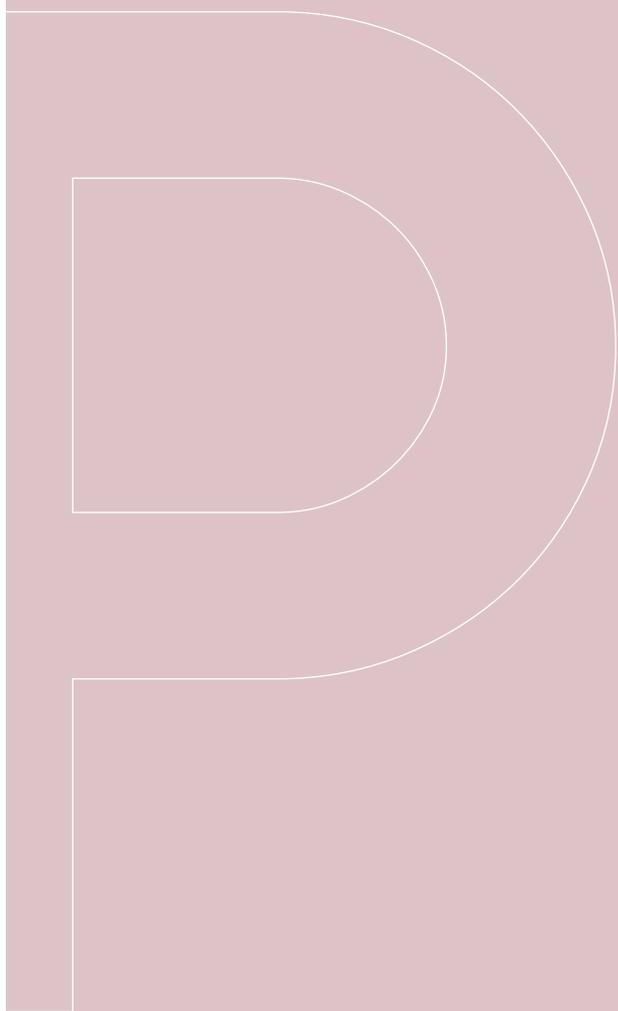


Preface



Few of us could be oblivious to the overwhelming negative behaviours that are now appearing with some voracity online, involving intolerant, abusive and hateful speech. These are not new phenomena, although historically they have been limited to specific off-line and local contexts. However, the advent of digital communication technologies – the anonymity and instantaneity of which coupled with their ever-growing importance as a source of information and communication – has given them an unprecedented boost and a global dimension. Because of this, new interdisciplinary theoretical and analytical methods and approaches are called for to improve our understanding of the shifting patterns of such practices in different parts of the world. In particular, a focus is needed on the ways in which to tackle and respond to the proliferation of these behaviours in the new media, and the radicalization of online space in the contemporary, increasingly multicultural information society.

While intolerant, abusive and hateful speech online has received a lot of attention by researchers in social media and communication studies, its linguistic aspects have yet to be thoroughly investigated. This book contributes to filling this gap by showcasing how a linguistic perspective has much to offer in unravelling exactly what is occurring. The idea for this book emerged from the meeting of researchers selected for a panel “The Dark Side of Social Media” at the 22nd Sociolinguistics Symposium in New Zealand in 2018. With a common goal to interrogate the linguistic aspects of negative online behaviours on different social media platforms and against different targets, these authors approached the phenomenon from a wide range of methodological frameworks. While primarily interested in identifying, describing and understanding intolerant, abusive and hateful speech online thoroughly and comprehensively, they also had a common belief that their work could inform efforts to contain or mitigate the impact of negative online behaviours regardless of where they occur.

As the five quite different, but equally interesting, studies offered in this investigation of the negative behaviours that are manifesting themselves in the digital age go beyond social media, we have extended the scope of the title to encompass the broader landscape of digital platforms. Each chapter interrogates a different communicative practice in different modalities for analysis involving a range of online platforms. It is no coincidence that the majority of this research relates to data accessed via online news websites. While news articles can play a role in the reproduction of negative discourses – sometimes in more subtle and unintentional ways when it comes to the representation of others – the comments sections of online news websites have become popular “hang outs” for networked publics where they can gather and discuss topics of the day. At the same time these sites offer users a ready-made online audience to be on the receiving end of an anonymous commenter’s negative discourse or ideology that may involve an attack on or abuse of another individual or community.

Equally, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube also play significant roles in providing a forum for negative behaviours, particularly when comments can be easily shared and “liked” courtesy of the affordances of digital technologies. While tech companies are attempting to address these issues through their content moderation policies, and some governments are implementing legislation to put a stop to online hate and abuse – negotiating and controlling the “wild west” of the internet is far from straightforward, and the wider implications of such interventions are not well understood either. This is why understanding what is occurring online and how users might respond to negative online behaviours is an important focus for academics and is also addressed in this volume.

