

LINGUISTIC STUDY OF POLITICAL FLAMING IN
NEWS ONLINE COMMENT SECTIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines flaming in general and political flaming in particular (in news online comment sections) as a form of discursive hostility that has become a trend in the modern world of cyber-bullying to provoke an argument online and escalate verbal attacks that create a toxic environment. The object of study is the emotionally charged linguistic units that uncover the implied intents of political verbal aggression through adversarial language. Case study methodology, employed in the research, enables to analyse verbal strategies employed in online news comments, particularly to disclose that emotionally charged, negatively connoted words and phrases significantly outweigh the neutral ones, exemplifying highly emotive, confrontational rhetoric that constructs an antagonistic discourse and fosters delegitimization and alarmism. The consequences of political flaming are grave – spread of false information, increase of hostility among individuals and groups which undermine proper political dialogue and lead to polarization of communities and society at large.

Keywords: Political flaming, news online, comment sections, emotional charge, negative connotation.

Introduction

Today, flaming (hostile and insulting online communication), otherwise called “discursive hostility”, “verbal aggression” [Andersen, 3] or “verbal abuse” [Dhayef & Alaassam, 2078] and its sub-categories, among them trolling (deliberate provocation of others online), cyber-bullying (online harassment) and hate speech (incitement of hatred towards a targeted group) have become an indispensable part of computer-mediated communication (CMS). Flaming messages are usually posted in online newsgroups and forums. The exchange of such messages – fanning the flames and extending flare-ups – usually results in a *flame war* (escalation of verbal attacks that create a toxic environment). This expression of hostility towards others in online news comments “exerts a negative impact on user perception and is said to be particularly disruptive” [Boehmer, 6].

As part of the broader concept of flaming, political flaming involves hostile interactions on political topics in social media platforms, **news online comment sections** and forums and other online spaces where political discussions are taking place. Via the usage of inflammatory language and hostile comments, aggressive conduct and personal attacks, political flaming provokes, offends or undermines the opposing party [Hutchens et al., 1201-1207]. In other words, political flaming is a kind of online incivility and disrespect towards individuals or groups whose political beliefs are different.

One reason for political flaming is the increasing lack of consensus of opinion and civility. Rather than respecting those who hold a different point of view and engaging in constructive political discussion, people engage in personal animosity and an aggressive form of communication in the arena of politics, shaping a “political landscape” not just via criticism but attacks and counterattacks, via “inflammatory comments that add little in the way of substance to the discussion” [Brooks and Geer, 1- 5].

As a consequences of political flaming, conflicts escalate, false information spreads, hostility increases among individuals and groups which undermine proper political dialogue and lead to polarization of communities. The hostile verbal behaviour or the uncivil, insulting language of flammers addressing those outgroup members who challenge their opinion, contributes to the above-mentioned consequences to a great extent. Hence, in this paper we will case study the flaming language of regular users of news online comment sections and forums to disclose which emotionally loaded linguistic units function as most typical markers of flaming.

Linguistic Characteristics of Political Flaming

Verbal flaming in text-based CMC is explained as a process that includes “the creation, transmission, and interpretation of a message that is perceived from multiple perspectives as violating norms” [O’Sullivan and Flanagan, 85] and is defined as “hostile verbal behaviour” “clearly associated with antagonism” [Thompson and Foulger, 225]. It involves aggressive, hostile, inflammatory messages aiming to provoke or insult others across various forms of online communication, online comment sections and forums included. In such environments flaming is usually realized through **emotionally charged linguistic utterances** present in all types of verbal aggression – (1) personal attacks (*You, uninformed loser, did you ever go to school?*); (2) sarcastic mockery (*Wow, you’re an expert on politics.*); (3) dismissing opinions with insults (*That’s the dumbest thing*

I’ve read here.); (4) hostile generalizations (*Typical right-wing nonsense.*); (5) threats and aggressive language (*Shut up or I’ll end up reposting your nonsense.*); (6) belittling (*You’re the reason our country is falling apart.*); (7) trolling (*You’re a troll as no person can be that dumb.*). The mentioned types of flaming comments synthesized from commonly recognized scholarly literature [Thompson, 51-72], [Kayani, 1135-1141], [Turnage, 43-59], [Nitin et al., 21-26], are typical of verbal flaming, or put in metaphorically – *the war of words*, and their intent is to attack the other party with the aim of fanning the flames, i.e. provoking a no less emotional response. It should be added here that the situational factor of anonymity (hidden true identity, masked personality or freedom from identification) contributes to flaming greatly. “When an account of a user appears anonymous, the tendency of the particular person to flame increases. More swearing, hate-speech and hostility is displayed due to the absence of one’s true identity” [Hutchens, 1207]. Thus, covering personal identity people are more likely to engage in discursive hostility, especially in the case of political flaming.

