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Foids are worse than animals. A cognitive linguistics analysis of dehumanizing metaphors in online discourse

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to examine the language used by an emerging online community known as *incels*. *Incels* are “involuntarily celibate” men who gather online to share their frustration and resentment. They blame their predicament on their alleged ugliness, as well as on the structure of modern Western society in general, and women’s behaviour in particular. Hate speech and violent language flourish on *incel* online forums to such an extent that most of their websites are taken down, one by one, due to breaches of rules around violent content. In the present article I aim to analyze the language used by *incels*, focusing on the dehumanizing metaphors used in order to describe women, who are the main target of *incels*’ hatred. This paper was realized within the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis with special emphasis on conceptual metaphor theory.

Key words

cognitive linguistics, cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, dehumanizing metaphor, hate speech, online discourse

1. Introduction

Internet forums provide a very specific arena for social interaction, retaining many of the advantages of real-time face-to-face conversation, but at the same time providing the impression of anonymity and safe distance between interlocutors. These kinds of environment foster a willingness to express opinions and beliefs, no matter how radical, in a straightforward way, which in turn, proves conducive to radicalization of language. Internet forum users are more likely to resort to hate speech and even post direct threats towards their anonymous and, to some extent, abstract enemies and opponents. This veil of anonymity and abstraction is, however, very elusive and radicalization of language, innocuous as it may appear, increasingly often leads to radicalization of behaviour which may have real societal consequences. In this paper I attempt to investigate the relatively new, yet rapidly growing and changing, Internet community of so-called *incels* (Donnelly et al., 2001) from a linguistic perspective. I scrutinize the ways in which *incels* use language and how this language use further exacerbates the spiral of radicalization. I pay particular attention to conceptual metaphors in general and dehumanizing metaphors in particular that *incels* use in order to denigrate and dehumanize women as well as other (*non-incel*) men.

2. Incels: Social background

Incel, an abbreviated form of “involuntary celibate”, is a term coined in 1997 by a woman named Alana (who does not want to reveal her full name)² who founded a lonely hearts website. It was called

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² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45284455>

the Involuntary Celibacy Project and was meant to bring together people who were feeling lonely and were looking for some comfort and empathy. It was a supportive and well-intentioned online community of people of all genders and sexual orientations. The term *incel* (originally *invcel*) used to refer to any person who was struggling to form a loving relationship. The term has, however, evolved beyond recognition. It was appropriated 20 years later by an informal community of mostly white, heterosexual young men who unsuccessfully struggle to find sexual partners and blame their situation on society. *Incel*s mainly have a grievance with women who favour good-looking, dominant males (“alpha” males), ignoring all men positioned lower in the attractiveness hierarchy in favour of males who scoop up the majority of women, leaving no matches for *incels*. They consider themselves extremely ugly (“abominable”, “deformed” and “subhuman” in their own words) and for this reason incapable of attracting any women. It makes them frustrated and resentful and, as a consequence, leads to the fostering of misogynist, toxic views. Many of these men have experienced violence or bullying at some stage of their lives and often pin these experiences on their perceived ugliness, too. They separate themselves from a society which, they think, despises them and looks down on them anyway, and search for company online. *Incel*s adopt a fatalistic approach to life, feel that their situation is out of their hands and there is nothing, or very little, they can do to change their predicament. This feeling of helplessness is one of the reasons why *incels* gather online, spread hatred and plan revenge on anyone whom they consider to be responsible for their misery. They grow bitter and resentful and consequently vent their anger at society in general and women in particular. This unreasonable sense of entitlement leads to a vicious circle as *incels* who cannot find romantic company shun society and alienate themselves even more. This behaviour limits the possibility to meet anyone and perpetuates their misled beliefs about other people as well as themselves.

Incel discussions found on social media are rife with hate speech of all sorts. They range from innocent banter and self-pitying moaning, through derogatory and pejorative name-calling to direct threats against women, including the descriptions of elaborate fantasies which involve rape, torture and murder. This pathological fantasizing further strengthened by supportive comments from other *incels* has led to the deaths of many innocent people (cf. crimes committed by George Sordini, Elliot Rodger, Christopher Harper-Mercer, Scott Beierle among others as well as the May 2020 *incel*-inspired terror attack in Canada which led to the first official recognition of *incel* ideology as a form of terrorism).

