

‘*I WOULD NEVER...*’: DEICTIC SHIFT AND MORALIZING IN ANTI-IMMIGRATION READER COMMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies how readers respond to a counterfactual request inviting them to imagine themselves in the shoes of an immigrant in a corpus of online reader comments to a Yahoo article on Latino immigration. We initially considered 7,000 comments and for our corpus and analysis selected those in which the commenters perform a deictic shift, i.e. assume the deictic center of the immigrant using the first-person pronoun *I* and the adjective *my*, which totalled to 452 comments. The discourse of the comments, however, turned out to be very moralizing – i.e. while managing to assume the spatial and the temporal position of the immigrants, they refused to share the same moral grounds as them, which resulted in a series of *I would...* and *I would never...* propositions, which frame the commenters as vastly morally superior to the immigrants. The commenters occupy the legality, good parenting, patriotism and gratitude moral high grounds and often revert to moral grandstanding.

KEYWORDS: Deictic shift; anti-immigration discourse; online comments; moralizing; moral grandstanding.

1. Introduction

In June 2019, an article entitled “*Imagine your own children there*”: *Grim reports mount from border detention camps*, appeared on Yahoo News¹. The title of the article cites Dolly Lucio Sevier, a physician, who visited two immigrant detention centers in Texas, the USA, and reported about what she called “dismal” and “inhumane” conditions in which immigrant children were

¹ <https://news.yahoo.com/grim-reports-border-detention-concentration-camps-165512055.html>.

placed. She expressed how broken she would be to see her own child there and made an emotional appeal inviting the readers to *imagine their children there* too. The article amassed a huge number of reader comments, even by Yahoo standards (23,098). Many of the readers directly responded to the title's request, deictically shifting themselves into the position of an immigrant, while still retaining the *us-them* dichotomy, which assigns good and moral qualities to *us*, and bad and immoral ones to *them*, the illegal immigrants. Using the first-person singular pronouns, they assumed the immigrant's deictic center but also a loftier moral ground, which resulted in a series of *I would (never)...* propositions, representing them as morally superior and criticizing the immigrants for their choices and actions. This paper looks at a selection of those comments which responded to the title and analyses the said deictic shift and the moralizing discourse imparted by the commenters. All of the comments responding to the request from the title expressed an anti-immigration stance, so this study belongs to the research of anti-immigration discourse.

The invitation from the article title is a *counterfactual* used as an argumentation strategy, commonly by the leftists, in pro-immigration, humanitarian discourse, with the aim to elicit sympathy by taking the place of another (Van Dijk 2000). According to Van Dijk, "what would happen, if...", is a formula defining counterfactuals, which play a significant role in argumentation – they enable people to point to absurd consequences when an alternative is considered. In immigration discourse, they demonstrate "the compellingness of a story about refugees and their experiences when WE would be in the same position" (Van Dijk 2000: 66). Van Dijk studied its use in parliamentary debates; however, the said Yahoo article and its comment forum allow for a unique opportunity to see how a wider audience responds to such a sympathy-eliciting counterfactual and to what extent they are able to project themselves into the shoes of the 'other'.

2. Theoretical background

In this part of the paper we will address the theoretical framework within which this study is situated. We first briefly look at how deixis and discourse space are studied within Critical Discourse Analysis. Then we proceed to a short review of the discourse of online comments and conclude the section with some morality-related definitions and concepts employed in this paper.

2.1. Critical discourse analysis, discourse space and deictic shift

Xenophobic ideologies against immigrants and minorities have been on the rise in North America and Europe, which is why studying anti-immigration and racist discourse is of particular relevance (Van Dijk, 2000). Anti-immigration discourse may be studied within Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk 1993, 2001; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak and Meyer 2001), an interdisciplinary study of language in its social context by applying a critical perspective, where analyzing the phenomenon of *us–them* polarization and the construction of discourse mental spaces are given notable prominence.

Van Dijk (1993, 2000, 2001, 2005) employs a socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse studies, in which three elements are interwoven – cognition, discourse and society. In his multi-layered system, society is at the macrolevel, at which power relations are exercised and are ultimately reflected, as well as reproduced, by discourse, which stands at the microlevel. Unlike Wodak’s discourse-historical approach (2001), he introduced an intermediary level of social cognition, which relates the two said levels “through mental representations of language uses as individuals and as social members“ (Van Dijk 2009: 64), as a type of a cognitive interface between discourse and society (Van Dijk 2017). According to Van Dijk (2000), social cognition includes, *inter alia*, ideologies, which are especially relevant from the point of view of critical studies.

Ideologies form the social beliefs of groups and function as a framework providing the coherence to those beliefs (Van Dijk 2000: 14). The general strategies of most ideological discourse (including the immigration discourse) involve positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Van Dijk 2000: 43-44). Ideological analysis may be based on a conceptual framework which Van Dijk calls the *ideological square*, resting on the said general strategies.

