

Examining the Effects of Language Misuse and Hate Speech on Individuals and Corporate Organisations

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Abstract

The effects of language misuse and hate speech are seemingly neglected. This study explores the effects of language misuse and hate speech on individuals and corporate organisations. It relied on questionnaire data from 400 respondents across Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia States, observation, and library and internet print materials for both primary and secondary data. Survey design and mixed method along with the plausible tools are used. The analysis proves that language misuse and hate speech, which correlate significantly, have some adverse effects on individuals and corporate organisations. The effects are linguistic, social, psychological and otherwise. The study concludes that hate speech is a manifestation of language misuse. It recommends operational legislations, language-based and technology-driven techniques, and stringent and strategic measures as the panacea.

Keywords: Effects, Language Misuse, Hate Speech, Individuals, Corporate Organisations.

Introduction

Language, a viable instrument of development, interpersonal and intergroup relations (Robert, 2022; Emeka-Nwobia, 2015) and a problem-solving mechanism (Anyanwu, 2023; Nkereuwem & Robert, 2023), is made less impotent when misused in any contexts. Language is a natural phenomenon that serves varied purposes of communication between and among individuals and groups, nations, humans and animals alike (Nwode & Anyadiegwu, 2023; Dibia & Robert, 2014; Monday & Eze, 2012). All human activities involve language use (Nwode & Anyadiegwu, 2023; Robert, 2022 & 2018). As Okafor and Nwode (2022) rightly note, language use either makes or mars interpersonal communication, and interpersonal and intergroup relations and interaction. This depends on how language is used by certain users and the context of its usage.

How language is used by individuals and groups matters a lot. This assertion is upheld by Nwode and Anyadiegwu (2023), who emphasise the importance of effective language use for organisational purposes and interpersonal relations. They agree that the right as well as effective use of language produces positive deserving results, while the negative use or misuse of it causes a lot of social and communicative issues. Hate speech typifies the misuse of language. Hate speech refers to any speech that causes harms to certain individuals, groups, organisations and nations being referred to the speaker(s) or writer(s). Considering

the adverse effects of hate speech and language misuse, this study seeks to show that hate speech is a manifestation of language misuse and a source of linguistic, religious and ethnic intolerance.

Although there are extant studies on language use and hate speech respectively, none of them explore language misuse and hate speech together. Also, unlike previous studies, the present study considers hate speech as a manifestation of language misuse. It also seeks to pay specific attention to the extent of the effects language misuse and hate speech exert on individuals and organisations. Additionally, it uniquely seeks to correlate these two linguistic trends, unlike other studies.

Statement of the Problem

Hate speech and language misuse have become worrisome practices in contemporary time. Considering the effects of these two linguistic trends, there is the dire need to carry out field-based research of this kind on them, with a view to finding lasting solutions to them. Making a survey of different empirical cases, the study will critically look at the effects of language misuse and hate speech on both individuals and organisations. Correlating the two and making an exposition of their effects would make the study significant and timely.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the effects of language misuse and hate speech on individuals and corporate organisations. Its specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the effects of language misuse on individuals and organisations;
- ii. Establish the effects of hate speech on individuals and organisations;
- iii. Ascertain the correlation between language misuse and hate speech;
- iv. Proffer scholarly solutions to the trends of language misuse and hate speech.

Research Questions

The following research questions are designed to guide the study:

- i. Has language misuse any effects on individuals and organisations?
- ii. Does hate speech have any effects on individuals and organisations?
- iii. Do language misuse and hate speech correlate?
- iv. What scholarly solutions can be proffered to the trends of language misuse and hate speech?

Theoretical Framework

In his Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory, Halliday (1978, 1985 & 1994) describes language as a social semiotic that offers its users a network of choices to create spoken and written texts (Halliday, 1985 & 1994). The network of choices accounts for why language users misuse it, as in using language for hate speech. This present study avers that it takes criticality, carefulness, expertise and experience for one to be able to select rightly from the many choices for discourses. In what reflects the foregoing, Teo (2000) notes, "the meaning

of spoken or written texts (messages) is dependent on the choices made by users, especially speakers and writers" (p. 24).

Again, as Halliday notes, there are three types of meanings available to speakers. These are textual, interpersonal and ideational meanings. Language users use their lexicon-cum-grammar over the course of a given utterance:

- i. For efficient structural information from a communicative point of view (textual meaning);
- ii. To achieve interpersonal goals (interpersonal meaning);
- iii. To represent experience (ideational meaning).