Internet forums are fertile ground for the formation of the most bizarre kinds of communities. This fact has both positive and negative repercussions. On the one hand, online forums provide a platform for discussion and counselling for discriminated-against minorities, people in real need of help and support that could be difficult to obtain in real life. There are online communities dedicated to sufferers of rare diseases and disorders, where they can share valuable information or offer advice. The role of social media and online forums cannot be overestimated in the context of politics either. For instance, the growing popularity of Facebook helped to spread ideas which resulted in the so-called Arab Spring (Khondker, 2011).

On the other hand, the Internet is also a hotbed of crime and radicalization (Bermingham et al., 2009; Torok, 2013; Omotoyinbo, 2014). Social networks enable paedophiles and people with other pathological and criminal interests to share illicit material and groom their victims. They also facilitate the recruiting of vulnerable people to serve various radical ideologies, such as those related to the radical Islamist agenda or alt-right neo-Nazi movements (Burris et al., 2000; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). They provide a much-needed feeling of belonging to people who otherwise feel alienated and dejected, and help them find like-minded individuals who are willing to fight for a common cause or against a common enemy. The *incel* community is no different in this respect. It has been also linked to the gamer community (which is a much broader and more varied community), because of the fact that it is increasingly difficult for *incels* to differentiate between the real and the virtual world. They expect instant gratification and get easily frustrated. They find it unthinkable that they are supposed to make an effort in order to earn a woman’s attention as they are used to the constantly available and instantly gratifying entertainment of online pornography. Instead, they state that they deserve women’s attention and are unjustly denied it. They share their frustrations online and start living a virtual life under the delusion that their grudges are justified. However warped and ridiculous their argumentation, it is worth analysing from a linguistic perspective, especially because these feelings of entitlement are echoed in discourses of other groups as well. They are created, shared and perpetuated within communities and lead to the creation of ideologies.

Incels take this to the extreme by claiming that they should have access to women as it is only too natural and obviously necessary for every man, no matter how ugly or otherwise disadvantaged he may be. There are many facets of the *incel* discourse which deserve proper investigation, and that applies both to the content of their discourse as well as its form and all the background circumstances, including social context, which surround its creation. In the present paper I focus only on a tiny slice of the problem. The main theory that is used in this paper for the analysis of *incel* discourse is the conceptual metaphor theory. This theory is of special relevance precisely because the connection between language and thought, and language and behaviour is not always consciously realized. The more entrenched and automatized these connections, the more insidious the power of metaphor.

One of the most important reasons to pay careful attention to the relationship between metaphors and thought is that this relationship is often largely invisible(...) Since the way we communicate emerges from the same conceptual systems out of which we think and act, an examination of our language becomes especially crucial in analyzing and interpreting that system. (Wills, 2009, p. 7)

In the following part of the paper I intend to shed more light on the language used on *incel* forums that leads to radicalization and consequently even crimes.

3. Conceptual metaphor

Conceptual metaphor theory has been one of the most influential and widely applied theories in cognitive linguistics. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are not only figures of speech but rather cognitive mechanisms which facilitate our understanding of complex phenomena. They are conceptual in nature, which means that they do not only have an ornamental function, but structure the way we think: “Far from simply ornamenting or elaborating an idea, metaphor actively influences the thought it helps to articulate, giving it a form and shape that can define or alter it in fundamental ways” (Wills, 2009, p. 5).

Most conceptual metaphors are not deliberate, or have lost their deliberate motivation in the process of conventionalization and are now used automatically and almost unconsciously (e.g. *head of state*). Nevertheless, some metaphors which structure our thought are used advisedly and with a pre-meditated aim. Metaphor creators can deliberately guide our thinking and manipulate our opinions depending on the kind of imagery they use in order to describe the problem in question (Steen, 2010, 2014): “Deliberate metaphor is different from non-deliberate metaphor in that non-deliberate metaphor does not involve the intentional use of metaphor as metaphor between sender and addressee: when people talk about argument in terms of war they typically do not pay distinct attention to the source domain of war as a separate domain of reference” (Steen, 2017, p. 2).

