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HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA OVER THE MACEDONIA NAMING DISPUTE

Abstract

The paper offers a critical discourse and pragmatic analysis of a corpus of hateful Facebook comments of Macedonian citizens over the Macedonia naming dispute, collected immediately after the name change was officially endorsed in the Parliament. The analysis first attempts to unveil who the hateful political discourse in the given socio-political context is directed at, what roles the commenters assume, what speech acts the hateful posts are predominantly composed of (e.g. assertive, directives, expressives, commissives), as well as what kind of negative lexis and rhetorical tropes are employed by the commenters. The main aim of the research is to unveil the main features of hateful comments through detailed language analysis as they could be easily detected and extracted from social media. The results show that social media have influenced the traditional pattern of communication by introducing a more interactive and participative type of communication. Social media users employ them to direct verbal assaults not only at fellow citizens, but also at political figures, journalists, diplomats and other officials, assuming roles of analysts and judges who mostly use assertive and expressive speech acts, ingrained with a variety of negative lexis and rhetorical figures intended to reinforce their negative stance.

Keywords: hate speech, social media, speech acts

1. Introduction

Being in close nexus with free speech and social media, the usage of hate speech has been growing exponentially in the last decades. Democratic societies, where the right to free speech is guaranteed, encourage people not only to speak their mind freely but also to direct expressions of hatred towards an individual or group of individuals on the basis of certain characteristics, such as race, colour, religion, descent, national or ethnic origin, etc. This, in turn, gives rise to numerous discussions and debates intended to elucidate this phenomenon, including why hate speech ‘flourishes’ on social media, particularly during turbulent socio-political times, what roles those who post hateful messages assume, who they address, what linguistic strategies and speech acts they employ in the realization of their hateful messages, etc. (Atifi & Marcoccia, 2017; ElSherief, et al., 2018; Sevasti, 2014; Trajkova & Neshkovska, 2018).

This study aims to further improve the understanding of hate speech by analyzing it in a very concrete socio-political context, i.e. the Macedonia naming dispute. In that sense critical discourse analysis is carried out on a corpus of hateful Facebook comments written as a reaction to online news articles published on Macedonian news portals after the name change decision was reached in the Macedonian Parliament, in January 2019. The power relations between the parties involved are also put under scrutiny (the analysis includes hateful comments directed at politicians and other officials who try to impose their dominance and power on the citizens/commenters). The paper also offers a pragmatic analysis of the selected hateful Facebook comments, by investigating the use of speech acts in the comments. In addition, further analysis is done on the negative lexis and rhetorical strategies employed by the commenters. The main aim of this detailed language analysis is to unveil the main features of hateful comments and to assist all those who work on detecting and extracting hate speech from social media.

In the following sections, we firstly discuss some of the major findings regarding hate speech as well as the research methodology employed. Then, we present and discuss the insights gained from this study, and finally, we proffer some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical framework

Nowadays, the Internet and social media play a very prominent role in producing and disseminating hate speech. Although social media is put to much positive use, it still also seems to encourage more and more

people to take an active part in discussing a variety of issues publicly⁵ (Karatzogianni, 2004 in Sevasti, 2014), which in turn “opens the doors to the proliferation of anti-social behavior” (ElSherief et al., 2018), and results in “inflamed discussions that polarize ‘us’ against ‘them’” (Mondal et al., 2017).

Various researchers have investigated the reason why people turn to social media to voice their hateful messages. Sevasti (2014) attributes the expansion of hate speech in the digital world to the following reasons: a) the absolute freedom of expression, b) the breadth of the message’s reach, c) the relative anonymity in the virtual world, and d) social media presents a mainly uncontrolled and unregulated social. Whillock (1995) argues that hate appeals are used consciously to inflame the emotions of followers, denigrate the out-class, inflict permanent and irreparable harm on the opposition, and, ultimately, conquer.

