Journalistic clichés under the conceptual "umbrella" of isotopies: "linguistic pathologies in vogue"† or "mirror-words" of psychosocial reality?

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Abstract

The present paper examines the dominant isotopies under which linguistic clichés emerge in the context of the intense media coverage of the current COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the linguistic automatisms excerpted from the online journalistic discourse proved to be prolific in identifying additional features of the linguistic "behaviour" of clichés. Furthermore, the investigation facilitated our understanding of the underlying motivations, implications, and potential effects triggered by the use of specific prefabricated structures. As a general remark, the analysis of these dominant overused schemes revealed how media institutions overuse, under the pressure of the international model, specific lexico-semantic isotopies which exploit prefabricated structures from distinct fields: *war*, particularly the area of *pyrotechnic elements* ("explosion of new cases", "huge explosion of Covid cases"), the semantic area of *natural disasters* subsumed to *liquidity* ("a new wave of COVID", "anti-Covid control wave", "death wave", "a wave of hateful comments", "wave of infections/confirmations/illnesses", "flood of accusations/fines", "tsunami of COVID-19 patients/displacements"). We have also identified journalistic automatisms circumscribed to the isotopy of the *economy* ("epidemiological balance"), *ranking and sports competition* (statistical clichés: "top of infections", "Covid top", "top Covid infections", "European top of Covid evolution", "vaccine race", among others), *disaster* (clichés of melodramatic excess, salient to tabloid journalism: "disaster", "chaos", "nightmare", "COVID-19 drama"). For the present article, we channeled our investigative effort only towards the first two dominant isotopies.

To achieve these objectives, we proposed a two-dimensional research model. Specifically, we correlated the data obtained through conjugating linguistic micro-parameters (semantic, stylistic features, lexical and morpho-syntactic patterns) and macrolevel variables (pragmatic, psycholinguistic aspects, perspectives derived from the sociology of media communication, critical analysis of discourse, among others).

The investigation results revealed that these linguistic patterns, analyzed under the conceptual "umbrella" of isotopy, can function as rhetorical and lexico-semantic strategies through which journalists activate the receptors' affective responses. Consequently, media discourse can trigger and maintain artificial states of anxiety, panic, and restlessness. Over time, this journalistic operation leads, through the impact of obsessive repetition, to the passive consumption of media representations and cultural stereotypes, of preconceived ideas.

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1. Preliminary remarks

Significant influences generated against the background of an infodemic[1] and a set of various factors (biological, social, political) reshape perceptions, attitudes, and interpretations attributed to current reality, marked by the spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19). In this context of a strongly digitally interconnected society, media networks and social platforms "feed" anxiety and uncertainty into the current discourse and culture. These media practices exert multiple implications at the level of sociocultural, behavioural, mental, discursive, political, and economic patterns. Thus, the effects are visible in the polarization of public debate, undermining health responses and actions, increasing the risk of conflict, a discourse of hatred and prejudice, threatening long-term human rights prospects, intensifying the phenomenon of social stigma, among others. At the linguistic level, prefabricated, clichéd metaphors and expressions can become vectors of manipulation at the expense of promoting alternative interests and agendas of groups or institutions.

2. The linguistic cliché and its functions: a conceptual "iceberg"

In a narrow sense, from a restrictive point of view, clichés are associated strictly with the pejorative dimension, as worn-out, obsolete expressions, denounced in everyday use. However, an analysis[2] in a broader, interdisciplinary context reveals various roles, ranging from the ideological function promoted by the political philosophy of language (Porter, 2010; Berger, 2011; Mackay, 2014; Norberg, 2014) to a set of roles derived from language sciences, theories of reading and reception[3].

Through social psychology's lenses (Zijderveld, 1979), linguistic clichés facilitate the acquisition of sociocultural competence of the community (Stark, 1999). Thus, they play a significant role in creating bridges, triggering connections in the process of identification with alterity. From this standpoint, prefabricated structures function as a source of stability and familiarity in a world oversaturated with information and stimuli, marked by emotional instability and existential uncertainty. Hence, they become a factor of cohesion in modern[4] society.

The divergent perceptions on the functions of these linguistic patterns have polarized the debate between radical attitudes, from sanctioning this type of "devaluing reproduction" perceived as an unjustified linguistic "fashion" (Guţu Romalo, 2008; Paraschivescu, 2009; Gruiţă, 2011) to a positive approach (Amossy & Rosen, 1982; Bagnall, 1985; Zafiu, 2001; Dumistrăcel, 2006; Amossy & Herschberg-Pierrot, 2011; Hargraves, 2014; Duda, 2016). The first direction, rooted in the Romantic aversion towards the commonplace, sometimes touches radical notes in its obsessive avoidance of prefabricated sequences in the modern disavowal of platitude. The devaluation of verbal automatism becomes clear in pejorative labels ("linguistic clumsiness") or the frequent associations with the subculture and dominant perceptions such

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[1]It is a term recently introduced in public discourse.The phenomenon of an *infodemic* is clearly defined by the World Health Organization as "an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—occurring during an epidemic. It makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" [online].

[2]Drawing on an analogy with Jakobson's functional model, Duda (2016) highlights a set of functions specific to linguistic automatisms. Hence, she identifies clichés that can either express critique or perform a persuasive, metadiscursive, discursive, or phatic function.

[3]The cliché structures have been positively resemanticized with argumentative, constructive, and phatic functions: "When the writer uses a cliché, he participates in a kind of recognized cultural substratum" (Stark, 1999, p. 454).

[4]The cultural sociologist Zijderveld (1979) understands modernity as a result of the replacement of meaning with function, which led to the emergence of the contemporary clichégenic society, characterized by the loss of uniqueness. In this context, in the theorist's perception, clichés become emblems/verbal signals of modernity, urbanization, bureaucracy. The Dutch researcher examines the social and political function of the cliché in modern society and highlights the fact that linguistic automatisms are indispensable ingredients of daily communication. In other words, adherence to the conventional, to the knowable, to the familiar, through daily verbal or behavioral automatisms, offers the function—socially validated—of protection against an uncertain reality, emptied of meaning. Thus, despite failing to convey meaning, clichés function socially and therefore play a vital role in the consolidation of fractured, atomized society (see Zijderveld, 1979, p. 53).

as emblem of trivial banality, of consumer literature and culture, the pinnacle of mediocrity: "Linguistic gaucherie, used mainly by the subarticulate and [...] participants in middle and "low-brow culture" (Suhor, 1975, p. 159).

Contrarily, the second direction, of positive reevaluation, legitimizes its rehabilitation approach by rediscovering and exploiting the vein of ancient rhetoric. This direction grounded its vision into a domain where there was no devaluation of the prefabricated discourse (du déjà-pensé, du déjà-dit). Recently, this tendency has become visible in the theories of argumentation and integrated pragmatics. Here the criterion of valorization is verbal effectiveness, and the main focus is the activation of the discursive mechanisms to gain the audience's adhesion.

To summarize, the interpretation through normative optics usually establishes a sign of equivalence between cliché and deviation, as a negative symptom of a "verbal pathology" (Duda, 2016, p. 17). At the opposite end of the spectrum, seen from the linguistic perspective of *language as a transaction* (see the contractual theories of the *French School*) between the encoder and the receiver/ decoder, the cliché "no longer seems so reprehensible but becomes a useful symbol of identification" (Bagnall, 1985, p. 20).

Generally, research aligns with the prevailing negative judgment given by the "banality stigma" (Amossy & Rosen, 1982, p. 128) and the association with the *frozen language* or, better said with a "linguistic fossil" (Nina, 1998, p. IV) in connection to the so-called *langue du bois*. Nevertheless, an analysis of linguistic clichés that extends beyond the surface observations of the normative perspective can reveal the invisible part of this "iceberg": a complex conceptual profile, a "communicative paradox" (Quéré, 1998, p. 101), with kaleidoscopic nuances, through its multiple levels of significance, through the various functions that these prefabricated patterns can (re)activate in various discourses (see Fig. 1).
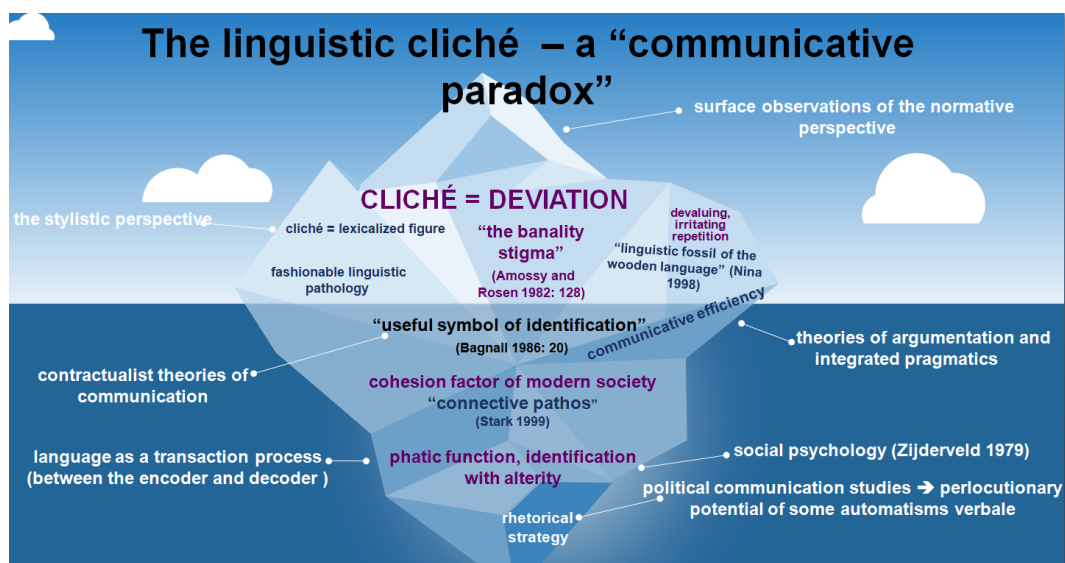

Figure 1: The linguistic cliché and its functions – a conceptual "iceberg"

2.1. *The profile of an interdisciplinary concept. Limits, terminological clarifications, and conceptual dissociations*

To have an extended perspective on the investigated linguistic phenomenon, one should correlate the dominant theoretical directions from different domains. Consequently, we have considered both the main linguistic approaches as well as relevant contributions, stemmed either from social disciplines (Zijderveld, 1979; Berger, 2011), language sciences (Bagnall, 1985; Olson, 1985; Stark, 1999; Amossy & Herschberg-Pierrot, 2011), theories of reading and reception (Eco, 1979; Riffaterre, 1979), didactics of reading (Dufays, 1994) or even aspects depicted from political theory and philosophy of language (Arendt, 2006; Norberg, 2014).

