



Discursive construction of identities in a social network-educational space: Insights from an undergraduate Facebook group for a linguistics course



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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study of a Facebook group created for a linguistics course at a university in Hong Kong. It examines the discursive resources and practices identified in the group, as well as discusses how identities are constructed through hybrid discourse. Informed largely by discourse-centered online ethnography, we observed the group and its discourse systematically, and contacted the group members. Specifically, we collected screen data with a view to identifying the discourse functions and analyzing the linguistic resources deployed by the members. Semi-structured interviews, incorporating the elements of techno-biography and stimulated recall, were conducted to delve into the practices and identity construction. The study argues that the group is not merely an academic group, but a “social network-educational space” in that both academically-related and socially-related discourse functions could be observed. The members were found to deploy a wide range of resources such as emoticons for meaning making. This article then presents a case of a participant which illustrates how various identities could be constructed with the discursive resources and practices. It concludes by advancing our understanding of concepts such as the community of practice and considering the implications for future computer-mediated discourse research.

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1. Introduction

With the advancement of mobile technology and the ubiquity of internet access, people are spending a great deal of time online. In particular, social media such as Facebook and Twitter are increasingly embedded in their everyday lives. Despite the technological affordances for social networking and relationship management (e.g. Boyd, 2007; Walther et al., 2008), these social media have been extensively explored for various applications in recent years. Facebook, for instance, is not only a site for interpersonal exchanges among friends, classmates, colleagues, and families, but also provides new opportunities for other domains such as business marketing (Holzner, 2008) and education (Wang et al., 2012). This paper aims to explore the discursive practices in what we call “social network-educational space” on Facebook – a “group” for an undergraduate linguistics course.

The exchanges and interaction identified on Facebook have provided rich data for linguists and discourse analysts. Recent years

have seen a growing number of discourse-oriented Facebook studies which collect data from “status updates” on participants’ timeline (previously known as “wall”) (e.g. Bolander and Locher, 2010; Page, 2010, 2012; West, 2013) and the data tend to be interpersonal interaction between friends; discourses in other Facebook spaces remain under-researched. The “group” function on Facebook, for instance, is a space in which users with shared interests communicate as a small community. While the education values of this space have been discussed (e.g. Cain and Policastro, 2011; McCarthy, 2010), little is known from a linguistic point of view. Drawing on data collected from a course-based Facebook group, the present study focuses on the discursive resources and practices student members adopt in the group. Specifically, the study, which takes a social constructionist approach to identity, further sheds light on how the members construct identities in the group through remixing, reappropriating, and negotiating these resources and practices.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews major theoretical discussions and research findings in relation to linguistic construction of identities in social media. Section 3 outlines the design of the present study. Section 4 overviews and

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discusses prominent discursive resources and practices identified in the data, and Section 5 uses the case of Matthew, a participant, to illustrate how identities are constructed through hybrid discourse. The final section revisits the issue of identity construction in social media. It is in this section where we argue the group serves as a social network-educational (SNE) space. The section also concludes the article by considering the implications for future computer-mediated discourse (CMD) research.

2. Facebook discourse and identities online

As pointed out by Bolander and Locher (2010), linguistic research on Facebook is far from sufficient. It is not until recently that more studies have been underway (West, 2013). Among this body of Facebook research, status updates on users' timeline have been most examined. They have been collected with a view to conducting basic textual analysis such as identifying the linguistic features (e.g. Lin and Qiu, 2013; Riley, 2013) and speech acts (e.g. Carr et al., 2012; Ilyas and Khushi, 2012). Seen as a kind of storytelling, status updates have also been studied extensively through the lens of narrativity and tellability (e.g. Page, 2010, 2012; West, 2013). In addition to these studies that feature the nature of status updates, some studies of timeline have been carried out in connection with sociolinguistic themes such as identity construction (e.g. Aguirre and Davies, 2015; Bolander and Locher, 2010; Lee, 2014), facework (e.g. Davies, 2012; West and Trester, 2013), power (Mak and Chui, 2013) and multilingualism (Androutsopoulos, 2013). While timeline constitutes a major communicative space on Facebook and offers exciting linguistic data, other spaces such as event, inbox, group, and page equally merit researchers' attention. It is also our observation that the existing literature has relied largely on the analysis of interpersonal communication. In view of the increasingly diverse use of Facebook, there has to be more studies that examine a specific context. These two under-researched aspects have thus rendered the present study all the more worthwhile.

