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# **English Language and Social Media**

Caroline Tagg

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research into English language and social media (ELSM) is important to the ongoing development and conceptualisation of digital humanities, not only because it illustrates the role of digital tools in humanities research but also because it draws attention to the way in which digital technologies are transforming what it means to be human. What tends to unite researchers of language and social media is an interest in understanding the ways in which communication is increasingly shaped by the availability and use of various social media platforms from WhatsApp to YouTube. In other words, the interest is in how digital technologies shape the particular object of study, that of language (and of languages, including the English language), albeit in different ways and from various research perspectives. However, despite an increasing recognition within digital humanities research of the transformative power of technology in shaping not only how research is conducted, but the outcomes of the research process itself, a distinction still tends to be made between research which uses digital technologies to study the humanities (that is, digital humanities as traditionally conceived), and that which uses humanities to study the digital. This chapter probes this distinction, showing how ELSM research (as an example of the latter) contributes to the digital humanities paradigm through the transformative impact that studying naturally occurring digital texts can have on our understanding of contemporary language use. In illustrating this argument, I focus particularly on the ways in which social media opens up access to ‘networked resources’, with implications for what it means to communicate online ‘in English’ and for who can be considered an English language user in social media contexts.

The chapter starts by giving a brief background to research into ELSM, before exploring the relevance of different strands of this research for the digital humanities paradigm, focusing on the use of digital technologies as tools for collecting and visualising language data, as well as research which foregrounds how social media is transforming language as the object of study and which often leads to a rethinking of traditional, pre-digital analytical frameworks. It then moves on to focus on one particular transformation, that of the conceptualisation of English as one set of resources within individuals' wider repertoire of multilingual and multimodal resources. A sample analysis of WhatsApp messages serves to illustrate the ways in which English language practices online involve the production, selection and deployment of various multimedia resources and how this contributes to changing ideas about language. The implications for digital humanities in acknowledging how the humanities informs the digital are then explored.

## **BACKGROUND**

Research into ELSM falls within the well-established and rapidly growing field of language and new media or social media (e.g. Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2015). Studies which fall into this field are defined primarily not by method, data or starting assumptions, but rather by the *medium* through which language is being used (that is, through social media). The term 'social media' – employed in academia to refer broadly to 'online environments which enable social interaction' (Leppänen et al. 2014: 113) – came into use with the proliferation of internet platforms in the first decade of the twentieth century: social network and media sharing sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and (more latterly) Instagram, Tumblr and Snapchat, as well as mobile messaging apps such as WhatsApp and WeChat. The studies encompassed under the umbrella term of language and social media are therefore multifarious,

encompassing most if not all of the above platforms and ranging from linguistic descriptions of particular digital language varieties (Baron 1998) to large corpus analysis of publicly available data, such as on Twitter (Zappavigna 2012) and eBay (Knight et al. 2015), and to small-scale in-depth ethnographies of people's online experiences (Androutsopoulos 2014). A wide variety of language practices have been investigated, from punctuation (Squires 2012) to online aggression (Angouri and Tseliga 2012), and from online consumer reviews (Vasquez 2014) to virtual business communication (Darics and Koller 2018). These studies document the many ways in which social media is transforming what it means to participate in human society, and particularly how people communicate and negotiate social relationships. Key transformations include the collapse of time and space as digital media enable far-flung interactants to communicate synchronously (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010); the increasing ability for busy people on the move to keep in constant communication with others across work, social and personal spheres (Papacharissi 2011); and everyday users' increasing access to an array of multimedia resources and commercial mainstream artefacts, in part because of the convergence of grassroots and corporate organisations into one space (Jenkins 2006).

Within this wider field, the focus on the English language (ELSM) has been a controversial one. In early studies of social media and language, the initial interest was often in exploring how the internet was shaping language by identifying and describing online varieties such as the language of email (Baron 1998; Gains 1999), Internet Relay Chat (Werry 1996) or bulletin boards (Collot and Belmore 1996). The majority of these studies looked at English-language varieties, in part because the internet and world wide web had been developed in English-speaking countries and did not initially support other languages or scripts (Pargman and Palme 2009), but also because of a tardiness within the academic community to look beyond English (Danet and Herring 2007: 5). Since the publication of Danet and Herring's *The Multilingual Internet* in 2007, the implicit assumption that the language of the internet is

English has been challenged by researchers consciously charging themselves with addressing the linguistic imbalance and recognising the multilingual nature of the internet (e.g. Lee 2016). Nonetheless, it could be argued that English continues to hold a special status as an online *lingua franca*, used alongside other languages in a range of social media contexts by speakers of various languages.

