



Designing talk in social networks: What Facebook teaches about conversation

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Abstract

The easy accessibility, ubiquity, and plurilingualism of popular SNSs such as Facebook have inspired many scholars and practitioners of second language teaching and learning to integrate networked forms of communication into educational contexts such as language classrooms and study abroad programs (e.g., Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Mills, 2011; Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011). At the same time, the complex and dynamic patterns of interaction that emerge in these spaces quickly push back upon standard ways of describing conversational genres and communicative competence (Kern, 2014; Lotherington & Ronda, 2014). Drawing from an ecological interactional analysis (Goffman, 1964, 1981a, 1981b, 1986; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) of the Facebook communications of three German-speaking academics whose social and professional lives are largely led in English, the authors consider the kinds of symbolic maneuvers required to participate in the translingual conversational flows of SNS-mediated communication. Based on this analysis, this article argues that texts generated through SNS-mediated communication can provide classroom opportunities for critical, stylistically sensitive reflection on the nature of talk in line with multiliteracies approaches.

Keywords: *Discourse Analysis, Social Networking, Technology-Mediated Communication, Literacy*

Language(s) Learned in this Study: *German, English*

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, social network sites (SNSs) have attracted millions of users worldwide and have contributed to the emergence of linguistic practices that are now woven tightly into the social fabric of many people's lives. The easy accessibility, ubiquity, and de facto multilingualism of these spaces have inspired many scholars and practitioners in second language (L2) teaching and learning and related fields to integrate networked forms of communication into educational contexts, such as classrooms and study abroad programs (e.g., Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Lamy & Zourou, 2013; Mills, 2011; Mitchell, 2012; Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011). Yet, the conversational landscapes of SNSs diverge in many important ways from the characteristic shapes and patterns of face-to-face interaction (see Kern, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Lotherington & Ronda, 2014). SNS-mediated interactions may also pose methodological and conceptual problems for language educators, who are often motivated to incorporate digital media by the promise of greater and more meaningful communication.

The notions of design and genre have been central features in literacy-oriented and multiliteracies approaches to collegiate foreign language (FL) teaching in recent years. A primary pedagogical goal of FL teaching in these discussions is the development of “textual thinking,” which is characterized as language use that moves beyond the “immediate physical environment” of learners and emphasizes the “verbally created and imagined world of texts that inherently contains a level of abstraction and ambiguity” (Maxim, 2006, p. 21). Because multiliteracies approaches first entered into FL and L2 teaching via education

research as a means of developing advanced language abilities, there has been very little focus on what we might call everyday literacies, such as conversational genres (Knobel & Lankshear, 1999). Increasingly, these vernacular literacies are digital and networked, which means that even the most basic and familiar genres are situated beyond the immediate physical environment of learners. A goal of this article is thus to carefully consider the potential of networked communication in SNSs for supporting richer conceptual thinking about conversation genres among teachers and learners.

Three case studies of researchers whose professional and personal lives are led largely in English and German provide the basis for our discussion. Based on an interactional analysis of key examples from the Facebook interactions of the three users, the authors consider how the study of SNS-mediated communication might enable opportunities for critical, stylistically sensitive reflection in instructed, FL contexts within a pedagogy of multiliteracies. In particular, we demonstrate how multilingual design choices and power dynamics often play a role in communicative maneuvers within SNSs (see also Androutsopoulos, 2013) and propose that SNS talk might be used to defamiliarize conversational genres and promote ecological thinking by making these elements more salient for learners (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008).

The Conversational Landscape of Social Network Spaces

Recently evolved neologisms such as Twitterverse and Blogosphere portray an expansion in how people conceptualize communication technologies. The internet has increasingly become a site where significant portions of our daily interactions and transactions play out. Facebook boasted over 1.2 billion daily active users on average for December 2016—a significant portion of the estimated mobile daily user population of more than 1.1 billion (Facebook, 2016). Around 80% of these daily active users live outside of the U.S. and Canada, and although it is not easy to track language use on personal Facebook pages, it is noteworthy that the site is available in over 70 languages.

In SNSs like Facebook, one has to “type oneself into being” (Sunden, 2003, p. 3). One’s presence in the space is through the existence of a *profile* (a unique page including an image and brief biographical information) and a *timeline* (a space consisting of posts put there by the page owner or by *friends* in their network). In this space, one’s affiliations with various social networks are created and maintained by posting on each other’s timelines, liking, commenting on friends’ posts, sharing friends’ posts, and tagging friends in posts and photos (see also boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). As SNSs have evolved over the last several years, the profile (in the sense of a relatively static, self-descriptive section) has diminished in importance and the timeline (with its dynamic activity stream) has emerged as the central locus of self (see Ellison & boyd, 2013). Thus, in order to be present in the flow of interaction, one must not only type oneself into being, but must keep typing oneself into being.