As already mentioned, political flaming that appears in news online comment sections is directed to people who hold opposing political views. Below are two typical examples of political

flaming based on reactions to online news articles on US immigration policy and presidential approval ratings. In the comments the focus is not on discussing issues rationally but on attacking and belittling the other party based on their political beliefs. The language is harsh, divisive, and designed to provoke emotional reactions, rather than foster productive conversation. The inflammatory language contributes to the overall toxic atmosphere.

The linguistic analysis examines the verbal strategies employed in the given passages, particularly focusing on emotionally charged and negatively connoted linguistic units.

- Typical leftist nonsense. You guys just want to turn America into a socialist hellhole where anyone can waltz in and ruin the country. If you can't protect our borders, maybe you should move to one of those third-world countries you seem to love so much.
- Liberals like you are the reason crime is going through the roof. You're too busy hugging illegals to notice what's happening to our own people. [Fox News]
- It's insane to me that people still defend this disaster of a president. He's ruining this country with his incompetence, and you idiots can't see it. Your worship of him is pathetic!
- Why do you leftists always make excuses for him? He's literally the worst president we've had in modern history, and you're too blind to admit it. [Politico]

The flaming comments employ **highly emotive and negatively charged** linguistic units, creating a strong affective stance via

(1) **Lexico-semantic features** that are expressed in recurring patterns:

- ✓ pejorative nouns and labels (*nonsense* – delegitimizing opposing views; *hellhole* – depicting socialism hyperbolically; *illegals* – dehumanizing immigrants; *disaster* – implying utter failure; *idiots* – insulting intellectual capacity; *worship* – mocking political loyalty);
- ✓ negatively loaded adjectives and adverbs (*incompetence* – evaluating ability in a negative way; *pathetic* – expressing contempt; *blind* – denying willfully);
- ✓ hyperbolic expressions (*turn America into a socialist hellhole* – apocalyptic framing; *crime is going through the roof* – exaggeration; *literally the worst president in modern history* – emotionally charged judgment).

(2) **Syntactic and rhetorical strategies** that reinforce emotive impact:

- ✓ rhetorical questions that function as confrontational devices (*Why do you leftists always make excuses for him? If you can't protect our borders, maybe you should move...?*);
- ✓ direct address and second-person pronouns that enhance confrontation (*You guys, You're too busy, You idiots, Your worship*);
- ✓ definitive and universalizing utterances that overgeneralize (*You guys just want to...; Liberals like you are the reason crime is going through the roof; You leftists always make excuses*).

(3) **Pragmatic emotive choices** that realize multiple discursive functions:

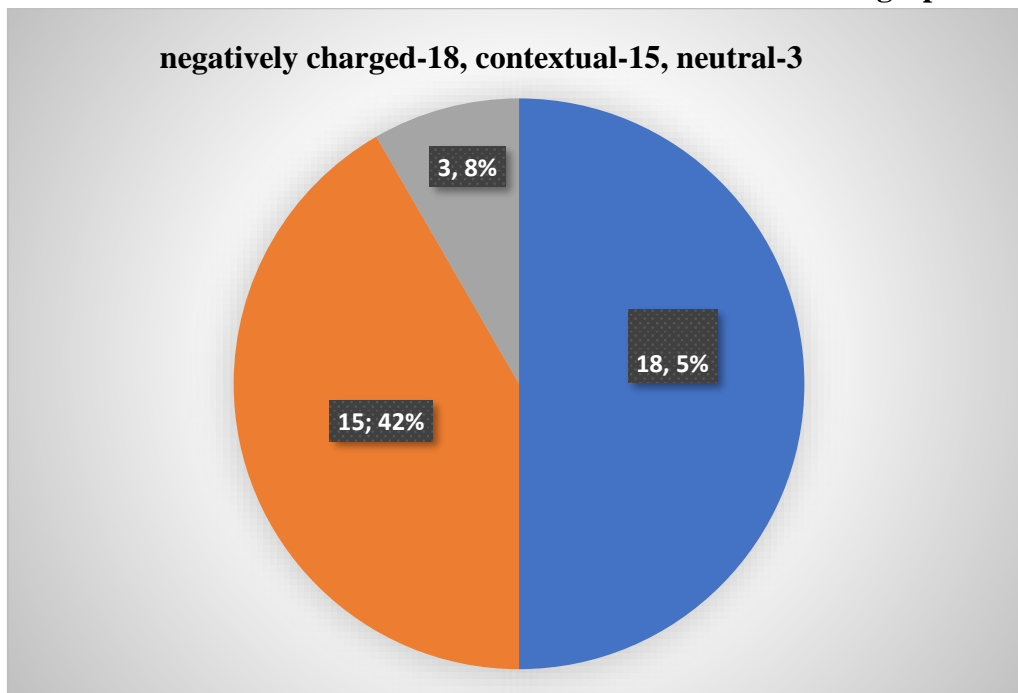
- ✓ polarization and othering, framing opposition as irrational (*nonsense; blind; idiots; hugging illegals*);

