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**Author(s):** Leppänen, Sirpa; Møller, Janus Spindler; Nørreby, Thomas Rørbeck; Stæhrc, Andreas;  
Kytölä, Samu

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## **Authenticity, normativity and social media**

Special issue of *Discourse, Context & Media*

Guest editors: Sirpa Leppänen, Janus Spindler Møller and Thomas Rørbeck Nørreby

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## **1. Authenticity and normativity in social media discourse: Introduction**

This special issue brings together research that examines the role of authenticity and normativity in various social media practices. Such a focus is, in our view, both timely and topical. As recent discussions have suggested, the pervasive and on-going changes brought by globalization and superdiversity, mobility, mediation and increased socio-cultural complexity (e.g. Baron 2008; Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Arnaut 2012; Coupland in press) have created new conditions for authenticity. For some this has even meant that authenticity, as it has been conceptualized and investigated by sociolinguists, is now in crisis (Coupland 2003: 425-7; van Leeuwen 2001: 395). Under these conditions, traditional demographic and territorial parameters of authenticity are not always easily available or relevant.

A crisis it may be, but as shown by the papers in this special issue, it should not be taken to mean that the notion, experiences, evaluation and regulation of authenticity are obsolete or irrelevant. On the contrary, in their own ways all the papers in this issue show that authenticity, or, more specifically, the need to authenticate (or disauthenticate) oneself and others, continues to be crucial for identification, socio-cultural participation and membership. The papers highlight that in complex, polycentric and shifting socio-cultural circumstances, what we often see is an acute and heightened awareness and reflexivity concerning authenticity.

However, it is now critical that we need to know more: we need to investigate in what particular ways and under what conditions authenticity is made locally meaningful, and how it is oriented to, indexed and communicated to in linguistic and semiotic action and interaction, as well as how local practice draws on and contributes to discourses on and related to authenticity. The nuanced investigation of authentication practices is what the present special issue aims to contribute to. By focusing on informal and interest-driven social media practices, it shows in detailed ways how participants in and around social media mobilize particular sets of linguistic and other semiotic resources with which authentication can be made and unmade: how it is achieved, crafted, argued for, negotiated, questioned, debated or rejected by participants.

More specifically, drawing on insights provided by new sociolinguistics, discourse studies, linguistic ethnography and cultural studies, the six papers in this issue explore how authentication - and, relatedly, disauthentication, or denaturalization - are played out multisemiotically in a range of social media activities and interactions. The papers approach these themes from an empirical point of view, looking at various kinds of data from a range of social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, discussion forums and blogging. They interrogate what socio-cultural meanings and effects are created therein, and how users locally claim (or reject), and are accorded (or denied) entitlement to use certain linguistic and semiotic resources. By authenticity we thus mean the authenticity effects that are created and accorded as outcomes of constantly negotiated social practices (Bucholtz 2003: 408), involving discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen as emblematic of particular identities (Blommaert and Varis 2013, 2015). What is in focus here is the interpersonal negotiations of what kinds of language use, semiotic practices and forms of participation count as 'genuine' and 'legitimate' for a given purpose (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), and how this kind of authenticity involves particular reflexivity and shared expertise. Importantly, the different contributions also illustrate how discourse practice is shaped and policed in various ways by norms that may sometimes be specific to the social media niches, activities and interactions in question, but other times draw from other everyday and institutional orders of normativity.

## **2. Reflexivity, normativity and conditions for uptake in social media communication**

The notion of reflexivity (regarding both linguistic production and uptake) is central when studying processes of authentication and orientations to normativity in communicative activities and interaction, since a condition for these meta-discursive activities is that certain ways of speaking (and writing) are recognized and associated with social meaning. Reflexivity is also central to social media activities and interactions because, as Weber and Mitchell (2008: 41) suggest, social media users' production of digital discourse (both in terms of outcome and process) forces them to look at themselves, sometimes from new perspectives. For example, Kytölä and Westinen's paper shows how a professional footballer, as he is crafting a versatile and entertaining online presence via Twitter, adopts linguistic resources from the domains of hip hop culture and African American (even Gangsta) English. These stylistic and discursive choices trigger response and uptake not only in Twitter but also on a major Finnish online football discussion forum, where the footballer's

