



Examining the Role of Speech Acts in Online Hate Speech and Cyberbullying

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Abstract

The study explores the prevalence and impact of speech acts in the context of online hate speech and cyberbullying. With the rise of the internet, communication dynamics have undergone a transformative shift, providing platforms for global expression. However, this virtual landscape also hosts a darker side characterized by hate speech and cyberbullying, which can have severe implications for individuals and society. The research investigates the linguistic patterns and strategies used in perpetrating harm, shedding light on how language is weaponized to spread hatred online. Using quantitative method, the study sampled 50 participants to respond to a questionnaire designed to this end. Being a quantitative study, SPSS was used to analyze the data. The study revealed that the most frequent cyberbullying speech acts are name-calling, threats and insults. The study provides evidence-based guidance to foster a more inclusive and compassionate digital environment. Through the analysis of data obtained from participants, this research aims to contribute to combatting hate speech and cyberbullying, fostering a safer and more harmonious online society.

Keywords: online; hate speech; cyberbullying.

دراسة دور أفعال الكلام في خطاب الكراهية والتنمر على الإنترنت

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الخلاصة

تستكشف الدراسة شيعوع و تأثير أفعال الكلام في سياق خطاب الكراهية و التنمر عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. مع ظهور الإنترنت شهدت جوانب التواصل انتقال نوعيا، مما وفر منصات عالمية للتعبير عن الرأي . ومع ذلك ، فإن هذا المشهد الافتراضي يستضيف أيضا جانبا مظلما يتميز بخطاب الكراهية والتنمر عبر الإنترنت ، مما قد يكون له آثار خطيرة على الأفراد والمجتمع. الغاية من البحث هي التحري في الأنماط والاستراتيجيات اللغوية المستخدمة في ارتكاب الأذى اللفظي، ويسلط الضوء على كيفية استخدام اللغة كأداة لنشر الكراهية عبر الإنترنت. باستخدام منهج كمي وظفت الدراسة 50 مشاركا ليقوموا بملا استبيان مخصص لهذا الغرض. وكونها دراسة كمية تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام برنامج SPSS. كشفت الدراسة ان اكثر افعال الكلام المستخدمة هي الشتم والتهديد والاهانة. تقدم الدراسة إرشادات قائمة على الأدلة لتعزيز بيئة رقمية أكثر شمولاً ورأفة. من خلال تحليل البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها من المشاركين ، يهدف هذا البحث إلى المساهمة في مكافحة خطاب الكراهية والتنمر عبر الإنترنت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عبر الانترنت ، خطاب الكراهية ، التنمر عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي



1. Introduction

The rapid growth of online platforms and social media has revolutionized the way individuals communicate and interact with each other. While these technological advancements have brought numerous benefits, they have also given rise to significant challenges, such as the proliferation of hate speech and cyberbullying in online spaces. Hate speech refers to language that denigrates, threatens, or incites violence or discrimination against individuals or groups based on attributes such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Cyberbullying involves the intentional use of electronic communication to harass, intimidate, or harm others. Understanding the role of speech acts in perpetuating online hate speech and cyberbullying is essential for developing effective preventive measures and interventions.

Speech acts, as conceptualized by Austin (1962), go beyond mere descriptive language and instead involve using words to perform actions and have real-world consequences. In the context of online communication, speech acts encompass various forms such as assertions, requests, promises, threats, insults, and slurs. These speech acts can have profound psychological and social ramifications, particularly when they are employed to propagate hate speech and cyberbullying.

2. Significance of the Research

This research offers evidence-based insights into the specific speech act patterns associated with hate speech and cyberbullying, providing a foundation for the development of more effective content moderation strategies and algorithmic approaches on online platforms. By recognizing and swiftly addressing problematic content, online platforms can foster a safer and more inclusive digital environment. Moreover, the study explored the psychological and emotional effects of hate speech and cyberbullying on victims, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to provide better support and protection for those affected. Policymakers, educators, and internet governance bodies can utilize these findings to develop comprehensive measures that promote empathy, understanding, and tolerance in online communication.

