

Prefinal author version

Polarizing representations of immigrant communities in Belgian French-speaking online political discourse¹

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Short title: Polarizing representations of immigrant communities

Abstract: In this study, we will present an analysis of how polarization, and more specifically polarizing representations of immigrant communities, are discursively constructed in the online discourse of Belgian French-speaking politicians. Our study is based on Facebook and Twitter messages from leading politicians from all major parties. They consist of two one-month samples, which were collected one month before and during the 2019 electoral campaign for the regional, national and European elections that took place on May 26th. We will show how a variety of linguistic devices, such as deixis and metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), contribute to creating an opposition between an in-group and an out-group and to presenting the out-group as a threat, thus producing polarizing representations of immigrant communities.

Keywords: polarization, social media, deixis, immigrants, hate speech

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Introduction

Hate speech is a particular example of discourse involving a strong polarization. While there is no shared definition of hate speech (see Millar, 2019 for an overview), most scholars or institutions concerned with that topic agree on the idea that it contributes to justifying, promoting or calling to hate, discrimination or violence towards a given group (Weber, 2009). Hence, hate speech is necessarily, though not exclusively, based on the polarized opposition between this targeted out-group on the one hand, and the speaker's in-group on the other hand.

In public discourse, hate speech is still infrequent, at least amongst the majority of social actors and mainstream media. This particularly holds for discourses produced by political actors who, besides some famous isolated cases, are careful not to produce speech acts

deemed liable to be prosecuted. Yet, although they do not fall under the category of *legally punishable* speech acts, many political discourses can be viewed as distinct from but still very close to hate speech. For instance, political discourses about different types of minorities often include some features of hate speech, such as forms of polarization – even though they are less explicit or more mitigated in one way or another. In this vein, several studies have focused on stigmatizing or polarizing discourse produced by politicians. Alcántara-Plá and Ruiz-Sánchez (2017) studied the representation of Muslims on the Internet in Spanish, which was, among others, produced by the five main Spanish political parties during nine months in 2015-2016. They showed that the framing of the Muslim community is mainly negative. Discourses representing migration as a threat were recently also analyzed in Issel-Dombert and Wieders-Lohéac (2019) who discussed the framing of immigrants in the discourse of the French and Swiss far right, in Taylor (2014) on the representation of migrants in British and Italian newspapers, and in Fijavž and Fišer (2020) who analyzed the use of water flow metaphors to represent migration in online news discourse.

This chapter presents the results of a research investigating derogatory or stigmatizing representations of particular social groups defined by their race, religion or origin, in the discourse of contemporary Belgian French-speaking political actors. Our study drew upon a broad definition of hate speech in political discourse. Indeed, we did not restrict our study to discourses that would legally be considered hate speech – i.e. prohibited discursive acts of incitement to hatred which can be prosecuted – but we also considered discourses that are regarded as regular use of the freedom of speech, but that nonetheless contribute to undermining a given minority's feeling of equal dignity as well as the equal respect it deserves from outsiders (Waldron, 2012). In our view, such a discourse does not simply express an opinion on certain practices, choices or behaviours of a particular set of individuals, but rather constitutes a negative judgment on the value of a group itself. Thus, we considered that discourse constitutes hate speech when it represents a specific group as inferior and/or less entitled to respect because of what its members *are* in the speaker's opinion and not because of what they *do*.

In order to understand the role this broadly defined political hate speech could play in the public debate, we focused on well-known politicians, because their discourse has a broader outreach, as well as a stronger impact than that of “ordinary people”. We specifically looked at the discourse of these influential figures in social media, namely Twitter and Facebook.

Analyzing political discourse in social media seemed of interest, as it is a form of communication that is at times considered to be less formal and sometimes less prepared and less controlled (if compared to political speeches during meetings, public debates on TV or radio, etc.). Hence, it could potentially give more space for hate speech to appear. Moreover, one could consider that social media discourse favors direct contact with citizens (Graham et al., 2016 ; Hermans and Vergeer, 2012; Lilleker and Malagón, 2010) and therefore has a greater influence on its audience – an idea largely promoted by the platforms themselves in their marketing campaigns. Yet, these two characteristics have to be mitigated. These platforms are communication channels and, as with other communication channels, uses may vary considerably depending on whether it is for private or professional purposes, as well as on the user's characteristics. Politicians use social media in a clearly professional way, which becomes clear both in terms of content (mainly related to political activity and/or position) and language use (few language errors, fairly formal register; see Roginsky and De Cock, 2015; Coesemans and De Cock, 2017). The informal communicative style and frequent use of exclamation marks and capital letters by Donald Trump (Kreis, 2017) rather appears as an exception in political discourse on Twitter.

