

## The language of social media: Identity and community on the internet

Edited by Philip Seargeant | Caroline Tagg

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Seargeant and Tagg's edited volume addresses one of the most contemporary topics in sociolinguistics, namely social media. The book cover itself showcases a common feature in 'the language of social media,' that is, writing in 'all lower case,' which is identified as one of the 'common features of digital writing' by Danet (2001, p. 17). Not only the book title but also the editors' names lack traditional capitalization.

Sociolinguists have researched electronic communication for quite some time, for example, 'netspeak' and 'textspeak' (Crystal, 2004), but earlier studies mainly focused on email and the Internet in general. As various platforms of digital communication have become increasingly popular, sociolinguists started paying attention to more recent social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so forth. As the editors pointed out, 'by the end of the first decade of the 2000s, social network sites had become an integral part of modern life the world over, and figured as paradigmatic examples of the increased social-orientation of online activity' (2). Seargeant and Tagg's volume aims to 'critically examine these effects, and investigate the implications that emergent online practices are having for an understanding of language use in society' (2). In terms of how the topic relates to sociolinguistics in general, Seargeant and Tagg note 'two fundamental social dynamics':

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‘the presentation of self’ and ‘the building and maintenance of networked relationships’ (5).

In other words, the book primarily focuses on the issues of identity and community.

The volume has the introduction and ten chapters, which are divided into two parts: ‘The performance of identity on social media’ (Part I) and ‘The construction of community on social media’ (Part II). Chapter 1 (‘The performance of a ludic self on social network(ing) sites’, 23-45) by Ana Deumert discusses teenagers’ use of the mobile instant messaging service called MXit in Cape Town, South Africa. The school at which Deumert conducted her interviews was in ‘a low-income, working-class neighborhood with a long history of gangsterism’ (39), but she notes that ‘playfulness remains a pervasive feature of digital interaction’ (42). Deumert summarizes advantages of using SNSs essentially into two categories: ‘social connectedness’ and affordances of ‘informal and playful’ communication with others (24). In ch. 2 (‘Hoaxes, hacking and humor: analyzing impersonated identity on social network sites’, 46–64), Ruth Page addresses ‘the relationship between identity, impersonation and authenticity’ in Twitter and Facebook (46). She argues that one’s ability to distinguish inauthentic from authentic interactions has something to do with one’s role as an audience member, that is, an addressee or an auditor (62). Page concludes that participants tend to show a desire to remain authentic and trustworthy in social network sites (63).

Camilla Vásquez in ch. 3 (‘“Usually not one to complain but ...”: Constructing identities in user-generated online reviews’, 65–90) deals with the online consumer review site TripAdvisor. Vásquez analyzes 100 travel reviews and reviewers’ explicit and implicit identity claims, focusing on discursive devices facilitating online identity construction that is, ‘humor, cultural references, and intertextuality’ (66). She observes that negative reviewers frequently point out their reasonability in order to avoid being viewed as unfair or a

complainer (77). Vásquez further notes that reviewers construct either “inscribed” identities’ addressed explicitly or “invoked” identities’ through ‘humour or cultural references’ (86). Chapter 4 (‘Language choice and self-presentation in social media: The case of university students in Hong Kong’, 91–111) by Carmen Lee focuses on a group of Hong Kong bilingual undergraduate students and their multiple linguistic resources on Web 2.0 sites. Lee’s research is based mainly on their ‘techno-biographic interviews’ probing ‘participants’ online writing activities’ (96). Her findings suggest that the ‘new affordances or possibilities of social media’ enable bilingual Hong Kong college students to highlight certain characteristics of their identities through IM, blogs, and Facebook (108).

