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Public discourse beyond the mainstream media: Intercultural conflict in socio-political discussion fora

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 applications such as virtual online discussion fora have created a new form of public discourse beyond the mainstream media with new formats of public *intercultural encounters*, where the negotiation of intercultural conflicts is closely intertwined with the highly individualised and affective mutual- and self-construction of complex virtual cultural identities. In these fora, users often position themselves and their opinions in open opposition to broader cultural and social norms and contest mainstream media narratives, thereby also establishing an indirect link between public online and mainstream media discourse. Our study addresses two questions: Firstly, which linguistic strategies do participants use in order to construct themselves and others as members of a minority/majority culture and how do these constructed identities relate to mainstream media content? Secondly, how do participants position themselves vis-à-vis the mainstream media and what stances do they take towards mainstream media news coverage of long-term intercultural ethnic conflicts. To do so, we examine two threads from the public online discussion board *UKDebate* and one thread by the BBC-run *Have your say*, which deal with intercultural problems in the UK unfolding between UK-citizens and migrants and refugees from various cultural backgrounds. Our semantic analysis of users' techniques of (self-)referencing and predication related to discourse topoi shows that participants use similar techniques when criticising mainstream media news-coverage and reception, but develop distinct group-specific patterns in shaping their respective cultural in- and out-groups. Furthermore, the discussions show similarities in the construction of minority groups between postings taking a majority perspective and tabloid news-coverage.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on long-term intercultural ethnic conflicts and their linguistic manifestations in public online forum discussions. Intercultural conflicts and their mainstream media coverage have long been a focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA-inspired work on macro-societal intercultural conflicts usually analyses *mainstream media content* from a *top-down* research-perspective. Studies address media output voicing the attitudes of the political elites and stress the persuasive and knowledge-forming effects of news reports on the broader public (see e.g. Duffy and Rowden, 2005, p. 66; Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008, p. 8; Hart, 2010, p. 16, pp. 55–56; van Dijk, 2014, p. 68; van Dijk, 1996, p. 10, p. 20). Already in 1996, van Dijk (pp. 20–21) observed readers' getting "seriously biased versions of ethnic affairs" as well as versions of "positive white self-representation

and negative other representation [...] in everyday conversation among whites". Crawley and Sriskandarajah (2005, p. 3) stress the complex relations between the press and their readers, negotiated and shaped both by the press's desire to report on items they believe are of interest to their readers and readers' preference for "those newspapers that are generally in accord with their own perceptions and approaches" – see also Hart (2010, pp. 16–17).

Yet, despite the multifaceted nature of this relationship, the interface between mainstream media and the discourse of non-elite media consumers has not been studied systematically from a bottom-up perspective (see also Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007, p. 7). Fraas et al. (2012, pp. 35–36) discuss the bi-directional character of online publicity with its potentially greater reach differentiating between *professional publicities* (e.g. journalism, political mainstream discourse) and *individual publicities* with their new formats of communication, interaction, publication, and hence new types of participation, which deserve further investigation. Web 2.0 applications such as virtual online discussion fora provide new forms of public discourse at this interface with users not only acting as potential *recipients* of the mainstream media, but taking

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on the role of *active*, ratified (private sphere) participants in public discourse from below.

Furthermore, public Internet fora have created new formats for *intercultural encounters*, providing a public space for users to negotiate broader cultural and social norms. Their participants represent a fragmented public with diverse moral, ethical and political beliefs. Thus, negotiation of intercultural conflict is closely intertwined with a highly individualised, affective and dynamic mutual- and self-construction of complex virtual cultural identities. In this process, participants often openly contest mainstream media narratives.

The object of this study is to scrutinise identity construction in intercultural conflict from below, at the interface of two realms of public discourse, socio-political forum discussions and mainstream media. More specifically, our study addresses two questions: Firstly, which linguistic strategies do participants use in order to construct themselves and others as members of a minority/majority culture and how do these constructed identities relate to mainstream media content? Secondly, how do participants position themselves vis-à-vis the mainstream media and what stances do they take towards mainstream media news coverage of long-term intercultural ethnic conflicts?

Our study approaches these two questions by drawing on well-established CDA-categories and methodologies, especially a thorough semantic analysis of users' techniques of (self-)referencing and predication related to discourse *topoi* (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008; Hart, 2010; Reisigl, 2007; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). However, the actual findings in Sections 4 and 5 are corpus-inspired and based on a detailed qualitative analysis of the data, using a software programme for qualitative data analysis (MAXQDA).

