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## The Language Impact of COVID-19 in the Spanish Online Press: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Hate Speech

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** This research addresses the study of the main lexical patterns, in the form of insults, used in the Spanish digital press, that might fall within the category of so-called 'hate crimes', and aims to discover whether there are specific sections within the newspapers in question wherein incidences of 'hate crime' are particularly prevalent.

**Design/methodology/approach:** As a corpus, we analyse the online versions of the four Spanish newspapers with the largest circulations in September 2021, according to the OJD (Spanish Audit Bureau of Circulation). The study is initially limited to one year, between March 14, 2020 (the date on which Spain declared a state of emergency over COVID-19) and March 14, 2021. Two tools are established as a starting point, Hatebase and Tus insultos más usados (Your most used insults), to analyse four of the most widely read national Spanish newspapers.

**Findings:** The data produced show that Spanish newspapers do not incite hatred, but are merely mirrors of reality, with significant differences between the newspapers in terms of the number of insults collected. In addition, we noted no greater social tension during the pandemic, from the linguistic point of view, in the media analysed.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis, hate speech, insult, e-newspapers, sociolinguistics, social tension.

**Paper type:** Commentary article with empirical evidence.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a popular notion claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic has made human beings better people, with better values. However, despite signs of solidarity, international crime figures are not so optimistic. For example, statistics show that hate crimes – online and generally – skyrocketed with the emergence of coronavirus (Statista, 2020), with automatic detection tools proving unable to prevent or eliminate them. Therefore, there was a process of discursive dehumanisation and lack of linguistic courtesy (impoliteness) (Fuentes Rodríguez and Alcaide Lara 2008; Culpeper 2021) within social networks and beyond, even in education (Santiago del Pino and Goenechea Permisán 2020), which can be measured by linguistic analysis, amongst other means (Mendelsohn, Tsvetkov, and Jurafsky 2020).

According to the transnational report “COVID-19 crisis and hate speech” of the European Union (Estonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020), the pandemic has not just affected the health and economic sectors, but intrudes upon all spheres of life (with the mass media and social networks at the fore) and has caused an excessive increase in “... racial hatred, xenophobia and anti-Semitism that was manifesting globally” (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020, 1). In the case of Spain “the variety of hateful incitement and targets reached the entire ethnic, religious, social, and even political spectrum - xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism being amplified in the context of the medical crisis.” (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020,1).

Paradoxically, this report seems to contradict another Spanish report, with the publication of the *Report on the evolution of hate crimes in Spain* from the National Office for the Fight Against Hate Crimes 2020), the figures reflected 1401 cases (on- and offline) of reported hate crimes and incidents. Of these, racism and xenophobia topped the list (485 cases), followed by ideological hate crimes (326 cases) and those around sexual orientation and gender identity (277 cases).

According to this report, a decrease of 17.9% (1706 cases in 2019) can be observed in the number of crimes and incidents. Be that as it may, in Spain, as Valentín Gonzalez points out, “new targets appeared such as the elderly and the health professionals” (Pankowski and Dzięgielewski 2020), accused of being the propagators of the disease, along with foreigners resident in Spain. In this scenario, as recent studies on language models for Spanish hate speech detection suggest, English dominates the majority of research on hate speech (*HS* hereafter) and there is a great academic need to incorporate other languages into such research (Fortuna and Nunes 2018; Plaza-del-Arco, Molina-González, Ureña-López, and Martín-Valdivia, 2021).

Regarding the concept of *HS*, in the face of a normative use of language or a politically correct language (conventional or prescriptive), there is a pejorative, rude,

or offensive use of it, composed of swear words, insults and threats (Plaza-del-Arco, Molina-González, Ureña-López, and Martín-Valdivia, 2021). However, defining *HS* is not a simple task, given that what, for some, is *HS*, for others is simply an exercise in freedom of speech with no legal implications (Cohen-Almagor, 2013; MacAvaney, Yao, Yang, Russell, Goharian, and Frieder, 2019). Within the various definitions of *HS*, Kiela *et al.* (2020) have a more pragmatic, normative and community approach, by defining *HS* as any use of language that fails to respect the community standards established, for example, by the conditions of service of Facebook and other social networks. Facebook includes a specific section on *HS*: “We define hate speech as a direct attack against people - rather than concepts or institutions— on the basis of what we call protected characteristics, race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease” (Facebook Transparency, 2021).