This encoding of meaning is regarded as Metafunctions. The metafunctions are characterised by three terms that influence language use. These are field, tenor, and mode. Tenor means the socially defined relations between the parties involved in an interaction or communication; field refers to the subject matter of the text; mode is the medium and role of language in situation (David, 2002).

The foregoing implies that language use involves two or more parties involved in communicative acts. This kind of communication is the interpersonal or intergroup communication. There must be a subject matter of discourse and language must be used for the communication. Without language use, there can be no communication. Communication requires using language and a medium or several media. The systems function interdependently (Okafor & Nwode, 2022). Given the brief on Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory, it is quite obvious that the theory is apt for the study.

Related Studies

The effects of language misuse on individuals and organisations are affirmed in the literature (Nwode & Anyadiegwu, 2023; Scheffler, 2015; Benesch, 2011). Also, studies affirm the effects of hate speech on individuals, groups, organisations and nations (Robert et al., 2023; Nwosu & Nwokolo, 2022; Ezeibe, 2020; Scheffler, 2015). Hate speech is linked to violence, violent conflict, sour relationships, prejudices, ethnic hate, and social vices (Robert et al., 2023; Ezeibe, 2020; Nwosu & Nwokolo, 2022; Scheffler, 2015). Hate speech of all categories "produces the same damaging effects" (Nwosu & Nwokolo, 2022, p. 3) in forms of "violence and disorder, arising from anger, internalised prejudices and hatred" (Robert et al., 2023, p. 125). More so, hate speech is found to have religious, ethnic, linguistic and political undertones and effects respectively (Bagga & Lavery, 2019).

Robert et al. (2023), Nwosu and Nwokolo (2022), Robert (2017), Scheffler (2015) Yanagizawa-Drott (2012), Benesch (2008), and Des Forges (1999) indicate that derogatory terms or labels for individuals, groups and organisations are elements of hate speech, which spark conflict and cause sour interpersonal and intergroup relations. Also, HIIK (2008) and CIPEV (2008) have noted that hate speech, characterised by expressions of ethnic prejudices, are the remote causes of the Rwandan post-electoral violence and genocide. Having stated the foregoing, several closely related empirical studies will be presented and reviewed hereafter.

Robert et al. (2023) demonstrate that hate speech is a source of linguistic, religious and ethnic intolerance among Nigerians and many other the sub-Saharan African peoples. Their study faults politicians and elites for fanning hate speech by consistently using it in political, religious and ethnic gatherings to incite their members against those outside their groups. Negative utterances are made about and against others. They reflect on the recent Russia vs. Ukraine war, pointing out that Putin's misuse of language and expressed hate speeches against Ukrain led to the war. The scholars emphasise that hate speech and hate crime arise from ethnic, linguistic, political and even religious prejudices and intolerance. The implication of the example is that hate speech, a disposition of language misuse, can engender war, violence, conflict, sour intergroup and interpersonal relations. It follows that hate speech is heinous crime. It is to control this kind of crime that legislative acts against hate speech are been advocated and put in place across some nations of the globe.

The work of Nwosu and Nwokolo (2022), which relates to the present one, because it engages with hate speech, defines hate speech as "a phrasal term that describes any kind of expression or statement that vilifies, humiliates and incites hatred against individuals and groups other than the speaker's own ethno-religious, linguistic and political groups, sex folk, and social class" (p. 2). The definition implies that hate speech is a manifestation of the misuse of language in describing and talking or writing about an individual, a group, an organisation, or a nation in a harmful manner or way. It is realised from the definition that hate speech is a deliberate speech act of destroying others verbally or otherwise, with a view to pulling them down or causing them harm and contempt from others. The authors make reference to the Jewish genocide by Hitler and other Nazi leaders, in which hate speeches were used against the Jews. That is, hate speeches were behind the Jewish genocide. In the same vein, Scheffler (2015) indicates that "hate speech is what remotely lies behind the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the Kenyan PEV in 2007/2008" (p. 8). As such, hate speech is a dangerous linguistic and communicative trend. It is a negative linguistic or language-based technique for pulling down others in an attempt to give more meaning or relevance to oneself or one's group.

The study done by Bayer and Bárd (2020) emphasises the effects of hate speech on individuals and groups in various regards, which also affect the society at large. It argues that hate speech produces hate crimes that poison societies; breeds hatred against individuals and groups, disunity, conflicts, division and discrimination; breaches law and order; and violates human rights. Obviously, the study highlights the effects of hate speech, though it does not link hate speech or its effects to language misuse. The present study does. The study proposes concrete, enforceable and comprehensive systematized legislative measures as the panacea. It charges the concerned stakeholders to take proactive measures against hate speeches, hate acts and hate crimes, and improve on extant ones. It is quite obvious that workable measures have to be deployed to proffer solutions to the issues as well as effects of hate speech.

