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A Linguistic Analysis of Facebook Comments: Political Discourse and Trolling Strategies

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This paper examines the language of comments that Georgian Facebook users write under public political posts, concentrating on the tactics that appear in heated, adversarial exchanges and in comments that slide into trolling. The central question is how people write when they argue about politics online, and which rhetorical moves keep recurring in quarrels, confrontation and troll-like behavior. The framework combines critical discourse analysis, the pragmatics of computer-mediated communication and (im)politeness theory, which allows such comments to be treated not merely as expressions of individual hostility but as socially situated and strategic acts. The data are comments under public political posts on elections, legislative initiatives and foreign policy, analyzed at the lexical-semantic and pragmatic levels, with each comment read within its whole thread. The analysis identifies five recurring strategies: provocation, name-calling, whataboutism, discrediting of authority and competence, and slogan repetition, accompanied by irony and sarcasm as pragmatic devices that make criticism difficult to rebut. The paper sets out a typology of these strategies and describes the function each performs in polarized political discourse, showing how aggression, mockery, irony and manipulative rhetoric operate in online political talk. It also considers how platform features such as anonymity, comment ranking and the like system encourage confrontational rhetoric, and why irony complicates automated moderation. The findings suggest that trolling is rarely spontaneous and relies on recurring formulas that combine argumentation with emotional manipulation. The proposed typology may be applied in media-literacy education and in the design of moderation policy.

Keywords: discourse analysis; social media; Facebook; political discourse; trolling; impoliteness theory; online communication.

1. Introduction

Facebook, and social media more broadly, has changed what political communication looks like. Traditional media kept political talk formal and tightly controlled by institutions. On social networks,

ordinary citizens speak directly and can answer a politician, a journalist or another user as it happens. This can be seen as a democratizing change, but it brings problems too: aggressive rhetoric, social polarization, and what is usually called trolling.

"Trolling" is a fishing term: a lure is dragged behind a boat until a fish bites. Online the idea is much the same. A troll posts something provocative and waits for someone to "bite," that is, to react emotionally. The term first covered posts written to provoke, where the whole point was to get an emotional reaction out of other people [Hardaker, 2010]. Since then it has widened well beyond openly destructive behavior to include subtler strategies. These can look like ordinary argument while actually working to discredit an opponent and throw the discussion off course [Hardaker, 2010].

The paper aims to describe the linguistic markers and pragmatic devices of political discourse in Georgian-language Facebook. This breaks down into three tasks: (a) to identify the lexical and stylistic features typical of political comments; (b) to describe the discursive strategies of trolling and build a typology of them; and (c) to look at how these strategies relate to the communicative context and to features of the platform, namely the degree of anonymity, the way comments are arranged, and the "like" system.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three connected approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis, the pragmatics of computer-mediated communication (CMC pragmatics), and (im)politeness theory.

Critical discourse analysis does not treat language as a neutral channel. It sees language as one of the means by which power relations are carried out [Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016]. On this view a political comment is already a statement of ideological position. Word choice, presuppositions and implied meanings show where the author stands and help draw the line between "us" and "them" [Van Dijk, 1998].

CMC pragmatics asks how the ordinary rules of pragmatics change once communication goes digital [Herring, 2004]. Online writing is often anonymous and spread out in time, which weakens people's sense of social accountability and makes disinhibited behavior more likely. This is the "online disinhibition effect," which psychological and sociolinguistic research counts among the main causes of aggression in online discourse [Suler, 2004].

(Im)politeness theory, and impoliteness in particular, gives a way to study the strategies speakers use on purpose to damage an interlocutor's "face," or public self-image [Culpeper, 1996]. Impoliteness of this kind differs from accidental rudeness because it is strategic and usually serves a goal: discrediting an opponent, strengthening solidarity inside one's own group, or winning public support [Culpeper, 2011].

Taken together, the three approaches let trolling be treated as more than antisocial behavior. It becomes a structured discursive practice with recognizable lexical, syntactic and pragmatic patterns.

3. Research Methodology

The material is made up of comments left under public political posts. The posts were chosen to cover different topics (elections, legislative initiatives, foreign policy), and the authors' anonymity was protected: the examples used in the analysis are de-personalized and contain no personal data or details that could identify a user.

The analysis had two stages. The first was quantitative: comments were sorted by tone (neutral, critical, aggressive) and by function (argumentation, mockery, provocation, expression of solidarity). The second was a qualitative discourse analysis, a close reading of the lexical, syntactic and pragmatic makeup of selected comments, including markers of irony, sarcasm and veiled insult.

The study has one limitation that should be stated. Intent is hard to establish in online discourse, and what one reader takes as irony another reads as a plain statement. To reduce the problem, the analysis works with the whole thread rather than with isolated statements: the original post, the comment, and the replies it received. This gives the interpretation more to rest on.

