

WHAT MAKES DISINFORMATION SO CONVINCING FROM A DISCOURSE ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE THE ART OF MIMICRY AND LEGITIMATION OF FALSEHOOD

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Abstract. This paper investigates legitimation strategies in Lithuanian disinformation texts aiming to determine how they are used to legitimize false information to make it look credible. This study examines the distribution of legitimation strategies, their forms and contents in disinformation texts and mainstream media. Its primary focus is on how these strategies in fake news help to mimic factual texts and the informative style characteristic of them. The approach of critical discourse analysis serves as the main analytical framework, which gives a broader outlook to the linguistic mechanisms that are at work when framing the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the results, it is argued that when developing media literacy skills, it is necessary to give attention not only to some distinct features of disinformation but also its intended imitation of “serious” genres.

Keywords: fake news, mainstream media, factual texts, COVID-19 pandemic, Lithuanian

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that disinformation is a widespread phenomenon and is a source of societal problems (the extent and nature of the threats it poses, however, is a debated matter). Beyond this, there remains considerable fuzziness, including in the terminology related to disinformation, the theoretical and methodological perspectives used to analyze it, not to mention the strategies for countering this phenomenon. Some of the broad and unanswered questions include how one can determine the criteria which can help to recognize disinformation (in both automated and non-automated ways) and what makes disinformation texts so convincing that they trap certain readers. These two aspects are at the core of media literacy: better

awareness of manipulative techniques signaling the deceptive character of public discourse can increase the public's resilience in the face of online disinformation.

When it comes to the language of information and disinformation, there is no clear-cut distinction. The conventions of the genre of news reporting are adhered to in both factual news articles and fake news articles, and the distinction between the two lies in certain subtleties of the way particular conventional features are used (e.g., Mahyoob et al. 2021). Disinformation texts are texts in disguise, which are based on simulation/imitation of "serious" genres and blended with more popular genres (cf. *meta-mimesis* in Horbyk et al. 2021, see also Molina et al. 2021). That is, similarly to factual news reports, disinformation texts mimic an informative style but tend to take a pseudo-scientific stance, while at the same time they also tend to have features of an argumentative style (more characteristic of debates, not news articles, although they may appear in opinion pieces).

This mimicry of factual texts, achieved through complex mechanisms of legitimation, makes it difficult to identify disinformation without fact checking. It is especially challenging in developing systems for automated detection of disinformation, but not only. Manual analysis is also overburdened by the fact that, without fact checking, disinformation and factual texts differ just in some subtleties and the frequency of certain properties rather than particular distinctive, straightforward, and definitive properties.

Another problem associated with disinformation is its vastness, which has been especially evident since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which researchers started speaking about the emergence of a parallel "infodemic": a "viral" increase in the spread of disinformation about COVID-19 (Recuero et al. 2022). Disinformation is typically fueled and made viral by certain authorities (esp. political authorities, and these are different political actors in different countries; see Recuero et al. 2022) and masquerades as factual information using particular legitimation strategies. These strategies are often based on predictable, archetypal narratives in the broad sense, and specific linguistic resources forming very complex inventories.

By adopting a discourse analytic approach, the present study aims to investigate legitimation strategies in disinformation texts to determine how they are used to legitimize false information to make it look credible. This investigation addresses the following research questions.

1. What legitimation strategies are used for justification in Lithuanian disinformation texts and mainstream media? What legitimation strategies are used to delegitimize opposing viewpoints?
2. What are the forms and contents of legitimation?
3. How does the use of these strategies help to mimic factual texts and the informative style characteristic of them?

The approach of critical discourse analysis is expected to give a broader outlook to the linguistic mechanisms that are at work when framing the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, this approach has mainly been applied to investigate (public) discriminatory discourses in political/institutional contexts (e.g., Rojo & van Dijk 1997, van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999). Disinformation, meanwhile, has been dealt with from the DA perspective to a very limited extent. Ebuka Igwebuike & Lily Chimunya's (2021) research on disinformation in Nigeria is, to the best of my knowledge, the only study of this type. A similar study is that of Vamanu (2019), but it applies a

broad CDA perspective and deals not only with argumentation schemes in fake news, but also the discourse participants and overall structure of texts to relate fake news and propaganda.

2. Background to the study

Disinformation has been receiving rather extensive attention in communication and mass media studies, political science, psychology, and other areas, but it has been addressed to a relatively limited extent from the linguistic perspective even though the main vehicle for expressing it is language. On the basis of a systematic literature review, De Beer and Matthee (2020) identify the following approaches used for fake news detection: 1) language approach (which in their review covers only the approach adopted in automated text analysis), 2) topic-agnostic approach, 3) machine learning approach, 4) knowledge-based approach, and 5) hybrid approach. Despite the growing interest in the language approach to disinformation, to date, there is still a lack of linguistic descriptions of disinformation texts (cf. Lugea 2021). In Lithuanian, linguistic properties of disinformation have also not been studied in a more systematic way, and in general most of the research focuses on English overshadowing what is potentially universal or specific in different social contexts.

