

Hate speech as a contested concept: examining the fuzzy boundaries between assertions and insults

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New communication technologies providing unforeseen possibilities to test the limits of freedom of speech are largely responsible for the proliferation of different forms of verbal violence labelled as hate speech today. Thus, while hate speech cannot be theorized without examining its connection with the notion of freedom of speech, there are also important links between these notions and phenomena brought to the fore by new communication technologies such as linguistic narcissism and the discourse of victimization.

On the other hand, while elements of hate speech can be identified in definable units of language use corresponding to different levels or perspectives (speech acts, discourses, genres, text types, types of utterances, words, etc.), new communication technologies appear to have favored the emergence of certain forms of materialization of hate speech over others. Thus, certain *genres* that are predominant in digital communication seem to be more susceptible to function as mediums of hate speech. Examples of such genres include chatroom discussions and opinion pieces related to news articles, columns, and blogs. In addition, new technologies may have enhanced the categorization of certain types of speech acts—*insults and threats*—as prototypical examples of hate speech. The blog “We know where you live” created by the Finnish Broadcasting Service YLE (http://yle.fi/uutiset/me_tiedamme_missa_asut/6590408) exemplifies this development. In such accounts, focus is often on *words* functioning as condensed or crystallized forms of hateful, performative utterances.

With examples from recent public debate about freedom of speech in Finland, this paper examines the characteristics of hate speech in non-prototypical cases in which the boundaries between hate speech and “respectful speech” remain fuzzy. Thus, emphasis is on the conditions and discursive regimes within which seemingly constative speech acts that are not threats or insults per se may function as hate speech. In particular, the paper aims at examining the sources of linguistic authority (or *position d’énonciation*) of constative utterances that may be interpreted as hate speech and the connections these may have with institutional and other discourses. Specifically, the paper analyses *attributive processes*, viz. processes in which certain characteristics are attributed to be properties of specific groups of people, on the one hand, and *material processes*, viz. processes describing actions that are represented as typical of such a group. Through this inquiry, the paper aims at illustrating possible links between hate speech and the identity function of language, possibly materialized through the discourse of victimization establishing boundaries between “us” and “others”.

The paper combines tools developed within critical discourse studies and continental theorizations of speech act theory. Thus, one of the goals is to examine ways in which language and discourse scholars can bring their contribution to general debates about hate speech as language use that cannot be understood without taking into account a wider social context.