Linguistics and social media

Ana Deumert

36.1 Introduction: social media, old and new

The phrase social media rose to prominence around 2002/2003 when the social network(ing) applications Frienster (2002) and MySpace (2003) made their debut. Yet, the idea of social media is not a new one. The American anarchist scholar William Greene (1875: 175), for example, discussed more than 100 years ago how the ways in which we think about the world are shaped by the social media which surround us. John Henry Stuckenberg (1898: 155) defined social media in his Introduction to the Study of Sociology as ‘all the means of social communication, such as look, gesture, conduct, language, literature, art, not considered according to what they are in themselves, but as social agencies’ (my emphasis). Forty years later, Hadley Cantril (1941: 50) provided the following examples of social media in his work on social movements: ‘movies, the pulp magazines, novels, dances, crowds [and] ballgames.’ In this broad, sociological sense, social media are multimodal communicative forms which organize semiotic processes within societies: they bring people together in conversation, allow for the sharing of information and collaboration, and enable community, sociability and interaction (for a historical perspective on social media, see also Burke and Briggs 2009).

The concept of social media has narrowed its meaning in contemporary usage. It is now used almost exclusively to describe interactive digital media platforms that allow for the creation and sharing of texts, images and other visual content between people. These include Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, Wikipedia and Twitter, but also older text-based applications such as bulletin board services (BBS), discussion groups and the virtual worlds of multi-user dungeons (MUDs), as well as dyadic applications such as texting, email and chatting. Following Stine Lomberg (2014), the different forms of digital engagement can be described as distinctive, yet overlapping, communicative genres, which are constituted at the junction between interactive functionalities configured in software, and the distinctly social purposes [including norms and conventions] toward which they are oriented (p. 15). Others prefer the term ‘mode’ to describe the interaction of technological affordances – the potential and limitations of a particular interface or technology – and its socio-culturally meaningful usage.
To include the study of mediated interactions within the discipline of linguistics is not unproblematic. For most of the twentieth century, linguistics, as well as the human and social sciences more generally, have privileged co-present interactions and seen, for example, writing as but a pale reflection of the richness of spoken (or signed) utterances. However, with the rise and profusion of, especially, digital media in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to maintain a stance where mediated interactions are seen as secondary, and of only marginal interest to those who wish to understand language in its socio-cultural context. Recent survey data for the United States, for example, suggests that people are now spending more time interacting online than body-to-body, and we might be entering a state where ‘written communication will quantitatively outstrip oral communication’ (Harris 2000: 240). Sociolinguists, especially, have been exploring new media as an area of study which allows fresh perspectives on topics which are central to the discipline: multilingualism and linguistic diversity, language variation and change, style and register, language and identity, language ideologies, interactional linguistics, and language and globalization (see Deumert 2014 for discussion and references). This chapter discusses three core characteristics of digital communication which are relevant for the study of language in these contexts: (1) the materiality of digital interactions; (2) the reflexivity and creativity this materiality enables; and (3) the ways in which the affordances of the medium reshape questions of identity and interaction.

### 36.2 Materiality matters: the political economy of digital communication

Materiality, as argued by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2012: 25), is ‘bedrock for digital anthropology.’ We can extend this statement to linguistic studies of new media: Communication using digital social media is only possible if people have access to the material artifacts, that is, hardware and software, which make such interactions possible. The materiality of the digital is not limited to individual possession and ownership: the technological artifacts, which allow us to communicate with others across time and space, are assembled in factories; their production requires raw materials mined under exploitative conditions; and in order to function they need access to data cables or mobile phone towers. Moreover, digital architectures are developed by programmers who are mostly employed by for-profit companies, and their design decisions shape what users can do with the technology (Fuchs 2014). The content users create has its own materiality. It is stored electronically in bits and bytes, and becomes visible on diverse screens as text, image or video. Unlike the spoken word, which is ephemeral, remembered but not, usually, recorded, digital content can be retrieved, copied and replicated well beyond its original interactional context. The digital is thus a complex and multilayered archive, consisting not only of the texts and images we produce, but also our browsing histories and even our movements in physical space (which are tagged and recorded via location software).