Thus, in order for a metaphor to be deliberate, the sender needs to be fully aware of the existence of the source domain from which the terminology to describe the target domain is drawn. Mappings, or correspondences, are established between the source domain (i.e. the domain which provides a concrete structure for understanding the concept) and the target domain (i.e. the domain which is understood by means of juxtaposing it with the source domain). The process of establishing mappings takes place primarily at the conceptual level, and can, but does not necessarily need to, surface at the level of language. In this way, certain concepts are structured or built upon others and thus understood in terms of others. Moreover, the target domain borrows terminology from the source domain which further strengthens the conceptualizations. For example, we think of and consequently describe time as a moving entity and use expressions such as *time flies*, *passing of time*, *time is running out* etc. Generally speaking, we conceptualize an abstract concept of time as a physical object and talk about *having time*, *wasting time*, *buying time* or we think of it as an animate being and *kill time*. *He went through life with a good heart* is, in turn, a linguistic manifestation of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, in which *life* as a more abstract concept is structured upon the more familiar and more concrete concept of a *journey*. In this way, *journey* provides a conceptual basis which is activated together with that of *life* during the construction and processing of the metaphor. What is activated is not only the semantic load but also the extra-semantic associations and connotations that the source domain provides. This fact has not gone unnoticed, especially in political discourse research. Even though, on the one hand, it is claimed that non-deliberate metaphors are most conceptually powerful (cf. “dead metaphor” in Ungerer and Schmid,

2006, p. 117), it is the deliberate metaphors which are most insidious and as a result harmful and potentially dangerous. Conceptual metaphor, when used deliberately, has a manipulative and persuasive function often exploited by politicians and rhetoricians (Charteris-Black, 2004). Lakoff famously claims that “metaphors can kill” (Lakoff, 1991, p.25) or if not kill, than at least justify killing and excuse aggression and violence towards the other.

In the context of the Internet in general and online communication in particular, these processes are accelerated and magnified. It is easier to find a target group or a community of like-minded people with whom to share opinions, ideas and interests, no matter how unconventional or disturbing. These environments aid the creation of close-knit communities which adopt a specific set of vocabulary elements as well as metaphorical representations. The *incel* community is not different in this respect. It is not only a close-knit but also a closed community, i.e. aliens are not accepted and cannot participate freely in the creation of the *incel* discourse. First and foremost, women are excluded from active participation and discourse creation.³ Similarly, men who are too handsome by *incel* standards are excluded from the forums and often heavily criticized and offended in the process. Often, in order to prove one’s *incelhood*, photos are requested and then evaluated by the community. If a person is deemed ugly enough they are accepted and welcome. This limited access to the community and, as a result, to the creation of the *incel* discourse, is in line with van Dijk’s argumentation. He claims that social power is parallel to access to discourse, and one’s social standing and position in the dominance hierarchy can be measured by the number of different discourse genres one has access to as well as the extent of one’s active participation in said discourse. A dominant position in society is reflected in a dominant position in public discourse creation.

Similarly, lack of power is also measured by its lack of active or controlled access to discourse: in everyday life, most ‘ordinary’ people only have active access to conversations with family members, friends or colleagues. (...) The crucial implication of this correlation is not merely that discourse control is a form of social action control, but also and primarily that it implies the conditions of control over the minds of other people, that is, the management of social representation. (van Dijk, 1993, pp. 256–257)

Like the communities of various political groupings and other more or less radicalized organizations, *incels* have developed a special way of speaking, a sociolect which they use to cover a relatively limited set of topics. Using this special way of speaking, which effectively excludes uninitiated non-members from any type of meaningful participation in the community, they elaborate and share a carefully constructed vision of the world. One of the major themes found in *incel* communities is the dehumanization of women. And one of the ways in which they express this line of thinking linguistically is through the use of dehumanizing metaphors.

4. Dehumanizing metaphor

The use of dehumanizing metaphors is one of the most common manipulation techniques aimed at negatively influencing readers’ perception of a given group of people (Haslam, 2006; Wills, 2009; Bastian and Haslam, 2011; Costello and Hodson, 2014; Hodson et al., 2014; Waśniewska, 2017, 2018; Prażmo, 2019; Prażmo and Augustyn, 2020). Linguistic representations which rely on animalizing metaphorical framing in order to denigrate a person or a group of people are especially pervasive. They range from relatively innocuous descriptions which do not aim to offend anybody directly, to aggressive and deliberately offensive language which constitutes so-called *hate speech* (Bastian and Haslam, 2011; Townsend, 2014). The concept of dehumanization (or inhumanization) has been widely applied across different scholarly fields. In the present paper, however, I restrict the use of the term only to the area of linguistic description and metaphorical representation of selected groups or individuals. Thus, dehumanization is here tentatively defined as mostly, but not exclusively, deliberate use of selected metaphorical framings in linguistic representation of people based on conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS (or in even more extreme cases HUMANS ARE INANIMATE MATTER) in order to conceptually deprive people of their humanness and human rights and denigrate their moral status.

