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Enhancing Disinformation Research by Discourse Theoretical Tools: A Critical Cognitive Study of the Rhetoric of the *Confederation* Party

Abstract

Disinformation discourse consists in the deliberate practice of disseminating false information with the intention to deceive. Using sophisticated techniques of propaganda and threat generation, it comprises all kinds of content of public interest, importance or urgency, from healthcare to environment to war, communicated by organized groups and, often enough, populist political parties. The aim of this paper is to show that threat-building and fear generation in disinformation discourse often involve the activation of general cognitive schemata that can trigger bipolar conceptualizations, typically the schemata of metaphorization and proximization. I argue that metaphoric as well as proximization based conceptualizations serve to enact virtual US vs. THEM distinctions and make credible and appealing the essentially artificial political differences, divisions and potential antagonisms. The paper investigates the power of such conceptualizations in the discourse of *Confederation*, a nationalist, radical-right political party in Poland, whose popularity has been on the rise in the past year.

Keywords: disinformation, threat generation, metaphorization, proximization, war in Ukraine, Poland, *Confederation* party

Introduction: Extending the Focus on Disinformation Discourse

Disinformation discourse can be described as a complex discursive practice consisting in the abuse of language to convey false information with the intention to deceive (d'Ancona 2017; Maci *et al.* 2024). Originating from random fake news spread online by individuals, nowadays it comprises all kinds of content of public interest and importance, from healthcare to environment to war, communicated by organized groups and, as will be shown in this paper, populist political parties. Disinformation discourse

is hard to counter, as it draws on the current construction of societies, their deeply rooted anxieties and fears (Chilton 2023). Using sophisticated techniques of propaganda and fear generation, it craftily exploits cases of public distrust in officially distributed information.

While coercion strategies such as anxiety generation are typical of most practices of disinformation, research in threat construction as a fundamental element of disinformation discourse remains quite fragmentary, focusing on random uses of various linguistic ploys to arouse fear (Maci *et al.* 2024). For example, in studies on (disinformation) discourses stimulating critical public attitudes and behaviors, such as climate change denial (Clarke 2024) or anti-vaccine activism (Padley 2024), a number of lexical items, phrases and grammatical patterns have been analyzed for their threat-building potential and the coercive capacity to make people reject the state-circulated information and advice. However, none of these studies have made an attempt to account for such linguistic forms in terms of what underlying conceptual frameworks they draw upon and what cognitive processes they activate.

The goal of this paper is to show that (coercive) disinformation discourse makes use of linguistic choices anchored in specific cognitive schemata serving conceptualizations of threat and fear, and that research in these schemata and conceptualizations is necessary for a comprehensive and systematic account of the field. In the following I argue that threat-building and fear generation in disinformation discourse very often involve the use of polarization strategies drawing on general schemata of metaphorization and proximization (Musolff 2016, Cap 2013, 2022). Specifically, I demonstrate that metaphoric as well as proximization based conceptualizations serve to perform virtual US vs. THEM distinctions and make credible and appealing the essentially artificial social differences, divisions and potential antagonisms. The paper investigates the power of such conceptualizations in discourse of *Confederation*, a far-right, nationalist party in Poland, whose popularity has been on the rise in the past year. It describes, in particular, how metaphor and proximization are exploited linguistically in the disinformation rhetoric of *Confederation* aiming at the suspension of support for the war-torn state of Ukraine, on account of its "excessive and eventually threatening" social and (geo)political costs to Poland.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section characterizes disinformation discourse, in terms of its form, goals and domains. It underlines the heterogeneity of studies in discursive strategies of disinformation, acknowledging the need to broaden the focus of inquiry to include their most important conceptual underpinnings. In that vein, the section following postulates research in the processes of metaphorization and proximization to account for their (exceptional) ability to force deceitful conceptualizations and faulty reasoning lines. It is argued that many metaphoric and proximization based discourses do not just force manipulative or simply false information, attitudes and beliefs on their direct audience, but allow easy replication and recontextualization of the original message in new socio-discursive contexts. The penultimate section illustrates these phenomena in a qualitative and quantitative study of the anti-Ukrainian discourse of the *Confederation* party between October 2024 and March 2025 in Poland. The final section wraps up the findings, concluding with a brief note outlining prospects for further cognitive-critical studies of disinformation discourse.

Disinformation Discourse: History and Research Challenges

A recent and developing phenomenon in the space of public communication, "disinformation discourse" reveals historical connections to concepts such as "political lie," "post-truth," and "fake news." While

"political lie" is commonly associated with deceitful propaganda messages of US government during the country's involvement in the Vietnam War in 1945–1967 (Arendt 1972), the latter terms have a much shorter history, originating from the writings of journalists spurred into action by the election of Donald Trump and the UK Brexit referendum in 2016 (d'Ancona 2017). Discourse analytical research organized around the concepts of post-truth and fake news flourished in the following years (Ball 2017; Lazer *et al.* 2018, *etc.*), accounting for instances of "fabricated information that mimics news media content" (Lazer *et al.* 2018: 1094) in different domains such as immigration policy (Taylor 2021), health (Musolff *et al.* 2022), or environment (Brüggemann and Rödder 2020). While all these explorations have been successful in elucidating the most salient aspect of discourse involving fake news, its propaganda value, the most comprehensive of the recent accounts of the field by Maci *et al.* (2024) indicates limitations of both "post-truth" and "fake news" in further work ("fake news exact character and influence are always going to be tied closely to the context in which it exists"; 2024: 2). Arguing for a more global concept of "disinformation," it advocates systematic, text-driven research in discursive practices of disinformation and their conceptual bases, postulating application of new tools and interdisciplinary frameworks.