However, within its community standards policies, Facebook states that it is sometimes permissible to publish certain content “if it’s newsworthy and in the public interest” (Facebook Transparency, 2021). The above definition seems to understand *HS* as a community issue (in the abstract sense of a violation of human rights) rather than as something individual or personal. Meanwhile, for other experts, hate crimes are malicious expressions that have to do with prejudice, stereotypes and, in general, with the discrimination that exists, above all, between different social groups (Boeckmann and Turpin-Petrosino, 2002; Turpin-Petrosinoy, 2015). In the same way, *HS* usually refers to social prejudices (Van Dijk 1999; Paz, Montero-Díaz, and Moreno-Delgado, 2020).

However, other authors focus their definitions more on the individual, defining *HS* as “speech that denigrates a person because of their innate and protected characteristics” (ElSherief, Kulkarni, Nguyen, YangWang, and Belding, 2018). Meanwhile, other authors include within the definition of *HS* both the individual and the group: “a bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived innate characteristics” (Cohen-Almagor, 2013).

Finally, there are those scholars who point out that *HS* is a type of discourse or narrative that transcends the discursive and becomes a dangerous call to action: “*HS* presupposes others having malicious or misleading intentions, and often makes use of emotional and negative language to urge the public to feel upset and/or take action” (Vargo and Hopp, 2020). These calls to action (Paz, Montero-Díaz, and Moreno-Delgado, 2020) and, ultimately, to violence, persecution and harassment, are governed by linguistic patterns with semantic frameworks whose calls to action might be *intentional action*, but also *make statements* and explicitly uses words to hinder the action of the target (ElSherief, Kulkarni, Nguyen, YangWang, and Belding, 2018). Hence, European Union experts classify these *HS* calls to action according to their focus on: 1) Anti-Semitism; 2) Aporophobia; 3) Religious beliefs or practices; 4) Disability; 5) Sexual orientation or identity; 6) Racism/xenophobia;

7) Ideology and 8) Discrimination by sex/gender (Gómez Martín and Aguilar García, 2015; Assimakopoulos and Millar, 2017; Reynders, 2020).

We might conclude that it is possible to distil some common elements such as the motivation or intention of those who use *HS* to dehumanise, denigrate, silence, humiliate, intimidate, incite to violence (targeting certain groups), harm psychologically (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010), separate “us” from “them” (Van Dijk, 2019; Piquer Martí, 2015) or promote hatred and threaten (Fernández-Smith, 2017), under the excuse of a freedom of expression that “... also enables anti-social behavior, online harassment, cyberbullying, and hate speech” (ElSherief, Kulkarni, Nguyen, YangWang, and Belding, 2018).

The newspapers analysed in this article, as mass media that are fed by social networks, propose the following when it comes to managing or preventing *HS*. The *El País Style guide* affirms that blasphemies, obscenities, and vulgarities are, in general, banned from its pages; and that, if they must be used, should be written in full, without any type of abbreviation. Similarly, it insists that: “Words or phrases that are offensive to a community should never be used” (2002, p. 17). That said, this manual accepts the inclusion of such language if and only if it contributes informatively to the news.

For its part, *20 Minutos* does not have a style guide, although it does have an internal document called “The 16 commandments. How and why do we construct our front cover”, in which points 2 and 7 state the following: “2. We prefer good news to bad news, positive news over negative”; “7. We must always provide useful information” (20 minutos, 2010). Accordingly, both *HS* and insults violate these clauses.

The *Style guide of the newspaper El Mundo* mentions the need to eliminate columns that contain both insults and extreme criticism, especially on topics such as religious beliefs, sexual preferences, or physical appearance (2002, p. 10-12). It does not prohibit the use of certain words, but rather obscenities, insults or expressions of bad taste that are not justified by informational needs. Individual instances are carefully reviewed and vetted in advance by the directors of the newsroom. Where authorised, such expressions will be published without any censorship (2002, p. 53).