In their investigation of laws against hate speech, apostasy and blasphemy in Africa, Bagga and Lavery (2019) reveal that hate speech is criminalised in 29 African countries. The

countries are Angola, Benin, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, Botswana, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Togo, the Gambia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zambia are African countries having pending legislations against hate speech. In Sierra Leone, freedom of expression and religion are at risk.

Laws against hate speech are majorly executed through the media. Hate speech laws are aimed at reducing intolerance and hatred in society. The extant laws against hate speech, apostasy and blasphemy are said to have some grave implications on citizens' human rights. In particular, hate speeches are found to have religious, ethnic, linguistic and political undertones, while laws against blasphemy and apostasy are mechanisms for controlling religious speeches that concern faith or human-divine relations (Bagga & Lavery, 2019). The grave implications are undoubtedly the effects of hate speech decried by the present study. Cahill's et al. (2019) study assesses the utilisation of Twitter data to elucidate the prevalence of hate crimes in the US. The study concerns itself with the lack of reliable knowledge of the prevalence of hate crimes; identifying and analysing online hate speech; and examining the nexus between online hate speeches and offline hate crimes. The analysis proves religiously and racially motivated crimes as the highest hate speeches and crimes. Nonetheless, the inconsistent mixed results show no possibility of using online behaviour to identify offline risk. No doubt, the study demonstrates that hate speech has untold effects on individuals, groups and organisations. It constitutes a crime by an individual, a group or an organisation against another or some others. Again, as their study shows, hate speech is a crime against humanity. It is motivated by religiosity and racism or religious and racial sentiments. Ethnically motivated hate speech is a disposition of ethnic hate. In the same vein, a religiously motivated hate speech is a disposition of religious intolerance. In any case, prejudices, sentiments, neglects, character assassination, tainting of image or reputation, pull-down syndrome, and superiority tendency are displayed.

As Mbah (2018) rightly notes, "language has no meaning in itself, but is deployed as a trigger that sets off and creates possible worlds or alternative meaning realities within a discourse situation" (p. 37). The implication is that the language is deployed to express hate speech constructs. The way in which language is used for such constructs differs from the normal or right way of using it. That is why this research associates hate speech with language misuse. Definitely, if language is not used in the negative sense to talk or write about others in ways that amount to hate speech or show hatred, hate speech would not obtain. And, its effects would not be on anyone. It is a case of making phenomena meaningful or meaningless using language (Okafor & Nwode, 2022). Thus, hate speeches convey meanings that have adverse effects on the addressees. The addressers know that the speeches have the effects, but do not care. The reason is that since they do not mean well for the addressees, they deliberately use hate speeches against the addressees.

Scheffler (2015) demonstrates that legislations against hate speech are productive or result-oriented, since they prevent the emergence of some crimes and uprising among individuals, groups and organisations. The need for legislative measures against hate speeches, hate acts and hate crimes, Adama Dieng, UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, advises that "we must recognize the limits of legislation to combat hate speech and incitement" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM, 2013, p. 17). This piece of advice was given during the intellectual event entitled "Hate Speech and Incitement to Genocide Panel Discussion," organised in 2013 by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The present study avers that legislative frameworks, language-based techniques, strategic analogous measures, and technology-driven techniques can be leveraged for tangible solutions to language misuse and hate speech. The right use of language and persuasive language are among the measures. Although some studies argue in favour of hate speech, the present study does not subscribe to such a defence. For examples, Haupt (2005), Leiter (2012), and Malik (2012) claim that hate speech is a means of criticising and getting at an unfavourable government, leading to the enactment of positive legislations against bad governance. Benesch (2008) and Robert et al. (2023) also reject such defence of hate speech, stressing that what is bad is bad, and hate speech is likewise. Robert et al. (2023) maintain that strong legislations against hate speech are feasible means of checking against flaming words and individuals' and groups' tendencies for hate speeches. Such legislations, they note, would prevent conflict, war and other forms of violence that sprawl from hate speech. These ills, to be prevented by legislative frameworks, are effects of hate speech. Thus, such legislations prevent the effects of hate speech.

