

## Affect in Online Hate Speech

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Karin Sandell 2022. *Parasiter och 'bättre folk'. Affekt i näthat mot det svenska i Finland*. [Parasites and 'better people'. Affect in online hate speech directed at the Swedish in Finland.] Diss. Åbo Akademi, Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi, Nordisk folkloristik. Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag. 197 pp. ISBN 978-952-389-007-7 (print) ISBN 978-952-389-008-4 (electronic).

One of the main subjects of debate in recent Finnish politics has been racism, namely its definition and role in society today. Around the time of the deadline for this review, in August and September of 2023, the Finnish Parliament discussed a statement written by the government on how best to promote equality and non-discrimination both within Finnish society and abroad. According to media reports, the parties found it difficult to agree on how so-called hate speech, in real life and on the internet, should be defined and addressed. The title of Karin Sandell's doctoral thesis, *Parasites and 'better people'. Affect in online hate speech directed at the Swedish in Finland*, is, in other words, highly relevant even if the Swedish-speaking minority has not been the principal focus of the debates mentioned above.

The thesis analyses online hate speech directed at the Swedish-speaking population in Finland in the web discussion forum Suomi24. Minorities of all kinds can be the target of online hate speech, and Sandell points out that she is not trying to compare the situation of different groups. As a Swedish-speaking Finn, Sandell is both an observer and the target of the forum posts and comments that she is studying.

Although online hate speech is not a new phenomenon, it has no fixed definition. Sandell examines the possibility of viewing it as a folkloristic genre by discussing the genre concept in general and its role in previous folkloristic research and theory development. She applied both an *ethic*, that is, universal and scientifically grounded, as well as an *emic*, that is, individually and culturally defined, understanding of what makes certain posts hateful when excerpting the posts for the study. The two approaches, Sandell points out, do not always correlate. The notions of intertextuality and so-called intertextual gaps are useful here: some of the posts and comments show clear influences from other genres, such as authority communication, which can make it difficult to identify them as online hate speech, even if the underlying intent was to express negative views about Swedish-speaking people. The wider the intertextual gap, the more difficult it can be to label a post as offensive. For

the reader, seeing examples of this type of post in the research material can be eye-opening.

As a context for the forum discussions, Sandell presents an overview of the history of the Swedish language in Finland, starting from Finland being a part of Sweden and Swedish being the language of education and of the elite, and continuing through the Finnish national awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in a new status for the Finnish language and conflicts between the language groups during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the role of the Swedish language, spoken as a first language by about 5 percent of the population, in Finnish society has caused occasional controversy, and such conflicts are reflected in the forum posts.

Sandell has excerpted a total of approximately 350 posts from the period 2015–2017. The discussions have been moderated to some extent, but limited resources seem to have made it difficult for the moderators to eliminate all posts that can be considered offensive. Even though the study does not seek to quantitatively measure the number of offensive posts, it could have been helpful for some readers to obtain an approximate idea of the total quantity of the research material: how much text is contained in 350 discussion forum posts? How closely can this amount of material be examined, and how easily can it be overviewed?

Sandell examined the excerpted posts using content analysis, with particular focus on affect, performance and performativity. In her discussion of affect, Sandell has primarily leaned on the work done by Sara Ahmed (2004) and Margaret Wetherell (2012). Scholars have often viewed affect differently than emotions – for example, as a more physically driven phenomenon – but Sandell concludes that she does not make this distinction. Her use of affect is, rather, justified by the fact that it has not been commonly used in folkloristic research and therefore can be expected to open new perspectives on texts of this kind. The curious reader, who may be wondering about the outcome of this endeavour, will not find an answer, however, since the possible advantages of the concept in relation to, for example emotions, is not explicitly discussed further. Applying a performance perspective means that Sandell focuses on how the forum post writers are ‘performing’ on a ‘stage’ to prompt certain kinds of responses.

For the analysis, Sandell developed an *affective tools* model to identify how affect is mediated in the forum posts. These tools include emotive expressions, emotional words, metaphors and orthographic practices. Contrary to what might be expected, emotional words appeared quite rarely, while forum post writers often used emotive expressions and metaphors to express or awaken emotions. One detail that can be pointed out here is that Sandell

has included words and expressions written in another language – in this case, in Swedish – in the category orthographic practices. I would like to question whether using the very language that is being criticised to achieve a stylistic effect should not, rather, be seen as a pragmatic practice that extends beyond the superficial level of the text.

The analysis is presented in two main chapters. The first chapter studies hate speech as performance, with extra attention being paid to the intersectional categories of language, class and gender. Sandell shows how forum posts on a wide range of topics convey an image of the Swedish-speaking population as an enemy and a threat to the Finnish-speaking majority. The affective tools mentioned above are used to awaken negative sentiments and suspicion: Swedish-speakers are pictured as living a privileged life separate from the rest of Finnish society and not contributing by, for example, working or doing military service, while at the same time taking full advantage of society and its services. The loyalty of the Swedish-speaking people towards the Finnish state and government is questioned, as many of those posting in the forum view Swedish speakers as descendants of the former Swedish rulers. The compulsory teaching of Swedish in Finnish schools is another popular topic, as is the legal protection of the right to use Swedish in certain areas of society, for example in healthcare. The Swedish language is often described as invasive and dominant in relation to Finnish. Finally, Sandell presents three metaphors that are especially common in the research material: the pig, death and cancer. She discusses the use of them in this context, for example by showing how they have been used elsewhere to awaken negative sentiments.

The second analysis chapter focuses on the performativity of online hate speech, that is, on just what it accomplishes in a forum like Suomi24. The main conclusions are that the forum posts aim to rewrite history and introduce an image of an earlier, completely Finnish-speaking Finland. Furthermore, they aim to dehumanise the Swedish-speaking people – especially some well-known individuals, like politicians – by portraying them as animals or other non-human creatures, and finally, to convey an image of the Swedish-speaking population as a threat to the traditional and solid Finnish way of life, for example when it comes to family values and sexual orientation.

In the final discussion, Sandell emphasises the importance of studying and understanding online hate speech. Hate speech does not, as Sandell puts it, remain only on the internet. The thesis makes it clear that this kind of communication cannot be considered a marginal phenomenon. Even if the focus is on the posts as texts, one can easily speculate about the discussion participants and what motivates them to engage in performances of this kind.

Sandell suggests that it, among other things, has to do with confirming one's own identity by pointing out differences between oneself and other groups.

Throughout the thesis, Sandell ensures that the message is conveyed to the reader in a way that is easy to follow. She engages in a constant dialogue between herself, the research material and other sources, which underlines the complexity of the matter. Sandell has done impressively thorough research on the context of the discussed forum posts, which makes the analysis transparent and comprehensible for readers who are not so well informed about the linguistic circumstances and recent political discussions in Finland. She also provides background information about presumably well-known phenomena, like the caste system in India and apartheid in South Africa, which is consistent but, in some cases, raises questions about the implied reader. Since the theoretical and methodological starting points are introduced quite thoroughly at the beginning of the thesis, some concluding critical remarks on the applied perspectives and methods would have been appreciated. It is, however, clear that the affective tools model can be of help in identifying online hate speech, especially where the intertextual gap is wide and the intended message is camouflaged.

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