Apart from "fake news," disinformation discourse shares a common terrain with a host of phenomena referred to as "alternative facts" and "conspiracy theory." These two concepts make for one of the most natural directions in (future) disinformation research, offering undeniable analytical benefits such as insight in socio-political conditions that make a fertile ground for disinformation. On Maci *et al.*'s (2024) view, one such condition is a growing lack of confidence in "official" news content generated by "experts" of all kinds "operating as part of the epistemological authorities" (2024: 4). This kind of content is often countered with messages that target socio-culturally shaped vulnerabilities of people, to make them believe "the ultimate reasons for" and "secret plots" behind the realities presented in the official news. Thus, cultural, sociological and cognitive factors must be amply addressed in disinformation research. Not least, explorations in disinformation must reflect the ongoing politicization of the space of public communication: issues of public interest or importance which used to be in principle out of politics (health, environment, even sports), these days get reconstructed, through discourse, as state-political affairs (Cap 2023). This means that authors of fake news, alternative facts and conspiracy theories in the world of politics can easily move between the "political" and the "public," and thus reach different audiences in multiple domains.

It appears that, to date, studies in disinformation have been unable to organize all these strands and aspirations into a complex research apparatus. In particular, they have been unable to account for the conceptual underpinnings of disinformation, involving the relation between specific language forms used by spreaders and their role in the activation of mental schemata facilitating disinformation effects. The reason for the absence of systematic procedures providing a sound methodological handle on disinformation discourse, might be, paradoxically enough, the proliferation of disinformation practices following the rapid development of social media in the last 15 years (Zimdars & McLeod 2020; Chilton 2023). Faced with massive amounts of new data, analysts seem to have sacrificed some of the research depth for essentially descriptive benefits, focusing on, primarily, the multiple manifestations and forms of disinformation produced by individuals across a great number of social and discourse domains. As a result, early analyses of disinformation exhibit essentially critical findings regarding the propagandistic agency and effectiveness of messages circulated via digital platforms by individuals. A common finding shared by abundant studies in online genres such as tweets, Facebook posts and comments, YouTube videos, and,

less frequently, SMS and WhatsApp messages, is that disinformation thrives in social media as they nearly always "blur the conceptualization of information source" (Tandoc 2018: 139).

This finding resonates in most research in disinformation discourse to date, undergoing consecutive tests and verifications across numerous domains, including prejudice, race, immigration, environment, and health, as well as some particularly sensitive and socially consequential domains of state politics (for example, international conflict and warfare). Eventually, however, works such as Balirano & Hughes (2024) and Veritasia *et al.* (2024) address issues of disinformation agency beyond social media genres, outlining research potential that resides in discourses produced by official, institutional and/or state-run communication outlets. Further studies emerge subsequently focusing upon disinformation as a tempting propaganda tool for state governments and the media channels they control. For instance, in a critical overview of the 2015–2023 rule of the far-right Law & Justice (L&J) party in Poland, Cap (2024) analyzes disinformation strategies in the anti-migration discourse of the L&J government. He describes, among others, how the government managed to earn public support for Poland's rejection of the EU refugee relocation schema, by deceitfully presenting it as a plan realizing essentially "German interests" at the expense of Poland's national security.

Perhaps the most conspicuous effect of moving beyond social media genres is the current awareness of researchers (*cf.* Maci *et al.* 2024 for a discussion) that new analytical tools are indeed necessary to make further progress, particularly as regards cognitive mechanisms of internalizing disinformation and how spreaders exploit them in their discourse. Most recently, this awareness radiates from projects set to investigate the Kremlin's disinformation discourse aimed at legitimization of Russia's invasion on the independent state of Ukraine in February 2022 (Henriksen *et al.* 2024; Yang *et al.* 2024; among others). Involving a broad spectrum of forms and propaganda patterns designed to affect socio-psychological predispositions of mass audience (Yang *et al.* 2024), president Putin's rhetoric is among those urgent discourses of today that inspire an extended, cognitive critical approach to disinformation discourse.

Metaphor and Proximization: A New Toolkit for Disinformation Studies?

Being among the most extensively investigated areas in cognitive critical discourse studies (see Hart 2018 for an overview), metaphor and proximization make for an excellent methodological addition to research in threat construction as a core element of disinformation discourse, to the extent that studies in metaphoric and proximization based conceptualizations appear necessary for a full-fledged account of the field. Crucially for the coercive function of disinformation, such conceptualizations set up and perpetuate virtual US vs. THEM distinctions, divisions and eventually antagonisms, on which spreaders build their fear appeals. Research in metaphor and proximization as cognitive mechanisms underlying the coercive appeal of disinformation allows to pinpoint concrete linguistic choices which individual as well as institutional and state-level disinformers use to activate the desired construals and visions. Though coercive powers of metaphorization and proximization are greatest when combined, there is a certain "division of labor" performed by the two mechanisms and thus we approach them separately.