4. Linguistic Features of Political Discourse on Facebook

4.1. Lexical-Semantic Level

Polarized vocabulary is one of the most visible features of political comments. These are words that label an event or a person as plainly good or bad before any argument has been made (for example "treason," "sellout," "patriot," "traitor"). Such choices do framing work, because they fix in advance how the reader is supposed to interpret the event.

Example: "This law isn't just a reform, it's a betrayal of the country." The word "betrayal" sets the reader's attitude to the event before any argument is offered.

Dehumanizing and stigmatizing vocabulary is common as well. Opponents are described through animal metaphors or through forms with pejorative suffixes. This pushes the opponent symbolically outside the circle of legitimate participants and devalues their arguments beforehand, which makes it a version of the classic ad hominem move.

Example: "Those [members of the political group] just move around in a herd, not one of them has an opinion of their own." The animal metaphor excludes the opponent from the category of rational subjects.

4.2. Syntactic and Stylistic Features

Facebook comments are usually built from short, fragmented constructions. Rhetorical questions and expressive punctuation (ellipses, strings of exclamation marks, words in all caps) stand in for the

intonation and facial expression that writing lacks, and they carry emotional intensity. Ellipsis and unfinished sentences are frequent too. They make a comment feel spontaneous and direct, but they also make it harder to reconstruct the logic of the argument.

Code-switching also appears. English political terms ("fake news," "hater," "troll" and similar) fit easily into Georgian syntax, which shows how global internet culture seeps into local political discourse.

4.3. Pragmatic Level: Irony and Sarcasm

Irony and sarcasm serve two purposes in political comments. They let the author criticize in a fairly safe way, without open insult. But the same indirectness often makes them better at discrediting an opponent, since there is little to rebut: the author can always say it was "just a joke" [Culpeper, 2011]. This is why irony is such a handy tool for trolling.

Example: "Oh great, another 'historic' decision — the tenth this month." In context, "historic" in quotation marks means the opposite of what it says, and the criticism is dressed up as praise.

5. Trolling Strategies and Typology

The analysis found five main strategies typical of trolling. They partly overlap.

5.1. Provocation and Emotionally Charged Statements

Provocative comments are built to get a quick, unreflective emotional reaction [Hardaker, 2010]. Typical features are sweeping generalizations ("everyone who thinks this way..."), openly evaluative vocabulary, and loaded presuppositions put into the grammatical form of a question that in fact already contains a finished accusation.

Example: "Isn't this law basically treason — or is it not?" The rhetorical question presents the accusation as settled and does not really need an answer.

5.2. Name-calling and Stigmatization

Here a humiliating label takes the place of engagement with the opponent's argument. Name-calling often merges with markers of political identity and divides the discussion into two camps. Whatever the opponent says is discounted in advance because of the "side" they belong to, whatever the content of the discussion actually is.

Example: "You're just a bot for [party name], you don't understand anything." The author does not answer the argument but "shuts down" the opponent with a label, after which there is no point in continuing.

5.3. Whataboutism

In whataboutism, the response to a criticism is to point to a supposedly comparable, but often disproportionate or unrelated, "example" from the other camp. The original issue is set aside and the

discussion turns into a secondary comparison. Linguistically it often takes the form of a rhetorical question or a parallel construction ("and when... happened, why didn't you...").

Example: "When I criticize, fine, but where were you when [the other party] did the exact same thing?" The original issue is pushed aside and the discussion moves to a secondary comparison.

5.4. Discrediting Authority and Competence

What gets challenged here is not the substance of the argument but the author's competence, education or the reliability of their source, for instance an ironic jab at how "informed" someone really is, or a direct accusation of bias [Culpeper, 1996]. It is the classic ad hominem move adapted to the digital environment.

Example: "I wonder, do you even have any education on this topic?" What is challenged is the author's competence, not the argument.

5.5. Slogan Repetition and Sloganized Communication

The last pattern found is a user repeating the same slogan-like phrase under different comments without adapting it to the specific context. It resembles argumentation but is really the mechanical spread of an already fixed position, and it is often linked to coordinated or semi-automated, bot-driven activity.

Example: the same user repeating an identical slogan under dozens of different posts, with no real connection to the topic of each.

6. Discussion of Results

The strategies identified suggest that trolling in Facebook's political discourse is seldom spontaneous or unstructured. The linguistic patterns point instead to something strategic. They rely on recurring rhetorical formulas that combine argumentation and emotional manipulation fairly effectively.

Features of the platform itself help these strategies spread: whether comments are ordered chronologically or by popularity, the visible count of "likes," and how fast content can be shared [Herring, 2004]. Highly emotional comments tend to draw more likes and replies, which raises their visibility algorithmically and gives users a reason to keep producing confrontational rhetoric [Suler, 2004].

