Discourse, Context and Media ■ (■■■■) ■■■–■■■

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context and Media

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

When I need/want to: Normativity, identity, and form in user construals of 'talk-like' tweeting

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 9 May 2016
Received in revised form
20 September 2016
Accepted 25 September 2016

Keywords:
Talk
Orality
Twitter
Normativity
Reflexivity
Metalinguistic
Enregisterment

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is on how Twitter users construe *talk-like tweeting* in metalinguistic utterances. In a material of tweets containing or responding to explicit comparisons of tweeting to talking ($N=520$), a broad range of construals are identified, showing Twitter users associating talk-likeness with, e.g., notions of the textual representation of voice, of grammatical (in-)correctness, of accurately reflecting one's 'real-life' identity, and of regional or social variation in language use. These associations frequently serve normative functions, enforcing or contesting linguistic and discursive norms in both serious and playful ways. The findings offer a novel perspective on the oft-debated orality of computer-mediated discourse, providing a window on how a process of enregisterment (Agha, 2007) is instantiated and how language norms are actively negotiated by participants in everyday online language use on Twitter.

1. Introduction

The focus of the present study is on how users of the micro-blogging platform Twitter themselves construe *Talk-Like Tweeting* (TLT) when explicitly comparing Twitter discourse to talk (illustrated in Example 1).

(1) [sherry] **tweets like she talks**.....too fast

A material of tweets similar to (1) are analyzed in terms of how different conceptualizations and evaluations are expressed concerning tweeting, talking, and TLT.[1] Thus, the study aims to contribute a novel perspective on computer-mediated *orality* and to use metalinguistic activity as a window on how everyday language normativity is performed and how Twitter is *enregistered* (Agha, 2007; see Section 2).

Linguistic research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has frequently addressed the orality of written language in online contexts, often responding to popular assumptions that written CMC is somehow extensively spoken-like. Research has tended to reveal a more "mixed profile" in terms of how spoken-like CMC may be across different platforms (Baron, 2013, p. 148), along with a general emphasis on variation across CMC modes (Crystal, 2006; Dresner, 2005; Herring and Androutsopoulos, 2015; Herring et al., 2013). Orality is a broad notion with aspects ranging from linguistic form to the cultural and ideological (Dürscheid and Frehner, 2013, pp. 46–48; see also Koch and Oesterreicher, 1994). Thus, it can encompass anything from structural features statistically associated with spoken registers or genres (Biber, 1988; Jonsson, 2013) to cognitive or cultural traits and social values associated with oral as opposed to literate traditions (Jahandarie, 1999; Ong, 1982). Arguably, CMC research has tended to focus on the former rather than the latter, though various scholars target different levels of discourse. These range from textual features ("speech-imitating" respellings, expressive typography, "paralinguistic" features such as emoticons, etc.; see e.g. Baron, 2009; Darics, 2013; Mar, 2006; Tagg, 2011; Walther, 2005), to interactional organization (synchronicity, rhythm, conversational floor, turn-taking, etc.; see e.g. Herring, 1999; R. Jones, 2013; Meredith and Stokoe, 2014; Simpson, 2005; Örnberg Berglund, 2009).

Orality has thus been of interest to CMC scholars. However, while there is a growing body of linguistic and interaction-oriented research on Twitter (see e.g. Page, 2012, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Zappavigna, 2012, 2014), research focusing expressly on the spoken-like or conversational quality of Twitter discourse appears to be quite limited. As one example, Honeycutt and Herring (2009) note how some of Twitter's affordances enable and restrict conversational interaction and collaboration, focusing especially on Twitter's addressivity device (the @-symbol prefacing a username, which tags a user in a tweet). Similarly, Boyd

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[1] The acronym *TLT* is not introduced here as a theoretical innovation, but merely to enable ease of reference throughout the analyses presented below.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2016.09.003
2211-6958/

et al. (2010) discuss retweeting (i.e., reposting, and possibly commenting on, another user's tweet) as a conversational practice, characterizing the conversationality afforded by retweeting as relatively loose in terms of coherence and broad in participatory scope. In a study on Twitter targeting spoken-like linguistic form, [Author] (2014a) examined reported speech using informal reporting frames such as GO or BE *like*. Specifically, [Author] identified a number of strategies (e.g. marked spelling choices and typographic iconicity) employed by Twitter users to animate their speech reports in ways that are partly comparable to face-to-face animation strategies such as voice imitation or gestures. Studies like these indicate that Twitter affords some type of interactional conversationality, as well as some formal features that have been associated with spoken-likeness in research on other platforms. However, as with previous work, these studies approach computer-mediated orality 'from the outside.' That is, features of CMC platforms or CMC discourse are assessed as being potentially spoken-like or conversational based on external criteria selected by the researcher. By contrast, the present study takes a novel approach by attempting to identify endogenous, or discourse-internal, perspectives.

The specific discourse-internal perspectives in focus in this study are *user construals* of what it means to tweet like one talks. Thus, the study is designed to target metalinguistic activity on Twitter in which the discourse participants themselves do the conceptual and normative work of characterizing their linguistic register (cf. Agha, 2007, pp. 17–21). The study aims to determine what users of Twitter themselves associate with TLT, what the situated functions of these associations are, what norms they index, and how this reflexive activity contributes to the construction of Twitter as a register.

