VACCINE MANDATES: DEEPENING THE RIFT BETWEEN POLARIZED IDEOLOGY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Facing the consequences of one of the most deadly waves of the Covid-19 pandemic towards the end of 2021, the political authorities all over the world struggled to persuade people to get as massively vaccinated as possible, using rhetoric which ranged from threats to even begging. Focusing on the vaccine hesitancy by certain populations, most governments have started to impose a vaccine mandate for all citizens, which resulted in eruption of protests across a number of European, Australian and American cities. Consequently, the intolerance of "the other", either vaccinated or unvaccinated, has risen among social media users. By combining the methods of critical discourse and pragmatic analysis, this research attempts to investigate the main pro and con argumentation of social media users (Macedonian and English) made in the comment threads of posted online news on mandatory vaccination. The detailed discursive analysis of the samples reveals that fear, triggered by threat as well as risk, is what justifies both sides' attitude and reasoning.

Keywords: vaccine mandate, vaccine hesitancy, CDA, pragmatics, social media

ЗАДОЛЖИТЕЛНА ВАКЦИНАЦИЈА: ПРОДЛАБОЧУВАЊЕ НА ЈАЗОТ МЕЃУ СПРОТИВСТАВЕНИТЕ ИДЕОЛОШКИ ГЛЕДИШТА ПРЕТСТАВЕНИ НА СОЦИЈАЛНИТЕ МЕДИУМИ

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Соочувајќи се со последиците на еден од најсмртоносните бранови на КОВИД-19 кон крајот на 2021 година, политичките власти насекаде во светот се обидуваа да ги убедат луѓето што е можно помасовно да се вакцинираат, користејќи реторика која варираше од директно заканување до молење. Свесни за фактот дека одредена популација граѓани се двоуми да се вакцинира, повеќето влади почнаа да ја наметнуваат вакцинацијата како задолжителна за сите граѓани, што резултираше со протести во многу градови во Европа, во Австралија и во Америка. Како резултат на тоа, „нетрпеливоста кон другиот“, вакциниран или невакциниран, порасна на социјалните медиуми. Со употреба на комбинирана критичка дискурсна и прагматичка анализа, ова истражување прави паралела меѓу аргументацијата „за“ и „против“, изразена во коментарите на корисниците на социјалните медиуми (македонски и англиски) на објавени онлајн-вести поврзани со задолжителната вакцинација. Деталната дискурсна анализа на примероците открива дека стравот, поттикнат од закана и од ризик, стои во заднината на однесувањето и на размислувањето и на двете страни.

Клучни зборови: задолжителна вакцинација, двоумење, КДА, прагматика, социјални медиуми

1 Introduction

The past few years the whole world faced a rather challenging and unexpected crisis and each country had to introduce measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and quarantines to deal with it. The deadly consequences of the corona virus urged scientists to develop a vaccine against it, with the USA, the UK, Russia and China taking the lead in that respect in 2021. What followed after the discovery of vaccines was an intensive campaign on the part of the World Health Organization, medical experts and authorities in each country, aimed at persuading people to get vaccinated. However, although many were easily persuaded that the cure they had been expecting had finally arrived, a major part of the world population showed vaccine hesitancy, their dilemmas being whether the vaccine was safe and equally relevant for all individual cases, particularly, given the fact that they were they were developed in a relatively short period of time. This doubt, which was most prominently expressed and spread on social media, intensified in the second half of 2021, when the governments decided to impose vaccine mandates, obliging people to get vaccinated. The consequences for those who refused to get vaccinated, varied across countries, from restriction of people's going to public places, schools and, in some cases even, going to one's work place. Consequently, some decided to transfer their children's education to home schooling, some lost their jobs[1], and many faced mental and psychological hardships. The intolerance of "the other", either vaccinated or unvaccinated, increased and could be witnessed the most on social media. The dissatisfaction with the imposition of vaccine mandates escalated in many countries, such as New Zealand, Canada, USA, Austria, Croatia, Italy, Northern Ireland, the French territory of Guadeloupe, the Netherlands[2] etc., where thousands gathered to protest against this measure.

The vaccination rhetoric on social media has been analysed by many researchers (Furini and Menegoni 2018; Germani and Biller-Andorno 2021; Wawrzuta et al. 2021; Weinzierl and Harabagiu 2022a, 2022b etc.). Furini and Menegoni (2018), for instance, analysed about 200.000 vaccination related messages on Facebook and defined four different linguistic and psychological types of messages: affective, social, biological and medical. According to their findings, the anti-vaccination groups use a language that is difficult to refute (e.g., not anxious, not focused on specific health issues or on specific diseases), whereas the pro-vaccination groups use a more anxious language and specificity (e.g., family cases, specific diseases or vaccines). Germani and Biller-Andorno (2021) analyzed the behavior of anti-vaccination supporters on Twitter, and found that the success of anti-vaccination

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[1]   See   for   instance   https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60351455;   https://www.npr.org/2021/10/24/1047947268/covid-vaccine-workers-quitting-getting-fired-mandates;   https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/homeschooling-in-california-boom-amid-kid-covid-19-vaccine-mandate/;