Section 2 briefly introduces the data and methodology of our study. Section 3 focuses on forum discussions as set-ups for intercultural encounters and conflict and discusses our use of key terms such as *participation*, *intercultural communication/conflict* and *cultural/political majority/minority*. In Sections 4 and 5, we present the results of our study. Section 4 focuses on *techniques of self-referencing* and discourse *topoi* as two facets of the discursive self- and other-construction of cultural majority and minority postings. Furthermore, it links our own results to CDA-findings on the mainstream media coverage of *Refugees*, *Asylum seekers*, *Immigrants and Migrants* coming to Britain (subsumed as RASIM in Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) and extended by one further category emerging in our data, *Muslims* – henceforth: RASIM (M)). Section 5 shifts the focus to participants' oscillating positioning and stance-taking vis-à-vis the mainstream media in general, the BBC as the host of the most complex thread in our study, and regarding the opinions of fellow posters and the broader public as media recipients.

2. Data and methodology

Our study analyses public online forum discussions on immigration policies and problems in Great Britain. The threads chosen for analysis were picked from a broader range of political forum discussions because of their topical relevance for intercultural conflict, which was confirmed by the high frequency of lexical items connected to the current subject – cf. Section 3. Furthermore, the threads chosen exemplify the ongoing immigration debate among members of the broader public, with participants positioning themselves vis-à-vis RASIM(M)s and the media.

The first thread was launched by the BBC's message board *Have your Say* (HYS) in the context of the UK's first points-based immigration system, which the British Labour Party introduced in 2008 (cf. Donald, 2014). In addition, two shorter, more recent threads

from the discussion forum *UKDebate* (UKD1 and UKD2) were analysed in order to include a discussion format not directly hosted by the mainstream media. Table 1 gives an overview of the dataset. The data were retrieved and stored electronically; the participants' names were anonymised in line with common ethical principles. The analysis was carried out by each researcher individually but discrepancies and borderline cases were jointly discussed until consensus was reached.

Interactions in *BBC-HYS* and *UKDebate* take place asynchronously and are open to the public. Active participation requires registration for the discussion boards, but participants may stay largely anonymous. These medium-specific conditions attract many users, as is evident from the high number of comments posted to HYS within only 29 h – cf. Table 1.

While *UKDebate* allows its users to start their own discussions by creating individual threads under certain headings and sub-headings provided by the forum (for example, *United Kingdom Political Debates > General Political Issues*), discussion topics in *BBC-HYS* are introduced solely by the BBC's staff. These HYS-topics often relate to articles published on the BBC website, however, they do not directly appear on the associated article page as comments sections of mainstream media usually are (cf. Landert, 2014, p. 71). In *UKDebate*, participants draw on a larger body of external texts in their comments as the forum is a media-independent site.¹

The first part of our study (Section 4) examines the two threads in which participants from both majority as well as minority cultures participate actively. We included the HYS-thread as it involves a total of 2886 participants contributing actively to the discussion and thus reflects private opinions from a broader online public. However, it turned out that our criteria for analysis were saturated (with no newly occurring types within approximately 200 postings) after about 500 postings.² This is why our detailed qualitative analysis in Section 4 only includes the first 500 postings (29,574 words) of HYS. UKD1 is much shorter and has been included in its entirety. Using MAXQDA, which allows for the tagging and quantification of multiple self-defined qualitative criteria, the first 500 postings from HYS and all postings from UKD1 were tagged manually for users' self-identification as members of the cultural majority/minority, techniques of self-referencing and discourse *topoi* realised in predicating expressions.

The second part of the study relies on a qualitative analysis of all comments posted to the HYS and the UKD-threads, featuring a discussion of mainstream media coverage of the RASIM(M) debate (Section 5). For this purpose, lexical lists of all postings in the corpus were generated using MAXQDA, from which lexical material referring to the domain of mainstream media news coverage such as names of news agencies (e.g. *Daily Mail*, *BBC*) and verbs denoting typical mainstream media activities (e.g. *write*, *release*, *portray*) were then retrieved manually. Afterwards, these items were analysed in their concrete contexts in order to show how users evaluate and challenge official mainstream media content and media consumption.

In line with Bucholtz and Hall's (2010, p. 18) socio-cultural linguistic approach, which focuses on the 'intersection of language, culture, and society', we define identity as "the social positioning of self and other". Like Duszak (2002) and Hart (2010), we use the term 'positioning' here in a broader sense, as encompassing acts in which interactants place themselves and, where applicable,

¹ Please note that both discussion boards have changed since the data were retrieved. Comments to the BBC can now be posted on HYS, *messageboards*, *blogs* and *comment modules*. The *UKDebate* was closed in spring 2015 and re-opened shortly afterwards under the name *UKDebate2* with only slight changes in its layout.

² Saturation of our categories for analysis was double-checked by an additional data-driven tagging of postings 1001–1100 and 2701–2800.

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