Metaphorization

The approach to metaphorization in cognitive critical discourse studies draws on the classical theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987, Gibbs 1994), incorporating insights from critical models (Charteris-Black 2005, 2013) and, crucially, from recent theories of political metaphor (Musolff 2016, 2023)[1]. It recognizes the conception of a socio-cognitive discourse space (DS) – a mental and ideological space activated by speaker's discourse, comprising the centrally located US group and the remotely located adversarial THEM group (Chilton 2004, 2010). On the cognitive critical approach, metaphor applies to disinformation practices and disinformation research because of its ability to use conventional scenarios and patterns of understanding to force potentially false visions of the US camp as exposed to particular kinds of threat posed by members of the THEM camp. Since the nature of such conceptualizations is deceitful, or at least manipulative, they count as acts of disinformation. The social impact of disinformation spread through such acts may in fact be larger compared to random instances of fake news or stories, for two reasons. First, metaphors can force visions and patterns of reasoning and behavior that addressees remember (and follow) longer than individual news. Second, expressions that draw on metaphoric conceptualizations are, as a rule, rhetorically attractive and appealing, which encourages addressees to circulate them further (Musolff 2016; Oddo 2018).

A telling example of abuse of a conventional metaphoric scenario in the interest of disinformation is the pro-Leave discourse of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the Brexit referendum debate. Specifically, it is the recruitment by the UKIP's leader Nigel Farage of the STATE IS CONTAINER metaphor, to paint a hyperbolic and often plainly false picture of the massive influx of immigrants into Britain in the months directly preceding the Brexit referendum (Koller 2019; Cap 2019). Metaphoric expressions conceptualizing the UK as a CONTAINER are a popular feature of British public discourse (including immigration discourse), reflecting and reinforcing an underlying cognitive arrangement, that is the perception of Britain as an island. In general anthropological terms, they emerge from ubiquitous and reoccurring experiences people have with the state of containment:

> Our encounter with containment and boundedness is one of the most pervasive features of our bodily experience [...]. From the beginning, we experience constant physical containment in our surroundings [...]. We move in and out of rooms, clothes, vehicles, and numerous kinds of bounded spaces. We manipulate objects, placing them in containers (cups, boxes, cans, bags, *etc.*). In each of these cases there are [...] typical schemata for physical containment. (Hart 2010: 160)

The CONTAINER schema consists of three structural elements: an interior and an exterior defined by a boundary. The interior also includes a CENTER-PERIPHERY structure, and the CONTAINER possesses, crucially, volume, which is to say a FULL-EMPTY structure (Hart 2010, 2014). This arrangement holds some important implications for political discourse (Hart 2014; Musolff 2016). First, it follows from the nature of the CONTAINER schema that something is either in or out of the CONTAINER (thus being "US" or "THEM," in DS terms). Second, the experience of containment typically involves protection from, or resistance to, external forces (the adversarial THEM). These features define some of the most broadly recognized and accepted patterns of understanding that underlie

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1   Research such as Lakoff's (1991) is not, also by the author's own admission, "a theory." It is, rather, an application of the theory of conceptual metaphor to the analysis of political discourse.

people's discourse. Consequently, the conventional nature of metaphors based on the CONTAINER schema, such as the STATE IS CONTAINER metaphor, goes a long way toward increasing credibility and pragmatic appeal of texts in which they occur. This is of course of exceptional value to potential disinformers.

Nigel Farage's proto-referendum discourse exploits and abuses the CONTAINER schema by notoriously highlighting those attributes of CONTAINER that expose it to potentially devastating external impact. This threatening construal is activated by the use of lexical items and phrases such as "at our gates," "wave [of immigration]," "absorb," "throw open," "borders," "full up," and "burst" in relevant contexts, for example: "illegal entrants are already at our gates," "day in and day out we face waves of asylum seekers," "the government has thrown open our borders to more than 30 million immigrants," "our country is full up to the bursting point," *etc.* (Farage 2016). Some of these phrases and contexts include plainly false or at best misleading information. For instance the "30 million" refers not to an actual number of immigrants in the UK, nor to people who might be, in one way or another, "en route" to Britain (*e.g.* applying for visas), but just to the global workforce of Romania and Bulgaria, the countries that joined the EU in 2007. Still, the presented word choices, even if deceitful in their own right, combine into a forceful and convincing metaphoric scenario that justifies a restrictive immigration policy to contain what is conceptualized as a massive social threat. The scenario comprises a structured set of inferences, such as the following: (a) the state/country (CONTAINER) – Britain – has a limited capacity; (b) continued immigration could cause the country (CONTAINER) to "burst"; (c) immigration will continue as, under orders from the EU, the government has "thrown open [the] borders"; (d) the country is thus under a real, massive threat; (e) the only way to offset the threat is to force the government to ignore the EU orders and maintain a tough immigration policy. The final inference (to force the government to ignore the "orders") is a direct instruction for the Brexit vote. The forced conceptualizations and inferences (a–e) rely for their social effects on the conventional character, popularity, and easy processing of insights conveyed by the STATE IS CONTAINER metaphor.

Farage's use of the CONTAINER schema to argue for a restrictive immigration policy and, eventually, for a Leave vote in the Brexit referendum illustrates the capacity of metaphor to spread what can be called "conceptual disinformation," in which, instead of false news, false or misleading insights in matters of public urgency are forced in the interest of radical and consequential policies. His argument for a Leave vote as the only effective means to avert the alleged "massive threat" follows the strategy of populist discourse to offer quick and easy solutions to social problems which political opponents are apparently unable to solve over a long period of time (Norris & Inglehart 2018). Metaphoric mappings, such as the ones underlying the CONTAINER schema, should thus be viewed and studied as a phenomenon that deserves focus from not just disinformation research but also studies in discursive populism as a whole. What makes this kind of research particularly appealing is the possibility to abstract specific linguistic items inducing potentially manipulative conceptualizations, such as STATE IS CONTAINER, NATION IS BODY, STATE IS PERSON, and so on (Musolff 2023). Further analytical prospects arise as these construals and perceptions are shared and new attractive metaphoric expressions are drawn from them by new audiences. While no metaphoric mapping, nor metaphorization as a process manipulate or deceive in their own right, strategic rhetorical choices highlighting certain attributes of metaphoric referents and hiding others go a long way in triggering disinformation effects.