An element of consensus in the metadiscourse on the cliché is highlighting an inherent semantic aspect: emphasizing the idea that the referential meaning is the least significant feature of the cliché. In other words, analysts of the phenomenon always accuse "the absence of the referential content, which is the result of an automated occurrence, rather than the outcome of a motivated, thoughtful reflection tr.n." (Nina, 1998, p. 66). To explain this, the same author illustrates this semantic peculiarity with examples of referential vacuum in the clichéd structures extracted from funeral messages (in this sense, see also Felecan, O., 2009). The example mentioned can represent a relevant case that shows how a "signifier is exploited regardless of its referential value (completely different, empty or neutral)" (Nina, 1998, p. 66). Despite the referential entropy attributed to linguistic automatisms, the use of these prefabricated structures in media discourse reflects, on a closer examination at a conceptual and functional level, the "trend towards brevity, as a way of showing convenience and minimal effort" (Felecan, D., 2009, p. 267) and the dominant socio-political mutations/convulsions. Specifically, with moments of tension—whether of an economic, ideological-religious, or political nature at (inter) national level—the clichés of crisis, catastrophe, terrorism, or the disease ones dominate the media discourse. Therefore, they can function as "witness words" (fr. *mot-témoin*) in the sense of Guilbert (1975, p. 87–88). Alternatively, we could say that journalistic automatisms can play the role of *mirror-words* of real events. One cannot assert this in the sense in which they would encapsulate, *in nuce*, a socio-political diagnosis, but because these prefabricated language structures can reflect a *forma mentis* typical of a society marked by the effervescence of globalization and the exponential consumption of information.

A pertinent analysis of the linguistic cliché requires drawing connections with the affiliated notions within the stereotypy's conceptual umbrella[5]. Therefore, it is essential to define the meaning we will be using the term since it reflects the subordinating status in relation to the stereotype. By encompassing it under the conceptual "accolade" of the stereotypy phenomenon, we align our approach to the consensual direction revealed by the specialized bibliography in the French and Anglo-Saxon space (Perrin-Naffakh, 1985; Dufays, 1994; Amossy & Herschberg-Pierrot, 2011)[6].

2.2. Elements of genealogy, origin and semantic history: the cliché, the terminological avatar of doxa

An insight into the semantic and etymological past of the cliché is essential to clarify its origins and understand the dominant perceptions marked by a halo of negativity. Therefore, we have retained how the semantic history of the notion of cliché condenses an interesting fluctuation in shifts of meaning: from the initial, technical connotation, in the neutral register (closely connected with the technical jargon of printing, and, later with the field of photographic art), to figurative, pejorative values.

Although the notion of cliché itself is relatively new, and we owe it to modernity, a careful retrospective on the interests related to the phenomenon of repetitive structures reveals the "roots" of the idea of prefabricated sequences even from ancient Greece and Rome. In this context, "our current obsession for originality would have been incomprehensible" (Bagnall, 1985, p. 19) if we take into consideration the credit given by rhetoric to the reservoir of *topoi*. Thus, the cliché and the stereotype (together with other affiliated notions) are, in fact, terminological "camouflages" or avatars of the old *doxa* concept, rooted in Aristotle's rhetoric (Amossy, 2002, p. 374).

To understand the prevalence of the negative, depreciative attitude regarding these automatisms, one must consider a significant moment on the phenomenon's timeline. The stigmatization of the cliché is, in fact, an aesthetically motivated reaction, deeply rooted in the Romantic ideology of promoting original, surprising expression.

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[5]The cliché is defined, predominantly, "as a stylistic stereotype, fixed verbal phrase, with "dull expressiveness" (Chelaru-Mǎrǎruş, 2007, p. 13), in other words as a lexico-semantic category marked by diminished expressivity and characterized by desemantization.

[6]Specialists in the stylistics and semiology of prefabricated structures attribute stereotypes a generic, superior value. In this perspective, stereotypes encompass other affiliated notions.

3. Features of the current media discourse

3.1. *Theoretical coordinates: media convergence, journalism 3.0, "producers"*

An overview of the online press features in the current media landscape requires a focus on the sum of interdependent factors, specific to the socio-historical context. The elements which can explain the sensationalist dimension[7] and the complexity of this type of discourse are diverse. They range from the spectacular development of technology, the permanent reinvention and metamorphosis of journalism in the digital age, the impact of social networks and post-truth culture to the role of intertextuality and hybridization in blurring the boundaries between different types of media. Hence, the need for adaptation leads to the so-called hybrid journalism, in which phenomena such as digitalization and convergence, "the meeting point between traditional journalism and new digital platforms" (Melinescu, 2013, p. 100), the dimension of infotainment, the pressure of "sensationalism taken to the extreme" (Rad, 2013, p. 262), permanently retraces the traditional boundaries between media genres. It is enough to think about the role of intertextuality and hybridization in blurring the boundaries between different types of media: online newspapers have web links, discussion forums, opinion polls, as well as audio and video recordings of television shows, while televisions announce press reviews and invite readers to access the web pages.

Therefore, this paradigm shift is visible in the "permeability" to innovation and the challenges of current *turbo-journalism*, focused on exploiting the ambivalent function of media channels. In other words, contemporary journalism capitalizes on any user's possibility to transform from a passive consumer of information into an active content creator. On the linguistic level, this new reality is encapsulated in the conceptual hybrid or the "portmanteau word" *(prod)users*[8], referring to a situation in which media consumers (readers of the online press, in our case) become content producers and vice versa.

3.2. *Media discourse and the constructivist paradigm*

Given that our entire investigative approach explores language automatisms in the media discourse, we considered it necessary to provide a concise clarification on the uses of *discourse*. Thus, in a theoretical accolade, we mention that the choice to circumscribe the current analytical approach to the *constructivist perspective* is based on the vision promoted by this paradigm. From this standpoint, media constructs a schematic *imago mundi*, sometimes diverted from reality due to the particular mediation system, based on specific journalistic operations and functions: *agenda-setting*, *frame analysis*, *selection*, and "«packaging» information into a framework, thus offering events interpretation" (Beciu, 2011, p. 129). Furthermore, sociologists and media communication specialists consolidate the constructivist paradigm by launching into circulation concepts such as "news-making", "media filters" (Steuter & Wills, 2009, p. 162) to emphasize that, despite the claimed objectivity, negotiation, the tendency to rewrite and interpret reality prove to be emblematic for the way media systems work.

4. The investigative approach

The present research stemmed from the interests to understand, refine, and deconstruct the complex profile and varied linguistic behavior of journalistic clichés generated by the media discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve these goals, the current investigation, based on an interdisciplinary approach and a two-dimensional research model, draws on the theoretical and methodological support provided by language

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[7]This semiotic characteristic should be correlated with the "borrowing" of dramatization strategies taken over by Romanian journalists from the world of theater, starting with the second half of the 19th century (see Zafiu, 2001; Stoichiţoiu-Ichim, 2005; Dumistrăcel, 2017).

[8]*Produser* is a term that captures the new media reality of *enriched media*. The term was "launched by the Australian researcher Axel Bruns, the one who established the new type of relationship, in which not only users multiply, through increased technical reception capacities, but also the number of suppliers, practically equivalent to users" (Melinescu, 2013, p. 115).

sciences, social psychology, and media communication studies. Specifically, we correlated the data obtained through conjugating linguistic microparameters (semantic, stylistic features, lexical and morphosyntactic patterns) and macrolevel variables (pragmatic, psycholinguistic aspects, perspectives derived from the sociology of media communication, critical analysis of discourse, among others). We consider that this approach from multiple angles of investigation brings an element of novelty in the methodology of cliché analysis. Mainly, this type of research model can contribute not only to reveal specific features regarding the "behavior" of the journalistic cliché but also to provide contextualized explanations for certain types of prefabricated structures.

4.1. Methodological remarks on the corpus. Difficulties and limits

The methodological perspective adopted derives from the need to constitute a linguistic corpus as relevant as possible. Consequently, we chose complementary methods of collecting and analyzing information. Expressly, we set up a complex corpus, with the help of three search engines specialized in providing selected results from the news (ZiareLive.ro, the official local version of *Google News*, respectively *Yahoo News*). By entering the keywords (*coronavirus*, *Covid*, *COVID-19*), we identified 50,459 articles using the first search engine. It is essential to mention that the digital archive limits access to the first 10,000 relevant results, distributed in the 1000 web pages. To ensure the accuracy of the qualitative analysis, we reviewed the articles and processed them manually. Subsequently, we correlated the results with the data obtained from the other two platforms.

A significant challenge was establishing the distinctive features of the linguistic automatisms, which would legitimize their inclusion in the inventory of clichés. A common element highlighted in the metadiscourse on the cliché is signaling the difficulty of reaching a consensus in formulating an exact definition based on objectively quantifiable characteristics (Kirkpatrick, 1996; Hargraves, 2014).

In this context, we considered that it is necessary to develop a working definition rigorous enough to clarify the terminological nebula and to answer some essential questions that fueled our investigative approach, such as: How can one scientifically identify a cliché: by resorting to intuition, linguistic sensitivity or are there specific features of differentiation? What are the intrinsic parameters salient to cliché structures?

