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THE DISCOURSE OF FEAR: A CASE STUDY OF MISINFORMATION IN POLISH ONLINE HEALTH-RELATED TEXTS

DYSKURS STRACHU: STUDIUM PRZYPADKU DEZINFORMACJI W POLSKICH INTERNETOWYCH TEKSTACH DOTYCZĄCYCH ZDROWIA

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł opisuje dyskurs strachu w polskich tekstach internetowych dotyczących zdrowia. Koncentruje się głównie na strategiach dezinformacyjnych wykorzystywanych do kształtowania społecznych wyobrażeń na temat zdrowia i procedur medycznych.

Autorka artykułu, opierając się na krytycznej analizie dyskursu, prezentuje mechanizmy konstruowania strachu za pomocą strategii dyskursywnych, takich jak argumentacja oparta na błędach logicznych, nominacja, predykcja oraz intensyfikacja. Pokazuje również, w jaki sposób strategie te przyczyniają się do rozpowszechniania dezinformacji zdrowotnej.

Słowa kluczowe: argumentacja, błąd logiczny, manipulacja, emocje, strategie dyskursywne

Abstract: This paper examines the discourse of fear in Polish online health-related texts, focusing on misinformation strategies used to shape public perceptions of health and medical procedures. Drawing on critical discourse analysis approach, the study explores how fear is constructed through discursive strategies, such as, argumentation through fallacies and demonstrates how these strategies contribute to the spread of health misinformation.

Key words: argumentation, fallacy, manipulation, emotions, discursive strategies

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying “infodemic” (Erku et al., 2021) have revealed how misinformation can shape public under-

standing of health and influence collective behaviour. In Poland, as elsewhere, the Internet has become a major source of medical information, but also a channel for spreading misleading narratives that rely more on emotion than on evidence. These narratives often evoke fear in text consumers — a framework that is termed the discourse of fear (Altheide 2002, 2018; Ventsel et al. 2019), in which this powerful and deep-seated human emotion is employed to spread misinformation.

While argumentation and ideology have been extensively studied in Critical Discourse Analysis, the role of fallacious reasoning in fear-driven discourse remains less explored. Logical fallacies are central to how misinformation impacts text-consumers by evoking emotions instead of offering evidence. In health-related discourse, these discursive strategies not only attract attention but also undermine trust in medical expertise and promote alternative belief systems (Culloty & Suiter, 2021). Given this, the research question that this study aims to answer is: How are fear-inducing effects discursively constructed in Polish health-related misinformation through logical fallacies and their interaction with other discursive strategies?

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2, which outlines the theoretical framework, begins with a concise overview of the Polish healthcare system, contextualizing the socio-institutional conditions that create fertile ground for the circulation of misinformation. It then examines the manipulative power of fear appeals in the dissemination of false information, defines the concept of misinformation, and discusses its interrelation with manipulation. Furthermore, this section addresses discursive strategies—interacting with fallacious reasoning—employed by authors to influence and manipulate readers. Section 3, which constitutes the analytical part, details the data collection procedure conducted with the use of *Sketch Engine* and identifies the dominant fallacies in the corpus. The analysis demonstrates how these fallacies co-occur with nomination, predication, and intensification strategies in constructing fear. Finally, the conclusion considers the broader implications of these findings for understanding how misinformation discursively triggers and sustains fear in public health communication.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

In the spread of misinformation in Polish online health-related texts, fear is instrumentalised particularly effectively for several reasons, one of which is the longstanding difficulties faced by the Polish Health Service. The 2023 Country Health Profile¹ highlights severe staff shortages and limited funding, leading to overwork, burnout, and reduced quality of care. Combined with poor doctor-patient communication, this fosters a sense of abandonment and helplessness among patients.

¹ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/12/poland-country-health-profile-2023_80434439/f597c810-en.pdf.

In light of the fact that medical care is often unavailable to Polish people on short notice, and overburdened medical staff may communicate inadequately with patients, those with health problems seek remedies outside the healthcare system. According to a report published by [www.rynekzdrowia.pl](https://www.rynekzdrowia.pl/E-zdrowie/Juz-40-proc-pacjentow-szuka-porad-medycznych-glownie-w-internecie-Ekspert-o-cyfrowym-znachorstwie,260665,7.html),² as many as 40 percent of patients search for medical advice online, demonstrating a significant demand for information. As Salvi et al. (2021, p. 2) state, “the need for information is especially pertinent during global crises”, during which individuals desperately seek explanations and often rely on easily available information from the Internet to make sense of the difficult situation.

