

Hate Speech Online and Two Sides of the Coin

Brainstorming

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Hate Speech is a term that we read in newspapers and on social net-working sites. We hear it in political speeches and scientific talks. Nevertheless, there is no exact definition and – if asked – people (even scientists) avoid giving a distinct answer. There might be several reasons for this kind of rather hesitating reaction: Firstly, (and this refers to the scientific discipline the people stand for) one simply does not feel responsible for the subject. Hate Speech is such an extensive subject. Thus, it refers to different disciplines such as jurisprudence, criminology, sociology, science of history, philosophy, psychology, theology or literary studies, and linguistics. Therefore and secondly, there are many different definitions, thus not a single definition we can agree on. It is, thirdly, conceivable that there is no need for an exact definition. Let us just assume that people feel fine with the imagination of hate speech as a nebulous cloud and items that one would denunciate could just be sent to it.

That does not sound very academic, does it? So where can we start from? We might start with the answer people normally give when asked about the meaning of the term *hate speech*: People tend to connect this term with the expression of hatred. This again rises

questions: What is hatred if not just another ‘cloud’? Hatred can be considered as a container for emotions such as rage, anger and fear. Hatred is one of many answers to fear as neurobiologists would put it. People who hate do not feel any empathy for the person they hate which leads to the loss of inhibitions. Hatred includes the attempt to separate from „the other“ and even to destroy the object of hatred. Keeping these characteristics in mind, we should have a look at examples for so-called hate speech, a post addressed to the German journalist Dunja Hayali, cited by her on Facebook:

„schade das sie nicht eine der frauen von köln in der silvesternacht waren, vielleicht hätte Ihnen das augen geöffnet.“

(It’s a pity that you weren’t one of these women on New Year’s Eve in Cologne. This might have opened [your] eyes.)

On the linguistic surface, we find a person’s expression of regret (*schade*), not hatred. The speech act of regretting, however, aims at involving a subject worth regretting. He/she names this subject also indirectly by just mentioning the women of Cologne’s New Year’s Eve (2015/16) and not explaining the concrete incident (namely sexual abuse and

harassment). With regard to the conditions for the speech act of expressing regret, one would assume a comprehensible reason for regret. This might be a lost opportunity or a mistake. The fact that someone was not affected by a crime is definitely no reason for regret. Regretting also includes the wish that things would have taken place differently: a grasped opportunity or an avoided mistake. The given example expresses the wish that the addressed person would have been victimized as well. Definitely, this is not an acceptable condition for a speech act of wishing neither. It raises the concept of malediction immediately. Where do we find the hatred? It is reasonable to ask the question why someone would wish something cruel should happen to a person. It is also reasonable to raise the question why someone would wish something cruel should happen to a person he/she does not even know personally – and thus doesn't share any personal (bad) experiences with? And why does he/she even contact a personally unknown person in order to express his/her emotions? The averseness to the addressed and simultaneously execrated person must be based on non-personal matters. Non-personal matters are linked to attitudes, prejudices and incertitude in relation to one

another. At the same time, these personal matters are related to a strong group that shares these attitudes and prejudices. Thus, as Carolin Emcke (*Gegen den Hass* published by S. Fischer) puts it: „Hass ist kollektiv und er ist ideologisch geformt.“ (Hatred is collective and formed ideologically). Looking at our example, the attitude seems to involve at least two subjects: misogyny (because the text reveals the opinion that women ought to be punished mentally and physically in case they do not behave the way it is expected by someone) and xenophobia. The text claims that the addressed person needs to open her eyes for a certain reason. This insinuates that she should change her mind. Dunja Hayali agitated and still agitates for refugees. This is the most prominent subject she was associated with when she received lots of hate speech commentaries on her Facebook account, and also via the broadcast's (*ZDF* and *ZDF-Morgenmagazin*) face-book account, and she probably still does. The formulated hatred shows the strong volition to separate from others – women on the one hand and refugees on the other hand. It shows that people who are somehow strange are rejected. Thus, hate speech is connected to political subjects. A look into Twitter data confirms it. Hate speech is related to:

(1) **Racism:**

#Facebook #hatespeech #respect #humanrights

An attached picture shows the inscription: Soutenir le racisme est un crime. Sur internet aussi.

