
LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL MEDIA

# LANGUAGE, CREATIVITY AND HUMOUR ONLINE

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ROUTLEDGE

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*



*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*
Names: Vasquez, Camilla, author.
Title: Language, creativity and humour online / Camilla Vâasquez.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2019. | Series: Language and digital media | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019001689| ISBN 9781138066823 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781138066830 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315159027 (ebk)
Subjects: LCSH: Creativity (Linguistics) | Wit and humor in social media.
Classification: LCC P37.5.C74 V37 2019 | DDC 401/.41—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019001689

ISBN: 978-1-138-06682-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-06683-0 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-15902-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# Acknowledgements

It seems to me that the only way to properly start this book is by acknowledging how inspiring the work of Ron Carter and Rodney Jones has been to me. Their scholarship has been influential on how I have come to understand linguistic creativity and has helped give my own diffuse interests a more single-pointed focus. I am additionally grateful to Rodney as well as to my other digital discourse colleagues who have supported this project in myriad ways: by providing feedback on the initial book proposal, supporting my various applications for funding, and offering enthusiastic forms of support along the way. Giant thanks in this regard go to *Language and Digital Media* Series Editors Carmen Lee and David Barton, as well as to Alice Chik, Ruth Page, Caroline Tagg, and Tuija Virtanen. Thanks also to Anna De Fina, Alex Georgakopoulou, Susan Herring, Sabina Perrino, and Betsy Rymes for their interest in, and support of, my early research on Amazon parody reviews – my first foray into exploring linguistic creativity online.

Of course, the largest group of people to whom I am grateful is my USF students. Over the last few years, they have contributed many new insights, shaped my thinking on these topics, and introduced me to internet phenomena that I would have been unlikely to discover otherwise. I will never forget the especially fascinating mix of students in my Spring 2016 Language & Technology course. In particular, Page Flint served as an indispensable cultural informant on more topics than I have space to list here, and Alex Kunkel reminded me to pay close attention to the comments associated with Amazon parody reviews. I am especially grateful to Samantha Creel, who introduced me to Tumblr Chats. Indeed, Chapter 4 of this book would not exist at all, had it not been for our ongoing collaboration on this topic. I also owe thanks to the talented graduate students in my Fall 2017 Language of the Internet elective. The group projects of "Team Kim," "Team Birds," and "Team Nye" helped bring clarity to various aspects of Chapter 3. I also wish to acknowledge the brilliant doctoral students with whom I have had the privilege of working at USF in recent years: Judith Bridges, Addie China, Derya Kulavuz-Onal, Zoe Fine, Andrea Fortin, Jessica Giovanni, Yaqian Jiang, Ramona Kreis, and Yi Zhang. I have benefitted from our intellectual exchanges on numerous topics related to online discourse and digital media. I am also grateful to my former student and current colleague, Erhan Aslan, for getting me excited about memes. Special thanks go to Chelsea Lo, my undergraduate research assistant, who helped me identify interesting novelty Twitter accounts, as well as collect and analyse a set of Amazon review comments. In addition, I extend my most sincere gratitude to my Tumblr research assistants and

cultural informants: Marina Trantham, Nelson A. Santiago, and Nastassia Clarke. Their contributions to Chapter 4 were absolutely vital.

I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge my Czech colleague, Jan Chovanec, and his gifted students who participated in my intensive, week-long Language of the Internet course in October 2017 at Masaryk University in Brno. I am also very grateful to the Humanities Institute at the University of South Florida, for supporting this research with a grant awarded to me during Summer 2017.

Finally, I offer my heartfelt thanks to my colleagues, supporters, fellow yogis, pub trivia teammates, friends, and family, who have had to hear about *Kim Kierkegaardashian* and *Bic for Her* reviews for way too long now. Thank you to Amanda, Amy, Anda, Anna, Anne, Bernie, Carole, Candace, Chris, Christine, CF, Doug, Gil, Jim, Karen, Kristy, Nicole, Maria, Mariaelena, Michael, Roxy, Rusty, and Yannick. Extra special thanks go to my mom, Jitka, who has offered me a lifetime of support and who has probably read more things I have written than anyone else – and to my amazing soul mate, Rubén, who shared my writing process, and literally remained by my side throughout this journey as he wrote his own book (as well as perhaps a few luminous secrets on the wall of existence).

