

Shifting linguistic identity performance and the acquisition of symbolic capital in an online white nationalist forum

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Abstract

This article contributes to a small existing literature which seeks to identify linguistic power resources in harmful online communities, using a dataset taken from a long-running, high profile white nationalist forum to longitudinally explore users' development of power resources over time. By improving understanding of the nature of power in such communities, this work can aid law enforcement in the investigative prioritisation of high- status community members. To do so, I combine Newsome-Chandler and Grant's (2023) linguistic resource model of power with Bourdieu's (2004) concept of symbolic capital, tying the former into a broader, more generalisable understanding of available power resources, while anchoring the latter in a more concrete model of how power may operate discursively in local contexts. My findings show that, surprisingly, users draw on fewer traditional discursive power resources over time, producing less explicitly assertive and extreme discourse. They also begin to treat the forum as a social, rather than solely ideological, space, and increasingly focus criticism on their white (nationalist) in-group, rather than racialised out-groups. I also show that users rely on non-linguistic forms of symbolic capital as secondary, non-linguistic power resources.

Keywords: *Language and power, linguistic capital, white nationalism, far-right, computer-mediated communication.*

Resumo

Este artigo contribui para a escassa literatura existente no âmbito da identificação de recursos linguísticos associados a uma linguagem de poder presente em comunidades online potencialmente perigosas. Para tal, recorri a um conjunto de dados retirados de um reconhecido fórum nacionalista branco para explorar longitudinalmente o desenvolvimento dos recursos de poder dos utilizadores ao longo do tempo.

Ao melhorar a compreensão da natureza do poder nessas comunidades, este trabalho pode ajudar as autoridades policiais a dar prioridade à investigação de membros da comunidade com estatuto elevado. Neste sentido, relaciono o modelo de recursos linguísticos de poder de Newsome-Chandler e Grant (2023) com o conceito de capital simbólico de Bourdieu (2004), interligando o primeiro a uma compreensão mais ampla e generalizável dos recursos de poder disponíveis e assentando o segundo num modelo mais concreto de como o poder pode funcionar discursivamente em contextos localizados. É possível concluir que, surpreendentemente, os utilizadores recorrem a menos recursos tradicionais de poder discursivo ao longo do tempo, produzindo, de forma clara, um discurso menos assertivo e extremista. Começam também a tratar o fórum como um espaço social, em vez de apenas ideológico, e centram cada vez mais as críticas no seu grupo interno branco (nacionalista), em vez de em grupos externos racializados. Demonstro, ainda, que os utilizadores recorrem a formas não linguísticas de capital simbólico como recursos de poder secundários e não linguísticos.

Palavras-chave: *Linguagem e poder, capital linguístico, nacionalismo branco, extrema-direita, comunicação mediada por computador.*

1. Introduction

Recent years have brought increased attention to the far-right movement, largely due to the electoral successes of far-right politicians and parties in the western world and beyond. This has been accompanied by a global rise in deadly far-right extremism, (Europol, 2023; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023; Pitcavage, 2023), and is compounded by the increasing normalisation of intolerant ideologies in mainstream political discourse (Mondon & Winter, 2020). Law enforcement authorities are increasingly concerned with the presence of far-right actors in online spaces (Europol, 2023). While the far-right has maintained an online presence since the earliest days of the internet (Levin, 2002), the ubiquity of the internet today has allowed the far-right to normalise and spread its message of hate to new audiences. Indeed, in the U.K. today, the majority of convicted extremists were, at least partially, radicalised online (Kenyon, Binder, & Baker-Beall, 2021).

The highly populous, but often anonymous, nature of far-right online spaces creates problems for the law enforcement agencies who monitor them, creating an investigative need to prioritise users who may pose the greatest threat. Understanding how to recognise powerful or high-status users in harmful communities, including extremist communities, allows law enforcement to better prioritise their investigations, and to more convincingly perform as powerful users in undercover operations such as account takeovers (Grant & MacLeod, 2020).

To this end, a limited amount of previous research has explored the discursive construction of powerful and authoritative identities in harmful online communities (Newsome-Chandler & Grant, 2023; see also Chiang, 2024). Being able to perform such

an identity relies on the acquisition of locally normative linguistic and pragmatic *resources* (Grant & MacLeod, 2020), which can only be done over time and through participation in the community. Despite this, the acquisition of such resources has rarely been explored longitudinally, and particularly not with reference to extremist or other harmful online communities.

This article addresses this research gap, drawing both on the resource-constraint theory of linguistic identity performance (Grant & MacLeod, 2020; Newsome-Chandler & Grant, 2023) and on the sociological lens of *capital* (Bourdieu, 2004), a symbolic resource which is acquired over time and through participation, and which renders the holder more powerful in a given context. Combining these two similar, but distinct, notions offers an interdisciplinary perspective which can anchor linguistic identity performances more strongly in existing sociological theories of interpersonal power within groups. I demonstrate this by applying, for the first time, the lens of capital to the primarily linguistic construction of powerful identity performances in the context of a far-right online forum, using a longitudinal inductive discourse analytic approach to explore how users begin to perform power over time.