Facebook spaces such as timelines and newsfeeds are semi-public, in that they are typically only accessible to those individuals who are in the user’s social network—their friends and possibly friends of friends, depending on individual privacy settings. Individual posts can be restricted to a particular subset of friends. However, in many instances, users must negotiate the multiple levels of audience within widely broadcast posts and related threads.¹ Although there is evidence that some users, specifically L2 English speakers, perceive the default language of Facebook to be English (Chen, 2012; Honeycutt & Cunliffe, 2010), the Facebook encounters analyzed in this study seemed to be characterized by what Androutsopoulos (2013) has dubbed *networked multilingualism*, or multilingual practices that are shaped by two interrelated processes: being networked (i.e., digitally connected to other individuals and groups) and being in the network (i.e., embedded in the global mediascape of the web). Of particular interest to this present article are the ways in which users draw from multilingual repertoires in order to design multiple layers of interaction and meaning in Facebook conversations and potential implications for the educational needs of L2 and FL learners.

Complex Encounters

The prototypical communicative scenario featuring a small and clearly defined set of interlocutors conversing in a single standard language has been increasingly problematized within applied linguistics and related fields. The increased movement of people across spaces, both the physical spaces traversed by migrational and diasporic communities and the virtual spaces created through networked technologies, has fundamentally reshaped communicative practices (e.g., Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Lam, 2009; Lotherington & Ronda, 2014). In these dynamic spaces, individuals must, “mediate complex encounters among interlocutors [who have] different language capacities and cultural imaginations, who have different social and political memories, and who don’t necessarily share a common understanding of the social reality they are living in” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 646).

The ecological approach espoused by Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) can be viewed as part of a broader critique within contemporary L2 education of notions of communication and communicative competence that focus primarily on monolingual, “transactional, oral language use” (Byrnes, 2006, p. 244; see also Allen & Paesani, 2010; Kern, 2000; Maxim, 2006). This ecological framework shares much in common with more recent discussions in literacy studies and, in particular, new literacy approaches, which emphasize the inherent multiplicity—of languages, of modes, of genres, and of sociocultural scales—implicated in the design of meaning (e.g. New London Group, 1996).

Scholars working within conversation analysis (CA) and new literacy studies have often emphasized that new media afford new ways of speaking (Gee, 2011; Street, 1995; see also Beisswenger, 2008, Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006, Herring, 1999; Rintel, Mulholland, & Pittam, 2001; Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003). From within the field of computer-assisted language teaching and learning, González-Lloret (2011) has shown how CA can be used productively to analyze L2 computer-mediated communication as a means of demonstrating learning that is *participation based*—in other words grounded in social interaction rather than limited to linguistic features and forms. However, while CA as a model addresses the ways in which participants orient themselves in an in situ, physically proximal context, networked communications connect a dispersed body of participants in both online and physical worlds (see Androutsopoulos, 2014). The multidimensionality of these technologies thus affords users with not only different ways of structuring discourse, but also different *ways of being* in a conversation (see Knobel & Lankshear, 2008).

In this article, we use the word *conversationality* to indicate an analytical cautiousness and to delineate the particular ways of being in SNS-mediated interaction. If conversations are understood as local interactional episodes (as they have tended to be theorized within conversational analysis and interactional linguistics), then the very concept of a Facebook conversation (outside of the site’s instant messaging function, which was not considered in our study) is somewhat problematic. There are moments when two or more users are online and posting at the same time and their posts and responses occur semi-synchronously, but for the most part, Facebook posts feature asynchronous communication. Additionally, participants are often engaged in a multiplicity of online and offline conversational contexts at any given moment (see boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Leppänen, Pitkänen-Huhta, Piirainen-Marsh, Nikula, & Peuronen, 2009). In a typical Facebook interaction, one user posts a short comment or multimedia content on either their or someone else’s timeline, and another individual (typically a member of their immediate social network, i.e., a friend) posts a response at some point later.² This response can then be viewed by and commented on by other friends, who have access to the user’s specific post. While these encounters may not neatly fit restrictive definitions of conversation, they do exhibit certain features of other conversational genres, which serve as interactional affordances for locally managing and designing talk.

A study by boyd et al. (2010) points to another dimension of SNS-mediated conversationality. In their examination of the microblogging site Twitter, boyd et al. describe how the practice of retweeting (the copying and rebroadcasting of other people’s posts) contributes to the conversational ecology of the SNS. By rebroadcasting online content, participants are able to create a sense of coherence across extended and somewhat diffuse stretches of talk, while the bounded space of the site also maintains a more local context

than many comparable forms of offline written communication (see also Leppänen et al., 2009). The very status of a series of utterances in a conversation in an SNS like Facebook is co-constructed and emergent, rather than an a priori aspect of the talk at hand. For this reason, both the aforementioned use of linguistically realized conversational affordances and practices of content sharing are important means of co-constructing a shared sense that participants are engaged in conversational interaction rather than, for example, information distribution or personal publishing (as found in many forms of blogging).

Moments of human interaction always involve multiple levels of interaction and multiple scales of time and symbolic meaning—even while networked communication increases and amplifies these multiplicities. Based on their exemplary ecological analysis of encounters between translanguals in San Francisco, Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) suggest that “symbolic competence,” an “acute ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes” (p. 664), is central to language use and learning today. A central concern in this article similarly involves the kinds of linguistic, interactional, and symbolic resources that L2 learners potentially need in order to be agentive conversational participants in the noisy, translocal, and translangual environments of the internet.

