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# Impoliteness strategies in Croatian and Serbian user comments on online news articles: A study based on readers' perceptions

This study examines readers' perceptions of impoliteness in user comments on online news articles in two daily newspapers: Croatia's *Jutarnji list* and Serbia's *Večernje novosti*. The study considers judgments by four younger study participants that did not participate in the online discussions as posters. These readers evaluated impoliteness from their own point of view, identifying impolite utterances in 668 user comments. Participants' judgments are categorized and analyzed drawing on Culpeper's (2011a) taxonomy of impoliteness formulae and triggers. This study focuses on utterances and language means judged impolite by the majority — that is, three or four participants — with the aim of identifying frequent impoliteness formulae and language means that are judged to be impolite. Among the phenomena judged impolite by three or four readers, predominant are conventionalized impoliteness formulae with terms from the domains of sexual activities and mental health, and referential terms with a historical burden. Cursing was regularly judged impolite, as well as expressions with words from the semantic domain of scatology, words evoking animal metaphors, and name modifications (blends) resulting in taboo or derogatory terms. There seems to be a strong correlation between the phenomena judged impolite and discursive identity construction — that is, establishing the border between “us” and “them” — which in the data often involved negative, and even stigmatizing, descriptions of those considered to belong to another national group.

**Keywords:** impoliteness judgments, impoliteness interpretations, user comments, impoliteness formulae, Croatian and Serbian newspapers

## 1. Introduction

Croatian and Serbian online discussions of politics and national identity are likely to result in numerous posts (as is the case elsewhere; see, e.g., Stroud et al. 2016) which often provide a rich conflictual context characterized by hostility and impoliteness (see, e.g., Kakava 2002; Sobieraj & Berry 2011; Kleinke & Bös 2015). These can serve various purposes: establishing solidarity between posters, or disassociating from certain posters or non-participants in the discussion, or entire (ethnic, religious, etc.) groups. Posters' perception and assessment of aggressive language and impoliteness, sometimes documented in meta-pragmatic comments, may differ from researchers' judgments, which in turn can be rather different from laypersons' judgments. A question that is rarely considered is how the audience perceives impoliteness in various types of computer-mediated communication (CMC). This study looks at user comments on news articles,<sup>1</sup> a genre that is insufficiently researched in the Croatian and Serbian context.

CMC is considered "a fertile ground for conflict" (Hardaker 2015: 201). This applies to various genres, including online forum discussions, YouTube comments, and user comments on news articles. User comments are valued for their potential to facilitate public engagement and political action, but their incivility and hostility is a frequent reason for news organizations to block comments (Ksiazek & Springer 2020: 92, 94). Online interactions have their own local rules, characterized by frequent aggressive discursive practices. Research has often linked such practices to anonymity (e.g., Ermida 2013; Ksiazek 2015; Ksiazek & Springer 2020: 65–70, Santana 2019). Since CMC offers "faceless" interactions and relatively anonymous identities leading to "the online disinhibition effect" (Suler 2005), interlocutors may "separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity" (Suler 2005: 185) and feel less vulnerable, but also less accountable for the effects of their discursive practices directed at targets and third parties (see, e.g., Peebles 2014 on cyberbullying).

In user comments, a genre characterized by colloquial and informal language,<sup>2</sup> people make their voices heard in public, engage and interact with news source or readers, and react to articles and/or comments by others. Given the frequency of impoliteness in CMC genres that utilize colloquial language, can it be assumed that readers accept impoliteness as a default and do not consider many phenomena impolite? This is one of the questions this study considers by examining the perception of impoliteness in comments on four articles in two newspapers: Croatia's

<sup>1</sup> See Ksiazek and Springer (2020) for a comprehensive account of this genre.

<sup>2</sup> Ehret and Taboada (2020) argue that online news comments are their own type of register, different from face-to-face communication and positioned on the written end of the written–spoken continuum.

*Jutarnji list* (JL) and Serbia's *Večernje novosti* (VN). The articles and comments were published in December 2016 on the newspapers' websites. The platform users responded to the same topics, while the articles discussed two political topics. Two (see Appendix A) discussed the Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović giving a chocolate bar produced in Serbia to Croatian children and her apology after a parent on Facebook criticized this. Another two (see Appendix A) reported on Croatia blocking the opening of a chapter in accession negotiations between the EU and Serbia and the reaction by the Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, who then refused to attend an EU meeting. Having politicians as their main social actors, these news articles addressed Serbian–Croatian relations, a sensitive topic in both countries since the wars of the 1990s. Issues related to these war conflicts, such as civilian victims of the wars, missing persons, and border disputes, continue to burden the two countries' relations. Nationalist political rhetoric frequently utilizes these issues by foregrounding sufferings and losses of one side only (Serbian or Croatian), which undermines reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> Discussing Serbian–Croatian relations in a (semi-)public media discourse, such as online discussions, is a sensitive topic related to identity negotiations and the discursive delineation between “us” and “them”, regularly characterized by verbal aggression and impoliteness, which is also a feature of the user comments examined. It may seem that the news stories published in 2016 and the discussion they provoked are of limited importance and no longer relevant. However, the analysis material for this study was not chosen because of the importance of the topics discussed nor their newsworthiness: instead, the choice was guided by the representativeness of the material. I claim that the four sets of user comments discussed here are representative of and illustrate many public and semi-public discussions dealing with the Croatian–Serbian relations from the 1990s up to the present.

This article starts with theoretical considerations and an overview of relevant research, focusing on the first-order approach to impoliteness, (im)politeness evaluations in CMC in general, and in online comments in particular (Section 2). Section 3 presents the aims and research questions, data and methods. Section 4 analyzes the material that three or four participants judged impolite. In this section, I topicalize the direction of impolite comments, present categories predominantly judged impolite, and provide representative examples examining micro-structures and language means employed in these examples. Section 5 provides conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, during commemorations of Serb victims of Croatia's 1995 Operation Storm, which led to the Croatian army taking control of Serbian-occupied territory in Croatia (but also forced 200,000 Serbs to flee Croatia), Serbian officials compared Croatia's policies toward Serbs with Hitler's policies toward Jews. See WS1, retrieved from: <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/hitler-je-htio-svijet-bez-zidova-hrvatska-je-zeljela-hrvatsku-bez-srba-1262309>. Accessed: 19 July 2017.

## 2. Theoretical background and state of the art

Linguistic and other behaviors are subject to being perceived as impolite or rude “when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be” (Culpeper 2011a: 23). In the discursive approach adopted here, (im)politeness is a phenomenon constructed in an ongoing discourse, whereby certain linguistic phenomena and behaviors can be perceived as (im)polite by the audience (e.g., readers or listeners), although the communicative event’s participants themselves might consider these phenomena perfectly appropriate (see Watts 2003: 161). Following Culpeper (2011a: 31ff.), it is assumed that a set of shared conventions and moral norms underlies an audience’s intuitive judgments of certain linguistic phenomena as impolite. People’s judgments often coincide with categories of impoliteness established in theoretical models (Kleinke & Bös 2015). It is assumed that the readers of user comments, like observers in face-to-face interactions, have a certain understanding of the acceptable norms of interaction, regardless of the frequency of conventionalized impoliteness tokens (Culpeper 2011a: 14f.; Kleinke & Bös 2015). (Im)politeness perceptions and interpretations are context-embedded, and rely on sufficient contextualization of the phenomena evaluated, which includes watching or reading the material and general familiarity with the genre and topics discussed in the material.

In research on (im)politeness, views vary as to what constitutes impoliteness and how impoliteness should be identified and conceptualized. The two general approaches to (im)politeness, first-order and second-order (Watts et al. 1992; Eelen 2001), differ in their foci. Whereas first-order research focuses on laypeople’s perspective and their judgments of (im)polite phenomena, research on second-order (im)politeness considers, to some degree, the layperson’s perspective, but approaches (im)politeness at a theoretical level, reflecting conceptualizations formulated by the researchers. “A first-order approach is grounded in an emic epistemology while a second-order approach is grounded in a theoretical one” (Haugh 2012). Haugh (2012: 9), deconstructing the first- versus second-order distinction, argues that “an ontology grounded in the participant and analyst respectively does not form a natural dichotomy.”