2. Shifting identity performance in online communities

Beyond far-right or other harmful contexts, a small literature exists which explores how users' language use changes over time in online communities, moving from the powerless performance of a new community member to the powerful performance of an established member. This literature can offer insights into the nature of the linguistic identity resources which users may acquire over time through their participation in an online community. However, these studies do not usually longitudinally investigate the same individuals over time, so do not directly demonstrate users' acquisition of resources. Instead, as a proxy, researchers have typically explored the discourse of up to two groups of users at the same point in time. In particular, the language of newcomers or 'newbies', and of users' first ever posts to the community, have received significant attention in the literature. Less commonly, scholars have directly compared newcomers' language with that of the rest of the community. While not explicitly focusing on longer-term users, these studies typically highlight the relative power and expertise of such members, and as a result they are often referred to as experts or 'veterans' (Newsome-Chandler & Grant, 2023), a term I will adopt here.

2.1. Newcomer language

Newcomers are commonly stigmatised due to their lack of knowledge of community norms (Golder & Donath, 2004; Graham, 2016), and may threaten the face of more experienced members (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Newcomer discourse is therefore often characterised by the use of negative politeness strategies, mitigating this face threat by emphasising the newcomer's powerless and even subservient identity. This includes the use of low epistemic commitment (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Golder & Donath, 2004) and self-deprecation (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006), including explicit reference to their newcomer identity and inexperience (Chiang, 2024). This performance of inexperience and powerlessness is further reflected through the frequent asking of questions, described by Golder and Donath (2004, p. 13) as the "single most prevalent behaviour" exhibited

by newcomers (see also Ang & Zaphiris, 2010; Chiang, 2024; Newon, 2016; Nguyen & Rosé, 2011).

On the other hand, newcomers may also perform what Chiang (2024) calls the ‘dual identity’ of the *competent newbie*, making claims to legitimacy within the community by highlighting their prior experience or highlighting common ground between themselves and the community (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Graham, 2016). This is a somewhat more powerful identity, creating greater alignment with the more experienced community, while still acknowledging the user’s newcomer status. This is often achieved by providing biographical narratives in an initial introductory post. These describe the user’s reasons for joining the community, emphasising their newness, but also what they share with the community (Chiang, 2024; Graham, 2016; Nguyen & Rosé, 2011). This more personal style contributes to a higher rate of first person singular pronouns than among veteran members (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, West, Jurafsky, Leskovec, & Potts, 2013; Nguyen & Rosé, 2011). This feature highlights the sometimes dual nature of newcomer identity performance; although used in the demonstration of the connection between the user and the community, the singular pronoun form nonetheless serves to individualise the user and set them aside from the collective.

2.2. Veteran language

Unsurprisingly, veteran language is often characterised in ways that directly oppose that of newcomers. While newcomers typically avoid imposing themselves and their views on others and most commonly ask questions, veterans perform a much more powerful, knowledgeable identity: depending on the nature of the community, they may give advice, often drawing on their own personal experience as the source of their expertise (Angouri & Sanderson, 2016; Newsome-Chandler & Grant, 2023; Rudolf von Rohr, Thurnherr, & Locher, 2019); provide technical information (Singh, 2012); or offer instructions (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010; Newon, 2011). In addition to providing their own, veterans may also have the authority to assess other users’ contributions to the discussion and community (Newon, 2011; Rudolf von Rohr et al., 2019). The few existing longitudinal studies of the development of expertise highlight that, as users spend more time in the community, the frequency of question-asking decreases (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010), while those questions that are asked become more detailed and informed (Singh, 2012). Veteran users may also highlight their knowledge of community, or topic-specific, vocabulary (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2013; Newon, 2011; Newsome-Chandler & Grant, 2023; Nguyen & Rosé, 2011).

Alongside performances of knowledge and expertise, veteran users are also typically more community-oriented. They show concern with building rapport between members (Angouri & Sanderson, 2016), sometimes through a lighter or more joking tone (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010). In contrast to newcomers’ use of first person singular pronouns, first person *plural* pronouns are more common among veterans; taking a rare longitudinal approach, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al. (2013) show that use of the singular may decrease as plural usage increases. First person plural usage among veterans has several functions, including allowing the user to act as the voice of the community (Rudolf von Rohr et al., 2019); signifying increased identification with the group (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2013); and displaying increased concern with rapport and emotional connections within the community (Nguyen & Rosé, 2011). On a less

inclusive note, veteran users' focus on community may involve gatekeeping and maintenance of community boundaries, and sometimes even active hostility towards perceived 'outsiders' (Graham, 2016; Honeycutt, 2005). In this way, veteran users position themselves as having the authority to determine the boundaries of the community and acceptable behaviour within it.

3. The acquisition of linguistic symbolic capital

Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023) review the ways in which the relationship between language and power has been explored, highlighting the unique situation of anonymous or pseudonymous contexts such as those commonly found in harmful online environments. In these contexts, traditional sources of power – such as institutional power, or macro-level social categories including age, gender, and class – are often invisible. Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023) therefore propose a *resource model* of power for the exploration of such online settings. Their work draws heavily on Grant and MacLeod's (2020) resource-constraint theory of linguistic identity performance, which posits: a) that identities are not essential or inherent, but are constructed discursively through interaction with others (see also Bucholtz & Hall, 2005); b) that the range of identity performances available to individuals is determined and constrained by the *resources* that the individual has access to; and c) that resources are acquired from a number of sources, including, significantly, the individual's previous socio-discursive experiences. Applying this to the performance of power, then, Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023) note that power in anonymous online spaces is primarily or solely interactional in nature, created and performed through the locally pertinent linguistic and pragmatic power resources that each individual has acquired and is able to draw upon for their identity performance. As this implies, access to resources – and therefore to performing power – varies across individuals. Resources of power also vary across contexts, with different individuals able to produce powerful performances in different environments. Over time, and through repeated engagement and interaction, members of an online community are able to acquire and subsequently draw on new interactional resources in order to perform an identity that is situationally appropriate and socially valued in the context of that particular community. This results in that individual being perceived by others in the community as powerful, someone “to be listened to” (Newsome-Chandler & Grant, 2023, p. 113).

