FLEKS
Scandinavian Journal of Intercultural Theory and Practice
Vol 7, No. 1 - Hate speech - 2020 Side 1/ 20

Chocolate, identity, and extreme speech online: An analysis of linguistic means in online comments in Croatia and Serbia

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Keywords:
Croatia
extreme speech
hate speech
impoliteness
Serbia

Abstract

In this article the phrase "extreme speech" is used to encompass both hate speech and impoliteness. Legislation against hate speech has been passed in many countries, while work on defining phenomena related to hate speech is still ongoing. As a rule, there is no legislation prohibiting impoliteness, and thus impoliteness is often perceived as a less serious verbal offence. There is, however, a grey zone between the two phenomena, which depends on contextual factors that must be constantly explored. In this article, we explore the gray zone between hate speech and impoliteness by looking at user-generated posts commenting on seemingly uncontroversial topics such as giving chocolate to children. The context we explore is the political relationship between Croatia and Serbia, two neighboring countries in the southwest Balkans with a history of recent military conflicts that ended in 1995. The relationship between these two countries can still be described as periodically troubled. The comments we analyze were posted on two online newspapers, the Croatian Jutarnji list and the Serbian Večernje novosti. Using impoliteness theory and Critical Discourse Analysis framework we identify and analyze various linguistic means that serve as extreme speech triggers, connect them to relevant contexts and highlight the grey zone that exist between hate speech and impoliteness. Our findings show that, in their discussions, the posters used a number of linguistic means for constructing national identities that at times resulted in extreme speech. The posters often targeted individual co-posters first and very quickly moved on to target ethnic groups, thus fluctuating between impoliteness and hate speech.

Introduction

Opinions are voiced freely online all over the world and online platforms have provided unprecedented access to new knowledge and experiences. However, this openness provides space for potential harmful practices as well, as shown by the recent focus on hate speech and impoliteness in research and practice (Lani, 2014). The research also shows that there is still a struggle to find common definitions for crucial terms such as hate speech (Titley, Keen, & Földi, 2015). Gray areas may be particularly challenging, because hate speech is often implicit.[1]

The unclear distinction between impoliteness (offensive language) and hate speech may prevent laws and regulations already in place from being enforced; it may also be used as a means of controlling free speech. We argue that analyzing particular cases of language in use and language in context can shed light on some of these gray zones. Thus, this paper presents an analysis of linguistic impoliteness triggers to provide knowledge about specific grey zones. This analysis is based on online comments posted in semi-public Croatian and Serbian discourse on the websites of the online newspapers *Jutarnji list* (Croatia) and *Večernje novosti* (Serbia). The comments were triggered by two events: a) The seemingly innocent action of giving chocolate bars produced in Serbia to children in Croatia by the then Croatian president, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović; and b) Serbia's prime minister leaving the talks about Serbia's accession to the EU when he was in Brussels (the talks were stopped because of the Croatian blockade of Chapter 26). These two events triggered a multitude of online comments both in Croatian and Serbian media.

We examine how the specific context of these two post-conflict societies influences extreme speech in online communication. Employing the impoliteness theory (Culpeper 2011, 2016) and the Critical Discourse Analysis framework (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Leibhart, 2009), we identify and analyze specific linguistic strategies related to past ethnic conflicts and utilized in the online interactions, and we explain their role in extreme speech.

Background

Hate speech online has been addressed as a topic in both research and legislation in recent years (see Assimakopoulos, Baider, & Millar, 2017; Beesch, 2014; Buyse, 2014; ECRI secretariat 2018, European Commission, 2014, 2016a, 2016b; European Parliament, 2017; Gagliardone, Gal, Alvez, & Martinez, 2015; Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, 2018; McGonagle, 2013; Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019; Zubčevič, Bender, & Vojvodić, 2018). Defining hate speech has proven to be a difficult task for a number of reasons, primarily because it challenges other rights such as that of freedom of speech.[2] Alternative terms to hate speech include "dangerous speech" (Benesch, 2014), "fear speech" (Buyse, 2014), "harmful speech" and "extreme speech" (Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019). Udupa and Pohjonen (2019) advanced the term "extreme speech" as a way to examine the expansion of "online vitriol and its political consequences in different regions of the world" (p. 3050). By advancing the term "extreme speech," they indicate a need to problematize the orthodox understanding of extremism and hate speech and emphasize the analytical value of considering extreme speech as "a spectrum of cultural practices" with such aspects as humor, fun, and banality. In this article we will use the term "extreme speech" to cover both hate speech and impoliteness.

Laws and regulations aimed at preventing hate speech online have been passed in most European countries (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017) providing a normative framework that nonetheless often fails to provide meaningful interventions and in some cases even enables

[1] See, for example, the distinction between "hard" and "soft" hate speech as explained by Assimakopoulos et al. (2017).
[2] For an overview of the various definitions, see Titley et al. (2015).

repression. We agree with the notion that a lack of consensus about a clear, common definition of hate speech is contributing to a failure to intervene when appropriate.

Extreme speech online in Croatia and Serbia

The term "extreme speech" refers specifically to digital acts, a form of digital communication that

> serves to reinforce differences and hatred between groups on grounds of religion, race, political ideology and gender, often with the overt intent to intimidate and agitate target groups and individuals. (Pohjonen, 2017: para. 1)

Extreme speech is also "intended to be emotive, it provokes people to act on their feelings, and lends itself to cultivating ethno-nationalist identities" (Kamra & Williams, 2019, para. 5).

