



Covertly communicated hate speech: A corpus-assisted pragmatic study

Vahid Parvaresh

Anglia Ruskin University, East Rd., Cambridge, CB1 1PT, UK



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ABSTRACT

While online hate speech is a perennial problem of modern times, there is still a lack of academic research on the topic. This could be attributed to the fact that hate speech does not always have clearly distinguishable linguistic features. As such, hate speech could well be communicated covertly. Consequently, and in order to better understand the phenomenon of ‘covertly communicated’ hate speech, one would need to first investigate the overarching thematic and discursive patterns in which hate speech is rooted. This study is a step in this direction. Assisted by a corpus-informed pragmatic analysis of hate language on *Instagram*, it focuses on hate language directed at Afghan immigrants in Iran, a rarely explored context involving one of the world’s most widespread population movements and displacement patterns. The findings of the study lay bare the fact that, in the corpus under investigation, overt expressions of hate were few and far between, to the extent that they did not have meaningful salience in the data. In this respect, the study indicates how a number of recurring discursive patterns provide the foundation on which covert ways of expressing hate are based.

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ملالی که انگار برای اولین بار در ایران واژه ی “افغانی” را با تحقیر شنیده بود، با دهان پر خون بی وقفه جیغ می کشید.

Malali, who had presumably heard, for the first time in Iran, the word ‘Afghani’ being used with contempt, was incessantly screaming with a mouth full of blood.¹

1. Introduction

Hate speech is considered to be any form of communication which serves to denigrate individuals or groups on the basis of one or more of their characteristics, including “race, colour, ethnicity, [...] nationality, religion” (Nockleby, 2000: 1277). The incidence of hate speech has continued to increase, to the extent that it has now reached extremely high levels (Baider, 2020; Baider et al., 2017). Consequently, hate speech has become a topic of great interest for researchers working in various fields of inquiry (see, e.g., Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez, 2016; Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Davidson et al., 2017; Baider and Kopytowska, 2017; Schmidt and Wiegand, 2017; Castellví et al., 2019; Qian et al., 2019; Fino, 2020; García-Díaz et al.,

E-mail address: Vahid.Parvaresh@aru.ac.uk.

¹ Ataee, Alie. 2020. *Koorsorkhi: Ravâyat-hâyi az dżan va dżang* [Red-blindness: Stories of soul and war]. Tehran: Cheshmeh Publications. My translation.

2022; Ghaffari, 2022; Williams, 2021, to name but a few). As a corollary of the increasing number of studies on hate speech, it has become even more evident that hate speech does not always have “unique, discriminative features” (Castano-Pulgarín et al., 2021: 1). In particular, in the field of pragmatics, researchers recognise that hate speech can be communicated covertly (Baider, 2020), i.e. without the presence of a direct correspondence between the uttered words and their overall meaning. In other words, there are occasions in which hateful illocutions are conveyed to the hearer in more covert ways. At the same time, the discursive patterns in which covertly communicated hate speech is embedded are yet to be determined. In other words, more work needs to be done on the topic of hate speech for the following two reasons: (a) covert expressions of hate are less amenable to linguistic analysis as they require moving away from treating hate speech as ‘isolated’ instances, towards considering the ‘conversational context’ in which they occur (Qian et al., 2019: 1); (b) the correct detection of hate speech and further research advances in the topic will not be successful unless one recognises the fact that there is a “growing need for research on this topic in languages other than English” (García-Díaz et al., 2022: 2).

One area that could benefit from further research into hate speech is cyberspace, which has witnessed a marked increase in the number of hate speech incidents in recent years. As Castano-Pulgarín et al. (2021: 1) note, while “[c]yberspace offers freedom of communication”, it is undeniable that “current social media is regularly being misused to spread violent messages, comments, and hateful speech”. In fact, “the anonymity, immediacy and global nature of the Internet” have turned it into an “ideal tool [...] to promote hate” (Banks, 2010: 233; cf. Chetty and Alathur, 2018; Cohen-Almagor, 2018; Alkiviadou, 2019; Parvaresh, 2019). In this respect, Sarkhoh and KhosraviNik (2020: 619) argue that in certain cyberspace contexts, “[b]ashing the Other and hateful speech is far more evident than discourse of positive Self”. It is therefore no surprise that various requests have been made recently by politicians, families and parents, as well as various mental-health charities, to increase the efforts being made to combat online hate speech (see, e.g., Home Office, 2016), for Internet has in a way “facilitated the global spread of hate” (Baider et al., 2017: 2).

In light of this, the current study is an attempt to throw light on the main thematic and discursive patterns that are relied on in the formation of covert hate speech. This objective is in part motivated by the common-sense observation that in order to understand a phenomenon such as hate speech, which does not always have clearly distinguishable features, one has no choice but to first investigate the overarching thematic and discursive patterns in which such hate speech is rooted. For this purpose, and by conducting a corpus-assisted pragmatic analysis of online hate language, the present study focuses on a rarely explored non-English context, namely Afghan immigrants in Iran. Focusing on hate language directed at Afghans is particularly rewarding for at least two reasons: (a) “[m]igration from Afghanistan during the past three decades is one of the largest displacement and refugee movements in modern world history” (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi, 2015: 89) and (b) Iran is “one of the most concentrated areas of Afghan [im]migrants and refugees” (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008: 4).

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, two competing approaches to the study of hate speech will be discussed. In Section 3, a review of literature on the issue of hate speech and immigration will be provided, together with some background information on Afghan immigrants in Iran. In Section 4, the study’s methodology and dataset will be explained in some detail. In Section 5, the findings of the study will be presented. Finally, the paper will be concluded in Section 6 with a discussion of the findings.

2. Approaches to hate speech

It has long been argued that understanding what is meant by an utterance is a pragmatic endeavour, which requires interactants to consider the broader context in which a particular utterance is used (see, e.g., Culpeper and Haugh, 2014; Cutting and Fordyce, 2020; Huang, 2017; Leech, 1983, to name but a few). However, scholars tend to disagree on how much influence ‘context’ can exert on the overall meaning of expressions (Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2021). As far as the identification of hate speech is concerned, the importance ascribed to context appears to be *minimal*, resulting in the overwhelming dominance of what has been termed a *lexical* approach (see Baider, 2020 for a discussion).

In a lexical approach, the main assumption is that our understanding of what is meant by an utterance is a controlled and bottom-up process, but this process might be assisted by a more context-dependent pragmatic process known as inference. According to this view, a context-informed inference could determine meaning but only if/when triggered by the expression itself (Recanati, 2010). In other words, in this approach the analyst’s focus is “on the message content” itself, hence the term ‘lexical approach’ (Baider, 2020: 200). In this approach, analysts tend to associate hate speech with, for example, the use of distinctly hateful words (e.g., slurring expressions like ‘darkie’, ‘nigger’) or so-called *hatemojis* (e.g., ‘My new manager is Muslim👹’²). This is an approach particularly favoured in computer technologies which seek to, for example, control the dispersion of hate speech on the Internet.