As to the idea of a more direct relationship between political messages' authors and their readers, studies show that social media do not necessarily allow for a breaking down of the hierarchy that may exist between citizens and politicians (D'heer and Verdegem, 2014). A paper on the followers of Belgian French-speaking Members of the European Parliament shows that those followers are mainly party members, journalists and citizens with a clear political commitment (e.g. via pressure groups) (Roginsky and Huys, 2015; Roginsky 2020), suggesting that not all parts of society are following politicians on social media. This explains the importance of sponsored messages on Facebook, that is, messages which appear on the Facebook wall of people who are not following them, because someone has paid the social network to send these messages to a target audience. These are therefore an important channel for politicians to reach a broader public. The effect of sponsored messages is nevertheless not necessarily positive, as it may also provoke rejection or irritation when appearing on the wall of citizens who do not share the politician's viewpoint. The presence of journalists does make these social media an important starting point for transmitting politicians' views to wider audiences via more mainstream media. Thus, while citizens may not be following politicians on Twitter or Facebook, these publications on social media platforms may reach them via news outlets. The public's reactions are often limited to expressing support and rarely contain

further questions to engage in a broader discussion (Zurutuza-Muñoz and Lilleker, 2018 on Spanish data; De Cock and González Arias, 2018, on a Spanish political blog). A retweet or retransmission of a message on Facebook, or a “like”, may be considered some sort of interaction, even though very limited (Roginsky and De Cock, 2015) but are undoubtedly much more frequent than fully formulated replies (Larsson, 2014).

In addition to the specificities of the public following politicians, a second reason for which social media have not contributed to creating more direct interaction with politicians is that the dominant discourse is monological self-promotion (Zurutuza-Muñoz and Lilleker, 2018; Roginsky and De Cock, 2015; Di Fraia and Missaglia, 2016). The dominant mode is then the distribution of information concerning the politician’s actions or merits rather than the exchange of ideas. Messages spreading ideas or opinions are less frequent. Thus, only a smaller portion of the politicians’ production on Twitter or Facebook contains the expression of opinions that may be analyzed in terms of potential polarizing representation.

Method

To study hate speech (in a broad sense) in the discourse of political actors, the first step is to determine a suitable corpus of texts. We opted for studying Belgian French-speaking online political discourse during two one-month periods (January 26th-February 26th and April 11th-May 26th 2019), respectively before and in the midst of the 2019 electoral campaign. The elections of May 26th combined the regional, national and European elections and were therefore the subject of an elaborate campaign. We contrasted these two periods, aiming to monitor the potential effect of the election campaign on the circulation of hate speech in social media. However, except for an overall increase in Twitter activity during the month before the elections, no differences between these two periods were found.

During these two periods, we gathered data from both Twitter and Facebook with a targeted approach. To reduce the amount of data and to increase the rate of relevant messages in our corpus, we filtered the data both at the level of speakers and content as follows. For both platforms, we selected and retrieved the data from four accounts for the seven major political parties (i.e. those having at least one Member of Parliament), that is, the official party account, the account of the president, and the accounts of two prominent members active in migration and minorities-related fields. As far as possible², the accounts studied were the

same for both platforms. Since the people managing these social media accounts often forward messages from other politicians (whether from the same party or not) as well, this gave us access to the messages of political actors other than the ones we had initially selected (see Annex 1 for the full list).

The selected public figures and political parties' Facebook pages were automatically collected with the software Facepager. The latter collects posts, comments and answers to the comments; however, it does not download re-shared posts (originally authored by some other account), which is why we manually added them to the database when they were related to immigrant groups and contained potentially polarizing content. When the politician only had a public profile (rather than a Facebook *page*), it was again not possible to retrieve their posts using this software, and they had therefore to be manually collected with the same limitation to messages related to polarizing representations of immigrant groups. When the comments and/or their answers met the same criterion, they were also included in the database. Several other elements were added manually to the database when they provided the necessary context to interpret the initial post – for instance, comments that showed how the post was received by the readers, information about the topic of the message, answers to the comments made by the profile owner him/herself, etc. Links to multimodal content were also harvested in the data collection. The analysis focuses on the linguistic aspects of the messages. The *Cental* (Centre de traitement automatique du langage) technological platform at UCLouvain automatically collected the Twitter data using in-house software (cf. Naets, 2018). This application used the Twitter API (application program interface) in order to collect tweets from the selected public figures' accounts. Finally, the entire raw database previously described consists of 2637 Facebook messages (as well as 100765 comments and answers) and 8513 tweets (including retweets).