# 1
# Introduction

In June 2015, the following text – an advertisement for a wedding dress – was posted on the site of the popular e-retailer, *eBay*. Rather than providing a straightforward product description about the object for sale, the text presented readers with a rather unexpected narrative. What is perhaps most unusual about this text is the animation of an inanimate object, whose voice tells us the sad tale of being jilted before a wedding. In a surprising twist, the first-person-narrator's voice that is represented here is that of one very depressed wedding dress.

As an audience who has just read this story, we might start by asking ourselves: What exactly is going on with this text? And why would its author choose to write it in this manner – and from this rather peculiar perspective? After all, most of us would probably agree that *eBay* product descriptions are normally written from the perspective of the human seller, and not from the perspective of the object that is for sale. (Plus, we all know very well that inanimate objects, like dresses, are incapable of writing.) As I will argue throughout this book, texts such as these can be viewed as acts of everyday linguistic creativity. And, as we will see, similar acts of linguistic creativity can be found in many different online contexts today. In crafting such texts, authors use language intentionally, skilfully, and we might even say "artfully," as they introduce some unexpected, incongruous, and (strictly speaking) unnecessary elements into their writing. Very often, this type of linguistic creativity involves playing with different voices, as we can see in the above example, where the wedding dress is given a voice in the form of the story's first-person narrator, and as, conversely, the dress's human owner (and the actual author of the text) is reduced to merely a secondary character in the story.

I was supposed to be worn at City Hall in New York.
I was going to be the main attraction of a 60s wedding theme.
I was going to be low-key, but elegant (I still am, for that matter).
I was going to complement a 60s updo, nude courts and a bouquet of Lily of the Valley.
When my owner put on a dress just like me in Selfridges, she knew I was the one so she ordered me online and had me delivered to her husband-to-be in Brooklyn.
I'm not over the top, nor am I too dressed down, and she thought she could perhaps wear me to other occasions in the future.
She thought I was a dress she could look back on and smile, not cringe at fashion faux pas (she was right).
When I arrived, she kept me sealed in my box so nothing could ruin me.
Then they split up.
And she kept me in the box.
Because she couldn't bear to look at me.
I am a constant reminder to her of what could have been.
So she wants to sell me.
Not necessarily to a bride, but to anyone looking to give me the home I deserve.
A home where I'll get worn and admired and dry-cleaned (as and when necessary).
She can't take me back to DVF because they no longer stock me.
I'm limited edition, if you like.
And the first time I have been taken out of my box is for these photos.
Because who's going to buy a dress based on a picture of a box?
I can't wait to be worn by you (and to see the back of my cardboard confines once and for all).
Love,
Zarita (in Ivory).
xx

*Example 1.1* Wedding dress narrative (*eBay*)

But why engage in such language play, especially when it is not required in order to achieve the author's practical goal of selling an item on an e-commerce platform? In this case, a straightforward product description is really all that is needed to make potential buyers aware that this dress, which has never been worn, is available for online purchase. One possible answer to this question is that creative language use such as this draws attention to itself. And in doing so, it simultaneously draws attention away from other, more pedestrian-sounding texts. Most digital environments today are replete with scores of texts and images that compete for our attention. Some scholars even use the term "attention economy" to refer to how, in content-rich online environments, human attention has become a very scarce commodity (e.g., Goldhaber, 1997). As media scholar Limor Shifman (2014) explains, "The most valuable resource in the information era is not information but the

attention people pay to it" (p. 32). This means that providing a text like this with some unexpected twist – especially in an information-dense digital context like *eBay* – is one way of making a seller's product stand out from dozens of otherwise similar products.

Originally posted on *eBay* in 2015 by a 30-year-old British woman, who wished to remain anonymous, this wedding dress advertisement was reproduced approximately one week later in a story about it in an online newspaper.[1] The very fact that the advertisement captured a journalist's attention enough to be taken from its original online context (*eBay*) and later recirculated in a different online context (*Huffington Post*) – through a process that linguists and media scholars call "recontextualization" – indicates that there must be something quite special about this text. It is also worth pointing out that the creativity in this example is not accomplished so much through formal elements (although you may have noticed a bit of repetition in the opening lines: "*I was going to* ..."). Instead, creativity here is primarily achieved through a kind of role-playing in the unexpected crafting of the *eBay* advertisement as though it were written by the dress in the form of a letter. Another interesting feature of this text is how the dress, as the letter's ostensible author, makes several appeals to readers' emotions. Indeed, the title of the *Huffington Post* article calls it "The World's Most Depressing eBay Listing."