While the Internet can be very useful for seeking general medical advice, many websites are neither credible nor reliable, at the same time overflowing with negative information, which realises a well-known mantra of journalism: “if it bleeds, it leads” (Rado, 2024, p. 287). This should be understood that nowadays news or information that is negative receives a higher number of clicks and is more likely to be shared. The reason for this is that we are hard-wired for negativity as a result of evolution – early in human history being attentive to danger and threats was necessary for survival (Vaish et al., 2008). Because of this, our processing of negative information is more elaborate and complex when compared to positive information; a phenomenon referred to as negativity bias (see Rozin, Royzman, 2001). In addition to this, memories of negative information are created more quickly and are more easily retrieved. As Hart (2010, p. 19) has put it, “[h]uman cognition is thus the product of an environment quite different from the industrialised world and contemporary society, which we negotiate with ‘a Stone Age mind’ (Cosmides, Tooby, 1997; Pinker, 1997)”.

Throughout evolution, human survival has been unremittingly challenged by various environmental threats (Öhman, 2007). Consequently, fearing for one’s well-being and life represents one of our most deeply seated fears, which has been confirmed by contemporary psychological research (e.g. Štolhoferová et al., 2023), according to which ancestral life-threatening stimuli are still potent in capturing human attention. Therefore, concern for personal health and survival has always been exploited by the media, including modern electronic media, also those spreading misinformation, which weaponise apprehension about one’s own safety and health with the aim of “undermining the public’s willingness to follow legitimate public health advice” (Erku et al., 2020, p. 61).

Evoking fear in order to realize the text-producer’s strategic aims has been a strategy known and implemented since antiquity, which is referred to as *pathos* in Aristotelian rhetorics.³ According to modern cognitive science, emotions constitute an essential component of mental operations (Hart 2010) as they regulate human thinking and actions (Cosmides, Tooby, 2000). Accordingly, emotions are “just as cognitive as any other kind of perceptual image we experience, and play a much larger role in

² <https://www.rynekzdrowia.pl/E-zdrowie/Juz-40-proc-pacjentow-szuka-porad-medycznych-glownie-w-internecie-Ekspert-o-cyfrowym-znachorstwie,260665,7.html>.

³ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>.

decision-making than we realise" (Barrett et al., 2002, p. 291). When we encounter deeply ingrained fears, information that threatens our life or health is transmitted directly to the amygdala, bypassing the cortex. This pathway is believed to elicit an automatic response, rather than a deliberate, conscious reaction (Hart, 2010).

The appeal to emotions is nowadays frequently referred to as emotive coercion (Chilton, 2004; Chilton, Schäffner 1997; Hart, 2010) and it is defined as an intention to affect the emotions of others to realise one's objectives (Hart 2010, p. 63). One of the primary objectives of text producers spreading misinformation about health issues is to instil fear in the general public, portraying health services and authorities as entities that seek to cause harm rather than provide help – an outrageous violation of the Hippocratic Oath.

There is no unanimity among scholars as to the definition of what misinformation is and it is frequently distinguished from disinformation. Thus, misinformation is commonly defined as false, inaccurate, or misleading information (Van der Meer, Jin, 2020). In contrast, disinformation refers to deliberately deceptive information shared with the intent to mislead (Broda, Strömbäck, 2024). However, since it is often impossible to ascertain the intentions of the unknown individuals who create falsehoods spread on the Internet, the term misinformation is frequently used as an umbrella term encompassing all forms of misleading information (cf. Wang et al., 2019), which is the approach adopted in this paper. Health-related misinformation, which proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic and is the focus of the present paper, has been addressed by Blumczynski and Wilson (2022) and Głażewska and Karwatowska (2023), among others, who emphasize the role of linguistic, cultural, and media factors in both the spread and mitigation of false health information.

Misinformation is frequently used as a tool in manipulation, which is the deliberate attempt to influence others for a specific agenda (Culloty, Suiter, 2021). Manipulators exploit misinformation to shape perceptions, provoke emotional reactions, and steer decisions in their favour often without the text-consumers' conscious awareness. At this point it needs to be remarked that manipulation is frequently compared with persuasion on account of the fact that they both aim to influence the addressee of the text so that they think (and act) in accordance with the text producer's intentions. Notwithstanding that, there is a crucial difference between persuasion and manipulation, as while the former stands for the practice of bringing about consent in a "symmetrical, power-free communication" (Reisigl, Wodak, 2000, p. 70) in which the speakers or hearers are capable of making "a rational and logical judgement", the latter is understood as "consent under conditions of suspended rationality" (Reisigl, Wodak, *ibid.*). This should be understood that manipulative discourse represses the ability of rational judgement by relying on, *inter alia*, emotionalisation in order to coerce consent. However, the intention to manipulate others can only be recognised indirectly as it is impossible to gain

insight into the actual workings of human mind (Fischer, 2022). For this reason, it is frequently difficult to distinguish manipulation from persuasion.

