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Languaging when contexts collapse: Audience design in social networking

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines strategies of language choice in social networking interactions among multilingual young people on Facebook. In media studies the term "context collapse" describes the process by which online social networks bring together people from various social contexts, thereby creating a diverse networked audience. In online social networks that involve participants from different countries and language communities, language choice becomes a pertinent issue. This paper draws on empirical data from social networks among young multilingual people on Facebook to examine strategies of language choice and negotiation. Drawing on the sociolinguistic framework of audience design, the sociolinguistics of multilingualism and computer-mediated discourse analysis, the analysis examines language choice in initiating and responding contributions, metapragmatic negotiations of language style and the role of English as a resource among networked writers.

1. Introduction

The term "context collapse" was coined in media studies by Marwick and Boyd (2011) in a study of communication on Twitter, and is defined there as a process by which technologies of social media "collapse diverse social contexts into one" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011: 10). In context collapse, people who originate in social contexts that usually remain distinct in everyday life become part of an online social network in which they "must contend with groups of people they do not normally bring together, such as acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011: 9). This paper examines the implications of context collapse for language style, and in particular language choice, based on a study of online interactions among multilingual young people on Facebook whose online social networks collate participants from different countries and language communities.

In a nutshell, this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines some basic notions in the study of social networking sites and introduces the notion of context collapse. Section 3 draws on the sociolinguistic framework of audience design (Bell, 1984), scholarship on language and superdiversity (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011) and research on computer-mediated discourse to develop a theoretical perspective on context collapse as a sociolinguistic issue. Section 4 presents the data and methods of analysis, and Sections 5–7 discuss strategies and negotiations of language style in the data. I discuss how initiating contributions can "maximize" or "partition" their audience by means of language choice (Section 5), how responding members of the audience align or disalign with initiative language choices (Section 6), and how language style is commented upon or even resisted by members of the audience (Section 7). Throughout the analysis, the relevance of English as a resource for audience design in social networking is also examined. In concluding (Section 8), the generalizability of the findings and the implications of context collapse in social networking for our understanding of audience design in general are discussed.

2. Context collapse in online social networking

An important distinction in the study of social networking is between a social network, defined here as a set of semiotically materialized, interactive connections among human participants, and a social networking site, defined as a bounded communication system that enables the formation of social networks among registered participants and affords them various tools for representation and interaction (Boyd, 2011; Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Social networking activities are carried out on a site such as Facebook by individuals ("users") who compile a network of connections to other users ("friends").[1] Each registered user is owner of a social network ("ego" in network analysis parlance) and is provided by the site with two main spaces of online engagement: a profile page ("timeline"), which

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[1] The quotation marks indicate that the descriptor "friend" refers to people who share a connection on Facebook. They do not imply a value judgement on the quality of this relationship.

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displays ego's own activities and their "friends" responses to these, and an overview page ("newsfeed"), which displays on-going activities by all "friends" in reverse chronological order. Communicating on a social networking site comprises a range of private (dyadic) and public practices unfolding in a pace that is determined by the size of a network and the frequency of activities by its members. Besides posting their own contributions, users traverse their newsfeed, browse and comment on recent postings by their "friends", visit profile page by "friends", etc.

Unlike earlier modes of computer-mediated communication such as discussion forums or chat channels, which provide public space for communication about a shared interest or purpose, an online social network is compiled by an individual user and includes members who are personally known to ego, the network owner, though usually not exhaustively known to one another.[2] Whereas forums and chats tend to bring together users who do not share a previous offline connection and often remain anonymous, social networking sites "tend to give online expression to existing offline communities" (Seargeant et al., 2012: 514; see also Schmidt (2013)). Social networks on Facebook can display density, i.e. include clusters of users who also share an independent relationship to one another and whose relationship to ego shows similar traits in a certain respect, e.g. former schoolmates or professional colleagues. However, social networks can also include "friends" who only share a connection to ego but not to any other "friends" within this network. Regardless of the density of their ties, all members of a social network can be thought of as comprising a "networked audience" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011) for ego's contributions and their subsequent communicative exchanges.[3] This is an "imagined audience" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011) in the sense that participants cannot be certain about which members of their audience will read and/or comment their contributions, and whether an exchange will unfold at all. However, a networked audience on Facebook consists of a limited number of members and is therefore not imagined in the same way as the large, anonymous audiences of broadcasting.

