

# What makes the Wuhan virus American?

## The discursive strategies of legitimising and delegitimising a coronavirus conspiracy theory

Natalia Borza (Budapest)

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### Abstract

From the sociolinguistic perspective, conspiracy theories (CT), which convey heterodox forms of knowledge that diverge from accepted narratives, are worth examining since their discourses abound in persuasive language. Still, the discourse of CTs is under-researched (Demata/Zorzi/Zottola 2022). The present empirical, discourse-analytical case study seeks to address this lacuna by exploring the discursive (de)legitimation strategies of conspiracy discourse in competing narrative frames. The research adopted the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, and the comparative analysis was carried out within the methodological framework developed by van Leeuwen (2008) and Tankard (2001). The findings complement van Leeuwen's "grammar of legitimation", and also contribute to existing knowledge on framing theories. The results of the explorative case study indicate that the persuasiveness of the discursive strategies of (de)legitimation depends on several features, such as synergy, projection, the sense of belonging, silencing with blockers, implying the generality of specific cases, and the partial investigation of causality.

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### 1 Introduction and aims

Conspiracy theories (CT) convey heterodox forms of knowledge that diverge from accepted narratives (Bergman 2018). As a result, the narratives of CTs rely on making their interpretations of particular phenomena credible, that is, on legitimation. Accordingly, CTs offer a rich ground for the analysis of discursive strategies of legitimation. With the global spread of Covid-19, conspiracy theories related to SARS-CoV-2 have been on the rise. Among the many heterodox forms of knowledge about the virus, Liljan Zhao, one of the spokespeople of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) claimed in his tweet (12 March 2020) that the pandemic originated in the USA. Zhao insisted that it was US military personnel who deliberately brought SARS-CoV-2 to the city of Wuhan, located in the central Chinese province of Hubei, during the 2019 Military World Games, in October. The PRC spokesperson also accused the USA of spreading SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan, the area that became the first epicentre of the outbreak, in January 2020.

The Chinese diplomat's tweet was reinforced by the official state media of the PRC, and Chinese embassies in different parts of the world likewise amplified it (Schindler/Nicholas/Cui

2020). Other media channels (such as BBC, VOA, and New York Times), however, called these grave accusations into question, and by emphasising facts that contradicted the claims of the spokesperson of the PRC,<sup>1</sup> they sought to debunk the CT.

The present empirical, discourse-analytical case study seeks to map the manner in which discursive (de)legitimation strategies are applied in competing narratives. For this purpose, the discursive modes of legitimation and delegitimation concerning the purported American origin of SARS-CoV-2 are examined in English-language media reports. Additionally, the explorative research intends to uncover features beyond the individual linguistic constructions that support and strengthen the application of a particular discursive framing. By focusing attention on the discursive realisations of legitimation in competing frames, the paper intends to contribute to theory building by complementing existing knowledge of framing theories (cf. Tankard 2001) and taxonomies of discursive legitimation (cf. van Leeuwen 2008).

To reach this aim, the research adopted the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, and the paper is organised according the following structure. First, the nature of conspiracy theories is discussed, showing why they are worthy of study (Section 2.1). There follows an outline of the situational context in which the particular conspiracy discourse was constructed (Section 2.2). This is followed by the description of the corpus and the methods of its compilation (Section 3.1). Next, the reason why the CDA perspective was chosen for the research is explained (Section 3.2). Then an introduction to the methodological framework, comprising van Leeuwen's (2008) taxonomy of discursive legitimation strategies (Section 3.3) and the concept of framing (Section 3.4), details the method of data analysis. Following this, the manner in which the discursive strategies of legitimation (Section 4.1) and delegitimation (Section 4.2) are applied in competing frames is mapped. Finally, the paper summarizes the features beyond the individual linguistic constructions that support the application of a particular discursive framing (Section 5). Let us first turn our attention to what the term conspiracy theory covers.

## **Background**

### **2.1 The nature and functions of conspiracy theories**

The notion of CT denotes a particular explanation of events or practices by reference to “the machinations of powerful people who attempt to conceal their role” (Sustein/Vermeule 2009: 205). Due to this concealment, the concept of CT is not a neutral one. CTs are typically conceptualised as value-charged (cf. Nefes/Romero-Reche 2020) pejorative markers with a negative connotation (cf. Bergman 2018; Bratich 2008; McKenzie-McHarg 2020; Rääkka/Ritola 2020). A CT, as a derogative term, tends to refer to stigmatised knowledge (cf. Barkun 2013) that is unscientific and irrational (cf. Barkun 2013; Robins/Post 1997), and unworthy of serious examination (cf. Byford 2011). Some scholars even describe the unorthodox accounts of social reality created by CTs as aberrant (cf. McKenzie-McHarg 2020). CTs are also condemned for their social effects, since they are regarded as capable of fuelling aggression and polarising society (cf. Bergman 2018) by undermining trust in public institutions (cf. Hofstadter 1965). In

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<sup>1</sup> Most frequently, it is claimed that the first cases did not occur at the time of the Military World Games, but two months later. Also, the outbreak and the first hotspot of the epidemic occurred in the PRC, and not in the USA.

other words, CTs are deemed a danger to the established world order (cf. Barkun 2013; Byford 2011; Hofstadter 1965; Pipes 1999; Popper 2002), as they are thought to threaten democratic societies. With the rise of populism, this view of CTs as inherently divisive has been emphasised, as in instances the elite or a powerful group is seen as making secret plans to commit unlawful and harmful acts against the people (cf. Bergman 2018).

CTs are also described as extreme in the sense that they diverge from mainstream knowledge (cf. Bratich 2008; Bergman 2018). Due to their extreme nature, the term CT is also used in an exclusionary manner to ridicule and discredit others (cf. Bergman 2018; Harper 2008; Husting/Orr 2007). Since CTs are judged as bogus knowledge, the label of CT can be applied as a strategy of exclusion (cf. Husting/Orr 2007) belittling and marginalising rival explanations (cf. Bergman 2018), dismissing dissident views (cf. Chomsky 2004), or even silencing rival interpretations (cf. Smith 1978).

In spite of the fact that CTs deviate from commonly held and accepted knowledge, they are worthy of investigation for various reasons. Scholars warn that although in most cases CTs are unfounded (cf. Pipes 1999), not all of them are necessarily false (cf. Krekó 2020). In some cases, CTs are accurate descriptions of events (cf. Pigden 1995). The idea, for instance, that western governments keep ordinary citizens under massive surveillance was dismissed as an improbable CT until Edward Snowden's leak about the gigantic surveillance projects of the US National Security Agency (cf. Bergman 2018).

Also, CTs can be used as official explanations that legitimise political actions, as in the case of the Iraq War, where the justification for the outbreak of the war was an untrue CT about the "existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq" (Krekó 2020: 242).

In addition, CTs can make sense in an allegorical way. Since CTs represent attempts to understand complex social changes which cannot be comprehended in a straightforward manner (cf. Jameson 1988), the description of intricate phenomena through CTs might be meaningful in a non-literal but symbolic way.

From a social point of view, some scholars (cf. Coady 2012; Uscinski 2018) draw attention to the importance of CTs, since CTs can be vehicles for political contestation (cf. Dean 1988). Thus, the non-pejorative treatment of CTs ensures free speech, which enhances democratic discussions.

