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“Hate Speech is Like a Weapon... It Destroys People”- Attitudes in Georgian Society towards Hate Speech

Sopio TOTIBADZE

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Abstract: It is well-known that language is often employed as a tool for gender oppression. Therefore, feminist and gender studies in linguistics ultimately aim to represent the problem, reflect on it, and propose ways to solve it. Together with technological advancement in communication, a new form of discrimination has arisen- hate speech used against women in electronic media discourse. Due to the nature of social media and the internet, messages containing hate speech can spread in seconds and reach millions of people. However, only a few know about the detrimental effects they may have on the addressee and society. This paper aims to analyse the answers to the anonymous questionnaire conducted on an electronic media platform. The questionnaire aimed to elicit what Georgian people know about hate speech and its detrimental effect on people. Altogether 200 people participated in the survey. As the research revealed, participants have heard of the hate speech, and have even been victims of it at a certain point in their lives. However, they do not know how to identify it. Thus, raising awareness about hate speech is of utmost importance to tackle the issue at hand.

Keywords: Hate speech, Sociolinguistics, Media survey, Awareness

Introduction

Nowadays, every society has experienced difficulties associated with hate speech and its application. Consequently, understanding the problem and how to combat it are essential. Any verbal or nonverbal communication that incorporates threats or prejudices towards certain social groups is considered hate speech. Thus, those who are different in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, religious views, sexual orientation, or age are the most common targets of hate speech (Nakaya, 2021). Hatred manifests itself in our words and deeds and it can even lead to premeditated and orchestrated genocide. Sadly, hatred has neither national nor geographic boundaries (Waltman & Haas, 2011).

Hate groups are even regarded as subcultures in society because of their distinctive viewpoints on racial, religious, gendered, and sexual orientation, all of which are researched and organically communicated through language (Perry, 2001; Waltman & Haas, 2011). Although there are many different forms of hatred ideology, they all ultimately aim to subjugate one group in favor of another. Extreme religious beliefs, white supremacy, xenophobia, sexism, and many other ideas fall under this category (Waltman & Haas, 2011).

Although hate speech should not be confused with verbal abuse, it is extremely challenging to provide a precise and thorough definition of the term. Richardson-Self (2021) asserts that hate speech ultimately harms every member of a certain group or community, regardless of whether it is intended for a specific person. Richardson-Self (2021) presents a social imagination theory in her book "Hate Speech Against Women Online" that she applies to the study of hate speech. This hypothesis contends that one method of knowing our environment is "social imaginaries." Furthermore, social imaginaries provide the common, acknowledged, and accepted socio-cultural aspects that enable us to behave in a way that is not perceived by others as bothersome or provocative. Social imaginaries are, in one way or another, similar in one particular society. The public will naturally become

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outraged if you depart from them. Social imaginaries serve a variety of purposes, including assisting with cognitive and emotional expression, influencing how we respond to outside stimuli, and establishing limits for us. The dominant/central social images in society are those related to religion, politics, the economy, sexuality, racism, ethnicity, morality, and national and international relations.

Deviation from social norms naturally causes negative emotions in society, and its violator often becomes the addressee of hate speech. Hate speech is directed at groups that are constant victims of systemic discrimination. As Gelber (2002) points out, women, people with weight problems, or people of non-traditional orientation often fall victim to such language.

As already mentioned, the language of power is aimed at groups that differ in some way from other members of society, e.g. members of the LGBTQI+ community. The stigma of difference can be considered both synchronic (it affects group members everywhere and all the time) and diachronic (over a certain period). Richardson-Self (2021) finds it problematic to distinguish hate speech from other "oppressive" language. The author writes that people belong to several social categories, we have sex, gender, race, and nationality. Therefore, in one category we can become a victim to hate speech, but in another - not.

