
Existential (0)	

Table 3: Frequency of each type of process within the DEN subcorpus

FAR Subcorpus	
Type of process	*Participants*
Material (19)	Actor (7)
	Goal (6)
	Scope (6)
Relational (15)	Attributed (6)
	Attribute (9)
Mental (4)	Senser (3)
	Phenomenon (1)
Behavioural (4)	Behaver (3)

	Behaviour (2)
Verbal (2)	Sayer (2)
Existential (1)	Existent (1)

Table 4: Frequency of each type of process in the FAR subcorpus

TERF Subcorpus	
Type of process	*Participants*
Material (72)	Actor (12)
	Goal (36)
	Recipient (14)
	Scope (10)
Relational (37)	Attributed (18)
	Attribute (18)
Mental (16)	Senser (6)
	Phenomenon (14)
Verbal (10)	Sayer (1)
	Verbiage (4)
	Target (5)
Existential (4)	Existent (4)
Behavioural (1)	Behaver (1)
	Behaviour (1)

Table 5: Frequency of each type of process in the TERF subcorpus

As emphasized in bold letters in tables (2), (3), (4) and (5), the three most frequent types of processes are material, relational and mental processes both in the three subcorpora and the general corpus. A look at the numbers shows that, in some instances, there are more participants than processes. This arises from the fact that some verbs are accompanied by more than one participant, e.g., a behavioural process might involve both a behaver and a behaviour at the same time, as illustrated in, for example, the TERF subcorpus. Since the quantitative analysis has been devised as an introductory guide to

the qualitative analysis, those aspects on which the latter is focused are highlighted in yellow. Within material clauses, the qualitative analysis will revolve around two specific participants: actors and goals, for they constitute the majority of the cases and, unlike other participants, they are found in every subcorpus and in the general corpus. The other processes (i.e., mental and relational clauses) only require two participants, on which the analysis will focus: senser and phenomenon, and attributed and attribute, respectively. Lastly, behavioural processes have been marked in italics, and their participants have been highlighted too. As it may be perceived in the tables, behavioural processes do not usually appear among the most frequent process types. However, their analysis showed the existence of a pattern across the three subcorpora and the general corpus, justifying their inclusion in the qualitative analysis.

4.2. Qualitative analysis

Building up from the quantitative findings, this subsection seeks to explain which linguistic choices and which discursive strategies result in the construal of the social actors and actions and their association to the in-group and the out-group (van Dijk, 2000; van Leeuwen, 2008). The qualitative analysis is thus organized as follows: first, the discursive strategies employed in the different subcorpora will be introduced and described, in order to reveal the peculiarities of each extremist group. Then, the analysis of the general corpus will draw similarities and differences between these three groups and their construal of the in-group and the out-group.

4.2.1. DEN subcorpus

As it has been previously explained, denialism is rooted in the clash between two opposing theories on a particular matter: the scientific consensus, often considered the enemy (or, in discursive terms, the out-group), and the anti-scientific beliefs held by the deniers (Hansson, 2017). However, as Leonel da Silva (2021) points out, COVID-19 denialism arose under very peculiar circumstances. Since March 2020, science and politics have coalesced, for science has arguably underlain most political decisions of the time. Thus the scientific consensus on the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to every sphere of everyday life (Leonel da Silva, 2021). With the majority of the population adhering to COVID-19 measures, the number of members associated to the out-group by deniers has exponentially grown, as they "reject anything incompatible with their fundamental beliefs" (Pascal Diethelm, 2009, p.3). The establishment of rules and

protocols for a "hoax," as deniers would denominate the recent pandemic, certainly attempts against their view.