followers begin to question and debate the authenticity of the ‘gangsta’ English that draws heavily from the domain of hip hop. Similarly, as discussed by Leppänen, in order to appear authentic as dog bloggers, writers need to take up and replicate very specific ways of writing about dogs. When establishing oneself as a legitimate and qualified participant in social media activities the ability to manoeuvre linguistic and other semiotic resources available is thus crucial. In one way or another, participants should establish legitimacy discursively in order to authenticate their roles in the social environment. This does not mean that ideologies based in authenticity are not relevant – as shown in several of the papers such ideologies are to a high degree made relevant in evaluations of online communication (e.g. Karrebæk et al.; Stæhr; Kytölä and Westinen). What is important here is that participants in social media activities need to make a discursive effort to position themselves in relation to these activities and other users. Such efforts and their uptake are important for all the papers in this special issue.

Our focus on reflexivity is naturally neither new nor particular for the study of social media communication. A fundamental characteristic of interpersonal communication in general and a cornerstone of the sociolinguistic paradigm is that the production of semiotic material, including language, is always in some sense designed to orient to and influence the recipient(s). This goes for the communication of denotational meaning as well as for how this meaning is communicated in terms of signalling “identifications, nuances, stances, etc. in the textual fine-grain” (Rampton et al. 2014: 4). Participants in interactional encounters are constantly engaged in the meaning making of communicative production. This process of reflexive meaning making involves people’s sociolinguistic knowledge as well as their expectations about communicative productions made by specific people in specific situations. Blommaert (2005:45) describes the relation between production and uptake in interactional meaning making:

What people do with words – to paraphrase Austin (1962) – is to produce *conditions for uptake*, conditions for voice, but as soon as these conditions are produced, uptake is a fully social process, full of power and inequality” (original emphasis)

Producing “conditions for uptake” with words preconditions that certain ways of speaking are recognized and ascribed social meaning. The “uptake” of “voice” involves meta-discursive reflections in many senses. One element in this is whether the use of features are consistent with

how the recipients view and categorize the producer of the discursive material. Such sociolinguistic reflexivity necessarily involves acts of authentication and (constructions of) ideologies of authenticity and normativity and may be explicitly expressed in interaction in evaluations, policing or sanctioning. These types of actions may thus address who are perceived as authentic or ratified users of specific registers (cf. Agha 2005, 2007 on enregisterment). The constructions and negotiations of the relations between linguistic resources, recognizable ways of speaking and groups of speakers can be observed in several of the papers in terms of who grants which rights to whom to use what semiotic material. (see for example Karrebæk, Stæhr & Varis; Kytölä & Westinen; Stæhr, this issue). The studies illustrate how social media interaction facilitates meta-discursive activities extraordinarily well, because of the persistence and searchability of written discourse as well as the users' affordances for sharing various material.

Reflexivity is an aspect of the ways in which norms and normativity constitute an integral part of social media activities and interactions. Normativity as reflexive action involves ways of evaluating, judging and policing the semiotic conduct of oneself and others. Thus, normativity is always partly "imposed from below - by oneself or one's peers" (Leppänen and Piirainen-Marsh 2009: 261; Varis and Wang 2011: 73; Kytölä 2012), in acts of micro-level language policing which can both reflect and thereby consolidate both situated and pre-existing norms for behaviour, but also contribute to the emergence, (re)shaping and (re)contextualization of new norms of specific, contexts, cultures and communities. Besides such bottom-up and interactional forms of normativity, normativity in social media also involves very explicit forms of regulation that constrain the options and opportunities of participants when they express themselves and interact with others. These include, for example, formalised codes of conduct, such as netiquettes, as well as explicit and institutionalized forms of policing, such as moderation and censorship (Leppänen 2009). The kinds of informal and interest-driven social media practices as featured in this special issue are also good examples of what Arnaut (2012) has referred to as late modern post-Panopticon normativity, i.e. normativity that is rarely regulated by centralised mechanisms of control by 'those in power' which means that participants need to orient to plural centers of normativity, some of which may be specific to the sites and activities in question, while others may draw on normativities in other domains and contexts (Blommaert et al. 2005; Blommaert 2010; Varis and Wang 2012; Leppänen et al. 2014).