In spite of this, there exists a set of rules that should be followed in rational argumentation and if they are, it can be stated that the text-producer is persuasive, not manipulative (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 1992). These include the obligation to provide justification, the use of plausible arguments and argumentation schemes, correct reference to the opponent's previous discourse, and reliance on logically valid arguments, to name but a few. Violations of these norms of critical discussion are referred to as fallacies, which are defined as "argument[s] that seem to be correct, but contain a mistake in reasoning" (Copi et al. 2019, p. 680). Fallacies "violate specific norms of critical discussion" (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 1992) in that they prioritize the text-producer's ideological aims over discussion quality. Being "intentionally deceptive arguments" (Wodak, 2021, p. 9), fallacies are frequently employed in discourse in order to manipulate text-consumers (Reisigl, Wodak, 2000).

Despite their frequent occurrence across various types discourses, logical fallacies in health-related misinformation remain an understudied area. Out of the limited research on this discursive strategy, the following studies can be mentioned: Lundy (2023), who examines health misinformation on TikTok; Teneva (2023), who investigates the mainstream media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic; and Musi et al. (2022), who focus on how fallacious reasoning triggers fake news.

From the wide array of fallacies described in the literature (cf. Walton, 2000; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004; Bowell & Kemp, 2014), a number of them — presented below — are the most prevalent in the gathered corpus. All these fallacies have been used to spread misinformation in Polish health-related discourse because they distort the picture of reality in order to suppress rational thinking and evoke fear, as will be demonstrated in section 3.2.

Argumentum ad metum uses fear, rather than reason or evidence, to persuade an audience. Instead of presenting logical arguments, the speaker attempts to scare people into accepting a claim by emphasising potential dangers or negative outcomes (Walton, 2000; Tindale, 2007).

False dilemma fallacy occurs when an argument wrongly presents only two options as if they are the only possibilities, when in reality, there are more alternatives. This fallacy oversimplifies complex issues and forces an artificial choice between two extremes, ignoring middle-ground solutions or other perspectives (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 2004; Bowell, Kemp, 2014).

Slippery slope fallacy occurs when an argument claims that a relatively small first step will inevitably lead to a chain of related negative consequences even though there is no logical necessity for this progression (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 2004; Corner, Hahn, 2009).

Post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy occurs when someone assumes that because one event happened before another, the first event must have caused the second. This false cause reasoning overlooks other potential explanations, such as coincidence, correlation, or an unknown third factor influencing both events (Copi et al., 2019; Tindale, 2007).

Straw man fallacy occurs when someone misrepresents, distorts, or exaggerates an opponent's argument to make it easier to attack. Instead of engaging with the actual argument, the person creates a weaker or extreme version of it and then refutes that version (Copi et al., 2019; Tindale, 2007).

Fallacies have a strong persuasive power and they are generally difficult to recognize in natural argumentation because they are considered successful when they go unnoticed (Lewinski, Oswald, 2013) – therefore they are so frequently employed to spread misinformation. The use of fallacies is one of two argumentative strategies employed in ideological and manipulative discourse (Reisigl, Wodak, 2009), the other one being topoi. Because the focus of most of analyses within critical discourse studies is on argumentation through topoi and the use of fallacies employed for the spread of misinformation remains an understudied area of research, the present paper aims to fill this gap by discussing the fallacies only⁴. Additionally, the aim of the discussion to follow is to investigate the interaction of fallacies with other discursive strategies, namely nomination, predication and intensification. Nomination and predication are crucial in each type of discourse as the former consists in shaping the representation of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, and processes/actions, while the latter is defined as discursive evaluation of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes, and actions, framing them in a positive or negative light (Reisigl, Wodak, 2008). As regards intensification strategies (Reisigl, Wodak, 2008), they strengthen the illocutionary force of statements.

Given the above, apart from investigating and debunking fallacies employed by the text-producer in the corpus under study, the present paper aims to look into the interaction of nomination, predication and intensification strategies with selected fallacies.