Finally, in a line very similar to the previous newspapers, the *Editorial Guide of La Vanguardia* (Camps, 2004) insists on the need to avoid content that is insulting, defamatory, obscene, or that threatens individuals and/or groups, or incites such behaviour. In addition, it includes an element of “perverse intentionality” as a reason to deny publication or reject a contribution.

In any case, the previous definitions are not capable of catching all the nuances of *HS* and its counter-narratives, given that this is a question addressed transversally by disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, law, communication theory, journalism,

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and philosophy. Thus, this article focuses on linguistic analysis of the selected news corpus in a broad sense, in order to observe which terms are most used, which newspapers are the ones that use them the most and in which sections, thus offering a brief snapshot of the linguistic situation in the country around *HS* and its different manifestations. We contrast the official figures (from the EU and the Spanish government's Ministry of the Interior) with those obtained in this investigation, as well as discovering whether *HS* increased during the first year of the pandemic.

## **2. Methodology**

Within the methodological process, it is presented transversal multimodal content. This starts with a keyword-based approach (MacAvaney, Yao, Yang, Russell, Goharian, and Frieder, 2019) for a subsequent study using linguistic analysis as a tool (Mendelsohn, Tsvetkov, and Jurafsky, 2020). It is analysed data extracted from the online versions of the four Spanish newspapers with the highest circulation, according to the *Spanish Audit Bureau of Circulation (OJD): El País, 20 Minutos, El Mundo and La Vanguardia*.

A qualitative and quantitative analysis was carried out, mainly studying the frequency of certain words or expressions -mostly in the form of insults, rude words, and threats (Plaza-del-Arco, Molina-González, Ureña-López, and Martín-Valdivia, 2021) and their location within the different sections of the newspaper, in order to investigate what *HS* patterns or trends might emerge from the analysis of all the data collected.

## **3. Research Tools**

To calculate the frequency of appearance of these expressions, it was decided to use the search engines (and the newspaper archives) of each newspaper over a span of one year: between March 14, 2020 (the date of the beginning of the state of emergency for COVID-19 in Spain) and March 14, 2021. These expressions or insults come from a lexical corpus (Gitari, Zuping, Damien, and Long 2015) created from two databases in Spanish cited in *Hatebase* (an open multilingual collaborative project open to the public) (2021) and in *Tus insultos más usados (Your most used insults)* (Duñabeitia and Méndez Santos 2020a), the results of which were announced in the blog of the Spanish newspaper *Público* (Duñabeitia and Méndez Santos 2020b).

*Hatebase* advertises itself as "... a service built to help organizations and online communities detect, monitor and analyze hate speech" (2021), while *Tus insultos más usados* features in a blog as a scientific project in the form of surveys open to the public, aimed at "knowing the insults preferred by Spanish-speaking people" (Duñabeitia and Méndez Santos, 2020a).

In September 2021, *Hatebase*'s Spanish search engine returned 142 words with a hateful meaning. However, only 29 terms are related to the variant of Spanish from Spain, on which we focus in this study. Most of these terms has masculine and feminine variants (also singular and plural) and some of them can even be rendered as verbs. The list of terms in alphabetical order is as follows:

