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Scapegoating in Telegram Groups: A Contrastive Analysis of Topoi and Rhetorical Strategies of Anti-Semitism in German and French Messages

Abstract: Human beings and social groups tend to apply diverse, often completely irrational strategies of self-defence when challenged with new situations that cause uncertainty or fear. Prejudices centred on blaming other groups are frequently articulated in messages distributed and shared on digital messaging services with a wide audience. In this synchronically grounded paper, we focus on contemporary anti-Semitic scapegoating strategies in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. A bilingual corpus compiled from a large number of relevant Telegram-groups is analysed with regard to the topoi and rhetorical strategies applied in anti-Semitic scapegoating. A contrastive comparison of the French and the German data gives evidence of several similarities concerning the topoi, the rhetoric strategies, and the types of anti-Semitism in play, but also reveals some divergences. Most instances clearly qualify as hate speech based on fake facts, thus more research will be needed in the future to dismantle similar tendencies and create a growing awareness amongst media users.

Keywords: Telegram, scapegoating, anti-Semitism, Coronavirus pandemic, topos analysis

1 Introduction

Whenever societies are radically challenged – as during the Coronavirus pandemic – new conspiracy theories tend to emerge, and old hostilities and phobias are recycled and exploited in contemporary ways. In particular, scapegoating strategies – which are as old as humankind itself – are applied. Scapegoating shall be defined according to Glick as "an extreme form of prejudice in which an outgroup is unfairly blamed for having intentionally caused an ingroups' misfortune" (2005, 244). It is an individual cognitive process frequently related to irrational and maladaptive ego-defence mechanism (Allport 1979). Moreover, it involves – as this paper will focus on – a social process anchored on the group-level that continues to serve as *glue* for nations, societies, ethnicities, and all types

of communities and (political) groups, including groups created by computer mediated communication (CMC).[1]

The spread of viruses, with their ensuing epidemics and pandemics have always been attributed to certain groups reflected in the fact that throughout history diseases have recurrently been named according to their assumed groups of origin (from the *French Pox* to *Kung Flu*, cf. Eckkrammer 2016, 610–746). However, these groups do not necessarily have to be at all related to the factual genesis of the microbe. Thus, during the virulent Black Plague epidemic, which reshaped European society from 1348–1350, Jews were blamed for poisoning wells. In contemporary society, social media is used in various ways and, therefore, has many communicative forms (Dürscheid 2005) that foster scapegoating and hate speech with a communicative reach that is previously unknown, since the speed and storage capacity of social media are enormous in comparison to print culture. Conveying advanced media competency and enabling people to understand the impact of a message's medium, channel or communicative form is an important task for language teaching, especially for the younger generation who is most strongly engaged with social media. Even if we do not agree on the medium being the message itself (cf. Eckkrammer 2021), it is important to untangle the media-specific, multimodal and, above all, verbal strategies applied in scapegoating in the context of a pandemic and beyond.

In this paper, we will focus on hostility towards Jews in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic within a specific social media application. Anti-Semitism is not a modern phenomenon, as it dates back to antiquity. Throughout the centuries, it has manifested itself in various forms of discrimination and violence and has displayed an enormous capacity to change its form and adapt to new historical circumstances. Linguists cannot distance themselves from this issue, because anti-Semitism usually expresses itself in verbal and pictorial form – in texts – before it comes to physical assaults. In addition, we are in the midst of a profound

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[1] In CMC the precise individual background of group members can hardly be traced, thus, group membership is constituted by a common interest and a language shared to communicate.

process of communicative change, a media turn[2] – triggered by the step from the atom to the bit and byte – in which the functions of the individual media are being redefined. In cyberspace especially, new forms of social interaction have emerged that trigger and enhance community building across space and time beyond the established forms of interaction and quality-assured media (cf. Baechler et al. 2016). Digital culture implies a multiplicity of digital spaces of interaction that may be public, semi-public, or reduced to certain individuals. Dynamic, non-linear, multimodal hypertextual interaction occurs in the most varied settings and groups, leading to new communicative forms and, genres and opening spaces for a variety of of mobile interaction (since smart phones and micro-computers have become omnipresent). Social networking is ubiquitous and creates platforms both for traditional interaction and for alternative countercultures and conspiracy theories.

Grounded in a genre-theoretical and media linguistic framework, we will analyse the topoi as well as the rhetorical strategies applied in messages posted (and/or reposted) in 50 different groups drawing on the messaging service *Telegram*. Given the strong presence of conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, we particularly spotlight the different types of topoi related to anti-Semitic patterns in the first half of 2021, at the time when COVID-19 vaccination started. We scrutinize the recurrent verbal strategies applied when anti-Semitic explanatory patterns come into play, for instance defamatory metaphors, but also analogies, synecdoches or euphemism etc.

To pave the ground linguistically, we will define in-group messaging as a specific social practice applied to dispense (fake) news and create an exclusive ingroup spirit by deliberately casting doubt on the truthfulness of other media outlets. As generic point of departure, in the first part of the following theoretical chapter (2.1) we will focus on the individual message, leaving it to later in the paper to address the interactive structures within the groups, with their heavy reliance on reposting,

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[2] We use this term to refer to the German term *Medienwechsel* which describes an epochal functional transformation and redefinition of the media-scape (so far two periods: from the manuscript and oral culture to the printed book, and from the printing press to the digital Turing society) rather than *Medienwandel* which refers to the constant change in media experienced by each society.

reframing, and commenting previous messages. In the second part of the theoretical chapter (2.2) we will adress different forms of anti-Semitism – which are bound to contemporary conspiracy theories – by drawing on the relevant literature in different disciplines (Sociology, Political Science, History, etc.). In this way, the various forms of anti-Semitism will become evident in their historical entrenchment and in the specific contours of their content, and which contribute to the generation of those topoi which have been under analysis in politolinguistic research for some time (cf. Wengeler 2003). Analysing the diverse topoi from a contrastive viewpoint wil afford a better understanding of how anti-Semitic scapegoating was rhetorically carried out in different languages in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic.

