

Examining Snarl usage

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Introduction

The project examines the usage of the word “भक्त” [Transliteration: Bakwa] throughout the last decade. The investigation stems from the observation that in recent discourse, the word is mostly used as a *snarl word*. On social media, the snarl connotation seems to be heavily dominating the neutral usage.

With these initial observations in mind, we post two questions:

- At what point in the recent past did it become primarily a snarl word?
- Could we explain said *change* in meaning?

Formal Problem Statement

Investigating the snarl usage of the word “भक्त” (transliteration: Bakwa) in popular discourse, with special emphasis on *when* and *why* it became a snarl.

(definitions used for snarl words have been mentioned later)

Literature review

Most previous work on the investigation of snarl words as used in the political discourse mostly focused on analysis of speeches of popular leaders. Not much (or any work we could find) has been done on analysis of snarl words as used in the normal discourse.

With access to twitter, a platform that is commonly used by people to publicly record their opinions, we are well placed to investigate the snarl usage of a word.

We referred to classic papers like “on sense and reference” by Gotlobb Frege (that later kicked off the field of formal semantics) and the book where snarl words were

coined: “Language in action” by S. I. Hayakawa. These papers referred to provide our problem statement a better definition.

For analysis, we took inspiration from analyses of speeches (most of the work on snarl words is directed towards this). The specific papers have been mentioned in the references section.

Definitions

This section highlights the definitions as used throughout the document

Snarl words

The study takes reference from the book “Language in action” by S. I. Hayakawa (1939). This work is the general authority in the literature for definitions of “snarl words” and “purr words” and these phrases as we understand them were coined in it.

“The terminology is used merely to emphasize the fact that judgments, like snarls and purrs, do-not as such have extensional content.” - Language in action

A central point in the description of “snarl words” made in the book is that they are primarily a judgement. Their primary usage is to convey the speaker’s feelings (and judgements) about the referent.

The above excerpt talks about the lack (or the deficiency) of “extensional content” in snarl words. **Extension** is a term coined by Gotlob Frege in the “on sense and reference”, roughly speaking it refers to the denotation of an utterance. What makes a snarl word, snarl is the lack of a denotation in favour of the heavy connotative loading. This is not to say that a denotation does not exist, but more importantly the denotation takes the back seat. The contribution a snarl word will have to the conversation is to give us important information about the speaker’s opinions on the referent.

“Bakwa (wx transliterated)”: non-snarl usage

The hindi word, literally translated to English means “devotee”. The neutral meaning of the word is generally used with context to deities.

Sometimes the denotation of “great admiration” is encapsulated in the usage of the word. The idea used is that the admiration to the point of deitifying (this particular usage is what leads to the snarl usage)

“Bakwa (wx transliterated)”: snarl usage

The snarl usage is typically used in a political context with the express intention of implying that the referent can’t think critically. The most active usage is for the speaker to dismiss the opinions of the referent by snarling at them with the word.

In the political context, it is typically used against the right wing with the general implication being that the “Bakwa” right wing can’t think rationally and will support anything the right wing does.

The word is also used against members of other parts of the political spectrum (although less typically) and in such cases is often preceded by the name of a political party or a political personality. For instance “congress bhakt” is a common example of this we found in the dataset, it has the same connotation just for a different party.

Methodology

Data Collection

The corpus consists of tweets organized into years: from 2011 till 2019 (inclusive). The data has been collected using the Tweepy version 4.3.0 and uses the full archive search API.

The API imposes some restrictions on requests made at a time and therefore tweets for each year were collected in chunks of 100.

The query used was “bhakt”, the api returned the set of tweets that had the word (note that this also includes tweets where it was part of a word or the part of a username).

This way 400 tweets were collected for each year. The unannotated data as collected can be found in the `data/` directory of the project repository.

Also an important property of the data is that the 400 tweets of the year were the last 400 tweets of that year.

The entire corpus, therefore consists of 3600 manually annotated tweets organized by year.

Note that the period for which tweets were collected was not decided beforehand, the trends seen in the data heavily influenced how far we went on the data collection because one of the questions we had posed was when “Bakwa” primarily became a snarl in the discourse.

Annotation

The data collection process was followed by manual annotation of each tweet. Each tweet was marked as a whole for the snarl and purr usage as followed:

- S: the usage of “bhakt” in the tweet was a snarl usage
- P: the usage of “bhakt” in the tweet was a purr usage
- N: the usage of neutral (and non-snarl)

At this point we must note that P usage occurred very little and wasn’t accounted for in our analysis and conclusions.

