'Everywhere I go, you're going with me': Time and space deixis as affective positioning resources in shared moments of digital mourning

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from an empirical study of *sharing practices* on a Facebook memorial site and draws attention to the uses of time and space deixis as *affective positioning resources*. Using Androutsopoulos's (2014) framework for the empirical analysis of sharing online, the article examines practices of *selecting, styling,* and *negotiating* in *significant moments of mourning online*, focusing on the entextualizations of a female user shared over the course of a six-month period. The analysis shows how sharers mobilize discursive resources to construct their multifaceted identities as mourners in the local context of the memorial site as well as in the wider situational context of public mourning online. In addition, findings indicate how sharers use time and space deixis to construe spatiotemporal framings and position themselves interactionally and affectively to the dead, the networked mourners, and their digitally entextualized mutable self. It is argued that shifts from static to dynamic construals of time ('tonight' vs. 'everynight') and space ('up there' vs. 'everywhere') are linked to shifts from positions of relative disempowerment to positions of empowerment and agency for the sharer in the context of public mourning. The article offers insights relevant to the study of public mourning in relation to digital performances of self and it contributes to the empirical study of time and space deixis in discourse and participation online.

1. Introduction

The present article analyses sharing practices on a Facebook memorial group site and brings to the fore key aspects of patterned semiotic and discursive activity shaping and shaped by the representation of death and mourning online. Special attention is drawn to the role of time and space deixis in organizing the personal and social experience of mourning in local and situational contexts. The article offers insights relevant to the study of public mourning and the digital performance of self and contributes to the empirical study of time and space deixis in discourse and participation online.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the analytical framework and the key concepts that have informed the theoretical conceptualization of the study. Section 2.1 presents the empirical framework for the analysis of *sharing online* proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014) and the related concepts of *entextualization* and *significant moments* as they relate to the uses of social networking sites for remembering the dead. Section 2.2 presents the understanding of deixis as communicative practice and interactional

resource that has informed the empirical approach to time and space in the present study. Section 2.3 overviews the data and research methods for the analysis. Section 3 moves on to the analysis and presentation of key findings. Section 3.1 provides an overview of sharing practices of mourning in the memorial site under focus. Section 3.2 zooms in on a single user's selection, styling and negotiations of shared moments, drawing attention to the different types of spatial and temporal deictic references mobilized by the sharer in the context of her self-presentations as mourner. Section 3.3 discusses the temporal and spatial framings construed by the sharer in her discursive trajectory of moments and points to shifts in the sharer's stances and alignments to the event of death, the dead, the networked mourners, and her digital performance of self as mourner. Section 4 presents the main conclusions of the article.

2. Background

2.1. Sharing online: digitally entextualizing life and death

Sharing has been acknowledged as the constitutive semiotic activity in social media (John, 2013) and hence as worthy of empirical study (Androutsopoulos, 2014). The empirical framework for the

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study of sharing practices proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014) takes into account the participatory character of social media that involves the user's representation of self, while addressing a knowing audience made up of diverse people existing on an online domain of sociability. Based on an understanding of the representation of self in social media as performance, sharing online involves the digital *entextualization* of social activities, in other words the semiotic representation of events judged to be significant by means of digital technologies and interactive negotiations with the networked audience. By entextualization, reference is made to the process of rendering stretches of discourse into texts that are coherent, memorable and circulatable (Bauman and Briggs, 1990). In the context of social media, entextualization further involves the use of visual, and audio resources that can result in assemblages of texts, pictures, videos, comments and likes that become an integral part of the sharing and are termed *vernacular spectacles* (Androutsopoulos, 2010).

The empirical framework of sharing online involves three inter-related stages: *selecting* that concerns what the sharer chooses to broadcast to their networked audience, *styling*, that relates to how the sharer entextualizes their selected significant moments and *negotiating*, that refers to the way the audience engages with what is being shared. Moments are understood as single communicative acts which entextualize an event that is of importance to a participant and their network of 'friends' taking into account the background knowledge and the linguistic resources that members of the networked audience have in common with the sharer (Androutsopoulos, 2014, p.15). Sharing a moment with and for a networked audience then does not involve simply the reporting of a significant event or the unambiguous expression of feelings, but rather involves acts of social and affective positioning (cf. Bamberg, 1997), that is semiotic and discursive practices whereby selves are located as participants in an interaction and as social beings producing one another in terms of roles. In this article, the empirical framework of sharing has been applied to the analysis of entextualizations of social activities on Facebook related to public mourning and memorialisation purposes (see Section 3).

