

"you woke cultists are a cancer to everything"

Toxicity through Personal References in the Steam Group 'Woke Content Detector'

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Abstract This study examines how personal references in the form of pronouns and noun-based nominal phrases can facilitate the adoption and construction of antagonistic social positions that damage discursive environments and render them toxic, as they make productive exchange impossible. To this end, the usage of personal references in the Steam Group 'Woke Content Detector', where both Detectors (who identify the supposedly 'woke' games) and Counter Speakers (who oppose the group's aim) engage in mutual discourse, is examined. While both groups construct antagonistic social positions through language, there are significant differences in the pronouns and other nominal phrases being used respectively. The Detectors use more generalizing, dehumanizing and hostile personal references, while the Counter Speakers primarily employ the second person singular, which directly addresses the user they're talking to. In contrast, the Detectors tend to talk about the Counter Speakers, rather than speaking to them, indicated by the higher use of the third person plural and noun-based nominal phrases. It is unclear if these differences can be attributed to the ideologies being represented respectively, or if this is a feature of online discourse and/or discourse in echo chambers in general. To determine this, further research and comparison with more progressive discussion groups is needed.

Keywords Discourse Analysis, Discourse Health, Positioning, Pronouns, Metaphors, Culture War, Social Media

Abstract Diese Studie untersucht, wie Personenreferenzen in Form von Pronomen und Substantiv-basierten Nominalphrasen das Einnehmen und

die Konstruktion antagonistischer sozialer Positionen begünstigen können, welche die Diskursumgebung schädigen und toxisch machen, da sie einen produktiven Austausch verunmöglichen. Zu diesem Zweck wird der Gebrauch von Personenreferenzen in der Steam-Gruppe ‚Woke Content Detector‘ untersucht, in der sowohl Detectors (die die vermeintlich ‚woken‘ Spiele identifizieren) als auch Counter Speaker (die sich gegen das Gruppenziel stellen) am gemeinsamen Diskurs teilnehmen. Während beide Gruppen antagonistische soziale Positionen durch Sprache konstruieren, gibt es signifikante Unterschiede in Bezug auf die jeweils verwendeten Pronomen und anderen Nominalphrasen. Die Detectors benutzen mehr verallgemeinernde, entmenslichende und feindselige Personenreferenzen, während die Counter Speaker vorwiegend die zweite Person Singular verwenden, die die User*innen, mit denen sie sprechen, direkt adressiert. Im Gegensatz dazu neigen die Detectors dazu, über die Gegenredner*innen zu sprechen, anstatt sie direkt anzusprechen, was durch die häufigere Verwendung der dritten Person Plural und Substantiv-basierten Nominalphrasen deutlich wird. Es ist unklar, ob diese Unterschiede auf die jeweils vertretenen Ideologien zurückzuführen sind oder ob dies ein Merkmal von Online-Diskursen und/oder Diskursen in Echokammern im Allgemeinen ist. Um dies zu klären, sind weitere Studien und der Vergleich mit progressiveren Diskussionsgruppen erforderlich.

Schlagwörter Diskursanalyse, Diskurs-Gesundheit, Positionierung, Pronomen, Metaphern, Kulturkrieg, Soziale Medien

1. Introduction¹

The declining quality of public discourse, especially in online spaces, has been a subject of criticism in recent times (e.g. Neuberger 2022). Indeed, it is cause for concern in any democratic society when constructive dialogue becomes less common and discourse environments grow increasingly toxic instead. It can be argued that in many ways, the internet and social media have contributed to a democratization of discourse, as usual selection mechanisms of participation have been negated in these spaces (Habermas 2006: 554). On the other hand, social media also seems to have a negative impact on public discourse, as “this easy access and broader scale of communication in addition to medium-

1 Quote in title: [DYE-11].

related aspects such as anonymity seems to have contributed to antisocial communication behaviour (Chui 2014)" (Gevers et al. 2022: 33). This perceived trend towards toxicity in online discourse is set against the backdrop of what is often referred to as the 'culture wars', which are also largely fought online. These culture wars are closely tied to popular culture, as Proctor and Kies (2018: 127) note:

Since at least 2014, the terrain of popular culture has paid host to an uptick in political conflict and quarrel, becoming the battleground on which the new culture wars are being fought.

This prominently includes the domain of video games, as the '#Gamergate' movement, which was characterized by "viciously sexual and sexist attacks on women in and around gaming communities" (Braithwaite 2016) has exemplified (see also Reinhold, Prinz in this volume). Massanari (2017) observes the emergence of what she calls "toxic technocultures", which "are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming" (ibid.: 333) and "often rel[y] [on] an Othering of those perceived as outside the culture" (ibid.). This study examines precisely the described phenomenon by analyzing the discourse within the Steam group 'Woke Content Detector', which aims to identify supposedly 'woke' games. At the same time, counter speakers are engaging in this group, disrupting internal group discourse and the surrounding echo chamber. As Sponholz (2024) notes, counter speech does not necessarily contribute to fighting toxicity in social media environments, instead it often increases the incivility, transforming the discourse into a metaphorical "gladiatorial arena" (ibid., translation C.L.). The same can be observed in the corpus of this study: Members of both groups position themselves in and thereby construct an antagonistic dichotomy between supposedly 'woke' and 'anti-woke' groups, which in turn damages the discursive environment and turns it toxic. The presence of the respective other group is thus reduced from an opportunity for open dialogue to a mere means of reinforcing one's own group boundaries. This is facilitated, in part, through personal references – i.e. the pronouns and noun-based nominal phrases used to refer to the other group, respectively. This study will show that, even when obviously toxic elements like hate speech or insults are comparatively rare, a discourse environment can become unproductive and toxic through personal references, which construct socially antagonistic positions and fortify in-group out-group boundaries in a relatively subtle manner.

2. Woke Content Detector, the term 'woke' and Counter Speakers

Woke Content Detector is a curator on Steam, which is the largest digital distribution service and storefront for PC games. According to Steam, curators are "Individuals or organizations that make recommendations to help others discover interesting games in the Steam catalog" (Steam: Curators) and "[a]ny Steam Community group can become a curator" (ibid.). Steam users can follow these curators to regularly get their recommendations. At the present time (from here on out meaning the 14th of April 2026) the Woke Content Detector Curators page has 13,168 followers. Woke Content Detector self-describes as follows: "We identify whether a game has Woke content and if so, to what degree." (Woke Content Detector: About) Based on the perceived amount of 'woke' content, the curator sorts games into the categories 'recommended', 'not recommended' and 'informative' (ibid.). Currently, of the 1,680 reviewed games, 940 are listed as not recommended, while 398 and 342 games are rated as recommended and informative respectively (ibid.). The curator also posts short reviews of the games, which further describe the perceived amount of 'wokeness'. As an example, the short review for the Game *Kingdom Come Deliverance II* (2025), which received the not recommended rating, reads: "Contains overtly pro-DEI, overtly pro-LGBTQ+, and overtly anti-western society messaging." (Ibid.) The site also links to the associated group page, which hosts the full-length reviews of the rated games as well as discussions about these ratings and other associated topics. The Woke Content Detector Group was established on the 16th of March 2024 and currently has 4,994 members. Discussions are organized into separate threads, each started by a post and open to comments from users. Users can also reply to other users' posts.