[2] See for instance https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/5/protesters-against-vaccine-mandate-in-belgium-clash-with-police; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/30/thousands-join-protest-in-canada-against-covid-vaccine-mandates;   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzpyq3LXTx0; https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-08/thousands-protest-covid-19-vaccine-mandates-in-l-a

supporters relies on a strong sense of community, which rests on sharing conspiracy theories and using emotional language. According to their research, the anti-vaccination supporters were more engaged in discussions on Twitter and shared their contents from a pull of strong influencers, among whom Donald Trump as the main driver of vaccine misinformation. Wawrzuta et al. (2021) compared the arguments used by anti-vaxxers in the context of COVID-19 vaccines across different social media networks: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. They revealed 14 categories of arguments used by the anti-vaxxers, whose frequency varied across different social media platforms. Their activity on Facebook and Twitter, however, was similar, because it focused mainly on distrust of government and allegations regarding vaccination safety and effectiveness. Weinzierl and Harabagiu (2022a) analysed about nine million tweets and found that vaccine hesitancy framed on Twitter is not only based on misinformation, but is also driven by erosion of trust in vaccines, lack of health literacy, interaction between civil rights and vaccination mandates.

The paper at hand is a continuation of our work on the Covid-19 narrative on social media in North Macedonia (Trajkova Strezovska and Neshkovska 2022), in which we made a comparison of the lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical devices commenters employed to build their for or against argumentation concerning the vaccination in two specific periods – the beginning of the first and the beginning of the second half of 2021. The results showed differences in the commenters' rhetoric employed in the two periods. While in the first half of 2021, the comments 'reflected people's deep-rooted mistrust in the authorities and their ability to provide the vaccines', in the second half of 2021, they 'revealed people's concern with the nature of the vaccine and its imposition by the government so their comments were burdened with irony, threats, curses and even summons for action against the government-imposed restrictions' (2022: 122). In this paper, we take the matter further by setting a goal to provide a thorough analysis of comments made by English speakers in the second half of 2021 on Facebook concerning the imposition of the vaccine mandates and compare and contrast them with the sample of comments made by Macedonian commenters in the same period. The analysis investigates how the commenters' stance is discursively constructed in the collected data, i.e. what language strategies are used to support or speak against the vaccine mandates in the two samples and aims to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the ideological features of the vaccine/vaccine mandates issue presented in both pro- and anti- vaccine comments?

2) How are these features linguistically represented – discursive analysis: lexical (specific vocabulary used) and pragmatic (speech acts and rhetorical features)?

3) Is there any difference in the language used by FB commenters when building their pro or con argumentation in the two corpora: Macedonian and English?

4) How do commenters position themselves in relation to the issue, the politicians and other commenters in the two sets of data?

Our initial expectations are that the ideology of both pro- and anti-vaccine/mandates groups in both samples will be similar, i.e. there will be similarities in the linguistic features employed to build the argumentation of the pro-vaccine/ man-

dates groups, as well as in the argumentation of the against- groups in both samples (Macedonian and English).

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Critical discourse analysis

In order to answer the research questions, methods of critical discourse analysis were used (Van Dijk 1995, 1997, 2001, 2009; Fairclough 1989, 1995). For Fairclough, "to fully understand what discourse is and how it works, analysis needs to draw out the form and function of the text, the way this text relates to the way it is produced and consumed, and the relation of this to the wider society in which it takes place" (Richardson 2007: 37). Therefore, the current research follows his three-dimensional framework (Fairclough 1989: 26), which consists of three inter-connected analytical steps to take: description (the stage which is concerned with the formal properties of the text or text analysis), interpretation (the stage focusing on the processes relating to the production and consumption of the text) and explanation (concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context – with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects, i.e. the social analysis). Linguistic analysis entails some form of detailed textual analysis, including features of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, types of speech acts etc., and their distribution across different parts of the text describes the relationship between the productive and interpretative processes of discursive practice, and shows the relationship between discursive practice and social practice (Elsharkawy 2012: 8).

Van Dijk (1997) developed an approach that is based on four categories: action, context, power and ideology and it is articulated within a conceptual triangle that connects society, discourse and social cognition in the framework of a critical discourse analysis. Highlighting the human cognitive feature in understanding discourse, van Dijk (1977) pointed out that speech acts can be defined in terms of action and inaction, or intentional events. Ideologies are the basic 'axioms' of socially shared representations of groups about themselves and their relations to other groups (van Dijk 1995: 30). Inherent in the notions of ideology, attitudes and the specific opinions based on them is the notion of 'position'. Events are described and evaluated from the position, point of view or perspective of the speaker (van Dijk 1995:17). For van Dijk (2009: 75), the relationship between context and society needs to be mediated by what he called 'context models', which are the cognitive devices that mediate discourses and the social structures. Frames are very closely related to social practices models, which are defined as the conceptual structures or sets of beliefs that organize political thought, policies, and discourse in the analysis of political text and talk (van Dijk 2001). According to Goffman (1974, 1986), Chong and Druckman (2007), Entman (1993, 2004, 2007), discourse almost inescapably involves framing – a strategy of highlighting certain issues to promote a certain interpretation or attitude.

2.2 Social media, stance and stance taking

Social media, especially Facebook, have proven to be very effective platforms that enable users to openly state their opinions on important social issues as well as engage in communication with others, especially in the online comment sections which operate as forum-like venues analogous to letters to the editor (McCluskey and Hmielowski 2012). According to Anderson et al. (2014), people who participate in online forums set a tone for public opinion, and can influence the tone of future comments. Mutz (2002, 2006) suggests that users are enticed to use online comment sections because they allow them access to people outside their usual social network and because talking to others helps them to fully crystalize their opinion.