Within socio-cognitive approaches to critical discourse studies, Chilton (2005) proposes the Discourse Space Theory, which sees discourse as a situated and speaker-oriented linguistic performance, rather than non-situated linguistic knowledge (2005: 3). He uses simple geometric vectors in a coordinate system to represent spatial locations in order to conceptualize linguistic input. Thus, when processing discourse, people position themselves and others in relation to themselves in three dimensions (2004; 2014), one being space, i.e. distance from self (both physical and metaphorical), the second representing time, again in terms of distance (the present moment being the center, whereas moving backwards and moving forwards represent the past and the future, respectively), and the third one being the epistemic dimension (also being

interpreted in terms of distance, where the center represents what is real and the distance from that center represents what becomes progressively less real). In other words, this model entails a center-periphery arrangement in which *I*, *here*, *now* and *real* are the starting point or the center.

In discourse, thus, we inevitably assume a certain perspective, defined through spatial, social, temporal, epistemic and deontic points of view, which serve as anchorage points (Filardo-Llamas et al. 2010) and we invite our collocutors to share it with us. The perspective is continually changing and is re-negotiated, i.e. it is not static. Additionally, language allows us to shift away from an egocentric viewpoint of the speaker to an allocentric viewpoint, and such shifting viewpoints are considered to be a fundamental issue in cognitive linguistics (Chilton, 2014: 17). More recent models, such as those suggested by Cap (2013), build on a more dynamic perception of discourse space than that argued by Chilton (2004, 2005, 2014), seeing it as prone to re-arrangement, where the entities from the periphery (the others, *them*) are capable of moving towards our center, which is seen as an incoming threat to *us*. This is called *proximization* in Cap's model and it refers to a discursive strategy of presenting distant entities and events (*them*) as more and more negatively consequential to the speaker (*us*). This model accounts for deictic movement, which is also what happens when we imagine ourselves in the shoes of another, i.e. when we temporarily migrate from our deictic center into what we assume to be theirs, to the extent our imagination and/or ideologies allow it.

In cognitive poetics, *deictic shift* is a term used for “the reader taking a cognitive stance within the mentally constructed world of the text” (Stockwell 2002: 46–47). It refers to the process by which a reader imaginatively projects himself/herself into the deictic center constructed in the narrative, i.e. the process of the readers' moving out of their *here* and *now*, into the *here* and *now* of the narrative, as well as into the deictic center of the narrator or a character (Stockwell 2002: 47). Bearing in mind the particular discourse situation we set out to explore in this paper, we will use this term for the process in which the online news readers assume the deictic center of the ‘other’, the immigrant, in our corpus, as they imagine being in their position.

2.2. Online comments and immigration

Reagle (2015) defines online comments as short and asynchronous social communication which is reactive to some internet content and is meant to be seen by others. Sometimes comments have identifiable authors, but more often they

are produced by anonymous users. Their content may be text, a verbal aside, or a rating – even clicking the *like* button is a comment, Reagle argues (2015: 55). Online comments can be seen as a genre in its own right (Reagle 2015: 17) and as a new public sphere (Santana 2015; Harlow 2015).

Critical exploration of online comments discourse emerged with the appearance of this genre. Their investigation may provide a powerful, albeit limited, glimpse into how readers discuss certain issues (Chen et al. 2019) and “an unprecedented opportunity to gauge the public’s consciousness” (Santana 2015: 92). Studies show that about 80% of the internet users read online comments and that as many as 53.3% both read and post online comments in the USA (Stroud et al. 2016).

Inter alia, reader comments may provide insights into how migration is seen and recontextualized by a wide readership, Boyd argues (2019). He also finds that articles certainly can generate a public debate, though he is unsure how much opinion power an article may have over the comments replying to it. Similarly, Somaini (2014) studies online comments reacting to the immigration articles in the USA and Italy, and finds that journalists and readers “walk on different paths—paths that sometimes even appear to diverge” (Somaini 2014: 132).

Initially, the internet promised to offer a space for the wider public to share information and voice their opinions, “potentially empowering those traditionally left out the dominant discourse” (Harlow 2015: 25), which is why many US news sites have been opened for comments since 2004 (Hughey and Daniels 2013). However, despite the initial hopes, racial stereotypes, prejudices and incivility have been found to reign in this public sphere (Harlow 2015; Santana 2015), as the extremists have “embraced technology with a frightening sophistication and received an unexpected boost from the Internet” (Brown 2009: 203). For instance, “cockroaches, locusts, scumbags, rats, bums, buzzards, blood sucking leeches, vermin, slime, dogs, brown invaders, wetbacks” are just some of the ways Latino immigrants are conceptualized in American online comment boards, Santana finds (2015: 103). Immigrants “should be hunted down like deer and shot on sight; left to die from choking on beans; eviscerated by piranhas; run over in the street like dogs and rounded up in cattle cars and roasted in oven chambers”, read some of the more vicious comments (Santana 2015: 103). These are just examples of how explicit and overt racism can be in online comments, which warrants for critical studies with real-life implications and applications.

As a result, the newspapers have invested substantial efforts to curb comments containing such discourse by employing different methods (aggressive

moderation, not archiving, turning the comments off for certain topics, banning certain readers from commenting, etc.), with various success, whereas some of them have even opted to disable such fora.² However, given that the website traffic is driven up by such online communities (Binns 2012: 547), many will not give up on reader comments just yet.

