Moments of sharing: Entextualization and linguistic repertoires in social networking

Jannis Androutsopoulos *

University of Hamburg, Institute for German Studies, Von-Melle-Park 6, 20146 Hamburg, Germany

In memory of Jens Normann Jørgensen (1951–2013).

Abstract

This paper reports findings of a case study of the networked language practices of two young users of the social networking site Facebook. Theoretically informed by sociolinguistics and computer-mediated discourse analysis, this paper contributes to the study of language and participation in social media by developing an empirical approach to sharing and by focusing on the relation between sharing practices and linguistic repertoires. The paper proposes an understanding of sharing as an interactional practice of entextualizing significant moments for a networked audience. Data collection and analysis follow a mixed-methods approach. The primary data consists of the participants' public Facebook timelines during a period of one year. It is complemented by qualitative interviews and systematic observation of the their digital literacy practices on Facebook. The analysis distinguishes three stages of sharing – selecting, styling, and negotiating – and then moves on to individual case studies, which illustrate how the two participants mobilise linguistic resources in order to share moments of transnational mobility with their audience. The findings show how subtle shifts in the selection, combination and negotiation of linguistic resources index participants' transnational trajectories and their orientation to particular subsets of their audience, and how the audience takes an active role in negotiating the modes and meanings of sharing in social networking.
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1. Introduction

This paper is a case study of the networked language practices of two individuals, 'Dema' and 'Zach' (pseudonyms are used throughout), during one calendar year. It examines how two young people of Greek background mobilise resources from their linguistic repertoires on their Facebook timelines in order to entextualize moments from their lives in a period of transnational mobility between Germany and Greece. The female participant, 'Dema', migrates from Greece to Germany and gradually adapts to her new social and linguistic environment. The male participant, 'Zach', relocates temporarily from his German hometown to Greece, thereby orienting to Greek language and everyday culture. Theoretically informed by sociolinguistics and computer-mediated discourse analysis, this case study aims to contribute to the analysis of language and participation in social media in two ways: by developing an empirical approach to practices of sharing in social media and by examining the relation of such practices to individual linguistic repertoires.

* Tel.: +49 40428387461.
  E-mail address: jannis.androutsopoulos@uni-hamburg.de.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 develops a working definition of sharing as a semiotic practice by which significant moments are entextualized for a networked audience. The concept of sharing itself and the three key components of its proposed understanding – entextualization, moments, and networked audience – are discussed in turn. Against this backdrop, the concept of linguistic repertoire is introduced and its relation to practices of sharing is outlined. Section 3 introduces the two participants, the data and methods of analysis. Section 4 develops an analysis of sharing practices in social media in terms of three stages: selecting, styling and negotiating. Section 5 then zooms in on the sharing practices of Dema and Zach. The analysis examines how their transnational trajectories both shape and are indexed by their selection and combination of linguistic resources, and how their networked audience takes an active role in negotiating the modes and meanings of sharing in the social media space.

2. Theoretical framework

In a paper that traces the emergence of 'sharing' as a keyword of Internet culture, John (2013:178) argues, ''sharing has become the word of choice to describe the way in which we participate in Web 2.0''. John suggests that *sharing* has two basic meanings in the context of social media: distribution and communication:

> 'Sharing on SNSs [social network sites] involves the distribution of digital content in the form of links, photos, video clips and more. In this sense, I share something by letting someone else have it as well. Yet sharing on SNSs is also, and importantly, about communication, particularly through the practice of updating one's status on Facebook or Twitter. Here, sharing is telling. Part of what we are encouraged to share on SNSs is our feelings (...) However, letting people know your opinion of current events, your location or any of the minutiae of your everyday life is, in Web 2.0, also called sharing. (John, 2013:175–176)

On Facebook, in particular, the first meaning of sharing – distribution – is closely associated to a command by the same name, which enables users to forward a contribution to their own timeline or that of a 'friend'[1] from their social network. Judging from my archive, a 'Share' command has been in use on Facebook at least since 2009, though it was first restricted to the distribution of embedded videos and only later extended to any status update. A study of sharing in this narrow sense would examine how users deploy the 'Share' command as a means of circulating semiotic resources though their network. In this paper, I follow John (2013) in orienting to a broader understanding of sharing as a concept that covers a wider set of language practices in social networking. However, sharing in this second sense is fuzzy and in need of specification, paraphrased by John (2013) as 'updating one's status', 'telling', or 'letting people know'.

Bauman and Briggs (1990:73) define entextualization as the process of ''making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting''. Unlike static definitions of text, which focus on the discourse structure and communicative function of text as completed artefact, the perspective of entextualization emphasizes the detachment of discourse from its original situational context and the recontextualization of the resulting text in new sites of discourse (Sung-Yul and Bucholtz, 2009; Giaxoglou, 2009). An analysis of entextualization involves ''exploring the means available to participants in performance situations to render stretches of discourse (...) into coherent, effective, and memorable texts'' (Bauman and Briggs, 1990:73–74).

Applied to an analysis of sharing in social networking sites, this understanding of entextualization must be adapted in two ways. First, practices of sharing include, but are not limited to the transformation of spoken discourse to written text. Sharing refers not only to things said, but also things represented by means of the semiotic resources social networking sites afford their participants. An analysis of social networking practices in terms of entextualization must therefore take into account the affordances of contemporary ''technologies of entextualization'' (Jones, 2009) and their situated appropriation by specific (groups of) participants. In his ethnographic research, Jones (2009) describes how young people entextualize social activities by means of keyboards, cameras, audio and video recorders, for example by making snapshots at a night club, which are then edited and eventually published as new units of text in social media. This approach extends the scope of entextualization from transcription (i.e. transformation of spoken into written linguistic signs) to semiotic representations of social activity that are produced by means of digital technologies, then recontextualized and interactively negotiated with an audience. A second aspect of rethinking entextualization in social networking sites and social media generally is its participatory character. Unlike traditional institutional discourse, in which agents of an institution use their power to represent by means of entextualization subjects and their discourse in highly controlled and regimented ways (cf. Sung-Yul and Bucholtz, 2009:486), social media offer a dispositive of participatory entextualization. They enable people to 'entextualize themselves into being' (to paraphrase Boyd, 2008) and allow them

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[1] The quotation marks indicate that the descriptor 'friend' refers to people who share a connection on Facebook. They do not imply a value judgement on the quality of this relationship.