### 3. The complexity of authentication

All the papers in this special issue highlight the delicacy and complexity of linguistic and semiotic authentication processes. They show how authentication involves the selection and use of a range of discursive strategies, such as styling, crossing (Rampton 2005), stylization (Rampton 1999; Eckert 2001) and categorization. The papers also demonstrate how such uses are situated and contingent, how they are negotiated discursively in activities and interaction, and how both the processes and outcomes often are ambivalent and multi-voiced. Another recurrent observation in the studies included in this issue is that this kind of complexity often appears to be an outcome of how the activities and interactions in focus take place in challenging (super)diverse (Vertovec 2007) social settings and constellations in which participants need to position and re-position themselves *vis-à-vis* responses by a range of others as well as to different centers of normativity. This is the case, for example, in the paper by Stæhr and the one by Nørreby and Møller, that focus on adolescents in Copenhagen and show how they engage in delicate choreographies of authentication in different activities and interactions involving various kinds of normativities in relation to social identities and different ways of speaking. Such shifting positionings are also detected by Karrebæk, Stæhr and Varis, who investigate the ways in which the Danish pop artist Anita Lerche strives to authenticate herself as an artist who transgresses traditional borders and territories, while also responding to and partly accommodating audience voices which predominantly emphasize an inherent and natural relation between language and ethnic or geographical belonging. Very similar issues also emerge in Kytölä and Westinen's discussion of the debates on whether or not 'gangsta' English can be seen as authentic when used by white-faced middle-class Finnish footballers.

Furthermore, that several papers in this issue engage with complexity also shows in how they demonstrate that authentication can also involve assertions and impositions of primordial authenticity. This often becomes motivated and topical in activities and interactions focused on drawing and emphasizing distinctions between identity categories based on race, ethnicity, territorial belonging and gender. For instance, such a focus on primordial identity as situationally meaningful is shown in Nørreby and Møller's analysis of how it becomes interactionally motivated for the participants in both physical and digital contexts to authenticate themselves or others as genuine and legitimate members of an ethnic or racial identity category, and to disauthenticate

others as inherently disqualified as members in such a category. A concern with categorization and policing focusing on who can or cannot belong to a particular identity category is also in the centre of Halonen's analysis where she identifies a cluster of emblematic features assigned to young girls in a way that categorically places (and disparages) them as 'core' members of a contested gender group. A somewhat different view on primordial authenticity is demonstrated in Leppänen's article in which she shows how a particular discursive orientation, deliberately adopted by blog writers, that is based on stylization and ventriloquism ends up suggesting an essentialist and idealized notion of gendered identity.

#### **4. Social media and their sociality**

In this issue we advocate a broad view of social media. We define them as digital applications that build on the ideological and technological premises and foundations of Web 2.0 (e.g. Herring et al., 2013) that allow the creation, exchange and circulation of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) and enable interaction between users. This view of social media encompasses a wide range of applications. Firstly, it includes *chat* and *IRC* applications (such as MiRC discussed in Halonen's paper in this issue). Secondly, it encompasses *social networking sites* (such as Facebook that is in focus in several papers in this issue). Within social networking sites, participants construct a (semi-)public profile, establish connections with friends with whom they share content and interact in various ways, viewing and traversing their list of connections and those made by others. Thirdly, our definition includes applications explicitly building on the idea of mutual exchange of content, and digital environments in which the main content can consist of single-authored or monophonic discourse (such as blogging or YouTube videos, also featured in this special issue) but which also offer an opportunity for authors and recipients to interact with one another, via, for instance, discussion sections of these sites.

Besides particular applications and their capacity to facilitate participants' interaction with both media content and other participants, the sociality of social media also entails how participants draw on and take up (see above) particular ways of using the linguistic, discursive and semiotic resources available to them (see also Leppänen et al. 2014). In this sense, these particular media are social in a way that goes beyond the interactive dynamics of their participants' activities. According to this



view, the sociality of social media thus involves a shared set of formal preferences, productive and interpretive conventions and of norms regulating to what degree and in what ways they can create and interpret their discourse. All of the papers in this special issue demonstrate sociality of this kind, but perhaps the most striking example of this is shown in Leppänen's article that discusses the ways in which bloggers from different corners of the world willingly and uniformly adopt a particular, and highly problematic, way of writing about their dogs.

