“Hofnarr” and “Bürgerschreck” vs. “kamir-batir” and “barakobamas”:
Face Work Strategies and Stylising in Russian and German Online Discussion Forums

1. Introduction

The politeness paradigm established by Brown/Levinson (1978; 1987) was developed according to oral language, which can be gathered from their examples. A second premise, which Brown/Levinson made even more explicit by their title, is their claim of their concept’s universal validity. This contribution calls both points, the focus on oral communication and the claim of universality, into question through the analysis of a corpus of apparently written language in a certain medium, with a focus on interlingual and intercultural comparison.

As the discussion on whether the language of the internet is some kind of “conceptual orality” (“konzeptionelle Mündlichkeit,” Koch/Oesterreicher 2008: 200ff.; Thimm 2000: 10) or a new kind of writing (“neue Schriftlichkeit,” Androutsopoulos 2007) seems to be still in abeyance, and as the applicability of the face concept can
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be assumed in this context, I will leave this debate aside.1 However, the second predisposition, regarding the question of whether the face paradigm is universal or culturally biased, is of interest to this contribution and has been widely discussed within the scientific community. Wierzbicka (1985) emphasised the predominance of the negative face wants in Brown/Levinson’s concept, which is, in her opinion, an Anglo-Saxon bias:

It is English which seems to have developed a particularly rich system of devices reflecting a characteristically Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition: a tradition which places special emphasis on the rights and on the autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people’s affairs […], which is tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, which respects everyone’s privacy, which approves of compromises and disapproves of dogmatism of any kind (Wierzbicka 1985: 150).

Wierzbicka and Rathmayr (1996) question the importance of negative face in Slavic (especially Polish and Russian) culture and emphasise the dominance of speech acts along the positive politeness scale. The claim to universality is also doubted by linguists from Japan and other Asian cultures (cf. e.g. Matsumoto 1988). More important to my project – a comparison of Russian and German politeness strategies – is the partial withdrawal from the rejection of the negative politeness pole for Slavic languages, first suggested by Zemskaja (1997: 274) and empirically shown by Ogiermann (2009). Ogiermann demonstrates that the use of imperative forms, often taken as an indication of positive politeness in Russian and Polish culture, is not as common as assumed and other forms such as questions and hedges, clearly coming from the negative paradigm, are used as well, although the fre-

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1 For the applicability of Brown/Levinson’s conception on computer-mediated communication cf. e.g. Upadhyay 2010 and other articles in the Journal of Politeness Research 6 (1), 2010.
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frequence of direct, positive polite behaviour is higher than in English or German (Ogiermann 2009: 198).

Culturally differing preferences in realising certain speech acts undoubtedly exist, as shown by the works in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1987; House/Kasper 1987; House 1989). Moreover, there might be a culture-specific preference for positive or negative politeness (O’Driscoll 1996: 4; Kreß 2010: 160ff.) and other factors influencing the choice of a face-saving strategy, such as age, gender or simply individual preferences, should not be neglected. However, this does not question the underlying concept of face wants and the reciprocal want of face-saving as a cause and explanation for verbal politeness.

2. Online discussion forums/online communities

This contribution focuses on the online discussion forums of selected major Russian and German online journals. Three of them (ZEIT, Spiegel, Коммерсантъ) have a print version as well. They all offer the possibility to comment on articles and to discuss with other readers in forums, so the debates are a form of connected communication (“Anschlusskommunikation”) which can only be fully understood when the content of the related article is known. One has to be registered to leave a comment and take part in the discussion. For participation on spiegel.de a username, real name and email address are needed (postal address and date of birth are optional); for zeit.de a username and email address is sufficient. To take part in the discussions on gazeta.ru one has to be a registered

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2 For a short overview of the history of online forums cf. Maaß 2012: 75.
member of Facebook or the Russian social network Вконтакте (“in contact”). Gazeta.ru requires registration in Живой Журнал (LiveJournal), a social network platform for blogs and online diaries.