In the "Methodology" discussion the group owner defines woke content as "any images, messages, characters, storytelling, dialogue, music, or game mechanics that include themes associated with the left-side of the political aisle in contemporary western politics." [M-OP]² Such themes supposedly include:

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- 2 References to the corpus are given as sigla and are marked in square brackets. The sigla consist of the first letters of the first three words of the thread title, followed by the comment number. If a thread title contains fewer than three words, only one or two letters are used correspondingly. The original post that starts the thread is not assigned a number by Steam and is therefore simply indicated as 'OP' (= original post). The posts were quoted in their original form, without any corrections.

pro-LGBTQ+ messaging / pro-DEI messaging / pro-climate action messaging / pro-communism/socialism messaging / pro-abortion messaging / pro-pedophilia messaging / pro-immigration messaging / pro-transhumanism messaging / pro-Democrat/progressivism messaging / anti-Republican/conservative messaging / anti-western society messaging / anti-human messaging / anti-colonialism messaging / anti-capitalism messaging / anti-heterosexual messaging / anti-patriarchy messaging / anti-white messaging / anti-family messaging / anti-free speech messaging / anti-gun messaging etc. [ibid.]

This attempt to define the term 'woke' is to be expected, given that its semantic scope has broadened considerably, making it difficult to identify a core meaning (Bettag et al. 2023: 2). Consequently, the definition attempted here is also very broad in scope and rather vague. Woke Content Detector itself recognizes this problem, as the group owner has opened a separate discussion, titled: "Is our definition of 'Woke' too broad?" [IOD-OP] The term originated in Afro-American communities and can be dated back to the 1930s (Allen 2023: 4). It originally referred to "being alert to or 'waking up' to the injustices faced by Black people in America." (ibid.) Up until the 2000s the term continued to be used with this meaning by black communities (ibid.: 5). It largely remained this way until 2013–2014, when in response to the killing of black Americans by the police (for example Michael Brown in Ferguson) and in concordance with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement the term was used as part of the hashtag #StayWoke on Twitter (now X), still referring to the same meaning, but now being used within as well as outside of Black communities (ibid.; Bettag et al. 2023: 2). The term has since suffered what Allen (2023: 2) describes as "a process of misappropriation, largely driven by online social media". According to Bettag et al. (2023: 4), who examined German-language corpora, 'woke' has a strong tendency to evolve into a cipher:

Der semantische Skopus dieses Begriffs ist derart vielfältig, dass ihm nur schwerlich eine Kernbedeutung zugeschrieben werden kann. Stattdessen ist mit ihm ein breites Konzept verbunden, dessen Einzelaspekte je nach Bedarf und in unterschiedlicher Gewichtung zum Tragen kommen. Als eine solche Chiffre, die je nach Kontext und Nutzergruppe eine unterschiedliche Bedeutung erhält – oder zumindest einen unterschiedlichen Bedeutungsschwerpunkt –, erhält der Begriff jenseits seiner semantischen Ausprägung vor al-

lem eine pragmatische Funktion zwischen Zuschreibungsvokabel und Stigmawort: ‚Die Woken‘ sind immer die Anderen.³

In consequence the term ‘woke’ has become a “a fundamental distinction in a polarizing discourse that itself creates what it purports to criticize.” (ibid.: 12, translation C.L.) This dichotomous polarization, fueled by the stigmatizing label ‘woke’, is also evident in the corpus of this study and forms the basis for the toxic discourse environment found therein.

What makes communication within the Woke Content Detector group particularly relevant to the study of toxic online discourse is that not only individuals who identify with the group’s aims take part in the discussions, but also those who voice opposing views. Going forward, both groups will be referred to as ‘Detectors’ and ‘Counter Speakers’, respectively. The group has attracted much attention from critics, with several high-profile uploads on YouTube talking about it. Leftist Twitch Streamer and YouTuber *HasanAbi* talked about the group on his Twitch Stream and on the 9th of September 2024 uploaded the footage to YouTube as a video titled “WOKE GAMES LIST???” (HasanAbi 2024). The video currently has 420,491 views. Subsequent uploads by other creators followed, most notably “Every Video Game Is Woke Apparently...” (The Act Man 2024) and “Guessing what Games are ‘Woke’ (WITH FRIENDS)” (Saltydkdan 2025), both reaching more than one million views.⁴ It may be this negative attention from leftist and/or more liberal online spaces that has contributed to numerous Counter Speakers engaging in this group. These Counter Speakers primarily contribute in two ways: They reply to already established discussion threads, or they open their own discussion threads, that are critical of the group (for example the thread titled: “Do you ever take a moment to think and reflect on where it all went wrong?” [DYE-OP]). The Counter Speakers successfully generate engagement: the Detectors respond frequently to their threads and comments. However, this engagement rarely if ever translates

3 “The semantic scope of this term is so diverse that it is difficult to attribute a core meaning to it. Instead, it is associated with a broad concept, the individual aspects of which come into play as required and with varying degrees of emphasis. As a kind of cipher that takes on a different meaning – or at least a different emphasis – depending on the context and user group, the term, beyond its semantic characteristics, primarily serves a pragmatic function somewhere between a label and a stigmatizing term: ‘the woke’ are always the others.” (Bettag et al. 2023: 4, translation C.L.)

4 This is not a comprehensive list of the online discourse surrounding the group, but rather a selection of contributions that have had the widest reach.

into fruitful discourse: No consensus is reached between Counter Speakers and Detectors, no common ground is found, and no positions are adjusted or switched. Instead, the discussions often devolve into mutual *ad hominem* attacks and/or insults.⁵ Thus, rather than serving as a space for negotiating ideas, the discussions serve to reinforce group identities and the antagonism (in the sense of Angermüller 2023: 80) between 'the woke' and 'the anti-woke' that constitutes the discourse – the discourse environment becomes toxic. A subtle way through which these group identities are constructed via linguistic positioning practices are the personal references used to designate the other group. This includes the use of pronouns as well as noun-based nominal phrases. The construction of antagonistic positions through personal references is the focus of the following analysis, but first, the theoretical basis of the study needs to be established.