Atifi & Marcoccia’s (2017) note that the authors of Twitter and Facebook posts (hateful posts included) play three major social roles when posting: a judge, an activist and an analyst. When they play the role of a judge they mainly assess and evaluate a certain situation or action (they perform asserting, evaluating, assessing, stating, affirming acts). The activist’s main focus is on persuading people to act, to do something about the issue at stake (they perform questioning, ordering, imploring, challenging, summoning acts). The analyst mainly makes an analysis of the situation and clarifies it so that their Twitter and FB friends would understand it better (they explain, contextualize, enlighten, clarify, analyze, etc.).

Irrespective of the motivation behind spreading hate speech via social media, and regardless of whether it is ‘directed’ at a specific individual, or ‘generalized’, targeting a group of people (ElSherief et al., 2018), the consequences that stem from it could be extremely detrimental. Hate speech violates the individual’s dignity, resulting in humiliation, distress and psychological or emotional pain (Leets, 2002). It provokes pain, distress, fear, embarrassment and isolation (Nemes, 2002). Apart from silencing the ‘victims’, sometimes hate speech galvanizes them to become aggressive and dangerous (Parekh, 2006).

Finally, some studies on hate speech on social media focused on the actual linguistic strategies used in the realization of hateful messages. Thus, Burgers et al. (2012) discovered four specific and inclusive categories of hate speech tweets: a) cursing, b) threat of attack, c) hostile criticism, and d) sarcasm. The

⁵Although an increasing number of people participate in the political discussions online, still it seems that social media and the way of communication they propagate actually leads to something that Shirky (2011) calls ‘slacktivism’, which translates to the tendency of users to seek social change through low-cost activities, such as following a cause online, signing petitions online, etc. He adds that the social media tools themselves are ineffective and ‘slacktivism’ can lead to actual political disengagement (in Sevasti, 2014).

‘cursing’ category contained a) profanities (e.g. fuck, assholes, bastards, bitch, etc.), b) insulting/offensive epithets and slurs (e.g. hypocrites, murderers, etc.), and c) hatred words/degradations (fascist, mocking characterizations for rightists, leftists, anarchists, etc.). The ‘threat of attack’ category included tweets that contain expressions of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage (e.g. kill, murder, hit, exterminate, remove, clean up, etc). The ‘hostile criticism’ category included tweets that contain expressions of disapproval and of noting the problems or faults of a person; whereas, the ‘sarcasm’ category comprised sarcastic comments and words that mean the opposite of what they are usually used for, in order to insult someone, to show irritation, or to be funny.

3. Research methodology

The corpus, tailor-made for the purposes of this study, consists of Facebook users’ comments provoked by 10 news articles published on some Macedonian news portals (Republika.MK; GRID.MK; A1ONMK, and MAK MAX com.mk⁶). The news articles addressed different aspects of the decision reached in the Macedonian Parliament regarding the change of the constitutional name of the country, the Republic of Macedonia, into the Republic of North Macedonia, in compliance with the Prespa Agreement⁷. Given that the analysed Facebook comments were instigated by and made in very specific socio-political circumstances and referred to a concrete political event of major importance for the Macedonian history and statehood, the corpus, in fact, comprises ‘a special subtype of political discourse produced by lay persons’ (Sevasti, 2014) who make use of social media to present their political stance.

The news articles were released immediately after the voting in the Parliament, on the 11th January, 2019. Six of them made reference to current Macedonian *politicians* and *prominent individuals* who had a role in the name change (Zoran Zaev, the Prime Minister; Kosta Kostadinov, the spokesperson of the government; Bahchev, an MP from the opposition; and Elizabeta Kancheska-Milevska, an MP from the opposition who voted in favour of the agreement; Vasko Eftov – a TV journalist, and Jess Baily – the former US Ambassador to Macedonia). The remaining 4 news articles depicted specific events that took

⁶ These portals were included in the corpus since on the particular occasion they published articles on the issue at hand. Since the focus was placed solely on people’s reactions to what was happening in society, no background checking was conducted of the political ideology of the people who ran those portals.