The influence of the editors is handled differently in the four forums. Spiegel.de influences the discussions through a moderator who makes comments, often a pointed summary of the article, apparently with the purpose of initiating a debate or provoking the readers. Zeit.de removes comments, shortens contributions or comments on them (“Bitte bemühen Sie sich um mehr Sachlichkeit. Danke. Die Redaktion/sc” – “Please try to be more objective. Thanks. The editors” (comment no. 2, Zeit.de 2011a)). On gazeta.ru and Коммерсантъ such intervening moderation cannot be observed, but according to the site guidelines the administrators delete comments with commercial features, as well as those that contradict moral norms or insult other users (cf. Gazeta.ru n.d.).

Online forums are here understood as an online community in the sense of Ebersbach/Glaser/Heigl (2011: 195): a community of persons who gather for a while on a site in the internet, are bound there for a definite time and leave some traces there.³

3. **Computer-mediated communication and face work**

The language of online communication is fairly well described (cf. e.g. Thimm 2000; Beißwenger 2001; Androutsopoulos 2007) and the applicability of the politeness paradigm has been shown in articles in the *Journal of Politeness Research* 6 (1), 2010. Therefore I

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³ “eine Gemeinschaft von Menschen verstanden, die sich um eine Seite im Internet scharen, sich eine gewisse Zeit an diese binden und dort auch Spuren hinterlassen”.
want to highlight just a few features that seem to be of special interest in this context.

First, nonverbal behaviour does not play a role in the initial concept of Brown/Levinson. Without doubt para-verbal signals, mimicry and proxemics can be decisive for a polite or impolite performance. Similarly, in computer-mediated communication (CMC), nonverbal signs play a special role, but they have to be made explicit and they have to be translated into other signals in this non face-to-face situation. Krämer (2000: 47) even points out that to participate in CMC, a user has to become a symbolic expression himself. This is one part of the depersonalisation, dramatisation and staginess that is often described as a key characteristic of online communication (Krämer 2000: 47f.; Döring 1999). Emotions, attitudes and other “meta” information, usually enunciated by facial expressions, are made explicit by emoticons or, at least in German CMC, by inflectives (“seufz”). According to Maaß (2012: 82), emoticons and other para-verbal signals play an important role in CMC in general, but especially in managing face threats and aggression. The communicator himself is symbolised by his username, his profile and eventually by a picture, which can be seen as his avatar (cf. Krel 2011). As a result of this “translational work” nonverbal signs take on an importance which seems to be much higher than in face-to-face interaction: In face-to-face interaction, nonverbal signs can also be interpreted as accidental, whereas in CMC they have to be understood as intentional. Thus they play a key role in the self-presentation^4 of the interlocutors and can be part of the relational work^5 in CMC.

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^5 For the concept of relational work as an enhancement of the politeness concept cf. e.g. Locher/Watts 2005; Locher/Watts 2008.
4. (Im-)Politeness strategies and relational work in online forums (German/Russian)

Proceeding from the fact that debates in online forums are not orientated towards a consensus, but rather are based on conflicting opinions on which the interactors work in their comments, this study focuses on face-threatening and face-saving acts, which are used to verbalise the contradicting positions, to define them and eventually to establish consensus.

Speech acts of contradiction and dissent are characteristic of verbal conflicts. According to Brown/Levinson (1987: 66), expressing contradiction or disagreement is a threat to the addressee’s positive face, as the speaker/writer “indicates that he thinks H [the Hearer] is wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issue, such wrongness being associated with disapproval” (ibid.). In Brown/Levinson’ conception, polite verbal behaviour would consist of compensating actions such as an excuse, a compliment, etc., intended to reduce the face threat. The notion of politeness itself has an evaluative nuance, and it could imply that an absence of such redressive actions has to be qualified as impolite. It may be doubted that this also counts for conflictive interactions, which are conducted under differing premises: Here the absence of politeness (which is not the same as impoliteness) is not only possible, but sometimes even appropriate (cf. Kreß 2010: 174f.). Therefore, I refer to the concept of “relational work” which allows the consideration of the whole spectrum, from verbal politeness and the absence of politeness to impoliteness, and focuses on the range of “relational messages” which are expressed “by the way” or explicitly and which indicate for the interlocutors how they see their relationship:

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4 My considerations are based on the definition of conflict in Kreß 2010: 51.
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Looked at in this way, relational work comprises the entire continuum of verbal behaviour from direct, impolite, rude or aggressive interaction through to polite interaction, encompassing both appropriate and inappropriate forms of social behaviour (Locher 2004: 51). Impolite behaviour is thus just as significant in defining relationships as appropriate/polite or polite behaviour. In this sense relational work can be understood as equivalent to Halliday’s (1978) interpersonal level of communication, in which interpersonal rather than ideational meaning is negotiated (Locher/Watts 2005: 11).