2 Theoretical framework

Language generally occurs in communicative routines that are functionally grounded, thus in genres which according to Østergaard and Bundgaard represent "recurrent ways of using language that emerge according to the constraints inherent in situations" (2015, 98). Accordingly, the messages analysed in this paper are bound to a specific social setting and triggered by a hierarchical order of functions, which become apparent when studied in relation to the multidimensional model of genre emergence, classification, and analysis (Eckkrammer 2020). In this context, the appellative function governs subjacent functions such as the referential and expressive function, since the messages generally try to convince people of a certain point of view. The anti-Semitic content and its textualization (in the current study we do not include pictures, emoticons, and videos, but concentrate on verbal features) are prompted by the function (scapegoating) that is either drawing on old forms of Judeophobic prejudice introducing new ones. The conceptual level of the messages can be, conceptually oral written language (especially in the French corpus), but also highly elaborate conceptually written messages (mainly in the German corpus). The communicative form is the digital group message, in other words short instances of individually produced content (in some cases citations) shared with a large group (cf. 2.1 with reference to the size of the group). The size of the messages is exter-

nally governed by the platform (maximum size 4.096 signs),[3] which also determines the sign systems allowed and the form. Since we shed light on German and French messages, the Latin alphabet is used along with emoticons and (individually produced) stickers allowed by the application. Finally, the nature of the group (social setting) is defined by the digital medium used, which leads to recurring macrostructural features as well as rhetorical strategies that can be considered as typical for the messaging genre, including lexical choices, analogies, and metaphors. To understand them, however, it is necessary to understand the digital messaging service used in more detail.

2.1 *Telegram* as hybrid messaging service – media linguistic preliminaries

The first instant messaging services emerged in the early Internet era when the IRC (*Internet Relay Chat*) protocol was adopted and paved the way for text messaging. In 1996, the first messaging service, *ICQ* (short for "I Seek You"), was commercialized and instant messaging (SMS) became widely used and extremely popular as a fast quasi-synchronous or asynchronous form of text-based interaction. As ever more powerful micro-computers have been integrated into cell phones, making them *smart* and able to fulfil services previously assigned to personal computers, the communicative form of the text message amongst others (i.e. email, microblogging) has remained important. It has diversified and turned increasingly multimodal (with emojis, pictures, stickers, audio-messages, gifs, videos etc.). Applications such as *WhatsApp* have become extremely popular and messaging services have boomed, even though fervent discussions on data protection and privacy aspects have made people reconsider their habits to a certain extent and forced providers to enhance their protective policies. Each provider supplies slightly differing options and tools, for example the size of groups to be administered. Text messaging has turned from an essentially bilateral affair into a group or broadcasting activity, regrouping and catering to interest groups of very different social and political kinds.

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[3] Messages exceeding the number of signs can be produced by adding another message.

The specific form of one-to-many group messaging is in the focus of our study. It serves as a type of push medium that provides the members of a group with the means to circulate (fake) news or information on a specific topic and therefore creates an ingroup sentiment. Communication may be encrypted to a certain degree (cf. below). Community building via messaging can also be seen as a social practice applied to create an exclusive group spirit – to the extremes of deliberately casting doubt on the truthfulness of other media outlets. Messaging groups are not isolated but interrelated in many ways, thus reposts of messages from other similar groups are frequent and seem to strengthen the ingroup spirit but also turn group messaging into a form of social networking. The individual messages may display a high degree of planning or be rather spontaneous, especially when commenting on other messages. Messaging services and their role and function in different societies display changes over time according to their options (especially group size, degree of rules, ban on certain content, i.e. hate speech).

Telegram is a messaging service launched in 2013 by Nikolai and Pawel Durow, the developers of vk.com (until 2012 Vkontakte.ru), a well-known platform in Russia. It is particularly known for its encrypted communication in one-to-one-chats and its lax moderation of content. It became known as a *safer* alternative to *WhatsApp* when the latter was accused of the lack of data protection, driving many users away, but subsequently turned into the preferred messaging service for groups with extremist political positions (cf. i.e. Squire 2020 on the use of *Telegram* by the radical Right). *Telegram* can be understood as part of a "hybrid system" (Rogers 2020, 216) that is located between private messaging and social networking. It provides three basic features (features 2 and 3 were added in 2015): 1) secret chats for one-to-one end-to-end-encrypted conversations, 2) public and private discussion groups focused on interaction within the groups, 3) public and private channels for one-way one-to-many broadcasts with unlimited followers.[4] All features allow multimodal content such as pictures, memes and videos, besides classical verbal text messages. Unlike other messaging

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[4] There is quite a deal of cross usage of messages posted in channels and groups. In our corpus, reposts of channel broadcasted content in groups, in particular, is frequently observed.

services, up to 200,000 users can join *Telegram* discussion groups (*Signal* limits group to 1,000 people, *WhatsApp* currently to 256) and therefore reach an enormous number of people. With regards to these unlimited channels, Squire underlines that "for clandestine radical right extremist groups, these public Telegram channels are indispensable for spreading their memes, forwarding content from similar channels, and attracting new recruits" (2020, online). Users can search for keywords and thus find and read public *Telegram* groups. Consequently, in both German- and French-speaking contexts content specific groups can be found through systematic and targeted searches. It is typical for the groups to camouflage their content in the group name and change the name recurrently, making it hard to find the topic targeted in the messaging groups.[5] Accordingly a certain culture of camouflage seems widespread amongst *Telegram* users. The very limited terms of service provided by the *Telegram* application explicitly prohibit the promotion of violence on public channels but they do not interfere or moderate content in private channels or groups (and even with regard to the public one's requests are not responded to according to the established terms, cf. Molla 2021). The messenger service clearly states on its website that illegal content will not be taken down: "All Telegram chats and group chats are private among their participants. We do not process any requests related to them" (Telegram FAQ 2021). This frequently criticised *liberty* also triggers excesses, and *Telegram* has become a meeting place for conspiracy theorists (so far lawsuits against Apple to erase the App from its App Store – like *Parler* – have not been successful). Researchers on the subject, amongst others Rogers, warn that *Telegram* is also used by extremist groups such as ISIS (cf. Rogers 2020, 217).

From a genre-theoretical point of view, the individual message directed at the discussion group (even if it stems from other sources) is the nucleus of the interaction. It is either an autonomous text produced

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[5] A vast majority of groups studied here do not contain the terms *Corona*, *COVID-19* or *conspiracy* in their names. It is only possible to find out which groups are relevant in this context from other sources or intense network searches, because the groups mainly operate with members simply sharing similar sentiments and points of view having been pointed to the groups in question by their *ideational network*.

by an individual sender, who is expressing a personal opinion and/or observation, or a text produced by somebody else shared with the group. The message is usually tailored to the targeted audience, and therefore a message to a public might differ from that sent to a private group.[6] Comments and answers are dependent generic entities since they can only be understood as reactions to an initial message, in many cases reaffirming, extending, or underlining previous content.

