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Dogs, swines and meat – animalisation and dehumanisation in Polish online discourse in the context of the war in Ukraine

Online warfare is a form of non-violent civic resistance that does not require individuals to be on the frontline but allows them to show solidarity with and support for those affected by war, regardless of their location.[1] Recognized by the Ukrainian government as particularly effective, accessible, and straightforward (Munk 2024), this form of resistance serves as the broader context for the present poster proposal. It aims to examine the phenomenon of dehumanization—specifically animalization—as it appears in entries on Polish online discussion forums about the conflict. Animalization, as a discursive tool, is used to depict people either positively or negatively by associating them with animal traits, thereby shaping perceptions of their volition and humanity (Lacalle et al. 2024). This practice also reflects underlying power and control asymmetries (Garcia 2021), which has pragmatic consequences, among others, in the form of hate speech, testified also in this particular context (Harmon 2023; Jaszczyk-Grzyb 2023; Szczepaniak-Kozak 2023).

The data under examination consist of entries derived from Polish online discussion forums between April and September 2022. A preliminary software-assisted analysis with the help of SKETCH ENGINE was conducted to identify particular linguistic patterns, followed by a qualitative examination using ATLAS.ti to determine key concepts and their associated sentiments. The findings reveal instances of animalization directed at the Russian nation, such as describing Russia as a "fierce dog" or depersonalizing Russians as a "piece of meat". Similarly, animalization is observed in references to Ukrainian civilians, such as the use of the verb "to shoo away," metaphorically portraying them as innocent animals victimized by a cruel hunter.

Keywords: online forum, dehumanisation, animalisation, war, Ukraine

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[1] Operational definition for the purpose of the current study

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