Table (1) illustrates these shifts in the configuration of the out-group and the in-group by COVID-19 deniers. One encounters several allusions to the measures taken at the time to slow the spread of the virus: "lockdown," "(social) distancing" or "mask," against which some tweets are addressed. These concepts are often personified and treated as another participant, capable of carrying out actions which harm the in-group: e.g., "[t]his lockdown is destroying our lives and our economy" (D4033). Those individuals who comply with or support these new rules also belong to the out-group, for example the "government": "Don't fall for another Government lie." (D1004). In the in-group, as long as they do not follow the COVID-19 measures, one might find the genericized "child" or "people." This lexical choice construes the social actor as a class or group (van Leeuwen, 2008), as illustrated in "[…] we shouldn't be contemplating SD[2] for our children" (D2019). The in-group is also linked to abstract entities, like "freedom," which is represented as a concrete entity which could be held against its will, as seen in: "We demand our freedom be returned now" (D4033).

Different verbal processes are performed by various members of the in-group and the out-group. In material clauses, the in-group appears as both actor and goal. Since the in-group, as an actor, often violates the then-COVID-19 measures, their actions are deactivated, as the verb appears in an embedded clause (van Leeuwen, 2008), and deagentialized (i.e., the action seems not to be "brought about by human agency") (van Leeuwen, 2008 p. 67). These result in a backgrounding and almost silencing of these actions. In example (1), "social distance" is deactivated and deagentialized, since it is not preceded by any agent and it is located in a subordinated clause. Those actions which affect the in-group goal are also backgrounded. Sometimes such processes are nominalized; i.e., the action is reflected as a noun (van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 63-65), turning a dynamic act into a permanent entity which just exists. In (2), the nominal group "the dilution of child protection laws" could be paraphrased as "child protection laws are being diluted" or "someone is diluting child protection laws." Moreover, the nominalization of the verb "dilute" into "dilution" does not only deagentialize the action, but it also

[2] The examples here provided were directly retrieved from Twitter. Thus, they may contain some spelling or orthographic mistakes, as well as unofficial acronyms and slang terms.

presupposes its existence. Likewise, in (3) death is also nominalized, leading to the omission of the actor of such natural phenomenon and to a co-textual reference to an unidentified "them" as member of the out-group.

(1) Listening to Boris Johnson 'accepting' that social distancing may not be possible for young children misses the point entirely: […] (D2019)

(2) Are you worried about being forced to wear a mask, the dilution of child protection laws, being tracked and traced or any other issues? (D3026)

(3) Deaths are merely a tool for them to support lockdown. (D4035)

In relational processes, the attributed in-group is characterized by positive attributes. For example, in (4), the in-group is described as "harmless", as inferred from "do not pose this risk." Lastly, in mental clauses, the in-group is always the senser. In (5), the first person singular "I" shows unwillingness to forgive "him" (in this case, Boris Johnson).

(4) An inspiring headteacher writes: "We know the reason schools can return is because children do not pose this risk to each other […]" (D2014)

(5) "[…] but I for 1 will never forgive him for the way my family were locked up for no reason" (D5043)

The out-group is also found as the actor and as the goal of material processes. However, in this case, its actions are emphasized, especially those which negatively affect the in-group. For this reason, the actions of the out-group are agentialized, for they are often accompanied by an out-group agent on whom to pin the blame. These actions appear in the main clauses and are thus activated, as illustrated in (6) with the actor "a government" and the verb "fail." The out-group goal is also introduced by activated and (sometimes) agentialized actions, which foreground the disappearance or erasure of the out-group with verbs like "waive," as seen in (7); "relax" (D4032) and "drop" (D2017).

(6) Has a government ever failed its nation's children more gravely? (D2019)

(7) I hear that there is a PARTY !! tomorrow at 8pm on Westminster Bridge ,apparently the police waive the social distancing regs anyone invited ?? (D5044)

In relational clauses, the attributed out-group is connected to negative characteristics, related to COVID-19 measures or deaths, which are seen as an instrument

for those who believe in the pandemic to force the in-group to stay home ("a tool (for them to support lockdown)") (D4035); or as an attack to the in-group, ("a further infringement on our human rights") (D3029). Finally, the out-group emerges as the behaver in behavioural clauses, e.g., in (8), "lockdown," the behaver, "tanks" the economy (i.e., brings down the economy). As a consequence, it seems as if the out-group is merely behaving without any reason, as the reader ignores the mental process underlying the following behavioural process.

