A chronotopic approach to identity performance in a Facebook meme page

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the negotiation of normativity in Facebook pages that create, share and react to multimodal cultural artefacts generally known as internet memes. Attention is paid to performances of 'vigilante' identity – reactions in comment sections to perceived or possible transgressions against normative orders of the community. It is assumed that normative negotiations largely depend on characteristics of internet memes that are also shaped by their trajectories of usage in various environments, and hence also by their history. Identity work is thus approached as a chronotopically organized phenomenon; memes appear in certain chronotopic (timespace) configurations which ratify certain communicative practices and the way people orient to them in discussion. Seeing much of the identity work as chronotopically organized and dialogically negotiated opens up the path to a greater degree of complexity in analysis and brings new insights for the study of identity in social media.

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1. Introduction

Countless Facebook users are generating digital traces of their identity on a daily basis, making 'user-generated' content one of the defining characteristics of social networking sites (SNSs) in terms of participatory 'prosumer' culture (Burgess and Green, 2009; Miller, 2011). People textualise themselves in an online environment and perform carefully managed practices of identity to project a self of their choosing. When enough people come together around a particular interest or agenda, they may form groups, communities, (fan) pages or other constellations on Facebook. In these collectives, participants co-create, share, appropriate, evaluate, or otherwise interact with the communal content on a daily basis – and by doing so, they help to establish and maintain a myriad of lifestyles and identities that other people can subscribe to or contest in a given situation.

Internet memes are a case in point. Often seen as remixed and reiterated multimodal artefacts rapidly spread by members of participatory digital cultures in response to various technological, social and cultural trends (e.g. Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2012), memes may also serve as a social anchor for the communities that form around them. Based on the memes around which the community is centred and their rapid diffusion, the process of community formation is a never-ending process resting on a constant negotiation of shared values as well as expectations and preferences in

communicative practices – including their acknowledgement, disputation, authentication, and other social processes. This has a significant bearing on identity work, because each semiotic resource employed to create, modify, or comment on a particular meme lends itself to (in)validation by other members and signifies a potentially important choice with regard to community affiliation (cf. 'culture of accountability' in Blommaert and Varis, 2015). Indeed, in Bauman's (2000) seminal definition, identity is not a given category but "the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others" (p. 1). Identity is essentially rooted in specific, situated and contextualized performances that are open for judgement against a number of normative benchmarks or centres which individual participants orient to or align with (Leppänen et al., 2017). The present work thus shifts its analytical focus to specific forms of social *action* that are performed, rather than presumed *actors* or *social systems* that distribute memes (cf. Wiggins and Bowers, 2014); this anchors my approach in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1961; Blumer, 1969), which has been further developed in contemporary linguistic ethnography and interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992, 2004).

More specifically, the approach is situated in discourse-analytical perspective informed by online ethnography (e.g.

Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kytölä and Androutsopoulos, 2012) and aims to explore the performance of 'vigilante' identities – pragmatic and metapragmatic interventions in an ongoing discourse enacted by regular community members upon potential transgressions or perceived violations of the established or emergent normative orders, i.e. linguistic and other semiotic transgressions against shared values, expectations, and conventions of such communities. 'Vigilante' performances are in this sense marked by meta-level reflections on acceptability, appropriateness and correctness focusing on the deployment of particular communicative resources in particular contexts – i.e. specific spatial and temporal conditions in which particular norms operate and in which particular communicative practices and resources are demanded, expected or considered optional. Drawing on recent theorizations of the chronotopic approach to identity work (e.g. Blommaert, 2015; Blommaert and De Fina, 2017; Blommaert and Szabla, 2017; cf. Bakhtin, 1981), the performance of 'vigilante' identity is seen as an outcome of a perceived failure to comply with normative parameters pertinent to specific chronotopes ('timespace' configurations) or the imminent possibility of such failure. This can provide deeper insights into "the complex identity work that goes on within communities and [...] relate it more specifically to times, spaces, and practices without resorting to simplistic dichotomies between macro and micro contexts" (Blommaert and De Fina, 2017, p. 6). This paper will show that the normative parameters of such configurations are largely derived from the recursive 'prosumption' of particular memes, upon which norms form *as ordered sets of interactionally ratified behavioral scripts* (Blommaert, 2017, p. 34; cf. Simmel, 1950, p. 11), and that this interactional achievement emerges from the intersection of "micro" locally contextualized practices and higher-scale "macro" conditions for such practices. The analysis thus focuses on the fine-grained fabric of such interactions within a specific meme page on Facebook – *Polandball 2.0*. The page was established in an effort to continue the activities of the original page (*POLANDBALL*), which had been suspended[1] at the time due to systematic violations of Facebook's Community Standards. Expectedly, the performance of 'vigilante' identity was quite prominent and extensive in this energetic communal endeavour to restore and maintain the substance of the original page based on its normative blueprints.