A filtering process was carried out, based on the content of the messages: any message that concerned immigrant groups and that could potentially come under the category of hate speech as defined in our introduction was marked as such. Remember that these were the criteria already used for the manual data collection (cf. *supra*) and during this filtering process, these criteria were then also applied to the automatically collected data. To acquire a better grasp of the context of the message under scrutiny, we simultaneously checked the original sources and read the automatically extracted data from the database for both media platforms. Each message potentially falling into the hate speech category was then stored in a

restricted database with additional metadata where applicable, such as a description of audio-visual or hyperlinked content included by the author of the original message. For Twitter, interesting retweets were also stored.³

We then proceeded to a fine-grained analysis of these data. Each of the 242 entries of the *restricted* database was read several times in order to refine the selection and arrive at a corpus with only unequivocal examples of hate speech (as defined above). Unclear cases were therefore discussed and thoroughly analyzed with the team and excluded from the corpus when needed. This last selection was checked and approved by all the members of the team and led to the constitution of a 31-message corpus.

The analysis presented below is based on these 31 messages, which are not legally punishable and hence constitute more indirect forms of hate speech. Yet, our analysis will show that polarization is *also* a central feature of the messages included in our corpus. When it concerns social groups, polarization implies (a) a sharp and binary division of a population into two homogenous and exclusive factions (in-group vs out-group), without any continuity between them, and (b) the association of each of these two groups with opposing values (positive vs negative). In order to keep their discourse within the scope of what is legally acceptable and more generally socially legitimate, political actors use several strategies to tone down the polarization upon which their discourse draws. We analyzed our data in detail in order to locate and understand the concrete aspects of the messages that contributed to this subtle form of polarization, as will be exemplified in section 3. This was a bottom-up process, in the sense that we did not have a predetermined list of linguistic elements that we looked for in the messages, but rather, we reported on what is actually present in each discursive unit. This is one of the reasons why such an analysis cannot be carried out in an automatized way. The main devices identified in our corpus principally relate to the discursive strategies of nomination and predication (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009, p. 95) and include devices such as metaphors and deixis. They are analyzed and illustrated in the remaining of this chapter.

Strategies for indirect polarization

Two clearly opposed but vaguely defined groups

As stated above, polarization relies on a binary opposition between an in-group and an out-group. In addition to this central feature, another recurring aspect of the messages we analyzed is the vagueness of the definition of these groups. Discourses convey that there is clearly an out-group, and that it represents a threat for “us”. However, both groups are identified in an implicit way only, so that it becomes difficult to blame the messages’ authors for having stigmatized a particular social group or minority.

In (1) (see below), Yasmine Dehaene, a figure of the *Parti Populaire*, laments a series of societal problems linked to housing, drugs and insecurity in Brussels, the capital of Belgium. The people affected by these problems are designated in several ways: sometimes with nouns – “des jeunes sans logement” (‘homeless young people’), “tu vois la classe moyenne s’enfuir” (‘you see how the middle class runs away’) – but also with the use of the pronoun “nous” (‘we’) – “les quartiers où on nous chasse” (‘neighborhoods from which we are chased away’). In fact, throughout the message, *deixis* is used to establish an opposition between *us* and *them* even though the identification of these two groups is not made explicit. The group of individuals whom she considers to be chased away – and thus left without access to some neighborhoods – forms the author’s in-group (since she includes herself in this “nous” (‘we’)), and can thus be considered to depend on an inclusive use of *we*. This group is distinct from another group expressed by means of ‘we’, namely the members of the *Parti Populaire*: “nous on passe depuis des mois notre temps en rue” (‘we have spent our time in the streets for months’; ‘we’ = the members of the party). The non-political ‘we’ is only defined through the opposition with another group whose speech is reported in the sentence “ici c’est chez nous il n’y a plus de blancs” (‘here, it is our home, there are no longer white people’). This use of “we” is constructed as exclusive, with the alleged utterer presented as claiming the exclusion of white people from the neighborhood. From the perspective of the author of the post, the out-group is then made up of non-White people and we also know that these people live in a place where you cannot find any individual with a European name (“les logements sociaux neufs où vous ne trouvez plus un nom Européen”, ‘new social housing where you won’t find European names any more’). Such strategies of shifting between inclusive and exclusive uses of *we* have been shown to fulfil important identity construction functions in political discourse (Wodak et al., 1998; Wilson, 1990; De Cock, 2014; Filardo-Llamas and Boyd, 2018).

