

The act of communication skills: between freedom of expression and hate speech

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Abstract

This paper presents an original research study based on a series of relevant observations, considerations, and suggestions resulting from a careful analysis of master's dissertations in the field of Institutional Communication, Master's cycle, at the Cross-Border Faculty of "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati. Our attention was drawn to several papers that aim to examine communication conflicts with a destructive character. Starting from the premise that people consciously trigger conflicts, many countries have laws designed to combat violence and cruelty, to restrict materials containing indecent language, and, implicitly, to prevent manifestations of verbal aggression. These laws aim to fight for the truthfulness of information and the observance of ethical communication norms. The essence of human aggression, its real causes, and ways to overcome it have long concerned specialists from various fields. Different scientific domains offer various approaches to this concept, depending on which element is considered essential. Aggression has become an object of study for linguists, sociologists, psychologists, educators, and experts from other scientific areas who analyze human thought and behavior. Moreover, verbal aggression, in a broad sense, is also a focus of legal specialists and is regulated by legislation. As a social phenomenon, aggression manifests both physically and verbally. The analysis and detailed description of verbal violence are among the core objectives of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, which are rooted in the theory of verbal activity. A substantial number of specialists have examined the various aspects of how aggression manifests in its multiple forms.

Keywords: communication skills, expression, speech, human aggression, linguistics.

Introduction

The concept of "aggressiveness" was initially analyzed in psychology. According to the definition proposed in *The Great Encyclopedia of Psychology*, aggressiveness is "a directed destructive behavior that violates the norms and rules of human coexistence in society, causing harm to the targeted subjects and producing physical or psychological injuries, states of tension, fear, or depression" (*The Great Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2007, trans.).

In the *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*, the term is defined as "a behavior whose primary or sole purpose or function is to harm another person or organism physically or

psychologically”. According to the *Larousse Dictionary of Psychology*, “aggressiveness, in a narrow sense, refers to the belligerent character of a person,” while in a broader sense, it “characterizes the dynamism of an individual who asserts themselves, who does not avoid difficulties or conflict,” and in a very general sense “characterizes the fundamental disposition through which a living being can satisfy its vital needs, primarily nutritional and sexual.

However, in the specific case of the human being, “aggressive behavior is an active and/or verbal offensive behavior oriented toward denigrating, humiliating, diminishing, or even physically eliminating those around, toward destroying objects with social significance, or even directed against oneself” (Ulmer, Robert R., Timothy L. Sellnow, and Matthew W. Seeger, 2018).

Regarding the forms of aggressiveness, the main distinction is between physical aggression (hitting, pushing, etc.) and verbal aggression (threats, insults, defamation, irony, sarcasm, indifference, etc.). According to N. Maldow (as cited in Stela Pislari, 2017), who analyzed different forms of aggressive behavior toward victims, manifestations of aggression may include: direct behavioral signs, direct verbal or cognitive signs, and indirect behavioral signs (Ion Chiciudean, Irina Stănciugelu, Aurel Bilanici, Marius Dogeanu., 2006).

In the last decade, with the unprecedented development of computer-mediated communication, a new type of aggression has emerged: cyber aggression. This involves the use of information technologies and manifests in various forms: attacks on social networks, identity theft, coercion, account hacking, defamatory posts, non-consensual recordings (including potential attacks on the victim).

It is also necessary to distinguish between the notions of “aggressiveness” and “aggression”: the former refers to an attitude, while the latter denotes a negative action (physical, verbal, etc.) against someone.

Aggressiveness may manifest as a means of achieving an important goal, such as enhancing one’s own status through self-assertion. Verbal and nonverbal aggressiveness appears in the form of socially destructive phenomena, such as insults and offenses, or may take much harsher forms, such as acts of terrorism, genocide, interethnic, interreligious, racial, or ideological conflicts.

Given that thought and consciousness, which generate all forms of human behavior, are closely tied to language as a means of expression, a discipline situated at the intersection of psychology and linguistics has emerged: *psycholinguistics*. One of its main objectives is to examine the relationship between verbal messages and the characteristics of the participants in the communicative act, for example, how the speaker’s communicative intentions are transformed into verbal messages and how these messages are received/interpreted by the listener.

