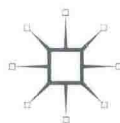


edited by philip seargeant and caroline tagg

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identity and community on the internet



The Language of Social Media

Identity and Community on the Internet

Edited by

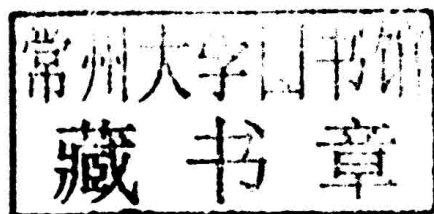
Philip Seargeant

The Open University, UK

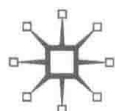
and

Caroline Tagg

University of Birmingham, UK



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First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–1–137–02930–0

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

The Language of Social Media

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Also by Philip Seargeant

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Also by Caroline Tagg

THE DISCOURSE OF TEXT MESSAGING

THE POLITICS OF ENGLISH: Competition, Conflict, Co-existence
(co-edited with Ann Hewings)

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Notes on Contributors

Ana Deumert is Associate Professor in Linguistics at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She has worked, taught and researched on three continents: Africa, Europe and Australia. Her research programme is located within the broad field of African sociolinguistics and has a strong interdisciplinary focus. She is one of the co-authors of *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (2000/2009), has edited books on language history and language contact, and published a monograph on the sociolinguistic history of Afrikaans (*The Dynamics of Cape Dutch*, 2004). Her present work focuses on digital communication and she is currently working on a book titled *Sociolinguistics and Mobile Communication*.

Henna Jousmäki is preparing her doctoral dissertation on the discourse aspects of Christian metal music and identity in the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. Her research interests include the sociology of language and religion, language and identities in popular culture, as well as new media discourses.

Samu Kytölä is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. His research areas include multicultural/multilingual football (soccer) discourses, sociolinguistic diversity in Finland, non-native and non-Standard Englishes, multilingualism *vis-à-vis* societal and individual inequalities, and the ethnography of ways of writing, particularly internet writing. He has recently worked in three projects: 'The Centre of Excellence for the Study of Variation, Contacts and Change in English', 'Multilingualism as a Problematic Resource', and 'Language and Superdiversity: (Dis)identification in Social Media'. Besides co-authoring the *National Survey on the English Language in Finland: Uses, Meanings and Attitudes* (2011), recent publications have appeared in *Routledge Critical Studies in Multilingualism* and Palgrave Macmillan's *Language and Globalization* series.

Carmen Lee is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interests lie mainly in language and literacy practices in new media. She has published and carried out research projects specifically on text-making practices, multilingualism and code choice on the internet, especially on Web 2.0 sites. She is also interested in the interaction between online and offline linguistic practices in everyday lives.

Aoife Lenihan recently completed her doctoral studies at the School of Languages, Literature, Culture and Communication, University of Limerick, Ireland. Her doctoral research is titled: 'The Interaction of Language Policy, New Media and Minority Languages'. Her research is primarily situated in the field of sociolinguistics, her overall interest being in language and popular culture, and her research interests include media discourse, language and globalization, the commercialization of minority languages and multilingualism. Recent publications include "'Join our community of translators": language ideologies and/in Facebook', in Thurlow and Mroczek's *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media* (2011).

Sirpa Leppänen is a Professor in the Department of Languages at University of Jyväskylä, Finland. With her research team (www.socialmediadisourses.fi), she investigates the ways in which resources provided by languages and discourses are used by individuals and groups in social media and the ways in which such resources are used for the collaborative creation, negotiation and appropriation of a participatory social and cultural reality offline and online. In her own work, she has approached these questions within a framework provided by sociolinguistics, discourse studies, ethnography and cultural studies, and looked at a range of social media settings and discourses. Particular questions investigated by her have included (1) the impact of globalized translocal social media on language choice and use, (2) linguistic and discursive heterogeneity as a semiotic resource for social interaction and cultural production in social media, (3) constructing and regulating identities and communality online, and (4) interventions and parody as a means for discrimination, social critique and activism. In addition, with the research team, Research Unit for Variation, Contacts and Change in English (www.jyu.fi/varieng), she has conducted a nation-wide survey on Finns' uses of and attitudes to the changing sociolinguistic situation in Finland, and the role of English in this change.

Frank Monaghan is Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in the Centre for Language and Communication at The Open University, UK. His interest in Liverpool Football Club began in the mid-1960s when, as an 8-year-old boy, it was possible to wander into the team's training ground and changing room, gawp at your heroes and collect their autographs. Modern football is very different and fans' efforts to assert an alternative identity to the consumerist role globalizing corporatism seeks to ascribe to them provide rich evidence of both their collective creativity and their semiotic savvy. An applied linguist by trade, Frank is keen

to explore language and football and to promote fans' creative use of newer technologies and multimodal resources as a significant and somewhat overlooked research area. He is currently researching fans' banners as markers of identity and sites of creativity.