This study analysed comments that appeared under the categories “Самое обсуждаемое” (“Most discussed”, gazeta.ru), “Самое обсуждаемое. Рейтинг за последние трое суток” (“Most discussed. Rating of the last three days”), “Meistkommentiert” (“Most commented”, zeit.de) and “Meistgelesene Themen” and “Meistdiskutierte Themen” (“Most read topics” and “most discussed topics”, spiegel.de”).

First, it is notable that the quantity and the presentation of the comments differ. Whereas in the Russian forums a highly rated article might have between 150 and 200 comments, the most commented articles on zeit.de have between 200 and 300 comments. In the Russian forums users often leave a comment via Facebook or Twitter without text or topic, simply to express sympathy and agreement with a longer comment. The relationship between a comment and a posted agreement or answer is made explicit by the graphic layout of the site. On zeit.de the reference is made clear by a specific rubric “Anwort auf” (“answer to”), allowing one

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7 The last category, “most discussed topics” differs a little bit from the others, as it includes some “top topics”, where an article is discussed, as well as questions from the editors, which can be discussed by the readers (e.g. “Euro – kann Griechenland in der Währungsunion bleiben?”/“The Euro – can Greece stay in the monetary union?” (Spiegel Online 2011a).
to see the reactions to this comment. On spiegel.de the related comment is shown in italics as a “Zitat von” (“quote from”).

4.1. Self-presentation in online forums

One comparatively noticeable difference between the Russian and the German forum users might seem at first sight rather peripheral to the focus of this contribution examining the relational work in online discussions. However, it is a peculiarity of online communication as mentioned above: The usernames, understood as symbolic expressions of the users themselves – as a kind self-presentation or self-stylisation – bring a measure of meaning, a communicative offer in advance. It is somehow a form of meta-comment or meta-information, a bracket to the actual comment, which might help the reader to interpret the statement and/or to classify it. This potential of usernames is widely exploited by the German participants, among whom we can find aptronyms like “DIELOGE” (“THELODGE”, cf. comment no. 275 on Zeit.de 2012b), “autopilot” (cf. comment no. 274 on Zeit.de 2012b), “LibertyOnly” (cf. comment no. 17 on Spiegel Online 2012), “Freiheitsfreund” (“friend of freedom”, cf. comment no. 277 on Zeit.de 2012b), “Hofnarr” (“jester”, cf. comment no. 5 on Zeit.de 2011b), “Bürgerschreck” (“terror of the middle classes”, cf. comment no. 2 on Spiegel Online 2011b) and “Duelist” (cf. Zeit.de 2011b). Whereas the first three names give some kind of general information – maybe about the user’s political preference – the names “Hofnarr”, “Bürgerschreck” and “Duelist” are of higher interest in this context, as they deliver meta-communicative information in the narrower sense: Whereas a “Hofnarr” claims that he should not be taken too seriously, the “duelist” and the “terror of the middle classes” send the message that we can expect rather conflictive communication. When such messages are sent through
nicknames, they can be seen as some kind of relational work in advance.

Although the Russian users also show a high amount of creativity in their choice of nicknames, their self-presentation is usually orientated toward general aspects of their identity with no special reference to their thinking or communicating. Many of them use their name or an abbreviation of their name, sometimes in combination with numbers. Then there are names like “Chesnok” (“garlic”, cf. Gazeta.ru 2012), which ensure anonymity and maybe hint towards a culinary preference, and “kamir-batir” (a boy made from dough in a Bashkir fairy tale, cf. Gazeta.ru 2012), which might refer to the user’s ethnic roots. However, the use of a real name, often even one’s given first name and surname, is standard, while such stylisations as “naughty lamer” (cf. Kommersant.ru 2012), “barakobamas” (cf. Gazeta.ru 2012) and, interestingly enough, the German nickname “ge-walt” (“vio-lence”, cf. Kommersant.ru 2012) are an exceptional case.

