

A Dysphemistic Approach to the Study of Textual Cyberbullying in Social Media

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Abstract

The current study is a dysphemistic approach to the study of textual cyberbullying in social media. Cyberbullying became, to an extent, widespread in social media interaction. The study aims to analyze a sample of 600 Facebook comments taken from different news agencies and websites. The study shows that cyberbullying is used in order to reach certain end. The sample of the study consists of 600 comments taken from 6 different topics, mostly in politics. The model of the study is Allan and Burrige's (1991) which classifies dysphemism into eight types. The analysis is carried out by taking the function, that cyberbullying can achieve, into consideration. The findings of the study reveal that the three functions that reported the highest ratio of occurrence are 'showing anger', 'emphasizing something' and 'representing bad condition'.

Keywords: cyberbullying, dysphemism, textual cyberbullying, social media.

"منهج التشنيع اللفظي في دراسة التنمر النصي الإلكتروني في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي."

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المخلص

الدراسة الحالية تتناول منهج التشنيع اللفظي في دراسة التنمر النصي الإلكتروني في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. أصبح التنمر عبر الإنترنت منتشرًا إلى حد ما خلال التفاعل عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. تهدف الدراسة إلى تحليل عينة مكونة من 60 تعليقًا على الفيسبوك مأخوذة من وكالات أنباء ومواقع إلكترونية مختلفة. وترى الدراسة أن التنمر الإلكتروني يتم تطبيقه من أجل الوصول إلى غاية معينة. تتكون عينة الدراسة من تعليقات لستة مواضيع مختلفة. وتم أخذ 100 تعليق لكل موضوع من المواضيع الستة. نموذج الدراسة المتبع هو آلان وبوريدج (1991) الذي يصنف التشنيع اللفظي إلى ثمانية أنواع. يتم تنفيذ عملية التحليل من خلال أخذ الوظيفة التي يمكن أن يحققها التنمر عبر الإنترنت في الاعتبار. تكشف نتائج الدراسة أن الوظائف الثلاث التي سجلت أعلى نسبة تكرار هي "إظهار الغضب"، و"التأكيد على شيء ما"، و"تمثيل حالة سيئة".

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنمر الإلكتروني ، التشنيع اللفظي، التنمر الإلكتروني ، التنمر النصي الإلكتروني ، التواصل الاجتماعي.

1. Introduction

People use words to express themselves; hence words are their way to communicate. Words can be the means to upgrade or downgrade in linguistic interaction, textual or spoken. The current study deals with the use of dysphemism in textual cyberbullying on social media like Facebook. Dysphemistic expressions are the kind with offensive connotations that people use to show disapproval or see things in a downgrade (Allen and Burridge, 1988). The dysphemistic connotation is not necessarily a property in the word, but it is related to the style, for example, the word 'Asian' is not dysphemistic by nature but Asians may feel bad to be addressed as 'Asian' instead of specifying their nationality. This happens a lot in social media, especially in the comment section where people can easily bully each other. Therefore, the study focuses on cyberbullying in social media. Weiss (2014) states that cyberbullying entails using the internet/ social media to abuse, threat, harass, stalk, humiliate, embarrass, or target someone.

2. Statement of the problem

People use social media platforms worldwide. This gives easy access to almost all ages and types of people. People can easily use dysphemistic expressions in their interaction on social media. It is hypothesized that dysphemism is used by bullies in social media to achieve certain function. Therefore, we try to answer the following questions:

1. How do people use dysphemistic expressions in textual cyberbullying?
2. What are the functions of dysphemism deployed by social media users ?

3. Theoretical background .

3.1 What is Dysphemism?

In language, there are certain phenomena that are used as means to soften, harden or just to decorate our speech; one of which is called euphemism. As for dysphemism, here, comes as the opposite of euphemism. Therefore, dysphemism, being the opposite, is defined as (talking offensively); the word dysphemism goes back to Greek terminology. the Greek ‘dys’ means ‘bad, unfavorable’ and ‘pheme’ means ‘speaking’ (Allen and Burrige, 2006). The term was first recorded in 1884, but it gained more interest in the recent years. (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008).