Proximization

Another concept within cognitive critical approaches to discourse studies which is directly relevant to disinformation research is proximization (Cap 2013, 2017, 2022; Hart 2010; Chilton 2014; Li and Gong 2022; among others). The focus of proximization theory (Cap 2013) is on the dynamics and size of the threat extending over the entities located in the conceptual US camp. This focus makes proximization research complementary with studies in metaphoric scenarios construing the US camp as exposed and vulnerable to external threats. In its theoretical and discourse analytical characterization, proximization involves the use of various linguistic forms (lexico-grammatical structures as well as single items) to construe the remote THEM (distant entities, events, states of affairs, and "distant," that is adversarial, ideologies) as increasingly closer and eventually threatening to members of the US camp. Proximization is thus, like some of the metaphoric conceptualizations we have looked at above, a forced construal operation whereby the speaker aims to impose on the addressee a threatening worldview in order to arouse their emotions, particularly those of anxiety and fear. As such, it reveals substantial coercive powers, which can be applied in the service of socio-political goals. Crucially, by projecting THEM camp entities as gradually encroaching on the US camp, the speaker is able to mobilize their audience and legitimize actions which the speaker declares to be the best preventive measures to stop the intrusion.

Though in many proximization studies the analyzed threat patterns are real[2], proximization can be, like metaphor, abused, that is it can serve to generate virtual, false threats. It is precisely that latter capacity that is relevant to disinformation and disinformation research. The use of proximization to create and force artificial threats coming from members of the THEM camp has been amply demonstrated over years (see Li 2024, for an overview), perhaps most thoroughly in studies in anti-terrorist discourse of policy legitimization, the cradle domain of proximization research (Cap 2008; Dunmire 2011; Cap 2013). One of the many informative findings from these studies is, for instance, the employment of different proximization strategies by the US administration and president George W. Bush to solicit legitimization for the military intervention in Iraq in March 2003, on the grounds of the alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by the Iraqi regime. Although the presence of WMD in Iraq has not been confirmed until today, the 2003 war rhetoric developed by the White House involves the vision of a massive threat encroaching upon America and the rest of the "civilized world":

> We are facing a crucial period in the history of our nation, and of the civilized world. On a September morning, threats that had gathered for years, in secret and far away, led to murder in our country on a massive scale. As a result, we must look at security in a new way, because our country is a battlefield in the first war of the 21st century. We learned a lesson: the dangers of our time must be confronted actively and forcefully, before we see them again in our skies and our cities. And we will not allow the flames of hatred and violence in the affairs of men. The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed terrorism and ideologies of murder. Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction are a direct threat to our people and to all free people. (An excerpt from G.W. Bush's address in the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) on February 26, 2003)[3]

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2   In health protection discourse (Li, Gong 2022), in environmental discourses (Liu, Cheng 2023), *etc.*

3   See Cap (2008) for a comprehensive analysis of the whole speech.

Delivered three weeks before the start of the war, Bush's AEI speech is a lucid example of the (ab)use of proximization discourse as, essentially, a public disinformation strategy. To obtain global approval for American intervention, Bush invokes the aura of a direct physical threat looming over the country ("a battlefield"), thus sanctioning a pre-emptive military response. The threat is construed in mostly spatio-temporal terms, which underscores the imminence and material nature of the envisaged impact. The proximization pattern in the speech involves, first of all, the use of specific linguistic items to develop an inherently adversarial THEM ("Saddam Hussein," "terrorism," "ideologies of murder," "secret and far away," "weapons of mass destruction") against US ("our country," "our skies and our cities," "our people," "stable and free nations," "democratic values") arrangement. Second, it involves the conceptualization of geographical, geopolitical and ideological distance between the two camps and, most crucially, the construal of the gradual narrowing of that distance relative to activity and the hostile stance ("hatred") of entities in the THEM camp. As THEM's actual, here-and-now actions are not explicitly described in the text, the proximization of THEM as a likely invader relies much on a forced inference from analogy. Specifically, Bush's speech includes a flashback of the 9/11 terrorist attacks ("On a September morning, threats that had gathered for years, in secret and far away, led to murder in our country on a massive scale"), whose job is to endorse the current threatening vision, and to justify the U.S. response in terms of "a lesson well-learned."

The 9/11 analogy and its abusive application to legitimize the intervention on clearly asserted though in fact unsubstantiated premises ("Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction") is arguably the most tangible element of disinformation in Bush's AEI address. It is also an example of the kind of disinformation that the use of proximization discourse can produce. Similar to metaphor, proximization has the capacity to force upon the audience some complex patterns of erroneous understanding and faulty reasoning, of potentially infinite range and appeal. Rather than communicating random news or individual messages, proximization discourse establishes a conceptual framework, which the audience is encouraged to adopt. The adoption of this framework may then lead to the replication of the original (threatening) insight (or even self-generation of similar insights) by individual addressees for sharing in later communication. Propaganda effects of proximization discourse are therefore of direct relevance to disinformation studies. Such studies will again benefit from a close linguistic and textual analysis, as items triggering proximization can be abstracted and quantified (*e.g.* Cap 2013). In combination with metaphor analysis, research in proximization based disinformation promises a comprehensive account of the entire THEM vs US conceptual relation and the artificial threat scenarios that disinformation spreaders derive from it. While the focus of metaphor is on the condition of the US camp as exposed to threat from the THEM camp, proximization completes the picture in its focus on the actual outlines of the threat, such as caliber and speed.