³ There are debates among *incels* concerning the question of whether women can also be true *incels* (*trueincels*). The so-called *femincels* (female *incels*) appear occasionally on the forums, but are generally frowned upon and often banned.

As human beings, we assume our uniqueness and superiority over other non-human beings. Humans claim a privileged position in the Great Chain of Being (*scala naturae*) yielding only to God and angel-like creatures (Lakoff and Turner, 1989; Krzeszowski, 1997; Rigato and Minelli, 2013). Different types of animals, plants and inanimate matter are perceived as inferior to humans. Thus, the PERSON IS ANIMAL metaphor serves a primarily denigrating function and creates a negative attitude towards a person described in this way (Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán, 2003 for the dehumanization of women; cf. for instance Tipler and Ruscher, 2019). This aim is usually achieved through choosing a particularly despicable, lowly or disgusting kind of animal as a source domain. Thus, there are examples of selected ethnic groups being linguistically represented as *insects swarming* and *infecting* a host nation, *parasites scrounging* off welfare, *wild animals attacking* and *flocking* or even inanimate phenomena related to natural disasters such as *floods* or *torrents* affecting a country. Another trend in linguistic dehumanization concerns adding yet another level to the hierarchy of beings represented traditionally on the *scala naturae*; the level of cyber organism. Representing people as soulless androids or machines that do not deserve to be treated equally to humans has been gaining ground recently. It is in line with a more general and exceptionally frequent way of dehumanizing people: objectification. Objectification and commodification of women in different kinds of discourse, including the apparently innocent discourse of advertisements and commercials is far from new (Perez, 2013), but on the *incel* forums it has been taken to a new level. It has undergone a strange sort of specialization: one of the most common types of objectification that *incels* use in order to talk about women is referring to them by means of expressions denoting robots and androids, which, in addition to the condescending and denigrating tone, carries also some undertones of fear and admiration. This type of dehumanization, i.e. dehumanization going beyond the realm of living organisms, is in line with the concept of the “mechanistic” form of dehumanization, as proposed by Haslam (2006). Mechanistic dehumanization consists in attributing machine-like qualities such as inertness, coldness, rigidity, passivity, fungibility and superficiality to humans, at the same time denying them emotionality, responsiveness, warmth and openness.

Studying conceptual metaphor in general and dehumanizing metaphor in particular can be enhanced by implementing it into the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Koller, 2005; Hart, 2008; Musolff, 2012). Musolff claims that the “investigation and exposure of racist metaphor have always been part of the critically oriented approach to language study” (Musolff, 2012, p. 301) and this statement can be extended to the exposure of metaphors and other linguistic devices underlying any other type of ideological discourse, including *incel* ideology. CDA by definition should be concerned with texts on dominance and inequality, especially when language turns into actual physical violence.

CDA does not primarily aim to contribute to a specific discipline, paradigm, school or discourse theory. It is primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis. Theories, descriptions, methods and empirical work are chosen or elaborated as a function of their relevance for the realization of such a sociopolitical goal. Since serious social problems are naturally complex, this usually also means a multidisciplinary approach, in which distinctions between theory, description and ‘application’ become less relevant. (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252)

Thus, it makes perfect sense to couple CDA’s methodology with conceptual metaphor theory in order to provide a powerful analytical tool which enables a thorough investigation of language related to contemporary social issues, such as the emergence of the *incel* community. In order for discourse analysis to be complete and informative, the importance of metaphor in general, and dehumanizing metaphor in particular, has to be accounted for.

What is more, metaphors are highly influential in shaping our perceptions and play an important role in decision making (Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011; Steen et al., 2014). As Gibbs observes, “the cognitive theory of metaphor has revolutionised the world of metaphor scholarship, but it is time to escape the traditional study of language on the page and see metaphor as something people do rather than something they tacitly know” (Gibbs, 2015, p. 184). Wills (2009) makes a case for a certain cycle of violence which is escalated by repeated use of dehumanizing language.