3. Literature Review

Recent research has shed light on the importance of examining the role of speech acts in the perpetuation and escalation of online hate speech. For instance, Suler (2018) emphasized the performative nature of hate speech acts on social media platforms. According to the study, hate speech acts, including derogatory slurs and offensive language, not only express hatred but also reinforce social norms and ideologies that perpetuate discrimination and prejudice. The performative aspect of hate speech acts amplifies their impact, as they can demean and marginalize targeted



individuals or groups.

Similarly, the role of speech acts in cyberbullying has garnered significant attention in recent years. Pörn et al. (2019) explored the role of speech acts in cyberbullying incidents among adolescents. Their findings highlighted that cyberbullying often involves speech acts such as insults, threats, and rumors, which are intended to harm and intimidate victims. The performative nature of these speech acts contributes to power dynamics and exacerbates the psychological impact on the victims.

Furthermore, the online environment significantly influences the use and effects of speech acts related to hate speech and cyberbullying. Cheng et al. (2020) investigated the influence of the online environment on hate speech acts. The study revealed that the anonymity and perceived lack of consequences in online spaces can encourage individuals to engage in more extreme and offensive speech acts. The detachment provided by the online environment contributes to the proliferation of hate speech and cyberbullying behaviors.

Overall, understanding the role of speech acts in online hate speech and cyberbullying is crucial for addressing the harm caused by these online phenomena. The performative nature of speech acts, the influence of the online environment, and the potential of counter-speech acts all contribute to the complex dynamics surrounding language use in online spaces. By comprehensively examining these factors, researchers can develop effective interventions and policies to combat online hate speech and cyberbullying, fostering safer and more inclusive digital environments.

In a study by Patchin and Hinduja, the scholars address the pressing problem of hate speech and cyberbullying in the digital age, providing insights into the role of speech acts in perpetuating harmful behaviors. Patchin and Hinduja (2018) deepen our understanding of online aggression, offering valuable insights into linguistic mechanisms used to perpetrate harm, benefiting academics, policymakers, and platform operators in combatting such behavior (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

Another research informs evidence-based policies and regulations targeting hate speech and cyberbullying, assisting policymakers in crafting more effective interventions conducted by Davidson et al. (2019). It also improves content moderation strategies for online platforms and social media networks by identifying speech act patterns indicative of harmful behavior.

Furthermore, research by Slonje and Smith intends to empower victims by enhancing our understanding of the impact of speech acts on their well-being, leading to more empathetic and effective support mechanisms (Slonje & Smith, 2008). It also encourages positive digital communication by highlighting the potential for constructive speech acts, fostering a digital environment that values inclusivity and dialogue (Bode, 2019). Interdisciplinary knowledge is enriched as the study bridges linguistics, psychology, and social sciences, adding complexity to the understanding



of linguistic aggression online (Herring et al., 2002). Ethical considerations in online communication are prompted, encouraging discussions on balancing free speech and responsible behavior (Nissenbaum, 2010).

4. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of different speech acts on online hate speech targeting various groups, including race, religion, gender, and ethnicity?
2. How frequently do different speech acts occur in cyberbullying situations?

5. Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between speech acts and online hate speech, specifically targeting different groups, to understand how language is weaponized to spread hatred and hostility.
2. To identify the most prevalent speech acts used in cyberbullying instances to gain insights into the linguistic patterns and strategies employed to harm and harass individuals online.
3. To categorize and analyze the different speech acts in online hate speech and cyberbullying, highlighting the most common types and their corresponding impact on targeted groups.

