Hate speech on social media: hate words and denigratory speech in the Italian political discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic

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The Covid-19 outbreak gave rise to a political debate that, for the first time, took place almost entirely on social media, to the extent that Facebook and Twitter became privileged channels of institutional communication. Hate speech, amplified and disseminated more rapidly by the new media, serves both as a direct aggression against individuals and groups and as a means of political propaganda (Bianchi 2021). For my presentation I have collected a corpus composed of tweets and Facebook posts by five Italian politicians, published between January and July 2020, and the subsequent reaction comments of other users.

I will focus firstly on hate words as they are emblematic symbols of hate speech, with their ability to combine the performative, normative and evaluative dimension of language with the pure descriptive dimension (Bianchi 2021). I consider as *hate words* epithets and statements that promote malicious stereotypes (Curtis 2016) and slurs, which is to say derogatory terms that target individuals and groups on the basis of their belonging to a certain category – their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and so on (Cepollaro 2017). The analysis will start from the lexical level: nouns, adjectives and verbs will be categorised according to the lexical and semantic typologies proposed by De Mauro (2016) and Faloppa (2020), which identify precise meanings for offensive terms (e.g. words indicating moral defects or evoking negative stereotypes).

Furthermore, hateful language can manifest through the use of implicit stereotypes and discriminations. I will show a few examples from the data in which the denigratory language is not overt, but the hate effect is rather created by linguistic elements that function as vehicles for implicatures and presuppositions (Lombardi Vallauri 2019).

Ultimately I will briefly illustrate how the linguistic and discursive effects of these hate words go beyond personal offence and have a strong discursive resonance through a complex network of strategies and hidden meanings. This level of analysis links the study to the tradition of examining identity and discrimination in Critical Discourse Analysis and to the construction of positive representations of the "self/us" and negative representations of the "other/them" (Wodak 2001). Strategies such as the use of *topoi*, intensification, categorisation and perspectivation will be highlighted. (Wodak 2001; Faloppa 2020).

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