

# Languages of National Socialism

## Sources, Perspectives, Methods

edited by

Tullia Catalan and Riccardo Martinelli

Cogito 6

*Studies in Philosophy and its History*

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This volume draws on contributions from historians and philosophers to analyze the languages of National Socialism from an interdisciplinary perspective. In addition to the languages of official propaganda, it considers the languages of everyday life and of academia, from science to philosophy. In addition to the rigorous study of a variety of sources from the past, the volume also offers an insight into contemporary communication.

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*Studies in Philosophy and its History*

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In quarta di copertina: Reichsminister Joseph Goebbels delivers a speech to a crowd in the Berlin Lustgarten urging Germans to boycott Jewish-owned businesses (1st April 1933).

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# More Than Words: Klemperer's *Lingua Tertii Imperii* as a Network of “Dangerous” Speech Practices

PAOLO LABINAZ, IRENE LO FARO<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter deals with Victor Klemperer's observations on the dangerous nature of the Nazis' usage of German, which constitutes what he called Lingua Tertii Imperii (the Language of the Third Reich). Our aim is to place these observations within the general theoretical framework of dangerous speech studies, integrated with a practice-based conception of language. After highlighting the crucial role played by Klemperer's work in the understanding of Nazi propaganda, we consider the contextual and content-related factors contributing to violence escalation identified in dangerous speech studies and examine whether (and if so, to what extent) they were also present in Nazi speech. We then argue that its dangerousness depended on how the network of speech practices it constituted led Germans to frame the social fabric they were part of in a distinctive way which mirrored oppressive Nazi ideology. Finally, we discuss two examples of how words used during the Nazi period could activate distinctive speech practices with “poisonous” effects.*

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<sup>1</sup> The authors collaborated on the research that this paper is based on and have discussed all aspects of it. However, Irene Lo Faro authored Sections 1, 2.3, and 2.5, while Paolo Labinaz authored Sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.4.



## INTRODUCTION

This chapter elaborates upon Victor Klemperer's first-hand, anecdotally-based investigation into the National Socialist (henceforth, for the sake of simplicity, Nazi) usage of German in the light of more recent studies on dangerous speech. These studies analyze those forms of speech that play a role in creating and encouraging a climate of violence and intolerance towards one or more social groups, as well as normalizing acceptance of (and sometimes participation in) acts of violence towards them, thereby increasing the risk of genocide or other forms of mass atrocity. Although Klemperer made some interesting observations on the dangerous nature of the Nazis' usage of German, these were mostly fragmentary: more specifically, they mostly refer to the role played by individual words, images, and speeches in Nazi propaganda. Here, we aim to place these remarks within the general theoretical framework of dangerous speech studies, integrated with a practice-based conception of language, in order to provide a better and more systematic understanding of the "poisonous" effects of what Klemperer called *Lingua Tertia Imperii* (the Language of the Third Reich). In particular, we consider the two most significant effects of the adoption in people's everyday speech of the Nazi usage of German, and namely, the denial of the worth and dignity of all alleged internal enemies (and especially of the Jews), and that insidious spread of ideological conformity among those not belonging to the target group which prevented the emergence of dissenting voices in much of the population. We shall argue that in order to understand how this could happen, and how the Nazis were able to use German as an instrument of power and domination over the population, we must conceive *Lingua Tertia Imperii* not simply as a linguistic system regulated by its own norms or as a vocabulary made up of a certain number of words with their distinctive meanings, but as a complex network of speech practices. By relying on a practice-based view of language, we hope to show the importance of speech practice in spreading and inculcating an oppressive ideology into the population, whether or not they are the victims or part of the dominant group.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section highlights the crucial role played by Klemperer as an eyewitness and field researcher – albeit against his will – in understanding Nazi propaganda through his anecdotally-based analysis of the Nazi usage of German. In the second section, after providing an outline of the analytic framework developed by scholars working on dangerous speech, we use it to systematize Klemperer's remarks on the dangerousness of the *Lingua Tertia Imperii*. In particular, we argue that its dangerousness depended on how the network of speech practices it constituted led Germans to frame the social fabric they were part of in a distinctive way which mirrored oppressive Nazi ideology. The section concludes with two examples of how words used at the

time could activate distinctive Nazi speech practices with “poisonous” effects. In the third and final section, we observe that the network of speech practices introduced by the Nazis did indeed “poison” (to use Klemperer’s term) German society to such an extent that it is hard to believe that anyone in the population remained immune, irrespective of an explicit adherence to Nazi ideology.

## 1. VICTOR KLEMPERER ON THE NAZI LANGUAGE

This section presents Klemperer’s first-hand, anecdotally-based investigation into the Nazi usage of German. Since his investigation is an in-depth reflection of his experience during the Nazi period, it is essential to begin by offering a short account of his life and explaining the genesis of the book containing the results of his investigation (Section 1.1). We then clarify what Klemperer meant by *Lingua Tertii Imperii* when referring to the Nazis’ usage of German to spread their ideology (Section 1.2). Finally, we present the distinguishing features he attributed to the Nazi language (Section 1.3).

### 1.1. KLEMPERER AS A WITNESS AND FIELD RESEARCHER IN THE NAZI ERA

Born the ninth son of a rabbi, Victor Klemperer (1881-1960) never really identified as a Jew, and even after converting to Christianity and being baptised, his religious affiliation was always a minor issue in his life compared to his sense of being a German citizen. However, despite not belonging to the Jewish community, according to the Racial Laws of 1935, his Jewish origins were enough to lose him his post as a Professor of Romance Languages at the Technical University of Dresden. Because he was married to an “Aryan” German, Klemperer managed to avoid deportation time and time again, but still lost not only his job, but also his home – eventually being made to share a house with other working Jews in Dresden, a so-called *Judenhaus* – and above all, his beloved books. Deprived of the opportunity to keep working and even to read – because owning or borrowing a book was illegal for a Jew – and subjected to daily stress and abuse, Klemperer’s interest gradually turned to trying to understand the Nazi usage of German. This happened despite the fact that at the beginning he had wanted nothing to do with the Nazi language: «[...] I wanted to hear as little as possible of it. [...] If by chance or mistake a Nazi book fell into my hands I would cast it aside after the first paragraph»<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> V. Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich. LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii, A Philologist’s Notebook*, translated by M. Brady, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 11.

Throughout his lifetime, Klemperer had regularly kept personal journals. During the years of Nazi oppression, writing them became a kind of lifeline for him, or as he wrote, «[...] my diary was my balancing pole, without which I would have fallen down a hundred times»<sup>3</sup>.