The increasing popularity of uses of digital media for mourning and remembrance under focus in the present paper needs to be understood in the context of digital affordances of social networking sites. As Boyd (2010) points out *persistence*, *replicability*, *scalability*, and *searchability* constitute the key affordances of social networking sites and their publics. In other words, despite the widespread sense of the ephemeral nature of online content, what is shared in online social platforms can be easily saved or archived, replicated and shared with others, accessed by mass audiences, both known and unknown, and can be easily searched and retrieved. The aforementioned affordances result in a higher level of self-reflection, self-awareness and self-monitoring on the part of users giving rise to the *mutable* self, that is a shift from the stability of self or *self as object* to change of the self or *self as process* (Papacharissi, 2012, p. 5). The high degree of incorporation of digital media in the everyday lives of users, especially in technologically and economically advanced societies where access to the Web is fast and affordable, has meant that digital performances of self have become part of routine ways of being and relating to others.

In light of the afore-described digital affordances social networking sites feature as apt spaces for remembering and memorializing the dead. Following the death of a public figure or of a loved one it is now common to share with known and unknown audiences expressions of condolences, mourning, and grieving. On social network sites, and most notably on Facebook, users often continue to post on the profiles of deceased users or create new group sites (also known as Rest in Peace or R.I.P. sites). Sharing tributes in memory of the dead builds up an archive of memories and public statements easily accessible and searchable, providing mourners with possibilities for engaging with mourning practices anytime and anywhere, e.g. via mobile devices, hence increasing opportunities for online support. In addition, the reach of digitized memorials makes possible the circulation of news relating to memorial events and the reinforcement of a sense of the continued impact of the dead on the living. Furthermore, new possibilities for interactivity in social media make it possible for users to sustain a sense of interaction with the dead via direct messages on the deceased's personal profile page or on sites specially created for memorialization purposes.

In the growing field of death online research, memorial digital sites are said to facilitate the sharing of memories and the direct interaction with the deceased (Brubaker et al., 2013; Dobler, 2009) and remediate (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) offline death-related practices. Digital memorial sites arguably bring back the sense of a community of bereaved (Walter et al., 2011) and expand mourning and grieving socially, temporally and spatially (Brubaker et al., 2013). Furthermore, social networking sites used as technologies of death (Varis and Spotti, 2011) afford opportunities for increased social visibility, in particular for mourners whose experience is not validated or legitimized – also known as *disenfranchised mourners* (Marwick and Ellison, 2012). Most importantly, the fact that social media allow individuals to manage their self-presentations more strategically allows them to address tensions between their individual expression of sorrow and the expected conventional and socially recognizable forms of communication in contexts of public mourning (Berthomé and Houseman, 2010).

In sum, the increasing use of social media for death-related practices is linked to the increased opportunities that social media afford users for sharing significant moments in order to build and maintain social relationships with groups of mourners and the dead as well as for creating a sense of co-presence with imagined and networked publics as will be shown in the analysis (see Section 3). The next section presents the understanding of deixis as communicative practice that informs the present study.

2.2. Deixis as communicative practice

Time and space deixis is integral to communicative practice and it occupies a central place in the study of discourse in society. By deixis reference is made to the use of linguistic expressions that establish the speaker in relation to other aspects of context, namely in relation to the hearer(s) (person deixis), space (spatial deixis) and time (temporal deixis). In English, for example, there is a set of indexical expressions, such as 'I', 'here', 'today', 'tomorrow' whose reference shifts depending on the context in which they are uttered. Tellers have been found to use deixis strategically in order to create positions for themselves and others as speakers and addressees, as close or distant from centered locations and also to orient to events as past, present or future (Toolan, 1999). The three dimensions of person, space and time are referred to as the deictic center of linguistic events that are crucial in interpreting any utterance and constitute the most commonly discussed deictic domains.

Space, time and person deixis can be seen as either static or dynamic. Static deictics point at an entity, e.g. English *here* (space), *then* (time) and *we* (person). Dynamic deictics, on the other hand, point at a movement in space (*hither*), developments in the course of time (*from now on*) or events that take place between persons ('*I-him*') (Zúñiga, 1998 cited in Zúñiga (2006, pp. 30–31)).

Furthermore, local deixis can be based on binary distinctions that separate the 'I' and 'you' in person deixis or the 'here' and 'not-here', the 'near' and 'far' in place deixis (van Peer and Graf, 2002). In addition to local deixis, there is also social and discourse deixis where spatial parameters like *proximal* or *distal* are used to structure their respective (deictic) space. Some analyses of deixis draw special attention to the bodily centered notions of 'proximal' and 'distal' and sub-categorisations of (linguistic) space between static and dynamic space, i.e. the location of entities in space and the movement or change of location of entities.