During the past few years, since the outbreak of the pandemic, social media platforms have played a crucial role in disseminating news connected to the spread of and fight against Covid-19. As this situation has taken everyone by surprise, social media users have actively engaged in online forums and comment sections communication to better communicate their views, fears and their stance. For Du Bois (2007: 163) stance is a single unified act which encompasses three subsidiary acts, it is "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and other symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects (themselves and others), and align with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of value in the sociocultural field". The notion of stance involves evaluation and assessment (Conrad and Biber 2000; Hunston and Thompson 2000; Goodwin 2006) and it generally reveals why people say what they say in the way they say it. Speakers can position themselves along both affective and epistemic scale, depending on whether they emphasize their feelings regarding the content of the utterance (e.g. I am pleased/ happy etc.) or they emphasize the degree of access they have regarding the information that follows (e.g. I know/ of course etc.) and this general concept is known as positioning (Du Bois 2007: 143). According to Myers (2010: 96), there is also a stylistic stance, referring to the manner in which the content is expressed. Drawing on the conclusions reached in the above studies, we want to determine the differences in positioning towards the vaccine mandates between Macedonian and English commenters.

3 Research methodology

For the purposes of this paper, a quantitative and qualitative critical discourse, pragmatic and rhetorical analysis of 1144 comments, 572 in Macedonian, written by Macedonian commenters and 572 in English, written by English commenters. The analysed comments were posted in comment threads as reactions[3] to news

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[3] The posts were chosen randomly – the only criterion was that they referred to the vaccine mandates in the specifically selected period. They (the English ones) were usually accompanied with a hashtag #VaccineMandates.
See for instance: **krcr news channel 7**'s post on 19th October 2021; **Ken Paxton**'s post on 16th September, 2021 (an American lawyer and politician who has served as the Attorney General of Texas since January 2015, and was reelected for the third time in 2022); **World Health Organization (WHO)**'s post on September 3, 2021, Getting vaccinated against COVID-19 helps protect you from

articles, media reports and politicians' or WHO's official statements published on the social media in the second half of 2021, after the vaccine mandates had been introduced. We used #vaccine #vaccination #vaccinemandates as key words to search for relevant comments. The aim, as previously stated, was to dismantle the ideology behind both pro- and anti-vaccine/ mandates comments in both English and Macedonian samples, by conducting a critical discourse analysis. Following Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of analysis (1989), first we conducted a lexical analysis to determine the polarity of the comments, i.e. whether they are for or against the vaccination and vaccine mandates. In addition, in order to reveal what exactly instigated commenters' reactions, we analysed the most prominent frame (Goffman 1974, 1986; van Dijk, 2001; Chong and Druckman 2007; Entman 1993, 2004, 2007) created by the politicians' and WHO's posts.

Furthermore, a pragmatic coding analysis on the data gathered in the two samples was conducted, by analysing the speech acts made in the comments (Searle's taxonomy, 1976), and dividing them into three main sub-categories: expressives, directives and assertives. Then, in order to interpret these results and explain their use and meaning in the specific social context, i.e. to reveal the commenters' general positioning towards the issue at hand and bring to light any differences in the attitude of commenters in the two samples, we matched these three categories of speech acts to Atifi and Marcoccia's (2017) three main pragmatic functions and three main social roles that commenters take: 1) evaluative, as a subcategory of expressives, reflected in the role of a judge that the commenter assumes, 2) directive, which subsumes the role of an activist and 3) analytical, as a sub-category of assertives, which matches the role of an analyst. When they play the role of a judge, commenters mainly assess and evaluate a certain situation or action (they perform asserting, evaluating, assessing, stating, affirming acts). The activist's main focus is on persuading people to act, to do something about the issue at stake (they perform questioning, ordering, imploring, challenging, summoning acts). The analyst, on the other hand, mainly aims to make an analysis of the situation and clarify it so that their FB friends, their readers, can better understand it (they explain, contextualize, enlighten, clarify, analyze, etc.) (Atifi and Marcoccia 2017). Finally, a rhetorical analysis was conducted to investigate the rhetorical figures (irony, sarcasm, metaphor etc.) employed by commenters to express their feelings, either positive or negative, related to the vaccine mandates.

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getting sick; **Liberty Nation (**October 15, 2021), BREAKING: Texas Governor Abbott Bans Vaccine Mandates etc.

As for the Macedonian posts, see for instance, the comments to https://arhiva.infomax.mk/ post on 8th August (Од 16 август нема влез во кафуле и на концерт без потврда за вакцина...); V**enko Filipche**'s posts (the Minister of Health at the time) on 8th August, 2021 in Naroden Glas (Јавното здравје и колективната заштита се приоритет,...), and Deneshen Vesnik (ФИЛИПЧЕ: Апелирам до шефовите, и во државниот и во приватниот сектор, да ги притискаат вработените да се вакцинираат), **Zoran Zaev**'s post (the Prime minister at the time) on 7th August, 2021 (Владата на вечерашната седница ги донесе следните одлуки со цел спречување на ширењето на новиот бран КОВИД-19...), etc.

4 Discussion of results

The results of the lexical analysis revealed that the anti-vaccine/mandates comments prevailed in both corpora, with 87.5% (Anti-) vs. 12.5% (Pro-) in the English data, and 94.9 % (Anti-) vs. 5.1% (Pro-) in the Macedonian data. The comments in both samples were generally laden with earnestness, worry, confusion, fear, anxiety, anger and revolt. There were also some comments whose polarity was hard to determine, because they were written by people who got vaccinated but spoke against the imposition, for example:

(1)   *We've all had it already or thrice. Remind people not to jab while ill or*
         full of antibodies. People need full instruction at this point other than jab
         jab jabby jab and jab again. Thanks.