From the sociolinguistic perspective, CTs are worth examining since their discourses abound in persuasive language (persuasion, convincing, cajoling, seducing, and coaxing), discursive legitimisation strategies, and manipulation. Still, the discourse of CTs is under-researched (cf. Demata/Zorzi/Zottola 2022). The present study seeks to address this lacuna by exploring the discursive (de)legitimation strategies of conspiracy discourse. The research applies the term CT in the broad sense, in a non-pejorative manner, emphasising that the level of plausibility of CTs can vary from transparently unsound to convincingly reasonable. In the present understanding of the phenomenon, the often non-falsifiable nature of a CT is kept in the foreground (cf. Craft/Ashley/Maksl 2017; Keeley 1999; Sustein 2014; Uscinski/Parent 2014). Consequently, a CT is defined in this study as a coherent narrative model of reality in which facts, events, or a series of occurrences of life are arranged in a causal relationship, though the cause and effect

relation cannot be proven directly. That is, the proof or evidence used in a CT are indirect, which keeps the narrative speculative.

In this interpretive framework, the PRC's official explanation for the American origin of the epidemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 can be regarded as a CT, since it is a coherent narrative that contains a series of occurrences whose causal relationship cannot be directly demonstrated. For this reason, Su and his colleagues (cf. Su/Lee /Xiao 2021) consider this narrative to be a CT and emphasize its unsubstantiated nature. Based on its content, van Mulukom et al. (2022) further subcategorises the CT about the American origin of SARS-CoV-2 as a secret military experiment theory.

The non-pejorative understanding of CTs harmonizes with the Critical Discourse Analysis perspective (see Section 3.2) in so much as CDA regards discourse as a form of social practice (cf. Fairclough 1989; Fairclough/Wodak 1997; Wodak 1996), and perceives discourse as the linguistically mediated representations of the world (cf. Fairclough 2003). In accordance with this perspective, the narrative model of reality in which the cause and effect relations of facts, events, or a series of occurrences of life cannot be proven directly (CT) develops a coherent account within the discursive construction of reality on the particular discourse plane.

## 2.2 The situational context

The present research adopts the CDA perspective, in which discourse is regarded as a linguistically mediated representation of the world (cf. Fairclough 2003). CDA scholars emphasise that the micro-level analysis of a text is only meaningful if the social practice in which it was created is taken into account. For this reason, the examination of the situational context of the discourse, that is, the events that happened in the real world related to the construction of the text, forms part of discourse analysis. Let us then take a brief look at what is known to have happened at the time of the outbreak of Covid-19. This overview aims to sketch the situational context in which the legitimising text was created, but it does not aspire to be a comprehensive record of the events.

The largest public health crisis in a century (cf. Beaunoyer/Dupéré/Guitton 2020; Guitton 2020; Su/Lee /Xiao 2021) has been caused by the novel strain of coronavirus, named SARS-CoV-2.<sup>2</sup> The first cases were reported in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, China, in 2019 (Koley/Dhole 2020; Huang et al. 2020). The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan was identified as “a likely source of cases in early report, but later this conclusion became controversial” (cf. Worobey et al., 2022). By 2022, however, it became scientifically evident<sup>3</sup> (cf. Worobey et al., 2022) that the epicentre of the pandemic was geographically located in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan.

According to the records of the PRC, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 can be traced back to 17 November 2019 (cf. Huang 2020; Prestowitz 2020). To halt the spread of the epidemic,

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<sup>2</sup> SARS-CoV-2: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2.

<sup>3</sup> Scientists (Worobey et al., 2022) have been able to “recover location data for most of the December-onset COVID-19 cases identified by the WHO mission with sufficient precision to support our conclusions” that “the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 occurred through the live wildlife trade in China and [...] that the Huanan market was the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

the government of the PRC took strict measures, such as banning public gatherings, closing schools and malls, and locking down Wuhan (cf. Koley/Dhole 2020) in a “draconian” manner (Manion 2020: 69). On 31 December 2019, the Chinese authorities reported the outbreak to the World Health Organisation (cf. Schindler/Nicholas/Cui 2020). When 114 countries reported confirmed cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection, the WHO declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (cf. WHO 2020).

Many questions have been raised with regard to the role of the PRC in the proper handling of the epidemic (cf. Koley/Dhole 2020; Prestowitz 2020). Alongside concerns that focus on Chinese domestic matters (e. g., failure of timely and truthful upward reporting, misinforming ordinary citizens, cf. Manion 2020), the question of how a local epidemic became a worldwide pandemic has been discussed (e. g., continuing international flights from Wuhan during its strict domestic lockdown, cf. Hanson 2020).

Chinese authorities were unsure about the place of origin of the Wuhan strain of SARS-CoV-2 (cf. Koley/Dhole 2020), which maintained a climate that favours the construction of CTs about the American origin of SARS-CoV-2. In this climate, one of the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MOFA) officials, Lijian Zhao, asserted in his tweet (12 March 202) that the pandemic started in the USA. Zhao stated that US military personnel delivered SARS-CoV-2 on purpose into the city of Wuhan, with a population of over 10 million people at the time (UN, DESA 2018; Statista; Worobey 2022), during the 2019 Military World Games. The PRC spokesperson further blamed the USA for having spread the disease in Wuhan, the first epicentre of the outbreak in January 2020. The official Chinese state media emphasized the Chinese diplomat’s tweet, and Chinese embassies around the world did the same (Schindler/Nicholas/Cui 2020). However, other media outlets (e. g., BBC, VOA, and New York Times) questioned these serious accusations by highlighting information that refuted the assertions of the CPR’s spokesperson.

### **3 Methods and description of data**

#### **3.1 The corpus**

In order to uncover the discursive strategies used to legitimise and delegitimise a coherent narrative model of reality in which the cause and effect relation between facts and events cannot be proven directly (CT), online media sources were analysed. To carry out the qualitative discourse analysis, a mini-corpus (Biber/Conrad 2009) was compiled, which allows the linguist to “drill down into the data in immense detail” (O’Keffee/McCarthy 2010: 6). The comparative and contrastive nature of the analysis was ensured by including two different texts in the corpus: one that supported the CT and another that debunked it. Considering the date of Lijian Zhao’s tweet about the American origin of the epidemic (12 March 2020) as a starting point, English-language news articles that reported on the CT within a period of three months were gathered. In building the corpus, the guiding principle for the choice of the respective two texts of the corpus from this pool of news articles was the potential wide variety of discursive (de)legitimation strategies applied by the media report. This was hypothesised to be rich in texts of considerable length that primarily focused on persuading their readers of the (in)validity of the CT. Accordingly, the Chinese Global Times (GT) news article that appeared on 13 March 2020 and

the BBC article that was published on 26 April 2020 (cf. Sardarizadeh/Robinson 2020) were selected for the present analysis from the pool of news articles. GT is a Beijing-based national newspaper, which is considered to be the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (cf. Su/Lee /Xiao 2021). GT, along with other means of mass communication in the PRC, is committed to “building national image and maintaining societal stability” (Gan 1994). In contrast, the BBC aims to pursue objective journalism, rather than presenting a particular political point of view. Its editorial guidelines explicitly stress the broadcast of objective, verifiable facts, and the “commitment to due accuracy” (Roy 2017). The structural units (SU) of the corpus were delineated in harmony with the online nature of the texts. That is, the SUs included headlines, images with captions, screenshots of tweets with captions, bylines and hyperlinks besides paragraphs. In the case of images with captions, only the caption part was relevant for the method of analysis of the present research, which is essentially textual, not multimodal. The legitimising text (LT) constructed the CT in forty SUs, and the delegitimising text (DLT) challenged the CT in an approximately similar number of thirty-eight SUs. The discourse analysis embraced all seventy-eight SUs.