This formulation of power draws on, and shows strong parallels with, Bourdieu's (1991b, 2004) notion of *symbolic capital*; for Bourdieu (2004, p. 16), capital and power “amount[t] to the same thing.” The idea of symbolic capital is to recognise that power and authority are drawn not only from financial wealth (economic capital), but also from the possession of prestigious cultural and social resources (symbolic capital). Bourdieu (2004) describes a number of subtypes of symbolic capital, including *social capital*, which is drawn from one's position in a social network, and *cultural capital*, which is the individual's familiarity and comfort with prestigious forms of cultural expression. Cultural capital can be *institutionalised*, formally recognised or reified by some institution; for example, an academic degree functions as a certification that the holder has cultural capital, allowing the degree-holder to ‘demonstrate’ their capital without the need to perform it interactionally.

However, cultural capital is not necessarily institutionally ratified. Symbolic capital of all kinds is a social, relational phenomenon. Those who *have* symbolic capital in a given context are able to recognise and implicitly ratify others' capital in that context, thus perpetuating the capital that they themselves have (Bourdieu, 1991a). Non-institutionally ratified cultural capital may be *embodied*, reflected in the “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 17) that allow individuals to enact their cultural capital unconsciously, as second nature. Embodied cultural capital is not easily acquired; it takes time and effort to consistently make the ‘right’ choices in the ‘right’ contexts until it is done unthinkingly, allowing the individual to be admitted to the community and recognised as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991a).

Bourdieu (1991b) recognises *linguistic capital* as a subtype of cultural capital. Linguistic capital can be understood as an embodied form of capital, concerning the repertoire of linguistic resources individuals have access to (Grant & MacLeod, 2020) which allow them to perform appropriately and in a socially valued way across interactions in a given cultural or subcultural context. As Thompson (1991, p. 13) summarises, the possession of linguistic capital gives individuals “a feel for the game” of successful performance in an interactional context. The notion of linguistic capital derives from Bourdieu’s criticism of the abstract, grammatically-focused Chomskyan view of linguistic competence, which disregards actual linguistic performance. Bourdieu argues that speakers also have a “practical competence [...] by virtue of which they are able to produce utterances that are appropriate in the circumstances” (Thompson, 1991, p. 7), and which therefore are “likely to be listened to” (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 55), mirroring Newsome-Chandler and Grant’s (2023) definition of (linguistic) power. Individuals with linguistic capital have a high level of practical competence, possessing the ability to draw on more resources from their larger repertoire, performing comfortably in a wider range of interactions. In this way, the socially dominant – those with greater (linguistic) capital – have a higher degree of interactional agency, and are able to recognise, and even set the standard for, what Bourdieu (1991b) calls *legitimate language* – that is, situationally appropriate and socially valued discourse.

The notion of linguistic capital has primarily been employed at the level of whole societies, characterising the relative capital associated with different languages or dialects and their relationships with socioeconomic class. Despite Bourdieu’s focus on *practical* competence, the wider literature on linguistic capital often seems to prioritise *grammatical* competence, typically focusing on the capital associated with proficiency in English in international and transnational contexts (Morrison & Lui, 2000; Roth, 2019; Silver, 2005). Observations about distinctions in practical competence exhibited by those with equal grammatical competence are rare, although Harrison (2009) notes one participant’s observation that her fluent Philippine English was considered inferior to the Australian English used by others working in her institution.

In this article, I take a different approach to linguistic capital. This approach moves away from exploring distinct (varieties of) languages with reference to the macro-social category of class; as noted above, the anonymous and disembodied nature of online discourse means that such social categories are often hidden. Instead, I explore how different forms of expression in the same language can index symbolic capital in a more local context. In doing so, I bring the concept of linguistic capital in line with more recent trends in sociolinguistics, which increasingly move away from exploring macro-

social categories in favour of a focus on discursive performance and indexing of more local identities (Eckert, 2012).

In this section, I have emphasised the connections between Newsome-Chandler and Grant's (2023) resource model of powerful identity performance and Bourdieu's (1991b) linguistic form of symbolic capital. Both address the role of discourse in power and authority, each speaking to their respective disciplines of linguistics and sociology, and thus bringing unique perspectives on the same issue. I argue that applying both lenses, as I do in this article, can therefore bring new strengths to each. Linking the resource model of power into a more generalised theory of power prevents linguistic analysis from becoming siloed, more fully recognising the relational nature of power by acknowledging that language is one of many resources which may be reciprocally recognised to construct relations of power (albeit one that is of central importance in anonymous online contexts). Meanwhile, using a resource model of power to explore linguistic capital demonstrates how capital can operate in more local contexts, which so far remains unexplored, and gives practical competence – the production of situationally appropriate and valued discourse, as distinct from technical grammatical competence – the central role that Bourdieu (1991b) intended it to have.