The materiality of digital communication has drawn attention to the materiality of language more generally. Thus, spoken language relies on sound waves while signed languages require bodily movements. And as we speak we are located in different physical contexts, where we are present as bodies, gendered and clothed, of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds. And finally, sociolinguistic work on language and symbolic power has shown that access to languages and ways of speaking is closely linked to material conditions. The access people have toward, for example, the standard norm or the global resource of English provides them with different life chances, including access to and success in educational settings, employment opportunities, earning potential and political voice (see Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012) for a review of language and materiality).
However, the materiality of spoken and signed language is not as exclusionary as that of digital communication: in principle, everyone can participate and the ability to communicate with others has been described as a public good (Grin 2006). This is not the case for digital communication: digital participation is not merely about speaking/writing ‘in the right way,’ but about being able to speak/write at all. That is, having access to digital technology in order to communicate with others.

The inequality of access to digital artifacts is commonly referred to as the digital divide: some people in the world have ample access to the Internet and other digital media (such as phones, tablets and laptops, the haves), others have some access (the have-less) and an ever-shrinking proportion of the world’s population has none (the have-nots). Generally speaking, material access is a function of economic prosperity: wealthier countries show high levels of technology access, poor countries show low levels. A similar pattern is reflected within countries: individuals with higher incomes have more access than those with low incomes. Other variables which structure access, are gender, age, disability, language, geography (rural/urban), as well as race/ethnicity. For example, in the USA, African-Americans and Hispanics have only fairly recently caught up with Whites regarding Internet access. Among the latter, Spanish-dominant Latinos are much less likely to be online than English-dominant Latinos. In addition, general and computer literacy skills as well as opportunities to practice these are important for using the technology successfully and being able to produce meaningful content. Although literacy rates show an upward trend worldwide, high levels of illiteracy persist in South Asia and Central Africa (including the West African interior). This adds another obstacle to digital engagement, as do low levels of educational attainment more generally and lack of in-school exposure to digital technology.

Considering current global access statistics, texting on mobile phones – a comparatively old digital technology, dating back to the early 1990s – emerges as the only truly global social media application (a comprehensive overview of sociolinguistic research on texting can be found in Thurlow and Poff 2013). Although the focus of existing social media research has been on Internet-based semi-public and public applications, definitions of social media do not exclude dyadic genres. They emphasize interactivity rather than plurality of participants, and as such include texting (as well as chatting and email; see Hunsinger and Senft 2014).

The pervasiveness of texting is a function of cost: basic phones, which allow for calls and text, can be bought for a fraction of the price of a smartphone, tablet or computer, and have become affordable consumer goods for many people in the world. Table 36.1 illustrates the near-universal access to mobile phones, compared to much more limited access to the Internet and, especially, data-intensive applications such as Facebook. The overall picture is one of persistent global inequality. On the one hand, there are wealthy and well-connected nations where the majority has plentiful access to a variety of digital media. On the other hand, there are those nations where only the elite, and perhaps a growing middle class, are able to take part in Internet-based digital practices. For the majority of the world’s population, digital social media engagement means, at this point in time, primarily text-based practices on a mobile phone.

Internet access, however, is not a binary variable: access or no-access. Rather, Internet users are diverse regarding the type of access they have to online spaces. Consider South Africa, a middle-income country and emerging economy. According to the most recent population census, about one-third of the population uses the Internet. Yet, this is a heterogeneous group: only about a quarter of South Africans access the Internet using a computer from the convenience of their own home, almost half use their phone to go online, and the remaining
### Table 36.1 Mobile phone access, Internet access and Facebook users (as percentage of total population for selected countries, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mobile phone access (%)</th>
<th>Internet access (%)</th>
<th>Facebook users (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suriname</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORLD 2012</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORLD 2014 (estimate)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.internetworldstats.com and statistics provided by the International Telecommunications Union (www.itu.int).  
Note: ITU statistics provide data only on mobile phone subscriptions, not users or handsets. Thus, one user may have purchased different SIM cards for different devices, or use different cards to exploit various benefits. In addition, some of the SIM cards may be inactive. This accounts for percentages over 100 percent.

quarter has access at work, public libraries or Internet cafes. Research has shown that these different types of access support different types of online engagement. Easy and plentiful access to high-end technology from home – which is common in Europe, North America, parts of Asia and Latin America, as well as Japan and Australia – facilitates complex multimodal practices and allows users to engage with diverse online visual cultures. Thus, images can be uploaded, video blogs and video remixes can be created and posted. In addition, intensive and regular engagement with the visual worlds of online gaming is possible. Trying to do all this from a phone is quite a different matter, especially since the phones that are used in most parts of the world are not smartphones with multiple apps and large high-resolution screens, but low-end feature phones which offer only basic Internet access. Moreover, data costs are high and many phone users switch off images and video altogether in order to save money as well as battery charge (as access to electricity is not always easy). For many people playing around with typography is all the multimodality they can afford.