3. Data collection and analysis

3.1 Data collection

The corpus of texts for the present study has been collected from *Wolne Media*, one of many portals spreading misinformation on Polish Internet. As early as in 2015 *Wolne Media* portal was officially placed on the Wikipedia's blacklist and news published there has been repeatedly marked as fabricated or distorted by fact-checking agencies, such as *Demagog* or *AFP Sprawdzam*. What should be emphasized at this point is that — probably with the intention of enhancing credibility and building trust — the portal sometimes publishes news from reliable sources, such as *Nauka w Polsce*.

Given this, the process of compiling the corpus consisted of several steps. First of all, the bookmark *Zdrowie* ('Health') was chosen to ensure that the collected texts would be health-related. Since the focus was on fairly recent and up-to-date health issues, the time span covered three months, prior to the analysis, i.e., from November 1st, 2024, to January 31st, 2025. Next, all the texts were cross-checked

⁴ For the discussion of topoi see e.g. Hart (2010), or Reisigl and Wodak (2020).

as to their sources and those based on information from official health and governmental institutions were not included in the sample. Then, the texts selected for the analysis were downloaded in txt format and manually cleaned to remove metadata, e.g. the date of publication, the number of displays, tags, external navigation links, etc. As a result, a corpus consisting of 29 texts was compiled, consisting of 20,078 words and 1,144 sentences. Then the corpus was uploaded to the *Sketch Engine* software with the aim of investigating the interaction of fallacies with discursive strategies aimed at triggering fear in text consumers.

3.2. Data analysis

First, the most frequent nouns in their lemma forms denoting individual members of society were identified using the *word list* function of Sketch Engine. These are: *człowiek* ‘human being’, *osoba* ‘person’, *lekierz* ‘doctor’, *pacjent* ‘patient’ and *dziecko* ‘child’, listed in a descending order of frequency (see Table 1). The noun *lekierz* was not included in the analysis because, unlike *człowiek*, *osoba*, *pacjent*, and *dziecko*, it represents an institutional agent rather than a vulnerable social actor. In misinformation discourse, *lekierz* typically functions as an object of blame or distrust, serving a different rhetorical purpose—delegitimising authority rather than constructing fear directed at ordinary individuals. The selected nouns are semantically central to health communication. Lexemes like *pacjent* and *osoba* frequently occur in discussions about medical care, treatment, or responsibility for one’s health, while *człowiek* and *dziecko* invoke more general or emotionally charged representations of vulnerability and morality.

The next stage of the analysis consisted in employing another functionality of Sketch Engine, that is *KWIC* (*key word in context*), which generated concordances with the words under study. Thanks to this, it was possible to investigate the use of *człowiek*, *osoba*, *pacjent*, *dziecko*, all in their lemma form, in a wider context, with a view to examining the way in which text-producers discursively construct threats to the health and life of society members referred to by means of the above mentioned nouns.

What follows is the analysis of fallacies as well as the nomination, predication and intensification strategies aimed at evoking fear in text consumers. In the collected sample, the following sources of looming danger have been identified: vaccinations, Covid pandemic, transplantations, WHO, and the use of chemical substances in pharmacy and agriculture. Due to space limitation, the present paper will be limited to the discussion of selected, albeit representative, text samples concerning Covid pandemic as well as Covid and childhood vaccinations.

WORDLIST

Fear health Wolne media



noun (2,438 items | 7,378 total frequency)

Noun	Frequency [?] ↓		Noun	Frequency [?] ↓	
1 to	181	...	14 świat	38	...
2 rok	99	...	15 pacjent	37	...
3 co	76	...	16 pandemia	37	...
4 człowiek	69	...	17 czas	37	...
5 zdrowie	69	...	18 wirus	34	...
6 choroba	69	...	19 dziecko	33	...
7 badanie	63	...	20 przypadek	30	...
8 osoba	62	...	21 zgoda	27	...
9 szczepionka	53	...	22 cel	27	...
10 śmierć	46	...	23 organ	26	...
11 szczepienie	45	...	24 stan	26	...
12 lekarz	43	...	25 nic	25	...
13 covid-19	41	...	26 zgon	25	...

Table 1. Frequency of nouns in their lemma forms

3.2.1 Discursive representation of Covid and Covid vaccinations

In (1) the text-producer employs alarming imagery, claiming that anti-covid vaccinations lead to physical suffering and an extremely high death rate (argumentum ad metum).

