

# Dynamics of Polyphony in Social Classification: An Exploration of an Anatomy of Digital Linguistic Practice

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As the information technologies grows and the digital online spaces become increasingly popular places for social interaction, we are confronted with new forms of sociality, practice, and knowledge organization that defy traditional distinctions between document, text, speech, language, and practice. This paper presents a study of use and practices of a social classification system, del.icio.us, through an overall theoretical approach that draws from the disciplines of linguistic anthropology, a sociology of interaction, speech act theory, and literary theory. From the ensemble of these approaches, this pilot study tentatively identifies an anatomy of social classification practices based on speech genres of monologue and dialogue. The use of a linguistic practice approach for the study of online classificatory practices is informed by the recognition of convergence among documents, text, language, and practice. The field of linguistic anthropology has long made the argument that language both produces and reflects social action. In turn, language is thus a reflection and enactment of action. Language and action are fundamentally intertwined and mutually constitutive. This idea is essential in digital environments where action is solely evidenced through textual forms of communication on-screen.

## 2. MONOLOGUE AND DIALOGUE IN SOCIAL CLASSIFICATION

From this linguistic practice approach, it appears that individuals are able to constitute and classify themselves into digital existence through the kinds of digital classificatory practice in which they engage. These digital linguistic practices can be distinguished in terms of monologue and dialogue. Within monologic practice, individuals typically use social classification systems as a space for collecting and storing their digital documents. As such, monologic practice consists of efforts to archive, remember, and ensure memory. Individuals contribute and save content to del.icio.us based on the notion that they might need it at a future date and would thus like to be able to easily refind and access their documents. With these efforts, monologue entails a kind of

communication to the self, where classification practices consist of the present self communicating to an imagined future self.

In addition to monologue, we also find dialogue forms of linguistic practice in social classification systems. While monologue practices focus primarily on internal self-communication, digital dialogue in social classification systems consist of utterances made based on imaginations and perceptions of interlocutors, audience, and their extended digital social network. As such, dialogue forms of practice help to weave individuals within a larger social fabric. This is achieved primarily through a play on voicing within the forms of commentary and annotation. Within social classification systems, it appears that dialogue manifests itself in several distinct forms: attribution, quotation, description, and assessment. These four forms represent a spectrum in which individuals animate others' voices or actively assert their own. At the far end of the spectrum, in the form of attribution, the individual's voice is barely present in their classificatory practices. At the other end of the spectrum, in the form of assessment, the individual's voice is of primary distinction.

## 3. DISCUSSION

The tentative findings from this study lay out a preliminary framework for understanding the nature and dynamics of digital linguistic practice. Using concepts of speech, language, and practice, this study attempts to identify the nature and dynamics of memory, social interaction, and information organization in an online social classification system. In digital social classification contexts, these private memory practices also happen concurrently with public acts of information sharing and recommendation. In turn, monologue and dialogue consists simultaneously of collecting information and organizing information. Dialogic practice in social classification systems thus consists of a series of speech genres such as quotation, attribution, description, and assessment. These speech genres reflect the various ways in which individuals negotiate the multiple authorial voices within their documents. In this view, social classification systems appear to accommodate and explicitly render the polyphonic nature of linguistic practice. This suggests that social classification systems have been designed in such a manner such that individuals are able to represent the plurality of voices that are embedded within any given document.

Heteroglossia in this digital environment includes the voice of the individual tagger-collector, the voice of the document, the voice of the document's author, and the voice of recommender. The continual switching of voicing demonstrates how oftentimes in our speech we do not speak from our own original voice. Following Erving Goffman's work on footing [1], examples of quotation in social classification demonstrate the ways in which individuals are able to animate the voice of others in their digital utterances. This ability to call forward multiple voices can be seen as a kind of corporal displacement that is also complemented by a temporal negotiation in which individuals manage their records and documents of their past and present based on their anticipation of the future. This is seen in the participants' use of future action tags as well as in their diary forms of annotation. In this way, linguistics practices in social classification systems are ideal examples of the ideas of polyphony in linguistic anthropology, sociology of interaction, and notions of intertextuality in literary theory.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Subsequently, the micro-narratives that emerge from these digital practices constitute a form of self-inscription in which individuals constitute themselves through digital speech. Through this

performative quality, individuals are able to create their digital selves through their digital speech. Individuals are able to constitute their digital selves through the very acts of collecting information and writing public commentary. As a result, individuals are able to write and classify themselves into digital existence. In part with this performativity, I would argue further that digital linguistic practice is, in part, informed by larger processes of interpellation in which individuals recognize themselves as subjects of address by choosing to speak and articulate their own voices. Moreover, if we extend this corporal metaphor, we can argue that speech genres form the underlying anatomy of the digital body and the digital self.

#### **5. REFERENCES**

- [1] Goffman, E. 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.