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## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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### *Abstract*

Texts, language, communication should always be considered in their social context. Texts do not merely passively report upon the world, but they imbue it with meaning, shape perspectives and call the world into being. The relationship between text and ideology, and between the author and reader, appears to have changed because of the opportunities of public communication that have been extended by social media applications such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. It is also clear that new methods are required for data collection, as content takes new forms, and forms of design, images, and data has to be integrated with language much more in online than in offline. We use the term social media to refer to “Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0”, where Web 2.0 means that “content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The aim of our research is to take into discussion different ways of approaching discourse analysis in this new online environment. Despite the large variety of platforms, some characteristics are common to many of them. Even if processes and structures of the public are subjects to change, the forms of discourse may be one of common points. Whilst the perspective on the system is one important aspect, another aspect is the perspective on the users who create the content. So, the three steps of the discourse have to be considered: production, form and reception. We try to seek out new models that are required to address how the technologies themselves come to shape the nature of content and discourse.

**Keywords:** social media; discourse; Facebook, YouTube; critical discourse analysis;

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Three decades of the World Wide Web, caused major changes to the communication paradigms. The swift, free of spatial and temporal barriers and ubiquitous manner in which information permeates all possible media, makes online consumption (media, social media) an easier and faster exchange, many times inculcating some sort of superficiality to certain communication forms. We are inevitably dealing with the fluidization of the boundaries between information and any circulation form in the public space.

Web 2.0 brought about functionalities unencountered before, from the viewpoint of interactions, the content created and broadcast online being, in many circumstances, co-created by both communication poles. The information transfer in the social networks features rapidity (which is extremely important in certain circumstances) as to its emergence and distribution, thus arriving with



more difficulty to the stability of the shape that information could recurrently take online. The complex interaction in the age of new technologies, the discursive writing forms and genres are major challenges to the language sciences.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The online native discourse, as discursive terminology, is a reproduced expression of the English *web native*, which represents any online created discourse, i.e. within a digital ecosystem (Paveau, 2015:3) connected to the Internet. The French linguist Marie-Anne Paveau proposes an integrative perspective when defining the online discourse analysis study object. Since the Web is viewed as a device made up of techniques, actors and statements, as well as of various practices whereby Internet recognition and resource utilization are learnt, while in the linguistic, discourse research field, Marie-Anne Paveau, proposes, for instance, new terms for naming the discursive realities and brings to the readers' attention the expression of *discursive technology*. "My definition of discourse genre shall be minimalist: an array of collective, pre-, extra- and intradiscursive frames, built by the elaboration-interpretation of statements" (Paveau, 2013 :7-30). Therefore, Paveau does not separate the intralinguistic manifestations from the extralinguistic constraints, as the French researcher sees an online "continuum" between the linguistic material, as intralinguistic manifestation and the extradiscursive that considers the discursive context, instead of a distinction or opposition between the two dimensions. Paveau's viewpoint is an integrative, non-dualist or post-dualist one. Thus, the Internet is viewed as a technolinguistic ecosystem. Taking the same direction proposed by the French researcher, we attempt at distinguishing a series a discourse technolinguistic features that must be considered when they intersect the online environment.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Discourse can be considered as an 'active relation to reality' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 41). Fairclough (2003, p.26) has delineated three features of discourse that describe its operation within social life, as 'part of the action.' These are: (a) genres (ways of acting), (b) discourses (ways of representing), (c) styles (ways of being). Discourses can be analysed by taking into consideration three steps: production, form and reception.

Beyond the steps we should consider when dealing with the new statement forms, the most frequent manner of analysing discourse seems to still reside in the old theories and methods. In linguistics, there aren't many theoretical innovations, so that, the analysis object, which keeps renewing itself, especially in the Internet age, is still viewed through the already existing theories. Native digital discourses question circumstances that haven't been encountered before, and, as such, would require new analysis methods.

« La nature technodiscursive de ce type d'énoncé, définie par une complète intégration de la technique à la matière langagière, impose de modifier nos regards et de prendre pour objet d'analyse, non plus les éléments langagiers dans une perspective logocentrée, mais l'ensemble de l'environnement technodiscursif dans la perspective écologique nécessaire à une analyse du discours numérique » (Paveau, 2015, p.2) (*The technodiscursive nature of this kind of statement, defined by a complete integration of the technique into the language matter, compels us to modify our view and to no longer consider language elements as analysis object from a logocentric perspective, but the overall technodiscursive environment in the ecologic perspective required to the digital discourse analysis*)

Consequently, Paveau (2012/2015) proposes the analysis of various aspects of the so-called "sensitivities" of online native discourses, because they require epistemological precautions and undoubtedly entail the preservation of data integrity/wholeness, impose the analysis of the subtle way in which producers and receptors (we might add) perceive the dimension of discourses in terms of public and private.

