

Comments as Part of the Dissemination of Disinformation Discourse

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Abstract

The virality of conspiracy content depends not only on the activity and communicative skill of the author but also on the responsiveness of the audience. Recipients may react to conspiracy narratives critically, yet also with strong conviction about their truthfulness and a desire to share their stance further. This paper focuses on the position of the recipient and their attitude toward shared conspiracy content, particularly within the realm of comments posted under such content. It examines the character, linguistic form, and communicative functions of these comments. Based on the identification of linguistic action frameworks in the sense of speech act theory, the study distinguishes various recipient roles in the dissemination of conspiracy content – from passive recipients without emotional involvement, through active recipients and sharers of personal opinions, to agitators encouraging others to take action. The empirical analysis draws on a corpus of comments responding to conspiracy-related content in German and Slovak. It aims to identify the types of linguistic actions (*Handlungsräume*) that these comments represent and to explore the linguistic strategies employed in their formulation (neutral and expressive means across different language levels). The findings may contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of recipients in spreading conspiracy content and to revealing the motives that shape this process.

Keywords: conspiracy content, disinformation content, social media, comments, speech act theory

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Introduction

The digital age, with its almost limitless access to a wide variety of content and the open space it provides for self-expression, has brought many benefits but also risks related to the issues of truthfulness, appropriateness, and the safety of available content in a broader context. The activity of the individual—the content author—has, in many cases, become more dynamic as a result of perceived anonymity in the online world and a certain lack of consideration regarding the potential impact of shared content. Nonetheless, in the context of online communication, verbal and visual means are equally significant as they are in face-to-face communication. Indeed, in certain cases, the consequences can be far more serious.

The present study focuses on one type of such content, specifically conspiracy content shared on digital platforms or social media. The primary focus of this study is not on the verbalisation and/or visualisation of the content itself, but rather on the reactions to it in the form of comments. Nevertheless, comments are reactions which, by their very nature, require a stimulus. It is therefore not possible to adequately comprehend a comment in isolation; it is inextricably linked to its initial impulse.

Comments are an extremely interesting object of study, given their potential to significantly influence the virality of conspiracy content, particularly when they are positive in nature. This phenomenon can contribute to the development of a broader base of sympathisers. Conversely, these interactions can also engender adverse tension or even aggression in the digital sphere. Furthermore, these interactions are characterised by the transmission of information regarding specific personality traits, psychological dispositions, and value and political orientations, which the author, often unconsciously, imbues into every interaction. However, in relation to the specified aspects of the study, it is relevant to acknowledge that this is a distinct communicative format which, through verbal and visual means, delineates its own scope of action (German: Handlungsraum). It is precisely within this scope that the author's specific functional strategy is realised. The focus of this study is therefore the functional and formal aspects of the comments, whilst concentrating on the way in which primarily verbal means shape the resulting communicative act.

Theoretically, the basis of our understanding is the concept of the communicative act as a speech act, in which the relationship between language and action plays a central role. This understanding is reflected in the utilisation of linguistic units or signs in close connection with a determining situational context, as a result of which they enter into various syntagmatic relationships with other linguistic units and form more complex structures. The determining situational context encompasses, on the one hand, the relevant segment of extra-linguistic reality, and on the other hand, the author's position together with their intentions embedded in the structuring of the resulting communicative product. In accordance with Bühler's Organon model (1934), these intentions can be interpreted through the three basic semantic functions (Darstellungs-, Ausdrucks- and Appellfunktion; Bühler, 1976, pp. 94–117). Linguistic signs or symbols, therefore, do not appear in isolation, nor do they exist in a polysemous dimension on their own, but, in Searle's words (2010, p. 175), they are part of the final product, the production of which aims to realise a speech act, necessarily integrating the author's intentions. These are reflected in the verbal and/or visual representation of the final product. From the perspective of speech act theory, it is therefore important in the context of the issue under consideration to examine two components: propositional content (Searle, 1969) or the locutionary act (Austin, 1962) and illocution or the illocutionary act (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

Whereas the locutionary act (referred to as propositional content in Searle, 1969) represents “the production of a meaningful linguistic expression”, the illocutionary act determines the nature and force of the speaker's intention (Huang, 2007, p. 102). Searle (1975) categorises these into five basic classes of illocutionary acts: representatives or assertives, commissives, directives, declaratives, and expressives (Krämer, 2001, pp. 66–67; Meibauer, 2001, pp. 94–96; Searle, 1975, pp. 350–351). According to them, representatives (assertives) are closely linked to the truth of a proposition that the author believes or is convinced of. Commissives represent an act of communication to an intended future action. Directives are oriented towards the addressee in the sense of a commitment to carry out certain actions in response to a call, request, or demand. Declaratives are linked to specific institutions, and their utterance brings about a change in reality. Expressives are closely linked to the speaker's current psychological experience, which they share when uttering the statement. Some speech acts can be directly linked to the linguistic functions in Bühler's *Organon* model (1934) (see above): representatives (assertives)/*Darstellungsfunktion*, expressives/*Ausdrucksfunktion*, directives/*Appellfunktion*. Finally, it is important to note that commissive acts can also function as indirect directives, corresponding to the appellative function.

In addition to the aforementioned classification of direct speech acts, it is also worth mentioning indirect speech acts, particularly when assessing the nature of the empirical basis. By an indirect speech act, it is meant an act in which, in relation to the contextual/situational framework, the illocutionary intention represented by the linguistic form of the utterance is neutralised for the purpose of realising another illocutionary intention (Krämer, 2001, pp. 69–70; Meibauer, 2001, pp. 108–109). In the context of comments as reactive acts, it is necessary to consider their close connection to the original contribution or previous discussion, as this creates their meaning.