In the pages that follow, I will explore the different ways that individuals use language in order to craft online texts that are creative or humorous, and often both. Admittedly, these central concepts – creativity and humour – are both highly abstract and highly subjective. It is well known that a particular text, performance, or artefact that one person considers to be creative or funny, another person may find to be boring, uninteresting, or even offensive. However, what makes these topics particularly interesting to study in digital environments – especially on various social media platforms – is that these platforms usually provide a means for *other* users to signal their appreciation (or lack thereof) of the texts that have been posted there. In other words, social media provide users with affordances for engaging with, or reacting to, a text, in the form of comments, likes, reposts, reblogs, retweets, shares, upvotes, downvotes, and so on. Admittedly, these digital records of user reactions to a text cannot capture all the nuances of an individual's response to what s/he has read or viewed. However, they can at least provide us with an overall indication of the extent to which others have found that text worthy of further attention or interaction. I will return to this idea of audience reactions at various points later in the book.

But first, let me present the contents of the rest of this chapter. The following section provides a brief overview of how creativity and humour have been theorized by various language scholars. This overview is then followed by a discussion of "voicing": this is the central theoretical concept that guides all of my analyses of linguistic creativity and humour presented in subsequent chapters. After that, I illustrate what I mean by voicing, as I present an analysis of a Twitter interaction

between a celebrity and one of her followers. Chapter 1 concludes with a brief preview of the book's remaining chapters.

## Linguistic Creativity

When many of us think of creative people, we probably imagine famous artists or great writers – in other words, the kinds of people who produce masterpieces. However, over the last few decades, a growing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have argued that creativity is not just something that characterizes great artists, but that it is actually part of our basic human nature. Where language is concerned, on some fundamental level, it can be said that each and every time we combine a set of words in a novel or unexpected way, we are being creative users of language. Experts on linguistic creativity, such as Ron Carter and Rodney Jones, make the point that creativity is not just the property of the artistic genius or the master wordsmith, but rather, that all competent humans have the capacity to be creative with language. In a nutshell, as linguists Carter and McCarthy (2004) explain, creative language use "is not a capacity of special people but a special capacity of *all* people" (p. 83, emphasis mine).

Most of us engage in some form of linguistic creativity on a regular basis. Carter (2016) calls this "everyday creativity," and he offers several examples of this, such as making puns or playing with extended metaphors in everyday conversation. If we think about exchanging witty banter with a friend or family member, or viewing something amusing that appears on the digital screens in front of us, we actually do not have to look too far to find such instances of creative language use that surround us on a daily basis. This contemporary view of linguistic creativity also stresses that creativity is a social, rather than a psychological, phenomenon. In other words, rather than being an internal quality, which is the unique possession of an individual, creativity is something that is shared and co-constructed. As Jones (2016b) explains, studying linguistic creativity involves paying attention to how "language is used in situated social contexts to create new kinds of social identities and social practices" (p. 62). So, taking the wedding dress narrative as an example, we might say that the author produced a creative text by deviating from what is normally expected from the existing genre of *eBay* product descriptions. Instead, this *eBay* author chose to engage in a different kind of social practice in that particular online space, and this practice involved playfully giving a voice to an inanimate object.

There are also, of course, various degrees of creativity involving language use. For this reason, Carter (2016) introduced the notion of a "cline of creativity" (p. 67), meaning that it can be useful to conceptualize linguistic creativity as existing on a cline, or a continuum. On one end, we would find more literary forms of creativity (for instance, great works of literature or poetry). Whereas on the other end, we would find more everyday forms of creativity, such as some of the playful ways in

which we use language in our daily interactions – or what we might consider vernacular forms of self-expression. So where would the above text (i.e., the wedding dress text) fall on this continuum of linguistic creativity? This is an intriguing question, and one which I will return to in the conclusion of this book. In the meantime, however, I would suggest that this is a useful question to ask ourselves each time that we encounter a text we consider creative.

