

Mirroring as a Linguistic Strategy of Discrediting the Opponent

Simona Fraščíková, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The study analyzes the language strategy employed by conspiracy theorists, specifically the concept of “mirroring.” This involves adopting the linguistic strategies of their opponents to explain events, while usually reversing the key positions. Such attacks serve both as a form of counteroffensive and as an attempt to focus attention on the opponent while reinforcing the credibility of their own shared content. This linguistic strategy is examined in German and Slovak conspiracy discourse, using examples from digital journalistic texts and (multimodal) texts disseminated online. The aim is to highlight a strategy that contributes to the growing popularity and spread of conspiracy theories, thereby fostering greater polarization in society. Methodologically, the study draws on corpus linguistics tools while also integrating a contextual approach necessary for understanding the strategy and interpreting its content.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, language strategies, mirroring, delegitimization of opponents

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Conspiracy theories remain a constant danger to society, especially during times of political, ethnic, or economic crises. In such moments, they tend to grow stronger, solidify the beliefs of their followers, and attract new supporters. The online environment acts as an ideal platform for quickly and effectively spreading their content.

The success of conspiracy content relies not only on crises themselves but also on how conflictual and sensitive topics are addressed and shaped. The communication strategies used are vital for maintaining attention, boosting emotional impact, increasing persuasiveness, and delegitimizing opponents. One key strategy is mirroring, which appears in various forms. In this study, specific examples will illustrate selected subtypes.

The empirical section combines corpus and contextual analysis. Corpus tools offer an overview of how often language units appear and enable observation within a wider context. Contextual analysis enhances this by illustrating the interpretive frameworks behind different types of mirroring. The data comprises journalistic and multimodal texts from 2023, chosen deliberately due to the presence of multiple crises.

Theoretical Framework: Conspiracy Theories

Available publications show that interest in conspiracy theories as a research topic remains high, even though most theories share similar basic features. This is because new aspects are gradually uncovered, reflecting the dynamic nature of conspiracy theories and their ongoing efforts to find new strategies to increase influence. They can also be examined from multiple perspectives, helping to create a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon.

This study will examine the main traits of conspiracy theories that help us identify (multimodal) texts as containing conspiratorial content. But it's important to recognize that behind these traits, there are often complex tactics designed to enhance the content's persuasiveness and diminish the recipient's critical evaluation.

Conspiracy theories interpret events and situations based on determinism as a central principle. According to this perspective, everything is seen as intentional, and chance, chaos, and uncontrollable factors are not considered possible causes. Instead, a conspiracy group is believed to secretly control events, manipulating them to achieve hidden goals (e.g., Barkun, 2003, p. 4; Brotherton, 2013, p. 11; Butter, 2023, pp. 22–29; Butter, 2021; Fuchs, 2022, pp. 30–31; Lutter, 2001, pp. 24–27).

By identifying the positions of conspirators in conspiracy theories, we highlight another key feature: dualism, or a binary view of the world that separates good from evil. Conspirators are seen as the ones representing the “evil/enemy/perpetrator/responsible for evil,” while their opposites are the “good/friend/victim” side (e.g., Barkun, 2003; Butter, 2023; Fuchs, 2022). Conspirators—whether individuals, bureaucracies, national and international institutions, organizations, scientists, or others—are perceived as highly competent and discreet regarding their secret intentions and plans (e.g., Brotherton, 2013). Opposing them are the so-called truth seekers or conspiracy theorists and their supporters, who take on the role of uncovering the real truth and revealing the conspirators' intentions, and are portrayed exclusively in a positive light.

From the perspective of key characteristics, it is crucial to pause at the point where conspiracy theory and empirical material connect. In the literature, we find valid critiques of the term “theory” when linked to “conspiracy,” which highlight the lack of scientific features such as formulating a scientific problem, developing hypotheses, describing appropriate research methods, creating a consistent theory in the conclusion, verifiability, and more (e.g., Götz-Votteler & Hespers, 2019, pp. 35–37; Schmiede et al., 2023, p. 441). Based on this, every conspiracy theory must be tested for its claims, even though this can be difficult. Pfahl-Traugher (2019), who uses the term conspiracy ideology, rightly emphasizes one key aspect of conspiracy theories stating, “Die Darstellung [eines Ereignisses als Folge einer Konspiration] ist [...] so gehalten, dass eine Prüfung an der Realität nicht möglich ist. Es gibt demnach Argumentationsmuster zur Immunisierung vor Kritik, welche gegenteilige Beweise nicht zulassen” (Teil 2/Part 2). Brotherton (2013, p. 12) similarly argues, “Conspiracy theories are epistemically self-insulating. Because of their epistemic approach towards new information, conspiracy theories are well insulated against questioning or correction.” These are explanations of events and situations that serve as alternatives to widely accepted explanations. Therefore, while we can identify some characteristics of scientificity in conspiracy theories, their strategic purpose is only fulfilled within the context of conspiracy theory, not scientificity. For this reason, it is recommended to use the term “narrative” instead of “theory.” The conspiracy narrative better reflects the structure and nature of the content it carries and is not as heavily burdened with negative connotations.

Empirical Part

Observed Aspects

In analysing empirical data, the focus is on the communication strategy of mirroring. This appears in several subtypes, not all of which must be present in every piece of conspiratorial content. Common subtypes include mirroring accusations, adopting the opponent’s terms and reinterpreting their use (such as irony or delegitimization), reversing strategies of overestimation and belittlement within the friend-enemy framework, mirroring victims’ discourse, reframing roles, and mimicking claims of scientific authority. An interesting example is the adoption of the label “conspiracy theorist/conspirator,” which is often deliberately used in an ironic tone to diminish its legitimacy.

