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Vocabulary of Hatred in Social Media: An Example from Italian

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Abstract The study focuses on Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites in our time, given its position in the digital world and the importance of the verbal component in it. The main objective of the research is to investigate whether in a corpus of utterances in Italian coming from two public Facebook groups, the incitement to hatred manifests itself through the use of slurs, the choice of which is delimited by precise criteria. The presence of the selected words is verified through automatic searches with the tools available on Facebook. Moreover, the analysis is aimed at discovering whether slurs always carry their denigratory potential, or whether they can also have a non-denigratory use. Some possible extensions of the research will also be defined.

Keywords hate speech, Italian language, social media, Facebook, slurs

1. Introduction

The presence of verbal hate in social media seems to be an issue that appears frequently in the debates on communication, yet at the same time the rapid development of this particular type of channel makes it impossible to exhaust the subject. For this reason, hate speech in recent years has become the object of much research in various disciplines, such as, for example, political and social sciences (Van Blarcum 2005; Daniels 2008; Bleich 2011), philosophy of language (Bianchi 2014, 2015a and b, 2021), law (Casarosa 2020), and, finally, linguistics (Cepollaro 2015; Alfonzetti 2019).

The purpose of this paper[1] is to investigate whether in a corpus of utterances in Italian coming from two public Facebook groups, the incitement to hatred manifests itself through the use of slurs. Moreover, the analysis should answer the question whether the use of slurs in an utterance always releases their denigratory potential, or whether slurs can also have a non-denigratory use.

In Section 2, the phenomenon of hate speech and the role that slurs can play in it are presented, taking into account, in particular, the social media

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1   The research is inspired by a broader study on hate speech, carried out in 2020-2021, as a part of the ALIHAS project (*A Linguistic Investigation of Hate Speech: How to identify it and how to avoid it*) https://blogs.helsinki.fi/alihas-unaeuropa/.

105

NEUPHILOLOGISCHE MITTEILUNGEN — I CXXIV 2023
Anna Dyda & Alicja Paleta • Vocabulary of Hatred in Social Media: An Example from Italian

environment. Section 3 is mainly devoted to the description of the corpus and the method of analysis. Later the text moves on to the results (Section 4). Subsequently, the limitations associated with the type of data are discussed (Section 5). The conclusions (Section 6) contain a synthetic summary of the results of the study and some possible extensions of the research.

2. Hate speech and slurs

Defining hate speech (hereinafter referred to as HS) is an extremely difficult task, given its multiformity and the rapidity of social changes to which it is subjected. This is not to say that there have been no attempts to capture this heterogeneous phenomenon, but one must be aware that what on a theoretical level (either legal or linguistic) may seem consistent, on a pragmatic level will not necessarily be so. And indeed, there are several documents within Community Law in which an attempt has been made to describe the characteristics of HS, but still none of them can be treated as generally accepted.[2]

The first attempt, dating back to 1997, was the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers[3] followed by the 2008 Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA.[4] Later, in 2016 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance published the General Recommendation n. 15[5] which was devoted entirely to HS.

In the same year, on the basis of the 2008 Framework Decision, the Code of Conduct[6] was drawn up in order to counter illegal online HS. This is an agreement which the European Commission came to with the most important

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2   For a more detailed reflection on the definition of HS cf. Fortuna and Nunes (2018), Brambilla and Crestani (2021), Dyda and Paleta (in press).

3   Recommendation No. R (97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on 'Hate Speech', 30.10.1997, https://rm.coe.int/1680505d5b. We will not cite all the definitions provided by the reported documents here since we have already done so and thus we refer to Dyda and Paleta (in press).

4   https://eur–lex.europa.eu/legal–content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32008F0913 (28.07.2022).

5   https://rm.coe.int/ecri–general–policy–recommendation–no–15–on–combating–hate–speech/16808b5b01 (28.07.2022).

6   https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en (28.07.2022).

social platforms (including Facebook). In this case, the signatory platforms committed, among other things, to a prompt examination of all complaints of hatred appearing on their services and subsequently to disable access to or remove such content, if necessary; to clarify the policy against HS; to sensitise users about the types of content not allowed within the community, as well as to promote close cooperation between platforms.

To complete the framework of the sources for the definition of HS, the internal regulations of each social media platform must also be mentioned. An interesting analysis of these documents can be found in Fortuna and Nunes (2018).

Now, what should be said and what emerges from the aforementioned documents, is the fact that the concept of HS is usually described in generic terms, which, at the level of language, means that one can expect a multiplicity of forms and structures. In fact, not only can HS present itself under different elements at the level of morphosyntax or lexis, but it can also be manifested through the use of irony or cynicism (Brambilla and Crestani 2021: 92) which is directly aligned with the circumstances and the interpretation made by the recipient. This leads inexorably to the area of linguistic pragmatics, in which the context decides on the final understanding of an utterance and on which the reflections contained in this paper will be based. For this reason, and for the purpose of this study, we regard HS as linguistic expressions of any kind, addressed to groups or individual persons as members of such groups, especially in public (social media included); these expressions must convey contempt, derision, etc., based on various, yet specific, factors such as origin, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, connoting in this way the idea of belonging to a group (minority). Moreover, it should be acknowledged that HS is closely linked to the context. It must, therefore, be premised that, just as the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of a speech act depends on the communicative context in which it appears, the evaluation of an utterance as HS must also take the circumstances into account.