Language scholars have identified several linguistic features commonly associated with creativity in everyday speech. These include "verbal repetition as well as a wide range of 'figures of speech' such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, idiom, slang expressions, proverbs, hyperbole" (Carter & McCarthy, 2004, p. 63), as well as "rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, wordplay, evocative metaphor" (Jaworski, 2016, p. 322). At the same time, these scholars caution against taking a strictly formal view of linguistic creativity, instead urging us to take a discourse approach. A discourse approach goes beyond the identification of these kinds of formal features of language, by also considering the functions, or the purposes, that such features may serve in discourse. This is important because not all instances of the abovementioned "creative features" will be considered creative by the participants who are involved in the interactions where they occur; in some cases, they may be considered quite unremarkable, or perhaps even go unnoticed. So, we might say that whether something is evaluated as creative, or not, ultimately lies in the eye of the beholder(s). Yet, it is also important to bear in mind that there may be a wide range of interpretations of any given text: especially when we think about texts found in online environments. These are important considerations, and for exactly these reasons, the digital texts that I have selected for inclusion in this book are those which have received some type of recognition, or signals of appreciation, from other internet users. In other words, I did not just select random examples that I thought were creative or funny, but instead, I selected texts that had been identified, in various ways, by other internet users as somehow remarkable.

As mentioned, a discourse approach involves not only identifying formal features of language, but also taking into account the various functions that linguistic creativity can serve. Previous scholarship has pointed out that linguistic creativity can be used to: contribute to humour or entertainment (more on this in the section below), emphasize a particular point being made, communicate a type of stance (either positive or negative), express a particular type of identity, mark topic boundaries, or construct a sense of mutuality (Carter & McCarthy, 2004). Often a single instance of linguistic creativity serves several of these functions simultaneously. These discourse functions have been derived from research examining linguistic creativity in spoken interactions, yet they are also relevant when it comes to communication in digital contexts. Finally, as will become evident in the later chapters of the book, many instances of linguistic creativity found in social media begin with a previously existing idea, text, or object, and add to it some kind of a novel, surprising, or unexpected twist. It could be said that creativity usually involves a tension between the known and the unknown – in other words,

some kind of transformation of some existing thing, which is already familiar, or recognizable, to us. As I will show, linguistic creativity in online environments often involves new variations on some given, existing theme(s). Discourse analyst Michael Toolan (2012) offers several expressions that refer to this blending of old and new elements, which characterizes creativity: "hybridity," "repetition with variation," "norm- or habit-breaking" as well as "deautomatisation" (or "a making strange of the familiar") (p. 18–22).

Taking a discourse approach, as I do in this book, means considering "how all the features of a text [...] work together to form an effective whole, and further, how this whole interacts with the social context in which it is situated" (Jones, 2012, p. 6). This requires looking for patterns in the data as well as identifying similarities across individual texts. It also requires an understanding of how texts relate to their contexts, both their immediate contexts (i.e., the platforms on which they appear), as well as how they "interact with broader social formations and systems of values" (Jones, 2012, p. 9).

## Humour and Language

Much of the existing scholarship on humour has tended to focus on conversational data. Moreover, it turns out that researchers of verbal humour have tended to actually focus much more on laughter than on humour (Attardo, 2015). This is largely due to the relative ease of objectively identifying laughter, in contrast to the greater subjectivity involved in deciding whether an utterance is humorous or not. Of course, not all laughter is a reaction to something funny (for instance, nervous laughter). Conversely, a strict focus on laughter as a signal of something humorous cannot capture instances of "failed" humour, or any attempt at humour that does not receive the hoped-for response. In sum, studying humour is notoriously tricky and involves several challenges, not the least of which is defining it, and determining what exactly "counts" as humour. But this has not stopped linguists from trying to gain a better understanding of the mechanics of humour.

Generally speaking, theories of verbal humour usually emphasize "script opposition" as one of the main principles at work in the creation of humour. Basically, a "script" refers to a specific domain of meaning and all of the words associated with it (Raskin, 1985). Furthermore, these scripts are both constituted by, and constitutive of, social norms. Script opposition happens when an utterance is compatible with two separate scripts that oppose each other (Attardo, 1994; Taylor & Raskin, 2012), and when the social norms underlying one of these scripts are defied (Tayebi, 2016). This accounts for how humour is created.

