Conspiracy Theories Are Not Theories: Time To Rename Conspiracy Theories

Kevin Reuter[1] and Lucien Baumgartner[1]

[1]*University of Zurich*

Abstract

This paper presents the results of two corpus studies investigating the discourse surrounding conspiracy theories and genuine theories. The results of these studies show that conspiracy theories lack the epistemic and scientific standing characteristic of theories more generally. Instead, our findings indicate that conspiracy theories are spread in a manner that resembles the dissemination of rumors and falsehoods. Based on these empirical results, we argue that it is time for both re-engineering *conspiracy theory* and for relabeling 'conspiracy theory'. We propose relabelling conspiracy theories as either 'conspiracy stories' or 'conspiracy narratives' to more accurately convey their true nature.

Keywords: corpus analysis; conspiracy theory; theory; spreading misinformation; conceptual engineering; relabelling.

1 Introduction and Theoretical Background

Two claims are frequently made about conspiracy theories. First, conspiracy theories are argued to be *about* conspiracies (see, e.g., Basham & Dentith 2016, Cassam 2019, Coady 2008, Cohnitz 2018, Feldman 2011, Harris 2018, Keeley 1999, Pigden 2007, Räikkä 2018). Second, conspiracy theories are argued to be *theories* (see, e.g., Butter 2018, Dentith 2022, Duetz 2022, Hepfer 2015, Pigden 2007). Both claims suggest themselves by a compositional analysis of the term 'conspiracy theory'. Consider, for example, the composite terms 'music theory', and 'string theory'. Very roughly, music theory is a theory about music, and string theory is a theory about strings. Thus, without evidence to the contrary, we might simply assume the minimalist account to be correct, according to which conspiracy theories are theories about conspiracies.[1]

---

[1] While the meaning of composite terms is often made up of the meanings of its parts, that is not always the case, e.g., the rainbow press is not the press about rainbows.

Empirical evidence against the first characteristic has recently been put forward by Napolitano & Reuter (2021). The results of their experiments reveal a double dissociation of *conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory*: Not only are people willing to call a claim a conspiracy theory even though no conspiracy has taken place, they also show that even if a conspiracy is part of the view that is put forward, laypeople are not inclined to call the view a conspiracy theory if the conspiracy has truly taken place.[2] What about the second pillar of the minimalist account: are conspiracy theories really theories? Very recently, several papers have raised doubts about the status of conspiracy theories as theories (Đorić 2020, Frindte & Frindte 2023, Huneman & Vorms 2018, Napolitano 2022). While Napolitano (2022) argues against the claim that conspiracy theories are theories but rather are self-insulated beliefs in conspiracies, others have defended the minimalist account (Butter 2018, Dentith 2022, Duetz 2022, 2023, Pigden 2007). Most of the arguments in this debate are based on *individual* scholars's intuitions about *individual* conspiracy theories. What is missing, so far, is a comprehensive analysis of the term 'conspiracy theory' that transcends the scope of individual conspiracy theories and circumvents the reliance on individual scholars' intuitions.

This paper utilizes corpus-linguistic tools to provide empirical evidence challenging the categorization of conspiracy theories as genuine theories. Corpus analysis involves using computational techniques to systematically and quantitatively study extensive text data. This method is exceptionally well-suited for investigating the general use of expressions.[3] Through a thorough examination of the usage patterns surrounding the term 'conspiracy theory' within both pre-built and custom-made corpora, we conduct a comparative analysis that juxtaposes conspiracy theories against both scientific as well as non-scientific theories.

Before attempting to determine whether conspiracy theories are truly theories, it is imperative to first address the question of what constitutes a theory. Regrettably, there is limited agreement regarding this matter. While sociologist Abend (2008) recognizes seven distinct meanings of the term 'theory', Duetz (2023) considers three different senses of the term: established account, hypothesis, and hunch. Meanwhile, philosophers often differentiate between the syntactic view, which conceives of theories as a collection of theorems formulated in languages of predicate logic (Carnap 1966, Hempel 1966, Winther 2021), and the semantic view, which equates theories with a set of models (Suppes 1960, van Fraassen 1989). Natural scientists rarely provide a definition of a theory, but

---

[2]   Napolitano & Reuter (2021) also raise the question of whether the concept of *conspiracy theory* encodes an evaluative dimension and present empirical studies that strongly suggest a positive answer. Particularists are particularly skeptical of attempts to define or re-engineer *conspiracy theory* as an evaluative concept (e.g., Dentith 2019, Pigden 2007). Shields (2023) has recently argued that "we should be very circumspect regarding engineering concepts that are primarily sites of conceptual domination." (2023, p. 465) Napolitano & Reuter (forthcoming) defend the re-engineering of *conspiracy theory* against the charge of furthering conceptual domination.

[3]   Reuter & Baumgartner (forthcoming), as well as Alfano (forthcoming) provide introductory chapters to corpus analysis from a philosophical perspective.

instead emphasize the unique epistemic status of theories (National Academy of Sciences 1998, see also Popper 1963). They assert that theories undergo testing, confirmation, falsification, substantiation, refinement, and revision in response to the observations and experiments of the phenomena that the theories are meant to explain. In this paper, we adopt the latter *pragmatic* approach to examine the status of conspiracy theories. Although this pragmatic approach is certainly inspired by a scientific perspective, we will see that less scientific uses of 'theory', e.g., 'fan theory' or 'my/your/her theory', satisfy these epistemic conditions for being theories to a very large extent. Consequently, if it is found that people do not test, confirm, substantiate, refine, and revise conspiracy theories, this would provide substantial evidence in support of the claim that conspiracy theories are not theories in any relevant sense of the term.

Our motivation for choosing a pragmatic approach is threefold. First, there is no definition of 'theory' along the syntactic or semantic lines, that commands widespread acceptance in the literature. In contrast, there will be few scholars who deny that people test, confirm, substantiate, refine, and revise theories. Second, as elucidated by Abend (2008) and Duetz (2023) in their discussions on the various conceptions of theory, different notions of theory come in different strengths. By adopting a pragmatic approach, we are not compelled to establish a definitive threshold beyond which it becomes implausible to consider something as a theory. Instead, our pragmatic framework permits us to evaluate the status of conspiracy theories along a continuous spectrum, as we substantiate in the subsequent analysis.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, only the pragmatic approach can be easily operationalized for empirical studies. We aim to examine whether conspiracy theories are regarded as theories through a linguistic analysis. If people engage in activities such as testing, confirming, and refining (conspiracy) theories, we can reasonably anticipate that they would also discuss these activities in talking and writing. Hence, examining the language used to describe the handling of theories and conspiracy theories can offer insight into their epistemic standing. To investigate this, we will observe the language employed by individuals to describe their own and others' interactions with theories. This method is comparatively straightforward as we only need to analyze the language rather than the many ways in which people use and engage with theories.

In the next two sections, we present our corpus-analytic results. Corpus Study 1 demonstrates that conspiracy theories not only fail to be subject of scientific and educational activities, it also reveals a frequent occurrence of spreading terminology preceding the term 'conspiracy theories', which we further investigate in Corpus Study 2. We subsequently find remarkable similarities between the way we talk about conspiracy theories and the way we discuss falsehoods and misinformation.

In the following two theoretical sections, we discuss possible objections and consequences of the empirical results. More specifically, we will make two proposals. First, we believe our results require us to *re-engineer* the concept of conspiracy theory. Both the minimalist account as well as some popular characterizations define conspiracy theories as theories. However, such definitions

3

lack empirical justification when considering the actual usage and application of the term 'conspiracy theory'. Second, we will argue that we should re-label conspiracy theories in a way that better reflects that conspiracy theories are not theories. In this regard, we propose the adoption of terms such as 'conspiracy story' or 'conspiracy narrative', which better encapsulate the true nature and characteristics of conspiracy theories.

