VERBAL AGGRESSION AND COGNITION

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ABSTRACT

Verbal aggression, in terms of its neural origins, has been traced back to a complex interplay between the cerebral cortex, the subcortical regions, and the autonomic nervous system (ANS). According to Damasio, damage to the frontal portions of the cortex reduces one's ability to prevent socially inappropriate behavior such as cursing. That is to say, cursing, as an example, is inhibited in a normally functioning brain, but a stimulated brain triggers the aggressive response. Thus, verbal aggression is a fairly common reaction to being provoked (Jay, 2000, p. 57). The present paper strives to examine the correlation between verbal aggression and cognition, as indicated by the title. To better understand this correlation, this paper sheds light on the differences between mental and neuronal states so that the brain can be appropriately described as having "internal and/or external states." Although the paper primarily focuses on verbal aggression, it also provides a sufficient description of other forms of aggression, including physical aggression and relational aggression.

Key Words: Aggression, verbal aggression, cognition, mental states, cognitive processing

العنف اللغـــوي والإدراك

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الملخص

يعود العنف اللغوي، من حيث أصوله العصبية، إلى تفاعل معقد بين كل من القشرة الدماغية والمناطق تحت القشرية والجهاز العصبي اللاإرادي. إن الأضرار التي تلحق بالأجزاء الأمامية من القشرة الدماغية تقلل من قدرة الفرد على منع السلوك غير المناسب اجتماعيا مثل الشتم. وهذا يعني أن الشتم على سبيل المثال يتم تثبيطه في الدماغ الذي يعمل بشكل طبيعي، في حين ان الدماغ المُحفز يؤدي إلى الاستجابة المتضمنة للعنف. وبالتالي فإن العنف اللغوي هو رد فعل متوقع إلى حد ما على أي محفز. ومن هذه المنطلق تسعى الدراسة الحالية للكشف عن العلاقة الكامنة بين العنف اللغوي والإدراك عن طريق التمييز بين الحالات العقلية والعصبية. وعلى الرغم من أن هذه الدراسة تركز في المقام الأول على العنف اللغوي، إلا أنها تستعرض أيضًا وصفًا شاملاً لأنواع العنف الاخرى بما في ذلك العنف الجسدي والعنف الارتباطي .

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنف، العنف اللغوي، الإدراك، الحالات العقلية، المعالجة الإدراكية

1. Aggression

In the past, when populations were far more spread out, the effects of a single act of aggression were typically limited to the target of that aggression. Nowadays, even the most minor acts of aggression can have far-reaching, catastrophic results due to the proliferation of destructive tools. That is to say, a large number of people can be seriously affected by aggression in urban settings because their well-being is dependent on the efficient functioning of vast intertwined networks (Bandura, 1973, p. 13).

In the last two decades, researchers have made tremendous strides in understanding aggression. New concepts, including relational aggression and social exclusion, have become staples on the list of aggression research. They have also witnessed a rise in interest in new types of aggression like cyberbullying as well as in old trends that continue to escalate in their risk to society, such as terrorism (Krahé, 2013, p. 14).

1.1. Defining Aggression

A variety of definitions have been proposed for the concept of aggression. The fundamental reason why there is not a universally accepted definition of aggression, as pointed out by Bandura (1973, p. 15), is that some authors focus exclusively on the behavior's characteristics, while others involve the motivations of instigators, the emotional states of bystanders, the goals of those who act aggressively and many other aspects.

Buss is credited with providing a classical definition of aggression, which he describes as "a response that delivers noxious stimuli to another organism." (as cited in Krahé, 2013, p.19). But this definition has problems on both ends of the spectrum. It's too general, as it covers situations that shouldn't be considered aggressive, including unintentional harm. At the same time, it's too limited as it fails to account for mental processes like emotions or attempts to hurt that do not actually succeed.

According to Krahé, when viewed from a social psychological perspective, aggression can be understood as a social problem in interpersonal and group interactions, shaped by both the particular characteristics of the individuals and the larger social and cultural contexts in which their acts take place (Ibid., p.14).

From a linguistic point of view, aggression is defined by Baron and Richardson as "any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment." (as cited in Krahé, 2013, p.19). Their definition takes into account the person's desire to cause harm, and it also permits the classification of non-action as aggressive behavior, such as the willful refusal to provide assistance to someone in need.

There are three major implications of Baron and Richardson's definition, which help to set it apart from other types of social and linguistic behavior (Ibid.,
p. 20):

1. Rather than being characterized by the damage it causes, aggressive behavior is defined by its intent (regardless of whether or not damage is actually done). That's why any action motivated by ill will is considered aggressive, regardless of the actual outcome.

2. An awareness on the part of the offender that his or her actions could potentially offend someone is an essential part of the intention to hurt. For example, if someone else gets hurt because of your behavior but you had no idea that was going to happen, that will not count as aggression.