Communication is essentially a bilateral act, an interaction between the speaker and their interlocutor. Therefore, “verbal aggressiveness can be analyzed from the following perspectives: on the one hand, the sender experiences negative emotions, and on the other, they direct these emotions toward their interlocutor (real or virtual). A negative expression may be triggered by an event or situation that affects both the interests of a specific sender and those of society as a whole”.

Verbal aggressiveness has become an object of linguistic study relatively recently, as the system in which it operates (communication linguistics and speech act theory) began to develop fully only in the second half of the 20th century. The concept itself originated in the United States and was later termed “hate speech”. The term is defined as “a form of

speech outside the law, which attacks an individual or a group of individuals based on attributes such as gender, ethnicity, origin, religion, disability, or sexual orientation” (ICR Strategic Comms, 2023).

Infante and Wigley consider verbal aggressiveness a personality trait that predisposes individuals to attack the self-concepts (i.e., the values and beliefs) of others, replacing or complementing their positions on communication topics. This definition places verbal aggressiveness within the framework of stable psychological characteristics, suggesting that such communicative behavior is not accidental but rooted in individual disposition. From this perspective, aggressive speech acts are seen as consistent behavioral tendencies that influence interpersonal interaction across different contexts.

At the same time, this notion is also referred to as “hate language” – “a generic term for the verbal means of expressing a strongly negative attitude towards ‘opponents’ who uphold a different system of religious, national, cultural, or other, more specific subcultural values. This phenomenon may manifest itself as a form of expressing racism, xenophobia, hatred and a lack of tolerance between nations, as well as homophobia and sexism”. This phenomenon may manifest itself as a form of expressing racism, xenophobia, and hatred, intolerance between nations, as well as homophobia and sexism. In this sense, hate language is not only a linguistic issue but also a socio-cultural and ideological problem that reflects deeper conflicts within society.

Texts displaying signs of “hate language” began to appear in the 20th century, a development closely linked to the emergence of the first tools for disseminating information to broad, diverse audiences (mass media). However, systematic attempts to define and study this phenomenon started relatively late. One of the main reasons for this delay lies in the heterogeneous nature of media discourse, which has significantly influenced how hate language is produced, distributed, and interpreted in contemporary communication.

At present, in linguistics and related disciplines, hate language is understood as a broad communicative category reflecting negative intent. Terms such as “verbal extremism,” “verbal violence,” or “communication conflict” are often considered components of this wider phenomenon. However, these terms do not fully overlap, as each reflects different aspects of aggressive communication, depending on the analytical perspective adopted by researchers.

The status of verbal aggressiveness as a linguistic phenomenon remains ambiguous, since it cannot be regarded as a single form of behavior or activity. Verbal aggressiveness may express various intentions, emerge in different situational contexts, and take multiple forms of linguistic realization. This variability makes it difficult to establish a unified theoretical definition and helps explain the diversity of approaches found in linguistic literature.

The difficulty of defining verbal aggressiveness is further illustrated by the variety of terms used to describe it, such as “verbal aggressiveness,” “aggressiveness of the word,” and “aggressiveness of language,” which often coexist within the same scholarly work. This terminological inconsistency reflects the absence of a standardized conceptual framework, as well as the interdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon, which is studied in linguistics, psychology, communication studies, and sociology.

Second, the notion of “verbal aggressiveness” does not currently have a precise linguistic definition, since researchers who address this topic examine aggressive verbal behavior from different perspectives.

Different scholars propose distinct interpretations of verbal aggressiveness. V.I. Apresyan argues that verbal aggressiveness encompasses all negative or critical attitudes the speaker holds toward the addressee, expressed through linguistic means. This definition emphasizes evaluative negativity as the core feature of aggressive communication.

O.N. Bykova defines verbal aggressiveness as a form of verbal behaviour intended to insult or harm an individual, group, organisation, or society as a whole. In this interpretation, the focus is placed on the intentional destructive function of speech acts and their potential social impact.

K.F. Sedov describes verbal aggressiveness as a communicative action aimed at provoking a negative psycho-emotional state in the recipient of verbal influence. This definition highlights the psychological consequences of aggressive speech, emphasizing emotional destabilization as a key outcome.

Verbal aggressiveness represents a “conflict-generating verbal behaviour based on (...) negative influence on the addressee” (W. Timothy Coombs, 1999).