## **5. Social media and superdiversity**

All the authors (except Varis) featured in this issue come from two research groups, one based in Copenhagen and the other in Jyväskylä, and the different papers are all based on a series of meetings in which aspects of social media as social interaction have been discussed. Both research teams are members of the International Consortium on Language and Superdiversity (InCoLaS).

Superdiversity is a relevant concept for the work featured in this special issue, although it is not always explicitly foregrounded in the analyses. The concept of superdiversity (Vertovec 2007; Baron 2008; Creese & Blackledge 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011) describes the social consequences of new patterns of human mobility combined with enhanced possibilities for communication facilitated by technological developments. One consequence of this kind is an increasing lack of predictability concerning relations between variables such as language, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, family background and country of origin. These social consequences are visible in social media, too: they constitute forums for activities and interactions by groups and communities that can themselves be superdiverse (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012), in other words, diverse across a wide range of variables (Vertovec, 2007). In this sense, social media spaces are not unlike superdiverse urban social spaces (cf. Wessendorf's (2013) description of the London borough of Hackney as a place in which diversity has become "commonplace").

Social media also engage with superdiversity by offering users a discursive space and a set of semiotic resources with which they can strive to make sense of and evaluate their experiences relating to superdiversity, featuring a great deal of reflexivity, which is a key element of communication in late modernity (Coupland 2010: 5). In this issue, the papers by Nørreby and Møller, and by Stæhr, illustrate these facets of superdiversity and social media. Both papers not

only focus on adolescents with complex family histories of mobility and identifications, inhabiting metropolitan, late modern, superdiverse Copenhagen, they also show how the adolescents routinely use Facebook as one of the sites in which they address, orient to and make sense of the complexity that is part of their everyday lives. In the same vein, but mainly focusing on social media activities and interactions only, papers by Kytölä & Westinen and by Karrebæk et al. approach social media as complex and interrelated polycentric and superdiverse social realities in which participants reflexively take issue with superdiversity.

A third facet of superdiversity in social media that illustrates the lack of predictability that generally characterizes late modern and superdiverse socio-cultural conditions is demonstrated by the mobility and mobilization of linguistic and other semiotic resources that are distributed, recontextualized and resemiotized in various ways in countless and rhizomatic digital media practices mushrooming on the internet (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012; forthcoming; Leppänen et al. 2014; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2014). As shown in detail in all of the papers, such an engagement with superdiversity is detectable in all of the social media activities and interactions in focus - perhaps thus suggesting that diversity and heterogeneity may, in fact, now be crucial characteristics of informal and interest-driven social media activities and interactions.

## **6. Ethnographic approaches to digital discourse**

The contributions to this special issue study language and social media from a range of different perspectives and methods. However, all the contributions approach social activities and interaction in social media environments from a perspective of discourse-centered online ethnography (DCOE, Androutsopoulos 2008, 2013; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos 2012; see also Stæhr 2014). As a general framework for the investigation of social media activities and interactions, DCOE is particularly suited to the purposes of the studies featured in this special issue. This is because it typically focuses on the investigation of the emergence of particular linguistic practices, affinity spaces and communities, their local and situated character, the social meanings of language use, the norms governing multilingual usage in various genres, and holistic description of multilingual communities (Kytölä and Androutsopoulos 2012). All of these are central foci in this special issue.

Methodologically, all of the studies reported in this issue also align with the principles DCOE - they have involved focused, systematic and long-term online observation of linguistic, semiotic and other discursive practices. The other main dimension of DCOE, as outlined by Androutsopoulos (2008), which involves engagement with online social actors, in turn, is explicitly part of studies characterized by a focus on both face-to-face and virtual encounters. This is the case in Nørreby and Møller's, Stæhr's, and to an extent, also Karrebæk et al.'s papers. The focus on the participants' sociolinguistic everyday lives outside the social media environment is most prominent in the papers by Stæhr, and by Nørreby and Møller. For example, Stæhr looks at a group of adolescents who on a daily basis engage in interactional encounters with one another using several modes of communication and shows how linguistic reflexivity, the organization of linguistic features and the normative behavior following from metalinguistic activities take place across online and offline activities. Along the same lines, Nørreby and Møller investigate how young Facebook users contextualize and organize identity categories associated with ethnicity across online and offline interactional encounters. What is common to the two papers is that ethnographically obtained knowledge about young Facebook users' sociolinguistic physical lives is used as an important tool in the attempts to understand and contextualize their digital correspondences. Methodologically, the study by Karrebæk et al. also builds on fieldwork in physical and virtual settings. However, their digital ethnography that consists of participant observations and interviews with the artist Anita Lerche is less wide-ranging than the studies by Stæhr, or Nørreby and Møller.