2 Corpus Study 1

In order to gain insight into the epistemic standing of conspiracy theories, we propose to examine the language employed in characterizing the activities associated with scientific theories, non-scientific theories and conspiracy theories. A fruitful avenue for investigating the discourse surrounding these concepts involves the compilation of a substantial corpus of phrases following the pattern of "VERB [target term]", e.g., "test theories", "share conspiracy theories", etc. Importantly, we need to compare the verbs preceding a whole range of different theories, in order to paint a fairly accurate and representative picture. This is what we have done in Corpus Study 1.[4]

Verbs occur in many different positions in English sentences. For our purposes, we only observe verbs that occur directly in front of the terms of interest. Let us illustrate the main idea by using a pre-built and freely available corpus like the NOW corpus.[5] The advantage of using such a corpus is that readers can—after registering—easily replicate the results for themselves. In order to get the respective data, we enter <VERB theories> into the search field of the NOW corpus, then click on options and group by lemma in order to catch all different forms of the verbs. Table 1 (right hand side) shows the most frequent verbs preceding the term 'theories'. This list of the 10 most common verbs provides some positive evidence that a linguistic approach is likely to deliver some promising results. Among the most frequent terms we find 'test', 'develop', and 'support', which highlight some of the scientific activities. Other terms like 'discuss', 'offer', and 'learn', more strongly emphasize some of the educational aspects surrounding theories.[6]

---

[4] A comparative corpus analysis is, of course, not restricted to verbs only. Further evidence for what theories are and how people specify theories can be collected by investigating adjectives that occur before the target terms: "ADJ [target term]". Previous studies by Napolitano & Reuter (2021) and Reuter & Baumgartner (forthcoming) have used a similar design, focusing on adjectives rather than verbs (see also Baumgartner 2022, Reuter 2019, Reuter et al. 2022, Sytsma et al. 2019, Willemsen et al. 2021). Their studies indicate that the term 'conspiracy theories', in contrast to the term 'theories', is primarily an evaluative term. While these corpus analyses suggest important differences between conspiracy theories and other theories, they do not provide strong enough evidence about the status of conspiracy theories as theories.

[5] The NOW corpus can be easily accessed through this website: https://www.english-corpora.org/

[6] The most frequent term 'fan' is wrongly identified as a verb by the NOW corpus. Note also that the NOW corpus is a dynamic corpus. Thus, numbers will change given that the corpus grows continously.

Next, we enter <VERB conspiracy theories> into the NOW search field and observe the most common verbs occurring before 'conspiracy theories' (see Table 1 left hand side). A look at the ten most common verbs preceding 'conspiracy theories' reveals a highly frequent use of verbs referring to the spreading of information. 6 out of 10 verbs in the top 10 belong to that category. In contrast, no terms appear that clearly belong to the scientific or educational realm with the possible exception of 'debunk', which is also the ninth most frequent term in front of 'theories'.

Conspiracy Theories		Theories	
Term	Number	Term	Number
promote	885	fan	1157
spread	611	test	320
push	490	develop	182
believe	441	discuss	125
peddle	389	offer	105
embrace	243	share	98
share	151	promote	96
amplify	141	support	96
debunk	136	debunk	95
espouse	135	learn	83

Table 1: A list of the 10 most frequent verbs in front of 'conspiracy theories', and 'theories'.

While these results indicate some important differences between the way people talk about theories and conspiracy theories, we need to be careful in not overinterpreting those results. First, we have only focused on the 10 most frequent verbs. Second, the NOW corpus only consists of texts from news websites. As such it might not give a representative picture of the way ordinary people talk about theories and conspiracy theories. Third, a more comprehensive comparative analysis should also include several control conditions. Given these limitations, we therefore decided to build our own corpus, include a greater list of verbs, and to throw several control conditions into the mix.

2.1   Methods and Data

As control conditions, we decided to analyze the following target terms: 'critical race theory', 'fan theories', 'game theory', 'music theory', 'string theory', and just 'theories'. The terms 'game theory', 'music theory' and 'string theory' were selected (a) because they are frequently discussed on the internet and would likely deliver a sufficiently large sample, and (b) because they are representative and much-discussed theories from three different domains. The terms 'critical race theory' and 'fan theories' were selected because the status of critical race theory and fan theories as theories is perhaps a little more controversial. Especially fan theories do not have any strong claim to being scientific theories. As such, we included control terms that also represent less demanding uses of the term 'theory'. If we were to find that a linguistic analysis of 'conspiracy

theories' is similar to an analysis of 'critical race theory' and 'fan theories', then this would certainly affect the conclusions we can draw from that data.

For this study, we focus on data from the social media platform Reddit. Reddit is often referred to as "the cesspool of the internet," and it is well known to host a myriad of conspiracy theories. However, one can also find elaborate discussions on more academic topics, such as music theory or string theory. Previous research has shown that Reddit plays an important role in the diffusion of conspiracy theories from Qanon to anti-vaxxers (e.g., Cinelli et al., 2022, Engel et al., 2022, Shahsavari et al., 2020). Hence, Reddit provides abundant corpus data relevant to our investigation.

The data for this study consists of 12,973 target structures extracted from Reddit comments spanning from October 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021, which were collected using the Pushift API (Baumgartner et al., 2020). The data was cleaned and syntactically annotated (PoS-tagging) in order to extract our target structures.[7] Except for modal verbs and participles (e.g., "competing theory"), verbs often do not directly precede singular direct and indirect objects without the addition of an article (e.g., "I read a theory"). Hence, the fact that we are focusing on constructions of the form "VERB [target term]" means that we are forced to use either the plural form or standing terms as our targets. We further excluded past, gerund, and present participle constructions, as well as modal verbs.

2.2 Verbs and Categories

In order to provide a quantifiable analysis of the verbs in our corpus, we need to group them into categories. This can be be done manually or using unsupervised, automated methods. One of the potential drawbacks of unsupervised methods is the limited interpretability of results. For this corpus study, we thus rely on manual coding. We examine the 30 most frequent verbs for all seven target terms and categorize them into five distinct categories:[8]

(i) **scientific**: build, confirm, create, develop, discover, disprove, elaborate, falsify, form, prove, solve, test, write.

(ii) **educational**: cover, describe, discuss, explain, grasp, learn, study, teach, understand, visualize.

(iii) **consumptive**: hear, read, see.

---

[7] The syntactic annotation was performed using `spacyr` (v1.2.1) in `R` (v4.1.0). Data cleaning entails addressing various elements such as special characters, inconsistent whitespace, fragmented text, and contractions, among other issues.

[8] Our decision to focus on the 30 most frequent verbs in our analysis might seem arbitrary, yet it was informed by several pragmatic considerations. First, we observed a notable drop in the occurrence of verbs ranked 30th to 40th when juxtaposed with our target terms, which implies that the top 30 verbs could likely serve as a robust representation. Second, expanding our scope beyond the 30th rank, for instance to the 50th, significantly increased the variety of verbs encountered, complicating the analysis. Third, beyond the range of 30, we encountered increasingly general verbs like 'have' and 'get', which proved challenging to categorize without additional context.

(iv) **attitudinal**: accept, appreciate, believe, embrace, enjoy, hate, like, love, oppose, reject, support.

(v) **spreading**: fuel, peddle, post, promote, propagate, push, share, spew, spout, spread.

Whether or not terms belong to the category consumptive, attitudinal, and spreading, should be fairly uncontroversial, the categories scientific and educational are certainly less clear. We asked five independent coders to tell us whether these terms belong to the scientific or the educational sector. At least four out of five coders agreed on all terms except two: 'define' and 'know' were subsequently excluded from the analysis.