4.2. Tools and concepts for the identification and analysis of journalistic clichés: semic analysis, lexico-semantic isotopy

Regarding the methodology of analysis of the annotated corpus, we started from the premise that the intuitive approach based on a particular type of linguistic sensitivity and the *déjà vu* reaction is not enough: it becomes essential to operate with a straightforward process for the identification of verbal automatisms.

Therefore, through the filter of semic analysis, we examined the definitions and perspectives on the cliché, extracted after the lexicographical insight and after reviewing the specialized bibliography[9].

Summarizing the results of the investigation, the dominant semes extracted from the definition of the linguistic cliché seem to be the following: *prefabricated character*, *referential entropy*, *familiarity*, *high frequency*, *varying degree of semantic wear*, *functional value* (phatic, pragmatic functions to facilitate communication, social cohesion, cognitive effort reduction, among others). Of course, to have a comprehensive perspective, it is necessary to dive into a detailed[10] discussion generated by the finding that the above-listed

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[9]Specifically, by taking this perpective, we investigated three categories of definitions taken from different sources, as follows: domestic and foreign lexicographic resources (both general and specialized: linguistic dictionaries, stylistic treatises, among others), respectively, from the profile literature (reference works of researchers who have studied the phenomenon of stereotype: Ruth Amossy, Anne Herschberg-Pierrot, Patrick Imbert, Eric Partridge, Anne-Marie Perrin-Naffakh, Walter Redfern, Michael Riffaterre, Hargraves, etc.).

[10]One cannot argue with conclusive arguments that these features would automatically guarantee the classification of a lexeme or a structure in the category of clichés. For example, it is noteworthy that other criteria invoked, taken independently ("the singular parameter of the frequency of an element in speech" (Nagy, 2016, p. 71), the degree of familiarity, the "noncompositional character", specific to some clichés in the class of idiomatic expressions), each of these are not indispensable

characteristics correspond to other linguistic facts, from interjections to phraseologemes. We must keep in mind that semantic and syntactic stability does not guarantee that a term can pass as a cliché if it results from "consensus fixation". As Duda (2016, p. 21) well points out, phraseologemes meet, for example, the consensus of the linguistic community, but we can speak about a cliché only when "meaning gets eroded through repetition".

In order to highlight the semantic networks which aggregate clichés generated by the media discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic, we will operate at the macrolevel with the concept of *isotopy*[11], borrowed from the interpretive semantics analysis toolbox. Adopted by A.J. Greimas in 1966 from the field of physics, *isotopy* "designates the modalities related to the structure and nonlinear organization of the text and contributes to its coherence, based on the redundancy of an element of discursive semantics" (Nagy, 2015, p. 203), implicitly or explicitly expressed at the syntagmatic level. Our corpus illustrates the relationships identified between a series of lexico-semantic groups with a less rigorous organization than lexical fields, which we will analyze at the semic (compositional), contextual and stylistic level (see the model proposed by Bidu-Vrănceanu & Forăscu, 2008).

5. Results and conclusions of the investigative approach

5.1. *The journalistic automatisms generated by the media discourse of the pandemic. Features at the micro-textual level*

At this first level of analysis, we drew on organizing our corpus on the formal extension criterion proposed by Dascălu-Jinga (2009). In this sense, the analysis revealed patterns which we have labelled *monolexematic clichés*, *polilexematic clichés* (similar to syntagmatic clichés in Dascălu-Jinga's view). Likewise, for prefabricated sequences, more elaborated from a lexical-syntactic point of view, we have retained the linguist's formula "clichés- utterance". The investigation aimed to deconstruct the new semantic values that these ready-made structures activate in media discourse, the specific contexts of use, as well as their effects in terms of reception. In essence, the model we propose for the analysis of linguistic clichés exploits the main aspects and theoretical angles of the approach outlined in Fig. 2.

5.1.1. *Morphological aspects*

From a morphological point of view, in the series of monolexematic clichés, we noticed the increasing number of qualifying adjectives, with a predilection for the abusive use of the absolute superlative (*ample,*

conditions for meeting the status of a cliché. Similarly, another precaution in defining the cliché would be to avoid extrapolating preconceived notions that all clichés are structures that have "lost their impact through constant use" (Bagnall, 1985, p. 19). In this sense, certain journalistic clichés specific to tabloid journalism refute this hypothesis if we consider the significant number of "consumers" of this type of press that offer a fertile space for linguistic automatisms. From the tendency to generalize on the basis of some classes of clichés and through the "filter" of a certain interpretation frame, one can easily fall into the trap of a restrictive definition. Therefore, it should be emphasized that we must take into account the linguistic level to which we refer or the perspective of analysis according to which we can identify particularities related to the nature and functional diversity of clichés.

For example, from the angle of the microperspective given by the lexico-semantic analysis, one can identify particularities of the cliché, bringing into discussion a series of aspects such as *semantic restriction*, respectively *referential variability*, specific to an advanced degree of clichéd phrase. Based on the semantic analysis, two types of clichés can be identified: on the one hand, the stable ones from a semantic-referential point of view (which always target a class, a specific reality: *the elected ones*, *barons*, *people of law*, *the king sport*, etc. and suffers, therefore, a semantic restriction), and on the other hand, clichés with an accentuated *referential variability*, being able to be applied to diverse realities (*life belt*, *collapse*, *at indigo*, etc.). If we take, for example, the phrase *people of law*, we notice that it is almost always used in media discourse to individualize the class of police officers, less often gendarmes, excluding other professional categories congruent with the legislative area, while the cliché expression *indigo* can be applied to an impressive number of extremely different referents, with predominantly negative, pejorative axiological values (*accident*, *assassination*, *murder*, *earthquake*, *tragic destinies*, *criminal case*, *drama*, *incident*, *robbery*, *bribe*, *problems*, *scandal*, *suicide*).

[11] Conceptually, the term designates a "redundant set of semantic categories that creates the possibility of a unitary interpretation of discourse. For example, one can read the utterance "Such cabbage!" on a culinary isotopy (successful food) or a cultural one (tangled, confusing work)" (Rovența-Frumușani, 1999, p. 295).
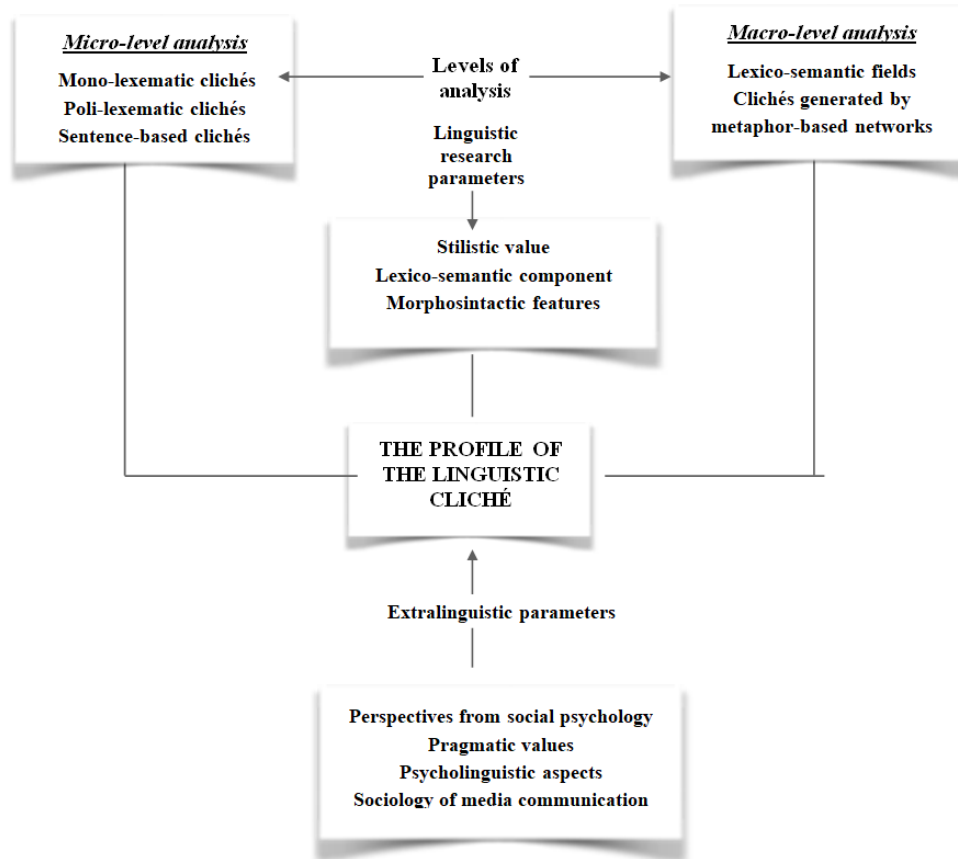
Figure 2: Research model developed for the analysis of the journalistic cliché

alarming, catastrophic, decisive, dramatic, fabulous, fatal, hallucinatory, incendiary, remarkable, major, rad-ical, astounding, total, astonishing, viral, among others), followed by adverbial occurrences. It is note-worthy that we have identified a lower percentage of clichés on the morphological pattern of simple nouns. Journalists tend to exploit these ready-made phrases in tabloid journalism until the point of emptying their meaning (*nightmare, collapse, earthquake, disaster, drama, shock, lightning, war, carnage, tragedy,* etc.).