(1)

To jest majsterszyt co oni nawyprawiali ze srowidem. Czekali aż ludzie⁵ się zadziajają i zaczyna chorować, po czym pokazują tych ludzi jako chorych. Potem przymusowe, a teraz mówią sorry jak już ludzie chodzą jak raki nieboraki (u mnie codziennie w kościele jest 1-2 pogrzeby, dawniej 2 na miesiąc). I co mają teraz ludzie z zrobić? Dostana odszkodowanie....ale w formie darmowej eutanazji.

'This is a masterpiece, what they did with **srowid**. They waited until people **jabbed themselves** and started getting sick, then presented those people as the sick ones. Then came the mandates, and now they just say "sorry" while people are left **struggling like helpless crabs** (in my town, here are 1-2 funerals in church every day, whereas before, it was only two per month). And what are people supposed to do now? They'll get compensation... but in the form of **free euthanasia**.'

⁵ The noun *ludzie* is a suppletive plural number of *człowiek*.

It assumed that because people are ill and they are dying, vaccine must be the cause. This argument ignores other possible explanations, such as, e.g. advanced age, or pre-existing medical conditions, falsely attributing illness to vaccinations (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*). On top of that, this passage suggests that one event, i.e. vaccination, inevitably leads to disastrous outcomes, namely mass death and forced euthanasia (slippery slope).

The fallacies have been formulated with the help of emotively loaded language which adds to the emotive coercion evoked by fallacies themselves. Covid-19 has been renamed mockingly as *srowid*, which is a blend,⁶ of *Covid* and the derogatory verb *srac* ‘to shit/disregard’, suggesting that Covid is not a serious disease. Consequently, the use of this nomination evokes distrust in the mainstream narration, according to which Covid is life-threatening, which in turn triggers fear of being deceived. This fear appears to be justified – from the perspective of the text-producer – because people who have followed the authorities’ advice and got vaccinated are now suffering from health problems, which is expressed by the comparison: [they are] *struggling like helpless crabs*. The act of taking a vaccine is expressed through the use of the non-standard verb *zadziabać się* ‘to injure oneself with a sharp tool’ (WSJP); thus, its use frames vaccinations as a rough and harmful act rather than a medical procedure. Sarcastically, the text-producer proposes a cost-free euthanasia as a way of compensation, which reinforces a sense of betrayal and helplessness thus amplifying fear both of authorities and for one’s health.

(2)

Zamówiono miliony dawek na nasz koszt (podatników) i prawie brak zainteresowanie, chyba tylko najzatwardzialsí covidianie chęć to brać, więc próbują nakłonić ludzi, by chcieli przyjąć ten preparat terapii genowej (bo szczepionka to nie jest – według starej definicji, którą później zmienili ej dla tych preparatów), bo utylizacja będzie kosztowała drugie tyle, o ile nie więcej.

‘Millions of doses were ordered at our expense (as taxpayers), yet there is almost no interest – only the **most hardcore covid believers** seem willing to take it. So now they are trying to persuade people to accept this **gene therapy product** (since it is not a vaccine according to the old definition, which was later changed specifically for these products). Otherwise, disposal will cost just as much, if not more.’

Those who are willing to undergo the vaccination procedure in (2) are labelled as *najzatwardzialsí covidianie* ‘the most hardcore covid believers’, which portrays them as fanatics blindly following authorities. This particular nomination strategy suggests a division between two opposing groups: the most hardcore covid believers (those who strongly adhere to Covid-related measures) and an implied opposing group (those who reject them). The said polarisation fosters distrust and fear of ‘the other side’. The adjective *zatwardziały* ‘someone who persistently clings to

⁶ Lexical blending, defined as the morphological process in which two source are combined with at the least of one of them shortened, is frequently employed in discourse to produce axiologically loaded coinages (Konieczna, 2013).

their habits, beliefs, or way of life' (WSJP) has been used here in the superlative form, which intensifies its meaning, implying that vaccine supporters are blindly devoted, irrational and extreme and that they may impose their beliefs on others or act in harmful ways. The passage suggests that taking the vaccine is dangerous, using the nomination *preparat terapii genowej* 'gene therapy product' to make it sound experimental and risky (argumentum ad metum). It also implies that the only reason why vaccines are being promoted is an attempt to avoid financial loss, rather than public health concerns (post hoc ergo propter hoc), which undermines trust in the justification of anti-Covid vaccinations and is fear-inducing.