Ruth Page is a Reader in the School of English at the University of Leicester. Her research interests include storytelling, sociolinguistics and social media. Her publications draw on literary-critical and discourse-analytic approaches to narratives in conversational, fictional and online contexts. She is author of *Stories and Social Media* (2012) and *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology* (2006).

Saija Peuronen is a junior researcher at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä. Combining sociolinguistic, ethnographic and discourse-analytic approaches, her research explores how linguistic, discursive and semiotic means are drawn on to build socio-cultural affiliations and identifications both in social media spaces and offline settings. Particularly, in her ongoing PhD research, she examines the ways in which Christian extreme sports enthusiasts construct participation in their online/offline communities through heteroglossic language practices.

Philip Seargeant is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the Centre for Language and Communication, The Open University. He is author of *The Idea of English in Japan: Ideology and the Evolution of a Global Language* (2009), *Exploring World Englishes: Language in a Global Context* (2012) and *From Language to Creative Writing* (with Bill Greenwell, 2013); he is also editor of *English in Japan in the Era of Globalization* (2011) and *English in the World Today: History, Diversity, Change* (with Joan Swann, 2012).

Caroline Tagg is Lecturer in English Language and Applied Linguistics in the English Department at the University of Birmingham. Her research interests are in language and creativity, and in the application of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis to the investigation of digital communication. She is author of *The Discourse of Text Messaging* (2012), co-editor (with Ann Hewings) of *The Politics of English: Conflict, Competition, Co-existence* (2012), and has published articles in journals such as the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *World Englishes* and *Writing Systems Research*.

Toshie Takahashi is Professor in the School of Culture, Media and Society, Waseda University, Tokyo. She was appointed faculty fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, 2010–2011 and, before that, visiting research fellow at the Department

of Education in the University of Oxford. Her current research is an ethnography centred on cross-cultural research into youth and digital media in the US, the UK and Japan.

Camilla Vásquez is an Associate Professor in the Department of World Languages at the University of South Florida. Her research centres on discourse and identity in various social, professional, and online domains. Her recent work has appeared in *Narrative Inquiry*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Research on Language and Social Interaction* and *TEXT & TALK*.

Elina Westinen is currently a junior researcher in the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä and in the 'Language and Superdiversity: (Dis)identification in Social Media' research project (funded by the Academy of Finland, 2012–2016). Combining insights provided by sociolinguistics (of globalization), discourse studies and ethnography, her research looks into multilingual language use, discursive practices and (dis)identifications in popular culture, particularly in (translocal) hip hop cultures. In her PhD thesis, she explores how Finnish rap artists construct authenticity in their lyrics and interviews via linguistic and discursive repertoires, on several scale-levels and orienting towards various centres of norms.

Michele Zappavigna is a Lecturer in the School of Arts and Media at the University of New South Wales. Her major research interest is in the language of social media and how users engage in ambient affiliation online. She is author of *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media* and *Tacit Knowledge and Spoken Discourse* (2012), *Researching Language and Social Media* (with Ruth Page, Johann Unger and David Barton, forthcoming) and *Discourse and Diversionary Justice: An Analysis of Ceremonial Redress in Youth Justice Conferencing* (with J. R. Martin and Paul Dwyer, forthcoming).

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Introduction: The language of social media

Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg

1 Early links in the chain

In 1929, the Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy wrote a short story called 'Chain-links' in which a group of friends discuss the fundamental interconnectedness of the modern world:

Let me put it this way: Planet Earth has never been as *tiny* as it is now. It shrunk – relatively speaking of course – due to the quickening pulse of both physical and verbal communication. This topic has come up before, but we had never framed it quite this way. We never talked about the fact that anyone on Earth, at my or anyone's will, can now learn in just a few minutes what I think or do, and what I want or what I would like to do. (2007[1929], p. 21)

The character who makes this speech goes on to argue that everyone in the world is related to everyone else through a series of chains of acquaintance, and that no-one is more than five acquaintances away from anyone else on the planet. Every individual is only six degrees of separation away from any other.

Karinthy's story is not a scientific hypothesis – it is more of a thought experiment – but the underlying idea became the basis for a great deal of the research and theorizing that has been conducted into the social networks that people form, and the way that society as a whole is structured around such networks. Part of Karinthy's argument was that changing patterns of social relations are a product of the ways in which technologies – such as the telegraph and telephone in the 1920s – 'shrink' our notions of time and space: the fact that ever-evolving

communications technologies allow us to stay in touch even when we are scattered across distant parts of the globe, rendering geographical boundaries increasingly less important. In other words, globalization changes our social and cultural relations; and communications technologies are a major driver behind such change.