2.3 Results

	attitudinal	consumptive	educational	scientific	spreading
conspiracy theories	29.70	6.17	5.34	6.73	52.06
critical race theory	25.92	4.58	60.10	2.54	6.86
fan theories	31.40	30.23	9.30	19.77	9.30
game theory	25.00	7.93	64.02	2.44	0.61
music theory	5.51	0.82	93.08	0.24	0.35
string theory	12.07	4.31	62.93	20.69	0.00
theories	16.65	21.09	18.74	33.04	10.48

Table 2: Shares of verb class per target phrase [%]

Table 2 displays the percentages of the five categories among all terms selected for classification. Crucial for an evaluation of conspiracy theories are those terms that belong to the scientific and educational category. Figure 1 illustrates the proportions of educational verbs versus scientific verbs. As we can see, the term 'conspiracy theories' has the lowest proportions for both verb classes (5.34% educational, 6.73% scientific) taken together. For 'theories', we find the highest proportion of scientific verbs (33.04%), but also slightly lower numbers of educational verbs (18.74%). 'Fan theories' is located between the two. On the other hand, 'music theory', 'game theory', and 'critical race theory' are predominantly preceded by educational verbs (>50%) and have very low proportions of scientific verbs (<5%). Lastly, 'string theory' is the only target phrase diametrically opposed to 'conspiracy theory'. If we compare the (summed) proportions of educational and scientific verbs to spreading verbs (Figure 2), we see that 'conspiracy theory' is an outlier, as it is mainly used with spreading verbs (52.06%).

2.4 Discussion

In our Corpus Study 1, conspiracy theories have revealed themselves to be markedly different from other theories. People do not write about conspiracy theories in the same scientific and educational manner in which they write about other theories: We neither find verbs that indicate people's scientific engagement
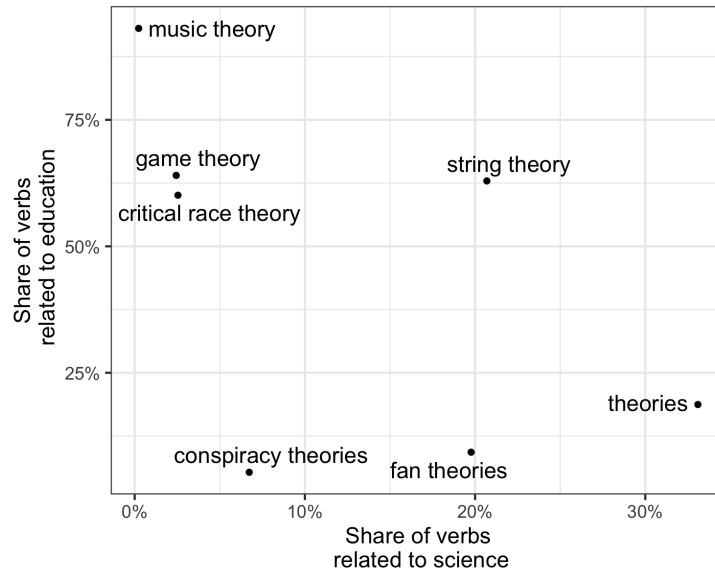
Figure 1: Relation between the seven different terms on a two-dimensional space spawned by the components scientific and educational.
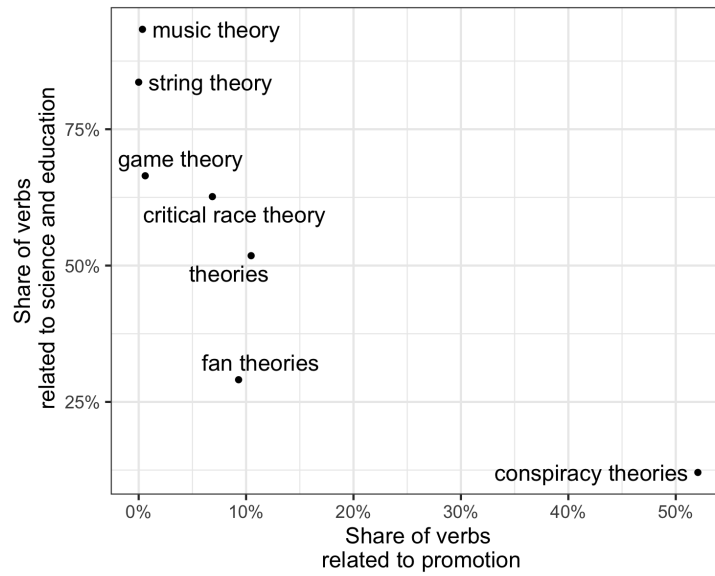

Figure 2: Relation between the seven different terms on a two-dimensional space spawned by the components promotion/spreading and scientific+educational.

with conspiracy theories, nor are conspiracy theories taught and studied like other theories.[9]

At this stage, one might want to raise an objection against drawing too strong a conclusion from these results. After all, conspiracy theories are quite different to theories such as string theory and game theory. However, our control terms not only included clearly scientific examples but also non-scientific theories like fan theories. Fan theories are speculative interpretations created by fans to explain elements within various books or films. Yet, our comparative analysis reveals that educational and scientific terminology is far more frequently associated with fan theories—double and triple the rate, respectively—, compared to conspiracy theories. We will revisit this objection in Section 4. At this juncture, the evidence suggests that conspiracy theories may share the nominal label of 'theories' but lack the substantial epistemic underpinnings of what one typically considers a theory.

3   Corpus Study 2

Not only did we observe a lack of scientific and educational verbs preceding 'conspiracy theories', we also found a class of verbs—spreading verbs—that frequently occur before conspiracy theories but hardly at all with any other of the tested theories. Why would people so frequently talk about conspiracy theories in that way? An answer might be provided by looking at other things that are spread, pushed and promoted.

In order to explore phenomena that are spread and peddled, we enter <spreading NOUN> and <peddling NOUN> into the search field of the NOW corpus. The most common nouns are displayed in Table 3. These include 'misinformation', 'rumours', 'lies', and 'falsehood'. The term 'conspiracy theories' is the fourth most common noun appearing after 'peddling', the third most frequent noun after 'spouting' and the 21st most common noun after 'spreading'. In other words, many people seem to treat conspiracy theories on par with falsehoods, misinformation and rumours.

spreading		peddling	
Term	Number	Term	Number
misinformation	7162	lies	733
awareness	5825	drugs	557
rumours	3873	falsehood	314
lies	3521	conspiracy [theories]	228
coronavirus	2818	misinformation	200
disinformation	2433	rumours	191

Table 3: A list of the 6 most frequent nouns occuring after 'spreading', and 'peddling'.

---

[9]   Critical race theory, music theory, and game theory also have very few scientific verbs preceding them. Perhaps this indicates their status as theories in the social sciences in contrast to theories in the natural sciences.

In order to further inquire into the similarities and dissimilarities of conspiracy theories on the one hand, and falsehoods and misinformation on the other, we decided to run a second corpus analysis in which we compare the categories of verbs preceding 'conspiracy theories' with verbs occurring before terms such as 'falsehoods'. In Table 4, we list the 10 most frequent verbs for 'conspiracy theories' and 'falsehoods' from the NOW corpus.

Conspiracy Theories		Falsehoods	
Term	Number	Term	Number
promote	885	spread	748
spread	611	perpetuate	370
push	490	peddle	304
believe	441	contain	142
peddle	389	promote	136
embrace	243	publish	121
share	151	propagate	116
amplify	141	tell	113
debunk	136	use	100
espouse	135	debunk	92

Table 4: A list of the 10 most frequent verbs in front of 'conspiracy theories', and 'falsehoods'.