Culpeper’s taxonomy<sup>4</sup> of “impoliteness triggers” and “conventionalised impoliteness formulae” (Culpeper 2011a: 135–136) is important for this study. However, Culpeper’s taxonomy is a descriptive tool in a linguistic model (second-order perspective on impoliteness), and it is retrieved from a metadiscourse on impoliteness in private contexts in a speech community, which is why this study also incorporates a first-order perspective on impoliteness. By looking at Slavic languages (Croatian and Serbian), this analysis examines to what extent a taxonomy designed for English

can be applied to other languages.<sup>5</sup> Impoliteness formulae do not necessarily result in impoliteness: they do so if hearers assess them as impolite (Culpeper 2011b: 426). Section 4 shows that phenomena judged impolite by readers of online comments encompass the entire inventory of Culpeper's conventionalized impoliteness formulae: insults (with four subcategories; see below), pointed criticism or complaints, challenging or unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions, condescension, message enforcers, dismissals, silencers, threats, curses and ill wishes, and non-supportive intrusions (e.g., shouting; Culpeper 2011a: 135–136; Culpeper 2011b: 426). However, in the data that were judged impolite, some formulae were identified much more frequently than others. The formulae also frequently cluster (e.g., conventionalized insulting vocatives and dismissals) and overlap; for example, in many cases the difference between dismissals and silencers is blurred and they often coexist with shouting. In addition, many phenomena found in concrete discourse samples can be categorized under multiple formulae (see Culpeper & Hardaker 2017: 21).

Culpeper's (2011a: 135–136) four subcategories of insults — personalized negative vocatives, personalized negative assertions, personalized negative references, and personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target) — applied to this study's data, required modification. The first category — insulting negative vocatives — were in fact mostly personalized. However, negative assertions and references turned out not to always be personalized; for instance, when they targeted groups (collectivities) constructed in ongoing discourse. The fourth subcategory — personalized third-person negative references — was sometimes realized in the absence of the targets. However, although absent, targets were addressed as though present.

Due to space limitations, the vast literature on linguistic impoliteness (a growing research field) in general, and particularly CMC, cannot be reviewed here. For comprehensive recent overviews of research on (im)politeness, see Dynel (2015), Culpeper and Hardaker (2017), and Ogiermann and Blitvich (2019), and on (im)politeness and CMC, see Locher (2010), Herring et al. (2013), and Graham and Hardaker (2017).

Important topics in research on impoliteness evaluations include their discursive nature (Locher & Watts 2008), cross-cultural variation (Tajeddin 2014; Fukishima & Sifianou 2017), and individual variability (Sifianou & Tzanne 2010; Mitchell & Haugh 2015; Dynel 2016; Haugh & Chang 2019).

Studies on (im)politeness evaluations in CMC (discussion forums, Facebook, etc.) examined interactants' metapragmatic judgments of other participants' con-

<sup>5</sup> See Kleinke and Bös (2015) for a taxonomy applied to German, and Ghani (2018) to Brunei Malay and Brunei English.

tributions (Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011; Kleinke & Bös 2015; Hatzidaki 2020) by examining metapragmatic markers, for example. These and other studies importantly relate impoliteness to identity issues: Sinkeviciute (2018) considers the impoliteness discourse on Facebook as expressing situated moral judgment, whereas Hatzidaki (2020), who examines a conflictive YouTube polylogue, concludes that online (im)politeness is construed as an ethical and political-ideological controversy.

User comments and their (in)civility have been examined in studies of online journalism practices (for a comprehensive recent study and a literature overview, see Ksiazek and Springer 2020). Santana (2014: 29) argues that newspapers that allow anonymity are characterized by rampant incivility and ad hominem attacks on their forums, particularly for sensitive news topics, such as ethnic and national identity (see Section 4). Studies employing linguistic approaches to (im)politeness also assume that explicit, unmitigated impoliteness relates to participants' anonymity and the discontinuous character of the interaction (Ermida 2013). Regarding particular reasons for impoliteness in user comments, Neurauter-Kessels (2011) found that impoliteness is a strategic tool for British online news readers used to attack journalists. Significantly, some studies have addressed the relation of impoliteness, positioning, and (group) identity in user comments. Badarneh & Migdadi (2018) found that Jordanian readers engage in self- and other-positioning in user comments through impoliteness and face attack, in addition to invoking national and religious identity. Upadhyay (2010), by linking impoliteness and identity, also claims that linguistic impoliteness is a strategic tool for communicating disagreements, arguing against an out-group's ideological views, or discrediting ideological opponents (see also Liu 2017 on a Japanese context). Vasilaki (2020) arrived at a similar conclusion when examining polarized political debates by Greek Facebook and YouTube users.

Similarly, research on a related genre, YouTube comments (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011), suggests that linguistic impoliteness can be a function of respondents' construction of their collective identity and intent to strategically act as agents to achieve a collectively desired goal. Users may target other users or any other social actors by attacking their "collective face"; that is, a larger group they (are assumed to) belong to (Badarneh & Migdadi 2018: 98). Collective identities become salient in deindividuated contexts, in which groups tend to lean toward polarization and are likely to define themselves ideologically, whereby the "them group" is likely to be explicitly associated with negative aspects (see also Georgalidou et al. 2020).

For some CMC genres, including users' comments, in which collective identities become salient, "group face" and "national face" are important notions. Kádár et al. (2013) focus on national identity perceptions and disaffiliation, arguing that it is

possible for group members to perceive their national face threat without conceptualizing it as an individual face threat.

The audience's perception of (im)politeness in user comments in different cultural contexts, and more specifically, what phenomena are judged impolite, is an underexplored issue. The following sections examine these questions in the Croatian and Serbian context, after an overview of the data and methods in Section 3.

### 3. Aims, research questions, data, and method

This study, drawing on Culpeper (2011a), examines laypersons' judgments, that is, the phenomena that readers of user comments perceive as impolite. It combines a first- and second-order approach to impoliteness, examining a few interrelated research questions.

The first RQ relates to the aforementioned pervasiveness of some phenomena that the second-order approach would consider impolite (e.g., name calling) in online communication: are these phenomena perceived as neutral (or normal) by laypersons? If such phenomena are a norm, then a limited number will be judged impolite by study participants (see below) familiar with the genre of online comments.

Further RQs addressed are:

Are impoliteness phenomena on the two different platforms (website versus Facebook comments) similar or different? Do Facebook comments exhibit less interpersonal impoliteness than website comments, as some studies (e.g., Coe et al. 2014; Rowe 2014) indicate?

What linguistic micro-structures and semantic domains prevail in the utterances judged impolite, and are there differences between website and Facebook comments in this respect?

What is the relation between phenomena judged impolite and discursive identity construction?

Finally, with regard to impoliteness strategies, triggers, and formulae elaborated by Culpeper (2011a), I address their applicability and the modifications that the system elaborated for English requires when applied to other languages and a specific genre: online comments on Croatian and Serbian news stories.

The data for this study were 668 user comments: 415 from *Jutarnji list* (JL) and 253 from *Večernje novosti* (VN).<sup>6</sup> The data consist of four smaller sets (two datasets

<sup>6</sup> Another recent study by Felberg and Šarić (2020) uses the same corpus. However, the method applied, the research questions, and the focus are entirely different: using impoliteness theory and Critical Discourse Analysis, the authors analyze various linguistic means that serve as extreme speech



from JL and two from VN) of user comments related to four news articles (see Appendix A). The material was collected in March 2017 from the newspapers' websites.<sup>7</sup> JL and VN are comparable in terms of readership and profile: both are widely read nationwide and both have some elements of tabloids. *Večernje novosti* online was the fifth most-read media portal in Serbia in December 2019 and *Jutarnji online* the third in Croatia in 2017.<sup>8</sup>

News articles 1 and 2 (NA1, NA2; see Appendix A) published on December 7th, 2016 in JL and VN reported on the same event ("the chocolate bar"), whereas news articles 3 and 4 (NA3, NA4; see Appendix A) published on December 12th in JL and VN reported on another event ("Serbia and the EU"). These articles were chosen because their topics were controversial and attracted public attention, which was reflected in numerous comments. Furthermore, as indicated, these user comments are representative of online discussions of Croatian–Serbian relations. The comments in JL and VN were in colloquial Croatian and Serbian, which are mutually intelligible, and predominantly in the Latin alphabet. A limited number of posters in VN and individual posters in JL used Cyrillic. Other general features include non-standard orthography (e.g., missing capitalization), reduplication of letters, and representation of non-speech sounds (e.g., laughter; see Bieswanger 2013). Some posters used real names or names resembling real ones and some used pseudonyms, made-up names, or descriptive phrases: whereas some participants seemed to prefer self-disclosure, some chose nicknames related to the discussion topic, and some obscure or cryptic ones (see Lindholm 2013). The posters responded to both the news events and other users' comments and opinions. They positioned themselves and others by targeting other users or participants in the news stories (e.g., politicians), or social groups these participants were assumed to belong to, and occasionally journalists.

JL used Facebook for user comments and VN its website. To post a comment on VN website, users are asked to provide a name and an email address that is apparently subject to verification. The newspapers are not transparent regarding how moderators remove inappropriate comments. Both, however, feature commenting guidelines, stating that hate speech, insults relating to national origin, race, or gender, swear words, and abusive language are not allowed or strictly forbidden, and

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triggers, connect them to relevant contexts and highlight the gray zone that exists between hate speech and impoliteness.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jutarnji.hr/>, <https://www.novosti.rs/>. The newspapers have introduced some changes in their design, including commenting options. As of June 2022, *Jutarnji list* does not feature any comments on its webpage: Facebook users can comment on the newspaper's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/jutarnji.list>). In the new design of *Večernje novosti*, comments are displayed on a separate page.

