

Research Project

Relational work in Facebook

Project funded by own resources

Project title Relational work in Facebook

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Organisation / Research unit

Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften / English Linguistics (Locher)

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Status Completed

This project analyses language use in the profile pages and Status Updates of 74 Facebook users from Switzerland and 58 from Great Britain. The aim of the study is to explore how users create identities through language, i.e., what ‘acts of positioning’ (Davies and Harré 1990) they engage in, and how this practice is linked to relational work. We base our work on a post-modernist understanding of identity, which sees identity as fluid, dynamic, and as constructed by individuals in interaction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) through linguistic, para- and extralinguistic means. We maintain that when individuals use language in interaction they are performing acts of positioning, since they are underlining the existence of a particular self which can be observed by others at a specific moment in time (Davies and Harré 1990). Within such a public space, where acts of positioning are performed in front of witnesses, the positioning of self and other becomes even more interesting, since by claiming ‘I am a friend of x’, for example, I am also positioning ‘x as a friend of mine’.

A systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of the profile pages and Status Updates of our pilot study group (10 users from Switzerland and 10 users from Great Britain) has shown that Facebookers employ a variety of implicit and explicit acts of positioning. Furthermore, our study shows that Status Updates are used for primarily assertive and expressive purposes (cf. Nastri, Peña and Hancock 2006), or more specifically to provide information on one’s state of mind (e.g., happy, angry, etc.), to refer to actions in progress, to refer to future actions, and to reflect on past events. Within these realisations of speech act types individuals do identity work, i.e., they construct their identities as students, employees, wives, etc. The next stage of the research will see us compile a catalogue of such identity acts and to explore whether existing results are indicative of idiosyncratic or group specific tendencies.

We hope to contribute to work on interactional sociolinguistics which emphasises the importance of appreciating what categories individuals find meaningful or important themselves. Facebook offers interesting possibilities in this regard, since in this particular computer-mediated context we find the practice of self-labelling; individuals use the profile pages and Status Updates to “type [themselves] into being” (Sundén, 2003:3, as quoted in Boyd and Ellison 2007).

Financed by

University funds

Add publication

Published results

437576, Bolander, Brook; Locher, Miriam A., Constructing identity on Facebook : report on a pilot study, 978-3-8233-6613-3, Performing the self, Publication: Book Item (Buchkap., Lexikonartikel, jur. Kommentierung, Beiträge in Sammelbänden etc.)

2434599, Bolander, Brook; Locher, Miriam A., "Peter is a dumb nut": Status updates and reactions to them as 'acts of positioning' in Facebook, 1018-2101, Pragmatics, Publication: JournalArticle (Originalarbeit in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift)

2434615, Locher, Miriam A.; Bolander, Brook, Relational work and the display of multilingualism in two Facebook groups, 3-643-90435-5 ; 978-3-643-90435-5, Face work and social media, Publication: Book Item (Buchkap., Lexikonartikel, jur. Kommentierung, Beiträge in Sammelbänden etc.)

2765915, Locher, Miriam A.; Bolander, Brook, Humour in microblogging : exploiting linguistic humour strategies for identity construction in two Facebook focus groups, 978-90-272-5661-4, Participation in public and social media interactions, Publication: Book Item (Buchkap., Lexikonartikel, jur. Kommentierung, Beiträge in Sammelbänden etc.)

2434588, Locher, Miriam A., Electronic discourse, 978-3-11-021439-0 (print hb), Pragmatics of discourse, Publication: Book Item (Buchkap., Lexikonartikel, jur. Kommentierung, Beiträge in Sammelbänden etc.)

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