

20. Electronic discourse

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Locher, Miriam A. (2014).
Electronic discourse. In Klaus P.
Schneider and Anne Barron (eds.),
Pragmatics of Discourse. Berlin:
Mouton, 555-581.

1. Introduction

This chapter deals with *electronic discourse* by discussing the pragmatics of language use in computer-mediated settings. In many so-called first world countries, accessing the Internet by means of a computer or a smartphone, etc. has become an everyday activity for many people. In only little more than twenty years of publicly accessible Internet access, the use of computer-mediated forms of communication has developed from primarily information websites and email exchanges to highly interactive and social forms of Internet use. In Crystal's (2011: 149) words, "[t]he Internet is the largest area of language development we have seen in our lifetimes. Only two things are certain: it is not going to go away, and it is going to get larger". While the 2000s have seen an increase in multi-modal uses of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in that video messaging (e.g., in YouTube), the exchange of pictures (e.g., flickr) or three-dimensional virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life) are popular, written "language" is still the primary means by which communication is achieved (Wilbur 1996, in Crystal 2006: 9). In Yus' (2011: 28) words, "[i]n the past, Internet-mediated communication was basically text-based, and even nowadays the text typed by users is essential in virtual interactions". As such, linguists started to study language use and by now we can look back on research from two decades. In the continuation of Crystal's (2011: 149) quotation above, he rightly points out that "[t]he challenges facing linguists are considerable, as they move towards the goal of formulating a sophisticated theoretical and applied Internet linguistics. But that, of course, is the basis of its appeal". In this spirit, this chapter attempts to first address the object of study by looking at the names given for the research domain (Section 2), before discussing electronic discourse as a moving target, and highlighting that offline and online communication are more often than not intertwined (Section 3). Section 4 is dedicated to identifying research approaches to electronic discourse, before discussing Facebook as an example of a Web 2.0 practice, i.e. multi-modal interactive CMC, in Section 5.

2. The object of study: a name for the research domain

"Electronic discourse" and "digital discourse" (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011b) are just two terms for language use by means of computer-mediated technology. The linguistics community has been looking around for an adequate label for the re-

search domain for some time now, proposing a number of alternative terms (see Crystal 2011 and Jucker and Dürscheid 2012 for an overview of terminology). Looking at this work, it transpires that the labels also reflect the development of language use as such. Susan Herring (2013), one of the pioneers in research on language use on the Internet, first used the term computer-mediated communication (CMC), before propagating the study of computer-mediated discourse (CMD) (see Herring 2004a for a discussion of the difference between CMC and CMD); in 2013, she now argues that the term should be adapted so as to incorporate the new use of multi-modal means of communication:

[...] CMC itself has been undergoing a shift, from occurrence in stand-alone clients such as emailers and instant messaging programs to juxtaposition with other content, often of an information or entertainment nature, in converged media platforms, where it is typically secondary, by design, to other information or entertainment-related activities (Herring 2009; Zelenkauskaitė and Herring 2008). This phenomenon, which I refer to as convergent media computer-mediated communication (CMCMC), is especially common on Web 2.0 sites. (Herring 2013: 4)

In fact, Herring (2013) goes on to argue that CMCMC is largely synonymous with Web 2.0 uses (see below for a definition of Web 2.0). David Crystal, another prominent researcher on electronic discourse, used the term “Netspeak” in his 2001 publication, a term that seemed to imply a unified form of language use common to the Internet. Taking into account the development of the Internet itself, he distances himself from a unified reading in 2011 by acknowledging that language on the Internet is diverse:

The stylistic range has to recognize not only web pages, but also the vast amount of material found in email, chatrooms, virtual worlds, blogging, instant messaging, texting, tweeting and other outputs, as well as the increasing amount of linguistic communication in social networking forums (over 170 in 2011) such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, and Bebo. Each of these outputs presents different communicative perspectives, properties, strategies, and expectations. It is difficult to find linguistic generalizations that apply comfortably to Internet language as a whole. (Crystal 2011: 10)

Some researchers have taken issue with the element “computer-mediated” in CMC or CMD, arguing that the term no longer adequately reflects current usage since it wrongly implies that the field of interest is restricted to the computer as a means of communication; others have argued that terms such as “digital discourse”, “electronic discourse”, “e-communication”, “digitally mediated communication”, etc. are too broad “since it would also include mass media communication via TV and radio, which is not in the focus of researchers analyzing language use in the new media” (Jucker and Dürscheid 2012: 40). For this reason, Dürscheid and Jucker (2012: 40) prefer the term keyboard-to-screen communication (KSC), which, for example, allows mobile phones and text messages to be included in the analysis in a more transparent way and can be characterized according to three main components: “a) primarily graphically realized, b) either in a one-to-one, a

one-to-many or a many-to-many-format and c) mediated by cell phones, smart phones, or networked PC tablets and computers”. However, as technology develops, even the keyboard might become a misnomer in the future, notably when voice-recognition tools (speech to text translation) become more widespread in smartphones and computers. In this chapter, the well-established term computer-mediated communication is used to refer to instances of communicative events that can be studied under the more general label of electronic discourse (see also Herring, Stein and Virtanen 2013b, section 3.1). The term ‘computer’ is not intended to describe the tool only but stands for any means that allows electronic communication.