The following analysis is based on the key elements mentioned above: the functional understanding of language according to Bühler (1934) and the pragmatic nature of communication in the context of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975). By examining the functional and formal aspects of the comment(s), we consider the role of the addressee (from the perspective of the perception of certain conspiratorial content) and, simultaneously, the author (from the perspective of the production of the communicative product – comment) in the dissemination of conspiratorial content. We believe that comments play an important role in this regard, and that their nature is also significant. The nature of a specific comment can significantly contribute to the establishment of conspiratorial content.

Comments as a Tool of Conspiracy Discourse: An Empirical Analysis

The analytical part of the study focuses on examining a selected set of German and Slovak comments about the following aspects:

- The verbal and/or visual elements of the content shared in the comment(s), including the expressiveness and the positive and negative connotation of the linguistic units; and the role of visual elements such as emojis, graphically highlighted punctuation, etc. The components in question are those that are located within the area of locution.
- The fulfilment of the communicative function is achieved through the analysis of comments concerning their communicative intent, which falls within the domain of illocution.

Although we can grasp the verbal aspect in isolation and categorise it descriptively based on the affiliation of linguistic units to stylistic layers of vocabulary, their use in a specific

communicative context is crucial. The analysis, therefore, proceeds in parallel with both aspects. In order to illustrate the key findings, the focus will be on two types of examples: firstly, those that are exemplary and secondly, those that may appear insignificant at first glance, yet carry considerably more weight.

The German-language comments originate from the social network Facebook and relate to posts shared within the publicly accessible Facebook group *Zeit für Aufarbeitung* (n.d.). This Facebook group disseminates content that is visible to everyone, and anyone can comment on it. The group's administrator is Helmut Egel, who is responsible for most of the posts. The total number of (German) comments analysed is 649, with a proportion consisting of replies to previously shared comments. The comments also include those by the administrator, which are usually posted first and serve to supplement the shared posts. The Slovak empirical data set consists of 243 comments, some of which are direct replies to existing comments. In consideration of the disparate scope of the German and Slovak empirical data sets, it is imperative to emphasise that the objective of the study is not a statistical comparison of quantitative parameters, but rather an examination of the qualitative aspect of the comments as acts of reaction within two distinct linguistic and cultural environments. The distinction between the two lies not only in the quantity of the data but also in the stimulus. In the Slovak case, there are comments on a single source post in the form of a video recording. The video originates from the YouTube channel BS - B Spiritual (n.d.), and, akin to the German material, is publicly accessible to a considerable user base. It is important to note that all analysed comments have been anonymised, in accordance with ethical principles in the digital space and because they are not relevant for linguistic analysis. The texts are presented in their original form, including any grammatical, stylistic, or punctuation errors. These errors are not viewed in a negative light, as they are considered to be an inherent part of the communication environment under investigation.

German Conspiracy Discourse

The German empirical corpus, consisting of over 600 comments, appears to be relatively homogeneous in terms of opinion. A thorough examination of the entire sample revealed no comment that expressed a counter-position to the original post or to other comments. This fact, which is important for the analysis, allows conclusions to be drawn about the nature of the communicative acts carried out through the comments. The comments thus establish a communicative environment in which speech acts do not serve to exchange counter-opinions or explicitly construct opposing viewpoints. The fulfilment of their function is evident in the sharing of attitudes and the discussion of the topics raised, which, however, is primarily directed towards the cooperative affirmation of group identity. This affirmation of identity manifests in various forms; through our analysis, we have identified the following dominant types.

Assertives are a category of verbs that typically take the form of the German verb *behaupten* (to assert). The use of assertives reflects the speaker's belief in the truth of the presented statement. This conviction, or belief, can be expressed in a variety of ways, as is evident in the formal aspects of several comments. The verb *behaupten* (to assert) and other verbs with a similar function (*feststellen*/ to state, *konstatieren*/ to state, *andeuten*/ to imply, etc.) appear only in a few of the comments, as assertives are predominantly realised directly. In relation to this, however, it is also important to emphasise another key finding: conspiracy discourse is not about ordinary factual statements of reality (in the sense of scientifically or empirically verified claims), but about the affirmation of shared content, and thus a shared reality. This

phenomenon is directly associated with the presence of an expressive charge of varying intensity, which can occasionally manifest as particularly dominant. Alternatively, it may be linked to the formulation of calls to action, typically directed towards combating an “enemy”. While comments may formally exhibit the characteristics of assertions, they frequently function secondarily as expressions or directives. The following figures illustrate the diversity of assertives in conspiracy discourse. These include a Facebook post and a selection of comments, along with a translation.

Figure 1

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Comments



Comments

[Redacted]

Einfach toll, ich vergönne ihm den Titel so 🍷🍷🍷 einer der wenigen Sportler der diesem Wahnsinn standgehalten hat. [C1]

(That's just great, I'm happy for him to win the title 🍷🍷🍷 He's one of the few athletes who has weathered this madness)

[Redacted]

Der Richtige hat gewonnen ich wünsche ihm noch viele Titel [C2]
(The right man has won; I wish him many more titles)

Note. From Post on Facebook (Anonymný účastník, 2023)

The initial figure comprises two comments and illustrates an assertive statement that is characterised by a relatively low degree of expressiveness. In both cases, the comments corroborate the content disseminated in the post (see Fig. 1) without the deliberate utilisation of negative linguistic elements. Despite the incorporation of the noun *dieser Wahnsinn* in the initial comment [C1], which already possesses an inherent negative connotation at the lexical level, it does not accurately reflect the author's current emotional state. In this context, the term functions as a collective designation for the pandemic and the associated measures in their entirety. In comments [C1] and [C2], a glorifying style of affirming a shared reality is observable, in which an individual's sporting victory is transformed into a moral victory for the group (and like-minded individuals). It is interesting to observe how, based on his stance on vaccination, the athlete becomes a symbol of exceptionality and righteousness, thereby implicitly integrating them into the group of pandemic opponents. In comment [C1], the verbal component is supplemented by a visual symbol – an emoji of approval. This is a visual means of explicitly expressing approval, which corresponds to a positive evaluation of the subject.