In these journals, Klemperer clearly expresses his wish to preserve some of his lost freedom by observing, studying, and reflecting upon the subject to which he had devoted his life as a philologist: language. Given the circumstances, however, the only language he had access to and could investigate was the one used by the Nazi regime, namely, what he called the *Lingua Tertia Imperii*. Since it was impossible, or almost impossible, for Klemperer to have books from which to gather evidence of this language<sup>4</sup>, his investigation focused primarily on what was most readily available around him, such as posters, radio speeches, propaganda pamphlets, obituaries in newspapers, and conversations overheard in the factory or on the bus.

After the war, in 1947, after rewriting and fine-tuning notes from his diary, Klemperer prepared a manuscript for publication which he called *LTI (Lingua Tertia Imperii) Notizbuch eines Philologen*<sup>5</sup>. The work's wide circulation made Klemperer a household name: in particular, his work has been very influential in subsequent studies on propaganda. However, it must be borne in mind that Klemperer's book has a strong autobiographical element which reflected his own tragic personal experience, and this makes his approach to the Nazi language polemic from the outset. For this reason, it cannot be considered as a scientific work, but rather – as Klemperer himself said – as a book with educational merit that had the aim of cleansing the German language of the poison with which it had been infected<sup>6</sup>. Despite its strong personal and pedagogical elements, the volume has long been considered a cornerstone in our understanding of Nazi ideology.

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<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> As mentioned above, Jews were not allowed to own or borrow books. The few books that Klemperer could work on were borrowed from his “Aryan” wife, but only sporadically because of the high risk involved for both. Ivi, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, when referring to the Nazi language in his personal journals, Klemperer generally used the acronym LTI, and not the complete expression *Lingua Tertia Imperii*. This choice was not accidental, although the motivations behind it changed over time. Initially, he used the acronym as a way of poking fun at the exaggerated use of abbreviations by the Nazi propagandists. In his opinion, the abundant use of abbreviations was intended to bureaucratize, and by so doing, normalize violence. Subsequently, the acronym LTI took on the metaphorical characters of an SOS, thus becoming a request for help to which Klemperer appealed when he felt he was losing himself both thematically in his writing and psychologically in his everyday life.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, pp. 14-16.

«Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all»<sup>7</sup>. This striking image sums up very well Klemperer's position on the toxic nature of the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (henceforth, LTI) – an issue particularly dear to him. In fact, it was this very toxicity that convinced Klemperer of the importance of cleansing the German language of Nazi ideology.

If we are to understand the poisonous effects of LTI, we must first understand what it consists of and the effect it has on the values associated with German words. To begin with, we should point out that according to Klemperer, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* – which he often described as the Bible of LTI – must be seen as the primary source of LTI, while its codification and diffusion in the German population was the work of Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for the Nazi regime.

Klemperer described LTI as a «fixed» language<sup>8</sup>. By “fixed”, he meant that LTI did not contain or involve linguistic changes, but stayed still, tedious, pertinacious, and constant, and was completely under the sole control of the Minister for Propaganda<sup>9</sup>. As a matter of fact, there was no difference between the written and spoken forms, but the tendency was towards a general impoverishment of its vocabulary – we will return to this issue in Section 1.3.1. Most importantly, Klemperer warned readers that they must be careful not to think of LTI as a brand-new language, completely different from the German of the time<sup>10</sup>. As he pointed out, the Nazis did not invent any words. It is no coincidence that all the “Nazi” words he analysed in his diaries pre-existed Nazism, and this is principally why Klemperer was interested in how the Nazis used these words rather than in their origin<sup>11</sup>. What he was concerned with was how the Nazification of certain German words came about, and the answer he came up with was that it happened because of their being used constantly by the Nazis, and it was this that caused the values associated with these words to be subverted. This is why he saw Nazism as a poison that actually infected words, groups of words, phrases, and acronyms.

Interestingly, although Klemperer was a philologist, he never dealt with the linguistic forms or philological aspects of Nazi language. Instead, as stated above, he was primarily interested in how it was used in context. Central to Klemperer's

<sup>7</sup> Ivi, pp. 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, pp. 43-45, 79, 189-190.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi, p. 41.

approach is the idea that language cannot be separated from its context of use: consequently, a word can survive only so long as it is kept alive by its use, and in Section 2, we shall return to this fundamental aspect of Klemperer's investigation of Nazi language. At the same time, he pointed out that the Nazis did not just use words to spread their ideology, but made use of whatever means were available for communicating something. For this reason, he also examined how architecture, forms of greetings, mass graves, music, parades, and even new roads were used to disseminating Nazi ideology. As he remarked, «[a]ll of this is the language of the Third Reich»<sup>12</sup>.

### 1.3. FEATURES OF LTI

Many of the chapters of Klemperer's book are taken up with describing the distinguishing features of LTI. Of all the features he identified, our focus here is upon the three most relevant to our work: lexical poverty, popularisation, and non-neutrality. Klemperer pointed out that these features made LTI the «language of the people»<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, LTI was not used only by a “clique” – the “small” group that Nazis belonged to – but was the language of every German. Through it, all Germans could describe and refer to every aspect of their life, and so LTI was the only language which people living in Germany at the time could use to communicate with others. This was precisely why Klemperer compared LTI to a poison poured into a well from which everyone drank, and it should be stressed that no German, not even Klemperer, was immune to this poison. The fact that it had the features mentioned above was not pure chance, but something already planned in advance in its Bible – which as we have already mentioned, was Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

#### 1.3.1. LEXICAL POVERTY

The first characteristic of LTI is its lexical poverty: in fact, Klemperer noticed that LTI diminished the lexical resources which an individual can draw upon to communicate. For that reason, he described it a “standardized language”, since its vocabulary and syntax lacks variety and nuances, and it consists of repetitive linguistic formulas<sup>14</sup>. This standardization gradually reduced variations in how

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<sup>12</sup> Ivi, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, pp. 12, 56, and 109.

German was used by members of different social groups to the point that, eventually, these differences completely disappeared. Distinctions became increasingly blurred even when it came to sacred and profane language. As Klemperer explained, the Nazis deprived the language of faith of its specificity. New Testament formulas such as «[...] he has risen» (Matthew 28:6) and biblical terms like «my apostles» (concerning Jesus' disciples) and «eternal» (often related to eternal life/eternal salvation) were taken by the Nazis and absorbed into LTI. Think of Hitler's speeches in which he frequently used expressions such as «you have risen again in the Third Reich», «my apostles» (now describing Nazi devotees), and «eternal Reich»<sup>15</sup>. To some extent, then, the language of faith was no longer about religion. Interestingly, as reported by Klemperer<sup>16</sup>, Goebbels recounted in one of his diaries that Hitler had once concluded a speech full of rhetorical pathos by saying "Amen" and commented that this Amen «[...] sounded so natural that everybody was deeply shaken and moved by it».