In addition, the representation of both in-group and out-group relies on generalization, a classical strategy in creating stereotypes (Leyens et al., 1996): there is no room for

heterogeneity either in the description of the in-group or in the description of the out-group. The end of the message calls to vote for ‘those who fight for YOU!’, and thus implicitly includes the addressee of the message in the author’s in-group, which is threatened by the out-group and needs some people to fight for it. Although this message is largely diffused on Facebook and is not explicitly addressed to a specific group, and even if it does explicitly target immigrant communities, it implicitly draws upon a polarization between a group of white people of European origin and the immigrants of North African origin, which constitute the main stigmatized immigrant group in Brussels.

(1) FR: #Bruxelles - Pendant que les partis passent en boucle à la télé pour jouer les séducteurs, **nous on** passe depuis des mois **notre** temps en rue. Si vous doutez encore... moi je peux vous dire que c’est catastrophique:

- entre la vente de la drogue à chaque coin de rue, des rixes, des vols, la saleté, les quartiers où **on nous chasse** et on nous dit: ici c’est chez **nous** il n’y a plus de blancs, des quartiers où la loi est dictée par des extrémistes, les logements sociaux neufs où vous ne trouvez **plus un nom Européen** mais nombreuses affiches PS, des gens en quête de quelques centimes pour manger... et les pensionnés qui survivent en comptant par centimes quand ils font des courses ou encore **des jeunes sans logement** qui se trouvent sur des listes d’attente depuis 1 an pour un logement social.

- Entre-temps tu vois **la classe moyenne** s’enfuir et la paupérisation s’installer. Des gens abandonnés dans la misère. Le quart monde qui fait surface et quelques ignorants qui te vantent encore le multiculturalisme alors que certains quartiers sont devenus des vrais ghettos. EmirKirLand en est un excellent exemple.

La révolte grogne en silence.

Certaines journées sont lourdes en émotions. Mais c’est aussi cela faire campagne, prendre le temps d’écouter.

Alors le 26 mai il faut le changement. Ne votez plus pour ceux qui détruisent **notre pays**, mais avançons avec ceux qui se battent pour VOUS!

Yasmine Dehaene, Parti Populaire, Facebook, 01/05/2019

EN: ‘#Brussels - While the parties are looping on TV to play the seducers, **we have spent our** time in the streets for months. If you are still doubting... I can tell you that it is catastrophic:

- drug selling on every street corner, fights, robberies, dirt, neighborhoods from which **we are chased away** and told: here, it is **our home**, there are no longer white people, neighborhoods where the law is dictated by extremists, new social housing where **you won't find European names any more** but many PS [Parti Socialiste] posters, people looking for some cents to get food... and pensioners who survive by counting their cents when they shop or young homeless people who have been on waiting lists for social housing for a year.

- In the meantime, you see how **the middle** class runs away and impoverishment takes hold. People left alone in misery. The fourth world that surfaces and a few ignorant people who still brag about multiculturalism, while certain districts have become real ghettos. EmirKirLand [reference to the high popularity of then socialist party politician Emir Kir in certain neighborhoods] is a great example.

The revolt growls in silence.

Some days are heavy with emotions. But that's also campaigning, taking the time to listen. So on May 26th, we have to change. Don't vote any more for those who destroy **our country**, but let's go forward with those who fight for YOU!

In (2), we find another illustration of the use of undefined deictics to refer to two opposite groups. In this post, Aymeric de Lamotte, member of a party called the *Listes Destexhe*, talks about a 'civilization' that is threatened in several ways. Several metaphors contribute to presenting the author's in-group as an objective and physical entity. First, a parallel is drawn between the damage done to the buildings which are the patrimony and symbols of this civilization, and social issues which affect the author's in-group and which are depicted as material harm: "Notre école est en lambeaux" ('our school is in rags'); "une sociologie bruxelloise lézardée entre communautés" ('a Brussels sociology split between communities'); "quand nos fondations s'ébranlent" ('when our foundations are shaking'). Second, the deep emotional relation he and his addressee share with this civilization – and hence this civilization itself – is presented as embodied and essential (vs accidental) in its nature: "Cet incident a serré les coeurs" ('this incident has squeezed the hearts'); "un attachement oublié, enfoui dans le souterrain de nos âmes : l'attachement charnel à une civilisation partagée" ('a forgotten bond, buried in the underground of our souls: the carnal attachment to a shared civilization'); "les frémissements collectifs que nous ressentons" ('the collective thrills we feel'). Therefore, the very existence of the author's in-group and its boundaries seem obvious and indisputable. But again, the boundaries of the group are only defined in opposition to a group that is different: the reader only knows that 'our' ("notre") civilization has been

somehow replaced by 'Islamist violence', because we neglected to protect it and were reluctant to share 'our language', 'our culture', 'our history' and 'our way of life'.