Figure 2

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Comments

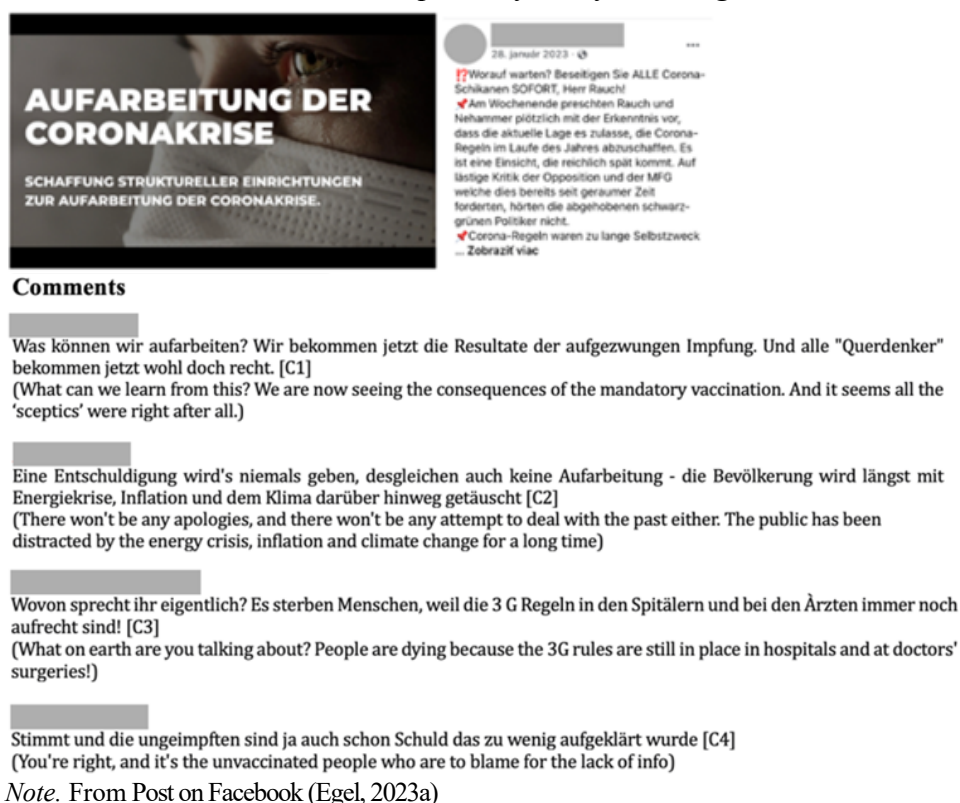


Figure 2 consists of a set of four comments, each representing an assertion in a different variation. Comments [C1] and [C3] both begin with a rhetorical question, a feature that is relatively common in conspiracy discourse. In both cases, the subsequent statements provide moral confirmation of the implicit answer by discussing the consequences of pandemic measures. The consequences are not specified in detail in the first comment [C1], but the opinion is anchored through the participial attribute *aufgezwungen* (in the phrase *die Resultate der aufgezwungenen Impfung*). The verb *aufzwingen* (to force/to impose), the source of this attribute, has a causative meaning and includes the idea of coercion or violence. It reflects an action in which something is forced upon someone against their will. The attribute *aufgezwungen* functions here as a referential carrier of the negative perception of vaccination and as a confirmation of the predictions of “dissidents” (“*Querdenker*”). In comment [C3], the consequences are explicitly named as a process unfolding over time: *Es sterben Menschen, [...]*. The second comment [C2] is relatively restrained in terms of the verbal means employed. However, it is the pragmatic potential of this term that is of particular interest. This potential is concentrated in the verb *hinwegtäuschen* (to mislead), resulting in topics such as the energy crisis, inflation, or climate being imbued with a false connotation or interpreted as conspiracies. In terms of illocutionary intent, the final remark is the most noteworthy. Although it is formally an assertive verb, the verb *stimmt* (which explicitly agrees) takes on a strongly ironic tone in the given context. Rather than presenting the guilt of the unvaccinated as a fact, it deliberately mocks the official narrative. The function's purpose is not to confirm the shared content, but to mock it. The formal assertive is functionally transformed into an expressive one.

Figure 3

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Comments



Comments

Diese Konformität ist leider auch auf Seiten der Justiz zu erkennen. Das bedeutet nur, dass offensichtlich Mainstream-Medien, wie auch gewisse Kreise der Justiz, nichts als willfährige Erfüllungsgehilfen eines antidemokratischen bürgerfeindlichen diktatorischen politischen Systems sind. [C1]

(Unfortunately, this conformity is also evident within the judiciary. This just means that the mainstream media, and some parts of the legal system, are basically working together to keep things going in a way that's not very democratic or friendly towards citizens.)

Da die Mainstreammedien alle gleichgeschaltet und regierungskonform sind, ist es wohl kein Wunder, daß von denen, das niemand fordert. [C2]

(The mainstream media are all in lockstep and toe the government line, so it's hardly surprising that nobody demands anything of them.)

Die Hand, die einen füttert, beißt man nicht 🙅🏻 Eventuell deswegen?! [C3]

(You shouldn't bite the hand that feeds you. 🙅🏻 Maybe that's why!)

Bei der ehrenwerten Gesellschaft tritt auch keiner zurück, Vorbild ?? [C4]

(In that community, no one ever steps down either – is he a role model??)

Wir werden von Idioten regiert 🤪🤪
Schamloser denn je!
Die hängen alle am selben Trog und decken sich selber!!!

Da kann der Bürger nur ratlos und kopfschüttelnd zusehen 🔥
Der Staat und seine Institutionen ist zum Spielball und Selbstbedienungsladen der Politiker und ihrer Erfüllungsgehilfen geworden 🤪🤪🤪 [C5]

(We are being ruled by idiots 🤪🤪

More shameless than ever!

They're all feeding from the same trough and looking out for themselves!!!

