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Forensic linguistics and online Islamic extremism

Introduction

This article introduces the employment of the expanding fields of forensic linguistics and phonetics in analysing extremist Islamic literature. While these fields are used in many other areas apart from counter-terrorism, this study is particularly focused on the use of forensic language analysis in detecting terrorist intentions in online texts with extremist content claiming to be based on Islam. This paper demonstrates the possibility of combining computational analysis of corpus linguistics with qualitative research methodology.

While there have been many studies on online extremism, the focus on Islamic extremism in scholarly inquiry still presents a relatively unexplored field.¹ Previous studies on extreme speech online have been devoted to the analysis of the language on white supremacist forums or to the presentation of minorities, especially the Muslim communities, by authorities or in the mainstream press. It has been observed that the use of the term “fundamentalist” has been often used interchangeably with or as a synonym for the term Islam, i.e. for the religion itself.²

Forensic linguistics and phonetics are sciences that examine text and speech. They are used, inter alia, in criminal proceedings, counter-terrorism, intelligence and surveillance.³ However, they are also used in civil proceedings, such as copyright disputes.

The procedures and techniques that are typically used in forensic linguistics can be divided into several subtypes. These include authorship analysis of written language (which can be used in detecting the author of an anonymous threat, be it written or a phone-call), sociolinguistic profiling (i.e. determining the membership in a social group according to the terminology used), comparative authorship analysis and meaning analysis. The determination of meaning is mostly used for uncovering criminal intentions through linguistic assessment, such as e.g. in the court case *R v Ogundele* (2010), which is assessed below.

Other types of forensic language analysis may include the uses of corpus linguistic approaches, speaker analysis, speaker profiling, speaker comparison, and, interrelated with the previous, automatic speaker recognition and verification.

¹ See: PRENTICE, Sheryl; RAYSON, Paul and Paul J. TAYLOR. The language of Islamic extremism: Towards and automated identification of beliefs, motivations and justifications. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*. 2012, No. 17(2) [Printed], ISSN 1384-6655, pp. 260-264.

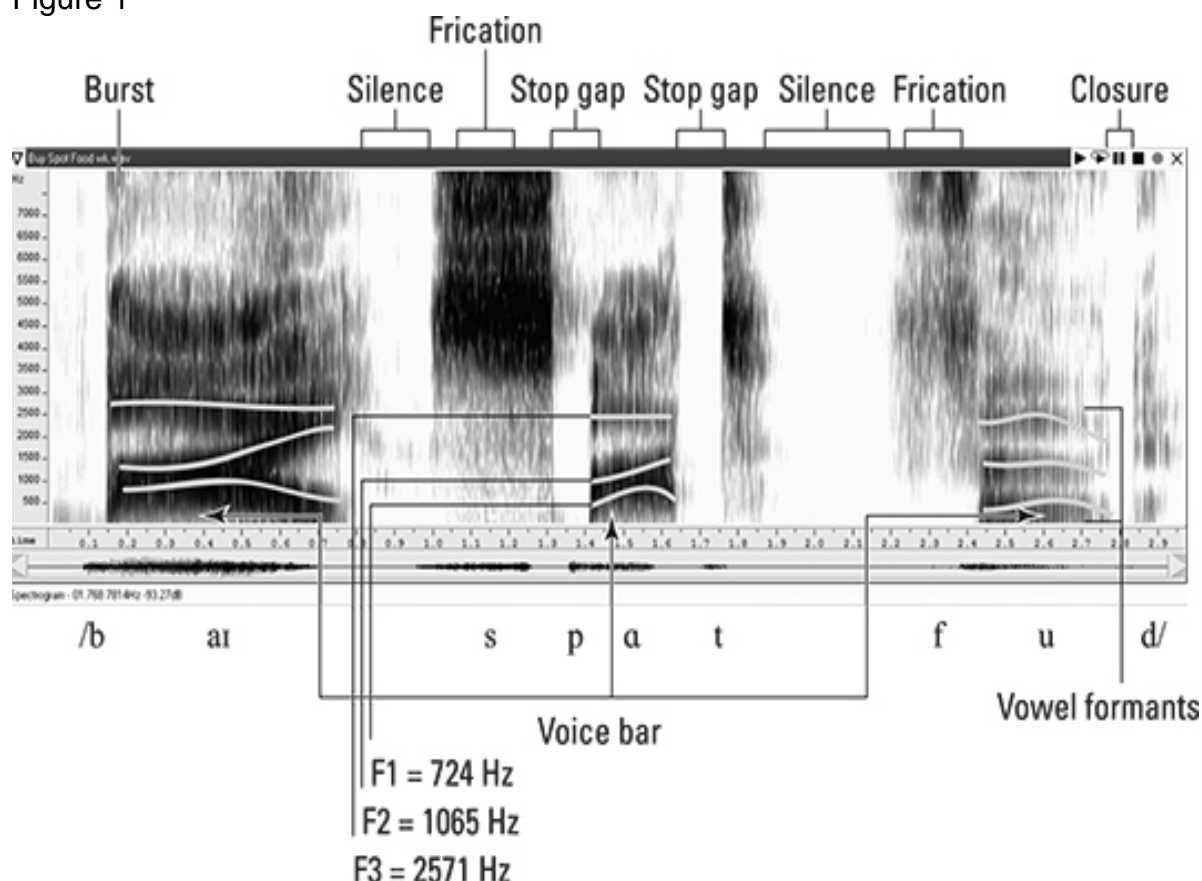
² Ibid.

³ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, Westminster, London 2015. ‘Forensic Language Analysis’. PostNote, Number 509, September 2015, p. 2.

Forensic linguistics is not only used in criminal proceedings, but also in other areas of law, such as authorship and copyright, civil or administrative law. For example, forensic phonetics is used in asylum procedures to determine whether asylum applicants speak the truth about their origin.¹ Such linguistic analysis is usually carried out in cooperation between a linguistic expert and native speakers of the language or dialect in question.² Figure 1 below is an example of a visual depiction of speech used by foneticians to analyse articulation specifics used in regional dialects.

Spectrogram³

Figure 1



The most relevant one of the above-mentioned procedures for the purposes of extreme speech is the semantic analysis leading to the determination of meaning. In the court case entitled *R v Ogundele* (2010) an expert analysed internet chat that contained abbreviations and dialect terms and appeared to contain conspiracy to

¹ PATRICK, Peter. 2012. Language analysis for determination of origin: objective evidence for refugee status determination. In: P. Tiersma and L. Solan (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 533-546, p. 540.

² KATZ, W.F. *Phonetics and Spectrograms: Putting Sounds on Paper*. Available at <<https://www.dummies.com/education/language-arts/grammar/phonetics-and-spectrograms-putting-sounds-on-paper/>>

³ PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 264.

murder. The expert determined the meaning of one term as having associations with shooting and killing.¹

Studies on white supremacist extreme speech

Both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches have already been frequently employed to study the public construction of terrorism and extremism. Much attention has already been paid to the analysis of linguistic practices leading to marginalization of minority groups, be it religious, ethnic, national or other minorities. Studies have been published about the discriminatory discourse surrounding Arabs in the American press² or about the vague media presentation of the Arab identity to contribute to an environment of fear.³

Misappropriation of terms leading to intolerance between religious and ethnic groups has also been studied together with politicians' negative presentation of Muslims in the Western media, as presenting threat to social order.⁴ Other related studies are focused on the discourse of extreme right-wing political parties in Europe.

The latter type of studies has led to the identification of five types of discursive strategies that appear in racial, national or ethnic discourse.⁵ These include referential strategies, which construct social actors as in-groups and out-groups; predicational strategies, which assert such actors stereotypical, evaluative attributions; argumentation strategies used to justify the positive and negative attributions; perspectivation and framing strategies, through which authors position their own involvement in discourse; and intensification and mitigation strategies, which assign the above certain epistemic modalities.⁶ Figure 2 lists typical examples of these discursive strategies together with linguistic devices used for their utilization and linguistic realization.