Observing these subtypes requires viewing the text as a whole, where various signs and codes are used. Although the analysis mainly focuses on the linguistic level, it also considers visual elements that help better understand the intentions of the author or sharer of the text (e.g., Stanková, 2020).

Empirical Material

The analysis focuses on empirical material from digital sources, specifically journalistic texts and posts of various lengths from social networks in 2023. The German-language journalistic texts are from the digital magazine *Rubikon*,¹ particularly from the sections *Fassadendemokratie & Tiefer Staat* and *Krieg & Frieden*. Slovak language sources include the portals *Zem a Vek*, *Bádatel*, and *Christianitas*. All these sources are classified as portals that

¹ *Rubikon* magazine published articles on its website until 1 April 2023, when it was replaced by the digital magazine *Manova*. However, *Manova* does not preserve the original section divisions entirely. Efforts are currently underway to revive *Rubikon* magazine, but without access to the article archive. All of the samples shown here come from a database created earlier.

share disinformation and conspiracy content (e.g., Holland-Letz, 2020; Müller et al., 2023; Konšpiratori.sk). It should be noted that not all texts are purely conspiratorial; many critique national or international regulations without explicit links to conspiracy theories, though their implicit framing may resemble or support such theories. Posts from social media were searched using keywords such as Corona, Covid-19, mainstream media, chemtrails, elites, among others. Since not all social media accounts are publicly accessible, the study focused only on available content. Some posts were analyzed individually, while others involved collections of posts from an “open” account within a specific time frame. When selecting the empirical material, the focus was not on quantity but on quality, specifically, the ability to accurately illustrate the mirroring strategies employed.

Analysis

The Use of Corpus Linguistics Tools

The empirical base outlined above includes texts of different lengths. Sometimes, German journalistic texts exceed ten pages. To work more efficiently, we also utilize corpus linguistics tools in our analysis, specifically automatic evaluation with the *Sketch Engine* corpus manager.

For this purpose, German texts were grouped into a German corpus and Slovak texts into a Slovak corpus. From the Sketch Engine functions, we mainly used the Keywords and Concordance tools. The Keywords tool (single-word units) helps us identify typical language units that signal a relevant content element, topic, or reference object. The Concordance tool allows us to search for a specific lemma, word, phrase, tag, document type, and other items. The results are presented in context, which is effective for analysis, as it helps us at least outline the interpretation direction of the searched unit and relate it to the relevant thematic framework. For a better illustration, we present an evaluation of units from the German and Slovak corpora using the Keywords tool:

Table 1

The 50 Most Frequent Single-Word Keywords in the German Corpus



Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 Rottenfußler	11 Regenauer	21 Weltfriedensordnung	31 NATO	41 Rossum
2 WEF	12 Unterworfene	22 Donbass	32 völkerrechtswidrig	42 Röper
3 Hersh	13 Selenskyj	23 Friedensbewegung	33 Riedl	43 Prescott
4 Rodrian	14 Waffenlieferung	24 Guérot	34 Schwab	44 Gaye
5 Bierling	15 Stockwell	25 Stellvertreterkrieg	35 Ukraine	45 Kissinger
6 Dutschke	16 Angola	26 Mächtige	36 Kriegstreiber	46 Zentner
7 BlackRock	17 Falstaff	27 Vad	37 Herrschend	47 Kriegsmaterialgesetz
8 Ganser	18 Savimbi	28 geopolitisch	38 Geoengineering	48 Lehrich
9 globalistisch	19 Gellermann	29 CIA	39 Wodarg	49 Nuland
10 Kulldorff	20 Ukrainekrieg	30 Despotismus	40 Deckelbaum	50 Thinktank

Table 2*The 50 Most Frequent Single-Word Keywords in the Slovak Corpus*

Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma	Lemma
1 Dvorská	11 mimovládky	21 LGBTI	31 NGT	41 Pentagón
2 Rostas	12 progresívec	22 proamerický	32 potrestanie	42 Aláča
3 Naumann	13 Ódor	23 Bartalos	33 B9	43 cudzinecký
4 GMO	14 dezinformátor	24 zapredanec	34 Čaputová	44 úradnícky
5 chlórpyrifos	15 Šimeček	25 drag	35 dezinformačný	45 lokajský
6 Soros	16 Denník	26 Solženicyn	36 ZVTV	46 Szijjártó
7 Buzalka	17 Hanzelová	27 postsediaci	37 Bratčikov	47 korporátny
8 IPCC	18 Štubňa	28 chlorpyrifos	38 Sofian	48 Blaščák
9 MVO	19 Huliak	29 antropológ	39 guvernerka	49 provládny
10 Gerulata	20 Šimko	30 ústavodarc	40 ICJK	50 Zimková

Contextual Analysis of Mirroring Strategy

The keywords identified through corpus analysis are not only typical for the given corpus but also highlight shared content trends. They can be categorized into patterns characteristic of conspiracy discourse. In contextual analysis, these findings guide targeted searches for specific units, enabling their contextual framing to be extracted from the entire corpus. These units then serve as a starting point for identifying a potential mirroring strategy or some of its subtypes. The selected frames also demonstrate the strategy in question.

Following this procedure, we have identified the following subtypes of the mirroring strategy:

- a. Reflecting historical or historical-legal context (shifting historical contextual framework to current situations; usually involves role reversal);
- b. Mirroring accusations (reversing the role in the accusation pattern);
- c. Mirroring the victims' discourse;
- d. Reversal of the strategy of overestimating and underestimating within the friend-enemy personnel scheme (deliberate reversal often linked with ironic overestimation and condemnatory underestimation);
- e. Mirroring of attributes related to conspiracy theories.