The use of dysphemism is tabooed, yet people use is sometimes because of fear, distaste, and also by hatred and contempt (Allen and Burrige, 2006). It can also be seen as a process in which most of the traits of the taboo are enhanced with an offensive aim (Crespo-Fernández, 2015). With the use of dysphemism, the statement is intentionally negative and has a harsh vibe (Gibbon, 2014). In other words, dysphemistic expressions are words or phrases with offensive intentions whether implicit/ explicit either about the denotatum and people addressed or overhearing the utterances. Noticeably, the denotatum is the thing that speakers refer to when using certain expressions, generally, things or events in this world or another (historical, fictional, imaginative) that may be referred to (Allen and Burrige, 2006). The use of dysphemism highly depends on the context. In fact, the same words or phrases can be both used and understood as either euphemism or dysphemism depending on the context, the exact usage, and the speaker’s intentions. For example, the words loo, lavatory can be considered as euphemism, however, if used in the context of army barracks, they are dysphemism (Ruiz, 2009).

3.1.1 1Dysphemism Strategies

Dysphemism is presented in many ways. There are several stylistic and lexical ways to add to a word or a phrase a dysphemistic element. There are many dysphemistic strategies among them are circumlocution, borrowed terms and technical jargon to offence (Allen and Burrige, 2003). To prove the diversity of the dysphemistic expressions, the term ‘so called’ may indicate dysphemism, for example:

1. *The so-called democracies of the Eastern bloc.*

The word *democracy* is not dysphemistic in its own, but it implies disagreement and disapproval.

There are a number of dysphemistic terms of insult which can basically be found in colloquial interactions, including: (A) Comparing people to animals who act in a certain way, e.g. calling them a *louse, mouse, bird, coot, chicken, bat, rat, cat, dog, bitch, ass/donkey, mule, snake, ape, monkey*, etc. (B) Epithets which are

derived from tabooed bodily organs, and sexual manners. (C) Ascriptions of mental or physical inadequacy, such as *idiot, fuckwit, nincompoop, fool, cretin, maniac*, etc.; *spastic, weakling, baldy, four- eyes*, etc. (D) lastly, there are a number of insult or disrespect, some of which invoke slurs on the target's character: e.g. *biddy, crone, hag, bag, battle-axe, codger, geezer, crank, fuddy-duddy, fuss-budget, grump, foggy, galoot*,(Allen and Burrige, 1988)

According to Power et al. (2017), they categorized dysphemistic terms into (1) the terms that are used explicitly, such as profane/ obscene, violent, and offensive/insulting, and (2) the terms that are used implicitly, including the ones related to negation, animal metaphors and similes. The implicit terms can be divided into positive and neutral depending on the context, they may become offensive. The word *nice* is a good example because the word itself has positive connotation but can be negated to be offensive; for example:

2. *You are not a nice person.*

However, the word *spell* is semantically related to neutral connotations, but still can be used to hurt someone's feeling, for example:

3. *You can't even spell!*

3.1. 2 Types of Dysphemism

Allan and Burrige (1991) suggest eight types of dysphemism. These eight types are summarized as follows:

1. Synecdoche

It is a figure of speech. It implies when a part is used to denote the whole, for instance, *new wheels* is used to mean *new car*. Other examples like *suits* is used to refer to *businesspeople*, *asking for hand* means *to marry a woman*, *The White House* can refer to *statements made by individuals within the United States government*.

2. Dysphemistic epithet

It is the use of animal names for the purpose of offending the listener. The user of this type always targets the listener's humanity such as *pig, bitch, rat, dog*, etc. So, calling someone *a chicken* is a way to refer that he/she is coward.