Polilexematic clichés are generally "molded" on the morphological pattern of nominal groups, ad-jectival and prepositional phrases. It is noteworthy that the most persistent utterance based clichés have such a high degree of familiarity that readers can reconstruct them from memory, right after noticing the prefabricated sequence's first elements. In Table 1, we have selected some relevant examples for the categories discussed:

Monolexematic clichés	Polilexematic clichés	Utterance based clichés
• **qualifying adjectives**: *alarming*[12]*, catastrophic, shocking*[13]*, crucial, dramatic, fatal, hallucinating,*	• *national catastrophe, life belt, planetary disaster*[14]*, COVID-19 drama*[15]*, zero priority, overwhelming*	• "Dozens of Moldavians *stormed* private laboratories in the capital to take the COVID-19 test" (*publika.md*, Aug. 3); • "*COVID-19 cases are growing alarmingly*. What is

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[12]"*Alarming* increase in the number of Covid-19 infections in Hunedoara" (*romania-actualitati.ro*, Aug. 12); "*Alarming* numbers! +474 new cases of Covid infection and six deaths in one day" (*ziarelive.ro*, Aug. 12); "*Alarming* growth in the number of infections with the new coronavirus in Hunedoara county, where over 50 new cases have been recorded" (*romania-actualitati.ro*, Aug. 12);

[13]"The *shocking* story of a young woman from El Salvador. COVID-19 killed her parents and three brothers in just two months" (*libertatea.ro*, July 28);

[14]"It's a *planetary disaster*! The pandemic has just begun. Shocking news for everyone" (*capital.ro*, Sept. 17);

[15]"The *Covid-19 drama* is just coming: Almost 60 million jobs in the EU are in danger" (*sputnik.md*, Aug. 25);

inflammatory, *infernal*, *massive*, *radical*, *terrifying*, *astonishing*, *viral*;

- **nouns**: *nightmare*, *collapse*, *earthquake*, *disaster*, *drama*, *shock*, *lightning*, *war*, *carnage*, *tragedy*[16];
- **verbs**: *to explode*, *to shake*, *to rise*, *to stop*;
- **adverbs**: *aggressively*[17], *harshly*, *firmly*.

proportion, *nightmare day / night / week / moments / scenes / forecast*, *apocalyptic images*, *pessimistic report / scenario*;

- *large-scale protest*[18];
- *outbreak of infections*[19];
- *outbreak of COVID-19*[20] / *coronavirus*;
- *absolute record of Covid cases*;
- *boundless*[21];
- *on the last moment*, *at a high level*, *fully*, *in the context of*, etc.

the explanation of the specialists" (*spynews.ro*, Aug. 5);

- "*Covid cases increase alarmingly*: 460 new cases" (*ampress.ro*, June 25);
- "*Coronavirus sets fire* to the entire community in Roșiești" (*vremeanoua.ro*, Aug. 7);
- "*Covid is back in force* in Italy: 947 cases of infection have been reported in the last 24 hours" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Aug. 21);
- "*COVID-19 is back in force*! China registers a peak of contamination" (*stiripesurse.ro*, July 29);
- "*COVID-19 wreaks havoc*" (*capital.ro*, Sept. 17);
- "*COVID-19 wreaked havoc* all over the world" (*stiripesurse.ro*, July 16).

Table 1: Types of journalistic clichés at micro-textual level

5.1.2. Stylistic aspects

The systematic analysis of our corpus reveals an interesting expressive behaviour of the journalistic cliché, in the sense that it activates its dominant stylistic values according to a specific domain. Specifically, we recorded a significant density of metaphorical clichés, predominantly in the political field, while hyperbole is a type of cliché exploited in the sports field, but, at the same time, it functions as a distinctive marker for tabloid journalism. We found a tendency to exploit the clichés modeled on the stylistic pattern of the antonomasia, such as those examined in Table 2. One should not neglect the significant occurrences of the litote-based clichés in our corpus, especially if we consider that journalists rarely activate this particular stylistic value. (Usually, litote has a restrictive use, limited to the field of diplomatic event reporting). In the table below, we outline the dominant expressive values, activated by pandemic clichés in the online Romanian media discourse:

Examples of clichés in context	Stylistic value, the domain of use
• "The Germans **break the Covid chains**, the Romanians pull their masks on their eyes too!" (*national.ro*, Aug. 2); • "**The puzzle of the COVID-19 pandemic** in Africa: scientists cannot explain the absence of an epidemic peak" (*adevarul.ro*, Sept. 6); • "COVID-19: testimonies from the **white inferno**" (*perfecte.ro*, Aug. 13).	**Metaphor** • The metaphor-based clichés prevail in the political, sports, economic-related news and editorials, conducive to subjectivism and stylistic figures.
• "COVID-19 cases are **booming**: Italy, for the first time over 1,000 after May 15" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Aug. 22); • "Alarming! COVID-19 cases in Spain are **booming** before school starts. Which is the most affected city" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Sept. 8); • "COVID-19 **wreaks havoc** in the Al. Marghiloman nursing home. Buzau County registers a new record of infections with the new coronavirus" (*ziarelive.ro*, Aug. 21);	**Hyperbole** • Usually, hyperbolic clichés have a wider area of use, emblematic for the tabloid, sports journalism, as well as for unusual weather events, natural disasters (floods, floods, snow), or reports of dramatic accidents. Our findings reveal that the media discourse of the COVID-19 pandemic exploits hyperbolic clichés of drama and excess, aimed at

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[16]"*Tragedy* in Rome, where a teacher committed suicide believing she had a coronavirus" (*digi24.ro*, Sept. 10);

[17]"COVID-19 is spreading *aggressively* among young people. WHO: The percentage of those infected has tripled" (*national.ro*, Aug. 5);

[18]"*Ample protest* against Covid restrictions! People went on strike" (*dcnews.ro*, Aug. 29);

[19]"Italy, the new *outbreak of COVID-19* infections in Europe. Areas to avoid. What the specialists recommend" (*ziuaconstanta.ro*, Feb. 24);

[20]"*Covid-19 outbreak* at the University of Manchester. Approximately 1,700 students are in self-isolation" (*jurnalul.ro*, Sept. 26);

[21]"*Borderless* tragedy. The Minister was killed by Covid-19" (*playtech.ro*, July 29).

- "Coronavirus **wreaks havoc**! New cases rolling on the conveyor belt. Doctors are on alert" (*capital.ro*, Sept. 17);
- "COVID-19 **wreaked** havoc all over the world - 579,938 people died! Which are the most affected countries" (*stiripesurse.ro*, July 16);
- "COVID **wreaks havoc** in Vaslui county: deputy mayor taken with the islet, a bank branch closed! 30 new cases in the last 24 hours!" (*vremeanoua.ro*, Aug. 7).

creating an artificial state of alarm and panic.

- "**Covid has pulled the USA into unemployment**. Almost half of Americans do not have a job because of the pandemic" (*romaniatv.net*, June 30);
- "More recently, COVID **comes** to Iași from across the Prut. We are on the fourth place at a national level" (*ziaruldeiasi.ro*, Sept. 11);
- "Coronavirus also **haunts** in penitentiaries in the country. How many detainees became ill with COVID-19" (*publika.md*, Aug. 25);
- "COVID **snuck into** the City Hall! It was known, but the institution reacts with a delayed effect!" (*satmareanul.net*, Aug. 2);
- "COVID **is fooling around**! 9 new cases in Satu Mare!" (*satmareanul.net*, Aug. 15);
- "What hotel does COVID-19 **choose** to stay" (*business24.ro*, Aug. 5).

Personification

- Regularly, the personifying cliché has notable occurrences in the weather forecast news, more frequently in television reports, where we have the formula established by a well-known television presenter (Busu): "The wind will blow **nervously** in most areas, and snow will predominate in the mountains" (*tvhappy.ro*, Oct. 6, 2016), "Weather: Cold days, **nervous** wind" (*ziare.com*, Apr. 21, 2015). The personifying cliché leads, in this case, to an anthropomorphization of the current pandemic.

- "A video was shooted at Botoșani county hospital, which showed a wedding like scenario in one of the salons. More than that, they posted the song on Facebook, to show how happy and healthy **the covids** are " (*adevarul.ro*, May 11);
- "Born among the "**covids**"! Life is on its way!" (*ziarelive.ro*, July 22);
- "Four **covid** Moroccans fled from quarantine" (*evz.ro*, May 12);
- "Infectious diseases in Balș, between **covids**, Salam, Bahmuțeanca and Pian" (*evz.ro*, Aug. 6);
- "They looked for "**covids**" and came across wood thieves!" (*jurnaldebacau.ro*, July 11).

Antonomasia[22]

- It is intriguing to note the rapid semantic evolution of the lexeme *covid* from the stage of *journalistic innovation*, perceived as "one of the most striking lexical novelties of the colloquial register in recent months" (Zafiu, 2020) at *the cliché stage*, by entering everyday use. This particular type of antonomasia, evidenced by lowercase spelling instead of capital letters, reflects a semantic shift from the name of the disease to "people infected with this virus." There is a tendency for the lexical form marked by the plural morpheme with the role of generalization to compete with the singular form, enclitic articulated (*Covidul, covidul*—both uppercase and lowercase). The cliché process is also visible in journalists' tendency to give up quotation marks as an index of the stylistic effect.

- "Priority is given to **Non-COVID voters**, in the ballot box voting" (*infomures.ro*, Sept. 25);
- "Colentina Hospital reopened for **non-COVID patients**" (, Aug. 31);
- "DSP: Colentina Hospital provides, from Thursday, medical assistance to **non-COVID-19 patients**" (*digi24.ro*, July 16);
- "Medical, surgical and oncological emergencies during the pandemic. What options do **non-COVID patients** have?" (*digi24.ro*, Apr. 23);
- "What happens to **non-COVID patients** during the pandemic: People died because they were first tested for coronavirus before the intervention for the stroke. The process lasted 7 hours" (*hotnews.ro*, May 11);

Litote

- Usually, the litotic cliché is frequently picked up by journalists from the diplomatic language. In the context of the reports about the coronavirus pandemic, the mentioned style figure relies on diminishing the possible stigma associated with the virus infection. By denying the opposite, it identifies those who are not sick.

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[22] Here we refer to "the semantic figure by which a proper name—considered representative for the respective class—is used instead of a common name" (Stoichiţoiu-Ichim, 2005, p. 75).