As for the discourse of online comments in Europe, the findings tend to be similar to those derived from the U.S. public fora, due to the fact that the right-wing populism is on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. However, they also vary to an extent amongst the individual European countries, depending on how much immigration they receive and the official stance on immigration of the ruling political elites. Thus, Fielder and Catalano (2017) study the U.K. reader comments on immigration and find that othering is the most dominant strategy used by the commenters. Domalewska (2016) studied user-generated comments posted below articles on the immigration topics in Poland and found them to be “biased, blatant, and based on repetitive generalizations” (2016: 28). Baider and Kopytowska (2017) similarly find a sense of threat from the immigrants as very salient in the Polish online discourse, but less so in the online comments from Cyprus. On the other hand, Fuller’s (2019) analysis of news comments in Germany points to the existence of competing discourses in them – apart from the anti-immigration discourse, this author also noted a substantial presence of the voices speaking in favour of cultural diversity. Further, Šarić and Felberg (2019) studied news comments in Croatia and Serbia, two countries which are generally the transit countries for the migrants (and not a final destination), and noted a presence of a positive presentation of the migrants, related to strengthening one’s own positive self-presentation, i.e. presenting Serbia and Croatia as humane and responsible as they help the migrants on their way.

Anonymity of commenters offers them certain protection, which may intensify incivility (Chen 2017: 5). It seems that the more comments are posted on an issue, the higher the likelihood that they will be stereotypical or racist, Harlow finds (2015). She explains this using Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) *spiral of silence theory* – namely, the more people voice an opinion, the more likely is that those in agreement with them will also speak out, whereas those who disagree with the majority will likely remain silent, as they will feel that they are in the minority. The massive number of comments to the Yahoo article

² Among those who have disabled commenting recently is the Yahoo news site itself, which suspended comments in July 2020.

studied here, might explain why the overwhelming majority of the commenters harbored strong anti-immigrant feelings.

2.3. Morality

In this subsection, we will provide some definitions of the morality-related concepts employed in this study. Instead of taking them for granted as commonly understood ideas, we would like to introduce them here in the sense they are used in the paper.

To begin with, it is quite difficult to grasp morality in a satisfactory definition. According to Haidt (2008), the most influential definition of this concept in psychology was given by Turiel (1983: 3), who defined the moral domain as “prescriptive judgements of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other” – this judgement of justice and rights is how we will understand morality for the purpose of this study.

After a focus on moral development, i.e. how morality is developed in children, which marked the last several decades of the 20th century, the turn of the new century brought about a change in focus onto how morality actually functions, often cross-disciplinarily explored nowadays (Grover et al. 2019). One of the most popular current theories, which is well applicable to our task at hand, is the Moral Foundations Theory, developed by Haidt and Graham (2007). In this theory, it is argued that cultures build their morality perspectives based on five universal psychological systems, called the *moral foundations*, which drive immediate reactions to stimuli, while these reactions in turn lead to making judgements on what is right or wrong (Koleva et al. 2012). These moral foundations involve the following polarities: care/harm (based on empathy), fairness/cheating (based on the ideas of justice and rights, i.e. what is justly owed to another), loyalty/betrayal (based on patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group), authority/subversion (based on the respect/obedience to legitimate authorities (including traditions, rules, orders)), and sanctity/degradation (based on the ideas of purity, scaredness and avoidance of contamination) (cf. Haidt and Graham 2007; Haidt 2012).

In cognitive linguistics, *morality* is often vertically construed, as evidenced by the conceptual metaphors MORAL IS UP, IMMORAL IS DOWN (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Meier et al. 2007). In this paper we use the terms of *moral high ground* and *moral low ground*, which can be assumed by a discourse participant, and we take them to correspond to the moral foundations described above, where one of the polarities would correspond to a moral high

ground (care/fairness/loyalty/authority/sanctity) and the other one would correspond to a moral low ground (harm/cheating/betrayal/subversion/degradation). These notions will be of special use in our analysis of the moralizing messages conveyed in the reader comments.

Another notion employed in our paper is that of *morally grandstanding*, a phenomenon described by public discourse philosophers (Tosi and Warmke 2016, 2020), referring to the use of moral talk in order to project oneself or one's group as morally superior to others, for the purpose of self-promotion, while not truly living up to such high moral standards in reality. In other words, the speaker assumes an unusually loft moral high ground and can be critical of those he/she sees on the moral low ground, i.e. he/she would be *moralizing*. This phenomenon can be individual, when ones just wants to promote oneself as extremely morally respectable, or one may want others to "make a positive moral assessment" of the group one identifies with (Tosi and Warmke 2016: 200).

3. Data and method

As noted earlier, the article "*Imagine your own children there*": *Grim reports mount from border detention camps* appeared on Yahoo News in June 2019 and gathered 23,098 comments at the time we inspected it. There were about 7,000 comments directly commenting on the article ('direct comments'), whereas the other comments were replying to other comments, forming a comment thread ('reply comments'). Bearing in mind our research intentions – to study the deictic shift in which the readers assume the *I*-deictic center of the immigrants and the discourse consequences this entails – we focused only on those comments where the readers accepted the 'challenge' from the title and employed the first-person pronouns and adjectives (*I, my*) to refer to themselves as the immigrants. This meant that we disregarded the 'reply' comments, as these generally did not refer directly to the title of the article but rather to the issues raised in the comment leading the comment thread. From the category of the 'direct comments', we managed to extract 452 comments fitting the description above, and these formed our dataset.

