

# “Beasts in human form”: how dangerous speech harms

## “Bestias en forma humana” o de los daños que causa el discurso peligroso

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### Abstract

Recent years have seen an upsurge of inflammatory speech around the world. Understanding the mechanisms that correlate speech with violence is a necessary step to explore the most effective forms of counterspeech. This paper starts with a review of the features of dangerous speech and ideology, as formulated by Jonathan Maynard and Susan Benesch. It then offers a conceptual framework to analyze some of the underlying linguistic mechanisms at play: derogatory language, code words, figleaves, and meaning perversions. It gives a hypothesis for assessing the moral responsibility of interlocutors in dangerous speech situations. The last section applies this framework to the case of demagogic discourse by Catalan nationalists. The framework offered explains how public discourse in Catalonia has harmed social relations and institutions, and is an obstacle to rational resolutions to the political situation.

**Key-words:** Dangerous speech, Code words, Slurs, Figleaves, Meaning perversions, Context update, Catalonia.

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## Resumen

En los últimos años se ha producido un recrudecimiento de los discursos incendiarios en todo el mundo. Comprender los mecanismos que correlacionan el discurso con la violencia es un paso necesario para explorar las formas más efectivas de contralocución. Este documento comienza con una revisión de las principales características de los discursos ideológicos peligrosos, formulado por Jonathan Maynard y Susan Benesch. Se ofrece además un marco conceptual con el que analizar algunos de los mecanismos lingüísticos subyacentes en juego, lenguaje despectivo, silbidos de perro, las llamadas ‘hojas de parra’ o perversiones de significado y una hipótesis para evaluar la responsabilidad moral de los interlocutores en situaciones de habla peligrosa. El último apartado explica desde este marco conceptual el discurso demagógico de los políticos nacionalistas catalanes, poniendo de manifiesto cómo el discurso público en Cataluña ha tenido **ha tenido** un impacto negativo en las relaciones sociales y en las instituciones, y es un obstáculo para la resolución racional de la situación política.

**Palabras-clave:** Discurso peligroso, silbidos de perro, calumnias, hojas de parra, perversiones de significado, actualización de contexto, Cataluña.

## 1. What is Dangerous Speech?

Philosophers have written on hate speech<sup>3</sup>, but not much on how and when discourse correlates with actual violent action. Maynard and Benesch offer an account that helps to fill that gap. They describe dangerous speech as speech that is capable of encouraging approval of violence by an audience: “The forms of speech and ideology that catalyze mass violence, and the ways in which they do so, are strikingly similar across different cases” (Maynard & Benesch 2016: 71). Dangerous speech is inflammatory speech that is motivational. Grasping the identifying features of dangerous speech offers tools for monitoring and preventing mass violence. Benesch leads the Dangerous Speech Project, whose guidelines have been put to use in various countries, for instance in Kenya, Nigeria, South Sudan, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Czech Republic.

Benesch (2012) distinguishes between directly and indirectly harmful speech. In this paper, I offer complementary resources to understand this distinction. In the second section, I describe directly harmful speech as language use that is *conventionally* or *constitutively* harmful, using denigrating and derogating language. I characterize indirectly harmful speech as that

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Maitra and McGowan (2012).

which exploits other pragmatic means of communication, like code words, racial figleaves, or meaning perversions. I will offer a view about the effects of harmful speech on conversational contexts, and a hypothesis about audiences’ moral responsibility for allowing such context updates. In the last section, the paper applies this theoretical framework to the case of secessionist discourse in Catalonia, showing that it meets the conditions for dangerous speech (‘DS’ henceforth), with examples of directly and of indirectly harmful discourse. This, I conclude, warrants monitoring and prevention strategies.

An explanation before I proceed. Friends tell me that there’s DS in Spain, too. It is undeniable that there’s *inflammatory* speech in Spain. But I think this is a version of the “both sides” fallacy, problematically presupposing that the political crisis is one of Spain (as a whole) against Catalonia (as a whole), ignoring the risks of the division within Catalan society. Other times, the comment assumes that there is at least as much of a significant *accommodation* of inflammatory speech in Spain as there is in Catalonia. I don’t know if that’s the case. Either way, others might of course try to establish that my considerations apply on equal terms to acts by opponents of secession, in particular among movements on the far-right. I invite anyone so interested to do so with the tools presented here. I’m convinced we should be clear-eyed and look at *all* possible sources of conflict, and take myself to be doing my part towards this end.

Friends also say that most secessionists in Catalonia are not xenophobes and dislike hate speech. I think this is true. The majority of secessionists are normal middle or upper-middle-class people who declare support for democracy (Llaneras 2017). As the politician Ernest Maragall has said in an interview to BBC’s *Hard Talk*, “we are *more European*”<sup>4</sup>. Regrettably, we must distinguish the accommodation of DS in the public record, i.e., speech that is taken for granted by a large group, and the individual acceptance of the various dimensions of its content (I address this in the next section).

The remainder of this section summarizes Maynard and Benesch’s criteria for diagnosing DS. They identify three features of the contexts of DS: the speaker, the audience in its sociohistorical environment, and the availability of means of dissemination. (Maynard & Benesch 2016: 77). The speaker is someone who is powerful, popular, or charismatic. Although audiences are not homogenous, and certain members may be more susceptible<sup>5</sup>, anyone can come to condone violence. DS often occurs in sociohistorical contexts that increase the likelihood that the audience condones violence. The final element of the context of DS is the medium of dissemination. If a community relies mainly on one source of news, the message spread is more influential. For instance, the station RTLW was the main source of the inflammatory messages in Rwanda. In

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3ct4f88>

<sup>5</sup> Young men are more likely to engage in violent action. (Maynard & Benesch 2016: 78)

a statistical study, Yanagizawa-Drott established a correlation between speech and violence, showing that killings were 65-77% higher in Rwandan villages that received the RTLM signal, compared with those that did not (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014).

Social media has played a major role in the dissemination of disinformation and inflammatory speech in recent years. In an article in the Pew Report of September 2017, it's reported that 67% of Americans said that they get at least some of their news on social media (Shearer and Gottfried 2017), and reports about Cambridge Analytica's exploitation of Facebook users' data to influence elections during the Brexit referendum vote and the 2016 US presidential election are worrying<sup>6</sup>. Facebook use in Germany has been showed to have fueled anti-refugee attacks (Müller & Schwartz 2018).

Interestingly, Maynard and Benesch say that in some cases language creates the relevant social and historical context, where a word used as a dogwhistle (of which I'll say more in the next section) can play this role by taking on a "fearsome meaning", for instance "to eat" and "to wash" (used in Rwanda before the 1994 genocide). The choice of *language itself* can be a form of dissemination:

...the same message communicated in the "mother tongue" of an ethnic group can have more force than if it were delivered in a language shared by other groups, since this reinforces the sense of solidarity within the group, and may encourage a feeling of impunity given the presumption that one will only be understood by co-linguals. (Maynard & Benesch 2016: 79)

They claim that the two necessary conditions for DS are the *inflammatory speech act* itself, and a *susceptible audience*.