### **3.2 The CDA perspective and legitimation**

For the analysis of the corpus, the Critical Discursive Analytical (CDA) perspective was adopted, as CDA analysts have extensively examined the linguistic means by which legitimation is carried out. CDA, which is a cross-disciplinary approach to the linguistic analysis of social phenomena (Fairclough 2003; Wodak/Meyer 2001), regards discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough/Wodak 1997; Wodak 1996b). The CDA approach perceives discourse as the linguistically mediated representations of the world (Fairclough 2003), and it aims to uncover the relation between language and power. Given its critical stance, CDA applies discourse analytical tools to controversial social issues (Vaara/Tienari 2008) to investigate power relations in society (Fairclough 1989, 2003; van Dijk 1998). CDA studies both transparent and opaque structures of domination (Wodak/Meyer 2001).

Legitimation in the CDA approach signifies the creation of a “sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary, or otherwise acceptable action in a specific setting” (Vaara/Tienari 2008: 986). Discursive legitimation strategies, that is, the “specific ways of mobilizing specific discursive resources to create a sense of legitimacy or illegitimacy” (Vaara/Tienari 2008: 987), have been the focus of CDA studies, and various discursive strategies used to legitimate controversial actions have been investigated (Fairclough 2003; Rojo/van Dijk 1997: 98; van Leeuwen/Wodak 1999). Since discursive legitimation is a complex practice, it often includes a set of diverse strategies (Lamphere/East 2016). Among the early CDA scholars, it was van Leeuwen (1996) who sought to describe the complexity of this diversity, which he termed as the “grammar of legitimation”. Van Leeuwen outlined a set of categories, which included four general types of semantic-functional legitimation strategies and a number of subtypes. The “grammar of legitimation” was further developed into a taxonomy that recognizes twenty-two subcategories of discursive constructions of legitimacy (van Leeuwen 2008).

### 3.3 The method of data analysis

The present comparative analysis was carried out within the methodological framework developed by van Leeuwen (2008), and in this framework I used the most elaborate version of the taxonomy. Van Leeuwen's (2008) comprehensive taxonomy, which brings some order to the various explanations of how a social practice is discursively made reasonable and acceptable, categorises the numerous discursive constructions of legitimation and delegitimation into four dimensions: authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis. In the case of authorisation, legitimation is grounded either in the relative power or a status, or in the authority of tradition, custom, and law (cf. *ibid.* 106). Moral evaluations, meanwhile, are based on value systems, which are embedded in the common-sense cultural knowledge of a particular community and thus appear appropriate for legitimation (cf. *ibid.*: 109). In a broad sense, rationalisations legitimise either by making reference to the goals and uses of the social practice or by referring to knowledge that has been endowed with validity in the community (cf. *ibid.*: 113). Mythopoesis, or telling a tale, legitimises by focusing on the outcome of a social practice, which is either rewarding or punitive (cf. *ibid.*: 117). The four major dimensions of the taxonomy include further subdivisions, twelve categories and twenty-two subcategories, which can be used separately or in combination in legitimising discourse.

In order to delineate the discursive constructions of (de)legitimation, the seventy-eight SUs of the corpus were annotated according to the classification of the taxonomy. Due to its qualitative nature, the tagging of the corpus according to the taxonomy did not require any algorithm, and was carried out manually. To organize the results of the annotation, Microsoft Excel was used. Data emerged in all four dimensions of the taxonomy. Particularly, the following different categorisations were observed in the corpus (see Table 1).

Dimension	Category	Subcategory
Authorisation	Custom	Conformity
Authorisation	Recommendation	Expert
Authorisation	Recommendation	Role model
Authorisation	Recommendation	MEDIA
Moral evaluation	Evaluation	-
Rationalisation	Instrumental rationalisation	Goal orientation
Rationalisation	Theoretical rationalisation	Scientific rationalisation
Rationalisation	Theoretical rationalisation	Explanation
Rationalisation	Theoretical rationalisation	CARICATURE
Mythopoesis	Cautionary tale	-

**Table 1: Classes of van Leeuwen's (2008) taxonomy that were applied in the corpus for the discursive (de)legitimation of the CT. Two novel subcategories emerged from the data (indicated in small capitals), which provide an extension of the taxonomy.**

Reference to custom, one of the categories of authorisation, gives legitimacy to a social practice by the authority of the prevailing behaviour which is conventionally accepted (cf. *ibid.*: 108). Its subcategory, conformity, legitimises the social practice by making reference to what is ob-

served to be widespread and predominant in a community (cf. *ibid.*: 109). Grounding legitimation in custom relies on no specific agent to enforce the social practice; rather it is the members of the community themselves who comply with the commonly held norms.

In contrast, the subcategory of recommendation involves authorisation by an explicitly stated figure in whom authority of some kind is vested (cf. *ibid.*: 109). While expert authorisation uses guidance given by a knowledgeable person in a particular area (cf. *ibid.*: 107), role models (such as opinion leaders, peers, figures of popular culture, and lifestyle influencers) provide recommendations in everyday matters of life (cf. *ibid.*: 107).

Van Leeuwen (2008: 110) warns that moral evaluations tend to remain covert in discourse, as the reference to value systems is rarely verbalised explicitly. Discursively, moral evaluations appear to be expressed by designative and attributive adjectives which praise or denounce a social practice. Despite the lack of the explicitly verbalized value systems, van Leeuwen's taxonomy does not discourage analysts from unveiling moral evaluations in discourse. On the contrary, van Leeuwen encourages discourse analysts to recognize them "on the basis of our commonsense cultural knowledge" (cf. *ibid.*: 110), knowing that the linguistic construction is only "the tip of a submerged iceberg of moral values" ((cf. *ibid.*: 110).

Goal orientation, a subcategory of rationalisation, legitimises by reference to a teleological action, where the object of an effort or ambition is clearly expressed (2008: 113). Since legitimacy lies in the means of pursuing an aim, it is categorised as instrumental rationalisation.

The other main type of rationalisation, named as theoretical, gives legitimacy to a social practice by making reference to an explicit conceptual representation of the natural order of things (cf. *ibid.*: 115). Making a social practice appear reasonable by relying on a systematic body of knowledge is grouped under scientific rationalisation (cf. *ibid.*: 116). While reference to the nature or genuine character of the social actor to whom the social practice appears to be acceptable is categorised as explanation (cf. *ibid.*: 117).

Mythopoesis involves moral tales and cautionary tales, which are distinguished by the consequences of the quality of the action of the major character (cf. *ibid.*). In moral tales, the protagonist is rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices or for restoring what is perceived as the legitimate order (cf. *ibid.*). In contrast, the main figure in cautionary tales is engaged in a socially deviant or illegitimate activity, which earns punishment for the social actor in the end (cf. *ibid.*: 118). Cautionary tales tell how neglecting or violating the legitimate order leads to disastrous results.

As the data from the corpus allowed for the emergence of two novel subcategory (Caricature and Media), I extended van Leeuwen's (2008) scheme of classification. These extensions will be presented in more detail in the discussion part of the data analysis.

