Haters in the spotlight: impoliteness strategies in socially unacceptable online comments

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Social media have become a breeding ground for socially unacceptable discourse (SUD) which includes a broad array of disrespectful communication practices (Vehovar et al., 2020). While the targets of SUD are usually the main focus of research, the producers of SUD are, on the other hand, often ignored despite representing a crucial group of discourse participants (cf. Backe et al., 2018). This study, therefore, explores the interplay between commenters' gender and their production of online SUD through their use of impoliteness strategies in order to answer if and how commenter's gender influences the production of SUD.

The study was conducted on a sample of the FRENK corpus (Ljubešić et al., 2019) containing comments to LGBT- and migrant-related news media Facebook posts that have been annotated as SUD. Our dataset comprised 726 Slovene comments manually annotated for commenter's gender as well as the type of speech act and the impoliteness triggers used. The annotation schema was adapted from Searle's (1975) taxonomy of illocutionary acts and Culpeper's (2011) list of conventionalised impolite formulae.

The results show that SUD comments are twice as frequently produced by men compared to women (similar observation in Al-Shlool (2016) and Liu (2017)). While commenters of both genders most often produced EXPRESSIVE speech acts, corroborating the finding by Carr et al. (2012), DIRECTIVES, which were the second most frequent speech act type overall, were more often used by men. EXPRESSIVES were mainly formed as covert opinions, i.e. representing personal view as a fact, and this type of EXPRESSIVES was also more frequently used by men. Likewise, men more frequently employed INDIRECT DIRECTIVES in which the executor of the indicated action is not specified, although, in general, commenters more often posted DIRECTIVES that specified the executor.

In comparison to men, SUD comments by women contained slightly more impoliteness triggers (similar observation in Oz et al. (2018)). The main difference between female and male commenters, however, lies in the type of triggers used: while men posted the highest number of bald-on impoliteness triggers in the form of insults, women more frequently used rhetorical triggers (e.g. sarcasm, interjection, etc.), especially rhetorical questions. Additionally, women-specific triggers included character multiplication and politeness formulae. While this points toward language use stereotypically associated with men (e.g. strong assertions, foul language) and women (emotional reactions, indirect language) (cf. Herring, 2003), qualitative reading suggests that especially politeness formulae and rhetorical questions function as offending strengtheners rather than attenuators.

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