A direct comparison between the ten most frequent verbs before 'conspiracy theories' and 'falsehoods' displays remarkable similarities: The verbs 'promote', 'spread', and 'peddle' are among the top 5 most frequent verbs before both target terms. This warrants a more comprehensive comparative analysis. We therefore conducted a second corpus analysis using Reddit comments. Just like in our initial study, we selected Reddit for its rich repository of conversational data that aligns with our research interests. Furthermore, the platform's informal discourse offers a refreshing juxtaposition to the more structured texts found in the NOW corpus.

For this follow-up, we were interested in how 'conspiracy theories' (along with 'theories') align with broader categories of speech often associated with spreading verbs, viz. 'truths/falsehoods', 'information/misinformation', 'lies', and 'rumors'. We chose these terms based on the data presented in Table 3. We added antonyms for 'falsehoods' and 'misinformation' but not for 'lies' and 'rumors' as their antonyms are already partially covered by 'truth'. The antonyms are intended as an additional control condition and also act as a sanity check. The Reddit data for Study 2 consists of 11,997 new comments (spanning from October 1, 2021, to December 31, 2021), in addition to the observations for 'conspiracy theories' and 'theories' previously used in Study 1. The pre-processing and annotation used in Study 2 is identical to the one in Study 1.

3.1 Results

What we find is that 'theories' and 'truths' behave similarly, whereas 'conspiracy theories' is much closer to 'falsehoods' and 'rumors'. Figure 3 shows the proportion of verbs related to education versus science. As we can see, 'con-
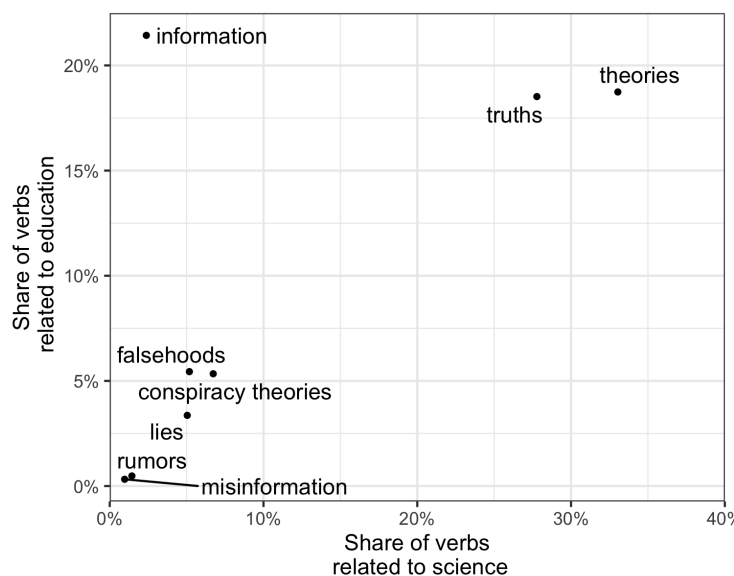
Figure 3: Relation between the eight different terms on a two-dimensional space spawned by the components scientific and educational.

spiracy theories' clusters nicely with 'falsehoods', 'lies', 'misinformation', and 'rumors', which all have very low proportions of either verb category. In contrast, the share of educational verbs is quite high for 'information' (21.43%), 'theories' (18.74%), and 'truths' (16.66%). However, unlike 'theories' (33.04%) and 'truths' (27.78%), 'information' (2.38%) has a very low share of scientific verbs, similar to 'conspiracy theories' (5.34%). Figure 4 compares the proportions of verbs related to science and education with those related to spreading. Here, again, we see 'theories' and 'truths' are used very differently from all other target expressions. Their share of spreading verbs is a lot lower, and their share of scientific and educational verbs is a lot higher compared to the majority of the other terms.

3.2   Discussion

The results of Study 2 indicate that the term 'conspiracy theory' behaves in a manner similar to expressions associated with the dissemination of false information, while the word 'theory' does not. Analysis of verbs used in reference to conspiracy theories revealed a prominence of terms related to spreading, suggesting that people tend to focus on the dissemination aspect of conspiracy theories, similarly to misinformation and lies. These findings provide further support for the argument that conspiracy theories are not widely perceived as theories.
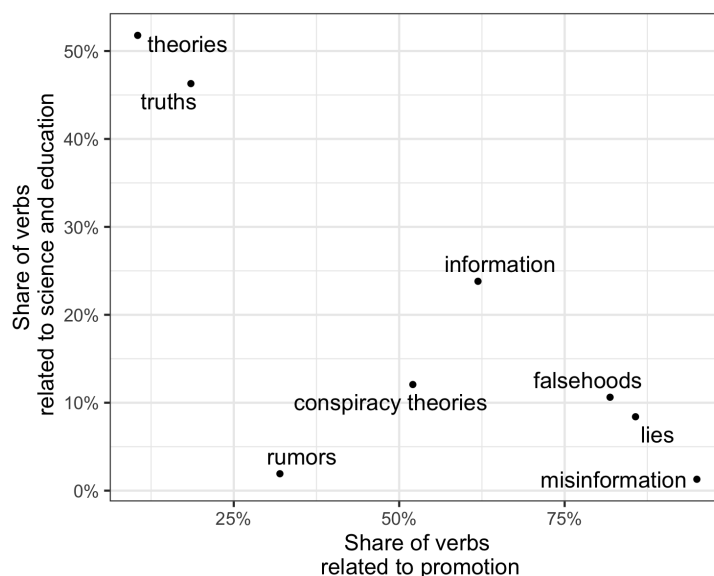
Figure 4: Relation between the eight different terms on a two-dimensional space spawned by the components spreading/promotion and scientific+educational.

4 Summary and Objections

The results of Study 1 reveal a significant discrepancy in the manner in which we discuss conspiracy theories as opposed to other theories. While theories are commonly described as being tested, developed, and studied, conspiracy theories are very rarely discussed in these terms. Additionally, we discovered that, in contrast to theories, people often express that they spread, promote, and peddle conspiracy theories. Further examination of the prevalent use of spreading terminology in Study 2 shows a significant overlap between the way in which we discuss conspiracy theories and falsehoods. This leads to the conclusion that conspiracy theories are not, in fact, theories, and should therefore not be defined as theories. This conclusion may be met with resistance. In the following, we will discuss four objections that are likely to be raised against our claims.

Some may raise concerns that the Reddit comments that make up our main corpus may not be representative and therefore, the data collected could potentially present a distorted perspective. However, if this were the case, one would expect to observe vastly different results when analyzing the NOW corpus. While the list of verbs used in relation to conspiracy theories may not fully align between the Reddit and NOW corpus, the overall conclusions remain consistent: conspiracy theories are rarely preceded by scientific or educational verbs and instead frequently co-occur with terms related to spreading.[10]

---

[10]   We do not, of course, deny the possibility of variations in language usage regarding conspiracy theories among specific communities.

Second, a counterargument could be advanced that the term 'theory' is a family-resemblance or exemplar concept, similar to the concept of 'game' (Wittgenstein 1953, Rosch 1978). While the activities associated with vastly different games such as poker and football are likely to be highly disparate, we still categorize both as games. Perhaps conspiracy theories and other theories are also only loosely connected. Some might even go as far as suggesting that the term 'theory' is polysemous (see also our discussion of the work of Abend (2008) and Duetz (2023) in the introduction): In the realm of science, a theory comprises a set of principles that shape and direct scientific inquiry. Contrastingly, in everyday language, 'theory' often simply denotes an idea that might explain a particular circumstance. While we do not disagree here with such possible distinctions, the important question to be raised is a different one: Do people really treat these theories differently in ways that are relevant given our pragmatic approach? Our results about fan theories suggest a negative answer. Fan theories are not spread and peddled but also tested and disproven (albeit perhaps to a sligthly lesser degree).