2.2 Conspiracy theories and forms of anti-Semitism

Times of crisis, such as famine, pandemic, or war, can lead to an increased psychological need for explanations and therefore give rise to the emergence of conspiracy theories. These theories attempt to explain the unexplainable through imaginary theories (cf. Popper 2003, 112). During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals increasingly had to deal with fears about the future, for instance the threat of unemployment and an increasing sense of frustration. At the same time, measures to contain the spread of the virus, such as social distancing, lead in many cases to a sense of loneliness, which is one of the factors behind the increase in the number of individuals suffering from depression and anxiety in response to the pandemic (Palgi et al. 2020, 110). Commonly, conspiracy theories are related to existing fears and find a scapegoat onto whom fears and anger are projected. By using already existing scapegoating concepts, conspiracy theories tend to simplify complex circumstances (cf. Jaecker 2005, 9). Seen from a linguistic perspective, their purpose is to discredit the self-declared enemy by persuasive means (cf. Pörksen 2005, 50). A decisive characteristic for the existence of a hostile image is the rejection of other groups of people, ideologies, or individuals without giving rational reasons (cf. Jesse 2004, 4). To a certain extent, scapegoating can be understood as a response to modern life, liberties, and its uncertainties, which result in a psychological burden for the individual (cf. Flohr 1991, 114). In this way, conspiracy theories

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[6] Public and private groups only differ in terms of membership procedures, as there are none for public ones and differing ways of being admitted in private ones (e.g. questions to answer, interaction with other group members, bot chats etc.). Group members have the possibility to act anonymously or with real names (and even pictures or videos) in both types of groups.

and inherent scapegoating strategies may become a source of guidance, "doubts become dispensable; the individual arrives at a firm position that is cognitively underpinned by pseudo-rational justifications".[7] They are pseudo-rational in the sense that they partly rely on intertextuality, as in the case of anti-Semitism propagated by the "Protocol of the Elders of Zion", one of the best-known anti-Semitic propagandistic texts of the 20th century (cf. Holz and Kiefer 2010, 121). Constructing an enemy can entail an identity-forming mechanism, given that "an essential part of personal identity results from the demarcation of one's own person from others".[8] It can create a feeling of cohesion and security because a common enemy makes the differences within the group fade and common convictions grow (cf. Flohr 1991, 122). The latter outcome is pursued, in particular, by marginalized individuals. Often, a "victimization contest" can be observed among marginalized groups (cf. Stender 2010, 7) since the ascription of negative attributes to others, helps to create a positive self-image (cf. Flohr 1991, 119).

Scapegoating is to be understood as a deep-rooted social practice (cf. Glick 2005 on the choice of scapegoats) and Judeophobia existed long before it became the topic of research in the late 1970s (cf. Fischer 2018, 54). In this context, Jews are conceived as a counter-image to one's own group to whom all negative attributions are transferred, i.e. negatively perceived events such as an epidemic, a pandemic or a natural disaster (cf. Jaecker 2005, 11). Examples for associated events are the French Revolution, the First and Second World War (cf. Holz 2005, 28), or the assassination of Martin Luther King (cf. Anton 2011, 45). Jew-hatred differs from xenophobia by portraying Jews as homeless, imposing, and operating in secret. The appearance of the term *anti-Semitism* is often dated to 1879 and attributed to Wilhelm Marr, although it existed decades earlier (cf. Laqueur 2006, 21). Jew-hatred, as mentioned at the very beginning, is a phenomenon that already existed in the times of the plague in the Middle Age, as manifestation of conspiracies around poisoning

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[7] "Zweifel werden überflüssig; das Individuum gelangt zu einem festen Standpunkt, der durch pseudorationale Begründungen kognitiv untermauert wird" (Flohr 1991, 116).

[8] "[E]s ergibt sich ein wesentlicher Teil der persönlichen Identität aus der Abgrenzung der eigenen Person gegenüber anderen" (Flohr 1991, 118).

wells (cf. Weyand 2010, 78). This pre-modern form of hatred was pri-
marily carried out by a Christian in-group, accusing Jews of deicide (cf.
Schwarz-Friesel 2013, 333) under the claim of knowing the sole truth (cf.
Grözinger 1995, 57). Forms of Christian-influenced anti-Semitism have
found their way into religious services up to the 20th century (cf. ibid.).
With the Enlightenment, legitimisation of the exclusion of Jews ceases
to exist (cf. Weyand 2010, 78–79). Therefore, a conception based on rac-
ist and Social Darwinist doctrine emerges and replaced the religiously
influenced concept (cf. Stein 2011, 23). It is based on a dualism in which
a distinction is made between Jews and all other peoples (cf. Schwarz-
Friesel 2013, 337), resulting in a "double structure of differentiation"
(Weyand 2010, 83). This lead to the establishment of a "völkisch racist"
anti-Semitism during the National Socialist era (Schwarz-Friesel 2013,
333). "Eliminatory anti-Semitism" resulted in the killing of more than
six million Jews (cf. ib., 336).

   Numerous researchers (i.e. Holz 2005; Holz and Kiefer 2010;
Stender 2010; Bergmann and Erb 1986; Schwarz-Friesel 2016) argue
that the period following the mass murders in the concentration camps
by the Nazi regime has been followed by secondary anti-Semitism, or,
according to Laqueur (2006) and others, modern anti-Semitism. Anti-
Semitic attitudes have persisted in the minds of many people far beyond
the Second World War, but (due to legal constraints) they are no longer
expressed openly (cf. Salzborn 2010, 204). The core of secondary anti-
Semitism is to perform a perpetrator-victim reversal (cf. Holz 2005, 59),
which is understood as an attempt to disburden oneself of a past, in which
the memory of the Holocaust is seen as a disruption of national identity
(cf. Salzborn 2010, 199). Furthermore, any compassion for Holocaust
victims and their descendants is rejected. Instead, the confrontation with
the murders is framed as an "experience of suffering of the Germans"
(cf. Holz 2005, 58). As the author puts it very unmistakeably: "Accord-
ing to this, the *Jews* and not Auschwitz are to be blamed for the fact that
Germany is not allowed to be a normal nation".[9] In this line, Jews are
accused of being "troublemakers of memory" ("Störenfriede der Erin-
nerung", Stender 2010, 12) and expressions of dissatisfaction concerning

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[9] "Demnach sind *die Juden* und nicht Auschwitz schuld daran, dass Deutschland
    keine *normale Nation* sein darf" Holz (2008, 215).

reparation payments are frequently spread (cf. Laqueur 2006, 128). The call to end preoccupation with National Socialism and the question of guilt is often referred to as democratic anti-Semitism (cf. Holz 2005, 11), a phenomenon also found in France. Nevertheless, in the French case it relates to colonial history as well as the atrocities of the Second World War (cf. Eckmann 2005, 107). Another difference between France and Germany is that a specifically Islamic anti-Semitism seems to be more frequent in France due to failures in integration policy (cf. Wetzel 2008, 108) and, to a certain extent, can also be perceived as a form of anti-modernism. In practice, it attributes anything that promotes the downfall of the Islamic world to Jews (cf. Holz 2005, 25). Additionally, young socially disfavoured migrants may see the defamations of other minorities as a possibility to level up their own social standing (cf. Eckmann 2005, 107).