Questions of access affect the global representation of languages and linguistic diversity in digital environments, and on the searchable web online multilingualism does not reflect offline multilingualism. English, which has been historically dominant on the Internet, remains the strongest language online, followed by a number of European languages (German, Russian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian and Polish) as well as Japanese and Chinese.5 Widely spoken languages such as Hindi, Farsi, Hausa or Javanese are only minimally represented, and the majority of the world’s 6,000–7,000 languages remain invisible online. This suggests that the digital space constitutes a linguistic ecology unlike...
that of spoken languages. It is more similar to what has been called the ecology of literacy (Barton 2007). For example, in many postcolonial countries, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese remain the languages of literacy, education and public signage, while local languages are used in spoken interactions. This offline pattern, reflecting a communicative separation between literacy and oral practices is often reproduced in digital spaces. At the same time, digital environments offer important opportunities for minority language use, and the digital is also a space where the status quo of the offline literacy ecology has been challenged. This is particularly true in high-income countries where the digital divide shows signs of leveling, and minority speakers have access to digital spaces. However, digital media have also become important writing spaces in middle- and low-income countries, especially when one looks at the ‘deep’ or ‘invisible web’; that is, those parts of the Internet which cannot be retrieved easily through conventional search engines. This includes much interactive content – such as Facebook and Twitter posts – and it is likely that these spaces show greater multilingualism than the searchable or surface Internet.

36.3 Digital literacies: visuality, reflexivity and creativity

Discourses of novelty and discontinuity have long accompanied technological change. Communication technologies, especially the Internet, are no exception. Just as social media have been portrayed and celebrated as ‘new,’ so has the notion of digital ‘participation’ or online ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2006). These discourses describe the ‘old,’ pre-2000 Internet – also called Web 1.0 – as a traditional mass medium which simply provided information to people. By contrast, the ‘new’ interactive Internet, Web 2.0, is seen as encouraging the involvement of users, audiences and consumers in the creation of online culture and content, thus constituting a new era for grassroots or vernacular media engagement. However, participation is not new and traditional dichotomies such as author/audience, producer/consumer or professional/amateur have always been dubious in media studies: radio and TV audiences have long been shown to engage actively and passionately with what they hear and see; letters-to-the-editor are an example of media participation and user-generated content long before digital media; discussion groups and MUDs showed intensive user interactivity on the ‘old’ Internet; and alternative media have a long tradition of encouraging listeners, readers and viewers to tell their own stories (see Fuchs 2014, for a critical discussion).

While there are important continuities between old and new media, we are not looking at the same-old-same-old and things have certainly changed for those who can afford to invest in the technology. There have been major changes of scale: more people write more than ever before and as they do so many of them have access to a vast, global archive of semiotic resources, via the Internet. In addition, the barriers to artistic expression have been lowered with the availability of multimodal technologies and platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. However, extensive multimodal opportunities notwithstanding, textual practices remain central to social media usage. This is true not only for low- and medium-income countries, but also for technologically rich contexts. Thus, looking at a recent research report for the United States, only about a quarter of adults said that they have ever posted videos online (the percentage for ever having posted photos was around 50 percent). American teenagers are more likely than adults to post a photo of themselves on a social network(ing) site (close to 90 percent), but their engagement with video production remains equally low. Digital writing, on the other hand, is a daily practice for most: American adults sent about forty text messages a day, teenagers more than 100. Similarly, textual engagement
with Facebook – writing status updates, commenting and checking messages – emerges as a daily practice in US survey data.6

Mark Sebba’s (2007) sociolinguistic discussion of writing and ‘orthographic regimes’ is useful for understanding digital literacies. Although writing is often seen as being linked to norms and the standard language, it is actually a diverse and varied linguistic practice, and only in some social contexts is correctness of orthography and grammar regulated, required and policed. Typical examples of such ‘fully regulated spaces’ are schools and publishing houses, or, in the digital space, online newspapers as well as government sites and commercial webpages. In other social contexts, it is permissible for writers to disregard existing conventions, to experiment with spelling, and to combine different styles and languages creatively. Sebba calls these ‘weakly regulated spaces,’ and interactive social media constitute such a space. They are similar to personal letters, graffiti and advertising: rules are relaxed, personalization of texts is encouraged, and transgression is often licensed.