At this stage, one might argue that even fan theories possess a considerable level of sophistication. Instead, consider the example, "My theory for why my dog barks at the postman is his fear of bearded men." In such a case, don't we use "theory" more clearly in the sense of opinion that is not straightforwardly subject to being tested? The empirical data paints a different picture. As demonstrated in Table 5, when we refer to "my theory", "your theory", or "her theory", the associated activities predominantly and clearly have an epistemic nature. The theory about your dog's behavior, for instance, undergoes processes of testing, proof, confirmation, support, and contradiction. In essence, there is no substantial evidence to suggest that there exists an interpretation of 'theory' that corresponds with the way conspiracy theories are commonly perceived.[11]

my theory		your theory		her theory	
Term	Number	Term	Number	Term	Number
test	88	support	35	prove	62
prove	80	test	19	test	62
confirm	65	prove	14	share	59
support	55	disprove	14	explain	50
contradict	23	think	14	support	33

Table 5: A list of the 5 most frequent verbs in front of 'my theory', 'your theory', and 'her theory' on the NOW corpus.

A third objection may pertain to the specificity of our examination of the term 'conspiracy theories'. The argument posits that individuals may use differ-

---

[11]   In a final attempt to address this issue, it might be proposed that there is a distinct sense of 'theory' unique to conspiracy theories. However, this perspective requires several critical justifications: (a) it must present a compelling and independent rationale for categorizing conspiracy theories as 'theories'; (b) it needs to clarify why specialists in the field of conspiracy theories have not recognized this unique interpretation, assuming it exists; and (c) it should convincingly argue against the necessity of re-engineering the term 'conspiracy theory' due to its idiosyncratic usage and implications.

ing language when referring to conspiracy theories in the plural form as opposed to a singular conspiracy theory, or when discussing specific conspiracy theories such as the QAnon conspiracy theories or the flat earth theory. However, corpus data does not support this assertion. As presented in Table 6, the most commonly used verbs occurring before both phrases "VERB the conspiracy theory" and "VERB QAnon theories" belong to the category of spreading. It should be noted that this analysis does not suggest that all conspiracy theories are undeserving of the label 'theory'. For instance, theories surrounding the Watergate conspiracy may indeed be considered proper theories as characterized in this article. However, as Napolitano & Reuter (2021) have proposed, such theories may no longer be classified as conspiracy theories in the contemporary understanding of the term.

The Conspiracy Theory		Qanon theories	
Term	Number	Term	Number
promote	155	promote	12
support	126	push	7
push	117	spread	5
spread	87	retweet	3
believe	65	post	3

Table 6: A list of the 5 most frequent verbs in front of 'the conspiracy theory', and 'Qanon theories'.

Fourth, and finally, it may be argued that the connection between the language used to discuss conspiracy theories and the manner in which they are treated may not be entirely justified. A skeptic may posit that language use can often be misleading. While this is a valid point, the operationalization used in this analysis seems to accurately depict the actions taken with regard to theories, i.e., people discuss, apply and explain these theories. A more specific critique may therefore question whether the most frequently used verbs preceding 'conspiracy theories' accurately reflect the actions taken with regard to these theories. While it is unlikely that individuals would actively test, develop, and elaborate conspiracy theories but talk about them in a very different manner, here are two possible explanations why such a discrepancy might exist: 1) individuals may refrain from discussing the development and testing of conspiracy theories due to potential social repercussions, such as mobbing or backlash, and 2) those who approach conspiracy theories from a scientific perspective may be a minority and thus, their discourse is overshadowed by those who dismiss these theories. While these explanations would offer some interesting insight if they were true, they would also imply that the majority of individuals do not consider conspiracy theories to be theories. Are there any independent reasons to grant credibility to the minority's viewpoint? It seems that such a justification can only be established by granting the minority the status of experts. It would be difficult, to say the least, to argue that advocates of conspiracy theories deserve the label 'experts' in any substantial sense.

5 Re-Engineering *Conspiracy Theory* and Re-labelling 'Conspiracy Theory'

We started the paper with an exposition of the minimalist account which states that conspiracy theories are theories about conspiracies. Our corpus-linguistic investigations have uncovered that conspiracy theories bear minimal resemblance to established theories. Even when considering more lenient epistemic criteria for labeling claims as theories, akin to the case of fan theories, or "your theory", conspiracy theories fail to satisfy even this minimal requirement for classification as theories. Instead, they bear a close resemblance to misinformation and rumors.

What implications should be derived from the findings of our corpus studies? The discrepancy between the term 'conspiracy theory' and the results of our studies may immediately raise the call for some serious conceptual engineering. Conceptual engineering involves the process of refining individuals' concepts in order to improve their cognitive processes. The motivation behind this practice stems from the recognition that at times, it becomes necessary to enhance our conceptual frameworks in order to achieve various advantageous outcomes, whether they are theoretical, social, political, or of other nature (Isaac, Koch & Nefdt 2022). One particularly well-known and extensively debated illustration is the redefinition of *planet* in 2006, wherein Pluto was excluded from the planetary category (for empirical data on the dissemination of re-engineered concepts like *planet*, see Landes & Reuter 2022, ms). Notably, philosophers have taken up the task of refining specific concepts themselves (e.g., Haslanger 2000, Napolitano & Reuter 2021, Reuter & Brun 2022, Scharp 2013).

A natural question to ask at this point is what the theoretical, social, and political advantages are of such an engineering process in the case of *conspiracy theory*. On a theoretical level, the importance of precision is akin to the need for clarity in the classification of planets within the scientific community. Just as it is unproductive to group dissimilar celestial bodies such as Pluto and Eris under the same category as Jupiter and Saturn, it is equally counterproductive to group conspiracy theories with proper theories. This delineation ensures the integrity of theoretical inquiry. From a social perspective, refining our terminology is imperative in order to dispel confusion and foster clearer communication. Given that 'conspiracy theory' is a term that permeates day-to-day conversation beyond academic circles, the likelihood of misunderstandings is considerably higher. By explicitly stating that claims regarding QAnon, Pizzagate, and Flat Earth are not theories in any relevant sense, we can mitigate the spread of false equivalencies. Politically, the atmosphere surrounding discussions on conspiracy theories is often charged and polarized. Some suggest that the term 'conspiracy theory' is employed to trivialize and dismiss contrary opinions (Shields 2023). While reengineering or relabelling these concepts may not single-handedly transform these debates into rational discussions, the impact of such strategic communication adjustments on public dialogue should not be underestimated, as marketing strategies have often shown.

We need to be careful not to conflate the engineering of *terms* with the engineering of *concepts*, both of which have been argued to be part of the engineering process (see Landes, this volume, but see Isaac 2020). Our results may only be taken to imply that conspiracy theories should not be defined as *theories* but rather as something else, like *narratives* or *stories*. In such a case, we would keep the label 'conspiracy theory' and thus only engage in the engineering of the concept *conspiracy theory*.

However, our results may also be interpreted to justify a more radical proposal, namely to change the very term that is currently used to refer to conspiracy theories. The current terminology, 'conspiracy theory', compositionally implies that they are indeed comprehensive and rigorous explanations. To avoid perpetuating the misconception that conspiracy theories are genuine theories, a modification of the label may be warranted. For instance, alternative labels such as 'conspiracy story' or 'conspiracy narrative' could be adopted. This latter proposal involves both conceptual and lexical engineering. Subsequently, we call these two options modest and radical proposal.

1. **Modest Proposal**: While we keep the label 'conspiracy theory', conspiracy theories should not be defined as theories or explanations but rather as stories or narratives that are based on speculative and unsupported ideas.

2. **Radical Proposal**: The term 'conspiracy theory' should be eliminated and replaced by the term 'conspiracy story' or 'conspiracy narrative'.

In the final section of this paper, we discuss both proposals and argue in favour of the radical proposal. More specifically, we will contend that 'conspiracy theory' should be replaced, and propose several suitable alternatives.