<sup>8</sup> See WS2, WS3. Retrieved from: <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2017/croatia-2017/>. <https://globalvoices.org/2020/02/07/how-russia-influences-serbian-media/>. Accessed: 19 July 2017.



even “deemed a punishable offense” (JL).<sup>9</sup> The remark “edited” was found in 32 comments in JL, and some posts in JL addressed removed comments. Some posts also referred to names that could not be found in the discussion, which indicates some comments were removed. However, at the time of data collection, i.e., March 2017, it was impossible to assess what was edited before appearing online (see Neuraüter-Kessels 2011 on the “web’s fluidity”).<sup>10</sup> As shown below, despite newspapers’ moderation, a significant percentage of the comments were judged impolite by the participants in this study.

To examine readers’ judgments, four participants<sup>11</sup> were asked to first read the four news articles to get an impression of the context and content, then all the comments, and finally to identify and underline all the impolite language units (word parts, words, phrases, sentences) in the comments. The participants were asked to read and evaluate a large amount of text (around 23,000 words). They were not asked to provide additional feedback on their judgments. Although the posts appeared in an unrestricted public space, where the communicative event is available to a large audience, before distributing the datasets, the comments were anonymized and timestamps removed.

The choice of participants sought to avoid gender and regional (country-related) bias: two females and two males were chosen, age 25 to 30, who had recently graduated from a university. One female and one male had studied in Serbia and consider a region or town in Serbia their home because of considerable time spent there; another female and male studied in Croatia and consider a Croatian region or town their home. All of them reported that they sometimes or regularly read South Slavic online newspapers, and they stated that they are familiar with user comments and sometimes read them, and rarely or never comment themselves.<sup>12</sup> The participants reported that they had not attended any courses in pragmatics (this was asked to ensure they were not influenced by expert approaches to impoliteness); see Appendix B for the form. The brief instructions given to the participants did not define (im)politeness or offer any examples. The participants were asked to read the comments and underline impolite (i.e., inappropriate, offensive)<sup>13</sup> language units in the context

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.jutarnji.hr/Pravila-komentiranja/>.

<sup>10</sup> As Su et al. (2018) indicate, comment moderation demands significant resources, and its effectiveness significantly differs across national and local news organizations.

<sup>11</sup> A small payment was offered for this work.

<sup>12</sup> There are various participation modes in the online environment. Passive participants, such as readers of online content, are sometimes described as “peripheral participants” or “lurkers”; see Edelman (2013). Discussing the participation status of the four participants in this study is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>13</sup> The Croatian and Serbian terms used in the brief instructions were *neuljudan*, *neučtiv* ‘impolite’, *nepristojan* ‘rude’, and *neprikladan* ‘inappropriate’, which are common everyday terms. None of the

of online comments and were informed that their evaluations would be anonymized for a linguistic study. The readers' understanding and judgments relate to both their cultural and frame knowledge, and their knowledge of the discursive, contextual level of situated discourse, both of which feed into their evaluation of impolite utterances.

Subsequently, I examined all the comments and their parts marked as impolite and established smaller units ("utterances" or logically connected units) within longer comments marked as impolite. In practice, some of such long comments (often discussing a few topics and/or addressing multiple social actors) contained two or more utterances; for instance, the following sequence was considered two utterances: *A znači ništa od velike srbije. Kako će te vratiti nekoliko stotina godina oplodnje vaših žena od strane Turaka.* 'So, greater serbia<sup>14</sup> will not happen. How will you delete several hundred years of fertilization of your women by Turks.' Short impolite comments as a rule contained a single utterance (e.g., *Vole* 'You ox'). Therefore, the total number of comments judged impolite (see Table 1) is lower than the number of utterances. As a rule, in long comments the participants underlined only some parts as impolite.

The share of website comments (VN) with some parts judged impolite by at least one person is 51 to 72%. The share for Facebook comments (JL) is higher, 66 to 85%; see Table 1.

*Table 1.* Share of impolite comments and utterances according to participants' judgments, and agreement in marking impolite utterances

Articles' topics	No. of comments	Comments with some parts marked impolite	No. of impolite "utterances"	4 Participants	3 participants	2 participants	1 participant
News article 1 (NA1) <b>Jutarnji list (JL):</b> The chocolate bar	196	130 (66%)	216	42	43	37	94
News article 2 (NA2) <b>Večernje novosti (VN):</b> The chocolate bar	69	50 (72%)	75	5	16	17	37
News article 3 (NA3) <b>Jutarnji list (JL):</b> Serbia and the EU	219	186 (85%)	361	128	84	70	79
News article 4 (NA4) <b>Večernje novosti (VN):</b> Serbia and the EU	184	94 (51%)	135	22	18	27	68

participants requested additional explanations related to these terms.

<sup>14</sup> The comments are provided in their original form; only unnecessary spaces have been removed. Capital letters in names were not always used, which is not surprising given that language used online usually departs from orthographic and other conventions applied in written discourse. The original orthography is retained in all the quotes. The translations follow the informal style of the comments (e.g., missing capitalization and punctuation).

In the dataset related to the “EU article” in JL, 59% of the utterances were judged impolite by three to four participants. For the other three sets, three to four participants judged a much lower share (28–39%) impolite. In these three sets, the share judged impolite by one or two persons only is significantly higher (61–72%).

## 4. Analysis and discussion

This section discusses the comments or their parts that three or four participants assessed as impolite. “Impolite comments/utterances” below refers to these. All parts of the examples provided were judged impolite, except for the parts in square brackets: I provide these parts as contextual information. The categories judged impolite are similar for both sets of comments from VN (with a total of 253 comments, the VN sets are smaller than JL), and for that reason the results are presented in a single subsection (4.1). Because the categories differ for the two sets from JL, these sets are discussed separately (Section 4.2).

In the following subsections, I first address the direction of utterances judged impolite. Then I provide an overview of the categories judged impolite by three or four participants, presenting the dominant and less frequent ones. I then discuss these categories, providing representative examples<sup>15</sup> closely examining their contexts, as well as micro-structures and language means employed in these examples (e.g., imperatives, vocatives, evaluative lexis, terms with a historical burden, etc.) to arrive at an understanding of impoliteness formulae and language means employed in them that the readers consider impolite.

### 4.1. *Večernje novosti: comments related to news articles 2 and 4*

The majority of users in the two datasets performed a Serb identity, discursively establishing an in-group by using *mi* ‘we’ or *mi Srbi* ‘we Serbs’, often in clear opposition to *oni* ‘they’, *Hrvati* ‘Croats’, the out-group. Only a limited number of users performed a Croat identity (e.g., by using *mi Hrvati* ‘we Croats’ or typical Croatian names; e.g., *Hrvoje*).

Only a limited number of utterances in VN were interpersonal, targeting other posters (NA2: 9%, NA4: 11%). The majority of impolite utterances were directed at entire national groups (NA2: 66%, NA4: 76%), often implying a “collective face attack” (Badarneh, & Migdadi 2018: 98). The in-group was less frequently targeted. The share of utterances targeting various social actors (e.g., politicians, journalists) ranges from 13% (NA4) to 25% (NA2). Unanimous impoliteness evaluations (see

<sup>15</sup> The examples quoted illustrate certain impoliteness categories and are not given in chronological order.

Figure 1) most frequently pertained to *negative assertions and references* mainly targeting groups, and to *pointed criticism or complaints*. The former extremely negatively evaluated “the other,” mainly an entire national collectivity and its state, performing a collective face attack. The remaining impolite phenomena were a few instances of *negative vocatives* (mainly directed at groups), *unpalatable questions, dismissals and silencers*, and *patronizing*. These categories are illustrated and commented on following Figure 1.