1. *Amariconada* [derogatory term for gay or effeminate]
2. *Bollera* [derogatory term for lesbian]
3. *Catalufo* [derogatory term for someone from Catalonia]
4. *Charnego* [a Catalanian immigrant from Southern Spain]
5. *Conguito* [similar to 'w\*g' in reference to black people]
6. *Disminuido* [derogatory term for a disabled person]
7. *Furcia* [derogatory term for a prostitute]
8. *Gabacho* [a foreigner, particularly a person of French ancestry]
9. *Gitanada* [gypsy trick, racket]
10. *Hombre con peluca* [a transgendered person, or man with a wig]
11. *Indio* [a person of dark brown or black hair and of browner skin tones and/or Amerindian or person Afro-Mexican origin]
12. *Lagartona* [derogatory term for prostitute]
13. *Maricón* [derogatory term for homosexual or effeminate male]
14. *Marrano* [a Jewish convert to Christianity, or a Spanish slang term for 'dirty pig']
15. *Minusválido* [derogatory term for a disabled person]
16. *Mongólico/Mongolo* [derogatory term for a mentally disabled person]
17. *Moreno* [a person of dark brown or black hair]
18. *Moro* [derogatory term for an Arab]
19. *Moromierda* [pejorative term for someone of Arab or Middle Eastern descent]
20. *Mujerzuela* [equivalent of 'sl\*t']
21. *Negro de mierda* [pejorative term for a black person]
22. *Perra* [a promiscuous woman. An unattractive woman. B\*tch]
23. *Perroflauta* [pejorative term for an anti-capitalist person or dropout]
24. *Putá* [wh\*re]
25. *Retrasado mental* [mentally retarded]
26. *Sudaca* [pejorative term for a person of Hispanic Latin American origin]
27. *Travelo* [transsexual or transvestite]
28. *Zorra* [a woman of loose morals; equivalent to wh\*re].

*Tus insultos más usados (Your most used insults)*

This database lists 83 insults (Duñabeitia and Méndez Santos 2020b). The present study focuses on the 10 most repeated in Spain, according to the authors, organised according to popularity:

1. *Gilipollas* [stupid, foolish, idiotic, w\*nker]
2. *Imbécil* [imbecile, fool]

3. *Cabrón* [b\*stard, scumbag]
4. *Subnormal* [subnormal, dim-witted]
5. *Hijoputa* [son of a b\*tch, motherf\*cker]
6. *Tonto* [fool, idiot]
7. *Idiota* [idiot, stupid]
8. *Puta* [wh\*re]
9. *Capullo* [idiot, moron, jerk, ars\*hole]
10. *Payaso* [clown, buffoon]

This avoids duplications by gender (tonto/tonta...), variants (hijo de puta), and lack of imagination, according to the authors themselves.

#### 4. Procedure

In the two lists only one term is repeated (24 and 8), *puta*, so the 37 non-repeated terms were entered in the search engines (and newspaper libraries or archives) of each newspaper over the course of a year. This work was done manually since there is no specific software for tracking such things.

From there, a database was created that would report the sections of the newspapers in which samples of potential *HS*, or at least of linguistic microaggressions (McClure 2020) most frequently appeared, based on these 37 terms. In this database, we collected the number of times that these terms appeared in each of the different sections, within the four newspapers. The sections analysed were *TV, People, News, Sports, Society, Culture, Opinion, Paper, Music, F5, Court and Legal, Interviews, Famous people, Events, Fashion, Politics, International, Economy, Technology, Cinema, Writing, Recipes, Education, Travel, Ecology, Motor, and Psychology*. Some of these sections had similar, but not identical names; we decided to respect the denomination of each section without grouping them.

#### 5. Research Results

As can be seen in Table 1, *El País* contained a total of 794 insults. Regarding the 4 most used insults (relevant in that they scored 30 or more insults) in all sections, the search reports the following data: “Wh\*re (Puta)” (appearing 103 times, of which 25 occurrences are in the *News* section); “W\*nker (Gilipollas)” (81, of which 26 appear in the *News* section); “F\*g (Maricón)” (74, of which 24 appear in the *News* section); “B\*stard (Cabrón)” (66, of which 17 appear in the *News* section). Indeed, the section containing the most insults is *News* (92). For their part, in terms of the insults listed above, the three sections that contain the fewest of these are *Business* (1), *Sport* (1), and *Opinion* (1).

*20 Minutos* shows a total of 486 insults. Regarding the four most frequently used insults in all sections, the search returns the following data: “W\*nker (Gilipollas)” (99 times, of which 25 insults appear in the *People* section); “Idiot (Tonto)” (71, of

which 18 appear in the *TV* section); “Wh\*re (Putá)” (48, of which 27 appear in the *People* section); “Sl\*t (Zorra)” (32, of which 12 appear in the *News* section). In this case, *People* is the section with the most insults (52). And the three sections that contain the least are *Sports* (10), *Cinema* (8), and *Economy* (1).