The determination of the meaning of the term “verbal aggressiveness” would be incomplete without consulting dictionary definitions. For example, the *Encyclopedic Stylistic Dictionary of the Russian Language* defines verbal aggressiveness as “the use of linguistic means to express antipathy or hostility; a manner of communication that harms a person’s self-esteem and dignity. Verbal aggressiveness is most often found in colloquial and journalistic spheres of communication” (Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning, 2020).

Synthesizing the entire range of work presented above, we may conclude that verbal aggression is a harsh, brutal, offensive statement intended to insult, demean, or humiliate the recipient. Within contemporary linguistic and communication studies, verbal aggression is increasingly interpreted as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond purely linguistic realization. It incorporates psychological, pragmatic, behavioral, social, and political dimensions, thereby reflecting its complexity and its strong connection to broader processes of interpersonal and societal interaction. Verbal aggression is a complex mechanism, a multidimensional phenomenon that, “in addition to its linguistic manifestation, has a psychological, pragmatic, behavioral, social, and political component.” In this sense, aggressive discourse functions not merely as a vehicle of expression but as a mechanism of cognitive influence, shaping or constraining the interlocutor's interpretative autonomy. Such communicative behavior may manifest either explicitly, through direct verbal attack, or implicitly, through more subtle forms of linguistic pressure and manipulation.

Some scholars argue that verbal aggression, expressed through linguistic means, influences the recipient’s consciousness. This refers to the explicit and insistent imposition of one’s own opinion on an interlocutor (or reader), as a result of which the latter is deprived of the possibility to draw their own conclusions and independently analyse the facts. Other researchers define verbal aggression as an overt or latent verbal influence—either entirely unsubstantiated or insufficiently supported—directed at the recipient, with the purpose of modifying their personal attitudes (mental, ideological, evaluative, etc.) or of defeating them within a debate or polemic exchange. In argumentative or polemical contexts, such influence is often oriented toward “defeating” the opponent rather than engaging in constructive dialogue. This highlights the strategic dimension of verbal aggression, where communication becomes a tool of dominance rather than mutual understanding.

There is also a wide range of views regarding the essential quality of verbal aggression: its deliberate intent to offend or harm another person. Moreover, this feature “does not necessarily stem from the speaker’s desire to persuade the interlocutor” (Fearn-Banks, Kathleen, 2016). However, it is important to note that this intention does not always derive from a conscious desire to persuade. As Fearn-Banks (2016) observes, aggressive communicative behavior may emerge independently of persuasive goals, often as a reaction to communicative tension or conflict escalation. This suggests that verbal aggression is not only a rhetorical strategy but also a behavioral response to interactional breakdown. As a form of conflictual communicative behaviour, verbal aggression stems from the speaker’s inability to resolve a communicative conflict constructively. In such cases, aggressive speech will inevitably trigger a similar (aggressive) reaction, thus escalating and deepening the conflict.

However, this inability to resolve conflicts is not the only cause of verbal aggression in communication. The spread of verbal aggression is promoted, first and foremost, by the distortion of spiritual value systems and of corresponding social attitudes within society’s collective consciousness. A major role is played by the mass media, which, in recent times, have undertaken an intensive activity of promoting violence and cruelty. In such cases, instead of negotiation or rational discourse, individuals resort to aggressive verbal strategies that intensify disagreement. This inevitably triggers reciprocal aggression, creating a cyclical pattern of escalating hostility. Consequently, verbal aggression becomes both a product and a catalyst of communicative conflict.

Specialized literature (Coombs, 2010) highlights the significant impact of media-promoted violence on the formation of aggressive behavioural patterns. This influence lies in the fact that techniques, means, and scenarios of aggression can be learned through exposure. Frequent viewing of violent television programmes and films strongly affects cognitive processes, directing thinking and memory predominantly toward violent acts, which, inevitably, also leads to verbally aggressive manifestations of the corresponding attitudes. Nevertheless, the causes of verbal aggression are not limited to interpersonal communicative failure. Broader socio-cultural factors play a significant role in its development and dissemination. Among these, the distortion of value systems and weakening of ethical and spiritual norms within society are particularly influential. In modern contexts, mass media is frequently identified as a major contributing factor, due to its capacity to disseminate violent and emotionally charged content to large audiences.