3. The range of electronic discourse: a moving target

To discuss the range of CMC, it is worthwhile to look at its development once again. The early 1990s predominantly saw the use of email messages and information websites. Since then, in short order, the use has spread to encompass instant messaging, chat, blogs, virtual worlds, Wikis and social network sites. Within these types of CMC, we find a vast range of different styles and functions of language use (see Crystal 2011: 10, quoted above). In other words, while email messages might have originally been short and geared towards quickly passing on information, the range of functions for which email communication can be used nowadays spans a vast array of different activities. For example, email messages can be used for formal job applications and requests to authorities (leaning toward the “letter” as a close text type relative), as well as for quick and informal exchanges that might even lack address terms and farewell phrases and can be sent to individuals in close time proximity (resembling the exchange of instant messages, see also Jucker and Dürscheid 2012). Email is used for personal one-on-one communication as well as for reaching a selected group of people by adding multiple addressees or by using mailing lists that allow the quick and efficient distribution of content. The scope of use has thus increased with more people using email and with the sanctioning of uses over time. While there are certain aspects that remain constant (e.g., the addressee and subject headers, the possibility to add a signature line, etc.), what becomes clear is that there is no unified linguistic way of using this technological means and there is no one restricted function for its use. As linguists, we can be both interested in how this technical means developed as well as how different styles become linguistically manifest (see the next section for research approaches).

With a view to the development of CMC, the buzzword *Web 2.0* stands for a turning point that refers to the more dynamic and user-shaped development of electronic discourse. Yus (2011: 93) aptly summarizes the changes in CMC that gave rise to the term:

The Internet is under constant evolution and development. One of the most strikingly successful environments for virtual interactions and information transmission is the popularization of a new form of production and reception of information that avoids the traditional “pyramidal media communication pattern” based on an authority that unidirectionally filters and delivers Internet content to the mass of users. Instead, this new trend of informational dissemination feeds from the users through special interfaces for interactions and content sharing. This phenomenon, now consolidated, has been given different labels, such as *social networks*, Web 2.0 (see O’Reilly 2007), *wiki phenomenon*, *participatory culture* (Jenkins et al. 2006), *user-generated content*, *Me Media* (Garfield 2006), and *social software*, among others. (Yus 2011: 93)

While Yus particularly highlights the move away from typically hierarchical communication patterns to interaction and content sharing in his description of Web 2.0, in her study of the language of tweets on Twitter Zappavigna (2012: 2) especially highlights the social function of Web 2.0: “The social web, or Web 2.0, are popularized terms used to signal a shift toward the internet as an interpersonal resource rather than solely an information network. In other words, the social web is about using the internet to enact relationships rather than simply share information, although the two functions are clearly interconnected”. Working with Hsu and Park’s (2010) distinctions between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, Zappavigna (2012: 2) presents a useful comparison of central features (paraphrased, italics added):

- The *mode of usage* is “read” in Web 1.0 and “write and contribute” in Web 2.0
- The *unit of content* is the “page” in Web 1.0 and the “record” in Web 2.0
- The *state* is “static” in Web 1.0 and “dynamic” in Web 2.0
- *How content is viewed* is achieved in a “web browser” in Web 1.0 and in “browsers, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) readers, mobile devices, etc.” in Web 2.0
- The *creation of content* is “by website authors” in Web 1.0 and “by everyone” in Web 2.0
- Web 1.0 is the domain of “web designers and geeks”, while it might represent “a new culture of public research” in the case of Web 2.0.

Next to a more participatory and relational use of language in Web 2.0, Herring (2013), Thurlow and Mroczek (2011b) and Jucker and Dürscheid (2012) all point to the fast development of multi-modal communication and the convergence of practices that used to be separate.

In this light, Crystal (2011: 10) identifies three research challenges: (1) the “rapidly growing language corpus”, (2) the “diversity of language encountered on the Internet”, and (3) the “speed of change”. The Internet provides us with a vast and growing corpus of language produced in computer-mediated settings, which offers a wide spectrum of language use. Challenge (3) is particularly noteworthy because language use collected from the Internet often presents a moving target. While some practices have already gone out of use altogether (see Crystal 2011: 138), others may cease to exist in the near future. Many researchers who are currently working with a corpus of data gathered a few years ago face the fact that the technological affordances have changed in the meantime. For example, researchers

working on status updates in Facebook (e.g., Bolander and Locher 2010; Lee 2011; Page 2012) were confronted with the interface changing the prompt for the status update from “What are you doing right now” to “What is on your mind”. Potentially, this change in prompt might also influence the types of status updates produced. However, rather than seeing this as a problematic event per se, Lee (2011: 111) convincingly maintains that “[u]nexpected design (or affordance) changes such as these pose real challenges for internet researchers [...] but they are also a perfect opportunity for tracing creative adaptations in people’s new media textual practices”. This claim is also valid for other CMC data. As a consequence, there clearly is a need to be (even more) cautious when it comes to generalizing about practices and to pay particular attention to the time factor.