4.2. Relational work: Redressive actions

At first glance the discussions in the online forums do not seem to be the place for politeness – bluntness on point (“bald on record” Brown/Levinson 1987: 94ff.) seems to be more appropriate. This coincides with the phenomenon known as trolling,\(^8\) which is much more extreme online in comparison to a verbal behaviour without redressive actions. Trolling refers to posts with inflammatory or insulting content, which are posted in the security of an anonymous internet. It is interesting, however, that in the German forums, posts that directly respond to another comment and contradict it are often connected with the use of humor.

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\(^8\) Cf. the contribution of Kluge in this volume.
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Brown/Levinson (1987: 124) define humor as a strategy of positive politeness:

Since jokes are based on mutual shared background knowledge and values, jokes may be used to stress that shared background or those shared values. Joking is a basic positive-politeness technique, for putting H [the Hearer] at ease.

Humor is used to establish a good relationship, but even more important to my context, it is also used to mitigate a face threat in form of criticism or the like (humor hedging, cf. Locher 2006: 146).

A good example where this strategy is used – to some extent with the purpose of reducing the face threat – is the following, where, in a discussion about vegetarianism, a user responds “seriously” to a statement that a vegetarian lifestyle preserves animals’ rights:

Ich bin dabei, öffnen wir den Grundrechtkatalog des Grundgesetzes endlich auch für Tiere, Recht auf körperliche Unversehrtheit, Religions-, Versammlungs- und Meinungsfreiheit. Und Aufsichtsräte sollten künftig zumindest zu einem Drittel mit “hohen Tieren” besetzt werden.

Aber was machen wir mit Tieren die einfach Tiere essen, z.B. mit Vögeln, die Insekten fangen, um damit ihre Jungen zu ernähren? Oder mit Löwen die wehrlose Gazellen killen? Und was ist mit Aasgeiern, die die Totenruhe stören?
Da sind noch viele Fragen offen.
Im Ernst: Echter Tierschutz in der Massentierhaltung (keine Legebatterien etc.), da bin ich sofort dabei.
Aber staatlich verordnetes Veganertum? Ich sage ja zum Schnitzel. (comment no. 2 on Zeit.de 2011a)

I’m with you, let’s open the charter of fundamental rights for animals at last, the right to physical integrity, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of opinion.

And in all advisory boards should at least on third be appointed with “high animals” [“big shots”].

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But what shall we do with animals which simply eat animals, e.g. birds that catch insects to feed their young? Or with lions that kill defenseless gazelles? Or with vultures who disturb the peace of the dead? There are many open questions.

Seriously: Real animal welfare in factory farming (no battery farms etc.) – I’m absolutely with you.

But state-ordered veganism? I say yes to Schnitzel.

With this exaggeration, the user wants to show that the opposing standpoint makes no sense in final consequence. This would constitute an open face-threat. However, there are certain verbal instruments that reduce the offence: The contribution starts with seeming agreement (“I’m with you”); the play on words (“high animals”) and the rather absurd pictures (vultures disturbing the peace of the dead) make the opposition less sharp. After a meta-communicative announcement to leave the humorous mode (“Seriously”) the user expresses partial agreement. And even after the step into a more serious mode, humor is again used: “I say yes to Schnitzel” sounds like a political slogan which in combination with such a mundane thing as a Schnitzel is rather ridiculous. This means that the user takes themselves not too seriously – a tribute to the addressee’s face, which seems to function like the tact maxim as described by Leech (1983: 104ff.) where cost and benefit have to be kept in equilibrium.

A second example works with a humorous distance from the self as well. Here a caricature, published on the website of an Austrian politician, is discussed with respect to its anti-Semitic content. A fat bigwig with a hooked nose eats greedily while a poor, skinny man (standing for the people) can only nibble on a bone:

Ich habe meine Brille mehrmals geputzt, genau hingeschaut, auch des öfteren geblinzelt. Es tut mir nach intensiven Studium des Bildes in der Folge jedoch sehr Leid, Ihnen mitteilen zu müssen, dass die Anatomie der Nase “des Volkes” zwar ästhetisch nicht
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ansprechend, jedoch in keinem Falle eine “Hakennase” ist.
(comment no. 10 on Zeit.de 2012a)

I cleaned my glasses several times, I had a close look, I blinked many a
time. However, I am very sorry that after an intense study of the picture I
have to inform you that, while the anatomy of “the people’s” nose is not
esthetically pleasing, it is by no means a “hooked nose.”