In this context, we may say that mass media even promotes the invectivisation of language, that is, the unjustified use of indecent or offensive words and expressions.

From a linguistic standpoint, K.I. Brinev distinguishes two main directions of conflictual verbal interaction. The first is the invective function, which involves insults, offensive language, and explicit verbal attacks intended to cause psychological harm to the recipient. The second is the evaluative function, which seeks to reduce the interlocutor’s social or communicative status to assert the speaker’s superiority. In addition, Brinev notes that insults may also appear within manipulative communicative acts, where the speaker’s true intention is concealed, further complicating the analysis of aggressive discourse.

It is well-known that verbal aggression, in essence, may be a form of manifestation of destructive social phenomena, such as insult, slander, racism, xenophobia, and extremism. Such actions are considered crimes and are prohibited by various legislative acts. The European Convention on Human Rights (Article 10, para. 1), the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova (Article 32, para. 1), and the Constitution of Romania (Article

30, para. 1) guarantee all citizens the freedom of thought, opinion, and public expression. However, they clearly stipulate that the exercise of these freedoms must not damage another person's honor, dignity, or right to free expression, and that "defamation of the state or the people, incitement to aggression, national, racial or religious hatred, incitement to discrimination, territorial separatism, public violence, and other actions that threaten the constitutional order" are punishable by law (Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, Article 32, para. 3). In a democratic society, these sanctions are considered "measures necessary for national security, territorial integrity or public safety, the defence of order and prevention of crime, the protection of health or morals, or the protection of the reputation and rights of others..." (European Convention on Human Rights, Article 10, para. 2).

In addition, national legal frameworks, such as the Contravention Code of the Republic of Moldova (Articles 69–70), provide specific sanctions for defamation, slander, and the dissemination of false information. Penalties typically include fines or community service, with severity increasing depending on the offender's status and the nature of the offence. This legal structure reflects the recognition of verbal aggression not only as a communicative issue but also as a juridical and social problem requiring institutional regulation.

In addition to the previously discussed perspectives, it is important to emphasize that verbal aggression also reflects broader transformations within contemporary communicative culture, particularly in digital environments where anonymity and rapid information exchange often reduce social responsibility and increase the frequency of hostile discourse. Online communication platforms, including social media networks, have intensified the visibility and spread of aggressive language, allowing negative verbal behavior to reach wider audiences and to be reproduced at a much faster rate than in traditional forms of interaction. This digital context contributes to the normalization of aggressive linguistic patterns, where insults, irony, and hate-oriented expressions are frequently used as tools of self-expression or group identity construction. Furthermore, the reduction of face-to-face accountability in virtual spaces often weakens self-regulation mechanisms, leading individuals to express opinions in a more extreme and emotionally charged manner. From this perspective, verbal aggression is not only a linguistic or psychological phenomenon but also a technologically mediated social practice shaped by the structures of communication platforms and the dynamics of online communities. Consequently, future research should place greater emphasis on digital discourse analysis in order to better understand how technological environments shape aggressive communicative behavior and how such behavior can be effectively regulated or reduced through educational and ethical interventions.

Historically, the regulation of insult and defamation has undergone significant changes, particularly in Romania. During the communist period and in the years following it, insult and slander were criminal offenses, often used in political contexts to control journalistic expression. However, with Romania's integration into the European Union, these provisions were abolished, reflecting a shift toward stronger protection of freedom of expression. Attempts by certain political actors to reintroduce such sanctions have sparked public debate and resistance, highlighting the ongoing tension between freedom of speech and protection against defamation (Coman, 2009).

It should nevertheless be noted that, from a legal standpoint, the notion of verbal aggression is approached differently from the linguistic perspective. Jurisprudence relies on notions such as "facts," "evidence," "truth," and "falsehood," whereas linguists must

analyse texts and verbal productions in order to identify manifestations of aggression expressed in statements.

In conclusion, verbal aggression should be understood as a complex communicative phenomenon situated at the intersection of language, psychology, society, and law. It emerges from both individual communicative failures and broader sociocultural influences, particularly those related to media exposure and shifts in value systems. At the same time, its regulation under legal frameworks underscores the need to balance freedom of expression with the protection of human dignity and social harmony. Therefore, the study of verbal aggression remains essential for understanding contemporary communicative practices and for developing effective strategies of conflict prevention and responsible communication.

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