4. Research approaches to electronic discourse

Linguistic research on CMC can look back on more than twenty years. Next to many research articles on CMC data published in linguistics journals and collections, there are dedicated journals such as the *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, *language@internet*, or the recently launched (and somewhat broader) journal *Discourse, Context & Media*; next to themed issues in the mentioned journals, a number of special journal issues dedicated to CMC have been compiled (e.g., *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2006, edited by Androutsopoulos; *Journal of Politeness Research* 2010, edited by Locher); and the number of edited collections (e.g., Beisswenger 2001; Beisswenger, Hoffmann and Storrer 2004; Danet and Herring 2007; Giltrow and Stein 2009; Gurak et al. 2004; Herring 1996; Herring, Stein and Virtanen 2013a; Rowe and Wyss 2009; Thurlow and Mrozek 2011a) and monographs in linguistics that exclusively deal with CMC is steadily picking up (e.g., Baron 2000, 2008; Beisswenger 2000; Crystal 2001, 2006, 2008, 2011; Heyd 2008; Hoffmann 2012; Janoschka 2004; Locher 2006; Markham 1998; Page 2012; Richardson 2005; Yus 2011; Zappavigna 2012). There are also many sources in media studies, communication studies or the digital humanities that linguists can draw on (e.g., Baym 2003; Markham and Baym 2009). What exactly linguists study when confronted with the potentially enormous corpus of language use on the Internet is of course influenced by their research agenda and training. Like in any research design, the research questions will call for different methodologies, ranging from qualitative, ethnographic work to large corpus studies, with a trend to use mixed methods (see Bolander and Locher 2013). Here it is possible to name only some of the large research strands and to give a number of literature pointers for each.

There is work that aspires to develop a *theoretical framework* by providing tools which allow us to describe and understand the developing patterns of CMC language use more generally. For example, Herring’s (2007) faceted classification scheme constitutes an etic grid by means of which researchers can identify relevant

situational/social and medium/technological factors that *together* shape CMC practices. These facets help to describe the specifics of a particular dataset in a systematic way. The ten medium/technological factors comprise aspects of synchronicity, message transmission, the persistence of transcript, the size of message buffer, the channels of communication, the possibility for anonymous messaging, private messaging, filtering, quoting, and the message format. This open-ended cluster thus tries to grasp central technological affordances shaping the practice in question. At the same time, the fact that it is human beings who use language in the provided interface is taken into account by working with a set of situational/social factors, that are derived from Hymes' (1974) work on the Ethnography of Speaking, specifically from his SPEAKING mnemonic: the participation structure, the participant characteristics, the purpose, topic or theme, tone, activity of the interaction, the norms developed and invoked, and the code. By paying attention to both types of factors, one can avoid giving precedence to the medium factors. The tendency for early research to explain a pattern primarily by recourse to technical factors has been criticized as computer/technical determinism (see, e.g., Androutsopoulos 2006b; Baym 1995; Herring, Stein and Virtanen 2013b). In their critical state-of-the-art article, Jucker and Dürscheid (2012) also work towards providing a set of concepts that allow us to further our knowledge of CMC more generally. They question common parameters for discussing CMC practices in the literature, such as the "old dichotomies [...] 'asynchronous' versus 'synchronous', 'written' versus 'spoken', 'monologic' versus 'dialogic', and in particular 'text' versus 'utterance'" (2012: 39). In some instances they argue for expanding the terminology (e.g., by adding "quasi-synchronous" to the first dichotomy) or for being more precise in the definitions. In other cases they argue for replacing concepts such as "text" and "utterance" altogether since they have become blurred in light of Web 2.0 developments. Instead, they propose that "the new realities of online communication" can be better captured with the concepts of "communicative acts" and "communicative act sequences". The former is defined as "all forms of ostensive communication" (in Sperber and Wilson's (1995) *Relevance Theory* sense¹). This renaming of "text" and "utterance" allows the researcher to draw on all multimodal acts of communicating "irrespective of their monologic or dialogic context, irrespective of their synchronous, quasi-synchronous or asynchronous communication pattern, and ultimately also irrespective of their production in the graphic or phonic code or even in a non-verbal manner" (2012: 46). When such communicative acts form "strings of related units", such as Tweet sequences or chat contributions, Jucker and Dürscheid (2012: 46) speak of a "communicative act sequence".

There is a body of research that is dedicated to particular *modes of computer-mediated communication*, such as chat, blogs, e-mail, instant messaging, listserv, websites, wikis, interactive online games and worlds, social network sites, etc. In Giltrow and Stein's (2009) collection on *Genres in the Internet*, the question of "genre" is reviewed so that the data are studied with respect to their uniqueness and

difference to other, similar language use practices offline and online. This collection continues and goes beyond the discussion of much early work on CMC, which tried to pinpoint to what extent a CMC practice was influenced by oral or (print) written “counterparts”. For example, chatroom interaction was often described as having oral features, and smileys were argued to compensate for the lack of facial expressions and to aid in the disambiguation of messages (see, e.g., Brennan 1998). The attempts at situating a set of chatroom data on the continuum from oral to written features ultimately resulted in many scholars arguing that the emerging written form of interaction is unique in its own right, while *at the same time* drawing on previous sources available to interactants (see, e.g., Crystal 2001). However, Dürscheid (2003), and Jucker and Dürscheid (2012: 44) convincingly argue that there is no doubt about the fact that chat interaction is presented in the *graphic code* rather than the *phonic code*, so that the previous discussion is more about the “conceptional dimension, i.e. the language of immediacy versus the language of distance”. Continuing the discussion of how to best classify CMC modes, a number of papers have recently addressed the fact that research endeavors on CMC seem to be chasing the “novel”. Both Herring (2013) and Thurlow and Mroczek (2011b) call for caution in this respect. The latter argue that:

Technologies – even “new” communication technologies – are, however, often not as spectacular or revolutionary as many would have us believe (cf. Thurlow 2006). Indeed, they are usually embedded in complex ways into the banal practices of everyday life (cf. Herring, 2004[a]). Technologies are thus best understood as prosthetic extensions of people’s abilities and lives, rather like the hearing aid and the paperclip (Keating, 2005; McLuhan, 2005 [1964]). (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011b: xxiv–xxv)

The authors are right in pointing out that there is no clear distinction between online and offline life. In fact, it should be stressed that it is the same human beings who choose from a number of means for their communicative purposes, electronic or not. Herring (2013: 1, italics in original) proposes to use the terms “familiar”, “reconfigured” and “emergent”: “phenomena *familiar* from older computer-mediated discourse (CMD) modes such as email, chat, and discussion forums that appear to carry over into Web 2.0 environments with minimal differences; CMD phenomena that adapt to and are *reconfigured* by Web 2.0 environments; and new or *emergent* phenomena that did not exist – or if they did exist, did not rise to the level of public awareness – prior to the era of Web 2.0”. She argues that this classification helps to get a better handle on CMC practices and to steer away from making too large claims about the novelty of a practice.

Some research strands focus on how well-established linguistic topics like *interactional organisation* and different *activities* are managed in online contexts. There are studies on classic interactional linguistic topics such as coherence, turn-taking and floor management, (e.g., Herring 1999; Panyametheekul and Herring 2003) or code-switching (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2013; Siebenhaar 2003) in a number

of different modes of CMC. Examples for studies of “activities” can be found in research on disagreeing in blogs or online newspaper comments (e.g., Bolander 2012, 2013; Langlotz and Locher 2012; Neurauter-Kessels 2011, 2013; Upadhyay 2010), apologising in emails (e.g., Davies, Merrison and Goddard 2007; Harrison and Allton 2013), requesting in emails² (e.g. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Merrison et al. 2012), or advice giving in a variety of contexts, including studies of peer-to-peer and professional-to-lay person interaction (e.g., Harrison and Barlow 2009; Kouper 2010; Locher 2006, 2010c, 2013; Morrow 2006, 2012; Placencia 2012).

Other work delves into particular online practices to understand the complex *emergence of situated relational and interpersonal language use*. For example, work has been conducted on how relationships online are created and maintained, and how community building online is achieved (Androustopoulos 2006b; Baym 1995, 1998; Herring 2004a). Such early work is now complemented with studies on social network sites, which only started to boom in the mid 2000s (e.g., Bolander and Locher 2010; boyd and Ellison 2007; Jones, Schieffelin and Smith 2011; Lee 2011; Page 2012; Yus 2011; Zappavigna 2012). There is work that studies the negotiation of norms of conduct (e.g., Graham 2007, 2008; the special issue on im/politeness and CMC in the *Journal of Politeness Research* 2010 see below), or the construction of identities online (e.g., Turkle 1995; Danet 1998; Hamilton 1998; Locher and Hoffmann 2006; Planchenault 2010). Research on solidarity building or conflict has been conducted (Baym 1995, 1998; Bolander 2012; DuVal Smith 1999; Hardaker 2010; Kollock and Smith 1996; Korenman and Wyatt 1996; Langlotz and Locher 2012; Smith, McLaughlin and Osborne 1997; Zappavigna 2012), and there is a growing body of studies discussing politeness and impoliteness in CMC (e.g., Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Darics 2010; Fayard and DeSanctis 2005; Graham 2007, 2008; Harrison 2000; Haugh 2010; Herring 1994; Hongladarom and Hongladarom 2005; Kouper 2010; Locher 2010b; Neurauter-Kessels 2011, 2013; Nishimura 2010; Planchenault 2010; Upadhyay 2010; Yus 2011).

The handbook on the *Pragmatics of Computer-mediated Communication*, edited by Herring, Stein and Virtanen (2013a), shows the spectrum of research quite nicely by being split into five parts. The first covers the “pragmatics of CMC modes” (including texts on email communication, listserv communication, blogging, real-time chat, instant messaging, text messaging, mobile phone communication and synchronous voice-based CMC); the second is dedicated to “classic pragmatic phenomena in CMC” (dealing with notions such as relevance, performativity, address, apologies, advice, deception), the third part is on the “pragmatics of CMC phenomena” (from email hoaxes, authentication and Nigerian letters, the maxims of online nicknames, to micro-linguistic structural features of CMC), the fourth part presents work on “discourse pragmatics of CMC interaction” (raising issues of rhythm, timing, the floor, coherence, repair, responses, small talk, politeness and flaming), and finally the fifth part discusses the broader perspectives of

code-switching, genre and narrative analysis. This brief overview of *Pragmatics of Computer-mediated Communication* shows that while the spectrum of research is vast, at the same time, research interests overlap to a certain extent. Scholars working on coherence and cohesion will do this by working on particular practices – for example, “chat” in the case of the contribution to the Handbook by Markman (2013), or blogs in Hoffmann’s (2012) case. In this way, research will contribute to more than one of the areas delineated in the parts of the handbook, enhancing our knowledge of the mode of communication as well as how the interactional side is handled by people engaging in online chat or blogs.