Klemperer also pointed out that the standardization and so the impoverishment of the usage of German involved both written and spoken communication: there was no longer any distinction<sup>17</sup>. For example, there was no difference between the language in the newspapers and the one heard on the radio. They were the same language with the same goal: to incite people to action.

### 1.3.2. POPULARISATION

Let us turn to the second feature of LTI, namely popularisation. Klemperer describes Hitler's speeches as *volkstümlich*<sup>18</sup>, literally "of the people" in his diary, and when we think of Hitler's speeches, we imagine him addressing a crowd of people who are cheering him on. For Nazi propaganda, it was essential to put the leader in direct contact with the people, not just with their representatives and so the audience of Hitler's speeches was not made up of a select, elitist public, but included people of every class and gender, and this obliged him to use German in the most accessible way possible. Unfortunately, popularisation took its worst and most degraded form: pure demagoguery. Klemperer found it almost impossible to understand how Hitler managed to keep the attention of the German masses and subjugate them to his will<sup>19</sup>, despite his unmelodious raucous voice, his

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<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 114-115.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, pp. 55-56.

crudely constructed sentences, and his un-German style of rhetoric. His speeches were surprisingly effective, however, perhaps for those very reasons. As a matter of fact, they contained a strong demagogic and fanatical element: he used words to seduce the masses, certainly not to appeal to rationality, with the deliberate aim of shutting off their intellect<sup>20</sup>.

Klemperer argued that creating this language “of the people” was not just about making lexical shifts to a register considered easier to understand yet unsophisticated, like that of the workers<sup>21</sup>; in this case, it would amount merely to the lexical impoverishment we discussed in Section 1.3.1. Instead, popularization was more about appealing to the specific feelings triggered by particular words. One example is the use of the word *Gefolgschaft*, an old-fashion term describing the bond of loyalty between a feudal vassal and his lord, used by the Nazis to address blue- and white-collar workers. Harking back to the old Germanic tradition stirred up completely different emotions and awakened the fighting spirit inherent in that relationship of loyalty and service. Just as vassals would die for their lord, so were Germans expected to do the same for their Führer.

As Klemperer realised, it could be said that thanks to its popularization, LTI soon became a language within everyone’s reach and above all, a language that everyone felt was their own.

### 1.3.3. NON-NEUTRALITY

Klemperer believed that whether it was written or spoken, LTI had never been neutral. In fact, it was divisive, creating hierarchies among groups of individuals and constructing enemies to target. In particular, as he pointed out, “[...] it always has to have an adversary and always has to drag this adversary down”<sup>22</sup>. These adversaries might be outsiders, an external enemy like the Russians, or insiders, like the Jews in particular (who we will discuss later on). As far as external enemies were concerned, LTI was designed to undermine their credibility. An example of how this worked is the Nazi use of what Klemperer called «ironic inverted commas»<sup>23</sup>. While inverted commas are normally used to report a quotation objectively, under the Nazi regime they became a silent tool of propaganda, often being used to cast doubt on the credibility of what

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<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi p. 189.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, pp. 75-76.

was placed between them. For example, when the Communists' victories were reported, they were referred to as a «red victory» placing the term “victory” in inverted commas, while Russian generals are presented as «red generals» with “general” in inverted commas<sup>24</sup>. Whereas as far as internal enemies were concerned (the Jews especially), the Nazis made use of words associating Jews with diseases from which the Germans must be cured. For example, Jewish people were presented as a «tumour of cultural life», «worse than the Black Death of old», or the «Black Death»<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, the very adjective “Jewish” was used as a derogatory expression. In written and spoken discourse, it was usually associated with terms that referred to other potential enemies. As a result, one could find expressions such as, for example, Jewish-Marxist ideology or Jewish-Bolshevik barbarism. By doing this, the Nazis simplified things and tried to create associations between different adversaries. By “bracketing everything together”, as Klemperer said, they created one internal enemy upon whom the German people could focus their hatred<sup>26</sup>.

## 2. FROM *LTI* TO DANGEROUS SPEECH STUDIES, AND BACK AGAIN

This section deals with Klemperer's observations about *LTI* in the light of more recent studies on dangerous speech. We start by providing a brief overview of these studies, focusing in particular on the work of Susan Benesch and her colleagues, due to their attention to the relationship – and interaction – between language and ideology (Section 2.1). We go on to consider the context- and content-related variables which, according to them, affect the dangerousness of speech (Section 2.2) and then examine whether and to what extent they can be associated with *LTI* (Section 2.3). Next, relying on Beaver and Stanley's notion of speech practice, we focus on what made *LTI* so dangerous that it led to genocide and argue that its dangerousness primarily resides in the network of speech practices which constituted it. Indeed, due to their apparent harmlessness, Nazi speech practices quickly spread among Germans, shaping their ways of representing the social fabric they belonged to in ways that were in line with oppressive Nazi ideology (Section 2.4). To conclude, we discuss two examples to show how words used at the time could activate distinctive Nazi speech practices with “poisonous” effects (Section 2.5).

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, p. 164.



Klemperer's investigation of LTI has been a milestone in the study of the language of propaganda. The way the Nazis used German, however, was more than just propaganda: they manipulated the national language to disseminate anti-semitism among the population, thereby creating the ideal conditions for their ultimate goal, which was to exterminate the Jews. Unfortunately, the example of the Nazis is only the most extreme and well-known case of genocide planning in the last century: more recent genocides have occurred in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. Also in light of these horrific events, scholars from a variety of disciplines have become increasingly interested in understanding the forms of speech that contribute to violence escalation. In particular, starting in 2010, Susan Benesch developed the *Dangerous Speech Project*<sup>27</sup>, which has two main goals: (i) to identify recurring forms of speech and more generally, any form of expression (such as images, songs, and films) that encourage people to accept and even take part in acts of violence against the members of a particular group, and (ii) to find effective responses to these forms of speech and expressions in order to counteract them and prevent their dangerous effects<sup>28</sup>.

In Benesch's view, dangerous speech is to be taken as a subset of the broader "hate speech" category. While hate speech is prevalent in almost all societies, even in those where the risk of mass atrocities occurring is virtually zero, not all of its forms lead to acts of violence against a target group – although it might damage members of the target group emotionally or psychologically<sup>29</sup>. What Benesch and the scholars involved in her project are concerned with is all those forms of hate speech that have «[...] a reasonable chance of catalyzing or amplifying violence by one group against another, given the circumstances in which [they were] made or disseminated»<sup>30</sup>. The focus of dangerous speech studies, then, is on the conditions under which hateful speech can lead to an escalation of violence and thus become a case of "dangerous speech". Accordingly, what makes speech dangerous is that it not only persuades its audience of something, but also inspires them to

<sup>27</sup> A detailed presentation of the project is available at <[www.dangerousspeech.org](http://www.dangerousspeech.org)>; accessed 27 January 2023.