- "**Non-COVID patients**, ignored and refused by hospitals.
  The definition of "emergencies" creates life and death
  problems" (*adevarul.ro*, Apr. 8).

Table 2: Synthetic table with dominant stylistic values activated by journalistic clichés
from COVID-19 pandemic media discourse

5.2. Characteristics of the journalistic cliché at macro-textual level

According to cognitive linguistics, the observation, the description of the dominant cliché patterns, and the interpretation of how the COVID-19 pandemic is conceptualized in the media discourse reflect tightly intertwined connections between thought, language, and action. Our corpus' extensive analysis provided the configuration of the following dominant and well-defined lexical-semantic isotopies, subsumable to the following fields: *war*, *natural disasters* with the area of *liquidity*, *sports competition* and *ranking*, among others. The space constraints related to the present article limit our examination to the first two isotopies.

5.2.1. COVID-19 through the filter of metaphors in military terminology: the isotopy of war

Of all the lexico-semantic isotopes investigated at the macro-textual level, the one configured around the conceptual metaphor of war is the best represented in our corpus. Corroborated with these observations, a series of questions guided our research and sparked further theoretical reflections: What are the implications of extensive use of cliché military metaphors in the current pandemic-based media discourse? Can we talk in this case about a distorted perception of reality?

An insight into the specialized bibliography reveals that the increasing use of military metaphors in both the Western and Asian media discourse has piqued the interest of many researchers, usually in medical reports, of cancer[23]. Of course, in the current context, they have also been analyzed in connection to the media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic (Craig, 2020; Al Husain, 2020; Yang, 2020; Olimat, 2020; Rafi, 2020; Rajandran, 2020).

One can deconstruct the reasons for the increasing popularity of the metaphor of war in media discourse based on a simple argument: on the one hand, war is a familiar concept; on the other hand, the complexity of this "multifarious phenomenon" (Shimko, 1995, p. 79) allows drawing connections with different aspects from reality due to the various dimensions embedded. Therefore, journalists activate through conceptual metaphor what the readers already know about this source domain (war) and transfer this knowledge into a new, unfamiliar domain of experience (target domain: *the COVID-19 pandemic*): *the enemy* becomes the pandemic, the "front line" *soldiers*, *the heroes* are the doctors, *the weapons* are of various kinds (wearing a mask, isolation and quarantine measures, a possible vaccine, travel bans). Similarly, *the battlefield* becomes the human body, cities, continents, and, ultimately, at an extended level of interpretation, the "body" becomes the society itself. In the same register, *victory* becomes synonymous with hindering the spread of the virus by identifying a solution (which launches *the vaccine race*), *defeat* is quantified daily by the number/rate of infections, people found positive, exacerbation of the financial crisis. More than that, the authorities' *war strategy* translates into measures of isolation, social distancing, and quarantine.

Another point of consensus in the studies devoted to this aspect is highlighting the immediate consequences triggered by the media use of military metaphors in real life (Al Husain, 2020; Yang, 2020).

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[23] The impact of war rhetoric on cognitive, social, and behavioral patterns has been systematically examined in seminal studies (Vaisrub, 1977; Sontag, 1978; Semino *et al.*, 2017, among others). Recent contributions have revealed the predominantly negative implications of military metaphors for health. Hence, research findings suggest medical staff a reconceptualization of diseases like cancer on the direction of alternative metaphor such as *cohabitation*, *travel* (see the metaphorical "menu" proposed by the team of researchers from Lancaster University coordinated by Elena Semino [online]). Interestingly, following this model, specialists in cognitive linguistics have recently launched an initiative aimed to rethink the metaphorical approach of the COVID-19 pandemic [online].
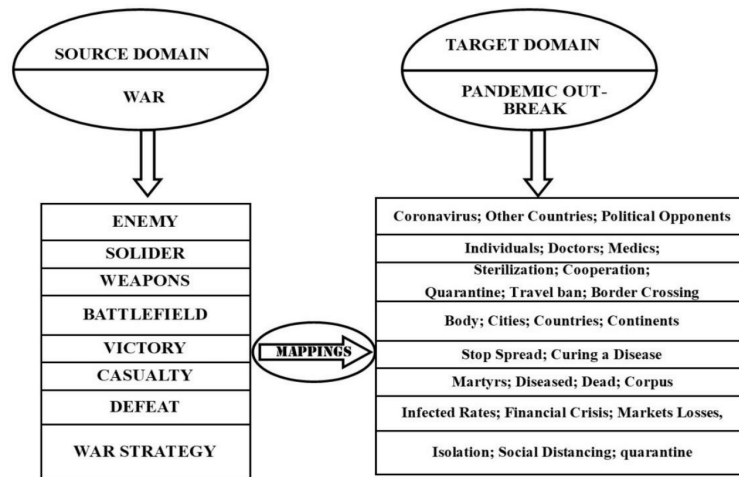
Figure 3: A representation of the metaphorization scheme: *The pandemic is a War*. Source: Al Husain (2020, p. 119).

Specifically, the excessive use of war rhetoric, with a predilection for military offensive metaphors, fuels a discourse of terror, anxiety, panic, alarm, generating a distorted perception of a reality dominated by violence:

> "Modelling **COVID-19 as ENEMY** and human encounters with it as BATTLES resulted in the actualization of emergent conceptual structures, **a rather aggressive perception of the world**. Indeed, **the semantic associative mappings of conceptual field (battle, weaponry, victory, casualties, conspiracies, etc.), may result in such aggressiveness of worldview**, accelerating negative responses such as anxiety, fear and panic" (Al Husain, 2020, p. 110).

Also noteworthy is the persistence with which journalists tend to exploit elements and technical forms of military organization: the *battlefront*, *weapons*, *sharp objects*, *explosives*, *combat equipment*, but also human resources involved, namely the protagonists of a *war scenario* (*heroes*, *victims*, *enemy*), specific warlike reports ("Practically, yesterday, only one resident of Iași **won the battle with SARS CoV2 infection**", *ziaruldeiasi.ro*, Apr. 25). Undeniably, the undesirable effects of such metaphorical modeling are, among others, creating anxiety, amplifying panic, but also triggering irrational actions:

> "**FIVE-YEAR PLAN to fight COVID-19**. WHO leader shocks Europe: Surely the vaccine will not end!" (*dcnews.ro*, Sept. 14);
>
> "The vaccine against COVID-19 has generated **a proper war** in the world of spies, both China and Russia intensifying their efforts to steal American secrets" (*digi24.ro*, Sept. 7);
>
> "**Heroes on the front line** – The nurse cured by Covid-19 who donated plasma five times to save her patients" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Sept. 7);
>
> "Fiscal Council: **The war with COVID-19** is a damaging one, but the economy is recovering" (*europalibera.org*, Sept. 1);
>
> "Spain is again in a critical situation, after recording **the first assault of the COVID-19 epidemic**" (*tvr.ro*, Aug. 12);
>
> "Good news **from the Covid-19 front line**: the outbreaks in two hospitals in Timiș were closed by doctors" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Aug. 3);
>
> "And yet, good news **on the front of the anti-COVID fight**: Rescuers from the Cîmpina Fire Brigade have returned to work!" (*ziarulprahova.ro*, July 25);
>
> "**Fighting the COVID pandemic**: Medical staff forced to stay 12 hours in protective clothes, some fainted" (*botosaneanul.ro*, July 31);
>
> "How many people from Buzau are **fighting COVID-19** at the moment" (*opiniabuzau.ro*, Aug. 10);

"New **equipment for combating COVID-19** will be in use at the department of the Cluj County Emergency Hospital" (*turdanews.net*, July 29);

"Mureș County Clinical Hospital remains in the **first line of the fight against COVID-19**" (*infomures.ro*, Aug. 26);

"**Victims of misinformation about COVID-19**. They died after drinking cow urine and camel" (*playtech.ro*, Aug. 11).

Another intriguing fact depicted at the lexical selection level is the observation that one of the most prolific patterns for generating clichés consists of coupling the lexeme *war* with an adjectival determiner used as an absolute superlative (*unprecedented*, *total*). This peculiarity in the linguistic physiognomy of the cliché reminds us of the "curse of superlatives", typical of the so-called *wooden language* (Thom, 1993, p. 76):

"**Unprecedented war** in the world of spies. At stake: the secrets of the vaccine for COVID-19" (*digi24.ro*, Sept. 7);

"**Total war** between Raed Arafat and Victor Costache! Where everyone wanted COVID-19 patients to go" (*capital.ro*, Mar. 27);

"**Total war** between the USA and China. Severe accusations brought against the Chinese Communist Party" (*evz.ro*, Apr. 22);

"Firea, in **total war** with DSP Bucharest and the Ministry of Health. Explosive accusations" (*evz.ro*, June 11).

5.2.1.1. Frequently activated aspects from the source field of war

Pyrotechnic / explosive elements. Not surprisingly, journalists also activate from the conceptual field of war various munitions and explosives, particularly in the political and sports field, to characterize a tense situation. At the phraseological level, the occurrences of the widely used pattern *to blow up* reflect the journalistic passion for the verbal paradigm of the explosion. Based on the many examples observed, it is easy to notice that media discourse consolidates the activation of a sense different from the denotative one, recorded in dictionaries ("to destroy something with the help of an explosive"). Precisely, based on our systematic analysis of examples, we could deduce a semantic overuse, visible in the frequent activation of the dominant contextual meaning: "provoking a tense, difficult situation through the controversial actions of politicians, journalists, famous personalities", with potential worrying effects for the future of the country, of the policy or other fields of activity. At the psycholinguistic level, journalists' preference for using the phrase *to blow up*, in relation to abstract or concrete referents, derives from their preconceived idea in the existence of lexemes that can guarantee an increased impact on readers. Most often, the semantic patterns in use for this ready-made phrase introduce and consolidate specific figurative meanings, of which we highlight the following dominant ones:

- to contest, to abolish, to expose (a theory, a program, an institution, laws, regulations, among others):

"Oxford University **blows everything up**: «The death toll from COVID-19 could be overestimated»" (*stiripesurse.ro*, July 17);

"China has deciphered the genome of the new coronavirus. The discovery that **blows up** all theories about Covid-19. It was found out who spread the virus!" (*gandul.ro*, June 19);

"The latest discovery about SARS-CoV-2 **blows up** everything that we knew until now" (*evz.ro*, Aug. 8);

"The Chinese are blowing up Europe! The scandal that **blows up** the entire international scene" (*capital.ro*, Sept. 21);

"The information that **blows everything up**: The Coronavirus was a false global alarm" (*capital.ro*, June 12).