Irony and sarcasm also complicate moderation and automated toxicity detection. Algorithms built around direct lexical markers (offensive words) often miss indirect, ironic insults, so automated monitoring of political discourse is especially hard.

A linguistic and cultural point follows from the results as well. In the Georgian-language segment, mockery and discrediting often rely on historical and cultural allusions. Understanding them takes more than linguistic knowledge; it needs background sociocultural knowledge. A purely formal approach to the linguistic analysis of trolling, one that ignores context, is therefore unlikely to work.

7. Conclusion

The study shows that political discussion on Facebook relies on lexical, syntactic and pragmatic devices that are closely linked to one another. Trolling is not random or chaotic. It follows recurring strategies (provocation, name-calling, whataboutism, discrediting authority, sloganized communication) that operate alongside the pragmatic devices of irony and sarcasm.

In practice, the typology could be used in media-literacy education and in shaping moderation policy for social media. Understanding how manipulation shows up at the linguistic level is a necessary first step toward healthier public discourse.

Future research could use longitudinal data to follow how these strategies change over time, for example during election periods or other politically tense moments. Comparative work across platforms (Facebook, X/Twitter, YouTube comments) could also show how platform-specific structure shapes the character of the discourse.

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Facebook-ის კომენტარების ლინგვისტური ანალიზი:პოლიტიკური დისკურსი და ტროლინგის სტრატეგიები

რეზიუმე

ნაშრომში განხილულია ქართველი ფეისბუქ-მომხმარებლების მიერ საჯარო პოლიტიკური პოსტების ქვეშ დაწერილი კომენტარების ენა, განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება გამახვილებულია იმ ტაქტიკებზე, რომლებიც ჩნდება მწვავე, დაპირისპირებულ დისკუსიებსა და ტროლინგში გადაზრდილ კომენტარებში. ნაშრომის ძირითადი კითხვაა, როგორ წერენ ადამიანები, როდესაც ონლაინ პოლიტიკაზე კამათობენ და რომელი რიტორიკული სვლები მეორდება ჩხუბში, დაპირისპირებასა და ტროლისათვის დამახასიათებელ ქცევაში. თეორიული ჩარჩო აერთიანებს კრიტიკული დისკურსის ანალიზს, კომპიუტერით შუამავლობილი კომუნიკაციის პრაგმატიკას და (არა)თავაზიანობის თეორიას, რაც ამ კომენტარებს განიხილავს არა მხოლოდ ინდივიდუალური მტრობის გამოხატულებად, არამედ სოციალურად განპირობებულ და სტრატეგიულ აქტებად. მონაცემებია საჯარო პოლიტიკური პოსტების ქვეშ დაწერილი კომენტარები, რომლებიც არჩევნებს, საკანონმდებლო ინიციატივებსა და საგარეო პოლიტიკას ეხება; ისინი გაანალიზებულია ლექსიკურ-სემანტიკურ და პრაგმატიკულ დონეზე, ამასთან ყოველი კომენტარი განხილულია დისკუსიის მთლიანი ნაკადის კონტექსტში. ანალიზის შედეგად გამოიყო ხუთი განმეორებადი სტრატეგია: პროვოკაცია, შეურაცხმყოფელი სახელდება, (whataboutism), ავტორიტეტისა და კომპეტენციის დისკრედიტაცია და ლოზუნგების გამეორება; მათ თან ახლავს ირონია და სარკაზმი, როგორც პრაგმატიკული საშუალებები, რომლებიც კრიტიკის გაბათილებას ართულებს. ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილია ამ სტრატეგიების ტიპოლოგია და აღწერილია თითოეულის ფუნქცია პოლარიზებულ პოლიტიკურ დისკურსში; ნაჩვენებია, როგორ მოქმედებს აგრესია, დაცინვა, ირონია და მანიპულაციური რიტორიკა ონლაინ პოლიტიკურ საუბარში. ასევე განხილულია, როგორ უწყობს ხელს კონფრონტაციულ რიტორიკას პლატფორმის ისეთი მახასიათებლები, როგორიცაა ანონიმურობა, კომენტარების რანჟირება და „მოწონების“ სისტემა, და რატომ ართულებს ირონია ავტომატურ მოდერაციას. კვლევის შედეგები მიუთითებს, რომ ტროლინგი იშვიათად არის სპონტანური და ეყრდნობა განმეორებად ფორმულებს, რომლებიც არგუმენტაციას ემოციურ მანიპულაციასთან აერთიანებს. შემოთავაზებული ტიპოლოგიის გამოყენება შესაძლებელია მედიაწიგნიერების სწავლებასა და მოდერაციის პოლიტიკის შემუშავებაში.

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