### **3.4 Framing**

Discourses of legitimation construct so-called frames "to help the audience make sense of particular issues" (Lamphere/East 2016: 2) and to apply meaning to these issues (Fairclough 1989: 92; Fiss/Hirsch 2005; Vaara/Tienari 2008). Frames are conceptual structures which "influence the interpretations of reality among various audiences" (Fiss/Hirsch 2005: 30). They are the outlines or "schemata of interpretation" that "organize experience and guide action" (Snow et



al. 1986: 464). It is the frame which provides coherence to a set of ideas (Benford 1993; Ferree et al. 2002) by being the central, organizing idea for “making sense of relevant events” (Gamson/Modigliani 1989: 3). That is, frames bring order to events precisely because they “make the world make sense” (Gamson et al. 1992: 385). Besides organizing ideas, frames embrace the complexity of beliefs, attitudes, and emotional responses as well (Tankard 2001: 96). In the case of media reports, the events of the world are organized for the audience by the frames applied in the media (Gitlin 1980). Frames define the case, which includes defining “the issues, and to set the terms of a debate” (Reese/Gandy/Grant 2001: 96). Frames allow for certain kinds of subject positions and enable particular concerns (Fairclough 1992; van Leeuwen/Wodak 1999). Given that particular, conflicting versions of reality are articulated to potential supporters of interested actors (Coles 1998; Gamson/Modigliani 1989; Haines 1996), different, competing frames are used for the narration of respective positions to mobilize support (Snow et al. 1986). Taking the existence of competing frames into account, the use of the concept of framing within the field of media discourse analysis is useful, since it can uncover hidden assumptions (Tankard 2001; Reese/Gandy/Grant 2001: 96), ideologies (van Dijk 1998), and draw attention to the space in which discursive manipulation takes place (Breeze 2012).

The present research applies the concept of framing in the sense that it is the “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration”, as defined by Tankard (2001: 100). The legitimization strategies that appeared in the corpus, and which were tagged according to the classification of van Leeuwen (2008), were annotated as “Selection” when the issue was brought up in the narrative the first time, while the repeated use of the same issue was tagged as “Emphasis”. The lack of mentioning events, phenomena and facts tightly related to the issue was annotated as “Exclusion”, while their detailed presentation was tagged as “Elaboration”.

## **4 Discussion**

The following part of the paper discusses how the discursive (de)legitimation strategies, as enumerated in van Leeuwen’s (2008) classification, are applied in the corpus, and also uncovers the features that strengthen the application of the particular discursive framing. The structural organization of the discussion follows the van Leeuwenian taxonomy (2008), and the specific aspects of framing (A) selection, B) emphasis, C) exclusion, D) elaboration) as distinguished by Tankard (2001) are provided in square brackets at the relevant places. The two-part codes in the analysis gives the location of the quote in the corpus. For instance, the code LT.SU17 stands for the 17<sup>th</sup> structural unit (SU17) in the legitimising text (LT), while DLT.SU8 reads as the 8<sup>th</sup> structural unit (SU8) in the delegitimising text (DLT).

### **4.1 Discursive legitimation of the CT**

#### **4.1.1 Authorisation**

The LT uses several discursive constructions of legitimation along the van Leeuwenian dimension of authorisation. It gives reference to experts, to the media, to role models, and to conformity.

#### 4.1.1.1 Experts

The narrative upholding the CT that SARS-CoV-2 is of American origin grounds legitimation in various experts. The claim that SARS-CoV-2 originated in America is supported by the argument that the exact origin of the virus is not absolutely clear, and discussions about its origins are still ongoing. The LT reinforces this argument by introducing it as a quote from Zhang Yiwu (LT.SU17). To increase the strength of legitimation of the quote, it is also specified that the source, Zhang Yiwu, is an expert affiliated at Peking University (LT.SU17, [A] Selection)]. However, Zhang Yiwu's specialist field of expertise is not virology or any related medical field, but culture. Consequently, the strength of legitimation of the expert depends on the reader's attitude. If the reader has a pro-PRC inclination, the citation of the employee of a Chinese university in the LT is highly convincing. In contrast, if the reader has no prior positive leaning towards the PRC, the quote from a non-medical expert (a culture specialist) has low persuasive power. In other words, the predisposition of the reader has an impact on the interpretation of information when evaluating one part of the complex information as more emphatic than the other (cultural specialist or working at Peking University). The same supportive argument about the disputed origin of SARS-CoV-2 is emphasised in the LT by another expert, Geng Shuang, a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry (LT.SU27, [A] Selection)]. Similarly to the previous expert, the spokesperson is not a virologist, thus the legitimising power of naming the source stems from the presupposition that spokespeople communicate reliable information collected from specialists in the field. The narrative of the CT leaves it unexplained why the dispute about the origin of the virus has not been settled [C] Exclusion]. Similarly, the reasons why international investigations were not carried out, which would weaken the legitimising force of the CT, are not mentioned.

The third expert identified by name in the LT is American Senator Tom Cotton, whose words declaring that the virus originated in a bio lab in Wuhan are provided as a summary (LT.SU35). The account of the CT supports the unfoundedness of this claim by the idea that the American Senator was spreading "rumors" (LT.SU34) rather than verified, factual information. Adding the position of the expert ("Senator", LT.SU35) bolsters the impression that high-ranking American officials spread doubtful truth in general. The notion that American rumours are not merely inaccurate and incorrect pieces of information is buttressed by the fourth experts in the LT, "analysts" (LT.SU32, [A] Selection and C) Exclusion)], who evaluate the rumours as "disinformation". It is important to note that the experts in the narrative use the word "disinformation" (LT.SU32) rather than misinformation, as the former markedly differs from the latter. In the case of disinformation, false information is deliberately spread with the intention of misleading the public, to influence rival powers, and to obscure the truth (cf. Merriam-Webster 2022, s. v. *disinformation*), while misinformation can be unintentional. The group of experts through whom the narrative legitimises this evaluation are referred to as "analysts" (LT.SU32), about whom no other information is given. The fields of expertise, the names, or the organisations at which these "analysts" (LT.SU32) work remains undocumented, which weakens the legitimising force for an audience without a pre-existing propensity to favour China. Additionally, the narrative of the LT does not make any mention of the doubts western countries raised about the PRC withholding factual information [C] Exclusion].

Another group of experts, American “frontline doctors” (LT.SU12, [B] Emphasis and C) Exclusion]), are applied in the narrative to increase the authenticity of the statement that the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is mishandling the pandemic, since the source of information is American experts who have direct experience of the medical situation in their own country. The narrative of the LT, however, does not specify which medical practitioners are meant exactly, implying by this imprecision that all American doctors are of the same opinion. The measures or treatment for which the American nation’s health protection agency is “fiercely criticized” (LT.SU12, [C] Exclusion]) likewise go unmentioned. In terms of practical reasoning, this statement of criticism does not provide relevant factual grounds for the support of the main claim of the CT (cf. Toulmin/Rieke/Janik 1984: 40), as the particular fact about the situation (the US mishandling the pandemic in some way) does not directly support the notion that SARS-CoV-2 is of American origin. Yet, in synergy with other facts and arguments shown later in the analysis, this irrelevant statement has the effect of legitimising the CT to some extent.

Another expert who is used in the narrative of the LT to make the claim of the CT legitimate is Matt McCarthy, “an infectious disease physician in New York” (LT.SU20, [B] Emphasis]). Both his nationality and his profession ensure that his insights regarding the American medical situation in the midst of the pandemic sound credible. In the account, McCarthy’s exact words are not quoted, but a summary states that he “publicly criticized the unavailability of rapid diagnostic tests, and he deemed the insufficiency of test kits a national scandal” (LT.SU20, [B] Emphasis]). In terms of its informational content, the summary consists of two rather similar statements, one after the other. Besides emphasising the poor medical conditions in the USA, through the use of reiteration, the second statement involves an evaluation, which evokes strong feelings, since a “scandal” (LT.SU20) refers to a morally or legally wrong action that causes public outrage. Like the criticisms coming from of “frontline doctors” (LT.SU12), criticisms concerning the inadequate number of rapid diagnostic tests available in the USA does not directly support the main claim of the CT either, according to which SARS-CoV-2 is of American origin. The question of the extent to which the Chinese medical situation was out of control in the first phase of the epidemic is not raised in the narrative of the CT [C] Exclusion]. The unbalanced representation of the events increases the legitimising force of the narrative. It is only one of the agents whose social actions are scrutinized: circumstances related to one of the agents (the USA) are described in detail, while the circumstances related to its counterpart (PRC) is not presented at all. As a result, the narrative does not allow for a factual comparison of the two agents involved, but provides a one-sided interpretation of the events.

