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## **Investigating multilingualism and multi-semioticity as communicative resources in social media**

Sirpa Leppänen & Samu Kytölä

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the role of multilingualism and multisemioticity as key resources in communication in contemporary interest-driven social media. We approach social media as translocal arenas for social interaction and (trans)cultural activities (Leppänen 2008, 2012; Kytölä in press) which complement and intertwine with participants' offline realities in different ways. In particular, we show how the investigation of such activities can benefit from a multi-dimensional framework drawing on insights from several fields, including online ethnography, the study of multimodality, and research into computer-mediated discourse (CMD).

In this chapter, we show that communication in contemporary social media involves resources provided by language(s), varieties, styles and genres, alongside other semiotic resources – textual forms and patterns, visuality, still and moving images, sound, music, and cultural discourses – as well as their mobilization in processes of *entextualization* (Bauman & Briggs 1990; Blommaert 2005) and *resemiotization* (Iedema 2003; Leppänen *et al.* 2014). We thus explore the ways in which the 'language' of social media can be a bricolage of multiple, intertwined semiotic materials (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Scollon & LeVine 2004; Leppänen *et al.* 2014) which are socially significant to the participants, groups or communities of practice (Wenger 1998) involved in the digitally mediated social actions and engaging in different ways with the (super)diversity (Vertovec 2007) that they encounter. Finally, we draw attention to the cultural aspects of much of today's social media discourse, and we argue that the deployment of multilingual and multisemiotic communicative means is integral to contemporary forms of collaborative and participatory knowledge construction and cultural production.

Our contributions to the themes of this volume are thus the following: Since the new sociolinguistics of multilingualism should take "account of the new communicative order and the particular cultural conditions of our times" (Martin-Jones & Martin, this volume), we argue that social media are increasingly important and meaningful sociocultural and communicative niches for participatory prosumer cultures (Burgess & Green 2009; Leppänen *et al.* 2014) building around shared activities. Reflecting the mobility patterns in

the current phase of globalization and the increased availability of digital communication technologies, social media practices ~~are~~ have become, to an extent unexperienced before, translocal and transcultural ~~being translocal and transcultural~~ (Peuronen 2011; Leppänen 2012; Jousmäki 2014; Kytölä in press). Moreover, as research on late modern forms of multilingualism ought to retain “a central concern with the processes involved in the construction of social difference and social inequality” (Martin-Jones & Martin, this volume), we want to draw attention to the construction and evaluation of difference in informal interest-driven social media settings

Methodologically, the study of these resources calls for an ethnographic and multi-dimensional theoretical and methodological approach (Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Martin-Jones, Blackledge & Creese, 2012; Leppänen 2012). In what follows we argue for the usefulness of combining insights from the study of bi-/multilingualism with online ethnography, (computer-mediated) discourse studies, cultural studies, and the study of multisemiotcity (multimodality).

### **Defining social media**

Social media are often seen fairly narrowly (see e.g. boyd & Ellison 2007) as referring to *social networking sites* within which participants construct a (semi-)public profile, establish connections with friends with whom they share content and interact in various ways, view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others. We wish to broaden this perspective on social media and define them as any digital applications that build on the ideological and technological premises and foundations of Web 2.0 (e.g. Herring 2013) allowing the creation, exchange and circulation of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) and enabling interaction between users. This broader view of social media encompasses both 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) but that also offer an opportunity to authors and recipients to interact with one another (such as discussion sections of blog sites). In principle, this broader definition could even be extended to include more traditional media, too, as long as they make it possible for participants to interact with each other, i.e. to be ‘social’. This multi-faceted conceptualization of social media suggests that the scope of social media research can, in fact, be much more wide-ranging than is often the case, involving different types of (social, print-based, audio-visual and aural) media as well as their interconnections.