Besides democratic anti-Semitism and anti-modernism, a third type of secondary anti-Semitism can be identified as *Israel-critical* or anti-Zionist anti-Semitism. In this case the semantics associated with the term *Jew* is replaced by *Israel* (cf. Beyer and Leuschner 2010, 136). Jews, regardless of their nationality, are perceived as a collective, and thus guilty (cf. Stein 2011, 27). According to Wetzel (2008, 108) this phenomenon can be found across Europe and is particularly spread by left-wing groups. To evade legal proceedings (cf. ib., 106), it is often based on the apodictic assertion that Jews are associated with Satan and strive for world domination (cf. Laqueur 2006, 1).[10]

3 Instant messaging and scapegoating in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

3.1 Previous studies on the subject

The changes in anti-Semitism, its different forms of expression and its latency over time have already been examined by Bergmann and Erb (1986). They outlined that, although people have remained aware of anti-Semitism remains in people's minds, the boundaries of what can

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[10] Researchers dispute whether anti-Zionism is in fact necessarily anti-Semitic. It is argued that classifying anti-Zionism as anti-Semitic might result in an immunization of Israel's policies from any criticism (cf. Kiefer 2006, 279).

be said have shifted substantially (cf. ib., 230–231). In addition, Beyer and Krumpal (2010, 286) argue that a distinction between must be made the expression of anti-Semitic opinions in public and private groups. Accordingly, individuals tend to communicate anti-Semitic attitudes more often in a social environment not condemning or even endorsing them and the anti-Semitic message communicated does not necessarily correspond to one prevailing in public consciousness (ib., 701), which makes anti-Semitism difficult to study and entails methodological challenges. The study of anti-Semitism in the field of *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) is still in its infancy. Hortzitz in her analysis of the "Language of Hostility towards Jews" examines emails sent to the Central Council of Jews in Germany (CCJG) and concludes that the use of metaphors, synecdoche, analogies and euphemisms is particularly frequent (cf. Hortzitz 1995, 37). Schwarz-Friesel picks up this thread and analyses emails with anti-Semitic and anti-Israel content sent to the CCJG from a cognitive linguistic perspective. She gives clear evidence of a frequent use of metaphors with a defamatory effect and a revival of Nazi vocabulary. Furthermore, she identifies a high number of Holocaust-denying or -trivialising emails (cf. 2013, 198). As for the link between the Coronavirus pandemic and anti-Semitism the European Commission's study "The rise of antisemitism online during the pandemic", a comparison of the first months of 2020 to the first months of 2021, revealed that there was an enormous increase in both German (multiplication factor 13) and French (multiplication factor 7) anti-Semitic comments shared on social media (cf. European Commission 2021, 8). In the same field, the study "From anti-vaxxers to anti-Semitism: Conspiracy theory in the COVID-19 pandemic", published in 2020 by John Mann, analyses English-speaking Facebook groups on the topic of COVID-19 vaccinations. The author gives evidence that 79% of the groups contain at least one anti-Semitic statement (cf. Mann 2020, 19) and exemplifies various pseudo-arguments of conspiracy theorists, but without quantifying their frequency (ib., 8).

Even though linguists have made digital communication on social media in French and German the subject of debate linguists (cf. for example Rentel et al. 2014; Rentel and Schröder 2018), one-to-many messages in large discussion groups on messaging services with anonymisation functions such as *Telegram* or *Signal* have not yet been examined from a

linguistic perspective. It was a pre-study based on 300 conspiracist comments published at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in German and French *Telegram* groups that brought to light the relevance of the topic focused on in this paper, since it provided evidence of a strong presence of anti-Semitic topoi (22 % of the German, 11 % of the French topoi detected).

3.2 A topos-theoretical and rhetorical approach to telegram messages

3.2.1 Topos-analytical and rhetorical framework

As the aim of this paper is to examine messages from *Telegram* groups from a linguistic perspective in order to detect anti-Semitic topoi and rhetorics, it is Wengeler's topos analysis that provides a suitable form of discourse analysis, having been predominantly developed for political discourse. It is designed to dismantle comparable patterns of thought detected in a discourse and therefore, outlines a prevailing opinion without making a value judgement (cf. Wengeler 2003, 178). The term *topos* goes back to Aristotle and means the discussion of enthymemes, prototypical patterns of argumentation that aim towards plausibility. A topos therefore represents "the substantive reason for justifications".[11] The growing tendencies of individualism in current society contribute to a "multiperspectivity of opinions"[12] meaning that individuals can no longer rely on nation-wide traditions and shared knowledge, but instead they constantly have to deliberate and compare positions with each other (cf. Knoblauch 2000, 664–666). To avoid genuine deliberation, what is used to persuade group members of certain points of view are apodictic statements, which do not necessarily have to be true. Wengeler (2003, 177–178) refers to this type of argumentation by illustrating how the Toulminian three-step scheme is employed. It consists of an argument, leading to a rule of conclusion and the conclusion itself. The conclusion is derived from the conclusion rule, thus in terms of credibility it is crucial that the reader finds the conclusion rule plausible (cf. ib., 180–181) even if the argument is untrue. When recording basic social

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[11] "der inhaltliche Grund für Begründungen" (Hamp 2017, 98).

[12] "Multiperspektivität der Meinungen" (Knoblauch 2000, 665).

attitudes within the framework of topos analysis, moral values should not be considered (cf. ib., 141), which is why Wengeler's discourse analysis is intended to bring rationality to political or social discourse (cf. ib., 244). The basis for a topos analysis is a text corpus which, according to Wengeler, should be limited to a specific genre, a defined time, and a specific topic (cf. ib., 294). The author understands topoi as content categories, which reveal different types of thinking patterns, designed "clichés that have congealed into linguistic commonplaces" (ib., 186). Thus, topoi do not compartmentalise information, but rather create thematic categories. Based on the assumption that certain knowledge is socially prescribed, but not necessarily verbalised (cf. ib., 248), a topos may be realised in different shapes, differing from each other in their degree of implicitness or explicitness (cf. ib., 253).