Such phenomena are not new in Croatian and Serbian contexts. A number of studies have analyzed hate speech in media and its connections with the military conflicts of the 1990s (e.g., Bugarski, 1995; Kolstø, 2009; Kurspahić, 2003; Tompson, 2000). Post-conflict political relations between Croatia and Serbia have fluctuated and the two countries have developed in different directions. Croatia joined the EU in 2013; Serbia, however, is still working on its accession while simultaneously fostering closer connections to Russia and China (Pentagon Report, 2019).

Even though the wars ended in 1995, many media debates both in Croatia and Serbia still focus on the troubled Croato-Serbian relations. The articles that triggered the comments we analyze discuss—directly or indirectly—exactly that: Serbian-Croatian relations. Public discourse in the two countries on these relations relates to the discursive delineation between "us" and "them". As we will see, these identity negotiations can provoke extreme speech (i.e., hate speech and impoliteness).

A variety of measures to combat hate speech have been implemented at the European (McGonagle, 2013), regional, and state levels. Hate speech in general and hate speech online in particular have been addressed in public and in laws and regulations in both Croatia and Serbia. For example, in 2013 at the regional conference Addressing Online Hate Speech in South-eastern Europe and Turkey, organized by UNESCO, the participants from the region stated that the media and lawmakers throughout the region are challenged by the increase in non-tolerant language, which often results in hate speech in online communication. The recommendations from the conference included harmonizing the laws regulating hate speech and introducing common standards for dealing with hate speech, "particularly [that] concerning the moderation and management of user-generated content and online comments on journalistic work" (UNESCO.int 2013, para. 5). These recommendations have been taken into consideration in Croatia and Serbia, as we will see in the comments we analyze. Both newspapers that we consider, Croatia's *Jutarnji list* and Serbia's *Večernje novosti*, have repeatedly addressed hate speech and its relation to hateful actions in recent times (see, for example, Šimleša, 2018; Toma, 2019). However, in 2018 there are still reports warning about new instances of hate speech, despite the existing laws and regulations prohibiting it. It seems that existing laws and regulations are not being used in practice, and so the report proposes measures to combat the politics of not punishing the culprits (Stojković & Pokuševski, 2018, p. 11).

In a 2016 survey of online hate speech in Serbia by the NGO CNM Liber, 93 percent (n = 993) of respondents answered that they have noticed hate speech online (Vehovec, Kišjuhas, & Vehovec, 2016). The targets of hate speech were identified as members of the political parties, other nationalities, the LGBT population, national minorities and refugees. Platforms where hate speech was identified were Facebook, comments in media, and Twitter. The most worrying finding from this survey is that over 80 percent of respondents considered that hate

speech can spill from the internet to the streets (Vehovec et al., 2016, p. 25). This finding is consistent with the research in social psychology that we discuss below.

Provisions against hate speech in *Večernje novosti* and *Jutarnji list*

In the context of global and local focus on combating hate speech, it is unsurprising that the editorial guidelines in the two newspapers from which our data are drawn, *Jutarnji list* and *Večernje novosti*, explicitly state that they are against hate speech. The wording used to express this is almost identical. It is forbidden to post, send, or share

> content that violates existing [Serbian/Croatian and/or international] laws, [or] content that is offensive, vulgar, threatening, racist or chauvinistic and otherwise harmful[3]

Both newspapers also feature more specific guidelines for users about how to comment in sections entitled "Comments" (in *Večernje novosti*) and "Commenting rules" (in *Jutarnji list*). Both of these guidelines mention "hate speech, insults on national, racial or sexual grounds and curses" (*govor mržnje, uvrede na nacionalnoj, rasnoj ili spolnoj osnovi i psovke*), thus indicating that these are different phenomena. Only the administrators and the editorial staff are authorized to interpret the guidelines; in other words, it is up to them to decide what is to be classified under the categories of hate speech, insults, and curses. However, little information is available about the newspapers' actual moderating practices.

In our data, some removed comments are addressed and some posts refer to names that cannot be found among the discussion participants, which indicates that some comments were removed. Some comments in *Jutarnji list* contain a note "modified" (*uređeno*) indicating that some content has been modified or removed, but no information was provided regarding what exactly was removed or modified. Nevertheless, we will show in our analysis that posting formally forbidden content, such as insults and curses, is still an ongoing practice.

The directionality of hate speech is addressed in both sets of guidelines, forbidding hate speech aimed at other users, persons mentioned in newspaper texts, administrators, journalists, and other newspapers' employees. The two newspapers use different platforms for readers' responses: *Jutarnji list* uses Facebook, while Večernje novosti uses its website. To post a comment in Večernje novosti, one has to either register or provide a name or nickname and an e-mail address. Previous research indicates a correlation between anonymity and incivility, assuming that reader responses on newspapers' internet pages are usually posted under pseudonyms or made-up names, whereas Facebook comments presumably reveal posters' real names (e.g., Hardaker, 2010; Santana, 2014). If a relatively high level of anonymity is associated with incivility and impoliteness, then the website comments are expected to be more harshly worded than Facebook comments, but this was not confirmed by our material. Facebook comments use more overt impoliteness (conventionalized impoliteness formulae, name-calling, and taboo expressions; see Šarić, 2017), which may be related to the common practice of using an invented name on Facebook.