By employing the concept of Van Dijk's ideological square (2000), as well as the concept of discourse space, as presented in the theoretical section of the paper, we qualitatively analyzed the said corpus of comments. We focused on the constructions with *I* as the subject referring to the immigrants and identified the moralizing strategies that were employed by the users generating these

comments, and subsequently critically analyzed them in the vein of Critical Discourse Analysis.

We also provide some supporting statistical analysis, i.e. counts referring to the number of comments containing various types of the moralizing propositions identified.

4. Analysis: Deictic shift and moralizing

As explained earlier, the title of the news article counterfactually invites its readers to imagine their own children in the grim conditions of an immigrant detention center. This requires a deictic shift, i.e. an alignment of one own's *I*-deictic center (which involves *my* children) with that of the immigrant's *I*-position (and *their* children), or an orientation shift of one's deictic center away from his/her *here* and *now*, and into the hypothetical mental space in which they become immigrants themselves. The counterfactual request clearly invites us to imagine our children *there*, which aligns the writer's and the readers' spatial location (presumably both *here*), as distinct from the location of the others – the immigrants (*there*). The readers can thus relate more with the writer's stance, which should elicit more sympathy than in the case that an immigrant called them to do the same thing.

Given the strong polarization of *us* and *them*, found to be the cornerstone of every anti-immigration discourse, the request to imagine such a situation by those harboring anti-immigration feelings is immensely difficult. Still, in 452 comments (our dataset) out of about 7,000 directly commenting on the article, the readers accomplish the formal alignment by using the shifted pronouns (*I*, *my* (children)). However, in many of these, the commenters reject the need to imagine the invited counterfactual scenario:

- (1) Lynda: **I won't imagine my children there.** I did not traipse through hundreds of miles to a country that did not want **us**.
- (2) Poker: Imagine **MY children...I wouldn;t have to. I would not of been dupped** by the socilist USA haters in **my country**, would not of subject **them** to the dangers in **thier illegal crossing**, and not to the criminals along the route. **I would of stayed in my country, worked to improve my way of life and that of my children. I**

would of fought for MY country, voted for anyone BUT the social-ists. **I would of understood NOTHING** is FREE!

Such rejections (*I won't imagine; I wouldn't have to*) are quite common in the dataset, and are always accompanied by reasons why making such a parallel is impossible. Still, in order to dismiss it, the commenter first effectively has to imagine himself/herself in the position of an immigrant, before they can deconstruct and reject such a thought. Thus, in (1), even though the commenter Lynda uses a negative proposition, one might conclude that the hypothetical scenario is nonetheless activated, as evidenced by the second part of the comment, where she puts her children in the position of the unwanted immigrants (*my children*). In (2), the commenter Poker also negates the need to respond to the requested imagination task (*I wouldn't have to*), but then goes on to elaborately explain, using plentiful deictic shift, what he/she would (not) do, were they in the position of an immigrant (*I, my way of life, my children, their (my children's) illegal crossing*). The temporal positioning is also shared and so is the spatial one (*in my country*). It seems that the hypothetical scenario is, in fact, activated, despite the initial refusals and denials, just as the elephant frame is invoked in the famous Lakoff's book title (*Don't think of an elephant* (Lakoff 2004)). To this aim, a restricted number of devices are used by the commenters, typically: *I don't have/need to imagine, I can't/couldn't imagine, I am not going to imagine, I don't imagine, I wouldn't have to imagine, I won't imagine, why would/should I/we imagine*. They were used in about a third of the comments (153 comments), which is a significant share.

As we have seen, there is evidence to suggest that at least a partial alignment takes place, i.e. that the commenters, however aggressive in expressing their anti-immigration stance, do assume to some extent, albeit unwillingly, the position of an immigrant. Still, while making a deictic shift in the mental space where they assume the shoes of the immigrant, they only succeed to match one coordinate of this multi-dimensional space. As we have seen in (2), the commenter Poker can imagine himself/herself living in a Central American country (as the place of birth is something a person cannot have control over), and while he/she can thus assume the spatial coordinate (and presumably the temporal one), he/she fails to assume the other coordinates, which together define the position of the immigrant in the discourse space. The other coordinates, which the readers typically have problems assuming, are those relating to what a person has control over – one of them is *morality*, which can also be spatially or, more precisely, vertically construed, as explained earlier. Poker's vantage point is drastically morally superior and loftier than that which he/she

assigns to the immigrants, and thus Poker's discourse becomes moralizing (*he/she would have stayed in his country, fought for it, not subjected his/her children to illegal acts, etc.*).

The *us-them* dichotomy deeply pervades this discourse (as it is always the case with anti-immigration discourse in general) and, despite the deictic shift, it remains as deep as ever, as the readers assume the moral high ground vs. the moral low ground which they assign to the immigrants, which puts them in a position to issue moral lessons to them.

