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“Forget about the words”? Tracking the language, media and semiotic ideologies of digital discourse: The case of sexting



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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how the social meanings of digital discourse are metadiscursively framed and structured by a combination of language, media and semiotic ideologies; that is, culturally shared beliefs about how words, technologies and meaning-making work. Illustrated with examples drawn from news-media stories and other mediated texts, I demonstrate what this looks like in practice through a three-part, multimodal analysis of “sexting” as a case in point. Grounded first in the linguistic and visual accomplishment of three familiar language-ideological strategies (i.e. *iconization*, *erasure*, *recursivity*), my analysis is then expanded to incorporate four closely related media-ideological issues (*materiality*, *authorship*, *remediation*, *historicity*) before turning to *mode/modality* and *performativity* as two key instantiations of semiotic ideology. While digital discourse studies should certainly not “forget about the words”, it needs always to stay attentive to the complex intersection of language with media and semiotic ideologies. This analytical principle has particular importance for critically-oriented work concerned with the way digital media are used to discipline, for example, sex and sexuality.

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This paper is principally not about sexting, but uses the case of sexting as a vehicle for advancing a fairly straightforward analytical proposition for scholars of digital discourse. In point of fact, the paper is altogether less concerned with technology *per se* and more with the kinds of ideological processes invariably at work when people start to talk or write about technology. As with my previous studies, the focus is therefore on the way digital discourse is represented in everyday communication rather than what people are actually or necessarily doing with/in digital media (Thurlow, 2006, 2013; see also Jones and Schieffelin, 2009; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008). In this sense, it is metadiscourse (i.e. discourse about discourse) which is central: the way digitally mediated communication is explicitly thematized and commented on in, for example, the news media, advertising and other public settings. As before, I remain particularly, but not exclusively, concerned with the way the digital media practices of young people are misrepresented or misrecognized; this time, however, my attention turns also to the discursive disciplining of sexuality – both young people’s and more generally. An online BBC news story titled “Sexting boy’s naked selfie recorded as crime by police” is a neat example of the kinds of metadiscourse which interests me and, as such, nicely illustrates the main analytical-theoretical objectives of the current paper. (See <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34136388>.)

[Note 1] Importantly, this example also points to the cultural politics of young people’s digital media practices. Accompanied by a close-crop image (hands, parts of faces and cellphones) of three young people lying on a fluffy carpet, the byline reads: “A boy who sent a naked photograph of himself to a girl at school has had the crime of making and distributing indecent images recorded against him by police”. In this story, we have a fairly typical example of how the news media likes to depict sexting and, specifically, the sexting supposedly being done by young people. This all-too-familiar metadiscursive framing is accomplished both linguistically and visually. To start, we see how digital media practices and/or terminology (“selfie” and “sexting”) are picked up and circulated in the news. More importantly, we see how sexting, in particular, is framed in terms of a moral panic about the (sexual) activities of young people and the deleterious role of technology in their (sex) lives. Needless to say, this story also reveals some deep-seated notions about the link between sexuality and criminality, which relies on the policing of societal norms of “appropriate”, “healthy” or “good” sexual practice. The legalistic, moralistic tone of “making and distributing indecent images” in the tagline further frames this particular instance of sexting as being somehow pornographic. The story also reminds us that there are places where sex is apparently acceptable and where it is not; school is one unacceptable domain but, as I will show presently, work is another. Of course, any story about sexting is grounded in cultural

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beliefs about what constitutes sex in the first place; for example, whether it entails bodies in or out of physical contact, or whether it should be done between familiar bodies or unknown bodies. There are key pieces of information left out of the picture in this news story. We are, for example, told that it was a naked “selfie” that was sent, but we are told nothing about the nature of the relationship between the boy and the “girl at school”. The image, too, is clearly vital to the framing of this news story, although what is not obvious is how it actually relates to the story. Who, for example, are these three (one implied) young people – at least one of whom is apparently a young woman? Where are they – a living room? And what exactly are they doing on their phones? Are they receiving messages or are they sending messages? The image is only loosely and generically anchored to the headline, by-line and, indeed, the story as a whole.