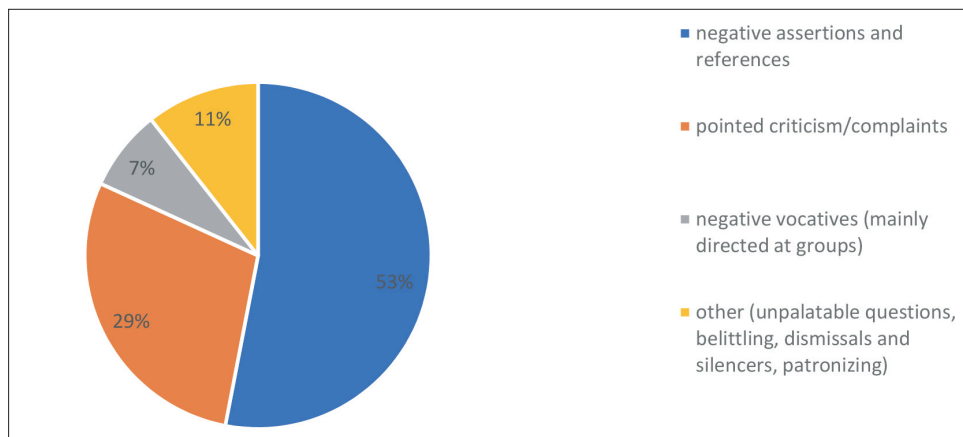


Figure 1. Conventionalized impoliteness formulae in NA2 and NA4

The most frequent targets of negative references and assertions, and pointed criticism or complaints were entire (national) groups. Less frequent targets were news articles' social actors (for commenters often metonymically representing groups). The predominant category judged impolite, *negative references and assertions*, resembles but does not entirely correspond to Culpeper's (2011a: 135–136) formulae because these references and assertions were not personalized (directed at other posters). According to Culpeper, insults (negative vocatives, assertions, references, and third-person negative references) are personalized, which, for instance, is realized in addressing the target directly with *you*. However, non-personalized negative references and assertions that were frequently judged impolite in the VN datasets can still have an insulting effect when a collective or national face is threatened by, for instance, discursively depriving a country of its location (Sinkeviciute 2018), distinct history, culture, and so on. Such non-personalized negative references and assertions differ somewhat from pointed criticism or complaints because the former employ lexical items with high offensive potential (e.g., taboo words). Other formulae judged impolite in the VN datasets, corresponding to Culpeper's formulae, include instances of negative vocatives (mainly addressing groups), as well as single instances of unpalatable questions, belittling, dismissals, and silencers. A few instances of patronizing (Kleinke & Bös 2015: 54) were also judged impolite.

Most impolite negative references and assertions are found in contexts that extremely negatively evaluate another national community (Croats), their country, and its institutions. Such negative evaluation was frequently achieved by using terms with a historical burden: the nouns *ustaše* 'Ustashe' (PL) and *ustaštvo* 'Ustasha movement/attitudes', and the adjective *ustaški* 'Ustasha'. These were used fifteen times in VN comments. The Ustasha was a Croatian fascist movement that ruled the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War, exterminating Serbian, Jewish, and Roma inhabitants of Croatia. The term is linked to Serbian traumatic collective memory. Interestingly, *ustaše* has a history as an offensive item: for example, in the wars of the 1990s, it was used by Serbs as an offensive term for Croats.<sup>16</sup> Posters performing a Serb identity when using these terms linked the (traumatic) history and present, and occasionally claimed that there exists a historical continuity of certain traits and behavioral patterns. For instance, example (1) contains explicit references to history and extermination of Serbs in the Second World War at the Jasenovac concentration camp:

(1) *95% hrvata ustaški kulturno odgojeno i da su krvoloci prve vrste... Ubijete 700000 hiljada ljudi i onda se busate u prsa. Fuj kakav narod odvratn (NA4)*  
 '95% of croats are raised in the ustasha spirit and are first-rank bloodthirsty people... You kill 700000 people and then you thump your chest about it. Yuck what a disgusting people'

In some of the contexts, these terms are used as attributes negatively evaluating companies belonging to the out-group (e.g., *njihove firme ustaške* 'their Ustasha-firms'), or as referring terms used to delegitimize political representatives of the out-group (e.g., *na vlasti su ustaše!!!* 'Ustashe are in power!!!'), or the entire national collective, as in (2):

(2) *ustase bili i ostali. nikad cud nisu ni menjali. (NA4)*  
 'they were and will remain ustashe. they have never changed their nature.'

In the insulting negative assertions, important language means identified were distortions, or name modifications, such as *Kurvatska* 'Whoreatia' and *Kurvati* 'Whoreats' in (3). *Kurvatska* is a blend of the noun *kurva* 'whore, slut, bitch' and the geographical name *Hrvatska* 'Croatia', whereas *Kurvati* is a blend of *kurva* and the ethnonym *Hrvati* 'Croats'. These blends inherit the negative connotations of *kurva*, which is a frequent insult in Croatian and Serbian. Example (3) uses the blend and also contains references to the wars of the 1990s, and to Croats as a homogenous group:

<sup>16</sup> On its use in football-related contexts, see Hughson & Skillen (2015).

(3) *Kurvati [traže srpske ikone]... posto su sve pravoslavne Srbe proterali iz Kurvatske* (NA4)

'Whoreats [are demanding Serbian icons]... after they exiled all Orthodox Serbs from Whoreatia'

In a specific sub-group of generalizing negative assertions, posters claimed that Croats, conceptualized as a collectivity and undifferentiated whole, hate Serbs:

(4) *Hrvati mrze Srbe jos jedan dokaz!* (NA4)

'Croats hate Serbs another proof!'

Insulting negative assertions repeatedly employed words referring to mental health (e.g., *bolest* 'illness', *neizlečiva* 'incurable'), negatively evaluating the out-group's attitude; see (5):

(5) *Njihova bolest je neizleciva.* (NA4)

'Their illness is incurable.'

Some negative assertions judged impolite were hyperbolic, using negatively connoted adjectives (e.g., *monstruozan* 'monstrous', *genocidan* 'genocidal', *fašistički* 'fascist', *satanistički* 'satanic'), for instance, in contexts evaluating the EU (e.g., *fašistička tvorevina* 'fascist creation', *satanistička tvorevina* 'satanic creation'). Similar adjectives are clearly evaluative when used attributively (Hunston & Thompson 2000: 14). Moreover, they are extremely negative, and likely to be identified as such even without the context. In (6), the hyperbolic effect is achieved by repeating *monstruozan*, followed by *genocidan*:

(6) *[hrlimo u susret] monstruočnoj EU i monstruočnim nacijama kao sto je genocidna hrvatska nacija.* (NA4)

'[we rush to join] the monstrous EU and the monstrous nations such as the genocidal croatian nation.'

In the comments judged impolite in VN, pointed criticism frequently overlapped with insulting negative assertions. *Pointed criticism* includes "expressions of disapproval and statements of fault, weakness or disadvantage" and relates to producing and perceiving "a display of low values for some target" (Culpeper 2011a: 109). Frequent targets of pointed criticism were in-group members. Impolite comments with pointed criticism employed negatively connoted words from the domain of mental health (e.g., *lud* 'insane, crazy'), and references to troubled pasts and experiences of the in-group (Serbs) with which the posters identified (see 7):

(7) *Srbin je lud, Srbin je proklet, jednom ga ubiješ (zakolješ) on oće opet* (NA2)

'The Serb is insane, the Serb is cursed, you kill (slaughter) him once, and he wants it again'

The poster in (7) used creative impoliteness (Culpeper 2011a, Section 7.5) in a rhymed message alluding to the Second World War, criticizing Serbs for not learning from their traumatic historical experiences.<sup>17</sup>

*National identity negotiations* were the common denominator of impolite assertions in which some posters created an in-group (Serbs) and denied distinct group identity to others (Croats), claiming that Croats are Catholic Serbs and/or ignorant of their origin, see (8):

(8) *Da zelis znati onda bi znao da ste vi Hrvati Srbi... Prelistaj malo ozbiljne knjige pa ces to i shvatiti. Vi ste Srbi katolici!!!!* (NA2)

'If you wanted to you would know that you Croats are Serbs... Flip through some serious books and you'll understand. You are Catholic Serbs!!!!'

In some comments exemplified by (8), posters utilized interpersonal communication by directly addressing other commenters with *you* (plural). Example (8) contains two identity-related predications (*vi Hrvati ste Srbi* 'you Croats are Serbs', *Vi ste Srbi katolici!!!!* 'You are Catholic Serbs!!!!') and an imperative (*prelistaj... ozbiljne knjige* 'flip through... serious books') that alludes to another poster's ignorance, presupposing that he does not consult serious information sources. Imperatives like *prelistaj* 'flip through' in (8) are judged impolite due to their degree of directness in many contexts in all four datasets.

In some comments on NA4, users identified one of the news article's social actors—the Croat complaining about chocolate bars produced in Serbia given to Croatian children—with Croats as a collective. In (9), a poster did this by (perhaps ironically) addressing the Croats with a vocative plural (*dragi susjedi* 'dear neighbors') to subsequently question their identity using the attributive phrase "former Serbs", implying (religious?) conversion and Croat construction of a disputable national identity:

(9) *Hvala dragi susjedi i bivši Srbi* (NA4)

'Thank you, dear neighbors and former Serbs'

National identity discussions occasionally contained other impolite attributive phrases, such as *srpski Dubrovnik* 'Serbian Dubrovnik' in a comment in which

<sup>17</sup> See WS4. Retrieved from: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jasenovac>. Accessed: 19 July 2017.



Dubrovnik was contextually relevant as the hometown of the father complaining about the chocolate bar.