3. Discourse avoidance through Toxicity and Positioning

The terms 'toxicity' and 'toxic' originate from the fields of chemistry and medicine and are now applied to the social sphere in both everyday language and scientific contexts (Hoffmeister 2023). This metaphorical use of these terms already reveals their meaning: They refer to something harmful, something that exerts a venomous, destructive effect on social interactions, behaviors and discourses. Due to the online disinhibition effect, toxic behavior is less discouraged in online spaces than in offline spaces (Beres et al. 2021: 3), especially when users do not use their real names but rather an anonymous pseudonym (Cho, Acquisti 2013) – as is the case in Steam communities. Toxicity is difficult to define and linked to concepts such as incivility, harassment and hate speech. Beres et al. (2021: 1) define toxicity in the context of online gaming as

various types of negative behaviors involving abusive communications directed towards other players (i.e., harassment, verbal abuse, and flaming) and

5 This happens even though the group owner has formulated discussion rules (e.g. "We encourage civil, respectful discourse only. We cannot give Steam/Valve any reason to shut us down due to out-of-control members/trolls. No *ad hominem* attacks will be tolerated in any way, shape, or form." [DR-OP]). However, the administrators (including the group owner) do not seem to enforce these rules. As stated in the quote, they seem to serve primarily as a means to protect the group from sanctions by Steam, not to facilitate productive discussion.

disruptive gameplay that violates the rules and social norms of the game (i.e., griefing, spamming, and cheating).

Referring to toxicity in the context of discourse, Sponholz (2024) defines incivility as “behavior that hinders rather than promotes a free and inclusive exchange of ideas and positions between individual persons” (ibid., translation C.L.). According to Sponholz, these behaviors include “insulting statements, threats, heckling, deception and much more” (ibid., translation C.L.). In this paper I argue, that it is not only these obvious forms of harassment and uncivil behavior that constitute toxicity and produce toxic discourse environments, but that more subtle communication practices – such as antagonistic social positioning through personal references – likewise create a poisoned discursive climate in which mutual understanding becomes impossible, and which must therefore also be regarded as toxic. This understanding aligns with the definitions of the term put forward by Demus et al. (2023: 265) and Mall et al. (2020: 1), who respectively define Toxicity as “the harmfulness or poisonousness of a comment to the conversation and, consequently, to other conversation participants” (Demus et al. 2023: 265, translation C.L.) and “actions of a user or users that create a negative atmosphere for the other users of social media” (Mall et al. 2020: 1). I argue that – even without employing explicit insults or hate speech (even though both are present in the corpus to some degree) – the construction of antagonistic social groups through personal references is poisonous and damaging to the conversation and creates a negative atmosphere in a more subtle, yet equally toxic manner. In the corpus, personal references are used as an understated form of creating an ‘us vs. them’ dynamic as well as assigning social belonging to these groups. In this way, the Detectors are also constructing an echo chamber, which Kanz (2025) describes as:

einen digitalen Kommunikations- und Resonanzraum, in dem Mediennutzer*innen lediglich Inhalten begegnen, die ihre eigenen, bereits bestehenden Ansichten bestätigen, während abweichende Perspektiven und Meinungen ausgeblendet bzw. abgelehnt werden. Es entsteht ein Verstärkungseffekt der eigenen (Gruppen-)Position durch die echohafte, d. h. sich stets wiederholende Bestätigung dieser.⁶

6 “a digital space of communication and resonance in which media users encounter only content that confirms their own preexisting views, while differing perspectives and opinions are blocked out or rejected. This creates a reinforcing effect on one’s own

This does not mean however, that no opposing voices can be found in echo chambers – instead, their presence may actually reinforce the echo chamber by allowing members to distance themselves from them (ibid.). Nevertheless, in the long run, it is necessary for comments from within the group to be quantitatively predominant (ibid.). The same can be observed in the corpus of this study: On the surface, the Counter Speakers appear to disrupt communication within the group; however, the Detectors also use their presence to assign group allegiances and thereby reinforce the inherent antagonism. This can be observed, for example, when in response to a dissenting opinion one Detector asks: “are you a member of the ‘Rainbow Vanguard of the Proletariat?’” [SWT-70], thereby positioning the other commentor as belonging to a specific out-group and at the same time reinforcing the borders of the in-group as well as the acceptable scope of opinions within it – thus shutting down discourse.

The linguistic construction of these groups and the assigning of allegiances to them can be described through the lens of positioning, which “is based on the discourse-psychological ‘positioning theory’, which was developed as an alternative to the concept of roles, which was perceived as too static (cf. Davies, Harré 1990; Harré, van Langenhove 1999)” (Dang-Anh 2025, translation C.L.). Dang-Anh (2025) describes positioning as the basis for human communication. Through talking about something or someone, we also position ourselves in relation to the topic discussed (ibid.). Positioning therefore is a constant, often implicit part of human communication that establishes social relations (ibid.). It is thus inherently tied to the construction of identity (ibid.) – naturally including group identities. This encompasses assigning identities to oneself as well as others, or ‘self and other positioning’ (ibid.), as can also be clearly observed in the corpus of this study (e.g. “You must be an undercover liberal, which there seem to be a lot of in groups like these.” [IOD-170]). Dang-Anh (2023: 8) formulates the following summary definition: “Positioning [...] is the creation of relationality through language use. Inseparably linked to this is the construction of social identity.” (Ibid., translation C.L.) Importantly, positioning can be and often is constructed implicitly and in passing, for example through the use of pronouns (ibid.: 12), as this study will also show. Angermüller (2023: 94) highlights how the wish to position oneself as a subject has served to create antagonistic and uncivil discourse environments:

(group) position through the echo-like, i.e., constantly repeating, confirmation of it.” (Kanz 2025, translation C.L.)

Personen können nicht am öffentlichen Diskurs teilnehmen, ohne aus einer sichtbaren und anerkannten Subjektposition heraus zu sprechen. Doch der Wunsch, sich als Subjekt zu etablieren, treibt viele dazu, sich an antagonistischen Diskursen zu beteiligen. Der diskursive Kampf um anerkannte Subjektpositionen kann Emotionen wecken, Teilnehmer:innen zu fanatischen Anhänger:innen machen und zu einer Entzivilisierung der öffentlichen Debatte führen. Der gesellschaftliche Wandel (wie die Individualisierung), bestimmte Regierungsformen (vom Neoliberalismus bis zum Autoritarismus) sowie neue technologische Möglichkeiten (einschließlich sozialer Medien) tragen zum wachsenden affektiven Wert antagonistischer Subjektivitäten im politischen Diskurs bei. Die gegenwärtigen Kulturkriege, Identitätskämpfe und libertären Bewegungen zeugen von dieser Entwicklung.⁷

This observation is highly relevant to the study at hand, as the discourse in the Woke Content Detector group is structured around the antagonism between social groups and the attribution of affiliation to them through personal references, thereby hindering the productive exchange of ideas, as the study will demonstrate. However, before presenting the results, the corpus and methodology will be briefly introduced.

4. Corpus and Methodology

The corpus of this study was compiled on September 11th 2025. It contains 258,291 tokens and 5,277 types, which in addition to the user comments themselves, also include usernames and functional text on the website, such as date and page information. The corpus consists of three parts:

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- 7 “People cannot participate in public discourse without speaking from a visible and recognized subject-position. Yet the desire to establish oneself as a subject drives many to engage in antagonistic discourses. The discursive struggle for recognized subject-positions can stir up emotions, turn participants into fanatical followers, and lead to a breakdown of civility in public debate. Social change (such as individualization), certain forms of government (from neoliberalism to authoritarianism), as well as new technological possibilities (including social media) contribute to the growing affective value of antagonistic subjectivities in political discourse. The current culture wars, identity struggles, and libertarian movements testify to this development.” (Angermüller 2023: 94, translation C.L.)