In summary, the author creates a representation in which “we”, the in-group, form a physical entity, have a common origin (and hence a shared language, culture and history) and are opposed to an out-group that is foreign to us and is notably associated with Islam. Again, through an indirect and implicit discourse, we find the polarization between so-called 'autochthonous' Belgians and immigrants of North African descent.

(2) FR: *Modeste réflexion de ma part en réaction à l'incendie de Notre-Dame de Paris. “Cet incident a **serré les cœurs** au-delà des frontières françaises, car il a fait émerger un attachement oublié, enfoui dans **le souterrain de nos âmes : l'attachement charnel à une civilisation partagée.**” “Bruxelles est le théâtre quotidien d'un des plus illustres saccages patrimoniaux. Le phénomène de “Bruxellisation” est enseigné jusque dans les universités américaines. **Notre** sublime Palais de Justice qui éclaire, comme un phare, les horizons de notre Capitale est enlaidi d'un manteau d'échafaudages depuis 1982. **Notre** école est **en lambeaux**, car nous avons négligé pendant tant d'années d'y **transmettre les savoirs fondamentaux, indispensables à tout épanouissement.** Nous savons que la **violence islamiste** s'est érigée sur le vide qu'a laissé **notre** négligence. Nous observons avec tristesse une sociologie bruxelloise lézardée entre communautés à cause de notre timidité et nos scrupules à partager notre langue, notre culture, la sagesse des enseignements de notre histoire troublée, et notre manière de vivre qui fait notre fierté.” “Cet électrochoc est l'occasion de comprendre que l'heure n'est plus à l'échappatoire. Protégeons, aimons, et transmettons humblement **notre** patrimoine culturel pour que, dans un siècle, les frémissements collectifs que nous ressentons quand nos fondations s'ébranlent soient encore éprouvés.”*

Aymeric de Lamotte, Listes Destexhe, Facebook, 18/04/2019

EN: “A modest reflection on my part in reaction to the fire at Notre-Dame de Paris. “This incident **has squeezed hearts** beyond the French borders, since it has brought to the fore a forgotten bond, buried **in the underground of our souls: the carnal attachment to a shared civilization.**” “Brussels is the daily theater of one of the most famous examples of patrimonial pillage. The phenomenon of “Brusselisation” is taught even in American universities. Our sublime Justice Palace that lightens, like a beacon, the horizons of our

Capital, has been made ugly by a covering of scaffolding since 1982. **Our** school is **in rags**, since we have neglected to **transmit** there **fundamental knowledge that is indispensable for all development** for so many years. **We** know that the **Islamist violence** has been built on the void that our negligence has allowed. **We observe with sadness a Brussels sociology split between communities because of our timidity and our scruples about sharing our language, our culture, the wisdom of the teachings of our troubled history, and our way of life which constitutes our pride.**” “This electroshock is an opportunity to understand that there is no longer time for loopholes. **Let us** humbly protect, love and transmit our cultural heritage so that, in a hundred years’ time, the collective shudders **we** feel when **our** foundations are shaking, are still felt.”

Presenting the out-group as a threat

Polarization in hate speech implies not only the construction of two distinct binary groups, but also the association of each group with opposite values – positive for the in-group, negative for the out-group. More precisely, in our corpus, the out-group appears as a threat to the in-group. The groups are not just opposed to each other, but the presence of the former seems to jeopardize the very existence of the latter. Yet, in many messages we analyzed, this threatening aspect of the out-group is formulated in a very elusive way.

In (3), for instance, the behavior of particular individuals is stigmatized and presented as a threat to ‘our society’ which is ‘falling apart at high speed’ (“Notre société se délite à grande vitesse”), but this negative behavior is only implicitly presented as a consequence of the fact that they are members of the out-group – which corresponds again to ‘people of foreign origin’. Indeed, Alain Destexhe, the president of the *Listes Destexhe*, starts his message by negatively portraying some demonstrators as having an unjustified violent and distrustful behavior: “Jets sur la police, défiance de l’école qui éduque leurs enfants” (‘Throws at the police, distrust of the school that educates their children’). He suggests that there is no rational justification for this behavior: he explicitly mentions the amount of human resources involved in the investigation concerning an accusation of sexual abuse of a school girl, which later on turned out to be incorrect: “12 (!) policiers enquêteurs et des médecins pour conclure qu’il n’y avait rien de sexuel” (‘12(!) police investigators and several doctors to conclude that there was nothing sexual’). The number of police officers involved is highlighted both because of its position at the start of the sentence (head position) and because of the presence of an

exclamation mark between brackets. The agrammatical use of this sign conveys an evaluation of something that is remarkable: in this case, the abnormally large number of police officers involved.