[3] Retrieved from: https://www.novosti.rs/vecernje_novosti.45.html; https://www.jutarnji.hr/Pravila-komentiranja/

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Impoliteness and hate speech

As previously mentioned, there is no clear consensus on a common definition of hate speech. As summarized by Erjavec and Kovačič (2012, p. 900), some common elements of hate speech emphasized in different definitions include:

> expression[s] that [are] abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing and/or [incitements] to violence, hatred or discrimination. It is directed against people on the basis of their race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, physical condition, disability, sexual orientation, political conviction and so forth.

However, it is not easy to define impoliteness either. In the broadest terms, impoliteness is defined as "using language to cause offence" and often involves "seeking to damage and/or damaging a person's identity or identities" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 1). Intentionality plays an important role in determining whether a language unit is impolite: If something is intentionally said to cause offence, it is considered more offensive than if something is said unintentionally. Furthermore, the context of an utterance is relevant. Some utterances that may be perceived as rather offensive without any context or in a workplace context are not perceived as such in a conversation between friends or family members.

The main differences between hate speech and impoliteness seem to be related to who the target of such utterances is and the legal consequences different utterances may be subject to. Hate speech, which targets groups of people, is described in various regulations as something unwanted and subject to a legal framework. Impoliteness is usually aimed at a particular person and there are as a rule no legal consequences for impoliteness. Impoliteness might be thus perceived as a less serious verbal offence. However, we argue that there is a large and fluctuating grey zone that needs constantly to be explored. In our material, some impolite exchanges first target single (or a few) discussion participants, but in the course of the discussion entire groups become targets. This is an important recurring pattern that will be illustrated below.

Impoliteness triggers and discursive identity construction

We follow Culpeper in understanding impoliteness strategies as "ways of achieving particular goals in interaction that are conventional for a particular community" (Culpeper, 2016, p. 424). These ways include posters' choices and their use of the language means at their disposal. Language means include grammatical structures, choice of terminology, argumentation schemas, and speech acts. It is important to underline that the term "strategy," as we use it, does not imply language users' intentions, because we do not have access to them and do not analyze them. Furthermore, we apply a bottom-up approach by analyzing our data to eventually flush out the strategies used by the posters. We do not start with an already known list of strategies, but rather identify and analyze them in our data. We use the term "triggers" to indicate the effects of the linguistic strategies used.

In order for a language phenomenon (or other act) to be considered impolite, it "must be challenged" either by counter-impoliteness, "meta-pragmatic comments" (e.g., "that was so rude"), indications (verbal or non-verbal), or offence being experienced (i.e., symptoms of emotions such as humiliation, hurt, or anger (Culpeper, 2016, pp. 436–437). In the comments we analyzed, a number of linguistic units were challenged in different ways, including by counter-impoliteness (also referred to as reactive rudeness; Kienpointer, 1997, p. 266), as illustrated by the following exchange:

1) Poster XX: Chocolate bars? … Croatians are fucking [us] so nicely….

Čokoladice?... jebu Hrvati onako ufino….

Poster YY: Fuck you, Poster XX [literally, smoke a dick].

Pusi kurac Poster XX

Culpeper divides impoliteness triggers into conventionalized formulae for a particular context of use, such as the response of Poster YY quoted above, and implicational impoliteness, such as mimicry and sarcasm (Culpeper, 2016, p. 436).

Impoliteness triggers can be related to discursive identity construction. This was indirectly suggested by Wodak et al. (2009, pp. 38–39), who mentioned *antimiranda* (low-value words), pejorative/negatively connotated attributions, and derogatory denotations (for ethnic groups) among the various means of realizing a specific identity construction strategy.

According to Wodak et al. (2009), national identity construction relates to a number of strategies related to argumentation schemas (topoi)[4] and typical language realizations. Among the "constructive strategies" in national identity construction is dissimilation/exclusion, which employs a topos of comparison/difference to show that members of an out-group ("them") are inferior compared to in-group members ("us"). Its means of realization are lexemes with semantic components constructing difference—personal and demonstrative pronouns (*they, them*); anthroponyms (the Serb/s, Croat/s), personified toponyms (Serbia, Croatia) used metonymically, and the aforementioned low-value words and derogatory terms. As we will show below, impoliteness and hate speech in our material frequently relate to the dissimilation/exclusion strategy. Another set of strategies, "strategies of demontage (or dismantling) and destruction" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 42) is also related to the topos of comparison, and its realization means also include derogatory terms, including denotations of persons/ethnonyms and derogatory metaphors.

Data

The data—totaling 668 comments[5]—were drawn from publicly available comments posted in response to four articles published in Serbia's *Večernje novosti* and Croatia's *Jutarnji list* in December 2016. These newspapers are comparable in terms of readership and profile. The four articles discuss politics as their overall topic and are related to collective identity negotiations. These articles were chosen because they triggered numerous reactions by posters, thereby providing a solid data set for a qualitative study. Furthermore, they established intertextual relations with each other, such as referring to the "chocolate affair" when discussing Croato-Serbian-EU relations. According to the names they use, some of the posters appeared to comment on more than one article and on both topics.