Now focussing on the *other* side of communicative interaction (i.e., the humour recipient), cognitive linguists who study the processing, or interpretation, of humour often invoke the notion of "incongruity resolution." For instance, when a Twitter

user crafts a message incorporating two (or more) elements that usually do not "belong" together (i.e., script opposition), this often helps to clue readers in to the fact that the intent of the message is humorous, and that it is not intended to be interpreted literally. As humour researchers Alamán and Rueda (2016) explain further, often it is this juxtaposition of two incongruous elements that invites readers to "recognize this contrast and activate a process of inference, which must lead to the recognition of the non-serious attitude of the speaker and the interpretation of the (implied) humoristic sense of the message" (p. 41). In other words, to understand that any message is funny, our minds must be able to resolve the incongruity that has just been presented to us in two somehow opposing social scripts.

If the identification of humour in conversational interactions is challenging, that challenge may even be further magnified in online contexts, where we typically do not have access to those paralinguistic cues that often function as acknowledgements of humour in face-to-face conversation (e.g., laughter, smiles, facial expressions, etc.). Yet most interactive online contexts have their own built-in affordances for signalling acknowledgement of humour. And while it may be even more difficult to determine if someone is *trying* to be funny online, the *appreciation* of "successful" humour in online discourse is frequently signalled in various ways, such as: laughter tokens (e.g., *lol*, *hahahaha*), metalinguistic comments (*Hilarious!!*, *I'm still laughing like crazy*), and other forms of appreciation (such as repetition, or imitation, of the humorous element), which can be found in comments from other users. Appreciation may also be indicated by a range of possible user "responsive uptake activities" (Varis & Blommaert, 2015, p. 35), such as the liking, upvoting, reblogging, retweeting, sharing, and so on that I mentioned earlier.

Just as I have pointed out that there are lists of formal features commonly associated with creative language, linguists have also found there to be certain formal elements that tend to appear in humorous language. For instance, discourse features such as *polysemy* (playing with different meanings of the same word), *paronymy* (playing with two words or phrases that sound similar, but that mean different things), and *intentional register variation* (inserting a different style of language into a text which is not typically associated with the given text and/or context), often appear in verbal humour (Ruiz-Gurillo, 2016). We will see many examples of each of these throughout this book. In addition, linguists Jan Chovanec and Villy Tsakona (2018) have identified various framing devices – also known as *contextualization cues* (Gumperz, 1982) – which are signals enabling the identification of a text, or utterance, as humorous. Some common framing devices found in digital media texts include unconventional spellings and punctuation, as well as emoji. Other larger discourse strategies that appear in humorous online texts include exaggeration, personification, parody, multimodality, and intertextuality (Alamán & Rueda, 2016). Once again, these will be defined and illustrated throughout this book.

When considering the functions of verbal humour, it is often associated with the

relational – rather than the transactional – dimension of communication. For instance, linguist Francisco Yus (2018) argues that humour encourages interaction and participation in many online spaces. Humour serves as a "connective device" (p. 295) that brings people together around something shared, creating a sense of "closeness and an in-group feeling" (p. 297). This feeling of being part of an in-group is often the direct result of sharing the background knowledge needed to understand a humorous text. Those who "get it" share the necessary background knowledge, whereas those who do not share this knowledge cannot be part of the in-group. Other digital media scholars have used different terms, such as "ambient affiliation" (Zappavigna, 2012, 2014) or "conviviality"(Varis & Blommaert, 2015) in referring to those fleeting, often momentary, connections that we share with hundreds, thousands, or perhaps even millions of other internet users, as we enjoy and appreciate the same online text. As mentioned above, one of the functions of linguistic creativity is also to construct a sense of mutuality, making this is a key area of overlap between creativity and humour. In fact, there is a very close relationship between linguistic creativity and humour, which is perhaps best summarized in the following way: not all creative utterances or texts are necessarily humorous, yet all humorous language use entails at least some degree of linguistic creativity.

While it is possible that some texts may be universally funny, humour is often highly cultural. Although humorous texts may seem to appear all over the internet, linguistic anthropologist Marcel Danesi (2017) reminds us that, in fact, this may be a culturally specific phenomenon, noting that especially for individuals in English-speaking nations, "Humor […] seems to be a regular part of informal interactions via social media" (p. 124). Linguist Leonor Ruiz-Gurillo (2016) has further pointed out the essential role of shared cultural and background knowledge that needs to exist between writer/speaker and addressee in order to interpret humour. Indeed, culturally shared rules and conventions are required for audiences to "produce [the] particularized conversational implicatures" (Alamán & Rueda, 2016, p. 53) that are necessary for interpreting a particular text as non-serious in its intent.