#### 4.1.1.2 Media

In van Leeuwen’s (2008) taxonomy of legitimation, the category of recommendation, which belongs to the authorisation dimension, includes two subcategories: expert and role model. In the present case study, a novel, third subcategory emerged: the media. Reference to mass communication has a power to legitimise, since the media is expected to convey authentic messages from trustworthy sources. Although some media outlets attempt to remain objective, and in this sense avoid giving recommendation, its influence on public opinion is undeniable (cf. Baker at al. 2008; van Dijk 2005). The narrative of the LT uses legitimation grounded in the media to

further describe the American medical situation. Without identifying specific media outlets, the account treats “the US media” (LT.SU21, [A] Selection)] in general, and reports that it accused “the Trump administration” of “weakening the officers in charge of preparing for an emergency public health crisis, as it kept cutting US CDC’s budget and staff in the past two years” (LT.SU21). As in the case of the above expert legitimations (frontline doctors and McCarthy disclosing the less than perfect medical situation in the USA), the statement about the American CDC’s budget does not provide direct support to the main claim of the CT. Extracted from the fabric of the narrative of the CT, it turns out to be an irrelevant statement regarding the origin of SARS-CoV-2. Still, this irrelevant statement, together with other selected facts and arguments, gives effective legitimising force to the narrative of the CT.

#### **4.1.1.3 Role models**

The narrative of the CT grounds legitimation in the readership’s peers, through both named and anonymous role models. Lu Xiaozhou, one of the users of the Chinese social media platform Weibo, is quoted as calling the USA to account for producing false evidence against China (LT.SU37, [B] Emphasis)]. Establishing trustworthiness through the discourse of peers is an effective tool of legitimation as it develops the feeling of closeness towards the opinion of the peer in the reader. The reader who does not have a pro-American stance can feel that their own feelings have been expressed, since the quote uses colloquial, informal language (“Why is the US talking nonsense and framing China all the time?” LT.SU37). Another anonymous “netizen’s” (LT.SU38) opinion is quoted to reinforce the American origin of SARS-CoV-2. This unidentified social media user writes that “in October, the US army participated in military games hosted in Wuhan, and soon Wuhan had the COVID-19 outbreak” (LT.SU38). Since the presence of American military personnel in the Chinese province is sufficient for a peer to justify the claim of the CT, it can also make the CT convincing for the reader who feels a sense of belonging to the same group of ordinary users of the Chinese social media users.

#### **4.1.1.4 Conformity**

The narrative of the LT also grounds legitimation in conformity, that is, in the habit of most people doing the same social practice or thinking the same way. The main claim of the CT that SARS-CoV-2 is of American origin is emphasised through phrases of conformity, such as “the Chinese public” (LT.SU5, LT.SU8, LT.SU15, LT.SU40, [A] Selection, B) Emphasis]) and “the Chinese people” (LT.SU16, [B] Emphasis]), who share the same “doubts” (LT.SU8, LT.SU16, LT.SU39), “concerns” (LT.SU8), and “suspicion” (LT.SU15, LT.SU40, [B] Emphasis]) as the ones raised by the Chinese diplomat Zhao. The emphasis of the popularity of the CT among the Chinese people is used in the narrative to increase the force of its legitimation through an appeal to the multitude. Besides, the reference to the populace in general creates the impression that the PRC is homogenous and strong. However, the means by which the opinion of the Chinese public was measured, and the extent to which it was found to be unanimous, remains unstated in the narrative [C) Exclusion].

## 4.1.2 Rationalisation

### 4.1.2.1 Goal orientation

The legitimacy of the main claim of the CT is also reinforced by goal orientation. The “Trump administration” (LT.SU5) is named in the narrative as allegedly seeking to damage the reputation of the PRC by false accusations. The intention of the US “to smear China on its handling of the coronavirus crisis” (LT.SU5) leaves the claim of the CT unsubstantiated, as the American disapproval of the Chinese ways of reacting to the outbreak of the epidemic in Wuhan is irrelevant in terms of proving for the American origin of SARS-CoV-2. However, the use of the word “smear” (LT.SU5) has the power to deflect attention from the responsibility of the PRC for a possible mishandling of the outbreak, as investigating the PRC’s role in the epidemic growing into a pandemic is explicitly regarded as an act of defamation in the narrative. At the same time, the narrative of the CT does not reflect on the fact that accusing the USA of deliberately spreading SARS-CoV-2 can be considered as an act of defamation on the same grounds, [C) Exclusion]. The legitimation grounded in goal orientation explicitly states the allegedly hostile objective of the USA, which has the effect of lending a purposeful, systematic dimension to the CT [B) Emphasis].

### 4.1.2.2 Explanation

The use of explanation, which is a subcategory of theoretical rationalisation in van Leeuwen’s (2008) taxonomy, grounds legitimation in the nature of the social actor. In the LT, Zhao Lijian, the Chinese diplomat who promoted the CT, is described as “famously outspoken” (LT.SU8, [B) Emphasis]). The narrative of the CT strengthens the legitimation of the main claim by emphasising the honest and direct character of the diplomat. At the same time, the quoted opinion of Li Haidong, a professor at the Institute of International Relations of China Foreign Affairs University, adds a different shade to the picture (LT.SU30). Regarding the diplomat’s “outspoken” manner (LT.SU3, LT.SU5, LT.SU8, LT.SU18), the Chinese professor considers Zhao’s less than diplomatic tweets as personal messages, thus concluding that the CT does not represent “China’s stance” (LT.SU31). The LT also adds that interpreting the “personal tweets” (LT.SU31) as the official standpoint of the PRC stems from “America’s long-standing hostile attitude toward China” (LT.SU31, [B) Emphasis]). By introducing the possibility that the CT is merely a personal opinion, the LT offers an interpretation that absolves the government of the PRC of responsibility for blaming the USA for the outbreak of the global epidemic. This interpretation would be close to reality if the government of the PRC had issued an official statement distancing itself from the content of the tweets, which it did not. The narrative of the LT fails to mention this fact [C) Exclusion]. Within a completely different frame of interpretation, Susan Shirk, a China scholar and director of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century China Center at the University of California, points out that the use of the direct style is not a personal decision: “Chinese diplomats are encouraged to be combative by Beijing”, and the very promotion of Zhao to spokesman “signals to everyone in China that this is the official line” (Erlanger 2020).

## 4.1.3 Moral evaluation

Similarly to goal orientation, legitimation grounded in evaluation focuses on the USA. The narrative evaluates the USA as a malevolent agent, which wages an “information war on China”

with its “malicious accusations” (LT.SU5). The narrative regards as groundless the claim that SARS-CoV-2 originated in the PRC, seeing it as part of the scheme of disinformation intentionally spread by the USA. In terms of argumentation, the narrative of the LT does not seek to disprove the accusations of having mishandled the outbreak, as it brings up no evidence against it [C) Exclusion]. Instead, it regards the accusations as “malicious” (LT.SU5, [B) Emphasis]) and cements the image that the USA is an enemy of the PRC. By illustrating the USA’s alleged hostility towards the PRC, the narrative does not aim to factually prove the main claim of the CT, but rather to create a context in which the claim becomes apparently plausible.

