



Authenticity, normativity and social media



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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 23 May 2015

Keywords:

Social media
Authenticity
Normativity
Sociolinguistics
Ethnography
Discourse studies

1. Authenticity and normativity in social media discourse: introduction

This special issue brings together research that examines the role of authenticity and normativity in various social media practices. Such a focus is, in our view, both timely and topical. As recent discussions have suggested, the pervasive and on-going changes brought by globalization and superdiversity, mobility, mediation and increased socio-cultural complexity (e.g. Baron, 2008; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Arnaut, 2012; Coupland, *In press*) have created new conditions for authenticity. For some this has even meant that authenticity, as it has been conceptualized and investigated by sociolinguists, is now in crisis (Coupland, 2003, pp. 425–427; van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 395). Under these conditions, traditional demographic and territorial parameters of authenticity are not always easily available or relevant.

A crisis it may be, but as shown by the papers in this special issue, it should not be taken to mean that the notion, experiences, evaluation and regulation of authenticity are obsolete or irrelevant. On the contrary, in their own ways all the papers in this issue show that authenticity, or, more specifically, the need to authenticate (or disauthenticate) oneself and others, continues to be crucial for identification, socio-cultural participation and membership. The papers highlight that in complex, polycentric and shifting socio-cultural circumstances, what we often see is an

acute and heightened awareness and reflexivity concerning authenticity.

However, it is now critical that we need to know more: we need to investigate in what particular ways and under what conditions authenticity is made locally meaningful, and how it is oriented to, indexed and communicated to in linguistic and semiotic action and interaction, as well as how local practice draws on and contributes to discourses on and related to authenticity. The nuanced investigation of authentication practices is what the present special issue aims to contribute to. By focusing on informal and interest-driven social media practices, it shows in detailed ways how participants in and around social media mobilize particular sets of linguistic and other semiotic resources with which authentication can be made and unmade: how it is achieved, crafted, argued for, negotiated, questioned, debated or rejected by participants.

More specifically, drawing on insights provided by new sociolinguistics, discourse studies, linguistic ethnography and cultural studies, the six papers in this issue explore how authentication – and, relatedly, disauthentication, or denaturalization – are played out multisemiotically in a range of social media activities and interactions. The papers approach these themes from an empirical point of view, looking at various kinds of data from a range of social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, discussion forums and blogging. They interrogate what socio-cultural meanings and effects are created therein, and how users locally claim (or reject), and are accorded (or denied) entitlement to use certain linguistic and semiotic resources. By authenticity we thus mean the authenticity effects that are created and accorded as outcomes of constantly negotiated social practices (Bucholtz,

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2003, p. 408), involving discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen as emblematic of particular identities (Blommaert and Varis, 2013, 2015). What is in focus here is the interpersonal negotiations of what kinds of language use, semiotic practices and forms of participation count as ‘genuine’ and ‘legitimate’ for a given purpose (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), and how this kind of authenticity involves particular reflexivity and shared expertise. Importantly, the different contributions also illustrate how discourse practice is shaped and policed in various ways by norms that may sometimes be specific to the social media niches, activities and interactions in question, but other times draw from other everyday and institutional orders of normativity.

2. Reflexivity, normativity and conditions for uptake in social media communication

The notion of reflexivity (regarding both linguistic production and uptake) is central when studying processes of authentication and orientations to normativity in communicative activities and interaction, since a condition for these meta-discursive activities is that certain ways of speaking (and writing) are recognized and associated with social meaning. Reflexivity is also central to social media activities and interactions because, as Weber and Mitchell (2008), p. 41 suggest, social media users’ production of digital discourse (both in terms of outcome and process) forces them to look at themselves, sometimes from new perspectives. For example, Kytölä and Westinen’s paper shows how a professional footballer, as he is crafting a versatile and entertaining online presence via Twitter, adopts linguistic resources from the domains of hip hop culture and African American (even Gangsta) English. These stylistic and discursive choices trigger response and uptake not only in Twitter but also on a major Finnish online football discussion forum, where the footballer’s followers begin to question and debate the authenticity of the ‘gangsta’ English that draws heavily from the domain of hip hop. Similarly, as discussed by Leppänen, in order to appear authentic as dog bloggers, writers need to take up and replicate very specific ways of writing about dogs. When establishing themselves as legitimate and qualified participants in social media activities the ability to maneuver linguistic and other semiotic resources available is thus crucial. In one way or another, participants should establish legitimacy discursively in order to authenticate their roles in the social environment. This does not mean that ideologies based in authenticity are not relevant – as shown in several of the papers such ideologies are to a high degree made relevant in evaluations of online communication (e.g. Karrebæk et al.; Stæhr; Kytölä and Westinen). What is important here is that participants in social media activities need to make a discursive effort to position themselves in relation to these activities and other users. Such efforts and their uptake are important for all the papers in this special issue.