1. The group homepage itself as well as the discussion rules set by the group owner
2. General discussion threads, which pertain to topics such as the methodology of the group, their definition of 'woke', the question if Anti-Nazism is woke and other broader topics (6 Threads were selected)
3. Game Discussion threads, in which the degree of 'wokeness' of specific games is discussed (10 Threads were selected)

At the time of compilation, the group had 156 active general discussion threads. Of these, the 5 threads with the most comments as well as the 'Methodology' thread were chosen for analysis. Additionally, of the 299 active game discussion threads, the 10 threads with the most comments were selected. In these threads the following games are discussed: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), *Monster Hunter Wilds* (2025), *Project Zomboid* (2013), *Warhammer 40.000: Space Marine 2* (2024), *Kingdom Come: Deliverance II* (2025), *Battlefield 6* (2025), *Fabledom* (2023), *Deadlock* (Announced) and *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (2025). Additionally, there is a thread compiling supposedly 'non-woke' games. More game discussion threads were selected because, on the one hand, there was a greater number of them and, on the other hand, they contained fewer comments than those in the general discussion section. The threads with the most comments were selected to identify both the most relevant discussions and those which contain a high level of interaction between the users – and thus between the Detectors and the Counter Speakers.

Using the software MAXQDA, all selected threads were compiled in their entirety, including all comments. In the next step, personal references in interactions between Detectors and Counter Speakers were annotated. A distinction was made between pronouns and nominal phrases based on nouns, as well as terms used by the Detectors and Counter Speakers. Only references used for the respective other group were considered. As it was essential to take the context (who is speaking to whom?) of the comments into account, the annotation was done manually. In some cases, it was difficult to distinguish between ironic and sincere statements, and it was therefore not possible to attribute certain comments to either the Detectors or the Counter Speakers (e.g. "Imao [women belong] in politics and in the military of course, what are you a sexist? we need more women leaders and soldiers they are doing such a good job!" [BF-26]). In such cases, where the position of the speaker could not be determined with certainty, the comment was not annotated. Similarly, deciding between the second person singular and plural as well as plural and singular

‘they’ was also often an interpretative act. With this framework established, the results of the analysis can be presented next.

5. Results

5.1 Use of pronouns and noun based nominal phrases

5.1.1 Frequencies

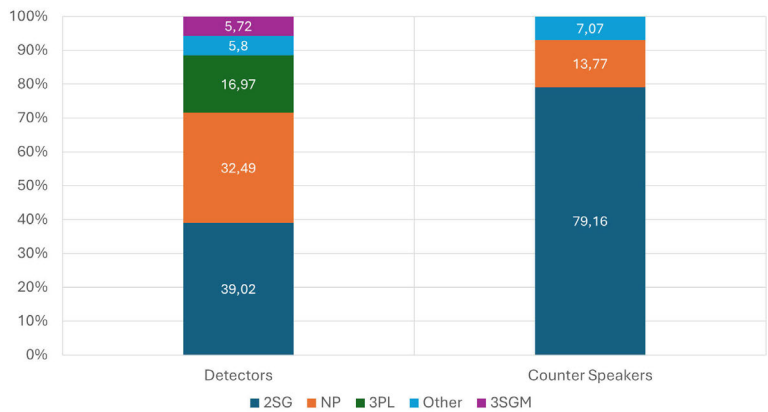
When analyzing the quantities of pronouns and noun based nominal phrases, significant differences are noticeable between the Detectors and the Counter Speakers. The table below shows the pronoun and nominal phrase usage of both groups in percentages as well as their respective number of instances (marked in brackets). Percentages have been rounded to the second decimal.

Tab. 1: Use of pronouns and nominal phrases by Detectors and Counter Speakers

	NP	2SG	3SGM	3SGN	SG they	
Detectors	32,49 (358)	39,02 (430)	5,72 (63)	2,36 (26)	1,09 (12)	
Counter Speakers	13,77 (115)	79,16 (661)	0,12 (1)	0 (0)	0,48 (4)	
	1PL	2PL	3PL	Ironic Pronouns	Intentional Misgendering	Total
Detectors	0,18 (2)	0,64 (7)	16,97 (187)	1,45 (16)	0,09 (1)	100 (1102)
Counter Speakers	0,96 (8)	3,23 (27)	2,28 (19)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (835)

The data is also shown in the following graphic. All categories which make up less than 5 percent of the pronoun usage have been subsumed under ‘other’.

Fig. 1: Use of pronouns and nominal phrases by Detectors and Counter Speakers as a graphic



5.1.2 Construction of group-based antagonism through pronouns

We can clearly observe that while in both groups, the second person singular is the most used personal reference, the Detectors use this pronoun considerably less than the Counter Speakers, with its usage making up 39,02 and 79,16 percent of all personal references respectively. This indicates that the Counter Speakers more often try to engage the users they’re replying to in direct conversation and speak to them as individuals⁸ (“I want to understand why you believe in what you do and why you want me to do the same, I’m genuinely willing to hear you out.” [FD-11]). The Detectors on the other hand utilize a larger percentage of noun based nominal phrases (32,49% vs. 13,77%), while also employing the generalizing third person plural (16,97%), which the Counter Speakers use only very rarely (2,28%). It can thus be inferred that the Detectors more often – rather than speaking to the Counter Speaker – talk about them with other group members, as the examples below illustrate:

- 1. *They* can only subvert I.P.’s that have the ball rolling, when *they* try and make *their* own openly-woke slop (Dustborn, Concord etc.) *they* all fail. *They* now

8 Which of course does not automatically mean that the exchange is civil or non-toxic, as the following comment from a Counter Speaker illustrates: “If you say some hateful shit, people will call you a hateful bitch. You silly hoe. If you don’t want to be called hateful, stop expressing hatred.” [SWT-13]

- have a better idea how to plant *their* woke slop into games, but *they* still need an I.P. to subvert. [MHW-44, emphasis added C.L.]
2. In my opinion, it's more fruitful to let silence reign whenever *they* come and attack us. *They're* brainwashed. Only when *they* show a hint of doubt it makes any sense to respond. [FD-3, emphasis added C.L.]
 3. Hehe *this fool* probably already has a speech ready for when crappy barrel files chapter 11 and that doesn't involve blaming *wokies* but people like me who refuse to support *THEIR* agenda [SWT-52, emphasis added C.L.]
 4. It's funny how *these pathetic degenerates, living in their own imaginary bubble*, stubbornly continue to go where *they* are clearly not welcome, and then whine about how *they, the poor*, are being repressed. [NWL-39, emphasis added C.L.]