## Voicing

Voicing is the central theoretical concept that guides my discussion of linguistic creativity and humour presented in the following chapters. As sociolinguist Allan Bell has remarked, "We are immersed in dialects, varieties, genres, registers, accents, jargons, styles, codes (Bakhtin, 1981). They eddy and swirl around us in an always changing current of linguistic reproduction and creation" (2017, p. 588). Bell's flu-vial metaphor reminds us that, as language users, we are constantly surrounded by both numerous, as well as very particular, ways of communicating. What we may be less aware of, though, are the ways in which we draw on these diverse ways of communicating – both consciously and unconsciously – in crafting our own

utterances and texts. Appropriately enough, in the above quotation, Bell references the early 20th-century Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose insights into voicing were truly visionary. I like to joke with my students that it sometimes feels like Bakhtin predicted the internet. In reality, of course, Bakhtin was busy writing about 19th-century novels and probably did *not* predict the internet. Nevertheless, his sophisticated understanding of how individuals rely on many different social voices to craft what they write, or what they say, remains highly relevant today, almost a century later. Indeed, Bakhtin's insights about voicing are uncannily applicable to contemporary communication found in digital contexts.

What exactly do I mean by *social voices* in the previous paragraph? To explain this, it may be helpful to offer a few examples. One very obvious example is that of stand-up comedians. It is not uncommon to observe stand-up comics impersonating public figures, like celebrities or well-known politicians. In order to impersonate others, comics often mimic particular non-linguistic features, like body posture or physical gestures. But they also rely heavily on particular ways of speaking – and these ways of speaking may include paralinguistic features (like particular patterns of pausing, or recognizable patterns of intonation and stress), as well as actual linguistic features, such as using specific pronunciations, words, or idiosyncratic phrases, that are associated with an individual – or with members of a particular social group that the individual belongs to. For instance, if the person being imitated speaks with a distinctive regional or ethnic dialect, the imitation will often incorporate these dialect features as well. Therefore, by imitating and reproducing these recognizable linguistic (and other) features, comedians are able to "voice" particular individuals. Of course, not all instances of voicing involve public performances by people who imitate others for a living, like comedians or impersonators. So, for instance, as I narrate a story to my coworker about what happened at work last week, I might relate to her something that our boss said. Instead of merely reporting on what our boss said to me, I can instead choose to "voice" him, by using some of his favourite expressions or by imitating his accent, as I bring him to life (so to speak) through my performance in the current interaction (i.e., the casual conversation with my coworker).

However, not all acts of voicing are necessarily deliberate, or conscious, on our part. Nor do we need to evoke a specific individual when we bring others' voices into our speech or writing (Cooren & Sandler, 2014). A rather pedestrian example is when I am tasked with writing a memo at work, on behalf of a particular committee that I happen to serve on. In this case, I will most likely draw on "committee-types-of-language" that I have seen before, as well as my background knowledge of what "memo language" is supposed to look like. This represents a type of genre, or register, knowledge. And even though I am technically the author of this memo, my language in this document is not really 100% my own. Rather, according to Bakhtin, what I am doing as I write this memo is fishing those words and constructions that I am using from somewhere out of the giant pool of all the memo language that I have read and seen before during my lifetime. Yet, most likely, I probably remain mostly unaware

that is what I am doing, as I am immersed in the actual writing process. Furthermore, as I write this professional memo, I am definitely *not* using the same "regular" language that I use when I speak to, or write a casual note to, my friends (i.e., my vernacular). Instead I am using a specific type of more formal and more bureaucratic-sounding language that I happen to know, from experience, is more suitable for this professional activity. Linguists refer to these types of context-specific languages as *registers*. Many examples of online humour involve some type of register incongruity, as we will see.

Another example of unconscious voicing is when my friend responds to a white lie told by her 7-year-old son by saying, "Come on, I wasn't born yesterday!" At times like these, she finds herself saying things that sound identical to the sorts of things that her mother used to say to *her* when *she* was a child. Most certainly, she did not set out to repeat exactly the same sentences that used to drive her crazy when she was younger. Rather, she is drawing on particular ways of speaking (using words, expressions, and tones of voice) to accomplish a function associated with performing the particular social identity that she is enacting at that moment: i.e., being a parent – or "doing being a mother" as some discourse analysts might say. Sometimes we use voicing strategies deliberately: for instance, when we use the voices of others to parody or make fun of someone. But many other times, we do this unwittingly, as we use language for communication in going about our daily business, in the various social roles that we occupy. In any case, whether or not we happen to be conscious or aware of it, our words are rarely, if ever, truly our own. This is one of the major insights from Bakhtin's work: we draw on elements of diverse social languages in all of our own utterances and writing.