In order to achieve gender equality, this problem needs to be addressed at the level of the constitution, and this is where misogynistic and sexist social practices need to be eliminated first. Needless to say, it is equally important to raise awareness about the phenomenon and tackle the problem within society through education too. Thus, it is extremely interesting to study what Georgian society already knows about hate speech and what measures can be taken to fight against the issue at hand.

Method

It has already been mentioned that the exact definition of hate speech is difficult to convey due to its complexity. Therefore, it is interesting how well the Georgian society understands what hate speech is and what consequences its use can have. This is the purpose of the conducted research - to determine what the research respondents know about hate speech, which, in turn, serves to raise awareness about the phenomena. The survey questionnaire includes eight open-ended questions where the survey participants can anonymously express their opinion and share their personal experiences. Anonymity helps respondents to be more open and honest in reporting their answers.

The questionnaire includes the following questions:

1. What do you think is hate speech? How is it manifested?
2. Have you ever been the target of hate speech or know someone who has? If yes, share your experience with us.
3. What do you believe, who falls victim to hate speech? Why?
4. Who do you think uses hate speech the most?
5. Have you ever used hate speech against someone? If yes, how did you use it and why?
6. In your opinion, what is the purpose of hate speech?
7. What do you think is the disadvantage of using hate speech?
8. In your opinion, how can we fight hate speech in society?

As can be seen, the questionnaire is designed in such a way that when analyzing the answers of the respondents, a complete picture is presented - the respondent's definition of hate speech, the addressee of the hate speech and who can use it. When possible, the research participants can enrich the answers with their examples and, finally, offer their opinion regarding how we can fight hate speech. The questionnaire was distributed electronically and anyone over eighteen years old and interested in this issue could participate in it. A total of two hundred people took part in the electronic questionnaire. Below are gathered the most frequently stated opinions, which portray a clear picture of what Georgian society knows and thinks about hate speech.

Results and Discussion

We received quite diverse and, at the same time, insightful answers to the first question of the questionnaire, which is concerned with what hate speech is and how it is expressed. As it turned out, the respondents of the questionnaire more or less know what hate speech is, but they do not know "exactly" how it can be expressed.

As the majority points out, hate speech is discriminatory language, mocking, bullying, or insulting someone on any grounds, be it race, gender, religious affiliation or otherwise. Moreover, the participants note that Georgia occupies a leading place in the use of hate speech, especially in the electronic space, and, "it can serve as a classic" example of hate speech.

- ❖ This is a form of discrimination based on race, gender or other characteristics. It can be expressed through stereotypes or "jokes".
- ❖ Humiliating, insulting words directed at a specific person/persons. often even undeservedly. It is most often found in the social network, then at the so-called meetings, in everyday life.
- ❖ Georgian media space will serve as a classic example. [Hate speech is] when there is no room for others' opinions.
- ❖ Expressing contempt and humiliation for a person or group based on their belonging to a certain group.
- ❖ In my opinion, hate speech refers to the use of violent or offensive words against any group and inciting hatred towards them.
- ❖ Hate speech is like a weapon, it destroys a person...

When asked whether the respondents have become the addressee of hate speech or whether they know someone who has, most of them indicated that they, as well as their friends, acquaintances or relatives, have often become victims of hate speech in various forms. Based on the answers, several main themes emerged -

Religion

Yes, they made fun of my classmate because of their religion and even made them leave the class.

Weight, Appearance

- ❖ ...I have also often become the addressee of hate speech. The funniest thing is that mostly, everyone focuses on my physicality.
- ❖ Yes. For example, comments about my weight. 'If you lost 10 kilos, no one could compare to you' as if it was said in a good, caring way, but, in reality, was full of hatred.

Politics

- ❖ Hate speech is often used in political space and political programs in Georgia. It is common to use derogatory words addressing people with different political opinions.
- ❖ Any person who lives in Georgia can become the addressee of hate speech. Hate speech can be encountered in private conversations, in the media, and in politics, directed at the general public or against a single individual.

