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Diss: Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics: Georgalou: 'Constructions of Identity on Facebook...'

Editor for this issue: Danuta Allen <danuta@linguistlist.org>

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From: Mariza Georgalou <m.georgalou@gmail.com>

Subject: Constructions of Identity on Facebook: A discourse-centred Online Ethnographic Study of Greek Users



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Institution: Lancaster University

Program: PhD in Linguistics

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Author: Mariza Georgalou

Dissertation Title: Constructions of Identity on Facebook: A discourse-centred Online Ethnographic Study of Greek Users

Linguistic Field(s): Discourse Analysis

Sociolinguistics

Dissertation Director:

Sirpa Leppänen

Greg Myers

Dissertation Abstract:

The social network site (SNS) of Facebook is a dynamic online socio-cultural arena which gives users ample and unprecedented opportunities for self-presentation through the meshing of language with other semiotic modes. Research on the subject has tended to focus on either a particular linguistic phenomenon in relation to identity (e.g. code-switching) or on a specific aspect of identity (e.g. ethnic identity) without treating multimodality in much detail. It has also been limited to exploring identity through information abstracted from member profiles alone and not interactions amongst participants, while it often lacks an ethnographic perspective. Moreover, identity on Facebook constitutes, in the main, a slice of larger-scale linguistic research on social media and not a fully-fledged study per se.

In this light, the present study is in its entirety dedicated to the ways in which identity is discursively constructed within Facebook, drawing on insights from Greek users. More specifically, it investigates 1) how Facebook users construct themselves, 2) how they are co-constructed by their Facebook friends, 3) the role of multimodality in these identity constructions, and 4) the kinds of textual practices that Facebook users follow to construct their identities. To this end, I adopted a discourse-centred online ethnographic approach (Androutsopoulos 2008), which combined a three-year systematic observation of specific Facebook profiles with the direct engagement with their owners (two females and three males; mean age = 28). The data of the study comprise Facebook profile information, status updates, comments from interactions, video and article links, photos my informants have taken themselves or have found elsewhere in the internet, interview excerpts, survey and field notes as well my informants' comments on my analysis.

Developing a data-driven, bottom-up approach of discourse analysis, this study offers a multifaceted and nuanced view of identity on Facebook through the lenses of place, time, profession, education, stance, and privacy. It identifies the ways in which the users locate themselves in terms of place and time; announce activities, share and broaden their expertise and buttress solidarity among colleagues and fellow students; communicate emotions, tastes, thoughts, opinions and assessments; and control the flow of information on their profiles to secure their privacy and hence identity.

It is argued that apart from being a self-reflexive process, identity is intrinsically an interactive and collaborative process, shaped and reinforced by those with whom the users share a 'friendship' on Facebook. Focusing on discourse manifestations of identity, this study shows how Facebook can function as a cathartic gateway for self-expression, a powerful grassroots channel, a digital memory bank, a tool for promoting one's work, a platform to exchange information, a dynamic knowledge depository, a meta-friend, and a research tool.

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