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Parasites and “better people”: Affect in online hate speech directed at the Swedish in Finland

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Introduction

My thesis deals with what is generally referred to as online hate speech. I focus on posts about the Swedish-speaking population in Finland published on the web forum Suomi24. The purpose is to analyse how online hate speech directed at the Swedish-speaking population in Finland is expressed in this public forum. This is done through a content analysis of the published texts focusing on affect, performance, and performativity (Ahmed, 2004; Butler, 1997; Wetherell, 2012). With affect theory as a point of departure, I explore how online hate speech is performed in relation to the intersectional categories class, gender, language, and ethnicity (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; Karkulehto et al., 2012). In doing this, I analyse the material using a self-developed affective tool model. The model includes four affective tools: emotional words, emotive expressions, metaphors, and orthographic practices. Inspired by a performance perspective, I discuss online hate speech as a folkloristic genre (Briggs & Bauman, 1992; Frog et al., 2016). I also analyse the performative effects of online hate speech by showing how the claims made about the Swedish-speaking population are reiterated and which norms and values are upheld as a result.

Affective tools

Online hate speech is commonly defined as hostile utterances directed at individuals and/or groups in the form of comments, e-mails, blog posts, and various discussions on the Internet. The affective tools are the outset for my qualitative content analysis. The affective tools are four different means of expressing and mediating affect through text. The method is inspired by Ahmed's (2004) analysis of emotions, Marander-Eklund's (2009) use of emotive expressions together with Heggli's (2002) utilisation of metalinguistic tools. Emotive expressions are expressive in character (Melin & Lange, 2000; Marander-Eklund, 2009). They are not named emotions but convey affect. Emotional words are words for feelings like "hate" or "love" (Ahmed, 2004). Metaphors are figures of speech, and a manner of talking about an entity by experiencing and understanding it via something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Orthographic practices such as capital letter, punctuation and (mis) spelling usage convey and strengthen a message (Heggli, 2002; Palmgren, 2014).

Online hate speech is not always expressed through explicit aggressivity and resentment; it might be conveyed in a composed and objective manner

(Saresma, 2020). In researching online hate speech as a genre, I see how crude statements about Swedish-speakers are mediated and reiterated in a discussion forum, but there is a wider context. The mediated texts are not independent opinions, they are continuations of a dream of a monolingual Finnish nation originating from a time long before Finland's independence from Russia in 1917 (Engman, 2016; Himmelroos & Strandberg, 2020).

The transmitted texts are not contained within the forum but are spread online and into other contexts. Online hate speech leaks into other genres in both public and private domains; it is resounded in the parliament and in private conversations (Löow, 2017). The digital world is not separate from the analogue “reality”, rather it is a part of the same entirety (Hajduk-Nijakowska, 2015).

Research Material

The material for this thesis consists of about 350 discussion forum posts from Suomi24 published and collected between 2015 and 2017. During my search for online hate speech directed at the Swedish-speaking population, I came across hate speech directed at several other minorities, for example asylum seekers, sexual minorities, and religious minorities.

Online hate speech targets many different groups. Research shows that the debate climate overall, both online and offline, has become more aggressive over the years (Himmelroos & Strandberg, 2020; Korhonen et al., 2016; Lindell, 2016 & 2020). Online hate speech is affective, it conveys affect, and works through affect. Affect is a combination of emotions, corporeality, and cultural context, and it is shaped between individuals and their contexts (Wetherell, 2012). I view online hate speech as a performance, where the performer calls upon the audience using affective tools. Affective utterances work through performance; they create affective communities and call for action. Affects are performative. (Butler, 1997; Saresma, 2020)

Through analysing the web forum material, I show the performativity of online hate speech, how it produces and upholds negative sentiments about the people it targets. Actual societal impact is outside of my scope, but previous research has shown how an online environment where xenophobia and misogynistic opinions are given space can contribute to real acts of violence. What goes on online does not necessarily stay online. (Saresma, 2020; Malkki et al., 2021)

The Enemy Inside

I have paid extra attention to the intersectional categories of language, ethnicity, class, and gender (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). It is through different combinations of these that the Swedish-speaking population is framed as the opposite of Finnish-speakers, and even their enemy. The analysed quotes include examples of Swedish-speakers being called quislings, and their loyalty towards the Finnish nation is questioned. Swedish-speakers are thought of as being upper-class and descendants of old Swedish nobility. Homophobia is a visible theme in online hate speech, and the sexuality and masculinity of Swedish men are up for scrutiny. Swedish-speaking women, on the other hand, are depicted as raging feminists or even as the grim reaper.

The Swedish language acts as a marker for what is not considered genuinely Finnish. The idea of a monolingual nation as a sign of a strong and independent nation is expressed through the quotes about Swedish-speakers as unwanted citizens. Historical concepts and events are used to justify positions regarding Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. History is produced in online hate speech to give it a sense of authority (Herd, 2018). The people who are singled out as objects of hatred are dehumanised by being portrayed as animals, likened to diseases, or described as an unnecessary cost (Stollznow, 2008). Finally, online hatred expresses a backward-looking value conservatism and presents heteronormativity as the only alternative (Ambjörnsson, 2016).

Swedish-speakers are posed as a threat to the Finnish nation, and by that, online hate speech is sanctioned. The publisher of the hate becomes the victim. The online hate speech produces history in which the Finnish-speaking population comprises the only legitimate inhabitants of Finland, and Swedish-speakers are occupiers. Along with immigrants, sexual minorities, feminists and others, Swedish-speakers are depicted as an obstacle and a threat to the homogeneous ideal life that the online hate mongers express a longing for.

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