3. Since aggression is understood to be behavior that the victim would like to avoid, activities that may lead to damage but are carried out with the victim's agreement are not considered to be aggressive behavior, like unpleasant medical procedures.

1.2. Forms of Aggression

An exploration of the various forms of aggression is necessary for any attempt to define verbal aggression. This provides valuable insight into the phenomena under investigation. Aggression can manifest itself in three possible behavioral forms: physically, verbally, and relationally. The manner in which one causes harm to another is one of the primary defining characteristics that differentiate these forms of aggressive behavior (whether it is physically, by the use of verbal threats, or by the destruction of social ties, etc.) (Bushman, 2017, p. 63).

1.2.1. Physical Aggression

In their precise definition of physical aggression, Loeber & Hay describe it as "... a category of behavior that causes or threatens physical harm to others." (as cited in Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003, p.

545). To put it another way, actions that intentionally cause physical damage to another person, animal, or even object fall under the umbrella of physical aggression. For instance, punching someone in the face, destroying another's property, throwing things at animals, etc. (Shechtman, 2009, p. 3).

Physical aggression can be broken down into two categories, identified by the functions they serve:

1. **Reactive physical aggression (impulsive aggression)**: It describes an outburst of physical aggression in response to an urgent threat or provocation from another person. Due to the lack of strategic planning, it is frequently called "cold blooded aggression." (Reynolds & Janzen, 2007, p. 83).

2. **Proactive physical aggression (instrumental aggression)**: As the name implies, it is a goal-directed pattern of behavior with the intention of achieving an aim other than the use of physical aggression. Unlike reactive aggression, which lacks a clear endpoint or rationale, proactive aggressiveness takes place in preparation for consequences that are beneficial to oneself, which is why it is sometimes referred to as "cold blooded aggression." (Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003, p. 545).

1.2.2. Relational Aggression

Recent research has pointed to a new category of aggression called "relational aggression," which refers to actions that hurt others by disrupting their social relationships or their sense of belonging in a group. Girls are more likely than boys to be relationally aggressive because their interactions are typically based on intimate friendships and are motivated by their desire to be close (Shechtman, 2009, p. 3).

It is worth mentioning that relational aggression can take both overt and covert forms; experts believe that, while the former is more common among young children, the latter emerges later in life. Overt relational aggression can seem like informing a friend that he is not allowed to

participate in the game until he gives up his toy; on the other hand, intentionally spreading harmful rumors about someone would be an example of covert relational aggressive behavior (Coyne & Ostrov, 2018, p. 15).

1.2.3. Verbal Aggression

In broad terms, verbal aggression can be defined as "the use of the language symbol system in ways that are perceived to be aimed at negatively influencing an individual's self-concept" (2017, p. 30). Samp, by this definition, not only acknowledges but celebrates the multifaceted nature of communication phenomena. Additionally, neither the victim nor the offender are identified. Therefore, the target of verbal aggression may suffer negative consequences in a variety of settings. On the other hand, Bjorkqvist claims that there is no difference between males and females when it comes to the use of verbal aggression, which he describes as "face-to-face verbal confrontations such as insults, threats, name-calling, and hurtful teasing." (as cited in Pepler et al., 2005, p. 5).

However, in his definition of verbal aggression, Videbeck (2020, p. 409) incorporates the emotional component, saying, "Verbal aggression is an emotion expressed through verbal abuse, lack of cooperation, violation of rules or norms, or threatening behavior." According to him, one of the ways people deal with feelings of helplessness and threat is to express them verbally and aggressively. Consequently, the goal of verbal aggression is to frighten or emotionally hurt the target, which can then escalate into physical aggression.

Although differences of opinion still exist, there appears to be some agreement among scholars, specifically Infante and Renfrew, that 'verbal aggression' refers to a form of communicative behavior intended to damage someone's self-esteem. Their definition makes it clear that verbal aggression is not limited to verbal interactions. In other words,

the power of verbal communication can be amplified by the use of nonverbal clues, including body language, eye contact, and voice tone, in addition to the spoken word. Nevertheless, language is at the heart of verbal aggression due to the fact that it incorporates the patterns that provoke its meaning (Samp, 2017, p. 29).

2. Mental States

When compared to neuronal states which reflect 'the external states', mental states are considered to be 'internal states.' Mental states, or "the contents of phenomenal experience," as termed by Northoff, are part of brain states but cannot be localized to the brain. No one has ever found physical evidence of the existence of a mental state in the brain. Even with direct and real-time access to the brain, contemporary imaging techniques have failed to reveal the presence of any mental state within the brain itself (2004, p. 186).