Although ELSM scholars tend not to position themselves as working within digital humanities, the work of the former is often very relevant to the varied concerns of the latter. Given the fact that work in the humanities is increasingly ‘being done digitally’ (Fitzpatrick 2012), digital humanities is rapidly expanding in scope (Klein and Gold 2016) to the point where questions are being raised as to the usefulness of a separate ‘digital humanities’ field (Deegan and Hayler 2016) or the possibility of demarcating it (Terras 2016). Digital humanities is usually defined as ‘not a unified field but an array of convergent practices’ (Schnapp et al. 2009) or a ‘conjunction and collision of many fields’ (Liu 2016: 1550) which engages in ‘ongoing, vigorous discussion of disciplinary identity’ (Liu 2016: 1547). Despite the various disciplines encompassed by digital humanities, as an umbrella term it carries with it certain assumptions and values, such as the endeavour to ‘reshape and reinvigorate contemporary arts and humanities practices’ (Schapp et al. 2009: 13) and to explicitly reflect on the ‘difference that the digital can make to the kinds of work that we do’ (Fitzpatrick 2012: npg). At the same time, digital humanities has moved from a focus simply on ‘technology as a tool’ (Svensson 2010: npg), typically involving large-scale digitisation projects, towards an interest in interpreting ‘knowledge that is ‘born digital’ and lives in various digital contexts’ (Presner 2010: 6) alongside a growing awareness of the ways in which the digital may be transforming the object of study (Fitzpatrick 2012). Digital humanities work is transformative in the sense that scholars using digital technology to understand an artefact, practice or phenomenon find that their understanding is transformed by the perspective enabled by the technology. Collins

(2016) gives the example of how the digitisation of medieval manuscripts enables present-day scholars to adopt flexible and ‘vertical’ approaches to fifteenth-century texts (that is, practices which do not rely on linear reading) that more accurately reflects the way manuscripts were produced and consumed at the time, before particular ways of interacting with texts were imposed by print (see Deegan and Hayler 2016 for other examples). Within English language studies, another example is that of corpus linguistics (see chapters in the present volume by xx and xx). From the 1960s, the use of computer technology to collect, store and interrogate large amounts of textual data has not only allowed researchers to study more texts, but the practice of looking at a large amount of data at the same time has led to new understandings of how language (initially English) works (Sinclair 1991: 100), namely in lexical patterns rather than a grammatical slot-and-filler approach. Based on corpus analysis, language production is now seen as being driven primarily by the collocational and patterning behaviour of different lexis, rather than the slotting of words into existing grammatical structures. Thus, the use of corpus technology transformed linguists’ understanding of the object of study, language itself. Key to digital humanities work, then, is the recognition that digital technology not only transforms how research is carried out but can be transformative in shaping disciplinary knowledge.

This kind of impact can be seen within strands of ELSM research for which digital technologies serve as a tool for obtaining naturally occurring language data. For example, sociolinguists who study regional patterns of linguistic variation and change are increasingly exploiting social media (and particularly Twitter) for its wealth of time-stamped, geo-coded data (e.g. Bauman et al. 2014; Huang et al. 2016) in order to obtain information on language use which can otherwise only be obtained at a much smaller scale through elicitation (i.e. through interview or surveys). With a focus on lexical innovation – the emergence of new words – Grieve et al. (2018) exploit a multi-billion-word corpus of American Tweets to map the spread of new forms such as *baeless* (a single person), *rekt* (wrecked, intoxicated or

defeated) and *yaas* (yes) across the United States, drawing also on multivariate spatial analysis to visualise the findings. Their use of big data and digital visualisation tools enables insights into patterns of lexical diffusion not otherwise accessible and which serve to confirm predicted patterns of diffusion – such as, for example, the role of large densely populated urban areas in lexical innovation. At the same time as confirming general language trends, however, the research also reveals how the use of social media itself shapes patterns of lexical innovation, with Atlanta in the Deep South emerging as an important origin of new forms because of the city’s African American cultural influence and the relatively high engagement of African Americans on Twitter (Grieve et al. 2018: 309). The researchers conclude that, on Twitter, the cultural profile of an urban area is more important for lexical innovation and diffusion than its size or population density. It is also evident that many of the new forms on Twitter (such as *rekt* and *yaas*) are characterised by phonetic spelling and other practices primarily associated with (text-based) social media (Eisenstein 2015). In short, then, this research attempts to understand general human language and communication patterns not only through the use of language data that is conveniently produced in digital form but also by exploring the impact that digital mediation has on the language being used.