When our enemy is inhuman, especially when metaphorically figured as toxic, spreading, insidious, and contaminating, it becomes a civic, even a moral duty to inhibit its pernicious spread. Eradication of

the enemy within this framework becomes a paradoxically humane task, taking on the very aspects of humanity we have removed from our dehumanized enemy. (Wills, 2009, pp. 37-38)

Dehumanization is achieved in language mostly through metaphors, although sometimes also through the interplay of metaphor and blending (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, 2003; Brandt and Brandt, 2005; Prazmo and Augustyn, 2020). This strategy further strengthens the message and leads to the creation of metaphorical blends (Grady et al., 1999; Grady, 2005; Semino, 2010; Schröder, 2015; Berberović and Mujagić, 2017). Metaphorical blends are lexical combinations (e.g. compounds or formal blends) whose constituent parts correspond to metaphor domains. Thus, for instance, the WOMAN IS A MACHINE metaphor can be manifested linguistically as a metaphorical blend *femoid* (*female* and *android*). This mechanism and its outcomes are further elaborated upon in the analytical part of the paper.

5. Materials and methods

The analyzed data comes from various websites belonging to the so-called *manosphere* in general, and *incelosphere* in particular (Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Ging, 2017; Jane, 2018; Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2020). The original forum where the *incel* community came into being and started blossoming, subreddit */r/incels* was banned in November 2017 in breach of violent content rules, before I started gathering data for this analysis. The data-gathering process turned out to be not only distressing due to the extreme content of the online forums visited but also tricky because of the fact that many websites were being taken down during the process (all due to violent content and anti-abuse policy infractions). For instance, another subreddit, *r/maleforeveralone* was banned in June 2018. Incels.me website was banned in October 2018. Truincels.org was taken down at the beginning of December 2018. Later in 2019 *r/braincels* was first quarantined i.e. only accessible after granting informed consent to entering a forum which “is dedicated to shocking or highly offensive content” and subsequently also banned (www.reddit.com). As of 1 February 2020, only a few websites dedicated to *incel* content are still accessible: incels.net, incels.co (previously incels.is and incels.me), *r/IncelsWithoutHate*, love-shy.com, Incelistan.net, Facebook’s Incelistan).⁴ After each new ban is introduced, *incel* community members spread to other offshoots on reddit.com as well as other websites. The arms race between *incels* and Internet content moderators still continues.

The extracted data was analyzed in order to reveal *incel*-specific vocabulary based on misogynist dehumanizing metaphors. The method consisted of manually searching through the materials and applying the MIP (Metaphor Identification Procedure) as proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (Crisp et al., 2007) in order to find metaphorical expressions of interest. MIP involves four steps. The procedure starts with (i) reading a text in order to establish a general understanding of meaning; the next step is (ii) to determine the lexical units in the text. Then (iii), for each lexical unit, its meaning in context should be established, and other more basic contemporary meanings of the unit should be recognized and compared to the meaning in context, and finally (iv), if the meaning in context is different to the most basic meaning, this usage of the lexical unit can be marked as metaphorical.

However, I wish to explicitly point out that the present paper is not meant to be a corpus-driven quantitative study, but primarily a qualitative study of linguistic phenomena, which is only illustrated here by a set of excerpts extracted from selected Internet sources, including online press articles, blogs, and forums dealing with *incel*-related issues. Having selected the most common and striking metaphors, I submitted them to an extensive meaning analysis using the cognitive apparatus offered by conceptual metaphor theory coupled with the concept of *scala naturae*. In this way, the dehumanizing nature of the misogynist language used by the online community of *incels* is highlighted and brought to attention. The research, then, is meant to be illustrative and revealing, rather than quantitative.

6. Incelspeak: General characterization and data analysis

Incelspeak is rife with neologisms as well as novel uses of existing words. There is, for instance, a set of archetypal figures or *sui generis* models, according to which people are classified based on their attractiveness and behaviour. The social world is divided mainly into the following categories: *Chads*,

⁴ An updated list of active *incelosphere* forums can be found on Incel Wiki (https://incels.wiki/w/Main_Page)

Stacies, *Beckies*, and *incels* themselves. *Chad* is a label used to refer to attractive alpha males who gain women's interest and attention. This is a group against whom *incels* direct a lot of loathing and contempt. Implicit contempt is nonetheless accompanied by undertones of admiration, fascination and jealousy. *Stacies* are attractive women who admire *Chads* and do not show any interest in *incels*. *Beckies*, in turn, are less attractive women who, according to the *incels*' twisted logic, owe them attention and should be available to fulfil whatever sexual or emotional needs *incels* may have. Such labelling leads to deindividuation and further facilitates dehumanization of people represented in this way. Most importantly though, *incel* forums are rife with metaphors.