All the public can do is watch, helpless and shaking their heads 🔥

The state and its institutions have become a plaything and a self-service shop for politicians and their henchmen 🤪🤪

🤪)

Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023b)

In relation to the third figure, five comments were selected to illustrate the aspects not previously described and to reveal further possibilities for the use of assertives. The variability observed is closely associated with the selection of linguistic means employed in both their primary and metaphorical meanings, with all the analysed comments tending towards the verbalisation of an identical negative attitude towards the mainstream media, the government, or state institutions. The common denominator in these cases is an attempt at the discursive delegitimisation of the system.

The initial comment [C1] is essential in relation to the post and the subsequent discussion. It explicitly references the situation described in the post, developing it within a broader conspiracy context. The concept of *Konformität* (adaptability, conformity) allows any social entity to be integrated into the narrative of “systemic elites”. The comment in question refers to the judiciary, which, in its role as the so-called *willfährige Erfüllungsgehilfen eines antidemokratischen bürgerfeindlichen diktatorischen politischen Systems*, loses its character

as an independent institution and becomes part of the “systemic plan”. This designation is a lexical accumulation of negatively connoted units, which multiplies the negative pragmatic charge and makes it seem more urgent. The concept of conformity is also used in comment [C2], specifically as part of the compound *regierungskonform*. While this compound carries an explicit ideological connotation, the participle *gleichgeschaltet* also plays an important role in its predicative function. The lexicographical description of the verb *gleichschalten* reveals both a National Socialist connotation and a more general meaning of forced alignment under system pressure (DWDS, n.d.-a, “gleichschalten”).

Comment [C3] is based on paremiology. The idiom *Die Hand, die einen füttert, beißt man nicht* is a metaphorical confirmation of the alleged corruption of the media. Thanks to the widespread familiarity of this folk wisdom, no further evidence is required to contextualise the meaning for the addressee. The following question *Eventuell deswegen?!* serves as a rhetorical question leading to an unambiguous, predetermined answer.

Comment [C4] shares the metaphorical nature of the previous comment, specifically through the figurative meaning of the phrase *ehrenwerte Gesellschaft*. Although the adjective *ehrenwert* is primarily positive, meaning respectable or honourable, in this established phrase, it functions as a euphemistic term for the Sicilian Mafia (DWDS, n.d.-b, “ehrenwert”). Through its use, the author transfers the concept of organised crime to his political opponents. This seemingly unassuming, assertive statement thus conveys a strong negative emotion and an implicit appeal.

Comment [C5] is the most linguistically expressive. Here, the originally formal assertive, due to the accumulation of pejorative and negative evaluative units, as well as exclamatory sentences, transforms into an expressive speech act representing indignation and disgust. These emotions are duplicated visually (through emojis), which do not directly reflect reality, but signal the author's emotional state. Comments [C1] to [C5] demonstrate the gradual emotional gradation of assertives up to their functional transformation into other types of speech acts.

In relation to the visual aspect of the analysed comments, it can be observed that emotions occur frequently, supplementing, modifying, or replacing the verbal component of the assertives. The visual elements under scrutiny range on a functional scale from affirmative ones (emojis of agreement, a bullseye, an OK gesture, applause, or pointing to the original post) to emojis expressing an affective stance. In such cases, a semantic shift occurs; for example, the vomiting emoji symbolises the degree of indignation and the urgency of the problem. The utilization of positively charged emojis, such as clasped hands to denote gratitude and a heart to signify agreement, serves to reinforce the group's internal cohesion.

Other comments can also contain multimodal assertives, where the text is supplemented by external visual content, such as a shared quote accompanied by a portrait of an authority figure. An example can be seen in comment [C1] in Figure 4 (see below). Here, the image serves not only as an illustration, but also as visual evidence intended to reinforce the truth of both the original post and the verbal part of the comment (*Ganz nach Plan*):

Figure 4

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comment)

Ganz nach Plan 🙄
(Just as planned 🙄)



[C1]

Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023c)

Directives are speech acts of the directive type, realised primarily through performative verbs in standard communication (e.g., *auffordern* (to call upon), *befehlen* (to command), *bitten* (to ask), *einladen* (to invite), etc.). Their primary function is to influence the addressee's behavior. In this context, it is imperative to acknowledge the role of imperative sentences, which function as directives in the realm of digital discourse. In addition to the aforementioned ways of realising directives, it is necessary to reflect on the findings of analyses of assertives. In conspiracy discourse, these often acquire a secondary illocutionary dimension of a directive, thereby functioning as indirect speech acts.

Concerning the empirical basis, in this section, the focus will be on direct speech acts, which are represented to a significantly lesser extent in the corpus:

Figure 5

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comment)

Und die Gläubigen Lämmer haben sich bis zu "X" Mal eine "Impfung" geben lassen, Die nur nachgewiesene Nebenwirkungen hat !

Leute denkt noch ein bisschen weiter als euch die Medien geben !

Grippe sind immer schon Corona Viren ! [C1]

(And the gullible sheep have had a 'vaccine' given to them loads of times, and it's only had side effects!

Don't just take the media's word for it, think for yourself !

As we all know, the flu is always caused by coronaviruses !)

Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023d)

Figure 6

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comment)

Die Frage ist, WAS wurde ihm geimpft, welche Charge, usw

Und vielleicht hat er ständig Infekte und will sein Nebenan nicht anstecken (nicht wirklich ernst gemeint)

Solche Menschen gehören eigentlich ignoriert ! [C1]

(So, the question is, what was he vaccinated with, which batch, and so on?

And perhaps he's constantly catching infections and doesn't want to infect his neighbour (not literally, of course).

People like that really should be ignored !)

Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023e)

Figure 7

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comment)

Hier zum Nachlesen !! [C1]
(Read more here !!)



Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023f)

Figures 5–7 and their accompanying comments represent a representative sample of the identified direct directives. Despite the absence of conventional directive verbs, the identification of their illocutionary intent is possible based on other pragmatic features. In the comments appended to figures 5 and 7, the direct appeal is conveyed by a sentence type – specifically an imperative sentence (*Leute denkt noch ein bisschen weiter als euch die Medien geben !*), which explicitly urges the addressee to alter their cognitive stance. In the comment to figure 6, the use of a competing form of the passive with a modal factor is evident (*Solche Menschen gehören eigentlich ignoriert ! [C1]*). The subjective opinion is thereby transformed into a categorical demand. These directives must therefore be considered as part of a broader discursive framework, relating both to the comment itself and to the community's overall line of argument. These appeals are frequently accompanied by external references (see Figure 7), which provide argumentative support for the direct appeal. While these appeals do not typically target a specific individual, they are directed towards a collective recipient who shares similar attitudes, thereby reinforcing the group spirit.

Expressives are primarily linked to the speaker's mental state and serve as indicators of the emotions being experienced. Although typical performative verbs in this category include *danken* (to thank), *gratulieren* (to congratulate), *(sich) entschuldigen* (to apologise), and *kondolieren* (to offer condolences), the empirical data suggest a similar trend to that seen with directives: the expressive function is realised primarily through indirect verbal and visual means. A partial exception is the verb *danken*, which occurs in the corpus at two pragmatic levels. Its predominant usage is in conjunction with negation. The expression of a negative stance, whether towards vaccination (e.g., *Impfen nein Danke*) or political opponents (*danke für nichts, Opposition!*), is characterised by an ironic undertone. Conversely, the verb *danken* assumes a

positive connotation when addressed to like-minded allies and authorities in recognition of their commitment (e.g., *Danke Dr. Spitzbart ... Super, danke für euren Einsatz für uns alle*).

The majority of expressive elements in the analysed discourse serve the function of expressing emotion and are accompanied by linguistic units carrying a high emotional charge. The following figures illustrate the comments in which they occur:

Figure 8

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comments)

Das größte Experiment am Menschen 🤖 Der größte kriminelle Betrug an der Menschheit 🤖 [C1]
 (This is the biggest experiment on humans ever 🤖 It's basically a massive crime against humanity 🤖)

MÄÄÄHHH das hat Mann ja klar und Deutlich bemerkt....wie viele Määäähhh es gibt. 🍑🍑🍑 [C2]
 (BAAAAH, you really did notice that loud and clear... just how many “baaahs” there are. 🍑🍑🍑)

Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023g)

Figure 9

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comments)

Trotteln werden von Obertrotteln regiert [C1]
(Fools are ruled by bigger fools.)

Diese 🇪🇺🇪🇺🇪🇺🇪🇺 werde ich mein Leben lang nicht mehr vergessen. [C2]
(I will never forget this 🇪🇺🇪🇺🇪🇺🇪🇺 for the rest of my life.)

Diese Arschlöcher werde ich sicher nie mehr sehen! Weder live noch im TV! [C3]
(I'll definitely never see those arseholes again! Neither in person nor on TV!)

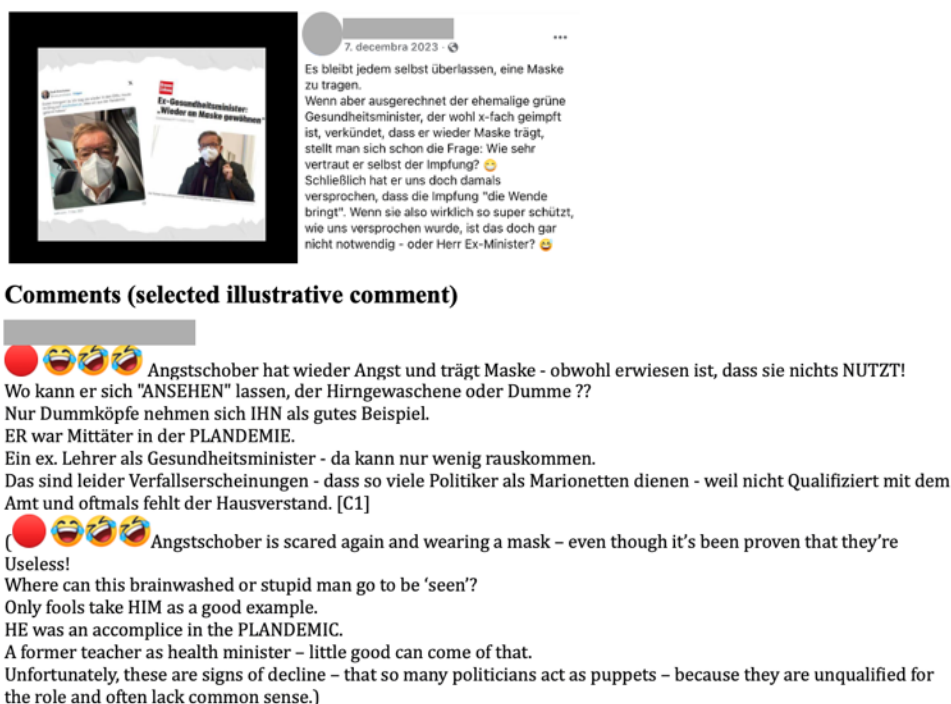
🤒 Unsere lieben "ImpfNazi" ganz extreme "UnMenschenfreunde". [C4]
(🤒 Our dear 'vaccine Nazis', those utterly extreme 'enemies of humanity'.)

Ich kann diese verlogenen und korrupten Typen nicht mehr sehen! 🤒 [C5]
(I can't stand these dishonest, corrupt lot any longer! 🤒)

Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023h)

Figure 10

A Post From the Facebook Group “Zeit für Aufarbeitung” With Selected Comments



Note. From Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023i)

Most of the expressive language is directed towards a “systemic adversary” and employs linguistic units with inherently negative connotations (e.g., Figure 8 [C1]: *Experiment am Menschen*; *(der) kriminelle Betrug an der Menschheit*; Figure 9 [C5]: *verlogenen und korrupten Typen*; Figure 10 [C1]: *nur Dummköpfe*), pejoratives (e.g., Figure 9 [C1–C3]: *Trotteln*, *Obertrotteln*; *Arschlöcher*) or onomatopoeic interjection simulating animal sounds (e.g., Figure 8 [C2]: *MÄÄÄHHH*), which serve to dehumanise the opponent.

