

## *Colloquium*



# L'Unione europea tra pandemia, nuove crisi e prospettive future

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Marisa Della Gatta

# “Facts, not Fear”: Islamophobia, Coronaphobia and the Language of Fear

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## ABSTRACT

*The world is currently living in a time in which crises are at the doorstep. The primary scope of this study is to shed some light on the role of fear and extremist discourses during security threats. Islamist terrorism and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic are frames for evaluating the responses of Islamophobia and Coronaphobia. The use of fear in politics has been convincingly linked by Wodak (2021) with extreme rhetoric and the refusal to conform to any value-normative model or stereotype. This article argues that extreme and divisive discourses surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic have not substituted fears of “otherness” (van Dijk 2009), but rather have created a new dimension of fearing the unknown. Looking for communalities between Coronaphobic and Islamophobic discourses, this study undertakes a corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker 2006; Gee 2011) of online reports and instances of fear and extremist speech on traditional and social media, Facebook and Twitter (Zappavigna 2012). First, this article provides a background of representations of hateful and fearful rhetoric with the aim of evaluating differences and similarities in online reports, speeches, press releases and social media posts. A diachronic analysis of a self-compiled collection of texts containing an extremist and/or phobic stance, with a special focus on Australia, follows. The study can foster the understanding of the interplay between fear and insecurity.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, running from a crisis into the other feels like the new normal. The primary scope of this study is to shed some light on the role of fear and hate generating discourses in critical periods. Social and economic disruption caused by Covid-19 pandemic has been severe and led to feelings of insecurity. In such contexts of instability, novel divisive discourses spreading fear and hate tend to emerge worldwide. During the Covid-19 crisis vectors of panic transmission have been as many as vectors of disease transmission (Nie *et al.* 2021).

This article looks at the use of fearful and hateful rhetoric in the frame of security threats. Two events that put people’s general safety at risk like terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the outbreak of Covid-19 will be

used as frames to understand the circumstances under which fear- and hate-based campaigns find fertile ground. Interestingly, in both cases, hate for the enemy, namely the terrorist and the virus, generate phobic discourses, respectively Islamophobia and Coronaphobia.

The use of fear in politics is not a new phenomenon, having instead a long tradition. Wodak (2021) has convincingly linked its use with the rise of extremism in politics and populist stances. She claims that anti-Semitism, xenophobic stances and Islamophobic judgements overlap and can coexist, meaning that they are not interchangeable (*ibid.*). Hate rhetoric often arises as a response to the other's refusal to conform to any value-normative model or stereotype. Hate speech, fear-generating and risk management linguistic strategies are based on a form of polarization of social sentiments and emotions. Extreme and divisive discourses surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic have not substituted fears of "otherness" (van Dijk 2009), but rather have created a new dimension of fearing the unknown. Given the communality amongst these strategies, this study undertakes a corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker 2006; Gee 2011) of online reports and instances of fear and hate speech online, including their resonance examining comments and replies in social media, Twitter in particular (Zappavigna 2012).

This chapter unfolds as follows: first, a background of representations of hateful and fearful rhetoric with the aim of evaluating differences and commonalities in online reports, speeches and social media posts will be provided. A self-compiled collection of texts containing an extremist stance vis-à-vis the "invader", may it be the virus, the Islamist or the stranger, has been selected and analysed diachronically starting from fear of Islamist ideologies and episodes of Islamophobia (Ciftci 2012; Choudhury 2015) to spreading fear during the Covid-19 pandemic and emergence of "Coronaphobia" with a special focus on Australia. The study comprises a detailed analysis pursuing a critical understanding of the interplay between fear, hate and insecurity, at a time of rapid change following the upheaval brought by Covid-19.