The remaining papers (Kytölä and Westinen; Halonen; Leppänen), in turn, concentrate primarily on the long-term ethnographic observations of activities in social media, as well as on the close analysis of the discourse outcomes of these activities. In addition, all three papers have conducted archive searches, tracing and identifying typical features and patterns in the data, on the basis of which they then selected their key examples. In Kytölä and Westinen's, and Halonen's, studies, their tracing of discourse trajectories has involved searches in several media platforms, whereas Leppänen's study has used one blogsite as the source of her data. In her case, this was motivated by the fact that this particular site is internationally significant and includes a massive number of blogs by writers from around the world.

## **7. Ethical considerations**

In social-scientific research on digital practices and discourses, ethical considerations are an ever-evolving area of metapragmatic scholarly debate (see e.g., Androutsopoulos 2013; Kytölä 2013: 69–76; Stæhr 2014: 25–34). In all of the studies included in this special issue, the researchers have compiled and followed their own, well-informed principles of ethical research. The ethical questions central to the kind of sociolinguistic study of social media represented in this issue can be broadly divided into three main strands:

- 1) Access to, observation of and collection of online (and offline) data; the self-positioning of the researcher(s); ethnographic approaches to the (online) communities in focus
- 2) The researcher’s sensitivity towards controversial issues (when selecting appropriate data and rejecting inappropriate data for closer discussion)
- 3) Granting the informants and authors of online data sufficient anonymity (or, alternatively, sufficient credit for their writings).

All of the three strands involve careful consideration and often exigent choices as there are few unambiguously straightforward ethical guidelines that would pertain to any digital environments (beyond the obvious imperatives of not harming any persons or their reputations, or not circulating sensitive personal information accrued during research and data collection). As for the first strand above, a canonical approach has been to distinguish between publicly available online discourse and digital texts and interactions that require passage through any form of gate-keeping (registration, becoming accepted as a member, winning confidentiality via private messaging, etc.). Moreover, there is a broad distinction between, on the one hand, ethnographic approaches to digital practices (usually characterized by long-term observation, deep contextualization, and possible participation in the digital activities of the communities that are being researched from some perspective) and, on the other, non-ethnographic approaches (usually characterized by shorter observation timeframe, quicker data collection, less familiarization with and attention to the communities “behind the discourse”, and more emphasis on the digitally mediated product than on the process). For the most part, studies reported in this special issue have followed selected key principles of ethnography and long-term data collection at least for a major part of the overall dataset, whilst many of us have obtained complementary data via more discourse-based (less ethnographic) approaches. All the researchers have assessed the extent to which their data can be considered publicly available, or

intended to be accessible to the general public – and use this assessment as a basis for data inclusion or exclusion.

As for the second point above, all scholars involved in this special issue have encountered sensitive and controversial issues related to our shared foci, authenticity and normativity in social media. While conflict, discrimination and antagonism arguably lie in the heart of most of the studies in this special issue, the authors have constructed their analyses with due acknowledgement of emic categories. Sensitivity is shown towards the informants and producers of the digital discourse that is in focus of the research. The third ethical question is that of anonymity or credit. One canonical solution in human subject research in digital contexts is giving anonymity to all participants when using (and quoting) online discourse data for the analysis; however, the question of credit (duly acknowledging, crediting and representing their voices and originality) has also emerged strongly in the scholarly debate. Whilst acquiring informed consent individually from every possible informant and author in digital contexts is often practically impossible, every study included in this issue attempts to strike an informed balance between these two approaches to quoting and using data excerpts. Further elaboration on ethical considerations concerning online ethnography, data collection and analysis are found in the authors' other works (see especially Kytölä 2013: 69–76; Stæhr 2014: 25–34).

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