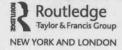# Social Media Discourse, (Dis)identifications and Diversities

Edited by
Sirpa Leppänen, Elina Westinen
and Samu Kytölä

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This volume serves as an in-depth investigation of the diversity of means and practices that constitute (dis)identification and identity construction in social media. Given the increasing prevalence of social media in everyday life and the subsequent growing diversity in the types of participants and forms of participation, the book makes the case for a rigorous analysis of social media discourses and digital literacy practices to demonstrate the range of semiotic resources used in online communication that form the foundation of (dis)identification processes. Divided into two major sections, delineating between the (dis)identification of the self across various social categories and the (dis)identification of the self in relation to the 'other', the book employs a discourse-ethnographic approach to highlight the value of this type of theoretical framework in providing nuanced descriptions of identity construction in social media and illuminating their larger, long-term societal and cultural implications. This volume is a key resource for researchers, and students in sociolinguistics, discourse studies, computer-mediated communication and cultural studies.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The seed for this book was planted in discussions in our research group on discourse and social practice in social media in the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. For the past ten years, our group have been investigating different kinds of social media activities—fan fiction, political mash-ups, buffalaxing, dog blogging, football forum discussions, multi-sited social media activities by young Christian extreme sports enthusiasts, and discourses of heavy metal and hip-hop—and have come to realize how, despite their variation and range, all these practices highlight the importance and meaningfulness of social media in contemporary life. For many people, social media have become key sites for everyday sociality and identity work, in ways that increasingly engage with diversity in different ways.

Another incentive for this book was given by our discussions with colleagues from around the world that reminded us that, while there is a great deal that social media discourse practices and their means, motivations and functions share across borders, continents and cultures, participation in them is always a fundamentally local phenomenon. Social media practices intertwine with and complement people's lives outside digital contexts, responding to and molding according to their personal concerns, interests and aspirations, as well as more general sociocultural, linguistic, discursive and ideological factors and circumstances.

A crucially important source of help in the cultivation of our budding ideas into this book has been the intellectual and academic hothouse of the *International Consortium for the Study of Language and Superdiversity* (InCoLaS) in which we have been involved since its foundation in 2012. Importantly, our involvement in InCoLaS has made us appreciate that the heterogeneity, complexity, polycentricity and mobility of participants and their resources, repertoires and normativities that we have been observing in social media, although intriguing as such, are not unique to activities afforded by technological and discursive environments of social media. Instead, we realized that they need to be seen as something that both exemplify and engage with complex diversity, or superdiversity, as articulated and developed, on the basis of Vertovec's original notion (2006, 2007), in recent sociolinguistic theory (see, e.g., Arnaut, 2016; Blommaert & Rampton

2011). Viewed through the superdiversity perspective, social media discourse practices highlight broader processes of diversification and mobility in the globalized world whereby the sociolinguistic object has become increasingly complex and unpredictable.

We are thus deeply indebted to our InCoLaS community and the many intellectually and scholarly insightful and open-minded discussions under its auspices. Thank you so much, Jan Blommaert, Piia Varis, Jeff van der Aa, Max Spotti, Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris, Karel Arnaut, Janus Spindler Møller, Martha Karrebæk, Lian Malai Madsen, Thomas Nørreby, Andreas Stæhr, Annelies Kusters, David Parkin, Angela Creese, Adrian Blackledge, Chris Stroud, Amiena Peck and Quentin Williams, as well as the many other senior and junior contributors to our joint activities. Outside InColaS, we have been very fortunate to have other wonderful colleagues to whom we also owe warm thanks for their helpful ideas, comments and encouragement—in particular, we are very thankful to Jannis Androutsopoulos, Crispin Thurlow, Marilyn Martin-Jones, Caroline Tagg, Sue Wright, Sari Pöyhönen and Saara Jäntti.

Although one of the goals of this book is to discuss and theorize how identity work and diversities are key aspects of social media discourse practices, its main contribution to their study are the 12 case studies. They report on a broad range of social media practices, involving participants and data representing different social media settings, countries, cultures and participant repertoires. Besides their empirical insights into digitally mediated identity work, these studies are also a good illustration of the range of theoretical and methodological approaches and combinations thereof, in use in language-oriented research on social media, including, for example, ethnography, linguistics, discourse studies and the study of multimodality.