Early on in the project we had decided that human annotation was required to contextualize and understand snarl usage. The recognition of snarl usage was done using the above mentioned definitions and takes reference from the following papers of discourse analysis:

- “Words as weapons for mass persuasion: dysphemism in Churchill’s wartime speeches” - Eliecer Crespo-Fernández
- “An Analysis of Political Language on the Word Level – George W. Bush’s Speeches” - Kerstin Edler

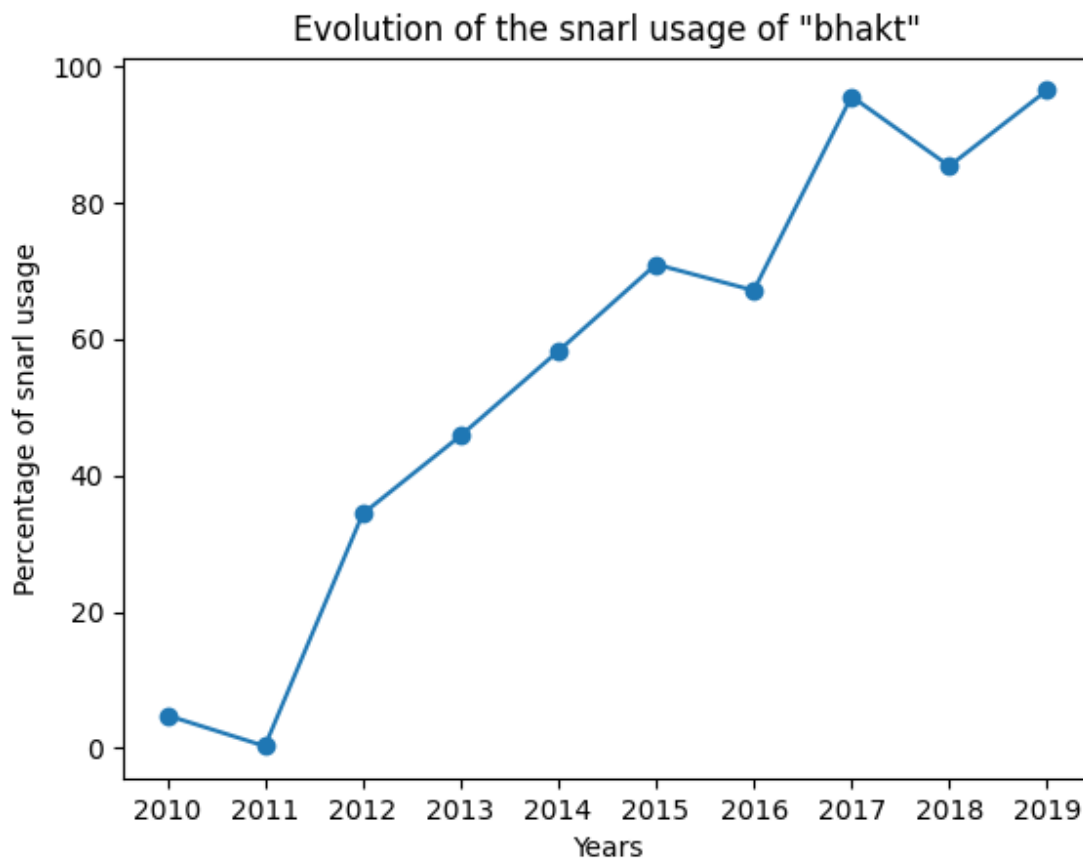
Analysis

After annotation was over, the proportion of snarl usage in each years was logged and a line plot was created (presented in the observations section)

Some speculations were made and discussed on the properties of the graph (details in the discussion section)

Observations

The graph



General observations

The important observation we make from the graph is that there is a significant rise in snarl usage from about 0.25% in 2011 to 34% in 2012. Even in 2010 the usage was recorded to be about 4.7% still fairly below 34%.

This allows us to safely make the claim that snarl usage became significant around late 2012, thereby answering the first question of the study.