⁷ Macedonia and Greece have been negotiating for almost three decades, when finally, the left-wing SDSM, which took over the government in 2017, eager to move ahead Macedonia’s integration into Europe and NATO, signed the Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018. The agreement stipulated a change in the country’s constitutional name, which was, consequently, ratified by the Macedonian Parliament early the following year (2019).

place after the decision was made official (the protests in front of the Parliament, the ensuing protest in Greece and the celebration of the MP who voted in favour of the agreement in the Parliament).

The comments made by Facebook users under the selected news articles were mostly negative and contained negative lexis. The first step in the analysis was *to detect and separate the hateful comments from the non-hateful ones*. The identification was based on Cohen-Almagor's (2011) definition of hate speech, and all instances of *hard* and *soft hate speech* (Mihajlova et al., 2013) were entered in the corpus. The identification of the hateful comments was also greatly assisted by Parekh's conditions (2006): a) the comment singles out an individual or a group of individuals on the basis of certain characteristics (e.g. politicians), b) the comment stigmatizes its target by ascribing to it a set of constitutive qualities that are widely viewed as highly undesirable (e.g. the politician is a liar), and c) the comment places the target group outside the pale of normal social relationships (e.g. politicians are corrupted).

The next step of the analysis was *to identify the targets* of the derogatory comments. More specifically, the analysis was directed at determining whether with their comments the commenters were trying to demean and criticize the politicians who made the decision or those who were against the decision, and whether that was done on an individual ('directed' hate speech) or collective ('generalized' hate speech) basis (ElSherief et al., 2018). Also, the study sought *to determine the role of those who posted the comments*, i.e. whether the commenters wished to present themselves as judges, analysts or activists (Atifi & Marcoccia, 2017).

Finally, critical discourse (Fairclough, 1989) and pragmatic analysis (Austin's Speech Act Theory, 1962) of the comments was performed, in order to detect *the predominant speech acts* (expressives, assertives, commissives and directives). Finally, *the negative lexis* and *rhetorical tropes* (irony, metaphors, rhetorical questions, etc.) used in the comments were analyzed in order to gain a more detailed perspective on the content of the hateful comments.

4. Results

The analysis of the corpus showed that almost all of the selected comments, i.e. 161 out of 183, were identified as hateful. The greatest chunk of the hateful comments (73%) were instigated as a reaction to the news articles discussing the role of a *particular individual* (e.g. a politician, journalist, diplomat, etc.) in the name change. The rest of the hurtful comments (27%) were more general and referred to *the events* themselves related to the name change issue.

What all these comments have in common is that they were all written and posted on the spur of the moment and in an extremely emotionally-charged atmosphere. 78% of the hateful comments were clearly directed towards the current representatives of the government and their collaborators as well as towards their sympathizers and supporters, all of which, generally speaking, were labelled in the comments as ‘traitors’ of the country’s national interest. 22% of the hateful messages were directed towards the representatives of the opposition (VMRO DPMNE) and their supporters, who were against the Prespa agreement and the name change, presenting them as backwards and corrupted individuals, defensive of the politicians of the former ‘criminal’ government of VMRO DPMNE.

4.1. The targets of the hateful comments

Depending on who the targets of the hateful comments were, the analyzed Facebook comments were further classified as either a ‘*directed*’ *hate speech* comment (comments directed towards a specific individual, most typically a politician, but also there were instances of hate speech directed at journalists and diplomats), or a ‘*generalized*’ *hate speech* comment (comments directed at a group of politicians or individuals of the same political affiliation and the same political stance regarding the name change) (Table 1).

	‘Directed’ hate speech		‘Generalized’ hate speech
	individuals	a group of individuals	Facebook users
Targets			
No. of hateful comments	91	32	38
%	57%	20%	23%

Table 1. Directed versus generalized hate speech

As shown in Table 1, out of all the 161 comments, 57% were of the ‘directed’ type, as the targets of those comments were specific individuals, and 43% were instances of ‘generalized’ hate speech, as they were targeting a group of individuals.