#### **4.1.4 Mythopoesis**

The account of the LT also grounds legitimation in mythopoesis. The mythopoetical cautionary tale, that is, the narrative in which the social actor is punished for the engagement in nonlegitimate actions, is centred on the USA. The LT regards the USA as deviant due to the fact that the American administration identified the PRC as the origin of SARS-CoV-2, based on the Chinese location of the first outbreak of the disease. According to the cautionary tale, which serves as a warning, recognising the PRC as the origin of the virus “would hinder countries from cooperating in overcoming the common enemy” (LT.SU6). Focusing on the possible lack of collaboration among countries, the mythopoetic part of the CT maintains the implicit claim that the country from which the pandemic plaguing every corner of the world originated should take responsibility for unleashing the virus. The narrative does not test the validity of the argumentation of the cautionary tale by examining whether, how, and to what extent locating the origin of SARS-CoV-2 in the USA would hinder cooperation among countries [C) Exclusion]. Considering its effect, the cautionary tale has the potential to silence scrutiny of the PRC as the most plausible source of the virus, since the narrative immediately equates such examination with the intention to impede the joint action aimed at bringing SARS-CoV-2 under control. In this way, the narrative of the LT suggests that every country cooperating to control the pandemic approves of the main claim of the CT.

#### **4.1.5 Caricature**

The LT also legitimises the main claim of the CT by describing the general situation through representing a set of circumstances connected to the topic but not to the main claim of the argument. Rather than using argumentation, the representation of the situations (including the events and the people involved) paints a portrait. Since the portrayal tends to select particular elements of reality, the picture created by the narrative resembles an illustration that exaggerates parts and peculiarities, that is, a caricature. This type of legitimation, which remained uncategorised in van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework, was abundantly present in the corpus, thus I classified it under the term caricature. Since caricature gives legitimacy to a social practice by making reference to the conceptual representation of how things are, it can be categorised under theoretical rationalisation. It is important to note, however, that legitimation through caricature provides a particular perception of how things stand in a given situation. The set of facts, events and occurrences which are selected to be included in the narrative shows the standpoint of the narrator. Also, the extent to which the elements of the caricature match the events and the actions that occurred in real life can vary. It is untypical for the caricature to use a significant body of transparently implausible factual material, as it makes the portrayal appear unrealistic,

thus rendering it less convincing. Instead, caricatures tend to apply fact-based statements in an arrangement that serves the interest of the propagator or disseminator the CT.

The LT perceives the USA as an unreliable agent, whose then President, “Donald Trump tried to downplay the impact of coronavirus” (LT.SU11). This statement does not use a deductive argument in order to logically prove the main claim of the CT, but creates a context in which the agent of the main claim (the USA) appears in an unfavourable light. In a similar fashion, the incompetence of American medical professionals is recounted through reports of a series of “misjudgement of coronavirus cases” (LT.SU10), where “cases may have been misdiagnosed as flu that actually were infected with coronavirus” (LT.SU9, [B] Emphasis)]. To make this statement apparently more powerful, the narrative widens the scope of those responsible for not containing SARS-CoV-2, and puts the blame on the American medical system in general by describing it as a “flawed system that might have seriously delayed the epidemic response” (LT.SU9). As a verification of this claim, the narrative explains that the American health care system “is based on market-driven principles, ignoring the fundamental interests of American people” (LT.SU12, [B] Emphasis)]. Making matters worse, it is not only the interests of the American people which are not taken into account according to the narrative of the LT: the whole world is to suffer due to the decisions of President Donald Trump, who “is also proposing [...] a 53 percent cut to the World Health Organization” (LT.SU23, [B] Emphasis)]. The LT does not examine the possible reasons why the USA might have proposed reducing the WHO’s funding [C] Exclusion], but it identifies America as a universally acknowledged source of global problems by stating that “the world sees the US as the reason for many problems” (LT.SU17). The lack of any examination into the possible causes of events makes the legitimacy of the narrative stronger, as the reader is not prompted to question the responsibility of the social actor who is illustrated as a victim in the narrative. Using general terms for the social agent and for the social action (“the world”, “many problems” (LT.SU17, [A] Selection, B) Emphasis)], the portrayal of America as a wrongdoer remains unsubstantiated in the account. The unspecified offence that the US government is said to have committed is regarded in the LT as intentional, as shown by the clear emphasis on the US government making “efforts to conceal information about the epidemic” (LT.SU22). The LT does not examine the practices of the PRC in this respect, which implies appropriately transparent behaviour [C] Exclusion]. The narrative represents the two social actors in an unbalanced manner: it focuses solely on the alleged responsibility of one of the actors (the USA) for causing a disaster, while failing to investigate the responsibility of the other agent (PRC) for averting the calamity. The account of the LT also specifies that America’s aim, through the alleged suppression of information, was to “to shift blame on others” (LT.SU22), that is, on the PRC. The narrative of the LT labels this alleged shift as “racist rhetoric” (LT.SU22), which has the potential effect of silencing critical scrutiny, as people generally seek to avoid being labelled as racist.

With the caricature in combination with the previously discussed statements that seemed to be irrelevant in directly proving the main claim of the CT, the narrative of the LT moves beyond the scope of deductive reasoning. It portrays the USA (both in terms of its governance and its medical system), as defective, inept, and harmful, a context in which the American origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not implausible. Rather than employing chains of arguments to justify the

claim that SARS-CoV-2 originated in the USA, the narrative depicts the USA in such unfavourable a light that it might as well imply the main claim of the CT. Besides, the caricature also deflects the focus of the narrative from the PRC's responsibility for its handling of the epidemic, and as such the accountability of the PRC is not discussed but concealed in the narrative. The one-sided selection and emphasis of events in the narrative means that the responsibility of the agent whose interest the narrative serves is not considered. This exclusion creates an unbalanced representation of the social agents, where one of them is illustrated unfavourably as the cause of the disastrous situation, while the other is depicted as a victim without responsibilities for the development of the situation.

## **4.2 Discursive delegitimation of the CT**

### **4.2.1 Authorisation**

The narrative of the DLT, which debunks the main claim of the discursive model maintaining that the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated in the USA, seeks to question the credibility both of the expert whose claim was advocated and of the source of the information. The DLT unveils the structural backbone of the LT by demonstrating the steps by which the CT was constructed. First, Zhao Lijian, spokesman of MOFA, tweeted without evidence that the US army could have brought the coronavirus to Wuhan (DLT.SU8), then a day later he tweeted an online article from the website Global Research headlined "Further evidence that the virus originated in the US" written by Larry Romanoff (DLT.SU8).

The DLT uses scientific rationalisation to shed light on Romanoff's inaccuracy in claiming that there was evidence for the virus originating in the USA (DLT.SU15). Namely, the DLT focuses on the fact that Romanoff misquoted from the magazine *Science*, which raised doubts only about the market in Wuhan being the origin of SARS-CoV-2, and not about its Chinese origin [C) Exclusion]. While the misquotes implied SARS-CoV-2 to be of American origin, the proper quotes from the original text would not have supported this view.

By highlighting the carelessness of the expert, the DLT demonstrates how Romanoff also relied on Japanese sources which had been debunked by the time of his argumentation (DLT.SU16). The narrative of the DLT postulates that Romanoff could not have come to his conclusion that SARS-CoV-2 was of American origin in an academically honest manner, since the hollowness of his source had already been exposed to the public [C) Exclusion].