3. Euphemistic Dysphemism

This type refers to applying a minced oath in the case of swearing interjectionally. It is used without having the intent to offend. The act seems euphemistic but it is expressively dysphemistic, for example, when someone says "she is freaking smart". Here, the speaker uses the word *freaking* to denote *fucking* to just look like less harsh. Words like *frickrn, frickrn and friggin* can be used to mean *fucking*. Other examples like the use of *passed away* or *departed* to mean *died*.

4. Dysphemistic Euphemism

This type entails using abusing language to indicate friendship familiarity such as greeting between friends such as the word *dumbass* in the following example:

4. *You are a dumbass, but I love you anyway.*

The purpose behind this type is mocking between members of groups and families.

5. 'ist' Dysphemism

This type is used to target particular ethnicity. It may cover religion, biological sex, political standing, level of ability, etc. or the use of personal traits words like *communist, fascist, racist*, etc.

6. Name Dysphemism

In this type, the speaker uses another's name instead of an appropriate kinship title when addressing people. It entails using lower style in a formal context. Sometimes, language users use more casual style than is often given in a social situation like:

5. *Hi, Tom?* rather than "*uncle Tom*".

7. Homosexual Dysphemism

It is the use of the terms that are applied in issues of homosexuality. Examples are *faggot, queer*, etc.

8. Cross-Cultural Dysphemism

The use of vulgar and slang terms which are considered dysphemistic in a given culture. The same terms may have a different meaning in another culture. A very well-known example of this type is the word *fag*, which denotes *gay man* in American English while, in British English, it means *cigarette*. Another example is the use of slang word *fanny* by British or Australian English speakers to denote *vulva* which can be deemed vulgar (Ezeife,2016).

3.1.3. Multi-functionality of Dysphemism

Dysphemism is, often, used to reach certain purposes. For most, it is a verbal and non-verbal behavior by which the writer/speaker tends to let the reader/listener know something. According to Warren (1992) and Allan and Burridge (2006), dysphemism is applied to carry out the following functions: 1) humiliating others, 2) characterizing an identity, 3) showing anger, 4) emphasizing something, 5) representing bad condition, 6) unveiling closeness, and 7) expressing amazement.

The first function is used to put someone down and degrade him/her. The reason behind humiliating others is self-protection. The feeling of power gives the idea of superiority which leads to acting humiliation. Mean people like to see others downgraded (Abbas and khudhayir, 2016). The second function, characterizing identity, implies, as Zimmermann (2003) claims, using dysphemistic expressions unintentionally or for no specific purposes.

The third function is applied by people to show anger. People tend to be rude enough and harm others when they are angry (Lowth, 2019 ; Kienpointer, 1997). Lowth believes that anger, for most, cannot be avoided and it is manifested through the way of doing things or speaking to others. It is characterized by a high tone and word choice. On the other hand, the fourth is using dysphemistic expressions for the purpose of emphasizing something in a certain situation. This case entails using bad words. This means that by using bad words and style, the speaker forces and compels the listener to be convinced with what the speaker is putting forth. The next function, which is similar, in a way or another, to the latter function, is

representing bad condition. This function is brought about through the use of nouns and adjectives (Allan and Burrige, 2006). In the same tone, Harris et al. (1986) maintain that it might be preferable to counter-attack in order to save face in case of verbal attack.

The sixth function is showing intimacy and closeness. According to Culpeper (1996), dysphemism is applied to show closeness and intimacy with friends or members of families. The use of dysphemistic and impolite expressions correlates with closeness. So, according to Culpeper, the closer the friends are, the more dysphemism is expected. To agree with, Labov (1972) claims that insults could serve positively in groups.

The last function designates using dysphemism for the purpose of showing amazement. This is a positively-oriented use of dysphemism. It is used to show astonishment over something in which the speaker can unveil emotions. It is, sometimes, used to attract the addressee's attention (Fernández, 2006).