An interesting phenomenon is the formation of ad hoc compounds (e.g., Figure 9 [C4] “*ImpfNazi*”, “*unMenschenfreunde*”) and portmanteaus (e.g., Figure 10 [C1]: *Angstschöber*/ *Angst+Anschober*, *PLANDEMIE*/ *Plan+Pandemie*), which, in their semantically condensed form, carry a strong evaluative dimension. The employment of capital letters and the accumulation of emojis (e.g., emojis of disgust, irony) serve to augment the intensity of the shared emotion, thereby prompting an immediate affective reaction in the recipient. Furthermore, it is possible to identify ironic shifts in meaning in connection with *unsere lieben* (“*ImpfNazi*”) or the metaphor *Politiker als Marionetten*, which contribute to the discursive discrediting of the opponent.

The Heterogeneity of Slovak Comments

In comparison with the German empirical data, which demonstrated a high degree of opinion coherence, the Slovak corpus¹ is characterised by a certain degree of heterogeneity. The comments encompass not only expressions of community agreement with the source post, but also counterarguments articulated through opinions characterised by a pronounced expressive element. This discrepancy may be attributable to some factors; however, it is hypothesized that

¹All analysed comments refer to the YouTube video excerpt shown in Figure 11, and translations are also included.

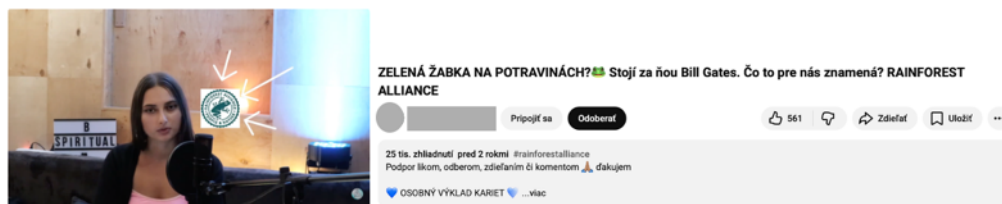
it is most likely to result from the inherent characteristics of the source post. Notwithstanding the presence of visual components in the original video, the monologue delivered by the protagonist is the primary element that dominates the video. This may be a key factor in the manner in which the content is processed, as the audience's primary focus is on the verbal component and its arguments. Moreover, the inherent characteristics of the YouTube channel itself are of equal significance. The algorithms utilised by the platform have been observed to enhance the virality of content, transcending the boundaries of the opinion community. This approach has the effect of drawing opinion opponents into the discussion as well.

In view of the heterogeneity of the corpus, it is also important to note the specific linguistic variability. A proportion of the analysed comments have been written in Czech, yet this does not compromise the integrity of the study. A high degree of mutual intelligibility is observable between both languages, Slovak and Czech, with the result that users of these languages form a shared communicative sphere in the online environment. In addition, Czech comments have been integrated into the analysis to enhance its comprehensiveness. The analysis is principally focused on identifying discrepancies in comparison to the German corpus. The objective of this study is to identify, above all, the verbal representation of disagreement and its reflection at the illocutionary level of the comments.

Before analysing the contrasts themselves, it should be noted that the expression of opinion in the Slovak corpus follows a pattern analogous to that of the German comments, albeit with a different quantitative distribution of the individual illocutionary levels. Expressive statements predominate, characterised by gratitude for shared information and appreciation for the protagonist's courage in publicly articulating her own views. In both linguistic contexts, a high degree of interpersonal solidarity with the main protagonist can be observed, expressed through respect and esteem. In this particular section of the corpus, assertives frequently coalesce with the expressive function, thereby serving to substantiate a shared cognitive basis (i.e., awareness of the issue). In addition, directives are present in small numbers, typically as part of a broader set of comments, and are characterised by a tendency towards a call for mutual support. The following examples represent the aforementioned illocutionary levels and, in terms of realization, combine positive verbalisation with visual means (emojis) that enhance the affective charge of agreement:

Figure 11

A Screenshot of a Video From the BS - B Spiritual YouTube Channel, Along With Comments



Comments (selected illustrative comments)

Assertives:

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

Diky Bianka, opäť skvelee video.. som rada ze mas odvahu takto verejne o tom hovorit.. ked nie ty, tak kto?? :D ja uz par rokov ziadne polotovary nekupujem, jedine kimchi kym si najadem svoj vlastny recept :) straavvujem saa uz viac akko 15 rokov rastlinne a nie som ani pichnuta.. :D ale tak komu uz dneska mozes verit. preeto hovorim, ze najlepsie jee prestahovat sa na opussteny ostrov, pestovaat si potravinky zit a uziivaat ssi samotu... [C1]

(Thanks, Bianka, another great video... I'm glad you're feeling brave enough to talk about this publicly. If not you, then who? :D I haven't bought any processed foods for a few years now, except for kimchi, until I figure out my own recipe. :) I've been eating a plant-based diet for over 15 years and I'm not sick a day... :D But who can you trust these days? That's why I say the best thing is to move to a deserted island, grow your own food, and enjoy the solitude...)

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

Děkuji, cítím to stejně [C2]

(Thank you, I feel the same way [C2])

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

🇸🇰Povedali ste to presne tak ako to už veľmi dlho viem a chápem [C3]

(You put it exactly as I've known and understood it for a very long time [C3])

Expressives:

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

Super ze si to dokazes tak zrozumitelne jjednoducho vysvetlit ,dakujem [C4]

(It's great that you can explain it so clearly and simply—thank you [C4])

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

Děkuji za informaci ,dám si větší pozor při nákupu [C5]

(Thank you for the information; I'll be more careful when shopping.)

