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# The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication

*Edited by Alexandra Georgakopoulou  
and Tereza Spilioti*

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## YouTube

## Language and discourse practices in participatory culture

Jannis Androutsopoulos and Jana Tereick

## Introduction

YouTube, the globally leading video-sharing website and one of the iconic environments of the social media era, has received less attention from language scholars than other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, let alone older communication modes such as discussion forums. One reason for this could be the impression that YouTube is mainly about the moving image, with language playing a peripheral role. In this chapter, we argue that language is a key resource in the semiotic landscape of YouTube. We discuss a number of approaches to its analysis and suggest that researchers have conceptualized the role of language in YouTube in different ways, such as a resource for multimodal semiotic creativity, for digital multi-party interaction, or for participatory discourse on social and political issues. Our discussion is based on a survey of literature as well as on our own research. In the following section, we outline the development and growth of YouTube in the ten years of its existence to date. We then examine YouTube as a complex discourse environment at three levels: the 'big picture' of discourse structure and participation framework; the range of multimodal digital recontextualization practices that are often termed 'remix'; and the realm of audience comments and interaction. We then present two research approaches to language and discourse practices on YouTube, which originate in our own research. The first outlines a social-semiotic and sociolinguistic approach to YouTube as a site for the performance and negotiation of dialect, and the second outlines a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of YouTube as a site of participatory discourse on climate change. We conclude with recommendations for practice and suggestions for future research.

## Historical perspectives

Founded in 2005 and bought by Google in 2006, YouTube is currently the third most popular website globally.<sup>1</sup> Its exponential growth in the ten years of its existence to date has played out at various levels. In terms of technological facilities, YouTube constantly increases the size of uploaded videos, and has refined available viewer statistics, introduced features to increase coherence among comments, and extended its range of localized versions, which now amount

to 73 countries and 51 different languages.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, certain features have ceased to be available, including the option of video response, which was removed in August 2013. In terms of social penetration, YouTube claims that 'More than 1 billion unique users visit YouTube each month' and 'YouTube reaches more U.S. adults aged 18–34 than any cable network'.<sup>3</sup> While the latter information is limited to U.S. audiences, there is little doubt that YouTube is among the core features of the contemporary global digital media landscape. The viewing figures of certain YouTube videos probably exceed the reach of any single broadcast show in most of the world's countries. For example, the (apparently) original 'Harlem Shake' video has reached 52,386,603 views and 47,354 comments, and a YouTube compilation of popular videos of the year 2012 reached 146,497,785 views and 249,160 comments.<sup>4</sup>

These ten years have also seen a massive diversification of the individuals and/or organizations that upload and make available content on YouTube. Soon after its launch, YouTube became a key site for practices of civic engagement, grassroots activism, and vernacular semiotic creativity at the interface of mainstream media and participatory culture (Burgess & Green 2009; Jenkins 2006; Lovink & Niederer 2008). As early as 2006, media scholars celebrated YouTube as a prototype of participatory culture because it offered alternative publics a much broader reach than earlier niche media (Jenkins 2006, 2009). At the same time, its rapid mainstreaming meant that YouTube now hosts video channels by all kinds of political, religious or commercial actors, including the Vatican (channel name: *vatican*); the German federal government (*bundesregierung*); the International Olympics Committee (*olympic*); Coca Cola (*cocacola*); luxury vehicle brands (e.g., *Porsche*); NGOs (e.g., *Greenpeace Video*); educational institutions (e.g., *Harvard*); media organizations (e.g., *BBC*); manufacturers of consumer goods (such as *durex*, the globally leading producer of condoms); and so on. Providing a platform for the distribution of video content by almost any author and/or producer imaginable. YouTube has gained massive importance in contemporary media culture from a global to a very local scale. Besides consuming a large amount of web traffic and filling people's time with pastimes such as watching funny cat videos, it has gained considerable political power as a publishing space for videos which document, among other things, police violence, war crimes and natural catastrophes. YouTube's development into a resource for civic activism has increased the potential impact of contributions 'by the people' on the unfolding of a particular event, but this has also led to its perception as a threat by certain governments, which have blocked or censored YouTube in a number of countries (see the Wikipedia entry on 'Censorship of YouTube').

YouTube's rise in popularity and present-day de facto market dominance can be described as a network effect (Sundararajan 2008). Simply put, the more users are already using YouTube, the more likely it is that new users are going to use it too, and once a critical mass is reached, user numbers grow exponentially. In this respect, YouTube's success story is similar to that of Facebook or other social media. However, YouTube is not a social networking site like Facebook (despite efforts to integrate it into *Google+*). Though users have the option of setting their videos as 'private', uploaded videos and comments are by default publicly accessible to an infinite audience. While YouTube users clearly do not constitute a homogenous community, YouTube is accessible to members of online communities (in the sense of Herring 2004) and enables user interaction centred on, and sometimes sparked through, video content, in ways which we discuss below.