These neutral comments were not taken into consideration in the analysis.

It is important to note down that, our previous research (Trajkova Strezovska and Neshkovska 2022) on the rhetoric of Macedonians on social media in two specific periods, the first and second half of 2021, i.e. before and after the imposition of the vaccine mandates, showed that the number of Macedonian commenters who were for the vaccine in the first half of 2021 was higher 88.43% (Anti-) vs. 11.57% (Pro-) compared to the second half of 2021. The comments at that time were mostly directed at officials, criticising them for their inability to provide the vaccines, and were written in a non-serious and bantering manner, seasoned with ironic criticism and mockery (2022: 134). The commenters were taking the role of 'onlookers', 'observers' and 'critics' of the government's actions (Trajkova Strezovska and Neshkovska 2022: 129). This attitude changed after the vaccines were mandated and the comments reveal that 'many felt angry, afraid and desperate to find a 'way out' of the 'dead-end' they were forced into (ibid: 129).

The lexical analysis of the two samples gathered for the purposes of this research generally showed use of negative lexis in offensive and derogatory comments written a great deal by anti-vaccine/mandates commenters (36.38% (Mc), out of which only 0.5% were used in pro-vaccine/mandates comments vs. 2.3%, (En)), such as: 'liars', 'thieves', 'thrash', 'good-for-nothing', 'beggars', 'fags' etc. The comments were directed mostly towards politicians, government officials or the World Health Organization, comparing them with fascists, tyrants, Hitler and North Korea, as in the examples (2)-(6) below. Some of the commenters would use debasement language to mock politicians, as in (4), or visual symbols with short messages, as in (6).

(2)   *Се врати Хитлер!*
         'Hitler is back!' (Mc; Anti-)
(3)   *Ова е чист Фашизам!!*
         'This is sheer Fascism!!' (Mc; Anti-)
(4)   *That's great don't need old Obiden telling us what we need .he isn't a*
         king (En; Anti-)

(5)   *WHO are you, WHO WHO, WHO WHO!*
        WHO be a bunch of conning dweebs, pushing the alien pee, trying to jab it into me.
        WHO wanna terraform humanity, turn us into cyborg insanity, this is the reality.
        WHO be a bunch of conning dweebs, nothing but a bunch of conning dweebs,terraforming humanity, turning us into cyborg insanity. (En; Anti-)

(6)   (En; Anti-)

The analysis of the selected posts and comments further showed a repetition of lexis, the most frequent being: death (die/died/deadly/dying/death), in 19.8% of posts; safety (safe/safety), 15%, risk (4.3%), illegal (4.3%), side effects (3.9%), and freedom (2.7%). The most prominent frame created by authorities (either politicians or WHO) was the loss frame[4]: *If you do not get vaccinated you might get infected or die.* The examples below are taken from the World Health Organization's facebook page:

(7)   *We can end the tragedy of COVID-19 by stopping the deaths, by stopping the hospitalisations - vaccines give us the power to do that. But we need to use vaccines in a much fairer and much more equitable way - Dr Mike Ryan*
(8)   *Get vaccinated as soon as it's your turn to protect yourself from serious COVID-19 disease and death.*

According to Gantiva et al. (2021), loss-framed messages are more effective at increasing awareness of risks. The ideology of both pro- and anti- vaccine commenters was based on fear caused by threat (partially reasonable and partially imposed by the politicians), as their comments were mostly focused on what they had to lose if they did not take or took the vaccine. For instance:
Stance: Acceptance (pro-vaccine oriented comments)

(9)   *Just this January, one of my closest friends lost her brother, another friend lost her partner, a relative got long covid...please please take the vaccine. You cannot comprehend what the relatives of a covid patient go through while the person is sick at the hospital…is a real nightmare filled with torture and despair.*
(10)   *What about the millions who died without being vaccinated??*
(11)   *Getting ready to get my 3rd one end of the month thank God, I feel safer with the shot as I do taking the flu shot.*

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[4] Gain or loss framing refers to phrasing a statement that describes a choice or outcome in terms of its positive (gain) or negative (loss) features (Baumeister and Vohs 2007).

Stance: Rejection (anti-vaccine oriented comments)

(12)   *My cousin is dying as we speak, he was vaccinated! My daughters aunt in law is in ICU because of a brain bleed, she was fully vaccinated! ... What do these people have in common? They were all fully vaccinated and were all healthy before the vaccine! Nothing else!*

(13)   *Zosto barate soglasnost deka narodot na svoja odgovornost ja prija vakcinata? Zosto nikoj NE garantira bezbednost na vakcinata? Zosto vakciniranite povtorno se razboluvaat i nazalost ima i mrtvi? Zosto,Zosto??? Kade ni se covekovite prava????*

    'Why do you ask the people to bear responsibility for taking the vaccine? Why doesn't anyone take responsibility for the safety of the vaccine? Why do the vaccinated get infected again and unfortunately die? Why, Why??? What about are our human rights????'