### **Combining insights from several approaches**

In what follows we outline the key research lines for our study of social media, followed by an illustration with two empirical examples. First, we draw on recent developments in **the study of multilingualism** (see Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Leppänen & Peuronen 2012), where empirical and theoretical orientations to non-digital (offline) contexts have adapted

and responded to the social changes brought about by globalization. This is shown in critical and ethnographic work within **new sociolinguistics** (e.g. Heller 2007, Blommaert 2010), entailing the inclusion of a more holistic understanding of the diversity of linguistic styles and varieties (Coupland 2007, Jørgensen *et al.* 2011), and heteroglossia (Bailey 2007; Androutsopoulos 2011; Lähteenmäki *et al.* 2011), as well as the significance of space and **social semiotics** in multilingual environments (e.g. Scollon & Scollon 2003; Blommaert 2005, 2010, 2013). Many of these studies have highlighted the convergence between **linguistic ethnography** and **discourse studies**.

Second, we have the recent advances in **research into CMC/CMD** (computer-mediated communication, computer-mediated discourse, respectively), where scholars have noted how the latest advances in social media, or 'Web 2.0' (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2008; Thurlow & Mroczek 2011a; Tannen & Trester 2013), further complicate contemporary digital discourses due to their growing multimodality and interactive participation options. Iconic formats of this 'Web 2.0' currently include *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube* and *Instagram*; each application allows different kinds of affordances and constraints for linguistic and other semiotic expression, and, importantly, each one has been adopted and appropriated differently for personal and community-based usages by different groups of people (Thurlow & Mroczek 2011a; Androutsopoulos 2011; Peuronen 2011; Leppänen *et al.* 2014).

In contrast to the more text-based 'first wave' and the 'second wave' (retrospective labels) of CMC and CMD research, their 'third wave' (Androutsopoulos 2008; Herring 2013; Kytölä 2013) is interested in connections between online and offline social activities, by default defining (and accepting) diversity, heteroglossia, and complexity as research targets. The participatory character of digital discourse (Androutsopoulos 2013) is rapidly changing, too: anyone with an internet connection and a device can now be a producer as well, 'writing the self' online (Barton & Lee 2013: 67–85) on their own. Participation and digital production are becoming more accessible and at least potentially democratic. As Kytölä (2013: 190) points out, "this may be reflected in increasing affordances to use more and more languages online compared with the present, and compared to the English-dominated prehistory of the internet".

Just as many researchers on multilingualism have adopted a more ethnographic perspective (e.g. Blommaert 2010; Creese & Blackledge 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011), similar lines have been outlined by scholars of CMC (e.g. Hine 2000). A prime example is Androutsopoulos's **Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography**, DCOE (Androutsopoulos 2008; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos 2012), which entails venturing beyond screen-based, 'log data' observations by long-term observation of and contact with the individuals and communities online. Such a multi-method approach adds perspectives on interpretations of both online discourse events and offline social activity; methodologically DCOE is eclectic, versatile and triangulative, including participant observation, informal interviews, contact by online messaging contact, or participating in

moments of digital discourse with the people being researched (Androutsopoulos 2008; Peuronen 2011; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos 2012)

The **study of multimodality/multisemioticity** (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Iedema 2003; Scollon & Scollon 2003; Scollon & LeVine 2004, Thurlow & Mroczek 2011a) offers key insights into the study of contemporary digital practices, in which meaning-making occurs in increasingly complex multisemiotic ways. A central tenet from this field that enhances our understanding of diversity in digitally mediated practices is the *a priori* equal salience of different modes and modalities of communication: even language and discourse scholars should not give by default greater preference to verbal language in contemporary digital communication. Instead, the social meanings and communication preferences of different communities and individuals should be investigated carefully, with ethnographic grounding. In addition to the growing role of pictures and videos in the diversity of digital practices, we should pay attention to issues of layout, design and positioning, as well as complex mediation chains and sequences between online (and offline) spaces.

As digital social media are increasingly multisemiotic and interconnected both translocally and 'rhizomatically'<sup>1</sup> across boundaries of nations, ethnicities, languages, genres and formats, the notions of *resemiotization* and *entextualization* are useful means to conceptualize and model the complex interconnections between the various layers of elements in contemporary digital communication. We define them as follows:

*Resemiotization*: the unfolding and rearticulation of meaning across modes and modalities, from some groups of people to others; emphasizes the need for socio-historical exploration and understanding of the complex processes which constitute and surround meaning-makings (Iedema 2003; Leppänen *et al.* 2014)

*Entextualization*: earlier, socially, culturally, and historically situated, unique pieces of discourse are lifted out of their original context and transmitted, by quoting/echoing them, by inserting them into another discourse (Bauman & Briggs 1990: 73; Blommaert 2005: 47; Leppänen *et al.* 2014; Androutsopoulos 2014)

Resemiotization and entextualization are crucial in the investigation of social media discourse since in them, the circulation and appropriation of discourse is multiplied, accelerated and highlighted. Resemiotization and entextualization are potential but so far under-used models and concepts for the description of the complex inter-relations between moments and nexuses of social action between online and offline sites.