In 2., 3., and 4., the Detectors are commenting to other Detectors about a Counter Speaker engaged in the same thread as them, rather than addressing them directly. In 4. the user even adds: "I was talking about *this troll [username Counter Speaker]*." [NWL-39, emphasis added C.L.] clarifying the personal referenced by the generalizing third person plural. The examples show how pronouns are used to construct an out-group as well as to assign affiliation to it. In this way, they serve to stabilize the own in-group, which – in this case – creates antagonistic social positions that hinder collective discourse.

It is difficult to say whether this distinctive feature of the Detectors' communication stems from the group's internal ideology, or whether their numerical dominance is more relevant here. To determine this, further research into a group in which progressive voices predominate is needed for comparison.

Additionally, both groups rarely use the inclusive first-person plural, with the usage by the Counter Speakers being slightly higher (0,96%) than that of the Detectors (0,18%). This indicates that both Counter Speakers and Detectors predominantly conceptualize themselves as separate groups and not as a collective 'us'.

Interestingly, the Detectors also occasionally use the male third person singular (5,72%), while the Counter Speakers only very rarely employ this gendered pronoun (in the corpus there is only one instance). In this way, the Detectors position the referenced Counter Speaker as male – even though on Steam the gender of users is not necessarily displayed. This perhaps is a linguistic manifestation of a cognitive bias – unconsciously conceptualizing the other person as male – that is linked with the in-group ideology, that places a heavy emphasize on the importance of gender and regressive gender roles. At the

same time, the third person singular continues the trend of the Detectors talking about the Counter Speakers, rather than with them.

5.1.3 Hostile Pronoun Usage

Pronouns are also used by Detectors to stigmatize and/or dehumanize the Counter Speakers, which I denote as hostile pronoun usage.

For example, there is one instance, where the male third person singular is explicitly and knowingly⁹ used to misgender a Counter Speaker:

Counter Speaker: It's funny how you constantly try to play the 'she's crazy' card to deflect anything you cannot articulate why you oppose [...] [FD-52] /
Detector: *he's crazy / Spelling error but that's okay. [...] [FD-54]

In 26 instances (2,36%) the Detectors also use the neutral third person singular to refer to Counter Speakers, thus assigning to them a pronoun that is usually reserved for animals, monsters or inanimate objects, e.g.:

1. Several of us tried legitimate debate with *it* for a period of weeks and the thing is a brick wall. Block *it*, ignore and move on. [ADA-52, emphasis added C.L.]
2. You can safely ignore & block '[username Counter Speaker]': *it's* a known troll that despises *it's* own biology and prefers the fiction of trans ideology instead. If *it* can't determine *it's* own gender, then all other opinions from *it* should be seen as suspect and/or flawed. [IHK-31, emphasis added C.L.]
3. I'm amazed at how pathetic this rainbow transformer [username Counter Speaker] is. *It's* been here for almost a month just to spread *its* woke crap. [ADA-10, emphasis added C.L.]

The examples also illustrate how this dehumanization is additionally often associated with or stemming from a de-gendering of the referenced person.

The Detectors also employ the use of what I denote as ironic pronouns, when a whole collection of different pronouns is used to refer to just one person (e.g.: "him/her/zhey/zem" [RCT-26]; "xe/she/they/whatever" [ADA-28]) or

⁹ There may be – and likely are – more instances of intentional or unintentional misgendering, however only in this exchange does a misgendered Counter Speaker specify their correct pronouns within the same thread as the wrong one is used.

by using individual neopronouns in an obviously ironic manner (e.g.: “like every creature on Earth *xē* has *xis* role, *xē* reminds us everyday why groups like this exist. We love *xim* though, with time *xē*’ll probably become the group’s mascot...” [ADA-28, emphasis added C.L.]).

These are examples of how pronouns can be used in a hostile manner, assigning a social position the referenced person does not claim for themselves or ridiculing the assumed social position.

5.2 Invitation and Refusal of Discourse

These trends in pronoun usage reflect the distribution of discourse-inviting and discourse-refusing statements across both groups which were annotated additionally. Discourse-inviting statements include open questions as well as the meta-discursive signaling of a willingness to engage in honest conversation. Conversely, discourse-refusing utterances are metadiscursive rejections of dialogue or calls for other Detectors not to interact with Counter Speakers.

Examples of discourse-refusing utterances by the Detectors include:

1. Block it, ignore and move on. [ADA-52]
2. Best course of action is to ignore them, and let them shout into the void. [TFN-121]
3. Guys just ignore the troll... [TFN-116]
4. I will not be responding to you again. [IHK-13]
5. Cool I don’t remember asking you for your opinion, [...]. Don’t even bother answering my question because I do not want to hear anything you have to say. [IHK-2]

While 4. and 5. are directed at the Counter Speakers, in 1., 2. and 3. the Detectors also instruct other users, who are perceived to be part of the in-group, to not engage with the Counter Speakers. In this way, the group borders as well as the echo chamber are reinforced. We can, however, also observe discourse-inviting utterances by the Detectors: “The confrontation of ideas need to happen and he’s been pretty civil. I still plan to respond him when I have time.” [TFN-118]; “I’m trying to engage with you in an honest debate.” [FD-58]. While the sincerity of some of these statements is questionable and/or they could be read as ironic (e.g.: “That’s fascinating. Can you please elaborate more?” [FD-25] in response to an already above-average length comment by a Counter Speaker), this nevertheless indicates that there is some level of disagreement

among the Detectors on whether to open the group to discourse with the perceived outsiders.

Among Counter Speakers, we can primarily observe discourse-inviting utterances: “I want to understand why you believe in what you do and why you want me to do the same, I’m genuinely willing to hear you out.” [FD-11]; “yh no I did come here to troll originally but now I just honestly want to have a conversation with this group.” [TFN-125]. Though similarly, the sincerity of some of these statements can be called into question: “What led you to believe that gay people merely existing is somehow some elaborate malevolent scheme of propaganda to do... what exactly?” [IHK-30] Discourse-refusing utterances by Counter Speakers were comparatively rare and include the following examples: “i won’t read all of that, sorry.” [NWL-61]; “don’t even try to argue or talk to thos retards man” [WIA-68].

The ratio as well as the (number of instances) of discourse inviting and refusing utterances among Detectors and Counter Speakers can be seen in the table below.

Tab. 2: Refusal and Invitation of discourse among Detectors and Counter Speakers

	Refusal	Invitation	Total
Detectors	64,00 (32)	36,00 (18)	100 (50)
Counter Speakers	14,49 (10)	85,51 (59)	100 (69)

Here we see that while the Counter Speakers mostly invite discourse (85,51%), the Detectors make fewer discourse-inviting statements, instead mostly refusing discourse (64%). Once again, it is unclear whether this difference stems from the group’s internal ideology, or whether it is part of a more general strategy to fortify the existing echo chamber, or both. Either way, through the discourse-refusing utterances an antagonistic discursive environment is constructed and constructive dialogue is hindered. Instead, the group boarders are fortified, and other group members are instructed that ‘we don’t talk to *them*’.