Reflecting Historical or Historical-Legal Context

Example 1: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Krieg ist wieder gesellschaftsfähig, neuer Lifestyle. Viele Stimmen schreien nach Rache, schreien nach modernsten Waffen, denn es gibt neue hinterhältige Angriffskrieger mit giftigen Pfeilen. Das alles erscheint wie ein Duplikat der US-amerikanischen Gründungsgeschichte. Die neuen Wilden, die neuen Indianer sind die Russen. Sie müssen besiegt, also vernichtet werden. Dann, nach dem Leben in Reservaten, nach der Umerziehung im Sinne unserer westlichen Wertegemeinschaft, nachdem sie ihrer eigenen Geschichte abgeschworen haben, unter der Führung durch vom Westen akzeptierte Gouverneure, dürfen die Überlebenden vielleicht wieder in unserer regelbasierten Ordnung mitspielen.

(Gysi, 2023)

The first example comes from the article “Defensive Invasion,” the title of which hints at mirror imaging and role reversal. It illustrates the clear transfer of the historical colonial framework to the current military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It begins with a historical narrative from the United States, which is mirrored to shift focus onto the opponent (in other texts, the conflict is seen as a dispute between Russia and the US, with Ukraine acting as a proxy, known as a proxy war/ *Stellvertreterkrieg*). The reversal of roles (*Die neuen Wilden, die neuen Indianer sind die Russen. Sie müssen besiegt, also vernichtet werden.*) justifies violence and dehumanization, portraying the original aggressor as a victim forced to defend itself. When reflecting on the colonial framework, the narrative employs familiar language, such as *Leben in Reservaten, nach der Umerziehung, müssen besiegt, vernichtet werden*; military terms are also used (e.g., *Krieg, modernste Waffen, Angriffskrieger*), which sometimes overlap with colonial vocabulary.

Example 2: Thematic Framework—The Covid-19 Pandemic.

Situácia na Slovensku

Ministerstvo zdravotníctva SR pred pár dňami oznámilo, že od 31.1.2023 sa na Slovensku začne znova očkovať aktualizovanými posilňovacími dávkami „vakcín“ proti Covid-19. Ako teda máme chápať poslednú iniciatívu ministerstva vo svetle zistení tejto novej štúdie? Asi tak, že ide o snahu ministerstva doraziť tých zaočkovaných ľudí, ktorých nedorazila základná očkovacia schéma. Inými slovami, je to štátom riadená genocída vlastného národa.

Genocída je nepremlčateľný zločin a jeho páchatelia jedného dňa povstanú pred novodobým Norimberským tribunálom. A my dúfame, že dovedy bude zároveň obnovený trest smrti.

(Badatel.net, 2023)

Similar to the German sample, we identified examples in the Slovak corpus that reflect the historical context but are not related to war conflict; instead, they pertain to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example 2 references the historical framework of the Nuremberg trials (e.g., Drábik, 2024), specifically its legal dimension as a criminal tribunal, which is applied to the Slovak government and health officials during the pandemic. The accusations of crimes against humanity are not presented as historical but gain significance through their reflection of relevant events in a legal context. Additionally, strongly negative vocabulary is used here, especially in the second example, which employs the term genocide. This term itself evokes the severity of past crimes and transfers that gravity to current circumstances.

Mirroring Accusations

Example 3: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

[Daniele Ganser] *Sein Anliegen als Historiker und Friedensforscher, die Ursachen des Krieges zu beleuchten, stößt beim politischen Establishment und seinen Leibmedien auf erbitterten Widerstand. Diffamierung, Hetze und versuchte Auftrittverbote sind die selbstlegitimierten Scherenschnitte gutbürgerlicher Demokraten, um Meinungsfreiheit und kritische Beschäftigung mit geschichtlichen Zusammenhängen auf ein weichgezeichnetes Bild vom guten Westen und bösen Russen zurechtzustutzen. [...]*

Vordergründig führt nicht Putin Krieg gegen Wolodymyr Selenskyj. Die Ukraine ist Schauplatz eines Stellvertreterkrieges der USA gegen Russland.

(Behla, 2023)

Example 4: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Der seit dem 24. Februar 2022 tobende Weltwirtschaftskrieg gegen die Russische Föderation ist ein unübersehbarer Beweis dafür. Er ist ein aus USA-Sicht genialer Schachzug unter dem Deckmantel Krieg, weil sie in mehrfacher, einzigartiger Weise profitieren werden und damit ihr völkerrechtswidriges Welthegegonialstreben formal-legal korrekt arrondieren.

(Weinert, 2023)

Example 5: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Celý svet dnes vie, že zástupná vojna USA proti Rusku bola vyvolaná Američanmi. [...]

3. odsek – nasledujúce vyjadrenie že "Ukrajine budeme naďalej pomáhať, aby dosiahla mierové riešenie za podmienok, ktoré si sama určí a budeme ju podporovať tak dlho ako to bude potrebné, vrátane vojenskej, finančnej a humanitárnej pomoci" svedčí o tom, že kolektívny Západ nemá v úmysle ukončiť zástupnú vojnu USA proti Rusku na Ukrajine, ale bude ju naďalej eskalovať.

(Štubňa, 2023)

One subtype of the mirroring strategy involves adopting a blame pattern linked to role reversal. This is shown through examples 3–5. All of these follow the aggressor-victim pattern, where the conspiratorial discourse reverses the usual positions compared to the common explanation of events, which states that Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine is the victim. Russia is depicted as the victim, a point also visible in the linear arrangement of the participants within the pattern. From a linguistic perspective, the words used not only show the direction of the action from X to Y, but the preposition *gegen/against* explicitly frames this direction as a conflict. In the analyzed texts, Ukraine is mostly portrayed as the site of the conflict, but in other sources, it is also discussed as the aggressor or an active participant in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Part of this strategy often involves reframing Russian aggression, which can also be seen in the headlines of the texts. A prime example is the title of the text from which the first example is taken, “Defensive Invasion” (see above), which clearly demonstrates the reinterpretation of the term “aggressor” in this context.