(14)   *Why not list the serious side effects on here too... let people know there are chances they could die from the jab also.*

Overall, the comments in both samples were mostly expressing trust or lack of trust in the safety, effects, ingredients and testing of the vaccines, as well as the role of the pharmaceutical companies in fighting the infections, and the politicians and authorities in general. The analysis of the issues that were continuously foregrounded by all commenters revealed three main dilemmas they were mostly concerned about and around which their argumentation revolves:

1. *Are the vaccines legal and are they in accordance with the basic human rights?*

The pro-vaccine/mandates commenters' stance was that everyone should get vaccinated because that is their obligation as society members. Those who refuse are selfish and pose a direct threat to other people.

(15a)   *Everyone eligible without a health threat should be vaccinated for community safety. (Pro-)*

On the other hand, the anti-vaccine/mandates commenters' stance was that nobody should be forced to do anything against their will because that is against the constitution. Everyone should have the right to decide for themselves. In addition, they stated that they could not understand the fear of the vaccinated if they had already gained immunity.

(15b)   *Coercion is illegal anyway. It's against our constitution. (Anti-)*

2. *Should the authorities be trusted?*

The analysis revealed that unlike the pro-vaccine/mandates commenters (16a), the anti-vaccine/mandates commenters lacked trust in the authorities, stating that the governments hide vaccine safety information, imposing them on the people (16b). According to some English (American) commenters, the government did not mandate the vaccine for their closest associates (see 16b and 16c).

(16a) *You know that 1.8 BILLION people have got this vaccine, right? That's a mighty large sample size. If there were any of the problems postulated in this article, believe me, we'd know. There aren't. (Pro-)*

(16b) *Очигледно набавиле повише од што им треба и сеа нема како да ги потрошат...* 🤣
'They have obviously provided more than needed and now they have to use them ... 🤣' (Anti-)

(16c) *You know who DOES NOT mandate the vaccine?*
WHO - for its' employees (I personally know someone who works for them)
White House - for its' employees... (Anti-)

(16d) *[...]Members of Parliament and Judges and other officials are exempt from the mandates. This is absolutely disgusting! The lowest of low. How can we have any respect for these people when they force, blackmail and coerce the people into having an experimental vaccine.*

3. *Should the vaccination be mandatory for those who have already been infected and have natural immunity?*

And finally, the dilemma bothering the commenters the most was whether the vaccine should be mandated for those who have already been infected and have gained natural immunity (17b, 17c). According to many experts' opinion,[5] the natural immunity is stronger than the one gained from vaccines. Even those who decided to take the vaccine shot expressed their doubts about this issue (see 17a)

(17a) *We've all had it already or thrice. Remind people not to jab while ill or full of antibodies. People need full instruction at this point other than jab jab jabby jab and jab again. Thanks.(Pro-)*

(17b) *Great article, especially highlighting that those with natural immunity are being completely ignored. Its like it doesn't matter?? But natural immunity IS safer and more effective than the vaccine.(Anti-)*

(17c) *Tie sto prelezale isto treba da imaat sertifikat ??!!!!!!!!*
'Those who have already been infected should also get a certificate??!!!!!!' (Anti-)

4.1 Pragmatic and rhetorical analysis: social roles of commenters

The results of the analysis of the comments (see Figure 1) indicate that the most prominent role the commenters assumed in both corpora was the one of analysts (English corpus (En) 67.3% vs. Macedonian corpus (Mc) 42.2%). It is also noticeable that Macedonians assume the role of judges (16%) when the English do not (0%), but would judge only when they have made an analysis of the situation (En 11.7% vs. Mc 26.8%). The results also reveal that the English commenters take the role of activists when they call for protest and civic disobedience more frequently

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[5] See for instance: https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/968553;
https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/prior-covid-infection-more-protective-than-vaccination-during-delta-surge-us-2022-01-19/

than Macedonians (En 7.8% vs. Mc 0.9%), who mostly urge for action after making an analysis of the situation (Mc 10.8% vs. En 10.1%). Although much less frequently, some commenters in both samples assume all the three roles at once by analysing, judging and, then, by attempting to activate or motivate people to react (En 3.1% vs. Mc 3.3%).
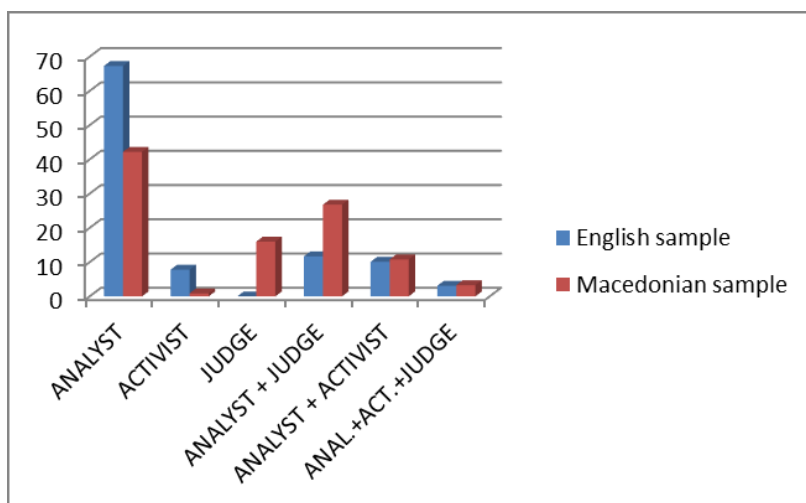

Figure 1. Commenters' social roles in both corpora

Example (1) features an anti-vaccine/mandates commenter taking the role of an analyst by employing logical reasoning and concluding that the vaccines cannot be applied to everyone equally because some people might be allergic to some of the ingredients, and they should not be made to sign a document which obliges them to take full responsibility for the consequences. Over one thousand people agreed with this reasoning.