<sup>28</sup> See, in particular, J. Maynard, and S. Benesch, *Dangerous speech and dangerous ideology: An integrated model for monitoring and prevention*, in: "Genocide studies and prevention: An international journal", n. 9, 2016, pp. 70-95, and S. Benesch, C. Buerger, T. Glavinic, S. Manion, and D. Bateyko, *Dangerous speech: A practical guide*, The Dangerous Speech Project, 2021, <<https://dangerousspeech.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Dangerous-Speech-A-Practical-Guide.pdf>>; accessed 15 November 2022.

<sup>29</sup> S. Benesch, C. Buerger, T. Glavinic, S. Manion, and D. Bateyko, *Dangerous Speech: A Practical Guide*, cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> S. Benesch, *Dangerous Speech: A Proposal to Prevent Group Violence*, 2012, <<https://dangerousspeech.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Dangerous-Speech-Guidelines-2013.pdf>>; accessed 15 November 2022, p. 1.

commit or condone violent acts. It is one thing to persuade one's audience to adopt certain negative attitudes toward a particular social group, as in the case of hate speech. It is quite another matter if, by adopting such attitudes, people feel entitled to use violence against members of said group. It should be noted that it is not so much the hate speech itself that drives people to take action, but the ideologies that this kind of speech encourages among the population. It is these ideologies that lead people to feel justified in acting violently themselves and also to condone the violent actions of their fellow citizens. As Livingstone Smith has pointed out, «dangerous speech ignites and organizes the violence latent in pre-existing ideologies»<sup>31</sup>.

To understand how speech can become incendiary, Maynard and Benesch analyzed several recent cases of genocide and mass atrocities and found striking similarities in the forms of speech employed by the perpetrators and the ideologies which were spread through their use<sup>32</sup>. In their view, knowing the patterns of speech used in these cases and the ideologies behind them helps us to foresee the escalation of violence, and develop strategies to anticipate such escalations and counteract the influence of dangerous speech.

In the following sub-section, we shall see what factors influence the dangerousness of speech.

## 2.2. CONTEXT AND CONTENT

Maynard and Benesch claim that the dangerousness of speech is influenced by both context- and content-related variables<sup>33</sup>. Regarding context, they identify four factors that can contribute, individually or in combination, to the escalation of violence: the status and qualities of the speaker, the target audience, the socio-historical context, and the means by which the speech is disseminated.

The status and qualities of the speaker play a key role in increasing the capacity of her speech to influence the audience and make them willing to act<sup>34</sup>. She may have formal authority or be recognized as a *de facto* leader. In the first case, one can think of a political or religious leader, while in the second case, one can think of public figures who have no formal power but who are recognized as leaders because of their charisma or popularity, such as actors, journalists,

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<sup>31</sup> D.L. Smith, *On inhumanity: Dehumanization and how to resist it*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 120.

<sup>32</sup> J. Maynard, and S. Benesch, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, pp. 77-86.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, pp. 77.

scholars, singers, or athletes. Of course, we can think of many leaders with formal authority who also possess charisma and popularity. As noted by Maynard and Benesch, the speaker's possession of a certain position or qualities must always be accompanied by a persuasive speaking style in order to mobilize the affective inclinations of the audience<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, recent studies show that appeals to affect and emotion are a key factor in driving the masses to commit violent acts<sup>36</sup>.

With respect to the audience, Maynard and Benesch point out that the propensity of its members to engage in or condone violence can vary widely<sup>37</sup>. This propensity is directly proportional to the audience's perception of the distance between themselves (understood as an "us") and the target group (understood as a "them"): the greater the distance, the greater the propensity. This distance is mainly determined by fear, low empathy towards outsiders, and exploitation of in-group norms. All these factors lead to a weakening of ties between the groups within a population. In particular, the fear of being seriously harmed by another group is a key factor in triggering and justifying violence. After all, when faced with an existential threat, any of us would be inclined to justify violence to defend ourselves and our loved ones. As well as fear, low empathy or even a complete lack of empathy for members of an out-group can further reinforce the acceptance of violence against them. Finally, social norms that create cohesion within a group, combined with fear and low empathy toward outsiders, can easily be exploited to reinforce feelings of hatred towards other groups<sup>38</sup>.

The social and historical aspects of the context constitute the third factor that makes it more likely that a speech, whether false or exaggerated, will become dangerous, thereby increasing the audience's propensity for violence. This is an essential variable because if there are social or cultural reasons which motivate a particular audience to want to harm a particular group or justify violence against it, it is much easier for a speaker to make an inflammatory speech against that group. As Maynard and Benesch point out, intergroup conflict may have deep roots: it may involve past or ongoing diatribes, past episodes of violence, or competition for resources due to difficult living conditions<sup>39</sup>. In addition, the existing or emerging background of ideological beliefs and attitudes plays an important role. It should also be noted that ideologies can lie dormant for years and be reactivated under the right social and historical conditions. As Jason Stanley has

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> For a review of these studies, see O. Olusanya, *Emotions, decision-making and mass atrocities: Through the lens of the macro-micro Integrated theoretical model*, Farnham (UK), Ashgate, 2014, pp. 67-91.

<sup>37</sup> J. Maynard, and S. Benesch, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

observed, the primary function of ideologies is to maintain and reinforce the influence over the population of the dominant group and the political institutions headed by its members<sup>40</sup>.

The final contextual factor to consider is how the speech is disseminated. If a particular community of individuals relies predominantly on one source of information, it is fairly obvious that if the speech comes from that source, it will be more effective in encouraging people to commit and condone acts of violence. In such circumstances, the speech will have a greater impact on the audience than it would in a situation where its members can choose among multiple sources of information. More specifically, if the monopoly of communication is taken over by those who advocate mass atrocities, the communication channels will be saturated with ideas that justify such atrocities by presenting them as things that make sense<sup>41</sup>. When speaking of the means by which the message is spread, we must of course mention the role played today by social networking platforms in the dissemination of dangerous speech and ideologies. These platforms are programmed with algorithms which allow users to select the information that best fits their beliefs and ideologies and avoid information that does not. They are also guided towards interacting with like-minded users. In such cases, even the most absurd beliefs gain more and more traction among people as they become increasingly credible within their close communities<sup>42</sup>.

Finally, still on the topic of means of dissemination, Maynard and Benesch point out that the language in which a speech is delivered can play a significant role in increasing the audience's propensity for violence<sup>43</sup>. If a speech is delivered in the language predominantly used by the in-group, it can lead to a sense of solidarity among its members, thus making group members feel blameless because they assume that only those who speak the same language will understand them.