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<sup>1</sup> We adopt this metaphor from Deleuze & Guattari (1987), who adopted such metaphorical usage of the rhizome from biology to social sciences. As opposed to linear, tree-like ('arborescent' in Deleuze & Guattari 1987) structures, 'rhizomatic' connections between individuals, communities or nodes of social action are by default non-linear, non-chronological, non-hierarchical and non-binary. The metaphor of the rhizome, therefore, allows for more complex and unpredictable connections, being suitable to the conceptualization of the social life of late modern digital discourses.

The investigation of interest-driven social media practices also needs to draw on insights from **cultural studies** as digital practices are often geared towards the creation, appropriation, sharing, and evaluation of culture, i.e. towards active ‘prosumption’ (consumption *cum* production) of cultural products and practices. Social media build on the existence of participatory convergence culture that enables individuals to engage in collective meaning-making practices (Jenkins 2008; Burgess & Green 2009: 10). Meaning-making practices are no longer organized primarily along local, ethnic or national identifications; rather, it is the engagement with transcultural flows and translocal identification lines which both consist in and go beyond the local and the global (Leppänen *et al.* 2009). Translocality (Kytölä, in press; (Leppänen *et al.* 2009) can be manifested in various ways, but for our present purposes its mutually constructive relationship with language and other semiotic practices is particularly significant. It is often a motivated and meaningful option for participants to draw on resources provided by more languages than one (Leppänen 2012; Leppänen & Peuronen 2012; Kytölä 2013) and to deploy them in ways that resonate with or contest the normative expectations of the specific discourse contexts.

### **Multilingual and multisemiotic social media discourses and practices: two empirical cases**

We will now turn to two empirical examples which illustrate recurrent types of multilingual and multisemiotic digital discourses and practices with which the participants make sense of and construct their social and cultural identities and realities online. The first example is that of Finnish footballers’ Twitter usages and the uptake and responses they arouse within a football community, while the second example analyzes a particular cultural practice of crafting transgressive music videos, which is known as *shredding*.

In the analysis of the examples we engage with the interface between epistemology and methodology, interrogating theories of how language, discourse and meaning-making work in social realities and weighing up methodological choices and ways of approaching and investigating the complexity of discourse. In more concrete terms, this means that, with the help of the two cases, we wish to demonstrate how their analysis crucially draws on (i) our long-term ethnographic study of social media cultures, environments and practices which enables us to gain emic understandings and develop thick descriptions of social media practices, (ii) linguistic, discourse and multimodal analysis to describe and interpret the forms, discourse functions and local socio-cultural meanings of participants’ semiotic choices, (iii) new sociolinguistics to describe resources provided by language/s, registers and styles, and their meanings and effects, and (iv) cultural studies, new media studies and fan studies to describe and explain the ‘culturality’ of the practices.

### ***From professional footballers’ jocular online performance to metapragmatic policing – entextualization of multilingual resources***

Football (soccer) culture is rich ground for research on multilingual and multisemiotic practices, because football is a highly translocal, transcultural and polycentric sport, which is reflected in texts and talk about football (Kytölä 2013). Despite the significant role that football and football culture play in the formation of many trans- and multicultural contexts, its study has not been properly incorporated in studies on multilingualism and diversity (Kytölä 2013). Our first example entails an entextualization and resemiotization chain of online and offline social activities by three Finnish football professionals (Mikael Forssell, b.1981; Mika Väyrynen, b.1981; Tim Sparv, b.1987) who use the extremely popular micro-blog platform *Twitter* as a means of self-expression, contact with their friends and fans, and socializing with each other. The life and career trajectories of these Finnish footballers are characterized by mobility and transculturality, with contract-based sojourns in Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Their digital writing, thus, has diverse audiences transnationally, and their Twitter updates (*tweets*; quick messages limited to 140 characters) show orientation to multiple centers and audiences (Kytölä & Westinen 2015), with linguistic choices varying between Finnish, Swedish, English, German and Dutch. Furthermore, they display great 'intra-linguistic' variety of register and styles, with Sparv leaning towards (and being close to) standard varieties, and the other two leaning towards colloquial, non-Standard, slang style(s).