We have shown how the verbal strategies here in question can be analysed according to rhetorical strategies known since antiquity that are employed in manipulating texts with the purpose of evoking certain reactions. Rhetorical devices in Judeophobic discourse have already been examined by Hotzitz (1995) and Schwarz-Friesel (2013), with a focus on metaphors, comparisons, and synecdoches. In the following section, we will show to what extent the rhetorical means of the "Language of Hostility towards Jews" (Hortzitz 1995) can also be traced on *Telegram*. In this context, we define metaphors as the paradigmatic structure that establishes the relation "X is a Y" (Schwarz-Friesel 2013, 196), thereby serving to stimulate attention and generate a higher readiness to absorb information (cf. Dietz 2012, 77). The aim of attracting attention, in particular, is key, due to how numerous *Telegram* groups are, coupled with the fact that these groups can only gain a greater audience if group members remain participant in the discussion. "Conspiracy theorists are almost overflowing with the need to communicate and missionary eagerness for persuasion".[13] Synecdoches consist of an 'exchange between elements that stand in some sort of a *pars-totum* relationship',[14] implying that there is a transfer of meaning between a part and a total.

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[13] "Verschwörungstheoretiker quellen geradezu über vor Mitteilungsbedürfnissen und missionarischem Überzeugungseifer" (Jaworksi 2004, 41).

[14] "Austausch zwischen Elementen, die in einem wie auch immer gearteten *pars-totum*-Verhältnis stehen" (Dietz 2012, 40).

3.2.2 Corpus compilation

In order to approach the topic empirically, we identified 300 German and French *Telegram* groups containing conspiracy theory content in the time horizon of the pandemic. The precise time frame chosen was the first half of 2021, because it was at this point that mass vaccination started.[15] The central discourse event selected therefore was the start of mass vaccination. Subsequently, we made random selection of groups using French and German as their main languages until 25 German-language and 25 French-language groups containing anti-Semitic comments were identified. To cope with the large volume of anti-Semitic messages within these groups, we applied specific keywords such as *Hitler*, *Zion*, *Sion*, *Jews*, *juifs*, *Jewish*, *juif*, *juive* and *Holocaust*. In the successive stage of data collection, we randomly selected ten anti-Semitic messages above and underneath each keyword message until we had a compilation of 500 comments (250 in French, 250 in German). During the compilation process, we constantly took into account the second criterion – the association of the messages with the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition, we eliminated duplicates if individuals shared the exact same message multiple times in different groups.[16] If this was the case, an attempt was made to identify and quote the originally submitted message.

3.2.3 Results of the topos analysis

Following Wengeler's topos analysis (2003, 297), we created a list of all occurring topoi combining Coronavirus and anti-Semitism, after studying and reviewing the corpus data in French and German in detail. Once

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[15] The Europeans Commission's recommendation for approval of the vaccine Comirnaty, developed by BioNTech and Pfizer, was issued at the end of December 2020, but due to the seasonal holidays and other organisational challenges, the actual vaccination process does not start for the most part until January 2021. Thus, the number of people who receive a first vaccination in week 52 of 2020 was below 55,000 across Europe, while more than two million first vaccinations were administered within the first week of January (cf. COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker).

[16] *Telegram* offers the option to forward messages, with the feature that corresponding messages are automatically marked with a disclaimer.

the list was completed and revised[17], in a second step of analysis we coded both corpora in relation to the listed topoi. Since Wengeler's analysis aims at identifying the most frequent ways of thinking (cf. ib., 296), topos analysis is less particularized in comparison to other approaches and infrequent topoi may also be omitted (cf. ib., 297). Percentage distributions are understood as indicative values according to Wengeler (ib., 299) and have to be contextualized and interpreted.

The following topoi were detected respectively in the French and German corpus and subsequently quantified in both corpora in order to determine their actual frequency. The following table shows the ten most frequently detected topoi in both the French and German, corpus, indicating their distribution:
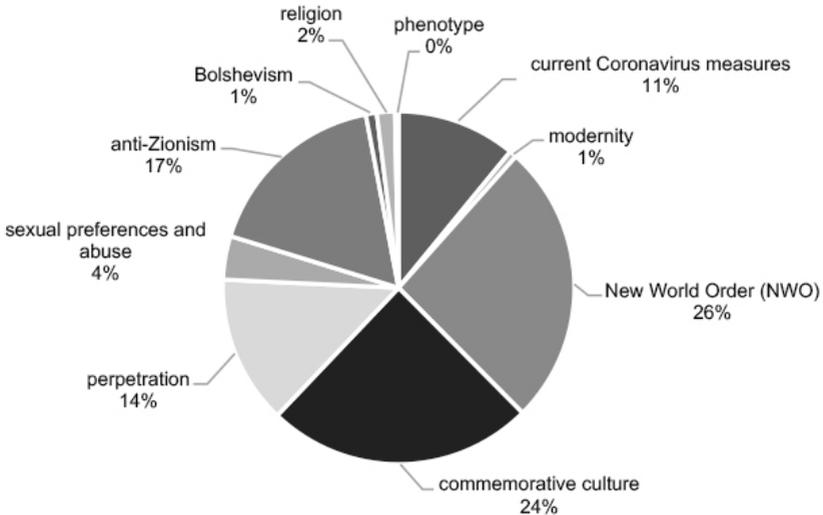
Fig. 1: Relative topoi frequency (French corpus)