Ultimately, much of what we come to know about digital media is not so much what we may have done or may be doing ourselves, but what we have read about or been told others are (supposedly) doing. Inevitably, also, these borrowed, second-hand narratives are only ever selective and/or partial. In other words, they are ideologically informed and organized. Against the backdrop of sexting’s specific cultural politics, my goal in the current paper is to demonstrate how digital discourse – sexting or otherwise – is inevitably caught up in, and structured by, a combination of culturally shared beliefs about how words work, how technologies work, and how meaning-making works more broadly. Using sexting as a case in point, I offer a three-part analytic framework for thinking through the metadiscursive production of digital discourse. To this end, I start by considering some of the ways (meta-)discourse about sexting is rooted in familiar *language ideologies* (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994); as such, we learn as much about people’s attitudes and prejudices towards certain kinds of people or certain kinds of sexual practice, as we do about certain ways of speaking or interacting (Irvine and Gal, 2000). However, I want to extend this perspective by showing how the social meanings of sexting, as a typical but obviously particular instance of digital discourse, are shaped also by closely related *media ideologies* (Gershon, 2010) and, especially, deep-seated *semiotic ideologies* (Keane, 2003). In tracking and demonstrating these different ideological processes or strategies, I draw on a convenience sample of international news stories about sexting, as well as a high-profile sexting scandal and a much talked-about sexting campaign – both from Switzerland. These various mediatized examples are used not so much as exhaustive empirical evidence, but rather as means of illustrating the analytical interventions being made.

My approach in this paper is broadly consistent with the kind of work that falls under the rubrics of critical discourse studies and social semiotics (cf Machin, 2013). I am therefore concerned equally with the sociologically-oriented perspective of Foucauldian discourse analysis as I am with linguistically-oriented discourse studies (see Thurlow, 2017, for more on this distinction in the context of digital discourse studies). Indeed, like many critical discourse analysts, I treat ideologies as being somewhat akin to Foucault’s *discourses* (cf Purvis and Hunt, 1993): that is, culturally shared belief systems or ways of talking about the world by which people come to know what (or who) should be treated as natural, neutral and/or normal. Inevitably, some ideologies are more powerful or persuasive than others; regardless, all ideologies are only ever partial versions of reality, inevitably privileging the interests of certain people and not others. Throughout, I take a decidedly multimodal approach, examining both linguistic and visual metadiscourse. (Roderick, 2016, offers a useful, thematically relevant perspective on multimodal critical discourse analysis.) As we see from the example above, the images used in news stories for visually depicting digital discourse relate in complex and often contradictory ways to the verbal content. Besides, the question of

mode is central also to both the media ideologies and semiotic ideologies which, as I mean to show, inform and organize how digital discourse, and sexting in particular, is typically framed in public discourse.

One last point needs to be made before moving on. Language ideologies, media ideologies and semiotic ideologies are all tightly inter-related, and it is not always clear when the one ends and the other begins. As Gershon (2010) notes, the separation of these different cultural belief systems is done largely for analytical convenience; in other words, in an attempt to describe digital discourse more carefully and to understand better the different metadiscursive framings of digital media. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, we tease these fundamental ideological processes apart precisely to demonstrate how inextricably interconnected they are. Indeed, it is the combination of language ideologies, media ideologies and semiotic ideologies which makes them often so compelling or convincing. With this said, I turn now to a brief sketch of language-ideological strategies as the first step in my case-study analysis of sexting and its depiction in mediatized public discourse.

Part 1: Language ideologies – Iconization, erasure, and recursivity

Ideologies of language are significant for social as well as linguistic analysis because they are not only about language. Rather, such ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology.

[Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994: 55–56]

Suffice it to say, sexting, like texting, is thematized time and again in news media commentary, and stories about sexting are likewise rooted in familiar language-ideological strategies. One obvious example of this is how the term “sexting” itself has apparently been entered into dictionaries, and how this, in turn, is quickly spun into news. Take a look at the following random but fairly typical selection of headlines. [Note 2]

Extract 1: “Sexting” making headline news

- ‘Sexting’ added to dictionary
- Sexting makes it into the dictionary: Phrase joins ‘friends with benefits’ and ‘date night’ among 1000 words added to latest Chambers edition
- ‘F-bomb,’ ‘sexting’ land in Merriam-Webster dictionary
- Oxford Dictionary Defines Sexting, Cyberbullying

Elsewhere, I have discussed how rhetorical appeals to standardization and legitimation like this work to secure the belief that “textspeak” (also added to the dictionary) is a “proper”, distinctive language (Thurlow, 2006, 2014). We see the same thing playing out here with the word sexting. These moments speak to an endless fascination with, and feigned disapproval of, language change; it is almost an annual ritual for newspapers to carry “this year we saw such-and-such a word added to the dictionary” stories. Following the lead of Woolard and Schieffelin (quoted above), representations of language are inevitably loaded also with aesthetic, moral and epistemological judgement. There is always an added, but implicit moral evaluation inherent in the idea that revered lexicographical domains such as Chambers, Oxford and Webster’s are being opened up to these neologisms. It is a metaphoric parallel for the way new-fangled or unseemly acts – like sexting itself – are making their way into our lives and into the fabric of society. All of this helps to create a sense of the “extra-terrestrial” nature of something like sexting as a phenomenon which reportedly comes from nowhere or comes from “out there”. Otherwise ordinary, cul-

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