[4] "Within argumentation theory, topoi can be described as parts of argumentation which belong to the required premises. They are the formal or content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument(s) with the conclusion, the claim. As such, they justify the transition from the argument or arguments to the conclusion" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 110).

[5] 415 comments were taken from *Jutarnji list*; 253 were taken from *Večernje novosti*.

Table 1.

Article Headlines, User Comments and Their Time Spans

	Article Headlines	Number of Comments and Their Time Spans	Number of Unique Users
Article 1 (December 7, 2016) ***Jutarnji list*** [the chocolate affair]	The chocolate affair **The president unpleasantly surprised** "I'm deeply disappointed; we'll apologize to the parents who received these chocolate bars and we'll send them some Croatian products."	196 (24)* 07.12.16 16:03 – 8.12.16 20:13	123
Article 2 (December 7, 2016) ***Večernje novosti*** [the chocolate affair]	"The chocolate bar scandal." The Croatian mutiny against Serbian chocolate bars.	69 (15) 07.12.16 17:28 – 09.12.16 04:35	64
Article 3 (December 12, 2016) ***Jutarnji list*** [Serbia and the EU]	Losing one's temper "Enough of Croatia's brutalization. Remove the blockade or I'm leaving!" Vučić became furious with Zagreb and boycotted the meeting with the EU governments.	219 (26) 12.12.16 20:39–14.12.16 17:00	107
Article 4 (December 12, 2016) ***Večernje novosti*** [Serbia and the EU]	On the Way to the EU: Croats have blocked us due to books and icons; Vučić: We've had enough of Croatia's brutalization!	184 (24) 12.12.16 17:22 – 13.12.16 17:49	166

The data were collected in March 2017; since then the posts related to the articles in *Jutarnji list* have been removed and were not available online in March/April 2020. Articles 1 and 2 (see Table 1) were published on the same day and discuss the same event (the chocolate affair). Articles 3 and 4, published five days later, discussed another event ("Serbia and the EU"), and became thematically interconnected with the articles 1 and 2. Thus, users of each platform responded to the same overall topics and similar content. The comments were published on the same day or a day or two after the articles came out (see Table 1 for the exact time span).

All of these articles concern collective identity negotiations and are likely to stimulate robust responses. Their overall topic is politics—more specifically, Serbian-Croatian relations—and the main social actors of the news stories were politicians. Articles 1 and 2 discuss the Croatian president giving a gift box containing a chocolate bar produced in Serbia to Croatian children, and her apology after a parent on Facebook criticized the fact that the chocolate was produced in Serbia. Articles 3 and 4 discuss Croatia blocking the opening of a chapter in the accession negotiations between the EU and Serbia, and the reaction by the Serbian prime

minister, who subsequently refused to attend an EU meeting related to the Serbian negotiations.

We perceive online newspapers as public spaces, and our intention is not to gather sensitive information about posters. To be on the safe side, we have anonymized our examples by not connecting them with the names that the posters used. As mentioned above, some of the posters used made-up names; nevertheless, we have further anonymized the material by using new pseudonyms (Poster XX, Poster YY, etc.) instead of the posters' chosen names (Sveningsson, 2004, pp. 52–53). The above-mentioned removal of the comments by *Jutarnji list* further ensures anonymity.

Analysis: Performing national identities

The majority of people who produced the comments we analyzed performed their national identities while communicating with others in their posts by using various linguistic means, which in some cases resulted in extreme speech.

In the following, we first focus on the directionality of extreme speech, i.e. who is using extreme speech when addressing whom. We then present an analysis of the posters' self-naming strategies, followed by examples of linguistic strategies and extreme speech triggers used to perform national identities.

The targets of extreme speech

The targets of extreme speech used by the posters varied. For analytical purposes we divided the targets into three levels: a) a macro level with Croatia, Serbia, and the EU as targets; b) a mezzo level, with public figures such as politicians and journalists as targets; and c) a micro level, with other posters as targets.

On the macro level, the posters targeted entities such as countries (i.e., Croatia and Serbia) or political organizations such as the EU. Linguistic strategies included ridiculing "the other" by modifying names, demonizing "the other" by applying identity labels, and negatively evaluating "the other". Some representative examples are below.

a) Modification of the names of peoples and countries: Croatians and Serbia

Kurvati: The word for Croat/s in Croatian is *Hrvat*/*Hrvati* (singular/plural). This word is modified into *Kurvat*, blending the noun *kurva* (whore) and the ethnonym *Hrvati*. In this blend, national identity is connected to a metaphorical, negative connotations of the word *whore*, meaning an unfaithful person not to be trusted.

Smrdija: The word for Serbia in Serbian is *Srbija*. In this modification, the name of the country is combined with the stem *smrd-* (stink), resulting in the modified form *Smrdija*. Blending the label pertaining to a country and national identity with the stem carrying the negative connotations of a bad smell results in an overall negative evaluation of Serbia as a country.

b) Demonizing the other by using derogatory identity labels, some of which are terms with a historical burden—for example, referring to all Croatians as ustashas and all Serbs as chetniks.