This leads to the argument underpinning this chapter, which is that research into ELSM is important not only because it shows how digital methodologies and tools can impact on the gaze of the researcher (with implications for how an object of study is conceptualised) but also because it illustrates how digital technologies can transform language use, the object of study, creating objects that are themselves ‘born digital’. This line of work is not typically considered to fall within the paradigm of digital humanities. However, it could be argued that the use of humanities to understand digitally mediated interactions constitutes another facet of the complex relationships between computing and the humanities (Rosenbloom 2012). In her discussion of the boundaries of digital humanities, Fitzpatrick (2012: npg) points to the

‘overlap ... between scholars who use digital technologies in studying traditional humanities objects [i.e. ‘digital humanities’ typically conceived] and those who use the methods of the contemporary humanities in studying digital objects’; in other words, those who use humanities to explore how digital technologies are transforming human life. Part of this overlap, as I shall argue below, can be found in the ways in which the study of digital objects goes on to transform disciplinary knowledge and research perspectives.

## **CRITICAL ISSUES AND TOPICS**

A number of strands of ELSM research, both quantitative and qualitative, foreground the ways in which social media is transforming (English) language use, the object of their study. For example, drawing on the established framework of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which emphasises the ideational and interpersonal functions of language (Halliday 1978), Zappavigna (2012, 2014) aims to illuminate a new kind of communication which she terms ‘searchable talk’. Searchable talk captures the ways in which people communicating via a large fast-moving social media site like Twitter seek to create ‘ambient affiliation’ – to bond, however fleetingly, with other users without directly interacting with them – which they do by creating alignment through social media affordances such as hashtags (#example) and usernames (@example). In order to explore this, Zappavigna works with large Twitter corpora, created using the Twitter streaming application programme (API), which she explores through SFL by means of discourse analysis. A similar combination of digital tools and analytical frameworks taken from the humanities is employed by Page (2018) in her study of online stories. Page draws on and extends existing narrative analysis frameworks in situating what she calls the ‘shared story’ as a distinctive narrative genre facilitated by social media platforms including Wikipedia and YouTube. Characterised by their potential to involve thousands of



interactions and tellers, the shared story has offline antecedents but differs both functionally and formally from typical everyday stories told in face-to-face or private online interactions (Page 2018).

The particular ways in which communication unfolds on social media often requires researchers to revisit existing theoretical and analytical frameworks with implications for our wider understanding of language use. Jones (forthcoming 2019), for example, explores the implications of online algorithms for traditional pragmatics, arguing that the ways in which users interact with algorithms – which monitor users' actions in order to create inferences about the users' future actions – requires researchers to rethink some of the fundamental principles of meaning and interaction. Similarly, Tagg et al. (2017) argue that social media requires a shift in how we conceptualise sociolinguistics frameworks of audience design and addressivity, with Facebook users needing to write themselves and their audiences into being through their posts (to paraphrase boyd 2008). Given the complexities of the online space – such as the diversity of online connections within one's Facebook friends and the fact that the particular audience for any one status update is unknown – users must more carefully style their utterances than in typical face-to-face situations, in order to target particular users, exclude others, and avoid creating offence (Tagg et al. 2017). In studies positing shifts in established thinking, the argument is not always that social media creates new or completely unique forms of communication (Facebook can, in terms of its diverse audience, be compared to an offline situation like a wedding) but rather that the novelty and salience of social media draws attention to practices which have a bearing on communication more generally, potentially transforming existing ideas about language use. As Page (2018: 23) argues, for example, a focus on non-linear and open-ended nature of online shared stories brings 'fresh impetus' to wider thinking around narrative structure.

As with much digital humanities work, then, ELSM is transforming how we understand what it means to be human, not only through the application of digital technologies but through its focus on how digital technologies are shaping the digital object, in this case the language of social media. One of the ways social media transforms languages use, I will argue below, is by making available an array of multimodal and networked resources. As we shall see, the act of analysing how English is used through social media has not only informed ELSM researchers as to how the English language is being used in the twenty-first century, but feeds into transformative ideas regarding the English language, and language more generally.