Metaphor and Proximization in the Disinformation Discourse of the *Confederation* Party

In the following, I illustrate the disinformation potential of metaphor and proximization in a brief study of discourse of the *Confederation* party. *Confederation* (or *Confederation Liberty and Independence*, in full) is a far-right, ultra-conservative political alliance in Poland, initially founded in 2018 as a political coalition

for the 2019 European Parliament election, and later expanded into a political party. Chaired by Krzysztof Bosak and Sławomir Mentzen (a candidate in the May 18, 2025 presidential elections), it expresses essentially nationalist, anti-EU and anti-immigration stance. Its popularity among voters had been moderate and relatively stable until mid-2024, when the party experienced a massive growth of support in public opinion polls, from about 8% in April 2024 to almost 15% in September ([at:] https://www.wnp.pl/polityka-i-sondaze/sondaze/poparcie-dla-partii-politycznych/45.html [date of access: 12.11.2025]). Ever since, the support levels have been at the continual high of 14–15%, until today[4]. The unprecedented rise in the popularity figures of *Confederation* is often attributed to political and discursive skills with which the party responds to developments in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and their social and political consequences in Poland (Lipińska, Jemielniak 2025).

The Stance of *Confederation* on the Russia-Ukraine War and the Ukrainian Refugees in Poland

Though never questioning Russia's direct responsibility for the war, *Confederation* always opposed the Polish political mainstream in its stance of solidarity with Ukraine. This position has eventually become somewhat consistent with attitudes of the general public, whose support for helping policy for Ukraine as well as the Ukrainian refugees living in Poland has markedly declined in the past couple of months. *Confederation* draws on this trend and aims to perpetuate it, particularly by framing Ukrainian refugees as not only a growing economic burden but also a potential threat to Polish identity and state security. Accordingly, many radical politicians of *Confederation* describe Ukrainians as "invaders," creating vivid and emotionally charged negative representations. At the same time, hyperbolic language is frequently employed to exaggerate the perceived impact of Ukrainian refugees, such as describing their presence as "occupation," which serves to amplify public fears (Lipińska, Jemielniak 2025).

In their negative representation of Ukrainians, *Confederation* draws explicitly upon the most difficult moments in the history of Polish-Ukrainian relations, which have long been marked by contentious and often tragic events, particularly the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) between 1943–1945 (Motyka 2018). Historical grievances, stemming from World War II and the post-war resettlement, are craftily reactivated by leaders of the party to fit current anti-immigrant and anti-refugee discourses. These discourses align with broader narratives of exclusion and xenophobia promoted for a long time by Polish right-wing parties (Krzyżanowski 2020).

The following subsections include excerpts from the central anti-Ukrainian narratives developed by the *Confederation* party. The examples reflect the three most recurrent themes in the narratives, involving issues of identity, economy, and national security. They come from a corpus of 77 texts[5], comprising parliamentary speeches, convention and rally addresses, and media interviews by Krzysztof Bosak (KB) and Sławomir Mentzen (SM), the co-chairs of the party. Spanning the time from October 2024 to March 2025, the examples illustrate *Confederation*'s apparently successful strategy to play the anti-Ukrainian,

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4   I am writing this paper in April–May 2025.

5   For the sake of the quantitative study in 4.4., the corpus includes texts of roughly similar length (between 400-600 words each) and similar thematic focus (*i.e.* each text deals only with issues of the Russia-Ukraine war). It includes the total of 41260 words (2752 sentences).

anti-refugee and generally anti-immigration card, in order to keep the party's approval ratings at their unprecedented high. The narratives of both party leaders include instances of disinformation, craftily embedded in complex metaphor and proximization structures.

Identity Threat Narrative

Issues of identity count among the most recurring elements of *Confederation*'s discourse on Ukraine. Raised in practically every speech of the party leaders, they set up the basic ideological framework for threatening conceptualizations of the influx of Ukrainian citizens into Poland:

(1) Hardly a week passes without more and more terrifying policy plans being disclosed: to provide Ukrainians with the right to vote in our elections, to force our teachers to learn Ukrainian to take care of their kids, to grant Ukrainian newborns in Poland our citizenship. Is this still Poland? Are we still masters of our own house? (KB, October 30, 2024)

(2) Mr. Tusk, our colors are not blue and yellow, they are white and red. We are a proud, strong and healthy nation, and wish to remain so. We must stop the creeping Ukrainization of Poland! We must stop this sick madness! (SM, November 11, 2024)

(3) It is inconceivable that only 35 years after the fall of communism, the Polish government would have willingly embarked on a pathway to hand over swathes of our hard-won sovereignty to another state, whose insatiability is growing each day as its people colonize our cities and villages. (KB, February 18, 2025)