English is perceivably the dominant language choice in tweets by each of them, but they frequently use other languages and mix between them. They also post pictures, hyperlinks to websites, indications of the addressee of the tweet (indicated by the '@' sign) and the popular indexing practice called 'hashtagging' (indicated by '#'), which enables Twitter users to quickly index, search for, or follow particular keywords or phrases. Below (Figure 1) is a brief sample from Forssell's Twitter (August 2011), involving interaction with Tim Sparv:



FIGURE 1. Mikael Forssell's Twitter

This excerpt illustrates how the footballers can direct their tweets to each other, yet make them publicly visible for their followers, often as performance aimed at entertainment. They use (features from) English for this reciprocal communication, although they also share Swedish (home language) and Finnish (the main language in Finland) – languages which they would probably use in face-to-face contact without non-Finnish interlocutors. Forssell's style is much more informal and non-Standard than Sparv's; the linguistic/stylistic diversity of their tweets notwithstanding, this sample seems rather representative in this respect.

Kytölä's long-time observation and online ethnography of Finnish football fandom (Kytölä & Androutsopoulos 2012; Kytölä 2013) identified a 'thick momentum' in the Twitter activity of the three players (Forssell, Sparv and Väyrynen), where they deployed several recurring linguistic features that can be associated with African American Vernacular English, or the register of 'gangsta' talk (see also Kytölä & Westinen 2015). Below are two examples (text only, no screenshot) of tweeting sequences:

**Väyrynen:**

*@MikaelForssell wtf bro?harvoin kuullu et jäbä tyytyväinen jos et oo maalannu tai pelannu..still keep ya head up n c ya next week*

Translation from (colloquial) Finnish: "*wtf bro?rarely heard ya happy when ya ain't scored or played..still keep ya head up n c ya next week*"

**Forssell:**

@MikaVayrynen10 *no enhän mä ookkaan mut gotta be happy for the lads...ne ansaitsee...mun aika tulee kun tulee....u know bro! C u this week!!*

Translation from (colloquial) Finnish: *“well i’m not but gotta be happy for the lads...they deserve...my time comes when it comes...u know bro! C u this week!!”*

[...]

**Sparv:**

@MikaelForssell *Hey seriously, you got chocolate in your room??*

**Forssell:**

@TimSparv *of course I do...&4 a few euros I could offload a few grams to you...but the price has 2 be right...u know...financial-crisis mate*

The choice of Twitter, along with varieties and styles of English, for the jocular communication between the players highlights the affordances of Twitter: the discourse is simultaneously private and public, restricted and open, intimate and international, for friends and fans. Moreover, this is only a brief episode in the flow of Twitter updates and rhizomatic connections for Forssell, Sparv, Väyrynen and their colleagues, and for the diverse translocal audiences picking up their tweets.

To illustrate the open-endedness, hyperlinkability and rhizomaticity of such digital discourses, let us explore the ‘next stage’ of the digital mediation chain (though this also happens nearly simultaneously). This on-line communication occurs within a community of Finnish football fans at the bustling online hub *Futisforum2.org* (Kytölä 2012, 2013), who initiate and maintain metapragmatic, normatively oriented discussions on the acceptability and authenticity of the language of these *tweets*, notably non-Standard English usages (see also Kytölä & Westinen 2015). Examples of the community-based evaluations of the Twitter writing by Forssell, Väyrynen and Sparv are shown below (translations from colloquial Finnish by SK):

“Could someone teach that lad how to write, when the media gets interested too? What do they now think about us etc.” 🤔

“As if he would need any more space for his brainfarts - he has a hard time forming even 160 characters of text” 😊