In the last example, the new semantic value becomes apparent as it appears explicitly in the lead of the article: "A 93-page internal document prepared by several external medical experts, commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior in Berlin, **denounces/ exposes** the measures taken by the German authorities against the new coronavirus" (*capital.ro*, June 12).

- "to provoke or intensify a scandal as a result of disclosure of controversial information":

> "Coronavirus and death. The revelation that **blows** Romania **up!** What is the truth?" (*evz.ro*, May 5);
>
> "COVID-19 **blows up** the election year. Electoral paradox: organizing local elections on time – mission impossible. Postponing them – an adventure"(*jurnalul.ro*, Apr. 6).

Similarly, from the same sphere of pyrotechnic elements, we signal the occurrences of a widely used verbal form: *to explode*. In most contexts in which this journalistic automatism emerges, the connotations are predominantly pejorative. It designates an "exponential increase in the number of cases of new coronavirus infections" or "proliferation of illegal activity". The verbal form reaches an advanced stage of clichéd status if we consider the referential variability and the appreciable diversity of the causes generating "explosion" ranging from the infections with the new coronavirus to drug trafficking:

> "*Infections with the new coronavirus* **are exploding** again. Romania exceeds the threshold of 1,300 cases of COVID-19, a new record in 24 hours" (*digi24.ro*, July 30);
>
> "*The virus rate of reproduction* **has exploded** in Germany, after the outbreak at the slaughterhouse with thousands of Romanian employees" (*ziarelive.ro*, June 22);
>
> "Europol Specialist: *Drug trafficking* **exploded** during the coronavirus pandemic" (*puterea.ro*, Sept. 7).

However, we also point out cases, in the context of the relaxation of measures, in which this verbal cliché acquires neutral or meliorative values, the latter one particularly in the economic field where it gains the meaning: "to obtain immediate profit":

> "The British stormed to buy Dacia! *Sales* **EXPLODED** in July: an increase of 77.02% compared to the similar period of 2019" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Aug. 5);
>
> "*Diamond sales* **have exploded** because of coronavirus quarantine" (*forbes.ro*, Apr. 26);

At the level of lexical selection, one can deconstruct the following overused phrase by observing its morpho-syntactic pattern *explozie* + **de** [of] + **nominal group**[24], integrated in negative contexts, perceptible in the explanatory determinants (*explosion of COVID-19 cases/of COVID-19/of the market for false vaccines/infections/the number of patients*, etc.).

> "Spain: **Explosion of COVID-19 cases** after the first week of school" (*radioiasi.ro*, Sept. 13);
>
> "**Explosion of COVID-19** at the Olympic judo teams: 17 athletes, 3 people from the technical staff, plus the general secretary!" (*gsp.ro*, Sept. 23);
>
> "Europol expects an **explosion of the market for counterfeit vaccines** against COVID-19" (*agerpres.ro*, May 18);
>
> "Once again an **explosion of new coronavirus cases** in Suceava County. Another 123 people from Suceava are confirmed with the new Covid-19" (*svnews.ro*, Apr. 21);
>
> "With a **new explosion of cases**, Russia has become the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic. But why does it have such a low mortality?" (*libertatea.ro*, May 8);

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[24]Our findings reveal that many of these linguistic patterns result from the translation of articles published in the international press, thus reflecting the influence of the Western media model on the local journalistic discourse. For example, in this case, we have a journalistic automatism with international circulation: Engl. *explosion of COVID-19*; Fr. *explosion de COVID-19*; Germ. *Explosion von COVID-19*.

> "**Explosion of COVID-19 infections**. What Scenario 3 means and how it affects you" (*realitatea.net*, Mar. 14);
>
> "COVID 19: Again **explosion of coronavirus infections** in the last 24 hours" (*opiniabuzau.ro*, Aug. 15);
>
> "**Explosion of Covid-19 cases** in Germany" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Aug. 12).

The lexeme *bomb*, imported from the same terminology of war, has been widely used in the online media discourse. There are different stages in the process of phrases turning into clichés. The various contexts reveal nominal phrases with different degrees of semantic wear, usually derived from the prototypical pattern *bomb news/ breaking news*. Preceded by nominal elements such as *declaration*, *discussion*, *information*, *move*, *scenario*, this lexical cliché activates the connotation of "sensational news" and is used excessively, to the point of semantic weakening or desemanticization. One can explain the excessive use of this journalistic cliché by resorting to pragmastylistic and psycholinguistic arguments. Specifically, at the core of using this automatism may lie the journalist's tendency to hyperbolize and produce the effect of surprise and sensationalism through any artifice meant to capture the attention of the readers ostentatiously. We noticed that, due to its impact and potential of *captatio benevolentiæ*, this cliché is exploited mainly in peritextual elements (especially in the title, lead). Nonetheless, this is a strategic option if we consider the pivotal role any title plays in the architecture of journalistic text:

> For Roland Barthes, the title, under the "empire of signs", is a "metalinguistic" utterance with an "aperitive" function, which means that it must provoke the reader's desire to read, a strategy that is related to the suspense. The text being a "commodity", its offering is preceded by a "boniment" or an appetizer (Dumistrăcel, 2006, p. 16).

Both in the online and the television discourse, we signal a tendency of excessive usage of the lexeme *bomb* together with other clichés exploited to convey the effect of alert and urgency. This category of clichés is always in an initial position, graphically segmented from the rest of the message through the exclamation mark. The journalist uses this strategy to force and keep the readers' attention in this area of ostentatiously signaled information. Thus, the cliché becomes a distinguishing mark for the sensationalist-based tabloid journalism, salient to the local press, with persistent occurrences and in the "serious" public discourse as well:

> "**Breaking news!** Single-dose Sars-CoV-2 vaccination begins today. 60,000 volunteers will be tested " (*evz.ro*, Sept. 24);
>
> "Oxford **breaking news!** It is about the experimental anti-Covid vaccine" (*evz.ro*, Sept. 12);
>
> "Breaking news – **bomb resignation!** The Minister of Health, resigned in the midst of a pandemic" (*evz.ro*, Sept. 21).

If we "deconstruct" this prolific mechanism in generating clichés, we find the following morpho-syntactic structure: **N1 – N2**, where **N1** is the noun center of the nominal group, while **N2** is the noun with qualifying form, subordinated through the syntactic position of an attribute. Due to this configuration, this pattern is known in the profile literature either by the name of *adjectivized nouns* or "epithet-name" (Stoichiţoiu-Ichim, 2006, p. 239), or by the formula of "noun-attribute" (Barbu, 2012, p. 153). Beyond the fact that this lexical combination has managed to raise numerous controversial interpretive scenarios, we notice that both nouns have as a distinctive feature their use without a definite article. Interestingly, this prefabricated pattern has turned into a cliché and has undergone a significant evolution since the interbelic period, initially in the sports media discourse, later being taken over and adapted to the political context. Furthermore, this elliptical pattern proved to be versatile and extremely productive, generating numerous versions in the contemporary online media discourse. For instance, one could notice *earthquake-statements* ('declaraţii-cutremur'), *shock-statements* ('declaraţii-şoc'), *typhoon-sentence* ('sentinţă-taifun') being usually exploited for the potential of expressing "lexicalized values of the superlative" (Stoichiţoiu-Ichim, 2006, p. 245).

Also, journalists tend to characterize an imminent and challenging situation by extending the monolexematic cliché *bomb* to the syntagmatic expression *ticking time bomb* (*COVID-19 time bomb*). The following group of examples illustrates this transition:

Constatăm că, pentru a caracteriza o situație gravă, iminentă, jurnalistul extinde clișeul monolexematic *bombă* la expresia sintagmatică *bombă cu ceas* (engl. *COVID-19 bomb*). Următorul grupaj de exemple surprinde această tranziție:

> "**The bomb** that is about to explode at Țăndărei. The County Committee for Emergency Situations proposes the quarantine of the city with 4 deaths due to COVID-19" (*adevarul.ro*, Apr. 2);
>
> "**The bomb** from Pașcani: 14 medical staff and 10 patients confirmed with COVID-19 (*ziaruldeiasi.ro*, Apr. 25);
>
> "**The ticking time bomb**, after the three new cases of COVID 19 from Municipal: Nobody is at home, in isolation. No direct contact" (*pressalert.ro*, Apr. 10);
>
> "**The ticking time bomb** that is about to explode in Romanian schools" (*pressalert.ro*, Sept. 25).

<center>∗</center>

Technical means of warfare: weapons, sharp objects. The analysis of numerous clichéd patterns in the corpus reveals a significant variety in terms of the technique of fighting and "weapons" against the virus. These warfare strategies range from environmental properties (*humidity in the air*), therapeutic instruments (*hypnosis*), officially recommended protective measures (*wearing protective masks in public*), innovative sterilization devices (*ultraviolet lamps*), up to hormonal substances (*progesterone*):

> "Study: *Humidity in the air*, a **weapon against COVID-19**" (*stirileprotv.ro*, Aug. 22);
>
> "Romanians are storming psychotherapy offices. *Hypnosis*, the new **weapon against the pandemic**" (*evz.ro*, Aug. 23);
>
> "Wearing face masks in public – the **secret weapon** that helped Japan keep the coronavirus under control" (*digi24.ro*, June 7);
>
> "The **weapons against COVID** and other bacteria are *ultraviolet lamps*!" (*profit.ro*, July 13);
>
> "*Progesterone*, the **'secret weapon' against Covid 19**? The hypothesis of American researchers about the female sex hormone" (*mediafax.ro*, Apr. 27).