Mirroring the Victims' Discourse

Example 6: Thematic Framework—The Media/Political Manipulation.

V podobnom hoaxovom duchu píšú hoaxové korporátne médiá, hoaxerskí politici a lokaji Západu na iné témy... Podstata je v tom, že spochybnia pravdu a legalizujú lož.

(Štubňa, 2023)

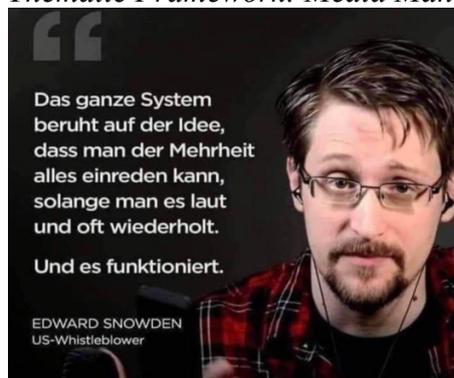
Example 7: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

In Wahrheit ist es wohl eher so, dass mit wachsender Härte des Angreifers die Neigung des Opfers wächst, sich aus Angst anzupassen. [...] "Wir merken dann erst, wie Mächte und Medien fast unaufhörlich damit beschäftigt sind, uns aufzuscheuchen, zu zerstreuen, zu ängstigen und anzutreiben – uns im schlimmsten Fall sogar von einem Trauma ins nächste zu jagen. Von der Pandemie in den Krieg.

(Riedl, 2023)

Figure 1

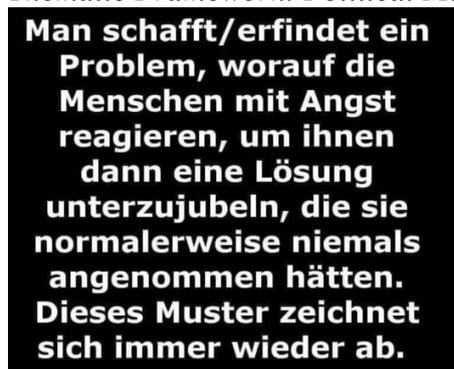
Thematic Framework: Media Manipulation



Source: post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 2

Thematic Framework: Political Manipulation



Source: Post on Facebook (Clos, 2023)

The analyzed samples reflect the discourse of victims. The initial idea that the public is manipulated and deceived by disinformation is challenged: the recipients of the messages are portrayed as victims of mainstream media, political elites, or “powers that be.” This framework is used across various contexts—from criticizing news reporting and political figures (example 6) to discussing war conflicts and their media coverage (example 7), and to the visual and

verbal depiction of victims of political decisions during the pandemic (figures 1 and 2). A common feature is framing the audience as defenceless victims of manipulation, fear, and oppression, with mainstream platforms identified as the perpetrators.

Reversal of the Overestimating and Underestimating Strategy Within the Friend-Enemy Personnel Scheme

Example 8: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Der "Marken"-Kern des Faschismus – die imperialistische Eroberung – ist geblieben. Dieser hat sich lediglich von der Nation auf die "westliche Wertegemeinschaft" in toto ausgeweitet.
(Mies, 2023)

Example 9: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Der zum weißen Ritter Hollywoods aufgeblasene ukrainische Präsident spiegelt als Erstes sich selbst. Aber vor allem spiegelt er uns, mit allen Mitteln moderner Propagandatechnik.
(Gysi, 2023)

Example 10: Thematic Framework—The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Im Jahr 2019 hat RAND in einer Studie festgestellt, dass Russland keinerlei aggressive Absichten habe. Statt das als Ausgangspunkt für Entspannung zu sehen, hat RAND ein sehr umfangreiches Maßnahmenpaket vorgeschlagen, mit dem Russland endlich dazu gebracht werden soll, aggressiv auf die Provokationen der USA zu reagieren, damit die USA Russland endlich als internationalen Bösewicht darstellen und politisch und wirtschaftlich isolieren können.
(Angerer, 2023)

Example 11: Thematic Framework—The European Union; Migration; Russia-Ukraine Conflict.

Na čele jednej z členských krajín EÚ je už pár dní okrem Orbána aj ďalší „výtržník“ – ako západné mediálne prostitútky prezývajú nového slovenského premiéra Fica. Fico na summite v Bruseli 26. októbra vyhlásil, že Slovensko pod jeho vládou odmieta dodávať zbrane Ukrajine. Práve Slovensko za predchádzajúcej neoliberalnej vlády poslalo do Kyjeva najviac zbraní v percentách na obyvateľov, čím si elita krajiny chcela zarobiť na bonusových bodoch s USA/NATO a EÚ.
(ZEM&VEK, 2023)

Example 12: Thematic Framework—Media Conflict (Mainstream vs. Disinformation Portal).

Hanzelová (redaktorka DenníkaN/ mainstream) sa drží svojich závideniahodných "argumentačných zručností" a vyhrkne túto formuláciu na potvrdenie svojich schopností: "Šíri konšpirácie, môžete si to prečítať, šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach, je tam toho naozaj veľmi veľa."
(Rostas, 2023)

Overestimating or exaggerating the opponent, or belittling a representative from one's own side, is not common in the analyzed corpus. However, several examples of this strategy type can still be identified. Usually, overestimation is an ironic tactic, indicated by quotation marks or expressive vocabulary, which shifts the originally positive tone into ridicule (examples 8, 9,

and 12). Conversely, belittling is often used in a context that softens its negative connotation and redefines it as a value accepted within one's own camp (examples 10 and 11). This approach ensures that the intended message aligns with the communicator's (author or content sharer) position.