Despite limited relevant research, the ones conducted by Ried (2011) and Lee and Lien (2011) are of relevance in terms of the research setting and offer some insights to the present study. Drawing on Janks' critical literacy model (2010), Ried (2011) examined how Facebook pages for an education course served as a pedagogical space where students brought the "out-of-school literacy practice into a schooled space" (p. 60). In Hong Kong, Lee and Lien (2011) conducted exploratory research into a Facebook group for an undergraduate course to evaluate the group's potential as a pedagogical tool and to obtain an overview of the discursive resources and practices within the group. The two studies have opened up the possibility of studying how Facebook can be adopted for academic purposes and paved the way for more in-depth research on course-based Facebook groups. In contrast to the two studies, the current research zooms in on discursive resources and practices of student members and teases out how such resources and practices help to reflect their identities.

In offline face-to-face communication, interlocutors express themselves and construct identities readily with paralinguistic features such as gestures and tone of voice. On the contrary, interlocutors in text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) have limited access to these tools; they have to make use of punctuation, case, and emoticons alongside writing instead (Tagg, 2015). The limitations point to the fact that linguistic features become major identity markers online. It is thus crucial to scrutinize users' linguistic practices, which are concerned with "the outcome of the relation between media constraints and user agency within specific socio-cultural settings" (Androutsopoulos, 2010, p. 212). Against this backdrop, a number of studies have been done to discern how self is instantiated in the online context over the past decades. Early research tended to focus on anonymous settings

(e.g. Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Danet et al., 1997). These studies not only illustrated how online identities can be constructed through linguistic means, but also highlighted that one can be different from who they are in the offline context. As far as the aspects of social identity are concerned, gender has been researched extensively in CMC literature (e.g. Herring, 1992, 1996; Herring and Zelenkauskaitė, 2009; Katsuno and Yano, 2007; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2007; see Herring and Stoerger (2014) for a complete overview). Other facets of social identity, nevertheless, drew little attention from researchers as critiqued by Androutsopoulos (2006). As Vásquez (2014) also identified, research in the earlier wave on identities in social media placed undue emphasis on participants' profiles. As a result, the scope was greatly limited by what the pre-set categories of personal information offer. The importance of how users construct and enact identities through what and how they write in key writing spaces was often downplayed.

Recent years have gradually seen more studies that shift the focus from profiles to other spaces in social media. The studies have pushed forward our understanding of the subtle relationship between linguistic practices and identities that may be more closely connected to who users are in the offline world. There have also been more studies with an interest in other aspects of identity. Tagg and Seargeant (2012), for instance, collected informal exchanges on Facebook and MSN from Thai-English bilinguals. One interesting finding was that a group of participants commented on a photo in which they were tagged on Facebook by consistently using letter repetitions. The analysis suggested that the use of letter repetitions helped the participants to index a group identity. Most recently, Bolander and Locher (2015) studied status updates of individuals in the UK and Switzerland and comments to these updates both qualitatively and quantitatively. Participants were found to position themselves by expressing to friends a range of aspects, including personality, work, and pastime endeavors. In Aguirre and Davies' (2015) study, their case participant, Amy, asserted the identity as a successful migrant in New Zealand by means of place-making and multimodal resources with the affordances of timeline as "a communicative and signifying platform" (p. 3). The identity was noticeably created for her audience – friends and family in the Philippines.

Indeed, it is not uncommon that participants are alert to self-presentation and identity management in social media; they carefully monitor the linguistic styles displayed in different spaces. Lee's (2014) study is a case in point. The case participant, Tony, revealed that he had developed a series of linguistic practices for different online platforms, such as forums where he communicated with mainland Chinese and his two Facebook accounts, one for his friends and the other for students and colleagues he met while being a student teacher. Within a course-based Facebook group in which the present study is situated, then, it would be interesting to see in what ways student members perform identities accordingly with their practices in front of different audiences for different purposes.

The studies on identities in social media discussed above have also shown that the social constructionist approach to identity seems to be more appropriate, for it captures the dynamics, possibilities, and complexities of how people identify themselves through interacting with others in different communicative events. It is this approach that we overall adopt in this study. In Ivanič's (1998) words, identity from this perspective is conceptualized as "the result of affiliation to particular beliefs and possibilities which are available to . . . [individuals] in their social context" (p. 12). It is not fixed or primordial, as what essentialists argue, but socially situated. Identity is even shaped "from moment to moment" in the course of interaction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 591). Goffman (1959) described identity dramaturgically as "a product of scene that comes off . . . [and] a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a

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