## 4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The statements produced in the networked environments are actually composite discursive technologies. We can no longer speak of mere language discourses but of a combination of language elements with the afferent technology. Even words could become techno-words, if we abide by the term proposed by the French researcher, as it happens with the hashtag in the social media or the hash sign (#)

that makes those names accessible by placing the hashtag in front of them. We could mention here the example of the indicator words such as *like*, *share*, *follow*, *unfollow* in the Facebook network, *retweeter* on Twitter or *pin* on Pinterest. If we would like to analyse these words just from the logocentric perspective, they would no longer have the same meaning; moreover, we could find ourselves in a serious interpretation error and disregard certain aspects pertaining to their structure and meanings. Their researchability and correlation would no longer be possible if we “extracted” them from the digital context they belong to and which they represent in all its manifestations.

What Marie-Anne Paveau proposes is a symmetrical linguistics, i.e. a perspective going beyond the existing separation between language and technique, between body and soul, between internal and external. Actually, we are dealing with hybrid objects embedding language and technique. Language can no longer be considered as such, in its pure state, but it must be viewed in its “natural” condition, natural in the web field meaning it infallibly bears the marks of the digital techniques. Technology no longer is a mere support (just like paper is to writing, the TV channel to the televised discourse or sound waves to the radio discourse), it is part of the production process, it has a certain form and interpreted through the digital options that the Internet offers. Thus, the plurisemiotic (social) networks such as Pinterest (even technical-iconic-discursive) can no longer be analysed outside the support they identify with. To continue in the same direction, it might not be that improper to speak of the separation of “real” life from the “virtual” one, but of our separate worlds, as we have a professional and personal life, parts of our life that cannot be entirely dissociated but treated as a continuum, as a mingling of “lives” taking place around the same life. The virtual actually became part of our reality. « Mais une plus grande familiarité avec les technologies numériques nous fait désormais comprendre que l’espace qu’elles produisent est un espace concret, réel et probablement aussi physique. Comme tout espace, l’espace numérique est l’agencement d’une série de relations entre des choses » (Rosati, 2012 : § 6) (*But a greater intimacy with the digital technologies makes us henceforth understand that the space they create is a concrete, real and probably physical one. As any other space, the digital space is the arrangement of a series of relationships between things*). A post-dualistic vision no longer distinguishes between linguistic and extralinguistic but views language elements only in the context they manifest themselves.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODS

The working corpora in the case of online discourse analysis consider the positioning of the one analysing them against the analysed object. Should the linguistic-extralinguistic delimitation be diluted, and the discursive element is made up of several composite aspects, the linguist must also adapt the working perspective. The technological dimension takes language out of its verbal purity and its independence from the technique.

This perspective, that we might call both post-dualistic, according to Marie-Anne Paveau’s terminology, and symmetrical, in order to put the language and technical elements on equal footing, and because both aspects are impossible to separate, is not recent. The materiality of the contexts has been highlighted before by researchers such as Michel Pêcheux (Pêcheux et al. 1971), who built a constitutive relationship between meaning and the social-historical circumstances of statement production. Robert Laffont substantiated the praxematics that brought reality into the sphere of verbal production analysis. Socio-linguistics treats as well the relational aspects between the socio-material and human constraints. Non-verbal aspects remain nevertheless in the field of receptors’ discourse utilization, of the role in interactions or as discourse topics. The relationship between objects, material and social anchoring of actions has been insisted upon, considering gestures besides the linguistic aspects, such as word manipulation. A post-dualistic vision, embedded in the online discourse analysis would no longer extract language from the context of its production, formulation and reception, the discourse being viewed in its wholeness and integrity.

The way the researcher positions him-/herself against his/her study object may differ. Departing from the exterior observation, participative objectivation, even immersion, the analysing eye should nevertheless practise that discursive form, at least in what concerns the online environment. Let us explain our position: an entirely exterior analysis could not foresee, prevent or even control the interpretation of the techno-language, as long as it does not know it. Because techno-language no longer offers itself to the specialist as it did on paper, but it is written and rewritten along with the presentation,

presence and “passage” through the online. An archiving is almost impossible, because the “text” is permanently subject to modifications (by the author or the receptor who, in turn, becomes writer-reader). We mention here the example of the news broadcast in the social media, news that almost always updates itself with clarifications that the readers of that material make. About the admiration forms (like), requesting friendship, sharing, we could specify the same aspects: the receptor and emitter always switch positions and one thing recorded online today might look different tomorrow.

## 6. FINDINGS

### Data/information wholeness

When it comes to social media and online environment discursive analysis in general, the working corpora wholeness is an extremely important criterion to consider. A complete perspective cannot be spoken of as long as the language composed of written and spoken words (videos, lives) is simply “extracted” from the environment it was formulated in order to find meanings. Four techno-discursive features are worth considering, according to Marie-Anne Paveau (2012) when the analysis object is the online discourse, for instance the blog, social media, commercial, administrative or institutional websites discourse: (1) delinearization, (2) development or extension, (3) technogenericity and (4) plurisemiotics.