5.2 Categories of noun based nominal phrases

We already observed that the Detectors use more noun-based nominal phrases to refer to the opposing group (32,49% and 358 instances) than the Counter Speakers (13,77% and 115 instances). In the final step of the analysis, it is now important to identify the meanings conveyed by these nominal phrases. This allows us to determine how the groups conceptualize one another semantically. To this end, all nominal phrases used were sorted into different categories. Each nominal phrase was assigned to only one category. If a nominal phrase could be assigned to multiple categories, its head was used as the deciding factor (e.g. “lesbian feminist” [MHW-29] was sorted into the category ‘Ideology’, not ‘Demographic’). The following table shows the percentage of the different categories of nominal phrases as well as their (number of instances) for both groups.

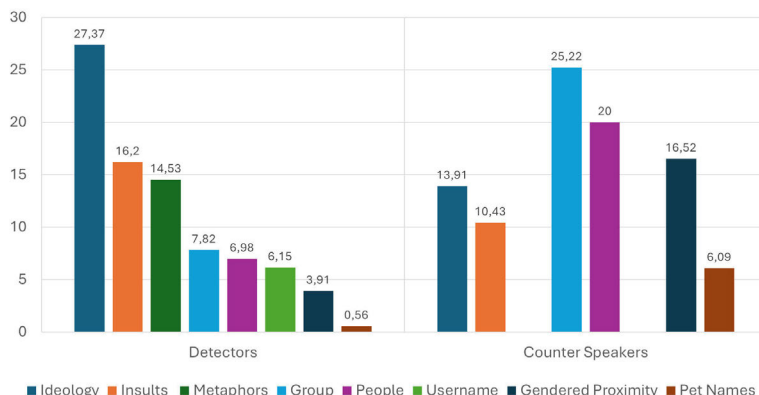
Tab. 3: Usage of different categories of noun-based nominal phrases

	Ideology	Metaphors	Insults	Group	People
Detectors	27,37 (98)	14,53 (52)	16,2 (58)	7,82 (28)	6,98 (25)
Counter Speakers	13,91 (16)	0 (0)	10,43 (12)	25,22 (29)	20 (23)
	User-name	Insincerity	Gendered Proximity	Demo-graphic	Thread Role
Detectors	6,15 (22)	4,47 (16)	3,91 (14)	3,63 (13)	1,68 (6)
Counter Speakers	0 (0)	0 (0)	16,52 (19)	2,61 (3)	0 (0)
	Adversary	Pet Names	Other	Total	
Detectors	0,84 (3)	0,56 (2)	5,87 (21)	100,01 (358)	
Counter Speakers	0 (0)	6,09 (7)	5,22 (6)	100 (115)	

These percentages are also presented in the following figure. As many different types of noun-based nominal phrases could be identified, the following figure shows only those categories whose usage makes up at least 5% for at least

one of the two groups. For the same reason, the category 'other' was also omitted. For the sake of brevity, the following analysis will focus only on the categories presented in this figure.¹⁰

Fig. 2: Usage of different categories of noun-based nominal phrases $\geq 5\%$ as a graphic



Here we can clearly observe differences in the usage of the different categories by the two groups. For the Detectors, the three most used categories are 'Ideology' (27,37%), 'Insults' (16,2%) and 'Metaphors' (14,53%) – with 'Ideology' making up more than a quarter of all used noun-based nominal phrases. The Counter Speakers not only use a smaller variety of categories (possibly due to the overall smaller number of nominal phrases), the three most used ones also

10 The categories not further considered are 'Insincerity', 'Demographic', 'Thread Role', and 'Adversary'. Included in the category 'Insincerity' are noun-based nominal phrases, which question the sincerity with which the referenced people engage in discourse. This is done by including the lexeme 'troll' (e.g. "the troll" [TFN-116]; "another woke cult troll" [TFN-154]; "the retarded troll" [NWL-26]). The category 'Demographic' includes nominal phrases, which center on (often only assumed) demographic characteristics of the referenced person (e.g. "a wealthy western liberal boomer" [SM-60]; "homosexuals" [KCD-10]). 'Thread Role' refers to nominal phrases, that reference the role the other user has in the discussion thread (e.g. "OP" [WIA-79] = meaning 'Original Poster'). Lastly 'Adversary' includes those phrases, that conceptualize the referenced person or group as an opponent (e.g. "enemies" [IOD-198]; "our far left opponents" [IOD-206]). All these examples are nominal phrases used by Detectors, as, except for the 'Demographic' category, all of these categories are not used by the Counter Speakers.

differ: Most used by the Counter Speakers are the categories 'Group' (25,22%), 'People' (20%) and 'Gendered Proximity' (16,52%), with 'Group' making up around a quarter of all noun-based nominal phrases. All categories will now be examined individually.

Ideology

This category includes nominal phrases which focus on the (presumed) political ideology of the referenced person or group. In doing so, the named ideology becomes a meronym for the person or group of people it refers to, whilst their status as individuals and other personal aspects are obscured. In this way, referring to people as an ideology is, to a certain extent, dehumanizing and therefore harmful, i.e. toxic, for the discursive environment. This is by far the category most used by the Detectors (27,37%), while being utilized significantly less by the Counter Speakers (13,91%).

Examples employed by the Detectors include substantivized variations on the lexeme 'woke' (e.g. "the woke" [IOD-210]; "wokes" [RTW-6]; "wokies" [M-15]) as well as other lexemes used to describe progressive politics (e.g. "leftists" [NWL-105]; "a leftie" [SWT-OP]; "undercover liberals" [KCD-73]; "commies" [IOD-131]). It is perhaps not surprising that the Detectors make extensive use of this category, given that the group's aim is to identify progressive content. Another notable aspect is the repeated utilization of the diminutive suffix '-ie', which in this context has a derogatory connotation.

In the corpus there are only 16 instances of the Counter Speakers employing this category. For example, these include: "right wingers" [M-49]; "Far Rights" [ADA-24]; "just plain old Nazis" [WIA-3] and "anti-wokes" [ADA-11].

Group

These nominal phrases are the one most used by the Counter Speakers (25,22%), while the Detectors utilized them significantly less (7,82%). This is perhaps not surprising, given that the Counter Speakers' position is defined precisely by the fact that they set themselves apart from the Woke Content Detector group. This category includes noun-based nominal phrases which conceptualize the referenced people as a group. Usages by the Counter Speakers include the following examples: "WCD" [DYE-67] (= acronym for 'Woke Content Detector'); "this group" [WIA-12]; "your group" [DYE-55] "group members" [WIA-12]. The examples show that the Counter Speakers largely refer to the Woke Content Detector group when using nominal phrases, which can be regarded as a relatively neutral, value-free reference. At the same time, by

using phrases such as 'your group', the Counter Speakers position themselves as standing outside of this group (even though they are commenting from within it), thus reinforcing the antagonistic group identities.