## 2. BACKGROUND ON FEAR AND HATE CAMPAIGNS

Broadcast media, social media and other political campaigns have long been used to persuade people to adopt a desired behaviour (Soames 1988: 164). One consistent finding has been that language – including fear appeals – is effective at getting people's attention and promoting



preventive behaviour. For instance, the quit-smoking campaigns over several decades are a striking example of how successful fear appeals can be at convincing people their behaviour is riskier than they think, and to stop smoking. Likewise, intense and shock language is effective at getting people to reduce alcohol consumption and to adopt sun protection. On the other hand, some scholars argue that in the long term the fear strategy leads to irrationalism and a level of panic that is disproportional to the risk itself (*ibid.*).

The politics of fear opposes cosmopolitanism, post-nationalism, European citizenship and multilingualism (Wodak 2020). Focusing on language and discursive strategies of populist parties, according to Wodak, the terms “unity”, “cohesion” and “nation” appeal to ethno-nationalist populist parties, which employ these terms to justify their exclusionary politics and consequently their tight security policies (*ibid.*: 26). Denial, ambivalent apologies, and conspiracies are presented as their language strategies. Wodak (*ibid.*: 28) argues that this kind of rhetoric builds “us” as the owners and protectors of the fatherland, and “others” as dangerous invaders. Further, the author argues that the normalization of exclusionary rhetoric is underway, with strangers described as “parasites, illness, disease”.

This is linked to the idea of a “liquid society” in which “liquid fears” (Bauman 2020) stem into overlapping forces. Fear and hate go hand in hand. Broadly, there the tendency of people to react with the emotions they see around them, especially when those emotions are negative, such as fear or anger. In other words – panic increases panic. We communicate panic interpersonally, through language and nonverbal channels. One was that risk perception, and reaction to risk, is not as straightforward or as rational as one might hope. A kind of risk called “dread risk” (Fischhoff *et al.* 1978) involves panic about low probability but very serious events like air crashes or terrorism, combined with unrealistic optimism about the chances of the event happening to us. Fear-based hostility to other groups shows that extreme fear is the more common reaction and vice versa. There is a tension between unknown and genuine threat at stake, leading to feelings of powerlessness.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. *Approach*

Corpus-assisted discourse analysis underlines using corpus linguistics (CL) methods in discourse analysis, such as frequency list, keywords, clusters, collocates, and concordances (Baker 2006; Liu 2009). As Liu (*ibid.*) points out, this proves beneficial for two main reasons. First, it allows the use of computer-assisted corpus-analytic tools in the processing of large samples of texts and identifying important linguistic patterns. Second, “it highlights the incorporation of discourse analytic methods and theories in the descriptions and interpretations of the findings generated by corpus-analytic tools” (*ibid.*: 56). Using CL methods in discourse analysis can allow the efficient analysis of a large sample of texts, provide empirical evidence for testing research assumptions, generate findings that cannot be acquired through mere manual analysis of a small sample of texts, reduce the researcher bias in data selection and interpretation, and make the analytic procedure replicable (Baker 2006; Baker *et al.* 2008; Friginal, Hardy 2020).

The method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) combined with CL as in Baker (2006) suits the scopes of this study, which is corpus-based in the sense that the analysis is meant to test the hypothesis that hate speech and phobic rhetoric is reiterated throughout the different uses. In this study a corpus-based (Tognini-Bonelli 2001) approach for the evolution of the language of fear and hate has been adopted; integrated with CDA and the evolution of fear-generating rhetoric: discourse as both socially constituted and as a constitutive semiotic practice embedded in history (Wodak 2001: 7). Keyness, Word Search and Concordance were the main tools.

On “new media democracy”, it can be said that this is a two-way relationship and that we live in a time of which the hyper visibility of politics and instant reception, exchange, resonance, and commenting have dominated the transition from traditional to new digital era. Fowler focuses on the creation of the news as “representation of the world in language” through two principal processes: selection and transformation (Fowler 1991: 4). One step in the process of transformation is the translation of institutional concepts into “personal thoughts” in a style used in interpersonal communication, “narrowing a gap” between institutions and people. A second strategy is “transforming an event into a finished news item” (*ibid.*). It does not mean stopping the discussion about a certain topic or solving the problems

linked to it, but it is a way to make it properly an event with its finished structure.