Ustashas and chetniks were the names for the members of extreme nationalist and fascist movements during World War II. These names were later also used in the military conflicts of the 1990s. By using these labels, posters evoke the historical conflicts and construct a story of an everlasting conflict between Croats and Serbs with set black-and-white roles and no possibility of peaceful coexistence.

c) An extremely negative evaluation of the EU (in the comments posted in response to Article 4) was achieved by using adjectives with negative meanings, e.g., monstrous, criminal (monstruozna EU, "monstrous EU"; zločinačka tvorevina, "a criminal creation").

In some contexts, negative evaluation is combined with calls for action, e.g., (we/one) should give up the EU (*treba odustati od EU)*; (we/one) should leave the EU (*treba napustiti EU)*; (we/one should) never join the EU concentration camp (*nikad u EU konc logor).* The examples with verbs meaning should/would/need (*trebati, ima/nema potrebe*) employ a deontic modality and construct the speaker/commenter as knowledgeable and superior, thereby seeking to give the comments credibility.

On the mezzo-level, posters targeted individuals, particularly public figures such as presidents and politicians, using both conventionalized impoliteness formulae and implicational impoliteness. For example, the then president of Croatia, whose first name is Kolinda, was referred to as *Koljinda*. This slight modification of her name resembles the present tense form of the verb *klati* ("to slaughter"). Relating the verb to her identity hints at her strict political reputation or to her friendly connections with Kosovo politicians (the latter interpretation is supported by some other words in the immediate context that allude to the Albanian pronunciation of Croatian/Serbian *l* as *lj*).[6]

The prime minister of Serbia, Vučić, was referred to by several posters as *pičkousti,* a compound adjective consisting of two nouns meaning "cunt" and "mouth". This is an allusion to the prime minister's physical appearance, connecting it to a taboo domain. Furthermore, this nickname is derogatory and expresses a negative gender bias. Comparing a male politician to a female genital organ is intended to convey a message that the politician is powerless and weak.

Within the microcosmos of commenting online, posters often target each other. This group of posters authored the majority of impolite comments. The type of strategies used are most often either personalized negative vocatives, such as "you primitive stinker" *(smradu primitivni)*, "you moron from Herzegovina" (*debilu ercegovački*), or "you monkey" (*majmune*), or personalized negative assertions such as "what a fool you are, you poison the land you walk on" *(koja si ti budala trujes zemlju kojom hodas).* Attacks on individuals are connected with the usage of words from the domains of animals, illness, and negative personal characteristics, and are linked to ethnic belonging. The example addressing ethnic belonging is an example that belongs in a grey zone where hate speech and impoliteness overlap.

Micro- and macro-levels are often interconnected. We noticed the following tendency in some threads: single individuals are targeted first, but in the next step(s) entire groups that the posters addressed presumably belong to are targeted on the basis of ethnic belonging and origin. This is illustrated by the following example:

2) Poster XX: You chetnik idiot! You who suck Albanian dicks in Switzerland, you are not in a position to patronize anybody. If only all the towns were like Zadar, you big monkey. You Serbs are the biggest peasants in Switzerland, ordinary serfs. Fuck off, you shit.

idiote cetnicki.ti po svici pusis kurac siptarima7 pa ces nekome da solis pamet.kamo srece da su svi gradovi ko zadar majmuncino jedna.vi srbi ste u svici najvece seljacine,obicni kmetovi.mars dubre.

In similar examples, single individuals are initially addressed in the singular, and the vocative case forms (personalized negative vocatives) of various derogatory terms are typically used (e.g., *idiote četnički; majmunčino jedna*) in example 2. Commenters then switch to plural forms, frequently in generalizing declarative sentences that assert certain things as "facts"

[6] Retrieved from: Blic, IZOSTALA PREDSJEDNIČKA „LOŽA" Samo Kolinda podržala Tačija https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/izostala-predsednicka-loza-samo-kolinda-podrzala-tacija/s3wm35c

[7] When used by South Slavs, *Šiptari* is a derogatory term for Albanians (the neutral term is *Albanci*). It is also considered derogatoty from an Albanian point of view. *Majmunčina* and *seljačina* are augmentative forms and derogatory when used in direct addresses (personalized negative vocatives).

about entire ethnic groups: The phrase *vi Srbi* ("you Serbs") explicitly links the addressed commenter to Serbian ethnicity. Interestingly, in example 2 the commenter again uses a personal insult at the end of the comment (*mars dubre* "Fuck off, you shit").

Posters' self-naming as a linguistic strategy in online debates

The posters post their comments under names that are either their own or resemble real names or pseudonyms, or use names that are more or less obviously made-up. It is often difficult to know which names are real and which are made-up. Online posters perform different kinds of online identities, which are realized, among other acts, by deciding what name to use. The names that users choose to assume online reveal certain details about how they perceive themselves and/or how they want to be perceived by other users (Sveningsson, 2004, pp. 52–53). Another point to consider is a well-known strategy of using a certain name to avoid being blocked by a web administrator from commenting. This strategy implies that some users change their names and post on different occasions as different people.