Incels make ample use of metaphors based on the great chain of being. Women are often represented linguistically as animals (especially dangerous, treacherous and dirty animals, such as pigs, cattle, vipers, insects and pests) and thus the WOMEN ARE ANIMALS metaphor is very common. For further degradation, women are depicted as inanimate pieces of meat (the WOMEN ARE MEAT metaphor as a subcategory of WOMEN ARE FOOD metaphor found in expressions such as: *rapemeat*, *roast meat*, *roastie*) or metonymically as body parts (the metonymies HOLE STANDS FOR WOMEN'S GENITALIA, WOMEN'S GENITALIA STAND FOR WOMEN found in expressions such as: *holes*).

Then, there are other metaphors referring to women as inanimate objects: WOMEN ARE COMMODITIES, WOMEN ARE OBJECTS, WOMEN ARE CONTAINERS found in expressions such as: *cum dumpsters*, *cumbuckets*. These metaphors constitute a common way of dehumanization through objectification.

In what follows, I turn to one specific metaphor which serves to dehumanize women by pushing them out of the chain of being altogether and refusing them human (or any other animate being's) rights. It is done by linguistically referring to women as cyborgs, androids and humanoids. Such views are considered default on *incel* forums, with an occasional voice of objection on the part of more moderate *incels*. Consider the following exchange:

User 1:⁵ *Women are made to please men and to have their children. Women today don't know their place and need to be forced to learn it.*

User 2: *As much as I don't like most foids I disagree with this, they should be allowed to have basic human rights but there are privileges they have over us (ex. a foid can't be arrested during the night) Also, I don't think they should be allowed to vote, just because they vote for the dumbest feminists ever.*

Below I offer a selection of excerpts from posts in which women are conceptualized as machines by means of neologisms such as *feminoids*,⁶ *femoids*, *foids*, and *FHOs* (*female humanoid organisms*).

- (1) ***Foids*** *are worse than animals. They treat a dog better than they treat me.*
- (2) *I am also literally a voicecel to the point where I sound like I'm 13. Just lol at that, **femoids** are below insects and nothing you can do will attract them, only what you've been born with.*

In these two excerpts dehumanization, reaching even beyond animalization, of women is evident not only in the use of *foids* and *femoids*, but by the explanation given by the authors of the posts. Women are perceived to be "worse than animals" and "below insects" in the hierarchy of beings. Such descriptions go beyond the widely investigated instances of metaphors which draw from the Great Chain

⁵ The nicknames originally appearing in this exchange have been anonymized. Original spelling is retained throughout.

⁶ The term *feminoid* appears also outside the *incels*' community as a derogatory term used to describe feminists. Lexically blending two elements: *female* and *android* leads to the emergence of a new semantic value, here suggesting heartless, robotic qualities of character. Another term used in a similar way, bringing about even more sinister associations is that of *feminazi* (a blend of *feminist* and *Nazi*) used to describe "a radical or militant feminist who is intolerant of opposing views or a feminist who wants superiority of women over men" (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/feminazi>, accessed 13 February 2019). Its rarer equivalent, *femifascist*, in turn, has apparently been coined as "an alternative to *feminazi* to avoid the genocidal connotations of *Nazi*" (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/femifascist#English>, accessed 13 February 2019).

of Being. According to *incels*, women do not deserve any position in the hierarchy of living beings. They are to be treated as artificial, robotic organisms and – by extension – are not deserving of any compassion, empathy, rights (not even animal rights) or even humane treatment. Metaphorical framing which excludes women from the category of living beings frees *incels* from any responsibility towards them and justifies and excuses any treatment, no matter how bad. *Incels* cannot be held accountable for maltreatment of a machine-like, artificial robot incapable of suffering or experiencing emotions. At the same time, interestingly enough, in excerpt 1, the HUMANS ARE ANIMALS metaphor encompasses the complaining *incel* himself, as he states that women “treat a dog better than they treat me”. Here, he also enters the Great Chain of Being and, in an *incel*-typical self-depreciating way, denigrates himself by locating his position below that of dogs. Such self-pitying forms of description are very common on *incel* forums and can be found even at the level of nicknames which, very often refer to undesirable qualities, perceived defects or the general misery of members of the forums.⁷ Excerpt 2 places women even below insects in the hierarchy of beings, apparently because women are so simple-minded that they can never see beyond “what you’ve been born with”.