Mirroring of Attributes Related to Conspiracy Theories

Example 13: Thematic Framework—Truth/Lie.

Hanzelová (redaktorka DenníkaN) sa drží svojich závideniahodných "argumentačných zručností" a vyhrkne túto formuláciu na potvrdenie svojich schopností: "Štri konšpirácie, môžete si to prečítať, šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach, je tam toho naozaj veľmi veľa." Redaktorka tak odhaľuje svoju "komplexnú gramotnosť" a divákov pouča: "Zem&Vek šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach." Odhliadnime od toho, že Zem&Vek má jednu z mnohých pravidelných rubriek "Sprisahania a fakty", kde sa zaoberá sprisahaniami, ktoré od úsvitu dejín vytvárajú našu históriu a charakter utvárania mocenských vzťahov.

(Rostas, 2023)

Example 14: Thematic Framework—Objectivity and Quality of Shared Content.

Armin Stalder schreibt in Transition News (6): "In den Mainstream-Medien, die sich in einem kolossalen Akt der kognitiven Dissonanz als 'Qualitätsjournalisten' unverzichtbar wähnen, findet man denn hauptsächlich Belanglosigkeiten zum WEF, überboten nur noch durch Bekundungen vermeintlicher Notwendigkeiten und Heiligensprechungen: 'Das WEF ist super; wir brauchen das WEF; die Elite ist unfehlbar.' Solche Verabsolutierungen hört man sonst höchstens aus dem Mund eines Priesters." (...) "Man will ja nur die Welt retten, völlig selbstlos, versteht sich. Einfach nur, weil man übernatürlich gut ist."

(Schuhmacher, 2023)

Example 15: Thematic Framework—Requirement for Scientific Rigour, Expertise, Authority/Authorities.

Redaktorka (Hanzelová/DenníkN) tak odhaľuje svoju "komplexnú gramotnosť" a divákov pouča: "Zem&Vek šíri konšpirácie o sprisahaniach." [...] Zamerať sa treba na skutočnosť, že Hanzelová so svojou úrovňou vedenia rozhovoru a myslenia "kádruje nielen odbornosť sudkyne ale aj periodikum", ktorého redakciu už dekádu tvoria vysokoškolskí pedagógovia, výnimoční odborníci, lekári, ekonómovia, docenti, právnici a profesori, pri ktorých je Hanzelová iba groteskná atrapa novinárčiny a intelektu. Tieto ponášky na novinárov namiesto hlbších úvah všade a unizono donekonečna opakujú ten istý metanaratív o potrebe zvyšovania "mediálnej gramotnosti" (brainwashing indoktrinácie) a boja proti hoaxom a dezinformáciám (stupňovanie cenzúry a vytlačanie iných názorov).

(Rostas, 2023)

Example 16: Thematic Framework—Requirement for Scientific Rigour, Expertise, Authority/Authorities.

Mehr als zwei Jahre lang haben die globalistischen Parteienkartelle in diversen Ländern ihre Coronapolitik als „alternativlos“ hingestellt. Unterstützt wurden sie dabei von ihren ausgesuchten „Experten“ und gleichgeschalteten Mainstream-Medien. Kritiker wurden diffamiert, verhöhnt und sanktioniert. [...] Kritische Wissenschaftler wie Roland Wiesendanger und viele einfach logisch denkende Menschen haben es von Anfang an nicht für einen Zufall gehalten, dass Sars-CoV-2 ausgerechnet in Wuhan entstanden ist, wo sich ein Labor befindet, in dem Gain-of-Function-Forschung an Sars-Viren betrieben wurde.

(Angerer, 2023)

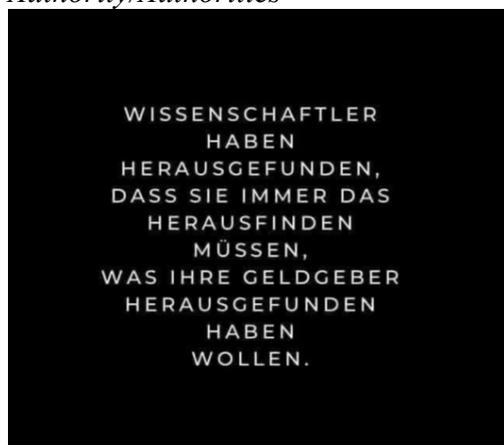
Example 17: Thematic Framework—Requirement for Scientific Rigour, Expertise, Authority/Authorities.

Z tohto pohľadu je to presne to isté, ako keď sa skoro 6 miliárd ľudí nechá presvedčiť, že si po najgigantickejšj psychologickej operácii dejín o "pandémii", ktorá nikdy nebola, nechá do tela vstreknúť chemikálie neznámeho pôvodu o ktorých samotní výrobcovia a promotéri hovorili, že nevedia, čo spôsobujú, pričom mnoho z nich upozorňovalo celkom zrozumiteľne, že to je koktejl s následkami nedozerných rozmerov vstupujúci do ľudského genómu. Popritom je celkom zábavné sledovať "odborníkov" arogantne opovrhujúcimi nielen pochybnosťami "hlúpeho plebsu" ale aj vynikajúcimi lekármi, ktorých umlčiava: vyjadrovať sa smie iba elitná špička imunológov a virológov, ktorú pred svetom reprezentuje Rockefellerov najgeniálnejší odborník – softvérový vývojár Bill so striekačkou v ruke.