2016-11-14, RT2, L1

(Racism is a crime also on the Internet);

(2) **Discrimination:**

Plumpe Hetze gegen Minderheiten, weil man was weis ich für Probleme hat, sind keine Meinung, sondern nur Hass #againsthatespeech, 2016-11-14, L3

(Coarse baiting against minorities, because one has such and such problems, are no opinion but only hatred #againstthatpseech);

(3) **Hate speech is even a synonym for the politically motivated offense sedition:**

#againsthatespeech? Aber dann darf ich ja nicht mehr als Meinung getarnte Volksverhetzung betreiben!Mimimi!, 2016-11-14, R2, RT3, L5

(#againstthatespeech? Then I am not allowed to pursue sedition in disguise of opinion anymore! Mimimi!).

§130 of the German penal code describes sedition as acts of goading hatred and (verbal) violence against national, racial or religious groups or groups defined by their ethnic origin. The examples given above reveal exactly those acts. The scientific disciplines mentioned beforehand also have to deal with hate speech as ethno-category. If one has a closer look at the discourse in Social Media, one finds definitions of hate speech far beyond the ones given. Hate speech is an expression of so-called “different” opinions and one finds the following interpretations:

(4) **Hate speech is a conflict of opinion:**
Wann ist es #hatespeech? Immer dann, wenn sich durch Deine Meinung jemand anderes angepisst fühlt. Also immer.
#againstthatespeech,
2016-11-17, R0, RT1, L2

(When do we call it #hatespeech?
Whenever someone is pissed off
by your opinion. Thus, always.
#againstthatespeech);

(5) **Hate speech is criticism:**
Wann wird aus Kritik Hatespeech?
Komischerweise immer genau dann,
wenn ihr anderer Meinung seid :^)
#againstthatespeech,
2016-11-17, R1, RT1, L3

(When does criticism turn into hate
speech? Funnily enough as soon
as you have a different view :^)
#againstthatespeech);

(6) **Hate speech is censorship:**
So Hashtags wie #againstthatespeech
einfach mal als Untergrabung der
Meinungsfreiheit verstehen und nicht
als scheinheiligen Kampf gg Hasz,
2016-11-17, R1, RT2, L10

(To understand hashtags such as
#againstthatespeech as undermining
freedom of opinion and not as
hypocritical fight against hatred);

(7) **Hate speech is protest:**
Ihr müsst alles aufsaugen und
verinnerlichen, was euch der nette
Onkel in den Nachrichten sagt!
Widerspruch ist Hatespeech
#againstthatespeech,

2016-11-17, R1, RT4, L10

(You have to absorb and internalize
everything the friendly uncle in the
newscast says! Protest is hate speech
#againstthatespeech).

(8) **Hate speech is truth:**
@Adressierung, #Hatespeech' ist
Neusprech, um friedliche Kritiker v
wirklich hasserfüllten Figuren wie
Volker #Beck mundtot zu machen.):
#GKPsymp

An attached picture
shows the inscription:
Truth it's the new hate speech
„During times of universal deceit, telling
the truth becomes a revolutionary act.“
George Orwell (2016-11-14, RT9, L10)

(@addressing, #Hatespeech' is newspeak,
in order to get peaceful critics muzzled
by really hate-ridden characters such as
Volker #Beck.): #GKPsymp).

What we find here is a typical pattern of dis-
courses related to the sensitivity and reflec-
tivity of speech (see also the debate on poli-
tical correctness). Interacting persons fear a

government censorship and interference with freedom of expression. They try to intercede by complaining about it. As we all know they also use expressions like „Das wird man ja wohl noch sagen dürfen“ (One must be allowed to say XYZ). This implicates that there seem to be certain issues that are not allowed to be stated, although we live in a democratic regime. It is a misconception right wing populist parties often use. Hate Speech also seems to be a concept that fits this imagination. When trying to take over the terminology, people also try to confuse the discourse.

If terms are re-interpreted by assigning them a different semantic content, a discourse chaos might be created. If hate speech is equated to truth, freedom of speech, criticism and protest, these terms can get poisoned. One could think a term such as *hate speech* cannot be used without a right-wing (extremist) connotation anymore. Moreover, it gets even harder to legitimately criticise issues or protest against them because the concepts are re-framed. Disclosing these discourse phenomena, mechanisms and strategies and showing that there are parallel overlapping discourses that use one term for different meanings surely are tasks of linguistics as a discipline. Regarding our concrete

example, another important task for linguists would be to define linguistically grounded categories for different kinds of *hate speech*.