There is no unique physical state of our neural system that corresponds to each mental state, because each mental state can be realized by a wide variety of physical states. Thus, one-to-many rather than one-to-one dependence best describes the relationship between mental and physical states. It is common to think of mental states as analogous to computer programs (the software) that can be put into action by turning on certain parts of computing hardware. Rather than relying on a specific collection of circuits, the identity of these programs is instead determined by the array of functional relations connecting their pieces (Dascal, 1983, p. 18).

From the ontological perspective, Northoff (2004, p. 282) describes mental states as "ontological relation i.e., a particular 'dynamic configuration' within the 'intrinsic' integration between brain, body, and environment." Accordingly, mental states can no longer be "placed" as a distinct "ontological element" in the brain or the mind. He goes on to say that they accurately portray the 'intrinsic' connection that

exists between one's brain, body, and surroundings because of their incorporation of the relevant context of the phenomenal experience of an event.

At any point in time, human beings are capable of exhibiting a variety of different mental states. These can range from emotional to cognitive, and from conscious to unconscious. Due to the limited scope of the present research, only those states that are intrinsically crucial in human interactions, like those involved in the creation and interpretation of communication acts, will be considered here. According to Bara, when it comes to the act of communicating, only the following states are supposed to be included (2010, p. 67):

2.1. Common Attention

Common attention is the defining characteristic of effective communication because communication is impossible unless both parties are actively paying attention to one another. Aside from paying attention to the conversation at hand, participants also need to make sure that everyone else is engaged. In other words, they should stay on top of what is happening throughout the interaction, regardless of whether it is the result of their actions or those of others. 'Conditions of Contact' is the scientific term for this initial prerequisite (Ibid.).

Herbert Clark (as cited in Bara, 2010, p. 67) has examined the conditions of contact in great detail from a cultural perspective. He has argued that eye contact is the primary mechanism of social interaction. Undoubtedly, making eye contact is not the only way to connect with someone. Thus, acoustics is a popular option in situations where the parties involved cannot see each other.

2.2. Belief

In the field of cognitive pragmatics, there exists a strong relationship between knowledge and belief. This subject has been the source of contention between proponents of the logic models (such as

Rips 1994) and those of the mental models (such as Johnson-Laird 1983, 2006). The former argue that belief is viewed as primitive and that all people have some type of mental logic that allows them to correctly extrapolate the results of a set of beliefs. Mental model theorists, on the other hand, claim that people are able to reason deductively and construct mental representations of real-world situations as well. In this sense, belief is a product of human thought. Through formalization, it refines one's innate thinking abilities. Therefore, logic is not the simple result of triggering primitive brain regions (Ibid., p. 68-69).

There are three distinct types of beliefs that Bara distinguishes in order to present the notion of shared beliefs, which is essential when talking about mental states in communication:

2.2.1. Individual Belief

Individual Belief is used to describe situations in which each participant has formed his own independent opinion about a topic, with no influence from any other participants (Bara, 2010, p. 71).

2.2.2. Common Belief

Under this category, individuals share a similar set of beliefs, especially those beliefs that are connected to the individuals' general knowledge of the environment in which they live or their cultural knowledge. For example, the belief held by all pacifists is that the use of all nuclear weapons ought to be prohibited, and the knowledge held by all humans is that we are all the products of a biological mother and a biological father. This kind of belief, which is also known as mutual belief, forms the basis of a great deal of human interaction, and it is often held by a diverse set of people (Ibid.).

2.2.3. Shared Belief

Shared belief is a belief that is known to be held by all parties involved in the speech event. A key distinction between shared belief

and common belief from a psychological perspective is that shared belief is subjective rather than objective. Since an individual can neither read minds nor be certain that all individuals share the same views he holds, a subjective viewpoint is essential for shared belief to exist (Bara, 2010, p. 72- 75).

2.3. Consciousness

The transition from the unconscious to the conscious, in the Freudian view, is analogous to turning on a lamp in a dark room; otherwise, nothing changes, except that what was before invisible is now visible. The field of cognitive science, on the other hand, adopts a unique stance which says that awareness is not an intrinsic aspect of a mental state but rather something that must be developed. From a cognitive standpoint, when knowledge content moves from the unconscious to the conscious state, it undergoes a cognitive shift that changes the nature of the previously stored information by imposing a new interpretive framework on it, one that is often serial rather than the previously used parallel form. Searle elaborated on this dichotomy between conscious and unconscious states, arguing that several cognitive processes, including those that actualize syntactic capacities, fall into neither category. Instead, they occur solely at the neural level, unaccompanied by any higher-level cognitive processing (Ibid., p. 76).

3. Cognitive processing

The cognitive processing of individuals, and how it evolves across the lifespan, affects their aggressive behavior in general and their verbal aggression in particular. Bushman (2017, p. 4) claims that it is typically the result of an interaction of the following two factors:

1. **Situational determinants**: The cognitive processes and emotional responses that are associated with a certain circumstance are given a head start in associative memory by the presence of situational factors.