However, even if analysed in the light of speech act theory, HS does not present itself as a simple and easily definable linguistic phenomenon. In fact, it is not possible to enclose HS to a limited and precise number of categories because their boundaries are fuzzy and tend to overlap (Alfonzetti 2019: 69). At the level of speech acts HS seems most easily identifiable with insults.

Bazzanella (2020: 13) defines the latter as "an intentional and serious offence directed at a person or group to which the person belongs and carried out by means of words, insulting expressions, or by the use of gestures, outrageous actions [...] that may accompany or substitute linguistic expression".[7]

As can be seen, this definition is very close to the considerations on HS discussed above. The only distinctive elements seem to be the idea of belonging to a group (indispensable for HS, not required even if possible for insults) and the component of incitement to hatred, which in a certain way makes one think of HS as an act carried out in public, while insults can have a more personal/individual character.

The association between HS and the speech act of insulting appears thus reasonable. In the light of prototype theory[8] and its pragmatic-functional criterion (Alfonzetti 2019: 71), the insult is defined as a negative opinion that contains an evaluative element and is expressed by a sender with the aim of offending a recipient directly *tu* [you], *voi* [you] or indirectly via a third party (*lui* [him], *lei* [her], *loro* [them]) who is somehow dear to the recipient. Moreover, such an opinion must be interpreted as offensive by the addressee.[9]

The question remains how, on a linguistic level, the aforementioned negative evaluation of the other is conveyed. To answer this question, however partially, it is necessary to give due weight to the role of words within communication. In the context of HS, especially, there are some words that have a particularly strong impact. They deserve special attention as they have a significant negative emotional charge if they are used in certain circumstances. Such words—called denigratory epithets or slurs[10]—are characterized by

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7   "Un'offesa intenzionale e grave rivolta ad una persona o ad un gruppo a cui la persona appartiene ed attuata tramite parole, espressioni ingiuriose, oppure con gesti, azioni oltraggiose [...] che possono accompagnare o sostituire l'espressione linguistica". If not specified, the translation of Italian sources into English is by the Authors.

8   Cf. firstly Alfonzetti (2019). For the application of prototype theory in linguistics, cf. De Fornel (1989), Luraghi (1993).

9   The case of social media is peculiar since, on the one hand, in a discussion within a group, there is always a sender and an addressee, but, on the other hand, the discussion never takes place 'face-to-face' due to the presence of a potential audience of all group members, any of whom can join and leave the discussion at any time.

10   See Bazzanella (2020: 12–13).

the fact that they are addressed to an individual and a target group at the same time. We think of expressions such as *negro* [*nigger*][11] or *frocio* [*faggot*] which—on the one hand—offend the person to whom they directly refer and —on the other—offend the entire group that is targeted, which is here the ethnic group and the group of sexual orientation. It is precisely this multiple addressee that characterizes and differentiates utterances containing slurs from generic insults, such as, for example, "Sei un idiota!" [You're an idiot!] (Bianchi 2021: 95–96).

It is not possible to speak about unanimity among scholars on how to treat slurs as the related research still seems to be quite a new phenomenon. It is generally considered that they have neutral counterparts which refer to the same target group in a non-pejorative way (Hornsby 2001: 129). In this light, taking up the examples given above, the counterpart of the derogatory epithet *negro* is *nero* [black person], while slur *frocio* finds its neutral 'equivalent' in the word *omosessuale* [homosexual].

Claudia Bianchi (2021: 105 et seq.) has devoted much space to slurs in her research on HS. She presents three different approaches to dealing with denigratory epithets:[12] semantic strategies (where the denigrating potential of an epithet is part of its literal meaning), pragmatic strategies (where the denigrating potential is conveyed by the use of the word in a given context) and, finally, social strategies (where the denigrating potential depends on social factors). As mentioned above, this paper follows the pragmatic perspective, which is the one that links the denigrating potential with the context of use. This means that the slurs can be used for a variety of purposes and there may be a non-denigratory use of these words.[13] A phenomenological representation of the concept, according to which slurs can be used with small or no

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11   Taking up Bianchi's theory (2021: 101) according to which the quotation marks neutralize or seal the denigrating value of the slurs, at the moments in which the slurs are given by us, they are transmitted between quotation marks, otherwise italics will be used. The English translation, in brackets, is presented only the first time when a slur is mentioned. If the English equivalent is missing, an approximate translation is given.
12   Hom (2008: 416–420) mentions two strategies, namely the semantic strategy and the pragmatic one.
13   See also Hom (2008).

offensive level, is brought up by Kennedy (2002: 54), who argues that the meaning of the word *negro* can differ on the basis of intonation, relationship between speakers, the place where it occurs, etc.