(3) FR: *Jets sur la police, défiance de l'école qui éduque leurs enfants. 12 (!) policiers enquêteurs et des médecins pour conclure qu'il n'y avait rien de sexuel, mais ces manifestants, **la plupart d'origine étrangère**, n'ont pas confiance dans **nos institutions**. **Notre société** se délite à grande vitesse.*

Alain Destexhe, Listes Destexhe, Facebook, 01/05/2019

EN: 'Throws at the police, distrust of the school that educates their children. 12 (!) Police investigators and several doctors to conclude that there was nothing sexual, but these demonstrators, **most of them of foreign origin**, do not trust **our institutions**. **Our society** is falling apart at high speed.'

While ruling out any rational justification for their behaviour, Alain Destexhe underlines one feature of the demonstrators: their foreign origin. He does so through a structure between commas: "la plupart d'origine étrangère" ('most of them of foreign origin'). This kind of structure conveys an explicative content: that is, it is used to give some explanatory information about the previous element in the sentence, in this case "ces manifestants" ('these demonstrators'). It is important to note that among all the features that might be put forward from this group of people (e.g. their being parents of young children at the school, being inhabitants of the school's neighbourhood...), it is the fact of being a foreigner that the reader is invited to consider. In accordance with Grice's (1975) pragmatic principle of cooperation, even though the maxims of quantity and relevance seem to be transgressed, the reader should assume that the author is still cooperating. The reader is then expected to make an implicature and to treat this information as relevant anyway, that is to understand that this qualification is related to the (violent) acts described. In doing so, the reader is led to infer that there is a link between the violent and illegitimate acts on the one hand and the foreign origin of the actors on the other hand, yet this link does not need to be made explicit. Indeed, Destexhe avoids making such links in an explicit ways, as he also avoids downright generalization (and explicitly claims not to generalize in some other messages). In this excerpt, his discourse does not explicitly state that foreigners are violent and disrespectful but underlines the fact that

people who act in a violent and disrespectful way are of foreign origin, hence suggesting that it is not by chance that it is specifically these foreign people who committed violent acts.

The same pragmatic mechanism leads to understanding the acts of the out-group as the cause of the breakdown of the in-group's environment. Indeed, the second and last sentence tie in with the first one without any explicit linking word, and are only relevant if we interpret it in relation to the anecdote at hand. Again, the author relies here on the opposition between *us* and *them*, which is associated with foreign demonstrators: Alain Destexhe excludes the demonstrators from the 'we' group, to which he and his intended audience belong and there is a clear opposition between, on the one hand, 'our' society ("notre société") and 'our' institutions ("nos institutions") which the out-group does not seem to share, and on the other hand, 'their' children ("l'école qui éduque leurs enfants") which seem distinct from ours – while in all these cases an alternative formulation would have been possible ("la société" 'the society', "les institutions" 'the institutions', "l'école qui éduque nos enfants" 'the school that raises our children').

To summarize, the association of the out-group with violence and being a threat for the in-group is thus indirect yet outright. Similar indirect ways to attribute negative values to the out-group can also be found in the two other examples presented above. In (1), although there is one segment which does explicitly assert that the members of the out-group are agents intentionally causing harm to the in-group (by suggesting that the we-group is chased away), other parts of the message limit themselves to suggesting that there is an obvious yet implicit causal relation between the presence of the out-group and the problems evoked. For instance, this can be seen through the simple juxtaposition of statements about these problems (e.g. drug traffic, fights, robbery, dirt, beggars, references to poverty) and statements vaguely referring to the out-group, that is North-African immigrants ("extrémistes" 'extremists', "plus un nom Européen" 'no longer a European name', "multiculturalisme" 'multiculturalism', "ghettos"). As a consequence, the out-group is not directly accused of acting in a way that harms the in-group, but this message suggests that its simple presence creates problems.