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- ✓ identity markers used pejoratively to reinforce *us vs them* dichotomy (*leftists; liberals like you*);
- ✓ moral indignation and alarmism via repeated use of words that convey a sense of crisis or catastrophe (*ruin; hellhole; worst; disaster; waltz in and ruin the country, crime is going through the roof*);
- ✓ mockery that diminishes the political group and negates possibility of debate (*your worship of him is pathetic; typical leftist nonsense*).

By identifying and counting flaming linguistic units based on tone and emotional charge in the text of the above comments, we can estimate that it contains **3 neutral linguistic units (3,8%)**: *If you can't protect our borders; maybe you should move; our own people*) expressed in factual statements, **18 negatively charged linguistic units (18,50%)**: *typical leftist nonsense; socialist hellhole; ruin the country; third-world countries; Liberals like you; crime is going through the roof; too busy hugging illegals; insane; disaster of a president; ruining this country with his incompetence; you idiots; Your worship of him is pathetic! Why do you leftists always make excuses for him? You guys just want to turn America into...; It's insane to me that people still defend this; literally the worst president we've had in modern history; too blind to admit it*) which contain insults, strong accusations and emotionally charged criticism. Such words/phrases express strong negative emotions or derogatory connotations. The remaining units (**15 (15.42%)**) fall into the group of **contextual or connecting words** – prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, auxiliary verbs, pronouns that link ideas and provide context without conveying any tone.

Infographic 1



Thus, it is evident that most comments lean heavily on negative language, making the neutral parts minimal and context-dependent. The highly emotive, confrontational rhetoric is realized through linguistic units that are negatively connoted. The linguistic choices create an antagonistic discourse that fosters polarization. The heavy reliance on absolutes reinforces ideological hostility, discouraging constructive discussion.

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Political flaming in news sources that comment on situations surrounding the Israel-Palestine or Russia-Ukraine conflicts is extremely intense, as these issues are highly polarizing today.

- You left-wing idiots act like Hamas is some kind of oppressed freedom fighter group. They are terrorists, plain and simple. Israel has every right to defend itself, but you keep attacking the only democracy in the Middle East while ignoring the terrorism.

- Stop pretending Israel is the bad guy here. Hamas is launching rockets at civilians, and yet you people defend them? You wouldn't care if it was happening to your own country, but since it's Israel, you act like they deserve it. Pathetic. [BBC]

- You're just regurgitating the Palestinian propaganda. They're not innocent victims. Hamas hides behind civilians, and they use them as shields. How much longer will you support them in this charade?

- Every time something happens in Gaza, you try to make Israel look like the villain. Well, maybe stop focusing on the victims and look at the perpetrators for once. Hamas and their allies are the real terrorists here. [**The Guardian**]

- You leftists in Israel disgust me. How can you be so blind to the dangers of the Palestinians? You're sacrificing your own country for the sake of political correctness and misguided peace efforts.

- How does anyone in good conscience support a country that continues to infringe on Palestinian rights while pretending to be the victim? Israel is a colonial occupier, and if you can't see that, you're part of the problem. [Haaretz]

- Why do people still defend this regime? Russia invaded a sovereign nation, and all you do is make excuses for them. Putin's regime is a war criminal organization, and the only people who can't see that are the ones who are either brainwashed or too scared to speak out.

- You guys are so blinded by your anti-Western hatred that you can't even admit the obvious: Russia is the aggressor here. It's sad to see some of you still making excuses for Putin's expansionist policies. [New York Times]

- How can anyone justify pouring billions of dollars into Ukraine while Americans are struggling? Zelensky's cronies are laughing all the way to the bank, and we're just feeding the military-industrial complex. Wake up, people!