Therefore, we assume that the meaning of slurs may depend on the context and, sometimes, also on external factors, and we follow the path traced by Bianchi (2021: 100–102) who mentions so-called non-denigratory usages, such as: citational, pedagogical, fictitious and reappropriation. As far as citational use is concerned, these are situations in which the denigratory potential of an epithet is neutralized and the responsibility is shifted to the author of the original utterance and not to the person who quotes it. In pedagogical contexts, the denigratory potential of slurs is made explicit or questioned, such as in: "Institutions that treat blacks as blacks are racist"; "Why do racists think Chinese are cretins?" or "Anyone who uses the word '*terrone*' [Southerner] will be sanctioned." (cf. Hom 2008: 429; Panzeri 2016: 66). Another situation in which it is possible to use a slur without conveying any offense is that of fictitious use which is justified by the intention of describing a social environment or a historical period. Non-denigratory use is also present in reappropriation contexts, in which a sense of identity and solidarity within the target group is expressed. This involves the use of slurs by the members of the target group themselves, generally considered to be non-offensive and indeed aimed at separating the group from non-members. Possible examples of reappropriation include the use of the term *nigger* by African Americans, or *gay* by the homosexual community. Focusing on the notion of reappropriation, Bianchi (2015b) distinguishes two types of contexts generally considered as non-offensive. These are i) the so-called *friendly* contexts, in which the slur is used by a target group member in a non-offensive way to express solidarity without any conscious political intentions; and ii) the proper reappropriation in which the slur is used by the group members to defend their rights as a tool of deliberate political action.[14]

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14   In the present paper the notion of reappropriation will follow the general line, with no distinction between the two sub-contexts.

3. Corpus and research method

The study has been carried out in the field of social media and especially one of the most popular communicators in our times, namely Facebook (hereinafter referred to as FB). The latter—according to research referring to 2021[15]—is the most used social network site in the world, with nearly 3 billion active users per month.[16] FB has, in recent years, undergone a rapid development and is no longer used just for digital social exchanges with friends. Its multifunctionality spreads over various fields, including business, donations and fundraising, advertising, and promotion. Furthermore, this social network covers a specific social role, as it also gives the possibility of creating communities of people—so-called *groups*—with common interests and/or needs.[17] These communities can be private (accessed only by authorized users) or public where the contents are accessible to every FB user.

The two groups on which the corpus is based, namely *Italiani in Polonia* [Italians in Poland] founded in 2008 and *Italiani a Cracovia* [Italians in Cracow] founded in 2010, are public groups. In total, in mid-February 2022, the two groups included 28,500 members. Both were created with the aim of uniting Italians who live or intend to live in Poland in general excluding Cracow, or specifically in Cracow, respectively, to exchange views and help each other in the case of doubts or difficulties. Over time, however, the groups have been joined by many Italians who travel to Poland for short periods for tourism purposes, those who only consider moving and, finally, numerous Poles who know Italian or are somehow linked to Italy or to Italians. These factors contribute to considerable linguistic heterogeneity, as the corpus is based on the statements of people from different parts of Italy (and Poland), of different ages, sexes, and levels of education; in many cases it is even impossible to trace these data since the members' profiles do not necessarily provide it

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15   For further information, see https://www.truenumbers.it/social-network-piu-usati/ and https://digitexport.it/affermarsi/social-media-panoramica-dei-piu-popolari-al-mondo.kl#/ (28.07.2022).

16   The second most used social platform is YouTube with 2.29 billion active users, while in third place is Whatsapp (https://www.truenumbers.it/social-network-piu-usati/) (28.07.2022).

17   For FB as a social means of communication, see Miłkowska-Samul (2019).

(sometimes it is even difficult to tell if a given profile belongs to an Italian or a Pole). It should also be mentioned that the Poles present in both groups use Italian of different levels of competence that varies from the fluency of a native speaker to basic knowledge with many deficiencies in the written language. This is the reason for which linguistic errors of all types[18] are frequent and there are also examples of code mixing between Italian and Polish in a way that exceeds the characteristics of the language of social media[19]. What is more, errors may also be noted—and not infrequently—in the utterances produced by the Italians, but, in these cases, the phenomenon is linked to the characteristics of the online language, such as, among many others, speed in production, failure to reread, etc.

This particular composition of the two FB groups, whose members are predominantly representatives of two different nations, is also significant with regard to the potential presence of HS, since on a terrain where two cultures and worldviews clash, there is an abundance of different opinions and points of comparison. For this reason, in this paper, we want to investigate whether hate speech is present in the corpus through slurs. To this end, we have chosen a set of headwords according to certain rules, which will hereafter be discussed.