Some phenomena judged impolite can be considered mild *threats*. In some, disassociating from the other (Croats, see (10)) seems to be an overall strategy:

(10) *Treba im sve uskratiti a zaliti ih ne nego raskinuti sve veze sa njima.*  
(NA4)

'We should deny them everything and not pity them but sever all ties with them.'

Similar comments call for negative actions against a collectivity—the modal verb *trebati* 'need, ought to' was repeatedly used advocating termination of relations with "the other".

*Belittling* that relates to questioning certain abilities of a group and associating others with a negative aspect was also judged impolite; see (11).

(11) *vi niste hteli da se branite 95. Ni 5 dans niste mogli da sacuvate polozaје!*  
(NA4)

'you didn't want to defend yourselves in 95. You couldn't even hold your positions for five days!'

In (11) a poster performing Serb identity is condescending Serbs from Croatia, questioning their ability to protect themselves and their territory in the wars of the 1990s.

#### 4.2. *Jutarnji list*

Regarding the identity performed, the JL datasets show greater variation than the VN datasets, which is related to the affordances of the Facebook platform that *Jutarnji list* used when the datasets were published. The majority of posters in the JL Facebook comments performed Croat and Serb identity, whereas individual posters performed Slovenian, Bosnian, and Macedonian identity. Identity performance was linked to the posters using a specific dialect or language, their chosen names (e.g., names referring to well-known historical persons), and their specification of places of residence and affiliations. An explicit identity performance is attested in the use of phrases with pronouns and ethnonyms, such as *mi Hrvati* 'we Croats'. In the comments judged impolite, a great variety of conventionalized impoliteness formulae corresponding to Culpeper's (2011a: 135–136) types were identified.

As for the targets, in the comments following the "EU article" (NA3), salient targets were other posters—mainly out-group members (44%) and entire national groups, most frequently Croats or Serbs (44%). Infrequent targets were news arti-

cle's social actors (11%) and others (1%). NA3 triggered a much larger share of interpersonal impolite utterances (44%) than NA1 (28%). NA3 also triggered a much larger share of impolite utterances directed at entire national groups (44%) than NA1 (16%), in which 52% of impolite utterances were directed at journalists, the newspaper, and the news article's social actors, whereas only 11% of such utterances were found in the NA3 set.

#### 4.2.1. Comments on news article 3 (NA3)

Participants' unanimous impoliteness judgments were most frequently related to diverse conventionalized impoliteness formulae. Among these, personalized negative vocatives and assertions prevailed (and were repeatedly combined). Pointed criticism, often with taboo or profane language, followed. Relatively frequent were unpalatable questions and presuppositions, personalized third-person negative references, negative assertions and references targeting groups, curses and ill wishes, and dismissals and silencers. In addition, a limited amount of threats, belittling, shouting, and patronizing was found; see Figure 2.

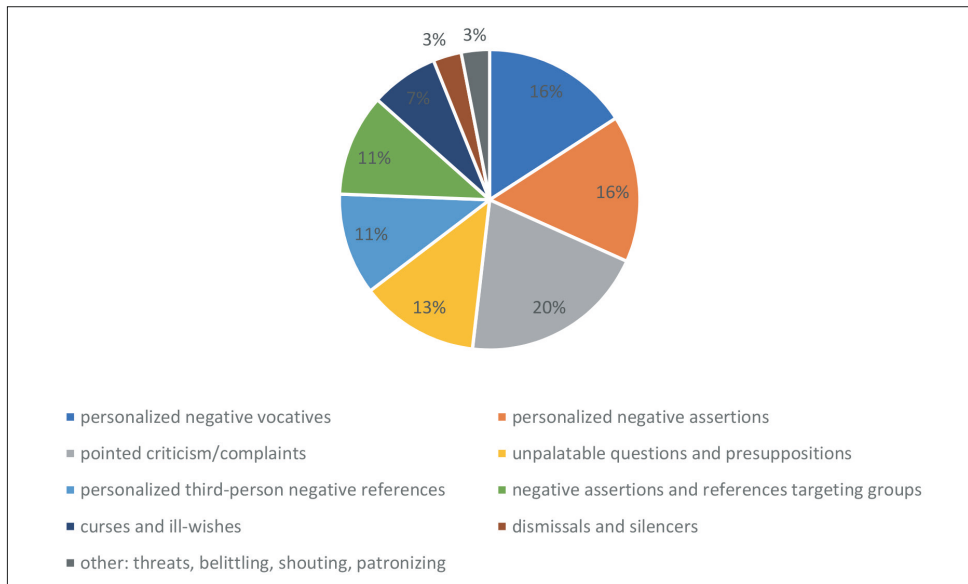


Figure 2. Conventionalized impoliteness formulae in NA3

Many utterances judged impolite in NA3 can be described as motivated intergroup rudeness (Kienpointner 2018: 335), “appropriate reactions to previous provocations in a given context (reactive rudeness)” (Kienpointner 2018: 336). The entire discussion was characterized by a significant number of conventionalized impo-

liteness formulae with taboo words that participants mostly judged impolite. The discussion tone was already set in the first group of comments presented in Table 2.

The first user performing a Croat identity opened the discussion with a conventionalized impoliteness formula using a taboo term (*Jebu Hrvati* 'The Croats will fuck with you'), commenting on the behavior of Croatian politicians, who metonymically represented all Croats for the poster:

(12) ... *jebu Hrvati onako ufino, a Vučiću...nauči se diplomaciji...nije ti ovo Trebević 1993*

'...Croats will fuck with you, but politely, and Vučić...you should master diplomacy...this is not Trebević in 1993'

Then the user directly addressed the main social actor of the news article, Serbian PM Vučić, with an imperative construction (containing a vocative) presupposing that the PM is no master of diplomacy. The presupposition of the subsequent utterance "this is not Trebević in 1993" refers to the wars of the 1990s and the siege of Sarajevo, implying Vučić's involvement in the siege.

The first poster quoted in (12) used a typical Croatian name (or nickname) and specified his institutional affiliation as a faculty in Croatia, which influenced how other posters subsequently positioned him, assigning him a Croat identity. His initial use of the conventionalized impoliteness formula with the taboo term (*jebu* 'fuck') sets the tone for how the discourse develops. The subsequent impoliteness is "justified" (Kienpointner 2018); that is, it can be considered reactive; see (13):

(13) *pusi kurac* [Poster 1]<sup>18</sup>

'go suck a dick [Poster 1]'

Directly addressing the first poster with a vocative, the second commenter with a female name/pseudonym used in the comment quoted in (13) a very short impoliteness formula with a sexual taboo phrase in a silencer. The subsequent impolite comments continued using *sexual taboo words* and also introduced other domains, such as *referential terms with a historical burden* and terms from domains of *scatology and mental health*. Table 1 provides an overview of the first ten comments, showing how they relate to each other, indicating their targets and sub-topics, as well as language means judged impolite.

18 The names that posters used are either omitted or changed to Poster 1, Poster 2, etc.

Table 2. An overview of the first ten comments (NA3)

	Comments	Subtopics, language means
1. Impolite comment (by a male)	čokoladice?...jebu Hrvati onako ufino,a Vučiću...naučiti se diplomaciji...nije ti ovo Trebević 1993... 'chocolate bars?...Croats will fuck with you, but politely, and Vučić...you should master diplomacy..this is not Trebević in 1993...'	Criticizing Croats (Croatian politicians) and the Serbian PM. Taboo words (see 12).
2. Impolite response to 1 (by a female)	pusi kurac [Poster 1] <sup>19</sup> 'go suck a dick [Poster 1]'	Insulting vocative with taboo words (see 13).
3. No impoliteness	polako ne zuri... 'slowly no need to hurry...'	
4. Impolite response to 1 (by a male)	[Poster 1], jebo te ante Pavelić u supak a sranjo tudjler u zvalje, pa se dugo ljujajte u trojku na rvackoj pucini dok ne završite na americkoj crnacnoj kurcini... '[Poster 1], may ante Pavelić fuck you in your ass and sranjo tudjler in your mouth and may you have a long threesome on Croatian sea until you end up on an American nigger's dick...'	References to history and to Croatian politicians, and their good relations with the US. Swear words with taboo lexemes ( <i>jebo te ante Pavelić u supak a sranjo tudjler u zvalje</i> 'may ante Pavelić fuck you in your ass and sranjo tudjler in your mouth'); name modifications and blends ( <i>sranjo</i> 'shit' ← Franjo; Tudjler: <b>Tudman</b> + <b>Hitler</b> ).
5. Impolite response to 2	Sta je [Poster 2] nesto žulja? 'What's up [Poster 2]? is something rubbing you the wrong way?'	Direct address: vocative with a diminutive form of the addressed female poster's name (suggesting intimacy or condescension) in an unpalatable question (... <i>nešto žulja?</i> 'is something rubbing you the wrong way?').
6. Impolite response to 4	[Poster 4] A tebe će kao pitat neko 'očeš ili nećeš!? Kao i '99...hahaha '[Poster 4] And you think somebody is gonna ask you will you or won't you!? Like back in '99...hahaha'	Rhetorical question implying that Poster 4 is not important. References to history. Laughter.
7. Impolite response to 4	[Poster 4] Uf što se četnik uspuhao,idi bre pa se leči! '[Poster 4] Chetnik has really gotten all worked up,get back on your meds!'	Calling Poster 4 četnik 'Chetnik': an insulting referential term with a historical burden. Dismissal utilizing expressions from the domain of insanity ( <i>idi bre pa se leči</i> 'get back on your meds').