Bearing in mind the particular topic of this context, the readers present themselves as good/responsible/loving/smart parents, as opposed to the immigrants, who are quite the opposite – bad/irresponsible/unloving/stupid parents. The negative attributes are sometimes directly assigned to the immigrants:

- (3) Paul: Number one I would not send my child on a 1500 mile walk. What kind of parent would I be. **Maybe Central American parents are terrible.**
- (4) Connie: I wouldn't have my children in that position. I would try a more assured way to leave the supposed dangerous country. Not subject my children to thousands of miles of possible contagions and sickness. **Parents who do that are not responsible to begin with.**

Such examples may contain some of the most overtly expressed racism (as in (3) – *Central American parents are terrible*). More often, however, good qualities are directly assigned to *us* and, given the stark contrast built between *us* and *them*, we can only assume the opposite parenting qualities on the side of the immigrants:

- (5) X-GEN: 'Imagine your own children there?' My children are in their own country and **I am a good parent!** Dems, do your job!
- (6) Feeman: 'Imagine your own children there' - I DON'T HAVE TO! **I am a responsible Parent.**
- (7) 4MoreYears: **I love and respect my kids.** I'd never put them through anything that a liberal approves.

- (8) jOHN L: My children would never be there because **I am not a brainless idiot** who would bring them illegally to a foreign country in the first place!

The presuppositions in (5–8) propose that the immigrants are bad, irresponsible, unloving and stupid parents. The moral high ground thus assumed by the readers clears the way for much of the moralizing they employ using the first person singular. If they were the immigrants, they would be morally superior and take wiser, more responsible actions. Thus, in their comments, they assume various moral high grounds (sometimes simultaneously more than one), expressed through various individual stances of what they would and would not do (we will call these *moral stances*), as can be summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Moral high grounds and stances assumed by the commenters.

HIGH GROUND	MORAL STANCE (no. of comments)
LEGALITY (MF ³ : authority/subversion)	I wouldn't break the law/make my children break the law (260) I would come legally (29)
GOOD PARENTING (MF: care/harm)	I wouldn't submit my child to danger (90) I wouldn't put my child in such a situation (58) I wouldn't use my child (9) I wouldn't have children (4)
PATRIOTISM (MF: loyalty/betrayal)	I would stay in my homeland (12) I would fight for my homeland (8)
GRATITUDE (MF: fairness/cheating)	I would be grateful (5)
UNDEFINED	My children would not be there (5)

Legality high ground

This moral high ground is assumed in 64% of the comments (289 comments). The readers depart from a point in which disobedience to the law may not be justified regardless of the circumstances. Having assumed such a moral high

³ Moral foundation.

ground, the commenters most often deny any possibility of their breaking the law, even if they were in the position of the immigrants, or, more rarely, declare that in such a situation they would seek legal ways to emigrate.

– **I wouldn't break the law / make my children break the law**

This moralizing message was present in just over a half of the comments (260 comments). Let us examine three of them:

- (9) Matthew: **I wouldn't force my children to break laws** in order to make **my life** easier!
- (10) Mario: My kids wouldn't not be there because **there is no way I would have subjected them to breaking the law** - especially when there IS a legal way to immigrate. **I would not make smugglers rich at the expense of my own kids**, No decent parent would.
- (11) Michael: I can't imagine my own children there because **I wouldn't be in a caravan of idiots headed to a boarder that I can't legally cross. I'd rather live in the woods.**

The anti-immigration discourse accomplished in our corpus typically views the immigrants as criminals and their acts as criminal acts. Vocabulary related to illegality (*illegals, illegally, break law, criminals, break and enter, arrest, jail, incarceration...*) pervades the dataset and most often the immigrants are metonymically presented as *illegals*, where one selected, foregrounded attribute (illegality) stands for the whole (the human being), backgrounding all their other attributes. In (11), breaking the US immigration law is seen as an *idiotic* act, over which *living in the woods* is preferred.

These immigrant bad parents *force* (9) or *subject* (10) their children to illegal acts – the said verbs suggest that the children are the patients and not the agents of the action, and that the blame is attributed to the parents. Still, despite this and the children's legal incapacity to break laws until a certain age, for the reasons of their not knowing right from wrong, the commenters generally equate them with their parents and see them as law-breakers as well. As one commenter from the corpus puts it, "My children were not brought to this country **as a criminal by criminals**". Additionally, as suggested in (9), the immigrant parents are construed as selfish – the commenter assumes that the immigrants force children to break laws in order to make their own life, and

not that of the children, easier (*not better*, but *easier*, suggesting again, some laziness on the part of the immigrants). Apart from the legality high ground, the good parenting high ground is simultaneously assumed in some of these comments, i.e. those suggesting they would not make their children break the law.

– I would come legally

This moral advice comes from the same moral high ground as the previous one – disobedience to the law is unacceptable regardless of the circumstances; however, this time, the readers do provide an alternative and share a seemingly more empathetic stance. They do so comparatively much more rarely, i.e. only in about 6% of the cases (29 comments):

- (12) Caleb: I wouldn't take my child there. **I'd obey the laws of the country I wished to live in and follow legal processes.**
- (13) William: my children wouldn't be there, **because I'd go through legal channels to enter the country.**

Come legally would sound as a benevolent advice to the immigrants, which should solve the readers' main concern – that of the illegality of the immigration in question, whereby breaking the immigration law is considered the ultimate offence. These commenters seem to be oblivious to the quota restrictions and strict requirements of legal immigration, which most immigrants are unlikely to meet. Once again, the readers presented themselves as law-abiding citizens, whereas the immigrants can be reconstructed as criminals.

The commenters assume the spatial positioning of the immigrants, but not of those already at the detention centre (*there*) but of those still in their homeland, planning to emigrate (*come, take children there, go, enter*) through the legal channels. This legal proximization is not represented as threatening in this thread of comments.