Regarding the content of dangerous speech, Maynard and Benesch argue that it includes statements and arguments used to justify mass atrocities. In particular, they identify six justification mechanisms that aim to make violence «[...] permissible, desirable, and even necessary before, during, and after mass atrocities»<sup>44</sup>. Since dangerous speech usually involves more than one of these mechanisms simultaneously, their boundaries are often blurred. The six justification mecha-

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<sup>40</sup> J. Stanley, *How propaganda works*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 269-291.

<sup>41</sup> J. Maynard, and S. Benesch, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., C. Thi Nguyen, *Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles*, in: "Episteme", n. 17, 2020, pp 141-161.

<sup>43</sup> J. Maynard, and S. Benesch, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Ivi, p. 80.

nisms are dehumanization, guilt-attribution, threat construction, destruction of alternatives, virtuetalk, and future bias.

Dehumanization serves to make people believe that members of the target group are biologically subhuman, mechanically inhuman, or supernaturally alien<sup>45</sup>. This justification mechanism diminishes any moral responsibility for their future death and more generally, the obligations that every human being is supposed feel towards his or her fellow human beings. If members of the target group are considered to have a less-than-human status, then anyone can consider themselves justified in condoning others for committing acts against them that would be unacceptable in a normal context. As for the guilt-attribution mechanism, it consists of justifying violence against the target group because of past crimes committed by its members against in-group members or the audience of the speaker's speech<sup>46</sup>. Violence is thus justified as just collective punishment (or perhaps even revenge) that falls on the entire group, even if the violence was committed by only some of its members. As Maynard and Benesch note, threat construction is probably the most effective justificatory mechanism<sup>47</sup>. This mechanism requires the construction of a narrative that the target group poses a threat to in-group security because of past crimes or plans to commit crimes against its members. For this reason, any violence against the members of the former is seen as more than justified, as it is necessary to keep the members of the latter safe. In particular, narratives about plans for future violent actions by members of the target group can be highly persuasive for the audience: indeed, as psychological studies have shown, people usually perceive the future as frightening because of the impossibility, or near impossibility, to intervene in what might happen. When people feel threatened, they have no problem justifying the legitimacy of violent defensive action. In such situations, violent action against threatening out-group members will be seen as necessary for one's own survival and that of the other in-group members. Significantly, Maynard and Benesch emphasize that these first three justification mechanisms place «[...] out-group members into a social category in which conventional moral restraints on how people can be treated do not seem to apply»<sup>48</sup>.

The next three justification mechanisms are often related to the previous ones. Those who make dangerous speeches usually present violence against the target group as the only viable alternative. If there are no other viable alternatives, then violence becomes inevitable and its acceptance becomes necessary. There

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 81-83.

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 80.

are several ways in which alternatives to violence can be destroyed. A speaker can present violence as a historical necessity or represent its possible alternatives as ineffective or impractical, or emphasize their unacceptability given the current situation of emergency or exception<sup>49</sup>. By virtue talk, Maynard and Benesch refer to the justificatory mechanism by which violence is associated with praiseworthy qualities, while non-participation in or resistance to it is portrayed as suggesting lack of virtuous qualities or a deplorable “weakness”<sup>50</sup>. To this end, those who make dangerous speeches often associate violence with verbal expressions, symbols, and images that invoke praiseworthy qualities such as duty, honor, manliness, and so on. Thus, if members of the in-group do not participate in violence, they are qualified as inappropriate or inadequate members of the group and are thus shamed and socially ridiculed. Finally, there is the future bias mechanism. This justification mechanism is based on the idea that if the speaker tells the audience about the future benefits that can be obtained through violence, then the audience will have good reason to consider acquiring these benefits more important than the moral costs of their violent actions. When speaking of future benefits, a speaker may refer to the guarantee that no other outside group will be able to threaten the in-group, that there will be economic and social benefits from atrocities, and many other similar things. If the audience believes that the attainment of these future benefits depends on their actions, then they will agree to perform them and condone the violent actions of others precisely because such actions are necessary to obtain these future benefits<sup>51</sup>.

### 2.3 LTI AND ITS “DANGEROUS” CONTEXT- AND CONTENT-RELATED VARIABLES

Let us now consider whether and to what extent the context- and content-related variables identified by Maynard and Benesch can be related to LTI. Interestingly, Klemperer’s study of the Nazi use of German already provides some excellent clues as to how LTI might be related to them.

Let us focus first on the contextual variables. As reported in Section 1.3.2, despite the serious flaws Klemperer found in the way Hitler addressed the masses, he had to admit that the Führer was a dangerous, manipulative demagogue, surprisingly good at stirring the population’s feelings and emotions. Hitler was therefore endowed not only with formal authority (being the Führer), but also with the manipulative skill enabling him to incite hatred in one group for an-

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<sup>49</sup> Ivi, pp. 83-84.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, pp. 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, pp. 85-86.

other. To demonstrate the manipulative power of Hitler's speeches, Klemperer recounts a dialogue between himself and an acquaintance. Confronted with the latter's enthusiasm for Hitler's oratorical skills, Klemperer asked him what made Hitler's speeches so irresistible. He replied, "I have no idea, but you simply can't resist him"<sup>52</sup>. This suggests how much of a church-like effect his speeches had, leading the audience to blindly believe what he was telling them. As for the audience, Klemperer argued that the German people possessed certain character traits that created the ideal conditions for the fascist experience to be exported to Germany and taken to the extreme. These traits are: lack of any limits, excessiveness, and hyper-perseverance. "Lack of any limits" translates to the German term *Entgrenzung*, which literally means "the removal of borders". According to Klemperer, this is a characteristic peculiar to Romanticism, the German movement which, in his opinion, already contained those same traits that would later be found in Nazism. As for excessiveness and hyper-perseverance, these were traits which had already been identified previously in Germans by authors who Klemperer quoted, such as Scherer and Tacitus<sup>53</sup>. In his view, it was this combination of character traits which led to the anti-Semitic nature of Nazism. Although anti-Semitism had existed throughout Europe for centuries, it had never taken on such violent, destructive, and excessive proportions as it did during the Third Reich. Moreover, unlike the anti-Semitism of the past, Nazi anti-Semitism claimed to have a strong "scientific" basis, focusing on blood and thus racial differences between Germans and Jews. For Klemperer, such hatred was a symptom of hyper-persistence because it was «ineradicably tenacious»<sup>54</sup>.