4. Data and methods

The data for this study was taken from a large and long-running self-identified 'white nationalist' forum. *White nationalist* is one of many terms used to refer to the broad movement which is also commonly described as *far-right*, *white supremacist*, and *right-wing extremist*, whose members espouse racist and other illiberal views. Preferred terminology is not settled and has shifted over time, although many scholars currently favour *far-right* (Mudde, 2019), which I have used so far in this article. I have chosen, however, to use *white nationalist* to describe this particular forum community. I believe this term balances accuracy, by capturing the research subjects' own self-identification as well as the racially exclusionary nature of their beliefs, with the complex ethics of representing human data subjects whose views I find abhorrent (e.g. Pasiëka, 2019). Such ethical concerns have also influenced my decision not to name the site from which my data is drawn. This offers a degree of protection to the site's users in the form of greater anonymity. However, it also recognises the dangerous nature of the community; by not publicly associating my name with that of the forum, I attempt to shield myself from the dangers facing researchers who become known to extremist communities (Conway, 2021).

The full corpus from which the data for this study is taken contains every post made to the forum from over 120,000 user accounts between 2001 and 2018. Here, however, I focus on a much smaller sample. This article is based on work from a much broader project reported in Booth (2023), where smaller samples were drawn from the full dataset. Full details of this process of data filtering can be found in Booth (2023), particularly pages 71-74, and the process is summarised below.

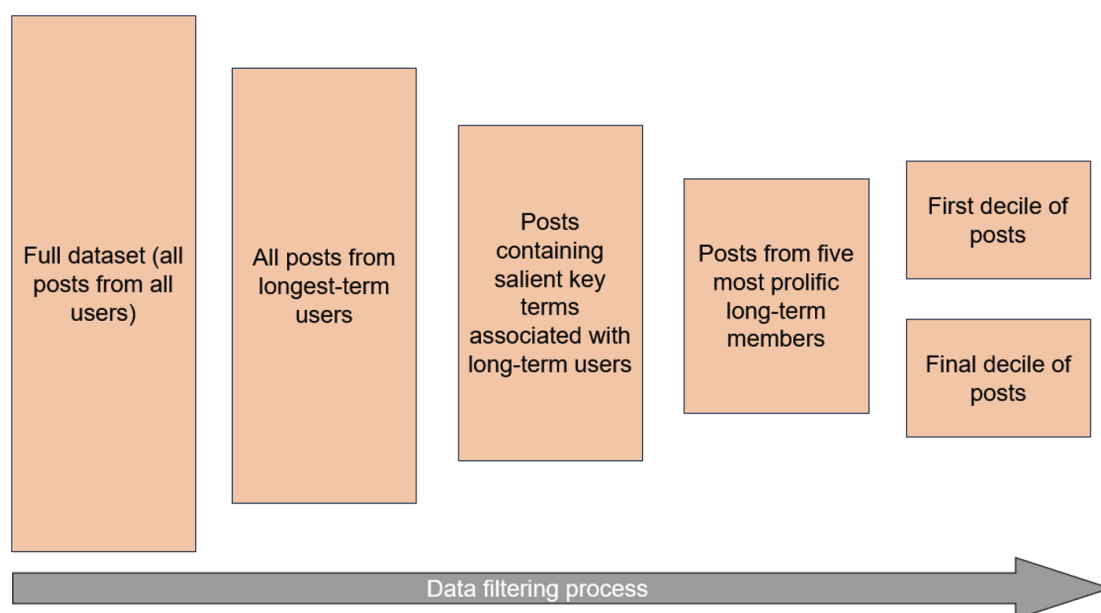


Figure 1. Summary of data filtering process for the present study. Further details can be found in Booth (2023, pp. 71-74).

The dataset was split into four groups of users based on the duration of their engagement with the forum. Using Sketch Engine, keyness analysis was used to identify terms and constructions that were particularly salient to the longest-term users by comparison to all other users. These terms were explored in the first and final chronological deciles of posts made by a sample of five long term users (that is, in the earliest tenth of these users' posts, and in the latest).

The posts in the present dataset therefore have the following characteristics:

- Written by one of the five most prolific members within the longest-term user category (that is, users who posted over a period of seven or more years);
- Within the first or final decile (tenth) of posts that these users made across the duration of their engagement with the forum;
- Contain one or more of the terms identified as salient for the purposes of an earlier study reported in Booth (2023).

Using this dataset, I was able to explore the difference between users' postings at the beginning and end of their engagement with the forum. As we have seen above, users acquire identity resources through sustained engagement with a particular social milieu which allow them to perform in more situationally appropriate, and therefore powerful, ways. Exploring the first and final deciles of users' posts therefore allows an insight into the resources of (linguistic) symbolic capital that they have accrued over time. To do so, I coded each post manually, focusing on the content and function of the discourse. This analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data. While Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023) provide a valuable starting point for the identification of linguistic power resources, I do not use their typology of resources as a framework for deductive analysis here. Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023, p. 129) themselves note that their typology is not intended to be seen as an "exhaustive list" of power resources even for the three fora they investigate, and is based on an exploratory study of small sets of data. My aim in this paper is to go beyond the resources

identified by Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023), exploring how these may fit into a wider framework for the performance of power that incorporates both discursive and other resources. Nevertheless, some of the coding themes identified do, unsurprisingly, overlap with those reported elsewhere in the literature, including in Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023).

Following annotation and compilation of results, I used the most frequently occurring themes to characterise each user's discourse at both the deciles. I then compared the two deciles for each user, identifying themes which were shared or unique to each decile. Finally, I compared themes from the first and final deciles across all five users in order to understand how users change over time. These convergences reveal what is considered to be situationally appropriate and socially valued discourse, and therefore allow us to understand the nature of power and linguistic capital in this forum.

