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MASSIMILIANO DEMATA, VIRGINIA ZORZI & ANGELA ZOTTOLA (eds.), *Conspiracy theory discourses*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2022. Pp. 509. Hb. €105.

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Much research on conspiracy theories has been rooted in disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, psychology, and communication studies, with the field of discourse analysis being relatively underrepresented. *Conspiracy theory discourses* successfully amends this underrepresentation. The volume convincingly demonstrates the potential for discourse analysis to investigate conspiracy theory discourse. It covers an immense array of topics, thus setting the scene for future research.

The volume's introductory chapter (Massimiliano Demata, Virginia Zorzi, & Angela Zottola) offers a comprehensive state-of-the-art review of conspiracy theory research across disciplines. After providing a historical overview, the authors identify 2016 as 'a key moment' in the 'transformation of many conspiracy theories into mainstream narratives' (4). A skillful discussion integrates this changing political context with the few existing discourse-analytical approaches to conspiracy theory discourse, and the authors formulate a strong case for the volume's undertaking. Each of the volume's twenty subsequent chapters (organized in five parts and an epilogue) effectively contributes to a deeper understanding of conspiracy theory discourse.

Part I covers epistemological questions related to conspiracy theories and opens with a corpus-driven analysis of discursive features of conspiracy theories (chapter 2, Paola Catenaccio). Analyzing a corpus of 9/11 conspiracy theories, Catenaccio identifies a relatively frequent use of (i) metadiscursive references, (ii) terms related to epistemology, and (iii) hypothetical structures as key features to

identify conspiratorial discourse. Chapter 3 (Rodney H. Jones) analyses online talk about the notion that mobile phones are ‘listening’ to their users, arguing that this talk constitutes an emerging ‘literary practice’ that functions as a collective means to oppose contemporary tech companies’ intrusive practices. The implied question of ‘what is a conspiracy theory’ is dealt with in chapter 4 (Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Nuria Lorenzo-Dus). Analyzing Reddit and YouTube threads, the authors argue that conspiracy theories are viewed emically as relying on a *sui generis* scientific method. Chapter 5 (Thierry Herman & Steve Oswald) proposes the category of ‘ethotic straw man’ as a type of fallacious argument within conspiracy theory discourse: one where ‘a speaker boosts her/his own *ethos* through the misrepresentation of the emotional and cognitive states of an opponent’ (110). In chapter 6, Andreas Musolff analyses various Trumpian Covid-19 conspiracy theories as relying on a cognitive metaphor WAR scenario, and highlights that this framing was instrumental in ‘gloss[ing] over the absence of any direct proof’ (132) of the theories.

Part 2 contains chapters on ‘Conspiracy-theory related communicative phenomena’, which each link up conspiracy theory discourses to wider discourse categories. Chapter 7 (Marina Bondi & Leonardo Sanna) elucidates the potential functioning of echo chambers by showing how linguistic features related to usage of the term *hoax* are fundamental in constructing affective and social identity. Chapter 8 (Jessica Mason) focuses on the ‘false flag’ conspiracy theory related to the Sandy Hook shooting, and persuasively argues that the cognitive-stylistic processes of ‘schema activation and manipulation’ and ‘figure-ground’ are instrumental in the online spread of the conspiracy theory. In chapter 9, Philip Seargeant provides a historicized view of the notions of ‘fake news’ and ‘conspiracy theory’. He proposes several key features of ‘conspiracy theory’ as a distinct genre subsuming fake news as a subgenre. In chapter 10, Carmen Lee employs a critical discourse analysis framework to analyze Hong Kong Facebook comments on the origins of Covid-19. The author juxtaposes conspiracy theory discourse with hate speech, as both rely on specific discursive strategies to elicit negative emotions that concurrently justify their ideological stance.

Part 3 focuses on ‘Social media and conspiracy theories’, with each chapter covering a different social media platform. Olivia Inwood & Michele Zappavigna, in chapter 11, employ systemic functional linguistics to examine YouTube comments on the ‘ID2020’ conspiracy theory. The authors identify several textual personae, each with their own ideological background and positioning vis-à-vis other personae, with which participants affiliate through various textual means. Approaching Instagram memes as ‘digital multimodal units’, chapter 12 (Derya Gür-Şeker, Ute K. Boonen, & Michael Wentker) highlights the importance of meta-reflexive discourse and the strategic use of hashtags in the spread of conspiracy theory discourses on Instagram. Employing appraisal theory, chapter 13 (Natalia Mora López) contrastively analyzes English and Spanish tweets on the ‘New World

Order' conspiracy theory, finding amongst others that English tweets more regularly employ evaluative language that provides social and moral judgments.