5.1   Re-Engineering *Conspiracy Theory*

The existing philosophical literature predominantly espouses the minimalist account, which explicitly defines conspiracy theories as theories. It seems advisable to also investigate how other authoritative sources approach this matter. Among the various online dictionaries commonly consulted, only Merriam-Webster defines conspiracy theory as a theory. Encyclopedia Britannica defines a conspiracy theory as an *attempt to explain* harmful events, Collins as a *belief* that a group of people are secretly trying to harm someone, and Cambridge Dictionary as a *belief* that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan. In comparison, when examining the definition of string theory, which serves as one of our control conditions in the corpus studies, all four dictionaries (Merriam-Webster, Encyclopedia Britannica, Collins, Cambridge Dictionary) consistently define it as a theory.

A cursory examination of these widely used online dictionaries highlights the lack of unanimity in defining conspiracy theory. This discrepancy suggests that reservations already exist regarding the characterization of conspiracy theories

as theories. Consequently, it implies that conceptual engineering surrounding the term 'conspiracy theory' may already be underway.

Let us examine the notion of characterizing conspiracy theories as 'beliefs'. Both Collins and Cambridge Dictionary present a definition that aligns with this alternative perspective. However, we think that such a definition poses at least two significant problems. First, beliefs are typically understood as cognitive mental states. Theories, stories, views, and explanations, on the other hand, are not inherently cognitive entities themselves; instead, they constitute the content of our beliefs: We are convinced of theories, believe in stories, deliberate views, and think about explanations (see Uscinski 2019, p.50). Thus, defining a conspiracy theory as beliefs, and not as the content of beliefs, fails to respect this distinction. Second, and of greater significance, we find that defining conspiracy theories as beliefs does not adequately reflect the empirical reality we have tried to depict in this article. Individuals frequently revise their beliefs in response to new evidence. Conversely, conspiracy theories are often constructed in a manner that renders counter-evidence inconsequential to their truth or falsity. This essential disparity undermines the proposition of classifying conspiracy theories as mere beliefs (but see Napolitano 2022). Considering the weight of these arguments against defining conspiracy theories as beliefs, we are compelled to explore alternative approaches. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that such definitions still hold certain advantages over both the minimalist account and Merriam-Webster's definition.

Based on the findings from our corpus-analytical studies and the experimental studies conducted by Napolitano & Reuter (2021), we put forward the following re-engineered definition of conspiracy theory:

Definition: A conspiracy theory

  (i) constitutes a story or narrative concerning a particular event or situation;
 (ii) relies on speculative and unsubstantiated claims.[12]

Readers of this article may wonder, why we put forward an explicit definition of conspiracy theory given that we preferred a pragmatic approach in our corpus-linguistic analysis. The answer is rather straight-forward: We believe that definitions and characterizations can often be best investigated empirically by taking a practice-driven approach. Nonetheless, definitions and characterizations themselves are best formulated through an organized body of propositions. These propositions ideally constitute necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the application of the target term. Such an ideal, however, often cannot be satisfied, given the vagueness, polyeidic and prototypical character of many concepts. In fact, we do not deny that conspiracy theories frequently include the

---

[12]   Napolitano & Reuter also advocate for engineering *conspiracy theory* to include an epistemic evaluation. The second criterion thus nicely fits their approach. Yet, they do not focus on the theoretical aspect of conspiracy theories, which is something the first criterion of our definition deals with.

suggestion of a conspiracy as an integral component of the event or situation. However, as the suggestion of an occurring conspiracy is not a necessary aspect of a conspiracy theory, our definition does not feature a proposition about a merely frequently occurring phenomenon.

We do owe the reader, however, a thorough justification for characterizing conspiracy theories as stories or narratives. In order to do so, we would like to delve into a related and, as we will see instructive, discourse on alternative labels of the German term 'Verschwörungstheorie'.

5.2 The Re-labelling Discourse on 'Conspiracy Theory' in German

The lack of discussion in the English-speaking realm regarding the ongoing usage of the term 'conspiracy theory' is quite surprising. However, the situation is markedly different when considering the discussions centered around the German term 'Verschwörungstheorie', which directly corresponds to 'conspiracy theory' and serves as the most prevalent term for denoting speculations regarding flat earth, lizard people, and other views in the German language. Over the past five years, alternative terms have emerged as viable alternatives (see especially Götz-Votteler & Hespers 2019, and Lamberty 2020). These include 'Verschwörungshypothese' (conspiracy hypotheses), 'Verschwörungserzählung' (conspiracy narrative or conspiracy story), and 'Verschwörungsmythos' (conspiracy myth). Certain scholars (Götz-Votteler & Hespers 2019, Lamberty 2020, see also Reinalter 2010) have proposed reserving the term 'Verschwörungshypothese' for serious and verifiable conspiracy accounts, while designating flat earth and Qanon conspiracy claims as 'Verschwörungserzählung'. Furthermore, Verschwörungsmythos constitute a subset of Verschwörungserzählungen, positing the existence of malevolent extraterrestrial beings, lizard people, and other mythical creatures.

Michael Butter (2018) has defended the use of the term 'Verschwörungstheorie'. As his arguments are instructive and apply just as much to the question of whether we should keep the term 'conspiracy theory', let us respond to them one by one. First, Butter concurs with Hepfer's (2015) assertion that conspiracy theories share similarities with scientific theories. According to Hepfer, both conspiracy theories and scientific theories strive to acquire knowledge about the world. However, the findings of our two corpus analytic studies cast substantial doubt on the notion that conspiracy theories aim to generate knowledge. A crucial element of knowledge generation involves testing, developing, instructing, and engaging in discussions regarding claims. Our studies demonstrate that the majority of conspiracy theories fail to undertake such processes, resembling falsehoods and rumors instead. Consequently, there exists minimal convergence between conspiracy theories and (scientific) theories.

Second, Butter challenges the assertion made by critics that conspiracy theories lack falsifiability. According to Butter, it is evident that conspiracy theories can and often are refuted and proven false. While conspiracy theories are indeed falsifiable, Uscinski (2019, p.49) correctly notes that "it is impossible to prove

that a secret plot is not at work". The issue, therefore, lies not with conspiracy theories themselves, but rather with conspiracy theorists who refuse to acknowledge contradictory evidence and interpret it as further confirmation of the conspirators' deception. While we acknowledge the importance of distinguishing between conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists, Butter's argument fails to consider the practical function and usage of conspiracy theories in comparison to scientific theories. Scientific theories are designed to provide plausible and evidence-based explanations for specific states of affairs, as demonstrated in our corpus analysis. People employ the term 'theory', and even more so, 'scientific theory', to fulfill that particular function. In contrast, individuals do not typically actively engage in developing, falsifying, refuting, or discussing conspiracy theories.[13] In other words, while we concur with Butter that conspiracy theories can be subject to falsification, most people neither approach conspiracy theories in a scientific manner nor do conspiracy theories serve the same purpose as scientific theories.

Third, proponents of alternative labels such as 'Verschwörungserzählung' criticize the term 'conspiracy theory' for unjustifiably elevating conspiracy theories to the status of theories, despite their lack of deserving such recognition. Butter counters this argument by asserting that the term 'conspiracy theory' is deployed in a highly derogatory manner, targeting those who espouse particular beliefs. We believe that both claims are not necessarily contradictory. While it is true that 'conspiracy theory' carries a negative connotation (as highlighted by Napolitano & Reuter (2021)), it creates the impression of being a theory, albeit a flawed one. It would be prudent for us to refrain from even considering conspiracy theories as theories. Ultimately, reengineering the concept conspirary theory can direct people's communicative strategies away from the disparaging use of 'conspiracy theory', and thus further our understanding of why proponents of conspiracy theories hold such irrational viewpoints.