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

Ďakujem Bianka za ďalšie skvelé informácie [C6]

(Thank you, Bianka, for another great piece of information)

[Redacted]

pred 2 rokmi

Moja zlatá, vzácne informácie a zároveň tak smutné až desivé. Ďakujem,že otvárate ľuďom oči. Veľmi si Vás vážim. [C7]

(My dear, this is valuable information—yet so sad and even frightening. Thank you for opening people's eyes. I hold you in very high regard.)

Direktives:

pred 2 rokmi

Jste uzasna,dekuji ze za vasi praci....Japonci nasli jak se proti tomu branit...konzumovat vajicka profesor ,Peter Stanek ma o tom informace,proto likvidace slepic atd...jeste jedinou dekuji za vasi tvorbu a POMAHEJME SI,JE TO

DULEZITE [C8]

(You're amazing, thank you for your work....The Japanese have found a way to protect themselves against it...by eating eggs. Professor Peter Stanek has information on this, which is why they're culling the hens, etc....Once again, thank

you for your work, and LET'S HELP EACH OTHER—IT'S IMPORTANT)

Note. From Video on YouTube (B Spiritual, 2023)

A fundamental departure from the German corpus is represented by the counterarguments present in the Slovak corpus. These are speech acts by opponents that disrupt the affirmative line of the discussion. The depiction of these emotions is primarily through assertives and expressives that are characterised by a negative emotional tone.

Within the illocutionary level of assertives, the following functional subtypes can be identified: denigration of the speaker's cognitive ability with the aim of negating the truth value of her statements [C9]; strong criticism of the content combined with the delegitimization of the audience (potential supporters) [C10]; questioning of the truthfulness of shared information by labeling it a hoax or disinformation with an explicit call for legal accountability [C11–C15]; sarcastic questioning of arguments through demands for empirical evidence and sources [C16–C20]:

Figure 12*Selected Comments on a Video on the BS - B Spiritual YouTube Channel*

Assertives (in some cases overlapping with expressives):



pred 2 rokmi

tak mladá holka i hezká a tak tupá... [C9]
(such a young girl—so pretty, yet so dumb...)



pred 2 rokmi

Nikdy jsem neviděl horší video než tohle, tomuhle reálně můžou věřit jen důchodci a tupci [C10]
(I've never seen a worse video than this; only retirees and idiots could actually believe this)



pred 6 mesiacmi

obyčejné kecy [C11]
just a load of nonsense



pred 2 rokmi

Reálně to vubec není nebezpečné... je to hoax. Neco si o tom zjistete a pak na to reagujte [C12]
(It's actually not dangerous at all... it's a hoax. Look into it a bit and then respond)

pred 2 rokmi

Pěkná blbost za dezinformace by mělo být vězení.... [C13]
(I think that spreading misinformation should be a criminal offence....)

pred 2 rokmi

Ty nejsi normální 😏 Přečti si co to znamená, nechápu jak můžeš šířit takový dezinformace. [C14]
(You're not normal, mate. 😏 Look up what that means – I don't understand how you can spread such misinformation.)

pred 2 rokmi (upravené)

Trestní zákoník č. 40/2009 Sb. paragraf 357 [C15]
(Criminal Code No. 40/2009 Coll., Section 357)

pred 2 rokmi

panebože dukazy? [C16]
(oh my God, evidence?)

pred 2 rokmi

zdroje??? [C17]
(evidence???)

pred 1 rokom

Vážne? Ako môžete tvrdiť niečo bez toho aby ste doložili dôkazy. 🙄 Vy si verte čomu chcete ale nevymývajte mozog ostatným [C18]
(Seriously? How can you say that without showing any evidence? You're free to believe whatever you like, but please don't try to brainwash others)

pred 2 rokmi

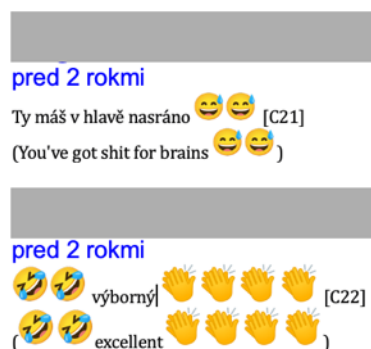
A máš vlastní důkaz z laboratoře a né jedna paní povídala? Ano řekněme že máš pravdu ale né důkaz. A snížit počet lidí na to by byly jiné snazší metody hlavně snížení porodnost. [C19]
(Do you have any actual lab results to back that up, or is it just something you've heard? OK, let's say you're right, but you don't have any evidence to back it up. There are other, easier ways to reduce the population, mainly by lowering the birth rate.)

pred 2 rokmi

Už jste slyšel o programu Photoshop? Ta videa jsou totiž ucebnicový příklad. A to ze všech aspektů. [C20]
(Have you heard of Photoshop? Those videos are a perfect example – in every way.)

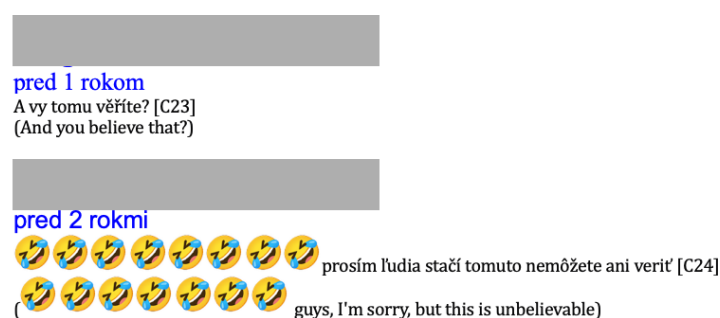
Note. From Video on YouTube (B Spiritual, 2023)

Expressives are evident in conjunction with assertives, in which a pejorative verbal component predominates (see the above comments and [C21]), as well as independently. In the latter case, they are most commonly realised through emojis of mockery and/or applause, which symbolise an ironic perception of shared content (see [C22]):