We have noticed the following strategies for self-naming in our material:

a) Using first names: Branko, Uros,[8] Mara

b) Using first and last names: for example, Jovan Jovanović, Marko Spaic, Jelica Radojcic. These could be either poster's real names, or invented names that resemble some real names.

c) Using nicknames such as Djole, Nele, Riki. These forms resemble some common patterns for nicknames in the offline reality (e.g., they are abbreviated forms of longer first names, such as Nele for Nenad).

d) Using initials: A.V.; vh.

e) Using names of historical or imaginary persons, or contemporary public figures: John Wayne, Tsar Dušan, Bruce Lee, Muhammad the Magnificent (John Wayne, Car DUŠAN, Brus Li, Мухамед Величанствени)

f) Using modified (impolite) forms of names of real persons (in the respective contexts, well-known public figures), e.g., Milokliz Šupak Pupavac.

g) Using numbers: 011 (indicating the telephone code for Belgrade)

h) Using phrases: "Who is to blame?" (ko je kriv?), EU NATO PACT (EU NATO PAKT), "Let me tell you" (Да ти кажем)

i) Using the first part of the following comment: What have you done all these years…when you do not understand anything? (U šta su ti prošle godine...kad ništa ne razumeš)

Female names comprise a clear minority. Only ten percent of the posts contained forms that indicated female nicknames, real or invented, or descriptive phrases applied to women (e.g., Madame Kolinda, Serbian woman, Baba Yaga [evil old woman], Jasmina [*Sjora Kolinda, Srpkinja, baba roga, Jasmina*]). However, offline and online identities must be kept apart, so it is possible that female commenters use male names.

Posters use their chosen online names to position themselves as members of specific groups, supporters of certain ideas, or to perform various other identities, such as their national identity. Some names relate to the political affiliation of the commenter or his/her views on a particular topic. Names of famous kings or tzars from historical periods considered prosperous in national histories and myths often used for nation-building purposes (celebrating glorious pasts) are used to perform national identity. Popular examples of such names include Tzar Dušan (considered by some an important leader for the Serbian nation

[8] With regard to the lack of diacritic signs in some of our examples, please note that we provide the names in the form found in the postings. Uros should be written Uroš, but we assume that the poster did not have the correct keyboard.

during the fourteenth century) or King Zvonimir (considered by some an important leader for the Croatian nation during the eleventh century). The national identity of the posters is in a few cases implicitly performed by the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, which connotes Serbianness; using the Cyrillic alphabet in some contexts in Croatia may be considered a challenge to the "other" (Šarić & Felberg 2017).

One interesting example is one poster's use of a nickname to express a negative view of a particular politician. The name used by this commenter is a modified form of the name of the politician Milorad Pupovac, the president of the Serbian National Council in Croatia. The modified form, *Milokliz Šupak Pupavac* (*Milokliz* = "Glad to glide," a made-up word with sexual connotations; *Šupak* = asshole; and the last name Pupovac was changed into the similar last name Pupavac), expresses the poster's negative opinion of Pupovac through conventional impoliteness, i.e., the use of a taboo word meaning asshole and implicational impoliteness (the made-up word and the combination of words) that can be inferred from the context. Another example of (first) name modification resulting in an impolite lexical unit is Denis -> Penis.

The choice of a name is related to performing a specific identity that other commenters may attack or align with. The names used (e.g., Culum) are in some instances explicitly discussed by some commenters. Some of the names used are examples of sophisticated verbal creativity that other posters may find entertaining and inspiring (see Culpeper, 2011, p. 237). The notion that impoliteness can be entertaining is supported by numerous other examples in our material. One reason for this frequency is probably that entertaining impoliteness gives "emotional, aesthetic, voyeuristic [pleasure,] the pleasure of being superior and the pleasure of feeling secure" (Culpeper, 2011, pp. 234–235).

A poster's chosen name is often part of his or her message and should be analyzed together with the comments. However, we will not analyze this aspect in this article.

Constructing and performing national and supranational identities: Croats, Serbs, and the EU

The two most salient identities constructed and performed in the four sets of comments are Serbian and Croatian national identities, which are constructed as oppositional and the majority of commenters contribute to this polarization.[9] In contrast to Večernje novosti, in which the majority of the posters are a homogenous group in the sense that they all perform a Serb identity, the comments in *Jutarnji list* show greater diversity regarding the implicit or explicit national identification of the posters: Many perform a Croat identity, and many a Serb identity.

The linguistic strategies (which function as triggers) used by the posters in order to delineate Serbs from Croats and vice versa, include:

a) Positive terms used for us vs. negative terms used for them in constructions, often of the type "X is Y" (Y is an adjective/noun with a negative connotation) or "X [commits a negative action against] Y". These are predications in which certain characteristics are attributed to groups (Wodak, 2015).

3) Serbs are cunning. Blackmail and fraud, typical peasants…

Lukavci su Srbi. Ucjena i prevara, tipični opanaka...[10]

[9] However, in each set of comments, a few commenters seek to challenge this polarization.
[10] This is a derogatory metonymy: *Opanak* is a traditional peasant shoe in Southeastern Europe.

4) The Croats don't like us and they keep showing it, this is further evidence that they will never stop persecuting us.

Hrvati nas ne vole i to stalno pokazuju, ovo je jos jedan dokaz da nikad nece prestati da nas proganjaju

b) Denying separate identities to an out-group member or ascribing new and unwanted identities to "the other". Four exclamation marks show strong emphasis.

5) You [Croatians] are Serbian Catholics!!!!

Vi ste Srbi katolici!!!!

c) Positioning of in-group members as victims. This strategy is connected to a strategy of self-criticism in order to underline one's own role as a victim. For example, in article 2, several commenters performing Serb identity portray Serbs as foolish (blesavi) because they are peace-loving (pomirljivi) while out-group members, in this case Croatians, are the opposite.