Methodology

The survey design is adopted for this study. The choice of this design is informed by the nature of the study along with its preoccupations. The design involves eliciting information from a sample drawn from a target population through self-administered questionnaire or interviews, which are subjected to statistical analysis (Ubah et al., 2012; Nwodu, 2006). The aim of this design is to answer the research questions, meet the research objectives and solve the research problem the informed the given study. The qualitative method, which aligns with the survey design, is employed.

Questionnaire was used to source primary data from 480 respondents across Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia. These states were taken to represent other Eastern Nigerian states. The researcher comes from and resides in Anambra State. Having chosen Enugu on the basis of proximity, Ebonyi and Abia, which are closer to Enugu than Imo State, are also chosen. These states are equitably represented. In each of the states, 120 questionnaires were administered. Upon collection, only 400 were duly filled and returned.

The 400 is used for the data presentation and analysis, using the formula: $\frac{N}{EN} \times \frac{1}{100}$. The Other statistical tools made use of include four-point Likert scale, tables, figures and

interpretive tools. National and international research ethical principles are followed to avoid breaching any research ethics. The participants' consent was sought, and the concerned authorities of the corporations involved in the pilot study. The authenticity of the primary data adds to the ethical considerations, which together validate the data and make them reliable.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Here, the data gathered on the research objectives and questions are presented and analysed.

Table 1: Language misuse has some significant effects on individuals and organisations.

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agreed	147	36.75
Agreed	87	21.75
Neutral	15	3.75
Strongly Disagreed	65	16.25
Disagreed	86	21.5
Total	400	100.00

Source: Author's field survey, 2024

The research question 1 is answered by the data presented in the Table 1. By so doing, the research objective is also met. Put together, 234 of 58.5% respondents agreed that language misuse has some significant effects on individuals and organisations. The other responses are statistically insignificant. The reason is that since over half of the total number of the respondents strongly agreed (SA) and agreed (A) to the proposition, the remaining numbers for the other variables are insignificant. Given the finding, language misuse is indeed a negative linguistic and communicative trend that has to be addressed significantly. It is imperative to address this negative linguistic trend so as to avert the effects of language misuse on individuals and organisations. This finding reflects the theoretical postulations on social semiotics and language use on the basis language presenting a range of options to users.

Table 2: Hate speech has some significant effects on individuals and organisations.

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agreed	197	49.25
Agreed	108	27
Neutral	14	3.5
Strongly Disagreed	35	8.75
Disagreed	46	11.5
Total	400	100.00

Source: Author's field survey, 2024

The effects of hate speech on individuals and organisations are affirmed by 305 (76.25%). Out of this figure, 197 (49.25%) strongly agreed, while 108 (27%) agreed. Considering the statistical significance of the figures for 'Strongly Agreed' (SA) and 'Agreed' (A), the result from the two sets of data is upheld. Based on the upheld result, other sets of data (responses) are disregarded or considered insignificant. Thus, the finding confirms that hate speech has adverse effects on individuals and organisations.

Table 3: When language is misused and hate speeches are expressed conflict, trouble, disagreement, misunderstanding, sour relations, tarnished image or destruction reputation, prejudices, negligence and wrong notions and constructs are spread about the addressee(s).

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agreed	219	54.75
Agreed	92	23
Neutral	10	2.5
Strongly Disagreed	-	-
Disagreed	79	19.75
Total	400	100.00

Source: Author's field survey, 2024

Clearly, the data presented above convey the results, implications or effects of language misuse and hate speech. The data show what occur(s) when language is misused and hate speeches are expressed. The listed factors are effects or consequences of language misuse and hate speech. They are affirmed by the respondents. The affirmation is given by majority of the respondents (311 of 77.75%). Other sets of the responses are inconsequential compared to the 311 of 77.75% for SA and A.

Table 4: Language misuse and hate speech correlate.

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agreed	95	23.75
Agreed	189	47.25
Neutral	13	3.25
Strongly Disagreed	47	11.75
Disagreed	56	14
Total	400	100.00

Source: Author's field survey, 2024

As evident in Table 4 above, the larger proportion of the data show that language misuse and hate speech correlate. The proof is given by two sets of the data for SA and A. While the former has 95 (23.75%), the latter has 189 of 47.25%. Clearly, 284 of 71% respondents confirmed that language misuse and hate speech correlate. The result from the 284 of 71% is upheld as the finding that justifies the proposition that language misuse and hate speech

correlate. The remaining 116 of 29% figures for Neutral (N), Strongly Disagreed (SD) and Disagreed (D) are quantitatively insignificant.