In his introduction to the special issue on “Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication”, Androutsopoulos (2006b) reflects on the research history of CMC, claiming that there has been a development in three waves. The first wave is characterized by looking for “a single, homogeneous genre or communication type” in CMC, as Herring (2007) phrases it. The second wave gives more attention to “the interplay of technological, social and contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices”, and the third ongoing wave of research on CMC highlights “the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet” (Androutsopoulos 2006b: 421). Georgakopoulou (2006) emphasizes the dynamics of interaction and stresses that variability should be embraced as a subject rather than considered to be noise. This latter perspective is also shared by Thurlow and Mroczek (2011a) in their recent collection. In addition and next to calling for research on discourse, ideology and technology, they especially call for an incorporation of the analysis of multi-modality in the CMC research toolkit (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011b: ix, xxv). This comment is particularly pertinent for the platforms that converge means of interaction. For example, Facebook allows microblogging in status updates, the uploading of pictures and video clips, the use of chat windows and messaging options, etc. In the next section, I will illustrate a number of examples of multi-modal practices.

5. Illustrations of Web 2.0 practices taken from *Facebook*

While Facebook is only one of many possible social network sites (SNS) to choose from, it is a social internet platform that offers many forms of computer-mediated interaction previously found in isolation and thus, according to Lee (2011: 112), offers a Web 2.0 interface par excellence:

Facebook clearly demonstrates multimodality (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), intertextuality and convergence (Androutsopoulos 2010), and mash-up (cf. O’Reilly 2007) – the coexistence of various formerly separate web spaces and media in one single platform.

Table 1. Visualization of the Facebook interface “home” in September 2012

Icons indicating new messages, friend requests, notifications.	Search box.	Links: “My name” (the account holder’s wall), “Find friends”, “Home”.	The friends’ latest activities are listed that are not displayed as independent events in the chronological news feed (e.g., comments, likes, etc.)
Facebooker’s profile picture.	Prompt to update status (“what’s on your mind?”), add photo/video.	Birthday and events reminders.	
Lists of the Facebooker’s favorites, groups, apps, games feed, etc.	News feed: A list of activities by the Facebooker and his/her friends in chronological order, most recent at top. Prompts to ‘like’ or ‘comment’ under each new post.	Commercial ads.	A list of friends; a green dot next to the name indicates whether they are logged on and available for chat.
		Space for a chat window that opens only on demand.	

In what follows, I will use Facebook as an example of a social network site to illustrate a number of issues that emerged in a research project on Facebook data conducted by Brook Bolander and myself (see Bolander and Locher 2010; Locher and Bolander 2014).

SNSs boomed in the first decade of the 2000s (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Bebo). According to boyd and Ellison (2007), they are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users [‘friends’] with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. As pointed out by a number of studies (Bolander and Locher 2010; Jucker and Dürscheid 2012; Page 2012; Yus 2011; Zappavigna 2012) and indeed in the quote by Lee (2011) above, social network sites such as Facebook offer a platform for different multi-modal activities. Facebook users first need to establish a profile page where they can upload a profile picture and provide information by ticking boxes (e.g. on marital status, gender, hobbies, music/tv/movie preferences, etc.). After this, a personal network is created by “befriending” other Facebookers, so that a network of people who can see each other’s activities emerges. On the main interface itself (see the schematized visualization from 2012 in Table 1 of what you can see when clicking on “home”), users can write on their own or each other’s “walls”³, they can produce status updates, upload hyperlinks, videos and pictures. Status updates and other activities are displayed on the news

feed (home) interface in chronological order with the most recent post on top (second column at the bottom in Table 1). This space is the largest and most prominent in the interface. By means of a “like”-button, and the possibility to leave comments on activities, a dialogue can emerge.⁴ In addition, many users send each other notes/messages similar to e-mail communication (managed within the platform, upper left corner of Table 1), and use the instant message window (a list of those friends who are online at the same time is displayed; lower right corner of Table 1). Furthermore, the platform offers manifold possibilities for activities such as virtual “poking”, engaging in surveys, quizzes or games (apps, games feed; lower left in Table 1).⁵ In the privacy settings, users also have the option of organizing their friends into groups and assigning different viewing/accessing rights.

Jucker and Dürscheid (2012: 61) argue that Facebook practices defy an easy typology:

[...] Facebook is a multiple-tool platform for which it is impossible to say whether it is quasi-synchronous or asynchronous, monomodal or multimodal, based on texts or on utterances, monologic or dialogic, mobile (via applications for smart phones) or stationary (via PC) and which can be characterized by a formal or (more frequently) an informal language. Thus, Facebook is all in all: the profile page, which provides information about the user, represents a monologic context, the chat window, which offers quasi-synchronous communication, represents a dialogic one; the language used in the chat conversation is typically in an informal style, the profile information typically in a more formal style. The distinction between public and non-public and between private and non-private is not clear-cut either. Status updates, for instance, may contain private topics, whereas other CAs [communicative acts], such as the user’s profile information (hometown, sex, work or study environment etc.), are of a far less private nature. Furthermore, messages users send to each other are not public, whereas comments drafted on each other’s wall are public (at least for all friends).

