

TYPING FRIENDSHIP INTO BEING: WALL-TO-WALL CONVERSATIONS ON FACEBOOK

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Facebook is a hybrid social-networking site reflecting pre-existing networks of friends and communities. Facebook comprises as many networks as it has users, because each of the social networks on the site is ego-centric and unique to each user. However, people may join networks based around universities and workplaces, often requiring a valid email address at the institution in question. Facebook allows its users to construct an online version of themselves and to engage electronically with their “Facebook Friends”. Communication may be by private message, instant messaging, status updates, comments, and the wall-to-wall posts.

Data for this analysis comes from a corpus of wall-to-walls from users in Facebook communities associated with the University of Sydney (Anglophone) and the University of Lausanne (Francophone with some codeswitching). These Facebook wall-to-wall posts provide a specific context with a unique combination of restraints (an asynchronous dialogue in plain text, restricted to two active participants but visible to many more) which yields a new style of ‘Netspeak’, halfway between an informal conversation and a personal letter. This can be treated as a ninth mode of computer-mediated communication, to be added to the 8 that Crystal posits as primary communication mediums on the Internet (Crystal 2006).

The language used in these conversations is ‘scripto-conversationnelle’ (blurring properties of spoken and written language) (Anis 2001). It also reflects aspects of the medium, as well as influences from other computer-mediated communication types. For example, the fact that the posts are asynchronous means that the shortenings found in SMS and Instant messaging are less essential for speed of communication. Nevertheless such shortenings are occasionally found, e.g., *biz* for *bisou* a colloquial expression for ‘love and kisses’. By contrast lengthenings such as those resulting from holding the key down (e.g. *bisousssssss*) can be used for expressive functions in wall-to-walls.

When a user publishes a wall post, they are *performing* on the site, publishing material available to all within their friendship network; or even everyone on Facebook, depending on privacy settings. Users may be unaware of who is accessing their personal broadcast or ‘Mini-Feed’ – but they are aware that there is a potential audience of ‘overhearers’. Thus their posts are simultaneously addressed to the other active participant as their addressee, and to their mutual “Facebook friends” as potential overhearers.

Maintaining an online identity on Facebook is intrinsically linked to the notion of positive face. In dialogues in a public computer-mediated space, users craft their language so as to construct a public persona which reflects not only how they wish to appear to the addressee, but also how they wish to appear to their mutual public of Facebook friends. We examine how politeness and apparent impoliteness contribute to the articulation of friendship through typing.

Anis, Jacques. 2001. Approche sémiolinguistique des représentations de l’ego dans la Communication Médinée par Ordinateur. *Langages* 35, p.20-38.

Crystal, David. 2006. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

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