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Beyond the Timeline: Constructing time and age identities on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Human actions and activities take place on some timescale (Lemke, 2000). Within the context of Facebook, all kinds of material posted on one's profile, be that photos, stories and experiences, are organised in the form of a Timeline with time-stamps being appended automatically. Yet, the sense of identity linked to time is actively constructed in the posts, and is done in interaction with other people. Viewing time as a polysemous entity (Evans, 2005) and as a significant orientation device for the self (Georgakopoulou, 2003), this paper examines the ways in which Facebook users position themselves in time as well as the different ways in which they conceive and value age. Drawing on insights from discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), the frameworks of age-categorisation and temporal framing on identity marking (Coupland et al., 1991) and research on small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Page, 2010), I present and discuss empirical data from a Greek female user's Timeline. Focusing on instances of explicit and implicit references to age and ageing, I argue that age identity is an interactive and collaborative process both facilitated and hindered by certain Facebook configurations. The findings also show that Facebook can be divorced from its orientation to the present as participants utilise the medium to evoke certain periods of life, recycle memories, appeal to experiences and recall past tastes.

1. Introduction

Facebook, like any type of social media, is essentially time-bound. At the bottom of every Facebook post there is always a date and a time. Users' content (status updates, photos, videos, links) is categorised according to the period of time in which it was posted or created in the form of a Timeline. Nevertheless, there is more to the time of a post than its time-stamp. Facebook participants employ intricate ways to talk about how they integrate and accumulate identity, experience and meaning across different timescales, namely across who they are in this event and that, at this moment or the other, with this person or another, in one role and situation or another (cf. Lemke, 2000).

Viewing time as a significant orientation device for the self (Georgakopoulou, 2003), this paper considersthe following questions: How do Facebook users discursively construct themselves as "chronological beings" (Jenkins, 2002)? How do they position themselves vis-à-vis time? What are their relevant conceptions of time? The decision to focus on the topic of time was reached within the context of a larger online ethnographic study on the discursive construction of identity on Facebook (Georgalou, 2014; see also Section 5). While rereading, recoding and reprocessing the data I had garnered, I was surprised to discover that time referencing was so permeating, both explicitly and implicitly (e.g. by dint of birthday wishes, narrations, and recycling of memories), in my informants' discourse activities that it would definitely merit further exploration and unpacking.

To address these questions, I begin by untangling the notion of time, its pivotal role in our lives and its implications for our identity (Section 2). I next look at how a particular sense of time identity, that of age identity, is constructed in discourse (Section 3). Then I talk about the mediated nature of temporality in Facebook (Section 4). After charting my methodological course for data collection and analysis (Section 5), I present and discuss a Greek case study from Facebook (Sections 6 and 7). I close the paper by recapitulating and reflecting upon my key findings (Section 8).

2. Time and identity

Time is an abstract notion, what Jenkins (2002: 269) has appositely called an "abstraction of human construction", with manifold and complex meanings. Starting with its semantics, time is a polysemous lexical category between units, periods and events, which, according to Evans (2005: 49–70) and Evans (2007: 748), bears eight distinct senses: duration, moment, instance, event, matrix, agentive, measurement-system, and commodity. Table 1 summarises these senses

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Table 1
Senses of time (categories and examples from Evans (2005: 49–70) and Evans (2007: 748)).

Senses of time	Time as…	Examples
Duration	Assessment of magnitude of duration.	*It was a long time ago that they met.*
Moment	A discrete or punctual point or moment without reference to its duration.	*The time for a decision has arrived.*
Instance	A particular instance (i.e. occurrence) of an event or activity, rather than an interval or a moment.	*The horse managed to clear the jump 5 times in a row.*
Event	A boundary event.	*The barman called time.*
Matrix	An unbounded elapse conceived as the event subsuming all others.	*Time has no end.*
Agentive	A causal force responsible for change regarding humans and animals.	*Time has aged me.*
Measurement-system	A means of measuring change, duration and other behaviours, events etc.	*Eastern Standard Time is five hours behind Greenwich Mean Time.*
Commodity	An entity which is valuable, and hence can be exchanged, traded, acquired etc.	*They bought more advertising time.*

providing representative examples from Evans's work (2005, 2007). I shall return to some of these meanings to discuss how they fare in terms of experienced and lived time at the end of this paper.