In linguistics, two main trends in disinformation research can be identified: 1) studies attempting to develop criteria for automated detection of disinformation (receiving an upsurge of attention but still in its initial phases of development) (see Peng et al. 2025 for an overview of existing false information detection techniques) and 2) an even less developed discourse analytic approach aiming to understand the mechanisms of deceit by examining discursive strategies used to disseminate disinformation. Regarding the former approach, a lot of research has been done in languages other than Lithuanian aiming to establish tangible criteria (linguistic indicators) for automated detection of disinformation/fake news (e.g., Badaskar et al. 2008, Chen et al. 2015, Conroy et al. 2015, Rubin et al. 2015, Rashkin et al. 2017, Shu et al. 2017, Parikh & Atray 2018, Marquardt 2019, Jover 2020). This type of research usually combines the methods of corpus/computational linguistics and stylistic analysis or register analysis (following, for instance, Douglas Biber, as in Lugea 2021). Perhaps the most extensive register analysis to date is provided by Jack Grieve & Helena Woodfield (2023), whose primary focus is on grammatical variation in real and fake news. Thus, the focus in this trend is mainly on grammar and syntax and to some extent lexis (but in any case, these are surface-level features).

An exhaustive taxonomy of online content for “fake news” detection has been provided by Molina et al. (2021). They identify “eight categories of online content for the purpose of algorithm-based detection of ‘fake news’: real news, false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism” (Molina et al. 2019: 186). For each of these categories, a detailed set of features is developed by covering such aspects as the type of message and its linguistic properties, sources and intentions, structural properties, and network features (Molina et al. 2021).

In the area of automated disinformation detection, there has already been some tangible progress in the sense that some tools have been developed (or are being

developed) for detecting fake news and sets of relatively reliable criteria are already emerging (see Peng et al. 2025). For example, Atodiresei et al. (2018) report on the initial version of a tool developed to identify fake news on Twitter with the component of the Twitter Crawler, which collects and stores tweets in a database to make it possible to assess suspicious and supposedly false content against credible content.

In contrast to the approach focusing on automated fake news detection, the discourse analytic perspective is less widely applied in linguistic research of disinformation. It has a more holistic viewpoint and goes beyond the surface-level features, which does not necessarily provide unambiguous criteria for automated detection of disinformation, but it can lead to a holistic picture of the disinformation landscape.

3. Data and methods

This section describes the data used for the empirical analysis and outlines the methodological and analytical framework applied to analyze the data.

3.1. Data

The data cover the topic of COVID-19 and consist of two datasets: one representing disinformation texts, and one consisting of texts obtained from mainstream media. Each dataset consists of 40 texts. The data used to represent mainstream media were collected in August 2022 from a major Lithuanian news portal *delfi.lt* and comprise 34,293 tokens. To represent disinformation, 40 texts (18,111 tokens) were collected in November 2022 from the portal *minfo.lt*, which is well-known for publishing propaganda and disinformation. Instances of disinformation were determined through fact-checking, and some facts had already been debunked by national and/or international mainstream media.

The forty texts in the disinformation dataset include all the items found on the topic of COVID-19 on this portal at the time of data collection. Interestingly, when collecting the data, it emerged that there is very little original Lithuanian content used for disinformation, and the texts posted and recycled are mainly translated or adapted reposts from *The Epoch Times* and *Technocracy News* (for more detail, see Ruzaitė 2024). Both *The Epoch Times* and *Technocracy News* frequently publish misleading or false information and conspiracy theories from a far-right perspective and promote pseudoscience.

The portal *minfo.lt*, paradoxically, defines itself as “[a] portal of good knowledge for a thinking person. Its goal is a sober, thoughtful, bright Lithuania that believes in the future. The creators believe that the media can serve a person, lead them to awareness, expand awareness, and promote changes in the person themselves.” However, the content published contradicts these claims.

The analysis adopts both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. The strategies used are first quantified in both datasets in order to map out the level of justification used in the two types of texts. These quantitative results and trends observed in them are further discussed in the qualitative analysis. Though two datasets are employed, the analysis does not undertake a systemic comparison. The data containing factual news serve only as a background against which the trends

in fake news are compared, and the primary focus is on the argumentation strategies used in disinformation. The analysis was carried out from the perspective of critical discourse analysis; the analytical concepts and categories applied in it are outlined in the next section.

3.2. Analytical framework

The analysis applies a discourse-analytic (DA) approach and draws on the legitimation strategies proposed by Theo van Leeuwen (2007) and van Leeuwen & Ruth Wodak (1999). In this study, legitimation is treated as an analytical category that forms part of the methodology and guides the identification of discursive practices in the data. The definitions and categories outlined below thus underpin the operationalization of what is considered to constitute legitimation in the analysis and how different legitimation strategies were determined.

Legitimation is understood here as a strategy or mechanism employed to rationalize and validate certain actions, practices, or the social/institutional order. More specifically, following van Leeuwen, who uses Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann's definition (1966: 111, as cited in van Leeuwen 2007: 92), legitimation is defined as follows:

Legitimation provides the 'explanations' and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. (It) 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings and [---] justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives.