Examples (1–3) characterize the kind of narrative used by *Confederation* leaders to depict the presence of Ukrainian immigrants in Poland as a developing identity threat. The narrative combines elements of direct disinformation consisting in spreading blatantly false news, with discursive strategies designed to amplify the long-term effect caused by these news. It is essentially a macro-narrative (De Fina 2023), which means that its elements need not appear all at once; rather, the threatening conceptualizations are forced on the audience incrementally, from one address to another. This allows a certain division of labor between the main actors, and thus, in *Confederation*'s discourse, "factual" argument is usually performed by Krzysztof Bosak, while Sławomir Mentzen's responsibility is to give that kind of argument an ideologically-charged, emotive embedding. This of course reflects the rhetorical predispositions of the two speakers (Kosman 2024). Accordingly, in text (1) Bosak outlines an outrageous vision of pro-Ukrainian policies allegedly considered by Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his government ("provide Ukrainians with the right to vote in our elections…"). Though none of these "plans" is *actually* under consideration, Bosak uses them as evidence of the government plotting against its people ("being disclosed") and goes on to put a question mark over their sovereignty as a nation ("Are we still masters of our own house?"). This final judgement is expressed figuratively, by means of a common STATE IS HOUSE metaphor (Musolff 2016). Obviously, such a lexical choice serves Bosak's goals to construct the image of Poland as being under threat from the influx of Ukrainian immigrants and to call for prompt countermeasures. In fact, it serves even more goals. The STATE IS HOUSE metaphor presupposes the CONTAINER schema (*cf.* 3.1), which in turn entails, in Chilton's (2004: 88) words, "protection by means of exclusion," as opposed to any other means available to defenders of the CONTAINER. Consequently, by employing the STATE IS HOUSE metaphor for coercive effects (such as the effects sought by Bosak)

the speaker is able to not only activate a sense of external threat to "the house," but also artificially inflate it to instill a strong protective instinct in the threatened in-group. The latter is, needless to say, a great premise to draw on in further appeals for social consolidation and mobilization.

The use of metaphor to conclude the argument in (1) is consistent with the application of proximization strategy earlier in the passage. While the HOUSE metaphor essentializes the threat, the proximization element salient in phrases such as "hardly a week passes without," "more and more," or "being disclosed" forces an exaggerated vision that highlights the progressive nature of the threat, and its fast-growing outlines. Interaction between metaphorization and proximization is equally salient in text (2), which is an excerpt from Sławomir Mentzen's address to participants of "The Independence March," an annual far-right and largely nationalist demonstration taking place in Warsaw on Poland's Independence Day, November 11. Forcing the vision of "the creeping Ukrainization of Poland," Mentzen employs axiological proximization (Cap 2010) to construct a gathering ideological threat to central Polish values, symbolized by the "white and red [colors]" of the Polish flag. This conceptualization presupposes – analogically to example (1) – a certain degree of vulnerability of the home camp, which is "strong and healthy" as yet, but remains exposed to external impact in the long run. The vulnerability argument follows in principle the NATION IS BODY metaphor (Musolff 2016), however individual mappings engaged in the general scenario bring to light only some attributes of the metaphor's vehicle (BODY), while hiding others. In particular, attributes drawn from the health domain are addressed, enabling the construal of Poles as potentially "infected" by the alleged 'Ukrainization," the latter described as "sick madness."

Example (3) demonstrates Krzysztof Bosak's conspicuous tendency to provide a historical perspective on the current policy of the government. This strategy often serves the goal of adding extra appeal to his overtly critical stance. Here, Bosak describes the government's pro-Ukrainian posture as a proof of historical and political ignorance – a lack of ability to learn from lessons of the past such as the loss of national sovereignty in the communist period. The remainder of the passage endorses this accusation, developing a metaphoric scenario of "colonization" of Poland's "cities and villages" by "another state." This scenario carries a substantial load of conceptual disinformation, which goes beyond the hyperbolic word choice, the "colonization." Crucially, it establishes a metonymic relation between Ukraine as a state and Ukraine as a people, thus brushing aside the humanitarian aspect of the presence of Ukrainians in Poland. While certainly logical from a conceptual standpoint, the relation reveals a huge manipulative potential in political terms, which Bosak exploits in his argument. The resulting fear appeal draws extra strength from the accompanying proximization pattern, which provides the impending threat with a clear trajectory ("a pathway to") and dynamic nature ("growing each day").

Economic Threat Narrative

A substantial part of the anti-Ukrainian discourse of the *Confederation* party involves presentation of Ukrainian immigrants as a growing burden to Polish economy, particularly the labor market and welfare state. This narrative counts among the most blatant examples of the party's disinformation strategy, ignoring a wealth of state institutional as well as independent research data on the impact of Ukrainian immigration into Poland (Ptak 2025). In one of the most comprehensive and in-depth reports, Poland's

National Development Bank indicates that, between February 2022 and March 2025, Ukrainians have paid 23% more into the Polish state budget in taxes than they have received in benefits (BGK, 2025). The report underscores that Ukrainians – who number around 1.5 million, making them by far Poland's largest immigrant group – have contributed in that period between 1.5% and 2.4% to Poland's annual GDP growth (BGK, 2025). These points are however disregarded in the argument of the *Confederation* leaders:

> (4) "March of Gratitude"? Really? If I were provided by the government with a free apartment, food, healthcare without queuing, medicines, even the most expensive ones, all kinds of benefits, and all the other privileges that Poles can only dream of, I would march like this every day. We must get rid of these <u>social parasites</u>. (SM, January 16, 2025)

> (5) The greedy and cunning Zelensky <u>is outplaying</u> Tusk like a child. Parts of our country are no longer Poland, they <u>are becoming something like Ukropolin</u>. The Poland we know and love has turned grey and sad, and <u>it is going bankrupt</u>, too. (KB, February 1, 2025)

> (6) We have our own, qualified people looking for jobs for months, and the government is giving Ukrainians further employment priorities. Mr. Tusk, on whose orders <u>are you planting this delay-action bomb</u> under our job market? (SM, March 3, 2025)

