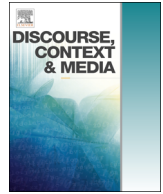




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# Reflexivity in Facebook interaction – Enregisterment across written and spoken language practices



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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is how linguistic reflexivity, the organization of linguistic features and the normative behavior following from these processes takes place across online and offline activities among a group of adolescents who daily interact with one another through several modes of communication. In the paper I argue that written discourse has taken up a much more important role in people's everyday discursive practices because of the widespread availability and impact of social media. As a consequence of this I make the claim that spoken and written discourse in combination should be considered when studying everyday language use and processes of enregisterment.

In this article I illustrate how young people from a linguistically and culturally diverse area of Copenhagen use linguistic features indexical of speech styles in their linguistic practices on Facebook. I study how the use of such linguistic resources points towards different stereotypes and what sense of rights and sanctions are involved in the reactions to the use of these different types of marked language use. I study this to discuss how spoken language practices and practices associated with writing contribute to similar processes of enregisterment.

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## 1. Introduction

Due to the increasing popularity of social media and digital communication, writing now has a new status in people's everyday communication. Before the arrival of technologies such as the internet and mobile phones, written language in the public domain was to a great extent characterized by one-way communication, so that there were few possibilities for instant (and repeated) written replay and immediate response (letters and telegrams being an exception). These new technologies have contributed to a shift in the history of writing, because today far more people use writing as a frequent everyday means of communication (Baron, 2008). Thus, written communication has become a common (and possible) choice for everyday interaction equivalent to verbal communication (at least for some people, and in some corners of the world). Social network sites such as Facebook, for example, allow people to discuss more or less important day-to-day issues in writing (and through the use of other semiotic signs).

Historically, the internet – mythologized as 'cyberspace' – has been constructed as a 'world apart' from offline settings (Leander and McKim, 2003:217). However, the new status of writing in everyday encounters and the way in which social media have been integrated into many people's everyday communication contributes to a breakdown of the artificial gap between online and

offline contexts. So when it comes to explaining processes of language change, social media and digital communication technologies are becoming increasingly important for understanding current processes of enregisterment (Agha, 2007). Enregisterment, in Asif Agha's (2007:190) sense, can be described as a process through which languages, styles, registers and varieties become differentiable as socially recognized registers of forms. Such processes of enregisterment involve an understanding of how performable signs (words, semiotic resources, etc.) are recognized as a cultural model by a given population. In this way enregisterment can be described as the relation between the organization of semiotic resources, norms and speakers.

Norms are thus a key aspect of enregisterment processes. According to Agha (2007), normativity should be conceptualized as involving at least three different levels. *The first level* deals with norms in the sense of externally observable patterns such as a statistical distribution of some order of behavior (Agha, 2007:126). *The second level* of normativity is defined as "a reflexive model of behavior, recognized as 'normal' or 'typical' by (at least some) actors, i.e., is a *norm for them*" (Agha, 2007:126). On this level a reflexive model specifies a norm for a given group of people based on their behavior. *The third level* of normativity is the normative standard, in other words, a norm codified as a standard. That is, "a normative model, linked to standards whose breach results in sanctions" (Agha, 2007:126). By employing these three levels of

normativity, Agha relates the study of linguistic variation (level one) to the study of enregisterment (level two and three).

In this paper, I focus on the second level of normativity, as defined by Agha. I look at how linguistic reflexivity, enregisterment and the normative behavior following from these processes take place across online and offline activities among a group of adolescents who interact daily with one another by relying on different modes of communication. In this investigation my particular interest will be to trace how the enregisterment of different speech styles takes place across written online discourse and spoken face-to-face discourse, and to consider how (through various metapragmatic activities) the participants orient towards peer group generated norms of language use.

More specifically, the aim of the article is to illustrate how important social media and the written discourse they bring along are to current processes of enregisterment. With my ethnographic fieldwork as a point of departure I investigate how a group of adolescents from a linguistically and culturally diverse area of Copenhagen adopt and use linguistic features indexical of styles usually observed in speech in their linguistic practices on Facebook. I study how the use of such linguistic resources points towards different stereotypes, and what sense of rights and sanctions are involved in the reactions to the use of these different types of marked language use. Furthermore, I describe how the adolescents relate to and use linguistic resources associated with different styles to discuss to what extent spoken language practices and practices associated with writing co-contribute to similar processes of enregisterment. These aspects of enregisterment are then further discussed in relation to a broader sociolinguistic perspective concerning how social media are becoming increasingly important for understanding current processes of language change in the Danish society. Thus, the present paper's contribution to the special issue derives from its central concern with normativity in online language use, highlighted in the participants' situated awareness of the nuanced meanings of their language choices, and in the monitoring and sanctioning of access to particular styles.