The purpose of the first (‘directed’ comments) was clearly to humiliate and attack these individuals, presenting them as the ‘others’, i.e. those who are to be blamed for the name change (e.g. *Зажко нема*

*долго да тераш – зајко*⁸). As for the second type, the ‘generalized’ hate speech comments, they were targeting mostly the government (e.g. *Вака сите на гробишта да ве соберат племето ваше предавничко*) and their supporters (e.g. *Кај се симпатизерите на СДС да слават по градовите што го менаа името што молчат како глумчиња нигде не видов славење леле гревчиња*). A small percentage of the comments referred to the opposition and their supporters who were blamed for being against Macedonia’s progress and prosperity, referring to Macedonia’s admission into NATO and EU (e.g. *Удбаиш нема повеќе сценарија за ВОЈНИ каде млатиш празна слама. Сите сте во офсајд со се УДБА-шката ДПМНЕ*). Slightly more than half of the ‘generalized’ hateful comments (23%) were addressing the general public, blaming it for its latency and passivity (e.g. *А народот македонски каде е? зошто не славите бе северни ирваси?*) and trying to make it aware of the seriousness of the situation (e.g. *Гнаса до гнаса мизерија од држава и политичари*).

4.2. The speech acts underlying the hateful comments

The analyzed comments were also inspected from a pragmatic point of view, the aim being to determine what speech acts⁹ are predominantly used in expressing hatred and intolerance towards the ‘others’.

Most of the comments were short and consisted of a simple comment (one utterance, one speech act), which means they consisted of a simple speech act (69%); whereas, the rest of the comments were more complex (31%) and consisted of 2 and in some cases up to 5 sentences, which implies that they were complex speech acts comprising from 2 to 5 speech acts of the same or different type.

	Assertives	Expressives	Directives	Commissives	Total
out of 161 hateful comments in total	45 (41%)	27 (25%)	20 (18%)	18 (16%)	110

Table 2. Single speech acts

⁸ All the examples are given in their original version. As most of them contain culture-specific vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, most of which are difficult to transfer adequately in English, we decided not to translate them.

⁹ According to Searle (1976) speech acts can be classified as: a) assertives (they commit the speaker to something being the case and include: suggesting, putting forward, swearing, boasting, concluding), b) directives (they try to make the addressee perform an action – asking, ordering, requesting, inviting, advising, begging), c) commissives (they commit the speaker to doing something in the future – promising, planning, vowing, betting, opposing), d) expressives (they express how the speaker feels about the situation – apologizing, welcoming, deploring), and e) declaratives (they change the state of the world in an immediate way – baptizing, firing from work, marrying, etc.).

The speech act of **assertives** was the most prevalent speech act used singly (41%) (e.g. *Многу лош политичар е овој Костадинов ни срам ни перде, тешка превара*) (see Table 2). With these comments, the commenters were making their position clear regarding the name change – they were either strongly against it or they supported it. They were also giving their own interpretation of the politicians' role in the newly arisen situation, probably hopeful that the readers will accept it. The **expressives** used singly were the second most frequently used speech act in the analyzed corpus (25%). The expressives contained expressions of strong negative feelings towards somebody, accompanied by a wish that something terrible (usually death) may befall them (e.g. *Бог е сведок момент убав да не дочекате проклети луѓе; Вака сите на гробишта да ве соберат племето ваше предавничко; Со поворка да ве испрќаме сите 81*).

The **directives** (18%) and **commissives** (16%) were almost equally present in the corpus. In the case of the directives, the commenters were issuing orders, making requests and suggestions, or asking, i.e. demanding some specific politician or person to answer a specific question (e.g. *Мри бе будало!; Оди лечи се невронпсихијарија; Глупердо Бачев прво најди го Хорхе а потоа заедно гонете се у 3 лепе нм*). With the commissives, the commenters were taking upon themselves to do something about the situation and the 'culprit'. That is why in most of the comments the commenters were resorting to using expressions that contained swear words and threats (e.g. *Сé најмило ви ебам; Зајко нема долго да тераш*).