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[17] In contrast to content-analytical methodological approaches, topos analysis allows to revise the list during the reviewing process.
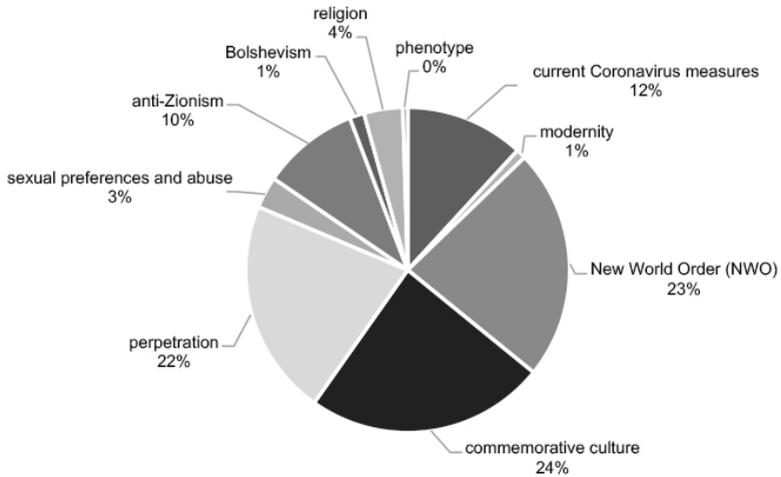
Fig. 2: Relative topoi frequency (German corpus)
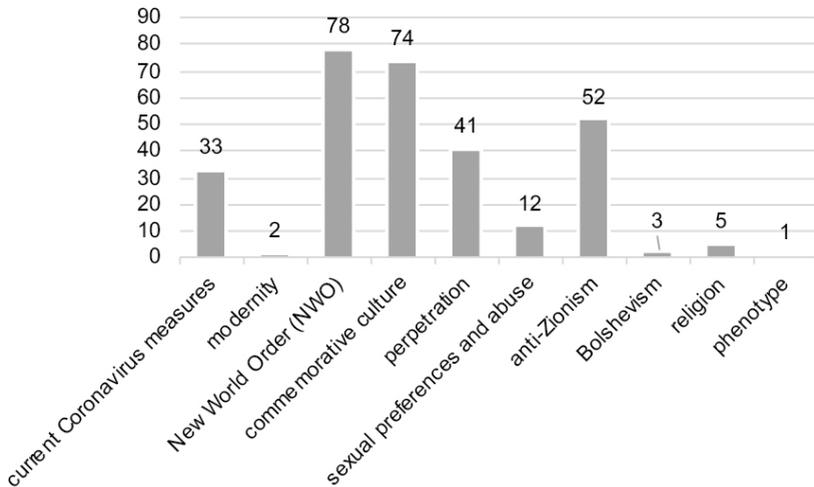

Fig. 3: Absolute topoi frequency (French corpus)
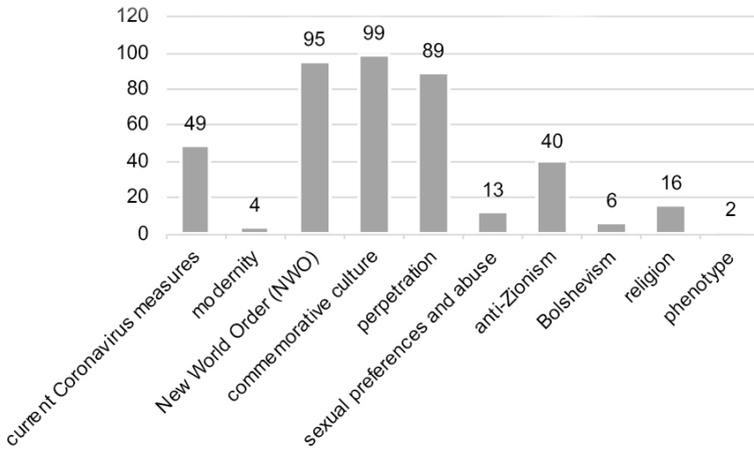
Fig. 4: Absolute topoi (German corpus)

The French and German corpus differ to a certain extent from each other in terms of the topoi most frequently represented, but also display an undeniable degree of homogeneity in terms of the five most widely addressed topoi (1–5). The three most frequent topoi in the French corpus are: NWO (26 %, 78 records), commemorative culture (24 %, 74 records) and by anti-Zionism (17 %, 52 records). In the German corpus, the most frequently occurring topoi are commemorative culture (24 %, 99 records), closely followed by the NWO topos (23 %, 95 records), and perpetration (partially including a perpetrator-victim reversal; 22 %, 89 records), though without specifying the deed. In the French corpus, the perpetration topos is also frequent, but only in forth position (14 %, 41 records), whereas anti-Zionism only figures in 10 % of the German messages (fifth position, 40 records).

However, there is a quite similar account of messages referring to contemporary Coronavirus measures as topos (12 % in German, 52 records; 11 % in French, 49 records), thus the pandemic seems to have caused a similar reaction in both language groups. All other topoi detected (6–10) are at 4 % or below and can therefore be considered marginal. From a contrastive perspective the most salient difference is that in the French messages, anti-Zionist ways of thinking – anchored in anti-Zionist anti-Semitism evident in the right- as well as left-wing spectrum (cf. Wet-

zel 2008, 107) – are much more prevalent as topoi in the context of anti-Semitic scapegoating, while the perpetration topos is more prominent in the German messages. The popularity in German messages of the perpetration topos, including perpetrator victim reversal, may be explained by a prevalence of democratic anti-Semitism (cf. 2.2) due to a guilt-ridden history.

Given the page limitations of this article, only the three most frequently detected topoi will be contextualised and explained in more detail. We also underline the fact that in many cases more than one topos is activated in a message. The NWO topos relates to a conspiracy theory that has its origins at the end of the Cold War and the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The actual term goes back to President George H. W. Bush, who used it to legitimise the American role in the Gulf War. On the liberation of Kuwait, he claimed that the New World Order consisted in the strengthening of the UN and its role as a guarantor of peace (cf. Ferdowsi 1994, 95). Conspiracy theorists have taken Bush's connection to Skull and Bones, as a starting point for the presumption that he is part of a secret society. According to this theory, a Deep State is striving for world domination by relying on the suppression of the world's population (cf. Barkun 2003, 40). As reported by the author, the conspiracy theory of the New World Order can be understood as a super conspiracy theory, which is constantly reinterpreted and therefore encompasses several other theories (cf. ib., 54). In anti-Semitic statements, the respective secret society is perceived as Jewish, and politicians are considered as puppets who merely carry out what they are ordered to do. The media play an essential role in this imaginary construct. They are said to perform a role in the spreading of conspiracy theories, but, paradoxically, they are also considered as a vehicle for the spread of Jewish omnipotent influence (cf. Anton 2011, 45). Also, traditional media are accused of wanting to conceal the truth:

> (1) Les médias juifs ne veulent pas que nous connaissions la vérité […] (F-G-41)
>   'The Jewish media does not want us to know the truth […]'

The commemorative culture topos (most frequent in German and second in French) is based on the claim that the current prevailing conditions are similar or the same as the conditions of the extermination of Jews during the National Socialist period. For the French corpus it could

be illustrated by a large proportion of comments with reference to the star of David:

> (2) Nous l'avons! L'étoile jaune ☆ À nous de l'utiliser car finalement entre Hitler et Schwab et son Great Reset, où est la différence de finalité? Des millions de gens vont mourir avec ce vaccin Pfeizer! Ne l'oublions jamais (F-M-2).
>
> 'We have it! The yellow star ☆ It's up to us to use it, ultimately between Hitler and Schwab and his Great Reset, is there any difference in purpose? Millions of people will die of this Pfeizer vaccine! Let's never forget it'

A similar equation of the ingroup with Holocaust victims was discussed outside of *Telegram* with media resonance in Germany in November 2020, when a speaker from the so-called *Querdenker* movement compared herself to Sophie Scholl (a young resistance activist murdered by the Nazi regime). However, this phenomenon is not entirely new: such comparisons were already openly proclaimed in 2002 during discussions about the publication of the names of high-income individuals (cf. Schwarz-Friesel 2013, 198).

