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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context and Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Negotiating authenticities in mediatized times



Jannis Androutsopoulos

Institut für Germanistik & Institut für Medien und Kommunikation, Universität Hamburg, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 3 July 2015

Keywords:

Authenticity
Mediatization
Social media
Multilingualism
Uptake
Online ethnography

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the papers of the Special Issue on “Authenticity and normativity in social media”, this discussion piece points out a number of key themes for research on authenticity in digital language practices. I argue that the theoretical backdrop provided by the deconstruction of authenticity in sociolinguistics must be complemented by taking into account the specific conditions of social media as a site of communicative action that is central to contemporary mediatized societies. In the new public spheres constituted in social media, the display of authenticity is a core value in the production of discourse for a personal public. Displays of authenticity in social media are made available to a networked public whose follow-up discourses can involve remarkable linguistic reflexivity and normativity. Constructions and negotiations of authenticity in social media are found to draw on multilingual repertoires. Their objects of normative assessment are registers of language, which form part of an indexical order that can draw on globally circulating as well as locally anchored semiotic elements. Research in this area is likely to benefit from polycentric and transmedia strategies, which enable researchers to follow actors and their authenticating practices across on and offline spaces.

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1. Authenticity in sociolinguistics

The early 2000s mark a turning point in theorizing language and authenticity. In 2001, a Special Issue of *Discourse Studies* on ‘Authenticity in Media Discourse’ lays out the meanings of authenticity in media talk. For [Montgomery \(2001\)](#), authentic media talk can be understood as spontaneous, true to the experience it reports and true to the speaker, in that it presents his/her ‘true’ inner self. For [van Leeuwen \(2001\): 395](#), there is no such thing as authentic talk; authenticity depends among other things on the participation roles that are brought to bear in a given situation and the social norms deemed relevant to its judgement. Following up on this in 2003, a Special Issue of *Journal of Sociolinguistics* extends this diagnosis to sociolinguistic theory itself. Authenticity is deconstructed as a part of sociolinguistic imagination that originates in dialectology. In its core lies the ‘authentic speaker’, imagined by researchers as an individual who is monoglot, not socially mobile, not well educated, immersed in vernacular speech, unspoiled by standard language, let alone language contact. Part of problematizing and deconstructing this notion of authenticity is the concept of authentication ([Bucholtz, 2003](#)), understood as a strategic process by which a speaker’s claims to authenticity are semiotically constructed and socially negotiated. In the same Issue, [Eckert \(2003\)](#) points out that the social diffusion of linguistic features may not always follow the path of the authentic vernacular, i.e. interpersonal interaction. Instead, Eckert suggests,

certain features can be taken directly from ‘the shelf’, i.e. ready-made pieces of talk, notably from the media.

Deconstructing authenticity is not only to say it is socially constructed rather than inherently given; it is to question traditional ideas about linguistic innovation and change; to reconsider our understanding of the ‘authentic speaker’; and to radically broaden the range of analytic objects, that is the settings where authentication processes can be witnessed at work. In particular, it lays the backdrop for recognizing media discourse as a vibrant stage of constructing authenticities (i.e. practices of authentication), much in contrast to earlier tendencies that draw a sharp line between ‘authentic’ vernacular speech and media language, the latter understood as strategically planned and staged, therefore supposedly ‘inauthentic’. Repositioning authenticity as a process to be examined enables researchers to view vernaculars as resources for stylization and performance (cf. [Bell and Gibson, 2011; Coupland, 2001](#)).

Digital communication figured in this theoretical repositioning from the very start. For example, [Coupland \(2003\)](#) points out that ‘electronically mediated social interaction is providing new means of achieving intimacy, rapport and sociality’ ([Coupland, 2003: 426](#)), thereby complementing and complicating authenticating processes in face-to-face communication. Along with several other factors, digitally mediated interaction contributes, Coupland argues, to an ongoing shift in our understanding of the authentic speaker ‘from place in a predetermined social structure to meanings locally negotiated in reflexive and strategic communicative

E-mail address: jannis.androutsopoulos@uni-hamburg.de

practice' (Coupland, 2003: 427). In view of the importance digital communication has gained in the meantime, a Special Issue on social media as a site of constructing and negotiating authenticity comes timely.

2. Social media: authentication in a mediatized world

The term 'social media' is fuzzy and inflationary used, its extension and boundaries hard to pinpoint. Often used in a commonsensical, apparently self-explanatory way, social media is easily reduced to a few globally leading platforms for networked communication – Facebook, YouTube, blogs. In social-scientific online research (e.g. Schmidt, 2013), social media is a technological as much as social phenomenon. Its base is a set of technologies that facilitate networked publishing, participation, cross-linking etc. But what makes it distinct from earlier stages of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a matter of scale. Social media comes at a tipping point (Gladwell, 2000), i.e. a historical moment when CMC practices are up-scaled to a level of mass digital literacies (Brandt, 2014). Social media also comes at a moment of unprecedented interpenetration of on and offline communication. And compared to the early days of CMC in the 1990s, social media is molded by a much higher degree of institutionalization, which becomes obvious in the way public institutions and commercial organizations participate in and control the networked public spheres.