- So now we're supposed to play world police? This is a European problem, not ours. You're all too obsessed with your anti-Russia crusade to care about the real consequences – a higher inflation, economic collapse, and getting deeper into another endless war. [CNN]

- You people have no clue about history. NATO's expansion is the primary reason Russia reacted the way it did. Stop parroting this pro-NATO propaganda and start understanding the geopolitical context. You're all just pawns in this global power game.

- You keep talking about how Russia is the aggressor, but NATO's actions have been just as provocative. The West has blood on its hands for pushing Ukraine into a conflict it couldn't win. [Al Jazeera]

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- You are all sheep. Ukraine was never going to win this war. Russia was always going to crush them under the weight of its military power. But keep telling yourselves the West is winning. The truth is, this conflict was created by American intervention in the first place.

- This is typical Western propaganda – demonizing Russia at every turn, ignoring the fact that Ukraine is not as innocent as you pretend. The real cause of war is Western interference, and you all are just too blinded by your own arrogance to see it.

[Russia Today]

The above comments rely heavily on **emotionally charged**, adversarial language, frequent usage of derogatory terms and hyperbolic expressions to reinforce ideological positions. At large, the flaming comments display a confrontational and emotionally charged nature. The flaming comments create a strong affective stance expressed in the following patterns:

(1) Lexico-semantic features:

✓ **pejorative nouns and labels** (idiots – insulting, dismissing opposing viewpoints; regime – negatively connoting Putin’s authoritarianism; sheep – considering opponents mindless; cronies – suggesting corruption in the Ukrainian administration; pawns – being manipulated by NATO).

✓ **negatively loaded adjectives and adverbs** (Pathetic – expressing contempt; blind/blinded – implying lack of thought; expansionist – suggesting Russia is an aggressor; provocative – blaming the West for escalating tensions and conflicts);

✓ **hyperbolic expressions** (Israel is a colonial occupier – framing ideologically; Russia was always going to crush them – asserting a fatal prediction; Western propaganda – demonizing Russia at every turn – insisting on generalization; Ukraine was never going to win this war – oversimplifying with absolute certainty).

(2) Syntactic and rhetorical strategies:

✓ rhetorical questions that do not seek answers, but rather express outrage (How can anyone justify pouring billions of dollars into Ukraine...? How does anyone in good conscience support a country that continues to infringe on Palestinian rights...? Why do people still defend this regime?

✓ **direct address and second-person pronouns** that express accusatory, increasing confrontation (You left-wing idiots act like Hamas...; You people have no clue about history; You’re all just pawns in this global power game).

✓ **definitive and universalizing utterance** that tend to overgeneralize, condemning a political group, presupposing bias, negating complexity (You leftists in Israel disgust me; Every time something happens in Gaza, you try to make Israel look like the villain; Russia was always going to crush them).

(3) Pragmatic and discursive choice of linguistic units (serving specific rhetorical purposes):

✓ polarization and othering when ideological opponents are framed as idiots; sheep; or blind reinforcing us vs. them; when identity markers are used (you leftists, you people) to create division; when negative characterizations are addressed to groups (Hamas defenders; pro-NATO propagandists).

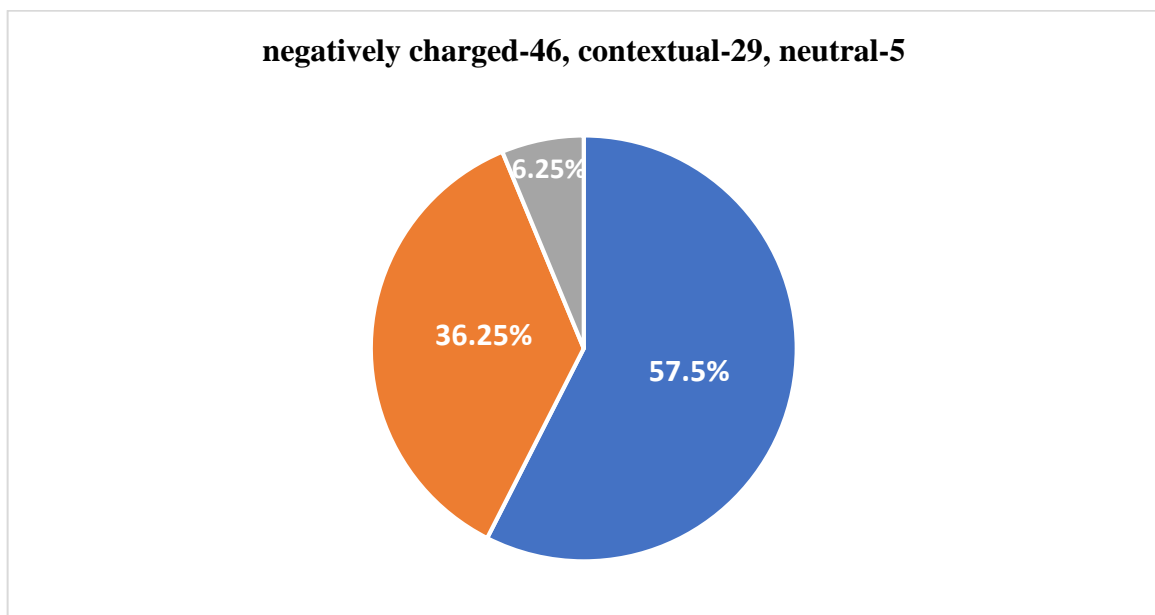
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✓ moral indignation and alarmism when assigning direct blame (The West has blood on its hands); urging action (Wake up, people!); claiming betrayal (You're sacrificing your own country for political correctness).