Almost 80 years after the publication of 'Chain-links', Karinthy's idea was used as the name for what is often described as the first social network site: SixDegrees.com (boyd & Ellison, 2008).¹ Launched in 1997 – less than ten years after the invention of the World Wide Web – SixDegrees.com did not last very long itself, but the model it developed was adopted and modified by other influential sites: first by Friendster, then MySpace, and then Facebook. 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. The shift that occurred in the nature of the web in the early years of the new millennium – the move from the idea of Web 1.0 to Web. 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2012 [2005]) and the rise of social media – saw an explosion in online interactivity and user participation. The web was no longer a place where you went predominantly to consume content and information. It became a place where you participated; a dynamic space that was shaped (both intentionally and inadvertently) by your own actions and contributions. And social network sites, purpose-built to facilitate social interaction, grew to become amongst the most used sites on the web (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012).

One of the results of the rise of sites such as Facebook is that they have transformed the ways in which people can interact. They do not simply offer an alternative way of engaging in the same forms of communicative interaction that were available prior to their emergence; they also provide a number of notably different communicative dynamics and structures. Just as the telegraph and telephone before them introduced new possibilities for the way people could communicate – and with this altered both communicative practices and patterns of social relations – so online social media are having a profound effect on the linguistic and communicative practices in which people engage, as well as the social groupings and networks they create. The aim of this book is to critically examine these effects, and investigate the implications that emergent online practices are having for an understanding of language use in society. To this end, it brings together a collection of studies exploring the linguistic and communicative practices being used on social media in order to shed light on this important new form

of communication and some of the influential roles it is playing in contemporary society.

2 Sharing, connecting and commenting: definitions of social media

This introduction has a twofold purpose: to outline the language and communication issues that exist for social media; and to delineate the topics, contexts and problems that the book addresses. The concept of social media is an extremely broad one. The focus of the book is primarily on those internet-based sites and platforms which facilitate the building and maintaining of networks or communities through the sharing of messages and other media. Social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Line and microblogging sites such as Twitter have this as their primary function and thus figure as a central focus for the book. Yet other forms of social media, such as YouTube and TripAdvisor, also increasingly feature social network capabilities, and thus also give rise to important issues concerning communication and language use which will be covered in the book. Given the broad scope of the concept of 'social media', and in order to begin drawing out the nature of the communicative and sociolinguistic issues it presents, it is worth first giving a brief overview of its development and definition.

A number of competing terms have been used to highlight different elements of the changes that have taken place in the web over the last decade or so. Michael Mandiberg, in his introduction to the *Social Media Reader*, lists various names and phrases that have been used to refer to the phenomena that constitute this phase in the use and development of the internet (Mandiberg, 2012). As well as 'Web 2.0' (given currency by Tim O'Reilly), these include: 'user-generated content'; 'convergence culture' (coined by Henry Jenkins); 'the people formerly known as the audience' (coined by Jay Rosen); 'participatory media'; and 'peer production' (coined by Yochai Benkler). Each of these defines the general phenomenon from a slightly different perspective, reflecting the particular interests of the analyst who coined or employed the term. What they all have in common, with the exception of the first, is an acknowledgment of the *social* nature of practices that constitute modern online activity. In other words, the users of the services and sites which make up the modern web are themselves central to its nature – the audience or consumer is actively engaged in production (and not solely passively engaged in consumption) – and thus previous dichotomies such as author/audience and amateur/professional are becoming porous.

The first term in the list, 'Web 2.0', indicates a new stage in the ongoing development of the web. It is a metaphor which has been adopted in other contexts (for example, Wael Ghonim's *Revolution 2.0*, which documents the role played by social media in the Arab Spring of 2011), and its use from the mid-2000s onwards was meant to signal that a new model was in operation which had replaced the first phase of internet development (which can symbolically be marked as ending with the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2001).

Scholars such as Leppänen *et al.* (this volume) define social media as including any digital environment which involves interaction between participants (see also Barton & Lee, 2012, p. 3), and it is this broad definition that we adopt in this book. The essence of social media, therefore, is a focus on the facilitating of participation and interaction, with the result that the 'content' of what is developed and shared on the internet is as much a product of participation as it is of traditional creative and publishing/broadcast processes. The expectation therefore becomes that this content is less regulated, more fluid, and more diverse, and that the dividing line between private or personal communication and publishing or broadcasting can be increasingly blurred.

The sites and platforms on which this happens are various and widespread, and increasingly applications and services which have a different primary purpose (e.g. the selling of books, the swapping of music) also include and make extensive use of commenting or sharing capabilities which allow users to interact with each other. Thus, for example, media sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube have networking features, and, in a broad sense, have become social network sites themselves. Also in this category are wikis – websites produced collaboratively by users – which, despite their focus on content rather than connections, bring people with shared interests together. More traditional websites where content is posted for user consumption – such as newspaper sites and the TED website, which streams short conference talks – now also enable users to comment on the content posted there and thus to interact with each other. Furthermore, there is a growing tendency towards interconnecting different services, so that, for example, sharing options via Facebook or Twitter are integrated into operating systems (e.g. Apple's iOS), thus allowing any activity performed in any application to be linked to the social networks managed through these sites. The result is that the ability to share the details of one's interaction with the internet, and through this to connect to people and organizations, has become a fundamental part of the architecture of the online world.