In the context of media and the social system of knowledge production, this institutional order refers to mainstream journalism, the authority of which relies on established norms of truth-telling and credibility, and against which disinformation outlets define themselves either through imitation or contestation.

The data were manually annotated by the author of this paper for four main types of legitimation strategies. To enhance analytical consistency, the annotated data were revisited after a two-week interval and reevaluated against the same definitional criteria, confirming the stability of the initially identified categories. To identify and examine the discursive means used to justify false news, the analysis consistently followed van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) analytical framework, which distinguishes four types of legitimation, defined as follows.

1. **Authorization**, that is, legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested; it includes references to:
 - a. Personal authority;
 - b. Expert authority;
 - c. Role model authority;
 - d. Impersonal authority;
 - e. The authority of tradition;
 - f. The authority of conformity.
2. **Moral evaluation**, that is, legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems, which covers the following resources:

- a. Evaluation (esp. through the use of evaluative adjectives);
 - b. Abstraction;
 - c. Analogies or comparison (positive or negative).
3. **Rationalization**, that is, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity:
- a. Instrumental rationalization (focusing on the purpose or effectiveness of a particular practice);
 - b. Theoretical rationalization (can be experiential or scientific; realised as definitions, explanations, and predictions of activities).
4. **Mythopoesis**, that is, legitimation conveyed through narratives/story-telling the outcomes of which reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions; these include:
- a. Moral tales and cautionary tales;
 - b. Inversion of actors/actions;
 - c. Protagonists vs. antagonists;
 - d. Symbolic actions. (Van Leeuwen 2007)

In the present study, these definitions served as operational definitions of different legitimation strategies. Due to space limitations, the four legitimation strategies are not exhaustively described here in full detail. Where analytical uncertainty arose, van Leeuwen's (2007) detailed conceptualization and examples were used as the guiding framework.

Following van Leeuwen (2007), these strategies were treated as analytically flexible categories that can occur in isolation or in combination and function both to legitimize particular claims and to delegitimize opposing viewpoints or sources of information. Accordingly, in the quantitative analysis, if a passage contained more than one legitimation strategy, each strategy was counted separately. This is especially important in cases where an entire text serves as a moral or cautionary tale but also contains passages with multiple instances of the authorization strategy (typically through references to expert authorities) and theoretical rationalization (often through references to the alleged negative consequences of vaccination). In addition to counting strategy instances, patterns across texts were qualitatively examined to interpret how different strategies combined to construct persuasive or delegitimizing discourses. When different strategies are intertwined in the same passage, their combination is discussed in the empirical analysis.

4. Analysis

The empirical analysis has revealed that, at the surface level, the rhetoric of disinformation texts clearly mimics the informative style of serious genres and tends to take a pseudo-scientific stance. At the same time, disinformation employs features of argumentative style more characteristic of debates but not news articles.

As the quantitative results demonstrate, both disinformation and mainstream media texts rely largely on the same strategies of legitimation but to a different extent (as displayed in Table 1). Most frequently, some rational (or pseudo-rational) arguments are provided by making theoretical generalizations (the strategy of

theoretical rationalization) or by making references to goals, means, and effects (the strategy of instrumental rationalization).

Table 1. Distribution of legitimization strategies in disinformation and mainstream media texts

Strategies	Sub-types of strategies	Disinformation	Mainstream media
Authorization	Impersonal	31	14
	Personal	179	290
	Expert	178	283
	Role model	1	7
	Tradition	0	0
	Conformity	0	0
	Total	210	304
Moralization	Evaluation	53	33
	Abstraction	42	28
	Analogies	16	4
	Total	111	65
Rationalization: Instrumental	Goal orientation	7	16
	Means orientation	9	12
	Effect orientation	68	13
	Total	84	41
Rationalization: Theoretical	Definition	11	6
	Explanation	162	158
	Prediction	40	120
	Total	213	284
	Total Rationalization	297	325
Mythopoesis	Moral tales	5	3
	Cautionary tales	25	4
	Total	30	7
Overall occurrence		648	701

These strategies will be further discussed in more detail in the order of frequency by primarily focusing on disinformation texts. Mainstream media texts are used here as the backdrop against which the distribution of legitimization strategies is assessed, but they will not be analyzed as thoroughly from the qualitative perspective.

4.1. Rationalization

Rationalization, which is the most prevailing strategy in both fake and factual news, is achieved through theoretical and instrumental rationalization. As can be seen in Table 1, theoretical rationalization clearly dominates in both fake and factual news, but, interestingly, it is more prevalent in factual news (284 instances as compared to 213 instances in disinformation). The most dramatic difference between the datasets

can be observed regarding the subcategory of prediction, which is three times as frequent in factual news than in fake news. This trend can be explained by the fact that mainstream media provides a broad diversity of projections about the possible effects of vaccines and the pandemic. Instrumental rationalization, in contrast, is more frequent in disinformation (84 instances as contrasted to 41 instances in factual news). This difference reflects the dominant focus in disinformation on the ineffectiveness of vaccines.