Examples and Analysis

The examples cited in this paper were taken from case studies of three Facebook users. All three individuals were academic researchers and their work lives were primarily led both in English and in German. Two (Udo and Mika) were native speakers of German, and the third (Paul) was a native speaker of Dutch.³ Both Udo and Mika held research positions in the US. Udo was a postdoctoral fellow in Florida for two years in 2009 and 2010, before returning to Germany. Mika was a professor at an R1 university in the North East since 2007. Paul spent his career in Germany. However, because German research in the natural sciences is published almost exclusively in English and because German research institutes tend to draw from an international pool of scholars for whom English has become the lingua franca, the professional lives of all three of these scholars was dominated by English. These three individuals thus served as models of multilingual Facebook users. Udo, Mika, and Paul worked together for a few years at a scientific research institute in Germany and then continued to stay in touch through Facebook. These users were chosen based on their proclivity for posting and practical reasons of access. Because all three participants were part of the first author’s social network, she was able to readily view discussions between them.

Between November 2012 and 2013, the lead author was engaged as a participant user (i.e., a friend) on the Facebook pages of the three participants on an almost daily basis. In order to develop a sense of how conversations are structured emergently in Facebook, the lead author collected all visible posts from the three users’ timelines that elicited at least three comments exhibiting minimal features of conversation, such as adjacency pairs or direct addresses. It was felt that posts shorter than this would not provide enough for an analysis of conversationality—although an analysis of less successful posts that do not elicit more extended talk might have been revealing in its own right. Based on the interpretive analysis of these Facebook conversations, as well as on the experience of being a participant observer in these Facebook sites, we were able to gain a sense of some tendencies. However, this article does not claim to present an exhaustive or even broadly generalizable picture of SNS-mediated communication.⁴ We have chosen particular examples because they demonstrate elements of SNS conversationality that we perceive as particularly relevant for L2 teaching and learning.

Designing Conversations in Facebook

In this section, we consider how users co-construct conversationality in the shifting and emergent spaces of Facebook timelines and newsfeeds using the technological, linguistic, and discursive affordances available to them. What resources do users invoke to bound off unfinalizable stretches or interlinked sets of utterances as conversations? In what ways and in which moments are they breached and what do those moments reveal about how language, technologies, and genres mediate communication? Consider the

following post (Figure 1) from Paul (the native Dutch speaker), in which he shares an internet meme from the page of another Facebook user.



Figure 1. Paul shared this internet meme, which indexes a moment of U.S. corporate transnationalism in Germany.

When users post or re-post material on Facebook, they have the option of providing a brief introductory text. For instance, here Paul includes the brief—and in this case, likely ironic—comment “*have a nice day*” accompanied by a frowning face emoticon. The quotation marks around the phrase might reference the (in)famous Walmart greeters, as well as the cliché quality of this chunk of English, which makes salient the globalizing presence of a company like Walmart. The frowny face, which mirrors the emoticon featured prominently in the image, immediately calls into question how “nice” anything about the meme’s message actually is. It is important to note that Walmart closed down in Germany in 2006. By most reports, the failure of the company’s almost 10-year-long attempt to win over German customers was due in large part to corporate practices that did not translate well—including, interestingly enough, the requirement that sales clerks smile. In this respect, the smiley face in the image, which is echoed in the frowning face in Paul’s comment, could also be seen as a fractal in Kramsch and Whiteside’s sense of “patterns of activities and events which are self-similar at different levels of scales” (2008, p. 660), in that it indexes this particular moment of failed American corporate international ambitions.

Two of Paul’s friends respond to this post: first E, a Dutch speaker that appears to be online at the same time as Paul for at least part of the exchange, and then T, an American (see [Excerpt 1](#)). The effect is two independent conversations initiated by the same prompt that overlap with one another sequentially, although each is marked fairly unambiguously by the choice of language.

Excerpt 1. The Overlapping of Two Emergent Conversations, Separated by Code-Switching

E: Dan zullen ze het wel verdienen ;)

Then they better earn it! ;)

Paul: “heirs” – alleen al door erfgenaam te zijn!

just by being heirs!

E: dat begrijp ik. Wat zou jij je nageslacht nalaten als oprichter van zo”en succesvolle firma.

I get that. What should you leave behind to your progeny as founder of such a successful company.

Paul: ambitie

ambition

E: En wat doe je met je geld?

And what should you do with the money?

T: Not sure, if this really means so much because if you have a positive net worth of any value you are probably above 30% of Americans. Seriously.

“One in Four Households has no net worth. Economy in crisis”

Paul: Hmm, dat geld zou ik als venture capital gebruiken om kansrijke innovatieve ideeën snel te stimuleren en een blijvende invloed op de bestaande en komende drijfveren van de economie te houden.

Hmmm I would use that money as venture capital to quickly stimulate favorable innovative ideas and the remaining influx to maintain the existing and future stimulants.

Paul: Of dat geïnvesteerde kapitaal dan wel of niet wordt meegeteld in het net worth van mijn nageslacht hangt er waarschijnlijk af hoe je telt!

Whether or not the invested capital is counted in the net worth of my offspring then probably depends on how you count!