- (3) *I have had “self confidence” my whole life and yet every **femoid** has called me creepy or a pedophile. All women are disgusting and just want you for sex/looks.*

Excerpt 3 offers another example of how *incels* project their own vices onto women. The author of this post claims that it is actually women (“all women”) who want sex and are only interested in physical appearance. *Incels* commonly project their sexual obsession onto other categories of humans, especially *Chads* and *Stacies* who, apparently, are constantly engaged in exuberant sexual activities, to add to *incels*’ despair, frustration and misery. Here again women are referred to as *femoids* and accused of misinterpreting desirable qualities such as self-confidence, for being creepy or even being a paedophile. What is more, *incels* seem to be obsessed with women’s rights and all the things that women should be allowed or forbidden to do. In such discussions, the term “women” never appears and is always substituted with an offensive *foids*, *feminoids* or *FHOs*. Excerpts 4, 5 and 6 provide more illustrations for the use of these terms. In each of them, clearly, the description is fairly negative and accusatory. Women are denied the possibility to make decisions about their own behaviour (e.g. wearing makeup in the workplace). They are perceived to be the root of all evil, deliberately manipulative and abusive towards men. As a result, they deserve no respect and *incels* “see them just as cattle”. In excerpt 6 women are thus conceptualized as animals (“cattle”) and as machines (“femoids”) at the same time. Another metaphor that appears here is that of WOMEN ARE NPCS which is built on the more general metaphor LIFE IS A COMPUTER GAME. NPCs (non-player characters) are characters in a game which are not controlled by the player. This introduces the concept of control that *incels* wish they had over women and, at the same time, shows the lack of maturity in the *incels*’ perception of life and other people. Finally, “a meme gender” also conceptualizes women within virtual reality and suggests that they cannot be taken seriously: like memes, they are only to be laughed at.

- (4) *Why are **foids** allowed to wear makeup in the workplace?*
- (5) ***Femoids** have a history of manipulating Incels for resources (making them payslaves) while not giving sex. Every men should watch out of being used (while also not beeing used, get it?).*
- (6) *Now I have lost all my respect for **femoids**, I have no respect for them at all. I see them just as cattle. It has helped me to deal with them. I have lost my anxiety with them. They are just a meme gender, NPCs, cattle. Why take them seriously.*

Excerpts 7 and 8 illustrate the use of *FHOs* instead of “women”. In 7 it is claimed that women are uninterested in having an *incel* even as a friend, not to mention a lover. This only strengthens the conceptualization of women as heartless and lacking empathy. Supposedly, women are only

⁷ Cf. nicknames such as: 172 cm midget, Saint Mentalcel, FatCel, 160cmMan, 5.4manlet, Abomination, Absolute Garbage (from incels.net and incels.co).

interested in Chads, their looks, their gym-bodies, and their money. In 8 women are accused of treating men as if they were “lower than trash”. The attitude of self-pitying and attributing malicious intentions and opinions to women resurfaces here. *Incels* claim that women are not interested in a man in any way, unless they find him sexually attractive.

- (7) *You know your incel if FHOs won't even accept your Friend Requests*
- (8) *To FHOs, incels are lower than trash. They don't care about us because they are not sexually attracted to us. I can't help but hate them for that.*

All these elements – *foids*, *femoids*, *FHOs* – are metaphorical blends comprised of *female* and *android* or *female* and *human organism* elements. The underpinning conceptual metaphor is that of WOMAN IS A MACHINE. The use of *female* rather than *woman* in these blends is motivated not so much by a phonological opportunity (in theory, *womanoid* would be just as opportune; comparably easy to pronounce and just as transparent morphologically as *femoid*), but is used in order to further highlight the dehumanizing nature of the term. *Female* (as opposed to, e.g. *woman*) activates the semantic frame of biological organisms profiling the biological functions that female bodies are predisposed to serve, i.e. the functions of reproduction and childbearing. Also, *female* is used in describing the sex of animals, unless a sex-specific term is available and sufficiently conventionalized in a given discourse community (e.g. *cow* vs *bull*). Thus, we speak of *female frog* vs *male frog*, but customarily not of *female human* vs *male human* unless in a specialized, for instance medical or otherwise biological, context. Thus, the first step towards dehumanization (through animalization or biologization) is taken via the choice of the marked lexeme *female*.