Sexual Minorities and Sexism

- ❖ My female friends were victims of sexism because of a lecturer who made fun of them in every lecture
- ❖ I haven't been myself, but I have a relative who was a victim of hate speech because of his sexual orientation.
- ❖ Not me personally, but the addressee became my journalist friend, due to reporting on LGBTQ+ that was unacceptable to others.

A Different/Unpopular Opinion

- ❖ Yes, it's easy to be the target of hate speech when you say something unpopular; what the masses consider wrong.

- ❖ I became a victim in social networks, for example. If someone does not like your position, they will immediately insult you. I solved the problem- I no longer post comments.
- ❖ Personally, I have not become the addressee of hate speech, but the people around me have, the main reason is to express one's own opinion, which other people cannot correctly criticize.

As can be seen from the answers, society has a special intolerance to differences; "Difference" can be represented by different markers in different societies. In Georgian society, it is obvious that a different opinion from the majority, non-standard, even just in appearance, a religious minority, a sexual minority, and sexism can become the cause of a huge wave of hate speech. And the addressee, due to less awareness of the issue, has no coping mechanism and sees the solution to the problem in conforming to the standards set by the society, which ultimately hurts their mental health no less than the hate speech itself.

As for the addressees of hate speech, the respondents believe them to be mostly successful people, as they are more seen in society; also, everyone who tells the truth, is a minority of some kind or is not afraid to express a different and bold opinion.

- ❖ Minorities because they are different from others.
- ❖ People who state their positions openly. Because all this causes public irritation. Also, people who are successful in one way or another.
- ❖ In my opinion, women are the victims most often. Maybe it's the fault of patriarchy, they always point fingers at women, but I think that hateful language is used more towards them.
- ❖ The victims of hate speech are often different people, for example, people of different races, orientation, ideologies, styles, weights and appearances. Also, those people who cannot fit into stereotypical standards.

On the other hand, according to the respondents, weaker, uneducated people tend to use hate speech more.

- ❖ A person who does not respect other people's culture and traditions.
- ❖ He who is weak and cannot control their emotions; An uneducated person or a politically or religiously - engaged person.
- ❖ People obsessed with a violent type of inferiority complex.
- ❖ Hate speech is most often used by people with less education because the concept of free speech is alien to them.
- ❖ Hate speech is still used by victims who have been deprived of care and love. In many cases, such people themselves are victims of bullying. They grow up in difficult family conditions, which negatively affects their personal development.

Regarding the question of whether they used hate speech, the majority of the participants of the experiment stated that they had not. However, there are also respondents who remember the discriminatory sentences they have used, although only unconsciously, because they did not know what hate speech is and what harm it can cause to others with their words and they regret it deeply, or because they grew up in a discriminatory society and believed they behaved in a correct way. Some also point out that the hate speech directed at them was countered by the hate speech employed by them.

- ❖ No, by no means. Everyone is individual and special. No one deserves it. Especially people who use hate speech themselves.
- ❖ I used it to protect myself. I don't like it at all. I responded to that person's aggression with greater aggression and cynicism (insulting and sexist) phrases.
- ❖ I have never used hate speech, because I believe that talking like this does nothing good, we can't solve the problem, and we can't make the offender understand anything.
- ❖ It's very difficult for me, I can't help anyone, and I also think it's a bad example. Because I don't like it, I won't apply it to others in a similar way. Oh, I remembered, one, I wrote to Tina Kandelaki to stay in Russia, as her place was there. I could not curse more.
- ❖ I have used hate speech when hearing an opinion that is unacceptable to me, but I later regretted it, because if I don't want anyone to put limits on my opinion, I shouldn't do the same, since then I have been trying to refrain from using it.

On the questions of what is the purpose of hate speech and what harm its use brings, everyone unanimously agrees on its negative, harmful aspects. Respondents believe that hate speech is an extreme form, which is used to oppress and degrade people in order to push their own power even further. All of this, of course, can happen subconsciously, but the consequences are irreversible, which can even lead the addressee to commit suicide.