The authors then characterize the six features of the content of DS. The first is *dehumanization* through forms of discourse that can harm *directly* by the offense, denigration, or derogation of members of a target group. This diminishes or denies the target group "their humanity, reducing the moral significance of their future deaths, or the duties owed to them by potential perpetrators" (Maynard and Benesch 2016: 80). The next section gives a summary of my preferred account of derogatory language, how it harms, and interlocutors' responsibility for it.

There are also forms of speech that can harm *indirectly*. Speech can silence or disable the target group's participation in democratic processes, promote deceitful ideology, or subvert democratic deliberation, normalizing racism and bigotry while reassuring and giving cover to those who don't want to see themselves as racists. Indirectly harmful speech is more likely to be used by demagogues, since it allows them to bypass explicit resistance to it.

<sup>6</sup> See the Cambridge Analytica files in *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files>

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The remaining features of DS are *guilt attribution*, *threat construction*, *destruction of alternatives*, *virtue-talk* and *future bias*. To accept that an out-group is guilty or presents a threat, to be convinced that self-preservation of an in-group requires taking drastic steps, and to accept promises that those drastic steps will bring about desired outcomes, are attitudes that exploit moral emotions and moralized reasoning. My hypothesis about the crucial mechanism underlying harmful speech capable of motivating regular people to condone acts of violence is that it deploys and exploits some of the fundamental functional roles of moral discourse:

- (a) That moral talk expresses affective and action-guiding, motivational, attitudes;
- (b) That moral talk builds a connection among the people who accept it; and
- (c) That updating a conversational context with a moral claim predisposes interlocutors to do their part in future actions by giving them reasons to act.

The next section offers a framework to account for the direct and indirect forms of speech.

## 2. How does speech do direct and indirect harm?

How is it that normalizing DS compromises people to future courses of action? Timothy Snyder hints:

A shop marked “Jewish” had no future. It became an object of covetous plans. As property was marked as ethnic, envy transformed ethics... Thus, the Germans who marked shops as “Jewish” participated in the process by which Jews really did disappear – as did people who simply looked on. Accepting the markings as a natural part of the urban landscape was already a compromise with a murderous future. (Snyder 2017: 34-35)

Speech can harm *directly* through insult, derogation, and denigration. And it can harm *indirectly* by undermining social and moral norms in surreptitious ways. Understanding the power of speech is hence necessary for the protection of liberal democracy, which relies on the reasonable and argued defense of divergent views. To counteract the harms of dangerous speech requires understanding the mechanisms at work.

I characterize directly harmful speech as speech that is *constitutively* harmful. How can speech be constitutively harmful? Speech can be directly harmful through its illocutionary force. The notion was developed by Austin (1973). The illocutionary force of an utterance is the action that is constituted by that utterance. If one says to her child, “I’m very sorry we didn’t get tickets for the concert”, the utterance has the illocutionary force of an apology. Utterances have different illocutionary forces: declaratives or constatives describe the world, orders or requests direct action. McGowan (2009) offered a view of oppressive speech that is directly harmful. As she put it, oppressive speech acts are *exercitive* acts that enact permissibility facts that oppress<sup>7</sup>.

Theories of derogatory language seek to explain facts about the effects of its use. In joint work with García-Carpintero, we argue that pejoratives and slurs conventionally carry expressive presuppositions (Marques & García-Carpintero 2019)<sup>8</sup>. We explain this expressive meaning on a normative view of presuppositions and of the context relative to which speech acts make their contributions. Our view explains why derogatory language *insults*, and why it is so difficult to articulate its derogatory content.

Stalnaker (2014) regards conversational contexts as “a body of information that is available, or presumed to be available, as a resource for communication”. Assertions that are accepted in a conversation add the propositions to which speakers are committed to the context set as beliefs. But, we argue, people are not only committed to *shared beliefs*, they are also committed to the *questions* that direct their inquiry, to the *directives* that structure their plans for action, and to other evaluative dispositions, emotions, and “reactive attitudes” (Strawson 1974/2008)<sup>9</sup>. The different types of shared commitments that structure and update conversational contexts, we hold, are constituted by their respective *illocutionary modes*: constative, directive, expressive. Slurs and pejoratives, which are *expressives*, make requirements on the conative record, and are governed by the *sui generis* constitutive norms that are specific to the expressed emotions (contempt, disgust, anger) and their acceptability.

Now, intentions, emotions, and evaluative dispositions form what Williams (1981) called a *motivational set*, the set of attitudes that explain why people act as they do. In our proposed modification of Stalnakerian contexts, a *shared motivational set* is part of context broadly understood. Collective emotions can function as both *motivating* and *justifying* reasons for joint action, sometimes

<sup>7</sup> Langton (1993) had already used speech act theory to make sense of MacKinnon’s (1987) claim that pornography (understood as speech) constitutes harm.

<sup>8</sup> Other authors defending expressive, or expressive presuppositional, views include Cepollaro & Stojanovic (2016) and Jeshion (2013a, 2013b, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Reactive attitudes are moral attitudes we have towards other agents qua *persons* in response to how they act. These are attitudes like resentment, contempt, disgust, or anger which contribute to structure our interpersonal relations.

even without prior joint intentions of the participants<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the people who accept to update conversational contexts with derogation normalize negative reactive attitudes against its targets, a normalization that provides both permission and motivation to act against them by canceling some of the duties owed to them *qua* persons.

To illustrate: two common slurs in Catalonia are ‘charnego’ and ‘botifler’. ‘Charnego’ denotes migrants from other Spanish regions (historically poorer regions like Andalusia, Murcia, or Castilla-la-Mancha). Its etymology may have its origin in the Spanish ‘luchaniego’, meaning mongrel, anyone of mixed race, or a non-assimilated foreigner. ‘Botifler’ denotes people with Catalan ancestry who oppose secession, and is associated with traitors. The expressive presupposition associated with ‘charnego’, for instance, concerns the contextual record of kinds worthy of contempt, to the effect that it includes Spaniards in Catalonia with ancestry from other Spanish regions, on account of their ancestry and habits<sup>11</sup>. Accepting a literal use of ‘charnego’ leads to taking for granted the acceptability of contempt for Spaniards without a Catalan background<sup>12</sup>.

How do we assess the moral responsibility of interlocutors who accommodate derogatory language? Kutz’s (2000) account of collective action explains cases where participants in a group act need not all have an *executive perspective* on the goal of the action. On Kutz’s account, in a collective action *G*, individuals have *overlapping participatory intentions* to do their part in the action. Often participants have no views or intentions concerning what should be done collectively, but participate in actions in hierarchical contexts where they do not make decisions, and they can contribute to do their part in actions whose ends they disavow. This can help explain how people can share in the responsibility for the outcome of actions even if not everyone in the audience actually forms the individual executive intention to bring about *the aim* of the action.

The combination of Kutz’s account with the view of derogatory speech sketched above provides a framework for assessing ways speech can be harmful by leading an audience to take for granted attitudes like resentment, contempt, anger, and disgust. It also serves to assess the moral responsibility of audiences who accommodate harmful speech. Since these are motivating attitudes, to accept inflammatory claims is to accept to do one’s part towards a collective action (doing one’s part may be simply to condone or give cover to future

<sup>10</sup> Salmela and Nagatsu (2016) give an account of collective emotions that links the intentional structure of joint actions and their underlying cognitive and affective mechanisms. See also Salmela & von Scheve (2017).