(1) Delinearization concerns the occurrence of hypertext links that sets out, starting from the initial text, the passage to another text, related to the contents of the source text, an operation presupposing a technique specific to the online environment. Thus, the reader is enabled to exit linear thread of the story, of the news or information and return to another piece of information on another page. Linearity is thus interrupted in social media by techno-words (hashtag, tag) or indicator words such as *like, love, haha, share, reply etc. or hyperlinks*. True codes develop the discourse and render words insufficient, although social media networks are mainly scriptural. Although it is considered that the image tends to replace writing in the online, words have remained the main transmission manner, percent-wise, of information (we are considering here not only Instagram, that imposed a culture of photography, but also blogs, commercial websites, institutional websites of the online versions of newspapers, for instance).

Illustration no. 1 – Print screen of the personal Facebook page, 21.05.2019



(2) Development or extension of declarative prerogatives. The speaker is no longer the sole communication source. The essential question we need to answer when analysing the online discourse is “Who is talking?”. In the social networks, discourse is permanently built through comments, sometimes more clarifying and more complete than the original information offered by the first emitter. It is actually a collaborative writing.

(3) Technogenericity refers to the plethora of discourse genres that developed, either natively digital (straight into the online environment), for instance the friendship request, sharing messages, posts, which gives birth to the so-called reported discourses within the social networks, or by transforming / “acclimation” of the genres from the traditional communication environments (log, private log, comment,

interview etc.). The oral code conversation has been transcribed in the social networks into the comments made to the emitters' posts, to the tickets posted on blogs for instance, or in the online discussion forums. Dominique Maingueneau (2013) brings into discussion the notion of hypergenre, quite a generalizing term encompassing several genres grouped around the same topic, the same subject. The notion of hypergenre is specific (maybe to a large extent) both to the digital environment and the written one, such as indicated in our PhD thesis about the "Typology of journalism texts in the current Romanian press", Institutul European Publishing House, 2018).

(4) Although the online discourse universe is marked by writing (writing underlies almost all our messages – on the wall), these many times the written message presents other signs as well – photography, symbols, smileys, applauses, gifs, drawings), has sound or graphics, follow certain templates.

Illustration no. 2, personal Facebook page, 22.05.2019



If, by now, the linguistic researches applied to the online environment have been based on offline discourse analysis notions, giving examples of corpora extracted as isolated segments or lists, the online discourse analysis must go beyond the technical elements regarded as an external factor conditioning the discourse production and should always contain the technodiscursive. A quantitative survey of a phenomenon such as the series of comments caused by a Facebook post must not omit the fact that those comments are made not only to the initial post but even as comments to comment or in addition to the initial comment or another made by the initiators of the discussions, their pseudonyms, page/post shares. The analysis validity could be seriously affected by the sine qua non technical aspects of the online environment.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The boundary between the producer of the communication/content and its user (to remain within the terminology of the social networks) is erased or reduced in terms of visibility/clarity, because, in the social networks, we are dealing with a mix between emitter and receptor, the writer becoming a writer-reader and the reader becoming in turn the writer. Both functions are interchanged and assumed, not by turns, but even simultaneously. Therefore, we are dealing with a hybrid agent (the expression belongs to Marie-Anne Paveau, 2012) that permanently modifies the existing contents, completes them with various forms of expression – like, love, wonder, disappointment etc.

“In collaborative communities the creation of shared content takes place in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge – frequently in a hybrid role of producer where usage is necessarily also productive” (Bruns 2007).

Technology has gone over or should go over the support status and be valorised at its true potential when it comes to the online discourse analysis. The online statements enjoy a production-usage process,

in which “writers” negotiate even while using the discourse and the online presence. For instance, in the social networks, hashtags become connecting elements between the posts that dealt with the same topics, causing certain threads to become common and regroup under a name preceded by a technical sign (hash).

Contrary to the current representations, social networks are not a platform or a website that we access but a directory of links, with multiple inputs, just like a dictionary, but, unlike the dictionary, the entries are static, fixed and are modified only once in a given period of time, social networks “comprise” statements that are never fixed, their transmission, completion, correction and interpretation manner being under permanent modification, based on relations networks that nobody has an identical perception of the same statement. Each internaut may modify in multiple directions: like, share, love, comment, share with or without comment, sending in private message with or without the afferent comments.

The discourse found online, and especially in the social networks (the blog, for instance, resembles to a greater extent a journal, with borrowed discursive genres adapted to the digital environment) exists only in that context, so that one cannot consider the discourse by itself, such as unique, singular and definitive publications. Think only about a post on Instagram to which we add the text (obviously beside the pertaining photo): “watching the sky...”, we tag one or more people. How could this text be correctly interpreted/received outside the network in which it exists, outside the “support”? Our discussions can only be understood in the network of relations and signs, technosigns the discourse is inscribed into.

In the social networks, more than in any other discursive environments, there is no statement by itself that might be extracted and analysed by itself. From this perspective, the decontextualized statement could be a theoretical and methodological nonsense, because it does not correspond to the reality of a statement produced or interpreted within the reality of the sociodigital exchanges.

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