An interesting deviation from the above-mentioned polarization between Serbs and Croats can be seen in the comments triggered by Article 4, where suddenly a large number of commenters performing Serbian identity thanked Croatia for blocking Serbia from fulfilling its obligation in the process of joining the EU. A conventional polite act of gratitude is in this case a conventional trigger for implicational impoliteness (i.e., sarcasm). The background for this action is that the majority of the posters do not support Serbia's joining the EU. In this context, another "other," the EU is constructed.

d) Reactivating myths. Extreme speech in all four sets of comments is relatively frequently related to establishing a border between "us" and "them" (Croats and Serbs) as national groups, meaning that impoliteness relates to a broader discursive strategy of dissimilation/exclusion (Wodak et al., 2009, pp. 38–39)—associating the out-group (Croats/Serbs) with a negative aspect and thereby disassociating oneself from that group. Within that strategy (employing the topos of difference; Wodak et al., 2009, p. 38), "myths of national/religious origin" are a recurring topic, addressed and "adapted" to associate the other with negative aspects: Serbs with orientalism, Croats with a servant mentality.

The Battle of Kosovo (1389) myth is the "constitutive," "foundational," or "core" myth of Serbian national identity (Klain 1998; Nicholson, 2018; Obradović, 2017). Foundational myths or myths of origin are dialogic, "constantly re-presented and re-negotiated to provide a historically rooted legitimacy for present ingroup goals and identities" (Obradović, 2017, p. 3).[11] The myth describes the eve of the Kosovo battle when the representative of the more powerful Ottoman Turks offered the Serbian representative, Tzar Lazar, a choice: Accept either an earthly victory or a heavenly one. Lazar chose the latter, resulting in the Ottoman Turks taking power over the land (Bieber, 2002; Nicholson, 2018). This myth has entered public discourse through pairing of victimhood and resilience (Obradović, 2017). Related to the Kosovo myth are also mythic narratives that, after their victory over the Serbs, the Turks killed all the male children and raped all the young Serb women so that they would give birth to Turks (based on the assumption that fathers determine their children's religious identity) (Klain, 1998, p. 288). We found indirect references to these mythic narratives in our data (see below).

Whereas the Ottoman legacy of South Eastern Europe has given rise to negative stereotypes of this region, "…chiefly the Ottoman elements or the ones perceived as such…have mostly given rise to the current stereotype of the Balkans" (Todorova, 2004, p. 1), the Habsburg

[11] Linked to commemorations, ritual practices, and songs, the Battle of Kosovo as a national symbol has played a significant role in bolstering collective esteem of Serbian people during both conflicts and peace.

legacy and affiliation with the Habsburg Monarchy are rarely perceived as negative. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that Croats have used "the legend of the fearless Habsburg, that is, the Hungarian general of Croatian origin" for their military and heroic national self-representation (Marković 2014: 6). Claims by Croatian political elites after the dissolution of Yugoslavia of the "Europeanness" of Croatia and of Croatia being superior to the southeastern parts of Yugoslavia have often been linked to its belonging to the Habsburg empire until 1918, i.e., to its Habsburg legacy (Roth, 2018, p. 144).

As Wodak et al. (2009) claimed, the *foundational myth* or *myth of origin* have great significance in the invention of a national culture. Particularly important in our context is the idea of a "pure people" (Hall, 1996, p. 615)—that is, a "pure" and "authentic" national identity that is discursively denied to the members of the "out-group".[12]

In the comments we analyzed, insults targeted at individual commenters (e.g., in the discussions of the origin of their family names) frequently evolved into discussions about national origin, in which the existing myths of national origin were addressed and challenged. In such situations, speech acts aimed at insulting a single person or a few persons tend to develop into acts stigmatizing an entire group of people (see example 2). This blurs the border between impoliteness and hate speech.

In the Facebook comments in Jutarnji list, the most salient targets of impoliteness are entire national groups, most frequently Croats or Serbs. Many impolite comments discuss the ancestors and origin of Serbs and Croats, and posters base their offensive remarks on claims about origin (there were 17 impolite comments discussing ethnic relations between Serbs and Turks, and a few discussing Croats as Serbs who converted to Catholicism). This is illustrated by the following examples:

6) Let me remind you that genetically you're a Turk. For five hundred years you've been giving your mothers and sisters to them, while your men were licking their horses' buttocks.

Samo da te podsjetim da si genetski Turčin. 500 godina ste im majke i sestre daval a muški su lizali dupe njihovih konja.

7) You ran away, became Catholics, and there's nothing worse than a Catholicized Serb.

pobegli ste, pokatoličili ste se a nema goreg katolika od pokatoličenog Srbina.

Disaffiliation is mainly constructed through highly negative and stigmatizing descriptions of those considered to belong to an out-group—in this case, another national group (Serbs or Croats). These descriptions are related to different impoliteness realizations, often "direct," using conventionalized impoliteness formulae and language referring to taboo domain. The construction of in-groups versus out-groups is likely to saliently rely on positive impoliteness strategies (which dominate in this material).