*El Mundo* prints a total of 691 insults. Regarding the four most used insults in all the sections, the following results were obtained: “Wh\*re (Putá)” (135 times, of which 21 insults appear in the Court and Legal section); “Idiot (Tonto)” (120, of which 42 appear in the *Paper* section); “Wanker (Gilipollas)” (66 of which, 17 appear in the *TV* section); “Fag (Maricón)” (40, of which 9 appear in the *Famous people* section). Therefore, the section with the most insults is *Paper* (42), whilst the three sections that contained the fewest of the listed insults are *Culture* (24), *Events* (8), and *Sports* (8).

In *La Vanguardia*, a total of 670 insults are recorded. Regarding the four most used throughout all sections, the search returns the following data: “Idiot (Tonto)” (99 times, of which 20 insults appear in the *TV* section); “Fool (Idiota)” (92, of which 17 appear in the *Culture* section); “Wh\*re (Putá)” (86, of which 17 appear in the *TV* section); “F\*g (Maricón)” (53, of which 26 appear in the *TV* section). So, the section with the most insults is *TV* (63). The three sections containing the fewest of the listed insults were *People* (11), *Events* (8) and *Society* (6).

In summary, we can see how the pattern of insults is distributed numerically as follows: “Wh\*re (Putá)” (372), “Idiot (Tonto)” (290), “W\*nker (Gilipollas)” (246), “F\*g (Maricón)” (167), “Fool (Idiota)” (92), “B\*stard (Cabrón)” (66), and “Sl\*t (Zorra)” (32).

The global figures for the three sections with the most insults, adding together the four newspapers studied, are: *TV* (138), *People* (123), and *News* (112). The other sections present these results, from the highest to the lowest occurrence of insults, thus: *Sports* (63), *Society* (60), *Culture* (55), *Opinion* (47), *Paper* (42), *Music* (38), *F5* (28), *Court and Legal* (27), *Interviews* (25), *Famous people* (18), *Events* (16), *Fashion* (15), *Politics* (15), *International* (13), *Economy* (13), *Technology* (9), *Cinema* (8), *Writing* (8), *Recipes* (7), *Education* (6), *Travel* (5), *Ecology* (2), *Motor* (1), and *Psychology* (1).

At first glance, the difference between the number of insults in each newspaper is significant, and so it was not necessary to undertake a statistical analysis. The reproduction of insults is homogeneous in *La Vanguardia* and *El Mundo* (670 and 691 respectively), but significantly lower in *20 minutos* (486) compared to *El País* (794). Likewise, it should be noted that the analysis of these words, considered within the context of *HS* over a period of twelve months, shows a steady appearance rate, without significant variation. In an overall appraisal that summarises the production of the four newspapers together, the values are similar month to month, with an average of 100 insults per month.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Four Main Insults by Newspaper and Section

Newspapers & Total No. of insults	Insult	No. insults	Section with More Insults	No. insults	% in that section
El País (794)	“Puta”	103	Noticias	25	24.27
	“Gilipollas”	81	Noticias	26	32.09
	“Maricón”	74	Noticias	24	32.43
	“Cabrón”	66	Noticias	17	25.75
20 Minutos (486)	“Gilipollas”	99	Gente	25	25.25
	“Tonto”	71	TV	18	25.35
	“Puta”	48	Gente	27	56.25
	“Zorra”	32	Noticias	12	37.50
El Mundo (691)	“Puta”	135	Tribunales	21	15.55
	“Tonto”	120	Papel	42	35.00
	“Gilipollas”	66	TV	17	25.75
	“Maricón”	40	Famosos	9	22.50
La Vanguardia (670)	“Tonto”	99	TV	20	20.20
	“Idiota”	92	Cultura	17	18.47
	“Puta”	86	TV	17	19.76
	“Maricón”	53	TV	26	49.05

Source: Own study.