The social and historical context of Germany at the time was also conducive to the spread of Nazi violence without there being any real internal opposition, especially as regards the persecution of the Jews. In fact, Klemperer believed that the anti-Semitic character of Nazism from its inception had contributed in part to its success. He made a brief and fleeting reference to the Zionist movements of the first half of the twentieth century<sup>55</sup>, which, in the name of national and territorial self-determination for the Jewish people, had given anti-Semites even more opportunities to consider Jews as non-Europeans and outsiders. Last but not least, there is no doubt that the Nazi regime had total control over the media through constant supervision of the press, radio, and film industry. Although this control was not monolithic, propaganda was pervasive. By controlling the media,

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<sup>52</sup> V. Klemperer, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, pp. 133-144.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> L. Halperin, *Origins and evolution of Zionism*, in: "Foreign Policy Research Institute", 2015. URL: <[https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/halperin\\_-\\_hi\\_-\\_origins\\_and\\_evolution\\_of\\_zionism.pdf](https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/halperin_-_hi_-_origins_and_evolution_of_zionism.pdf)>; accessed 25 January 2023.

the regime created a monopoly for itself as regards public language. With its official clichés and stereotypes, the LTI expressed the only approved way of thinking, and it did so according to certain rules and styles. Anything that deviated from the “official” Nazi speech code could only be expressed privately or clandestinely, otherwise the speaker faced severe punishment.

With regard to the content of Nazi speeches, Klemperer’s remarks make it possible to trace all six justification mechanisms identified by Maynard and Benesch. While the first three (dehumanization, guilt attribution, and threat construction) served to make the Jews a group to which ordinary human categories and rules did not apply, the other three (destruction of alternatives, virtuetalk, and future bias) served to create strong and stable bonds within the German “Aryan” population by assigning them a task and presenting the expected benefits they would receive if this task were successful. At the same time, of course, all of these mechanisms intersected and overlapped so that each one reinforced the other.

Let us begin with the dehumanizing element embodied in LTI. Klemperer describes the LTI as a dehumanizing language. Indeed, it expressed the Nazi will to objectify all (alleged) internal enemies, especially the Jewish people. The devaluation of their value and dignity was accomplished by referring to them not only as “racially inferior” but also as “not-human”, thereby denying their status as humans. Accordingly, in Nazi written and spoken discourses, we can find constant references to the *Untermenschentum* (sub-humanity)<sup>56</sup> of the members of the victim groups or their association with animals, such as pigs, or parasites. In particular, as Klemperer suggests, the adjective “parasitic” was used to refer to Jews above other target groups<sup>57</sup>.

As for guilt attribution, Klemperer points out that the Nazis blamed the Jews for Germany’s major defeats and problems. Although anti-Semitism has been part of Nazi ideology from the very beginning, the most violent actions taken against Jews were the result of events in which they were accused of crimes against Germany and the German people. As Klemperer suggests, the best-known case is the so-called Night of the Broken Glass (in German *Novemberprogrome 1938* or *Reichskristallnacht*). By 1938, the oppression and brutalization of the Jews was a daily occurrence, but the assassination in Paris of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by a Polish Jew was used by Goebbels as a pretext to justify increasingly violent actions against Jews. The result was the pogrom that destroyed Jewish businesses, homes, schools and synagogues, and led to the arrest and deportation of scores of Jews to concentration camps. Klemperer did not speak specifically about this episode; instead, he emphasized the role the Nazis believed the Jews had played in

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<sup>56</sup> V. Klemperer, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

<sup>57</sup> Ivi, p. 184.



the outbreak of the war. He reported that during an inspection, one of the Gestapo agents asked him: «At home you're all praying for the Jewish victory, aren't you? [...] We're at war with the Jews, it's the Jewish war»<sup>58</sup>. In fact, the Nazis presented the war as “defensive” and “imposed”. The Jews were considered guilty of a war that was described as a «[...] continuation of the murderous Jewish attacks on Hitler's Germany»<sup>59</sup>. Because the Jews were blamed for the outbreak of the war, the violence used against them was seen as not only justified, but necessary.

Finally, the German people were encouraged not only to seek revenge for what the Jews had “allegedly” done, but also to see the possible future threat posed by the Jews. Klemperer described how Hitler's speeches always adopted one of two attitudes towards the Jews: either mockery or terror. With terms like “black plague”, the LTI created a climate of fear toward the Jews, who were seen as dangerous and deadly, just like the Black Death. To fight this “plague” that threatened the lives of the German people, there was no other option but to eliminate the source of the threat, namely the Jews.

The presence of the other three justification mechanisms in Nazi speeches was mainly aimed at establishing ideological conformity among those who were not part of the target group, thus preventing the rise of dissenting voices. Indeed, the goal was to spread Nazi ideology among the population so that, over and above explicitly adhering to it, people would consider what Nazi propaganda demanded of them as something which was necessary and which had to be done for the good of Germany.

Let us first consider the mechanism of destroying alternatives. As noted above, the primary target of LTI hate was undoubtedly the Jews. The Nazi approach to this group was more violent than to any other “enemy”. Klemperer suggests that behind this insatiable hatred was the Nazis' need for the presence of a deadly enemy to fight and defeat. As Klemperer put it: «without the swarthy Jew there would never have been the radiant figure of the Nordic Teuton»<sup>60</sup>. Accordingly, hatred of the Jews was presented as the only way possible for the German people to realize themselves as “Aryans”. Klemperer even noted ironically that «[h]ad the Führer really achieved his aim of exterminating all the Jews, he would have had to invent new ones»<sup>61</sup>.

The reference to the term “Aryan” allows us to introduce the virtuetalk about Germanic “purity” in LTI. Klemperer noted that LTI was, first and foremost, an incitement to action and movement. Initially, this movement was the sports movement of athletes. Both Hitler and Goebbels made great use of the metaphors of sport. Then the active movement became aggressive, and boxing became

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, p. 182.

<sup>60</sup> Ivi, p. 164.

<sup>61</sup> Ivi, p. 181.

the most frequently mentioned sport<sup>62</sup>. As evidence that aggression and combativeness were considered the most important virtues of the Aryan people, Klemperer wondered how the new generation – raised under Nazi Germany – had encountered the adjective heroic and who that generation considered heroes. It is interesting to discuss the word heroism precisely because it carries with it the notion of virtue par excellence. Klemperer recognized three different types of heroes that propaganda presented one after the other: first, the SA guards, Hitler’s initial tool for seizing power, who were called “blood-soaked conquerors”; second, racing drivers, who were willing to die in order to achieve excellence (like Bernd Rosemeyer, who was considered a Nazi “martyr”)<sup>63</sup>; and third and finally, tank drivers, because during the war, the tank outshone the racing car. Heroism, as understood by LTI, makes heroes out of those who are willing to do anything to succeed: they are eager to die (like the racing drivers) and to kill (like the soldiers).

Finally, behind the incitement to hatred and action were not only fear and revenge, but also promises. These promises concerned the prosperous future that awaited the Germans after they had eliminated the Jews, defeated the Bolsheviks, conquered the necessary living space, and so on. Interestingly, as Klemperer noted, the future to which the Nazi propaganda constantly referred is a past to which one must return<sup>64</sup>. The reference to a Germanic ancestor superior to other “races” justified claims to supremacy and racism. Klemperer cites the emblematic motto *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Earth), engraved under the eagle’s coat of arms<sup>65</sup>. This phrase was inherited from the Roman legal formulas of *ius sanguinis* and *ius soli*, which embodied the desire to belong to a German race claiming a German homeland. Klemperer rightly pointed out that this glorious past had the characteristics of a mythical past which had, of course, never existed.