The following criteria were adopted when choosing the slurs to be used in the automatic search within the corpus. An initial starting point was the main corpus originating from the work of a well-known Italian linguist, Tullio De Mauro.[20] His article, entitled *Le parole per ferire* [Words to Hurt], was published in the online journal *Internazionale* on 27 September 2016 following the establishment, by the parliament of the Italian Republic, of the Commission on Intolerance, Xenophobia, Racism and Hate Phenomena with the aim of conducting research on these issues. In collaboration with that body, De Mauro decided to make an attempt to collect and classify hate words circulating in Italian, proposing an extensive list divided into semantic categories.

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18   When examples are given in this analysis, the errors present in the original versions will not be corrected.

19   For an in-depth analysis of language on the Net with respective bibliographical references, cf. Miłkowska-Samul (2019: 27–66).

20   https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/tullio-de-mauro/2016/09/27/razzismo-parole-ferire (28/07/2022).

De Mauro's list consists of several hundred headwords. It is based mainly on Gradit (*Grande dizionario italiano dell'uso*)[21] and the online dictionary of *Internazionale*.[22] The words have been divided into 11 categories: ethnic words, names of Italian regions and cities, human professions and activities, physical diversity, mental diversity, moral and behavioural defects, words denoting socio-economic inferiority, vegetables, animals, male and female sexual organs, homosexuality, as well as words that, although clearly derogatory, cannot be easily included in any of the above categories.

For the purposes of this research, however, we could not analyse all the words listed by De Mauro (for obvious reasons of time and space), and, therefore, we decided to narrow our list of words down to five categories:[23] ethnic words, names of Italian regions and cities, physical diversity, mental diversity and homosexuality. In the end, from those five categories we chose words for which it was possible to find a neutral counterpart (in order to remain coherent with the definition of slurs by Hornsby 2001: 129). We have also excluded words that do not refer to people, such as *americanata* [acting as Americans]. Below we present the list of slurs selected for the analysis, accompanied by a proposed neutral counterpart for each element:[24]

i) ethnic words:
Albionico (*inglese/brittanico* [English]); *ascaro*[25] (*meridionale* [Southern]); *barbaro* (*straniero* [foreigner]); *beduino* (*nomade* [nomadic]); *crucco* (*tedesco* [German]); *giallo* (*asiatico* [Asian]); *giudeo* (*ebreo* [Jew]); *italiota* (*italiano* [Italian]); *meteco* (*forestiero* [stranger]); *meticcio* (*sanguemisto* [mixed race]); *negro* (*nero*[26] [black

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21   *Grande dizionario italiano dell'uso,* II edition, VIII vol., UTET Torino.
22   https://dizionario.internazionale.it (28/07/2022).
23   Regarding the choice of categories, the ethnic words were chosen for the obvious reason of the characteristic of our corpus, while the remaining categories seemed the most fruitful in terms of the insults found on the net.
24   In the following cases, the English translation of the slurs is omitted, but instead the translation of the neutral counterpart of the slurs analysed is placed in square brackets.
25   De Mauro (2016) enumerates the word *ascaro* to mean low-ranking follower. In our case we refer to another meaning of the noun, such as southern.
26   De Mauro also enumerates *nero,* next to the word *negro,* used to offend a person. In our opinion, however, *nero* can be considered the neutral counterpart of the

person]); *zingaro* (*rom* [gypsy]);
ii) names of Italian regions and cities:
gabibbo (*meridionale* [Southerner]); *polentone* (*settentrionale*
[Northerner]); *terrone* (*meridionale* [Southerner]);

iii) physical diversity:[27]
handicappato (*disabile* [disabled]); *minorato*[28] (*disabile* [disabled]);
nanerottolo (*basso* [short]);

iv) mental diversity:
mongolo[29] (*soggetto Down* [individual with Down syndrome]);
spaghettaro (*italiano poco intelligente* [unintelligent Italian]);

v) homosexuality
*anormale, bagascione, baldraccone, bisex, bucaiolo, buliccio,
busone, checca, culano, culattina, culattino, culattone, culo, cupio,
dama, finocchio, frocio, garuso, gay, invertito, omo, omosex,
orecchione, paraculo, pederasta, recchione, sodomita, tubo, travestito*
(*omosessuale* [homosexual]).[30]

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derogatory epithet *negro*, since—as also referred to in the *Treccani* dictionary (https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/negro/)—it does not carry a negative or derogatory meaning.

27   From the group of 23 words arranged by De Mauro in the group of words for diversity and physical disability only three are considered by us to be HS, all the remaining, such as *bamberottolo* [retarded person] or *homunculus* [little man in the sense of commiseration] have been classified by us as insults, as they only refer to an individual not to the group they belong to.

28   See: https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/minorato_%28Sinonimi-e-Contrari%29/ (28.07.2022).

29   Although De Mauro classifies *mongolo* in the group of ethnic words, the derogatory meaning of this word is referred not to the inhabitants of Mongolia but to people with Down syndrome.