(8) When the economy inevitably tanks due to lockdown, […] (D4032)

4.2.2. FAR subcorpus

According to Wodak (2015), far right-wing populist discourse divides the nation into two groups: the people and the other, which are equivalent to the in-group and the out-group, respectively. Within the "others," one may find the elites, whose schemes control the world, and different enemies, who threaten the security and the integrity of the "people" (Wodak, 2015).

Table (1) above already hints at the previous outline of the far-right imagery. Among the out-group members there are the collectivized "elite(s)" and the nominated "Labour (Party)" (i.e., the social actor is referred to with a proper noun) (van Leeuwen, 2008). "Scandal" also emerges as a participant, which was individualized and personalized; i.e., an emotional reaction becomes a burdensome entity related to the out-group. For example, as a member of a rivalling political party, Priti Patel, British Home Secretary, belongs to the out-group which is linked to "this national scandal": "Will Priti Patel do something about this national scandal?" (F3030). Hence particular individuals are also profiled as out-group members. The "EU" represents another instance of a personalized and nominated out-group member. A group of nations and institutions becomes a force capable of harming "Britain," the nominated in-group member. All instances of "parliament" found in the data were tied to the Strasbourg European Parliament through a process of spatialization (van Leeuwen, 2008). This association of the social actor to a place with which it is connected (van Leeuwen, 2008) is another mechanism for representing the EU. In the in-group, one may find "Brexit." Brexit first arose as an idea or a goal. However, in the data it has discursively evolved into another participant (or social actor) through nomination and personalization. This can be seen in the use of "Brexit" as a goal of material processes (9). Finally, UKIP is another example

of a personalized and nominated in-group participant, as most tweets were extracted from accounts of UKIP members, as illustrated in (12) below.

(9) As a result, we […] finally achieved Brexit on January 31st (F2017)

The in-group and the out-group are differently characterized. In material clauses, the in-group appear both as actor and goal. The positive actions of the in-group actor are highlighted, for their agents are always identified. Found in the main clause, the verbs are often activated too. Furthermore, the described actions are rarely generalized (i.e., the actions are depicted with certain degree of detail) (van Leeuwen, 2008). For example, (10) gathers different aspects of the material process "vote," carried out by the actor "Britain," including its purpose ("to leave the European Union") or its date ("June 23rd" and "four years.") In-group goals are frequently linked to first-person in-group actors, who achieve such goals, e.g., in (9), the actor "we" is linked to the goal "Brexit" through the material process "achieve." In relational clauses, the positive traits of the attributed in-group are emphasized, as seen in (11), where the strength of Britain is highlighted. Lastly, in mental clauses, the in-group often emerges as the senser, e.g., in (12), the in-group senser "UKIP" undergoes the cognitive mental process of "believe."

(10) Happy June 23rd! Today marks four years since Britain voted to leave the European Union. (F2019)

(11) Britain is too big to bully. (F3022)

(12) UKIP believes that net migration should be reduced to below 10,000 per year. (F1003)

The out-group is also found as an actor and as a goal of material clauses. If the positive actions of the in-group are foregrounded, so are the negative actions of the out-group, which always occupy the agent position. Out-group goals and, rarely, recipients are linked to out-group actors, albeit sometimes omitted. In (13), it is not mentioned who pays the out-group recipient "Emily Maitlis," although one may sense such actor is associated to the out-group goal "the elite's political agenda."

(13) BBC's Emily Maitlis is paid £230,000 to feed the British public the elite's political agenda. (F1010)

In relational clauses, the attributed out-group is frequently connected to negative attributes, like "a disaster waiting to happen" (F5045) or "bad" (F2013). In mental clauses, the out-group appears as the phenomenon which often troubles the senser. For

example, in (14), the out-group "EU" is part of the phenomenon "EU anxiety" which bothers "Barnier," a rare out-group senser. Lastly, in behavioural clauses, the out-group stands as the behaver, whose behaviour evokes certain negative connotations. As an instance, "EU," the behaver of (15), threatens "us," the targeted in-group of the behavioural clause.