## **CURRENT CONTRIBUTIONS AND RESEARCH**

Social media has radically altered the possibilities for human communication and the ways in which language, including the English language, is used. One of the key transformations has been the opening up of the resources available to users and the increasing potential for everyday users to contribute to cultural artefacts on sites like YouTube through, for example, remixing and sampling (Leppänen and Elo 2016), and to public conversations on Twitter through, for example, the use of hashtags (Zappavigna 2012) and retweets (Drauker and Collister 2015). The availability of multimedia (through access to different platforms and apps) and multimodal resources – that is, an array of different modes including image, video, emoji and GIFs – is among the more salient aspects of social media communication, as is the increased potential for users to move between and combine different languages.

As mentioned earlier, the research community was slow to recognise the multilingual potential of the internet, with Danet and Herring (2007) at the forefront of studies of languages other than English. More recent studies of online language use find ‘unprecedented’ possibilities for language contact online (Androutsopoulos 2013: 667), often involving English,

due to the way in which the internet facilitates communities which span geographical distance and cultural divides. Scholars note a great deal of innovative code-switching and script-mixing across digital mediums as well as ‘trans-scripting’ (Androutsopoulos 2015) – writing a language using the spelling conventions of another, as when French *bisou* (‘kiss’) is rewritten according to English spelling conventions as <bizoo> (Morel et al. 2014: 274). The creative Romanisation of languages such as Chinese (Su 2007), Arabic (Palfreyman and Al Khalil 2007) and Greek (Spilioti 2009) also shows how a global language such as English can influence – and be influenced by – other languages on social media. This research has thus contributed in important ways to emerging ideas in sociolinguistics regarding the fluid, often unpredictable boundaries between languages. These ideas, predominantly associated with spoken face-to-face communication, are grounded in the empirical observation that language users do not, in practice, speak one language or another, but instead draw more fluidly on a range of named languages, language varieties, registers and styles in their individual repertoires – a practice known by some researchers as ‘translanguaging’ (e.g. Creese and Blackledge 2010; Garcia and Li Wei 2016). Social media has been recognised as playing a central role in facilitating such practices by connecting far-flung individuals and communities (Blommaert and Rampton 2011). Research into online multilingualism adds to this body of research by showing the implications for translanguaging when people have access to ‘a flow or semiotic [or communicative] resources that by far exceeds the resources that individual members bring along’ (Androutsopoulos and Juffermans 2014: 4); in other words, when people have access to additional resources available through their networks.

The expansion of resources available to internet users is a significant technological shift. There was an initial tendency to assume – among researchers as well as internet users and the media – that computer-mediated communication was dry and impoverished (Thurlow et al. 2004: 45-57). This was theoretically conceptualised with reference to ‘reduced social cues’

(Sproull and Kiesler 1986), the argument being that the lack of ‘contextualisation cues’ (Gumperz 1982) in the largely text-based online communication of the late twentieth century decreased inhibitions and led to online aggression; while, in the mainstream media, perceptions around the impoverished nature of online writing led to claims regarding the detrimental effect that technology was having on language: ‘the English language as we once knew it is out the window’ (Uthus 2007) declared one newspaper. This assumption overlooked the creative and personal ways in which interlocutors sought to express themselves online with, for example, the emoticon or smiley being invented in 1982 by Scott E. Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University in order for forum users to disambiguate meaning and indicate humour and irony (Baron 2009). The inherently playful nature of the internet – encouraged rather than discouraged by affordances such as anonymity, lack of physical presence, and other communicative constraints – was quickly recognised in a series of studies looking at humour and play online (Bechar-Israëli 1995; Danet et al. 1997; Reid 1991) and this line of research continues today (Deumert 2014; Thurlow 2012).