<sup>11</sup> For a historical view on urban pressure in Barcelona after migration from regions like Murcia, see Marín (2018).

<sup>12</sup> This is close to McGowan’s (2004, 2009) view that speech alters context by enacting what is permissible. See also Ayala and Vasilyeva (2016).



violent actions). This captures normative features of the use of derogatory language. To tolerate or condone derogatory language is to condone the actions it motivates.

In the previous section I raised the issue of how we assess the moral responsibility of a population where many disapprove of xenophobia and hate speech. We can now address this worry. The fact that individuals in a population declare disapproval of violent acts, or lack criminal intentions, is insufficient to assess their responsibility in joint acts. It is unsatisfactory to say that not everyone in a population who agree to do their part in an act have problematic beliefs or intentions. If they were not coerced, and if they accepted enough problematic motivating and justifying emotions to accept doing their part in the action, they share in the responsibility for the outcomes.

I move now to examine how speech can also bring about harm *indirectly*, by uses of language that is not constitutively harmful, but that motivates harmful actions. I will describe three mechanisms that harm indirectly: code words (or dogwhistles), figleaves, and meaning perversions.

In 2001, Mendelberg examined how and when politicians routinely evoke racial stereotypes and resentment without voters' awareness, while plausibly denying doing so. The U.S. Republican presidential campaign of Bush against Dukakis had used code words to animate racist feelings motivated by fears of black people, but without explicitly contradicting the (presumably) shared norm of racial equality *that racism is bad*. By using code words, campaigners could violate that norm with plausible deniability. Voters who explicitly condemned racism could act on the basis of high levels of racial resentment without feeling any psychological tension. Stanley (2015) argues that code words erode not only norms of equality, but also norms of reasonableness of public discourse, thereby subverting democratic deliberation. Speakers may publicly come to allow democratically illegitimate reasons for adopting a parochial policy into the public discussion (Stanley 2015: 129).

Code words can be overt or covert. *Overt* code words, or dogwhistles, are designed with intent to allow two plausible interpretations: a private content aimed at the desired target audience, and a plausible non-racist content aimed at a broader audience. Additionally, as Saul (Saul 2017: 122) argues, *covert* dogwhistles effectively activate racial attitudes in people who condemn racism by bypassing conscious awareness. Explicit racial appeals are less effective because they trigger self-monitoring. This makes covert code words especially fitting in the preservation of a positive self-image.

The speaker who uses a code word takes advantage of a common ground of information, of shared attitudes like resentment, and exploits conversational cooperative principles like *relevance* (Grice 1975). To illustrate, Trump said in 2011.



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If we keep on this path, if we reelect Barack Obama, the America we leave our kids and grandkids won't look like the America we were blessed to grow up in. The American Dream will be in *hock*. The *shining city on the hill* will start to look like an *inner-city wreck*. (Trump 2011, *Time to Get Tough: Making America # 1 Again*, quoted in Khoo 2017)

What is the relevance of bringing up city centers, where the majority of the population is black, while arguing and advising against reelecting the first black president? By mentioning Obama and inner-cities in the same breath, Trump invites the audience to see a relevant connection between the two, a connection based on the salience of skin color and the racial resentment the audience presumably shares.

Speech can erode social norms in other ways. Saul (2017) introduces the notion of *racial figleaves*, which describes an utterance made in addition to another openly racist one, providing cover for the offensive content. Figleaves also allow people to accept openly racist speech while preserving the self-assurance that they're not racist. A prime example is Trump's speech at the launch of the 2015 campaign:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you... They're sending people that have lots of problems... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. (reported in Philips 2017)

The last sentence is the figleaf. Notice that it also allows plausible deniability – “I didn't mean that they all are”.

Finally, we have what I call *meaning perversions* (Marques 2019). These include phrases like “free election” as used in the former USSR. As Gessen (2017) says, “There was nothing free about it, it did not constitute expression, it had no relationship to citizenship or will because it granted the subject no agency.” Now, meaning perversions carry with them *positive* or *negative connotations*, while being *grossly misapplied* to things that do not merit that valuation. This renders criticism of the misapplication nearly impossible, inviting the rhetorical reply, “how can you *be against* free elections?” The question *seems to enforce* shared social or moral values, and makes it difficult for socially conforming individuals to resist. The perversion is that this form of speech *undermines* and *erodes* the shared *norm* in its misapplication – the Soviet ritual isn't an actual election. To regard unsuitable referents as deserving of the treatment that the compliance with the shared norm requires is perverted:

Calling this ritual either an “election” or the “free expression of citizen will” had a dual effect: it eviscerated the words “election,” “free,” “expression,” “citizen,”

and “will,” and it also left the thing itself undescribed. When something cannot be described, it does not become a fact of shared reality (Gessen 2017)

The *indirect* harmful forms of speech achieve through non-constitutive means what derogatory language can achieve *directly*: to make problematic beliefs, plans, and reactive attitudes *common ground*. Both direct and indirect forms allow the normalization of problematic attitudes that are incompatible with preexisting democratic norms. We can’t take for granted non-discriminatory egalitarian norms, or the protections of the rights of all, while taking also for granted that resentment, contempt, anger, or disgust can motivate and justify the denial of the rights of some.

The next section takes Catalan secessionist demagoguery as a case study for directly and indirectly harmful DS.

### 3. Dangerous Speech in Catalonia

In a 2017 interview, the historian John H. Elliot comments on the current sociohistorical context in Catalonia, and suggests some of the conditions that contributed to it:

With their devolved powers, throughout the 1980s, under (longtime premier) Jordi Pujol, generations have been exposed [in public education] to a falsified version of history, a manipulation with nationalist tendencies. They have deliberately concealed the parts where it would have been fair to talk about the progress that’s been achieved. (interview with Ruiz Mantilla 2017)

Elliot is pointing to a sociohistorical context – a past history of conflicts – that Pujol’s governments exploited to feed anti-Spanish grievances and keep his party in power<sup>13</sup>. It’s not the task of this paper to offer historical analyses. But the examples offered below to illustrate direct and indirect harmful speech, and the various types of dangerous contents, are consistent with Elliot’s statement.

#### 3.1 Context

The elements of the context of DS, according to Maynard and Benesch, are influential speakers that exploit a sociohistorical context of resentment or grievances, the media, and an audience susceptible of accepting inflammatory speech. The Catalan case offers an illustration.

<sup>13</sup> Pujol was leader of *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC, 1974–2003), and Catalan president from 1980 until 2003.