(14) Barnier bluster belies deep EU anxiety. (F4038)

(15) No problem ....in last couple weeks, EU threatened to sue us, fine us, & still wants to treat us like slaves..... (F4040)

4.2.3. TERF subcorpus

The apparently irreconcilable dichotomy between "sex" and "gender" is embedded at the core of TERF discourse (Pearce et al., 2020). In the TERF imagery, "sex" stands as a material and permanent fact; "gender," as a social and modifiable concept. This clear-cut sex binary also determines the classification of different members of society. Since TERF is rooted in the belief of the fixed, dual state of sex, TERF labels trans men as "female," trans women as "male," and non-binary people as "delusional" or confused individuals on the basis of their assumed anatomy (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 679). Thus these previously enumerated subjects appertain to the out-group, for they attempt against the principles of TERF ideology. From a TERF perspective, trans women and girls, as well as non-binary people, threaten the existence of cisgender women and girls, for they wish to invade "women-only spaces" (also known as "safe spaces") through gender self-determination (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 680). Furthermore, as "males," TERF views trans women and non-binary people as physically stronger than cisgender women and girls, and as sexual predators (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 680). These assumptions are based on traditional stereotypes of cisgender men, who, as an associative result, are also considered a member of the out-group and a danger to cisgender women.

Table (1) above gathers the explained division between the in-group and the out-group. In the in-group one encounters participants like "woman" and "girl" as instances of genericized in-group members. Similar to the situation found in the DEN subcorpus, "child" and "people" prove to be rather unstable genericized participants, since they belong to the in-group as long as the in-group agrees with their actions. "Sex," the ideological pillar of the in-group, becomes a personified and individualized participant. Undergoing analogous characterization strategies, "gender" is also turned into an out-

group participant, much like "identity" or "self-id" (i.e., self-identification). Linked to the in-group or the out-group, the abstract notion of "rights" stands as another participant which is affected by the actions of the actors. Lastly, the biologically identified "male" rises as an out-group member, the opposite of "woman" or "girl."

The in-group is characterized by its lack of agency in material clauses, for it rarely appears as an actor and it is often found as a goal. The material processes which affect the in-group goal are deactivated (or backgrounded) and, in the case of nominalized actions, also deagentialized. In (16), the nominalization "sex reassignment" mystifies such process to the point in which it is no longer a dynamic action, but an entity which attempts against the TERF principle of biological essentialism (Pearce et al., 2020). This is often reinforced by the presence of clearly identifiable members of the out-group, as it can be seen in the reference to the LGBT group RFSL in (16).

(16) In 2018, the Swedish government, under pressure from LGBT group RFSL, proposed a new law to reduce the minimum age for sex reassignment from 18 to 15 (T2014)

In relational clauses, the in-group is rarely the attributed participant, since it appears as a part of the attribute that characterizes the out-group. Here emerges a particular pattern. With positive connotations, "women," as an attribute, is linked to the attributed participant with the verb "to be." With negative connotations, "women," as an attribute, is tied to the attributed participant with relational verbs that imply personal perception or change, such as "qualify," "present" or "identify," as illustrated in (17), where the author of the tweet explicitly states their negative reaction. Lastly, in mental clauses, the in-group is retrieved as the senser and the phenomenon. "Sex," the personalized, abstract participant of the in-group, often raises as a phenomenon which is "observed," "respected" or "honoured" by an absent senser in deagentialized actions, as seen in (18).