¹ COULTHARD, M. GRANT, T & KREDENS, K. 2010. 'Forensic Linguistics'. In: R. WODAK, B. JOHNSTONE, & P. KERSWILL (eds.). *Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Thousand Oaks and London: SAGE Publications.

² STOLTZ, G. 1.2007. 'Arabs in the morning paper: A case of shifting identity'. In: A. HODGES & C. NILEP (Eds.), *Discourse, War and Terrorism*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 105-122.

³ STENWALL, M. 2007. "'Fear of terror attack persists": Constructing fear in reports on terrorism by international news agencies'. In: A. HODGES & C. NILEP (Eds.), *Discourse, War and Terrorism*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 205-222.

⁴ BAKER, P, WODAK, R., GABRIELATOS, G., KHOSRAVINIK, M., KRZYZANOWSKI, M. & MCENERY, T. 2008. 'A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press'. *Discourse and Society*. 19 (3), 273-306.

⁵ REISIGL, M. & WODAK, R. 2001. *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism*. London/New York: Routledge, p. 45.

⁶ Ibid.

Examples of discursive strategies¹

Figure 2

Strategy	Objectives	Devices
nomination	discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/ events and processes/ actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • membership categorization devices, deictics, anthroponyms, etc. • tropes such as metaphors, metonymies and synecdoches (<i>pars pro toto, totum pro parte</i>) • verbs and nouns used to denote processes and actions, etc.
predication	discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events/ processes and actions (more or less positively or negatively)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits (e.g. in the form of adjectives, appositions, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, conjunctive clauses, infinitive clauses and participial clauses or groups) • explicit predicates or predicative nouns/adjectives/pronouns • collocations • explicit comparisons, similes, metaphors and other rhetorical figures (including metonymies, hyperboles, litotes, euphemisms) • allusions, evocations, and presuppositions/implicatures, etc.
argumentation	justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • topoi (formal or more content-related) • fallacies
perspectivization, framing or discourse representation	positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deictics • direct, indirect or free indirect speech • quotation marks, discourse markers/ particles • metaphors • animating prosody, etc.
intensification, mitigation	modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diminutives or augmentatives • (modal) particles, tag questions, subjunctive, hesitations, vague expressions, etc. • hyperboles, litotes • indirect speech acts (e.g. question instead of assertion) • verbs of saying, feeling, thinking, etc.

¹ REISIGL, M. & WODAK, R. 2009. The Discourse-Historical Approach. In: R. WODAK & M. MEYER (Eds.). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage Publications., p. 95.

The language of Islamic extremism

While it is obvious from the previous paragraphs that study of extremist language does not come out of blue, it is also evident that there is a considerable lack of studies focused on Islamic extremism, especially when compared to the number of studies of the opposite side of the issue, i.e. white supremacist extremism.

A unique approach has been adopted by researchers at Lancaster University, who conducted a corpus linguistics study combining computational analysis of a large sample with qualitative approaches.¹ According to the findings of this study, corpus linguistic analyses can reveal something of the beliefs and motivations behind authors of extremist texts.

This study is also unique by focusing on Islamic extremism. As such, extreme speech which employs Muslim terminology while departing from the original intentions of the pertinent religious teaching that it can be considered as “extreme” rhetoric misusing the vocabulary of Islam.