The third most represented topos in the French corpus consists in the criticism of Israel, namely anti-Zionism. This pattern can be identified across Europe since the establishment of the State of Israel (cf. Eckmann 2005, 104), which has been perceived as a threat (cf. Lacqueur 2006, IX). This form of secondary anti-Semitism is commonly based on the association of Jews with the state of Israel or its negation, holding Jews responsible for the state's policies (cf. Beyer and Leuschner 2010, 136).

The topos of the Jewish perpetrator – 22% of the German corpus (in the French only 14%), making it almost equal to commemorative culture (24%) and NWO (23%) – has its origins in medieval times, when Jews were held responsible for the murder of Christ, ritual killing and the drinking of child blood (cf. Erb 1995, 74). The peculiarity of this topos is that although it refers to Jews as perpetrators, it does not name the exact offence. Due to this very vague form, it could also be connected to the NWO, i.e. in messages such as

> (3) DER JUDE IST DAS VIRUS 🏉 🕎 🔯 [...] (D-C-27)
> 'The Jew is the virus'

> (4) ES IST EINE JUDENPANDEMIE! (D-C-22)
> 'It is a Jewish pandemic!'

(5) Genauso ist es. Der Jude ist ein Parasit der die Völker der Welt aussaugt und vernichtet. Der Jude muss neutralisiert werden. Egal wie (D-E-7)

'That is how it is. The Jew is a parasite that sucks and destroys the peoples of the world. The Jew must be neutralised. No matter how.'

In other cases the perpetrator topos intertwines directly with the Coronavirus measure topos, i.e.

(6) DER JUDE WILL EUCH VERNICHTEN! Hier ein Video zum Buch […], wo die Vernichtungspläne der Juden anhand von Tora, Talmud und jüdische Kabala bewiesen werden. UND ES SOLL MIT CORONA UND DEN IMPFUNGEN GESCHEHEN. In diesem Sinne: Erwachet schnell! (D-I-1)

'THE JEW WANTS TO DESTROY YOU! Here is a video of the book […], where the extermination plans of the Jews are proven on the basis of the Torah, Talmud and Jewish Kabala. AND IT SHALL HAPPEN WITH CORONA AND THE VACCINATIONS. Therefore: Wake up now!'

To conclude our observations with a typical example of explicit Holocaust denial as part of an obviously fake commemorative culture linked to the perpetrator topos and the NOW topos, we give the following example from the German corpus, which was widely shared in the respective groups. It exemplifies how anti-semitic topoi are connected with current processes and measures linked to Coronavirus, such as vaccination.

(7) Der Holocaust ist eine fast so große Lüge wie die Korona-Pandemie! Beides erlogen vom Juden! Der Jude stürzte Deutschland erst in den ersten Weltkrieg und sorgte mit seiner Lüge vom verlorenen Krieg für die Niederlage! Als Hitler die Zentralbanken Rothschilds in Deutschland und Österreich entmachtete, eine eigene goldgedeckte Währung einführte, an der Rothschild nicht mitverdienen kann und ihn 1938 ins KZ brachte, begann wenig später der Krieg! Alle historischen Quellen belegen deutlich, dass die Juden zuerst Deutschland den Krieg erklärten und zwar schon 1933! Und 1936 sagte Churchill "Wir werden Hitler den Krieg aufzwingen ob er will oder nicht!" Er arbeitete für Rothschild! Die BRD wurde von Rothschild 1949 gegründet und um die Verfolgung ein immenser Kult erschaffen! Nazis brachten Juden um aber NIEMALS 6 Millionen! Letztlich erkannten sie vor allem den inneren Feind, der auch heute ein Feind blieb und hinter den Giftspritzen und der NWO steckt! DIE KOMPLETTE DEUTSCHE GESCHICHTE IST EINE DREISTE LÜGE! (D-M-1)

'The Holocaust is almost as big a lie as the Coronavirus pandemic! Both lies by the Jew! First, the Jew plunged Germany into the First World War and then ensured defeat with the lie of lost war! When Hitler disempowered the central bank of Rothschild in Germany and Austria and introduced an own gold-covered currency, so that Rothschild could not make any more money and then locked him up in a concentration camp in 1938, shortly after the war began! All historical sources prove clearly that the Jews were first in declaring war on Germany and as early as 1933!

Then in 1936 Churchill said "We will impose war on Hitler whether he wants it or not!" He worked for Rothschild! The FRG was founded by Rothschild in 1949 and an immense cult was created around persecution, an immense cult! Nazis killed Jews but NEVER 6 million! In the end they recognized above all the internal enemy, who has remained an enemy until today and is behind the lethal injections and the NWO! THE WHOLE HISTORY OF GERMANY IS A BRAZEN LIE!'

(8) 🔊😳 Es wird in sachen Corona keine aufarbeitung geben.. sie werden erneut lügengeschichten verbreiten wie nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg! Es ist der Endkampf.. Er, der ewige Jude oder Wir!

🔊🔊🔊 (D-I-11)

'There will be no reappraisal in the matter of Coronavirus. They will again spread lies as they did after the Second World War! It is the final battle. Him, the eternal Jew, or us!

3.2.4 Results with regard to rhetorical strategies

Following the quantitative analysis, we will illustrate from a qualitative viewpoint how schemes such as the perpetrator-victim reversal, the trivialisation of the Holocaust or its denial are realised rhetorically in the corpus. In public, democratic discourse *Auschwitz* is frequently applied as a euphemism for the murder of more than six million victims (cf. Holz 2005, 59) and a similar trivialisation also occurs in various *Telegram* groups. In addition to *Auschwitz*, *Nuremberg* is referred to in some cases with an attached *#2* (F-U-40) in order to equate the current situation and to stylise oneself as a victim. At the same time, in the French corpus victim stylisation manifests itself in the form of various analogies, which, along with metaphors, is the most popular linguistic device. The strategies applied range from a comparison of Macron with Hitler (F-D-26) to the closure of French bookshops to contain the virus with book burnings:

(9) Sous Hitler on brûlait les livres, maintenant on ferme juste les librairies (F-N-1).
'under Hitler they burned the books, now they just close the bookstores'

Analogies are also observed in the comparison of features or qualities, such as queuing for vaccinations being equated with *récupérer l'étoile jaune* ('picking up the Jewish star'; F-U-34) or the Coronavirus vaccine itself being associated with gas used to exterminate Jews (F-Y-1). Additionally, many messages have a sarcastic subtext that denies com-

passion toward Jews: *les éternels victimes* ('the eternal victims', F-T-5). Sometimes Jews are even explicitly blamed for other victims during the Second World War (F-D-9) giving evidence to the fact that sarcasm is a targeted strategy of scapegoating in the corpus. In the German-speaking corpus, in addition to comparisons between vaccine manufacturers and Mengele aiming at trivialising the Holocaust, there can also be found comparisons that ostensibly deny the Holocaust:

(10) Der Holocaust ist eine fast so große Lüge wie die Korona-Pandemie! (D-M-1, D-T-1).
'The Holocaust is almost as big a lie as the Coronavirus pandemic!'