Table 5: Effects of language misuse and hate speech

S/N	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D
<i>Effects of language misuse and hate speech</i>						
1	Threaten individual rights, human dignity and equality Disagreement arises over divergent values and rules Rouse or reinforce tensions between and among social groups Denigrate and indict individuals and groups	34 (8.5)	-	-	-	-
2	Disrupt public peace and security, and law and order Shatter peaceful co-existence and smooth intergroup relations among peoples, groups and individuals Have verbal and psychological effects	29 (7.25)	-	-	-	-
3	All of the above	337 (84.25)	-	-	-	-
4	None of the above	-	-	-	-	-

Author's field survey, 2024

All the three sets of responses are given under the SA option. The highest responses are those for the 'All of the above' variable. The next is the 34 (8.5%) for Variable 1. The Variable 2 recorded 29 (7.25%). Therefore, all the responses confirm the identified effects of language misuse and hate speech. The effects affect individuals and organisations alike.

Table 6: The following scholarly solutions can address the trends of language misuse and hate speech

S/N	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D
<i>Solutions to language misuse and hate speech</i>						
1	Legislative frameworks Legal sanctions Organisational ethics	37 (9.25)	-	-	-	-
2	Public awareness campaign by agents of socialisation Attitudinal change Reorientation among individuals and organisations Language-based techniques Strategic analogous measures Technology-driven techniques	23 (5.75)	-	-	-	-
3	All of the above	299 (74.75)	41 (10.25)	-	-	-
4	None of the above	-	-	-	-	-

Author's field survey, 2024

As presented in the Table 6 above, the scholarly measures identified or proffered by this study are affirmed by the respondents. Majority of them indicated that the two sets of measures in Variables 1 and 2 are together capable of proffering solutions to the trends of language misuse and hate speech. The majority comprises 299 (74.75%), who chose the 'All of the above' option or variable. Besides, 41 (10.25%) of the respondents chose the 'Agreed' option of the "All of the above" variable. Thus, 340 of 85% chose the 'All of the above'. While 37 (9.25%) chose Variable 1, 23 (5.75) chose the Variable 2. The implication of the results is that all the 400 of 100% respondents agreed to the proffered scholarly solutions to hate speech and language misuse.

Contribution, Impact and Novelty

The impact of this study rests on its preoccupations and the problem it seeks to address. By engaging with these linguistic trends, the study impacts on language use and rouses deserving attention to the attendant issues of language misuse and hate speech. It seeks to identify causes of language misuse and hate speech, and present some scholarly solutions to the ugly trends. The study also bridges a knowledge gap and makes significant conceptual, theoretical and empirical contributions to knowledge. Besides, it helps to address communicative and social issues.

It is hoped that with the findings, improvement in language use and social relations is bound to be attained. Unity rather than division would be promoted much more, following the study's exposition. The findings are of immense benefit to teachers, students, parents, educational policy-makers, other stakeholders and researchers in various regards. Thus, the study significantly impacts on the following endeavours: language and linguistics, English and literature, media and communication, library and information science, sociology, psychology, research, and societal development.

Conclusion

All activities involve the use of language, including speech-making. In making or expressing hate speeches, language is used. Hate speeches are utterances made using language negatively. Whenever and wherever language is misused, solecism, mishaps, and communicative, linguistic, social, pedagogic and political issues arise. These also arise when hate speeches are made. So far, the study has empirically proved that language misuse and hate speech, which correlate, have adverse effects on individuals and organisations. Evidence is shown from related extant studies and the primary data relied on. The postulations of Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory are made evident in that the study has so far shown that as language presents a network of choices to users, misuse arises, as in the case of hate speech.

The effects of language misuse and hate speech are found to include denigration and indictment of the addressees— individuals, groups and organisations, and exert verbal and psychological effects on them. These effects constitute the base or overwhelming effects of language misuse for hate speech on individuals and organisations. Language misuse is a

rising linguistic misdeed that deserves an appreciable extent of scholarly attention and investigation. This study rouses the deserving attention to language misuse and hate speech, establishing their correlation. Unlike previous studies that engage with either of the two, the present study has explored both. The study concludes that language misuse and hate speech correlate because the latter is the manifestation of the former. The practical implications of the trends of language misuse and hate speech are unveiled by the findings.

Recommendations

The study recommends:

- i. Strong operational legislations outlawing hate speech and language use.
- ii. Consistent use of strategic language-based and technology-driven techniques by concerned authorities for effective regulation and prevention.
- iii. Reorientation and attitudinal change.
- iv. More scholarly attention and investigation into language misuse and hate speech.

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