The aforementioned study was a follow-up project after the authors had examined 50 extremist texts surrounding the Gaza conflict. They had discovered that ‘moral proof’ is frequently used in extremist texts, through which terrorist intentions can be identified: the analysed texts all shared the features of using moral comparisons to justify the morality of the authors’ actions and positions. Alternatively, some of the texts highlighted the immorality of an outgroup position action and some employed the tool of ‘social proof’, i.e. using social comparisons to communities, societies, or groups to support a viewpoint, including referencing cultural values.²

The follow-up study involved 250 extremist texts downloaded from open-source websites available in the UK.³ The authors decided to analyse online material, because they assumed that due to differences in media, it would otherwise not be possible to select a representative sample. Also, they based their decision on the assumption that the Internet plays an important role in continued functioning of extremist groups.⁴

Three criteria were used for the selection of texts for the corpus. Firstly, only texts written in English were included. This was due to the ability of such texts to reach wider audience. The researchers assumed that such texts were considered important enough to be translated into English. Additionally, the software used for language processing was not designed to deal with Arabic language.

Secondly, only texts explicitly advocating the use of violence were included. This enabled the authors to exclude texts which were mere statements or promotions of extremist values, but could not have directly contributed to spreading terrorism.

¹ PRENTICE, S., RAYSON, P. & TAYLOR, P. J. 2012. ‘The language of Islamic extremism: Towards and automated identification of beliefs, motivations and justifications.’ *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*. 17:2, 259-286.

² PRENTICE, S., TAYLOR, P. J., RAYSON, P., HOSKINS, A. & B. O’LOUGHLIN. 2011. ‘Analyzing the semantic content and persuasive composition of extremist media: A case study of texts produced during the Gaza conflict’. *Information System Frontiers*. 13, 61-73.

³ PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 262.

⁴ Ibid.

Finally, the corpus only included the texts that were written in the first person.¹ This enabled the reserachers to exclude texts which were third person narratives or reported speech.²

As for methodology, the texts were cleansed of extraneous information, such as headers or footers, introductions and information on the authors on nine forums. The texts were subsequently combined into one document in order to obtain a general overview of Islamic extremist rhetoric.³

The texts included those authored by people claiming to be the core of crucial Islamic extremist organizations, such as Al Quaeda and authors of organizations which are not primarily focused on promoting violence, but have other extremist views and purposes, such as asserting Shariah. Some texts were also authored by “unaffiliated” authors.⁴

Furthermore, the texts were uploaded into the corpus software tool Wmatrix CLAWS. A part-of-speech tagger was used to assign every word or multi-word unit a part-of-speech label. Sense disambiguation techniques were employed to assign items to one or more semantic field categories. Each Tagset was further arranged to 21 discourse fields.⁵

Figure 2 below explicates the relation between discourse topics and discourse fields. In the present study, for example, Islam is assigned to the field entitled ‘Social actions, states and processes’ and the sub-category ‘Religion and the supernatural’, by scanning for the term and its corresponding tags in the internal dictionary.

¹ PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 264.

² Ibid.

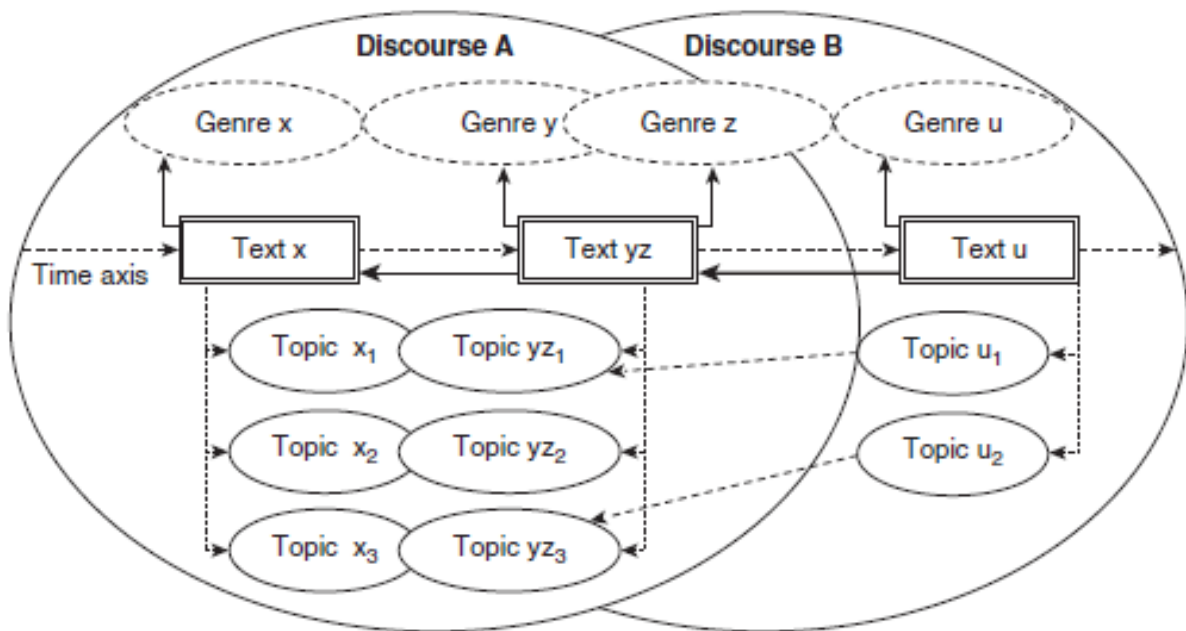
³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Discourse fields¹