5. Analysis

As expected, all five users display evidence of change in the linguistic and pragmatic resources which they exploit to engage with the community between the first and final decile of their posting careers. While each user naturally maintains a degree of individuality in their identity performance, a number of similar themes are identified across multiple users. The following analysis is organised around the major changes observed over time across users. In the subsequent Discussion, I consider what the findings reported here reveal about the nature of linguistic capital and authority in this white nationalist forum community.

5.1. Veteran users are less assertive in expressing their views

Contrary to expectations based on the literature (e.g. Ang & Zaphiris, 2010; Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2013; Newon, 2011), veteran users produce less overt performances of expertise, authority, and commitment to their point of view. For most users, claims of knowledge or strong assertions are not entirely absent in the final decile, but are much less frequent, suggesting a lower level of concern among users with positioning themselves as knowledgeable and asserting their own authority by the later stages of their forum engagement.

The data suggests that new users draw on a much wider range of resources than veterans to appear knowledgeable. Several users offer evidence, including personal experience, for the claims they make. While this 'evidence' is sometimes of a dubious nature, its inclusion nonetheless shows users' concern with a perceived need for validation.

- (1) *A study of history shows that England was as responsible for WW 1 as much as any country* (User 1, first decile)
- (2) *The majority of real [nationality]¹, and I know plenty of them, look nothing like Europeans but more like Arabs* (User 3, first decile)
- (3) *I carry different guns depending where I'm going and so far have never had a problem with the cops* (User 4, first decile)

¹Booth (2023) makes it clear that this user claims this nationality, so I also anonymise it here for ethical reasons.

Other resources used by new users in the construction of an authoritative, knowledgeable identity include the explicit assumption that their own view is surely correct (examples 4-5) and citing an example of having been right previously (example 6). User 1 positions themselves as an authority on the views of all white nationalists (example 7) or even all white people (example 8), and therefore able to speak on behalf of these groups.

- (4) *We are on the side of the facts and conversley the facts are on our Side* (User 1, first decile)
- (5) *when you know you're correct in what you're saying, (us)* (User 3, first decile)
- (6) *I quietly predicted that the media would start the "child abuse" comments when P[russian] Blue² was on last week. I was one week too early.* (User 3, first decile)
- (7) *We are White Nationalists and state senators do not represent us.* (User 1, first decile)
- (8) *White people know from our everyday dealings with negros, arabs and hispanics that they do not measure up in everyway to White people* (User 1, first decile)

Giving advice to other users is also unexpectedly more common in the first than the final posting decile. The advice given is often tangential or even unrelated to white nationalist matters, but nonetheless serves to position users as knowledgeable.

- (9) *You mean AOL as a service will not let you in to [forum]? Have you done a google search or so to let you to [forum]?* (User 2, first decile)
- (10) *If you ever go to NH [New Hampshire], go to North Salem route 93 and you will find a place called America's Stonehenge* (User 4, first decile)
- (11) *But if it's stabbing and slashing you want. I recommend the Rex Applegate/WE Fairbairn (German Boker-sousen) double edge, SOG Daggert³* (User 5, first decile)

This distinction between newcomer and veteran language use is typically reflected in a lower frequency of these authoritative themes in the final decile of posts. However, User 4 performs an explicitly uncertain or knowledge-seeking identity in their final decile of posts. This behaviour, which threatens the user's own face and position as an authority, is unexpected from a veteran user.

- (12) *On the news they said it was nearly a 1,000 yard shot with a AK47, I'm thinking about this, can that really happen?* (User 4, tenth decile)
- (13) *Maybe someone out there smarter than me can put more light on this.* (User 4, tenth decile)

The findings shared in this section are surprising in light of the literature, which suggests that knowledgeable and authoritative performances are typically the preserve of veteran users.

Given the selected users' very longstanding engagement with the forum (at least seven years), it seems possible that, by the final posting decile, these users feel that they no longer need to 'prove themselves'. When viewed on the forum website, each post is accompanied by metadata about its author's account, including, significantly, the date they joined the forum. Veteran users may therefore rely on their long tenure in the community as a kind of *institutionalised cultural capital*, endowed by the site's

²Prussian Blue is a former neo-Nazi musical duo whose members were young twin sisters.

³A variety of combat knife.

infrastructure rather than through their own linguistic performance. The importance of this long engagement is explicitly demonstrated by some users who draw on what Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023, p. 116) call *veteran power*, deriving from “long-term membership of a forum and/or of the wider community or subject area.” This is exclusive to the final posting decile for User 1, but appears in both deciles for User 4. In the first decile, User 4 employs this resource alongside others to perform a typically knowledgeable identity; its presence in the final decile, alongside a much less authoritative linguistic performance, suggests the power of time as a more institutionalised form of capital that users in their final posting decile have access to.

- (14) *As you can see I have been posting on [forum] for 13 years, have joined several Nationalist groups and given away all kinds of money* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (15) *Am I ready, you bet. I've been waiting for years.* (User 4, first decile)
- (16) *I know I grew up a long time ago, maybe it was another world. [...] Obozo⁴ wants change, but the country has changed way too much already.* (User 4, tenth decile)

5.2. Veteran users are less extreme in their expression

The previous finding concerned the assertion of an authoritative identity, which was unexpectedly more common among newcomers. Relatedly, the data also shows that users typically express more extreme views in the first decile of their posts (I define *more extreme*, following McCauley and Moskalenko (2017), as showing greater inclination to action, especially violent action, in the name of the white nationalist cause).