(1)   *Peanuts are safe, tree nuts are safe, dairy is safe, gluten is safe, latex is safe etc but not for everybody. There are some people for whom these things are deadly. Therefore you cannot just say they are safe for 100% of people. If is safe why i have to sign that is 100% my responsibility if I die?? (En; Anti- ; 1.2k like reaction)*

In the following examples, the commenters take the role of activists and attempt to summon people to a protest against, as they call them, the fascist measures (2) or urge them to take action against the government which, by mandating the vaccines, is threatening their basic human rights (3).

(2)   *НА 15 Август (недела) во Скопје, пред Собрание во 19 часот ќе се одржи ПРОТЕСТ ПРОТИВ ФАШИСТИЧКИТЕ КОВИД МЕРКИ ...*
          'On 15th August (Sunday) in Skopje, in front of the Assembly, at 7 p.m. a PROTEST AGAINST THE FASCIST COVID MEASURES will be held...' (Mc; Anti-)

(3)   *If anyone thinks this is ok has given their body to the govt, and their*
         human rights. Don't be silent, speak out and say no! (En; Anti-)

Macedonian commenters, as mentioned before, appear much more frequently as judges when they assess and evaluate the situation, and often use debasement language like insulting and ridiculing (3)-(4) when discussing the work of the government (official) or the decisions it is making. Example (6) features a commenter analysing the situation by comparing it to previous similar ones and accusing the people who think that they know better than those in charge.

(4)   *Fascism! (En; Anti-)*
(5)   *Even God cannot help you anymore, you went completely mad!*
         'Tebe ni gospod veke nemoze da ti pomogne cisto si zabegal' (Mc; Anti-)
(6)   *Just like the polio, diphtheria, small pox, whooping cough, and the rest…*
         Crazy that the western world is so blessed by medical science and doctors,
         but we're all smarter and know better (En; Pro-)

Commenters in both samples make comments in which they first appear as analysts of the situation and, then, attempt to activate the readers. For instance, in (7), the commenter urges the authorities to be more transparent in revealing the consequences or side effects that people might suffer from the vaccine. In (8), on the other hand, the commenter takes all the three roles, assessing the vaccine mandates as illegal as they are enforced to people who might lose their job if they refuse to be vaccinated and threatens to take action against such enforcement.

(7)   *Why not list the serious side effects here too?…let people know there are*
         chances they could die from the jab also. (En; Anti-)
(8)   *Biden's nationwide vaccine mandate would illegally force tens of millions*
         of private sector employees to get a COVID-19 vaccine, submit to weekly
         testing, or be fired. I urge the #BidenAdmin *to reconsider its unlawful*
         plan. If not, I will sue this lawless Admin once again. #VaccineMandates
         (En; Anti-)

The comparison between the social roles assumed by commenters in the pro-vaccine/ mandates comments (Figure 2) and in the anti-vaccine/ mandates comments (represented in Figure 3) reveals some considerable differences. While the roles assumed by the pro-vaccine/mandates commenters were mostly those of analysts (especially in the English sample) and of analysts and judges (a bit more frequently in the English sample again), the roles assumed by the anti-vaccine/mandates commenters were more versatile. Besides taking the role of analysts very frequently (English again more frequently than Macedonian), they also assume the roles of judges, or analysts and judges and even analysts and activists more frequently than the pro-vaccine/mandates commenters, especially in the Macedonian sample. This also might be an indication of a cultural difference in dealing with difficult social issues, as Macedonians seem to be more prone to being judgmental than the English, while English seem to summon people to action after presenting an analysis of the situation at hand.
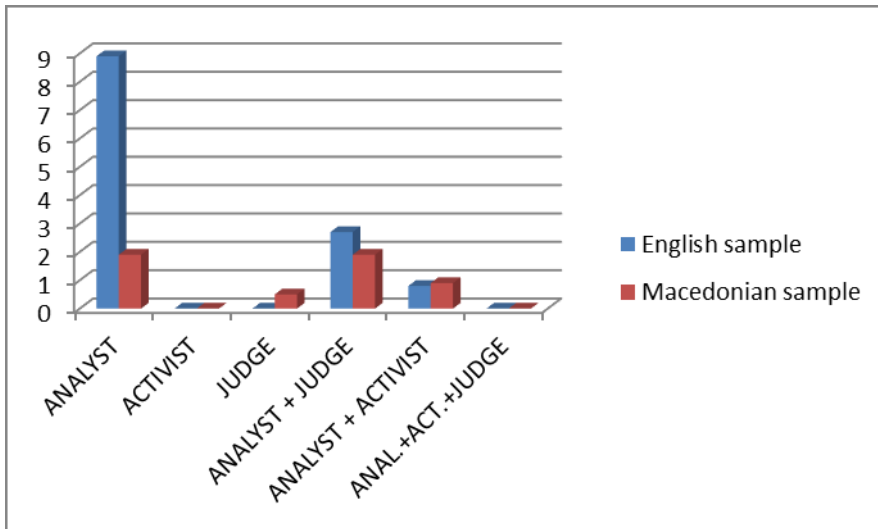
Figure 2. Social roles of commenters in the pro-vaccine/vaccine mandates comments
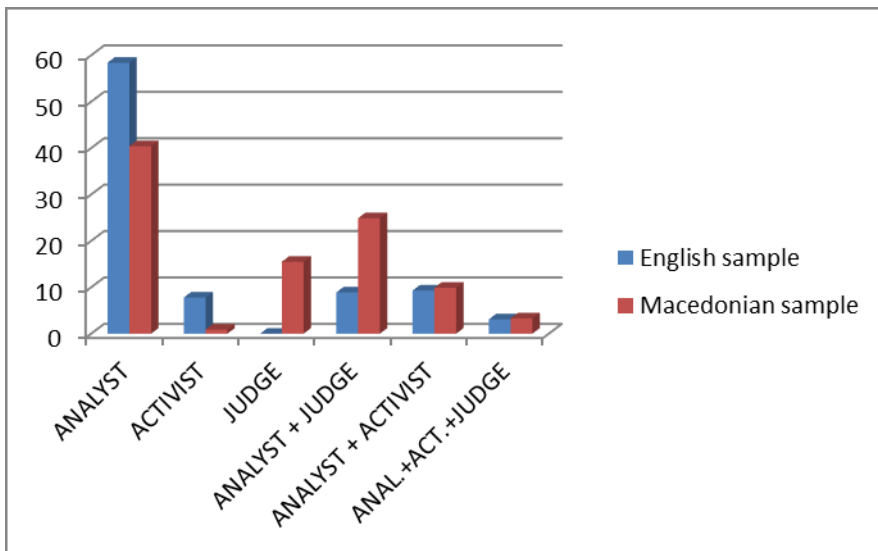