#### 2.4. LTI AS A NETWORK OF “DANGEROUS” SPEECH PRACTICES

So far, we have seen that the context- and content-related factors contributing to violence escalation were clearly at work in Nazi speech. In a certain sense, LTI made the Jewish genocide permissible and probably unavoidable. But how is it that Germans came to consider violence against Jews and members of other groups targeted by Nazi propaganda to be normal (and even participated in such acts): it would seem to have something to do with the ease with which LTI spread

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<sup>62</sup> Ivi, pp. 237-242.

<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ivi, pp. 77-78.

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, p. 246.

through the population. One might have expected German people to challenge and somehow try to combat LTI and its “poisonous” effects. Instead, as reported in Section 1.3.2, Klemperer described how LTI became the language of everyone in Germany, including the members of the victim groups. In his words, the poison was everywhere, and it was «[...] borne by the drinking water of the LTI», with the result that «nobody [was] immune to its effects»<sup>66</sup>. However, the fact that every German used this language does not mean that the oppressive ideology it communicated was clear to them, nor does it mean that they adhered to that ideology. As Klemperer notes when referring to conversations he overheard between ordinary people (his colleagues at the factory where he was forced to work) who used LTI terms, «none of them were nazis, but they were all poisoned»<sup>67</sup>. To fully understand this categorical statement, we should think of LTI not so much as a linguistic system regulated by its own norms, or as a vocabulary made up of a certain number of words with their distinctive meanings, but as a network of speech practices. According to a practice-based view of language, we are constantly engaged in speech practices when we communicate with others<sup>68, 69</sup>. As Beaver and Stanley suggest, “[a]ll communication takes place with respect to a context of practices, which licenses the communicative acts constitutive of the communicative exchange”<sup>70</sup>. Often the mere utterance of a word is enough to be part of a language practice, even if we are not consciously aware of it. In fact, the use of a word always takes place within a linguistic practice, and Klemperer places great emphasis on this:

For a word, or the particular nuance or connotation of a word, only takes on a linguistic life of its own and becomes truly alive within a language, where it enters into common usage within a particular group, or the public at large, and is able to assert its presence over a period of time<sup>71</sup>.

When a speech practice is activated, it can shape our ways of representing the social fabric of which we are a part, for example by assigning different social roles and positions. In this sense, a speech practice is never neutral; it is always a per-

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<sup>66</sup> Ivi, p.97.

<sup>67</sup> Ivi, p. 100.

<sup>68</sup> See D. Beaver and J. Stanley, *Toward a non-ideal philosophy of language*, in: “Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal”, n. 39, 2019, pp. 501-545, and D. Beaver and J. Stanley *Neutrality*, in: “Philosophical Topics”, n. 49, 2021, pp. 165-185.

<sup>69</sup> When, as seen in Section 1.2, Klemperer argued that language could not be separated from its context of use, he was advocating an idea of language not unlike the one we are proposing here.

<sup>70</sup> D. Beaver and J. Stanley *Neutrality*, cit., 184.

<sup>71</sup> V. Klemperer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

spective on the social world to which we belong. By framing the world within a situated perspective, speech practices fundamentally contribute to the emergence and spread of ideologies. For example, choosing to use the word *faggot* or *homosexual* to refer to a homosexual makes a socially relevant difference: they shape the relationship between the speaker and the homosexual group differently. Indeed, by choosing one or the other, the speaker locates herself, and invites her interlocutors to do the same, within one speech practice rather than another. Let us now suppose that more and more people begin using the derogatory term “faggot”. In this case, a certain discriminatory way of viewing members of that social group may become the dominant perspective and thereby, the dominant ideology. At the same time, however, not all of the people who use that term will be aware of its discriminatory power, because it is the term that everyone, or almost everyone, in their linguistic community tends to use when referring to homosexuals. That is how a person may engage unintentionally and unconsciously in a speech practice and thus adhere to a particular perspective (even a discriminatory one) without being fully aware of it. The problem is that whenever one enters a well-established and widely employed speech practice, one is socially compelled to conform to the perspective on the social world defined by that practice; if one does not, it is likely that some social sanction will be forthcoming.

Let us now consider the case of the network of Nazi speech practices. Interestingly, as reported in Section 1.2, Klemperer described Nazism as a poison that permeated words, word groups, phrases, and acronyms. Speaking of Nazism as a poison that permeates words, word groups, and other forms of expression seems to be a metaphorical way of suggesting that Nazism embedded them in speech practices that were designed to frame the world within a situated, poisonous perspective. This would seem to be the crucial move the Nazis made, and especially that Goebbels made, and Klemperer puts the emphasis on this aspect when he talks about LTI: since we are constantly engaged in speech practices, to the extent that there is a robust and well-established network of speech practices in a society, its proliferation will allow a dominant “social” perspective to be established in that society without those engaged in such practices being fully aware of it. In the case of the Nazis, this “social” perspective soon became an “oppressive” ideology that established the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in German society. In particular, Nazi ideology promoted one way of looking at Aryans and another way of looking at Jews that was disseminated covertly through everyday speech practices. Consider what was said in the previous section about the portrayal of internal enemies, especially Jews, as inhuman, threatening, and capable of the most nefarious deeds. It is not surprising, then, to find people who accepted the fact that it was necessary to exclude Jews from German society, including their physical presence. At the same time, as was emphasized in the previous section,

LTI was designed to highlight the virtues of the Aryan population. The emphasis on these virtues also had the effect of making the other social groups in Germany feel inferior. Consider again the example of the word “heroic” presented above. When Germans used this word, no one was being explicitly oppressed. At the same time, however, it promoted the idea that only Germans with certain characteristics could be considered heroes, and this had a demeaning effect on members of the population who did not possess these characteristics. More specifically, Nazi ideology was oppressive in two ways. On the one hand, it promoted the strengthening of bonds between the dominant Aryan population while silencing those of groups who did not conform. At the same time, it imposed or reinforced a certain hierarchical perspective on the German social fabric, according to which people must be treated differently according to which socially marked group they belong to. In the next section, we will consider two examples from LTI to show how words used in everyday German life at the time could activate distinctive Nazi speech practices with “poisonous” effects.

## 2.5. NAZI SPEECH PRACTICES: TWO EXAMPLES

This section discusses two examples of Nazi speech practices, one involving the word *Volk*, whose activation was intended to create ideological conformity among the German population (Section 2.5.1), and another involving the word *Parasiten*, which was aimed at stripping members of the Jewish group of their human dignity (Section 2.5.2).