(17) The phrase "who should qualify as a woman" makes us wince. (T1008)

(18) "The LGB Alliance, which states that 'biological sex is observed at birth and not assigned', promised to 'keep speaking the truth'.(T1003)

The out-group stands as the actor of most specific, agentialized actions in material clauses, which foreground the out-group negative aspects and highlight the culprit of those attacks against the in-group. In (19), "MALE-BORN trans people," the out-group,

play "FEMALE rugby" (i.e., a sport category associated to the in-group). This is considered a problem by the author of the tweet, who believes cisgender women are at disadvantage. On the contrary, the out-group goal is affected by deagentialized and (sometimes) nominalized actions. In (20), "forcing a gender identity" pushes aside any information related to the actor who is forcing such out-group "gender identity" on people.

(19) The issue is about MALE-BORN trans people playing FEMALE rugby despite evidence they retain male advantage. (T4035)

(20) Forcing a gender identity on those who don't have one is exactly like forcing religion on atheists. (T1002)

In relational clauses, the attributed out-group is compared to the in-group, i.e., the out-group is the negative opposite of the in-group, as exemplified in (21). In mental clauses, much like "sex" is an in-group phenomenon, "gender" is also a "confusing" out-group phenomenon, as seen in the nominalization "gender confused children" in (22), which sets this state as an unmovable fact. Moreover, in behavioural clauses, "gender" is depicted as a deactivated and nominalized behaviour, to which the out-group behaver has to "conform," matching the TERF conception of gender as a volatile social role. In (23), the nominal group "non gender conforming males" could be unraveled as "males who do not conform to gender," in which "males" represents the behaver; "conform," the behavioural process, and "gender," the behaviour.

(21) Male. People. Are. Not. Actually. Women (T3022)

(22) It confirms that too many within the trans lobby are perfectly willing to use vulnerable gender confused children as political pawns. (T5043)

(23) The ACLU should be campaigning to make sure male sports are inclusive of non gender conforming males (T3023)

4.2.4. General corpus

The general corpus encompasses the three previously analyzed subcorpora and allows for their comparison. Such combination of discourses results in a miscellany of in-groups and out-groups, which may be distinguished by applying the theoretical bases developed in the preceding subsections. Indeed, some nouns in the first table present a higher frequency in the general corpus than in its subcorpora (e.g., "right" in the general corpus and the TERF subcorpus), for they summed some marginal instances from the two

other subcorpora. All in all, table (1) contains clear TERF in-group members, like "sex" or "woman," as well as TERF out-group members, like "gender." "Lockdown," again, emerges as a mostly denialist out-group member. Much like in the subcorpora, "child(ren)" and "people" shift groups depending on the in-group approval of their actions. The noun "rights," which could appertain to the in-group or to the out-group, based on co-text, presents a similar nature. Lastly, the opposition between "Britain," the nominated in-group, and the "government," the out-group, is preserved, although with more cases than in the FAR subcorpus hence the need to dedicate a separate subsection to the general corpus.

In the general corpus, the fewer instances of in-group actors proceed from the FAR subcorpus. In material clauses, the in-group is frequently retrieved as a goal, often in the form of "children" or "rights" in the DEN and TERF subcorpora. These in-group goals are affected by deagentialized, negative actions which are occasionally nominalized, as seen in the prior examples and in (24), where "the equal rights of girls," the in-group participant, are being "discounted and disregarded," even though the actor is not explicitly stated. In relational clauses, the three subcorpora share "right" as an attribute which is possessed by the attributed participant, often belonging to the in-group. In (25), the distinctive mark of the in-group, the first-person plural pronoun "we," is attributed by the nominal group "a right to use all legal tender." Lastly, in mental clauses, the three subcorpora coincide in the presence of in-group members as cognitive sensers.

(24) The equal rights of girls are simply discounted and disregarded in this guidance. (T2018)

(25) We say no to cashless and believe we have a right to use all legal tender (D3030)

On the other hand, the out-group appears as an actor in material clauses in the three subcorpora. Albeit deactivated, their actions are always agentialized, so as to foreground the negative aspects of the out-group. Out-group goals, on the contrary, are often preceded by deagentialized, yet activated, actions, both in DEN and TERF subcorpora. Such material processes involve the pause or the disappearance of the out-group goal, e.g., in (26), the goal sex self-identification – the law against which TERF groups have fought for years – is "scrapped" by an omitted actor.