Figure 3. Social roles of commenters in the anti-vaccine/vaccine mandates comments

The rhetorical analysis, on the other hand, showed that the most prominent rhetorical figures used in both corpora were *irony* and *sarcasm*, with anti-vaccine/mandates commenters taking the role of judges or of analysts and judges and mocking the government's new measures and the imposition of mandates and the (in)efficiency of vaccines, as in (9) and (10) below, while the pro-vaccine/mandates commenters are mocking the "stubbornness" of the unvaccinated, as in (11). However, the number of such comments used by the Macedonian commenters was much higher (26.08% of the analysed comments, out of which only 0.5% written by

pro-vaccine/ mandates commenters) compared to the English (14% of comments, out of which 1.9% were made by pro-vaccine/mandates commenters).

(9)   *Најкриво ми е шо нема да можам да влагам во институцииве да си плаќам данок и остали давачки*
        'I really feel bad that I won't be able to enter the institutions and pay tax' (Mc; Anti-)'
(10)   *with +80% fully vaccination rates, why the lockdowns? Oh, that's right, the vaccines DON'T work! (En; Anti-)*
(11)   *Just like the polio, diphtheria, small pox, whooping cough, and the rest… Crazy that the western world is so blessed by medical science and doctors, but we're all smarter and know better (En; Pro-)*

Some anti-vaccine/mandates commenters used visual messages or slogans to make fun of the whole situation, as in (12) below.

(12)

A rather noticeable difference between the two samples was noticed in the use of *threats* and *curses*, especially by the Macedonian anti-vaccine/mandates commenters, whose social roles varied from activists to judges or both judges and activists. Threats, as commissive speech acts were used 7.24% by Macedonian commenters and only in 2.7% of the English comments. They were directed towards politicians, who were threatened to lose their voters at the next elections as in examples (13) and (14) or to be sued for breaching people's right to freedom and free choice, as in (15).

(13)   *Ќе го јадеш ти кај да е, мрсолче*
        'You're gonna get it, bugger' (Mc; Anti-)
(14)   *Следни избори уште пред да почнат знајте дека толку ви е позз*
        'Next elections will be over before they start, that's it with you. Bye.' (Mc; Anti-)
(15)   *I urge the #BiddenAdmin to reconsider its unlawful plan. If not, I will sue this lawless Admin once again. #VaccineMandates (En; Anti-)*

In addition, only Macedonians (2.89%) employed *curses* as expressive speech acts, directed towards politicians and their members of family, as in examples (16) and (17).

(16)   *Црко да бог да*
         'I wish you Died!' (Mc; Anti-)
(17)   *За пари и власт децата ќе си ги продадеш господ да ве казни сите*
         'You are ready to sell your own children for money and power. May God punish you all' (Mc; Anti-)

Commenters also employed directive speech acts, such as *requests* and *orders* and *suggestions* as commissive speech acts. In comparison to *threats* and *curses*, these speech acts were used more frequently in the English corpus of comments (21%, out of which only 1.6% were made by the pro-vaccine/mandates commenters) compared to the Macedonian comments (15.5%, out of which 1.9% were for the vaccine/mandates). The comments were directed towards politicians, government officials or the WHO and were about the commenters' dissatisfaction with their decisions (as in examples (18) and (19) below). *Suggestions* were a bit more frequently used in the English sample (4.7%, 0.4% of which were made by the pro-vaccine/ mandates commenters) compared to the Macedonian (3.3%, all made by those against the vaccine/mandates). The pro-vaccine/mandates comments were generally directed towards the unvaccinated, suggesting or urging them to vaccinate (20). Here, the social roles the commenters assumed were the one of activists, or judges or both judges and activists.