(Rostas, 2023)

Figure 3

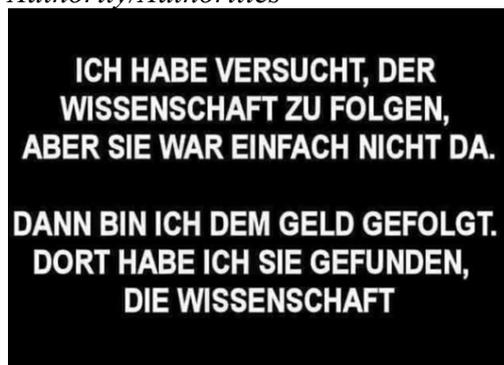
Thematic Framework—Questioning Scientificity, Expertise, and Presence of Authority/Authorities



Source: Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 4

Thematic Framework—Questioning Scientificity, Expertise, and Presence of Authority/Authorities



Source: Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 5

Thematic Framework—Questioning Scientificity, Expertise, and Presence of Authority/Authorities



Source: Post on Facebook (Henseler, 2023)

Example 18: Thematic Framework—Cluster for Assessing Group as an Authoritarian Cult.

Eine autoritäre Sekte [...] ein „Profil“ der entsprechenden Gruppe [...] Hierzu soll die folgende Checkliste dienen. Sie ist in sechs Bereiche gegliedert, die in den einzelnen Staatswesen zu Problemfeldern werden können — oder schon geworden sind:

1 Ideologie

2 Die zentrale Figur

3 Gruppenstruktur

4 Einfluss auf das Mitglied

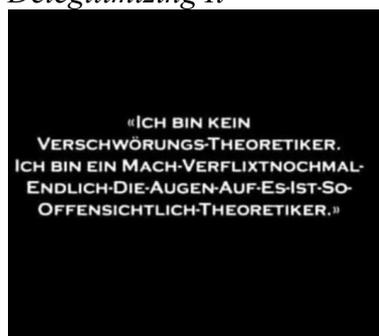
5 Techniken der Persönlichkeitsveränderung

6 Kontakte nach außen und Umgang mit Ehemaligen und Kritikern

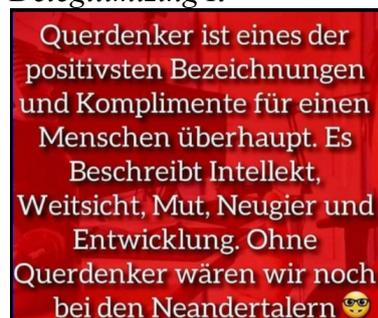
(Eggert, 2023)

Figure 6

Thematic Framework—Deliberately Adopting the Label “Conspiracy Theorist” and Delegitimizing It



Source: Post on Facebook (Egel, 2023)

Figure 7*Thematic Framework—Deliberately Adopting the Label “Conspiracy Theorist” and Delegitimizing It*

Source: Post on Facebook (Frühau, 2023)

Examples 13–18 and figures 3–7 are grouped under the strategy of mirroring attributes related to the profile of conspiracy theories, which is further organized according to thematic frameworks. These are typically responses to characteristics of conspiracy theories recognized from professional literature or public discussion. In texts and posts of a conspiratorial nature, these attributes are addressed with an extremely critical, aggressive tone aimed at turning negative evaluations against the opponent. The construction of a dualistic view of the world (good vs. evil) occurs against the backdrop of shared content and is easily recognizable to the audience.

Example 13 highlights the clash between truth and lies by framing conspiracy theories in favor of alternative media. Meanwhile, their opponents – elites, politicians, mainstream media, and others – are discredited. This is especially clear in efforts to damage the credibility of opponents through sarcastic statements (*Redaktorka sa drží svojich závideniahodných argumentačných zručností...; odhaľuje svoju komplexnú gramotnosť a divákov pouča...*). By flipping the attribute of conspiracy and adding suitable contextual links, the position of alternative media becomes more legitimate and stronger.

Another interesting example is example 14, which uses the technical term cognitive dissonance in connection with mainstream media (*...In den Mainstream-Medien, die sich in einem kolossalen Akt der kognitiven Dissonanz als “Qualitätsjournalisten” unverzichtbar wähnen, ...*). This is a term that is also used in connection with the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories and refers to a situation in which a person rejects other, contradictory explanations of an event in order not to disrupt accepted or expected interpretative frameworks and avoid a state of epistemic uncertainty (e.g., Binder & Kaltseis, 2023). In example 14, this term is used to discredit an opponent and emphasize their one-sidedness. Although cognitive dissonance usually refers to an internal conflict between contradictory beliefs, in this context it is understood more as a manifestation of the ideological closed-mindedness and inconsistency of the mainstream media, which nevertheless present themselves as “indispensable quality journalists.”

The following examples 15–17 and figures 3–5 are grouped under the framework of scientificity, expertise, and the presence of authority or authorities. Within this framework, two subtypes can be distinguished: the requirement for professional qualifications and the criticism or denigration of expertise. In professional discussions, conspiracy theories are often criticized for rejecting the opinions of scientific authorities, experts, and specialists. In example 15, we see a counterargument accompanied by an argument about the participation of experts from various fields in the creation of content in the periodical *Zem & Vek* (*Hanzelová ... “kádruje*

nielen odbornost' sudkyne ale aj periodikum, " ktorého redakciu už dekádu tvoria vysokoškolskí pedagógovia, výnimoční odborníci, lekári, ekonómovia, docenti, právnici a profesori ...). The legitimization of the alternative media is achieved by referring to the professional qualifications of the editorial team, thus reflecting the discourse of expertise. In contrast, mainstream experts (example 16) are presented as “selected” (*ihre ausgesuchten “Experten”*) and “like-minded” (*ihre gleichgeschalteten Mainstream-Medien*), thereby undermining their independence and expertise. The strategy of ridicule is applied in example 17, where the framework of scientific authority is transformed into a caricature symbolized by the image of Bill with a syringe in his hand. Direct criticism and even denigration of science are demonstrated by the posts in figures 3-5. Accusations of selling out science or having a limited view of events by fact-checkers clearly signal their rejection and simultaneous undermining of their position.