This typically takes the form of rallying other white nationalists, or white people more broadly, to various kinds of action, or of indicating that violence may be the only solution to the social problems that users perceive. User 1 (examples 17-19) is unique in sustaining this behaviour throughout both of the posting deciles explored here. However, as we will see below, in the final decile this is increasingly tied into a sense of despair at other white people and white nationalists and what this user perceives as these groups' inaction in the face of an existential threat. In the final decile, then, User 1's focus appears to be appeals for unity among the white (nationalist) community, with calls for violence secondary to this.

- (17) *A White Homeland will not be achieved unless we stop writing “our Congressman” and start taking matters into our own hands* (User 1, first decile)
- (18) *The question is are we finally ready to unify and take action* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (19) *The White race must march forward all at one time and totally united* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (20) *there will only be one way to solve our problems as a race, [...] and that way is a very uncomfortable way.* (User 3, first decile)
- (21) *I'm afraid that only blood will make these invaders go home and stay there.* (User 4, first decile)

User 4 is perhaps especially emphatic in their expression of extreme ideas; notice that example 21 is the most explicit advocacy of violent action. This user also openly mocks less extreme actions such as voting, and strengthens their calls to action by appealing both to history and to readers' emotions.

⁴Former United States President, Barack Obama.

- (22) *Off course if we become that lazy or chicken we could always vote for a 3rd. party that doesn't take much courage.* (User 4, first decile)
- (23) *if the founders were here they would have already marched on Wasington with a gun in one hand and a rope in the other* (User 4, first decile)
- (24) *our childern and grand childern will ask why we did nothing when we could have, and they will hate you.* (User 4, first decile)

As for the previous finding, this pattern suggests that veteran users may rely on their status as long-standing forum members, and no longer feel the need to overtly highlight their commitment to the white nationalist cause by performing a more extreme identity. This also aligns with findings reported below, suggesting that users display an increasingly casual relationship with the forum and its community over time, and/or have become increasingly jaded or disappointed with the movement and so no longer see the value in attempting to rally its members.

5.3. Veteran users are more sociable

For veteran users, the forum seems to take on new meaning as a more social, rather than solely ideological, space. This is often reflected in the tone of users' posts, which is typically more ironic or joking in nature in the final decile. While much of this content contains ideological elements, for example taking the form of racist jokes or mocking perceived political correctness, the tone is nonetheless more ironic than is typical among newcomers, suggesting that veteran forum members are increasingly interested in the 'fun', social side of interaction offered by the community.

- (25) *What do you call a black man in a three piece suit?* (User 2, tenth decile)
- (26) *Are you sure we can still use the word boy anymore? I mean no one wants to be a racist, well almost no one.* (User 4, tenth decile)
- (27) *And we all know that the very worst thing that could happen to a White man is being called a racist or bigot.* (User 5, tenth decile)

Typically, this simply contrasts with an absence of such a tone in the early posting decile. In the case of User 5, however, this user often takes a highly solemn and serious tone in their earlier posts; in turn, this is absent in their final decile of posts.

- (28) *The media will pound the masses with the evils of Secession. For this strikes at the very heart of the empire's existence. [...] The legs of the beast are shaking from the top heavy strain of bureaucrats and usurpers.* (User 5, first decile)
- (29) *True, the cannons are silent, but the shadow of oppression still lingers in every nook and cranny of our Southern homeland.* (User 5, first decile)

Some users engage in 'off-topic' talk, focusing on popular culture or lifestyle. This discourse is often entirely non-ideological, or with only tangential connections to white nationalist ideologies. Although found in both the early and the late decile for some users, across the dataset this is more common in the final decile, and is unique to this decile for User 3. Such off-topic talk may serve to build rapport and stronger bonds between community members (Angouri & Sanderson, 2016).

- (30) *I don't care for Michael Moore or his liberal politics,I'll wait and see this when it comes out on dvd.* (User 2, tenth decile)
- (31) *I played full court basketball with a group of friends in a gym once or twice a week until I was thirty* (User 3, tenth decile)

- (32) *Look at the label on these supplements, they say with a proper diet and exercise you will lose fat and weight.* (User 4, tenth decile)

User 3 presents a unique case among this sample of users. We have already seen that, as a newcomer, this user seeks to position themselves as knowledgeable and informed (examples 2, 5, 6). As a veteran, this user's discourse is heavily characterised by hostility and ad hominem attacks against other members, often through the medium of debate. This debating context naturally entails self-positioning as knowledgeable and assertive. I argue, however, that contrary to User 3's behaviour as a newcomer, which has a broader function of representing themselves as knowledgeable to readers, as a veteran, User 3 is much more strongly motivated by interaction and interpersonal relationships. Recall that User 3 also engages in off-topic talk in the later decile, further supporting this interpretation of a more interactional focus.

- (33) *Who do you think you're kidding here* (User 3, tenth decile)
(34) *your position doesn't hold water, as you're showing bias and ulterior motives.* (User 3, tenth decile)
(35) *You're a pathetic, cowardly little man who is all talk.* (User 3, tenth decile)

Combined with the previously-reported finding of less violent discourse among veteran users, this trend suggests that, while users may be brought to the forum by a desire to discuss their white nationalist ideologies, longer-standing users may additionally seek a more social environment. Users' increasingly joking or ironic discourse may suggest a greater sense of comfort or ease within the community, as well as mirroring the decrease in violently extreme discourse. Together, these findings suggest that social capital plays a greater role in veteran users' engagement with the forum, with users' relationship to and position within the forum's social network becoming a more significant element of their identity performances.