To illustrate how a lexical approach pans out in an actual analysis, consider the following comment from the current study’s dataset [see Section 4.1 to find out more about the data used in the current study]. The comment is posted in response to an Instagram post in which the reader is told that a recent Afghan soldier,³ who had behaved badly towards ordinary Afghan citizens, has been arrested by Afghanistan’s ministry of interior affairs:

² This example is adapted from Kirk et al. (2021).

³ In the context under investigation, *soldier* is a generic word which is used to refer to servicemen typically at the rank of lieutenant.

[1]

⁴ اینا بوی گه می دن.
 ʔ⁵inâ buye goh midan.
These people smell of shit.

In inferring the hateful meaning of the above comment, the analyst would need to establish the following:

- (a) The presence of negative words such as ‘shit’;
- (b) Assigning a contextual value to ‘these people’ and establishing that it refers to ‘Afghans’;
- (c) Activating any other contextual meaning which might be available, for example, the fact that Afghans have long been subjected to hate speech.

For all its merits, and despite all the advances made over the years, a lexical approach is still “far from being able to [fully] grasp context or to detect the intent or motivation of the speaker, failing to recognise specific usages of certain words” (Oliva et al., 2021: 702). This is in part due to the fact that a lexical approach tends to take the medium of ‘language’, through which hate speech is created and communicated, for granted, thereby ignoring the various, mostly implied, ways in which hateful messages could be conveyed (Castano-Pulgarín et al., 2021: 1). That is why, although it might be able to detect and remove a comment such as comment [1], it may also flag – at least as a potentially offensive expression – other non-offensive uses of the word ‘shit’, such as that found in the comment ‘You smell of shit, you need to take a shower’ posted under a humorous video in which someone trips over and falls into a pile of animal faeces. This is simply because most methods which rely on a lexical approach, for example, online algorithms that track hate speech online, fall short of reaching stages (b) and (c) mentioned above.

The inherent limitations of a purely lexical approach could, however, be remedied if one investigates hate speech by focusing on so-called illocutions of messages (Baider, 2020: 200–201). Originally broached by Austin (1975: 91, original italics), illocutions are defined as the “performance of an act *in* saying something”. Illocutions are therefore distinguished from locutions, which are defined as “an act *of* saying something” (Austin, 1975: 91, original italics). To illustrate how this approach works, consider the below comment made in response to the same post as comment [1]:

[2]

آگاه سرباز دارن؟
 mage⁶ sarbâz dâran?
Do they have soldiers as well?

Evidently, no markedly hateful word is present in comment [2] above. As such, what makes it an example of hate speech does not reside in its locution, i.e., the act of saying ‘Do they have soldiers as well?’, but rather in its illocution, i.e., the act of conveying the idea that Afghanistan lacks even the most basic agencies, which in this example is achieved covertly and in saying ‘Do they have soldiers as well?’. In other words, in this example it is the idea that Afghanistan lacks certain basic agencies, such as armed forces, that the comment in question communicates which renders the message as hateful. Indeed, such covertly communicated illocutionary meaning could have certain ramifications (technically referred to as *perlocutions* by Austin, 1975). For example, the above message might cause emotional and psychological distress to people of Afghan heritage. Therefore, it would be wise to consider comment [2] as being every bit as good an example of hate speech as comment [1]. By adopting a purely lexical approach, a comment such as [2] would, however, fall through the net as it would be unlikely to be flagged as hate speech.⁶

All in all, while a so-called lexical approach might be helpful in shedding light on hate speech, in view of the preceding argument, it could be claimed that “information available in the context that is not semantically encoded by an uttered sentence is relevant for determining [...] *what is said* by [...] the utterance” (Clapp, 2012: 72, original italics). This is precisely the reason why the current study draws inspiration from both lexical and illocution-informed approaches.

3. Hate speech, anti-immigration discourses and Afghanistan

Hate speech, defined as “forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia [...] or other forms of hatred” (Council of Europe, 1997, cited in Bilewicz and Soral, 2020: 4), is one of the most discussed and serious problems of modern times. As a matter of fact, it is through the use of hate speech that, for example, “individuals who belong to particular ethnic and religious communities” are psychologically harmed (Guiora and Park, 2017: 959). Hate speech can therefore inflict “considerable harm on both targeted individuals and wider society” (Vidgen and Yasseri, 2020: 66). As such, it

⁴ Note that Modern Persian is written in Arabic script, and from right to left.

⁵ In transcriptions, the symbol ʔ is a phoneme that typically represents the Persian letters ʔ and/or ʔ.

⁶ I am cognizant of the fact that as illocutions could be realised either overtly or covertly, a hate speech act could also be performed either overtly or covertly. Therefore, a mere synonymy between illocutionary meaning and covert hate speech is not what the current study proposes (cf. Assimakopoulos, 2020).

is no surprise that “[i]nstances of incitement to violence [more] often [...] overlap with hate speech” (Buyse, 2014: 780). In this respect, Culpeper (2021: 10, original italics) acknowledges that the term ‘hateful’ has “a particular association with *hurtful*”.

While hate speech could potentially be used against everyone and in every context, recent research findings indicate that hate speech directed against immigrants is a frequently observed phenomenon. For example, in a study focusing on anti-immigration discourse in the Scandinavian media, Hagelund and Kjeldsen (2021) note that this form of discourse performs such functions as “soft oppression, trivialization and stigmatization” and displays “important rhetorical variations in how anti-immigration actors are portrayed” (p. 10). Similarly, Arcila-Calderón et al.’s (2021) study points to the widespread use of anti-immigration discourse, involving “hateful comments and negative sentiments” (p. 5), which targets both politicians and refugees to varying degrees. In yet another study, Hrdina (2016) explores hate speech on Facebook that is directed at immigrants, and demonstrates that this use of hate speech “was aggravated [...] by the combined forces of disparate Facebook users, extremist groups’ propaganda, news media and the design of the social network itself” (p. 38). In this respect, Lesińska (2014) argues that while, for example, European countries have in a way “been open to migrations” and “promoted tolerance of ethnic diversity”, such “openness and tolerance” have not really made them “immune to anti-immigration sentiments” (p. 47). In this context, Bajomi-Lázár (2019) identifies, amongst other things, the presence of a nationalist narrative in some countries, which considers immigrants from certain countries to be a “threat to national culture and security” (p. 620).