<sup>19</sup> All the posts except 1 and 3 include either the full name/pseudonym or (modified) first names of the posters addressed. These names and pseudonyms are replaced by [Poster 1], [Poster 2] etc., in the table.

8. Impolite response to 4	[Poster 4] sto pjesnik zeli reci, mali turcin s greskom, zaboravio sai na prvu bracnu noc kada ti je pijani seoski beg oplodio babu,, , mutirao si malo ali jos puno puno moras da bi dosao u evropu, upsss hrvatsku '[Poster 4] what was meant by that, little turk with a flaw, you forgot your wedding night when a drunken village brute impregnated your wench,, , you've mutated a bit, but you need a lot lot more to come to europe, whoops to croatia'	Direct address, condescension, introducing the topic of ethnic origin/impurity ( <i>mali turcin s greskom</i> 'little Turk with a flaw'). Gender-related impolite assertions.
9. Impolite response to 2	[Poster 2] shemale '[Poster 2] shemale'.	Derogatory reference to Poster 2. <i>She-male</i> is a derogatory term "used to describe transgender/transsexual, intersex or gender non-conforming people". <sup>20</sup>
10. Impolite response to 4	[Poster 4] nije mi jasno čemu ovakva retorika. koliko znam dr.Franjo Tuđman(koji je zasigurno bio antifašist) se ispričao za politiku( i posljedice te politike) ... kada se četnici i velikosrbi ispričaju za svoje pizdarije možemo otvoriti još poneko poglavlje.jednostavno ne možeš biti pošten i heben ali možeš biti pošteno heben.što se tiče svjetske politike i mi i vi smo pičkin dim ... '[Poster 4] I don't understand the point of this rant.as far as I know Doctor Franjo Tuđman(who was certainly an anti-fascist) apologized for that policy( and its consequences)...when Chetniks and greater serbs apologize for their bullshit we can open another chapter.you simply cannot be proper and badass at the same time, but you can be a proper badass. and regarding world politics, both we and you are insignificant...'	Long comment thematizing the troubled Croatia–Serbian relations. Offensive referring expressions četnici 'Chetniks' and velikosrbi 'Greater Serbs' for Serbs, expressive colloquialism <i>pizdarije</i> 'crap, bullshit' in generalized claims about how Serbs act; <i>pičkin dim</i> 'a piece of cake' (literally, 'pussy smoke') used in derogatory self- and other-evaluation.

A significant number of *impolite assertions* targeted entire national groups, Croats and Serbs, discussing their ancestors, history and origin: some discussed ethnic relations between Serbs and Turks, and some others Croats as Serbs that converted to Catholicism, or Austrian stable boys. Repeatedly in impolite assertions, Serbs were claimed to be Turks; see (14):

(14) *samo da te podsjetim da si genetski Turčin. 500 godina ste im majke i sestre davali a muški su lizali dupe njihovih konja.*

'let me just remind you that genetically you're a Turk. For 500 years you've been giving your mothers and sisters to them, while your men were licking their horses' asses.'

<sup>20</sup> Terminology – LGBTQ Center - Montclair State University. Retrieved from: <https://www.montclair.edu/lgbtq-center/lgbtq-resources/terminology/>. Accessed: 20 June 2022.

Example (14) is illustrative for many other comments that started by targeting individual posters and continued with a collective (national) face attack.

Among *insulting negative assertions*, two groups were prominent. In addition to those thematizing national origin (and “national purity”) of Croats and Serbs of type (14), gender-related ones employing a prostitution theme were also identified. In these, women belonging to the out-group were constructed as a collectivity and described as whores; see (15).

(15) *Pa da nema vase kurave ne bi znali na Jadranu što je escord i jebačina za 40 eur*

‘Well, if it weren’t for your whores, we wouldn’t know here on the Adriatic what an escort and a 40 euro fuck is’

Study participants’ impoliteness judgments seemed to relate not to specific formulae as such, but primarily to the *semantic domains of the words* used within these. Personalized negative vocatives, references, and assertions that were judged impolite frequently contained the following language means:

– Taboo words from the domains of sexual activities, sex organs, and prostitution (fifty-five examples):<sup>21</sup> *Kurvo četnička!* ‘You Chetnik whore!’

– Words from the domains of mental health and intellectual abilities (twenty-two): *tupsone* ‘you fathead’, *ocito da si bolestan* ‘you’re obviously sick’, *toliko si nepismen da si imun na sramotu* ‘you’re so illiterate that you’re immune to shame’

– Referential terms with a historical burden (*ustaša* ‘Ustasha’, *četnik* ‘Chetnik’) (twenty-two): *bando ustaška* ‘you Ustasha bastards’

– Taboo/swear words from the domain of scatology (e.g., *sranje* ‘shit’, *sрати* ‘shit’) (fourteen): *Vi ste ti koji rade oduvijek sranja na balkanu.* ‘You’re the ones who’ve always been stirring shit up in the balkans.’

– Modified names of national groups and countries evoking the domains of bad smell and sexual activities (*Smrdija* ‘Stinkerbia’, literally, ‘a smelly place’ (for Serbia), *Smrdin* ‘one that stinks’ (for Serbs), *Kurvati* ‘Whoreats’ for Croats (nine): *КУРБАТИ, јадни сте да јаднију не можете бити.* ‘WHOREATS, you’re as miserable as it gets’

– Animal metaphors (in vocatives; eight): *majmuncino jedna* ‘you big stupid ape!’

<sup>21</sup> The numbers refer to occurrences in the NS3 dataset.

#### 4.2.2. Comments following news article 1 (NA1)

The distribution of different types of utterances judged impolite by three or four participants in NA1 is shown in Figure 3. Most impolite utterances are pointed criticism or complaints, followed by third-person negative references, some of which are personalized and sometimes “in the hearing of the targets.” Personalized negative assertions outnumbered a few negative assertions about groups. Insulting personalized negative vocatives are also a prominent category, along with unpalatable questions and presuppositions, as well as dismissals and silencers. Several instances of curses, shouting, and threats were also judged impolite. Impolite name modifications (see 4.2.1) were not frequent in this set (*Smrđija* ‘Stinkerbia’ is found twice), nor were referential terms with a historical burden (e.g., *ustaša* was used a few times).

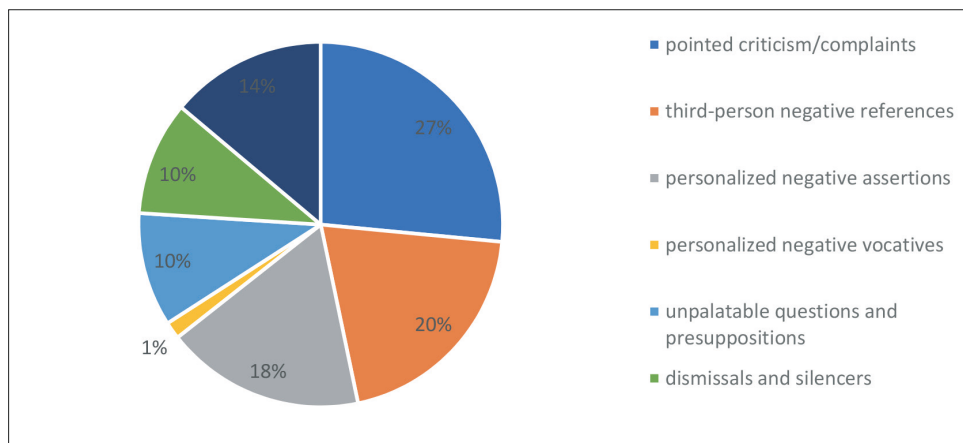


Figure 3. Conventionalized impoliteness formulae in NA1

The majority of impolite utterances employed various conventionalized impoliteness formulae whose most frequent targets were other posters the discussants disagreed with, followed by news article’s social actors, including: (a) the Croatian president whose actions—giving Serbian chocolate to Croatian children and her subsequent apology—were criticized; (b) the father that objected because a chocolate bar produced in Serbia was given to Croatian children, and (c) group(s) the posters associated the father with: Croatian war veterans from the 1990s, Croatian nationalists, and Croats disliking Serbian products. Below I comment on the categories judged impolite, providing typical examples.