(26) Sex Self-ID has been scrapped (T4040)

In relational clauses, the three subcorpora include a great number of instances in which the attributed out-group is negatively characterized, whether with adjectives or with an emphasis on those qualities the out-group lacks and the in-group (apparently) possesses. Lastly, it is worth mentioning how, in the three subcorpora, the out-group sometimes becomes the phenomenon the in-group undergoes as senser in mental clauses. For example, in (27), the in-group senser "a woman" has a right to know (mental process) "who's male" (the out-group phenomenon).

(27) […] it means you don't support a woman's right to know who's male. (T4039)

In brief, in spite of the different members of the in-group and the out-group of each subcorpus, and other peculiarities in the characterization of social actors and actions, the three subcorpora share some common strategies in the construal of these identities in opposition. Although the results of the general corpus hint at these similarities (such as the pervasive opposition of the in-group senser and the out-group phenomenon in mental processes), the detailed study of the three subcorpora reveals further analogous strategies, such as the tendency to genericize both in-group and out-group; the obscured (deagentialized and, sometimes, nominalized) actions of the out-group, as long as they can be considered positive or neutral; and the frequent absence or suppression of the in-group as an actor in material clauses with a negative effect.

5. Discussion

This section will provide an overview of the previously analyzed results and an interpretation of the consequences of such discursive strategies, so as to approach the final conclusions of the present study.

First, as illustrated in the preceding section, the three extremist groups share certain discursive features in the characterization of the in-group and the out-group. These conform to the ideological square of van Dijk (2000): the emphasis on the negative aspects of the out-group and the positive aspects of the in-group, and the de-emphasis on the positive aspects of the out-group and the negative aspects of the in-group. This polarizing trend clearly emerges in relational clauses, where the out-group is linked to adverse traits, whereas the in-group is often associated to favorable traits. In fact, as seen in the TERF subcorpus, the out-group is frequently described in comparison to the in-

group, i.e., the out-group lacks the properties or qualities of the in-group. As a result, while one might distinguish the members of the in-group, it is practically impossible to pinpoint the members of the out-group, which exponentially multiply.

Secondly, this portrayal of the in-group and the out-group is not limited to the nominal groups within the clause, but also to the verbal processes. Material clauses, which were the most frequently employed process type by the three extremist groups, best exemplify this phenomenon. Whenever the out-group, as an actor, carries out an action which the in-group considers negative, the verb is often agentialized and activated (i.e., foregrounded in the main clause). The seemingly positive actions of the in-group actor undergo the same foregrounding process, as the FAR subcorpus demonstrates. However, the in-group actor proves not to be a common occurrence, since, leaving aside some discursive demonstrations of strength, the in-group appears as the goal which is bothered or attacked by the actions of the out-group actor. Interestingly, when the in-group goal suffers an antagonizing action, the verb is deagentialized or nominalized. Consequently, the action turns into an entity whose existence is presupposed. Actions begin and end; entities exist, sometimes for a long period of time. Thus a new vague threat against the in-group emerges, for both deagentialized and nominalized actions suppress information, such as the actor (or threatening force). On the contrary, the menaces against the out-group goal may be agentialized or deagentialized. Either way, they can be retrieved from the three subcorpora and the general corpus.

Lastly, the dichotomy between the "good" in-group and the "bad" out-group is sustained by the dehumanization of the out-group through its depiction in mental and behavioural clauses. In the three subcorpora and the corpus, the out-group rarely appears in mental clauses, where it mostly functions as the phenomenon that triggers or disturbs the cognitive or emotional process of the in-group. As a result, the possible feelings or thoughts of the out-group are ignored by the reader, who is only aware of the reaction of the out-group as the behaver, apparently acting without any reason. Consequently, any retaliation of the in-group might be justified by a previous thinking or feeling process, of which the apparently irrational out-group is deprived.