In the case of Afghanistan, the most recent data from the UN Refugee Agency (cited in European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2021: 1) indicates that Iran is now home to “more than 950,000 registered Afghan refugees” and that at present “over 3.5 million Afghan nationals reside in Iran, including around 2 million undocumented” Afghans.

Historically, many Afghans have travelled to Iran, their neighbouring country, but over the last four decades or so, and with the rise in political, social and economic unrest and uncertainty, including civil wars, “population movements” in Afghanistan have increased “on an unprecedented scale” (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007: 138). At the same time, it has also been argued that an “Afghan presence in Iran [...] is a historical phenomenon which has much to do with the nature of the region, rather than being the result of popular responses to recent events” (McAbee, 2018: 90). Generally, the motivation behind Afghan immigration to Iran are manifold, including, but not limited to, the following reasons.

- “Many of the Afghans in Iran were fleeing oppression, the exact nature of which depends on the time in which they fled, be it during the Soviet invasion, during the civil war following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, or in the ascendancy and then collapse of the Taliban regime.”
- “Some Afghans came to Iran for specifically economic purposes. [...] labour-inspired migration, which often takes the form of habitual, seasonal movements, is a notable feature of the region as a whole.”
- “Given the developmental and economic disparity between Iran and Afghanistan, it is unsurprising that some Afghans, particularly young men, would travel to Iran to earn wages to repatriate home. In some communities, [...] this has become something of a rite of passage as it gives young men autonomy and freedom away from family life.”
- “Pilgrimage to shrines and other religiously significant sites in Iran also encourages Afghans [...] to travel to Iran, sometimes for extended periods of time.” (McAbee, 2018: 90)

Afghans have contributed, and continue to contribute, to Iran’s economy. Indeed, the Iranian economy greatly “benefited from their labour during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988) and the period of reconstruction that followed it” (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007: 141). However, in recent years, and due to various reasons, including “inappropriate economic conditions” as well as “miscellaneous social issues”, the policy of the Iranian government towards Afghan immigrants has changed, “making it more difficult for them to continue living in Iran” (Mansourian and Rejaei, 2018: 173). At the same time, while many Afghan immigrants have been living and working among Iranians for several decades, studies have indicated that some ordinary Iranians have negative attitudes towards them. For example, in a recent study, Shaterian (2020) reports that there is a belief among some Iranians, particularly those living in smaller towns, that the presence of Afghan immigrants “has caused economic disruption, social disruption, and expansion of insecurity” (p. 333). Historically, such negative attitudes can be traced back to the 1980s during which time Iran “was dragged into a bloody war with Iraq” (Ashrafi and Moghissi, 2002: 95). The war and a variety of other factors, including “[e]conomic scarcity and the political and social crisis of the period”, resulted in Afghans being branded as “scapegoats for the problems faced by ordinary [Iranian] citizens” (Ashrafi and Moghissi, 2002: 95). As a recurring complaint levelled against others by the dominant group (Ekman, 2019), there appears to be the assumption “that Afghans were being nicely provided for by a government that was unable to do the same for its Iranian citizens” (Ashrafi and Moghissi, 2002: 95).

4. The present study

It goes without saying that the rate at which social relations across the world are breaking down is alarming (Williams, 2021: 6). This, coupled with, amongst other things, technological advances such as the spread of the Internet and social media, have led to an increase in online hate speech. A suitable analysis and thorough investigation of online hate speech would therefore be timely as it enables us, as analysts, to enhance our understanding of how hate speech is formed and/or communicated. It is in this context that the current study seeks to make a contribution.

4.1. Data and methodology

The data for the current study is taken from comments that were manually collected from the comments section of news posts about Afghanistan on the official Instagram account of BBC Persian^{7,8}. The reason for focusing on an Instagram account is motivated primarily by the fact that, in Iran, Instagram “continues to grow in popularity in unprecedented ways” (Kargar and Rauchfleisch, 2019: 1509). Indeed, as reported in Rahbari (2019), “Iran has one of the top ten Instagram user populations in the world” (p. 3). By the same token, focusing on this particular news page, i.e., BBC Persian, was motivated by the fact that it is by far the most followed news page on Instagram among Persian-speaking communities. Indeed, at the time of data collection, the page in question had more than 12 million followers, by far the most followed Persian news account amongst Iranians. This suggests that the Instagram account of BBC Persian reaches out to, and has the potential to generate a response from, a vast audience. On a general level, focusing on online user comments as opposed to, for example, the language of the medium itself (i.e., the BBC), was deemed to be more fruitful as there is now an abundance of evidence which suggests that the Internet could be a hotbed of hate speech, unlike any other platform. As Brown (2018) observes:

... there is also evidence to suggest that the Internet disinhibits speakers to say things they would not otherwise say, face-to-face (Suler, 2004). There are different strands to this cyber-psychological phenomenon, but one is that anonymity—even perceived anonymity—can embolden people to be more outrageous, obnoxious, or hateful in what they say. (Brown, 2018: 298)

In order to collect data for the study, 58 posts on the above account were randomly selected. The posts covered a period of 24 months, from 2019 to 2021. The posts were selected purely on the basis of their news content. In other words, special care was exercised to ensure that the collected Instagram posts featured a news item about Afghanistan or the Afghan people while posts that featured news items about Iran or any other country were excluded from the corpus.

Having retrieved the posts, and following Parvaresh and Tayebi (2018), the comments section of each post was manually analysed by a research assistant, with a view to retrieving those comments which, in one way or another, involved what could be considered to be hate speech directed at Afghans in general, or Afghan immigrants in particular. In doing so, and in light of the preceding discussion, the following working definition of hate speech was adopted (influenced by and adapted from Chulitskaya, 2017: 66).

- Hate speech is characterised by the use of specific words or expressions, or rather the communication of meaning, which targets human dignity and/or makes references to stereotypes and biased opinion.

While applying the above definition, the following recognition criteria were also used.

- a) The comment in question should be made in response to the post, not as a response to other comments on the page.
- b) The comment in question should disparage the Afghan people/immigrants, Afghan society and so on.

The final corpus on which the current study is based comprises 744 comments. Each comment was double-checked by the author to ensure that all comments included were consistent with the above criteria.

After compiling the Persian corpus, Sketch Engine web service,⁹ a corpus tool which includes “a large number of corpora pre-loaded and ‘ready for use’, and tools for creating, installing and managing your own corpora” (Kilgarriff et al., 2014: 8, emphasis in the original) was used for the initial analysis.