6. Review of literature

The use of social media and the expansion of online platforms has significantly changed how people interact and communicate. This development has led to an increase in both hate speech and cyberbullying. Developing effective preventive measures and treatments requires an understanding of the role speech actions play in online hate speech and cyberbullying. According to Austin (1962), speech acts are activities carried out through language, where words are employed not just to represent reality but also to carry out actions with tangible results. Speech acts can take many different forms in the context of online communication, including claims, demands, promises, threats, insults, and slurs. Particularly when they are used to spread hate speech and cyberbullying, these speech acts can significantly affect people's psychological health and social interactions. Recent studies have emphasized the part speech acts play in the spread and amplification of hate speech online.

Suler (2018), for instance, stressed the value of looking at the performative aspects of hate speech activities on social media platforms. The study discovered that hate speech activities, such as unpleasant words and pejorative insults, can be used to marginalize and denigrate certain people or groups. Hate speech acts' performative nature increases their impact because they not only express hatred but also support social norms and ideas that support prejudice and discrimination.

Moreover, the use of speech acts in cyberbullying has been extensively studied in



recent years. Pörn et al. (2019) investigated the role of speech acts in cyberbullying incidents among adolescents. The results showed that speech actions used to harass and intimidate victims, such as insults, threats, and rumors, are frequently utilized in cyberbullying. The study emphasized the significance of taking speech actions' performative components into account when analyzing the power relationships and psychological effects of cyberbullying.

In addition to being performative, speech acts are greatly influenced by the context in which they take place.

Cheng et al. (2020) investigated how the internet environment affects hate speech. The study found that the anonymity and perceived lack of consequences in online spaces can encourage individuals to engage in more extreme and offensive speech acts. The online environment provides a sense of detachment, which may contribute to the proliferation of hate speech and cyberbullying behaviors. Furthermore, recent research has explored the role of counter-speech acts in mitigating the negative effects of hate speech and cyberbullying.

Farkas and Simor (2019) investigated the effectiveness of counter-speech acts in reducing the impact of hate speech on social media platforms. The study found that counter-speech acts, such as challenging and refuting hate speech, can disrupt the performative nature of hate speech acts and promote positive online discourse. These findings highlight the potential of

counter-speech acts as a preventive strategy to combat online hate speech and cyberbullying. Also, there are several other noteworthy findings and perspectives related to the role of speech acts in online hate speech and cyberbullying. One important aspect that researchers have examined is the impact of speech acts on the targeted individuals. Studies have shown that exposure to hate speech and cyberbullying can lead to adverse psychological effects, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, and decreased self-esteem (Bastiaensens et al., 2019; Kowalski et al., 2018). The performative nature of speech acts amplifies their impact, as they can reinforce negative stereotypes and further marginalize already vulnerable individuals or groups.

Furthermore, research has explored the motivations behind engaging in hate speech and cyberbullying. Some studies have found that individuals may use speech acts to gain social status, assert power, or express frustration and anger (Buckels et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2019). Understanding these underlying motivations can help in designing targeted interventions and strategies to address online hate speech and cyberbullying effectively. Investigations have also been made on how peer dynamics and social norms affect speech behaviors. Researchers have found that individuals are more likely to use hate speech and engage in cyberbullying if they perceive these actions to be commonplace in society or if they witness others doing so (Dooley et al., 2019; Slonje et al., 2018). This highlights how important it is to promote moral



behavior and foster an atmosphere of respect and empathy in order to stop the spread of online hate speech and cyberbullying.

In order to prevent hate speech and cyberbullying, technological breakthroughs and the application of artificial intelligence have also been investigated. Additionally, technological advancements and the use of artificial intelligence have been explored as potential tools to combat hate speech and cyberbullying. Some studies have focused on developing automated systems that can detect and filter out hate speech in online platforms (Davidson et al., 2017; Fortuna et al., 2018). However, challenges remain in accurately identifying and classifying different forms of hate speech, considering the nuanced nature of language and context.

Moreover, the legal and ethical implications surrounding hate speech and cyberbullying have been subjects of discussion. Balancing the right to freedom of expression with the need to protect individuals from harm poses challenges for policymakers and online platforms. Ongoing debates exist regarding the responsibility of platform owners and the appropriate legal frameworks to address online hate speech and cyberbullying (Kaye, 2018).