The post is related to a statement in which a user claimed that the
caricature cannot be anti-Semitic because the other person in the
picture has a hooked nose as well. In this example the distancing
and therefore slightly soothing character of the humor is more
overt than in the first excerpt. The author makes fun of himself by
drawing a rather ridiculous picture of him looking closely at the
caricature. Furthermore he admits the “not esthetically pleasing”
character of the nose in question and thus serves the positive face
of the addressee. Of course the disapproval of the contradicting
position is clear as well.

But humor is a two-edged sword: it can also be a weapon, and the
downgrading character is almost lost – a fact that becomes clear
when irony comes up. Obviously irony plays a role in the first two
examples, but one final German example shows that when irony is
solely applied to the addressee’s face it is clearly face-threatening.

Danke, großer “Check”! Bin immer dankbar, von Gelehrten
freundlich und doch bestimmt weitergebildet zu werden. Daß das
Problemchen auch “ganz simpel” zu checken ist, befriedet mich
noch mehr. (comment no. 95 on Spiegel Online 2011b)

Thank you, great “checker”! I’m always grateful to get a friendly but
thoroughly resolute instruction from a scholar. That this little problem can
be checked so simplistically makes me even more satisfied.

Here the author shows themselves to be “enthusiastic” about an
explanation of the German electoral system that the addressee had
provided for all the “Nonchecks” (German slang). The irony is
applied on the addressee exclusively: The problem is not as simple
as they think, and it is clear by the use of slang words in their post and its content that he is not from an academic background and their post cannot be called friendly. Irony is here used to increase the threat of an opposing standpoint, an “aggressive use of face-work” (Goffman 1967: 24ff.).

In the Russian forums, such a use of irony to soften or strengthen the face-threat can scarcely be observed. One of the few examples comes from a discussion about an article on Julian Assange, and is addressed directly to the author of the article:

Автор совершил географическое открытие: Мальвийские острова. Видимо, ему надоели Мальдийские острова. Надо вычитывать свои тексты! (Gazeta.ru 2012)

The author has made a geographic discovery: The Malvian Islands. Probably he’s fed up with the Maldive Islands. One has to proofread one’s own texts.

Although the user starts humorously, he ends with a serious admonition. This corresponds with the more sincere tone of the Russian posts in general. A tendency to limit the use of humor only to the original author of an article is confirmed by a second post:

Автор у нас Капитан Очевидность. Ну или эстонец (Gazeta.ru 2012)

Our author is Captain Obvious. Or he’s simply Estonian

Here the author of the related article is characterised as not very inventive or witty, as everything he wrote is self-evident. This criticism is “wrapped up” in a kind of nickname/mock name which stands for an internet character: Капитан Очевидность/ Captain Obvious, an ostensible superhero who reveals the truth on the internet – the truth that has been already obvious to everybody (cf. Lurkmore.to n.d.). And the Estonian is a popular butt of Russian jokes (cf. e.g. Anekdoti.ru n.d.). In both cases the original author is the object of jokes in a face-threatening manner.
4.3. **Relational work: Without redressive actions**

The Russian posts are often characterised by rather direct, face-threatening expressions of opposition. In these cases, the positions are stated without any kind of redressive actions, as in the following example:

Статья совершенно не о чем. Все с ног на голову перевернуто. У кого-нибудь есть сомнения в независимости шведского суда? У меня лично нет. Шансы, что Швеция выдаст Ассанжа стремятся к нулю. Ассанж, к которому я, кстати, с симпатией отношусь, по-моему действительно нашкодил. Хотя дело, конечно, непростое.

Но вот сомнения в независимости названного суда огромны, именно из-за них Ассанж требует гарантий, а Эквадор дал убежище. (Gazeta.ru 2012)

This article is about nothing. Everything is turned upside down. Does anybody doubt the independence of the Swedish court? I personally don’t. The chances that Sweden extradites Assange are close to zero. Assange, who I, by the way, find likeable, has caused some damage. However, the case is complicated.