30   For all of the words that follow, the neutral counterpart is *homosexual,* so we do not repeat it for each case. We renounced the analysis of two words proposed by De Mauro, *diverso* and *zia,* given their highly polysemantic character which gave thousands of results with the use of automatic search but among which it was practically impossible to find words with an offensive meaning.

As can be seen, a total of 49 slurs were subjected to analysis, the results of which will be discussed in the following section.

4. Linguistic analysis

The corpus is based on authentic material, i.e. on utterances (posts and comments) available in the two FB groups in the time period between 01.02.2022 and 15.02.2022. After the first stage in which the 49 slurs were selected, the next step consisted in the automatic search of the selected words in the FB contents of the two chosen groups. This method of verification was possible since it concerns single words and not expressions or whole sentences. However, the research, rather than being fully automatic, was semi-automatic as it did not give complete results, i.e. the search tool can only indicate the post in the comments of which the searched word is present but, in order to find it, it is necessary to proceed with a manual search by reading all the comments. In this way, about 45,000 comments and posts were read. After selecting the posts and comments containing the words, we proceeded to the interpretative analysis of the contexts of their use in order to verify whether a term was used in a denigratory or non-denigratory way, taking into account the context in which the words appeared.

4.1 Slurs with denigratory usage

The analysis, already in the preparatory phase, has brought about interesting results. In the first place, among the 49 searched words, we were able to trace the presence of 18 (*barbaro* [primitive], *beduino* [nomadic], *bisex* [homosexual], *checca* [homosexual], *crucco* [German], finocchio [homosexual], *frocio* [homosexual], gay [homosexual], *giallo* [Asian], *handicappato* [disabled], *mongolo* [individual with Down syndrome], *nanerottolo* [short], *negro* [black person], *omo* [homosexual], *pederasta* [homosexual], *polentone* [Northerner], terrone [Southerner], *zingaro* [gypsy]) in their denigrating function, as can be seen in the following examples:[31]

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31   For each epithet—for reasons of space—only one use is mentioned in the context found. However, there are cases, such as (9), (10), (11), in which several slurs are enumerated in a comment. They are marked in italics. For the other parts of the

1) web *beduino* perché stai criticando la Polonia, e tu che minghia ci fai in italia sei abituato ad essere mantenuto dal reddito di cittadinanza, qui in Polonia lavoriamo tutti[32]
[Bedouin why are you criticizing Poland, and what the hell are you doing in Italy are you used to being supported by the citizen's income, here in Poland we all work]

2) non fare la *checca* con me. Io sono etero
[don't be gay with me. I am straight]

3) Va be nn spreco il Mio tempo a rispondere ad uno chece'*handicappato* o finge di esserlo.
[Okay, I don't waste my time replying to someone who is handicapped or pretends to be]

4) che cazzo vuoi *mongolo*
[what the fuck do you want Mongolian]

5) Azz. hai in un botto solo offeso i napoletani altro che educazione. questa e- la tua educazione *polentone*?
[Shit. Suddenly you only offended the Neapolitans, nothing but education. this is your upbringing polentone?]

6) Ma sei un *terrone*!!! Domani ti spiego
[But you are a Southerner!!! I'll explain tomorrow]

7) se vuoi presentarti al matrimonio vestito come uno *zingaro* sei sulla giusta strada.

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sentences, we have not reported any changes and they are reported in the original form, which means that grammatical, spelling or punctuation imperfections have not been corrected. Unfortunately, it is not possible to report the total number of uses of each word, given the technical limitations of the automatic search on FB (see Section 5).

32 It is a comment from an Italian who writes to a user who, according to the FB profile, comes from Poland.

[if you want to show up at the wedding dressed as a gypsy you are on the right track.]

8) qui non centra etero e *omo*.
[it's not a question of being straight or gay.]

9) essere *gay* non è una questione culturale. ci nasci, è come nascere nero, o *giallo* o bianco.
[being gay is not a cultural issue. you're born there, it's like being born black, or yellow, or white]

10) La legge punisce chi aggredisce qualcuno, *gay*, etero, *bisex* etc.
[The law punishes those who attack someone, gay, straight, bisexual, etc]

11) *Gay* si sentono padroni di tutti posti qua in Italia diventata una cosa normale che due *froci* si baciano x strada!!!!! […]
[Gays feel like lords of all places here in Italy it has become a normal thing for two faggots to kiss in the street]

12) Mi sa che stiamo un po' a travisare eh. E meno male che non sono *frocio*.
[I guess we're a bit of a misrepresentation eh. And it's a good thing I'm not a faggot.]

13) In austria fermano alcune macchine (si sa che al *crucco* piace il controllo)
[In Austria they stop some cars (it is known that the German likes control)]

14) Che quel *pederasta* di Woityla li protegga
[May that pederast Woityla protect them]

15) A Febbraio vado a Varsavia, posso rimanere nel gruppo oppure ce l'avete con quei *polentoni* di merda?
[I'm going to Warsaw in February, can I stay in the group or are you mad at those shitty people from the north?]