These twelve studies demonstrate how the sociolinguistic study of social media is a field characterized by a great deal of diversity and variety. In our view, they also testify of the vitality and dynamism of this field—of the excitement of researchers who are curious about and willing to commit themselves to the serious study of social media practices and the rapid and often unanticipated changes that characterize both the technologies and the ways in which users take them up in their communication. Hence, we are deeply indebted to the contributors to this book for their enthusiasm and perseverance, and for sharing with readers their theoretical and empirical insights into this constantly evolving area of study.

We are also very grateful to the Academy of Finland for the research grant that enabled us to build an ambitious research venture, *Language and Superdiversity: (Dis)identification in social media* (2012–2016), one outcome of which is this book. Our two partners in this project, Saija Peuronen and Henna Jousmäki, have participated in significant ways in the development and fertilization of the ideas behind this book, despite the fact that their own research work is not explicitly featured in it. We are very grateful to you, Saija and Henna. Likewise, the support given to our work over the

years by the faculty of Humanities, and the Department of Languages in Jyväskylä has been very important in enabling us to rely on research assistance and to fully immerse ourselves in our work during several research retreats.

Special thanks go to our excellent research secretaries, too – Sonya Saffidine, Outi Etuaho, Piia Jäntti, Anni Aarnio, and Jenni Mäkelä – each of whom has helped us in different phases of our work. Without your assistance in the middle of our hectic academic lives we wouldn't have survived! Warm thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers of our book proposal and the individual chapters – thank you so much for your generous and helpful suggestions. Last but not least, we are very grateful to Allie Simmons of Routledge US for all her help and patience with us when we were struggling to get the book manuscript ready.

We hope that this book succeeds in highlighting the mutual embeddedness of identity work and diversities in social life in and with social media, as well as showcasing the vitality and multifariousness of sociolinguistic, ethnographic and discourse analytic research in this area of study that is, in our view, ready to fully flourish.

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Jyväskylä, August 25, 2016
Sirpa, Elina & Samu

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1 Introduction
Social Media Discourse, (Dis)Identifications and Diversities

Sirpa Leppänen, Samu Kytölä, Elina Westinen and Saija Peuronen

The focus in this volume is on *social media discourse, (dis)identifications and diversities*. It demonstrates how particular ways of mobilizing verbal, discursive and other semiotic resources serve as means for identity work (Blommaert, 2003; Bucholtz, 2003), involving acts, processes and practices of (dis)identification as essential aspects of sociality in social media. It will also illustrate how such social action also increasingly engages with a range of diversities in social media.

In this introductory chapter we present the focus and aims of this volume and introduce the case studies included in it. In addition, we clarify the key coordinates of this research. First, we describe the sociolinguistic and discourse-ethnographic approach taken in this book to the investigation of social media discourse practice. Second, we discuss social media as informal and interest-driven activity spaces (Leppänen, Kytölä, Jousmäki, Peuronen, & Westinen, 2014) with their emergent orders of normativity (Silverstein, 1976; Blommaert, 2010; Varis & Wang, 2011) in which social media participants, drawing on particular semiotic resources and in the context of specific activities and interactions, engage with (dis)identification. Third, we review the ways in which identity and identity work have been theorized and investigated in previous language-oriented work on social media activities and interactions and, with the help of recent critical discussion of identity theory, give an overall idea of the dimensions involved in identity work in social media, emphasizing its basis in the choices human actors make, under particular situated sociocultural, discursive and normative conditions, and the multiple dimensions and scales (potentially) involved in identity work. Fourth, this chapter discusses how, like identity, diversity can also be seen as a complex and multifaceted notion that ranges from the diversity of communicative sites and contexts, to participants and their activities, interactions and communicative repertoires and resources. Our discussion of the key theoretical coordinates of the volume will help the reader to place the empirical cases presented in the book, along with their takes on social media, identity work and diversity, within the conceptual space they demarcate. Finally, we highlight the general ethical guidelines in research on social media.

The Volume in a Nutshell

In this volume, we argue that, whereas there is a growing body of sociolinguistic studies focusing on identity in the globalizing late modern world (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Blommaert, 2005; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2008), identity is also a timely topic in the specific context of digital social media. While acknowledging that the digital divide is still very much a global reality, with the majority of the world's population living without the internet and thus without social media (P. Norris, 2001; Schradie, 2011), this volume argues that for a large portion of the world's population[1] social media serve as important sites for everyday life, as ways of 'being in the world', interacting with others, sharing and organizing information and collaboratively constructing culture, both in ways that resemble and intertwine with ways predating and spanning the internet, and in completely new ways.