As mentioned earlier, 31% of the comments were longer and consisted of combinations of various speech acts (Table 3). The combinations of speech acts most frequently included either two different speech acts, such as: **directive + assertive** (e.g. *Абе копиле ако толку сте сигурни во вашата радост излезете на плоштад да прославите, ама полни ви се устата со г.а*); **assertive + expressive** (e.g. *Тие кај МТВ се почесни од тебе господ да ти суди*); **directive + expressive** (e.g. *Треба да се срамив ПРЕДАВНИЦИ господ да ве казни све што ви е најмило*); **directive + commissive** (e.g. *Умри Заев предавник ќе дојде време кога ќе плачеш*), etc., or two speech acts of the same type, as the following: **directives + directives** (e.g. *Шознајш ти бе мрсулко еден мршиши*); **assertive + assertive** (e.g. *Удбаш нема повеќе сценарија за ВОЈНИ каде млатиш празна слама. Сите сте во офсајд со се УДБА-шката ДПМНЕ*); **commissive + commissive** (e.g. *Гробот да ви го ебам предавнички ќе ви дојде крајот на сите*).

	Combination of 2 speech acts	Combination of more than 2 (up to 5) speech acts	Total
out of 161 comments	41 (80%)	10 (20%)	51

Table 3. Complex speech acts

Albeit much more rarely, some of the combinations were relatively more complex and consisted of more than two acts (up to 5 speech acts) of the same or of a different type (e.g. *Кoj те тебе прашува како се чувствуваш козо една (directive) ти и другите предавници ќе бидете запишани во историјата и ќе ве помне МАКЕДОНСКИОТ народ како предавници (assertive) да даде гопод во најкратко време да ви случат најлоши работи од кои ќе патите (expressive)*).¹⁰

4.3. The roles of the commenters

The analysis showed that the commenters assumed different roles with their comments: judges, analysts, and activists (Figure 1). This was the case in the majority of the comments, which were relatively brief and consisted only of a single comment, and sometimes, even a single phrase, i.e. a single speech act. In the longer hateful comments, which consisted typically of 2 (and sometimes up to 5 speech acts) and which were notably less common, however, some commenters combined their roles and assumed two roles at the same time.

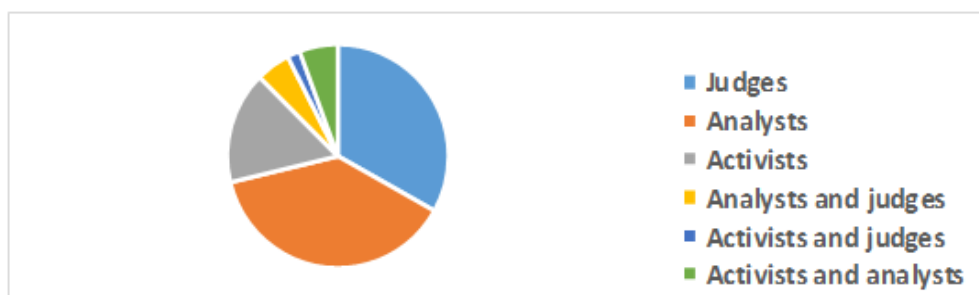


Figure 1. The roles of the commenters

The role of *analysts* was the predominant one. Namely, in 38% of the negative comments, the commenters felt a strong urge to share their perspective, analysis and understanding of the newly arisen

¹⁰ As can be seen in this example, the commenters most frequently made practically no use of punctuation, which made the analysis of these complex speech acts particularly challenging.

situation (e.g. *Не е овој толку виновен колку што се медиумите што му даваат простор на ваква БИТАНГА; Еве ви ги луѓето кои сакаат да ја спасат државата. Која бламажа*). In this case, most of the commenters, resorted to using the speech act of assertives as they wanted to present their judgment by giving a reasonable interpretation and analysis of the situation.