- ❖ Degrading the addressee and creating a negative public image
- ❖ It is an extreme form of negative emotion expression.
- ❖ Disrespect, oppression, gaining power over others.
- ❖ Demonstrating one's strength at the expense of humiliating others.
- ❖ In most cases, personal destruction of the object; In some cases, the user without purpose evaluates and says as much as s/he can (s/he doesn't know better).
- ❖ When they really want to hurt another person and can't find an excuse, they turn to race, religion or ethnicity.
- ❖ Hate speech can turn a society into a mob and in this case, common sense is lost.
- ❖ It damages the addressee emotionally and psychologically.
- ❖ An unhealthy society formed as a result of the influence of hate speech cannot become a healthy nation and, therefore, cannot create a state with civilized values.
- ❖ Hate speech brings a temporary sense of emptiness that follows the inevitable degradation of the personality. No mechanism of cognition uses hatred, so the individual who uses it is on the path of inevitable degradation.

Regarding the last question of how we can fight hate speech, most of the survey participants agree that education, raising awareness and, most importantly, raising the next generation of children in the right way are the most important strategies for eliminating this issue.

- ❖ More education in this direction in educational institutions; in social media; It is possible to talk about this topic and discuss it more; Promotion of punitive measures for the use of hate speech should also be taken into consideration...
- ❖ By raising awareness, especially among school-aged children, and perhaps in terms of enforcement, it should be an action punishable by law.
- ❖ Since I don't think adults can change anymore, we have to raise children, is it possible to get include the topic in the school curriculum in some way?
- ❖ The public's self-awareness should be raised and the law should be adapted to such actions so that the feeling of impunity does not prevail.
- ❖ Only by talking about it out loud, raising public awareness and protecting human rights as much as possible.. Starting from school, the rights of students should be protected and controlled, in universities and services, laws should not only be written on paper but there should be a controlling party of all of this, which we hope will be protected. .. If governmental or non-governmental organizations actively fight this, people's awareness will gradually rise and the problem will be eliminated.

Based on the analysis of the answers given by 200 respondents, the hate speech can be interpreted as follows-

Hate speech is one of the forms of discrimination, which is mainly aimed at groups that differ in some way, be it sexual orientation, gender, a religious minority of the society, or ethnic difference. It should be noted that hate speech is expressed not only verbally, but also non-verbally - for example, looks, gestures... The use of hate speech is accompanied by the speaker's desire to prove the difference of the addressee group and, therefore, to show it negatively to society. It has a long-lasting effect on the addressee - both on their psychological and spiritual condition. In short, "hate speech is like a weapon, it destroys a person". The participants in the study singled out several main themes of using hate speech, such as religious or sexual minorities, sexism, gender inequality, emphasis on appearance, etc.

However, it is also worth noting that it is obvious that the people participating in the questionnaire often do not understand the difference between hate speech and insults or bullying. Therefore, this fact once again emphasizes the need for such research in order to raise awareness about hate speech. It is necessary to know what harm it does to the addressee and even to the speaker themselves, and how it can be manifested linguistically so that we can easily recognize it. Needless to say, people should be equipped with the necessary tools to fight against it.

Conclusion

Hate speech is a relatively new and complex phenomenon, therefore, it is still difficult to comprehensively define it. Needless to say, it threatens the well-being of any society in the world and, thus, increases the need for it to be fully studied and researched. The analysis of the online questionnaire conducted among 200 Georgian participants has proved that hate speech is an evident phenomenon in Georgian society that has a detrimental effect not only on the addressees but also on the people who employ it in their daily lives. Moreover, even though hate speech is such a common occurrence, people still find it difficult to identify it and fully grasp the notion. This leads to the conclusion that awareness should be raised about the issue and more and more studies should be conducted that explore the linguistic features of hate speech and teach us how to tackle it.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the author.

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Author Information

Sopio Totibadze

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
Tbilisi, Georgia
Contact e-mail: sopio.totibadze@tsu.ge

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