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Online Aggression as a Discourse Practice

Online aggression is a problem of increasing concern in the digital age. To date, there is no consensus as to what precisely constitutes online aggression, as it is a highly complex issue subject to a range of motives, methods, and interpretations. However, what we do know is that aggressive behavior online is primarily enacted and sustained through language and discourse, such as posts on discussion forums and reactive comments in social media. Language-based research on online aggression is extremely limited. This talk aims to engage with recent arguments in linguistic research that conceptualize aggressive behavior online as recontextualized discursive practice (Baider, 2020; Lee, 2020, 2021). I first review the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of language aggression drawing on insights from pragmatics and discourse analysis, focusing on research on trolling, hate speech, and doxxing. I then discuss findings from my recent project on doxxing discourses in Hong Kong (Ref. 2021.A4.075.21A) to understand doxxing from the voices of netizens, university students and the government. A critical discourse analysis of online forum interaction and interview data suggests that the participants generally felt ambivalent about doxxing, in that they believed doxxing was an issue that needed to be tackled, although they found it equally important to uphold social justice and protect freedom of expression. In addition, many of them did not know what exactly constituted doxxing and often justified it as acceptable through a range of legitimation strategies. An important finding of the study is that much of doxxing was sustained through covertly aggressive expressions, which are not unlawful, but still perceived as harmful because of the use of coded language and discursive strategies (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Baider, 2020). The talk concludes by exploring the insights that a discourse-oriented approach to online aggression can offer to media literacy education.

Carmen Lee is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is also Associate Editor of the journal Discourse, Context & Media, and co-editor of the Routledge Language and Digital Media book series. Her research on digital discourse has been concerned with the relationship between people's online practices and their everyday lived experiences, as well as the impact of digital discourse on social practices. Her major publications include *Language Online* (2013, Routledge, with David Barton) and *Multilingualism Online* (Routledge), and *Researching Language in Social media: A Student Guide* (2022, Routledge, with Ruth Page, David Barton, Johnny Unger, and Michele Zappavigna). Recently, she is doing research on aggressive discourses such as hate speech and doxxing online.