Paul: Interesting points about Walmart that fit in eerily to other statistics: in the United States today, one of every four grocery dollars is spent at Wal-Mart. - Amazingly, 100 million customers shop at Wal-Mart every single week...

T: On one hand, Walmart is scary huge. On the other hand, the position of Walmart in America is not so different from the position of Aldi in Germany. To quote wikipedia:

T: According to a 2002 survey conducted the German market research institute Forsa, 95% of blue-collar workers, 88% of white-collar workers, 84% of public servants, and 80% of self-employed Germans shop at Aldi.

In face-to-face interactions, turn-taking is often organized by routinized couplings of utterances and provoked responses, such as a question and an answer or a request and the acceptance or rejection of that request, that appear in immediate subsequence. In digitally-mediated communication, these pairs are often interrupted, resulting in a phenomenon dubbed as *virtual adjacency*, in which a speaker orients towards previous utterances even in the absence of tightly interrelated sequence (see González-Lloret, 2007; Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003). Adjacency pairs thus become conversational affordances (Forrester, 1999). By completing adjacency pairs in talk, even when they are disrupted, speakers are able to design a sense of focused, shared interaction (i.e., of conversationality) in communication that is otherwise temporally and sequentially disjointed.

In the [Excerpt 1](#), the conversation between Paul and E includes two questions posed by E, which are answered without sequential disruption by Paul—although the turns are divided in time by minutes and even hours. Although Paul does not provide simultaneous feedback, the stretch of talk resulting from their contributions has the texture of a conversation. Through the completion of adjacency pairs and non-verbal backchanneling in the form of likes, Paul and E signal clearly that they are orienting towards one another's utterances, signaling that they are central participants in this interaction. T's participation, however disrupts the illusion of the dyadic conversation and makes salient the complexity of participation structures in Facebook. At the same time, the multilingual context affords Paul a resource (i.e., code-switching) that makes the two conversations identifiably distinct.

In the interactional model of Goffman (1981a), the concept of participation structures describes the relation of interactants to a speaker's utterance in a given moment of talk. Goffman makes a distinction between *ratified* participants, those who are officially recognized as participants in the interaction (whether they are

directly addressed or not), and *unratified* participants, which include a range of peripheral roles. Goffman's terms are intended to complicate the traditional descriptive dyad comprised of speaker and listener, and he emphasizes that there is no direct correspondence between participant roles and what they hear or read. In fact, "a ratified participant may not be listening, and someone listening may not be a ratified participant" (1981a, p. 132).

One of the assumptions in Goffman's model is that there is some central act of communication, which other talk subordinates to. In this regard, Facebook differs significantly from many other forms of talk. In face-to-face communication and even in the kinds of broadcast communication Goffman analyzes in other essays (e.g., 1981b), the statuses of participants are defined by an event frame. For example, in a talk at a professional conference the ratified participants would be the members of the audience and potential unratified participants might include members of the staff at the convention center moving quietly at the back of the room as they refill the refreshments table. While various kinds of peripheral interactions between both ratified and non-ratified participants may occur, the genre of *professional talk* makes clear what the central interaction is.

Facebook communication, especially when it occurs in the wild (i.e., outside of classroom Facebook groups), poses new questions for Goffman's conceptualization of participation structures because it is unclear what the central communication is in any given moment. At the same time, technological affordances of Facebook, such as tagging; conversational affordances, like adjacency pairs; and even plurilingual affordances enable participants to mark a portion of talk byplay within an extended conversation. In [Excerpt 1](#), for example, Paul and E use Dutch to bound off a stretch of talk as a dialogic conversation. At the same time, the communication remains public, which is what makes it possible for T to first make himself visible after five turns, inserting himself through the shared link and related comment. Although he does not truly interrupt the flow of the conversation that Paul and E have co-constructed—especially given the delineation indexed through the codeswitch—the intrusion into a sequence of interactions between the two Dutch speakers reveals the precarity of the conversational feel that is naturalized through the conversational affordances these speakers use. At the same time, it reveals the multidimensionality and de-situatedness of communication in digitally networked spaces.

The decentering of communication has further implications for conceptualizing ratified and unratified participants. Marcoccia (2004) describes how certain participants in online newsgroups become "favored recipients," because of their frequent and visible presence in the groups (p. 142). These users are assumed to be among the recipients of any contribution. The three users we studied displayed expansive social networks of more than 300 friends. By their own accounts, they rarely used additional privacy settings, which made it impossible to know exactly who belonged to a conversational group at any moment. However, a much smaller number of fellow users regularly responded to their posts, and when conversational structures did emerge, it was often these individuals who were central participants. We can speculate that these individuals became ratified, favored recipients for many posts (see also Androupoloutos, 2014).