The study of literacy as a social practice is at the core of a research program which is commonly referred to as ‘new’ literacy studies. The ‘new’ in this context does not refer to the ‘newness’ of the field, which emerged back in the 1980s, but to the fact that it took the study of literacy into a ‘new’ direction. ‘New’ literacy studies moved firmly away from questions of pedagogy and psychology, which conceptualized literacy as a set of context-independent skills that can be taught, measured and assessed, and focused instead on describing and understanding literacy practices. That is, writing/reading is seen as a communicative activity which is socially embedded, locally meaningful and inherently diverse (see Baynham and Prinsloo (2009) for an overview). From this, strongly ethnographic, perspective, written language is not simply an imperfect reflection of speech (Bloomfield 1933: 21), nor should it be measured against the orthographic and grammatical rules of the standard. Rather, it is seen as a creative sociolinguistic practice in its own right.

Writing allows people to do things with language, which are not possible when speaking. Importantly, writing is visual, not auditory. The visual aesthetics of writing have been emphasized, for example, by Gunther Kress (2000) in his work on children’s early writing and by Jan Blommaert (2008) in his discussion of informal, grassroots literacies. Thus, writers can, for example, choose between cursive and block-writing, embellish handwritten letters or choose a particular font on the computer; they can add colour to their letters, or keep it black-and-white; they may experiment with letter size, and put punctuation to new uses. Consider the following Facebook status update posted by Lindiwe, a South African woman in her twenties (2012). It is an everyday example of what Roman Jakobson (1960) has described as the poetic function of language: the writer pays attention to linguistic form and manipulates the shape words in order to create new meanings, and to articulate a personal voice.

(1) Indeed we surfer 4 BEAUTY can’t sleep nawoo my head is painfulooo iyhOooo!!
Nyt nyt (in pains)

(‘Indeed we suffer for beauty, can’t sleep now my head is painful, iyhooo!! Night night (in pains’) )

The complex ways in which the visual nature of writing enters into meaning-making becomes evident if one attempts to read such texts aloud. How should we represent the visual richness of this brief text in speech? How can we ‘speak’ capitals, rebus forms as well as playful non-standard spellings (nawoo, painfulooo)?
Writing is not only visual, it is also tangibly material (as mentioned above). It involves artifacts (pen/paper, keyboard/screen, spray-can/wall), and produces texts which – unlike spoken words – can be saved and archived. They can be revisited, rather than remembered; deliberately destroyed, rather than forgotten. Moreover, writing also frees us from the constraints of real-time processing and lessens the interactional pressures of body-to-body interaction. That is, it allows us time to plan and to reflect: if we wish, we can compose our texts carefully, reconsider habitual, pre-reflexive routines, delete and add, revise and edit. In his work on advertising, Erving Goffman (1979: 84) discussed the link between editing, reflexivity and creativity. He observed that editing allows us to take out ‘the dull footage’ and to emphasize ‘colourful poses.’ That is, it allows us to go beyond that which is expected and to create – if we wish to do so – texts that stand out.

An emphasis on reflexivity and creativity stands in contrast to much mainstream linguistics, which – by and large – sees speakers as following norms and conventions, and linguists as those who discover these norms by analyzing maximally unmonitored and pre-reflexive speech. Variationist sociolinguistics, especially, has focused its attention on ‘the vernacular’ and the systematic variation it displays. Does informal written language follow the same principles as informal spoken language? Sali Tagliamonte and Derek Denis (2008) compared variation in informal spoken Canadian English with variation in instant messaging (IM) for the same group of participants. Their results were stable across a range of variables, but did not support an interpretation of interactive digital writing as mirroring the patterns or principles of spoken language. While participants’ speech showed the systematic and patterned variation predicted by Labovian sociolinguistics, their chats looked quite different. What is most striking about the chat data is the unexpected combination of forms which belong to different stylistic realms. In (2), for example, the standard quotative (say), followed by standard use of punctuation (colon to indicate the beginning of a quote in writing), is combined with a sequence of stylistically marked non-standard forms. Such data, described by Tagliamonte and Denis as mixing, blending and fusion, play havoc with the co-occurrence expectations that underpin variationist sociolinguistics.