### 3.2. *Data collection*

As for the composition of the corpus, the latter was compiled with news articles on Islamophobia in Australia from 2001 to 2020 and on Covid (ABC News) from 2020 to 2022 (total of 582 articles), from 2020 to 2022 (add number of words); collection of tweets during Covid-19 from 2020 to 2022 by users worldwide, WHO and the last Australian Prime Ministers (Liberal Party) Tony Abott, Malcom Turnbull and Scott Morrison (until May 2022).

The sample design starts with the identification of the topics/themes associated with the coverage of Islamophobia (IP from now on) and Coronaphobia (CP from now on). The corpus-analytic tool WordSketch is used for the analysis of the most prominent and preferential topics/themes (Liu 2009). The keyword list can rank these statistically significant words in terms of their log-likelihood values. The more their key values are, the more statistically significant these keywords are. In order to identify the most prominent themes/topics of the two corpora, this study first compares the two corpora respectively with the *WHO Corpus* (BNC) Sampler written corpus in *Sketch Engine*. Although it has to be acknowledged that a British spelling is preferred in the word-search, the choice of American and British does not seriously affect the results because the semantic analysis categorizes these words in terms of meanings rather than spellings in *Sketch Engine*.

Subsequently, the research focuses on the top 20 keywords in each list to identify the shared topics/themes of the two corpora. After that, the two corpora are compared with each other. For the convenience of analysis, the top 20 keywords in each corpus to determine the corpus size. The specific functions can be further examined through a close examination of the most frequently used tokens in each sample (Rayson 2008).

It is followed by a close examination of the particular ways of framing IP and CP in the two corpora. According to Entman (1993), to frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (*ibid.*: 52). The particular ways of framing IP and CP can be examined through

their strong collocates (Liu 2009). With the corpus-analytic tool *Sketch Engine*, this study focuses on the top 100 collocates of IP and CP in their respective corpora to identify which collocates contribute to the four aspects of framing the issue: definition, cause, consequence, and action.

Nevertheless, the analysis of framing in terms of their collocates may not present an accurate picture about the exact stance in view of the journalistic norm of balanced reporting (Cunningham 2010). In order to examine to what extent media outlets adhere to the journalistic norm of balanced reporting and (dis)aligns with the scientific consensus on the existence of IP and CP, this study gives a further analysis of the perspectivization strategy adopted towards IP and CP. Perspectivization deals with the media position towards others' viewpoints and expresses involvement or distance in discourse, and it can manifest at all levels of discourse (Flowerdew, Richardson 2017). The concordance lines of some collocates with a contradictory evaluation of the existence of IP and CP are further examined to reveal the specific perspectivization strategies taken towards these statements.

#### 4. ISLAMOPHOBIA

In the case of Islamophobia, the nexus between fear and hate exacerbated as the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (Baker *et al.* 2008) that generated security concerns and phobic stances against the Muslim community. Negative representations of Islam have a longer tradition, though. Since the genesis of Islam in 622, despite periods of learning and understanding on the part of the English, there has also been ignorance, conflict, and the demonization of Islam: Muslims have been portrayed as barbaric, ignorant, closed-minded semi-citizens, maddened terrorists, or intolerant religious zealots (Panagopoulos 2006: 608). While there is no scholar agreement on a definitive definition of Islamophobia given its multi-dimensionality, many agree on its rise in recent times. In general, Islamophobic discourses emphasise the danger nature of sharia, stressing the negativity of religious legislation in the publish sphere and promoting its banning in western secular societies (Bleich *et al.* 2015: 942).

