A Comparison of Hostility in Online Debates for Anonymous and Identified Speakers

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I propose to investigate the effects of anonymity on online debates concerning controversial topics. As a member of a generation which has had unrivalled access to social media and the internet, I regularly debate with strangers online, and I find that disagreements can easily lead to hostile language when channelled anonymously (for example, on the comment section of a news site). Studies concerning the language of the internet are, to me, some of the most interesting and relevant areas of current linguistic research.

In my investigation, I will test the hypothesis that anonymity in an online channel of discussion will lead to more aggressive language (including expletives, non-hedged imperatives and other face-threatening acts) and less accommodation. I believe that removing the identity of speakers and geographically separating them enables them to avoid using politeness strategies and resist conforming to the majority viewpoint. This theory is tied into the psychological topic of conformity which I have studied.

Some theories related to my investigation include Tim Shortis’ idea of “disinhibition” when communicating over text, Howard Giles’ accommodation theory, and Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. By studying linguistic devices such as convergence/divergence, positive/negative politeness strategies and expletives, I aim to draw comparisons between participants whose identities are exposed and those whose identities are hidden.

To test my hypothesis, I plan to incorporate various methods. For example, I may conduct an experiment using two separate websites as sources, comparing the user comments on each site when discussing the same piece of controversial content and categorising the comments from each website under specific headings related to the type of response given. Alternatively, I may count the frequency of certain linguistic devices for both sites and compare them. In either case, I will generate quantitative data that can be easily analysed and interpreted. I may also interview a group of regular internet users to gain a greater insight into their online discussions. This would provide qualitative data that explores the key differences between anonymous and identifiable speakers.

I may collect samples from YouTube and Facebook, as both sites have the ability to offer the same video content as well as providing a comment section (with YouTube users being anonymous, and Facebook users being exposed). I may also include comments from other websites as sources.