16) Dai imbecille che dopo i *"negri"* i prossimi che prendono a schiaffi sono proprio I makarony.
[Come on imbecile that after the "niggers" the next ones to slap are the Italians]

Among the examples we have classified as derogatory, some interesting features can be found. Firstly, there is a clear distinction between insults addressed directly to the interlocutor and utterances in which the slur refers only to the target group (third party). In the first case (examples 1–7) we are dealing with a double insult, the individual and the target group together. In the second case (examples 8–16), which we can define as an indirect insult, the true denigrating power of slurs is revealed. These words offend even when not addressed to a specific person. This is particularly demonstrated by (12) where the negation (*I am not x*) instead of weakening the slur, makes it even stronger as it creates an insuperable distance between the sender and the offended target group.

It is also worth considering one of the characteristics of the corpus, which is based on the concept of two nationalities living together (in the real world in Poland/Cracow and in the virtual world on Facebook). Such cohabitation is a potential field for clashes based on belonging to a given nation. In this study it can be seen that Italians and Poles rarely use slurs in order to insult each other, whereas they do insult a third nation as in (13) where the epithet concerns Germans who are not supposed to be present in the group.

There are, however, some cases in which the conflict between the two nations must be taken into consideration. Example (14) deserves special attention in this respect since in a conversation between Italians about Poland's possible abandonment of the EU, in which some Poles are also present, the word *pederast* refers to Pope John Paul II. It is a specific case, as Poles here are the third party, but an iconic person of Polish culture is severely insulted. Moreover, the comment in question is preceded by other comments in which no slur is used but the interpretation is undoubtedly negative towards Poles. Therefore, although this is not a speech act of insult (the direct recipient is missing), we can see a strong contextual incitement to hatred (HS).

Some other noteworthy features can also be observed in the above examples. In (15) there is a particular situation in which a slur is used to refer,

always in an offensive way, to individuals who are not actually part of the reference target group but exhibit some of the properties that are stereo-typically associated with that target group. Indeed, we witness the semantic extension of the epithet *polentone,* which is offensive towards the inhabit-ants of northern Italy, but which here is used as a slur referred to the Poles of Warsaw which is north of Cracow. Moreover, example (16) was identified by the automatic search as the word *negro* appears in it, but in the same sentence the word *makarony* is used, and it can be considered a Polish slur towards Italians (*makaron* in Polish means pasta and *makarony* refers to 'those who always eat pasta' as in German *spaghettifresser*). The conversa-tion takes place only among Italians who use the word *makarony* towards their fellow countrymen, but the initial post alludes to an article published in 2017 on ilsudconsalvini.info in which the reluctance of Central European countries to welcome immigrants was discussed. Therefore, it could be said that in this context the use of the Polish language by Italians has resulted in the offence being felt not so much towards the target group (Italians) as towards the Poles being hostile to immigrants. This example confirms how important the context is in analysing offensive content in social media and it clearly demonstrates that automatic detection alone will never be effective in detecting HS.

4.2 Slurs with non-denigratory usage

It was also possible to trace some non-denigratory uses of slurs in the corpus.[33] Three of the four categories described by Bianchi (2021: 100–101) could be identified, namely citational use, pedagogical use and reappropriation. Consider the following examples:

> 17) Quindi, mi definisci *checca,* mi dai dell'arrogante con le donne e dai…
> [So, you call me queer, you call me arrogant with women and come on…]

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33   7 of the 18 words that revealed denigrating uses in the corpus were also used with non-denigrating meaning (*barbaro, checca, finocchio, frocio, negro, polentone, terrone*).

18) Solo una volta mi ha dato del *terrone* un milanese ed essendo di Bologna è stata una sensazione strana
[Only once did a Milanese call me Southerner and since I'm from Bologna it was a strange feeling]

19) mi hai definito *checca*, termine dispregiativo per definire un omosessuale, il che denota la tua indole verso costoro, ovvero omofobo!
[you called me queer, a derogatory term to define a homosexual, which denotes your nature towards them, or homophobic!]

20) A. Prima di tutto non si permetta a dare del *frocio* a nessuno.
[First of all, don't call anyone a fag.]
B. ... *frocio* e la parola italiana non polacca quindi lo ho usata ..... si offende ??
[... fagot and the Italian word not Polish so I used it ..... are you offended??]
C. E cito nuovamente "*frocio* e la parola italiana non polacca quindi lo ho usata".
[And I quote again "faggot is the Italian word, not Polish, so I used it".]

21) La vera VERGOGNA è scrivere come lei e, peggio ancora, pensare di aver ragione! N.B. "*finocchio*" è una parola volgare!
[The real SHAME is writing like you and, worse still, thinking you're right! N.B. "fagot" is a vulgar word!]