On *Futisforum2*, there is entextualization of the tweets by Forssell, Väyrynen and Sparv into the digital format and space of the web discussion forum. (Their tweets had earlier been representations, and thus entextualizations, of their offline social activity of physical exercise, chocolate eating and so on.) Along with quoting the players’ tweets, the forum

participants add a layer of metapragmatic evaluation and commentary on them; judging them as ‘bad English’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘pathetic’, or alternatively, ‘entertaining’, ‘wicked’ or ‘lol stuff’. These evaluations are made mostly in the mode of verbal language, emoticons (such as the laughing face 😄 or the sad face 😞 above) and hyperlinks; and they vary from explicit metapragmatic evaluations (e.g. “this is retarded”) to implicit metapragmatics whereby similar, ‘mock gangsta’ talk is used (“‘Da Gangsta’. Str8 from da ghetto”).

However, the meta-level evaluation further evolves into the adoption and appropriation of similar linguistic and stylistic features: some participants at *Futisforum2* start using features that were mocked earlier and they use them in a ways in which the line between mocking and ‘second-order entertainment’ gets blurred (see Kytölä & Westinen 2015):

“i feel rly stoopid right now, mate! gotta get me sum choco! ZÄDÄM!”

“Yo dawg! Gr8 2 have u bak, 4real, man! Yo!”

(“ZÄDÄM!” is a written representation of a colloquial, relatively infrequent Finnish exclamation that, to our best knowledge, has no primary meaning. It is likely to express e.g., enthusiasm, coming into sight, conjuring “a magic trick”, etc.)

Finnish football enthusiasts’ appropriation of these styles is not limited to new expressions and coinages in verbal language. A case in point is the cultural practice of *Futisforum* members (and no doubt many other online communities) to create stylized multisemiotic mockery by means of image manipulations juxtaposed with minimal excerpts of verbal language. For instance, one prolific member, nickname “Aarne Ankka”, has become appreciated within the community and across various online sites for his minimalistic and obscene comic strips (with four panels), one of which mocked both Forssell’s tweeting and his ‘gangsta’ English. Such creations represent another kind of multimodal resemiotization that has great potential for online circulation via social media. (We refrain from reprinting such examples here, but a Google image search with the search words ‘Aarne’, ‘Ankka’ and ‘Futisforum’ will give a few examples.)

All these phases and discourse events show different attitudes and stances towards cultural diversity and multilingual language use, which remain negotiable and ambivalent; on the one hand the footballers’ tweeting and related social activities are considered entertaining and carefully crafted, on the other, they are portrayed as ridiculous and ‘retarded’. The open-endedness and rhizomaticity of such digital practices is further illustrated by tracing the trajectories of Forssell’s (and others’) Twitter behavior into other online contexts and spaces (e.g. by searching for combinations of keywords with a search engine). The digital styles and practices emerging in the footballers’ Twitter accounts spread not only to the hub *Futisforum2*, but also to blogs, comments sections of institutional online media, institutional media articles and, iteratively, to new social media platforms (Kytölä & Westinen 2015).

In sum, the constellation of multilingualism (and to a degree, multimodality) is influenced by and constructed through the transcultural domain of football (where actors are *mobile*), the present participants' life trajectories, and the fluid, transnational communities of practice (of fans, followers, colleagues and media people). Moreover, they are characterized by the affordances of digital media (Twitter, web forums, etc.) and the open-ended, rhizomatic connections between online (and offline) sites.

### ***Shredding – multisemioticity as a key resource in cultural production in social media***

Our second example illustrates translocal, informal and interest-driven cultural practice which crucially draws on and thrives on resemiotization – *shredding*. Shredding is a particular type of online fan activity which involves either “a style of guitar playing characterized by extremely fast flurries of notes and extremely distorted tones” or a parodic representation of such musical performances involving the extraction of “the audio track from a video (usually featuring an overblown, overrated rock guitarist)” and replacing it “with perfectly synchronized, very well played rubbish” (*Urban Dictionary*). The outcomes of shredding, our focus here, are shreds – music videos published on *YouTube* or the shredders' own websites and the focus of active commentary and discussion by avid fans of shredding.