5.4. Veteran users criticise their in-group

Unsurprisingly for a white nationalist forum, both newcomers and veterans express hateful views towards groups racialised as 'non-white'. However, there is a tendency for users to increasingly shift the focus of their criticism towards their own in-group(s) over time. This is particularly marked for User 1, whose hateful discourse towards racialised groups is almost entirely replaced by criticism of their fellow white people or even white nationalists.

- (36) *there might be 500,000 muslims in this country right now that are willing to go on some kind of crime spree or commit terrorist acts.* (User 1, first decile)
(37) *They will start to harm White people from the minute they get there.* (User 1, first decile)
(38) *I am beginning to think there is some kind of fundamental flaw in White People that keeps them from reaching their full potential* (User 1, tenth decile)

Veteran criticism of the white in-group often centres around a perception that white people are apathetic to the alleged threat posed by racialised out-groups, and are therefore to blame for their own perceived oppression. In this way, white people with more liberal political or social views begin to be treated as a "functional out-group" (Berger, 2018, p. 63) in relation to white nationalist extremist in-group identity.

- (39) *more than can be said for lazy and stupid Whites in America who are doing nothing towards protecting and defending their race.* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (40) *I can't understand liberals and their attitudes supporting a subversive lifestyle.* (User 2, tenth decile)
- (41) *Maybe that is the trouble with white folk, they don't speak up when we see something that is wrong.* (User 4, tenth decile)

Some veteran users' criticism extends to their fellow white nationalists, including fellow members of the forum, with frequent reference made to division within the white nationalist movement. We have already seen that User 1 increasingly focuses on unity within the movement as a prerequisite for action (examples 18-19), lamenting their perception that a divided movement will be ineffective in its goals. This user also blames this disunity for the perceived unpopularity of white nationalism among white people.

- (42) *If WN [white nationalism] was strong and unified other Whites would begin to follow but they aren't because we don't have our own house in order* (User 1, tenth decile)

The focus on division within the white nationalist movement is also used to gatekeep white nationalist identity, as well as membership of this particular forum. By defining 'proper' conduct or beliefs for members of these groups, users implicitly position themselves as a 'good' member of the forum and of the wider white nationalist community, as well as having the power to exclude others who do not meet the standard they set. Complementing this behaviour, these veteran users also demonstrate their knowledge of forum rules and norms (examples 45 and 48). This serves as a further technique to gatekeep, while also performing a powerful identity with the authority to enforce rules.

- (43) *WN in the U.S. can help the overall picture simply by being the best we can be which few of us are* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (44) *If you approve of race mixing then you are on the wrong forum.* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (45) *I appreciate your post however it is generally known that we speak and write in English on this forum.* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (46) *Beware the ones among us that claim we're "white supremacists", they're not White Nationalists and are here to destroy us.* (User 3, tenth decile)
- (47) *You obviously are posting on the wrong website and would be better served posting on a site which is more in line to your views.* (User 3, tenth decile)
- (48) *Get over to OV [Opposing Views]⁵ where you belong, you antagonistic, phony WN.* (User 3, tenth decile)

In the final posting decile, some users even begin to criticise white nationalist organisation leaders or other high-profile figures in the movement. In the case of User 1, this is a direct reversal of the behaviour shown in the early decile, where they praise such organisations. The later criticisms, then, further demonstrate this user's apparent increasing disillusionment with the perceived state of the white nationalist movement. For other users, mention of these high-profile figures is simply absent in the first decile. The appearance of this behaviour among veteran users may suggest that these users feel

⁵The forum rules state that visitors who oppose white nationalist ideology must only post in the Opposing Views subforum.

more secure in their position within the forum, and therefore empowered to challenge the status quo by criticising powerful or popular figures within the white nationalist movement.

- (49) *Consider joining the National Alliance.* (User 1, first decile)
- (50) *I have a hard time understanding how Will Williams⁶ can do so many things that are in bad taste and judgement* (User 1, tenth decile)
- (51) *I wish something can transpire and move the National Alliance into a new direction. Gliebe⁷ has got to go.* (User 2, tenth decile)
- (52) *How dare we not like what Hitler did to our people and loved ones and be WN's.* (User 3, tenth decile)

6. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis showed that users' discourse becomes less assertive and violent in the tenth decile of posts. Fewer traditional discursive displays of authority and expertise are used to overtly emphasise the depth of users' commitment to the movement and its ideology, with users apparently taking their status in the forum for granted without feeling pressure to perform it linguistically. Over time, ideological discourse became increasingly accompanied by 'off-topic' talk and an ironic tone, suggesting that long-term users may not be solely concerned with or motivated by ideology, but also by the social relations they have established within the community. Where ideological discourse did appear in the final decile, its focus had frequently shifted to criticism of groups and individuals closer to the deictic centre of white nationalist identity, including other white people and white nationalists, often serving to gatekeep or negotiate the boundaries of these identities.

Comparing the findings reported here to the existing literature on newcomer and veteran language shows that members of this white nationalist community draw on some unexpected resources for their identity performances, in particular with regard to the performance of authority and commitment. This is particularly striking given the extremist nature of the forum, where we might expect to witness a process of radicalisation (Kenyon et al., 2021) resulting in the expression of increasingly extreme views over time. Instead, veteran performances of authority appear to have a pacifying effect on users' discourse, while newcomers express themselves with much more zeal. These new members are decidedly closer to Chiang's (2024) 'competent newbie' than to the deferential newcomer described by most scholars, and give traditional discursive performances of power drawing on typical power resources such as assertiveness and displays of knowledge.

