Introduction

Alma-Pierre Bonnet

Introduction

Alma-Pierre Bonnet

1　Following the publication of a seminal book on conspiracy theory discourse by Demata *et al.* (2022) and a series of seminars in Lyon (Centre d'Études Linguistiques – Corpus, Discours et Sociétés, Université Jean-Moulin Lyon 3), which brought together established international scholars in conspiratorial studies, political studies and discourse analysis, this special issue of *ELAD-SILDA* proposes to explore how conspiracy theories are linguistically constructed. However –and in line with the holistic ambition of the Lyon seminars– the various contributions presented here are by no means limited to linguistics. They offer a wide range of approaches, drawing on many disciplines – such as political studies, history, sociology, philosophy or narrative analysis – to provide a better understanding of conspiracy theories as discursive –but also cultural– constructions. As such, this special issue of the journal aims to shed (some) light on a phenomenon which has always influenced human social interaction and framed political debates and which continues, nowadays, to defy reality in a post-truth world and digital era.

2　The first two articles, by Christopher Jon Delogu and Armin Langer, offer general framing elements about conspiracy theories. The following two papers, by Alma-Pierre Bonnet and Emma Bell, focus on how British politicians resort to conspiratorial discourse for political gain. The remaining four articles, by Lexi Webster, Lucie Donckier de Donceel, Laura Levstock and Damien Lenoir, propose

case studies and helpful material to provide a better understanding of several types of conspiracy theories.

3   As the introductory contributor, Christopher Jon Delogu proposes to set the scene and offers a review of "conspiracism" from the 1950s to the present. Drawing on seminal works from many disciplines, the article offers an explanation of conspiracy theory discourse by political leaders who exploit the economic vulnerability of many and the status loss anxiety of many others. The objective is to increase the polarization of the American society and suspicion between opposing camps which then weakens confidence in public institutions and democracy. The objective of the paper is therefore to lay bare the socioeconomic, cultural, and rhetorical levers that allow leading politicians –and other "predatory con artists"– to "control the narrative" and frame the political debate in ways that serve their personal interests.

4   Armin Langer proposes a discourse analysis of the manifestos published by far-right extremists from the United States, Norway, and Australia, in order to illuminate how these manifestos mirror and amplify the narratives espoused by far-right populists. By doing so, the article contributes to the growing academic literature on the link between the rise of far-right populism and the increase in far-right attacks. Against the backdrop of rising far-right terrorist activities across the Western world, the article aims to decipher and deconstruct some of the most common far-right conspiracy myths promoted by far-right political parties and compare those with the conspiracy myths in the terrorist manifestos.

5   Through a critical approach to narrative analysis, Alma-Pierre Bonnet sets to establish whether the so-called "Turkey story", which was a key pro-Brexit argument during the 2016 referendum campaign to leave the European Union (EU) and which stated that Turkey was "in the pipeline to enter the EU", could effectively be considered a conspiracy theory. The analysis reveals the complexity of this narrative – and its potential for manipulation – and introduces the concept of "strategic conspiracy", to account for the rhetorical impact of this argument, but also to explain why leading Brexiters so eagerly tried to distance themselves from its political/geopolitical fallout.

6   Emma Bell further explores the strategic use of conspiracy theory discourse in the United Kingdom by analysing the way Conservative politicians promote an "anti-woke" agenda against what they perceive as "the enemies of the people", namely anyone suspected of being left-wing, anti-Brexit, pro-immigration and unpatriotic. She analyses the political implications of the "deep state" argument put forward by leading politicians, such as Boris Johnson, and offers to trace back the discursive origins of this controversial term. Such conspiratorial framing of the public debate is usually associated with the far right, but it is now widely used by Tory politicians to wage what researchers call a "war on woke", in a bid to attack supposedly "woke" organisations, such as universities, the BBC or the legal system, so as to reinforce post-Brexit political polarization in the country, for political gain.

7   Drawing on methods from cultural political economy and socio-cognitive discourse studies, Lexi Webster analyses Twitter and Mumsnet data in order to explores the socio-behavioural phenomenon of "transvestigations" in social media discourses. Social media so-called "transvestigators" refer to a person's physiological features and behaviour as indicative of their (secret) transgender status. As such, they deploy cis-normative ideological framing and appeal to pseudo-scientific expertise to legitimize transphobia and conspiratorial thinking about transgender ubiquity and their secret ambition to enslave the world's cisgender population. Within the prolific academic field of gender studies, the article therefore seeks to deconstruct "transvertigation" discourse to raise awareness about the negative role of social media in the dissemination and legitimization of hate speech.

8   Lucie Donckier de Donceel proposes to discuss the persuasive power of historical examples in conspiracy discourse around the Covid-19 pandemic in the French-speaking world. Through a corpus-based analysis of digital documents from Twitter and YouTube, she illustrates how the use of *paradeigma* (that is, "rhetorical examples") can reinforce the persuasiveness of conspiracy discourse. Drawing on the rhetorical use of the "Shoah example" during the Covid-19 vaccine rollout, she demonstrates how *paradeigma* helps construct a positive ethos for the speaker, mainly by providing some semblance of legitimacy. Besides, the framing dimension of the historical

example proves particularly useful in terms of rhetoric: it creates scenarios and characters that people are familiar with, which, arguably, help the (unconscious) dissemination of political/conspiratorial ideologies.

9   Laura Levstock studies the antisemitic codes and structural antisemitism at the heart of QAnon's conspiratorial discourse. Through a bottom-up perspective, using applied linguistics and the DIMEAN model as a theoretical framework, she proposes to analyse how antisemitic topoi frame the language of QAnon supporters on Facebook. The analysis reveals the quantitative and qualitative significance of antisemitic topoi in the QAnon spectrum and calls for a better understanding of the language of conspiracy theories in order to contribute to a possible prevention of their further spread.

10   Finally, Damien Lenoir's paper aims to establish how conspiracy theorists construct their legitimacy and authority in discourse by studying the marking (or lack thereof) of epistemic and authoritative stance. Focusing on online articles written by Jon Rappoport, known for his conspiracy theorist opinions, the paper analyses the plausibility hedges and certainty boosters to unveil the marking of authoritative and epistemic stance in Rappoport's discourses and the function(s) they perform.

Alma-Pierre Bonnet
Université Jean-Moulin Lyon 3, CEL alma-pierre.bonnet@univ-lyon3.fr
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/234087927