(2) Jeff says: ‘lyk omgod omgod omgodzzzzzzZZZZzzzz!!!11one (IM, female, 15 years; Tagliamonte and Denis 2008: 26)

(Jeff says: ‘lyk oh my god, oh my god, oh my god zzzzzZZZZzzz!!! 11one’)9

The data in (2) is structurally similar to code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual speech, and it has been argued that social media have created an important space for the production of multistylistic and multilingual texts. Digital multilingual texts combine different languages – as well as different scripts – creatively and ultimately unpredictably, just like the writer in (2) combines different styles and forms. Looking at Thai/English chat data, which shows diverse and unpredictable patterns of code-mixing similar to (2), Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg (2011) have argued for what they call a ‘post-varieties’ approach to language: the texts that are produced online do not show ‘obviously identifiable systematic regularities,’ and thus cannot be said to reflect a definable ‘variety’ or language. Instead they resemble what William Labov (1972: 225) has called ‘irregular dialect mixture,’ that is, the ad hoc, bricolage-like combination of linguistic forms which belong to different systems (as opposed to sociolinguistic variation as ‘an inherent and regular property of the system,’ my emphasis).
An alternative to Labovian variationism, and structuralist approaches to language more generally, can be found in the substantial and diverse body of work, which looks at language not as a variable yet structured and rule-governed system, but as a repertoire of signs. In other words, linguistic knowledge is recast as a set of communicative resources, which are reworked creatively in interaction. In this context resources are understood not as bounded language systems, but as any semiotic sign which carries meaning and is available to speakers/writers. This includes ‘bits of language,’ isolated words or phrases, which can be used to achieve communicative ends (Blommaert 2010).

Sociolinguists studying digital media have also turned to the language-philosophical writings of Mikhail Bakhtin in theorizing variation online (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2011). Bakhtin argues that when we speak (or write) we draw on a variety of social voices, each one with a unique tone and timbre, and speaking (as well as writing) is not about animating ‘a language,’ but rather about combining linguistic signs creatively, bringing them into dialogue with one another. Bakhtin (1981 [1934/1935]) uses the term heteroglossia, literally multi-speech-ness (translated from Russian разноречие [raznorečie]), to describe the multiplicity of languages, dialects, styles and forms which provide us with resources for speaking and writing, that is, for meaning-making and everyday creativity. Linguistics, from a Bakhtinian perspective, is not about discovering structures, systems or regular patterns; it is about approaching and understanding language as radically heterogeneous and open-ended. Individual utterances are the skilful, often artful, and always singular and unique manifestation of this diversity. And in crafting our utterances we establish particular speaking voices, social personae and identities. One of the affordances of digital communication is that we can go beyond Bakhtinian voicing, that is, the use of someone else’s voice in our own speech. Instead we can become the other voice, that is, invent, create and perform social personae which are distinct and separate from our offline self.

36.4 Disembodied language and heteroglossic identities

Like most cultural and social theories of identity, sociolinguistic approaches do not position the existence of a singular ‘authentic’ identity. Rather, identities are seen as multiple (not unified), dynamic (not static), something we do in interaction (not something we are), and co-constructed by audiences (not monologic performances). The focus on agency, on doing identity, brings with it the potential for reflexivity and creativity: identities and social personae can be carefully crafted and, as such, become part of what Goffman (1969) calls ‘impression management.’

However, because our bodies are always with us and mark us as members of particular social groups, the identities we are able to display in offline contexts are always constrained. Online spaces, on the other hand, allow us to engage in fantasies of the self and identity play: we can be who we are offline if we want to, but can also pretend to be someone entirely different. In her work on phone-sex workers, who – in the absence of a visual link – create complex vocal fantasies and erotic personae, Kira Hall (1995) refers to this as cross-expressing: a linguistic performance akin to cross-dressing in which speakers/writers successfully appropriate behaviors that do not match their bodily identity.¹⁰

The pre-2000 Internet was portrayed by many as a utopian space which enabled the unstrained performance of imagined identities. It was also a space of default Whiteness and maleness, culturally uniform and homogenous, and as such particularly suited to what Lisa Nakamura (2002) calls identity tourism: creating a diversity of interlocutors, where – in reality – there was none. Sherry Turkle’s (1995) book Life on the Screen captured the radical
Zeitgeist of the 1980s and 1990s. She describes the text-mainly Internet as a space where identities were created and invented at whim, where pseudonyms allowed users to establish as many different alter personae as they wished. The following is an extract from one of her interviews:

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be.