22) I Termini corretti oggi sono "vietati" ma sempre corretti: *negro* è vietato ma è un sostantivo bellisssimo.
[The correct terms today are "forbidden" but always correct: negro is forbidden but it is a beautiful noun]

23) lo so certo ma dipende cosa ci metti sopra alla pizza e se poi usi mozzarella di bufala i prezzi lievitano, anche se personalmente la preferisco non com mozzarella di bufala ma io sono un *polentone* nordico.

[I know but it depends what you put on top of the pizza and if you use mozzarella of bufala the prices rise, even if I prefer it not with mozzarella of bufala but I'm a northern man]

24) un po` di comprensione per un *TERRONE* come me
...........grazie !!!!!!!
[a little bit of understanding for a Southerner like me
...........thanks !!!!!!]

Among the examples, the citational use comes first as the most frequent (17–21). Even though the inverted commas are not always present, there is no doubt that a quotation is involved, since the presence of the slur is due to the direct reference to the interlocutor's previous utterance to which the sender now is responding (17–19). As a result, the denigratory potential of the word is neutralised and the offence brought both to the individual and the target group does not fall on the person quoting but on the person who originally used the slur (Bianchi 2021: 101). In (19–22), it is possible to identify also the pedagogical use of slurs. Indeed, it is observed that alongside the words themselves, their definitions are also given in order to undermine their previous meaning, and in (19) and (21) there is an explicit comment that these are vulgar and derogatory words. The denigratory potential of slurs can be considered neutralised here as well. It should be noted that (19–21) combine two of the aforementioned contexts: the citational and the pedagogical, as not only is there a quotation, but one can also notice some comments that confirm the awareness of the offensive character of the word quoted. In the remaining examples (23–24) the sender identifies with the target group and therefore we are dealing with reappropriation. In example (23) the speaker identifies himself with the inhabitants of the north, while in example (24) with the inhabitants of the south. In both cases the speakers choose to name themselves with the words considered as offensive (respectively *polentone* and *terrone*). The reappropriation is the context that, according to Bianchi (2021: 102), has received the largest consensus among scholars regarding the reduction of the denigrating potential.

Among the non-denigratory functions of the slurs mentioned by Bianchi in the material analysed we did not find examples of fictitious use. As for the

non-denigrating usages found in the corpus under study, viewed together, they all seem to be directed towards the same goal, that of mitigating verbal confrontation by not allowing the crescendo of insult provoked by the denigrating usage of slur. Moreover, in the range of the abovementioned non-denigratory uses, a certain scale of neutralisation can also be noticed. While in citational and pedagogical use the slurs acquire a certain level of neutrality (17–22), in the case of reappropriation the use of an offensive word can go even further and it may carry a humorous nuance as well as it can be converted into a strong point of the person who is reappropriating and self-identifying with the group to which the epithet refers (23–24).

5. Limitations of the research

Before moving on to the conclusions, it is necessary to mention the limitations of this kind of research, which are quite a few. One of them is the automatic detection system applied by FB (the algorithms, based on artificial intelligence, and work done by human moderators).[34]

It is worth mentioning, however, that the automatic selection of HS on FB is not governed by international standards and there is no coherent definition of what should be considered HS (especially from a linguistic point of view). Moreover, rapid social and linguistic changes lead to a constant extension of what becomes the target of haters. Consequently, although we have obtained positive results (the presence of slurs in the corpus), we are also aware of the fact that the automatic detection system constitutes a limitation of this type of research. It is very likely that some posts and/or comments were deleted, as the algorithms easily detect lexical items and this process falsifies the quantitative results of the analysis. In fact, sometimes the searched slur appeared as being present in a post in which the comments had been deactivated, so it was impossible to trace it in the context used.

Another technical obstacle is presented by the fact that the word searched for appears to be in the post but the comments do not load (due to the inter-

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34   Cf., for example, Perrigo (2019). The way the automatic detection system of FB works is clearly described in Fortuna and Nunes (2018).

vention of moderators or the author of the post). At this point, even if the automatic search noticed the use of a given word, it was impossible to find it.

These two peculiarities were visible during the preparation of the corpus, when, to give an example, at the time of publication of a post or comment in which HS was used, it was possible to derive the context of use of the slurs and in a subsequent attempt to reread the utterance, it was no longer available. This feature made the corpus very dynamic, also taking into account the fact that its preparation was articulated over several days.

A further obstacle consisted in the appearance of results that were not the searched word. For example, for the word *meteco* [metic] the automatic search gave the results for *meteo* [weather forecast]. It also happened that the results of surnames of Facebook users were shown instead of the word searched, as in the case of the search for the epithet *barbaro* [primitive], among the results you could see the surname *Sbarbaro*, for the search of the word *omo* [homosexual]—the surname *d'Omo*.