According to Facebook itself, “Facebook helps you connect and share with people in your life”. The literature confirms that the platform’s function seems to be primarily one of social connection (boyd 2009; Jucker and Dürscheid 2012; Page 2012; Yus 2011: 128; Zappavigna 2012). Hence, our own project aimed to study how relationships are created/maintained in the status updates (SUs) of Facebook users and in the reactions to these status updates (RSUs). To study these relational practices, we addressed linguistic identity construction in particular (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Before we turn to this focus, I will introduce our data.

Our data consists of the profile pages and the activities displayed on the walls of two focus groups of ten people each from German-speaking Switzerland (FG-S) and the UK (FG-UK) (overall we have 74 participants in the Swiss data set and 58 in the UK data set⁶). We chose one anchor person and then added those nine friends of the anchor person who had most ties among each other to each group. The UK group consisted of students, while the Swiss group of students and young professionals mostly in their twenties with a couple in their early thirties. However, these

people were not active in equal measures. All consented to us downloading their activities on their walls⁷ (for further detail see Bolander and Locher 2010, Locher and Bolander 2014). The data was collected during two months in 2008/2009. Neither group is large enough to be representative of students/young professionals in general, or of Swiss or UK people. Our aim was to conduct a qualitative analysis of two groups of people who have ties with each other in order to understand better how the groups use language in Facebook.

First we established what our twenty Facebookers *do* on the interface. Overall, they engaged in twelve action types (a total of 481 in FG-S and 673 in FG-UK). We found that writing status updates was the most prominent category (n=227, 47 % for FG-S; n=248, 37 % for FG-UK). Other actions shown on the walls included system messages announcing activities such as writing on each other's walls, writing a comment on photos/sources/quotes, posting a source/quote, uploading photos, accepting a "gift" or similar items, becoming a fan, creating a group, announcing an event, writing a review, and system messages indicating game activities (Locher and Bolander 2014). Only the FG-UK showed considerable gaming activity. Further activities popular in Facebook, such as sending each other notes or engaging in chat window communication, are not visible on the wall and thus do not show up in the overview. We should also stress that much of the interface has changed in the meantime. As already mentioned, the prompt for the status update was "What are you doing right now?" at the time of collection and has changed to "What's on your mind". The 'like'-button was not in place yet, nor could people shown on uploaded pictures be tagged with their Facebook profile names. In addition, today the system generated messages on activities are filtered into separate feeds. The entire wall is nowadays also presented in a different manner (the so-called timeline). Nevertheless, the survey shows that Facebook users engage in a multitude of activities with the text-based status updates constituting the largest category.

Pursuing the question of relationships and identity construction by Facebookers, for our datasets we can confirm that "Facebook Friends usually already know each other in the offline world before connecting via the Facebook site" (Page 2012: 67). The platform allows one to share mundane everyday experiences in a microblogging manner (much like in Twitter, Zappavigna 2012), and to display what one finds humorous, endearing or noteworthy, from musings about one's own life to discussing politics, events, music or global warming. Page (2012: 72), using the concept of small stories (Georgakopoulou 2007) for the status updates, demonstrates how Facebookers draw on "expressive resources associated with affective discourse" to mark their contributions as worth telling. These resources are explicit appraisals (i.e. the stance taking of a Facebooker through the expression of affect, judgment or appreciation), and more implicit stance taking, expressed in "nonverbal displays of affective style" (e.g., emoticons, kisses or laughter, the use of intensifiers and boosters). Page (2012: 84) found that the use of these resources increased from 2008 to 2010 in her dataset.

[“Personality”: we learn that Rose is compassionate and can easily be moved; “Pastime”: We learn about film tastes.]

- (5) Rose is getting down with the diss today, innit. (after Gilmore Girls that is ...)
 [“Work”: Rose is writing a dissertation and evokes the “student identity”; “Personality”: She is procrastinating; “Pastime”: We learn about her tv tastes; “Humor”: By means of the informal *innit* and the comments on Gilmore Girls in parentheses and the ellipsis, she qualifies her resolution in a tongue in cheek way.]

In a qualitative analysis of these categories (checked by means of coder agreement⁸), 1100 acts of positioning emerged in 474 status updates. The groups constructed identities in the fields of personality (46 %), followed by pastime (26 %), humor (10 %), work (9 %) and relationship (9 %). Roughly the same distribution appears when we look at the two focus groups individually. What our Facebook users thus stress are personality traits and pastime activities. Despite the fact that people in both networks share similar occupations, work or study related issues are not as prominent as they could be. Finally, it is striking that the category “relationship” is not evoked as frequently as the others. However, in line with Thurlow and Mroczek (2011b: xxxiv), we would like to stress that “[n]o identity work happens outside of, or without a view to, relationships; acts of identity are also always acts of comparison, social distinction, and othering”. In other words, the categories of personality, pastime, work, and humor also contribute to the creation and maintenance of relational ties by publicly creating in-groups and out-groups. The category “relationship” just does the same work in a more explicit manner.