For the sake of comparison, and to ensure that the collected (i.e., *focus*) corpus was unique, OPUS_Persian was used as the *reference* corpus. As a ‘ready for use’ corpus embedded in Sketch Engine, OPUS_Persian is:

a growing resource of freely accessible parallel corpora. It also provides tools for processing parallel and monolingual data as well as several interfaces for searching the data, which makes it a unique resource for various research activities. (Tiedemann, 2012: 2214)

Having compiled the corpora, I embarked on the analysis with a view to uncovering the pragma-linguistic strategies used in the formation of hate speech. To achieve this aim, I opted for a mixed-methods corpus-assisted pragmatic analysis in which I combined “elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches [...] for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al., 2007: 123). The quantitative investigation revolved primarily around the following steps:

⁷ The account in question can be accessed at <https://www.instagram.com/bbcpersian/> (Last accessed 2 June 2022).

⁸ It should be noted that the data used in this study was collected prior to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

⁹ The service can be found at: <https://www.sketchengine.eu> (Last accessed 1 Feb 2022).

- Establishing the frequency of words, also known as a frequency wordlist, i.e., how frequently specific words occur in the *focus* corpus being investigated (Gries, 2009; Crawford and Csomay, 2016).
- Comparing the frequency wordlist of the *focus* corpus against that of the *reference* corpus, with a view to confirming that the words in the *focus* corpus are demonstrably salient (Baker, 2006).

The quantitative corpus-assisted analysis was then complemented by a thematic analysis which began with the thematic organisation of emerging keywords by the author. This was then followed by a linguistic-pragmatic analysis in which the emerging patterns were analysed in their extended discourse contexts, following Parvaresh (2022).

5. Findings

In the following section, some of the study's key findings will be presented and discussed. For ease of management, the findings have been divided into quantitative and qualitative sections, respectively.

5.1. Quantitative findings

Table 1 summarises the linguistic make-up of the focus (comments) corpus and the reference (OPUS_Persian) corpus.

Table 1
The two corpora.

Focus Corpus	Number of words
Tokens	11,398
Types	3301
Reference Corpus	
Tokens	5,367,401
Types	140,818

As shown in Table 1, the *focus* corpus included more than 11,000 words, while the *reference* corpus included more than 5 million words. As far as unique word forms, also known as types, are concerned, the *focus* corpus included more than 3000 unique words while the *reference* corpus included more than 140,000 unique words.

To achieve the goals of this study, a keyword analysis was performed by comparing the frequency wordlist which was generated from the *focus* corpus against that of our *reference* corpus, which uncovered those words that were more demonstrably salient (Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016). That is to say, words that are significantly more frequent, also known as *keywords*, in the *focus* corpus “allow the analysis of linguistic saliency rather than simple frequency” (Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016: 85, as informed by Baker, 2006). The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Keywords in the focus corpus.

	Persian word	Phonetic transcription	English gloss	Frequency	Relative frequency (per 1 million words)	Relative frequency in the reference corpus (per 1 million words)
1	ایران	ʔirān	Iran	180	15792	6
2	افغانستان	ʔafqānestān	Afghanistan	148	12984	5
3	هم	ham	Also	127	11142	4
4	افغانی	ʔafqāni	Afghani	75	6580	0.3
5	کشور	kefvar	Country	50	4386	90
6	افغان	ʔafqān	Afghan	49	4298	0.18
7	مردم	mardom	Nation (people)	48	4211	543
8	ایرانی	ʔirāni	Iranian	44	3860	0.37
9	مگه	mage ^h	As well	35	3070	311
10	تریاک	tarjāk	Opium	30	2632	0

Table 2 demonstrates that: (i) the words Iran and Afghanistan are among the most salient words in the focus corpus; and (ii) other variations of these two words, e.g., Iranian, Afghan and Afghani, also appear among the most salient words in the focus corpus. This suggests that, content-wise, the corpus being investigated involves primarily the two countries of Iran and Afghanistan, and their corresponding nationalities. More importantly, what is particularly striking about Table 2 is that, despite the automatic associations that one might assume to exist between hate speech and markedly hateful words, the most salient keywords do not include markedly hateful expressions. This discovery lends support to the view expounded in Section

2 above, according to which a purely lexical approach is not sufficient when analysing hate speech as markedly hateful expressions do not appear to be salient. This observation is a good starting point for a more detailed qualitative analysis of the discursive construction of hate speech, which will be provided in the next section.

5.2. Qualitative findings

As noted above, having established the keyness, or rather centrality, of the above words in the comments corpus, it became evident that lexically-driven expressions of hate were not salient. It was therefore imperative to look for more covert ways of expressing hate. For ease of management, I began by arranging the keywords into a number of overarching thematic domains. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3
Dominant thematic categories within the corpus.

Thematic domains	Typical lexical items	Phonetic transcription	English gloss
Country and territory	ایران افغانستان	ʔirān ʔafqānestān	Iran Afghanistan
Nation and nationality	کشور افغانی افغان ایرانی	kefvar ʔafqāni ʔafqān ʔirāni	Country Afghani Afghan Iranian
Surprise and shock	مردم هم	mardom ham	Nation (people) Also
Product and artefact	مگه تریاک	mage ^h tarjāk	As well Opium

As can be seen in Table 3, the keywords in the corpus were thematically organised into four thematic domains: *country and territory*, *nation and nationality*, *surprise and shock*, and *product and artefact*. The above thematic domains laid the foundation for a detailed thematic analysis, the results of which are provided below. However, given the fact that the thematic domains of country/territory and nation/nationality largely overlap, I have analysed both these domains under one heading.

5.2.1. Domain 1: Country/territory or nation/nationality

One of the most common thematic domains in the corpus rests on the idea that Iran is a totally separate country from Afghanistan, and that each country or nationality is different. This tendency has given rise to the following interrelated themes:

a. Iran belongs to Iranians and not to Afghans

The first, and arguably the most noticeable, theme in the comments being investigated is that Afghans are living in Iran, a territory which does not belong to them. A case in point is provided in the following example¹⁰:

[3]

حق با آقای غنی است. بهای هر چیزی باید پرداخته شود. لطفا هزینه ی نگهداری چهل ساله ی برادران افغان در ای
ران را نقدا پرداخت کنید.

haq bā ʔāqāje qani ast. bahāje har tʃizi bājad pardāxt šavad. lotfan hazineye negahdārije tʃehelsāleje barādarān-e afqān dar ʔirān rā naqdan pardāxt konid.

Mr Ghani is right. The price of everything must be paid. Please pay in cash the cost of 40 years of keeping Afghan brothers in Iran.