Shredding is typically conducted by devoted prosumer-fans of popular culture who, as members of a particular participatory culture, engage in activities of crafting, disseminating and exchanging cultural content with their appreciative audiences. Shredding offers them a means of actively engaging with the objects of their interest and other fans: these include a range of semiotic resources for ridiculing highly revered popular music performances and artists. Shredders and their followers self-identify as members of their fan culture, and, through their own shredding activities and responses to and interactions around shreds by others, establish, negotiate and maintain forms of appropriate practice and their indexicalities. These forms of practices and their indexicalities constitute a basis for judgements as to who is sufficiently authentic to legitimately pass as a member of shredder culture (see also Leppänen 2012; Varis & Wang 2011; Kytölä 2012).

To illustrate shredding as a fundamentally interventional practice involving complex multisemioticity, we discuss a shred by one of its best known practitioners, StSanders. StSanders (aka Santeri Ojala) is a Finnish professional computer animator in Finland and media artist who has extended his expertise to shredding and has produced numerous shreds on well-known rock and pop bands and musicians. Thanks to his professionalism, musicality, versatility and meticulousness, he has, in fact, become an online micro-celebrity (Senft 2008). His work is followed, admired, discussed, imitated and circulated by shredders and audiences both in Finland and around the world. He has become so popular that he has even attracted the attention of mainstream media, again, both in

Finland and elsewhere. His shredding has also been acknowledged and admired by some of the musicians whom he has ridiculed. For example, a feature article in the *Wired* magazine in 2007 – itself an instance of resemiotization of StSanders' work – stated that

[...] after links to the videos were posted [...], even some musicians were caught criticizing the (as one poster put it) "insanely bad" stylings of Clapton and Van Halen -- only to later laugh along with everyone else once properly informed of the gag. (Phan 2007)

One of the most popular of StSanders' works is a video of the U.S. glam rock band KISS which has been active since the 1970s. The shred is entitled PISS (see Figure 2 below), and it is a prime example of multimodal interventional resemiotization of content originally produced by someone else, so typical of late modern social media participatory cultures (see e.g. Leppänen *et al.* 2014).



Figure 2. The PISS shred (copyright granted by StSanders)

The resemiotizations conducted by StSanders include the music which has been recomposed, rearranged and reperformed by StSanders, producing a piece that is melodically simple and rhythmically abrupt and angular, involving singing with a high-pitched, slightly off-key voice. StSanders also created new lyrics for the song and mediated

these, not only via the singing, but also through subtitles. Further, the lyrics are designed so that they are in perfect lip sync with the original mouthings by the KISS singer on the video. In doing this, StSanders is, in fact, relying on the so-called *mondegreen*, or *soramimi*, technique which is used in other transgressive social media practices (such as *buffalaxing*, see Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012). Such practices involve a deliberate mishearing of utterances or lyrics, on the basis of which new lyrics and/or subtitles are created. These new lyrics and subtitles are as closely homophonic as possible with the words said or sung in the original footage. In this shred, because the homophonic lyrics are created on the basis of how they coincide with the original mouthing patterns by the KISS singer, the lyrics of the shred turn out to be as an incoherent and absurd string of one-liners which do not convey any coherent narrative at all. As an illustration, consider the beginning of the shred:

#### EXTRACT FROM THE PISS LYRICS

Ha ha ho ho Yah  
Ah! Wow, oh Bobby!  
[whistles]  
Kiai!  
I will never go to school  
'cause it's not so nice  
and it's just so bizarre a place  
I just wanna eat pizza  
Bruce likes a trophy!  
I feel so bad for you!  
I'm so good for me!  
For me!  
But I was paid to fly with you, Batman!  
Why you're bad, Phil  
And I can't stand the smell  
'cause you make me...  
Ewww!  
Oh my!

Even though the new lyrics are thus basically non-sensical, in the context of the video they are not totally senseless. This is because they could be interpreted as incrementally building up an image of the protagonist and/or singer as someone who really doesn't have a message to deliver at all. StSanders also represents this character as a sociolinguistically hybrid creature by assigning him a range of impressionistic accents, which approximate American, Italian, and more generic non-native English pronunciations.