Then we notice that after 2012, it most rises dramatically and peaks in 2019 (which happens to be the time for the general elections)

Beyond the graph

As shown in the graph, the usage of the word “bhakt” as a snarl was almost non-existent but since the build-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, it has gained popularity as a term used to brand “blind supporters” of the BJP and its allies. What the graph does not show, however, is the evolution of “bhakt” as a snarl term. In late 2012 where it reached a noteworthy level of usage, the tweets that use it as an insult are used not only to describe staunch/ “blind” BJP supporters, but the supporters of any party, candidate and even apolitical personalities. We often found terms like “Swamy bhakt”, “Soniya bhakt”, “Congress bhakt” etc being used. Interestingly, since the term was only starting to catch on, the people using it against BJP supporters felt the need to specify it, using terms like “Modi bhakt”, “Namo bhakt”, “BJP bhakt” etc. It was rare, back then, for someone to call another person “bhakt”, without any prefixes, with no ambiguity (we can only assume the ambiguity would dissolve upon examining context).

This observation essentially helps us trace the etymology of the word “bhakt” in its snarl sense: it stemmed from the denotative meaning (devotee), stretching to the “blind followers” of any entity, and slowly gaining traction for use in political debates. It was used especially often by non-Modi-supporters against staunch Modi supporters, and hence it was only a matter of time before it started being used almost exclusively against BJP supporters to the extent where the word “bhakt”

alone carries the snarl connotation “blind BJP supporter” without needing to be called “BJP Bhakt”.

Also, it is interesting to note that as of recent years, the non-snarl connotation is more prevalent as part of the phrase “desh bhakt” than it was earlier. Earlier, a sizeable chunk of the non-snarl usage was about devotees, but with political discussions drawing a lot of participants and nationalism being a hot topic (also due to the BJP), “desh-bhakt” is more often than not the reason the word is used in a non-snarl sense.

Discussion

It is important to note that even though a sizeable amount of tweets from each year have been manually annotated, the tweets for each year are from the same day (in fact, December 31), so context plays a heavy role even with 400 tweets (which happen to include multiple retweets of the same tweet). For example, one may presume that there was a sharp spike in the snarl usage of “bhakt” in 2017, followed by a dip in 2018. However, that may not be entirely accurate. Shortly before the recorded tweets from 2017 were posted, Rahul Gandhi in a statement had himself used the snarl word “bhakt”, leading to the issue being temporarily a hot topic of debate online. A closer look at the annotated tweets from 2017 show that a lot of them pertain to the discussion about Rahul having used the word, leading to the spike in the usage. In fact, a significant number of the tweets are retweets of BJP’s response to Rahul’s statement; explaining the larger percentage.

An important factor that presents some anomalies in the data is the annotator disagreement. As mentioned above, the two of us annotated different years’ files, and annotated the complete file once we began. This introduces the inconsistency that what one annotator considers snarl, might be considered innocuous by the other. This is especially significant when analysing tweets, as the context to them is often not known and must be guessed. For instance, there’s the tweet ***“b’@AsYouNotWish @Ankita_Shah8 I can understand u being a bhakt but why attack***

someone personally” from 2016 that is marked as non-snarl in the final database by the annotator, as a line has been drawn between being a bhakt and being rude, but the other annotator (who annotated 2017, 2018 and 2019 - which may have led to some increase in the overall percentage), if marking the tweet, says they would interpret it as “I can see you’re a dumb bhakt but there’s no need to be rude” and mark it as snarl. This is the case with a number of tweets.

Another difference in annotation is when the authors of the tweet call themselves “bhakt” - either their past selves (indicating they no longer identify as a BJP supporter), or their present self (thus embracing the snarl word being used against them). In this case too, the first annotator considers the word to contain the connotation of BJP supporter but without the snarl, but the second would consider it snarl.

Conclusion

There seems to be a great correlation between the rise of snarl usage of the term “Bakwa (wx transliterated)” and the rise of Narendra Modi as a representative of BJP.

This is illustrated by the huge increase in snarl usage around the period he was announced to be the Prime Ministerial candidate followed by the final peak in 2019. In fact, we could go as far as to say that snarl usage became relevant in 2013 (when Modi was announced as the Prime Ministerial candidate).

However, while the snarl usage finds its roots in usage against the right wing it is often used against other parts of the spectrum in the same way.

Limitations and Future work

One of the limitations of the study is that the data corpus was collected by exclusively querying in the roman script. This ignores a lot of the Indian discourse on twitter that is carried out in the devanagari script.

The restriction to roman script restricts our understanding of the overall social context. Perhaps, the snarl usage is not as prevalent when being used in devanagari (and Hindi) because it's not so prevalent in the social groups of people who use devanagari on twitter.

This question is not answered by the current study and further work is required with queries in devanagari to get a bigger picture.

References

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