The comment in [3] has been made in response to a post in which the former Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, suggested that Afghanistan would no longer send its river water to Iran for free - beyond what they had traditionally agreed upon - but instead would exchange it for Iranian oil. On the surface, the comment does not appear to have markedly hateful words or expressions. If anything, it involves: (i) the above user even agreeing with the president of Afghanistan (*Mr Ghani is right*) and (ii) the use of the endearment marker 'brothers' as well as the politeness marker 'please'. However, the covert illocutionary message it communicates, which is particularly evident in, for example, the particular use of the verb 'keep', is suggestive of the general frame of mind of this user towards Afghan immigrants. 'Keep' downgrades Afghans to a group of people who are, in a way, being sheltered by Iran, an activity which, as implied by this user, comes at a cost to Iranian people and which should now be paid for by Afghanistan. Evidently, in the case of this comment, it is not so much the use of markedly hateful words that has given this comment an overall hateful meaning, but instead its covertly communicated illocutionary force, i.e., the notion that Afghan immigrants living in Iran should not do so for free but should be expected to pay Iran for the long period of time (40 years) they have been residing there.

¹⁰ Note that for the sake of consistency, the Persian comments have been corrected for spelling and punctuation.

b. Iran is being imposed upon by Afghans

Another pattern found in the data revolves around the idea that Iran is the imposed-upon and largely unappreciated provider to the Afghan people. To further clarify this notion, let us focus on the next comment which was posted in response to a news item in which an Afghan girl claims that, despite the fact she has lived in Iran since she was one month old, the Iranian government failed to issue her with a birth certificate.

[4]

آقا شما که اینقدر ناراحتی چرا جمع نمی کنی برین؟ هر روز تعدادتون بیشتر می شه. به لطف شما یک خونه خالی
ی تو روستاها و حاشیه شهر ها نیست. کلی پول درمیاری بعد باز دم می کنی ننه من غریبم. خیلی خیلی اگه ناراحت
ین تو کشور خودتون بمونید اونجا را بسازید.

ʔaqa šomâ ke ħâš-e nârahâtin tjerâ d'zam nemikonin berin? har ruz te ʔdâdetun bištar mife. be lotf-e šomâ jek xune xâli tu rustâhâ va hâšje^h fâhrhâ nist. koli
pul dar mijârid baʔd bâz ham migin nane man qaribam. xejli xejli ʔage nârahâtin tu kefvar-e xodetun bemunin ʔunjâ râ besâzid.

If you are that unhappy, why don't you pack up your stuff and just go back? Every day there are more of you. Thanks to you, there is not even a single house available in the villages and in the outskirts of the towns. You make a lot of money and then keep nagging. If you are so unhappy, stay in your country and make it better.

In comment [4], the user invites all immigrants of Afghan origin living in Iran – regardless of who they are or what contributions they have made to Iranian society – to consider ‘going back’ to their own country should they not enjoy living in Iran. This invitation has been couched in terms of a rhetorical question which makes the message linguistically less direct. However, the overall illocutionary meaning such a rhetorical question covertly communicates is that the Afghan people have no right of permanent residence and are considered to be an imposition. The user then claims that there are more Afghan people arriving and living in Iran on a daily basis. In saying this – hence the illocutionary meaning – the user implies that Afghan immigrants are no longer welcome in the host country. The user then claims that ‘thanks’ to the presence of Afghans in Iran, a country which apparently Afghans do not belong to, the country is witnessing a housing crisis in both the ‘villages’ and the ‘outskirts of the towns’. This claim is free of markedly hateful expressions, but the illocutionary message it covertly conveys is hateful as it involves the *attribution of blame* (cf. Malle et al., 2014) to an immigrant group. The user then proceeds to claim that Afghans make a great deal of money in Iran, which in the given socio-political context could be interpreted as implying that this money belongs to Iranians and/or should go only to Iranians. This statement appears to have been made on the basis of the tacit and long-held assumption of ‘us versus them’. Afghans are clearly seen as outsiders who will never be part of the ‘us’ group and, as a result, are blamed for creating a housing crisis. The user believes, quite condescendingly, that even though Afghans make a great deal of money in Iran, they still ‘nag’. In saying this, the user implies that Afghans are not as thankful as they should be.

c. Afghanistan is not even a country

Another frequent theme developed in the comments sections of the posts centres around the idea that the country in question, i.e., Afghanistan, should not really be called a country because it lacks the necessary prerequisites to be considered a country, and thus is not deserving of ‘country status’. A case in point is provided in the following comment posted in response to a video news item in which the speaker discusses the current problem of drug addiction among Afghan women and the steps needed to tackle it.

[5]

آخه افغانستان هم کشوره؟ [...] برو آرژانتین فرانسه انگلیس کانادا آلمان استرالیا ببین کیفیت زندگی

چطوره. [...] [لطیف کنیدی از این کشوره‌ای دره پیستی دست بداری. حالون داره بهم می خوره

ʔaxe ʔafqānestān ham kefvar-e? [...] boro ʔâr.ǧāntin, farānse, engelîs, kânâdâ, ʔâlmân ʔostorâlijâ bebin keffijjat-e zendegi tjetore^h [...] lotf konid ʔaz ʔin
kefvarhâje darepiti dast bardârid, hâlemun be ham mixore^h.

But is Afghanistan really a country? [...] Go visit [post news items about] Argentina, France, England, Canada, Germany and Australia just to realise how high the quality of life is in those countries. [BBC Persian] do us a favour and cover less of such lousy countries. We are sick of it.

The above user asks a rhetorical question about whether Afghanistan is actually a country, a question which, despite the lack of lexically hateful expressions, serves to convey the idea that Afghanistan is, according to this user, not a country. In other words, by asking the rhetorical question (i.e., locution), this user manages to covertly convey the illocutionary meaning that Afghanistan is not a worthy country to be bothered with. The user then goes on to provide an ad hoc list (Zhang and Parvaresh, 2019) of countries which, according to this user, the news items on this page should be reporting on. The list includes primarily Western European and North American countries which this user believes to be worthy of attention as news items because they have, for example, ‘high living standards’. This implicitly communicates the idea that living conditions in Afghanistan are so low that they do not merit the media’s attention. The user then asks BBC Persian not to report on ‘lousy’ countries like Afghanistan as readers/viewers are allegedly ‘sick’ of such reports. In this comment, while a word such as ‘lousy’, particularly when it is used to describe a country or people, might be considered to be a more marked means of expressing hate, it is the so-called ‘imagined West’ (Bui et al., 2013) which, according to this user, has a degree of superiority over the Afghan way of life, which renders the overall meaning of the comment in question as hateful. The comment as a whole conveys the desire for seemingly more superior social groups and countries to not only dominate, but also subordinate, the news arena by removing allegedly unimportant countries such as Afghanistan from their remit, thereby promoting and

further entrenching what could be termed ‘hierarchy-enhancing myths’, which, in a way, serves “to legitimize the subordination and discrimination of groups lower in the social hierarchy” (Costello and Hodson, 2011: 220).

d. Afghans are inferior

Another common discursive pattern found in the corpus centres around attempts to portray Afghans as displaying certain undesirable behaviours and beliefs. A case in point is provided below:

[6]

مردم افغانستان با وجود یک قانون غور دینی، گونی سر زن ها شون می کنند. مردم افغانستان هیچ باوری به آزادی و

دموکراسی ندارند.