Figure 3



The most frequent terms in the extremist literature corpus were also identified, as specified in Figure 4 below. It is obvious from the frequent occurrence of negatively loaded terms that the extreme Islamic speech is negatively oriented. Terms like “fighting”, “killing” and “annihilate” are a few examples of the specific vocabulary.

Most frequent terms in the extremist literature corpus²

Figure 4

Common word/string patterns	WMatrix label	Examples
Terms with negative connotations	Negative	<i>enemy, fight, killed, fighting, other</i>
Terms denoting existence	Positive	<i>is, are, be, all, was</i>
Terms with the word string pattern ‘ing’	ing	<i>fighting, killing, during, saying, being</i>
Terms denoting warfare, defence and the army	G3	<i>jihad, war, army, military, forces</i>
Terms with the word string pattern ‘ed’	ed	<i>killed, need, asked, indeed, started</i>
Terms with the word string pattern ‘rabi’	rabi	<i>arabian, Saudi Arabia, arabic, arabism, Arabia</i>
Terms with the word string pattern ‘ila’	ila	<i>similar, Khilafah, similarly, available, annihilate</i>

¹ REISIGL and WODAK, 2009, p. 92.

² PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 268.

Additionally, the top 100 keywords when compared to the British national corpus were identified. These were pictured according to their importance in the analysed texts. It is evident in the importance of personal pronouns (e.g. “we”, “they” and “them”) that the extreme literature corpus is highly relational towards the readers or opponent groups.

Top 100 keywords compared to the British national corpus¹

Figure 5

Afghanistan aggression **Allah** allah almighty **America** american americans **and** arab are army banner battle
 because **believers** bin **blessings** blood **brothers** cause comparisons crusader crusaders **enemies** enemy **evil** faith
fight fighting forces Gaza **God** names hearts **him** holy honor infidels **Iraq** iraqi **is** **islam** **islamic**
 Israel **jews** **ji** **had** killed killing land martyr martyrdom martyrs **messenger** **Muhammad**
Mujahideen **muslim** **muslims** nation not O occupation of **OUR** **Palestine**
 palestinian paradise path **peace** **people** praise **prophet** **religion** resistance rulers sake scholars sheikh yet **that** **the**
their **them** **they** this those truth **Ummah** **upon** US victory wa war **we** **who** will world
 you **zionist**

The frequently occurring terms included the words “leaders” and “media”. The concordance of the terms ‘leaders’ and ‘media’, was analysed by the WMatrix software and it was discovered that the authors of extremist texts are dissatisfied with the present-day leaders and that they find the role of the media salient in the working of their groups.