Marcoccia (2004) also argues that the eavesdropper role is necessarily different from how Goffman conceived it in newsgroup interactions. While the eavesdropper in Goffman's model holds an unratified status, the lack of a clear-cut distinction between ratified and not casts these bystanders in a contradictory role. "Indeed, when a participant sends a message, he/she knows that there are eavesdroppers, but he/she is forced to include them as recipients" (Marcoccia, 2004, p. 140). When used outside of a locally managed interaction, the like button might serve a secondary communicative function, by enabling some participants to be recognizable as eavesdroppers and thus to become more salient to the conversation.⁵

The ways in which SNS-mediated communication is decentered and co-constructively re-centered has implications for what it means to teach communicative competence. In pedagogical contexts, such as classroom discussion groups, learners may be immediately ratified as central participants. But in Facebook—as well as in many other spaces both online and offline—this status is not taken for granted. This might lead language educators and learners alike to examine what is meant by participation as a desired learning outcome of language learning and what kinds of learning different forms of participation might or

might not afford. Taking an example like this as a pedagogical object, learners can be guided to think about how we know when we are in a conversation online and offline: When does it stop and start? What kinds of participant roles do we take on in particular moments and why? What does it mean to lurk in the language classroom versus lurking in an online discussion forum? Learners can also reflect on the role of language choice in establishing these roles.

The practice of sharing content across Facebook also creates new possibilities for the production format of utterances. Take Figure 3, a post from Mika's timeline:



Figure 3. Mika shares a photo from *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*. Posts such as this one enable users to negotiate production roles as they position themselves in the multilingual ecology of Facebook.

Excerpt 2.

For my German speaking FB friends. This is simply *too* comical...

Tragic

Drawing by Dietrich Brüggeman (<http://d-trick.de/>). Vielen Dank!

Problems of intellectual couples

Bubble 1: Let's go out again.

Bubble 2: From where.

The comic entitled “Problems of Intellectual Pairs” was first posted through the Facebook page of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, one of the larger print news outlets in Germany that, like many others, now maintains an active online presence including a Facebook page. At the same time as multiplying the audience by effectively merging the readers of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin* (whose comments are seen in the light blue square to the right) with his own friends list (a subset of which is directly addressed at the start of his comment), Mika negotiated production roles in a striking way. In addition to recipient roles, Goffman theorized three production roles taken up by speakers in interaction: the animator, the physical source of the message; the author, who formulates the message; and the principal, the party to whose position the message attests. The technological structure of Facebook affords Mika the possibility of being both animator (sharing) and author (commenting) simultaneously, as he expresses the tragicomic feelings elicited by the joke. The irony of this double-voicing is emphasized by Mika through the address

to his “German-speaking friends,” an utterance made redundant by its formulation in German (see [Excerpt 2](#)), which in turn indexes the multilingual production context of Facebook and at the same time, potentially points to the relative statuses of English and German on the internet and beyond. The status of English as a global lingua franca means that German speaker becomes a sort of marked principal role in a way that English speaker does not.

An example such as this can be used in the language classroom to initiate a discussion about the roles learners take up in various conversations both online and offline and the potential effects of these positions. Goffman provides a relatively accessible metalanguage that learners can be introduced to in order to analyze the practices of sharing and commenting. Whereas the first example from Paul’s page demonstrated the use of codeswitching to construct two distinguishable conversations, Mika’s example is also a reminder that not all languages traffic equally. When asked to participate in online communities of languages other than English, learners may at first be confronted with the fact that purely monolingual spaces of, for example, German speakers, are hard to find. Engaging with an example such as this can provide an opportunity to consider how languages only exist in the context of other languages (see Pennycook, 2007)—a reality that is often more salient online, but is equally true offline—and the implications for structuring participation frameworks in digitally-networked spaces.

The focus of this section has been on the design resources which multilingual speakers engage in order to create more manageable local stretches of communication, an activity we have characterized as conversationality. As we have already indicated, the multiscale format of Facebook talk often makes it difficult to determine what is central and what is subordinate. If no act of communication is taken for granted as central, then the right to take up the floor is held by everyone and no one at the same time. Getting heard (or rather, getting read) then calls upon something more than the communicative competence needed to negotiate turn taking and create conversational coherence. It requires a symbolic awareness that enables speakers to focus the attention of others.

Social Networks and Conversational Power

The discussion of participant structures points to another factor in the relative successes and failures of Facebook conversations: speakers must not only negotiate more local interactional contexts in order to create a shared sense of focused interaction and shape on-going conversations, but also find ways to get heard lest they get swept away in the flood of communication appearing in their newsfeeds.⁶ In their research on the conversational ecology of Twitter, boyd et al. (2010) describe the ways in which diffuse conversations emerge in SNSs across longer spans and larger time scales. These conversations are, they argue, “composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context” (p. 1). Consider, for example, the following post ([Excerpt 3](#)) from Udo’s timeline:

Excerpt 3.

Udo: “I always cheer up immensely if an attack is particularly wounding because I think, well, if they attack one personally, it means they have not a single political argument left.” - Margaret Thatcher

R: pure shock doctrine

S: Is that you comment on Obama {indirectly} calling Romney a bullshitter?

Udo: On the meta-level maybe.

Udo: Any connection to living persons is left to the discretion of the reader...

Paul: Did you actually watch Romney?

Udo: TV-Wahlkampf in den USA: Jetzt wird es richtig schmutzig

TV-Election Campaign in the USA: Now it’s getting really dirty.

