

# Chapter 9

## Communicative Aggression in Online Education



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### 9.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many countries to adapt to new situations in various sectors, including education. The success of communication in the distance format is the most important guarantee of success in training. However, the lack of personal contact with the teacher can lead to many barriers in the distance learning process (Galusha, 1997; Kranich, 2003). Difficulties impeding effective communication can be caused by technical failures. However, along with access problems and technical difficulties, there are perception problems, as students often report feelings of confusion, anxiety, or frustration and want to get faster feedback from the teacher regarding the course content (Freedman et al., 2003; Isman et al., 2003; Sedov, 2005). Difficulties in communicating in online classes may arise due to a lack of a sense of emotional connection with each other or a lack of real-time feedback in traditional learning (Kim et al., 2005). The literature on distance education emphasizes that there is currently a “degradation” of interaction between students and teachers, on the one hand, and in student groups, on the other. In addition, the issue of aggressive behavior is raised, which can become a significant problem as online interaction becomes more common (Galusha, 1997; Nakamura, 2012). As noted by a number of researchers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011), online interaction, email, text messages, chats, blogs, etc., contribute to the spread of aggressive and offensive comments about fellow students, teachers, and other people. Aggression in online contexts has received an extensive research response over the past decade, and most of the works in this area are devoted

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to the study of verbal and nonverbal characteristics of online aggression in extremist forums (Fernandez et al., 2018; Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003), including information from users' self-presentation in social network profiles (Berger & Morgan, 2015), hashtags used (Like & Afif, 2020), cyber-aggression in online games (Gray, 2012; Magdy et al., 2016), etc. However, there is a need to expand the scope of online content analysis, and in this study, we aim to fill the theoretical and methodological gaps in the research of online aggression in the course of distance learning.

## 9.2 Materials and Methods

Samples of text and video data were collected from a total of 162 online recordings of classes and exams conducted in the form of distance learning, stored in the cloud service ZOOM, access to which was provided by the teachers who conducted the classes. The video recordings of the classes were preprocessed and translated into text format and then used to create the corpus for the study. The text of online chats written by users in each of the classes was cleaned up by removing the HTML/XML content left over from archiving, which is a necessary technical step before working with web text to ensure that only the actual data written by users is used for analysis.

The complexity of the analysis of the text corpus is explained by the specifics of the material being studied. And if earlier in the analysis of cyber-aggression in online chats or games, direct threats or insults were studied (Magdy et al., 2016), then in our study such explicit units of manifestation of this emotional state were not considered, since aggression was expressed implicitly.

Thus, after the text records were divided into groups ("students" and "teachers"), it was decided to select the following elements from the corpus texts as units for further analysis: abbreviations, slang, graphic items, and questions. Further, by means of a continuous sample, the analysis of the studied corpus was carried out to identify the syntactic, lexical, and morphological means of expressing aggression. The final text material formed in this way was supplemented with a description of the visual effects of communication in order to identify nonverbal manifestations of aggression.

## 9.3 Results

Considering the phenomenon of online communicative aggression as "purposeful, motivated, conflictogenic speech behavior, which is based on an emotional negative impact on the addressee" (Ushakova, 2018), we set ourselves the goal of identifying specific communicative and pragmatic means of verbal and nonverbal levels that allow the addressee to achieve their main pragmatic goal of destabilizing the communication process in general and the addressee, in particular, through aggressive speech behavior.

In the course of the analysis of the texts, we identified the following means of aggression:

### 1. Syntactic means of expressing aggression.

It is well known that one of the indirect rhetorical uses of questions is the expression of implicit aggression (Apresyan, 2003; Yakovleva, 2017). When analyzing video recordings and online chats, we identified some uses of rhetorical questions that have an aggressive implication:

- evaluative rhetorical question:

S (Student): Am I stupid? I'm telling you that I uploaded it yesterday (online recording of the lesson).

- a question challenging the teacher's competence:

S: Are you sure you know how to use it (anti-plagiarism)? (online recording of the lesson).

S: Maybe it was you who couldn't open it? (online recording of the lesson).

It should be noted that challenging the teacher's competence in online learning is a serious problem. For example, in a study on cyber-bullying of teachers, it is noted that 15% of complaints were related to attacks on the personal qualifications of the teacher (Clark et al., 2012a, b).

Rhetorical questions, following one after another, form a syntactic parallelism (Vorontsova, 2016), expressing aggression:

T (teacher): Don't you understand the question? Why don't you tell me about Maslow's theory? Why don't you just explain its meaning? (online exam record).

### 2. Lexical means of expressing aggression.

The analysis of the material under study showed that the most common means of expressing aggression were implicit negations. For example, verbs expressing a personal belief or opinion usually involve the postulation of an aggressive implicit negation (Dahl, 1979; Hamilton, 2012):

S: You think you're so smart, don't you? (to another student who gave an answer earlier - online chat during the class).