The overall parodic effect of the shred is not only created on the basis of a range of resemiotizing operations, but also by complementing and juxtaposing them with some of

the semiotic material of the original video, especially its ways of representing the performance of the band cinematically. The overall effect of all of these semiotic operations is a multi-dimensional parody of KISS, highlighting the superficiality, absurdity, and even narcissism of the kind of glam rock music genre they represent.

StSanders' shreds – as an example of translocal social media practice driven by a shared interest in globally prominent and influential popular cultural products – have themselves become globally viral and celebrated. For our purposes, they are an apt illustration of ways in which multisemioticity is drawn on in social media, and the ways it is taken up, appropriated, disseminated as resources with which participants can identify. Participants engage with the particular activity culture, express themselves, communicate, interact and build up shared socio-cultural worlds. StSanders' work also illustrates another important and recurrent facet of many interest-driven social media cultures: his trend- and norm-setting social media products have become an inspiration for others and countless versions, adaptations, samplings and imitations. In this sense, the virality of his products could even be argued to be creating affordances for the development of expertise. They exemplify how viral practices are quickly taken up, rehearsed and applied by others – more or less successfully. In short, in their own ways they function as vehicles for learning, as lessons in the multimodal 'language' and resemiotization activities of informal and interest-driven transgressive social media. As is already witnessed by StSanders himself and his micro-celebrity which has brought him visibility and, no doubt, new work and financial opportunities. In the increasingly media(tion)-saturated world, such expertise can turn valuable and can have applicability in other (educational, professional, institutional) contexts, on- and offline.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have argued that in social media diversity 'happens' in multilingual and multisemiotic and highly mediated ways, necessitating a multi-dimensional theory-as-method approach. Our multi-disciplinary approach and analyses of fluid and open-ended mediated discourse admittedly raise some thorny methodological challenges that need careful consideration and close, long-term contact with and observation of the sites, actors and discourses one aims at investigating. These include the following:

- ensuring that the investigation of complex social media practices is 'multi-sited enough' so that salient aspects of the discourses and phenomena in focus are convincingly covered;
- identification of meaningful nexuses of practice and sites of engagement (Scollon & Scollon 2004) in which particular multilingual or multisemiotic practices and styles emerge, thrive, circulate, are transformed, and possibly wither away;

- the delimitation and focusing of investigations to determine where to stop tracing the trajectories in qualitative research with the aim of holistic yet detailed description
- treating digital practices as grassroots cultural production in which the borderline between producers and consumers of digital discourse is a blurred one, in a world where anyone with an internet connection and a digital device can copy, imitate, edit and circulate different discourses.

In our discussion of two empirical cases, we have highlighted discourses and practices which are typical of not only informal, interest driven social media, but also, increasingly, of late modern, mediated *superdiversity* (Vertovec 2007; Creese & Blackledge 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011) in more general terms – its recurrent and symptomatic complexity, mobility and circulation (Arnaut 2012; Leppänen & Häkkinen, 2012; Häkkinen & Leppänen, 2014). We have shown how these complex activities and meaning-makings are socially significant and culturally valuable to the participants and groups. Some degree of agency is always involved as participants and groups mobilize these resources as prosumers in socio-cultural niches regulated by polycentric, ‘post-Panopticon’ normativities.

Our analysis also raises some more general points for the study of contemporary forms of cultural and semiotic diversity. Our first example highlighted multilingualism: certain forms of multilingualism can be enhanced and enabled via certain digital media (affordances and constraints). The Finnish footballers’ mutual but public Twitter exchanges and their various ‘aftermaths’ were shown to be a case in point. The second example showed that the same applies in the case of multi-semioticity: in digital media, as with linguistic and discursive resources, it is a crucial means for communication and interaction.

Our examples can also emphasize the ‘nothing new’ caveat. The multilingual resources as well as the competences in the use of multimodal literacies have to ‘reside’ *a priori* in the individuals and communities themselves. Despite the open-ended possibilities to ‘copy-and-paste’ from various online sources in the process of producing online discourse, there has to be certain prior experiences, ‘competences’ and literacies available in order for the complex discourses to make sense, to produce the desired social meanings, or at least ‘just enough’ unambiguity in the middle of ambivalence for successful (and often entertaining) communication.

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