[...] mardom-e ʔafqānestān ba vodʔud-e jek qānun-e qejr-e dini guni sare^h zan hāfun mikonan. mardom-e ʔafqānestān hitf ʔeteqtādi be^h ʔāzādi va demokrāsi nadārānd.

Even under the current secular law the Afghan people still put sacks on their women [i.e., they force their women to wear sacks]. People of Afghanistan have no belief in freedom and democracy.

This comment was posted under a news item covering the story of how a recent ban by Afghan government officials, preventing Afghan girls from singing, had been questioned and severely criticised by various civil rights activists across the country. While reports that civil rights activists had tried to resist the ban on singing could potentially be considered as an extremely positive and forward-looking move, which points to the idea of plurality and demands for civil freedom inside Afghanistan – something to be proud of – the above user has entertained the idea that, in Afghanistan, restricting people's freedom is not just a top-down process pursued by officials, but rather something followed and practiced by the ‘Afghan people’ themselves. Lumping all Afghans together, regardless of their feelings towards restricting their civil rights, ignores all the apparently positive changes in modern day Afghanistan and creates a monolithically negative image of the Afghan people, portraying them as individuals who, despite not having to strictly abide by ‘Islamic law’, force their women to wear a ‘sack’. In this case, the metaphorical word ‘sack’ refers to a burqa, a loose garment worn by women in some Islamic countries to cover their entire body. By ignoring the distinction between choosing and being forced to wear a burqa, the above user thus depicts Afghans, most notably Afghan men, as imposing this dress code on women. This, according to this user, runs contrary to the ideals of freedom and democracy which s/he argues are ideals that Afghans often lack. In other words, in this comment, it is the juxtaposition of such positive words and concepts as *freedom* and *democracy* with forcing women to wear ‘sacks’ which conveys the hateful illocution that Afghans are inferior.

e. The pain and suffering of Afghans are not a cause for concern

Another recurring theme in the comments being investigated hinges on relegating the suffering and pain experienced by Afghans, thereby reducing their status from people deserving of sympathy to that of people devoid of (human) features/emotions. To further clarify this point, let us consider the comment below

[7]

ایا این همه بلبا و جنگ، چرا تمام نمی شن افغانی ها!

bā ʔin hame balā va dʔang, tʔerā tamum nemiʔan ʔafqāni hā?

With so much tragedy and war, how come Afghans have not died out yet?

The above comment was posted in response to a news item on a recent avalanche in Afghanistan which had killed several Afghans. The stark and gloomy content of the post is in sharp contrast to the rather upbeat tone of the comment, communicated through the use of so-called ‘face with tears of joy’ emojis and the exclamation marks accompanying the comment. By asking a rhetorical question, the user covertly communicates the hateful illocution that it is not the extent of ‘tragedy and war’ (i.e., human suffering) in Afghanistan that is of concern, but rather the reason why, despite tragedy and war, the Afghans have ‘not died out yet’. In expressing indifference towards the pain, suffering and death of the Afghans, the user in question portrays Afghans as less human and hence not worthy of one's concern.

f. Afghans take every opportunity that comes their way to leave their country

Another frequent pattern found in the data concerns the central idea that Afghan citizens are opportunistic people, in the sense that they are ready to take every advantage to leave their country and settle in another one, causing inconvenience for the host countries. By way of illustration, consider the following example

[8]

امیدوارم ناتو از افغانستان بیرون نره که بدبختیشی برای ما ایرانی هاست و دوباره گله گله از بیابون می
ان ایران و وبال ما می شن

ʔomidvāram nāto ʔaz ʔafqānestān birun nare ke^h badbaxtiʔbarāje mā ʔirāni hāst va dobāre gale gale ʔaz bijābun mijān ʔirān va vabāl-e mā mijān.
I hope NATO won't leave Afghanistan. Should they leave, it will be a disaster for us Iranians as they [Afghans] will again start flocking towards Iran through the deserts and will burden us [i.e., our country].

The above comment was posted under a news item in which the Secretary General of NATO¹¹ announced that if NATO forces decided to withdraw from Afghanistan at some future date, the decision would first be discussed with all NATO members including the United States. The above user remarks that he hopes this will not happen and that NATO will instead remain in Afghanistan – arguably to enhance security in the country – because, according to this user, if they leave, it will bring ‘misery’ for Iranians as Afghans will ‘again’ begin to ‘flock’ across the deserts towards their neighbouring country and will ‘burden’ Iran. It is interesting to note that this user presents his prediction as being based on something that has happened before. This user uses the word ‘again’ to highlight the idea that Afghan immigration to, and/or presence in, Iran is not something new, and that if NATO leaves Afghanistan it will happen once again. Such discursive construction of superior knowledge and the adoption of an epistemic stance (Kärkkäinen, 2003) appear to be at the heart of the above comment and similar comments. It is particularly interesting to note that, in this comment, the expression of hateful illocutions is achieved indirectly, for example, through the use of strongly negative metaphors (Hampe, 2017), such as ‘flock’ and ‘burden’. The former lumps all Afghans together and tacitly likens them to animals ‘flocking’ towards Iran, while the latter portrays them as objects that could restrict, for example, the movement or actions of others (i.e., Iranians).

5.2.2. Domain 2: Surprise and shock

Related to the perceptions of Afghanistan and Afghans discussed above are those comments which are grounded in the simplistic idea that one does not expect to read or hear about the presence of certain things, activities and initiatives in Afghanistan. In this respect, two interrelated themes are apparent. These themes are as follows:

a. Certain things just do not exist in Afghanistan

One of the most noticeable discursive patterns in the data rests on the pre-conceived idea that one would find it surprising that Afghanistan has, for example, certain civil agencies. By way of illustration, let us focus on the following typical comments from the corpus

[9]

افغانستان مگه وزارت داره؟
 ʔafqānestān mage^h vezārat dāre^h?
Does Afghanistan also have a ministry?

[10]

افغانستان مگه وزیر خارجه داره؟
 ʔafqānestān mage vazir-e xāredʒe^h dāre?
Does Afghanistan also have a foreign minister?

[11]

مگه افغانستان پولیس داره؟!?!?!
 mage^h ʔafqānestān polis dāre^h?!?!?!
Does Afghanistan also have a police force?!?!?!?