This shift in perspective regarding the creative potential of online communication has been accompanied by developments in technology which mean that the resources available to early internet users – written words, respelling, and typographic resources such as punctuation (the constraints of which in fact encouraged typographical play) – have now greatly expanded. Social media users today have access to an array of material and resources which were not similarly available to many people in the pre-internet era – these include photos and other images, video, audio, GIF and emoji. Social media communications are thus increasingly multimodal, by which meaning is produced through drawing on and combining a range of different semiotic modes including font, image and colour (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Social media users have access not only to the graphic resources afforded by the computer or mobile phone keyboard, but are also increasingly able to draw on ‘networked resources’ – that

is, a range of external resources which can be linked to from ‘in the network’ and/or embedded in new sites (Androutsopoulos 2015). These networked resources can include language resources (such as dictionaries or online translations) as well as global commercial artefacts such as music videos which are now available for users to interact with and exploit (Leppänen and Elo 2016). Also relevant here is the extent to which social media are now seen as being embedded in people’s lives in a way that earlier platforms were not, with growing significance for what it means to be human. Howard Rheingold, an early internet user, wrote of using his computer to escape his daily life and to meet a virtual community largely separate from his physical, everyday life (Rheingold 1993). Online groups continue to provide the opportunity for people to meet likeminded others with whom they would otherwise not come into contact. However, online activities are now much more entangled in people’s everyday offline activities, and people move between physical and virtual contexts for various reasons and in a variety of ways (Cohen 2015; Monaghan 2014). Social media users can take photos or videos with a mobile phone and then embed them in an online interaction or website (many mobile apps allow users to take a photo from within the app and then immediately send it), they can link to a website or Facebook page from a Tweet, or they can record themselves and send an audio message through WhatsApp. (Examples of these are explored in the sample analysis in the next section.) Whereas once the text-based environment of an internet forum or online game enabled people to create new identities (Reid 1991), the contemporary online sharing of multimodal resources such as selfies or holiday photos mean that people’s online identities are often an extension of their offline ones.

Social media users can also use digital technology and editing suites to creatively design content by drawing on and reworking existing content; these result in remixes and mashups (Williams 2009), as well as buffalaxed videos – music videos on to which people add subtitling that does not match the original verbal content (Leppänen and Elo 2016). The creation of these

artefacts often depends on users having access to globally circulating commercial content as well as to the tools needed to digitally remaster them. They can result in what Androutsopoulos (2010) calls ‘vernacular spectacles’ – localised performances on media-sharing sites like YouTube to which other users can contribute through comments and further remixing. As well as enabling users to engage politically and critically with mainstream content, this access to networked resources can also encourage them to create new identities and align with particular communities, as illustrated by Jonsson and Muhonen’s (2014) study of young Swedish girls whose Facebook profiles highlighted their affiliation with Japanese manga. Users can post simultaneously on different sites (the same photos onto Facebook and Instagram, for example) and create a digital biography that extends across media platforms, as Adami (2014) shows in her analysis of one blogger’s transmedia practices. As this suggests, the availability of networked resources – as well as the multiple modes afforded by social media – has important implications for our understanding of ELSM.

As mentioned earlier, access to networked resources also increases the opportunity for users to engage in multilingual practices. Firstly, the network makes available to users affordances such as online dictionaries and translation tools and thus gives them recourse to resources from across a greater range of languages than might be the case in face-to-face spoken interactions. Secondly, stickers and emoji can be used as part of a conversation without the user themselves having to produce language (Tagg 2015). Thirdly, the fact that users can repost others’ contributions, embed videos in their posts, or link to other sites enables them to construct a multilingual assemblage of a kind not usually associated with spoken interaction. These practices are likely to contribute to a kind of ‘minimal bilingualism’ (Androutsopoulos 2007) which involves the use of accessible, formulaic phrases from a language (in online contexts, often English) which is not spoken to a level of proficiency by the individual or community involved. In their study of Swiss SMS text-messaging, for example, Morel et al.

(2014: 283) found that most code-switching into English involved users inserting formulaic greetings and expressions such as ‘you’re welcome!’ and ‘What’s up?’. Thus, what is often encouraged by users’ access to networked resources are translanguaging practices which involve users drawing fluidly on resources from a range of languages in which they may not always be proficient.