✓ **mockery** that dismisses opposing views as manipulated, reduces narrative to intentional misinformation, and ridicules optimism through sarcasm (You're all just pawns; Typical Western propaganda; Keep telling yourselves the West is winning).

Breakdown of linguistic units based on tone and emotional charge referring to Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts discloses that the flaming comments include **5 neutral linguistic units (6,25%)**: Hamas is launching rockets at civilians; Every time something happens in Gaza; Russia invaded a sovereign nation; Russia is the aggressor here; Putin's expansionist policies which contain factual statements or are not emotionally charged and **46 negatively charged linguistic units (57,5%)**: left-wing idiots; terrorists, plain and simple; attacking the only democracy; ignoring the terrorism; Stop pretending; Pathetic; you people defend them? regurgitating the Palestinian propaganda; You wouldn't care if it was happening to your own country; you act like they deserve it; regurgitating the Palestinian propaganda; not innocent victims; use them as shields; this charade; to make Israel look like the villain; Hamas hides behind civilians; maybe stop focusing on the victims and look at the perpetrators; the real terrorists here; You leftists in Israel disgust me; blind to the dangers; sacrificing your own country; political correctness; misguided peace efforts; How does anyone in good conscience support...; colonial occupier; part of the problem; defend this regime; Putin's regime is a war criminal organization; brainwashed or too scared; blinded; anti-Western hatred; It's sad to see some of you still making excuses; too obsessed; higher inflation, economic collapse; endless war; You people have no clue about history; Stop parroting this pro-NATO propaganda; You're all just pawns; NATO's actions have been just as provocative; West has blood on its hands; You are all sheep; Ukraine was never going to win; Russia was always going to crush them; This is typical Western propaganda; demonizing Russia at every turn; ignoring the fact that Ukraine is not innocent; blinded by your own arrogance) which convey hostility, insults, strong accusations and emotionally charged criticism. The number of **contextual or connecting linguistic units is approximately 29 (36,25%)**.

Infographic 2



It is evident that **the negatively charged units significantly outweigh the neutral ones**, indicating a strong emotional and critical tone throughout the passages. Hence, the above-mentioned political flaming comments exemplify highly emotive, confrontational rhetoric realized through linguistic units that are negatively connoted. The linguistic choices construct an antagonistic discourse that fosters polarization, delegitimization, and alarmism. The heavy reliance on generalization and absolutes reinforces ideological rigidity, discouraging nuanced discussion.

Conclusion

Most recently, in the present geo-political situation in the world, flaming has become a discourse that diminishes the credibility of those who disagree, deepens divisions between people and groups making it hard for individuals to have a productive political discussion. The linguistic study of political flaming discloses that highly emotive, polarized rhetoric reigns supreme throughout news online comments. The dominant linguistic strategies in emotionally charged narratives include derogative labels and insults, absolute, dehumanizing, aggressive, dismissive statements, *us vs. them* framing, accusatory second-person address, polarization in general. All the goals are achieved via emotionally loaded and negatively connoted linguistic units that function to convey bias and influence the reader's emotional response. The data analysis of flaming discourse in news online comments discussed in this paper shows that negatively charged linguistic units (64 or 76%) significantly outweigh the neutral ones (8 or 10,05%) indicating a strong emotional and critical tone throughout the comments. These results disclose the fact that, by intensifying the emotional impact, flaming in news online comments frames certain ideologies or actions as extreme and dangerous and fosters antagonism making constructive debate impossible.

Linguistically, by analyzing political framing in news online comments, we can better understand how language influences discourse and political polarization.

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