### 2.5.1. *DAS VOLK*

The word “Volk” (*das Volk*) is central to a rather complex network of Nazi speech practices. Indeed, its utterance activated, on different occasions, slightly different speech practices that were united by the fact that they were practices of exclusion within the German population. As Klemperer noted, the word was «[...] customary in spoken and written language as salt at table [...]: *Volksfest* {festival of the people}, *Volksgenosse* {comrade of the people}, *Volksgemeinschaft* {community of the people}, *volksnah* {one of the people}, *volksfremd* {alien to the people}, *volksentstammt* {descended from the people} [...]»<sup>72</sup>. In Nazi Germany, everything had become “of the people”: the chancellor was the chancellor of the people (*Volks-kanzler*), the party was the party of the people (*Volks-partei*), even the car

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<sup>72</sup> Ivi, p. 30.

ended up being the car “of the people” (*Volks-wagen*). But although the word *Volk* could easily be translated as “people”, the way the Nazis used it endowed it with an ideologically driven meaning. In their view, being a part of the *Volk* presupposed national, political and racial unity, and it was racial unity, in particular, which was the key element distinguishing members of the *Volk* from outsiders. The German *Volk* was therefore conceived by Nazis as a community of people united by blood. From this bond arose a connection to the so-called “Land of the fathers” (or the ancestors)<sup>73</sup>, which members of the *Volk* felt a claim to because it had belonged to them in the past. All of this shows that translations such as “of the people” or “national” do not sufficiently clarify the meaning attributed at the time to the word *Volk* (and related adjectives such as *völkstümlich*, which we considered in section 1.3.2 with reference to the distinctive features of the LTI), nor do they explain the constant and almost pathological use of the term. Moreover, there was another interesting aspect connected to the use of this term. Precisely because everything was “of the people” there was a lack of terms available to use when referring to the individual. In Nazi ideology, the individual disappeared to make way for the *Volk*, an indistinct entity of anonymous individuals with a blood bond and a common goal, which was to regain their (imaginary) ancestral land. Whenever something became “of the people”, the private sphere disappeared in favour of the public sphere. The motto quoted by Klemperer, «Du bist nichts, dein Volk ist alles» (*You are nothing, your Volk is everything*)<sup>74</sup>, sums up the poisonous effect spread by Nazi propaganda. With the imposition of a single thought – the “people’s thought” – and a single will – the “people’s will” – from which the individual cannot escape, the only possible effect was the nullification of every individual. Since the value system was defined by a person being part of the *Volk*, and not by their preferences and (free) choices, this obviously involved the imposition of ideological conformity.

#### 2.5.2. *PARASITEN*

The second term we consider is “parasites” (*Parasiten*), which we already mentioned in Section 2.3. There is no doubt that the association of this term with a particular social group is denigrating and has a degrading effect on its members. What we want to emphasize, however, is that the Nazis’ use of *Parasiten* to refer to Jews had an even worse purpose than denigrating and degrading them. In fact,

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<sup>73</sup> Surprisingly, but not too surprisingly, the Nazis never defined the boundaries and limits of this longed-for land.

<sup>74</sup> Ivi, p. 23.

the word was used to activate speech practices of total dehumanization that justified violence acts against Jews and contributed to their genocide.

The association between Jews and parasites had been present in Germany since the Middle Ages<sup>75</sup>. The choice of the term “parasites” to refer to them had to do with their “received” representation as “landless wanderers” who settled in someone else’s territory in order to survive. According to this received, biased view, by settling in someone else’s land, the Jews were exploiting the “host-people”. In LTI, comparing the Jew to a parasite was replaced by defining her as one. According to Nazi ideology, the Jew was no longer *like* a parasite: the Jew *was* a parasite. As evidence of this, Nazi biology textbooks defined the “Jewish race” as a “parasitic race” by nature.

The result of the constant use of the term *Parasiten* to refer to Jews in the Nazi propaganda was that Jews were increasingly seen as beings who were unworthy of being treated like human beings. Whenever Hitler or Goebbels used this term in their speeches, the German people were led to think of the Jew as *something*, not someone, the presence of *which* had to be eliminated before it became harmful. Indeed, if parasites (by definition) can only survive at the expense of someone else, and if by their very existence they harm the host to the point of the host’s destruction, there could be no possibility of coexisting with them: disinfection was necessary for the survival of the German people. As proof that the “disinfection” of the Jews went beyond the merely denigrating and degrading effects of the use of the term *Parasiten*, we should recall that their extermination was carried out in the same way as the extermination of germs and bacteria: with poison gas.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we placed Klemperer’s fragmentary observations on the “poisonous” nature of the Nazis’ usage of German (which constitutes what he called LTI) within the general theoretical framework of dangerous speech studies, integrated with a practice-based conception of language. Our aim was twofold: on the one hand, we wanted to show that the contextual and content-related factors contributing to violence escalation which have been identified in dangerous speech studies were clearly and powerfully at work in Nazi speech. At the same time, we wanted to highlight the crucial role played by the network of speech practices introduced by the Nazis in spreading and inculcating their oppressive ideology among the German population. As we have seen, Nazi ideology was all about

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<sup>75</sup> A. Bein, *Der jüdische Parasit. Bemerkungen zur Semantik der Judenfrage*, in: “Vierteljahrshäfte f. Zeitgeschichte”, n. 2, 1965, pp. 121-149.

belonging, and its criteria for inclusion and exclusion in German society were to a large extent modelled, proclaimed, and achieved through language. Indeed, the (not entirely conscious) use by ordinary people of Nazi speech practices (like those discussed in Section 2.5) made possible the rapid, silent spread of an inhumane way of representing the social fabric and some of the people within it. This made the idea acceptable among Germans that some lives could be treated with dignity and others not, on the basis of arbitrary criteria and without any reasonable justification. Should we conclude from this that those who lived within the network of “dangerous” Nazi speech practices must be considered complicit for not questioning the underlying oppressive Nazi ideology, even though many of them never explicitly supported the actions taken by the Nazis? Although it goes beyond the scope of this paper to attempt an answer to this question, we believe that from the perspective of ordinary people, the Nazi experience might be described (to return to Klemperer’s metaphor) almost as an unconscious collective poisoning. In their defence, it can be argued that they lived in a communicative “bubble” from which it was impossible, or nearly impossible, to break free. However, as Klemperer pointed out, it is truly astonishing that so many ordinary people, whether they were among the victims or belonged instead to the “Aryan” group, adapted their own speech to Nazi speech practices and adopted them without much ado. It does not even matter whether they adhered to Nazi ideology, what matters is that their action or inaction enabled these speech practices to spread and prosper, together with the oppressive ideology they represented.