In ch. 5 (‘Entextualization and resemiotization as resources for identification in social media’, 112–136), Sirpa Leppänen and her colleagues identify ‘entextualization’ and ‘resemiotization’ as critical tools in identity work in social media and discuss ‘acts and processes of identification and disidentification’ rather than ‘identity’ itself (112), which they argue is a differentiating approach in their research in comparison to earlier studies. Based on their analysis of the Facebook page of a group of young Finnish Christians with a keen interest in extreme sports, Leppänen et al. assert that in social media ‘identities are constructed in active processes of identification and self-understanding, seeking or eschewing commonality, connectedness and groupness’ (112). In addition, they emphasize the importance of semiotic resources other than language, for example, ‘textual forms and patterns, still and moving images, sounds and cultural discourses’ (113). Michele Zappavigna in ch. 6 (‘Coffee tweets: Bonding around the bean on Twitter’, 139-160) explores the interpersonal dimension of Twitter, delving into coffeetweets. Using concepts such as ‘rallying affiliation’ (Knight, 2010) and ‘appraisal theory’ (Martin & White 2005), she discusses how speakers use linguistic resources to create a social, cultural, and experiential

connection with others. Emphasizing 'couplings of ideation and evaluation work,' Zappavigna shows that 'hashtagging operates to allow ambient affiliation around common ideational targets' (156).

The editors, Caroline Tagg and Philip Seargeant, revisit the concept of audience design in ch. 7 ('Audience design and language choice in the construction and maintenance of translocal communities on social network sites', 161–185). They discuss multilingual SNS users' perception of audience and linguistic choices in translocal communities. Tagg and Seargeant argue that three elements are critical for generating 'a communicative dynamic' in multilingual online communication: (1) 'the ways in which users tailor their posts to the expectations of their imagined readership'; (2) 'decisions over which code, variety, register and script to use'; and (3) 'the context in and towards which the communication is performed' (162). Analyzing three multilingual Europeans' Facebook posts, Tagg and Seargeant conclude that differing audience roles influence participants' linguistic and stylistic choices (180). In ch. 8 ('Youth, social media and connectivity in Japan' 186-207), Toshie Takahashi analyzes social media use by young Japanese people. In her attempt to answer the question 'why do young people engage with media?' (188), Takahashi stresses the notion of connectivity focusing on well-known Japanese notions such as *uchi* ('a sense of belonging together in family or social groups') (191) and *kuuki* ('the atmosphere of a situation to which all those involved are expected to pay respect') (193). She asserts that 'once people communicate with others using their real identity on the internet, the same social norms that exist in face-to-face communication in Japan can become reinforced in mediated online communication' (197–198).

The last two chapters are more macro-sociolinguistically oriented than the previous chapters, dealing with policy and activism issues. Aoife Lenihan in ch. 9 ('Investigating

language policy in social media: Translation practices on Facebook', 208-227) focuses on language policy regarding Facebook and translation apps used by the Irish language community. Lenihan notes that language policy is not necessarily 'unidirectional' and challenges the existence of the dichotomy between 'top down' and 'bottom up forces' in language policy (224). Chapter 10 ('Seeing Red: Social media and football fan activism', 228-254) by Frank Monaghan examines roles social media play in fan activism by investigating Spirit of Shankly's (the Liverpool football club supporter's union) protest against owners' policies. He observes that online as well as offline campaigns are used to nurture fan identity and build 'a network or community of geographically dispersed activists' (229).

As far as the topic is concerned, the volume is a timely welcome addition to the growing body of research on digital communication. Although national boundaries are not as meaningful as before in social media-based communication because of its potential for translocality, it is still a noticeable and praiseworthy feature that the volume covers different regions (including Japan, South Africa, and Ireland) and varied platforms (such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and TripAdvisor). Different degrees of success and novelty in analysis and content, which is often inevitable in an edited volume such as this, caused me to find certain chapters more intellectually stimulating and attention grabbing than others. A common thread through all ten chapters was not explicitly articulated by the editors, which may have given me the impression that certain chapters fit better than others. However, there is no doubt that the volume is useful as it expands the scope of research on social media and includes both micro- and macro- sociolinguistic perspectives in diverse venues and on platforms of digital communication.

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