(Turkle 1995: 184)

However, starting around 2000, social media applications moved away from anonymity and pseudonymity (the latter refers to the use of nicknames which often created stable alter personae). People are now encouraged to use their ‘real’ names and to create online identities which are firmly rooted in pre-existing offline identities. Lee Knuttila (2011) calls this the ‘personal turn’ and argues that this ‘general closing of the gap between online and offline personas marks a dramatic development in the structure and experience of the Internet.’ The real-name policies of Google+ and Facebook are prominent examples of the personal turn. Both sites require users to register with their ‘real’ name and surname. Failure to do so, although technically possible, is a violation of terms of service. While Facebook largely relies on the honesty of users, Google+ closed a number of accounts, which were identified in breach of this policy, in 2011. This started what has become known as the #nymwars: a vigorous online debate about the value of online anonymity and pseudonymity.

There are practical, profit-oriented and political, reasons why some platforms prefer people to write under their ‘real’ name: it facilitates targeted advertising, a main source of income for many social media platforms, as well as Internet security and surveillance. However, a preference and indeed desire for ‘real,’ dependable and unchanging, online identities pre-dates 9/11 security concerns and the corporatization of digital platforms. Already in the mid-1980s, the virtual community The Well introduced the slogan YOYOW, ‘you own your own words,’ and insisted on real-name registration: ‘As a Well member, you use your real name. This leads to real conversations and relationships.’ In the 1990s, participants of the women-only discussion group SAPPHO, which allowed pseudonyms and alter personae, ‘screened’ new members stylistically in order to detect men-posing-as-women, ‘with the list veterans becoming quickly suspicious of anyone who [did] not conform to their idea of discursive femininity’ (Hall 1996: 159).

Thus, while some celebrate online spaces as enabling a ‘dream … of a powerful infidel heteroglossia,’ where we can be liberated from the strictures of our bodies (Haraway 1991: 181), others see identity play and pseudonyms as disruptive and dangerous to harmonious social relations online. Such discourses limit play and fantasy to socially acceptable ‘impression management’: we may portray ourselves as prettier, smarter or funnier than we usually are, but there should be some sense of continuity between the self online and the self offline. However, old habits die hard. Although the use of pseudonyms and identity play is increasingly discouraged on social media sites, users do not necessarily comply. In 2014, Facebook estimated that, real-name policies notwithstanding, between 5 percent and 10 percent of existing accounts were fake or fictional.\textsuperscript{11} The situation is similar on Twitter and YouTube.

Moreover, some online spaces support radical anonymity: they do not require registration or even a nick(name), users can simply log on and start posting. An example of this is the random board /b/ on 4chan.org. The site was founded in the same year as MySpace (2003),
but could not be more different. There are no profile pages and users do not even create fictional online identities: they simply write and post images with everyone using the default name ‘anonymous.’ The interaction order of the site is unique: if everyone is called ‘anonymous,’ then it is impossible to actually figure out who has been talking to whom, and how many people are involved in a conversation. That is, the different postings in any thread could be a monologue of one individual, a conversation of two people, or a multilayered interaction of several people. Consequently, conventional sociolinguistic analysis is entirely impossible. Consider the posts in (3) which responded to a comment and an image of a bearded man (11 June 2013). The image elicited over 200 replies, all by ‘anonymous,’ mostly in English, but also some in German and Croatian. Some swearing notwithstanding, (3) is a tame example of 4chan interactions. The site is classified as NSFW (‘not safe for work’) because of its offensive – usually pornographic but also racist and otherwise distasteful – content.

(3) Anonymous: [posts an image of a bearded man]
superior men hairstyle thread /b/ going to the barber at 1pm, need some ‘inspiration’
Anonymous: Go bald
Feels great
Head cold
Anonymous: if you’re over the age of 16 and have hair like that you’re below beta, you’re a fucking gamma
Anonymous: shave all that shit you fucking disgusting hipster hippie faggot cunt
Anonymous: DAMN IT. I wish I could grow a fucking beard.
Anonymous: why are you on the computer, did you ditch school today?
Anonymous: Summer break actually, you prehistorical fuck.
Anonymous: Used to have hair similar to this. Gigantic pain in the ass to keep up.
Anonymous: How the fuck do you style it like that?