In disinformation texts, **instrumental rationalization** is realized through references to the goals, uses, and effects of institutionalized social actions, such as vaccination, use of different types of treatment, lockdown, or other contra-pandemic measures, as in examples (1–3).

(1) *Goal orientation*

Norėdami nustatyti, ar populiarėjanėių skiepų daėnis neturi jokio ryėio su lėtinių vaikų susirgimų skaiėiaus padidėjimu, buvo atlikta preliminarus faktų nustatymo tyrimas, **kad bėtų galima vertinti** skiepytų ir neskiepytų vaikų sveikatos bėklės skirtumus.

‘**To determine whether** the increasing rate of vaccinations is unrelated to the rise in chronic illnesses among children, a preliminary fact-finding study was conducted **to assess** differences in health outcomes between vaccinated and unvaccinated children.’

(2) *Means orientation*

[---] kyla diskusija: jei taip yra iš tiesų, tuomet kodėl Kinijoje yra pradėti atlikinėti klinikiniai tyrimai, kuriais siekiama išsiaiėškinti, **ar į veną leidžiamas vitaminas C gali bėti naudingas gydant pacientus nuo koronaviruso?**

‘[---] the discussion arises: if this is indeed the case, then why have clinical trials been initiated in China to investigate **whether intravenous vitamin C might be beneficial in treating patients with coronavirus?**’

(3) *Effect orientation*

Nuo mirėių dėl vakcinos sukkelto miokardito iki rimto širdies priepuolio rizikos padidėjimo, su COVID-19 vakcinų injekcijomis susijusi rizika ir toliau auga, o jų veiksmingumas vaikams pasiekė gėdingai žemą lygį.

‘From deaths due to vaccine-induced myocarditis to an increased risk of serious heart attacks, the risks associated with COVID-19 vaccine injections continue to grow, while their effectiveness in children has reached a shamefully low level.’

As demonstrated in example (1), goal-oriented units frame interventions in terms of their intended outcomes, creating an appearance of objective assessment. Means-oriented passages, as in example (2), focus on procedures or methods, often questioning or portraying specific actions of governments, pharmaceutical manufacturers, or doctors as illegitimate. As illustrated in example (3), effect-oriented argumentation emphasizes consequences, often amplifying potential risks to shape audience evaluation.

When instrumental rationalization is used to delegitimize vaccines by framing them as an inappropriate response to the virus, the focus lies on deaths allegedly caused by vaccination, side effects of vaccines, and individuals resisting vaccination, as in example (4).

- (4) Pasaulio ekonomikos forume (WEF) Davose spręsta, kas geriausia planetai ir visiems joje gyvenantiems. Tačiau Stéphane'as Bancelas, “Moderna” generalinis direktorius, forume **buvo liūdnas**. Jis **buvo nusivylęs**, kad žmonės nebenori jo įmonės gaminamų COVID-19 vakcinų “Vaxx”.
 ‘The World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos discussed what is best for the planet and everyone who lives on it. But Stéphane Bancel, CEO of Moderna, **was sad** at the forum. He **was disappointed** that people no longer wanted Vaxx, his company’s COVID-19 vaccine.’

As demonstrated in example (4), instrumental rationalization can resort to pseudo-rational and hardly verifiable arguments about, for instance, the emotional state of the vaccine producer.

Theoretical rationalizations are realized by appealing to socially or scientifically constructed knowledge that grants claims validity or delegitimizes alternative positions. These include references to experiential or scientific knowledge and appear in disinformation texts as definitions, explanations, and predictions of activities, often in relation to vaccination, public health measures, or medical research, as in examples (5–7).

- (5) *Definition*
 Tai ne kas kita, kaip biologinis karas...
 ‘This is nothing less than biological warfare...’
- (6) *Explanation*
 Kitaip tariant, kvantinių taškų tatuiruotes reikia nuskaityti modifikuotais išmaniaisiais telefonais.
 ‘In other words, quantum dot tattoos need to be scanned using modified smartphones.’
- (7) *Prediction*
 vėžys – gali grėsti tiems, kam buvo suleistos vakcinos nuo kovido ligos
 ‘Cancer – it could pose a risk to those who have received COVID-19 vaccines’

Definitions are typically formulated using the structure ‘X is Y’, which presents claims as categorical and self-evident. Explanations often elaborate on the effects of vaccines, COVID, symptoms, and side effects, summarize recent studies, societal developments, or provide illustrative examples, giving the claim an appearance of empirical grounding. Predictions commonly employ future tense verbs or modal constructions to project possible negative effects of vaccines, amplifying perceived risk.

Theoretical rationalization is closely associated with scientific style, and as such, this strategy often involves the use of academic jargon and hedging (a means of mitigating or otherwise expressing the author’s stance), as illustrated in example (8), where only the English translation is provided to save space.