These comments, which have been posted in response to various news items on Afghanistan, are grounded in the idea that certain government agencies or civil forces (e.g., ministry, foreign minister and police) are not expected to exist in Afghanistan, hence the alleged surprise upon reading about them in the news items in question. To be more precise, comments [9] and [10] have been posted in response to news that the Afghan foreign minister is visiting India, and comment [11] is a response to a news item which informs the reader that the Afghan police have ordered an inquiry into the alleged domestic abuse of a child. These rhetorical questions, which evidently lack markedly hateful words or expressions, portray the user as being surprised to discover that Afghanistan, like other countries, has, for example, ministries, ministers and police officers. A hateful illocution is therefore conveyed through expressions of surprise and wonder, and presumably hidden layers of humour, thereby enabling the speaker to debase Afghanistan and question its status as a worthwhile country.¹²

b. Afghanistan cannot do better than us

¹¹ NATO stands for ‘North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’, a military alliance of several European and North American countries.

¹² Such comments could arguably be regarded as ‘mock politeness’ because they appear to convey varying degrees of ‘im/politeness mismatch’ which lead to an ‘implicature of impoliteness’ (Taylor, 2015: 130).

Another common theme emerging from the data revolves, rather interestingly, around the depreciation of Iran by comparing it to an allegedly 'less successful' country such as Afghanistan. While these comments might be regarded as providing a critique of Iranian society and/or government, they are couched in "expressions and strategies by means of which the speaker deprecates" (Zhou and Kádár, 2020: 265) various social aspects of his own life by comparing himself to his counterparts in Afghanistan, a country which is supposed to be less successful. By way of comparison, let us consider the following comment posted in response to a post featuring the news that Afghanistan has just started its Covid-19 vaccination programme.

[12]

خاک بر سرمون که افغانستان(م) واکسن‌هایش رو شروع کرده. باید بریم بمیریم.
xāk bar saremun ke^h ʔafqānestān(am) vāksināsijun ro ʔoru? karde^h. bājad berim bemirim.
It is a shame that even Afghanistan has begun to vaccinate its people. We should go and die.

Evidently, the user in [12] believes that Iran, presumably due to its perceived superiority, should have started, or was expected to have started, its Covid-19 vaccination programme sooner than Afghanistan. This does not appear to have happened, leading the user to voice his criticism by putting on record the idea that 'even' Afghanistan has started to vaccinate its people. The use of the adverbial expression 'even' presupposes¹³ a surprising or unexpected situation, which has happened despite all the odds against it. What makes this comment an example of hate is the illocution it covertly communicates, namely that Afghanistan is not expected to have commenced its vaccination programme before Iran. This notion clearly indicates a pitying attitude (Saxton and Benson, 2003) towards the status of Afghanistan as a country, its ability to control its own civil affairs and so on, without having to resort to lexically hateful words or expressions.

The same strategy can be found in the following comment which was posted in response to a previously discussed news item, in which the former Afghan president suggests that Afghanistan will no longer send its water to Iran for free, but will instead exchange it for oil (see comment [3] above)

[13]

خاک بر سرمون که افغانستانم داره برای ما شاخ می‌شه. باید بریم بمیریم.
xāk bar saremun ke^h ʔafqānestān ham dāre^h barāmun ʔax miʃe^h. bājad berim bemirim.
We should just go and die somewhere now that even Afghanistan is out-scaring us. We should just go and die somewhere.

This user is allegedly surprised by the news that Afghanistan is demanding payment from Iran for the water coming through it. As the comment lays bare, this user believes that the news demonstrates that 'even' Afghanistan is out-scaring Iran, something which, according to him, should theoretically and practically not have happened, as this user considers Iran to be the stronger of the two countries. The fact that it has happened, contrary to this user's expectations, leads him to suggest that Iranians should just 'go and die', i.e., be extremely embarrassed. While the comment in question is certainly a criticism of the Iranian government and/or Iranian policies, the overall hateful illocution it covertly conveys is the alleged, or rather expected, weakness of Afghanistan compared to its neighbour Iran, a weakness, the unfulfillment of which, has led to such comments.

5.2.3. Domain 3: Product and artefact

Another noticeable discursive pattern found in the data revolves around a particular illegal product, namely opium, that is used and/or produced in Afghanistan. In this respect, two related themes are evident.

a. Afghans/Afghanistan cannot do anything but produce opium

While opium products contribute a significant amount, approximately 16%, to Afghanistan's GDP (Na, 2018: 1), it is believed that the "surge in poppy cultivation and drug production" can be linked to militia groups across the country, most notably the Taliban, who use the revenue raised from opium production "to fund their operations" (Na, 2018: 2), over which the majority of ordinary Afghans have no control. However, as far as the comments in our corpus are concerned, the majority of references to opium or similar drugs specifically serve to question the legitimacy and validity of the Afghan people, or rather their country, by highlighting the production and use of illegal drugs in Afghanistan. To further clarify this point, consider the following comment posted in response to a news item informing the reader that several Afghan civil servants have been convicted of involvement in smuggling 'drugs'

[14]

مهمترین تولید و صادرات افغانستان همون تریاک و مواد مخدر هست اگر مواد مخدر صادر نکنند چه کنند؟!
mohemtarin tolid va saderāt-e ʔafqānestān tarjāk va mavād-e moxader hast. ʔagar mavād moxader sāder nakonan tje konand?!
The most important product and export of Afghanistan is opium. If they do not export drugs, then what else can they do?!

¹³ In Gricean pragmatics, an expression such as 'even' could be considered as an example of conventional implicature.

Evidently, the user in comment [14] uses a rhetorical question to covertly convey the hateful illocution that Afghanistan's main export is opium and other illegal drugs, and the country is incapable of producing anything else in the event that the country is banned from producing and/or smuggling drugs. Similar assumptions can be found in the next comment which was posted in response to the same news item

[15]

قياچاق مواد اوزم شو افغانستان مگه مچازات دم داره؟
 qatfāq-e mavād ōnam tu ʔafqānestān mage^h modzāzāt ham dāreh?
Smuggling drugs in Afghanistan is a criminal offence?

The user in comment [15] portrays Afghanistan as a country in which the illegal act of 'smuggling drugs/opium' is not treated as a criminal offence. This is of course in marked contrast to the content of the news item itself. This is achieved primarily by using a rhetorical question, which turns the expressed curiosity conveyed by the question into a sarcastic statement without the use of markedly hateful words. The hateful illocution the comment in question covertly communicates serves to undermine the position of Afghans, painting them as willing participants in illegal activities. It is also worth noting that the portrayal of Afghanistan in this comment as a country in which the illegal act of smuggling drugs is not a criminal activity, which is then followed by so-called 'face with tears of joy' emojis, serves to disparage the country, thereby questioning its legitimacy and credibility.

b. Afghans smoke opium

The generalisation that Afghans are in fact users of the notorious drug opium is rather similar to the previous theme. By way of illustration consider the following example

[16]

جوری تریاک می کشن دود می کنن که کرونا جلوی چشمش رو دم نمی‌بینه.
 dʒuri tarjāk mīkefan, dud mikonan ke^h koronā dʒeloje tʃeʃeʃrā ham nemibine^h.
They smoke opium in such a way that the coronavirus can't even see what's in front of it.