**Table 2.** Three Main Aims of the Insults during Spain Covid-19 State of Emergency

Attacked element	Insult(s) Used	No. of insults	%
Intellectual capacities	“Gilipollas”, “idiota” & “tonto”	628	52.38
Women’s sexuality	“Puta” & “zorra”	404	33.70
Men’s sexuality	“Maricón”	167	13.92
Total figures	6	1199	100.00

Source: Own study.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis shows, firstly, that the *TV*, *People* and *News* sections of the newspapers under consideration are those that present the greatest concentrations of insults. However, such insults or microaggressions (McClure, 2020) are enclosed in quotation marks when reproducing textual citations, the titles of works, when quoting the words of interviewees, or when transcribing statements or the verbal attacks of offenders (mainly in the *News* section). This is to be expected, since the main function of the media is to report objectively, reflecting reality as it is.

Therefore, the results obtained allow us to affirm that the chosen newspapers (regardless of their ideological profiles) do not generate or promote *HS*, nor do they allow it amongst their journalists, but limit themselves to reporting opinions, statements, and news. As far back as 1989, in its style guide, the *EFE Agencia* (one

of the major Spanish international news agencies, created in 1939), when discussing the lexicon of the press, explained that, in general, the offensive vocabulary presented in the press (labelled “lexical extravagances”) came for the most part from the sources used by journalists, that is, from the statements of the general public but, above all, from politicians, from the administration, and from technocrats (Agencia EFE 1989, 42).

Likewise, the style guides of *El País*, *20 Minutos*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* only accept the use of vulgar, obscene, or blasphemous expressions for the sake of an alleged need to inform (with the prior approval of the management and the editorial board of the newspaper). Therefore, in the context of the sociology of communication and sociolinguistics, these newspapers are reflecting the *HS* being generated widely in the society on which they are reporting, on television, among the world of celebrities, etc.

In other words, many of them are not direct expressions of hatred but a reflection of the rhetoric that circulates in society and end up in the newspapers, given that some of these insults have become part of common colloquial expression, thereby losing much of their offensive charge (Paz, Montero-Díaz, and Moreno-Delgado, 2020). Hence, despite the official policy of these newspapers, sometimes the reality of *HS* is relayed in their pages in the context of information, reporting, testimony, or communication under the principle of freedom of expression (Terry, Anderson, Wiley, and Memmel, 2020; Fangen and Holter, 2020). This is something that also happens on social networks (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016), although in these cases, as in the comments sections of the newspapers, *HS* is more direct and can be dangerous (inasmuch as it is a call to action) (ElSherief, Kulkarni, Nguyen, YangWang, and Belding, 2018; Vargo and Hopp, 2020; Paz, Montero-Díaz, and Moreno-Delgado, 2020).

#### *Characteristics:*

As can be seen in Table 2, the study finds that insults are used, mainly:

1. To attack the intellectual capacities of those insulted (“w\*nker -gilipollas-”, “fool -idiota-” and “idiot -tonto-” totalling 628 cases).
2. The sexuality of women (“wh\*re -puta-” and “sl\*t -zorra-” totalling 404 cases) and men’s sexuality (“f\*g -maricón-” totalling 167 cases). These data coincide with the classification of *HS* generated by the European Union (Gómez Martín and Aguilar García, 2015; Assimakopoulos and Millar, 2017; Reynders, 2020), although in this case it is mainly focused on disability, sexual orientation or identity and sex/gender discrimination, since these occur with the highest frequencies. As has already been commented, both in *Hatebase* and in *Tus insultos más usados*, the only term that was repeated is that of “wh\*re (puta)”, something that could lead us to conclude that women suffer from sexist *HS* to a greater extent than men both in the written and online press (Benito, Araque, and Iglesias, 2019; Ortega-Sánchez, Blanch, Quintana,

Cal and de la Fuente-Anuncibay, 2021). These results, in times of pandemic, seem distant from those mentioned earlier, regarding "... racial hatred, xenophobia and anti-Semitism..." (Pankowski and Dziegielewska, 2020).