In addition to obstacles of a more technical nature, the polysemy of words also hindered the automatic search. Not infrequently, in fact, the denigrating epithets were used in their main meanings or as other parts of speech (as, for example, adjectives, verbs or adverbs) which are not of denigrating value. As an example see (25):[35]

> 25) La sfoglia (all'uovo) e' fatta da noi, […] con l'aggiunta delicata dei semi di *finocchio* e del rosmarino
> [The puff pastry (with egg) is made by us, […] with the delicate addition of fennel seeds and rosemary]

Another relevant fact is the strategy of coding implemented by the users themselves, who, in order to circumvent the constraints imposed by FB, try to hide the use of words of negative value. Among the techniques used we can mention: use of punctuation marks: *ca...*; *ca**o*; *rompere i cogli...*; letters substitution: *caxxo*; wrong spelling: *Magari esci con troppi culattini*

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35   In the following example, in the case of word that is disparaging in other contexts, the epithet it recalls is shown in italics.

eaibizionisti and many others which, on the one hand, make it impossible to implement the algorithms but, at the same time, hinder the automatic search.

Given the limitations of the corpus, we have renounced from offering a quantitative elaboration of the data based on statistical principles, concentrating instead on the qualitative analysis.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to investigate if slurs identified by De Mauro as carriers of hatred (HS) in the general language are present in a social medium such as Facebook, as well as to define what their function is, i.e. whether the uses are denigrating or neutral. Despite numerous limitations, chief among which was the impossibility of carrying out a reliable quantitative analysis due to the automatic detection system of offensive content implemented by FB, the research produced interesting results.

Firstly, it can be noted that in the language on the internet, based on the contents of two FB groups analysed, there are many of the epithets identified by De Mauro. Some slurs that are present in the corpus occur with both a denigratory and with a non-denigratory function. Despite the absence of a quantitative examination, a strong presence of the non-denigratory uses is noted, which makes the application of the approach motivated, since the importance of the context in which a given word appears is crucial. It shall also be noted that if a slur is used in a denigratory manner, it is always offensive regardless of the context. In this case it does not matter whether it is addressed directly to the interlocutor or indirectly to a third party. Whereas in situations where the epithet is used in a non-denigratory way, its offensive charge may disappear, becoming from neutral or even humorous.

Second, not all of the slurs selected for analysis were found in the corpus. This may be due to the fact that some of the slurs are more rarely used, or their use is geographically more restricted. It may also result from the functioning of the automatic detection system or from the coding of the spelling by the users themselves.

Furthermore, as a result of the research carried out on the corpus, some other limitations came to light that we had not foreseen or discussed beforehand. In fact, the analysis revealed a large number of neutral uses of the

words that in a precise context could have been used as slurs, for example: *finocchio* [fennel] is used to refer to the ingredient used in Italian cuisine.

The research also proved HS's affinity to the speech act of insulting, but at the same time some differences emerged that can be connected with the specificity of the language on the internet and the analysed corpus (FB groups mainly composed of representatives of two nations). One thinks in particular of the double level of the addressees: the direct ones to whom a comment is addressed as a response and the potential ones who are members of the group and, as such, can join the discussion at any time, 'feeling called into question' by an offensive content.

As regards the two FB groups analysed, it must be admitted that, given the nature of these groups, which unite but also confront two realities (Italian and Polish) and in which the issues of nationality and emigration are inherently present, the conversations between the members are already a fertile ground for the emergence of HS. Even if we are not always able to identify the speaker, which prevents us from giving precise numbers, the groups analysed were created for Italians who constitute the majority of the members. Poles are in the minority, and are therefore less active and, in cases where it was possible to establish the nationality of the speaker, it was possible to notice that Poles usually react as the defenders and not the attackers. This is why the majority of the utterances in which slurs appeared came from conversations between Italians (so the senders of HS were Italians) and if the Poles intervened, they did so when a Polish-related issue appeared. This phenomenon is, however, probably due to the character of the groups and not to the different propensity for the expression of hatred between the members of the two nations.

As noted above, despite the visible implementation of FB algorithms for HS detection (e.g. deletion of some comments, posts that do not load), a certain spectrum of the use of slurs was found. Therefore, the question remains how to counteract HS in social media such as FB, if the tools applied sometimes fail. Moreover, it could be seen during the manual analysis of the corpus that apart from HS expressed through slurs there are also numerous cases of the so-called latent insult/HS (Brambilla e Crestani 2021) in which hatred manifests itself in the hidden form of irony and sarcasm. This fact confirms

the importance of the context in research on language on the internet since the latent form of hatred would always elude any automatic detection tools.

In this case, it seems that we should exploit the implicit potential of FB users and focus on education to prevent hateful content. Indeed, it can be seen that the presence of non-denigrating uses in content posted on FB is a strong signal of users' awareness of the power that is hidden behind words. One can see the phenomenon among some authors of posts and comments regarding the use of HS, as can be seen in the example: *N.B. "finocchio" è una parola volgare!* (which was classified as a pedagogical use).

As one might have expected, the research also showed some possible extensions, such as: i) broadening the list of slurs to be searched automatically; ii) isolating a smaller corpus for manual analysis in order to search for utterances containing offensive words from beyond the list analysed in the present paper and to examine their context in terms of denigratory and non-denigratory use. N

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