Paul: Am aktivsten sind Mitt Romney und die hiesigen Republikaner. 13 Spots gehen auf ihr Konto - vier direkte Attacken aus Präsident Barack Obama, acht auf andere Demokraten und einyiger positiver Spot im Namen eines Senatskandidaten. Dagagen kommen Obama und die Demokraten kaum an, nur je drei Attacken auf Romnez und diverse andere Republikaner. Plus zwei positive Spots.

The most active are Mitt Romney and the hiesigen Republicans: 13 TV ads registered on their account - four direct attacks on President Barack Obama, eight on other Democrats and one single positive ad in the name of a candidate for Senate. Obama and the Democrats hardly even compare, with three attacks on Romney diverse other Republicans. Plus two positive ads...

Paul: My opponent believes in global warming and has been to other countries, he is basically a monster

Udo: By comparison with the reality, my story [is] as tame as a holiday postcard.

Udo: Gestern im Auto gehört <Link to a radio show on the U.S. election> (gibt irgendwo nen Podcast)

Heard yesterday in the car <Link to a radio show on the U.S. election> (somewhere there's a podcast)

Paul: hmmm wer hat letztens das artikel gepostet über was für themen für amerika wirklich wichtig wären, nur kein Präsidentskandidat das eh ansprechen würde.

hmmm who posted that article recently about the topics that were really important in America, but no presidential candidate would ever bring them up.

Paul: hmmm ich kann es nicht finden, aber ich habe das hier gefunden! interessante discussion in den kommentaren auch

hmmm I can't find it, but I found this here!! interesting discussion in the comments too

Udo: Hansen seems to think paradoxically like me. ;)

Mika: Nice article, Paul.

The status update contains a single quote attributed to Margaret Thatcher. The quote is initially posted without commentary or explanation, and thus functions as an example of a common communicative strategy in Facebook, which—drawing from publishing jargon—we might describe as a teaser. Like its namesake, the function of a teaser in SNS-mediated communication is to capture the attention of readers. But whereas an article teaser attempts to compel readers to direct their focused attention to a longer article, the Facebook teaser draws fellow users into a potential conversation. In order to be felicitous, teasers must be compelling at the same time as cryptic. They invite further questions, which can only be answered through further interactions—as a reader or as an interlocutor. A typical variant of the teaser is personally directed, such as when a poster references some aspect of their own mental or emotional state, thereby calling upon their sympathetic friends to check in on the poster. In Udo's case, the teaser is oriented towards current events, namely the 2012 U.S. presidential election. The success of this is evidenced in the first two responses from Udo's network: R's comment "pure shock doctrine" locates the post within the field of political discourse, while S's question tries to ascertain to what extent the quote can be read as a comment on particular individuals and their actions. Udo's two rejoinders do not explicitly clarify his stance, but instead invite further talking. In particular, Udo's playful allusion to the distancing language used in fictional works functions as a sort of second teaser. Paul continues with a directed question asking whether Udo actually watched Romney's recent speech. Udo then replies with a link to an article from the German language news site *Spiegel*, which discusses negative campaigning during the election, thereby evading Paul's specific question, while also demonstrating a clear familiarity with current U.S. politics and offering more material to prompt activity on his timeline.

The emerging conversation exhibits many of the features already discussed including virtual adjacency and focused address, but two other features emerge when this post is analyzed as a manifestation of the more diffuse, affective conversationality described by Boyd et al. (2010). The first pertains to conversationality's situatedness in the flow of talk. If we move beyond the local context of this conversation and expand the scope, we can see this conversation as a particular shift in footing within the context of the Facebook wall, which includes other posts evidencing a diverse array of position-takings in English and German. However, it is also important to note that many users would actually have viewed this post in their newsfeed. This is an example of what Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) describe as the *unfinalizability*, the unboundedness of discourse and discourse communities. The post is recontextualizable in variety of different ways based on the users' access at any given moment. The Thatcher quote also indexes a phenomenon that Kramsch and Whiteside describe as "layered simultaneity" (2008, p. 659), a layering of historicity in discourse that creates the potential for "multiple and contradictory temporalities" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 128) leading to intertextual references and communicative tensions across the two languages at play.

The shifting production format makes the uptake of the post all the more noteworthy. With a total of fourteen responses over the course of a single day, Udo's post successfully fulfills its function as a teaser by initiating focused and sustained interaction. Udo thus exhibits what Kramsch (2008) has described "conversational power," which, she writes, "comes less from knowing which communication strategy to pull off and at which point in the interaction than it does from choosing which language to speak with whom, about what, and for what effect" (p. 390). Androutsopoulos (2014) demonstrates how the collapse of diverse social contexts in Facebook into one digital network heightens the linguistic and stylistic choices through which language users construct their audiences. In both Udo's original post and the extended discourse that ensues, conversational power is manifest as citationality. Less than two weeks before Udo's post, then presidential hopeful Mitt Romney made online headlines after posting a tribute to Margaret Thatcher on her 87th birthday bringing the former Prime Minister into the fore of political discourse. But even before that moment, the same famous quote posted by Udo had circulated widely among bloggers self-identifying as conservative as a standard recourse to political attacks from opposing parties. Udo's teaser was presumably most compelling to the friends who recognized the reference. In turn, the act of recognizing the connection to Romney's presidential campaign created the opportunity for Udo's friends to self-identify as in-the-know—as German-speakers and Europeans who are able to move deftly between American and German discussions of the U.S. elections.