The studies that are presented in the following pages offer insights into different quantitative and qualitative approaches when it comes to the complexities of the linguistic analysis of negative online behaviours. They range from corpus-based methods, to content analysis and critical discourse analysis, though some studies also apply a mixed-methods approach. Overall the range of methodological frameworks and theoretical approaches utilized in the explorations into online discourses of racism, misogyny, homophobia/LGBTQ+ rights and islamophobia/anti-immigrant discourses presented in this volume contribute towards a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic landscape of online hate. Despite the fact that the studies in this volume analyse data from three very different countries, cultures and languages – Cyprus, Japan and Slovenia – this demonstrates that negative online behaviours are a global problem which cannot be ignored. Therefore, the findings of these studies have much wider implications. We have organized the chapters according to the granularity of the linguistic units investigated in each study, starting with an analysis of orthographic practices and going all the way to culturo-historical contextualization of discourse.

In Chapter One authors Kristina Pahor de Maiti, Darja Fišer and Nikola Ljubešić from the University of Ljubljana and the Jožef Stefan Institute in Slovenia present their findings from a detailed quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of orthographic practices in socially unacceptable comments posted by users on the Facebook pages of three Slovenian mainstream news outlets under articles related to LGBTQ+ issues and migrants. Their results show that nonstandard features of socially unacceptable comments surpass the surface spelling deviations that are commonly found in computer-mediated communication. Their work sheds light on the mechanics of the language used in socially unacceptable comments, and shows that differences between the surface linguistic structure of what is socially unacceptable and acceptable do exist, which is a promising finding that could inform the machine learning community to help curb socially unacceptable discourse practices online.

Chapter Two analyses the discourse of two opposing Twitter accounts which were created for the referendum campaign on LGBTQ+ rights in Slovenia 2015. The authors of the chapter, Vojko Gorjanc and Darja Fišer from the University of Ljubljana, perform comparative content and critical discourse analyses of the two campaigns to uncover the prevalent persistency of heteronormativity and the disruptive perception of any counterforce efforts through a systematic, multimodal utilization of the concepts of “normal” and “natural” as key aspects of gender and sexual identities. Put in a broader socio-political context, the discourses of the referendum campaigns contributed to a heightened sensitivity of the general as well as political public.

Chapter Three presents findings from a study by Zoran Fijavž and Darja Fišer from the University of Ljubljana that examined metaphorical expressions of water flow in online news on the Balkan migration crisis in 2015. They show that metaphorical expressions were ubiquitous in the discourse, both in terms of authorship and timeline. While most frequently found in reported statements, the metaphorical expressions were also used by the journalists directly, which suggests that the metaphorical frame was heavily mediatized and uncritically reproduced by the media.

In Chapter Four Fabienne Baider and Anna Bobori from the University of Cyprus also approach anti-migration discourse and use the same theoretical framework, taking an in-depth look at the associated metaphor of sexual threat in their study of an online news article reporting an alleged violent rape in Sweden and the online comments in response to it. This study demonstrates how the discourses surrounding a fake news story can have negative effects on how migrants are perceived by journalists and readers alike. Yet at the same time this investigation of how some commenters attempted to counter these perceptions leads the researchers to propose some recommendations for the creation of effective counter narratives.

The study by Goran Vaage, from Kobe College in Japan, which appears in Chapter Five, concludes the volume by providing a comprehensive culturo-historical and sociolinguistic overview of present-day discourses of organized covert racism as well as overt racist hate speech by the Japanese right-wing organization Zaitokukai that features on YouTube. The study points to the role of digital media in the staging and dissemination of hate speech, but also as a facilitator for such speech outside the virtual realm.

It is anticipated that this book – while focused on studies on the linguistic aspects of socially unacceptable discourse practices online – will also be of interest to others who situate themselves outside of this field because of the contribution it brings in the building of knowledge on topics that also apply in sociology,

anthropology, computer science and internet studies. We also believe that readers beyond academia – governments, organizations and tech companies – will appreciate the content of this issue as they too seek to gain a better understanding of, and solutions to, the impact of the dark side of digital platforms and the role they play in stemming the proliferation of these concerning discourses.

Our work would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of all the authors who submitted their contributions and without the careful and insightful comments of the reviewers. We would also like to thank the language editor Paul Steed and the technical editor Jakob Lenardič for polishing the manuscripts, and for all the support and good spirits provided by Matevž Rudolf and Jure Preglau from the Faculty of Arts Publishing House.

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