- (8) **Neurodegenerative diseases** are **chronic diseases** that damage the **nerve cells of the brain** and cause a **pronounced cholinergic disorder of the brain** and *are manifested* by memory, speech, perception, behaviour, and movement **disorders**. **Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, Huntington’s disease, amyotrophic lateral (lateral) sclerosis** share similar **cellular and molecular mechanisms** of development, *such as protein adhesion and inclusion*

formation. Neurodegenerative diseases *are thought* to have **unfolded proteins in their native form**. They can form both **disordered and amorphous aggregates**, but the most characteristic are **amyloid fibrils**. **Adhesion** may increase with increased **protein concentration**. It can be caused by **genetic factors** leading to **increased gene expression**. *For example, hereditary Parkinson's disease can be caused by triplication of the α -synuclein site (promoter)*. A **polymorphism** in the **promoter region** of **disease-associated genes** can increase **gene expression**, leading to an increased risk of developing a **neurodegenerative disease**. When a **mutation** occurs in the **gene** that codes for a **protein**, the **primary structure of the protein** *is altered*, which makes the **protein** more prone to **binding**. **Neurons** can die selectively and their number decreases.

In this passage, the first sentence is a definition of neurodegenerative diseases followed by several explanations of the characteristics of the diseases (presented in all the subsequent sentences) and some examples (marked in italics). The overuse of academic jargon (highlighted in bold) makes the text overburdened with highly specific lexis characteristic of scientific style. Another feature imitating academic style in disinformation texts is that of hedging (underlined in example (8)), which here includes modals and passive verbs (underlined and italicized).

The dense mark-up in example (8) shows that disinformation texts can use an intricate texture of stylistic properties typically associated with the canon of scientific writing, which consequently creates the aura of sophistication, rationality, and credibility at least on the surface. However, these definitions and explanations are not necessarily false. What makes them deceitful is how they are integrated into the overall argumentation. For instance, neurodegenerative diseases are misleadingly presented as a consequence of vaccination and thus become part of the argument in the overall delegitimation of vaccines.

4.2. Authorization

The authorization strategy involves “[---] reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested” (van Leeuwen 2007: 92). Van Leeuwen (2007) distinguishes several types of authorities, including impersonal, personal, expert, role model, tradition, and conformity (legitimizing an action by showing it aligns with what most people do). Authorities are referred to because of their status or expertise, and their role is usually explicitly indicated, as in example (9).

- (9) JAV maisto ir vaistų administracija (FDA) ir “Pfizer” 75 metams bandė nuslėpti COVID-19 klinikinių tyrimų duomenis. “Kai tai pamačiau, pasakiau, kad įvyko sukčiavimo atvejis”, – sakė **advokatas Edwardas Dowdas**.

“The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Pfizer attempted to conceal COVID-19 clinical trial data for 75 years. “When I saw this, I said that a case of fraud had occurred,” said **lawyer Edward Dowd**.”

Example (9) is a typical illustration of how disinformation texts employ personal authorization through a named legal expert while simultaneously delegitimizing institutional authorities, such as the FDA and Pfizer, through scandal framing, thereby shifting epistemic credibility away from mainstream institutions toward oppositional voices.

As quantitative results show, references to a role model, tradition, and conformity are (almost) non-existent in disinformation texts; therefore, further analysis focuses on references to authorities. The incidence of such references in factual news clearly outweighs that in disinformation (290 instances of personal authorization in factual news as contrasted to 179 instances in disinformation). Interestingly, impersonal references (achieved by using, for instance, a passive or any other construction without the agent, or by using a very generic agent) are more than two times as frequent in disinformation as in factual news; consider example (10).

- (10) **Anksčiau rašyta** apie Vokietijoje atliktą tyrimą, kuriame nustatyta, kad vaikų gebėjimas skaityti smarkiai sumažėjo, palyginti su laiku iki COVID, – dėl lokdauno politikos, dėl kurios buvo uždarytos mokyklos. **‘It was previously reported** on a study conducted in Germany which found that children’s reading ability had declined sharply compared to the period before COVID, due to lockdown policies that led to school closures.’

Importantly, in disinformation texts references to authorities are marked by a high degree of abstraction, few direct quotes, missing references, or a lack of specific names. Authorization in fake news thus often includes such generalities as *experts* (“even the **experts** don’t know what’s next”) or *officials* (“**Government officials** continue denying deaths linked to Pfizer’s mRNA COVID-19 vaccines”). In addition, mainstream experts are questioned and undermined (thus, delegitimized), and scientists are demonized (represented as a sinister powerful group), as in example (11).

- (11) Tiesą sakant, 500 % daugiau futbolo žaidėjų ES miršta nuo širdies priepuolių nei prieš metus. Sutapimas? Tuomet, **kai žinoma**, kad “Pfizer” vakcina sukelia širdies uždegimą? Ne. Tiesą sakant, **daugelis gydytojų, gydančių šiuos žaidėjus, nurodo**, kad jų sužalojimai ir mirtys yra tiesiogiai sukeltos vakcinės. Tai nėra atsitiktinumas – sveiki paaugliai miršta po “Pfizer” injekcijos. **Gydytojai** įspėjo FDA prieš išleisdami eksperimentinę vakciną, kad ji “beveik neabejotinai sukels siaubingą organų žalą.”
‘In fact, 500% more football players in the EU are dying from heart attacks than a year ago. A coincidence? At a time when **it is known** that the ‘Pfizer’ vaccine causes heart inflammation? No. In fact, **many doctors treating these players state** that their injuries and deaths are directly caused by the vaccine. This is not a coincidence – healthy teenagers are dying after a “Pfizer” injection. **Doctors** warned the FDA before the release of the experimental vaccine that it would “almost certainly cause horrific organ damage.”’

