

Multicultural discourse in the Twittersphere on xenophobic attacks in South Africa

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Abstract

The current research considers multicultural discourse in a globalised world from the perspective of intercultural pragmatics. Its aim is to investigate the role of social media for intercultural/political discourse, in particular, we aim at exploring how the xenophobic attacks under consideration and related concepts of cause, effect, responsibility and solutions are constructed and negotiated. Intercultural pragmatics is an area of pragmatics that investigates utterance meaning across cultural boundaries and explores “the pragmatic appropriateness of a particular expression in a particular context of use” (Mey 2001: 263). Within this research paradigm, the current research responds to Blommaert’s (2010) call for an evolution of discourse study in the broader sense and contributes to a growing number of linguistic analyses that take into consideration social media communication and its societal/political significance (see, e.g., Bouvier, 2016).

Our research is inspired by Mey’s (2001) theory of pragmatic acts and his notion of “pragmeme”. A pragmeme is a “situated speech act” (Capone, 2005: p.1357). Bearing this in mind, we concentrate on tweets of South African and Nigerian interlocutors because these two heterogeneous groups were directly involved in xenophobic attacks, which happened in September 2019 throughout South Africa. For the current study, we use Twitter as a data source because of Twitter’s widespread usage in both countries. Our data source consists of live commentaries from Twitter users on Tweets that were made by reliable news outlets, like, e.g. @MorningLiveSABC, and @GuardianNigeria. As the hashtag has been identified to express speaker intentions we use hashtags as a goal directed search criterion, such hashtags are #Xenophobia, #XenophobiaSouthAfrica, #XenophobiainSouthAfrica, #NigeriansleaveSA, #StopXenophobia #SayNotoXenophobia, #WeStandAgainstXenophobia #Ubuntu, #OneAfrica.

In our analyses, we categorise comments into “allopracts” (the force behind the linguistic expression, see Vasilescu, 2016: 323) by identifying the sentence type (e.g., declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives). Most Twitter comments under consideration are assertive allopracts. For the current presentation, we concentrate on a subcategory of tweets that implicitly and explicitly develop around the keyword “government”. Surprisingly, both groups used the discourse revolving around the xenophobic attacks to point accusing fingers at failures in political leadership. We find that while the interlocutors negotiate a variety of recurrent topics around the xenophobic attacks in an often volatile and abusive discourse, each of the groups also uses the discourse to vent their frustration with their respective government. The findings of this research contribute to the field of pragmatic research on intercultural communication and promote linguistic research on language and conflict resolution.

Keywords: Speech Act Theory; Illocutionary Acts; Pragmatic Act Theory; Pragmeme; Pract; Allopract; Context; Intercultural Pragmatics; Twitter; Xenophobia; Multicultural Discourse

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