Good parenting high ground

The readers assume the moral high ground which refers to good parenting in more than a fifth of the comments in our corpus (102 comments). They would never put their children in harm's way (89 comments) nor abuse them

otherwise (9 comments), simultaneously presupposing that that is precisely what the immigrants do. Moreover, were the commenters to find themselves in the grim circumstances of an immigrant, a few of them propose they would be responsible enough not to have children at all (4 comments).

– **I wouldn't submit my child to danger**

Let us consider the following two comments containing this moralizing message:

- (14) Sage Advice: ... Which is why **I would not have invaded another country illegally, by way of dangerous and disastrous means, intentionally putting my children in harm's way** for such an unknown outcome...
- (15) .omg Wow: **I would not have walked 3000 plus miles and placed my children in such peril of their lives for weeks and months** just to arrive at a place they are not wanted. They should all take the free ride back home.

In (14) and (15), the moralizing is accomplished using the third conditional for unreal and impossible situations in the past, where *I* becomes the subject of the said impossible situation. These readers also share the temporal point in the discourse space with the immigrants – hence the past conditional, as they perceive the situation from the point of view of the immigrants already detained.

The moral lessons here delivered presuppose irresponsible parenting on the part of the immigrants, completely unrelatable to their own high moral standards of parenting. Strong vocabulary is used to depict the extremity of the situation (*dangerous and disastrous means, peril for weeks and months*). After the initial deictic shift, in (15), the commenter returns to his/her original *I*-deictic center and refers to the immigrants as *them*, disassociating from their worldview again, which is very often the case in the dataset.

– **I wouldn't put my child in such a situation**

In about 13% of the comments, the commenters simply state that they wouldn't put their children in such a situation. The presupposition is that the situation of the children is dire and that they, as good parents, could not

possibly bring them into such a predicament (unlike the unloving/irresponsible parents that the immigrants are). These comments are typically short and written with conviction:

- (16) BewareTheWombat: I can't image my kids there. That is because I love them and **wouldn't put them in that situation.**
- (17) TardsStalkMe: 'Imagine your own children there' No, **I wouldn't put my kids through it VOLUNTARILY like these people di**
- (18) Ed: **My children would not be in the predicament.** Arrest them if they are in the USA and send them back pronto., Then we would not have the problem

In (18), only the first proposition contains a deictic shift. After it, the commenter abandons the shift and switches back to his own perspective, which contains a clear *we-them* dichotomy (such a quick abandonment of the deictic shift is, as suggested earlier, common in the corpus; *we/us* are then indicators of presumed common moral high ground, which can strengthen the speaker's righteousness). Even though many of the comments in the dataset contain irony, it is interesting that in some of them it is accomplished using Spanish (*pronto* in (18)). It remains unclear whether this is a remnant of the deictic shift, i.e. of the commenters putting themselves in the shoes of the Latino immigrants.

– I wouldn't use my child

Whereas submitting the children to danger can sometimes be accounted to the foolishness of the parents, suggesting that they use and abuse their children puts the blame on the parents much more directly. Let us look at the following two comments:

- (19) Night Sky: I would never imagine my children there, because **I WOULD NEVER USE MY CHILDREN AS HUMAN SHIELDS! AND I WOULD NEVER ILLEGALLY ENTER ANOTHER COUNTRY.**

- (20) Thatguyknowthatguyknow: ‘Imagine your own children there’ **I wouldn’t use my children as pawns to break the law**, so no, I cannot imagine

As most other moralizing accomplished in our dataset, this moral lesson is typically relayed using the second conditional, expressing volitive modality (propositions expressing what speakers would or would not do of their own free will) – *I would never...*, *I wouldn’t...* These typically express speaker-imparted impossibility, bearing in mind the loft moral ground the readers as parents put themselves on. This construction is used throughout our dataset but it was most frequent in this particular category of comments, which might have to do with the strong emotions provoked in association with one’s children. Extreme-case formulations with ‘never’ in immigration discourse were also noted by Galasinska (2009), who studied the phrase ‘but I never’ and who was of the opinion that using the same extreme-case constructions, the discussants co-wrote and co-constructed their discourse in a public forum. The phrases we noted (*I would never...*, *I wouldn’t*) certainly pervaded our dataset and may be said to have provided some meta-cohesion and coherence to it.

Once again, the children are perceived passively, via a number of conceptual metaphors – CHILDREN ARE HUMAN SHIELDS (16), CHILDREN ARE PAWNS (17), as well others, most notably, CHILDREN ARE OBJECTS DRAGGED/HAULED, which was used in 36 comments (*I would never drag/haul my children...*). The immigrant parents are thus construed as using and abusing their children, who are mere objects manipulated by them to their own selfish purposes.

– I wouldn’t have children

Let us look at the following two comments:

- (21) Mark: “Imagine your children here.” **No, imagine not fathering children you can’t provide a safe and healthy environment.**
- (22) Olivia: My children would never have to put up with this because **if I was poor and without employment or food in a area where I was afraid for my life, I wouldn’t have children.**

The moralizing pinnacle is implicitly criticizing the illegal immigrants for having children at all. While assuming a moral high ground, some readers found themselves fit to judge who should and should not have children. They assume

the temporal as well as the spatial points of the immigrants (*if I was... in an area where I was afraid for my own life*) but, being morally superior to them, they *would not father/have children* in the first place (21–22), bearing in mind their unsafe environment. If we go a step further, then we might conclude that the message to all living in dismal conditions is simply not to procreate and cease to exist. Pronouncing such advice using the first-person pronoun should add credibility to it, but in fact it cannot.