Slightly fewer commenters adopted the role of *judges* (33%), i.e. behaved as an authority who passes a moral judgment and reaches a ‘verdict’ against those who hold the opposite political stance (e.g. *Овој куфер и депорт во русија нека вее таму руско знаме; Еден по еден сите предавници ќе си платат казната че ги стаса; Треба да се срамив ПРЕДАВНИЦИ господ да ве казни све што ви е најмило.*). When assuming the role of judges, the commenters made use of all types of speech acts – directives, commissives, expressives and assertives, but still the usage of the expressives prevailed. This is understandable as the comments were written in a situation when the commenters’ patriotic feelings were both ‘awoken’ and they felt deeply hurt due to the renaming of their homeland.

Despite their discontent and anger, a considerably smaller number of commenters took upon themselves the role of *activists* (16%). These showed willingness to do something about the name change, including the option to organize other like-minded individuals to act together against the ‘traitors’. In some of the comments, the commenters would go so far as to indirectly urge the readers to even kill the ‘traitors’ if needed¹¹ (e.g. *Смрт за предавниците смрт или слобода за македонија не ќе живејме 100 години само чекаме наредба; Кога не нема нас македонците да ги почитиме со крвта македонска*). Understandably, most of these hateful comments with which the commenters were taking upon themselves the role of activists were realized either as directives or commissives.

In some of the longer hateful expressions, the commenters combined the roles of an analyst and a judge (5%), which means they were not only willing to present their analysis of the situation but also wanted to pass their judgment (e.g. *Не само што сте предавници туку и апашии се искрадовте гниди едни неспособни*). Another notable combination was ‘an activist and an judge’ (2%) (e.g. *А народот македонски каде е? зошто не славите бе северни ирваси; Помина твоето време, лажни патриоти. Подобрo оди во Сомалија, Зимбабве и тн.*), in which the commenters not only passed their judgment regarding the ‘others’ but also tried to instigate action on the part of like-minded individuals. Finally, some of the commenters assumed the roles of ‘an analyst and an activist’ at the same time (6%) (e.g. *Море*

¹¹ A classic example of nationalism and extremism

све да ви ебам ваше требаше да си лежите затвор вие што ја искрадовте државата ама пушти зајко за еден глас ќе ве помилува).

4.4. Analysis of negative lexis and rhetorical tropes

The speech act of an assertive as the predominant speech act in our corpus was marked by an extensive use of *offensive words*, i.e. *negative lexis*, intended to humiliate and hurt the feelings of the targets of the comments. Sometimes they were used in isolation (e.g. *Абдал; Болесник; Северциани*), a noun modified by a negative adjective (e.g. *глушец окапан; кучко гнасна; педерче малечко*), or a string of negative lexis (e.g. *Гниди предавнички, фашисти, цијаши, удбаши, изроди, измет*). Nevertheless, most of the negative lexis, though, were, part of longer hateful expressions (e.g. *Удбаи нема повеќе сценарија за ВОЈНИ каде млатиш празна слама*).

The offensive lexis was rather versatile ranging from words that referred to: a person's (lack of) intellectual capacity (e.g. *Будала; ретардиран; смотан; непрокопан; идиоти; морон*), lack of education (e.g. *неписмени; простак*), sexuality and sexual orientation (e.g. *Педерче мало; курво; ороснијо*), lack of hygiene (e.g. *гнаса; смрден; сканан; небричен*), human excretion (e.g. *лајно; гомно; мрсулко*), lack of moral characteristics and loyalty (e.g. *предавник; потрчко; лигуш*), political affiliation, orientation or ideology (e.g. *комуњари; фашисти; цијаши; удбаши*).