Concordance of the terms “leaders” and “media”²

Figure 6

alqab; and] those among our leaders who sold themselves , and I am not
 nd a clearer revolution and better leaders who want to defend the oppressed a
 > , oh millions of Arabs , oh Arab leaders ? What are you going to do in lig?
 ing and watching . One of the Arab leaders claims that he opposes the attack
 have been to get rid of the local leaders of heresy namely the rulers of Ri;
 ised questions ! Intelligent use of media channels could be more effective th
 advantage means trying to use other media channels to convey our message even
 omised upon its ability to create a media storm . Kidnappings of journalists
 sources to own their own successful media devices . Therefore , such groups h
 . For example we could contact the media agency 's staff to convey our viewp

¹ PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 270.

² Ibid.

Additionally, the most frequently occulting semantic pair concepts were generated from the corpus. Figure 7 below demonstrates the working of semantic pair concepts. The analysed text contained pairs related to both religion and politics, such as “darkness and light”, or “those who help and “those who hinder”. The occurrence of such pairs was a result of the extremist texts’ authors holding a polarized account of the reality.

Semantic pairs

Figure 7.a¹

negative connotation	positive connotation
tense	serene
threatened	safe
unsure	self-confident
observed	unobserved
skeptic	outgoing

Figure 7.b²

Semantic pair concepts	
darkness and light	those who help and those who hinder
success and failure	those who are intelligent and those with inability/unintelligence
serenity (calm) and violence	those who are strong and those who are weak
life and death	those in power and those who have no power
warfare versus anti-war	those who are affluent and those with no money
contentedness and sadness	what is allowed/permitted and not allowed/permitted
those who are respected and those who have no respect	what is lawful/ethical and what is unethical
those who are selfish and those who are unselfish	what people have an obligation to do and what they are not obligated to do
those who are trying hard and those who are inattentive	what is true and what is false
those who are religious and those who are non-religious	

Moreover, the studied traits included the collocations of people and places - the collocates of personal names and place names. These were important, because they indicated which people and places were regarded by the authors of extremist speech as important, because of being influential or because of being apprehended as suitable potential targets of terrorist attacks.

¹ KOELLE, KRANZ and MOLLER, 2015, p. 7.

² PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 273.

Collocates of place names¹

Figure 8

MI	Collocate	MI	Collocate	MI	Collocate	MI	Collocate
8.48	<i>enter</i>	6.07	<i>invaded</i>	9.65	<i>western</i>	5.19	<i>northern</i>
8.07	<i>stationing</i>	6.07	<i>disappear</i>	9.02	<i>united</i>	5.17	<i>ongoing</i>
8.07	<i>rural</i>	6.07	<i>buried</i>	6.02	<i>tourism</i>	5.14	<i>north</i>
7.66	<i>web</i>	5.96	<i>domestic</i>	6.02	<i>safavid</i>	5.02	<i>boycotting</i>
7.49	<i>neighbouring</i>	5.93	<i>never</i>	6.02	<i>inseparable</i>	5.02	<i>soviets</i>
7.34	<i>resting</i>	5.83	<i>cities</i>	6.02	<i>ignite</i>	5.02	<i>spark</i>
7.34	<i>holiest</i>	5.66	<i>intend</i>	6.02	<i>four-fifths</i>	5.02	<i>sa'ud</i>
7.34	<i>dictatorial</i>	5.57	<i>sees</i>	5.8	<i>assad</i>	5.02	<i>recognizing</i>
7.21	<i>occupy</i>	5.49	<i>crackdown</i>	5.7	<i>extorted</i>	5.02	<i>mastery</i>
7.07	<i>rear</i>	5.49	<i>christian</i>	5.64	<i>liberating</i>	5.02	<i>killings</i>
7.07	<i>fortified</i>	5.41	<i>surrounding</i>	5.61	<i>jihad</i>	5.02	<i>governed</i>
7.07	<i>residential</i>	5.34	<i>internet</i>	5.61	<i>fundamentally</i>	5.02	<i>alleged</i>
6.9	<i>visits</i>	5.31	<i>outside</i>	5.53	<i>nile</i>	4.88	<i>islamia</i>
6.9	<i>nearby</i>	5.27	<i>moved</i>	5.43	<i>mujahed</i>	4.85	<i>steal</i>
6.81	<i>eastern</i>	5.17	<i>safe</i>	5.43	<i>recession</i>	4.85	<i>pilgrimage</i>
6.81	<i>leave</i>	5.16	<i>regimes</i>	5.43	<i>copts</i>	4.8	<i>slaying</i>
6.73	<i>european</i>	5.14	<i>targeting</i>	5.43	<i>collusion</i>	4.8	<i>paved</i>
6.66	<i>rescue</i>	5.11	<i>gulf</i>	5.4	<i>southern</i>	4.8	<i>mash'al</i>
6.49	<i>imposing</i>	5.09	<i>two</i>	5.28	<i>inch</i>	4.8	<i>inability</i>
6.48	<i>holy</i>	5.07	<i>stayed</i>	5.28	<i>idf</i>	4.8	<i>dragged</i>
6.34	<i>intervention</i>	5.01	<i>retreat</i>	5.28	<i>diyala</i>	4.8	<i>commander-in-chief</i>
6.2	<i>tribal</i>	4.99	<i>several</i>	5.28	<i>devoured</i>	4.8	<i>annihilated</i>
6.2	<i>streets</i>	4.99	<i>withdraw</i>	5.28	<i>befalling</i>	4.77	<i>bani</i>
6.2	<i>qualified</i>	4.96	<i>preparing</i>	5.28	<i>al-nafisi</i>	4.76	<i>usurped</i>
6.2	<i>interference</i>	4.95	<i>begun</i>	5.22	<i>south</i>	4.76	<i>ambassador</i>

