



Consciousness differentials, social regulation and discursive forms: Twitter as a battlefield of moral stances



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ABSTRACT

Twitter constitutes an arena in which moral stances and appeals for action, including discourse, fight for recognition. Bernstein's theory of codes was used to construct categories for the classification of tweets favoured by followers of a Mexican poet. Data analysis shows the conformation of two groups of users: on the one hand, those 'insiders' who can appreciate a critical discourse and who can free themselves from structural length limits (only 140 characters per message) and appreciate fragmented forms of distributed cognition syntagmatically joined; and, on the other, 'outsiders' who do not appreciate those forms of critical discourse and prefer self-contained messages such as aphorisms with unitary forms of distributed cognition, which ultimately depend upon the agglomerating pull of everyday language. Even if Twitter does not impose structural limitations to prevent the development of horizontal social relationships, the findings show that boundaries and cleavages are created by discourse itself. Unitary forms of distributed cognition, associated with 'outsiders' deal with knowledge beyond theoretical reach; whereas fragmented forms, associated with insiders, deal with a complex mix between theoretical generalisation and practical reasoning.

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1. Introduction

His concern for the way the mind fluctuates between heights and depths of feeling and thought, his interest in tracing these movements, and his belief in the place of aphoristic expression in finding or creating a 'balance between them'—these are the important developments for [Wallace] Stevens during this 1898–1912 period when he wrote very little poetry. (Coyle, 1976, p. 207)

If we want to understand how pedagogic processes shape consciousness differentially, I do not see how this can be done without some means of analysing the forms of communication which bring this about. (Bernstein, 2000, p. 4)

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the links between consciousness, discursive forms, discursive context, subject position and forms of social regulation on *Twitter*, the online social networking and microblogging service that allows its users to read text-based messages of up to 140 characters known as *tweets*. I am interested in *Twitter* for two fundamental reasons. First, *Twitter* has been designed or has the potential to sustain horizontal social relations. In this regard, it is a discursive platform with very limited forms of organisational regulation embedded in its technological structure. Unlike other internet resources, *Twitter* lacks participants' access and message distribution controls. Thus, whilst a mailing list might have an owner who controls members'

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access and postings that might be moderated, Twitter has none of those mechanisms of control in place. In other words, Twitter represents an ideal discursive platform that could be associated with notions such as access equality and freedom of speech and information. Second, in Twitter discourse is presented in written form and therefore it has the potential to develop forms of reflection similar to scientific knowledge. Yet the platform does not support distributing the lengthy forms of written speech which characterise the kind of abstraction and generality typical of the sciences (see, for instance, Derrida, 1997 and Muller's discussion of common sense–uncommon sense cline [2007]). It is as if the creators of Twitter designed the platform to block its scientific potential and focus it on forms of exchange that resemble oral speech, yet scientific-based discourse is *smuggled* in Twitter in different ways.

The questions I am asking deal with how subjects understand and position themselves toward different forms of discourse and social regulation afforded by the platform. A mixed research method design was used for a case study that examines the discursive production of a Mexican poet located in Mexico City. The poet, together with other users of Twitter, explores the poetic possibilities of the platform and uses it to air his social criticism. On the one hand, Bernstein's (2000) theory of codes was deployed in order to categorise forms of discourse belonging to the Mexican poet. On the other hand, those discursive forms were tested to check for correspondence between discursive forms, social regulation and their appreciation by groups of followers according to their relationship with the poet. Finally, the findings are discussed especially for the implications they may have on understanding new forms of distributed cognition and determining the limitations and affordances of public debate in social networks.

2. Literature review: Twitter as a battlefield of moral stances

In the present paper, I am extending Bernstein's notion of *pedagogic discourse* to a realm that may not be considered obviously pedagogic, as is the case with the spontaneous social activity mediated by Twitter. I argue, however, that this notion can be deployed to analyse any kind of discourse whether pedagogic or not. In my view discourse is intrinsically pedagogic because in its (a) quest for public recognition, being subject to the logic of social positioning, must (b) assert, by proposition or opposition, certain ideas about the social order and (c) draw on certain mechanisms which essentially amount to operations of recontextualising discourse itself.

In a nutshell, whether pedagogic or not, *discourse is speech subject to the logic of and enabling the distribution of forms of activity related to social projects which advance an ideal social order through discursive means*. The access to discursive means, especially of discursive means in the fields of production of complex discursive traditions (e.g., a scientific field), is normally regulated by educational institutions—that is what we call pedagogy—, however there is always pedagogic activity involved in the appropriation of any discursive form, even in contexts that are not considered pedagogic. Thus, *learning the talk* of a company, association or club implies certain pedagogic development.

Let me begin with the two functions of (pedagogic) discourse: *recontextualisation* and *segmentation*. For Bernstein, pedagogic discourse is basically a recontextualising principle of social order:

I will define pedagogic discourse as a rule which embeds two discourses; a discourse of skills of various kinds and their relations to each other, and a discourse of social order. Pedagogic discourse embeds rules which create skills of one kind or another and rules regulating their relationship to each other, and rules which create social order Often people in schools and in classrooms make a distinction between what they call the transmission of skills and the transmission of values. These are always kept apart as if there were a conspiracy to disguise the fact that there is only one discourse.

[(Bernstein, 2000, p. 31–32)]

Thus, whether one deploys a series of theoretical concepts to build a case or not—that is, to clothe an opinion in the gown of science—those theoretical concepts are a function of human projects or certain views about what long-term goals society should set and how it should be organised in order to attain them. Intermediate organisations such as institutions—and in our case a single individual—appropriate the discourses that are being created in actual fields of production—or distributed through educational institutions—and recontextualise them, which amounts to what Bernstein (2000) refers to as a *discursive gap* (p. 29). However, the kind of discourse deployed corresponds to forms of realisation of knowledge that are *vertical*, which is to say they take

the form of a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised as in the sciences, or ... the form of a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and specialised criteria for the production and circulation of texts as in the social sciences and humanities.

[(Bernstein, 2000, p. 157)]

The segmentation function, in contrast, is the kind of pedagogic process whose outcome is an informal or spontaneous learning experience. Its outcome may be defined as *spontaneous* but subject, for instance, to historical trajectories and traditions that play a role in reproducing mores and customs. Bernstein calls it segmentation because 'the pedagogy is exhausted in the context of its enactment, or is repeated until the particular competence is acquired' (2000, p. 159); thus, there is no connection between one context and another. The problems of everyday life are specific and are solved most of the time not by resorting to scientific knowledge but by learning through experience, imitating what other individuals do or listening to the voice of experience. This amounts to a form of discursive horizontality.

Because Twitter lacks structural forms of hierarchisation of pedagogic relations, it may be considered to be the ultimate battlefield of moral stances and of discursive forms. In Twitter subjects not only take position but also compete for recognition through discursive practices, drawing on scientific and nonscientific discourses alike. However, the apparent horizontality of Twitter is not an end to the consciousness differentials of subjects, for they are a function of the subjects' access to or appreciation of different forms of discourse.

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