As Lakoff (2001) pointed out in the days after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, frames of terrorism embodied terror from within. One frame focused on loss of control during the fall of the twin towers: "Control Is Up: You have control over the situation, you're on top of things. This

has always been an important basis of towers as symbols of power. In this case, the toppling of the towers meant loss of control, loss of power” (*ibid.*: 2). Evil was another frame: “Evil people do evil things. No further explanation is necessary. There can be no social causes of evil, no religious rationale for evil, no reasons or arguments for evil” (*ibid.*: 3) That was extended to Islamic fundamentalism. To quote directly from Lakoff’s commentary:

The question that keeps being asked in the media is, “Why do they hate us so much?” It is important at the outset to separate out moderate to liberal Islam from radical Islamic fundamentalists, who do not represent most Muslims. Radical Islamic fundamentalists hate our culture. They have a worldview that is incompatible with the way that Americans – and other westerners – live their lives. (*ibid.*: 5)

The important distinction between moderate and radical Islam started to become blurred after 9/11. Relying on an enduring suspicion, stereotypes, broadcast misinformation, and discrimination has been perpetrated (Sinclair, Antonius 2012). This drives the skepticism, wariness and hostility towards Islam (*ibid.*).

Another peak of anti-Islamic sentiment happened in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring that led to revolutions and regime change in Egypt and Libya and resulted in a still unfinished civil war in Syria. In the years following the Arab Springs conflict there were reports stressing their fear of Islamist takeover: “[most of Syrian Christians] they’re afraid of Islamists coming to power” (J. Ioffe, *The New Republic*, September 5, 2013). Facebook operating platforms such as Syrian Christian Watch publishes posts promoting anti-Islam sentiments. Syrian Christian Watch, for example, uses anti-Islam narratives in defence of real and imagined persecution’s threats. In one of the posts, a user quoted: “Islam is not a religion, it’s a political ideology, the ideology of a retarded culture. Nobody will silence me. No terrorist threats... no judge... nobody”. The same incipit is also the motto of right-wing Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders.

A comment to Trump’s ban says: “Muslims are cancerous to freedom”. There is also reference to otherness as “illness” and “disease” which is typical of extremist rhetoric. Alongside, general anti-Islam statements emerge: “Islam is without refinement or beauty”<sup>1</sup>. In a comment to other anti-Islam manifestations all over the world (reported in Italy, South America, the US and France), coarse language is: “Religion

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Arabic.

of Muhammad is religion for pigs”. The Syrian Christian Watch portal is a concrete example of a typically Islamophobic practice of instrumentalising the Salafist takeover in Middle East and fears of terrorism for criticizing Islam itself as a religion.

It is important to clarify that Islamophobic prejudices and other phobic attitudes are based on generalization (Ciftci 2012: 293), but in no sense can be associated to anti-Islamist sentiments alone. In the corpus of tweets, the word fear collocates with scarcity and the syntagm “hope over fear” occurs<sup>2</sup>. One post is representative of the proximity of fear and hate within the same message:

We'd like to encourage everyone to not say the pictures of Nashville look like Iraq, Syria, or any other Middle Eastern country. It just helps spread Islamophobia & reinforce the racism and hate against people. Nashville is distinctly white American homegrown domestic terrorism. (*ibid.*: 294)

Islamophobia collocates with racism and hate against a generalized people, left without a denomination while it could be easily inferred “against” Muslim “people”, which is, thus, omitted in the tweet to be only implied. In another post, this implication turns into a negation of the use the term “Islamophobia”: “In 2015, Denis Coderre fed a climate of Islamophobia (centered on students going to fight Assad in Syria and the work of Adil Charkaoui) by creating the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization. Now he has solutions for racist violence (which he won't call Islamophobic)” (*ibid.*: 295). “Climate” is here a metaphor to express a movement, a wave of anti-Islamic sentiments. The words in the second bracket “which he won't call Islamophobic” convey the unwillingness to refer to racist violence as a form of Islamophobia. Either way, the term Islamophobia has a significant proximity with the words hate, violence and racism.