The availability of networked resources therefore has implications for what it means to be an online user of English (or any other language). The use of networked resources in online conversation can be theorised using Goffman’s (1981) ideas about production format. According to Goffman, the label ‘speaker’, as used in analysis of spoken interaction, can refer to the *animator* (the person who actually makes the utterance); the *author* (the person who composed the words uttered); and/or the *principal* (the person whose beliefs are represented by the utterance). These three roles may all be carried out by one person, but not necessarily so. For example, a spokesperson can be seen as an animator reading the words of the script writer (the author) while the politician is the principal. Applying Goffman’s framework to Twitter, Draucker and Collister (2015) suggest that it can be useful to distinguish between the animator and the ‘broadcaster’ to describe instances in which a tweet is retweeted (or ‘broadcast’) by another user. In this case, the original author usually remains the animator, author and principal, although it is possible for this to be lost or obscured in a chain of citations (i.e. where a retweeted post is retweeted). Similarly, somebody who shares multimodal content might be seen as broadcasting the work of the original author. Both retweeting and sharing, like reported speech, produce what Bakhtin (1981) calls ‘multi-voiced’ discourse, as broadcasters inevitably take a stance on the repeated material, parodying it or (more often with retweets, according to boyd et al. 2010) aligning with the views expressed. Whatever their stance, users’ access to networked resources opens up the means available for them to join a conversation and take a turn.

In the sample analysis below, I explore English language interactions between friends via a messaging app which illustrate some of the ways in which digital technologies are transforming our object of study, that of contemporary language use. The argument that I aim to address is whether the use of the humanities to explore and understand the digital can usefully be seen as part of the digital humanities.

## **SAMPLE ANALYSIS**

This section looks at the communication taking place between a network of friends via the mobile messaging app, WhatsApp. The app provides a communicative space within which dyads and groups can share short typed messages, images, videos, audio recordings, and links. What emerges from this space often resembles a conversation, characterised by participant turns, initiations, question-and-answer sequences, response tokens, and other features associated with spoken conversations. The conversational nature of these exchanges is also foregrounded by the affordances of WhatsApp, including the speech bubble format and the fact that users are informed as to whether their interlocutors are online, have read their posts, and are replying. At the same time, unlike face-to-face conversations, WhatsApp interactions can take place between interlocutors in different physical places and in their own time (it is at best ‘quasi-synchronous’). Furthermore, the networked resources and multimedia available through WhatsApp transform the communication and, by extension, our ideas regarding the boundaries of English as used in social media interactions.

The data explored below are taken from a large AHRC-funded ethnographic project, ‘Translation and Translanguaging: investigating linguistic and cultural diversity across superdiverse wards in four UK cities’.<sup>1</sup> The project methodology involved our working closely with key participants. As well as observing and recording each key participant’s interactions at



work, we asked them to make recordings at home and to contribute social media data. The social media data was in most cases collected from participants' mobile phones through screengrabs, taken either by the participants themselves or by the research fellows. Where necessary, these were translated but we otherwise worked directly with the screengrabs, which gave us access to the original context in which the online posts were read. As will already be evident, the methodology differs in key ways from the other projects discussed earlier in this chapter. The social media data was collected only as part of a wider online ethnography, rather than constituting the main focus of the project, with the implication that the individual's online practices could be contextualised within their wider communicative practices and relationships. The focus, then, was not primarily on how digital technology shaped language use but rather on how particular individuals interpreted and incorporated the technology into their communicative practices. Of particular relevance is the fact that, beyond the use of screengrabs and digital anonymisation tools, the project did not use digital tools to analyse or visualise the data and so it was not a digital humanities project as typically conceived. However, while the digital did not shape our understanding of the humanities, we used humanities – frameworks like Goffman's as part of a linguistic ethnography – to understand the digital.

As part of this project, we worked with J., a volleyball coach and beauty salon manager in Birmingham who was originally from Hong Kong. J. submitted approximately 150 screenshots of his mobile phone, containing around 650 WhatsApp and SMS messages. These included individual interactions with colleagues, friends and members of his volleyball team, as well as group chats with friends and with his family and friends back home. What is interesting about his interactions includes the ways in which J. and his interlocutors exploit networked resources, appropriating them as turns in their conversations. For example, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, conversations in J.'s WhatsApp groups can be initiated by website links. In Figure 1, J. is not the author of the utterance nor the animator as such but rather the

broadcaster – or ‘sharer’, given the private, bounded context, while the recontextualised weblink appears to serve a clear communicative function for J in a way that positions him as principal of his turn. It is evident from G’s response (‘so funny’) that she found the shared resource both amusing and relevant, making comparisons with her own parenting of her son, F.

Figure 1: Posted in group labelled ‘Eating and drinking’, 4 participants.

Below I explore what existing analytical frameworks can reveal about this new form of communication by focusing on one longer extract taken from an interaction between J. and S., a close friend and also senior manager in J.’s salon (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Individual interaction with S.