To establish a theoretical framework of discussing how linguistic reflexivity, the organization of linguistic features and the normative behavior following from these processes takes place across online and offline activities I begin with considering how to approach enregisterment across written and spoken discourse. Next, I discuss how metapragmatic activities are relevant to the study of enregisterment in online contexts. This is followed by an account of the specific registers in focus of my analysis. Finally, the analyses are organized in three sections in which I discuss different instances of metapragmatic activities that reflect different degrees of reflexivity and point towards different norms of language use. In the first two analytical [Sections 6 and 7](#) I look at how street language (see [Section 5](#)) is used in styling, stylization and crossing across online and offline situations and I discuss how social media data contributes to our knowledge of ongoing processes of enregisterment among Copenhagen youth. In the last analytical [Section 8](#) I focus on how stereotypical notions of Danishness (connected to the register referred to as old-fashioned) are highlighted and negotiated across online and offline settings. In the following section, before introducing the theoretical framework of the article, I account for my data collection and methodological approach.

## 2. Data, participants and methodology

The data I draw on in this article were collected among a group of adolescents in Copenhagen. The adolescents all attended an urban public school in a Copenhagen area called Amager where

the student body was characterized by a high degree of ethnic diversity. As a part of the Amager project ([Madsen et al., 2013](#)), I have carried out ethnographic fieldwork in two grade school classes in Copenhagen for almost three years. The Amager project is a collaborative study ([Blackledge and Creese, 2010](#); [Erickson and Donald, 1998](#)) of language use, linguistic and social norms in the everyday life of contemporary children and adolescents under the current superdiverse social conditions of Copenhagen (see [Madsen et al., 2013](#)). The project was initiated in 2009 when the participants in our study attended 7th grade and ended when they left school in 2011 (a period of time equivalent to secondary school). Since then, I have continued to meet with some of the adolescents in focus in this paper. In 2010 most of the young people in our study had a Facebook profile and regularly engaged with each other through this social network site. Seeing this, I created a Facebook profile on behalf of the project. I advertised our new profile among the adolescents and soon we began to receive friend requests on Facebook. Afterwards I followed the young people's social media practices alongside their school and leisure time activities. In this way I both conducted extensive online ethnography ([Androutsopoulos, 2008, 2013](#)) and ethnography in offline settings ([Duranti, 1997](#)). This provided me with crucial knowledge about the participants in our study across the established divide between online and offline contexts ([Boyd and Ellison, 2008](#)). Following the young people both on Facebook and in other everyday situations made it possible for me to gain a wider understanding of the connections between the two contexts regarding social and linguistic practices and friendship relations (for a detailed account of the data collection see [Madsen et al., 2013](#); [Stæhr, 2014](#)). Methodologically I approach the study of online discourse from the perspective of linguistic ethnography (e.g., [Rampton et al., 2004](#); [Blackledge and Creese, 2010](#)) as I in my analysis combine micro-analysis of online discourse with considerations of locally prevalent language ideologies. My interaction analysis primarily builds on Facebook interactions, but to illustrate how the young people draw on styles usually associated with speech I also draw on analysis of semi-structured interviews, self-recordings and classroom recordings in my account of the relation between the enregisterment of spoken and written discourse.

The adolescents in focus in this article all live in the same area of Copenhagen. Furthermore, from our ethnographic observations and interviews we know that they have a variety of different cultural and linguistic heritages and competences. Bashaar is born in Iraq and immigrated to Denmark with his family when he was two years old. Jamil and Isaam are both born in Denmark and have family relations to Lebanon. Mark is born in Denmark as well and his parents are from Poland and Turkey. Khalid is born in Denmark and his parents emigrated from Pakistan. Fadwa is born in Iraq and came to Denmark with her parents late in life compared to her classmates. Nadia, Negasi and Fatima attend the same class and often hang out together and have family relations to Iraq, Eritrea and Lebanon, respectively. Rasmus and Michael are among the few majority Danes in the class. Some of the adolescents appearing in my analysis do not attend one of the two classes I followed. They will be introduced to the extent I find it relevant for my analysis. Furthermore, Bashaar, Thehan, Nadia and Negasi also appear in the analysis of Nørreby and Møller (same issue).

## 3. Enregisterment of written and spoken discourse

In this section I discuss the relation between spoken and written discourse and how this has been treated in the early studies of language on the internet and in contemporary research on digital discourse, respectively. Most studies of enregisterment either focus on spoken (see for example [Agha, 2007](#)) or written

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