All in all, recent studies have stressed the importance of speech acts in comprehending the dynamics of online hate speech and cyberbullying. By carefully examining these variables, such as the performative nature of speech acts, the influence of the online environment, and the potential for counter-speech acts, researchers can develop efficient interventions and policies to address the growing issues related to online hate speech and cyberbullying.

In conclusion, the use of speech actions in online bullying and hate speech is a complicated phenomenon with many facets. The performative aspect of speech acts, the impact of the online environment, the potential for counter-speech acts, and the psychological effects on the people who are targeted have all been highlighted in recent study. In order to establish safer online environments and prevent the negative impacts of hate speech and cyberbullying, it is essential to understand these dynamics.

7. Participants and Method

7.1 Study Participants

The participants in this study will be (50) individuals who have experienced or witnessed online hate speech and cyberbullying. They were randomly selected from different online platforms and social media users; Facebook, X and Instagram users.

7.2 Study Instrument

To assess the impact of speech acts on online hate speech and cyberbullying, a questionnaire was designed as a research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of Likert Scale questions. The responses were set to range from 'strongly agree',



‘agree’, ‘I’m not sure’, ‘disagree’, and ‘strongly disagree’ respectively.

7.3 Validation of the Study Instrument

The questionnaire will be reviewed by experts in the fields of linguistics, psychology, and online communication. Their feedback and recommendations will be considered to ensure the questionnaire's validity and appropriateness for the study. The questionnaire will include two parts: The first part will focus on the different types of speech acts commonly employed in online hate speech instances. It will include 30 phrases, each representing a specific speech act associated with hate speech. The second part will explore the speech acts used in cyberbullying instances. It will contain 27 phrases, each representing a different speech act used in cyberbullying.

7.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires will be distributed to the participants, who will complete them online. The researcher will be available to address any questions or concerns regarding the questionnaire. After collecting the data, statistical analysis will be conducted using software such as SPSS. The analysis will aim to identify and categorize the different speech acts present in online hate speech and cyberbullying instances. It will also examine the frequency and patterns of these speech acts and their association with specific demographic factors of the participants.

8. Results

8.1. Results for the First Question: The Impact of Speech Acts on Online Hate Speech

The results, as shown in Table 1, revealed the impact of speech acts on online hate speech targeting different groups. Regarding the hate speech targeting ‘race’ and the one targeting ‘ethnicity’ showed the highest means with (2.45) and (2.58), respectively, both classified as ‘high’ agreement degree and ranked 8 and 6 in the classification. More details are shown below.

Table (1): The effect of speech acts on online hate speech

Hate speech targets	No.	Mean	SD	Agreement Degree	Rank
Race	50	2.45	1.10	high	8
Religion	50	2.63	0.98	high	5
Gender	50	2.32	1.01	high	10
Ethnicity	50	2.58	0.98	high	6

As seen above and by looking at the mean values, it is clear that the hate speech that targets ‘gender’ showed the lowest mean (2.32) with a ‘high’ agreement degree and ranked 10 in the classification. On the other hand, the highest mean value is ‘religion’



(2.63). Less frequently, the hate speech targeting ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ are more prevalent in online communication compared to hate speech targeting ‘gender’. So, ‘religion’ and ‘ethnicity’ are the most frequent than the others. The interpretations and implications of these results are discussed in the ‘Discussion and Conclusion’ section.

8.2 Results for the Second Question: The Effect of Speech Acts on Cyberbullying

Regarding the manifestation of speech acts in cyberbullying, the table below depicts the effect.