At this level, among the recurrent morpho-syntactic patterns in our corpus, the following overused linguistic structure stands out: *weapon* + **adjectival attribute** (qualifying adjective which functions to show the angle for framing the pandemic, usually through the lenses of political, electoral, propagandistic interests and agendas, among others):

> "Covid-19, **electoral weapon** in Israel as well" (*mediafax.ro*, Feb. 18);
>
> "COVID-19 – the **propaganda weapon** of Russia and China" (*europalibera.org*, Apr. 6);
>
> "The United States is on trial for China. COVID-19, **a biological WEAPON** against humanity. SERIOUS DAMAGES and ACCUSATIONS" (*dcnews.ro*, Mar. 30);
>
> "The killer virus, a **biological weapon**? Tens of millions of deaths and chaos in hospitals around the world" (*capital.ro*, Jan. 27);
>
> "Covid-19, **electoral weapon** in Roșiești" (*vremeanoua.ro*, Aug. 12);
>
> „Covid-19 sword. The manufacture of **biological weapons** has never been easier" (*evz.ro*, Sept. 8).

5.2.1.2. Structures specific to war reports
Another peculiarity of the clichés generated by this isotopy derives from the discursive register typical to media war reports:

"*The coronavirus pandemic* **has resulted in** at least 526,663 deaths worldwide since the World Health Organization's China office announced the virus in late December and until today at 11:00 GMT (14:00 Romanian time), according to a balance sheet announced by AFP, notes news.ro" (*stiripesurse.ro*, Aug. 4);

"The third family **decimated** *by COVID-19*, in less than a month" (*bzb.ro*, Sept. 17);

"FCSB, **attacked** *by COVID-19* on all sides. Five more infected players. The match with Backa Topola, under investigation" (*impact.ro*, Sept. 17);

"Trump **pulls out heavy artillery** *against the COVID-19 pandemic*: the *Operation Warp Speed* project has been launched to speed up the development of a vaccine" (*zf.ro*, Apr. 30);

"US Congress **pulls out heavy artillery** *against COVID-19*: Nearly $500 billion will go to US hospitals" (*zf.ro*, Apr. 24).

Symptomatic for tabloid journalism, the verb-based clichés following the semantic pattern of explosives reach a significant worn-out state, and the occurrences update connotative values. For example, an interesting verbal phrase, recently clichéd, has picked our attention, and it is relevant to illustrate this point: to "detonate the nuclear of the evening". Journalists sometimes tend to highlight the entire phraseological nucleus by using a graphic strategy such as capital letters. It is probably an alternative to another widely used journalistic automatism to "drop the bomb".

In some cases, we notice an accumulation of clichés in the metaphorical chain of explosives, exploited in the title, from the journalist's desire to complete semantically and visually the effect of "explosive" information, in the sense of a spectacular revelation, impactful for the public:

"*Doctors* **drop the bomb**! A new symptom for coronavirus. What was observed in patients with Covid-19" (*national.ro*, July 17);

"Exclusive. *A coroner* **dropped the bomb**. What does not appear in the daily reports related to COVID-19" (*evz.ro*, May 4);

"Raed Arafat **detonates the bomb**: Nobody talks about it! The situation has become critical" (*capital.ro*, July 4);

"**Bomb**: Arafat **detonates the nuclear** of the evening! The services are on high alert" (*capital.ro*, May 19);

"Rareș Bogdan **detonates the bomb** regarding the coronavirus: There is no room for analysis time" (*capital.ro*, Mar. 18).

5.2.2. *The lexico-semantic area of natural phenomena and disasters*

Previous studies in the English or Serbian public space (Kilyeny & Silaški *apud* Duda, 2016, p. 153) reported this tendency of the media discourse to often put in analogy extreme natural phenomena (earthquakes, storms, fires, weather calamities, floods, droughts) "with situations of turbulence, social disturbance" (Bărîcă, 2009, p. 47). In a relevant article in this regard, *The Semantics of Disaster*, Duda (2010, p. 162) draws attention to the significant occurrences of terms imported from the lexical field of "extreme disasters" in the news discourse, both generic hyperonymic terms: "*calamity, cataclysm, catastrophe, disaster* as well as hyponymic, specific terms like *avalanche, earthquake, tsunami, hurricane, flood*". Interesting to note is that "the melodramatic treatment of selected events" seems to become symptomatic for this type of discourse.

5.2.2.1. *The lexico-semantic isotopy of liquidity: clichés modeled on the pattern of "hydrological metaphor". Morpho-syntactic patterns and stylistic features*

We will examine hydrological-based journalistic automatisms, taking into consideration a broader recontextualization. Thus, we have included this type of clichés within the lexico-semantic *isotopy of liquidity*. This media frame is recurrently activated to "filter" the dominant interpretations of the current pandemic.

Previous language research has highlighted journalists' preference for using "liquidity metaphors" (Chifane, 2013, p. 89), especially to characterize periods of economic crisis ("the economy is sinking"). Studies have shown recurrent lexical combinations modeled on the pattern of *hydrological metaphors* (see Bărîcă, 2009, p. 49), usually with a relatively high degree of frequency in the political and social fields. In our previous investigations, we have noticed that, in most cases, rain metaphors activate negative connotations (*rain of warnings/crimes/fines*, *flood of statements*, *torrents of accusations*, *wave of protests / sexual assaults*, *flood of politicians*[25].

In political editorials, conducive to journalistic subjectivism, the axiological values of meteorological clichés usually lead to negative, devaluing meanings. The results of the analysis carried out in our corpus reveal a significant percentage of structures created on the morpho-syntactic pattern *avalanche + of + nominal group*. Generally, these journalistic automatisms appear in negative contexts, made visible due to the semantic value of determiners (*avalanche of new cases of COVID-19 /of positive cases /of patients with COVID-19 /of legislative changes/complaints*, among others). The following representative samples illustrate such overused patterns:

> "Alarm IN BÎRLAD: COVID outbreak at the Maternity Hospital, the director, but also several people from the medical staff infected, an **avalanche** *of positive cases!*" (*vremeanoua.ro*, July 19);

> "Doctors in Spain are trying to stop the **avalanche** *of new cases of Covid-19*" (*stiripesurse.ro*, July 28);

> "The recent *Covid* **avalanche** *of cases* has taken the UPU tomograph out of use. There are also 50 investigations in an 8-hour shift, compared to 3-4 before the pandemic" (*obiectivdesuceava.ro*, Sept. 18);

> "Navigation guide in the **avalanche** *of legislative changes* in the context of COVID-19" (*business24.ro*, Mar. 31);

> "Taken by surprise by the **avalanche** *of patients with COVID-19*, Spain declares war on smoking: what the Government's doctors are proposing" (*stiripesurse.ro*, July 31);

> "Politicians and citizens who are afraid of thermometer have filed an **avalanche** *of complaints* with the People's Advocate. The CCR notification is required" (*digi24.ro*, May 22).

Remaining in the semantic field of weather phenomena, we noticed an interesting variation in the pattern of metaphors turned into clichés. For instance, journalists tend to exploit the category of intensity based on the semantic mark /+force/ (*wave*, *rain*, *flood*, *storm*, *tsunami*).

❖ **wave**

> "The reopening of schools would bring a **second wave** *of COVID-19*! What do researchers say?" (*monitorulcj.ro*, Aug. 4);

> "Germany is facing the **second wave** *of COVID-19*" (*gds.ro*, Aug. 4);

> "The **second wave** *of COVID* hits Austria, Chancellor Kurz announced. The government has decided to tighten restrictions" (*digi24.ro*, Sept. 13);

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[25]In our previous linguistic research, we have signaled and analyzed a series of metaphorical clichés created on the same semantic pattern of liquidity. Usually, these automatisms appear in contexts marked by social and political convulsions, among which we mention protests, immigration, acts of terrorism, major socio-political events (*wave of attacks/wave of immigrants, protests, bullet storm, flood of politicians, rain of crimes, economic storm, flood, financial tornado triggered by Brexit*, etc.). Here are just a few representative examples:

> "**Wave of attacks** in Paris" (*ziuaconstanta.ro*, July 16, 2016);
> "**Bullet storm** on people" (*ziuaconstanta.ro*, July 16, 2016);
> "Anonymous hackers have declared 'total war' on Islamic State jihadists after the bloody **wave of attacks** on Friday night in Paris" (*ziare.com*, Nov. 17, 2015);
> "BREXIT: The floods wreaked havoc, voters **swim** to the polls" (*ziare.com*, June 23, 2016);
> "UPDATE / Europe is trying to recover from **the storm triggered by Brexit**. The powerful of Europe meet in Berlin" (*evz.ro*, June 27, 2016).

"The UK could face a **new wave** *of COVID* if schools reopen and testing does not expand, according to researchers" (*digi24.ro*, Aug. 4);

"Why doesn't it make sense to talk about a **second wave** *of the COVID-19 pandemic*. What WHO says" (*adevarul.ro*, July 29);

"**Wave** *of COVID 19 diseases* in Huși: through the City Hall, public institutions and companies, the number of patients is increasing!" (*vremeanoua.ro*, July 28);

"**Wave** *of anti-Covid controls* in markets, on terraces and in shops" (*monitorulbt.ro*, Sept. 21);

"Employers do not comply with anti-COVID-19 prevention measures. **Wave** *of fines* applied by the Labor Inspectorate" (*capital.ro*, Sept. 14);

"The **wave** *of COVID-19 infection* hits Roșiești City Hall. The headquarters of the institution, disinfected" (*vremeanoua.ro*, Aug. 7);

"A **wave** *of confirmations* in the last 24 hours! 41 people from Buzau detected with coronavirus! Critical situation in hospitals" (*jurnaluldebuzau.ro*, July 28);

„COVID-19 balance sheet, August 30! The pandemic continues to wreak havoc in Romania. New **wave** *of infections*" (*capital.ro*, Aug. 30);

"Autumn brings a new **wave** *of anti-COVID restrictions*. European countries that have tightened measures to limit the spread of coronavirus" (*digi24.ro*, Sept. 12);

"New **wave** *of deaths caused by COVID-19*: 45 people died on the last day" (*stiridecluj.ro*, Aug. 18).