Comment [16] is a response to a post providing a daily summary of the number of people in Afghanistan who have contracted coronavirus and the number who have died as a result. The post indicates that over the last 24 h, 3 deaths and 29 new positive cases of the disease were recorded. Reading between the lines, this user appears to believe that the real number of cases is higher than the number reported. He attributes such low numbers, in a seemingly humorous way, to the fact that, according to him, Afghans smoke opium on a regular basis which blinds the coronavirus, i.e., it becomes less effective. Despite being couched in humorous or banter-like language, the comment in question covertly communicates the idea (illocution) that ordinary Afghans are opium users, which apparently prevents them from contracting the virus or helps them to recover quickly from illness because of the drug's stereotypical medical impact. There is arguably a mismatch between the seemingly polite and humorous message in the comment and the implied and tacit derogatory message it conveys.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Time and again, various studies and reports have demonstrated, particularly in recent years, that online hate speech is on the increase. This is certainly not a trivial issue, for hate speech serves not only to distance people, but also to stigmatise both individuals and groups with a view to, for example, *marginalising*, *disempowering* and *excluding* them (Grove and Zwi, 2006: 1933). Indeed, what makes any study of hate speech particularly relevant is the undeniable fact that, nowadays, a "rise in incidents of hate speech and hate crime around the world" is clearly evident (Fino, 2020: 32).¹⁴

Although some commendable attempts have recently been made at local, government and business levels around the world to curb this phenomenon, tackling hate speech is still a significant challenge, particularly in online contexts. Indeed, the Internet appears to act as "an amplifier to reflect and reinforce available discourses" of hate (Chetty and Alathur, 2018: 113). As Johnson et al. (2019: 261) note, "[s]ocial media platforms seem to be losing the battle against online hate and urgently need new insights". More importantly, hate speech could have some serious ramifications as noted below:

- "While the number of people personally targeted remains relatively low, large numbers of people are being exposed to online hate speech, potentially causing decreased life satisfaction";
- "The harms caused by online hate speech to victims and communities are not trivial, often matching those caused by physical crimes";

¹⁴ Such an increase in the use of hate speech appears to have been "exacerbated by the rise of nationalist political discourse against 'others', belonging to, for instance, a different colour, religion, nationality or ethnic origin or descent" (Fino, 2020: 32).

- “[O]nline hate speech is often a pre-cursor to, or an extension of, offline hate crime, which can multiply and intensify the effects.” (Williams, 2019: 9–10)

Consequently, the detection of online hate speech “has remain[ed] a vibrant research focus” (Ayo et al., 2021: 2). It is exactly against this backdrop that the current study seeks to contribute to the literature. To this end, the study has examined instances of online hate speech directed at Afghans, a group of people who have experienced one of the world’s most widespread displacement patterns.

As far as the findings of the current study are concerned, and despite the fact that some people might expect hate speech to be associated with markedly hateful expressions, it was revealed that, on most occasions, the language used did not necessarily involve markedly hateful words or expressions. In other words, and without denying the fact that hate speech in general and the hate speech found in the corpus under investigation do involve some instances of markedly hateful language, in most cases the hate language found lacked markedly hateful language and revolved primarily around covert ways of expressing hatred. Indeed, in the corpus under investigation, markedly hateful expressions were few and far between, to the extent that they did not have meaningful salience in the data.

In light of the preceding finding, a notable observation that could be made pertains to the inventiveness involved in the hate comments, such as the users’ self-depreciation of various aspects of their own lives or their country’s status quo with a view to stigmatising and undermining others. In this respect, as this study has shown, hateful messages could be conveyed inventively and in less direct ways (cf. Tayebi, 2018). Such hate-conveying innovations could provide so-called haters with a unique opportunity to express hate whilst evading detection (Gröndahl et al., 2018). In this respect, the evidence provided in the current study, i.e., that hate speech may not necessarily involve overtly hateful speech, could, to some extent, explain the lack of success in tackling hateful language, particularly on social media (cf. Yar, 2018; Tayebi and Coulthard, 2022). When the majority of hate language is communicated covertly it makes both its identification and classification much more difficult than is the case for hate speech involving distinguishable and marked linguistic features.

Needless to say, what the present study has discussed is just one of many ways that people can be hateful. Other, seemingly more ubiquitous ways, such as “insert[ing] typos, chang[ing] word boundaries or add[ing] innocuous words to the original hate speech” (Gröndahl et al., 2018, in the abstract) are already at work, making it more difficult for social media regulators, for example, to track down hate speech. The successful tackling of online hate speech would therefore require a paradigm shift, from a reliance on *lexemes* to *illocutions*. In the words of Baider (2020: 200):

While a lexical approach enables effective and quick text profiling (by age, region, gender, education, etc.), and can identify the typical hate speech keywords for selected communities, this method has its limitations, too, of which the inevitable complexity of assessing a speech act, the difficulty in evaluating abstract concepts such as racism outside the interactions in which the words used are embedded, and the introduction of innovative metaphors are just a few examples (Zhang et al., 2018). [...] Consequently, tracking down hate speech involves constant monitoring of the innovations thought up by the haters. (Baider, 2020: 200)

In light of the preceding argument, the discursive patterns uncovered in the current study, in which instances of hate speech under investigation were grounded, could be treated as “benchmarks datasets” (Ayo et al., 2020: 2) that could prove useful to the development of machine learning models for tracking hate speech across various social media platforms.

All in all, hate speech is a widespread phenomenon and the affordances of the Internet have, in some ways, assisted the spread of hate speech. This study is an initial but important step in shedding light on the hate language that is directed at one rarely explored immigration population. However, further research is needed, not only to explore the covert forms of hate language that are levelled at the Afghan people, but also the covert forms of hate language that are directed at other immigrant populations. Future researchers might therefore be interested in exploring the hate language that is used against other nationalities and immigration groups, particularly on social media. The current study focused on Instagram, but more innovative social networking platforms (e.g., TikTok) could also be a potential research topic. Also, although hate speech and its key role in provoking various forms of conflict have recently received special attention, “there is still more to be done to better understand the intersection between [...] language aggression and conflict more generally” (Culpeper et al., 2017: 7). Finally, as the data used in the current study was gathered from a social media platform, future researchers might be interested in exploring hate speech variations in more traditional media discourses. Such an endeavour would make more sense if one takes into account the fact that some of the affordances of social media (e.g. the ability to remain anonymous or to operate under a different identity) might be different from those found in traditional media discourses (cf. Tagg, 2015), which could potentially have an impact on the ways through which hateful illocutions are communicated.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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