Beginning with the sixth turn, the conversation consists almost exclusively of citations. Although unattributed, Paul's next contribution is a direct quote from the article on the U.S. election posted by Udo. Paul follows his own post with a new link to a parody article titled "My opponent believes in global warming and has been to other countries, he is basically a monster." Udo's joking response ("By comparison with the reality, my story [is] as tame as a holiday postcard") is yet another quote, taken from the 2001 John le Carré novel of political conspiracy and corrupt government, *The Constant Gardener*. In the subsequent turns, Udo and Paul each contribute further links to online news coverage of the U.S. election in the German press. Each of them connects the link in some way to previous stories they have encountered: Udo tags his link as something that he heard in the car the day before, for which he has tried to find the corresponding podcast. Paul searches first for an article that someone—presumably someone in their shared circle of favored recipients—posted recently and eventually settles for a similar piece. The conversation ends when Udo and Mika, who has been silent up until that point, express approval of Paul's final post.

In contrast to other posting practices in SNSs, such as those common to Twitter, the visual boundedness of this interaction ties all of the shared links back to Udo's original Thatcher quote. The presence of backchanneling in the form of relevant citations and the supportive comments at the end indicate that both Paul and Udo recognized and acted upon each other's rejoinders as part of an ongoing conversation. At the same time, the conversational power of each interlocutor arose from their ability to continually supply and acknowledge new material (in at least two languages). This allowed them to assert themselves and to validate their interlocutors as politically informed, while also only minimally offering their own thoughts or commentary.⁷ On another level, the practice of reposting also lends power to the news stories themselves.

With approximately 30% of Americans accessing news through Facebook (Holcomb, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2013), media outlets rely upon users to push their stories in their personal newsfeeds. In this sense, Udo and Paul's citational exchange becomes a fractal of the broader traffic of news as a larger public conversation (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 660).

The conversation from Udo's page, which we analyze here, reveals that situatedness, fixedness in space, time, and monolingual context, applies to only one moment in the story of an utterance or literacy practice. Digital literacy practices such as SNS-mediated conversations are exemplary of what Kell (2015) has theorized as the *meaning making trajectories* of literacy practices, which thread together words and meanings that are only situated in fleeting moments. SNS conversations that occur outside of the safe spaces of classroom pages and groups make these threads of meaning making visible and shift the comfortable ground of context as they do so. As a cultural artifact for the classroom, an example such as this can be used in order to reflect on conversational power and citationality as part of a larger conversation about what gets reposted or linked and why.

Bringing Facebook Conversations into the Classroom

This small study of three multilingual users of Facebook brings to the fore some of the ways in which SNS-mediated conversations call for continued re-theorizations of communicative competence and of literacy practices, both of which rely heavily on notions of contextually-situated meanings and identifiable, ratified participants (e.g., audiences, readers). This has implications for scholars and practitioners within L2 teaching and learning, who are interested in the role that these technologies might play in L2 development. Classroom Facebook use has been demonstrated to enable sociopragmatic awareness (see Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013) and encourage participatory learning (Mills, 2011), but the analysis of these three examples shows that outside of orchestrated pedagogical spaces, the possibilities for participation and access are often shifting and unequally distributed in SNS communicative landscapes. Staying afloat in the stream of online feed requires symbolic resources, awareness, and agility in order to navigate the obscured and, at times, even invisible audiences of networked publics. The semipublic format of Facebook and its combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools makes salient participation and production roles beyond the conversational speaker–listener dyads. The preference for citationality and other forms of remixing in SNS-talk makes tangible the layered scales of discourse that converge in a relatively short moment of interaction.

Side-by-side with other genres often privileged in multiliteracies and communicative curricula (including spontaneous conversations and literary dialogue), learners can be asked to take on the role of literacy ethnographers as they read and analyze SNS-mediated communication representative of the multilingual communities in which they might participate. Because of the ways in which conversational affordances such as adjacency pairs and even code-choice are made visible and entextualized in the digital medium, examples of Facebook talk such as [Excerpt 1](#) and [Excerpt 2](#) might provide opportunities for what can be described as a kind of reverse *bridging activity* (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). Thorne and Reinhardt focus on the development of academic literacies in advanced language learners, but digital vernacular genres such as Facebook conversations can also be used to defamiliarize speech genres that dominate the basic and early-intermediate levels of language instruction. In addition to interrogating these texts in terms of the differences between internet-mediated and more traditional texts—as suggested by Thorne and Reinhardt (p. 563)—a guided in-class analysis of SNS interactions can also help learners to recognize comparable complexities of other forms of communication. This might include interactions in which the learners participate or key examples, such as those analyzed in this study. Such a comparative analysis of Facebook and other conversations might include the following kinds of questions inspired by the examples above:

- Who are the most central participants in this conversation? Are there any additional participants?
- What examples of crossplay, byplay, and sideplay occur? Who are the participants in each of these levels? How do these levels interact with one another?