Another influential theorist, whose work is relevant to discussions of voicing, is sociologist Erving Goffman. Whereas Bakhtin's theories were based on his study of literary texts, Goffman was instead concerned with explaining humans' everyday social interactions. Where voicing is concerned, Goffman's (1981) concept of "production format" has been very useful in breaking down different types of speaker roles and in helping to be precise in describing exactly whose words are being voiced. More specifically, Goffman teased out three possibilities: when any individual communicates, s/he can be speaking as an author, an animator, or a principal. An author is the person who is responsible for the words being written or uttered. At this particular moment, I am the author of this sentence, because I am composing a series of words in a particular way to express my ideas. However, not all of the word combinations in this book are my own. In some instances, I literally use the words of other scholars, in the form of direct quotations. In those instances, the other scholars remain the authors of those words, but I am then serving as their animator, as I insert *their* words into *my* text. And a principal is the person – or entity – whose beliefs are actually being communicated. At this moment, I am both author and principal of this text. But a principal does not necessarily need to be a single individual: it can be a political party, a hypothetical type of person, and so on. Like Bakhtin, Goffman's enduring presence can also be felt in much research on digital communication,

especially in those studies that have focussed on various types of online interactions and that have addressed "the question of *who* or even *what* speaks when someone communicates" (Cooren & Sandler, 2014, p. 226). As will become evident throughout the pages of this book, it is not unusual to find authors of digital texts "animating" the voices of other individuals, in order to produce creative or humorous effects.

## An Example of Playing with Voices

I now turn to a discussion of a playful interaction between two Twitter users that I hope will illustrate how individuals can exploit voicing strategies to construct creative and humorous social media texts. In this example, Sam, a person who follows the famous rapper Nicki Minaj on Twitter, has posted an image of Minaj along with an evaluative comment about the image. Minaj's response to Sam's tweet then appears in her own Twitter feed and is shown here, in Example 1.2, right above Sam's tweet. The topic of this pair of tweets concerns Minaj's "wrist game" – i.e., the combination of her bracelets and expensive watch – that is depicted in the photo, which features Minaj holding up her left hand in a pose that shows off her jewellery (Due to copyright issues, some images have been removed in Example figures.).


*Example 1.2* Twitter: wrist game

In his tweet, Sam formulates a statement of positive evaluation in a highly creative fashion, as he playfully "animates" (Goffman, 1981) the voice of Nicki Minaj in order to comment about the jewellery that she is wearing in the accompanying photo. Sam adopts a first-person perspective, as though he were speaking *for* Nicki Minaj, as seen in the first-person possessive pronoun, *My*, with which he begins his tweet. In other words, Sam is not writing as Sam; instead, the language he uses is supposed to represent Nicki's language. Sam uses a discourse strategy of personification in his

tweet, when he states that the wrist jewellery in this image (i.e., *wrist game*) is *sneezing* (in the first line), because – as he goes on to further explain in the second line – it is very *cold*. *Cold* here is being used in a non-literal sense, to express positive evaluation, and it is likely referring to the fact that Minaj's wrist jewellery contains many diamonds (i.e., *ice* is a well-established slang term for diamonds). In doing so, Sam exploits the polysemy of the word, *cold*. As we will see throughout the pages of this book, polysemy is a highly productive and common feature of online linguistic creativity, as language users exploit multiple word meaning potentials in order to generate surprising or unexpected meanings (Yus, 2017) – just as is happening in this example. The semantic connection that Sam makes between *cold* and *sneezing* relies simultaneously on the literal meaning of *cold* (i.e., *being cold* or *having a cold*, which often results in *sneezing* and *coughing*) as well as on its metaphorical slang meaning(s), perhaps referring here to the impressive quantity of diamonds, or maybe serving as a more general marker of positive appraisal. Sam extends his metaphor even further and reinforces the connection between *cold* and *sneezing*, by clarifying that the jewellery is *sneezing*, not *coughin*. (Presumably, Sam considers sneezing to be a more emphatic expression of coldness than coughing.)