Broadly, the volume approaches the study of social media from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and discourse-ethnographic studies. In doing so, it contributes to an emergent tradition of language and literacy oriented research in which identity work is increasingly a key topic (see, e.g., Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011a; Tannen & Trester, 2013; Barton & Lee, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014a). In this research domain, identity work in social media is also beginning to be acknowledged as 'normal' and mundane practice instead of as something exceptional, exotic or particular to only specific social or age groups, as was sometimes the case in the early days of internet research (see Crystal, 2004; Herring, 2008).

This volume shows, first, how social media participants, via multi-semiotic and discursive means, engage in identity work in the sociocultural contexts of particular social media, networks, affinity groups or communities of practice. As is explained in more detail in the following, such identity work can, theoretically, involve a number of different kinds of processes and practices (and their combinations), each of which relate to particular possibilities and ways of understanding, orienting to, and constructing 'identity.' These possibilities and ways can be clarified with reference to the critical revision of recent identity theories suggested by Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 17–20), the main aspects of which are the following:

- categorical and/or relational identification of oneself and/or others by oneself/others,
- categorical and/or relational disidentification of oneself and/or others by oneself/others,
- self-understanding and social location and
- commonality, connectedness and groupness.

Such a multidimensional framework is helpful in conceptualizing the possibilities of and choices made in identity work in social media. As shown in

the following, it also provides us with a useful perspective from which to pinpoint and discuss the particular orientations taken in the individual studies included in this volume, and thus highlight the particular dimensions of identity work they analytically focus on.

Second, another key aim of the volume, and a theme running through all of the empirical cases included in it, is *diversities*. In this volume, diversity is approached as a complex, plural notion that involves social diversity as well as linguistic and semiotic diversity—diversity of participants, diversity in identity work in, between and across social formations, and diversity of resources of expression, communication and action. Diversity is thus seen as something pertaining to contexts, individuals and groups, as well as to discourse and social practice. Diversity can also involve the kind of complexity that has recently been characterized as *superdiversity* (Arnaut, 2012/2016; Blommaert, 2015; Meissner, 2015).

The twelve case studies included in this volume focus on different social media contexts involving participants from different corners of the world and exemplifying diverse online activities and interactions. These studies will tease out some of the particularities with which participants in social media verbalize and visualize themselves and others into being as particular kinds of social actors with particular kinds of social connections, allegiances and affinities. While doing so, the contributions in this book also demonstrate the value and efficacy of their analytic tools and methods, provided by sociolinguistics, ethnography, discourse studies, the study of multimodality and the ways in which these offer the kind of precision and sensitivity needed for a nuanced description of the semiotic resources mobilized in identity work in social media and the meanings they help to generate.

The 12 Case Studies in this Book

This volume is organized into two main sections. The first part is labeled "Identifications and disidentifications with others" and the second one "Identifications of the self", according to the primary focus of their analyses of identity work.

Part 1 begins with an exploration of a transgressive gender category by **Halonen** and **Leppänen**. Their focus is on social media as sites for constructing, negotiating and contesting gender and sexuality. Drawing on fictional short stories aimed at girls and young women as their data, they analyze the intricate ways in which the stories construct and critically investigate the category of the so-called pissis girls, a particular version of 'bad young femininity' in contemporary Finland. Their analysis shows how the discursive strategy of excess is used as a means for conducting nuanced sociocultural analysis and for both identifying with and disidentifying from the social category.

In his chapter, **Kytölä** examines popular discourses on nationalism in the context of web forum discussions of men's national football teams and that

of Finland, in particular. He focuses on the 'banal nationalist' tradition of the playback and singing of national anthems before international football matches, exploring the discursive and semiotic strategies online discussants draw on to categorize, represent and contest nationalism. His analysis shows how ambivalent stances emerge among football followers on the different aspects of ethnic diversification of national teams in a culture character-ized by growing mobility and diversity. Moreover, he addresses the ways in which football followers utilize ambivalent sarcasm, satire and jocularity in their identification and disidentification processes pertaining to diversifying national teams and even particular players with multiethnic family back-grounds and transcultural life histories.