At this point it needs to be remarked that in the corpus under study anti Covid vaccinations are also referred to as *zastrzyki cowidowe* 'Covid injections', *zastrzyki genetyczne COVID-19* 'genetic injections COVID-19' and *szpryca* 'syringe'. Renaming vaccinations as injections is anxiety inducing because while the aim of vaccinations is to prevent disease, the injections can be used for a variety of reasons, one of which being unethical medical experiments conducted in the past, such as Nazi medical experiments or Soviet biological warfare testing. For the older generations of Polish people the memory of these procedures is still vivid, therefore, these nominations are likely to evoke fear of an uncertain impact of the injection. The label *zastrzyki genetyczne Covid-19* 'genetic injections Covid-19' sounds even more threatening as it implies a possible alteration of a person's genetic material. Another term, *szpryca*, which is an example of INSTRUMENT for ACTION metonymy (Radden, Kövecses, 1999) is commonly used in slang⁷ to refer to injectable drugs, particularly illegal substances like heroin. Thus, this nomination, when used instead of *szczepionka* 'vaccine', creates a subconscious link between vaccination and harmful drug use, making it seem unsafe or untrustworthy. Besides, the use of the noun *szpryca* can be interpreted in terms of APPLICATION DEVICE for MEDICATION BEING APPLIED metonymy, which profiles the whole procedure negatively on account of the fact that both the device and method are unpleasant.

As regards the pandemic itself, it is hyperbolically referred to as *Wielka Histeria*, which suggests that the public reaction to Covid-19 was exaggerated, irrational, or artificially induced, rather than based on legitimate medical concerns. The irrationality and exaggeration are further underlined by the use of capital letters, which fuels distrust toward governments, scientists, and health organizations. Thus, by downplaying the severity of Covid-19 pandemic, the nomination *Wielka Histeria* implies that people were lied to and manipulated, which creates fear of deception. Another common reference to the Covid-19 pandemic is the blend *plandemia*, a borrowing from English, created from two nouns, namely *plan* and *epidemia*, which implies that the pandemic was intentionally planned or orchestrated by powerful individuals, organizations, or governments, rather than occurring naturally. The

⁷ <https://www.miejski.pl/slowo-Szprycowa%C4%87+si%C4%999>.

repeated use of this blend triggers distrust in the system, fear of being manipulated, as well as orchestrating another pandemic in the near future:

(3)

Następna plandemia będzie oznaczała zamianę paszportów folksdojczy na digitalID, bez którego nie będzie wolno wyjechać z kraju – będzie tam też CBDC, personalny limit CO2 a jak się globaliści sprężą to i kartki na żywność.

‘The next **plandemic** will mean replacing the “**Volksdeutscher passport**” with a digital ID, without which leaving the country will not be allowed. It will also include CBDC (Central Bank Digital Currency), a personal CO2 limit, and if the globalists push hard enough, even food ration cards.’

In (3), it is argued that not only is the next pandemic inevitable, but also that it will lead to extreme dystopian consequences, such as totalitarian control, the loss of personal freedom, financial control, environmental restrictions, and food rationing (slippery slope fallacy). This evokes fear of oppression and social collapse, further amplified by the use of the phrase *paszportiki folksdojczy* ‘Volksdeutscher passports’, which echoes strong historical trauma. In Nazi-occupied Poland Volksdeutsche (in Polish: *folksdojczcy*) were ethnic Germans or Poles who registered as Germans during Nazi occupation of Poland (1939–1945). Those who accepted Volksliste (the German ethnic classification system) were often seen as traitors because the list granted privileges under Nazi rule in exchange for loyalty to Hitler’s regime (Kulesza, 2019). In this context, *paszportiki folksdojczy* suggests that accepting a digital ID (or any official document imposed by global organizations) is akin to betrayal, just as some Poles were seen as traitors for signing up as Volksdeutsche. This nomination triggers deep-seated historical fears of occupation, betrayal, and loss of national identity, suggesting that compliance with global policies (such as digital IDs or pandemic restrictions) is equivalent to siding with an oppressor. The negative overtone of the nomination is intensified by the use of the noun *paszport* in the diminutive form, i.e. *paszportik*, which in (3) has got a dismissive and pejorative meaning (cf. Szymanek, 2010).