Impoliteness, albeit more indirect, is also applied when constructing disaffiliation from some in-group members who are judged to behave in a manner that the posters consider inappropriate. In many comments (which are very frequently found in *Večernje novosti*, following the chocolate bar article), the posters associate some members of the in-group they by and large claim to belong to (Serbs or Croats) with negative qualities. For example, the negative aspect that many posters identifying as Serbs relate some other Serbs to is buying Croatian products. By performing an online identity of "good" Serbs doing morally right things (not buying Croatian products), they disassociate themselves from some other "bad" in-group members. In their critique of these other Serbs, they occasionally use impoliteness, but as a rule they avoid direct impoliteness such as taboo and profane language:

[12] Theories regarding the origins of "authentic" identities and the role of (religious) conversions were common in the war propaganda of the 1990s (Wilmer, 2002).

8) And now let's all get in line for Ikea, or all go charging to the Adriatic Sea. Where's the common sense here? I haven't bought any of their products since the nineties….

E sad svi u red u Ikeu, juris na Jadran. Gde je tu zdrava pamet? Ja nisam kupio njihov proizvod od devedesetih…

The expression "where's the common sense" directly implies that some "in-group" members as insane.

-Call for action/aggressive behavior/violence. Calling others to commit an action is a step beyond describing one's own views about a particular situation, group, or individuals. Research in social and clinical psychology, law, and anthropology has frequently emphasized the relation between verbal and non-verbal aggression. Culpeper (2011: 3) indicated that in classical works of social psychology, verbal acts of aggression are considered alongside physical acts, referring to the work of Buss (1961) and Baron and Richardson (1994: 7), who emphasized that aggression is any form of behavior intended to harm or injure another. More recent research indicates that verbal threats usually precede physical violence (see Jackson 2007: 450; Pastor 2007: 224; Hoff 2014: 147) and that verbal abuse is rooted in bias, fear, and/or hatred. Paludi and Denmark (2010: 188) also stressed that physical violence is often preceded by verbal threats, although threats can be meaningless. The association between verbal and physical abuse was addressed by Paterson et al. (2007) and Mechanic, Weaver, and Resick (2008), who emphasized that the psychological consequences of verbal abuse can be as damaging as those of physical abuse.

The calls for action we found among the comments we analyzed can be divided into three categories. The first category is general declarative calls to react to certain actions by the "other" deemed to be inappropriate (e.g., buying products imported from another country, a theme of Articles 1 and 2). The second one is direct calls to boycott the other's products and going even further by calling on politicians to build a wall to separate two states. Finally, the third one is indirect calls to harm "the other". The most serious comment found in our material called for harming the other (in this case the Croats):

9) Poster WW: We should have sent them Juvitana baby food

Poster ZZ: Hahahah bravooo

Poster WW: Trebali smo da im pošaljemo Juvitanine kašice…

Poster ZZ: Hahahah bravoooo

The comment above refers to a scandal about baby food that contained pesticides produced by the Serbian factory Juvitana and calls for tainted baby food to be sent to "the other" (Briza, 2016). The fact that it is baby food contributes to its seriousness. This statement is disguised as a witty comment because it requires background knowledge in order to be understood, and it cannot be easily identified as hate speech by bots or even by administrators. The "wittiness" of the comment was confirmed by a fellow poster, who laughed and cheered the statement, thereby demonstrating approval of the message.

Concluding Remarks

Although the analyzed newspapers explicitly prohibit hate speech in their guidelines, a number of comments we identified in our data can be described as hate speech, according to the definitions accepted in Serbian and Croatian public space (see, for example, Alaburić, 2019). We have identified utterances that express hateful, abusive attitudes, content that advocates or incites hatred and discrimination, and content that mocks, humiliates, and degrades its targets.

The posters strategically used overtly impolite remarks, blatant face aggravation, and hence impoliteness, to communicate disagreement, to argue against some perceived attitude of in-group members, and to castigate the out-group for their assumed ideological views and behavior. The targets of both hate speech and impoliteness are frequently entire societal groups, especially national groups, religious groups, and women. Some of the identified phenomena can be considered to be sexist hate speech in a few contexts in our material, particularly those instances in which the entire female population of the "out-group" is described as whores. In many contexts, single individuals were targeted first, but in the course of a single comment or a thread, entire groups became targets. Alternatively, within a single comment some commenters switched a few times from targeting individuals to targeting entire groups to which their initial target was assumed to belong.

Performing national identities is the most important aspect predicting the type and frequency of extreme speech in the analyzed material. Existing analyses of reader responses and YouTube comments (Lorenzo-Dus, Blitvich, & Bou-Franch, 2011) suggest that linguistic impoliteness can be a function of a respondent's construction of his or her collective identity. Research also indicates the salience of collective identities in deindividuated contexts in which groups tend toward polarization and are likely to define themselves ideologically, whereby the "other group" is likely to be explicitly associated with negative aspects. Extreme speech in our material also closely relates to the posters' construction of their collective identities, wherein they establish a clear boundary between an in-group and out-group and use extreme speech to ascribe negative qualities to "the others". Posters' collective identity certainly seems relevant to a clear understanding of extreme speech in deindividuated contexts, such as this one, in which posters construct a salient social, collective identity.

Hate speech and impoliteness are phenomena that require further examination. The relevant context determines whether an utterance is one or the other, which is why it is important to continue examining particular cases of language in use in order to understand how these mechanisms function.

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