Similar to the identity narrative, the economic narrative involves a combination of direct disinformation and conceptual-discursive strategies, such as metaphor and proximization, employed to strengthen the rhetorical appeal of argument containing false or manipulative claims. This combination is immediately visible from excerpt (4), in which Sławomir Mentzen produces a sequence of false ("a free apartment"), hardly verifiable ("healthcare without queuing, medicines, even the most expensive ones"), or vague ("all kinds of benefits, and all the other privileges") statements[6], to wrap up his enumeration with a metaphorically phrased conclusion, "we must get rid of these social parasites." Mentzen's reference to Ukrainian people living in Poland as "social parasites" presupposes two mutually related metaphoric conceptualizations. One involves, as was already noted, perception of a NATION in terms of a (human) BODY, allowing view of the immigrants as a "foreign disease." The other conceptualization reactivates the infamous PEOPLE ARE PARASITES metaphor, by implying that a social out-group (here: Ukrainian immigrants) constitutes a menace to the (host) nation, in the sense that it feeds off the economic life force of the nation, and simultaneously infects it with a disease (which is where the two metaphors meet). Reminiscent of the Third Reich propaganda used to legitimize the Holocaust during World War II, the PARASITE metaphor represents, almost inconceivably, a strategic, recurrent lexical choice in anti-immigration discourse of not only Sławomir Mentzen, but the *Confederation* party as a whole. Apart from its obvious dehumanization effects stimulating and justifying a quick response to the "infection," it possesses a huge coercive potential that comes from its inherent proximization element. As observed by Musolff, "'parasite' has the ability to enter the body unnoticed, conceal its presence and delay the onset of the symptoms of illness, making the host unaware of infection until it is too late." (2016: 79). This metaphoric scenario makes messages such as Mentzen's final call in (4) particularly urgent and appealing. Interestingly, while that call functions as kind of a coda to factual disinformation chunks spread over the

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6   While Polish people would often offer free temporary housing, *etc.* to Ukrainian refugees, especially right after the Russian invasion in February 2022, none of the "benefits" mentioned by Mentzen have been state benefits.

entire passage, it itself represents what we have identified in 3. as complex "conceptual disinformation," instilling systematic insight patterns in the minds of the audience.

In (5) and (6), the presence and function of metaphor and proximization are equally salient, though there is a thematic difference between the two excerpts. While the argument in (6) focuses solely on the growing economic threat from Ukrainian immigration, (5) reveals a broader socio- and geopolitical focus, combining economic, identity, and sovereignty threat scenarios. In his reference to Poland as "Ukropolin," Bosak invokes a conspiracy theory that was quite popular around the time of the downfall of the communist rule in Poland in 1989. As supporters of the Solidarity trade union came to power, conspiracy theorists declared that "Polin" had arisen, a state controlled by Germany and Israel (Polin is the Jewish name for Poland). Bosak's recontextualization of the theory serves to extend the spectrum of his argument, as well as broaden its target audience, by appealing to people holding antisemitic beliefs and attitudes. The conflation of the two groups of adversaries, Ukrainians and Jews, is further performed by the mention of president Zelensky, a Ukrainian of Jewish descent. The description of Zelensky as "greedy," "cunning," and "outplaying [Poland's Prime Minister] Tusk" draws on some of the most common of the anti-Jewish stereotypes and prejudices in Poland, fitting well with the metaphoric and proximization based assertion of the economic threat ("it [Poland] is going bankrupt") toward the end of the passage. This last claim, though completely unsubstantiated in economic terms (Ptak 2025), derives considerable strength from its firm connection to the preceding claims and their conspiratory element.

Finally, in (6) Mentzen enacts the economic threat narrative mostly through the popular POLITICS IS WAR metaphor, developing a scenario in which the "commander-in-chief" ("Tusk") decides on the use of a "weapon" ("bomb") to destroy a "target" ("job market").[7] Again, given facts (BGK, 2025), Mentzen's narrative constitutes a virtual reality vision, rather than a genuine economic argument. Also again, the speaker expects the claim to earn extra strength from its local context. This time, the key contextual element is Mentzen's presupposition that PM Tusk is not the actual "commander-in-chief," but a leader who still has to take orders from someone else. The inclusion of such a presupposition in the form of a rhetorical question ("on whose orders are you…") allows Mentzen to reconfigure the main POLITICS IS WAR metaphor into a subvariant that accommodates the concept of treason, such as acting not for, or in defense of, but explicitly against one's own nation. That new variant is consistent with some features of the Polish political context, especially the view of Tusk's opponents of the PM being soft on certain international partners (particularly Germany), and often supporting their agenda at the cost of Poland's national interests (Rankin 2024). The reading of Mentzen's metaphor through the above lens explains his lexical choice and perhaps also his obvious assumption that the metaphor's appeal should keep the audience from fact-checking the earlier claims.

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7   The "delay-action" phrase provides the metaphor with a crucial temporal proximization feature (Cap 2013, 2017; Dunmire 2011) which amplifies the threat by making it extend significantly into the future.