With only 28 instances, the Detectors more rarely make use of this category. Examples include the following: "the woke crowd" [IOD-5]; "woke players" [IOD-181]; "the gender crowd" [ADA-57]; "your homo buddies" [YMW-15] and "your ilk" [DYE-2]. These examples show that when describing the Counter Speakers as a group, the Detectors employ less neutral, perhaps slightly derogatory ('crowd'; 'ilk'), language, which, in contrast to the Counter Speakers, also includes references to ideology ('woke'; 'gender') and/or demographic characteristics ('homo'). The antagonism is thus constructed not only by positioning oneself as outside of the aforementioned groups, but also by simultaneously implicitly devaluing them.

People

This is the category that Counter Speakers use second most frequently (20%), whilst it is utilized significantly less often by the Detectors (6,98%). Included in this category are nominal phrases, which conceptualize the referenced person or group as people, i.e. human beings with personhood. Examples employed by the Counter Speakers include the following: "the people here" [DYE-21]; "you people" [DYE-140]; "shitty people" [DYE-151]; "people of your ilk" [DYE-58] and "people who follow ideologies of which oppose minority groups" [DYE-51]. While the last example shows that these references can be highly specific and avoid meronymically referring to persons as an ideology, other examples can also be highly generalizing ('you people'; 'people of your ilk') and/or derogatory ('shitty people'). This shows that while this category has the potential to provide more humanizing personal references, it can also be utilized to further reinforce antagonistic social positions.

A similar observation can be made regarding the usage of this category by the Detectors, which includes the following examples: "these people" [KCD-51]; "people like you" [FD-61]; "the retarded class of people" [DYE-64]; "people who think there can be hundreds of genders" [FD-22].

Gendered Proximity

Gendered Proximity is the third most commonly used category by the Counter Speakers (16,52%). At the same time, it is employed very rarely by the Detectors (3,91%). This category includes personal references which integrate nouns that suggest social proximity to the speaker, and which also carry a gendered con-

notation. Examples used by the Counter Speakers include “Bro” [FD-53], “my man” [WIA-103], “dude” [TFN-130], “guys” [TFN-98] and “Girl” [SWT-18]. This is the first category of nominal phrases that instead of constructing an antagonism between the two groups, creates social closeness between the speaker and the referenced person, especially when employing the possessive first person singular ‘my’ or suggesting a familial relationship with the term ‘Bro’. Of course, these terms can also be used in an ironic or insincere fashion, for example in the following comment: “Bro just typing shit lmao” [FD-70]. The same goes for the utilization of this category by the Detectors, which includes the following examples: “bro” [DYE-107]; “Buddy” [M-40]; “Dude” [TFN-99], “Mate” [DYE-33] and “You guys” [DYE-4].

Interestingly, only the Counter Speakers use the female noun ‘Girl’ in this way, while the Detectors choose exclusively male nouns for this type of linguistic construction of proximity.

Insults (and Stigma Words)

Insults are maybe the most obviously toxic category of personal references examined in this study. They reference a person or group in a clearly derogatory and negative manner, thus creating an antagonistic and toxic discourse environment. This category is used by both groups, with the Detectors utilizing it more frequently (16,2%) than the Counter Speakers (10,43%). Examples employed by Counter Speakers include the following: “Bitch” [SWT-50], “Bitch who’s afraid of minorities” [ADA-13] “Silly hoe” [DYE-63] and “thos retards” [WIA-68]. What is perhaps unexpected is, that even though the Counter Speakers position themselves in opposition to ‘Anti-Wokeness’, they nevertheless employ misogynistic and ableist meanings through the chosen insults. This introduces a new aspect of toxicity to the discourse environment: group-focused enmity.

Surprisingly, misogynistic insults are not as common among Detectors, with “cunt feminist dykes” [SWT-10] being the only instance. However, instead, the Detectors employ a higher amount of ableist language, e.g.: “retard” [TFN-100], “these pathetic degenerates” [NWL-39], “the radical feminist / anti-patriarchy nuts” [ADA-58] and “mentally ill woke a55” [DYE-14]. They also use insults that are tied to male sexuality, like “fuckboy” [YMW-15] and “troll pricks” [TFN-135]. Additionally, there are insults utilized by Detectors, which integrate the lexemes ‘woke’ (e.g.: “waketard” [MHW-26]) or ‘liberal’ (e.g. “undercover libturd” [KCD-73]). Intelligence-based insults are also made use of (e.g. “volunteer village idiots” [DYE-45]; “this fool” [SWT-52], “bozo” [DYE-10]),

as well as those denoting the referenced person as unsuccessful (e.g. "a loser" [DYE-10]). From these examples, we can observe that Detectors choose a larger variety of insults, which coincides with their higher total number.

Another interesting specificity in the use of this category by the Detectors is that, other than the Counter Speakers, they do not only employ insults which are conventionalized in society at large but also group specific 'stigma words' (Hermanns 1994), which negatively denote an opposing social or political group. Due to them being specific to certain social and/or political groups, utilizing them also positions the speaker as belonging to that group, as well as assigning the referenced person to the devalued out-group. In this way they inherently reinforce an antagonistic discursive formation. These group-specific stigma words make up 27,59% of the insults used by Detectors. They include the following examples: "SJW" [M-46], "upcoming neo-marxists social justice warriors" [IOD-202], "NPC" [SWT-8]¹¹ and "normie" [WIA-40]. These are all commonly used and well-known stigma words of the 'anti-woke' movement (s. Braithwaite 2016; Chess, Massanari 2018; Liemann 2023; Liemann in press). Their usage thus signals belonging to that movement, while also constructing a devalued, even vilified out-group of non-thinking, aggressive 'woke activists'.

Metaphors

With 14,53%, metaphors (in the sense of Lakoff, Johnson 1980) are the third most used category of noun-based nominal phrases by the Detectors. Interestingly, the Counter Speakers do not employ metaphorical personal references.

The metaphorical personal references can be sorted by their source domains, which are applied to the referenced out-group or person as a target. The most prominent source domains chosen recurrently by the Detectors in the corpus are 'religious zealotry', 'organized crime', 'physical sickness', 'psychological sickness', 'artificial intelligence' and 'animals'. The source domains 'physical sickness', 'psychological sickness', 'artificial intelligence' and 'animals' have in common that they dehumanize their targets. Geyer (2023) identifies metaphors as a feature of xenophobic hate speech in social media and notes that "the aggressive speech act always consists of stating or asserting a relationship of similarity" (ibid., translation CL). In the corpus, the aggressive (or antagonistic/toxic) speech act consists of asserting a similarity between

11 Acronym for 'non playable character', referring to all characters in a video game that are not controlled by players and thus can only carry out predetermined code.

the referenced person or group and – depending on the source domain – illnesses, non-human technology and animals, which are either characterized as passive or actively harmful, depending on the source domain. The non-dehumanizing source domains ‘organized crime’ and ‘religious zealotry’ in turn de-individualize the referenced person or people and instead construct them as a homogenous group.

The most used source domain is that of religious zealotry. Examples include the following: “a cult” [DYE-107], “YOU WOKE CULTISTS” [SWT-55], “The LGBT cult members” [DYE-175], “The woke religion” [ADA-30] and “these fanatics” [ADA-41]. Through this metaphorization the referenced people are conceptualized as unable to think for themselves, instead blindly and ferociously following a religious fantasy.