Example 18 attempts to depict the opponent as an “authoritarian sect” (*eine autoritäre Sekte*). This indirectly replicates how the conspirators themselves are often portrayed. A closer look at specific aspects also indicates that certain traits are reflected, such as ideas of blind obedience to authority, ideological closed-mindedness, and the related inability to think critically. It is also noteworthy that the source of the cluster or profile is a German association of psychologists, as this lends an air of professionalism to the conspiratorial text (e.g., Gross, 1996).

Figures 6–7 demonstrate the explicit adoption of labels used by opponents. Negative labels are ironically adopted and then framed positively, thus weakening their stigmatizing effect. The protagonists express their own understanding of the terms conspiracy theorist (*Verschwörungstheoretiker*) and alternative thinker (*Querdenker*) and elevate them to “superlatives.” In spoken language or informal chat communication, these labels may also appear alone, with appropriate intonation or punctuation. The addressee infers the meaning of their use from the implicit levels of communication.

Conclusion

The paper focused on analysing the mirroring strategy and its subtypes in German- and Slovak-language conspiracy discourse, represented by journalistic texts and multimodal social media posts from 2023. The results of the partial analyses show that the mirroring strategy is used in both language areas, and we can conclude that similar and, in some cases, identical frameworks are employed. Regarding the individual subtypes of mirroring, a relatively broad spectrum has been applied (see contextual analysis), and it should also be noted that in several cases, multiple subtypes overlap within the text. We did not highlight this in the analysis due to their overlap.

Summarizing the findings of the analyses, we can conclude that mirroring is a highly discrediting strategy used in conspiratorial discourse. Traits often associated with conspiratorial thinking are mirrored in this discourse and shifted to the “other side.” Alternative media and social networks of this type and their supporters explicitly or implicitly present themselves as carriers of truth, expertise, and independent thinking, while elites, the scientific community, and mainstream institutions are portrayed as sources of lies, manipulation, and dogmatic behaviour. The strategy thus legitimizes its own position while stigmatizing opponents, creating a stark contrast between “ordinary seekers of truth” and “dogmatic sects.”

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Contract no. APVV-22-0221.

References

- Angerer, E. (2023, March 22). *Die Formwandler der Eliten* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: The Shape-Shifters of the Elites]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/die-formwandler-der-eliten>
- Angerer, E. (2023, March 23). *Die Formwandler der Eliten 2* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: The Shape-Shifters of the Elites 2]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/die-formwandler-der-eliten-2>
- Badatel.net (2023, January 21). *Prelomová štúdia zistila, že 4 dávky covidových vakcín spôsobia takmer úplný kolaps imunity* [A breakthrough study has found that four doses of COVID vaccines lead to an almost total collapse of immunity]. <https://www.badatel.net/prelomova-studia-zistila-ze-4-davky-covidovych-vakcin-sposobia-takmer-uplny-kolaps-imunity/>
- Barkun, M. (2003). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. University of California Press.
- Behla, T. (2023, March 23). *Besonnenheit gegen „Bombenstimmung“* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: Keeping a Level Head Amid the War Hysteria]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/besonnenheit-gegen-bombenstimmung>
- Binder, E., & Kaltseis, M. (2023, February 28). Pseudowissenschaftliche Verführung oder warum wir Daniele Ganser nicht einfach ignorieren sollten [Pseudo-Scientific Seduction, or Why We Shouldn’t Simply Ignore Daniele Ganser]. In: *Forschungsschwerpunkt „Kulturelle Begegnungen – Kulturelle Konflikte“*. <https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/fsp-kultur/activities/blog/akademische-seitenblicke/binder-kalteis-pseudowissenschaft/>
- Brotherton, R. (2013). Towards a definition of “conspiracy theory”. *PsyPAG Quarterly*, 88(3), 9–14. <http://www.psytag.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Issue-88.pdf>
- Butter, M. (2021, August 27). Verschwörungstheorien: Eine Einführung [Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction]. In: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte 2021*. <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/verschwoerungstheorien-2021/339276/verschwoerungstheorien-eine-einfuehrung/-footnote-target-3>
- Butter, M. (2023). *»Nichts ist, wie es scheint«. Über Verschwörungstheorien* [»Nothing Is What It Seems«. On Conspiracy Theories]. Suhrkamp.
- Clos, F. (2023, April 21). Facebook post from the *Nein zum Impfwang* account [Facebook post from the *No to Vaccine Mandates* account]. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=241019655256012&set=g.3032783013658945>
- Drábik, J. (2024, February 10). Norimberský proces [The Nuremberg Trials]. *Encyclopaedia Beliana*. <https://beliana.sav.sk/heslo/norimbersky-proces>