Elected politicians have taken advantage of historical resentment to gain political capital, and it is not hard to find instances of ethnicist or racist claims made by presidents of the Generalitat – the Catalan government – (with the exception of the socialist José Montilla). Pujol wrote in 1958:

The Andalusian man is not a coherent man, he is an anarchic man, he is a man who is destroyed [...] who lives in a state of ignorance and of cultural, mental and spiritual misery [...] from the outset he constitutes the sample of the lowest social and spiritual value in Spain... if by force of the number he were able to dominate, without having overcome his own perplexity, he would destroy Catalonia...<sup>14</sup>

In a text from 1966, Pujol had also referred to migrants as “an army of occupation” (Benitez 2018). Pujol later apologized (Pujol 1977). In 2010, Artur Mas became CDC’s leader and Catalan president. In the 2012 elections, his slogan was *La Voluntat d’un Poble* (“the will of a people”). Campaign posters showed him with open arms, like Moses against a sea of people and flags. In an interview, he said:

Perhaps *the Catalan cultural DNA is mixed with our long membership in the Franco-Germanic world*. In short, Catalonia, twelve centuries ago, belonged to the Hispanic March and its capital was Aachen, the heart of the empire of Charlemagne. Something must remain in *our DNA, because the Catalans have an umbilical cord that makes us more Germanic and less Roman*. (interview with Rahola, 2012) (my emphasis)

Mas is here animating racist nationalist feelings. But such racial essentialism occurs in other political quadrants. Oriol Junqueras, leader of ERC (Catalan republican left) wrote in 2008:

In particular, *the Catalans have more genetic proximity with the French than with the Spaniards*; more with the Italians than with the Portuguese; and a bit with Swiss. While the Spaniards are closer to the Portuguese than the Catalans and very little to the French. *Curious...* (Junqueras 2008) (my emphasis)

In 2001, Enric Vila published a book on the thought of Heribert Barrera, a historical figure of the ERC, who was secretary general of ERC (1976 –1983), president of the Catalan parliament (1980 –1984), and an MP in the European Parliament (1990 – 1994). The book attracted attention because of its racism and bigotry. Barrera’s quotes included:

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<sup>14</sup> Republished in Pujol, 1976: pp. 65-68. I translated all quotes from articles in Catalan and Spanish.

“In America, blacks have a lower intelligent coefficient than whites”,  
 “The mentally weak of genetic origin should be sterilized”,  
 An apology of the claims of the Austrian far-right leader Jörg Haider “when he says that there are too many foreigners in Austria he’s not making a racist proclamation.”

Other politicians like Josep Manel Ximenis, former mayor of Arenys de Munt with the far-left party CUP (who resigned after charges of misappropriation of public funds), said in an interview that the Civil War was a war of Spain against Catalonia. This is not true. Records of victims in mass graves are registered on databases that show the much higher number of victims of Franco’s troops in mass graves in Andalusia, Aragon, or Madrid<sup>15</sup>. Ximenis also repeats essentialist tropes:

I think that the Castilian character has not changed, and that it has nothing to do with the Catalan character. In Catalonia, society is diametrically opposed to the feudal Castilian society... Castile can be summarized in a simple hierarchy of farmers and aristocracy. The Castilian mentality carries in its genes to naturally accept: ‘submit to orders’<sup>16</sup>.

Other expressions of Catalan superiority are easy to find. Jordi Cabré, advisor for the Catalan Justice Department, titled an opinion article with a simple “We’re better” (Cabré 2015). As these quotes indicate, influential speakers in Catalonia have exacerbated longstanding grievances, resentment, racial essentialism, and misrepresented historical conflicts for political gains, contributing to a context of dangerous speech.

The second element of the context of DS is the media, to which Sandrine Morel, correspondent for *Le Monde*, dedicates a chapter of her 2018 book:

It’s June 2017 and the situation is becoming more and more tense. We’re having a casual conversation [with a communication director of PDeCat]<sup>17</sup> about the upcoming referendum on October 1st. I express my doubts about its legitimacy, about the guarantees that can be offered in the case of a consultation held unilaterally, about the consequences that defying the Spanish government may entail. And he utters a sentence that deeply shocks me: “If we buy two advertising pages in *Le Monde*, you will write what you’re told by your bosses [...]” Upon noticing my anger, he admits, embarrassed: “Well, that’s the way things work here”. This confession is very revealing: it proves the Generalitat is used to controlling the editorial line in private media through subsidies, institutional advertising or appointments; and that the same happens

<sup>15</sup> <https://desmemoria.eldiario.es/mapa-fosas/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://politica.e-noticies.es/la-guerra-del-36-es-una-guerra-contra-los-catalanes-94074.html>

<sup>17</sup> The secessionist PDeCAT – Catalan European Democratic Party – was founded in 2016 as a successor of the former CDC, which was being investigated for corruption.

with public media, where secessionists have placed supporters or outright pro-independence militants. The power of the Generalitat over the media is not a secret, but in Catalonia no one seems to find it shocking [...] After watching public Catalan TV for hours and checking its ideological bias on its news broadcasts and talk shows, on the selection of their guests and the subjects [...] in October I interview [in TV3] its director, Vicent Sanchis, an elated man, always with an ironic smile on his face [...] He believes that, if there is criticism against TV3, it’s due to the fact that public TV is, with the police and the school, one of the “three main pillars of a State”. (Morel 2018; quoted from the English translation available at <https://voicesfromspain.com/2018/08/07/inside-the-catalan-hurricane-part-ii-the-media/>)

“Ideological bias”, as Morel says, and derogation of Spaniards, are common in the public media. A former director of the public Catalan TV3, Joan Oliver, said on Catalan public radio RAC1, in a debate with Oriol Junqueras (leader of ERC), “Spaniards are Spaniards and are *chorizos* [a slur for thieves], in virtue of being Spaniards”. Junqueras didn’t interrupt or object to Oliver’s statement<sup>18</sup>. Under the assumption that the account of derogatory language introduced in the previous section is correct, this interaction between Oliver and Junqueras shows that the proposition *that Spaniards are thieves and worthy of contempt because of it* is taken as common ground, as is the associated contempt for Spaniards.

In spite of the proclaimed antagonism between the Spanish and the Catalan identities, Catalan politicians are not less prone to corruption than the Spanish. This corruption is sometimes connected with secessionist propaganda efforts. For instance, Barcelona’s Disputació (provincial council) was involved in a scandal in 2018, when the CATmón Foundation, presided then by Victor Tarradellas, was the target of a police operation, which investigated a plot of corruption in connection with the use of public subsidies distributed without a proper public contest between 2012-2015 (Pardo Torregrosa 2018, Cañizares 2018). Around thirty people were arrested and records were searched in buildings of CATmón, the Diputació, and other government offices. Among the recipients of the subsidies were publications like the magazine *Catalan International View*.

In 2018, the national and international press informed of a US report by congressional Democrats that said that there was “evidence that Kremlin-run news outlets like RT and Sputnik, reinforced by bots and fake social media accounts, carried out a disinformation campaign” leading to the independence referendum (Noack 2018, Alonzo 2018)<sup>19</sup>. Disinformation also exaggerated reports of police violence on the day of the referendum. *The Guardian* and the

<sup>18</sup> On the stealing trope, Olivás (2013) summarizes the economic relations between Spain and Catalonia when the slogans “Spain steals from us!” were popularized.