5.3   Which term best replaces 'Conspiracy Theory'

We are now in a position to make our case for the more radical proposal, which goes beyond merely re-engineering the concept of *conspiracy theory* and extends to relabel those viewpoints that have traditionally been referred to as 'conspiracy theories'. As readers may anticipate, our proposed alternative labels are directly influenced by the German term 'Verschwörungserzählung'. Although 'Verschwörungstheorie' remains the more commonly used expression, the successful adoption of this term within German discourse serves as tangible evidence that relabeling is not only a theoretical possibility but also a practical undertaking that can be effectively implemented.

Thus, we would like to propose to replace the term 'conspiracy theory' with the more accurate and theoretically sound terms 'conspiracy story' or 'conspir-

---

[13]   There are, of course, exceptions to this, such as (ex-)Flat Earthers engaging in testing their theories. In the Netflix documentary "Behind the Curve", for example, Bob Knodel uses a 20,000$ gyroscrope in an attempt to falsify that the Earth rotates. However, such initiatives seem to be limited to a small fraction of conspiracy theorists.

acy narrative'.[14] In fact, there are emerging approaches in this direction in the English literature as well. One of the most promising approaches treats conspiracy theories as fictional narratives rather than genuine beliefs: Non-doxastic fiction accounts of conspiracy theory (e.g., Heering 2022, Ichino & Räikkä 2021, Ichino 2022, Römer 2021, see also Fenster 2008) emphasize the role of narrative construction in conspiracy theories, highlighting their function as storytelling devices that shape collective understanding and interpretations of complex events. These accounts shed light on the psychological and social functions that conspiracy theories serve, providing individuals and groups with explanations, meaning, identity, and empowerment, even without a commitment to their literal truth. They acknowledge the epistemic limitations of conspiracy theories, recognizing their lack of empirical evidence, logical coherence, and scientific methodology. By considering these aspects, non-doxastic accounts avoid treating conspiracy theories as equivalent to established knowledge claims and provide a more nuanced understanding of their nature and impact.

Ichino (2022) and Heering (2022) have put forth a narrative model, suggesting that when conspiracy theorists *believe* in a conspiracy, they are engaged in a complex game of Waltonian make-believe (Walton 1990). They imagine a world where the conspiracy is true, while the content of their alleged beliefs serve as explanatory elements within this fictional narrative. The conspiracy itself serves as an explanation *within the story*, rather than an attempt to explain a real event through fiction. One of the major differences between belief and make-believe is that "[b]elief responds to evidence and reasons in ways in which make-believe doesn't, and this means[...] that belief undergoes constraints of coherent inferential integration that do not equally apply to make-believe." (Ichino 2022, p. 246) According to Walton (1990), make-believe involves engaging in a form of pretense or imaginative play, where individuals temporarily suspend their beliefs and adopt a fictional perspective. In this state of make-believe, people willingly enter into an alternative reality, accepting certain premises or assumptions that are not considered true in the real world. This framework can elucidate how an individual can actively participate as a fully functioning and rational member of society while, at the same time, immersing themselves deeply in the realm of conspiracy theories—reserving their engagement in make-believe for salient contexts. In instances where conspiracy theories exert substantial influence over a person's life, it is plausible that reality has been significantly supplanted.

While the narrative account of conspiracy theory seems promising, let us briefly touch on two possible objections. First, one may argue that a fictional account of conspiracy theories fails to explain their subversive and heterodox potential in challenging official views. Heering (2022) argues that conspiracy theories do not necessarily require an equivalent counter-hypothesis to challenge

---

[14] Why do we propose two terms instead of settling on a single recommendation? The straightforward answer is that we consider 'story' to be the more fitting term, but we acknowledge the potential negative ramifications. 'News stories' generally encompass earnest portrayals of real-world events. There exists a concern that proponents of outlandish conspiracy theories could exploit the term 'conspiracy story' to undermine the credibility of legitimate news articles.

orthodox explanations. What is important for heterodoxy is that the topoi of conspiracy narratives—the abuse of power, the undemocratic influence of interest groups—are heard in society. Narratives are well-suited for disseminating the rebellious attitude and values needed for cultivating heterodoxy, often more so than actual hypotheses about specific conspiracies. Hence, the allure and subversive potential of conspiracy theories is preserved and emphasized in the narrative model.

Second, one might object that by embracing a non-doxastic account of conspiracy theories, calling them out as false, unfounded, or in any other way epistemically irrational, is a category mistake. However, according to Ichino, this is not inherently problematic: "to say that the attitudes towards conspiracy theories are not epistemically irrational does not amount to saying that there is nothing whatsoever wrong with them and that those who endorse them are immune from criticism of any sort." (Ichino 2022, p. 256) Within a narrative framework of conspiracy theories, critique can still be directed at moral, prudential, or political aspects. However, this answer will not satisfy those who doubt that such a category error exists. It could well be argued that we are giving away too much if we can no longer treat conspiracy theories as false judgments. However, perhaps this problem can be circumvented metalinguistically. For it seems unproblematic to say that the statement "the floor is lava" is false outside of the eponymous game (i.e. the collective make-believe). Analogously, it seems felicitous to say that someone's make-believe involving a conspiracy theory is false *if* they behave like it is true outside of the fictional setting.[15]

Particularists like Dentith (2019), Pigden (2007) and many others have tirelessly argued that many conspiracy theories, such as the Watergate scandal or the default 09/11 conspiracy account are true and based on sound evidence. Consequently, according to their perspective, these theories should not be dismissed as mere 'conspiracy stories' or 'conspiracy narratives'. We concur with this viewpoint. Nonetheless, as highlighted by Napolitano & Reuter (2021), it is more appropriate to categorize such theories (and we wholeheartedly embrace the term 'theories') as 'conspiratorial explanations': "[t]he descriptive *conspiratorial explanation*—rather than a descriptive engineering of conspiracy theory—could be employed for those philosophical projects which necessitate a neutral definition, such as comparing explanations that involve conspiracies to other types of explanations, which have typically been the object of investigation [...]" (2021, p. 2058)

Before drawing to a close, let us revisit the proposal we have put forth. The arguments articulated in this section strongly advocate for the adoption of the terms 'conspiracy story' and 'conspiracy narrative' as substitutes for the inadequate expression 'conspiracy theory'. It is important to note that these same arguments also support the more moderate proposal of defining conspiracy theories as stories or narratives pertaining to a particular event. For those who may not be inclined to embrace the radical proposition, we suggest that a more precise definition of conspiracy theory should not refer to 'theories' or

---

[15] We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

'explanations' but rather 'stories' or 'narratives'.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we conducted a set of corpus analyses of the composite term 'conspiracy theory'. The results of our studies show that conspiracy theories are not discussed and tested like genuine theories but rather promoted and spread like falsehoods and rumours. We then proposed a relabeling of the predominant and most significant subset of conspiracy theories as 'conspiracy stories' or 'conspiracy narratives'. This proposal finds support not only in the empirical evidence expounded in this paper but also derives motivation from the (partially) accomplished adoption of the German counterpart term 'Verschwörungserzählung', as well as the theoretical benefits associated with a non-doxastic perspective on conspiracy theories.

7 Acknowledgments

References

Abend, G. (2008). The meaning of 'theory'. *Sociological theory*, 26(2), 173-199.

Alfano, M. (forthcoming). Semantic Network Analysis for Philosophers. In Bauer, Kornmesser, Baumgartner, Reuter et al. (Eds.): *Experimental Philosophy for Beginners*. Springer.

Basham, L. and Dentith, M. R. X. (2016). Social science's conspiracy theory panic: Now they want to cure everyone. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5 (10):12-19.

Baumgartner, L. (2022). Why are reckless socks not (more of) a thing? Towards an empirical classification of evaluative concepts. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, 44, 44.