Furthermore, neologisms are used as *contradictio in adiecto*, such as *the HOLOCAUST MÄRCHEN* ('the Holocaust fairy-tale'; D-C-34) to imply that the Holocaust is a myth. In addition to the denial of the Holocaust, however, a tendency towards trivialisation is also found in the German corpus, for instance by applying euphemisms. The verb *aufräumen* ('to clean up'; D-N-13) is euphemistically used for the murder of the Jews. At the same time, Hitler is exonerated in some messages of the German corpus by the means of metaphors such as *Spielfigur* ('game figure'; D-M-7) or *Marionette* ('puppet; D-T-11). In contrast, metaphors drawing on virus, parasites, diseases and vermin in farm animals are applied with the intention to depict Jews in a dehumanizing way, a strategy that implies, according to Hortzitz (1995, 24), that extermination is conceivable. Certain users escalate this way of thinking to the point where they explicitly share appeals for the murder of Jews on *Telegram* through euphemisms with reference to concentration camps:

(11) Ich glaube Dachau funktioniert noch (D-N-23)
'I think that Dachau still works'

or

(12) macht Auschwitz wieder auf (D-P-10)
'reopen Auschwitz'.

The defamatory attitude towards Jews is also expressed using synecdoche – a word or phrase applied to refer to the whole of it (*pars pro toto*) or inversely –, which is the most common linguistic device in the German corpus, for instance *der Jude* 'the Jew' to refer to all Jews. The expression *the Jew* additionally functions as a denial of individuality (cf.

Hortzitz 1995, 37). Another frequently applied synecdoche is *the eternal Jew*, alluding to a folk tale book published under this title in 1602 which established the stereotype of the anti-Christ. Since then, it has been repeatedly taken up in various modernised forms (cf. Körte 2008, 92). Intertextuality is also invoked by referring to propagandist writings, such as "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion", "Mein Kampf" or speeches given by Goebbels. At the same time, Talmud quotations and citations of German television programmes or Jewish journals are frequently applied when the group members aim at legitimising their statements. In addition, reference is made to contemporary conspiratorial publications in book form. *Telegram*, in contrast to platforms like *Instagram*, offers the possibility to share relevant writings as PDF files, or to tag messages with URLs.

The studied texts frequently seem rather atypical for messages in messenger services with their different degrees of elaboration, although this may be related to the fact that anti-Semitic statements are blocked on other websites. Particularly in the German corpus they are rather long and detailed, and it seems as if they intend to familiarize new users with anti-Semitic *theories* as quickly as possible to enable them to join the discussion. Calls to redistribute the messages and content are frequent and indicate a very specific sharing culture in this *scene*, which aims at scapegoating in a targeted way, as well as enlarging the communities themselves. Drawing on Glick's (2005, 251–252) ideological scapegoating model it seems due to specific rhetorical devices that shared beliefs, stereotypes and ideologies are fervently propagated without allowing any counter-position. The group's interaction seems tailored to a "collective process by which commitment to hateful ideologies becomes widely shared within a community, creating a consensus that spawns political movements (e.g., Nazism) and coordinated hostile actions (…)" (ib., 251). The final aim in terms of lessening frustrations of the ingroup and their members, however, will challenge the respective societies even more.

4 Conclusions

Telegram clearly offers echo chambers to further radicalize people who already have a tendency towards conspiracy theories and extremist content. Especially in terms of anti-Semitism, the hybrid medium certainly caters to the shifting limit of what can be said (a lot of the analysed content is simply illegal). The more messages of this kind are spread and shared among the participants of the groups, or even channelled and stored online, the more opinions tend to fossilize. The Coronavirus pandemic has challenged our societies in many ways and obviously triggered a backlash with regards to Judeophobic conspiracy theories, but also some adaptions to the new situation. One can only hope that we get the genie back in the bottle and find ways of including topics such as social media scapegoating strategies in language learning. This would help to create an enhanced awareness of scapegoating practices and enable people to dismantle questionable or simply fake content in social media, especially in applications, lacking moderation of content, such as *Telegram*, and therefore invite the spread of hate and fake news. The return of diverse anti-Semitic topoi in both German and French *Telegram* groups cannot be ignored, neither by political nor legal nor educational entities. However, France and Germany have to tailor their respective activities and programmes as a joint endeavour because the NWO topos and the commemorative culture topos prevail in both corpora and must, therefore, be addressed first. The alleged media conspiracy combined with other accusations (cf. 3.2.3) makes clear that there is an overall manipulation of content that can only be countered by a thorough uninterrupted transmission and study of facts as well as a clear comparison of social media with good moderation and lax moderation, to introduce those ethical guidelines to which the traditional print press is already subject. The commemorative culture topos – anchored predominantly in secondary democratic anti-Semitism – is manifold but must be counteracted by a continuous effort striving for a truth-bound memory culture and a strict persecution of any denial or trivialization of the mass murders of the Nazi regime. Equations and exonerations encountered with regards to this topos must not leave us speechless, but rather be rejected at all times by all legally possible means. We have to teach – including when training a foreign language or future linguists

– how guilt-rejecting anti-Semitism is staged on the rhetorical level in our own as well as the foreign tongue in order to dismantle scapegoating practices and hate speech. The notable increase in anti-Semitic messages during the described observation period, probably similar to other linguistic communities, if we take into account recent studies on anti-Semitisms across Europe (Bergmann 2008; 2014) and beyond (Rabinovici and Speck and Sznajder 2004) make it paramount that we consider the pedagogical implications of this type of social media communication, which aims at simple explanatory patterns in order to submit a certain group to scapegoating. The interrelatedness of language and thinking should lead us to ask more explicitly for moderation or bans on certain messaging applications and for the inclusion of social media competency as a key faculty in any type of language learning activity. Courageous approaches are needed to counter fake news or hate speech in communicative spaces where fact-based exchanges of views no longer happens, but only targeted scapegoating.

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