<sup>19</sup> The full report is available at: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>

BBC acknowledged that there was little checking of the veracity of the images of police violence (Preston 2017)<sup>20</sup>. Together, Morel's description of the media, the US congressional report, and the investigation into the misuse of public funds to subsidize pro-independence publications, paint a bleak picture of the role of the media in shaping public opinion.

The third feature of DS is the susceptible audience. The description of the events of September 2017 can help us understand the secessionist audience. José Luís Martí (2017) describes what he calls the constitutional *coup d'état* that took place in the Catalan parliament in September 2017, when Parliament passed the "Self-determination Referendum" and the "Legal Transition" acts. These bills were only set on the agenda on the morning of the 6th, and were approved with narrow majorities. Most of the opposition abandoned the chamber in protest, claiming that the bills were unconstitutional. The secessionists didn't do a consultative judicial review of unconstitutionality before the Court of Statutory Guarantees. Independent legal advisors warned that the decisions were unconstitutional, and violated the procedural rules of the Parliament. Left-wing journalist and author Antonio Santamaría considers that the events are indicative of authoritarianism:

This authoritarian character of the presidency of the Generalitat was evidenced in the so-called legal transition law, approved on September 7, 2017 and suspended by the Constitutional Court, where the president of the Generalitat would have the power to elect the members of the Supreme Court of the Catalan Republic and to issue bills that could not be appealed before any judicial instance. This would entail the end of the liberal democratic separation of powers and a conferral to the president of almost dictatorial power. For that reason, it is paradoxical that pro-independence media criticizes the low quality of Spanish democracy and claims that the Catalan Republic would have been a more advanced democracy. Moreover, in the draft-Constitution prepared by the former judge Santi Vidal, the illegalization of parties opposed to independence and to the Catalan Constitution was contemplated, significantly restricting political pluralism in contrast to the Spanish State, where the opposition to the Spanish Constitution is not a motive for outlawing parties. (Santamaría 2019)

And yet, around 40% of the population supported the disobedience promoted by the elected officials who controlled the parliament and the government. This indicated the division in Catalan society:

On the *diada* on September 11 2017 (...), between 500,000 and 1 million people peacefully marched through the city center of Barcelona advocating the secession and celebrating the referendum. *They supported the acts of disobedience already performed and those announced for the future* by the

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-41703119>

Catalan Government and Parliament, as well as by many Catalan mayors... These protesters can be said to represent the 1.8 or 1.9 million Catalans who are presumably in favour of secession. But *they constitute less than 40% of the electorate; many among the other 60% of voters in Catalonia follow these events with great concern.* (Martí 2017) (My emphasis).

The elected representatives of the majority were ignored. Puidgemont, then president, justified the constitutional *coup d'état* saying,

We will not let ourselves be robbed of our hopes and dreams just so that everyone can give an opinion<sup>21</sup>.

The tally of votes from the illegal referendum of October 1<sup>st</sup> had the participation of only 43% of eligible voters, of which 92% voted for secession.<sup>22</sup> Most Catalan voters abstained. This was an act promoted by the representatives of a large minority who disregarded the legitimate democratic representation of a majority of citizens in Catalonia who oppose secession; this may still have social and political repercussions.

### 3.2. Content

The features that Maynard and Benesch (2016) identify as characteristic of the content of DS are dehumanization, guilt-attribution, threat construction, *virtue-talk*, destruction of alternatives, and future-bias. We've seen some of these in the quotes above, but I will illustrate them with more detail in this section.

#### 3.2.1. Dehumanization, derogation and denigration

Dehumanization through speech is achieved with language that is directly harmful. It can involve slurs and pejoratives, names of animals that induce fear or disgust ('beasts', 'snakes', 'dogs', 'parasites', 'cockroaches', or 'vermin'), names for diseases or contaminants ('cancer', 'toxin', 'microbes'), names of inanimate objects ('logs') or for supernatural entities ('devils'). It's not hard to find examples of directly harmful speech in Catalonia. The socialist Miquel Iceta and the musician Joan Manuel Serrat are often called traitors and 'botiflers' (Bono 2017). "Put a España" is commonly hurled at Spain (I had it sprayed next to my office for over a year).

Popular actors in the public Catalan TV3, like Toni Albá or Jair Domínguez regularly insult Spaniards. Domínguez said in a tweet from March 7 2019, "I

<sup>21</sup> From the live coverage of the debate in parliament in *La Vanguardia*, at 16:41

<http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20170907/431084924979/referendum-1-o-en-directo.html>,

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/09/26/why-the-referendum-on-catalan-independence-is-illegal>



love these accounts of snitcher bots... They are the best of *the unionist leper*<sup>23</sup>. During the electoral campaign for the Catalan government and parliament of 2017, then leader of Ciutadans/Cs in the region, Inés Arrimadas<sup>24</sup>, whose family is from Andalusia, was told by the former president of the regional parliament, Nuria de Gisbert, “Why don’t you go back to Cádiz?”<sup>25</sup> More recently, after a 2019 campaign event of Cs in Puidgemont’s hometown, locals gathered to “disinfect” the public square<sup>26</sup>. Uses of names for contaminants or diseases are dehumanizing metaphors. Through them, speakers can make expressive speech acts that elicit anger, disgust and contempt, giving motivation and justification for *cleaning* or *disinfection*. This specific combination of emotions constitutes the so-called ‘ANCODI’ model that explains the role emotions play in violence (Matsumoto et al 2015).

The 2017 elections gave over 25% of the vote to Cs, ahead of Puidgemont’s party (21%). Quim Torra had been a contributor of opinion articles in the media, for instance an op-ed plagued with dehumanizing terms, a fact which did not deter left-wing ERC and CUP from supporting Puidgemont’s party to form government, allowing Torra to become president (as Puidgemont had escaped to Belgium to evade criminal charges). Torra wrote in 2008, for instance

Now we take a look at your country and we see the *beasts* once again... *Snakes, vipers, hyenas. Beasts in human form*, however, glistening hate. An outraged hatred, nauseating, like *dentures with green mold*, against everything that language represents. They are here, among us. They repudiate any expression of Catalanity. It’s a sickly phobia... *Or a small error in their DNA chain*. Poor individuals! They live in a country of which they know nothing: its culture, its traditions, its history. They are insulated from anything that represents Catalan feats. It gives them urticaria. They repel everything that is not Spanish and in Spanish. They have their names and their surnames, the beasts. We all know one. They abound, the beasts. They live, they die and they multiply. (Torra 2018a)

The dehumanizing terms elicit *fear* (‘vipers’, ‘snakes’, ‘hyenas’), *disgust* (‘dentures with green mold’), *contempt* (‘beasts in human form’, ‘small error in their DNA chain’) and *anger* (‘they repel everything that is not Spanish’). But the article continued with the tiniest *figleaf*, giving barely plausible deniability to the dehumanizing claims: “One of them was involved in an incident that has not been discussed in Catalonia...” By saying ‘one of them’, Torra can allege that he only meant people like that ‘catalanophobic’ person<sup>27</sup>. This works like

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/sempraludava/status/1103615037812457474>

<sup>24</sup> Misogynistic attacks against Arrimadas have been common (see García 2019).