## 5. FEAR AND HEALTH: THE CASE OF COVID-19 AND CORONAPHOBIA

Another important nexus to fear of disease has been a public health messaging trope in popular journalistic culture for more than a century and a half (Fairchild *et al.* 2015). Fear generating campaigns have been exceptionally popular and Australia was the world leading country in this regard. If we think of the anti-smoking campaign, for one, or fear

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<sup>2</sup> Miscellaneous tweets.

campaigns against HIV (*ibid.*). Similarly to the case of Islamophobia, effective positive counterparts of fear are hope, security and safety.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, “Discursive strategies announcing/ legitimising restrictive measures in order to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic where everybody is in danger of falling ill” to quote directly from Wodak (2021: 3). The other, the enemy to destroy, has become the virus itself, so the association “other-disease” is no longer a metonymic one. However, surrounding the virus, different “others” emerged, may it be “virus spreaders”, “no vax” people or the measures themselves to stop the spread of the virus.

Australia was chosen as case study for the corpus for its great reputation in handling crises. Its response to the Covid-19 pandemic is considered among the most successful in the world. On the other hand, “geographic distancing was severe”. The amount of panic around Covid-19 seems extreme, given the actual consequences of the disease. The economic disruption has been significant. At a social level, disruption was even greater. There is scholarly agreement on the use of the war frame as dominant in the representation of the Covid-19 pandemic (Semino 2021; Milizia 2023).

In the social media corpus, examples of tweets include: “We overcome the twin vices of self-interest and fear by actively rejecting them. The ancient Athenians failed to do this in the face of a plague and lost their democracy. Now the same choice is ours”. “#I fear for democracy” was extremely popular in the years surrounding the pandemic. This was a general tweet by Turnbull on fear and self-interest showing that fear is not only related to Covid-19 in Australia but, more broadly, to security threats. Scott Morrison wrote in a tweet “Our Government is committed to keeping every Australian safe. No one should have to fear for their safety. That’s why today we’ve announced we’re extending the Safer Communities Fund following the terrible terrorist attack in New Zealand. *No one* here is initialized and, thus, stressed”.

When it comes to Covid-19, the negation of fear is far more evident: “We have the best health system in the world and we are prepared to deal with this situation. While Australians should remain alert, they should not be alarmed”. This was the first phase of health crisis management in which “facts not fear” (*Fig. 1*) was dominant as once again a denial of fear and panic. After this, the fight phase began. Fearful rhetoric emerged here. The *Covid-19 Disaster Payment* will also become recurring for approved recipients for as long as the Commonwealth declared hotspot and lockdown restrictions remain in place alongside the safety appeal (S. Morrison, May 12, 2021).

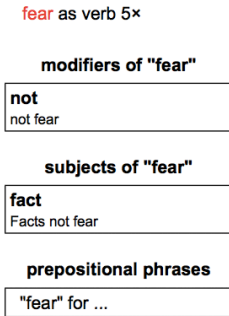


Figure 1. – Modifiers of fear with wordsketch.

The language of the news was different, as the quotes suggest: the tweets by WHO resonate with the ambivalence towards fear: The virus is described as “the dangerous enemy”: “Our singular focus is on working to serve all people to save lives and stop the #COVID19 pandemic – stop this dangerous enemy-@DrTedros #coronavirus”<sup>3</sup>. The occurrence of fear and safety equation is confirmed, even though in relatively open contrast against governments underestimating the seriousness of #longcovid.

Positive reinforcement is expressed by the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, in one press conference:

Australia is a country that just doesn't look to survive these things. We don't go through challenges with our heads looking down, overwhelmed by the circumstances. That is not who we are. Who we are is an innovative, adaptive people, supporting each other, reaching out to each other, drawing us all through not for survival but to be on the other side in a position where we can emerge strongly. We've been saying that since the outset, and we're seeing that in the responses of Australian businesses, their employees, families, health professionals, bus drivers, checkout workers right across the country, they are all doing their job and they will keep doing their job. (S. Morrison, August 9, 2020)

The stance of the Prime Minister is sided by the scientific and medical advice, whose representative for Australia is Paul Kelly:

<sup>3</sup> WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the Mission briefing on Covid-19 April 9, 2020 (<https://t.co/VUC6dW701f>).