Geopolitical Security Threat Narrative

The security threat narrative draws upon the assumption that helping Ukraine, whether militarily or economically, increases the probability of a direct conflict with the Russian Federation. This stance is present in speeches of both leaders of the *Confederation* party:

> (7) Each round of ammunition we send to Ukraine <u>brings us one step closer to war</u> with Russia. (SM, February 24, 2025)

> (8) This is not our war. Zelensky says Ukraine has been attacked by <u>a virus that spreads quickly</u>. We must not forget that the best way to avoid a virus is to <u>avoid contact with the host</u>. (KB, March 18, 2025)

In (7) and (8) Mentzen and Bosak outline future visions which derive their threatening appeal from the use of proximization and metaphor. In (7), a common proximization strategy is employed that consists in depicting an ongoing action ("each round of ammunition we send") as a source of threat that nears over time ("one step closer"). In (8), the fearful conceptualization involves, once again (*cf.* 4.2–3), the BODY metaphor, though this time the threat is not communicated explicitly, but emerges inferentially from the vision of "contact with the host." Whatever the strategy, the general message communicated by the two leaders goes against the stance of nearly all political scientists and war experts in Poland (see Wojczal 2025, for an overview of opinions). In one of the strongest and apparently most influential calls for the continuation of military support for Ukraine, Kuczabski *et al.* (2025) argue for the absolute necessity of maintaining a "buffer zone" between Poland and Russia. Having seized Ukraine, they say, Russia could very quickly redirect all their potential and commitment to hybrid warfare against the Baltic States, Poland and Romania, destabilizing the entire region and the territories where numerous sensitive installations such as power plants and pipelines are located. Kuczabski *et al.* (2025) conclude that the continued hybrid and military pressure from Moscow would force the West to deploy hundreds of thousands of troops from across NATO along the Pact's eastern flank, and thus, in fact, wage a second Cold War.

The apparently disinforming security narrative of *Confederation*, involving ample use of metaphor and proximization formulas, has recently become particularly salient in the party's anti-Ukrainian discourse. This can be seen from the following table, which specifies the number of instances of metaphorization and proximization[8] engaged in each of the three narratives between October 2024 and March 2025:

Table 1. Monthly numbers of metaphorization and proximization instances per text

Month	Average number[9] of metaphorization and proximization instances <u>per text</u>, serving		
	identity narrative	economic narrative	security narrative
October 2024	7	10	3
November 2024	7	11	4
December 2024	6	13	3
January 2025	5	11	6
February 2025	3	12	8
March 2025	3	11	10

8   *I.e.,* instances such as the underlined occurrences of metaphor and proximization in examples (1–8).

9   Rounded to whole numbers. See, also, the corpus description in 4.1.

The data in Table 1 warrant (at least) three important observations. First, the most stable contribution to the threat-based discourse of the *Confederation* party is from the economic narrative, and its many component metaphor and proximization structures. This can be explained by the fact that a significant number of the party's supporters are entrepreneurs and small business owners (Kosman 2024; Lipińska and Jemielniak 2025). Second, in the course of time, the identity threat narrative becomes gradually less salient, "giving the floor," so to say, to the security narrative. It seems that as the war in Ukraine drags on, *Confederation* leaders find parts of their identity argument ineffective, thus replacing them with more explicitly threatening discourse. Finally, the figures reveal mutual balance and consistency of the three narratives as a whole. This is reflected particularly in the narratives' collective use of metaphor and proximization strategies over a long time. For example, the average number of metaphorization and proximization instances per text in October 2024 (20) differs only slightly from the number of such instances in March 2025 (24). These data show the strategic character of *Confederation*'s anti-Ukrainian discourse, which is both internally consistent and able to respond to its changing contexts, mostly the security context.

Conclusion

This paper has shown relations that hold between disinformation, metaphorization and proximization on a number of research planes, such as empirical, theoretical and methodological. The critical study of discourse of the *Confederation* party and the consideration of anti-terrorist and Brexit discourses demonstrate substantial explanatory power and complementarity of metaphor and proximization as descriptive categories capable of accounting comprehensively for acts of strategic (state-political, institutional) disinformation as regards discourse processes of virtual threat construction and public fear generation. While both metaphor and proximization can be employed to force bipolar and essentially antagonistic US vs. THEM (or THEM vs. US) distinctions ("greedy Ukrainians" vs. "over-generous Poles," "(potential) terrorists vs. citizens of a democratic state," "EU federalists" vs. "true patriots"), their focus as research concepts is different. This brings us to the theoretical position and methodological postulates of the present paper. It seems that the best research effects can be expected when instruments of metaphor analysis are used to explore the socio-psychological condition of the US conceptual camp as exposed to threat from the THEM camp. Simultaneously, proximization frameworks (*e.g.* Cap 2013) should be employed to complete the metaphor-based analysis by insights in discursive constructions of the size, direction, speed and effects of the threat. Notwithstanding this kind of division of research labor, both metaphor and proximization emerge as concepts, phenomena, and strategies that can play equally significant parts in the design and distribution of disinformation. Engaged in discursive activation of central cognitive schemata of reasoning and emotional involvement, metaphor and proximization possess the potential to force faulty conceptualizations and purposefully erroneous reasoning lines, which can be later replicated by disinformation targets – more extensively than randomly communicated false messages or news. This last point is the key argument for further, possibly broader explorations in metaphoric and proximization based construals and their propaganda effects, a research agenda that is clearly in the interest of a comprehensive, systematic and up-to-date account of the field.

Proceeding in the above direction, research in metaphor and proximization meets remarkably well the aspirations voiced in Maci *et al.* (2024); it also responds to the current deficits of disinformation studies and their future challenges. Crucially, it provides tools for essentially text-driven investigations, focusing upon the power of concrete linguistic (lexical, grammatical, textual) choices to trigger psychological and cognitive processes producing, eventually, specific socio-political effects such as reinforcement or change of ideological beliefs and postures. At the same time, however, it attracts and readily connects with the existing theories and models, particularly those accounting for the social impact of (dis)information involving alternative facts and conspiracy theories (viz. the Jewish theme in discourse of the *Confederation* party).

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