'Once I stopped believing in Santa Claus...': Doing Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis on YouTube and Facebook Religious Talk

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This presentation focuses on a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of interaction among Christians, atheists, and Muslims on YouTube. The internet and social media sites in particular, offer access to diverse audiences, but for religious users, conflict can occur when attempting to make videos which are viewed by communities of believers who share the same faith, at the same time as users who are openly hostile to their beliefs. This presentation aims to describe how users manage these competing pressures by looking closely at how they speak about their faith, and how they speak to others on social media sites, particularly through the medium of online video.

Taking a discourse-dynamics approach (Cameron, 2015) to video interaction, I show how interaction across different levels of discourse activity can be used to describe trends in presentation of belief among people of different faiths and no faith. I present a case study of responses to one particular Evangelical Christian Facebook preacher, Joshua Feuerstein, by a Muslim YouTuber and an atheist YouTuber, using a corpus of 67 video pages (including 6 hours and 47 minutes of talk and 60,888 comments). The project investigates how user talk differs depending on the context of interaction and how users accommodate diverse audiences. The analysis included two stages: positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997; Harré & van Langenhove, 2008) and keyword analysis (Baker, 2006).

I first show how local, situated interactions create positionings that fit within larger storylines that serve each user's own ideological position. The can be observed in the conflict between users, as users position one another and respond to positionings. In the central conflict of the data, the Christian positions atheists as aggressive, antagonistic, and ignorant for 'believing in evolution'. These positions are constituent parts of a larger narrative that draws an equivalency between 'faith' in empirical evidence and faith in God. In the response, the atheist positions the Christian as ignorant, building a narrative where atheists are logical and sensible, and Christians follow archaic beliefs and are illogical. These competing narratives show how online 'drama' or antagonistic debate (Burgess & Green, 2008) provides affordances for users to create novel content and put forward their own ideological positions in response to those opposed to them. Every negative comment from another user is an opportunity to reassert one's own narrative.

Building on positioning analysis, I then show how keywords in the whole dataset can be used to contextualise the interaction among users and show how positionings within individual videos are part of larger narratives that stretch across many videos. Keyword analysis is used to investigate how positionings uncovered in the micro analysis are true of the larger data, particularly in the responses to videos in text comments. Looking at the top 100 keywords in the sub-corpora of users' spoken discourse and the text comments on each user's videos compared to BNC reference corpora using WMatrix, I show how three distinct ways of talking about religion emerge, one in which atheist discourse focused on science and logic, while

the discourse surrounding the Muslim and Christian videos was oriented towards religious practice. The keywords also reveal the importance of Christianity in the discourse of all three users and those commenting on the videos, as well as different registers that emerge when users speak to different audiences. I show how the keywords can be used to return to the process of discourse analysis and further uncover how discourse among users develops over time.

My analysis shows how user interaction, particularly hostile interaction around issues of faith and belief, is affected in online contexts. I focus on three main findings. First, given the open nature of public social media interaction, users are compelled to respond to a broader social contexts and this engagement requires some adaptation at least in the presentation of belief. This affordance allowed users to produce content that drew praise from likeminded users and derision from opponents, leading to a rising profile on the site when they posted their videos. Second, the content and themes of the arguments are not especially unique and are the result of ongoing interaction among people of different faiths. Historical arguments for and against particular faiths and between different faiths are enacted in online spaces, sometimes with very little development in terms of their content or approach. Third, talk about religious issues which is driven by and oriented towards popular personalities did not seem to support the growth of tangible affiliation among users or communities. While this has been observed to be the case in other studies, the analysis shows that the particular users created a hierarchical relationship between themselves and the people that watched their videos. The result was a lack of evidence for a sense of shared experience, but rather ad-hoc affiliations between users who held common beliefs.

References

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