Doubting the impartiality of the expert, the DLT also calls attention to the fact that Romanoff made false claims. The CT was founded on claims made by an alleged "top virologist" (DLT.SU16), which were broadcast on Taiwanese TV. However, as the delegitimising account reveals, the alleged virologist was a politician (DLT.SU16) [C) Exclusion]. To further increase doubts about the claims of the politician, the DLT emphasises that he was committed member of a pro-Beijing party (DLT.SU16) [B) Emphasis]. The narrative of the DLT underlines that the pretence of expertise, the use of an interested rather than an impartial source, and the concealment of partiality all challenge the authority of the CT in an intertwined manner.

Furthermore, the DLT points out that the expert made a strong yet unfounded claim stating that the original source of SARS-CoV-2 was "the US military germ laboratory in Fort Detrick, Maryland" (DLT.SU19). The account of the DLT questions the validity of Romanoff's claim on



the grounds that there is no evidence to substantiate it (DLT.SU19, [D] Elaboration]). By raising doubts about the foundation of the CT, the narrative of the DLT erodes the argumentation of the discursive model maintaining that SARS-CoV-2 originated in the USA.

In addition, the DLT delegitimises the CT by drawing attention to the irrelevance in its argumentation (DLT.SU20). The claim that the American laboratory was the origin of SARS-CoV-2 is supported in the CT by the fact that it was “totally shut down [...] due to an absence of safeguards to prevent pathogen leakages” (DLT.SU19, [D] Elaboration]). The two facts – even if they were true – do not stand in causal relationship, thus the main claim of the CT remains unsupported. In argumentation theory, this kind of reasoning is regarded as pseudo-argumentation (cf. Toulmin/Rieke/Janik 1984: 135).

Besides shedding light on the pseudo-argumentation of the CT, the DLT also uncovers that the above argument describes real facts imprecisely. The account of the DLT reveals that the laboratory “was not shut down, but only suspended its research” (DLT.SU19, [D] Elaboration]), and there were “no leaks of dangerous material outside the laboratory” (DLT.SU20, [D] Elaboration]). Both of the imprecisions decrease the validity of the argumentation of the CT. In terms of interest, neither of the inaccuracies are neutral, since the distortions in the portrayal of reality create an image about the American laboratory as critically unsafe, which favours the Chinese narrative.

Bringing to light false claims made during professional career of the expert is another way by which the DLT debunks the CT. According to the account of the DLT, Romanoff falsely created the professional image of being a “retired management consultant and businessman” (DLT.SU22, [D] Elaboration]) and a “visiting professor at Shanghai's Fudan University” (DLT.SU22) who delivered classes in international affairs to senior EMBA students. By citing The Wall Street Journal's finding, which clarified that Romanoff was unknown to the officials at the university (DLT.SU23), the DLT exposes Romanoff's claimed professional position as a baseless pretence. Unveiling the expert's lack of truthfulness damages the credibility of his expertise in general.

Besides raising distrust of the expert by demonstrating his dishonesty in creating a fictitious position in his career, the DLT also questions the claims of the expert by casting doubts on the quality of his expert knowledge. The DLT reports an obviously implausible claim Romanoff made in a podcast, according to which SARS-CoV-2 was “Chinese-specific” (DLT.SU21, DLT.SU27, [A] Selection, B) Emphasis]) and it “did not infect peoples of other origins and racial backgrounds” (DLT.SU27, [D] Elaboration]). This evidently improbable claim, soon disproved as the local epidemic has swelled into a pandemic infecting people of all racial backgrounds around the world, call into question the reliability of the expert's knowledge. Although the immediately questionable claim is a particular one, its damaging impact on the authenticity of the expert is general. The narrative of the DLT also notes that Romanoff did not comment on his unconvincing claim to the BBC (DLT.SU28, [D] Elaboration]). The lack of participation in a dialogue further diminishes the expert's already low credibility.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Since Romanoff did not explain his peculiar assertion, it is not certain what he meant exactly by the “China-specific” nature of the virus. He may have been attempting to use this fictitious character of SARS-CoV-2 to ex-

The narrative of the DLT gives information about Romanoff's political disposition by evaluating his other articles unrelated to the CT. The DLT states in a summative manner that "most of his writings seem to be critical of the US and supportive of China" (DLT.SU26, [B] Emphasis)]. Revealing the inclination of the expert largely discredits the objectivity of the argument he proposes. Raising awareness of the interest that the expert represents casts doubts on his impartiality, which in turn undermines the validity of his claims.

#### 4.2.2 Scientific rationalisation

The DLT uses a variety of discursive constructions to show the weak points and the imperfections of the expert, and at the same time focuses on the issue of the source's trustworthiness. The discursive attempt at declaring SARS-CoV-2 to have originated in the USA contains two sources: the spokesperson of MOFA, Liljan Zhao, and the website called *Global Research*, where the article headlined "Further evidence that the virus originated in the US", written by the expert Larry Romanoff, was disseminated (DLT.SU8, [D] Elaboration)]. The credibility of the spokesperson is questioned in the DLT by pointing out that his argument was baseless, as he provided no evidence to justify the claim (DLT.SU8). The DLT also directs attention to the fact that the same source rested his considerations on an online article that was shortly deleted (DLT.SU8, DLT.SU14). Identifying the use of untraceable information, the narrative of the DLT alludes to the dubious character of the CT.

The DLT casts doubts on the others source, the website called *Global Research*, as well. According to the account of the DLT, the website, the declared aim of which is to function as a centre for research on globalisation (DLT.SU12), "has advanced specious conspiracy theories on topics such as 9/11, vaccines, and global warming" (DLT.SU12, [D] Elaboration)]. The reference to the previous creation of CTs in different topics implies that the current discursive model might as well be a CT. With the allusion to preceding CTs, used with a pejorative connotation, the DLT suggests that the website is of low quality as it demands no scientific objectivity. The mention of previous cases delineates a tendency, which is predicative in the sense that there is a great likelihood the current case will match this trend as well. In this way, when the term "specious" (DLT.SU12) is used to describe the earlier publicised CTs, it is enough to give the impression that the plausibility of the present CT is superficial.

The two types of discursive constructions in which delegitimation of the CT is grounded (authorisation by an expert and scientific rationalisation) are carried out with numerous foci in the narrative of the DLT, which all reveal issues undermining the credibility of the expert or information source. Since the DLT appears to abound in features that weaken the legitimacy of the narrative, it is worth summarising them (see Diagram 1). In a synergic manner, the more of these features are used in a narrative, the more the narrative's credibility is undermined.

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plain away a weak point of the CT, that is, how it was possible for the first outbreak not to occur in the USA if the alleged leakage of SARS-CoV-2 took place in Maryland.



**Diagram 1: The manifold foci of discursive delegitimation that undermine the legitimacy of the expert.**

## 5 Conclusion

The “grammar of legitimation”, as van Leeuwen (2008) developed the taxonomy of the discursive constructions of (de)legitimation, appears to be used within a schemata of interpretation, where frames are discursively created by the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration (cf. Tankard 2001). The present explorative case study indicates that the persuasiveness of the discursive strategies of (de)legitimation depends on several features, which will be individually described below. The findings complement van Leeuwen’s classification of discursive legitimation and extend his taxonomy (2008) with two subcategories (Caricature and Media), and contribute to existing knowledge on framing theories as well.