<sup>25</sup> [https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/11/17/catalunya/1510905240\\_893566.html](https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/11/17/catalunya/1510905240_893566.html)

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.elnacional.cat/es/politica/ingeniosa-accion-vecinos-amer-visita-cs\\_355857\\_102.html](https://www.elnacional.cat/es/politica/ingeniosa-accion-vecinos-amer-visita-cs_355857_102.html)

<sup>27</sup> The explicit target of the article had his flat broken into and vandalized after the article was

Trump’s ‘and some of them, I assume, are good people’. The phrase gives Torra enough ambiguity as to what was meant: the dehumanization of all Spaniards in Catalonia, or only those that are like this one person.

Torra also wrote indirectly harmful articles, for instance using code words like “April Fair”:

Catalanism must be based on a bloody defense of our identity and our culture, our language and our dignity, the desire to build a cosmopolitan and cultured country, with the courage and pride of being Catalan. Or do you want to allow an independent Catalonia to be turned into an immense April Fair? (Torra 2012)

April Fairs are popular Spring festivals celebrated in Andalusia. Torra’s quote is structurally analogous to Trump’s “inner-city wreck”. Torra could plausibly say, “I wasn’t attacking anyone, I’m just defending Catalan traditions!” Yet, assuming the conversational maxim of *relevance*, we can ask: what is the relevance of bringing up an Andalusian festival in the context of defending Catalan traditions? Mentioning it under the construction ‘or would you rather...’ invites an association between the defense of Catalan identity, and the rejection of the presence of Andalusians and their traditions in Catalonia. Now, explicitly asserting this would trigger self-monitoring, since it would explicitly deny that people of Andalusian ancestry have a right to cultural and political expression in Catalonia. But using the code word does not explicitly deny Andalusians these rights. It thus allows xenophobic resentment to go unchecked, while protecting the audience’s positive self-conception as fair and democratic. This illustrates how code words contribute to undermine rational democratic deliberation.

### 3.2.2 Guilt attribution

Guilt attribution for e.g. rape or murder, current difficulties, the destruction of the economy, occupation, oppression, etc., presents an out-group as the morally deserving target of resentment and retributive action (Maynard & Benesch 2016: 81). This is illustrated in statements by political leaders: Pujol’s description of Spanish migrants as an occupation army, Torra’s description of Spain as “an exporter of poverty, materially and spiritually speaking” (Torra 2010), or the common propaganda slogans “Madrid robs us” and “Spain does not respect us”. Even writers who proclaim a rejection of xenophobia fall back on contrasting Catalan superiority and victimhood, against Spanish guilt and inferiority, recovering the trope of the beast of the Franco regime:

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published, events he correlates (Iglesias 2018).

Although the emotional disconnection experienced by many Catalans is due to the catalanophobia of some and the complicit silence of others, there are deeper processes that explain a progressive distancing between Spain and Catalonia. We speak, for example, of a divergent political culture: *one based on the survival of the Franco regime in its strategic institutions, while the other on militant anti-fascism*, which explains, to give an example, a system of parties more in keeping with continental logic than with the Iberian. We also speak of an identity, *the Castilian Spanish identity, rocky, unalterable, exclusive, not permeable to plurality and intolerant of dissent, and another, the Catalan, dynamic, heterogeneous, mutant, which, in order to survive, reinvents itself at each generation.* (Díez 2019) (my emphasis)

The dichotomy Xavier Díez lays down is based on the essentialization of features presumed to constitute two incompatible national identities. But Díez overlooks the reality of democratic progress across Spain, and undemocratic resistance to such progress in all regions, Catalonia included, which are evident in abuses of power, corruption cases, and authoritarian tendencies reported in many of the articles surveyed in the preparation of this paper. It is worth registering that the historian Roger Molinas (2018) draws attention to the fact that CiU, a coalition that included Pujol's party CDC, absorbed the most politicians from the Franco dictatorship, particularly Catalan mayors. There were three times more Francoist mayors transitioning to CiU in 1979 than to all other parties together (see also Marcet 1984, and Antich 1988).

### 3.2.3 Threat construction

The third feature of the content of DS is *threat construction*, where an out-group is accused of planning violent attacks against the in-group. This happened in Rwanda, through "accusations in a mirror" (Marcus 2016), a technique for inciting violence that accuses the intended victims of the crimes that are planned against them. Other techniques deploy familiar tropes, e.g. "they're coming for our women!" deployed often in representations of Muslim men (Sherwood 2016).

In an issue of *Catalan International View*, Marta Jorba refers to people who defend the Spanish rule of law as accomplices of sexism, racism, and sexual assault, presumed essential features of Spanish identity, while raising the trope of the Francoist threat:

The Spanish state has let its mask slip, revealing the inheritance of a *beast* [Francoism] that now sees the chance to reemerge... Unionists that tolerate and whitewash the unpunished presence of the fascist far-right on the streets. A presence accompanied by high levels of testosterone directed at *flagrant sexism and racism*, that celebrates disharmony and humiliation. *Taking the occasion, once again, to assault women whenever they have an opportunity.* A state of

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emergency that is the normal state of affairs in a country of dubious democratic quality. (Jorba 2018: 46-47) (My emphasis)

The truth of the claims is taken for granted without providing supporting evidence of the alleged increase in sexual violence. This has an intended effect – to silence opponents of secession from expressing their equally legitimate political opinions. In fact, the opposite of what she says (and of what Díez alleged) is true, as others have argued:

Spain has been declared the best country in the world to be born, the most sociable to live, the safest to travel alone without danger throughout its territory. According to *The Economist*, its democratic quality is well above Belgium, France and Italy. Spain is a world leader in organ donation and transplants, in assisted fertilization, in early cancer detection systems, in free universal healthcare, in life expectancy only behind Japan... in editorial production, in maritime conservation, in water treatment, in clean energies... in construction of large high-speed railway infrastructures... Spain is the country with the lowest incidence of gender violence in Europe, far behind socially envied Finland, France, Denmark or Sweden; the third with the least killings per 100 000 inhabitants, and together with Italy, it has the lowest suicide rate. (Vicent 2018)

More worrying, given the high-profile of the speaker, were Marta Rovira’s (from ERC) comments after the referendum in 2017:

... the Government [of Catalonia] was not willing to accept a scenario of extreme violence with dead people on the street. They [the Spanish government] told us that *there would be* blood and that we had to stop because *they were very prepared, that they would not hesitate* and that this time they would not use rubber bullets...<sup>28</sup> (my emphasis)

She concluded with the recurrent trope: “now that the independence movement is the majority, *the beast of Franco has emerged again*.” In the meanwhile, official intermediaries between the central government and the Generalitat denied that there were any threats of violence (Ubarretxena 2017).