2. Enregisterment and Twitter

The kind of metalinguistic activity in focus here forms part of what Agha (2003, 2004, 2007) calls processes of *enregisterment*. A *register* may be regarded as a cultural model of discourse, a "classification of discourse [type] – linking speech repertoires to typifications of actor, relationship and conduct" (Agha, 2007, p. 145). In Agha's linguistic anthropological framework, registers are regarded as being produced and maintained through social practices, which means that the study of register is the study of "reflexive social processes" (Agha, 2007, p. 146). This view of register may thus be contrasted with, e.g., the approach preferred by Biber and Conrad (2009), which construes register as a scholarly perspective on discourse that "combines an analysis of linguistic characteristics that are common in a text variety with analysis of the situation of use of the variety" (p. 2). That is to say, the framework employed here focuses on register as constructed 'within' the discourse, reflexively produced and indexed by discourse participants, rather than as it may be constructed from the outside (cf. the approach to Facebook interaction taken in Stæhr (2015)). Agha's framework for thinking about register is thus preferred here because of how it corresponds with the aim of the present study.

Twitter is a widely used microblogging and social networking service (Boyd and Ellison, 2007), which is perhaps too diverse a platform for linguistic interaction to be described as a single register in a traditional sense. Users of Twitter range from private individuals sharing slice-of-life status updates intended for close friends to official user accounts of institutions or businesses sharing information or managing public relations. This diversity aside, however, the metalinguistic comparisons of tweeting to talking analyzed below form part of a process of enregisterment in Agha's sense. These Twitter users are positioning and negotiating the linguistic character of their platform, contributing to turning Twitter style into a socially recognizable register (cf. Johnstone, 2010). The notion of Twitter language as a differentiable register is broadly comparable to the conceptualization of SMS text messaging by Tagg (2011, p. 9) as a more-or-less distinct form of discourse, *Txt*, "that emerges through a configuration of texting strategies" (see also Shortis, 2007). However, in this regard, the purpose of the present study is not to identify such a configuration of "strategies" per se, but rather to identify how users metalinguistically index their own ideas of what characterizes Twitter discourse.

The social process of enregisterment is also, centrally, a performance of linguistic normativity, perhaps most obviously in terms of *competing valorizations* (Agha, 2007, pp. 157–159). That is, several models of the 'same' register may be at play in competition with one another, serving different normative agendas in terms of how they characterize the register. As a case in point regarding competing valorizations of Twitter in the public sphere, a 2011 *Telegraph* article attracted attention when it cited actor Ralph Fiennes blaming Twitter's famous 140 character length constraint for supposed linguistic decay (Jones, 2011). As this story was spread, some agreed whereas others came to Twitter's defense, rejecting language snobbery and claiming that Twitter communication is actually "making [the English language] better" (Greenfield, 2011). Research on CMC has to some extent addressed questions of how various modes of CMC may be evaluated (see e.g. Baron, 2008; Crystal, 2008; Thurlow and Brown, 2003; Turkle, 1996; Varnhagen et al., 2010), often with a focus on challenging popular, or 'folk,' valorizations. In a particularly explicit response to folk linguistic construals, Thurlow (2006) analyzed a large number of international press articles commenting on forms of communication such as text messaging. He found that construals of CMC in this material tended to be negatively framed, and tended to exaggerate the differences between online and offline language relative to scholarly descriptions. The present study does not further consider debates in the media, but continues in the vein of investigating the normative dimension of folk linguistic construals. The folk linguistics considered here is contained in, rather than produced about, computer-mediated discourse. What Twitter users do in comparing tweeting to talking, as the analyses will show, is to engage in the everyday performance of linguistic normativity.

3. Material and method

In line with the aim of investigating metalinguistic activity comparing tweeting with talking, this study uses a targeted retrieval method. Specifically, the material for this study comprise a set of retrievals of the search string "tweet/-s like [pronoun] talk/-s" for each of the pronouns *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, and *they*. This search string was settled on after initial test searches using various strings with roughly equivalent paradigmatic substitutions (e.g. *write* for *tweet* or *speak* for *talk*). Focusing solely on this string was preferred for three main reasons. Firstly, the string yielded a high ratio of relevant to irrelevant retrievals (that is, good precision in terms of targeting metalinguistic activity). Secondly, the inclusion of variant strings would raise problems of comparability (e.g. in terms of comparing one user's notion of talk-like tweeting to another's notion of speech-like writing). Thirdly, the avoidance of variants such as *write* for *tweet* permits a more stringent focus on how users of Twitter construe linguistic activity on Twitter specifically.

The searches were conducted in February, 2015, using the advanced search interface provided by Twitter (http://www.twitter.com/search-advanced). Separate searches were conducted for

Please cite this article as: Wikström, P., When I need/want to: Normativity, identity, and form in user construals of 'talk-like' tweeting. Discourse, Context and Media (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2016.09.003