- Who is speaking in various moments of communication (including non-verbal communication acts and citation acts such as quoting, sharing, and reposting)? When citation occurs, is it direct, indirect, or implied (i.e., allusion)?

Students can also be asked to transform SNS-mediated conversations to spontaneous face-to-face conversation or to a scripted theatrical, film, or literary dialogue to raise awareness of the affordances and constraints of the different modes and genres, as they consider how the participant roles shift and which forms of communication become difficult, awkward, or even impossible.

The notion of conversational power reminds us that affordances, as opportunities for social action, are by no means neutral. As Rambe (2011) concludes in his study of academic uses of Facebook, “power circulates through technology’s...affordances and constraints and manifests through the actions and reactions of...agents in communicative events and interactions” (p. 275). Discussions of digital literacy and education sometimes overstate the creative potential and democratic participation of new media, while disassociating the ways in which meaning and social action are designed from questions of power even as current events repeatedly present us with examples of the power that emanates through and within online spaces.⁸

In his article on integrating textual thinking in a beginning-level language classroom, Maxim (2006) concludes by describing some of behaviors that his learners exhibited at the end of a one-semester pilot study working with a fictional novel: “By starting to recognize the utterances, characters, and behaviors that exercised symbolic power, students began to gain access to the underlying system of thought within the novel” (p. 28). Comparably, our claim is that Facebook texts provide opportunities to (a) teach the many important ways in which utterances, characters, and behaviors exercise symbolic power, even in vernacular literacy practices such as social media; and (b) lay bare the underlying, sometimes layered, sometimes contradictory systems of thought that undergird the flow of symbolic power. This may be of particular importance for native English speakers learning other languages, because English is a source of symbolic and conversational power on the internet in ways that become most apparent through the analysis of translingual talk. While getting one’s meaning across on the internet may require only English, being an effective, critical, and symbolically sensitive communicator does not.

As texts in practice, the conversational microcosms of Facebook offer striking examples of how conversational power flows through everyday interactions. Integrating key examples of SNS-mediated communication (among other literacy practices) can enable learners to consider not only how to get their own meanings across, but also which meanings get across to whom and through what channels, in what ways these meanings evolve as they are trafficked from conversation to conversation, and to what extent they are fractal figures for larger cultural relations. For example, learners may be given conversations from Facebook, such as Excerpt 2 and Excerpt 3, and asked to compare them with interactions in other media. They can be guided to inquire the following:

- When individuals take on a role as principal, what societal or cultural authority do they invoke?
- Whose utterances get cited or shared? In what ways are they shared and to what effect?
- How do citational practices differ in Facebook, spontaneous face-to-face communication, academic genres, and represented face-to-face communication found in theatrical, film, and literary works?

A guided contrastive analysis of these features can raise learners’ awareness of the various ways in which language users recycle and remix the speech of others to different purposes and effects as well as of the precarity and vulnerability of conversation and the ways in which language users maneuver in order to be heard, gain favor, and demonstrate their symbolic capital.

Conclusion

The intent of this article is to draw attention to some of the particular elements of translingual SNS-mediated conversations in order to emphasize the complex design choices at hand in the construction of conversationality and the negotiation of conversational power. These online conversations are not

necessarily more complex than the kinds of face-to-face interactions described by Kramsch and Whiteside (2008). However, their textualized nature as literacy practices makes them convenient as classroom materials. We have argued that the realities of contemporary communication push us to reframe language learning not as apprenticeship into a new linguistic community, but as increasing agility in a complex, multilingual ecology. Framed within multiliteracies pedagogies, the great potential for SNS-mediated communication in contexts of language teaching and learning is perhaps not as a means of accessing speakers of a given language as if they were a clearly definable speech community whose ranks can be entered through technology nor as an alternative classroom management site, but rather as a means of exploring the complexities of speech communities and speech itself.

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Notes

1. Restricted interactions would not have been detected in our data, although all three subjects reported using these features only occasionally.
2. Up until 2011, the messaging board feature of Facebook was a user's Wall. Facebook phased in a new format (the Timeline) in 2011, first allowing users to opt in and then transitioning completely at the end of that year.
3. All names were changed to protect the identities of the participants.
4. For a broader picture of SNS interaction, see work by Baym and boyd (2012) and Androutsopoulos (2013, 2014).
5. A face-to-face comparison can be made with the audience members in a large lecture hall who nod emphatically and make eye contact while the professor speaks, thus signaling nonverbally that they are more central or more favored recipients.
6. Facebook algorithms also determine which posts will show up in an individual's feed. Although it is difficult to determine exactly how these algorithms work and Facebook changes them often, they tend to operate according to what the Facebook data science page describes as strong and weak ties. In short, this means that the posts and updates of friends with whom one interacts more by mutually sharing, commenting on, or liking their content will appear more in one's feed.
7. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) have described this aspect of Facebook interactions (by which users attend to particular texts on someone's page) as *insiderliness* (p. 272).
8. A relatively recent and poignant example of this was Facebook's creation of French flag overlays for profile photos as a show of solidarity following the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015. The overlays were widely used, but also received backlash from those who criticized their valorization of certain tragedies over others.

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