During the on-going trial of the secessionist politicians in 2019, former leaders of the Catalan police (*Mossos d’Esquadra*) testified that they had warned Puidgemont, Junqueras, and Joaquim Forn (then minister responsible for the police) of the risks of violence on the referendum day, and recommended that the Generalitat suspended it, since all police forces had orders from the Catalan Supreme Court to apprehend the ballot boxes and stop the voting. Puidgemont replied that if the anticipated violence occurred, he would declare independence

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.rac1.cat/programes/el-mon/20171117/432938124502/entrevista-a-marta-rovira-minut-a-minut.html>

(Solé Altamira 2019). There are further indications that violence was not only expected but desired. Former communications director of the Generalitat, Josep Martí wrote in a recent monograph: “It was known that there would be charges on 1-O day and some Sovereignists<sup>29</sup> not only took it for granted but also desired it”, and concluded the book saying that the secessionist process was a “power struggle” and not a movement driven by the people (Martí 2019). Searches conducted by the national police and national guard found that the former Catalan finance secretary, Lluís Salvadó, had tried to destroy files that laid down plans for guerrilla or war scenarios after the referendum (Charte & Gutierrez 2019).

Primary schools served as polling places on October 1<sup>st</sup> (a Sunday) and had been occupied on Friday 29<sup>th</sup> September, when the Catalan government suspended school directors to shield them from criminal charges. The Òmnium and ANC associations rallied people to “defend the voting points”, which were occupied with “permanent activities” (pajama parties, games, live music, films) from Friday evening until Sunday at dawn. Whole families participated: children, parents, and grandparents. In hindsight, the irresponsibility of the Catalan leaders can be properly appreciated – vulnerable people (children, elderly voters) were used as means to obstruct justice, with the expectation (and possible desire) that there would indeed be violent confrontations. (The events of the voting day are described in Morel 2018: ch. 20). It is arguable that the only reason there wasn’t more violence was Mariano Rajoy’s (then Spanish president) unresponsive disposition.

### 3.2.4 Destruction of alternatives

According to Maynard and Benesch, the fourth feature of DS is the *destruction of alternatives*, which represents the proposed course of action as a historical necessity, or alternatives as impractical. In a 2011 interview, Torra said: “We have no allies; the effort will be monstrous. If Spain... sends the tanks against us, we will have a great victory. I hope they send them, so that we can win some kind of sympathy”<sup>30</sup>. Torra statements implicate a desire that the central government would, indeed, take violent action against secessionists.

In this article he reduces alternatives for what he presents as the survival of Catalans as a people:

<sup>29</sup> The Spanish constitution declares that the Spanish people are sovereign. In Catalonia, secessionists use ‘sovereignty’ and ‘sovereignists’ to refer to themselves. An editorial of *El País* fact-checked Puigdemont’s claims in this regard: [https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/09/20/inglish/1505917320\\_788824.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/09/20/inglish/1505917320_788824.html)

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.racocatalla.cat/forums/fil/150628/quim-torra-tant-bo-espanya-ens-enviitancs?pag=0>

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There is no longer “right-wing Catalanism” or “left-wing Catalanism”... neither “liberalism” or “social democracy... today the battle is “unionism” or “independentism”, Spain or Catalonia, province or State. When the country lives a moment of national urgency, when there is a risk that the nation will dissolve like sugar in a glass of milk, when all the alarms are ringing at the same time for our survival as a people, the ideological discussion can’t be the axis that separates us... (Torra 2009)

### 3.2.5. Virtue-talk

The fifth feature of the content of DS is *Virtue-talk*, where the audience is motivated by deep and unreflected feelings that something feels “good” or “bad” inducing positive moral self-appraisal, a “satisfactory mental image of themselves... often shaped by notions of ideal group-identities, that produces considerable self-esteem” (Maynard & Benesch 2016: p. 84) A positive self-appraisal is expressed when Mas speaks of “a connection with the best European traditions” and a Germanic “umbilical cord”, when Junqueras or Torra talk of a Catalan DNA, Maragall claims that “we’re more European”, or Cabré that “we’re better”. On a demonstration for the release of the people jailed while awaiting trial in 2017, a man who dropped the Catalan independence flag nervously said: “If I lose my identity, I die” (García & Congostrina 2017).

### 3.2.6 Future bias

The final feature of DS is *Future-bias*, presumed to outweigh the short-term difficulties, or the moral costs of violence:

But the anticipated benefits can also be extravagant and utopian—promises that a positive transformation of society will be brought about through a temporary violent transition, or that national unity and prosperity for a long-mistreated people can be obtained. In light of the expectation that Soviet violence would protect the revolution and usher in Communist utopia, Lenin assured his followers that in the future “the cruelty of our lives, imposed by circumstance, will be understood and pardoned. Everything will be understood, everything.” ... The novelist Boris Pasternak wrote in a letter in 1935: “The fact is, the longer I live the more firmly I believe in what is being done, despite everything. Much of it strikes one as being savage [yet] the people have never before looked so far ahead, and with such a sense of self-esteem, and with such fine motives, and for such vital and clear-headed reasons”. (Maynard & Benesch, 2016: 85-86)

Agustín Colomines, historian at the University of Barcelona, nicely exemplifies future-bias:

Hey, didn't everyone say that in the big rallies people held hands without asking who they were voting for?... [W]hen people called "Our President, Puigdemont", they were calling for unity and resistance. *Sovereignty* will only win this combat when it gives shape to a flexible political movement of ordinary people, not of party militants... We must fight for independence and never forget the day we tried to vote and police violence prevented it. Only if the civil society decides to show up to vote, with or without the agreement of the traditional parties, will *Sovereignty* make *the State and the unionists piss blood*. (Colomines 2018) (My emphasis).

Colomines advocates for a unitarian movement that goes beyond political parties, supporting political sovereignty only for secessionists, and presenting violence and suffering *as desirable*.

*Meaning perversions* were particularly useful in the propaganda that promoted the alleged benefits of the referendum. In Mas's campaign of 2012, he used the slogan "the will of the people". In this context, the phrase makes a conversational implicature. First, the demagogue claims to represent the will of the people. But a large majority is not represented, a fact we know from context. Puigdemont claimed that his voter base (under 50% of population) gave him a popular mandate to approve the illegal acts of September 2017. But secessionism never had majority support in Catalonia. In the slogan, 'the people' excludes most of the people.

The slogan as used then implicates that the large majority that is excluded does not have a right to political representation, because they are not *the people*, and that only those referred to have a right to make decisions concerning the future of the region. There are two levels of meaning perversion in the slogan. First, democracies are presumed to represent the will of each person who has the right to political representation. A collective in itself – *the people* – doesn't have *a will*. Second, and more importantly, 'people' is presumed to refer to all citizens. But 'people' is not used descriptively to talk about the Catalan voting population, not even of a large majority of Catalans. As if to confirm this perversion, current president Torra has tried to silence accusations that he is not doing enough for the Catalan republic by claiming "I am the people".<sup>31</sup>

Stanley (2015) defines *propaganda* as the mechanism that frames "the debate in such a way as to exclude the perspective of a targeted group", while creating "flawed ideological beliefs to the effect that the perspectives of a designated group are not worthy of reasonable consideration". Propaganda in Catalonia has made use of numerous meaning perversions. The meaning perversion in the phrase "the will of the people" is an instance of propaganda as defined. There are other perversions in campaign slogans, such as "we vote to be free!", or "Democracy!" "We vote to be free!" perverts the meaning of

<sup>31</sup> [https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/03/23/catalunya/1553328538\\_236007.html](https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/03/23/catalunya/1553328538_236007.html)



“freedom”. Spanish citizens in Catalonia enjoy all the freedoms that Spanish citizens enjoy elsewhere in the country, and enjoy essentially the same rights as other European citizens. The construction “we vote to be free” implicates that if we don’t vote, we are not free. Given the Constitutional Court and governmental opposition to the referendum, the slogan served a part in the argument that opposition to the referendum is opposition to the freedom of Catalans. The slogan was presented as a defense of democratic freedoms, perverting the meaning of “freedom” since it was used in a context that violated the rights and freedoms of the majority. Another slogan was the simple “Democracy!” Torra regularly repeats that democracy is *above the rule of law*.<sup>32</sup> The meaning perversion here is that outside of the rule of law there are two possibilities: autocracy or the state of nature.