In fake news, as illustrated in example (11), impersonal authorization often operates by invoking unspecified research (e.g., “a study conducted in Germany”, “doctors”), thereby avoiding clear attribution or accountability and thus making factual verification difficult.

4.3. Moralization

Moralization is a legitimation strategy achieved through “(often very oblique) reference to value systems” (van Leeuwen 2007: 92). In the case of disinformation and mainstream media, the value systems are directly conflicting and often incompatible. All the subcategories of moralization (evaluation, abstraction, and analogies) occur more frequently in fake news, and the overall number of occurrences is almost two times larger in disinformation (111 instances) than in mainstream media (65 instances).

The most intricate subcategory of moralization is that of abstraction, which, following van Leeuwen (2007: 99) is defined as references to moral evaluations by referring to “practices (or to one or more of their component actions or reactions) in abstract ways that ‘moralize’ them by distilling from them a quality that links them to discourses of moral values”, as in:

- (12) Manoma, kad šios ligos vis jaunės. Deja, nežinome, ar šių ligų daugės dėl vakcinų, nes tarp skiepijimo ir ligos diagnozės praeis gana daug laiko. **Tai labai naudinga vakcinų gamintojams, kurie daug uždirba iš mūsų bėdų.**
‘It is believed that these diseases will increasingly affect younger people. Unfortunately, we do not know whether the incidence of these diseases will increase due to vaccines, because a considerable amount of time will pass between vaccination and diagnosis. **This is very beneficial for vaccine manufacturers, who profit greatly from our misfortunes.**’

In example (12), complex causal relations are reduced to an oversimplified moral opposition between “us” as victims (“our misfortunes”) of morally corrupt, profit-seeking “them” (“vaccine manufacturers”). By omitting specific evidence, the claim presents an abstract generality that frames vaccination as ethically problematic.

In moral evaluation legitimation, different narratives are resorted to make moralizing judgements in disinformation, but most commonly these texts assess what is generally morally right and wrong (e.g., “their [vaccines] efficacy in children has reached a **shamefully** low level”). Evaluative adjectives and metaphoric expressions are central in the analysis of this strategy, as in example (13).

- (13) Yra daug priežasčių vengti kovido ligos vakcinų, kurios **užplūdo rinką savo agresyvia taktika.**
‘There are many reasons to avoid COVID-19 vaccines, which have flooded the market with their aggressive tactics.’

Here metaphoric language (“flooded the market”) and evaluative phrasing (“aggressive tactics”) frame vaccination as morally questionable and a threat, thereby appealing to the readers’ sense of moral judgments rather than empirical evidence. In general, disinformation texts heavily exploit this type of scare narrative about vaccine producers hiding evidence.

4.4. Mythopoesis

Mythopoesis, as has already been mentioned, is defined as the use of narratives where agents are rewarded for their legitimate actions and are punished for non-legitimate ones (van Leeuwen 2007: 92). As the quantitative results show (see Table 1), this legitimation strategy clearly prevails in disinformation texts (30 instances as opposed to only 7 occurrences in mainstream media). These narratives are structured as archetypal tales with prototypical good and evil characters, follow a plot with an easily identifiable scheme, and usually have a moral. The characters are involved in the fight between “heroes” and “anti-heroes”, and good against evil. In other words, an outstanding trend in fake news is that complex societal issues are reduced to the well-recognizable scheme of protagonists confronting a major conflict. Such discourses thus exaggerate hostility and frame society as two poles representing irreconcilable enemies.

Mythopoesis is realized through cautionary tales and moral tales. Proportionally, cautionary tales constitute the majority of such storytelling (25 instances out of 30). Both cautionary and moral narratives predominantly resort to sensationalization. One of the common approaches in sensationalization is the use of scare tactics (e.g., “we will all be trans people”) and making predictions about a frightening future. Often, these tales use numerical references thus creating the myth of objectivism.

Moral tales in fake news are usually structured as research reports, where individual cases are presented as model or paradigmatic examples of a delegitimized action, which typically is the act of getting vaccinated. Such stories often start with an opening sentence followed by a complication, which sets the scene and frames the antagonist, as in example (14).

- (14) Būtų labai kvaila vertinti korporaciją “Pfizer” kaip tiesiog nekompetentingą ar korumpuotą. Panašu, kad ši įmonė bendradarbiauja su kitais, perimdama visą genetinę medžiagą žemėje.
'It would be very foolish to see the Pfizer Corporation as simply incompetent or corrupt. This company seems to be working with others to take over all the genetic material on earth.'