4. Textual Cyberbullying

Mackay (2013) maintains that Bully-like behaviors have different types from physical and verbal to social bullying. However, a fourth type evolve in the recent years with the dominance of technology and social networks, it is called cyberbullying. Bullies of the latter kind use cellphones, internet, and social media sites to bully others. Sites like Facebook, Instagram and twitter are mainly used by cyberbullies since it has easy access.

Relatedly, Weiss (2014) argues that bullies on social media may threat, torment, harass, stalk, verbally attack, humiliate, and embarrass others via using comments or direct messages or any other form of digital technology. On the same aspect, Anderson et.al., (2014) states that Facebook is one of the social media sites that constantly receive cyberbullying reports. It may take several forms, starting with comments, information or photos on personal walls.

Power et.al., (2017,p. 160) define textual cyberbullying as:

A given public textual instance (whether expressed as a message, a post or a sentence) can be classified as cyberbullying if it contains all of the following three elements: (1) the personal marker/ pointer, (2) the explicit or implicit dysphemistic element, and (3) the link between the personal marker/pointer and the dysphemistic element.

4.1 Types of Cyberbullying

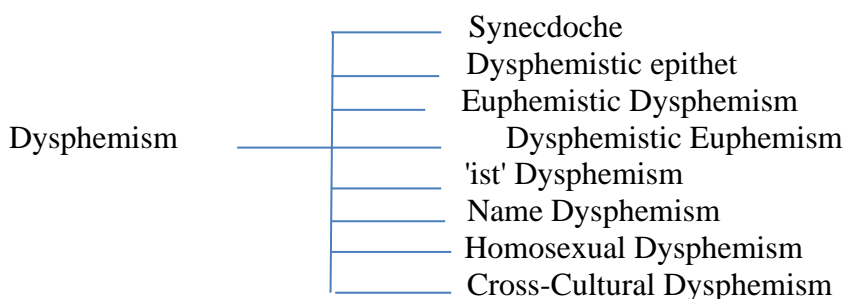
Singhal and Bansal (2013) introduce nine different types of cyberbullying. Flooding is one of the types which entails monopolizing the media so that the user can message or post freely. Another type is masquerade which means using someone else's screen name on the internet. As for flaming or bashing, it involves users attacking each other in a personal way. Their interaction involves heated bullying language although it may only be short comments. Trolling is another type of cyberbullying that involves posting comments full of bully language that are emotionally abusive and provokes fighting or other hate related acts. There are a

number of other types including, harassment which entails the usual bully-victim relationship, cyberstalking which basically mean observing and sending content messages or posts to the victim, also denigration which involves talking bad about someone online. The research mainly focuses on flaming or bashing and trolling since they are the most common on social media.

5. Methodology

5.1 The Model

The model of analysis is that suggested by Allan and Burrige (1991). The model consists of eight types of dysphemistic expressions through which the sample of the study is analyzed. The model of the study is diagrammed below:



5.2 Data Collection

The data collected for analysis is taken different news agencies and websites. The data consist of six different topics. People came to put their comments about the selected topics. The first topic is "Evidence appears to support sedition charge against Trump" taken from HuffPost which is an American news aggregator and blog, with localized and international editions. The second is " Kylie Jenner slammed for requesting donations to pay for stylist's surgery", while the third is " Trump booed at his own rally for finally telling the truth about something". The fourth topic is taken from CNN news agency. The topic deals with "U.S.-Mexico border is closed, but unaccompanied minors accepted" and the fifth one is "racially profiled black man called him a drug dealer" taken from TMZ which is a tabloid journalism online newspaper owned by Warner Media. The last topic, the sixth, is "Joe Biden is coward who needs to remember he answers to the American people not the Taliban" taken from Fox News agency. Out of other social media, Facebook is selected to take the comments from where it is allowed for people to drop their viewpoints towards an issue publically. 100 comments were taken for each topic. So, the total number of comments is 600 which are analyzed according to the model suggested for the study.