A dominant category judged impolite was pointed criticism or complaints using swear and/or taboo words. In some contexts, posters performing Croat identity criticized other in-group members (Croats) for negative attitudes toward Serbian



products. See (16), which used words from the domain of mental health (*bolest* 'illness', *bolesno* 'sick', *debili* 'idiots'), a swearing formula (*pizda li vam materina* 'you motherfuckers'), and a ridiculing question:

(16) *ovi ljudi [su] teški bolesnici... Ovo je bolesno do bola. Pizda li vam materina kad bude puhao istočnjak, hoćete li i prestati disati debili jedni!?*

'these people [are] seriously sick... This is sick as hell. Motherfuckers (literally: 'your mother's pussy'), when the east wind blows, will you stop breathing you morons!'

Unlike the poster in (16), who disassociated from the group referred to by *ovi ljudi* 'these people', some other posters performing Croatian identity created a homogenous in-group of Croats, including the speaker, criticizing the attitude of that collectivity; see (17):

(17) *Baš smo govna.*

'We are such shitheads.'

Similar group identity construction is achieved by using the pronouns *mi* 'we', *naš* 'our', and *ovaj* 'this' (e.g., *naši ustašoidi* 'our Ustashoids', *ova zemlja* 'this country').

Some posters positioning themselves as Serbs criticized Croats, the out-group, by using, for example, lexemes related to mental health and negative psychological traits (e.g., *koji kompleksaši* 'what complex-ridden people', *budale kao vi* 'fools like you'). In some negative references to a collectivity, posters performing a Serb identity delineated a clear borderline between "us" and "them" by attributing genetic hatred to the out-group; see (18), which implies "hatred is in your genes":

(18) *nama nije u genima da mrzimo*

'it's not in our genes to hate.'

In some of the impolite comments, it is unclear who "you" refers to: other posters, news articles' social actors, or a national collectivity. See (19) with an impolite message enforcer (BOK TE JEBO).

(19) *KAKVI BOLESNICI STE VI BOK TE JEBO*

'YOU ARE ALL SUCH SICKOS FOR FUCKS SAKE (literally: 'may God fuck you.')

Example (19) also illustrates a non-supportive intrusion—specifically, shouting.

Personalized negative assertions used direct address targeting other posters as individuals or group members; see (20a) and (20b):

(20a) čemu vrijeđanje, jel' to odgoj koji si donio s brda...

'why the insults, is this how you were raised in the hills...'

(20b) *Koja si ti budala truješ zemlju kojom hodas...*

'You're such a fool you're poisoning the ground you're walking on...'

In (20a), a poster performing Croat identity targeted another in-group member questioning his mental abilities and upbringing, and (20b), which, in addition to the personalized negative assertion (*ti si budala* 'you're a fool'), contains two message enforcers (*koja si ...* 'you're such a...'; *truješ zemlju* 'you're poisoning the ground'). Personalized third-person negative references are exemplified by (20c), which also uses a message enforcer (*koja je to...* 'she's such an...').

(20c) *Koja je to kretenka.*

'She's such an idiot.'

Interestingly, euphemisms, illustrated by *jedna, da ne kažem šta* 'an, I'm not going to say what' in (20d), were also judged impolite:

(20d) *nemoj da se zivciras zbog jedne, da ne kazem sta...*

'don't get annoyed because of an, I'm not even saying what...'

Impolite interpersonal comments frequently used *personalized negative vocatives* with negatively connotated nouns and adjectives from the domain of mental health; see (21), in which the vocative *debilu ercegovački* 'you (h)erzegovinian idiot' is preceded by a challenging question and followed by a dismissal:

(21) *otkad je Hrvatska Smrdija debilu ercegovančki idi ti nazad odakle si doša*

'since when is Croatia Stinkerbia, you (h)erzegovinian idiot, go back to where you came from.'

Using the adjective *ercegovački* without the initial standard *h* (*hercegovački* 'Herzegovinian') presumably mocks the addressee's assumed dialect. Insulting vocatives in other interpersonal posts similar to (21) employ words from the domain of mental health (e.g., *budaletino* 'dumbbell') and the animal domain (e.g., *majmune* 'you ape) and those with dysphemistic connotations of a bad smell (e.g., *smrad* 'stench' in *smradu primitivni* 'you primitive piece of shit').

The news article's social actors, primarily the Croatian president, were also targets of insulting personalized vocatives; see (22a) and (22b).

(22a) *Kolinda idi u tri pičke materine*

'Kolinda go to fucking hell' (literally, 'go to your mother's three pussies').

(22b) *Kitarovička pod hitno na izvanredni pregled psihijatra*

'Kitarovička go urgently to an emergency psychiatrist examination'

In (22a), the vocative *Kolinda* (the president's first name), an inappropriate identity label, is followed by a swear formula with a taboo term. *Tri* 'three' intensifies the formula whose neutral version is *idi u pičku materinu* 'go to fucking hell' (literally, 'go to your mother's pussy'). Example (22b) is an implicit imperative construction that utilizes the domain of mental health, with an offending presupposition (i.e., she needs psychiatric help) pertaining to the person for which the inappropriate identity marker *Kitarovička* was used.

Both (22a) and (22b) correspond to Culpeper's dismissals. Similar comments judged impolite express negative evaluation of the Croatian president on the one hand, and posters' negative emotions caused by the events she participated in on the other.

Among other frequent utterances judged impolite are third-person negative references; see *seljanka* 'hick' in (23):

(23) *kad seljanka dode na vlast*

'when a hick comes to power'

In the comments targeting the news stories' social actors, referring expressions judged impolite typically used negatively connoted nouns and adjectives in attributive phrases (e.g., *jeftina manipulatorica* 'cheap manipulator', *glupa kolinda* 'stupid kolinda'), animal metaphors (e.g., *krme* 'pig', *kokoš* 'hen'), and adjectives evaluating appearance and mental health (e.g., *napudran*, literally 'powdered', *debeo* 'fat', *glup* 'stupid', *imbecilan* 'imbecile', *retardiran* 'retarded').

*Silencers* and *dismissals* were as a rule intertwined and often employed insulting personalized negative vocatives of negatively connoted nouns referring to psychological traits, character, and sanity (e.g., *kompleksaš* 'complex-ridden person', *bedak* 'fool', *ništarija* 'good-for-nothing, loser'); see (24):

(24) *Bježi u Makedoniju, ništarijo!!!*

'Run back to Macedonia, you loser!!!'

Impolite comments negotiating national identity were infrequent in this set, as were those calling for action against the "other": one of the infrequent instances is (25), which uses three terms with a historical burden (*ustaša* 'Ustasha', *ustaški* 'Ustasha'):

(25) *pod hitno ga isteratit iz Srbije, i zatvoriti granice za ustasku robu...ustasa uvek ustasa!*

'expel him urgently from Serbia and close the borders for the ustasha goods...  
ustashe will always be ustashe!'

## 5. Conclusions

The overall difference between the four datasets relates to the nature of the interaction on the two platforms. The Facebook comments in JL included a great deal of interaction, which is related to the features of the platform which foster interactivity: users responded to posts by others and engaged in lengthy conversations. In contrast, website comments in VN included little interaction: users predominantly reacted to some aspects addressed in the news stories. For these reasons, the website and Facebook comments differed significantly with regard to the direction of impolite comments: In VN, only a limited number of impolite utterances targeted other posters (NA2: 9%, NA4: 11%), whereas the majority of impolite utterances were directed at entire national groups, often implying a "collective face attack" (Bardarneh, & Migdadi 2018: 98). In JL, a much larger number of impolite interpersonal utterances targeting other posters was identified (NA1: 28%, NA3: 44%).

A further difference was seen in the semantic domains (or themes) evoked. Certain semantic domains identified in JL comments judged impolite were not found at all in VN (e.g., curses and ill wishes with taboo words), or were rarely found, which might be related to moderation. Further, the VN and JL datasets differed in the types of impoliteness formulae, with a greater variety of these attested in JL.

The participants judged a considerable percent of all the comments impolite (see Table 1), which indicates that they did not consider impoliteness a norm of this genre. Interestingly, the quantity of phenomena judged impolite by three or four participants was higher in the JL datasets (see Table 1) that involved discussants performing identity memberships in various groups.

Some previous findings indicate that Facebook comments tend to exhibit less interpersonal impoliteness than website comments, suggesting that incivility is significantly more common on websites, which is related to users' anonymity (Rowe 2014; Santana 2014; Coe et al. 2014; however, Calabrese and Jenard 2018 found that insults as a form of address are mostly present on Facebook compared to website comments). The participants, readers of Croatian and Serbian user comments, in this study did not identify less impoliteness in Facebook comments than in website comments: for JL, impolite phenomena were identified in 66% (NA1) and 85% (NA3) of the comments and for VL in 51% (NA2) and 72% (NA4) of the comments (see Table 1). In addition to the interactivity mentioned, this may be due to the fact that many Facebook users in the two datasets analyzed choose anonymity, constructing fictitious selves by, for instance, using names such as *Aristotle* and *John Wayne*.

