

Title of Article: Language Use in Crisis Situations: A Study of Rhetorical Strategies in Online Reactions to News Reports of the *Washington Navy Yard* Shooting and the *Nairobi Westgate* Attack

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Abstract: This study applies (critical) discourse analysis to examine rhetorical strategies in online reactions to news reports of the mass shooting that occurred at a Navy Yard in Washington D.C. and the attack on Nairobi Westgate Shopping Mall in September, 2013 referred to as ‘crisis situations.’ ‘Online reactions’ refers to feedback comments often generated by online newspapers and other digital news sources that are of interest to the public. This platform not only serves for public interactivity, but most often forms an arena for hot arguments and debate among contributors, and some commenters have used it to attack one another especially where two sides of an argument reveal different opinions or represent different group allegiances. Some comments in the present study for example, reveal their writers’ opposing views about social security and government policies.

This study shows that language use in crisis situations is highly ideological and exhibits features of *affect*, involving the use of flaming, labeling, and other forms of rhetoric that reflect negative evaluation of some perceived social enemies. The use of rhetoric in this context reflects affective stance of those that posted comments on the news of the attacks. According to Ochs (1990), affective stance is a socially recognized feeling, attitude, mood or degree of emotional intensity.

They are also generally referred to as 'attitude markers' (Hyland, 2005). Negative representations of the 'other' are understandably influenced by the emotional conditions of people who are directly or indirectly affected by the attacks. Since emotions influence language use, emotional reactions such as anger, fear, shock and frustrations become inevitable.

Rhetorical strategies like exaggeration, metaphor and irony are noticeable in the online comments and function as evaluative strategies to maximize the criminal activities of the mass shooter and the Somali radical group. However, some forms of labelling and negative constructions of Al Shabaab, are actually misleading and tend to divert attention from some serious nature of the social crisis in question. This study also shows that people's responses to danger and social crises are the same irrespective of colour, race or geographical locations.