The adversary here is a typical one: an “incompetent” and “corrupt” pharmacy corporation. Such a role ascribed to the antagonist is part of the scare tactics characteristic of disinformation.

Moral tales are different from cautionary tales in that they are didactic and aim to teach a moral lesson, which is based on the paradigm of protagonists being rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices, or restoring the legitimate order and vice versa. For example, in the current study, researchers resisting “official” science are claimed to be “persecuted”, which frames the protagonist as a martyr trying to restore the legitimate order imposed by the antagonist. In such stories, the weaker character confronts a stronger opponent.

To teach a moral lesson, such narratives refer to some negative consequences (“punishment”) for those who side with the Other or “them” (“the antagonist”). Consider example (15), where a person who got vaccinated is framed as a victim of vaccination.

- (15) Anksčiau sveika 36 metų dviejų vaikų motina mirė praėjus 11 dienų po “Pfizer” vakcinos nuo COVID-19. Iš pradžių jos mirties priežastis buvo laikoma neaiškia, tačiau tyrimo metu patologas dr. Sukhvinderis Ghataura paaiškino, kad jis mano, jog kaltos COVID-19 vakcinos: “Vertinant tikimybių pusiausvyrą, ji turėjo su vakcina susijusių problemų. Mano nuomone, tai yra labiausiai tikėtina priežastis.”
‘A previously healthy 36-year-old mother of two died 11 days after receiving the Pfizer vaccine for COVID-19. At first, the cause of her death was considered unclear, but during the investigation, pathologist Dr. Sukhvinder Ghataura explained that he believes the COVID-19 vaccines are to blame: “On the balance of probabilities, she had a vaccine-related problem. In my opinion, this is the most likely reason.”’

This moral tale is based on the storyline of “good” vs. “poor” decision making, and the moral lesson is that it was a wrong decision to get vaccinated.

Finally, both cautionary and moral tales often employ the metaphor of war based on antagonism between the adversaries “us” and “them” and in this way delegitimize vaccines, as in example (16).

- (16) Kiekvienas **karas** atneša **aukų**, o technokratijos **karas** prieš žmoniją nėra išimtis, išskyrus tai, kad 98 procentai gyventojų net nepripažįsta, kad mes **kariaujame**. Vakcinų su mRNR užtaisų injekcijos visiškai nepavyko ir žudo tūkstančius, tačiau valdžia vis dar nieko nedaro, kad sustabdytų šias skerdynes.
‘Every **war** brings **casualties**, and the technocracy’s **war** on humanity is no exception, except that 98 percent of the population doesn’t even recognize that **we’re at war**. Injections of mRNA-loaded vaccines have completely failed and are **killing thousands**, but the authorities are still doing nothing to stop this **carnage**.’

Military lexis, highlighted in bold in example (16), austere polarizes “us” and “them” and thus aims to create an atmosphere of fear, danger, and distrust. During the pandemic, mainstream media were also criticized for overusing the war metaphor, but, unlike in factual news, in fake news the adversary is not the virus but vilified “technocrats”, framed as a powerful, venal, and conspiring group of people, supporters of vaccination, or generally people with a different value system.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The current research aimed to examine three major aspects: 1) the distribution of legitimation strategies, or otherwise the level of justification in disinformation and mainstream media texts, 2) the way different legitimation strategies are used to justify disinformation to make the reader susceptible to it, and 3) how the use of these strategies helps to mimic factual texts and their informative style. The most general conclusion that follows from the present analysis is that disinformation masquerades as factual information using particular legitimation strategies, which also appear in mainstream news. These strategies are often based on predictable,

archetypal narratives in the broad sense, and specific linguistic resources forming complex inventories.

The level or extent of justification was assessed mainly from the quantitative perspective: the frequency of different legitimization strategies was compared in the two datasets (fake and factual news). The results have shown that overall, both types of texts extensively use justification (or legitimization) strategies. Very similar conventions typical of the genre of news reporting are followed in both factual news articles and fake news articles, and the differences between the two lie in the frequency of different strategies (cf. Mahyoob et al. 2021). As was initially hypothesized, there is no clear-cut distinction between the language of information and that of disinformation. An argumentative style in disinformation clearly imitates the informative style of factual genres through strategies such as: legitimization by reference to different types of authority, reference to value systems, and (theoretical) rationalization imitating scientific conventions realized as definitions, explanations, and predictions of activities. Thus, at the surface level, no major differences emerged. These results confirm some earlier observations that disinformation texts mimic “serious” genres, an informative style, and scientific texts (cf. Horbyk et al. 2021, Molina et al. 2021, Grieve & Woodfield 2023); thus, fake news can be deceptive already at the surface level.

The quantitative results further suggest that there are no *categorical* criteria at the level of discourse analysis that would help to distinguish disinformation and factual texts, but there are some noteworthy differences in the frequency of some legitimization strategies and in the way they are integrated into the overall discourse argumentation.