Many of the offensive words were in fact metaphorically used, which implies that a specific person (politician) or a group of people (usually the MPs who voted in favour of the name change) were very unfavorably compared with *animals* (e.g. *говедо; стока; крава; овца; коза; кучка; мајмун; гнида; вошка; мачор; глушец*). The metaphors also extended to *religious terms* (e.g. *слуга на гаволот*); some made reference to *the seven 'deadly sins'* (e.g. *некрофил; нарцисоид*), etc. Some of the metaphoric expressions were much more elaborate and longer (e.g. *Претседателот е само една кукла за сликање .. морон; ... Сите сте во офсајд со се УДБА-шката ДПМНЕ*).

In addition to the metaphors, in many of the speech acts identified in the corpus, *irony*¹² was utilized as a linguistic strategy applied to convey strong criticism and disapproval. The usage of irony was signaled by irony markers, such as *idiomatic expressions* (e.g. *Да слават затоа само тројца се смеат а другите се ко удрени со чоран мариовски...; Удбаи нема повеќе сценарија за ВОЈНИ каде млатиш празна*

¹² According to Burgers and Beukeboom (2016) verbal irony has often been associated with expectancy violations and can be identified by some irony markers, such as metaphors, hyperbole, understatements and rhetorical questions.

слава.; *Нема повеќе на кого да му продаваш магла.*), and *rhetorical questions* (e.g. *Кај се симпатизерите на СДС да слават по градовите што го менаа името што молчат како глувчиња ...; А народот македонски каде е? зошто не славите бе северни ирваси?*).

The expressives used by the commenters most commonly contained *curses*¹³. A great deal of the curses were short, direct and straightforward (e.g. *Да умрете сите до еден; Да ти умри најмилото што го имаш дома*). Some of them were more elaborate, being combined with swear words or other obscene and offensive words (e.g. *Говедо непрокопсано господ да те казни и тебе и сите тие со тебе; Вака сите на гробишта да ве соберат племето ваше предавничко*). Many of the curses were metaphorically phrased, which means they required inferencing on the part of the readers in order to grasp their true meaning (e.g. *Пелин во душата да им расне; Со поворка да ве испркаме сите 81*).

Analyzed from a semantic perspective, almost all the curses made reference to death (e.g. ... *до дома да не одиш да паднеш да се отепаш...*; *Да умрете сите до еден*), bodily harm or diseases (e.g. *Да даде госпот тие пари што ги земавте зада гласате за децата и внуците да ги давате за лекови а лек да не најдете да ве боли додека сте живи!*). Some curses were simply not that specific – the commenters just wished that bad things would befall a specific person/people (e.g. ... *да даде господ во најкратко време да ви случат најлоши работи од кои ќе патите; Да ти се закопа целото поколение маме ти ебем; Све живо да ти помре, гнасо; Гроб да немате да ве закопаат, гнаси едни*). Rarely though, some of the curses were seasoned with a dose of irony in order to make them more effective and impressive for the readers (e.g. *Следната година свеќи да ви запалиме у чест на предаството*).

The speech act of commissives with which the commenters were commonly assuming the role of activists were marked by an excessive use of *swear words/expressions*.¹⁴ Most of the swear words used in the comments referred to sexual activities and made reference to the target's mother, wife or children (e.g. *Бегај мамчето твое да ти го ебам; Да ти ебам жената и децата; Се најмило ви ебам*), or the target's body parts (e.g. *Да те ебам во шупак; да ти ебам фаца*). Some of the commenters being

¹³ Jing-Schmidt (2017) claim that cursing is a term used to invoke a supernatural power to inflict calamity on the one being cursed. Cursing is often done by invoking the name of God, a divine being or supernatural spirits.

¹⁴ Swearing is a form of expression with which a person can express anger, shock, frustration, surprise, pain or disappointment. Swearing makes references to bodily functions, such as sexual activity and excretion. In addition, swearing refers to the use of profane words, taboo words or words that make reference to animals, religion, scatology, sex, sexual reproductive organs, diseases, bodily functions and moral decadency in expressing anger (Pinker, 2010).

aware of the obscenity of their expressions tried to mitigate their force by using abbreviations of the swear words (e.g. *Гонете се у 3 лепе пм; ... м... то предавничко да ти го ебам у копило*). The swear words were rarely used on their own, i.e. they were always accompanied by other offensive derogatory language (e.g. *Не само што сте предавници туку сте страм за државата племе да ви ебам продадени души гниди смрдени*).