The second input space in these metaphorical blends is occupied by the *-oid* suffix derived from *android*. This element introduces selected associations and connotations into the blend, i.e. it activates semantic values such as heartlessness, soullessness, a lack of human qualities and, by extension, a lack of human rights. The machine frame is also linked to associations related to the fear of artificially intelligent robots, commonly represented in sci-fi movies and books as willing to take over the world and submit humans to their rule. The suffix *-oid* also serves to designate a set of qualities similar to something, but not genuinely belonging to a given category. Thus, *femoid* is a female-like creature, something resembling a female, but not exactly being one. It is used to refer to a manipulative creature that wants to trick men into thinking it is female, but actually will not let them enjoy any of the benefits that a genuine female would be able to provide. This line of argumentation is common in *incel* discourse. At the same time, the suffix *-oid* may be derived from *humanoid* which, instead of activating the machine frame, leads to the interpretation of *femoids* as being inherently inferior to men, creatures merely resembling humans, rather than properly evolved, more advanced and refined, humans. This perception is further strengthened among *incels* by referring to women as *female species*, completely separating them from men.

The suffix *-oid* brings about strong associations with certain mechanistic qualities. When blended with *female* and used to denote a human, these associations acquire negative semantic values. Their soullessness, heartlessness and lack of a capacity to experience emotions results in degrading these organisms to the status of potentially dangerous and immoral creatures. They are perceived to be not only below real humans (animistic degradation), but as if beyond them (mechanistic degradation) and as such are incapable of human experience and unworthy of human rights.

Thus, in fact, the use of these metaphorical blends results in a twofold dehumanization: animalistic and mechanistic. *Femoids* are reduced to their animalistic femaleness which emphasizes the biological functions of an organism in general and reproductive functions of a female organism in particular. At the same time, they are deprived of their humanness by means of activating mechanistic, robotic associations.

7. Conclusion

The metaphorical terminology used by *incels* may be novel, but the motivation behind using terms such as *femoids* or *foids* is no different than that in the examples found in other instances of hate speech. To compare women to non-human organisms, be it animals, insects, objects or cybernetic organisms is to deprive them not only of human-like qualities, but primarily of human rights. The WOMEN ARE ANDROIDS/HUMANOIDS metaphor, as manifested by e.g. *feminoids*, *femoids*, *foids* and *FHOs* justifies

inhumane treatment of women in the eyes of *incels* and further strengthens the objectification and commodification of women. Women are perceived as machines which should be accessible to every man and always ready to serve and satisfy their needs. They are thought of as being robot-like, i.e. having no emotions or sympathy. Since they have no sympathy, they deserve no sympathy, which leads *incels* to share their unsavoury fantasies with other members of the community, fantasies which involve scenarios of scaring, beating, enslaving, torturing, raping and killing women. *Incels* encourage and cheer one another to create more and more inhumane and atrocious descriptions, or even brag about the actual things that they manage to accomplish in real life (e.g. stalking, pushing, tripping, touching and rubbing against women in crowded places, esp. public transport, but also trying to have non-consensual sex with, esp. drunk women). These descriptions of real or imaginary cases of abuse often lead to a moderator's intervention and a subsequent banning of a user or even taking down a whole website. Some of the accounts may be fake and posts fabricated by so-called internet trolls whose motivation is to steer discussion into a certain direction. Nonetheless, places where such extreme content appears should be under close observation and subject to moderation. Language is often the first sign of advancing radicalization, and metaphor is one of the most productive tools by means of which different types of dehumanization or denigration resurface in language. For this reason, metaphor research coupled with critical discourse analysis as well as other tools facilitating quantitative analysis of online discourse (Jaki et al., 2019) should be employed in order to monitor internet communities prone to radicalization and prevent them from embodying their fantasies in the real world.

All in all, the present paper provides a contribution to metaphor research in general, and more specifically to the growing study of dehumanization in language as well as in other semiotic modes. The investigation presented here sheds light on the discourse used by one of the newly emerging and rapidly growing online communities. It is another voice in the discussion on the radicalization taking place in Internet echo chambers and the role that language in general, and metaphors in particular, play in creating certain worldviews. Radical, harmful and dangerous views and beliefs are perpetuated and spread via the use of dehumanizing and degrading descriptions of individuals. Women seem to be especially vulnerable to being victimized by participants of the so-called manosphere to which *incels* belong. Hate speech is rife there and, even more worryingly, spreads into the real world too. Thus, all online activity should be monitored closely, even at the linguistic level, so as to be aware of the potential dangers of the brewing radicalization and help prevent actual violence from happening.

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