(18)   *Премиере најдобро е да воведете јавно стрелање на невакцинирани-*
         те и по брза постапка да ја прогласите Короната за умрено. Само
         напред!
         'Prime minister, you better publicly kill the unvaccinated and pronounce the Corona virus dead. Go ahead!' (Mc; Anti-)
(19)   *OH PLEASE STOP. !!!! Why not tell people how many people die when they took the vaccine (En; Anti-)*
(20)   *Let's stop the spread of covid. Isn't that the entire reason for this? So who has pollio or small pox who would let their kid be around them? Vaccines work for a reason (En; Pro-)*

Furthermore, *requests for information* and *(rhetorical) questions* were used rather frequently in both samples, especially by the Macedonian commenters (37%, with only 0.4% used in pro-vaccine/mandates comments) compared to the English (28.4%, out of which 3.9% were used in the pro-vaccine/mandates comments). As it can be seen from the results, the English pro-vaccine/mandates commenters were engaging more with other commenters than the Macedonians and were trying to lead a conversation, usually by asking them questions which seemed that were primarily intended to dispel doubts that taking the vaccine was the right thing to do. The social roles assumed by commenters were either the ones of analysts or judges or analysts and judges. The pro-vaccine/ mandates comments were directed

towards the unvaccinated, trying to persuade them to get vaccinated by asking them relevant questions, as in examples (24) and (25), while the anti-vaccine/mandates questions were directed mostly towards politicians, government officials and the WHO, asking them concrete questions connected to the vaccine safety and the side effects people suffer, as in examples (21)–(23). Their general remark was that there was lack of information on things that were of grave concern for everyone.

(21)   *Zosto barate soglasnost deka narodot na svoja odgovornost ja prija vakcinata? Zosto nikoj NE garantira bezbednost na vakcinata?Zosto vakciniranite povtorno se razboluvaat i nazalost ima i mrtvi?Zosto,Zosto???Kade ni se covekovite prava????*
'Why do you ask people to state that it is their responsibility if they take the vaccine? Why does no one guarantee the vaccine safety? Why do the vaccinated get infected too and even die unfortunately? Why,Why??? Where are our basic human rights???' (Mc; Anti-)

(22)   *If safe then why many people died after taking the shots? (En; Anti-)*

(23)   *How many tests? Over what period of time? Which ingredients? Every time I see something like this, I view it with an open mind and the hope of being won over by good information; instead, you're spewing platitudes and doing zero to allay anyone's concerns.Up your PR game W.H.O. (En; Anti-)*

(24)   *what about the millions who died without being vaccinated?? (En; Pro-)*

(25)   *What about the millions who could have been saved with therapeutic medicine?? Which they deemed unsafe, which in fact have saved thousands of people. (En; Pro-)*

Finally, only the anti-vaccine/mandates commenters used *refusals* as commissive speech acts, especially the English commenters (7.8% vs. 2.4% (Mc)). By assuming the social roles of analysts and judges or both analysts and judges, the commenters either directly refused to take the vaccine regardless of vaccine mandates, as in example (27), or first tried to explain their position and then refuse, as in (26), or they criticised the politicians or the WHO for imposing the vaccine/mandates and used that as a supporting argument to refuse to get vaccinated, as in (28) and (29).

(26)   *za vakcina NIKOGAS NEMA DA KAZAM DA. Prosta matematika TOJ STO ME TRUE TOJ LEK NEMOZE DA MI DADE.*
'I WILL NEVER SAY YES to the vaccine. Simple Mathematics. THE ONE WHO POISONS ME CANNOT GIVE ME ANY CURE.' (Mc; Anti-)

(27)   *Никад нема да ја примам таа вакцина.*
'I will never take that vaccine shot.' (Mc; Anti-)

(28)   *I don't think so. I am a covid survivor and have anti bodies. My God created body is working as it should thank you! Get off my page! (En; Anti-)*

(29)   *Thanks but no thanks. And I'd ask the WHO to consider what kind of road*
          it's going down when its forcing medical proceedures on people or taking
          away their human rights. (En; Anti-)

5 Conclusion

This research attempted to analyse and compare Macedonian and English com-
ments written as a reaction to the authorities' mandating of vaccines. As to the
first research question which concerned the ideological features of the vaccine/
vaccine mandates issue presented in both pro- and anti- vaccine comments our re-
search shows that commenters (both pro and anti-vaccine/vaccine mandates) build
similar argumentation to support their ideological position and that fear, triggered
by threat as well as risk, is what justifies both sides' attitude and reasoning. This
ideology is particularly made conspicuous in the negative lexis used by the an-
ti-vaccine/mandates comments generally directed towards politicians, government
officials or the World Health Organization. By using a range of different speech
acts, the commenters in both corpora mostly assumed the role of analysts in their
comments, analysing, explaining and clarifying issues; however, compared to the
English, Macedonian commenters appeared much more frequently as judges, or
analysts and judges, assessing, evaluating and judging the decisions of the govern-
ment to impose the vaccine mandates and movement restrictions. Their comments
were ironic and sarcastic, and they used much more threats and curses compared
to the English. The English commenters, on the other hand, asked more questions,
demanding the government or the WHO to give more information and clarify their
doubts concerning the safety of the vaccines. Therefore, they were more direct, ex-
plicitly refusing to take the vaccine, regardless of the consequences. Overall, the re-
sults of the analysis yielded some important conclusions that need to be confirmed
on a larger sample. However, although the language features, which were used by
both groups of commenters differed in certain aspects, the research showed that
they generally shared the same doubts, fears and opinions about the governments'
actions in regards to the vaccine mandates. Therefore, this research shows that the
governments must be ready to address these issues to gain their citizens' trust and
loyalty, rather than simply impose their decisions and expect people to obey them.

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