(4)

*Przebudzili się teraz w Styczniu 2025... a co robili, gdzie byli wtedy jak panowała ta wielka a prawdopodobnie jeszcze bardziej wielka epidemia ze miliony ludzi umieralo na chodnikach ze nie było miejsca ażebypowiedziec ze to bujda, gdyz duzo takich co dzisiaj krytykujom te epidemie to wtedy zabrali by nas silom i podlonczyli pod krematorium...ups pomyłka komputera podlonczyli pod respiratory lub rozpiertatole.*⁸

‘They woke up now, in January 2025... but what were they doing, where were they back then when that **great**—perhaps **even greater**—epidemic was raging, **with millions of people dying on the sidewalks**, with no space left to even... say it was a hoax? Because many of those who criticize the epidemic today would have, back then, taken us by force and hooked us up to the crematorium... oops, computer error—hooked us up to respirators or **smashilators** [fuck~INF.-atol-ACC.PL]

⁸ Original spelling.

In (4), by employing a slippery slope fallacy in it is argued that that pandemic measures led to extreme and inhumane consequences: the text-producer equates medical interventions (respirators) with mass deaths (crematoriums), through which public health measures are made terrifying. Respirators are referred to by means of an axiologically loaded nomination *rozpierdatole*, derived by the addition of a pseudo-suffix *-atol* to the stem of the infinitive *rozpierdalać*, a vulgar Polish slang verb for ‘to blow something up’ or ‘to completely destroy sth’. This extra-grammatical derivation (in the sense of Ronneberger-Sibold, 2015) implies that respirators, instead of saving lives, cause lung damage or even kill patients, which makes people distrust and fear life-saving medical interventions.

Attention should be drawn to non-standard noun and verb inflectional endings, namely *krytykujom*, *podlonczyli*, *siłom* (cf. standard *krytykują*, *połączyli siłą*), encountered only in the rural Polish dialects, the use of which is associated with the speech of uneducated Polish people. These forms have been used here to mock or ridicule those who blindly followed the official narrative during the pandemic and present them as ignorant or foolish. This, in turn, implies that the pandemic was a deceit, which has been suggested already at the beginning of the passage. The ironically used adjective *wielka* ‘great’, repeated in the non-standard comparative form *jeszcze bardziej wielka* ‘even greater’ (instead of *jeszcze większa*) referring to the pandemic and the accompanying hyperbolic statement *miliony ludzi umieralo na chodnikach* ‘millions of people dying on the sidewalks’ are meant to ridicule the seriousness of the pandemic.

3.2.2 Discursive representation of childhood vaccinations

Fallacious argumentation is employed to weaponise fear not only to for a distorted picture of Covid pandemic and Covid vaccinations but also to create a skewed perception of childhood vaccinations:

(5)

*Swoja droga u nas probuje sie teraz rozpędzić “krztuśca” – kazdy **katarek** u lekarza to teraz krztusiec i skierowanko na dziabanko, nawet jak rodzić nie chce to wypisują*

‘By the way, they’re now trying to hype up “whooping cough” – every **little snuffle** at the doctor’s office is suddenly whooping cough, and they hand out **referrals for the jab**. Even if parents don’t want it, they still write them up’.

The situation described in (5) is an evident example of a straw man fallacy as it is implied that doctors are falsely diagnosing people with whooping cough in order to enforce vaccinations. The diminutive form *katarek* ‘little snuffle’ from *katar* ‘runny nose’, representing the reason for having children vaccinated, has got a dismissive meaning and as such it expresses the negative attitude of the text-producer to the reliability of the doctors portrayed as reckless and deceptive individuals,

which evokes fear of false diagnosis and unnecessary vaccinations. The nomination *skierowanko na dziabanko* ‘referral for a jab’ consists of two diminutive nouns, which evoke fear through ridicule and trivialisation: a playful, almost childish tone suggests that officials and/or doctors have a dismissive attitude towards medical procedures, downplaying potential risks of the vaccine for young kids.

Another fragment is devoted to enforced vaccinations as well:

(6)

Jedyną drogą do normalności jest całkowite odrzucenie systemu w którym anonimowy niewybieralny **urzędas** decyduje o życiu mojego dziecka a inny trochę mniej anonimowy wdraża przymus. ‘The only path to normalcy is the complete rejection of a system in which an anonymous, unelected **pen-pushers** decides about my child’s life, while another, slightly less anonymous one enforces coercion.’