Meme pages such as *POLANDBALL* or *Polandball 2.0* might be viewed as 'light communities' (Blommaert and Varis 2015, p. 54) i.e. *focused but diverse occasioned coagulations of people* that converge around a shared focus, be it an object, a game, another person, an event, or, as in this case, a shared interest – creating, sharing, appropriating, and evaluating a particular type of internet memes, namely geopolitical satire memes known as Countryballs or Polandball[2] comics. Countryball comics appear in a very simple, easy-to-draw format featuring ball-shaped characters in colours denoting both contemporary and historical states/countries/regions, while the narrative usually revolves around reinterpreting and reinventing geopolitical events and international relations in a satirical manner, mostly by drawing on national and socio-cultural stereotypes. Throughout its history, the Countryball format has kept its recognizable communicative patterns and scripts based on the reiteration of these stereotypes, which represent a set of communicative resources that are available for meaning making, identity work, and managing interpersonal relationships (power relations). Despite the plain design of the Countryball format, it therefore contains within it a differential inequality that is exploited by 'vigilantes' as a normative benchmark. Participants of course differ in the degree of their access to such resources and the historical trajectories through which these resources acquire specific functions and values (Blommaert, 2010), hence their communicative input might prompt vigilant gatekeepers into action if it is viewed as insufficient or not in line with expected communicative competence.

This study focuses on two posts published by the page and subsequent 'vigilante' performances in their comment sections, with different effects. In the first case, 'vigilante' identity is performed in response to the violation of established normative orders pertinent to various layers of particular chronotopic conditions, while in the second case it is enacted as a joint negotiation in response to a situation which is relatively new, yet on whose basis a normative order still emerges. Although Facebook's measures taken against meme pages likewise constitute an act of vigilance, these measures are not viewed as an identity performance, since they largely occur as an automated process with limited human agency – and furthermore this process is hidden away from the public space and directly involves only the owners of the page. Nevertheless, before proceeding further, it is necessary to briefly outline the key concepts employed by this work in greater detail.

2. Literature review

Approaching performance as situated behaviour rendered meaningful with reference to relevant context (or relevant 'timespace' configurations) implies that identity is not a static or predetermined concept, but rather something dynamically performed – constructed, authenticated, debated, negotiated, and/or challenged (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). The notion of identity as fixed, essential or biologically determined no longer seems adequate in the light of the pervasive changes instigated by globalization and the increasing socio-cultural complexity recently characterized as 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007; cf. Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Arnaut, 2012). Indeed, in the context of digital discourse, communicative practices are increasingly multimodal and linguistically and discursively heterogeneous (e.g. see papers in Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011; Leppänen et al., 2009). Further, such heterogeneity serves participants as "a means for indexing identifications which are not organized on the basis of local, ethnic, national or regional categories only, but which are increasingly translocal [...] not only to their local affiliations but also to groups and cultures which can be distant but with which they share interests, causes or projects" (Leppänen and Häkkinen, 2012, p. 18; Leppänen 2009, 2012). In the light of these transformations, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have recently become interested in addressing the representation and negotiation of identity on social media (e.g. Preece, 2016; Seargeant and Tagg, 2014; Bamman et al., 2014), highlighting and analysing its performative, dynamic, and situated aspects (Leppänen, et al., 2017). These reflections and theorisations on identity build largely on context-sensitive, social constructionist paradigms (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), yet they may still remain insufficient if we wish to arrive at a more complex understanding. This is evident in the emergent critique levelled at the widely cited notion of 'context collapse' which is used for analysing how users manage and self-evaluate their communication strategies on SNSs while facing the diversity and unpredictability of their audience, as these sites bring together "people from different contexts [who] become part of a singular group of message recipients" (Vitak, 2012, p. 451; cf. e.g. Marwick and boyd, 2010). Similarly to Tagg et al. (2017) and Blommaert and Szabla (2017) take issue with assumptions about identity as something 'verifiable' or 'singular'

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[1] The suspension had been thought to be permanent, so followers of the original page (more than 350,000 since its establishment in September 2009) were galvanized to support the new page; however, these efforts were rather short-lived as the original page was eventually reinstated two weeks later, and *Polandball 2.0* has been made a back-up page.

[2] The present study prefers the term 'Countryballs' instead of 'Polandball' in order to avoid confusion with the name of the actual Facebook meme page.