Yus (2011: 131), quoting boyd (2011: 43), makes the valid point that much of the identity construction we witness might not be entirely controlled by the authors of the posts, since readers can use the comments to enhance, maintain or criticize a person’s face. In our data, only about half of the status updates (SU) receive comments and these reactions (RSU) are supportive of the writer’s stance in the majority of cases, and only rarely challenge the identity put forward (see Page 2012: 86–89).⁹ One of the few challenges we found, which illustrates Yus (2011) and boyd’s (2011) point, can be seen in (6):

- (6) SU: *hard-disk des MAC kaputt, Rettung kostet 3000.-!!! und jetzt??????*
 ‘hard-disk of MAC is broken, Saving the disc costs 3000 !!! what now??????’
 RSU: *sicherheitskopie hervornehmen und weiter arbeiten..*
 ‘take out the backup copy and keep on working ..’

While the status update writer is asking for help and is indicating distress by the exaggerated use of exclamation and question marks, the writer of the RSU does not react to the level of distress at all. Instead, the writer implies that a conscientious computer user would have a backup readily available, and, since the SU writer did

not mention this solution herself, implies that she does not belong to this category. This kind of reaction and positioning of herself is probably not what the status update writer had in mind when posting her call for help.

The status updates in our data clearly connect to the offline life of the users and allow the readership to learn more about them. For example, Lauren creates the identity of a student by sharing her experience of writing an essay with her readership:

- (7) Lauren is clearly avoiding work. She is aware that she still has 900 words left to reach her target for the day. She just doesn't care enough to bother! [12/11/2008, 5:02pm]
- (8) Lauren has only another 1500 words left and is rather glad that she had the amazing idea of splitting everything into sections. [12/17/2008, 1:14pm]
- (9) Lauren has passed the 3,000 word mark meaning there's less than 1,000 words to go ... I think I'll call it a day to be honest! [12/17/2008, 7:07pm]
- (10) Lauren is preparing herself for the final push but just needs a bit of time to settle into it .. honest. [12/18/2008, 11:16am]
- (11) Lauren has just 500 words left ... joy of joys :). [12/18/2008, 12:43pm]
- (12) Lauren is as good as finished. [12/18/2008, 2:40pm]
- (13) Lauren's computer has just deleted her essay ... it's gone ... she's screwed :([12/19/2008, 11:24pm]

We follow her from the procrastinating phase on December 11 to the joys of almost having completed the task to the devastating news that the computer has crashed and her work has disappeared on December 19. An impressive example of how online and offline life is intertwined and how status updates can be used for identity construction is discussed in Lee's (2011) study of Peggy, who wrote Facebook status updates while giving birth to her child, thus allowing her friends to witness her transformation to a mother: "The story of Peggy also makes the case for the domestication of new media (Berker et al. 2005; Silverstone and Haddon 1996). Being 'always on', as she was, certainly blurred the boundary between Peggy's online and offline lives, and between her public and private personae" (Lee 2011: 123).

While Peggy reports on a life-changing event, the majority of status updates in our data report on more mundane happenings. Zappavigna (2012: 38), working on tweets, argues that "[...] microblogging can be seen as an ongoing performance of identity" and goes on to explain that the act of sharing the mundane might be

the human desire for affiliation: we exist within communities of other voices with which we wish to connect. The stances we adopt and observations and evaluations we share all exist relative to the meaning-making of the other members of our social network and to all other potential networks of meaning. In other words, we perform our online identities in order to connect with others. (Zappavigna 2012: 38)

This comment is clearly also valid for our Facebook data. What is striking in both Lauren's report on her work progress, as well as in Peggy's account of her birth experience is that Facebook is not the primary activity that they are engaged in at the time of writing the status updates. They are working or in the hospital, but use Facebook either on their computer or smartphone to keep people informed about their progress. Jones, Schieffelin and Smith (2011) give further evidence of how interwoven the practices of the users can be. In their study they discuss how teenagers use instant messaging to discuss norm violations committed by their "friends" in Facebook. In other words, the interactants have access to an interface that allows them to have both Facebook and the Instant messenger open, while probably engaging in a number of other activities in their physical surrounding or on different Internet platforms/computer applications. They send each other references to the offending Facebook posts in the Instant messaging interface, and thus interlink the practices. Jones, Schieffelin and Smith (2011: 27) show how in "[g]ossiping about these online [Facebook] activities of absent others, the teens in our study use IM to establish and affirm shared moral stances [...]," and thus engage in negotiating identities discursively.

Finally, we should point out that acts of positioning do not only occur in the status updates or the activities that Facebookers engage in. Jones, Schieffelin and Smith (2011: 40) describe the Facebook interface as rich in stance "insofar as it provides contexts in which users generate visual and verbal representations of identity, taste, affiliation, and membership for others to respond to". In Bolander and Locher (2010), we adapt Zhao et al.'s (2008: 1824) work, to distinguish between more implicit and more explicit ways of making identity claims. While creative language for implicit and explicit acts of positioning is used in status updates and comments displayed on the wall as discussed above, the profile page, which is set up at the very beginning of the Facebook experience, also entails acts of positioning. These can be explicit acts of self-labeling, such as indicating one's gender or sexual preferences, as found in the basic information section. More implicit acts are performed in the sections on the profile where users are invited to write freely about themselves (narratives in the "about me" sections) or list their likes in an enumerative way (the "self as consumer", Zhao et al. 2008: 1824). Finally, by posting pictures of themselves (in the profile and on the wall), the users make implicit claims about themselves as "social actors" since, "[i]t is as if the user is saying, 'Watch me and know me by my friends'" (Zhao et al. 2008: 1825). Such identity claims through pictures are made on the basis of "showing without telling" (cf. Zhao et al. 2008: 1825). In Sunden's (2003: 3) words, "[p]rofiles are unique pages where one can 'type oneself into being'" (quoted in boyd and Ellison 2007) and they interact with the creative use of written status updates and other activities that Facebookers engage in.