The chapter by **Zhukova Klausen** deals with the complexity of transna-tional belonging in a Denmark-based Russian-speaking discussion forum. Guided by its orientation to (dis)identification as *subjectivation*, the chap-ter looks at how diverse discursive and semiotic resources mediate identifica-tion and disidentification practices through which belonging is constructed. It examines ways in which participants in computer-mediated social inter-action mobilize, on one hand, psy(chology) discourses and practices that construct transnational living as problematic and, on the other hand, resist this kind of problematization and refuse to identify themselves with the proposed transnational subjectivity.

Van Nuenen and **Varis** investigate the practices whereby a popular, pro-fessional American travel blogger is assigned with an expert identity. Look-ing at the construction of expertise both algorithmically and discursively, their analysis shows how the blogger's identity is a discursive composite of two roles—that of a travel expert and of a life coach. Furthermore, they demonstrate how the 'enregisterment' of expertise can be usefully conceptu-alized and analyzed in terms of the Goffmanian notion of 'team', whereby identity construction can be seen as a 'team effort' to which not only the travel blogger but also his blogger peers and his varied audiences contribute.

The chapter by **Bortoluzzi** discusses practices and processes of self- and other-(dis)identification in the context of online popular forensics relating to a recent murder case in Italy. Using participant interviews as her material, the author concentrates on analyzing how social media participants, shar-ing the belief that the murder suspects were innocent, engaged in processes of identifying themselves as members of what became to be seen as a 'pro-innocent' community, as well as disidentified themselves from those who took the opposite view, the 'pro-guilt' community. Of particular interest in the study are the discursive formulations of empathy and dyspathy that con-tribute to these processes, and the intricate ways in which these are enacted both online and offline.

To conclude the first part, **Georgakopoulou** investigates two sets of data, one featuring the interactions of an ethnically and linguistically diverse group of young Facebook friends and the other YouTube commentaries on a spoof video based on an incident of a male politician attacking two female

members of parliament, originally shown live in Greek TV news. In focus in her analysis are processes of alignment at the intersection of social media users' interactional practices and the affordances of participation offered by social media. Drawing on small stories analysis and the study of interaction, she focuses on two systematic interactional patterns of doing alignment, ritual appreciation and knowing participation. Overall, her findings advance our understanding of how participants manage social relations of (dis)identification in the interplay between media affordances, actual communication choices and participation frameworks.

The second part of the book, "Identifications of the Self", begins with a chapter by Tagg and Seargeant. Drawing on a questionnaire-based survey of Facebook users as their data, the authors examine the extent to which people's online identifications are shaped by the social roles they inhabit offline, as well the extent to which they are aware of the likely trajectories and potential accessibility of their postings, and thus which social roles they deem relevant in the online context. The chapter thus highlights how offline social roles are made relevant in social media contexts as an interactional resource for identity work and relationship building as well as how users' perceptions of their roles (and the social expectations which typically accompany them) may potentially shape or constrain what they post and how they manage their online communication.

The chapter by Georgalou looks at the role of time and temporality in identification in social media interaction. More specifically, in a case study, based on a more extensive discourse-ethnographic investigation of Greek Facebook users, she examines how the user discursively constructs himself as a 'chronological being', positions himself vis-à-vis time and makes aspects of time relevant in his Facebook interactions. On the basis of her analysis, Georgalou argues that the construction of age and time identity is essentially an interactive and collaborative task and that identifications with cultural elements, such as music, constitute powerful indices of affiliation, belonging, commonality, alignment, and groupness.

Age identification is also central in Nishimura's chapter. With the help of both a corpus-based analysis of pronominal choices and a close qualitative linguistic and textual analysis, including features associated with 'role language', the author examines blogs by senior Japanese men and women. While positing that two conceptual identities—the blogger and the character—are relevant in the analysis of such blogs, the author demonstrates diversity in blogging styles, highlighting how both gender and age have an impact on the particular ways in which senior bloggers compose their texts.

Lehtonen also engages with questions of gender and age. Her particular focus is on the close analysis of stories by Finnish 'bronies' (a portmanteau of *brother* and *pony*), adult young men who are interested in the *My Little Pony* franchise and find it important for their identity construction. She examines the intersections of gender, sexuality and age in these fans' brief life narratives posted on a discussion forum, and argues that, while bronies

do gender in nonnormative ways in the context of social media, age and sexuality should also be mapped in order to understand the overall picture. Her discussion showcases that, despite their shared bronyhood and fandom, the participants also exhibit a great deal of diversity in their identification processes.