These three cases are meaning perversions. They use words with strong positive evaluative connotations that are part of shared social norms and values. *Freedom* and *democracy, for the people*, are all desirable in themselves. However, the slogans are used to refer to things that restrict or violate freedoms, are undemocratic, and deny political representation to a large part of the population. In so doing, they undermine and erode the norms that underlie the rule of law and protection of democratic values.

How does one resist these slogans? Any direct criticism invites rhetorical questions like “how can you be against *democracy*?”, “How can you be against *my freedom*?” “How can you be against *the people*?” An interlocutor is left speechless, since the reply to *these* questions should be obviously, and repeatedly, “no! I’m not against any of that”. The questions, and the slogans, are effective because they *undermine norm-enforcements*: they seem to reinforce shared democratic norms, whereas in fact they erode liberal democracy itself.

Meaning perversions play a powerful role in future-bias arguments. They make it hard to resist propaganda that uses them. Together with code words and figleaves, they convey harmful content *indirectly*. It is easier to accept what they communicate indirectly than it would be if what they proposed were explicitly asserted. Their indirectness allows an audience to avoid the psychological tension they would otherwise feel between the explicit profession of liberal democratic ideals, and the endorsement of parochial or partisan motivating attitudes. This is an obstacle to the resolution to any political situation, since rational political deliberation requires identifying and stating explicitly the policies under consideration.

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<sup>32</sup> [https://www.ondacero.es/programas/mas-de-uno/videos/quim-torra-democracia-primero-antes-que-ley\\_201902135c63dc710cf2cb42a35882af.html](https://www.ondacero.es/programas/mas-de-uno/videos/quim-torra-democracia-primero-antes-que-ley_201902135c63dc710cf2cb42a35882af.html)

## 4 Closing comments

In this paper, I've done three distinct things. I started with a brief introduction to the notion of dangerous speech and ideology, as characterized by Susan Benesch and Jonathan Maynard (2016). The importance of the notion is displayed in the correlation between the set of identifying characteristics and historical acts of mass violence. But I was interested here in doing two additional things, which I believe are both interesting in themselves and important. One was to offer a framework for integrating various philosophical theories in an explanation of how dangerous speech and ideology harms. The second section of the paper integrated aspects of philosophy of language and of philosophy of action to offer such a framework. In 2012, Benesch had made a distinction between directly and indirectly harmful speech. This is a distinction that can be typified in philosophy of language as one between (i) speech that is constitutively harmful, because of its illocutionary force, and (ii) speech that is harmful because of its perlocutionary effects. I offered examples of the two kinds, with derogatory and denigrating language as directly harmful discourse, and a set of indirectly harmful forms of discourse, including code words, figleaves, and meaning perversions. This section then gave a possible explanation of the motivational force of harmful speech, and of the moral responsibility of the audiences who accommodate it.

The second thing I did in the paper was to use reports in the media about the secessionist efforts in Catalonia, and quotes from Catalan leaders, as a case study of dangerous speech, one that *has not* so far led to mass violence (and which, obviously, I hope will never do). The exercise of illustrating how demagogic discourse in Catalonia, from presidents of the Generalitat to political pundits from the various quadrants of Catalan nationalism, is important because it is revealing of a common ground of victimism, resentment, recurrent derogation of Spain and/or Spaniards, and of ill-resolved past conflicts, which are often used for political gain. Catalan authorities have exploited local media to offer a coherent view of reality consistent with the secessionist ideology (as admitted by some of those responsible for Catalan TV, for instance), have *attributed guilt* for occupation, colonization, for deprivation of wealth, have *constructed an existential threat* (from sexism and violence, to dangers of annihilation of one's cultural identity, or actual military violence), tried to reduce alternatives, constructed a positive self-image as *just better*, or *more European and civilized* – a self-image that has a hint of racism, since it is construed in opposition to *the other* that is uncultured, uncivilized, un-European, reminding of an unfortunate common saying, “south of the river Ebro, all moors” – and promoted future-bias. The examples reviewed illustrate also how directly and indirectly harmful forms of speech have been present, as the existence of specific slurs for

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Catalans with origins from non-Catalan regions and for Catalans who oppose secession illustrates, as well as several of the past writings of the president of the Generalitat, Quim Torra, and his ease at contrasting the desirable North and the undesirable South: “here there are people who have said enough and... fight for their ideas and their country. People are no longer looking to the South and look to the North again, where people are clean, noble, free and cultured. And happy.” (Torra 2008b)

Why is this important and interesting? I started with a caveat explaining what I did not want to do here. I did not want to point at the obvious – that there are risks to democracy arising from the far-right. This is true across Europe, and many commentators and theorists are doing the important work of signaling it (e.g., Stanley 2018). I wanted to do what is not obvious, and use theoretical resources to point to the naturalness with which demonstrably harmful speech is accepted and taken for granted as normal in Catalonia, and the responsibility shared by a large minority of the Catalan population that accepted, in 2017, to take part in actions that could foreseeably have led to violent confrontations, and to involve their vulnerable family members (e.g., their children) in that action. The responsibility is shared even by those who so participated while disavowing of any possibility of violent confrontation, and believing to be merely expressing their desires. Catalan police officers and Catalan government officials foresaw that possibility and discussed it, and government leaders nonetheless chose to put into motion a series of acts that not only defied the Constitution, the Catalan Supreme Court, lacked majority support, and, worst of all, which they knew would put their own supporters in harm’s way.

Do I believe there is a real risk of serious violence in Catalonia? I think that the socioeconomic status of most supporters of secession suggests that many will not risk losing their privileges. They may still harbor a sense of aggrieved entitlement, resentment, and contempt. The real risks of violent behavior arise among smaller, and younger, activist groups that have been engaged in acts of vandalism, some threats of violence, condoned by secessionist politicians (Baquero 2018). And depending on the result of the April 2019 elections, on the threat posed by the far-right.

A suggestion for parties that defend the rule of law is this: do not make concessions that compromise the truth, or the defense of equal rights and duties for all citizens in Catalonia, and the rest of Spain. Those concessions will be exploited to animate further resentment, and to fuel extremism, as the recent rise of the far-right testifies. The past history of division and violence in Spain should serve as a warning and a deterrent, not a motivator.

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