I have no doubt that the Premier feels the same way. But the actions that are being taken are necessary. As we look around the world, we know what’s happening. And we know that we have to be cautious and the *great gains* that have been made at great sacrifice and at *great cost* over the course of this year, we intend to maintain them. [...] They’re tough calls, and he knows he has to make them. He sought to consult. He sought advice, including from the commonwealth. We’ve offered our views, and I think the challenges in Victoria going to be hard to call, but they’re going to be necessary. (P. Kelly, October 28, 2020)

The permutation of the adjective “great” referred to both positive and negative terms within the same sentence is significantly stressed to reinforce the adjective “cautious” before them. The medical adviser added: “I’m really convinced that this [the end of the pandemic] will happen. It will take time. These things always take about two weeks or so, sometimes longer to show that they are effective, but this will be effective” (*ibid.*). Certainty and uncertainty coexist in the same remark.

A blurred distinction between safety and insecurity appears in another press release by the Australian Prime Minister, when he said: “The idea that in this country we would be living at a time where there would be a night curfew on an entire city of the size of Melbourne was unthinkable. But frankly, as we’ve moved through this pandemic, we’ve had to deal with a lot of unthinkable things” (S. Morrison, March 3, 2021). The adjective unthinkable is repeated twice with two opposite meanings. While fear is negated is public discourses insisting on safety-related expressions like “to stay safe”, to keep “Australians safe” and fight the virus, Twitter users talk about “Fear based negative brainwashing” from the government and the media. The hashtag “Coronaphobia” on Twitter collects voices of fear of Coronavirus and contains both posts genuine of worriedness and posts criticizing and/or mocking the safety measures. In the first case, users refer to real “post pandemic stress” and “fear of normal” after the shock pandemic. In the Twitter corpus, one post reports:

Making “coronaphobia” a pathology disregards the very real fear of long #COVID. For my family, the cognitive impacts are terrifying given our consistent & straight family line of dementia. So yes, I fear COVID. And yes, it’s rational. Stop gaslighting people.<sup>4</sup>

In this case the repetition of “yes” and fear reinforces the gravity of the pandemic. Other posts contain “I have #Coronaphobia” (*ibid.*). Coronaphobia correlates with “anxiety” and “paranoia”. This is also a term

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<sup>4</sup> Miscellaneous in the Twitter corpus.

that refers to anti-vaxxers and users expressing skepticism about Covid-19, as in the following comment: “Can the people who want to live in a perpetual state of disease panic please just leave the rest of us out of it?” (*ibid.*). Over the term, a form of polarization between fear of contracting Covid and hate of excessive limitations emerges.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The language of fear, which was typical of extremist rhetoric and populism, has pervaded the public discourse. The use of fear in the analyzed mediatic campaigns has the aim of convincing people to stay safe and do the right thing. In this sense, the Covid campaign is not different to the other health campaigns that Australia first launched with the intent of “making people do the right thing for their health”. What has profoundly changed is the way fear is being deployed from a linear way to an ambivalent one.

The instrument of power, fear, and the counterpart, safety, are so intertwined that it is sometimes difficult to understand when one finishes and the other starts. The two cases of Islamophobia and Coronaphobia have commonalities in the sense that the enemy, the other, the threat is conceived as unhealthy. Fear of unknown implies hate, may it be the terrorist or the spreading of the virus.

Having said that, there are divergencies in the language used to express those fears. A form of calculated ambivalence emerged with fear and denial of fear, assuring and terrifying statements delivered simultaneously. An evolution of language of fear resulted as convincing through fear, negation of fear, dread risk, and prolonged uncertainty. Concurrency of fear and safety including variants exist in the same messages.

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<sup>5</sup> All links were verified on September 30, 2022.

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