Baumgartner, J., Zannettou, S., Keegan, B., Squire, M., & Blackburn, J. (2020). The Pushshift Reddit Dataset. arXiv:2001.08435, https://arxiv.org/abs/2001.08435.

Butter, M. (2021). There's a conspiracy theory that the CIA invented the term 'conspiracy theory'—Here's why. *The Conversation.*

Butter, M. (2022). Verschwörungstheorien: Eine Einführung. In Müller & Kirchberg (Eds.) *Verschwörungstheorien*, p. 12-27.

Carnap, R. (1966). *Philosophical Foundations of Science*, New York: Basic Books.

Cassam, Q. (2019). *Conspiracy Theories*, Oxford: Polity Press.

Cinelli, M., Etta, G., Avalle, M., Quattrociocchi, A., Marco, N. D., Valensise, C., Galeazzi, A., and Quattrociocchi, W. (2022). Conspiracy theories and social media platforms. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 47:101407.

Coady, D. (2003) Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 17(2), 197-209.

Cohnitz, D. (2018). On the Rationality of Conspiracy Theories. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (2):351-365.

Davies, M. (2016-) Corpus of News on the Web (NOW). Available online at https://www.english-corpora.org/now/.

Dentith, M. R. (2019). Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence. *Synthese*, 196(6).

Dentith, M. R. (2022). Suspicious conspiracy theories. *Synthese*, 200(3), 243.

Duetz, J. C. M. (2022). Conspiracy Theories are Not Beliefs. *Erkenntnis*, 1-15.

Duetz, J. C. M. (2023). What Does It Mean for a Conspiracy Theory to Be a 'Theory'?. *Social Epistemology*, 1-16.

Đorić, M. (2020). Sociopolitical crises in the times of Covid-19. *Security Crises in the 21 st Century and How to Manage Them Social and Security aspects*, Volume, 140.

Engel, K., Hua, Y., Zeng, T., and Naaman, M. (2022). Characterizing reddit participation of users who engage in the qanon conspiracy theories. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6:1-22.

Feldman, S. (2011). Counterfact conspiracy theories. *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21 (1): 15–24.

Fenster, M. (2008): *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture.* University of Minnesota Press.

Frindte, W., & Frindte, I. (2023). "But Otherwise But Otherwise. All Lies!" (Rio Reiser, 1986)—From the Charm of Conspiracy Theories. *In Support in Times of No Support: A Social Psychological Search for Traces* (pp. 157-164). Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.

Götz-Votteler, K., Hespers, S. (2019). *Alternative Wirklichkeiten? Wie Fake News und Verschwörungstheorien funktionieren und warum sie Aktualität haben*, Bielefeld 2019, ISBN 978-3-8394-4717-8.

Harris, K. (2018). What's epistemically wrong with conspiracy theorising? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84:235-257.

Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender and race:(What) are they?(What) do we want them to be?. *Noûs*, 34(1), 31-55.

Heering, D. (2022): Alethische und Narrative Modelle von Verschwörungstheorien. *Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie* 9(2): 143–174.

Hempel, C. (1966). *Philosophy of Natural Science*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Hepfer, K. (2015). *Verschwörungstheorien. Eine philosophische Kritik der Unvernunft.* Bielefeld.

Huneman, P., & Vorms, M. (2018). Is a unified account of conspiracy theories possible?. *Argumenta Oeconomica Cracoviensia*, 3, 49-72.

Ichino, A. (2022): Conspiracy Theories as Walt-Fiction. In Engisch, P. & Langkau, J. (Eds.), *The Philosophy of Fiction*: pp. 240-261.

Ichino, A. & Räikkä, J. (2021): Non-Doxastic Conspiracy Theories. *Argumenta* 7, 1: 247–263.

Isaac, M. G. (2020). How to conceptually engineer conceptual engineering?. *Inquiry*, 1-24.

Isaac, M. G., Koch, S., & Nefdt, R. (2022). Conceptual engineering: A road map to practice. *Philosophy Compass*, 17(10), e12879.

Keeley, B. L. (1999). Of conspiracy theories. *Journal of Philosophy* 96: 109-126.

Lamberty, P. (2020). Zwischen Theorien und Mythen: eine kurze begriffliche Einordnung. *Informationen zur politischen Bildung*, 344.

Landes, E. (forthcoming). How Language Teaches and Misleads: "Coronavirus" and "Social Distancing" as Case Studies.

Landes, E. & Reuter, K. (2023). Empirical Data on the Implementation of Engineered Concepts. Available online at https://xphiblog.com/empirical-data-on-the-implementation-of-engineered-concepts/

Landes, E. & Reuter, K. (ms). Conceptual Revision in Action.

National Academy of Sciences (1998). *Teaching about evolution and the nature of science.* Joseph Henry Press.

Napolitano, M. G. (2021). Conspiracy theories and evidential self-insulation. *The epistemology of fake news*, 82-106.

Napolitano, M. G., & Reuter, K. (2021). What is a Conspiracy Theory?. *Erkenntnis*, 1-28.

Napolitano, M. G., & Reuter, K. (forthcoming). Is *conspiracy theory* a case of conceptual domination?. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective.*

Pigden, C. (2007). Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom. *Episteme*, 4 (2):219-232.

Popper, K. (1963/2014). *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge.* reprinted by Routledge, 2014.

Räikkä, J. (2018). Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories. *Argumenta* 3,2: 205-216.

Reinalter, H. (2010). *Die Weltverschwörer: Was Sie eigentlich alles nie erfahren sollten.* Ecowin Verlag, Salzburg.

Reuter, K. (2011). Distinguishing the appearance from the reality of pain. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 18(9-10), 94-109.

Reuter, K., & Baumgartner, L. (forthcoming). Corpus analysis: A case study on the use of 'conspiracy theory'. In Bauer, Kornmesser, Baumgartner, Reuter et al. (Eds.): *Experimental Philosophy for Beginners.* Springer.

Reuter, K., Baumgartner, L., & Willemsen, P. (2023). Tracing thick and thin concepts through corpora. *Language & Cognition.*

Römer, D. (2021): Verschwörungstheorien als argumentative Narrative. *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 51: 281–298.

Rosch, E.(1978). *Principles of categorization.*

Scharp, K. (2013). *Replacing truth.* Oxford University Press.

Shahsavari, S., Holur, P., Wang, T., Tangherlini, T. R., and Roychowdhury, V. (2020). Conspiracy in the time of corona: automatic detection of emerging covid-19 conspiracy theories in social media and the news. *Journal of Computational Social Science* 3:279–317.

Shields, M. (2023). Conceptual Engineering, Conceptual Domination, and the Case of Conspiracy Theories. *Social Epistemology*, 1-17.

Suppes, P. (1960). A Comparison of the Meaning and Uses of Models in Mathematics and the Empirical Sciences. *Synthese* 12: 287–301.

Sytsma, J., Bluhm, R., Willemsen, P., & Reuter, K. (2019). Causal attributions and corpus analysis. In Fischer and Curtis (Eds.) *Methodological advances in experimental philosophy*, 209-238.

Tsapos, M. (2022). Who is a conspiracy theorist?. *Social Epistemology*.

Uscinski, J. E. (2018). *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*. Oxford University Press.

Walton, K. L. (1990): *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Harvard University Press.

Willemsen, P., Baumgartner, L., Frohofer, S., & Reuter, K. (2021). Examining evaluativity in legal discourse: A comparative corpus-linguistic study of thick concepts. In Magen S. & Prochownik K. (Eds.) *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Law*.

Winther, Rasmus Grønfeldt (2021). The Structure of Scientific Theories. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2021 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

Wittgenstein, L. (1953/2010). *Philosophical investigations*. John Wiley & Sons.

van Fraassen, B. (1989). *Laws and Symmetry*, New York: Oxford University Press.