Patriotism high ground

Some commenters also assume the patriotism high ground (20 comments) by imparting two moral lessons, *I would stay in my homeland* and *I would fight for my homeland*.

– I would stay in my homeland

Let us consider the following comments:

- (23) edward: As I have said before. I would never put my children through this. **I would provide for them at home. They all come from beautiful countries. Take pride in your home...**
- (24) KennethKenneth: ...**i WOULD stay in my home country and WORK HARD to care for them as i do now...**

The presupposition present in (23) and (24) is that the immigrants are not doing enough to better their lives in their home-countries, which has to do, implicitly, with the negative attributes assigned to them and not to their home-countries. In (23), the commenter invites the immigrants to take pride in their beautiful countries and suggests he would stay there, whereas the proposition in (24) saying that *I WOULD stay in my home country and WORK HARD* presupposes that the immigrants, in fact, are not working hard enough (the laziness stereotype), and the capital letters emphasis is not accidental. As can be seen, the spatial points are easily assumed (*I would provide... at home; in my home country*) and the blame is not assigned to the spatial setting, i.e. it is not on the home-countries but on the immigrants for not making the most of what they can there. Despite making the deictic shift by using the first-person pronouns and the adjectives to refer to themselves as the immigrants, the

readers seem not to be in the position to fully grasp the situation in which their earnings and quality of life do not dominantly rely on their hard work, living in a country with high unemployment rates and low wages. Imparting such a moral lesson from the position of a worker in the USA, one of the strongest economies in the world, might be regarded as naive or hypocritical.

– **I would fight for my homeland**

Painting themselves as true patriots, some of the commenters would go to extreme lengths to improve their homeland (note the shared spatial positioning with the immigrants):

- (25) Water Geek: No need to imagine my children there, since I would never sneak into a foreign country with them. **Instead I would organize my fellow citizens and attempt to change or overthrow the corrupt government that is making Mexico and central America a cesspool.**
- (26) Jade: I can't imagine my own children there because I would never do that to them. I would follow the law. Then again **I'd probably be killed trying to improve things in my own country, so I wouldn't even lie long enough to follow the law.** Which is exactly why I'm for deport them all, because I'm trying to improve things in my own country and will do whatever it takes.
- (27) Donald: I don't have to imagine my kids being held in a detention center because I would never abandon my children to human traffickers in the first place. Born **would I be so cowardly to abandon my homeland to drug lords and corrupt politicians either and instead seek to break another countries laws.**

In the comments above (25–27), the commenters assume that the immigrants could fix their countries by taking some extreme and likely violent measures, such overthrowing the government (25), standing up to drug lords and corrupt politicians (26), where one would probably be killed in such efforts (27), presumably as a hero or martyr. It is really difficult to assume that the readers are genuinely sincere and that they would indeed be capable of going to such great lengths as required to change an entire country's system or, as we have seen earlier, to live in the woods as a hermit (11). This moral stance is particularly

not coherent with the position that the commenter assumes in the discourse space – that of an immigrant parent with kids (all these comments are pronounced from the position of a parent and mention “my children” or “my kids”).

In these and many other comments, the readers, in fact, *morally grandstand*. As explained earlier, the term *moral grandstanding* refers to using moral talk in order to project oneself or one’s group as morally superior to others, for the purpose of self-promotion, while not truly abiding by such high moral standards in real life. The quoted commenters raise moral standards to a ridiculous level – in (25), the commenter Water Geek would single-handedly organize his fellow citizens and change the government; in (26), the commenter Jade adds he is trying to improve things in his country and “will do whatever it takes” to that effect (he would even die), whereas Donald, in (27), finds it “cowardly” to abandon homeland and not stand up to drug lords. We may assume that self-promotion, which is part of the definition of moral grandstanding, may not be used solely to the individual purposes, but that it also involves promotion of the in-group, which is held to an absurdly high moral standard, as is the case in many of the comments here analyzed.

Gratitude high ground

Gratitude is generally promoted as being morally good and being grateful is widely seen as a virtue, particularly when gratitude is *justly owed* and it is only *fair* to express it to those to whom one is somehow indebted (the fairness moral foundation). From the moral high ground that the commenters put themselves on, some of them proclaim they would disregard all the deficiencies of a detention situation and in fact be grateful for what has been provided to them:

- (28) Mishmish: My children won’t ever be in one of those. But if by some chance, we have to flee our country and seek asylum elsewhere, **I would feel grateful to be in a situation better than the one I was in previously.**
- (29) Bossman: **I wouldn’t blame the people who were trying to help me and my family. I appreciate every meal and every night sleep indoors in safety** and do whatever it took in ingratiate myself into my hopeful new Homeland to prove my sincere desire to belong.

One of the stereotypes in immigration discourse in general is that the immigrants are supposed to owe special gratitude, beyond the gratitude that native citizens feel for their country, and feel indebted for everything they receive – in this case, mere being kept alive, separated from their children. These commenters might again be seen as morally grandstanding.