Although ostensibly an English language exchange, the boundaries of what this constitutes is expanded in three main ways: through creative respellings, images, and emoji. Below I address these three sets of resources in turn. Firstly, the creative or unconventional spelling variations in Figure 2 include letter repetitions or ‘flooding’ in ‘Awww’ and ‘sooooo’, and <ur> (in ‘How’s ur beef stew?’) which can be analysed either as a clipping of <your> or as a use of homophones (<u> for ‘you’ + <r> for ‘are’). Drawing on sociolinguistic ideas about spelling as a meaningful social practice (Sebba 2007), we can see that the letter flooding emphasises the emotive evaluation which S. wishes to convey. Although <ur> is ostensibly a shortening carried out for reasons of efficiency, it is worth noting that J. makes the effort of adding an apostrophe to ‘How’s’ (i.e. that he is not only concerned with efficiency) and therefore

speculating whether <ur> is also carrying out identity or relational work (Tagg 2012). Thus, as in other new media practices, the communicative possibility of English is expanded by the potential for orthographic choices to convey meaning within an everyday online interaction (Shortis 2016).

Secondly, the use of images can be explored using Goffman's participation framework. J. initiates an exchange within Figure 2 by posting a screengrab displaying an online voucher for a 'Live Escape Game for Two to Six People at Clue HQ Birmingham (57% Off)' (a game in which people must solve clues in order to obtain a door code and escape from a locked room). Thus, the referential content of his post is conveyed not directly by J., but through the text (and image) on this screengrab, meaning that he is 'sharer' but not author or animator of his turn (Goffman 1981). By sharing the screengrab in this context, J. does not take an evaluative stance towards it, but uses it to perform a particular speech act, namely an offer or suggestion along the lines of 'Do you fancy doing this Escape Game?'. This seems to be the interpretation made by S., who responds accordingly. We might then suggest that J is the principal of his turn, 'the party to whose position the words attest' (Goffman 1981: 226).

When J. changes the subject to that of food, he responds to S.'s question 'what you got?' with a picture of his half-finished dinner, and the caption 'Groupon' (an online company that supplies vouchers and discounts). The photo constitutes what Zappavigna and Zhao (2017) call an 'inferred selfie', the nature and placement of the objects suggesting the presence of the photographer. If we thus assume that he took the photo and posted it to WhatsApp, we can argue that J. is author, animator and principal of this turn, but that each role differs from that envisaged for face-to-face interaction (the author being the photographer rather than the composer of a written utterance, for example) and that meaning is created primarily by image, with the caption complementing the image by extending the information provided (Unsworth 2004) – perhaps explaining why he is eating out. It is a common practice in J.'s WhatsApp

interactions for a photo of what the poster is eating to serve as a turn, apparently fulfilling a communicative function as part of an online interaction without the need for words. This form of communication is enabled by the convergence of various digital functionalities – camera, messaging app, internet connection – into the everyday user’s mobile phone.

Thirdly, as is evident in Figure 2, emoji are frequently used in these WhatsApp interactions and they serve a number of pragmatic functions (Danesi 2016). In Figure 2, S. uses a heart emoji to add an evaluative stance to her verbal response (‘Cool, it was amazing!’). In a subsequent turn, three heart emoji serve as a turn in their own right, where they convey an evaluative stance and also mark S.’s presence in the conversation – that is, in a medium where she cannot rely on gestures or facial expressions, she is showing that she is listening. In this way, emoji standing on their own act as backchannels or response tokens – minimal contributions realised in speech by words like ‘yeah’ or ‘okay’. As whole turns, emoji are always multiple in this dataset, with up to six or so emoji (usually identical, but sometimes in combination) appearing alongside each other.

These pragmatic functions are further illustrated by the WhatsApp group chat in Figure 3 below. The first turn is in response to a photo posted in the group space. In the second turn, G. replies with a response token of three emoji representing laughter, before moving on to the main part of her utterance: ‘wen he gets back I will x’. After two audio recordings posted by D. (another illustration of the multimodal nature of the interactions in this group), S. adds two different emoji to her next turn, a pointing finger and a dancing woman, in a way that serves to illustrate and bring to life her claim that ‘We can rock the boogie’. G. then replies with a series of seven emoji that stand for her full turn. There is a sense that these interlocutors are not engaged in transactional or informational but highly interpersonal discourse, and that the turns serve mainly to keep open a channel of communication (Ito and Okabe 2005) and to show

users' participation and engagement in the only way possible in social media – by making a contribution to the discourse.