Honing in on a key feature within conspiracy discourses, Part 4 highlights 'Stancetaking and (de-)legitimation within conspiracy and anti-conspiracy discourses'. In chapter 14, Liljana Mitkovska & Fevzudina Saračević highlight the importance of 'strengthening strategies' aimed at 'negative affect' (338) in stancetaking on Macedonian online fora discussing Covid-19 conspiracy discourses. Turning the focus to UK newspaper articles, Carlotta Fiammenghi (chapter 15) carries out a diachronic analysis of their representations of the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine conspiracy theory. She argues that newspapers' increasing tendency to denigrate the theory's proponents risks backfiring by further alienating them. Chapter 16 (Virginia Zorzi) analyses several articles from conspiracy theory websites, and argues that, in terms of collective identity, an individualization of conspiracy theory supporters combined with dehumanizing representations of opponents is instrumental in building an elevated moral position for conspiracy theorists.

The final group of chapters in Part 5 focus on 'Political and international dimensions of conspiracy theories'. John E. Richardson & Ruth Wodak (chapter 17) provide a historical overview of the antisemitic 'Jewish world conspiracy' to contextualize its modern instantiations. Analyzing propaganda posters through a discourse-historical approach, they demonstrate how the Hungarian political party Fidesz casts the philanthropist George Soros as a *Feindbild* (416), symbolizing all that is evil within an us/them ideology. In chapter 18, Kelsey Campolong, presenting a new critical discourse analysis methodology, investigates Trumpian conspiracy theories about crowd sizes at election rallies. She demonstrates how intertextual and interdiscursive usage of several key linguistic features (such as insults and stock phrases) were crucial in the theories' construction. In a highly topical chapter 19, Mari-Liis Madisson & Andreas Ventsel focus on Russian government-financed *Russia Today's* coverage of Covid-19 conspiracy theories. While the outlet initially spread several conspiracy theories itself, it subsequently presented the theories as a strategic means for allegedly hostile Western countries to sabotage Russia and China, thus essentially conspiracy theorizing about the spread of conspiracy theories. In chapter 20, Angela Zottola & Rodrigo Borba focus on Brazil and US far-right press coverage on the 'gender ideology' conspiracy theory. They identify key discursive features of these transnationally circulating narratives, arguing that these features provide a template for localization according to divisive domestic issues. The volume wraps up with an incisive epilogue by Johannes Angermüller (discussed below).

As this review indicates, the volume contains an array of relevant frameworks and methods applied to a wealth of topical and contemporary conspiracy theory discourses. Amidst a dearth of discourse-analytical work on conspiracy theories, the volume constitutes a key resource for further research on the topic (a function facilitated by the inclusion of an index including key figures, theories, and methodologies).

The volume's twofold limitations are largely due to the lack of a critical mass of work on the topic and are indeed foreshadowed in some of its chapters. First, while the chief focus of the volume lies on conspiracy theories related to western, right-wing politics, several chapters demonstrate in passing that twenty-first-century conspiracy theorizing is interrelated with current geopolitics. Increasingly authoritarian blocs may also employ conspiracy theories as a means of regime legitimization or may be instrumental in the spread of untruths. While western right-wing conspiracy theories are an excellent entry point to analyzing conspiracy theories, the focus spurns a more profound understanding of features generalizable across political contexts.

Second, while the volume intermittently deals with conceptual issues of the notion of 'conspiracy theory', it only partially succeeds in extracting itself from them. Designating 'conspiracy theories' as the *quasi* pathological and nonsensical has the benefit of a clearly delineated dataset. Yet such a clean definition is not always feasible: Jones (chapter 3) demonstrates how features of conspiracy theorizing may bleed into the relatively mundane and non-pathological and points out that "'paranoia" might really be the healthiest response' (66) to the invasive practices of modern tech companies. Similarly, politically inspired accusations of 'conspiracy theory' are becoming ever more commonplace in the public sphere: chapter 19 highlights how accusations of conspiracy may function as an essential discursive resource for malicious actors to denigrate others. These conceptual issues are contextualized in the broader field of discourse analysis by Angermuller in the epilogue. Pointing to the origins of discourse studies as partially relying on an 'epistemology of suspicion' (492), the author ponders whether we are warranted to 'use the conspiracy mode of reasoning as a basis for criticizing conspiracy theories' (493) and urges more reflexive theorizing to strengthen the field's basis of social critique.

This is a tall order and, as mentioned earlier, the volume's trailblazing qualities attenuate this specific criticism. Indeed, the volume would be indispensable itself in engaging with these questions. It represents a milestone paving the way for exciting advances in discourse-analytical studies of conspiracy theories, with each chapter presenting significant and innovative findings.

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