¹ PRENTICE, RAYSON and TAYLOR, 2012, p. 277.

Conclusion

The linguistic analysis as described above can be employed to contribute to counter-terrorism research. The analysis aids revealing beliefs and motivations behind authors of extremist texts. Thorough linguistic evaluation of extremist material provides a global overview of extremist literature content.

Furthermore, the value gained from combining quantitative techniques with more qualitative approaches is in the combination of the focus on abstract concepts such as morality and values with quantifiable data. This enables the researchers to provide exact quantifiable measurements to support their hypotheses about terrorist intentions.

This paper has thus presented a scalable technique which can be applied to a much larger dataset without losing the advantages of qualitative analysis. The presented observation of 'rhetoric of antithesis' has revealed that the authors of the studied extremist texts present a polarized account to encourage the use of violence.

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RESUMÉ

ŘEZNÍKOVÁ, Sylva: FORENZNÍ LINGVISTIKA A ONLINE ISLÁMSKÝ EXTREMISMUS

Tento příspěvek představuje rychle se rozvíjející obor forezní jazykové analýzy a jeho použití v odhalování teroristických záměrů pomocí automatizované analýzy textu. Forezní lingvistika a fonetika jsou obory aplikované lingvistiky, které se v současnosti rychle rozvíjí. Mnoho pozornosti již bylo věnováno kritické analýze veřejné konstrukce terorismu a extremismu pomocí diskurzivních praktik. Tento příspěvek je věnován možnosti použití automatického lingvistického rozboru textů na internetu s cílem odhalit extremistický jazyk a teroristické záměry autorů daných textů.

Klíčová slova: Automatická analýza textu, extremistický jazyk, forezní lingvistika, teroristické záměry.

SUMMARY

This paper introduces the expanding field of forensic language analysis and its use in detecting terrorist intentions through automated text analysis. Forensic linguistics and phonetics are currently rapidly expanding areas of applied linguistics. Much attention has already been paid to the critical analysis of public construction of terrorism and extremism through discursive practices. This paper explores the possibility of employing automated linguistic assessment of online texts in order to detect extremist language and terrorist intentions of the authors of such texts.

Keywords: Automated text analysis, extremist language, forensic linguistics, terrorist intentions.