The text-producer frames the system as a threat to personal freedom and safety, implying that faceless pen-pushers are making life-or-death decisions about people’s children: it is suggested that parents have no control over medical procedures imposed on their children by unknown officials, who have not been elected by people and for this reason they are not accountable for their actions (argumentum ad metum). The augmentative form *urzędas* ‘pen-pushers’ created from *urzędnik* ‘official’ intensifies the negative overtone of this statement; suggesting incompetence, corruption, or indifference, it reinforces distrust in institutions. Thus, it is argued that any form of regulation or authority inevitably leads to coercion and oppression (slippery slope fallacy). The passage presents only two choices: either completely rejecting the system, or accept total control, ignoring middle-ground solutions like reform or oversight (false dilemma fallacy). Such a line of argumentation is fear-mongering, as eliminating the possibility of balanced solutions and offering two alternatives, neither of which is safe, it creates the feeling of helplessness.

Finally, let us look into a very extreme case of fear-mongering argumentation:

(7)

To bardzo dobry argument – “nie chcę mieć dzieci, bo boję się później je zaszczepić” – genialne i proste.

‘That’s a very good argument – “I don’t want to have children because I’m afraid of vaccinating them later” – brilliant and simple.’

The statement suggests that vaccination is so dangerous that it is a legitimate reason to avoid having children altogether, implying that the risk of vaccination outweighs the benefits of parenthood, which is an extreme and fear-inducing claim (argumentum ad metum). The text-producer argues that one action will inevitably lead to extreme consequences through implying the following chain reaction: having children → needing to vaccinate them → vaccination is dangerous → therefore, one should avoid having children (slippery slope). The phrase *genialne i proste* ‘brilliant and simple’ adds a layer of sarcasm, making it sound as if avoiding parenthood is a rational response to the perceived threat of vaccination.

Thus, the text-producer mocks this reasoning and highlights the irrationality of letting fear of vaccination dictate life choices. On the whole, the example illustrates a common fear-based argument in anti-vaccination discourse and through sarcasm it critically evaluates this reasoning,

4. Conclusion

As has been argued in section 2, fear's communicative power is grounded in human cognition. Within Critical Discourse Analysis, such emotionalisation of communication is seen as a form of manipulation that suspends rational judgment and legitimises ideological positions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2021). Evoking fear in text consumers, referred to as the discourse of fear (Altheide 2002, 2018; Ventsel et al. 2019) is achieved through rhetoric that employs a wide range of fallacies, which text producers use to present a distorted picture of reality. In the corpus of analysed texts, fallacies frequently overlap or stem from one another within a single text fragment – or even a single sentence – to maximize the fear. The corpus collected from *Wolne Media* and analysed in this study is not comprehensive enough to support broad conclusions; however, some general observations can still be made.

First of all, it should be stated that through nomination, predication, and intensification strategies employed for manipulative purposes, text producers shift “the boundaries of the ‘sayable’” (Wodak, 2021, p. 6).⁹ Thus, in *Wolne Media*, linguistic and social taboos are broken, amplifying the fear-inducing effect of fallacies. Health and life hazards to members of society (linguistically referred to as *człowiek*, *osoba*, *pacjent*, *dziecko*) are discursively constructed through nomination and predication strategies, frequently employing vulgar language to create new terms for illnesses, medical devices, and medical procedures, as demonstrated by *srowid*, *rozpierdatol*, or *zadziubać się*, respectively.

Other instances of renaming include nominations for vaccines (*preparat terapii genowej*, *zastrzyki genetyczne*, *zastrzyki cowidowe*, *szpryca*, *dziabanko*), the pandemic itself (*Wielka Histeria*, *plandemia*), or people following official guidelines (*covidianie*). By renaming health-related objects, phenomena, and individuals, text producers construct an alternative reality –one that presents these elements as life- and health-threatening.

Apart from renaming, another function of nomination strategies has been observed: name modification through the use of augmentative and diminutive forms, which are classified as intensification strategies (Reisigl, Wodak, 2009). Augmentative and diminutive suffixes alter word meanings from neutral to negative (e.g., *urzędas*, *skierowanko na dziabanko*), encouraging text consumers to distance

⁹ This phenomenon has been observed in populist far-right discourse by Wodak (ibid).

themselves from official medical procedures and guidelines. Other intensification strategies, such as sarcasm (e.g., *darmowa eutanazja*) and hyperbole (e.g., *miliony ludzi umieraly na ulicach*), serve a similar purpose – namely, to disengage text consumers from mainstream health-related narratives. All these strategies are aimed at evoking distrust, which, in turn, breeds fear of deception.

On the whole, nomination, predication, and intensification strategies reinforce the fear-inducing effects of fallacies. The main subjects of fear are doctors, authorities, and medical procedures. Members of society are victimised and manipulated into avoiding medical help from doctors and other healthcare professionals.

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