5.3 Analysis and Discussion

The process of analysis is carried out to unveil the occurrence coefficient of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Cyberbullying, which is the core interest of the current study, is analyzed according to the dysphemism type and percentage. So, every dysphemism type would be measured with reference to the function it

delivers in the text as in the following table which shows the number of occurrence of each dysphemism type followed by the percentage of each function of cyberbullying taken from 600 comments on Facebook.

Cyberbellying Function	Dysphemism Type/Percentage								Total / Percentage
	Synecdoche	Dysphemistic epithet	Euphemistic Dysphemism	Dysphemistic Euphemism	'ist' Dysphemism	Name Dysphemism	Homo Dysphemism	Cross-Cultural Dysphemism	
Humiliating others	1	6	5	2	11	-	3	1	29
	3.4	20.6	17.2	6.8	37.9	0	10.3	3.4	%16.29
Characterizing an identity	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	4
	0	25	25	25	25	0	0	0	%2.24
Showing anger	3	13	9	4	16	4	3	3	55
	5.4	23.6	16.3	7.2	29.1	7.2	5.4	5.4	%30.89
Emphasizing something	3	10	7	5	21	3	2	2	53
	5.6	18.8	13.2	9.4	29.6	5.6	3.7	3.7	%29.77
Representing bad condition	2	7	5	1	8	2	1	1	27
	7.4	25.9	18.5	3.7	29.6	7.4	3.7	3.7	%15.16
Unveiling closeness	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	%.56
Expressing amazement	-	1	1	1	5	-	-	1	9
	0	11.1	11.1	11.1	55.5	0	0	11.9	% 5.05
Total	9	39	28	14	62	9	9	8	178
Percentage	5.05	21.9	15.7	7.8	34.8	5.05	5.05	4.49	%29.66

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Dysphemism Types and Functions

The table reveals that highest occurrence of the dysphemism type is 'ist-dysphemism' which reached 62 uses with a percentage of % 34.8. For example, a comment says:

Facebook user: you are being racist, THE government is stupid enough to let the like of yours be on BBC.

The reason behind this ratio is that people use certain personal traits widely with a number of words disclosing ethnicity, political standing, level of ability, biological sex, etc. The function of this usage is to show anger towards something or to emphasize an issue. The second occurrence is dysphemistic epithet. The purpose behind the high usage is to offend the targeted recipient's humanity. For example:

Facebook user: you shut up, you crazy pig.

The basic three functions which rated higher than the other four functions are showing anger, emphasizing something and representing bad conditions. It is clear that cyberbullying is used to show anger over something done or when someone tries to assure or emphasize a point of view and not to humiliate or hurt for nothing. The function of unveiling closeness reported the lowest in the table which is

attributed to that the sample of the study deals with formal situation like giving viewpoints to people who are not necessarily close to the comment writers. This function can be seen within the family field and groups of friends or colleagues. The other lower rate belongs to the function of 'characterizing an identity' which reveals using dysphemism unintentionally. The comments writers have shown rigorous use to deliver their standing and viewpoints.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that cyberbullying is used to achieve certain functions. Dysphemism users vary from one type/function to another. The functions that are recorded higher ratios are 'showing anger', 'emphasizing something', and 'representing bad condition'. The first one 'showing anger' is applied to disagree with the politicians and with decision makers about certain issues in addition to the public. 'Showing anger' is a way that a language user can do to differ in opinion in written language.

'Emphasizing something' is that function which is used to affirm an idea or viewpoint. In spoken language, a speaker may use loud voice or shouting to emphasize an idea where the normal styles do not work. In written language, among other ways, writers use dysphemistic words to affirm something.

The use of 'representing bad condition' function is applied by the comment writers to represent the bad conditions to the public. These writers use social media to portrait the living and real situations to the public and decision makers as a way for improving and changing the situation.

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