6. Conclusion

This overview article on electronic discourse started out by claiming that linguists took up the challenge to study this vibrant and evolving field of language use and can already look back over more than twenty years of research. The search for a name of what we are studying when looking at computer-mediated communication mirrors the different concerns and developments in the field itself and is not over yet. After a discussion of such concerns, I moved on to reviewing a number of research strands, from the development of theoretical approaches and tools for systematic description of CMC, to the exploration of modes and genres, the interactional organisation of activities, and the complex emergence of situated relational and interpersonal language use. The discussion of Facebook as one of the popular Web 2.0 platforms showed how intertwined online and offline action can be.

In Section 3, it was reported that Crystal (2011: 10) identifies the speed of change as one of the research challenges for linguists. The brief comments on the quickly changing interface in Facebook since 2008 make clear that reproducing our study with a more recent dataset derived from a comparable group of people will be difficult. However, qualitative studies can never easily be reproduced, so that this comment will not come as a surprise and it is nevertheless possible to build on each other's knowledge. In the same vein, it will also not be easy to mirror large quantitative corpora a number of years down the road when so many of the technical factors may have changed in the meantime. In addition, next to the fast shifts in technical developments, research on electronic discourse has shown that interaction online is no less complex and no less tied to the negotiation of social conventions and norms than offline interaction.

The more the modes merge in Web 2.0, the more the researchers are forced to work on ways in which to account for multi-modality. Thurlow and Mroczek (2011b: xxv) remind us that “[m]ultimodality is – or at least should be – a ‘taken-for-granted’ in new media studies. It is increasingly regarded as a core concept in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis more generally [...]”. It is important to highlight that the last part of the quotation calls for more attention to multi-modality in general and not only in CMC research. At the same time, we can also call for more transfer from face-to-face research methodologies to CMC data (see Bolander and Locher 2013). (For example, when looking at virtual worlds such as Second Life, we are indeed confronted with many of the same problems that face-to-face researchers confront when making data accessible that is derived from videos recorded from different points of view). Acknowledging to a greater extent that online interaction is inventive, creative and evolving, but ultimately conducted by the same people who engage in offline interaction and who draw on this experience, allows us to shift our attention to what Herring (2011: 346) repeats as research desiderata (already mentioned in [2004b: 34]): to “consider more deeply the question of what determines people’s use of mediated communication” and to theorize “[i]n

addition to technological determinism, the effects of time, familiarity, and mass popularization". She adds that it is time for "synthesizing, distilling, and extracting core insights from the available corpus of empirical digital discourse studies" (Herring 2011: 346). In connection with Crystal's (2011) three challenges – the "rapidly growing language corpus", the "diversity of language encountered on the Internet", and the "speed of change" – this leaves us with plenty of work to do in the future.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Klaus P. Schneider for his encouragement and feedback, Brook Bolander for her perceptive comments on this article and the joint *Facebook* research. Thanks also go to the students Lisa Domenghino, Vera Mundwiler and Andrea Wüst, who helped us develop the Facebook project, and to the students and young professionals from FG-S and FG-UK for providing us with a window into their lives and thus with an opportunity for this research.

Notes

1. Yet another theoretical approach is represented by Yus (2011), who uses the Internet as a pool of data to work on questions of cognition and interpretation, drawing on relevance theory in his 'cyberpragmatic' approach.
2. This growing body of work especially also uses a contrastive, cross-cultural, variational and interlanguage pragmatics approach.
3. You write on a friend's wall by clicking on the name of the person, which directs you to this person's interface.
4. The comments and 'likes' can typically be made by anybody who is a friend with the person who posted the item in the news feed, or if it is a public account by anyone at all. They are displayed in a threaded manner below these posts. Depending on the privacy settings in Facebook, which are constantly evolving, 'everybody' or 'friends of friends' or 'only friends' can see them. As a consequence, you can start being in a dialogue with friends of friends, who are not in your own network.
5. In the past, the system generated posts on apps/games activities also showed on the Facebooker's wall and home, while they now appear in separate feeds, probably in order to avoid clustering of the news feed.
6. The study design is not contrastive with respect to 'culture' and we do not interpret the groups as representing their countries of origin.
7. The wall interface only shows the Facebooker's activities and the reactions by other people to these activities. It can be accessed by clicking on the name of the Facebooker. In contrast, the newsfeed shows all activities by the entire group of friends.
8. The coder agreement was at 80 percent and any remaining problems were resolved after discussion between the two authors.
9. Jones et al. (2011) show how teenagers use instant messenger to discuss controversial Facebook posts of their friends. In other words, the challenging of an act of positioning can occur in a different medium than in Facebook itself.

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