Viewed in this perspective, social media is a core part in the on-going mediatization of communication. From the many meanings of mediatization in the current discussion (cf. Androutsopoulos, 2014), the one relevant here comes from European (particularly German and Norwegian, but also British) communications scholars, who define mediatization as an on-going process of social and cultural change with change in mediated communication at its core (Lundby, 2009a; Krotz and Hepp, 2012; Livingstone, 2009). Mediatization indicates a stage where communications media of all kinds, from interpersonal and to mass media, become indispensable to all domains, institutions and practices of social life, from intimate (think of romantic text messages in the evening) to most official (e.g. the German chancellor's weekly video cast, or the news tweets from Brussels). Mediatization research aims at bridging the gap between interpersonal, small public and mass media. It rejects a media effects approach and favours an approach centered on human practices with media. Returning to the main thread, the point is that social media emerges at a particular stage in the mediatization of social (and sociolinguistic) life. What once was a bunch of discrete online worlds, each with their esoteric lingo, has now become a site of social action that is central to society as a whole, and therefore to our theorising of language, society and media.

Research that turns to social media needs to avoid presentism, i.e. the tendency to frame and legitimize its object of study as new or innovative (cf. Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011). The ways in which digitally mediated interaction complements and complicates practices of authentication are as old as the 'new media' itself. In the 1980s and 1990s Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) provided spaces of public, anonymous, partially role-playing interaction. There, authenticity amounted to building up and sustaining a persona in the discourse of the community, which could be completely opposite to speaker's persona (e) outside the net. Personal home pages, a genre iconic to early ('web 1.0') online participation, provided opportunities to present 'authentic' selves to an unknown and anonymous, but potentially like minded audience (Chandler, 1998; Döring, 2002). These early days of CMC witnessed a range of authenticating practices with

their own multimodality in terms of then available means (e.g. Colored text, pictorial images, animated gifs).

The important thing about social media, then, is not that they provide a brand new stage for authentication practices, but rather that they become normalized as such a stage. Put differently, the default expectation is that authenticity be strategically and reflexively displayed, and negotiated, in participatory social media. This becomes obvious if we consider how communication scholars position authenticity as a core value in personal publics, i.e. in the new type of public sphere that social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter enable. In distinction to the nation-wide (or region-wide) public sphere created by the mass media, a personal public is a network of individuals assembled and sustained within the boundaries of a social media infrastructure by the option of following (on Twitter) or friending (on Facebook). Members of a personal public may share (on Facebook more often than Twitter) a degree of pre-existing knowledge and social ties, and they can vary considerably in size, from 100 or so Facebook friends to several thousands of Twitter followers. These differences aside, the logic by which communication is designed for a personal public is distinct from other types of public (Schmidt, 2014). News for a mass-mediated public are selected on the basis of newsworthiness (which is regulated by linguistically constructed news values, cf. Bednarek and Caple, 2014). Expert publics, e.g. in academia, orient to expertise as a core value, which is operationalized by e.g. peer reviewing and journal rankings. A core value in the production of discourse for a personal public is authenticity, and its structural correlate is the affordance of digitally mediated interaction, which becomes the site of negotiating authenticities, to which I return below. It is useful to understand authenticity here in Montgomery's (2001) sense: a discourse that is spontaneous, true to the speaker, and true to the reported experience. However, in communication studies scholarship, this 'trueness' is posited rather than investigated, and its content-analytic methods are more useful for delimiting subtypes of authenticity rather than critically questioning its construction and on-going negotiation. The latter exercise requires linguistic, semiotic and interactional microanalysis, as performed by the papers in this Special Issue. In the transdisciplinary space of online research, then, one task for linguists is to examine how authenticity it is constructed and negotiated online, and how the various modes, platforms and genres of digital discourse shape this process.

3. Networked uptake

Against this backdrop, this Special Issue on 'Authenticity and normativity in social media' drives home three points that will be important, I believe, for our understanding of authenticity in a mediatized world. They can be labeled as a) audience uptake, b) multilingual resources and c) blended ethnography, and will be briefly discussed in this order.

The first point is closely related to the new public spaces created by social media. Discourse in social media is oriented to networked audiences – friends, followers, imagined readers of blogs etc. – and open to uptake by self-selected audience members. The element of social negotiation, which is inherent to any claim to (linguistic) authenticity, is now recontextualized to a networked audience. From an audience point of view, claims of authenticity in social media are the starting point for a chain of more or less synchronous responses, which are multi-authored, interactive, open-ended and unforeseeable in their unfolding. Viewed as data, they are persistent, re-scalable, and searchable (boyd, 2011). The opening of authentication claims to networked uptake is qualitatively different to the audience reception of authentication claims in unidirectional media, e.g. commercials

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