Another way to express aggression in online communication are verbs in hyperbolized meaning, which, according to some researchers, can indicate in the main meaning a quantitative assessment and suggest that the action they indicate requires a lot of physical effort (Glovinskaya, 2004). For example:

C: This test is stuffed with all sorts of tasks (online chat during the lesson).

Another lexical tool for displaying communicative aggression in the course of online learning is the use of inappropriate abbreviations in the chat, such as "wtf":

S: Wtf, but I forgot to forward it (online chat during the class).

Aggression aimed not at a negative impact on the addressee (Soni & Singh, 2018), but at assessing the situation when it does not match expectations, is represented in the studied material by phraseological units:

P: Blood from the ears (online recording of the lesson).

P: You are silent, like you've lost your tongue (online recording of the lesson).

### 3. Morphological means of expressing aggression.

When analyzing recordings and chats of online classes, the only identified means of transmitting aggression were diminutives, i.e., “words with suffixes of subjective evaluation” (Buryakovskaya, 2010). Obviously, if we consider words with diminutive suffixes out of context, they are a “form of positive characteristic” (Buryakovskaya, 2010). However, the meaning of these units has expanded and in a certain context, they can change the meaning of an utterance, giving it a shade of aggressiveness and disdain, for example:

T: Please enable screen demonstration when answering.

S: You have excellent tricks (in Russian: *хитрые мучульки*) (online record of the exam).

It should be borne in mind that such morphological means as diminutive suffixes are not typical for all languages.

### 4. Stylistic ways of displaying aggression.

Negative comparison, irony (Perreault et al., 2002):

T: ... clearly not Shakespeare (online recording of the lesson).

### 5. Nonverbal paralinguistic ways of displaying aggression.

Aggressive speech is also characterized by “kinetic intensity”, various nonverbal manipulations “make the speaker visible, increase his image” (Komalova, 2015; Perreault et al., 2002).

In this study, when viewing the provided ZOOM recordings of classes, we noted active gesticulation and throwing out objects that are clearly associated with aggression, but at the same time accompanied by the choice of neutral language and speech means:

T: Do you disagree with the mark?

S: I agree (he waves his hand and throws a pen). (online recording of the lesson).

In addition to active nonverbal means, it is impossible not to mention the so-called “tactic of threatening silence” (Sedov, 2005) on the part of the teacher in response to provocative actions of students (imitation of a network failure, inability to enter the class due to technical problems, etc.).

### 6. Nonverbal graphic means of expressing aggression.

The insertion of emoticons creates a new digital nonverbal landscape that can even enhance communicative content. Laughing emoticons are not supposed to show any negative intent in their original nonverbal meaning, but the combination of several similar graphic images of a smiling human face could be associated with irony and sarcasm. In the example below, a repeated smile can convey a strong desire to insult a person:

S: You can turn on the sound yourself, you're IN CHARGE here—smile, smile, smile (online chat during the lesson).

In this example, another indicator of the student's irony and sarcasm toward the teacher is the use of capital letters in the phrase “to be in charge”.

Ellipsis also appears as a means of aggression (Fortunatus et al., 2020; Komalova, 2015):

S: And the teacher is always right ... (online chat during the lesson).

Polemic brackets as a means of saving lexical resources help to achieve the maximum concentration in the expression of negative emotions:

S: Did she give the best (!) answer? (online chat during the class).

Another means of expressing aggression identified in the course of the study was the intensification of punctuation marks, which carries an aggressive connotation (Fortunatus et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020):

C: My Internet was just down!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (online chat during the class).

## 9.4 Conclusion

Based on the studied facts, it seems possible to assert that communication in the framework of distance learning has various specific features, which also include the manifestation of online aggression. The latter is characterized by the presence of special tools, consisting of verbal and nonverbal means, actively used by both teachers and students for the purpose of emotionally negative impact and destabilization of the communication process during online lessons.

Among them are syntactic means (indirect rhetorical and evaluative questions with aggressive implication), lexical means (the use of verbs expressing a personal belief or opinion, verbs indicating quantitative evaluation in a hyperbolized meaning, inappropriate abbreviations), morphological means (the use of diminutives), stylistic techniques (negative comparison, irony), nonverbal paralinguistic methods of kinetic intensity, tactics of threatening silence, and nonverbal graphic means (font size, emoticons, punctuation marks).

In general, communication in the framework of online learning differs from other forms of virtual communication in that it is a combination of oral and written communication between a teacher and a student, which is carried out synchronously and cannot be interrupted voluntarily, since it is regulated by the "compulsory" format established by the educational institution. Thus, if there is no choice: to enter or not to enter into communication, the probability of aggression against the background of spontaneous manifestations of negative emotions, both on the part of the addressee and on the part of the addressee, is quite high. Nevertheless, it is necessary to emphasize the conditionality of such communicative conflicts, since, unlike real ones, they usually have neither a logical conclusion nor communicative consequences. The teacher most often uses his administrative resource and interrupts an aggressive dialogue or switches to other students of the online class.

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