The spatial point is, again, shared with the immigrants; however, this time it is not their homeland that is the deictic center of this counterfactual discourse space, but rather the detention center (*in a situation better than the one I was in* – presumably this is at the detention center; *indoors in safety*), which makes this strand of comments different from the other ones in terms of the readers' spatial positioning.

Undefined moral high ground

In a few cases, the type of moral grounding could not be defined. This typically happened in very short comments, in which the commenters denied the possibility of their winding up as immigrants, but did not explain the reasons why they imposed such an impossibility:

- (30) chris: My own children would not be there idiots...
- (31) GT350RGT350R: I simply wouldnt come
- (32) Brian: I would never send my children there, no matter what my circumstances. I guess that's the point, isn't it?

The commenters assumed the shoes of the immigrants in terms of deixis (*my*, *I*) but they did not even care to explain themselves, precisely as they believed themselves to hold a very high moral ground. This is additionally indicated by their calling those who invited them to imagine themselves as the immigrants – 'idiots' (30), and by emphasizing that this could not happen 'no matter what' their circumstances might be (32). In all the previous categories, the commenters felt the need to explain why such a situation was an impossibility for them, while those who took the moral high ground without a need to explain themselves perhaps took the loftiest moral high ground, which they thought obvious to everyone.

Spatially, in the comments above (30–32), the readers assumed the position outside the U.S.A. (*I wouldn't come* – meaning I am still at my homeland)

and not as being at the detention center (referred to as *there*), strongly refuting any chance of proximization.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we studied some specific aspects of a specific anti-immigration discourse. Namely, we investigated the discourse of online reader comments in which the readers were asked to imagine that they were a Latino immigrant and that their children were in a detention center. This counterfactual request (*imagine something that is not true or possible*) was intended to elicit sympathy and empathy for the immigrants from the readers. We studied the comments of those users who responded to this task and employed a deictic shift using the first-person pronouns and adjectives (*I* and *my*) to refer to themselves as the immigrants. The term ‘deictic shift’ was borrowed from Stockwell (2012), who under it assumes being able to see things ‘virtually’ from the perspective of another, i.e. imaginatively projecting oneself into the deictic center constructed in the narrative.

We found that the users were partially successful in employing the deictic shift. On the one hand, they could use the “right” pronouns and adjectives, and generally share the same temporal and spatial coordinates with the immigrants. When it comes to spatial positioning in particular, they almost invariably took the position of the Latinos still in their homeland, and most often they refuted any chance of their proximization (Cap, 2018) (except for legal proximization, which was advocated in a small number of comments). Very few commenters took the spatial positioning of the immigrants already at the detention center, which is what was precisely invited by the counterfactual request. In fact, this happened only in the comments invoking the moral high ground related to gratitude – the writers of such comments thought that the immigrants justly owed gratitude for being taken in.

On the other hand, the commenters found it hard to relate to the immigrants on various moral grounds. The commenters put themselves on very high moral grounds and assigned the immigrants comparatively low ones, which is why we may say that they never truly assumed the immigrants’ position. We identified various moral high grounds the commenters assumed and broadly categorized them (legality, good parenting, patriotism, gratitude), while also providing some statistical data regarding the number of comments these grounds were assumed in by the commenters.

In the majority of the comments, the users framed the immigrants as criminals and refused any possibility that they themselves would ever break the law, regardless of the circumstances they would be in. The frequency of employing this particular moral high ground corresponds with the findings of Somaini (2014), who found that such framing of the immigrants pervaded the reader online comments in the USA and Italy. When it comes to good parenting moral high ground, the commenters framed themselves as good parents vs. the bad parents that they saw the immigrants as. They would never do those things that the immigrants do to their children, they argued with conviction, and if they were compelled to live in dismal conditions, some of them would choose not to have children, out of responsibility. Departing from the patriotism high ground, the readers moralized that they would stay in their homeland and fight for it instead of abandoning it. Thus, in many of the comments, the commenters employed moral grandstanding (Tosi and Warmke 2016, 2020), committing themselves to absurdly high moral standards expressed through the propositions with the *I*-subject and volitive modality (*I would, I would never...*), in order to promote themselves and their in-group as morally superior to the outgroup, the immigrants. Implicitly, the immigrants were framed as unthinkably immoral on all the moral grounds. Bearing this in mind, the commenters were able to match just some of the coordinates defining the immigrants' position in the discourse space – the spatial and occasionally the temporal one (ones that a person has no control over), whereas they remained in their own center when it comes to the moral dimension (one that a person has control over).

In many of the comments, after initially formally conducting the said deictic shift, they quickly abandoned it and continued their comments using the *us-them* perspective. This is in line with Boyd's (2019) findings, who establishes that an article can certainly open up a debate in the comments, but also that it is not clear whether the opinions from the article may "wield any power over the commenters" (Boyd 2019: 311). Also, even though the article asked for sympathy from the readers, they nonetheless overwhelmingly expressed an anti-immigration stance, which confirms Somaini's (2014) argument that journalists and readers often walk diverging paths.

This study shows that using counterfactuals to elicit sympathy for the immigrants from a wide reader audience only works to a very limited extent.

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