Inability to think for oneself is also asserted through the source domain ‘artificial intelligence’. Here, the referenced people are conceptualized as having been programmed by an outside force, unthinkingly executing on that external script. Examples include: “progressive-robots” [RTW-13] and “the AI” [DYE-59]. The Stigma Word ‘NPC’, that has been discussed before, also carries this metaphorical meaning.

In the ‘animal’ source domain, the referenced people are metaphorized as “sheep” [MHW-43], “good lil sheep” [IHK-2] and “your herd” [IHK-18]. These examples also highlight the inability to think for oneself, only blindly following what others are doing. However, in this domain we can also observe the metaphorization as “locusts that come and destroy every field” [FD-5] or “this pestilence” [KCD-74]. This highlights the supposed damaging or even destructive nature of the referenced person or group and also carries a biblical connotation.

Another recurrently used domain is that of physical sickness. Examples include: “a cancer to everything” [DYE-11], “the tumor” [M-45] and “Woke virus” [RTW-8]. In these instances, the referenced people are conceptualized as an entity that actively harms the human body and/or that can rapidly spread and grow.

Examples from the source domain of psychological sickness are: “radical left wing insanity” [WIA-24] and “the crazies” [FD-19]. Here, the referenced people are conceptualized both as the illness itself (‘insanity’) as well as those afflicted by it (‘crazies’).

The source domain ‘organized crime’ is constructed through nominal phrases such as “a cartel” [M-46] or “the Alphabet Mafia” [M-9]. In these examples, the supposedly opposing group is constructed as an interconnected and

powerful group of people that is intentionally and actively harming society for the sole reason of personal profit.

Username

The Detectors also occasionally use a Counter Speaker's username or integrate it into a more complex nominal phrase (6,15%). The Counter Speakers do not employ the usernames for personal reference. If the username is utilized in isolation [e.g. DYE-166; FD-65], this category addresses the individual person directly and with their chosen username, thus not generalizing or assigning affiliation to any social group and thereby not reinforcing the antagonism inherent to many of the other categories.

However, the usernames of Counter Speakers are also used by Detectors to form more complex nominal phrases, which always either carry an ironic (e.g. "Chairman [username] Tse-tung" [FD-23]; "comrade [username]" [FD-65]) or derogatory (e.g. "this fairy [username]" [IHK-33]; "this troll [username]" [NWL-39]) meaning, thus reinforcing the antagonism between speaker and the addressed user.

Pet Names

Overall, this category is utilized very rarely, with the Counter Speakers showing a higher ratio (6,09%) than the Detectors (0,56%). While using pet names may on the surface suggest familiarity, in the context of the corpus, they are exclusively employed in an insincere and therefore mocking fashion, thus contributing to the antagonism between the users and creating a toxic discourse environment. The following is a list of all the pet names used by the Counter Speakers: "silly" [DYE-94], "silly billy" [SWT-60], "pooks" [DYE-148; DYE-120], "bbg" [DYE-150] (= babygirl), "sweetie" [FD-62], "my darling little chud" [FD-64]. At the same time, the corpus contains only two instances of Detectors using pet names: "Sweetie" [DYE-2] and "silly goober" [DYE-16].

6. Conclusion

This study has shown how personal references in the form of pronouns and noun-based nominal phrases are used in online discourse to construct antagonistic social positions and group affiliations. These antagonistic group identities, in turn, are damaging, or toxic, to the discourse environment. We can also observe this in the corpus: there is no meaningful communication, no

constructive dialogue between Detectors and Counter Speakers. The Counter Speakers are successful insofar as they disrupt internal group discourse, with the designated topics of the threads – the video games under review – often no longer being discussed. Instead, fundamental political differences, group affiliations and the Counter Speakers themselves repeatedly become the subject of discussion. As a result, the presence of the Counter Speakers is used by the detectors to demarcate and reinforce group boundaries, a phenomenon already identified as a typical characteristic of echo chambers (Kanz 2025). Of course, the Counter Speakers also position themselves, construct groups and assign affiliation to them. Central to this is the use of specific pronouns and noun-based nominal phrases, which were identified in this study and through which social self and other positioning is carried out in passing.

Concerning pronouns, this is facilitated, among other things, by the underspecified third-person plural, which can construct a generalized, homogeneous out-group – as is often the case in the corpus. In contrast, the second-person singular allows the individual user to be addressed directly (which, of course, does not mean that it cannot also appear in toxic utterances). Both Detectors and Counter Speakers utilize both variants, although Detectors employ the third-person plural significantly more frequently (16,97%) than Counter Speakers (2,28%). At the same time, Counter Speakers primarily chose the second-person singular (79,16%), which – while still being their most used personal reference – is utilized significantly less often by Detectors (39,02%). This indicates that the Detectors, the group that quantitatively predominates in the echo chamber, use more generalized pronouns that can facilitate antagonistic social positioning. They also tend to talk about the Counter Speakers, rather than to them, thus employing the second person singular significantly less. Furthermore, the usage of hostile pronouns was observed on the side of the Detectors through misgendering, ironic pronouns or the third-person singular neuter. The Counter Speakers do not utilize hostile pronouns. This aligns with the higher ratio of discourse-refusing statements made by Detectors (64%) than by Counter Speakers (13,91%). Counter Speakers exhibit more discourse-inviting behavior (85,51%), which is significantly lower on the side of the Detectors (36%).

Furthermore, the Detectors employ a significantly higher proportion of noun-based nominal phrases (32,49%) than the Counter Speakers (13,77%). Nominal phrases are also used in the corpus for antagonistic positioning and for the construction of antagonistic groups.

The antagonism is conveyed, among other things, through noun-based nominal phrases that refer to individuals and groups meronymically as ideologies, insults and stigma words, a variety of metaphors and ironic pet names. Additionally, noun-based nominal phrases conceptualizing the referenced humans as people or as a group are used as well as nominal phrases that create proximity through nouns with a gendered connotation. Although the last three groups also convey a social position, they are generally less antagonistic and may even foster a sense of common ground – depending on how they are utilized. These categories are primarily employed by the Counter Speakers, with the three most used categories by the Detectors being 'Ideology', 'Metaphors' and 'Insults'. This of course does not mean that the Counter Speakers do not engage in antagonistic positioning.

It is unclear whether the differences in the utilization of personal references between the Detectors and the Counter Speakers can be attributed to inherent elements of these groups' respective ideologies, or whether this is an inherent feature of online discourse and/or online discourse within echo chambers. Answering this question could yield significant insight into the mechanisms of discourse on social media platforms. To determine this, further research and a comparison with groups in which progressive views predominate are necessary.

Either way, it has become apparent that social positioning is carried out subtly (or less subtly) through personal references, and that they can damage the discourse environment and render the discourse toxic, making constructive dialogue impossible. An important step towards making online discourse less toxic may lie in questioning and deconstructing such antagonisms and the way they are constructed through – often seemingly harmless – personal references.

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