Not only is what is posted on 4chan fully anonymous and not attributable to individuals, it is also entirely ephemeral as the site has no archiving function. Posts appear, elicit comments and disappear when participants lose interest. When Christopher Poole aka moot, the founder of 4chan, spoke at a TED talk in 2009 about the ‘case for anonymity online,’ he argued that it was precisely the site’s anonymity which supported creativity. He argued that anonymity helps to overcome self-censorship, relaxes inhibitions and encourages experimentation. Radical anonymity certainly has its attractions and the last few years have seen the emergence of a growing number of anonymity applications. These include Whisper launched in 2012, Secret in 2013, Cloaq and Yik Yak in 2014.12

While pseudonymity and anonymity support play, fantasy and also provide us with a safe confessional space, they also have a dark side: they make it easy to spread untruths and deceive others, to be outright nasty and hurtful without taking responsibility. Practices of this type are often associated with so-called trolls, a new media variant of the trickster archetype, who take delight in upsetting others and causing havoc. A popular trolling practice is to be accepted as a legitimate member on a particular site, such as a chat room or
discussion group (see the example of SAPPHO above), and, once accepted, to engage in antisocial behavior, typically by posting inflammatory and offensive messages. Trolling and other forms of online deceit, such as scams, provide linguists with important data to study the linguistics of successful as well as unsuccessful deception and lying. The frequency and success with which such impersonations are done online – and even picked up as ‘true’ by mainstream media as in the case of the gay-girl-in-Damascus blogging hoax and the entirely fictitious Moldovan soccer sensation Masal Bugduv – show that textual deception can be particularly difficult to detect (Hancock 2007). This has opened up new areas in applied linguistics. Text messaging forensics, for example, is now a specialization within forensic linguistics and is becoming increasingly important in criminal investigations (Grant 2010).

### 36.5 Conclusion: social media and linguistic theory

The study of digital communication has drawn attention to aspects of language and communication which have so far been marginal to linguistic as well as sociolinguistic theory. First, digital media encourage us to consider the materiality of communication: the ways in which physical artifacts enter into meaning-making and the persistent global inequalities we see with regard to access to these artifacts. While language and communication might be public goods, digital communication is only possible when one has access to consumer goods.

Second, new media linguistics has brought writing and multimodality firmly into linguistics. Although digital communication remains, at this stage, primarily text-based, such texts are, as shown above, complex visual artifacts which often co-articulate multiple voices and identities. Moreover, writing, because of the opportunities it allows for editing, moves linguistics beyond its traditional focus on norms and conventions, and toward creativity and the unexpected. Reflexivity is a central theme in contemporary social theory and considered to be a defining feature of social practice in contemporary societies.

And finally, online spaces can be important for understanding how identities are expressed, created and challenged. Real-name policies notwithstanding, the digital still allows ample scope for fantasy and identity play, and radically anonymous interactive platforms such as 4chan defy existing models of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics. The use of pseudonyms is challenging for traditional sociolinguistic analysis too: well-established ways of looking at language and the social world are not possible when we simply do not know if the text we are analyzing was produced by a young White male or a middle-aged African woman. Sociolinguistic approaches which rely on a construct of language as reflecting speakers’/writers’ ‘real’ background and socialization are all but impossible.

### Notes

1. Voice-based applications (the telephone, Skype) are not usually included in existing definitions of social media.
2. I follow Leopoldina Fortunati (2005: 53) in using body-to-body rather than face-to-face because ‘the “communicative act” involves not just the face but the entire body, its gestures and postures,’ as well as its position in space and its visual appearance (height, weight, perceived ethnicity/race, clothing, etc.).
5. w3techs.com, March 2014.
A. Deumert

6 www.pewresearch.org/2013/05/21/teens-on-facebook; www.pewinternet.org/2012/09/17/smartphone-research-infographic.

7 The pain referred to is the result of having extensions woven into the hair.

8 Although spoken language can also be recorded and archived, this requires special equipment and is not an inherent affordance of the medium.

9 The ‘11one’ cannot be ‘translated’ easily into an equivalent English expression. Since both the exclamation mark and the number 1 share the same key on computer keyboards, writers might end up typing ‘!1’ instead of ‘!1one.’ This has evolved into the expression 11one, indexing excitement and a sense of humor (also written as !1!1one; www.urbandictionary.com).

10 Cross-expressing is different from crossing as discussed by Ben Rampton (1995). The latter is not about creating a fantasy and making others believe that one really is the person one pretends to be. Rather, it is an example of Bakhtinian voicing: the other voice remains visible to the audience throughout.


References