❖ rain

"**Rain** *of fines* for non-compliance with the restrictions issued during the emergency state! More than 400 people were sanctioned in one day" (*stiridecluj.ro*, June 21);

"**Rain** *of sanctions* throughout the country" (*cotidianul.ro*, Aug. 8);

"After the **rain** *of fines*, the **rain** *of lawsuits* follows: Romanians have begun to challenge the quarantine and isolation measures in court" (*zf.ro*, July 30).

❖ flood

"Coronavirus. Ciolacu, a **flood** *of accusations*: record number of fines!" (*evz.ro*, Apr. 30);

"**Flood** *of fines* applied for non-compliance with measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic" (*adevarul.ro*, Aug. 14).

❖ tsunami

Natural disasters, which exert an emotional impact on the international community amplified by intense media coverage, also significantly influence the repertoire of local media metaphors. For example, after the tragedy from the Indian Ocean in 2004, the occurrences of the Japanese term *tsunami* recorded an exponential increase in the media discourse. Hence, the cliché can be explained through the exaggerated activation of its metaphorical value, especially in articles on political and economic issues (see Bărîcă, 2009, p. 46–47; Duda, 2016, p. 156) to refer to an inevitable crisis generated by an unpredictable event with devastating effects. Consequently, the emotional intensity encapsulated by this metaphor and the potential to mobilize the affective energies of a heterogeneous mass of readers are elements that can explain journalists' preference for the abusive use of these lexemes. The systematic analysis of our corpus reveals the following distinctive patterns:

- *tsunami* + **preposition** + **noun determiner**

"**Tsunami** *of Covid-19 patients* in London; observance of isolation, put to the test" (*ziare.com*, Mar. 26);

"**Tsunami** *of Coronavirus cases*. Supreme alarm signal from doctors" (*evz.ro*, July 17);

"The country that could be hit by a '*coronavirus* **tsunami**'. Without water, hospitals, and medicines: only 100 tests a day and accusations of concealment" (*gsp.ro*, Apr. 13);

"Hospitals in London, facing a continuous **tsunami** *of patients* in serious condition because of coronavirus" (*digi24.ro*, Mar. 26);

"Alarming situation in 19 European countries, where a '**tsunami**' *of new coronavirus cases* has been reported" (*digi24.ro*, Aug. 18).

- *tsunami* + **genitive article / preposition + nominal determiner**

At the lexico-semantic level, the pattern retains from the primary, denotative meaning, indexed in the dictionary, the seme /+quantity/ with the role of amplifying the size and severity of the consequences of a situation:

"The New York Times: A **tsunami** *of layoffs* is about to hit Europe. Millions of employees risk losing their jobs" (*romaniatv.net*, Aug. 25);

"Great Britain: A **tsunami** *of layoffs*" (*forbes.ro*, May 25).

- *tsunami* + **qualifying adjective** (recurring pattern in the economic, financial, and political field):

"Spain faced with a *financial* **tsunami** in case of non-extension of the partial unemployment program" (*zf.ro*, Aug. 7);

"We can expect an *economic* **tsunami**! Dan Voiculescu, explosive scenario" (*capital.ro*, Mar. 6).

∗

The above-analyzed journalistic automatisms enjoy remarkable popularity in the international media landscape[26] as well. In fact, in our previous studies (Brexit case), we have noticed that local media tend to take over, in mimetic fashion, specific well-established international media frames.

This research model helped us to understand and explain the persistence of clichés "molded" on the pattern of hydrological metaphors, symptomatic for contexts dominated by social, political upheavals (protests, immigration, acts of terrorism, major socio-political events: "wave of attacks", "rain of crimes", "wave of protests", "wave of immigrants", "financial tsunami", among others). Journalists' preference for these *clichés of liquidity* can be interpreted by switching the analysis angle from the (micro) lexico-semantic level and relating it to the (macro)perspective. Thus, we suggest taking into consideration the *constructivist paradigm* (according to which events are filtered through media frameworks, with specific *priming* and *framing* strategies) as well as the *sociological vision* on today's society, marked by vectors of globalization and dynamism, specific to the so-called *liquid modernity* (see Bauman, 2000).

One can further explain such linguistic behavior by considering the interpretation of sociologists on the modern world, increasingly defined by the dual dimension of liquidity: on the one hand, the obsession and contemporary fascination of flow as an image of "global flexibility", the fear of fluidity and social chaos ("waves of immigrants"), on the other one:

"The modern world, that sociologists increasingly characterize by its liquidity, is peculiarly fascinated by flow as an image of global flexibility. The more our world is economically and militarily interconnected, the more we fear social fluidity" (Turner, 2003, p. 8).

It is worth noticing a common strategy employed by Romanian journalists to amplify the usual dose of drama, chaos. For instance, they tend to use relevant images, taken from the international discourse, as an appealing visual "accessory" to their text: "On the new cover of TIME magazine, Trump swims in an ocean of COVID" (*libertatea.ro*, Aug. 8; Fig. 4).

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[26] "**Tsunami** *of hotel closures* is coming, experts warn" (LA Times via *Yahoo Finance*, Sept. 19);

"France is in midst of **second wave** and hospitals «at tipping point» warns A&E union chief" (*yahoo.com*, Sept. 20);

"Rogue Oktoberfest parties could spark Covid **second wave** in Germany as cases hit highest since April, experts fear" (*the-sun.com*, Sept. 21);

"Op-Ed: Could COVID-19 set off a **wave** *of heart disease*?" (*latimes.com*, Sept. 18).

Figure 4: Source: *libertatea.ro*

By applying our research model, the current investigation revealed a significant percentage of clichés whenever the pandemic related media discourse overlaps with the semantic area of meteorological phenomena. This observation led us to the idea of a lexico-semantic strategy that the journalist activates to convey a subliminal message. Through this metaphorical transfer on the devastating, uncontrollable side of nature, journalists seem to highlight the lack of willingness to take responsibility, typical to authorities, in case of economic, financial, political dysfunctionalities, among others. A further explanation for the journalists' tendency to use these lexemes lies in the emotional intensity encapsulated by these metaphors of natural disaster, in their potential to mobilize the emotional energies of a heterogeneous mass of readers.

6. Concluding remarks

The analysis of the linguistic automatisms generated by the current pandemic's intense media coverage proved fruitful. It provided us with relevant clues, useful not only to identify additional features of the linguistic behaviour of clichés but also to understand the underlying motivations, implications, and potential effects of excessive use of specific semantic networks. As a general remark, the analysis of these dominant overused schemes revealed how media institutions overuse, under the pressure of the international model, specific lexico-semantic isotopies that exploit prefabricated structures from distinct fields: *war*, *sports competition*, *ranking*, *natural disasters*, *liquidity*.

What are the implications and consequences when journalistic discourse exploits these linguistic clichés within different media frames and lexico-semantic isotopies?

The reflections derived after examining the linguistic automatisms related to the current pandemic led us to emphasize the critical need to decode overused metaphors and other clichés employed by journalists. Hence, a natural question arises: to what extent can we argue that the exploitation of these linguistic patterns brings us dangerously close to accepting a distorted perspective or to an unconscious fall on the slide of extremism? It is noteworthy that radical attitudes can range from passive consumption of information that leads, in time, to anxiety and collective psychosis, to a total denial of reality. Nonetheless, more than aiming to provide an objective answer, such questions become critically essential for developing an awareness of the effects that the strategic use of prefabricated language can trigger. These aspects become salient if we admit that media discourse (re)activates the constructive, ideological function of clichés. Thus, more than simple overused phrases, journalistic automatisms provide frames or interpretive

"filters" meant to replace one's explanations, to "hijack" the search for meaning, through the "anesthesia" of thoughts and the forced inducement of intense emotional states.

In the context of an infodemic, the effects of framing reality through the metaphorical lenses of war or natural disasters and the dissemination of journalistic automatisms are, in the short term: stimulating anxiety, panic, and irrational actions, and in the medium and long term, amplifying hate speech, stigmatization, social and anti-racist prejudices (see the cliché "Chinese virus" in both the Western and domestic media). Current studies argue for promoting neutral language or alternative metaphorization schemes for conceptualizing the current pandemic (*travel*, *cohabitation*, etc.). On a mental and conceptual level, these re-contextualizations can work as a "vaccine" to limit infection with what we might call the virus of fear, racist feelings, prejudice, and stigma: "act as a vaccine to control the spread of fear and racist feelings" (Rafi, 2020).

The investigation results revealed that these linguistic patterns, analyzed under the conceptual "umbrella" of isotopy, can function as rhetorical and lexico-semantic strategies. Journalists may activate the receptors' affective responses, creating a distorted reality maintaining an artificial state of anxiety, panic. In time, through the impact of obsessive repetition, this operation is conducive to the passive consumption of media representations and cultural stereotypes, preconceived ideas. The more "rooted" these schemes get in the collective mind, the easier it is to function, in Bourdieu (2007)'s words (2007, p. 44), as "cultural fast-food" or "pre-digested, pre-thought food". Hence, they can easily shape perceptions, attitudes, and reactions, including relationships and processes in relation to alterity at the micro- or macro-community level.

Therefore, we need to be aware that we live in the context of a post-truth society, dominated by disinformation and the exponential consumption of fake news (infodemic). As such, it becomes essential to develop the competence to recognize and analyze—based on the lucid exercise of critical thinking—the semantic values, ideological and cultural functions, activated by journalistic automatisms for a correct and objective interpretation of reality.

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