As newcomers, however, users have little symbolic capital. By dint of their newness and inexperience, they do not have "a feel for the game" (Thompson, 1991, p. 13) of the norms of interaction in this particular social context, and therefore lack the resources to behave in a fully situationally appropriate and socially valued way. As a result, newcomers risk threatening their own face and that of others, and, to avoid this, are more likely to feel the need to impress others and 'prove themselves' as legitimate members of the community. In this forum, they do so by drawing on the resources which they

⁶Leader of the (now largely defunct) National Alliance neo-Nazi organisation.

⁷Erich Gliebe, former leader of the National Alliance.

do have: those which, as the literature tells us, are typical of powerful discourse across other contexts.

Veteran users, on the other hand, have greater familiarity and comfort with the community and its norms, and therefore have greater symbolic capital within it, distinct from the self-conscious use of traditional power resources by newcomers. Alongside the resources of linguistic capital which they have acquired over time through their participation in the community (Grant & MacLeod, 2020), veteran users are also able to claim other forms of symbolic capital. The date when a user joined the forum is presented beside every post they make, alongside their username and avatar. For each of the five users explored here, this date is at least seven years prior to their final decile posts, placing them in the longest-standing group of users. The join date therefore serves as a form of *institutional cultural capital*: a resource, derived from the infrastructure of the site, upon which veteran users can rely to demonstrate their status without needing to perform it linguistically. In addition, the more social nature of veteran users' discourse points to their *social capital*, suggesting that these users are more tightly enmeshed in a "durable network" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 21) of their fellow forum members than they were as newcomers. While the existence of this network is reflected in users' humorous, off-topic, or ad hominem talk, this discourse alludes to a form of capital that goes beyond the purely linguistic, alluding to a social network and the user's position within it. Veterans, then, are able to rely on other forms of symbolic capital beyond the purely linguistic; they do not need to use typical power resources to perform their legitimacy within the community and have their capital and authority recognised. These users can therefore 'get away with' drawing on a wider range of resources without fear of threatening their own, or others', face (unless this is their purpose; consider User 3's overt hostility and insults). Individuals with symbolic capital have the power to set the standard of legitimate language (Bourdieu, 1991b); therefore, through association with capital, veterans' less traditionally powerful linguistic performances in fact become powerful in this forum context. In this way, forum veterans "valoriz[e] their own capital" (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 7) and ensure their continued high status. These resources are unavailable to newcomers until they undergo what Bourdieu (1991a, p. 8) calls a "metamorphosis," a recognition and acceptance of the local "rules of the game" as perpetuated by veteran users.

In their review, Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023) highlight the lack of availability of traditional power resources such as macro-social categories in anonymous online contexts, and argue for the primacy of discourse as an identity- and power-constructing resource in such spaces. Indeed, I have shown that, through time and participation, users are able to acquire new linguistic resources which allow them to perform power in a situationally appropriate way for the context of this white nationalist forum. However, I have also shown that, alongside the powerful *linguistic* resources with which Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023) are concerned, veteran identity performances are also able to draw on non-linguistic elements – namely, institutional cultural capital and social capital – to construct powerful identities, and to use language to make these pertinent in a primarily linguistic environment.

This demonstrates the value of linking Newsome-Chandler and Grant's (2023) linguistic resource model of power (broadly construed as a model of power expressed through discursive resources, and not limited to the particular set of resources they

identify in their exploratory study) into the broader view of power offered by Bourdieu's (2004) notion of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital functions as a semiotic system: certain forms of cultural expression signify capital, allowing individuals to claim authority and to be recognised as powerful by others. Language, as a semiotic system *par excellence*, is naturally central to the expression of symbolic capital. While Bourdieu (1991b) introduced the idea of linguistic capital as a *practical competence* in producing situationally appropriate and socially valued utterances, this has remained empirically underexplored in subsequent literature. In this article, I have demonstrated both how power is constructed and deployed using linguistic resources, and how language may be used to highlight forum users' other, non-linguistic resources, such as institutionalised cultural capital and social capital. In this way, I argue, linguistic capital, expressed through the kinds of linguistic power resources introduced by Newsome-Chandler and Grant (2023), 'slots into' studies of symbolic capital in a hierarchical relationship, representing just one facet of the many to be explored within this general semiotic system of symbolic capital. While of particular importance in anonymous and pseudonymous online contexts such as the one I explore here, the ubiquity of language ensures that a consideration of linguistic capital stands to enrich any study of symbolic capital.

Beyond these theoretical implications, the findings reported here also have practical value, showing how power is performed in a large, long-running white nationalist forum and therefore adding to the body of knowledge used to prioritise powerful individuals in harmful communities. My analytical focus has primarily been linguistic, showing that socially-oriented discourse and criticism of white and white nationalist in-groups are associated with powerful performances, and that assertive performances of knowledge and violent ideation are, unexpectedly, not. However, I have also shown that other resources, such as the user's join date and their position in the forum's social network, may also be valuable starting points for prioritisation. The partially unexpected findings of this study, which is almost unique in both a) its longitudinal approach and b) its focus on a white nationalist community, show the value of these more authentic approaches for the identification of powerful and high-priority individuals in harmful online communities; the findings reported here could not have been predicted based on the existing literature.

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