From a philosophical perspective,[1] time is conceived in a "tensed" way, that is to say, in terms of past, present, and future, as well as in a "tenseless" way, namely as clock times and relations of succession and simultaneity (Baker, 2009). On the same wavelength, for Chafe (1994: 205), tense linguistically marks the relationship between "the time of an extroverted consciousness and the time of a representing (not represented) consciousness". To substantiate this point, Chafe (1994: 205–206) says that in the example "I was there for about six years" the time of the extroverted consciousness preceded the time of the representing consciousness. Conversely, in the example "then I'll go my own way" the time of the extroverted consciousness is expected to follow the time of the representing consciousness. Heidegger (1962), on the other hand, proposes a radical departure from the traditional conception of time as a linear series of now-points. On this understanding of time, "[t]he 'now' is not pregnant with the 'not-yet-now', but the Present arises from the future" (Heidegger, 1962: 427). Heidegger even goes further to argue that time finds its meaning in our awareness of our own mortality, and hence finitude, and not in eternity.

In anthropological parlance, an influential definition of time comes from Jenkins (2002: 277), who places weight upon human activity[2]:

> Time is something that humans do, naturally, and human life without time is unthinkable. What we call "time" is, in fact, perhaps best understood as an inevitable consequence of our need to have a working sense of the here-and-now if we are to go about the business of everyday life, in a universe of perpetual, and in a very real sense timeless, transformation.

Time, thus, apart from a chronometric or categorical measure, conventionally segmented by the members of a culture into seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, centuries and millennia, is also a social, interactional and irreducibly subjective construct related to one's personal history, experience, self and episodic memories, or put it differently, to one's personal identity (van Dijk, 2009: 61, 129).

Identity is a temporal process (Mead, 1932). Every human action, process, social practice, or activity takes place on some timescale (Lemke, 2000: 275). Humans cannot live without time: they need to have a past so as to situate who they are in a biography and history (memory); they need a future to envision what they are in the process of becoming (anticipation); and they need to build a sense of the present, of where they are now (perception) (Flaherty and Fine, 2001: 151; Jenkins, 2002: 268). Memory, perception and anticipation can come together in narrative action (i.e. "telling stories, recounting happenings, commenting on events, and putting together explanations and plans"; Jenkins, 2002: 270) and emplotment (i.e. the process of weaving events together, viewing them as a coherent whole; Ricoeur, 1984). As Ricoeur (1984: 52) has insightfully explained, "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence".

3. Age identity and discourse

Harking back to Evans's (2005: 63) agentive sense of time above, time appears to bring about certain effects, one of which is age. Age identity is a product "of the evaluative component of our life narratives, the cumulative assessment of where we stand, developmentally—as individuals and in relation to our social environments" (Coupland, 2001: 203). Thus, apart from a chronological matter, age is also a developmental, psychological and social process best understood in terms of cultural definition (e.g. through features attributed to age identity by the cultural context in which people live) and interactional accomplishment (e.g. through processes of negotiation in turn-by-turn talk with other interlocutors) (Boden and Bielby, 1986: 73). Age categorisation as baby, toddler, adolescent, young man/woman, middle aged man/woman, old man/woman (Sacks, 1992) is something we do in discourse. Put it another way, age "identities are ascribed by and for us largely as speakers affirm, reject, avow, allude to, and display their own or other people's characteristics, and thereby, membership in specific categories" (Nikander, 2002: 44). So the analysis of this discourse can disclose how cultural meanings of age are enacted, experienced and reproduced in interaction, that is, how age acquires meaning through discourse (see articles in Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003), Coupland and Coupland (1995), and Poulios (2011)).[3]

According to Coupland et al. (1991), older age identities in discourse are constructed in terms of two fundamental processes: age-categorisation processes and temporal framing processes. The former include disclosing chronological age, age-related categories/role references, and age-related experiences of illness and decline. Temporal framing deals with adding time-past perspective to current or recent events and topics, associating the self with the past, and recognising historical, cultural and social change. Their model is summarised along with some of their original examples in Table 2.

With respect to age identity and online discourse, exemplary discussions can be found in Lin et al. (2004), who studied online discussion forums for older adults and showed that age identity can be bound up in negative themes such as physical decline, loss,

[1] For more insightful discussions within the realms of philosophy and sociology, see O'Rourke et al. (2009) and Adam (2004) respectively.

[2] However, there are still some traditional cultures, as is the case of Pirahã in the Amazon Rainforest, for which time is not that essential (see, for example, the work by Everett (2005)).

[3] For an interesting analysis on the multiple discourses of age (as chronological, physical, experiential, and symbolic), see Aapola (2002). For a meticulous overview of young age and old age identities in language and discourse studies, see Georgakopoulou and Charalambidou (2011).