Our focus on reflexivity is naturally neither new nor particular for the study of social media communication. A fundamental characteristic of interpersonal communication in general and a cornerstone of the sociolinguistic paradigm is that the production of semiotic material, including language, is always in some sense designed to orient to and influence the recipient(s). This goes for the communication of denotational meaning as well as for how this meaning is communicated in terms of signaling “identifications, nuances, stances, etc. in the textual fine-grain” (Rampton et al., 2014, p. 4). Participants in interactional encounters are constantly engaged in the meaning making of communicative production. This process of reflexive meaning making involves people’s sociolinguistic knowledge as well as their expectations about communicative productions made by specific people in

specific situations. Blommaert (2005), p. 45 describes the relation between production and uptake in interactional meaning making:

What people do with words – to paraphrase Austin (1962) – is to produce *conditions for uptake*, conditions for voice, but as soon as these conditions are produced, uptake is a fully social process, full of power and inequality (original emphasis)

Producing “conditions for uptake” with words preconditions that certain ways of speaking are recognized and ascribed social meaning. The “uptake” of “voice” involves meta-discursive reflections in many senses. One element in this is whether the use of features are consistent with how the recipients view and categorize the producer of the discursive material. Such sociolinguistic reflexivity necessarily involves acts of authentication and (constructions of) ideologies of authenticity and normativity and may be explicitly expressed in interaction in evaluations, policing or sanctioning. These types of actions may thus address who are perceived as authentic or ratified users of specific registers (cf. Agha, 2005, 2007 on enregisterment). The constructions and negotiations of the relations between linguistic resources, recognizable ways of speaking and groups of speakers can be observed in several of the papers in terms of who grants which rights to whom to use what semiotic material (see for example Karrebæk, Stæhr and Varis; Kytölä and Westinen; Stæhr, this issue). The studies illustrate how social media interaction facilitates meta-discursive activities extraordinarily well, because of the persistence and searchability of written discourse as well as the users’ affordances for sharing various material.

Reflexivity is an aspect of the ways in which norms and normativity constitute an integral part of social media activities and interactions. Normativity as reflexive action involves ways of evaluating, judging and policing the semiotic conduct of oneself and others. Thus, normativity is always partly “imposed from below – by oneself or one’s peers” (Leppänen and Piirainen-Marsh, 2009, p. 261; Varis and Wang, 2011, p. 73; Kytölä, 2012), in acts of micro-level language policing which can both reflect and thereby consolidate both situated and pre-existing norms for behavior, but also contribute to the emergence, (re)shaping and (re)contextualization of new norms of specific, contexts, cultures and communities. Besides such bottom-up and interactional forms of normativity, normativity in social media also involves very explicit forms of regulation that constrain the options and opportunities of participants when they express themselves and interact with others. These include, for example, formalised codes of conduct, such as netiquettes, as well as explicit and institutionalized forms of policing, such as moderation and censorship (Leppänen, 2009). The kinds of informal and interest-driven social media practices as featured in this special issue are also good examples of what Arnaut (2012) has referred to as late modern post-Panopticon normativity, i.e. normativity that is rarely regulated by centralized mechanisms of control by ‘those in power’. This means that participants need to orient to plural centers of normativity, some of which may be specific to the sites and activities in question, while others may draw on normativities in other domains and contexts (Blommaert et al., 2005; Blommaert, 2010; Varis and Wang, 2011; Leppänen et al., 2014).

3. The complexity of authentication

All the papers in this special issue highlight the delicacy and complexity of linguistic and semiotic authentication processes. They show how authentication involves the selection and use of a range of discursive strategies, such as styling, crossing (Rampton, 2005), stylization (Rampton, 1999; Eckert, 2001) and categorization (Sacks, 1992). The papers also demonstrate how such uses are situated and

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