### A) Synergy

The legitimising text applied a wide range of discursive constructions of legitimation: expert knowledge, the media, role models, conformity, goal orientation, evaluation, cautionary tale, caricature, and explanation. It can be observed that the text has a massive force of legitimisation due to the synergy of the use of a great variety of discursive strategies.

The delegitimising text showed signs of the use of synergy at a different level. The discursive constructions of delegitimation did not appear in abundance, as merely authorisation and scientific rationalisation were used. However, authorisation was applied with a dozen different foci (see Diagram 1), which resulted in increasing the persuasiveness of the delegitimation. The more points are shown where the credibility of those whose interest the narrative propagates are in question, the more effectively these concerns tear the fabric of the narrative apart, since showing problems with credibility can effectively undermine the validity of the narrative. Due to the diversity of targets around which the detailed presentations centred, the extensive use of elaboration had a powerful delegitimising effect in the narrative, in terms of framing.

**B) Monoframes**

The role of frames cannot be underestimated in the case of synergy. The effectiveness of legitimation and delegitimation depends on the synergic use of various discursive strategies as long as they belong to the same frame. The use of different frames might have increased the objectivity of the delegitimising narrative, however, the application of one single frame increased its legitimising power. It can be detected that neither the legitimising text nor the delegitimising text applied any discursive constructions that would have supported the competing frame, which made their own legitimation powerful. In other words, both texts avoided using multiple frames in favour of a particular monoframe.

**C) Caricature**

The use of caricature, which is a novel category that extends van Leeuwen's (2008) taxonomy, creates a general image which allows for the interpretation of events in a one-sided manner. Caricature represents the situation through a set of selected circumstances connected to the topic, but does not seek to directly support the main argument of the narrative. Thus legitimation grounded in caricature does not tend to use chains of arguments but moves beyond the scope of strict deductive reasoning. It is important to note that the particular perception of events depicted through caricature tends to apply fact-based or at least believable statements; however, these statements are put in such a sequence or relationship that their arrangement operates in favour of the propagator of the narrative. Furthermore, even if the elements of the selected events that create the caricature are not proven or cannot be proven, they are regarded as facts in the narrative. Also, as caricature provides a one-sided selection of events, the responsibility of the agent whose interest the narrative serves can remain hidden. This omission of responsibility creates an unbalanced representation of the social agents, where one of them (whose interest the narrative safeguards) is depicted as a victim without responsibilities for the development of the adverse situation, while the other is illustrated unfavourably as the cause of the disastrous situation, that is, the aggressor.

**D) Projection**

The discursive constructions of legitimation were applied in the legitimising text in such a manner that the narrative deflected responsibility away from the social agent whose interest the text intended to support. The several actions for which the social actor has been criticised appeared in the legitimising text as if they were committed by another social actor, who was depicted as an adversary in the text. Using the technique of projection, that is the transfer of certain characteristics, affects, and actions of one social actor to another social actor,<sup>5</sup> the narrative of the legitimising text did not attempt to counter the criticism directed at the social actors whose interests the narrative represents. The lack of response to criticism obscures the question of the responsibility of those whose interest the narrative serves. At the same time, the transfer of responsibility causes those whose interest the narrative supports to appear as victims in the face

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<sup>5</sup> Projection, a term that originates in psychology (APA 2023), denotes "the process by which one attributes one's own individual positive or negative characteristics, affects, and impulses to another person or group. This is often a defense mechanism in which unpleasant or unacceptable impulses, stressors, ideas, affects, or responsibilities are attributed to others. [...] Such defensive patterns are often used to justify prejudice or evade responsibility. [...]. In classical psychoanalytic theory, projection permits the individual to avoid seeing his or her own faults."

of ill-treatment by the social actor depicted as the adversary or aggressor. The evident lack of scrutiny regarding the responsibility of one of the social actors (whose interest the narrative serves) was covered by the abundant consideration of the responsibility of the alleged adversary, the aggressor. Projective legitimation bears similarity with the discursive legitimation strategy of caricature painting in the sense that both operate with the transfer of responsibility from the agent (presented as the victim in the narrative) to the alleged adversary (shown as the aggressor in the narrative).

### **E) Sense of belonging**

The use of the discursive constructions of legitimation in the narrative reveal that it is targeted at an audience already disposed to accept the main claims of the narrative. None of the discursive legitimation strategies used in the narrative were applied to build a strict chain of rational argumentation; however, all of them appealed to the sense of belonging. Thus the legitimising force of the narrative depends on the extent to which one feels a sense of belonging to the community whose interest the narrative represents. The legitimation of the narrative is convincing for those who are members of the community, whose interests the narrative supports, or who are inclined to be supportive of this community; those, that is, who are likeminded, and who feel empathy and understanding for the group. The systematic lack of deductive reasoning in the legitimising text demonstrates that it does not aim to directly persuade people who disagree with the main claims of the narrative but it seeks to strengthen the attitude of those who already have a sense of belonging to the community whose interest the narrative safeguards.

Since the investigated legitimising text was published in English, a foreign language in the context of the narrative, it can be assumed that the narrative was targeted at people who are not members of the native community. In this sense, the legitimising text is a tool of soft power, that is, the ability of a country to influence citizens of other countries through persuasion, in particular by setting the agenda that the target audience regards as legitimate (Nye 2021). The empathy of the target audience with the community of those whose interests the legitimising narrative promotes is enhanced by the emphasis on the victimhood of the community.

### **F) Silencing with intellectual blockers**

The discursive legitimation strategies in the narrative were enhanced by the use of phrases which silence scrutinising the role and responsibility of those whose interest the narrative serves. The use of lexical items whose connotation stigmatises the inquirer (e. g., racist) hinders the possibility of critical thinking, and blocks the formation of independent opinion. Stigmatising phrases act as blockers since they suppress discussion, silence rival interpretations, and eventually terminate debates. The application of discursive blockers gives no room for comparing the issue, that is, for considering the narrated events in relation to similar events in other contexts. The impossibility of relativizing, that is, the lack of developing comparative and contrastive relations regarding the matter in question, paralyzes the act of thinking, which is essentially the development of systems of relations. This is why stigmatizing phrases function as intellectual blockers. The interpretation of inquiries per se as inherently disgraceful or degrading further reinforces the image construed by the legitimising narrative that the apparent victimhood of the community whose interest the narrative represents is undeniable.

### **G) Implying the generality of specific cases**

Comparing the discourses of legitimising and delegitimising accounts, it can be observed that both rely on the narration of particular cases. The objective in employing specific, concrete cases is to create general implications, both in support of and to debunk narratives. The introduction of a past action conveys suggestions about the disposition of the social actor. The quality of the general character of the social actor creates a general image about the community to which the social actor belongs, which in turn directs the reader's interpretation of the narrative, whether to admire or depreciate it.

### **H) Causality under partial investigation**

The legitimacy of a social action can be reinforced in narratives by exposing legitimate cause and effect relations related to the specific social action. The legitimising narrative disclosed the possible causes of events; however, the inquiry confined itself to the social actor depicted as an adversary. The text increased its legitimising force by avoiding any investigation of cause and effect relations with regard to the social actor whose interest the narrative propagated. In effect, the narrative directed readers' attention to the responsibility of the alleged adversary, the aggressor, while it deflecting attention from the social actor who represented as the victim of the adversary. In terms of framing, the narrative increased its force of legitimation through exclusion, that is, by avoiding the investigation of the responsibility of the social actor portrayed as victim. The one-sided representation of the text fails to allow for a factual comparison of the two social agents (illustrated as aggressor and victim), and stifles even consideration of the responsibility of the alleged victim.

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