

Linguistic and semiotic aspects of extremist discourse

Social media offer a new, and very popular, platform for discursive power, and extremist groups from various ideological backgrounds have used this to their advantage, constructing their own social realities and promoting their ideological agendas (Bouko *et al.*, 2022; Bouvier & Machin, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2015). They use specific linguistic and semiotic means as well as discursive strategies to create their own rhetoric of hate (Andersen & Sandberg, 2018).

While hate speech has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention, and hate speech studies seem to have become an established research field over the last ten years (see Fernandina & Nunes, 2018, for an overview), extremist discourse needs to be explored more systematically, in both discourse studies and in critical discourse studies (Hamdi, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2019; Wignell *et al.*, 2017).

As a starting point, it is key to clarify the term *extremism*, which is problematic to define and also to categorize insofar as it can comprise various and opposing meanings (cf. Hamdi, 2022). For instance, lexicographical definitions vary both in terms of the word's semantic content and the intensity of its social consequences. As a case in point, the online *Cambridge Dictionary* offers a very narrow definition of extremism. i.e., "the fact of someone having beliefs that most people think are unreasonable and unacceptable", whereas the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* broadens its semantic content by defining it as corresponding to "political, religious, etc. ideas or actions that are extreme and not normal, reasonable or acceptable to most people" and associates it with violence.

This semantic broadening, however, could also include various social consequences of such ideas and action. Moreover, defining extremism as what the 'majority' considers 'not normal' or 'unreasonable' or 'unacceptable', by implication, excludes what smaller communities consider not normal or unacceptable. Furthermore, ideas can be unreasonable to most people and at the same time may not be extreme. Thus, there seems to be much room for improvement regarding the definition of extremism. We suggest other dimensions of its meaning that should be explored:

- The parallel often made between extremism and radicalization. Indeed, there is a contiguity of both terms and concepts according to the European Union (Alonso *et al.*, 2008), which defines radicalization as socialization to extremism.
- The presence of an overt versus a covert call for violence, as well as overt and violent extremism (Hamdi, 2022).
- The fact that the press tends to combine the term 'extremism' with 'terrorism' or 'fundamentalism' (Collings *et al.*, 2002; Smith, 2007; Hamdi, 2022); this has contributed to misunderstanding of the term and led to its being restricted in much scholarly literature to Islam-based extremism (Pisoiu, 2012; Prentice *et al.*, 2012; Wignell *et al.* 2020, Wignell *et al.* 2021; Bouko *et al.* 2022).

More important and relevant to our project are the studies focused on the linguistic aspects of extremism, e.g., Perry & Olson (2009), Brindle (2009), Prentice *et al.* (2012), which have explored online extremist groups using corpus linguistics methodology. These studies have identified associated themes (morality, racism, sexism, homophobia, among others) and some ideological tenets underpinning them (such as white supremacy, intolerance

among ethnic/ religious groups). Other scholars use a multimodal and multidisciplinary approach to explore how extremist Salafist groups construct their social order, especially through discourse patterns to radicalize potential sympathizers on social media (Bouko *et al.*, 2022).

However, despite these few examples, research on linguistic and semiotic forms of extremism that look beyond religion-based extremism or nativism is limited, and those investigations that do examine other forms of extremism focus on what the majority sees as socially unacceptable, non-normal or violent. For instance, Marko (2022) examines extremist language in anti-COVID-19 conspiracy discourse on Facebook, confining extremism in a narrower hegemonic sense.

As Gales (2011) has already pointed out, any ideology using threatening language will reveal stances of violence and control as well as commitment to the act (marked by commitment modals, certainty adverbs) (Gales, 2010). Indeed, specific linguistic means and discursive patterns can trigger “key cognitive biases”. For instance, intensification and negative outgroup status can be achieved through the use of modalities, lexicalizations, repetitions, exclamations (Bouko, 2022), or through the use of visual affordances, such as pictures, emojis, memes (Baider and Constantinou, in press).

Therefore, with this issue we hope to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which extremism, whether overt or covert, unfolds or is perceived/ defined linguistically and semiotically, both online and offline. We want to consider extremism in a broader sense, including any form of extremist discourse and extremist narrative that might go beyond what is considered extreme by the majority.

Papers could also examine what distinguishes hate speech and extremist and radical discourse. Here, we understand hate speech as a hateful and dehumanizing discourse that advocates discriminatory hatred and incites to hostility, discrimination and/or violence against a specific group of people or an individual belonging to that group.

With regard to linguistic choices, we propose the following as possible thematic axes:

- lexical units like metaphors, compound nouns, concatenations of nouns, neologisms;
- the impact of grammatical features on social consequences (repetition of specific pronouns, morphosyntactic characteristics, shifts in grammatical word category, usages of suffixes, specific constructions, personal pronouns, choice of mood such as imperatives, etc.);
- rhetorical strategies that strengthen stances and / or attitudes towards a person (e.g., the enemy) or a proposition (e.g., terrorist act) of violence; irony and humour;
- semantic shifts or redefinition of words or semantic shifts resulting from grammatical changes (pronoun or article change, for instance).

With regard to the semiotic aspects, we suggest as topics:

- any visual affordances addressed to the reader to increase her/his sense of involvement (through polarization, disparagement of the other, etc.). These could include memes, videos, cartoons, or emojis.

Further, we are looking for a diverse theoretical framework, such as Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Critical Analysis, Appraisal analysis, linguistic descriptions; and we would like to see a variety of approaches, including pragmatic, functional, and cognitive linguistics and speech act theory. We welcome both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

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