Figure 13*Selected Comments on a Video on the BS - B Spiritual YouTube Channel*

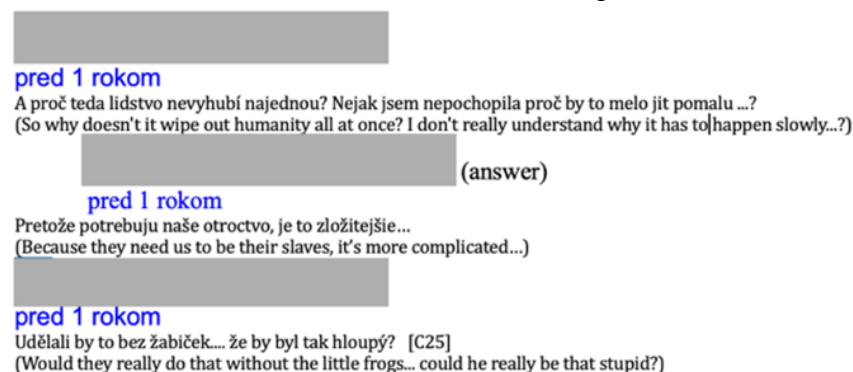
Note. From Video on YouTube (B Spiritual, 2023)

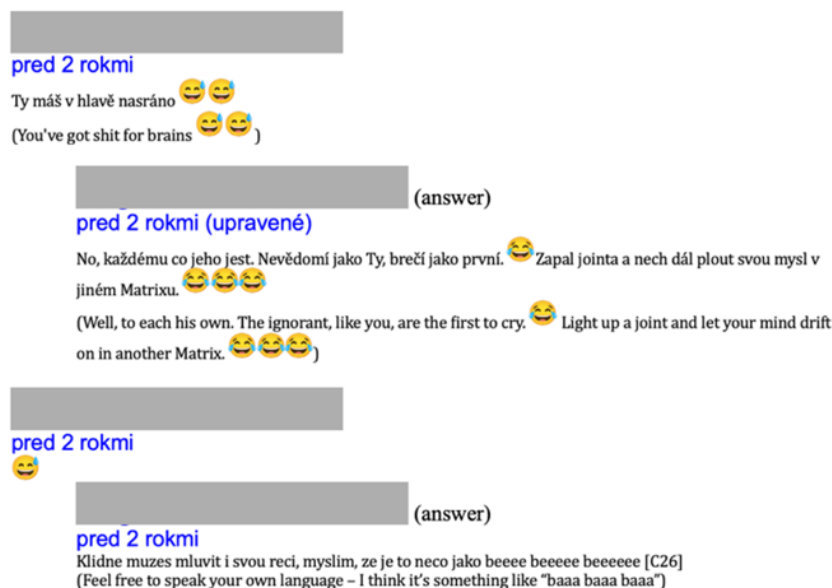
As with affirmative comments, only a few directives are found in the area of counter position. These appeals are made either implicitly or as indirect speech acts, such as rhetorical questions [C23] or sarcastic statements [C24]:

Figure 14*Selected Comments on a Video on the BS - B Spiritual YouTube Channel*

Note. From Video on YouTube (B Spiritual, 2023)

It is also intriguing to observe the dynamics of interactive threads within the Slovak corpus. Attempts at a rational deconstruction of the narrative ([C25]) are evident, as are defensive strategies. When an opponent disrupts the homogeneous zone of agreement, the community's immediate response is to discredit them, as evidenced in [C26]:

Figure 15*Selected Comments on a Video on the BS - B Spiritual YouTube Channel*



Note. From Video on YouTube (B Spiritual, 2023)

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of German and Slovak conspiracy discourse on social media has yielded findings that can be summarised as follows:

From a pragmatic-functional perspective, comments represent linguistic constructs that play a key role in the dissemination and reinforcement of conspiracy narratives. The primary function of these expressions in both environments is to demonstrate group cohesion and affirmative agreement. Despite the fact that assertives constitute the predominant form of speech act, they seldom manifest as neutral. In the German sample, assertives primarily function as carriers of covert appeals (indirect directives) and intense emotions (indirect expressives) within the community itself. In contrast, in the Slovak sample, assertives are also observed to possess a distinct corrective and confrontational dimension. A fundamental difference between the examined linguistic environments can be identified in this respect (German: unity of opinion; Slovak: heterogeneity of opinion). Direct directives and expressives are indeed less prevalent; direct directives were identified almost exclusively in the German corpus, where they serve to mobilise and vent affective states explicitly.

In the context of the verbal and visual representation of conspiracy content, a wide spectrum of stylistic devices was observed. These ranged from neutral linguistic means through expressive pejoratives to creative ad hoc devices and contaminations, as evidenced in the German section. In comparison, German comments exhibit a higher degree of creativity, while expressive pejorative units are more frequently represented in Slovak comments. The visual aspect, primarily represented by emojis, fulfils a dual role. In addition to its illustrative function, it acts as a semantic hook and trigger for a subsequent emotional reaction. This, in turn, serves to increase the post's viral potential.

The utilisation of verbal or visual means, or a combination thereof, is predominantly observed to serve the following purposes: Within the German corpus, the following strategies are employed: the discrediting of a “systemic opponent”, the delegitimising of the official narrative, and the reinforcement of the community's ideological identity. It is important to note that, due to the public accessibility of the analysed Facebook group, the comments also acquire

the status of publicly available information. From this standpoint, they assume a role that is equal in importance, if not more so, in the propagation of conspiracy theories within the online environment, surpassing the significance of the original posts themselves. Within the Slovak corpus, this role entails the reinforcement of the community's ideological identity, the mobilisation of its supporters, and the specific discrediting of the primary antagonist in instances of opposition. It is also noteworthy that there has been a considerable delegitimisation of the official version of events, as well as that presented by the main protagonist – in this case, by her opponents.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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