Regarding the differences between impoliteness judgments by one or two participants only and the judgments of three or four participants (the “majority,” which this study focused on), the following tendency was noticed: very negative (sometimes even stigmatizing) evaluative utterances about the out-group (i.e., another national group)—that is, utterances associating “the other” with some negative aspects—were often judged impolite by a single participant or two participants. Similar phenomena were judged impolite by three or four participants when these negative evaluations were accompanied by conventionalized impoliteness formulae with taboo words and curses. Various formulae with taboo or derogatory terms relating to the domains of sexual activities and mental health, as well as formulae using referential terms with a historical burden, were regularly judged impolite by three or four participants, who also judged impolite cursing, phrases referring to sexual activities and scatology, words evoking animal metaphors, and name modifications when they resulted in (novel) taboo or derogatory blends (e.g., *Kurvatska* ‘Whoreatia,’ *Smrđija* ‘Stinkerbia’). Name modifications — blends with a humorous or ridiculing effect (e.g., *Čokolinda* ‘Chocolinda,’ referring to the Croatian president) — were also judged impolite by a single participant.

There seems to be a strong relation between phenomena judged impolite and discursive identity construction. Impolite phenomena in all four datasets were relatively frequently related to establishing the border between “us” and “them”; that is, Croats and Serbs as national groups. Whenever posters’ personal or group identity (which were often intertwined) was seen to be under attack, they responded with equal impoliteness. Moreover, national face attacks were frequently performed and as a rule received a response in counterattacks. Thus, the phenomena perceived as impolite often seemed to relate to a broader discursive strategy: to associate the out-group (Croats/Serbs) with a negative aspect and disassociate oneself from that group. In addition to judging utterances with a negative evaluation of the out-group impolite, the participants also linked impoliteness to utterances in which posters disaffiliated from some in-group members whose behavior was judged inappropriate.

As shown in Section 4, “national face threats” were active in many instances of the user comments judged impolite by readers of Croatian and Serbian online comments. Culpeper’s (2011a) conventionalized impoliteness formulae were used not only in individual face attacks, but also group attacks, in which some of the insulting formulae were not personalized.

Discursive disaffiliation was constructed through negative, often even stigmatizing, descriptions of those considered to belong to another national group (Serbs or Croats). These descriptions, regularly judged impolite, were conventionalized impoliteness formulae: pointed criticisms and complaints, personalized negative vocatives, negative assertions and references, dismissals, silencers, curses, and ill

wishes (Culpeper 2011a: 135–136). Some of these phenomena can be considered hate speech (see, e.g., Assimakopoulos et al. 2017).

The majority of the material judged impolite contained one or another impoliteness formula listed by Culpeper (2011a: 135–136): Culpeper's taxonomy thus proved to be applicable and rather useful in the classification of phenomena perceived impolite in Croatian and Serbian online user comments. Overall, unanimous impoliteness judgments seemed to be strongly related to the micro-structures used and semantic domains evoked in the formulae: the formulae judged impolite by three or four participants regularly employed various taboo and derogatory terms from the domains of mental health and sexual activities, and referential terms with a historical burden.

A shortcoming of this qualitative study is the small number of participants, who were all of similar age and educational level and whose judgments were the basis for extracting impolite comments from the entire dataset. In a possible future study, a limited number of potentially impolite representative examples should be included in a questionnaire distributed to a larger group or to a few varied respondent groups. That method would make it possible to examine how impoliteness judgments relate to variables such as gender, age, education, and participants' engagement in online commenting.

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## Appendix A: Articles and user comments - an overview

Articles	Headlines and subheads	No. of comments, words, publication date(s)	Unique Users
News article 1 (NA1) (Dec. 7, 2016) <b>Jutarnji list</b> [the chocolate bar], 374 words	AFERA ČOKOLADA PREDSEDNICA NEUGODNO IZNENA- ĐENA 'Iznimno sam razočarana, roditeljima koji su dobili te čokoladice ćemo se ispričati i poslati hrvatske proizvode' THE CHOCOLATE AFFAIR THE PRESIDENT UNPLEASANTLY SURPRISED "I'm deeply disappointed; we'll apologize to the parents who received these chocolate bars and we'll send them some Croatian products."	196 (24)* ca. 7,000 words 12–14 Dec. 2016	123
News article 2 (NA2) (Dec. 7, 2016) <b>Večernje novosti</b> [the chocolate bar], 543 words	"ČOKOLADNI SKANDAL" Hrvatska buna zbog srpske čokoladice. "The chocolate bar scandal." The Croatian mutiny against the Serbian chocolate bar.	69 (15) ca. 1,800 words 7–9 Dec. 2016	64
News article 3 (NA3) (Dec. 12, 2016) <b>Jutarnji list</b> [Serbia and the EU], 1,236 words	IZGUBIO ŽIVCE 'DOSTA JE HRVATSKOG IŽIVLJAVANJA, POVUCITE BLOKADU ILI ODLAZIM!' Vučić pobjesnio na Zagreb, bojkotira sastanak s vladama Europske unije LOSING ONE'S TEMPER "ENOUGH OF CROATIA'S BRUTALIZATION. REMOVE THE BLOCKADE OR I'M LEAVING!" Vučić became furious with Za- greb and is boycotting the meeting with the EU governments.	219 (26) ca. 8,000 words 12–14 Dec. 2016	107
News article 4 (NA4) (Dec. 12, 2016) <b>Večernje novosti</b> [Serbia and the EU], 611 words	PUT KA EVROPSKOJ UNIJI Hrvati nas blokirali zbog knjiga i ikona; Vučić: Dosta nam je hrvatskog izživljavanja! ON THE WAY TO THE EU: Croats have blocked us due to books and icons. Vučić: We've had enough of Croatia's brutalization!	184 (24) ca. 3,700 words 12–13 Dec. 2016	166

\*Threaded comments.

## APPENDIX B: Readers' form

Year of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Last university degree in (subject): \_\_\_\_\_; obtained (year):  
\_\_\_\_\_

South Slavic town or region I consider my home because of the amount of time  
spent there: \_\_\_\_\_

I have attended courses in pragmatics (choose one): Yes No

I read South Slavic online newspapers (choose one): Never Sometimes Frequently

I read user comments on South Slavic newspaper articles (choose one): Never So-  
metimes Frequently

I most often read South Slavic online sources from (country): \_\_\_\_\_

I comment on South Slavic online newspaper articles (choose one): Never Someti-  
mes Frequently

## STRATEGIJE NEULJUDNOSTI U KOMENTARIMA NA ONLINE VIJESTI U HRVATSKIM I SRPSKIM NOVINAMA: STUDIJA TEMELJENA NA PROCJENAMA ČITATELJA

U članku se ispituju neuljudni fenomeni i strategije neuljudnosti u žanru komentara na mrežne novinske članke. Analiza se oslanja na čitateljske percepcije neuljudnosti. Komentari (668) koji su predmet analize iz dvaju su dnevnika: hrvatskog *Jutarnjeg lista* i srpskih *Večernjih novosti*, a izazvala su ih četiri članka s političkim temama, dva iz JL-a i dva iz VN-a, objavljena u prosincu 2016. Analiza se temelji na procjenama četvero mladih čitatelja koji sami nisu sudjelovali u raspravama na mreži. Klasifikacija i analiza iskaza koji su oni interpretirali kao neuljudne temelji se na Culpeperovoj (2011a) taksonomiji obrazaca i „okidača“ neuljudnosti, te neuljudnih formula. Najveći prostor daje se iskazima i jezičnim sredstvima koje je troje ili četvero čitatelja ocijenilo neuljudnima, a pritom je cilj utvrđivanje fenomena koji se redovito ocjenjuju neuljudnima. Među iskazima koje je većina čitatelja interpretirala kao neuljudne, najviše su zastupljene konvencionalne neuljudne formule s izrazima iz domena seksa i mentalnog zdravlja, te izrazi povezani s traumatičnim povijesnim iskustvima. Kod fenomena ocijenjenih neuljudnima dominiraju psovke, izrazi iz semantičke domene skatologije, izrazi kojima su u podlozi metafore s izvornom domenom životinja, te modificirana osobna i vlastita imena kada su rezultat preinake stopljenice s pogrđnim značenjem ili izrazito negativnim konotacijama. Analiza je pokazala da postoji jasna veza između izraza koji se interpretiraju kao neuljudni i diskurzivne izgradnje identiteta, odnosno utvrđivanja granice između „nas“ i „njih“: u materijalu su česti izrazito negativni, čak i stigmatizirajući opisi onih koji se svrstavaju u (nacionalno ili etnički) „druge“.

**Ključne riječi:** procjene neuljudnosti, interpretacije neuljudnosti, neuljudne formule, *online* komentari, hrvatske i srpske novine

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