In the second line of this tweet, Sam goes on to actually provide a clarifying gloss for the meaning of his evaluative message, which may be difficult for some readers to decode, as he explains: *THAT MEAN MY WRIST GAME IS COOOOOLD*. He uses ALL CAPS for emphasis both in this line, as well as in the contrasting statement in the preceding segment (*AIN'T COUGHINNNN*) to further intensify the evaluative aspect of his message. In addition, Sam uses letter repetition – a type of non-verbal signalling device (Darics, 2013) – in drawing out the vowel sound of the word *cold*, as well as in extending the word-final *n* in *coughin*, which is also represented here as though it were spoken casually: i.e., *coughin* versus *coughing*. So these letter repetitions help make it appear as though Sam is simulating speech in his online communication, and also help to emphasize the overall evaluative meaning of appreciation that is signalled by his tweet. The message concludes with several emoji, which clearly mark this as a form of digital communication (Danesi, 2017). The emoji include a crying face (signalling awe, or laughing so hard that it is crying), several waving hands emoji (reinforcing the overall positive appraisal of the message), a heart (another visual signal of positive evaluation), and a snowflake (in this context, mostly likely a semiotic reference to *cold*).

In addition to the creative strategies of animating the voice of Minaj and of personifying her jewellery, Sam's post also includes several noticeable features of African American English (AAE), such as invariant *be* (*be sneezing* instead of *is sneezing*), no grammatical inflection on third-person singular verb forms (*THAT MEAN* versus *THAT MEANS*), and the use of non-standard negative contraction, *ain't*. Keeping in mind that Sam is not speaking for himself, but rather that he is speaking on behalf of Minaj in this tweet, it is interesting to note that in animating, or speaking "for" Minaj, Sam constructs her as a speaker of AAE.

## Overview of the Book

While playful, humorous, and creative language use in digital contexts – like the two examples I have just discussed – could be easily dismissed as silly or trivial, their impact should not be underestimated. The *eBay* product advertisement featuring the wedding-dress-as-narrator became the topic of a news story, and the Sam/Nicki Minaj Twitter exchange was both viewed and recirculated by thousands of Twitter users. To cite another example, Nathan Hall of McGill University publishes research on educational psychology; yet, his serious, academic scholarship has achieved nowhere near the level of readership as have the humorous tweets from his novelty Twitter account, Shit Academics Say (discussed further in Chapter 3). In fact, Shit Academics Say, with its more than 300,000 visitors per month, has more social media readers than most academic publications. This points to an interesting fact about social media and contemporary life: playful, creative, and humorous online texts are often far more effective at achieving mass distribution than those with more serious informational content. This, I believe, makes them worthy of further analysis, interpretation, and discussion.

In the chapters that follow, I take a closer look at this phenomenon as I provide in-depth textual analyses of three distinct genres from three different social media platforms: tweets from novelty Twitter accounts, Chat posts found on Tumblr, and parodies of Amazon reviews, in order to better understand these technologically mediated linguistic performances, and to simultaneously consider what it is that makes them appealing to so many individuals, leading to their high levels of (re-)circulation by thousands of users of digital media. Central to my discussion throughout this book is Bakhtin's notion of voicing, as explained earlier. That is, all three genres, on all three social media platforms rely on authors' representations of voices that belong to individuals, social groups, or entities, other than themselves.

Chapter 2 offers a review of research that has addressed various aspects of linguistic creativity online. It begins with a brief discussion of research on creativity in computer mediated communication from the 1990s, highlighting in particular the insights and contributions made by one of the first scholars to address this topic: Brenda Danet, in her monograph, *Cyberplay*. This is followed by a survey of more recent research on language and creativity online, focussing on digital communication from the era known as Web 2.0. In this chapter, I also present research on specific forms of online creativity, such as fan fiction, YouTube videos, as well as internet memes. In addition, I discuss research that has addressed the topic of humour online. After surveying the state of research, in the conclusion of Chapter 2 I argue that more research on this topic is needed which considers data from a wider range of social media platforms.

Chapter 3, the first of the three chapters that present analyses of digital texts, takes up the topic of creativity and humour in novelty Twitter accounts. Such accounts often target celebrities (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Murray), while others project


image
not
available


image
not
available