The independence of the court in question has to be deeply doubted though, which is why Assange demands a guarantee and Ecuador gave refuge.

Whereas the initial post has certain downgrading devices, which limit the poster’s own position (“Assange, who I, by the way, find likeable”, “the case is complicated”), the response expresses direct opposition (“Does anybody doubt” → “has to be deeply doubted though”).

Furthermore, an aggressive use of face work can be observed in many cases on the Russian forums. This includes not only direct contradiction, but also exposing and insulting the opponent. This is done by a total rejection of a position by declaring it as nonsense

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9 In the Russian debates direct addressing is rather common, here it outweighs the talking about a present third party, as Maalß 2012 describes it for German forums.
through the use of slang and a pejorative lexis. The first example comes from an article about the elections for a new governor of St. Petersburg:

зато вас, максим, как обычно очень обильно и бессмысленно) 10
(Kommersant.ru 2011)

However, this is as usual from you, Maksim, wordy and pointless)

This is an open face-threat through the evaluation of an opinion as pointless, but the affront is intensified by the use of the proper name; it is a personalised insult, only slightly weakened by a smiling emoticon at the end of the post.

A tendency to insult opponents personally can be seen especially in the hot discussions where very high numbers of comments are reached. One such topic is the “Pussy Riot” case, and an interview with a well-known Russian musician, songwriter and poet, Andrey Makarevich, who says that he is ashamed of his country because of the judgment in this court case. The following examples are taken from posts regarding this interview.

The first example comes along with an open insult through an invective. It is a reaction to a statement where the author points out that the Russian church (which played a rather poor role in this case) by nature should be merciful and not be interested in a personal boost for the patriarch:

Церковь это община, олух. (Kommersant.ru 2012)

The church is the congregation, blockhead.

The use of abusive, vulgar language is rather frequent in heated debates, not only concerning the opponent, but also the object of the controversy, perhaps to express a general irritability concerning the discussion. Another example from this thread, related to the same statement, is:

10 On the Russian internet one or more single brackets are used as emoticons.
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Нет милости, об том и спич. Есть лишь срань. (Kommersant.ru 2012)

There is no mercy, that’s what they’re talking about. There is just bullshit.

Already the lexeme спич (from Engl. speech) is colloquial, but срань is from the vulgar language variety.

The intentional argumentation ad hominem, and therefore an argumentation with face-threatening – if not face-destroying – can be observed as well. The musician Makarevich is characterised as a greedy Jew who uses this interview for self-promotional purposes. This is rebutted immediately:

Макаревичем согласен в последнем ответе, что PR проект удался, они будут греши большие деньги, еврей уже все заработал… Стыдно Вам давно уже должно быть Макарончик!

Все, что заработал Макаревич, он заработал своим талантом, а про Вас, как было сказано выше, вряд ли кто-нибудь-когда-нибудь услышит. Кстати, вы знаете, что у вас имя еврейское )) (Kommersant.ru 2012)

I agree with Makarevich’s last answer, the PR venture succeeded, they will shovel more money, this Jew has earned already enough… You should be ashamed of Makarevich for a long time!

Everything Makarevich has earned he has earned through his talent, and about you, as already mentioned above, hardly anyone has ever heard anything. By the way, did you know that you have a Jewish name))

The superfluous and inappropriate hint to an ethnic background, which has nothing to do with the discussed object and is simply mentioned to destroy someone’s face,11 is immediately returned, only slightly mitigated by an emoticon. Although there are some discussions where the users get more direct in the German forums as well, personal insults of that kind cannot be found there, which might be due to a rigid policy on the part of the editors, who delete all content of that kind. It is interesting, though, that the last

posts clearly contradict the policy of the Russian forums as well (as mentioned above) but are not deleted.

5. Conclusion

After a qualitative study of Russian and German online forums, one can assume that a more direct, blunt style (bald on record) is appropriate in the Russian debates. However, as this study has not been quantitative or longitudinal, these results are by no means representative and should be reinforced by statistically reliable arguments. However, the more straightforward and sharp communicative style in the Russian forums shows some parallels with the suggested preference for the positive politeness pole in Russian culture.\footnote{A second hint to this assumption is the tendency to approval “by whole heart” in the Russian debates, which could not be illustrated in this contribution due to limited space.}

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