The notion of context collapse aims to capture what happens when a networked audience comprises "friends" with different socio-demographic features and types of social relationship to ego (Boyd, 2011; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Context collapse occurs when the members of an online social network "reflect different social contexts and have different expectations as to what is appropriate" (Boyd, 2011: 30). For example, network members can differ in terms of their country of origin and residence, their education and professional affiliations, their length and degree of acquaintance to ego, their shared cultural knowledge and semiotic repertoires, etc. It seems important to emphasize that context collapse is not limited to social networking sites but operates in other public spaces of computer-mediated communication, such as discussion forums. It is not even limited to online communication but also occurs in offline settings, for example ritual events such as weddings or graduation ceremonies, which bring together different groups of people who all share a connection to the host, e.g. family members, old friends, professional colleagues, etc. (cf. Boyd, 2011: 51).[4] However, I suggest that context collapse is particularly pertinent to social networking sites, because it results from one of their basic design features, i.e. the formation of ego-centred, translocal networks. As Marwick and Boyd (2011: 17) point out, "In sites like Twitter and Facebook, social contexts we used to imagine as separate co-exist as parts of the network". In this sense, context collapse in social networking can be regarded as a test bed for a wider problem of human communication in general.

Social media researchers discuss the issues arising from context collapse in terms of content selection and relationship management. Marwick and Boyd (2011: 1, 10) point out that context collapse makes it "difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation" and "to engage in the complex negotiations needed to vary identity presentation, manage impressions, and save face". They also suggest that faced with context collapse, users "learn how to manage tensions between public and private, insider and outsider, and frontstage and backstage performances". Language use is hardly discussed in this literature. Boyd (2011: 51) brings up the examples of language choice ("bilingual speakers choose different language depending on context") and language style in general (speakers "describe events differently when talking to different audiences") to support her argument that people manage their online performances in order to suit or separate social contexts. However, no empirical analysis of language or discourse is provided in this literature.

3. Context collapse as a sociolinguistic problem

As far as multilingual settings are concerned, context collapse gives rise to a communicative situation of partially overlapping linguistic repertoires (Franziskus and Gilles, 2012), where members of a social network share some, but not all of their linguistic resources. By definition, the network owner must share at least one linguistic resource with each of their "friends", and certain clusters of "friends" within a network often share more than one linguistic resource. However, no individual can be in command of all the different languages that circulate through an international network on Facebook, and some of the communicative exchanges that flow through the network will be carried out in a language beyond their own linguistic repertoire. To illustrate this with a couple of examples from the data presented below (Section 4), Ingo can draw on German, English and Chinese to communicate with different parts of his Facebook audience, but his German "friends" do not, as a rule, understand his Chinese contributions; likewise, Dema's Greek "friends" do not understand her contributions in German. As a consequence, we need to clearly distinguish the linguistic repertoires individual users bring along to social networking from the linguistic resources that circulate through a social network. The more linguistically heterogeneous a networked audience, the more persistent the problem of addressing this audience in terms of content and linguistic form.

Given the presumable spread of online context collapse worldwide, there is a striking lack of relevant research, which the difficulties of obtaining access to social networking data presumably aggravates (but see Androutsopoulos (2013a, 2014), Lee (2011), Sharma (2012)). One of very few exceptions is the study by Seargeant et al. (2012) on language choice in Facebook interactions among a group of female Thai speakers who live or have lived in Anglophone countries. They too draw on the notion of context collapse, defined there as "the conflation of many different friendship groups into one online network" (Seargeant et al., 2012: 515), and on Bell's framework of audience design. This study discusses the complex process of addressivity in social networking, whereby initial posts are addressed to all members of the social network and subsequent comments are "generally directed

[2] The following analysis assumes a semi-public social network with the following settings: posts by ego are available to all their "friends", but not to "friends" of "friends". A discussion of customized settings is outside the paper's scope.

[3] In practice, participants do not see all posts by their "friends", but only a selection, which is determined by their own degree of attentiveness to the activities of their "friends" and by Facebook's algorithms, which filter the displayed contributions in non-transparent ways.

[4] I thank both reviewers for offering examples of context collapse in offline communication.