Figure 3: emoji posted in group 'Eating and drinking', 4 participants

These examples serve to illustrate the wide range of digital, multimodal and networked resources available to, and exploited by, interlocutors on WhatsApp, the various pragmatic and communicative functions that these resources can fulfil, and the implications for the ways in which people can participate in social media interactions, for example as 'sharers' rather than animators in the sense of physically producing the text, and not as authors. Although the interlocutors in the examples above are all fluent English users, this in turn has implications for our understanding of the skills and abilities which equip people to communicate in English – the global *lingua franca* – in the contemporary world. An English language user on social media may not necessarily be what is traditionally considered 'fluent' in English as long as they have access to the networked resources and media that enable them to animate English language comments; in other words, as long as they are aware of how to exploit the resources available to them through the network. Rather than ability in any one particular language, an individual's communicative flexibility, language/media awareness and digital literacy skills may instead prove more important in defining a successful communicator online.

Meanwhile, the ways in which these various modes work alongside English within an online conversation, often in place of written text, serve to transform our understanding of the boundaries between language and other modes. English language utterances do not necessarily have to constitute a sender's own words, but instead the words of others can be linked to through screengrabs and weblinks (such as the Escape Game voucher), while turns in an English language exchange can be conveyed through other modes entirely (such as image and

emoji). In this way, the digital serves to transform the object of study, with implications for how existing frameworks of analysis must be altered to accommodate new practices.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

In this chapter, I focused on the impact that recognition of the availability of networked resources has had on our understanding of what it means to communicate online ‘in English’ and the implications for who can be considered an English language user in social media. For many scholars, such analyses and insights may fall outside the purview of digital humanities, at least as traditionally defined. The interest of digital humanities scholars typically lies in the transformative impact that digitalisation and digital technologies can have on the research process and, as such, are much more easily aligned with ELSM projects such as those described earlier in the chapter which use social media as a source of data and which exploit digital technologies in visualising and analysing it (e.g. Grieve et al 2018). However, what unites digital humanities research is increasingly a recognition of the transformative power of technology in shaping not only how research is conducted, but the outcomes of the research process itself. In this sense, ELSM research contributes to the digital humanities paradigm by highlighting the transformative impact that social media has on the digital object and, by extension, how this informs and shapes wider scholarship. Amidst rapid technological developments and shifts in the roles that digital technologies play, digital humanities is as much about exploring and pushing at the limits of what digital technologies can do and the role they play both within and beyond academia, than it is about carving out and investigating its own space. The relationships between the digital and the humanities are complex and ever-shifting (Rosenbloom 2012). As an ever-widening range of social, personal and work-related activities are increasingly mediated by digital technology, the need for theories and frameworks of

analysis within the humanities to account for its impact on their object of study will only grow. As discussions around the identity of digital humanities continue, it may be necessary for scholars to consider how their objects of study are being transformed not only by digitalised research methods but by the key roles that digital technologies increasingly play in human life.

## **FURTHER READING**

Androutsopoulos, J. (2015) Networked multilingualism: some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 19/2: 185-205.

This article discusses the resources available to (multilingual) users of social media.

Androutsopoulos, J. and A. Staehr (2018) 'Moving methods online: researching digital language practices' in Creese, A. and A. Blackledge (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Superdiversity*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 118-132.

This chapter discusses some of the characteristics of online text, and explores the implications for research methods.

Deumert, A. (2014) *The Sociolinguistics of Mobile Communication*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

This book discusses creativity, intertextuality, and multimodality within mobile communications from a global perspective.

Grieve, J., A. Nini and D. Guo (2018) Mapping lexical innovation on American social media. *Journal of English Linguistics* 46/4: 293–319.

This article, as discussed in the chapter, draws on naturally occurring digital texts to explore language variation and innovation.

Leppänen, S. and A. Elo (2016) Buffalaxing the other: superdiversity in action on YouTube. In Arnaut, K., J. Blommaert, B. Rampton and M. Spotti (eds) *Language and Superdiversity*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 110-136.

This chapter illustrates the many ways in which social media users can draw on and exploit networked resources for political and interpersonal ends.

## **RELATED TOPICS**

digital discourse, corpus linguistics

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