*Significance:*

One of the challenges when preparing this study has been the polysemy of insults. For example, search engines (and newspaper archives) are ineffectual in cases such as "moro" (in addition to being an insult, Moro is the surname of a famous Brazilian politician, a Creole food of Cuban origin, a popular party in southeast Spain, and an historical term); meanwhile "Moreno" is also a common surname). Even if the surnames are capitalized, the search engines do not distinguish between an insult and another meaning of a polysemic term, and thus each search had to be manually corroborated in order to avoid errors in the insult count. Another example of failed or ambiguous searches is over the term "cripple (disminuido)" an insult that arises 491 times in *La Vanguardia*.

However, in the majority of these appearances, the word is simply being used as the past participle of the verb "to decrease/reduce" (also disminuido in Spanish) and does not refer to a person as an intended insult. Something similar appears in the case of "Marrano (pig)", and "black (negro)" is also polysemic, referring to the dark colour of some objects and, in its meaning 17 in the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Language Academy, to a "person who works anonymously for the benefit and prestige of someone else, especially in literary works, or a fictional genre" (RAE, 2021) (a ghost-writer in English).

Other complex cases are those of insults referring to oneself, for example, when a person calls him/herself a fool or an idiot (or worse) in an interview; on such occasions we are not looking at *HS*. Something similar occurs with insults used for humorous purposes in the newspapers. These cannot be considered *HS*, given that they are not comments directed at a specific individual, but rather towards anonymous or fictitious characters for comic effect, for example, with the term "perroflauta (anti-capitalist dropout)". A final challenge in the counting of insults in the different sections of these four newspapers has to do with the wealth of idiomatic expressions in Spanish that contain offensive terms but which, surprisingly, are not insults but quite the opposite, i.e. a slang expression with positive connotations; a paradigmatic example would be "de puta madre" that, though literally "wh\*re-mother" signifies "f\*cking great".

Another challenge is whether or not to consider insults that appear in the titles of books or in the titles of TV series reviewed in the newspapers. Here, we have chosen not to include these in our insult figures. Examples of these books and series are *Quiérete mucho, maricón*, by Gabriel J. Martín and *Yo, charnego* by Javier López Menacho. Among the titles of popular Spanish series based on biographies, the

following stand out: *Maricón Perdido* by Bob Pop and *Ni puta, ni santa: Las memoria de la Veneno*, by Valeria Vegas.

In summary, these polysemic, or at least ambiguous forms, require human and sometimes subjective intervention, in the process of screening them (one by one) as insults, in order not to vitiate the study. At the same time, this phenomenon demonstrates that automatic detection tools are currently not capable of detecting these polysemic forms and would benefit from further refinement in the future, since "... many keywords can be used in different contexts, both benign and hateful; and the interpretation or severity of hate terms can vary based on community tolerance and contextual attributes" (ElSherief, Kulkarni, Nguyen, YangWang, and Belding, 2018).

#### *Sprachraum:*

In analysing the data obtained, it is noteworthy that issues of geographic and national identity also emerge when collecting examples of insults and depend on the head offices of the newspapers. Evidently, *La Vanguardia*, as a Catalan newspaper, picks up significantly more insults related to Catalonia, such as "catalufo" – appearing 11 times in the different sections as follows: *Opinion* (2), *Society* (3), *Books* (3), *Culture* (2), *Debates* (1) - and "charnego" -appearing 11times in *Opinion* (2); *Society* (3); *Books* (3); *Culture* (2); *Discussions* (1). Meanwhile, *El País*, *20 Minutos*, and *El Mundo* never include "catalufo", although they do contain "charnego": 11 times in *El País* - *Opinion* (1), *Culture* (4), *Chronicle* (1), *Art* (2) and *Literature* (3), 7 times in *El Mundo* - *Cultura* (3), *Paper* (2), *Chronicle* (2) - but none in *20 Minutos*.

Finally, and following the linguistic analysis of these newspapers and their sections, we can conclude only that the question of whether civic solidarity has improved as a result of COVID-19 remains unresolved, but that *HS* has not increased in terms of what is reflected in the newspapers. However, we can confirm that the media studied have correctly applied their mechanisms for dealing with *HS*, which in themselves can help to identify linguistically new predictors of online hate crime (Sorokowski, Kowal, Zdybek, and Oleszkiewicz, 2020), given that, pragmatically, they do not encourage *HS* in opinion pieces or editorials.

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