- Egel, H. (2023, March 7). Facebook post from the *Zeit für Aufarbeitung* account [Facebook post from the *Time for Reckoning* account].
[https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=6266350650043929&set=g.39281374172741\)1/](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=6266350650043929&set=g.39281374172741)1/)
- Egel, H. (2023, March 16). Facebook post from the *Zeit für Aufarbeitung* account [Facebook post from the *Time for Reckoning* account].
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=6296472267031767&set=g.392813741727411>
- Egel, H. (2023, June 6). Facebook post from the *Zeit für Aufarbeitung* account [Facebook post from the *Time for Reckoning* account].
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=241019655256012&set=g.3032783013658945>
- Egel, H. (2023, August 8). Facebook post from the *Zeit für Aufarbeitung* account [Facebook post from the *Time for Reckoning* account].
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=6775016169177372&set=g.392813741727411>
- Eggert, W. (2023, February 8). *Eine autoritäre Sekte* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: An authoritarian sect]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/eine-autoritäre-sekte>
- Frühauf, J. A. (2023, November 18). Facebook post from the *Nein zum Impfzwang* account [Facebook post from the *No to Vaccine Mandates* account].
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=7601661259860818&set=g.3032783013658945>
- Fuchs, Ch. (2022). *Verschwörungstheorien in der Pandemie. Wenn über COVID-19 im Internet kommuniziert wird* [Conspiracy Theories during the Pandemic: When COVID-19 is discussed online]. Narr.
- Götz-Votteler, K., & Hespers, S. (2019). *Alternative Wirklichkeiten? Wie Fake News und Verschwörungstheorien funktionieren und warum sie Aktualität haben* [Alternative Realities? How Fake News and Conspiracy Theories Work and Why They Are Relevant Today]. Transcript.
- Gross, W. (1996). *Was eine alternativ-spirituelle Gruppe zum problematischen Kult macht. Psychologische Kriterien zur Beurteilung von Destruktiven Gruppierungen* [What Makes an Alternative-Spiritual Group a Problematic Cult: Psychological Criteria for Assessing Destructive Groups]. Berufsverband Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen e.V. Arbeitskreis “Psychomarkt und Religion”. <https://www.bdp-gus.de/gus/religionsps-psychokulte.pdf>
- Gysi, G. (2023, March 7). *Defensive Invasion* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: Defensive Invasion]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/defensive-invasion>

- Henseler, K. (2023, March 12). Facebook post from the *Nein zum Impfzwang* account [Facebook post from the *No to Vaccine Mandates* account]. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=6350644991620334&set=g.3032783013658945>
- Holland-Letz, M. (2020, June 25). *Online-Magazin „Rubikon“: Zweifel in der eigenen Echo-Kammer* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: Doubts in your own echo chamber]. <https://uebermedien.de/50234/online-magazin-rubikon-zweifel-in-der-eigenen-echo-kammer/>
- Lutter, M. (2001). *SIE KONTROLLIEREN ALLES! Verschwörungstheorien als Phänomen der Postmoderne und ihre Verbreitung über das Internet* [THEY CONTROL EVERYTHING! Conspiracy Theories as a Postmodern Phenomenon and their Spread via the Internet]. Ed. Fatal.
- Mies, U. (2023, February 2). *Der Putsch von oben* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: The Coup from Above]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/der-putsch-von-oben>
- Müller, T., Dehn, J., & Fürniß, A. (2023, December 12). *Rechte alternative Medien. Eskalationspresse* [Right-wing alternative media. Escalation press]. <https://katapult-magazin.de/de/artikel/eskalationspresse>
- Pfahl-Traugber, A. (2019, July 29). *Verschwörungen, Verschwörungsmymen und Verschwörungstheorien* [Conspiracies, Conspiracy Myths and Conspiracy Theories]. In: *Humanistischer Pressedienst: Wissenschaft*. <https://hpd.de/artikel/verschwoerungen-verschwoerungsmymen-und-verschwoerungstheorien-17050>
- Riedl, N. (2023, March 4). *Strategien der Macht* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: Strategies of Power]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/strategien-der-macht>
- Rostas, T. E. (2023, August 26). *Tí, čo nepodľahli teroru najrozšírenejšej propagandy dejín sú naozaj výnimoční* [Those Who Have Not Succumbed to the Terror of History’s Most Widespread Propaganda Are Truly Exceptional]. <https://zemavek.sk/ti-co-nepodlahli-teroru-najrozsirenejsej-propagandy-dejin-su-naozaj-vynimocni/>
- Rostas, T. E. (2023, December 7). *Ako sudkyňa vysmiala Hanzelovú aj ohľadne Z&V* [How the Judge Also Ridiculed Hanzelová over Z&V]. <https://zemavek.sk/ako-sudkyna-vysmiala-hanzelovu-aj-ohladne-zv/>
- Schmiege, J., Engelmann, I., & Lübke, S. (2023). Populistisch und verschwörungstheoretisch? Die Darstellung der Covid-19-Pandemie in rechtsalternativen Online-Medien [Populist and Conspiracy-Theory-Oriented? The Portrayal of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Right-Wing Alternative Online Media]. *Publizistik*, 68, 433–457. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11616-023-00819-2>
- Schuhmacher, V. (2023, February 4). *Die Gehirnwaschanlage* [Online magazine “Rubikon”: The Brainwashing Machine]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/die-gehirnwaschanlage>

- Stanková, M. (2020). Semiotická analýza ako metóda skúmania žurnalistických textov [Semiotic Analysis as a Method of Examining Journalistic Texts]. *Slavica Iuvenum XXI.18*. <https://doi.org/10.15452/SlavicaIuvenum.XXI.18>
- Štubňa, I. (2023, June 8). *Prezidenti B9 sa zaviazali nahnať občanov do vojny proti Rusku na príkaz USA...* [B9 Presidents Vow to Drag Citizens into War Against Russia at the US's Behest...] <https://zemavek.sk/prezidenti-b9-sa-zaviazali-nahnat-obcanov-do-vojny-proti-rusku-na-prikaz-usa/>
- Štubňa, I. (2023, June 21). *Je Čaputová milenka českého prezidenta Pavla?* [Is Čaputová Involved with Czech President Pavel?] <https://zemavek.sk/je-caputova-milenka-ceskeho-prezidenta-pavla/>
- Weinert, R. (2023, March 8). *Die Welt-Unglücksquelle* [Online magazine "Rubikon": The World's Source of Misfortune]. <https://www.rubikon.news/artikel/die-welt-ungluecksquelle>
- ZEM&VEK.sk (2023, October 28). *Okrem Orbána je teraz na summitoch EÚ už aj druhý „výtržník“* [Besides Orbán, a Second "Troublemaker" Now Joins EU Summits]. <https://zemavek.sk/okrem-orbana-je-teraz-na-summitoch-eu-uz-aj-druhy-vytrznik/>