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# Metalinguage and Conceptual Unsettling: Metalinguistic Density as an Indicator of Sharedness

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Individual Paper

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## Abstract

Communication is made possible by the metapragmatic dimension of language use—the fact that language to varying degrees always refers to itself (Agha, 2007). The most explicit manifestation of metapragmatics is explicit metalanguage: mentions of, comments on, or talk about features of language (Verschueren, 2000). Since it is a universal feature of language use, explicit metalanguage is in itself unremarkable. Yet where social polarization or conflict is concerned, it is crucial in localised discursive struggles and conceptual debates.

To more closely approximate the role of metalanguage in these struggles, the current paper presents research on online newspaper comment boards. Due to its textual nature, this mediatized context offers an amplified scope for metalinguistic engagement. Investigated comments focus on event during 3 critical moments in the Eurozone crisis (April 2010–April 2011), and were analysed for metalinguistic content through thematic coding, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, and Agha's (2007) framework of metapragmatics.

On this basis, the paper proposes the concept of 'metalinguistic density': a measure that indicates the extent to which a term's denotation is shared in a particular social context. The data suggest a tripartite distinction of terms: (i) common terms (with widely shared denotational norms), (ii) contentious terms (whose usage is divisive), and (iii) unstable terms. Unstable terms are relatively frequently the focus of metalanguage that seeks to 'unsettle' the terms by commenting on, or problematizing, their denotation/usage, usually for argumentative goals. Since 'metalinguistic density' is rooted in language users' own understanding of terms, it reflects and/or crystallises the discursive disputes that interrelate with social polarization, in an epistemically replicable manner.

Agha, A. (2007). *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge UP.

Verschueren, J. (2000). Notes on the role of metapragmatic awareness in language use. *Pragmatics*, 10, 439-456.

## Keywords

Metapragmatics;

Metalanguage;

Online communication;

Denotation

Economics discourse