Some important differences emerged at the level of macroanalysis in terms of the types of agents referred to in the texts, larger narrative structures, and the way the overall goal is framed. In disinformation texts, the agents form the dichotomy of “us” and “them”: “us” (the good, those resisting the government, the rich, scientists, mainstream journalists) vs. “them” (the evil, sinister agents). Regarding the larger narrative structures, in disinformation, the narratives are centered around “the Enemy” (stemming from the bipolar opposition between “us” and “them”) and thus recycle and disseminate strongly polarizing discourses. In terms of the goal, disinformation texts formulate it as a mission of fighting the enemy, while mainstream media focus on the goal of fighting the virus. Hence, disinformation discourses are enemy-oriented, as opposed to solution-oriented discourses in mainstream media. Importantly, these aspects (polarization and focus on the enemy) are a predominant feature of hostile discourses in general (e.g., hate speech, aggressive language, discriminatory discourses, and negative stereotyping (cf. Ruzaitė 2021, 2023, 2024)).

The most dramatic differences between disinformation and mainstream media manifest in terms of the storytelling technique, or the use of certain myths or tales in van Leeuwen’s terms. Quite unexpectedly, the results revealed that disinformation texts employ this strategy considerably more often than mainstream news. This finding contradicts some previous studies, which have identified mythopoesis as a rare legitimization strategy: in van Leeuwen (2007) it was infrequent, and in Igwebuiké & Chimunya (2021) it did not feature at all. This difference in the results can be explained by the fact that van Leeuwen’s (2007) study examined institutional data from educational contexts and factual information, not disinformation, which suggests that mythopoesis is a feature of fake news. Igwebuiké & Chimunya’s (2021) research did examine disinformation, but it addressed social media (WhatsApp,

Facebook, and Twitter), where the brevity of texts perhaps does not allow to develop an archetypal storyline. Thus, it can be assumed that mythopoesis in larger textual units can signal deceitful content though it is not an unambiguous identifier.

Importantly, as the present study shows, the surface-level features are where imitation takes place the most, and the bottom layer is where the texts diverge in some fundamental ways and where the value systems and ideologies emerge. It is easiest, though, to observe surface-level features (therefore, disinformation texts are so manipulative), but for the larger constructs, critical reading skills and a more holistic approach are required. Critical reading thus should develop the skills of noticing both similarities and differences between texts as both are indicators of disinformation. Disinformation, in broad terms, is marked by two important properties: imitation of serious genres and a distinct ideological agenda based on a specific conflicting value system.

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MIS MUUDAB DESINFORMATSIOONI DISKURSUSANALÜÜTILISEST VAATENURGAST VEENVAKS? MIMIKRI JA VÄÄRINFO LEGITIMEERIMISE KUNST

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Artikkel uurib legitimeerimisstrateegiaid leedu desinformatsioonitekstides eesmärgiga selgitada, kuidas neid kasutatakse valeinfo legitimeerimiseks ja usaldusväärseks esitamiseks. Uurimus käsitleb legitimeerimisstrateegiate jaotust, vorme ja sisu nii desinformatsioonitekstides kui ka peavoolumeedias. Põhitähelepanu on sellel, kuidas need strateegiad aitavad valeuudistes jäljendada faktilisi tekste ja neile iseloomulikku informatiivset stiili. Peamise analüütilise raamistikuna kasutatakse kriitilist diskursusanalüüsi, mis võimaldab avaramalt käsitleda lingvistilisi mehhanisme COVID-19 pandeemia kujutamisel.

Analüüs näitab, et desinformatsioon esitleb end faktilise teabena, kasutades strateegiaid, mis on omased ka peavooluajakirjandusele, toetudes sageli arhetüüpsetele narratiividele ja mitmekesistele lingvistilistele vahenditele. Kvantitatiivne võrdlus näitas, et nii peavoolu- kui ka desinformatsioonitekstid kasutavad ulatuslikult legitimeerimisstrateegiaid, kusjuures erinevused ilmnevad pigem sageduses ja löimingus kui kategooriaalsetes tunnusoontes. Autoriseerimine on sage mõlemas andmestikus, kuid peavoolumeedias esinevad avaramad vaatenurgad ja täpsemad tsitaadid, samas kui desinformatsioon on polariseeritum ning kaldub vastandama “õigeid” ja “valesid” seisukohti. Suurim erinevus ilmneb mütopoeesis: desinformatsioon kasutab jutustamist ja müüdilaadseid narratiive märksa rohkem kui peavoolumeedia, vastupidiselt varasematele uuringutele. Desinformatsiooni diskursust iseloomustavad ka polariseeritus, vaenlasekeskne narratiiv ja vaenulikkus, mis lähendab seda diskrimineerivatele diskursustele, näiteks vihakõnele. Kokkuvõtvalt tugineb desinformatsioon ajakirjanduslike konventsioonide pealispinnalisele jäljendamisele, samal ajal kandes sügavamaid ideoloogilisi kavatsusi. Seetõttu eeldab selle tuvastamine tähelepanu pööramist mitte ainult lingvistilistele tunnustele, vaid ka laiematele diskursiivsetele muustritele ja väärtussüsteemidele.

Võtmesõnad: valeuudised, peavoolumeedia, faktiline tekst, COVID-19 pandeemia, leedu keel

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