Focusing on YouTube instructional videos on Pidgin (Hawai'i Creole) and Konglish (Korean English), Higgins, Furukawa and Lee explore the production of social media content to find out whether and to what degree social media can provide new affordances for representing and valorizing sociolinguistic diversity by studying how video producers (dis)identify with mainstream metapragmatic messages, or ideological statements about language. On the basis of their analysis they argue that the videos end up legitimizing these two marginalized and stigmatized languages as linguistic systems in their own right, and challenging the valorization of mainstream varieties of hegemonic languages, thereby contributing to the value accorded to multilingualism.

In the final chapter of the volume, Westinen explores the multi-semiotic and polycentric construction of the self as Other in social media, in the specific context of Finnish hip hop. By drawing on Finnish rap music videos by artists of immigrant origin as data, she discusses the ways in which these 'Black' artists and entertainers negotiate their role in society, and in the hip-hop scene. They engage in various (dis)identification processes, some of which draw on (yet also run counter to) 'traditional' identity categories such as ethnicity, and on gendered and racialized stereotypes of 'Black', African men to raise awareness and tolerance, thereby exhibiting an 'in-your-face' type of Otherness.

A Sociolinguistic and Discourse-Ethnographic Approach to Digital Discourse

The vantage point taken in this volume and its case studies can be broadly defined as a sociolinguistic and discourse-ethnographic approach to digital discourse. Such an approach has been highlighted in online-ethnographic work, where we can see a shift from solely medium-related research, focusing on the technologies, software, platforms and sites to user-related approaches, to what people *actually do—why* and *how* they adopt and appropriate linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources, and *what* discursive and sociocultural *meanings and effects* are generated thereby. The specific sociolinguistic orientation in such studies is manifest in the close attention they pay to the emergence and situated use of particular linguistic and discursive resources in social action and interaction in the context of specific affinity spaces and communities, and the social meanings and norms of language use (see, e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos, 2012; Leppänen & Peuronen 2012; Stæhr, 2014).

For most of the chapters, their discourse-ethnographic orientation involves an engagement in focused, systematic and long-term online observation and analysis of social media participants' linguistic, semiotic and other discursive choices and patterns in the context of their activities and interactions in digital settings for the purposes of describing and explaining the social meanings, identities and relations constructed in and via these. In their own ways, the case studies in this volume highlight and testify to the value of investigating social media discourse practice as an important topic in ethnographic research. All except three of the contributions do this via detailed qualitative analysis of the semiotic and discursive choices and patterns made in the social medium under investigation. In two cases (the questionnaire study on Facebook 'behavior' by Seargeant and Tagg and the interview study on the identification processes of the online community by Bortoluzzi), the main focus is, in turn, on the participant views and evaluations of identity work in social media communication. In addition, in one study (Nishimura), qualitative analysis of discourse is complemented by corpus analysis.

However, as is the case in online ethnography more generally (see Androutsopoulos, 2008; Varis, 2016), this volume also underlines the importance of investigation into the connections between and interfaces of digital (online) and 'otherwise mediated' (offline) discourse. While close and detailed analyses of online data continue to be a worthwhile target of investigation, of equal importance are the polycentric, transmedial aspects of ethnographic research that follows actors and their communicative practices across online and offline spaces (see Androutsopoulos, 2015, on 'blended ethnography'; see Marcus, 1998, and Stæhr, 2014, on 'multi-sited ethnography'; for an overview on approaches in digital ethnography, see Varis, 2016). Indeed, social media "may constitute only one of the settings in which the participants or groups engage in shared activities—online activities may intertwine with their activities in offline contexts" (Leppänen et al., 2014). Such fluid connections between online and offline activities are nowadays seen as important in digital media research and have been called for by many scholars (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2008; Barton & Lee, 2013, pp. 178–183; Leppänen et al., 2014; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014b; Stæhr, 2015; Kytölä, 2016, Peuronen, forthcoming).

Although sociolinguistics, ethnography and (different approaches to) discourse studies feature strongly in the volume, many studies also draw on insights provided by other fields. Significantly, many address identity work in social media as something that encompasses the use of diverse semiotic resources (see the chapters by Westinen, Georgalou, and van Nuenen & Varis, in particular). Thus, in the same way as in other recent language-oriented studies on digital media (e.g., Barton & Lee, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014a; see also Page, 2016), another key emphasis in this book is that the language of social media is defined in a broad, inclusive way. To this end, the book highlights the importance of other modalities besides the verbal