Stephen Pihlaja
Antagonism on YouTube:
Metaphor in Online Discourse

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Stephen Pihlaja's debut book *Antagonism on YouTube: Metaphor in Online Discourse* (Bloomsbury 2014, pb 2016) offers scholars an exemplar of how the unique social

interactions and fluctuating spaces that epitomize social media environments might be navigated competently and productively. Dr. Pihlaja, a Senior Lecturer in Stylistics at Newman University in the UK, is specifically interested in how the use of metaphor in interactions between YouTube vloggers can contribute to, precipitate, and evolve within dramatic episodes between users. In particular, he orients his analysis around one prototypical event of “drama” that ensued as a result of a conflict between a Christian user, “Yokeup,” and an atheist user, “Crosisborg,” involving Yokeup’s condemnation of Crosisborg as “human garbage” in an enflamed response to a video created by Crosisborg in which he questioned Yokeup’s wife’s testimony of religious conversion and subsequent “reformation” from her former lesbian lifestyle. From this initial conflict an extended drama ensued, drawing in vlog entries from other users and involving the formation of camps in defense of either Yokeup or Crosisborg. From such a seemingly trivial series of events, Pihlaja is able to draw out an extended analysis of how metaphor—the term “garbage,” for example—evolves and is used by both religious and secular advocates. Because of the nature of Pihlaja’s subject matter and method of empirical research, this study offers the potential to engage with scholarship in a diversity of disciplines from sociology, psychology, and anthropology to religious studies and linguistics.

Where *Antagonism on YouTube* really shines is in Pihlaja’s ability to define the scope of his project with great clarity and to analyze his texts thoroughly, milking even the most seemingly-tangential or irrelevant vlogger commentary for all its worth. In choosing YouTube vlogs as his text, Pihlaja has of course set himself up for all of the challenges of research involving social media: the potential for texts to be deleted by creators or edited from their original version; the constantly-shifting rules, regulations, and practices of use of the site itself; and the unique pace and nature of conversations online, which may, at various moments, involve fierce and quick responses or responses that are delayed for days or weeks and which allow for conversants to come and go as they please, sometimes disappearing entirely. Pihlaja attempts, as much as possible, to both accommodate these unique features of YouTube and to prevent unnecessary

complication and confusion. He chooses, as I previously mentioned, to limit himself to analyzing one particular instance of online drama; however, he further limits the scope of his project by selecting three particular vlogs created as a part of the “human garbage” episode for analysis. Nevertheless, despite his clear delimitations, the two original videos that first sparked the drama had been deleted by Yokeup and Crosisborg by the time formal data collection and analysis were underway. Thus, Pihlaja is left to reconstruct these inciting moments from quotations relayed by viewers of the original text and audio and clips that were preserved by viewers who remixed them into their own response videos.

Pihlaja does, however, despite these challenges, make expert use of the three texts he selects to achieve his purpose of better understanding how metaphor functions in YouTube drama. Quoting extensively from the three vlogs and user commentary, Pihlaja is able to arrive at an impressive array of observations and conclusions. He begins, for example, by tracing the metaphor of “human garbage” from its first use by Yokeup to attack Crosisborg to its later manifestations. After being critiqued by both Christians and atheists for his word choice, Yokeup defends and reiterates his condemnation by referencing the Gospel of John, Chapter 15. His biblical exegesis is contrasted by secular appropriations and definitions of the term: user philhellenes, for example, emphasizes that, for him, “human garbage” is a particularly atrocious attack because it conjures images of the Holocaust, a line of thinking that further develops into a full-blown story concocted by philhellene in which he is on a sinking ship and chooses to save a puppy rather than Yokeup, a story which myriad other users subsequently take up and remix as well. From this analysis, Pihlaja is able to draw conclusions regarding how metaphor can contribute to impoliteness, how metaphor functions in relation to socio-economic and racial prejudice, how metaphor evolves in the context of drama, and how metaphor can be involved in the creation of categories (for example, “good Christian” or “bad Christian,” two categories used by Yokeup and directly related to his understanding of “human garbage”).

Naturally, the risk Pihlaja takes in choosing a single event of drama for a book-length analysis with such a particular analytical focus involves a commitment to a highly-limited audience. Each chapter of *Antagonism on YouTube* begins with extended theoretical grounding, emphasizing the particular gap in scholarship that the analytical focus of the chapter will fulfill, followed by intensive analysis. Despite the fact that the subject at hand is YouTube vlogs, there is not even so much as a screenshot of a video or user profile to break up the rigorous analysis. Such a highly-academic and text-based approach will necessarily limit Pihlaja's primary audience to scholars, despite the fact that YouTube is a popular forum for the general public who could certainly be drawn in by a conversation on the nature of online flame wars had it perhaps been presented differently.

A second complication presented by *Antagonism on YouTube* is that, in my opinion, its theoretical underpinnings might have greatly benefited from engagement with the works of religious media scholars, particularly those who have done extensive, in-depth work on manifestations of religion in social media. While Pihlaja's scholarship is certainly broad and while he does touch on religious studies and media studies scholarship, the neglect of work by prominent academics working in a nearly-identical vein in regards to religion in social media—Drs. Heidi Campbell and Elizabeth Drescher, for example—seems an unfortunate oversight. While the particular topic of metaphor use in flame wars on YouTube is certainly novel and undoubtedly a helpful contribution to academic discourse, many of the secondary concerns Pihlaja considers—community formation online, the role of biblical interpretation in online fora, and online antagonism between Christians and atheists—is richly-covered territory.

Nevertheless, *Antagonism on YouTube* will certainly be of use to academics interested in the very particular intersection of metaphorical language and YouTube vlogging and will surely, as Pihlaja hopes, result in further research into how impolite interactions and drama manifest, evolve, and conclude in various social media environments.