In the same vein, the out-group is not represented as an agent causing harm in (2) either. Through its use of metaphors, the discourse pictures the in-group's civilization as a building falling apart, but the very source of this collapse is our own reluctance to praise our cultural patrimony, to share our language, history and way of life, and it is on the void created by our

neglect that another building/civilization, namely Islamism, was erected: “Nous savons que la violence islamiste s'est érigée sur le vide qu'a laissé notre négligence” (‘We know that the Islamist violence was erected on the void left by our neglect’). As such, ‘their’ rise is linked to the falling apart of ‘our’ civilization. The out-group then appears as living at the expense of the in-group, as arising out of the ruins of the in-group, as if the coexistence of both groups was naturally impossible. This message is published in the context of the fire in the Paris Notre-Dame cathedral, tying in to a recent event that had a strong symbolic and emotional impact, with which a parallel is drawn. The polarization is thus strong here and the out-group is associated with a very negative value, though the message does not overtly blame it but rather appeals to the in-group members’ reaction when they feel that the ‘foundations’ of their civilisation are ‘shaking’ and are under threat.

Interestingly, research on hate crime (Khan, 2019) has shown that it often builds on a representation of the ethnic or religious group of which the victim is a member as a threat. Whether the concrete victim of hate crime is a plausible threat seems less important and, indeed, the victims studied in Khan (2019) are rather vulnerable. Their being associated with a threat is, then, only related to their membership of an ethnic or religious group, not to their personal characteristics.

Conclusion

Through our analysis, we have been able to establish several strategies and devices that contribute to creating polarizing representations. Within a wider context, these instances of discourse build an opposition between groups, on the one hand, and construe a negative image of the out-group, on the other hand. At the level of linguistic devices, we have illustrated among others the use of deictics (we-they), the (in)direct reference to the menacing other, or the use of metaphors. It is important to underline that polarization is subtly built at several levels, which contribute to conveying often implicit meanings, which readers have to decipher through their contextual knowledge. In general, polarizing messages – especially those that are not punishable – are a complex and subtle combination of strategies that convey a particular worldview where a group is portrayed negatively because of what it is, and not because of what it does. These representations create “a worldview with certain implied values” (Jeffries and O’Driscoll 2019, p. 13) that the author wishes to transmit to the audience as a shared worldview.

As explained in our methodology section, we compared messages published before and during the election campaign, with the hypothesis that the proximity to the election might enhance polarization. However, we did not find differences between the strategies used during each of these periods. On the one hand, the particular Belgian context, where the previous government fell in December 2018 following an internal conflict, may have contributed to the fact that, although there was not yet an official electoral campaign before February 26th 2019, the parties were already in a campaigning mode. On the other hand, our results could mean that discourses during and outside election times do not differ as to polarizing content, but further studies at other time points would be needed to confirm this. Moreover, this type of discourse is more frequent (while still being rare) in parties identified as far right or similar (such as *Parti Populaire* or *Listes Destexhe* in our corpus), although it appears in other parties as well, especially among certain non-mainstream politicians. Indeed, several authors that we analyzed have in the meantime been excluded from their parties. The *Parti Populaire* has ceased to exist, while *Listes Destexhe* did not gain a seat and has changed its name into *Libéraux-Démocrates*. This suggests that, although this type of polarizing discourses might obtain for these politicians or their parties considerable immediate attention, such a profile is no guarantee of their long term survival or success in the current Belgian French-speaking political landscape. Finally, we would like to point out that, in order for the implicit nature of this polarizing discourse to be successful, it has to rely on the context and on pre-existing representations of specific communities. In that sense, these polarizing representations rely on many discourses across the political spectrum (and also by non-political actors) that contribute to creating an opposition between seemingly homogenous and exclusive “we” vs. “them”-groups, even if these discourses represent certain minorities in a positive way, as shown by Alcántara-Plá and Ruiz-Sánchez (2017) on the representation of Muslims in Spain. Though these examples show that not all polarizing representations are necessarily uttered in the context of hate speech, polarizing representations presenting the out-group as inferior, threatening or less entitled to respect, feed into hate speech. Indeed, we found in our corpus many messages that are not hate speech in a strictly legal sense but that do contribute to creating a discursive environment in which polarizing representations can thrive.