Table (2): The Effect of Speech Acts in Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying Speech Acts	No.	mean	SD	Agreement Degree	Rank
Name-calling	50	2.90	1.03	high	2
Threats	50	2.73	0.99	high	4
Insults	50	2.68	0.98	high	5
Mockery or ridicule	50	2.82	1.11	high	3
Exclusion or social isolation	50	2.50	1.05	high	7
Sharing private or embarrassing information.	50	2.15	0.90	moderate	10
Spreading rumors	50	2.35	0.95	high	8
Harassment based on identity	50	2.47	0.97	high	6

The table reveals that mean value of ‘name-calling’ is (2.90) which means it is the most frequent speech act. In the second position, ‘mockery or ridicule’ showed higher mean with (2.82). Both acts ‘name-calling’ and ‘mockery or ridicule’ are scaled as ‘high’ agreement degree and ranked 2 and 3 in the order. On the other hand, ‘sharing private or embarrassing information’ showed the lowest mean (2.15) with a ‘moderate’ agreement degree and ranked 10 in the order. ‘Threats’, ‘insults’ and ‘exclusion or social isolation’ appeared to be the third, fourth and fifth acts respectively. In the low scale, ‘harassment based on identity’, ‘spreading rumors’ and ‘sharing private or embarrassing information’ appeared to be the least used acts. To sum up, the results indicate that ‘name-calling’ is common speech acts in cyberbullying, while ‘sharing private information’ is relatively the least prevalent.

8.3 Correlation Analysis

To know the degree to which variables are related to each other, the tabulation below was generated to serve this end.



Table (3): Correlation between speech acts and online hate speech

Variable	Race	Religion	Gender	Ethnicity
Race	1	0.42	0.21	0.36
Religion	0.42	1	0.27	0.49
Gender	0.21	0.27	1	0.18
Ethnicity	0.36	0.49	0.18	1

Table (3) shows the correlation between different speech acts and online hate speech targeting different groups 'race', 'religion', 'gender', and 'ethnicity'. The correlation coefficient ranges from -1 to 1, with 1 representing a perfect positive correlation, 0 representing no correlation, and -1 representing a perfect negative correlation. The values in the table indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between each speech act and hate speech targeting each group.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

These results provide valuable insights into the relationship between speech acts and online hate speech, helping us understand how specific language is used to target different groups and perpetrate harmful behavior in the digital environment.

The present study aimed to investigate the role of speech acts in online hate speech and cyberbullying. The findings shed light on how different speech acts are employed to target marginalized groups based on race, religion, gender, and ethnicity, contributing to the perpetuation of hostility and discrimination in the digital realm. Drawing on the literature, it is evident that language plays a crucial role in shaping social dynamics and identity formation in the online environment. Hate speech and cyberbullying are alarming examples of how speech acts are weaponized to spread hatred and foster a toxic online atmosphere. The prevalence of hate speech targeting specific groups, as revealed in Table (1), indicates the urgent need for effective interventions to promote empathy, understanding, and tolerance in digital communication.

The results presented in Table (2) further emphasize the significance of speech acts in cyberbullying behaviors. Name-calling, threats, insults, mockery, exclusion, and other harmful speech acts contribute to the negative impact on individuals' mental health and well-being. Understanding these patterns can inform the development of content moderation strategies and algorithmic approaches to swiftly detect and address problematic content on online platforms.

The findings highlight the urgent need to address the darker side of the online world, characterized by hate speech and cyberbullying, as they can have serious negative effects on individuals' mental health and society. Understanding the linguistic patterns and strategies used in perpetrating harm through speech acts is essential to combat these harmful behaviors effectively.



10. Limitations and Recommendations

The research has its limitations, as it focused on a specific group of participants and may not be fully generalizable to other populations or contexts. Future studies could expand the scope to include diverse language learning environments and investigate the long-term impacts of speech acts on individuals' online behavior and language proficiency.

11. Novelty and Originality

In conclusion, our investigation into the role of speech acts in online hate speech and cyberbullying underscores the critical importance of addressing and combatting harmful behaviors in the digital space. By raising awareness of the linguistic aggression present in online communication, we can collectively work towards fostering a digital environment that upholds inclusivity, free expression, and fundamental values of empathy and respect. Implementing proactive measures and leveraging the potential of language for positive communication can contribute to shaping a more compassionate and equitable digital future for all.

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