Finally, the speech act of a directive with which the commenters were asking the targets to answer their questions or do something, with which they were issuing orders and making requests were marked by the presence of *threats*, i.e. expressions of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage¹⁵. Some of the threats were rather direct and targeted a specific individual/politician (e.g. *Зажко нема долго да тераш - зајко*) and some of the threats targeted a group of people, for instance, the MP who voted in favour of the name change (e.g. *Ќе ве бараме со потерници! #од прв до последен; ИДИОТИ!!! Ќе платите за се, а улакот Струмички најмногу со неговата мртвечка фаца*). The threats were also frequently combined with additional linguistic strategies employed for conveying hate, such as curses (e.g. *Смејте се додека ви е смешно после тоа ќе плачите #еденданеостани*) or other offensive words (e.g. *Ќе цркнеш клептоману. Рахитично копиле; ИДИОТИ!!! Ќе платите за се, а улакот Струмички најмногу со неговата мртвечка фаца*), or even a combination of several strategies – swear words, curses, and offensive words (e.g. *Мамето курвинско (swearing expression)! Следната народна власт ќе ве гони и до самиот некол (threat). 80 курви (offensive word) ја разнебитуја МАКЕДОНИЈА и македонскиот народ. Гроб да немате да ве закопаат (curse), гнаси едни (offensive words)*). Analyzing the semantic content of the threats, it was noted that some of them were: a) extremely intense and aggressive, intended to provoke a real action, violence and aggression towards the targets (e.g. *... за вас само убиство*), whereas b) some threats were used only to warn the targets of the bad consequences that will ensue and the misfortune that they have brought upon themselves because of their ‘irrational actions’.

5. Conclusion

The research of the intricate phenomenon of online hate speech in this particular study was placed in a very specific socio-political context – Macedonia’s name change. The findings of this research definitely confirm Sevasti’s (2014) claim that social media has influenced the traditional pattern of communication

¹⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>

by introducing a more interactive and participative type of communication. Obviously, people in general have become not only more willing to share their position regarding both minor and major socio-political issues, but also now they seem unhesitant to verbally lash out hateful rhetoric at all those who hold the opposite views. What is more, our findings also show that these verbal assaults are not only directed at fellow citizens, but very frequently they are addressed to political figures, journalists, diplomats and other officials. We discover firm confirmation regarding this particular finding in Haque (2014) (in Sevasti, 2014), who also noted that unchecked hate speech on social media ‘creates an environment where actual violence against politicians or journalists is not only condoned, but also celebrated, giving those carrying out such attacks greater space and encouragement to act’. In our study, the targets of hatred were usually specific individuals as well as groups of people, usually politicians, representatives of the government and the opposition, whose politics and political moves the Facebook users strongly disapproved of.

The results also showed that social media users mostly employ assertive and expressive speech acts in formulating their hateful comments. Interestingly, despite their obvious frustration, in their comments they mainly assume the role of analysts and judges (slightly less frequently), and very infrequently place themselves in the position of activists. These results are in line with Trajkova and Neshkovska’s (2018: 328) previous findings on the roles Macedonian social media users assume when writing political comments, which suggests that they are culturally and socially specific. Macedonians in general, analyze and judge politicians, but rarely do they call for or take action.

As for the lexical analysis, the research showed that the assertives abounded with a lot of negative lexis and rhetorical figures (mostly metaphors and irony), the expressives with curse words, whereas the commissives with swear words and the directives with threats.

All in all, the paper unveiled the main characteristics of the hateful social media comments in the given socio-political context, and these findings can, hopefully, be utilized to assist the efforts of all those who work on detecting, identifying, preventing and even removing potentially harmful linguistic contents from social media.

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