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Annex 1. List of accounts included in the analysis

(PA= personal account on Facebook; PP= Public page on Facebook)

Person/account	Type	Party	Facebook URL	Twitter
Peter Mertens	party leader	PTB-PVDA	peter.mertens.pvda	@peter_mertens
Elio di Rupo	party leader	PS	elio.dirupo (PA)	@eliodirupo
Zakia Khattabi	party leader	Ecolo	zakia.khattabi (PP)	@Zakiakhattabi
Jean-Marc Nollet	party leader	Ecolo	Jean-Marc-Nollet-264133970699746 (PA) jeanmarc.nollet.5 (PP)	@jmnollet
Maxime Prévôt	party leader	cdH	prevotmaximebis (PA) maximeprevot78 (PP)	@prevotmaxime
Olivier Maingain	party leader	DéFi	Olivier-Maingain-477748085719328 (PA)	@oliviermaingain
Olivier Chastel	party leader (till 18/02/2019)	MR	OlivierChastel (PA) olivier.chastel.officiel (PP)	@OChastel
Charles Michel	party leader (from 18/02/2019)	MR	CharlesMichel (PA) charlesmichel.officiel (PP)	@CharlesMichel
Alain Destexhe	party leader (party unofficially launched on 27/01/2019; internally launched on 13/03/2019; officially approved 04/04/2019)	Listes Destexhe	alaindestexhe2 (PA) alain.destexhe.9 (PP) alain.destexhebis (PP)	@destexhe
Mischaël Modrikamen	party leader	PP	mischael.modrikamen (PA)	@modrikamen
PTB Officiel	Political party	PTB-PVDA	ptbbelgique (PA)	@ptbbelgique
PS Officiel	Political party	PS	psofficiel (PA)	@PSofficiel
Ecolo Officiel	Political party	Ecolo	ecolo (PA)	@Ecolo

cdH Officiel	Political party	cdH	lecdh (PA)	@lecdh
DéFi Officiel	Political party	DéFi	DemocrateFederalisteIndependant (PA)	@defi_eu
MR Officiel	Political party	MR	MRbe (PA)	@MR_officiel
Listes Destexhe Officiel	Political party	Listes Destexhe	listesdestexhe (PA)	@listesdestexhe
PP Officiel	Political party	PP	partipopulaireofficiel (PA)	@lepeuple2
Raoul Hedebouw	Politician. Party reference person for the French-speaking part of Belgium	PTB-PVDA	raoul.hedebouw.be (PA) raoul.hedebouw (PP)	@RaoulHedebouw
Emir Kir	Politician active concerning migration issues	PS	emir.kir.12 (PP) emir.kirii (PP) emir.kiriii (PP) emirkir (PA)	@emir_kir
Benoit Hons	Politician active concerning issues related to religious neutrality	PS	benoit.hons (PP)	@hons_benoit
Zoé Genot	Politician active on discrimination issues	Ecolo	zoegenotpage (PA) zoe.genot (PP)	@ZoeGenot
Georges Dallemagne	Politician active concerning migration and religion	cdH	DallemagneGeorges (PA) georges.dallemagne (PP)	@G_Dallemagne
Alda Greoli	Secretary of Equal opportunities in the Walloon government	cdH	GreoliAlda (PA) alda.greoli.5 (PP)	@AldaGreoli

François de Smet	Politician active concerning migration issues	DéFi	François-De-Smet-576069462821364 (PA) francoisdesmet (PP)	@francoisdesmet
Didier Gosuin	Politician active concerning migration issues	DéFi	GosuinDidier (PA) didiergosuin (PP)	@DidierGosuin
Denis Ducarme	Politician active concerning migration issues	MR	denisducarmeofficiel (PA) denis.ducarme (PP) denis.ducarmebis (PP)	@ducarmedenis
Alain Destexhe (jusqu'au 27.02.19)	Politician active concerning migration issues	MR	alaindestexhe2 (PA) alain.destexhe.9 (PP) alain.destexhebis (PP)	@destexhe
Etienne Dujardin	Politician active concerning migration issues	MR	etiennedujardin1150 (PA) etienne.dujardin.52 (PP)	@etiennedujardin
Aymeric de Lamotte	Politician active concerning migration issues	Listes Destexhe	aymericdelam (PA) aymeric.delamotte (PP)	@AymDeLamotte
Claude Moniquet	Politician, expert on terrorism	Listes Destexhe	Claude-Moniquet-1021310417915887 (PA) claudio.moniquet (PP)	@ClaudeMoniquet
Yasmine Dehaene	Politician active concerning migration issues	PP	dehaene.yasmine (PP)	@ydehaene
Aldo Carcaci	Politician active concerning migration	PP	aldocarcaciofficiel (PA) aldo.carcaci.7 (PP)	@carcaci49

	issues			

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² Some actors do have a Twitter account but no (publicly accessible) Facebook page, or vice versa.

³ Since the end of the retweet is often cut off by the Twitter API (Application Programming Interface), when a retweet was considered interesting, it was manually retrieved in its entirety and added to the database.