To sum up, adhering to the ideological square of van Dijk (2000) and the characteristics of extremism defined by Bötticher (2017), the three groups highlight the positive aspects of the in-group and the negative aspects of the out-group, for which the

latter must be eradicated. In order to do so, the far-right, denialism and TERF turn towards similar discursive strategies to foreground and background information that fit their polarizing narrative.

6. Conclusions

This final section will answer to the questions first presented in the introduction, so as to summarize the main ideas of this dissertation. Possible future lines of research around the topic of populist extremism on social media will also be discussed.

Needless to say, different strategies are used in the characterization of the in-group and the out-group. The in-group is the active actor in positive material clauses but the erased actor, through deagentialized or deactivated actions, in negative clauses, as seen among COVID-19 denialist and far-right discourses. The in-group refuses to acknowledge their involvement in actions which may negatively affect their reputation. In fact, this de-emphasis of negative processes is taken one step further in TERF discourse, where the in-group is rarely the actor of material actions, but the goal who endures their consequences. Indeed, one may not be blamed for any mistake if they never carry out any action. Furthermore, the inner world of the in-group (i.e., thoughts, beliefs or feelings) is frequently exposed to the reader through mental clauses, in which the in-group stands as the senser. The three extremist groups coincide in this emotional and sensitive depiction of the in-group, for, unlike the out-group, the in-group members often offer their fears, their ideas or their hopes to justify their other actions.

On the contrary, the often-genericized out-group appears as the actor and the goal of material clauses in which the rather specific action presents a clearly identified agent. TERF, COVID-19 denialist and far-right discourses all pin the blame on a concrete member of the out-group without leaving any doubt. The out-group is also found as the attributed participant in relative clauses, in which, more often than not, the out-group is only characterized in terms of its lack of in-group qualities. If one asked "what is the out-group?" to any of the three extremist groups, they will receive one all-encompassing response: "the out-group is that which the in-group is not." This ambiguous, general response fits the scenario which has been previously explained, where the list of the out-group members of the three extremist groups only seems to grow. Lastly, in the rare instances of behavioural clauses, the out-group is usually the behaver, who acts upon feelings and thoughts unknown to the reader.

As it may be perceived from the previous sections, the analysis of the discursive strategies of in-group and out-group characterization was organized according to the different processes proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), who highlight the influence verbs hold in the construal of groups. For example, few strategies would be more effective at presenting the out-group as an active threat than making out-group members the actors of agentialized material actions, which directly affect in-group goals. In Twitter, where there is a strict character limit, every word is carefully chosen to maximize the effect of the message, and verbs, as a lexical category, gain great relevance. Thus, it should not be mistaken for a coincidence that, in the dichotomy between in-group and out-group, the former has come to be associated to mental processes and the latter, to behavioural processes, or that particular roles as participants of different clauses seem to be linked to either the in-group (e.g., the goal in material clauses and the attribute in relational clauses) or the out-group (e.g., the actor in material clauses and the attributed in relational clauses). Each verb only reinforces the division between in-group and out-group by associating them to different kinds of actions.

Lastly, although the present study has answered its three research questions, it opens the door to many others. The two processes which were discarded for this study (i.e., verbal and existential processes) are certainly worth looking into, to check whether they adhere to the aforementioned conclusions or not. On the other hand, the rising of populist extremism is not limited to Twitter, as one may encounter it in any other social media platform. Different social media platforms require different discursive and communicative strategies, whose comparison to the results of this research would not only shed some light on other dimensions of TERF, COVID-19 denialism and the far-right, but also on the nature and the functioning of social media discourse. The examination of the in-group and out-group construal of other extremist groups on Twitter would be as interesting as the study of extremism on other social media platforms, so as to better comprehend the essence of this phenomenon. In brief, the considerable number of future lines of research goes beyond Twitter or the three selected extremist groups.

To sum up, in spite of some differences, TERF, COVID-19 denialist and far-right discourses share several strategies in the characterization of the in-group and the out-group. These similarities are anchored not only in the nominal groups, but also in the verbal processes, leaving the possibility of new lines of research for the future.

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