Therefore, extreme circumstances have the potential to provoke verbally aggressive behavior in almost anyone.

2. **Personal predispositions**: Over time, a person's unique combination of biological and environmental variables shapes their predispositions in ways that are reflected in their emotions, thoughts, and cognitive progressing. As a result, some people develop a natural tendency to be verbally aggressive, regardless of the context. Genetic predispositions, anomalies in neurophysiology, domestic violence, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), central nervous system (CNS) trauma, and excessive punishment are only some of the many other social and biological elements that have a role in the development of extreme verbal aggression, as explicated below in the figure constructed by the researcher of this paper:

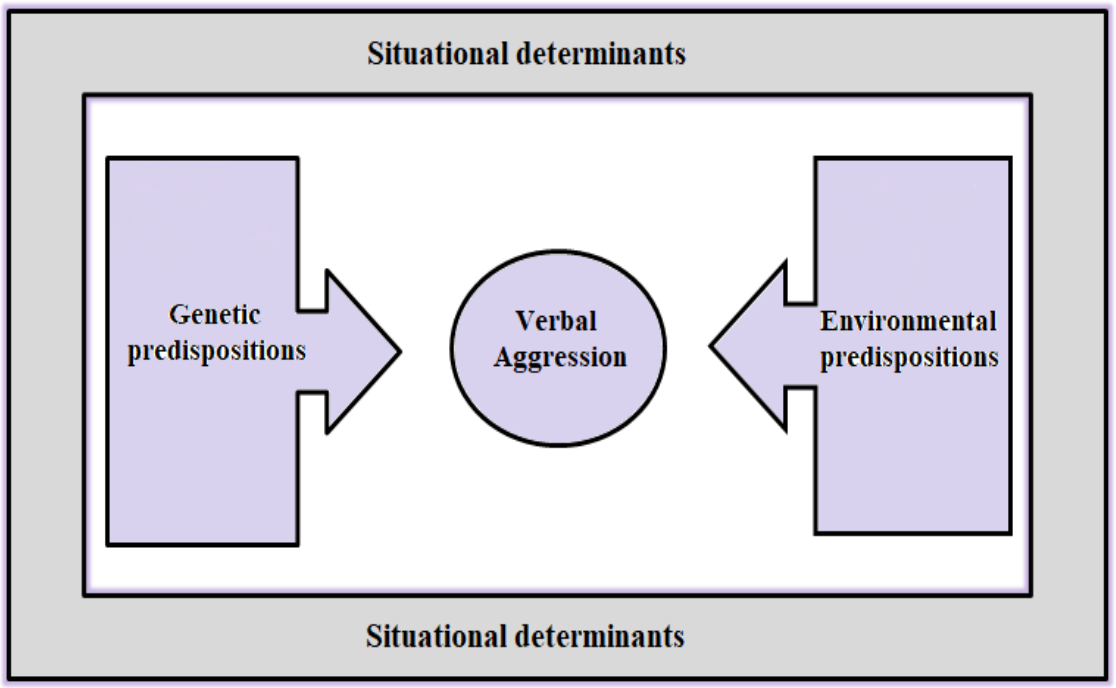

Figure 1: Interaction of personal predispositions in producing verbal aggression .

Cognitively speaking, while the above-mentioned range of predispositions may increase the likelihood of the establishment of particular cognitive routines, scripts, and schemas, it is the individual's interactions with the environment that are most likely to either erase or solidify these cognitions. Hence, individuals who are exposed to and surrounded by aggressive adults and peers, who are frequently bullied or victimized, and who are taught that aggression is appropriate, are at a higher risk of developing verbal aggression (Ibid.).

Conclusion

Language is notable for its versatility, which allows it to be utilized in a variety of contexts, and its everyday use is remarkably innovative as well. And hence, when discussing elements of language, it is important to keep in mind that even though they serve a common function, they can be put in unexpected circumstances to fulfill various purposes and consequently be linked to a wide range of mental states. As a result, the relationship between the linguistic expressions and mental states is extremely complex and multifaceted (many-many relationship).

People's perceptions of stimuli are shaped by mental constructs called schemas. As one gathers information and experiences in a certain situation, he or she forms a schema to describe the characteristics that are to be expected. Schemas influence not only people's encounters with a phenomenon, but also their ability to pay attention to and process that phenomenon unconsciously. So, schemas help to effectively encode stimuli, while heuristic rules shape the meanings people assign to them.

When it comes to verbal aggression, the schemas that alert people to aggressive interactions are actually an integral part of the cognitive processes that bridge the gap between witnessing verbal aggression as a child and responding to similar situations in adulthood. To put it another way, when people are exposed to verbal aggression repeatedly,

their schemas adjust to accommodate the new verbally aggressive experiences, and as a result, their emotional responses become less intense, that is what the present study suggests to call 'normalization of verbal aggression'.

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