## Critical issues and topics

Research on YouTube tends to follow different strategies for reducing its sheer volume of content to analytically meaningful and manageable samples. In this process, the research priorities

of each discipline determine to a large extent how YouTube is studied. Researchers in socio-cultural linguistics have focused either on videos or comments or – perhaps more typically – on videos together with their comments. In this section, we first take an integrative view on YouTube from the perspective of the discourse structures and user activities it hosts. We then focus on YouTube videos in terms of multimodality and remix practices, and finally consider comments in terms of interaction structure and audience engagement.

### Discourse structure and participation framework

What we see on any YouTube page is neither just audio-visual content nor just a thread of comments, neither just image nor just language, but rather a complex configuration of semiotic components. YouTube was the first digital environment that introduced a tripartite order of content that may seem rather common today, but revolutionized the structure of multimodal web platforms in its early days. Its centre part is a (usually short) video clip that is publicly available for users to watch, save, share and discuss. This central piece of content is complemented by audience responses, which are likewise publicly available and open to counter-responses by other users. Finally there is the hosting space, i.e. the individual webpage on which each video is framed by additional information, such as viewing statistics, recommendations of similar content, navigation bars and other elements. Defined by this tripartite configuration, YouTube pages share in our view four characteristics that shape their discourse structure: they are *multi-authored*, *multi-semiotic*, *dialogic* and *dynamic* units of discourse (Androutsopoulos 2010, 2013; Tereick 2011). We briefly discuss each one in turn.

YouTube pages are *multi-authored* in that their three dimensions of content (i.e., videos, comments and framing elements) are contributed by different sources. Videos are produced and/or uploaded by different kinds of people (a point to which we return below), and even the components of a single video sometimes have different origins, this being the case with compilations, remixes and so-called ‘buffalaxed’ videos – i.e. short movie clips with added subtitles that provide a phonetic pseudo-translation (see Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012). Comments are obviously contributed by multiple authors. Many post one-off comments to a video, but some contribute multiple comments as they get engaged in a debate with other YouTube users (see Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). Surrounding elements are based on the site’s algorithms, in part related to user tags, and are therefore beyond the agency of video uploaders and commenters.

YouTube pages are *multi-semiotic* in that they combine multimedia and multimodal characteristics. By multimedia, we mean the combination of audio and visual media that is generally typical for YouTube videos, whereas the notion of multimodality focuses on the distinct semiotic resources that make up a video, e.g., spoken and written language, music and other sounds, moving and still images. From a language studies perspective, YouTube has been pivotal in extending the modalities of language in computer-mediated communication. Whereas spoken language was marginal in earlier CMC, being limited to video conferencing and online phone calls, it has gained a much wider presence through video-sharing sites. This development is of particular interest to sociolinguists, since YouTube videos raise questions about the public online representation of linguistic diversity (e.g., dialects, multilingualism) and of the hybrid combinations of linguistic resources (see Androutsopoulos 2010; Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012).

YouTube pages are *dialogic* in a number of ways. In the most obvious sense, dialogues can be carried out in the uploaded videos, either among the characters or in terms of a character addressing the viewer. There is, further, dialogue in comments responding to the videos (see discussion of video turns below), video responses addressing the main video, and dialogue carried out among commenters. To this we can add the special cases of collaborative video

annotation (Herring 2013: 18) and ‘buffalaxed’ videos (Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012), which extend the dialogic qualities of YouTube videos in media-specific ways.

YouTube pages are *dynamic* in that even though the posted video remains unaltered, new comments can be added at any time. Readers might be anecdotally familiar with the phenomenon of ‘tribute comments’ after the death of an artist or other personality whose YouTube videos suddenly receive new viewers. The surrounding textual elements, too, are ever-changing depending on the website’s algorithms. To paraphrase the famous statement by Heraclitus of Ephesus, no man ever visits the same YouTube video page twice, as each new visit alters its overall configuration. This raises methodology issues with regard to ‘freezing’ a corpus, as we discuss further below.

Androutsopoulos (2010, 2013) proposed to conceptualize the discourse structure of YouTube as a ‘vernacular spectacle’, thereby drawing on a pair of metaphors from Goffman’s frame analysis (Goffman 1986). Goffman distinguishes between ‘game’ and ‘spectacle’, i.e. ‘between a dramatic play or contest or wedding or trial and the social occasion or affair in which these proceedings are encased’ (p. 261). In this analogy, a YouTube video can be likened to a ‘game’, while the webpage that encases this video alongside its comments and surrounding elements can be likened to a ‘spectacle’. From the viewpoint of user practices, an entire YouTube video page could be likened to a game, with each individual instance of reception constituting a spectacle. Either way, the notions of game and spectacle foreground the performance qualities of YouTube discourse. Exceptions of private settings notwithstanding, videos are uploaded to be displayed to an audience and to prompt responses by members of that audience.

The participation framework proposed by Dynel (2014) draws on research on media talk and mediated interaction to distinguish three levels of YouTube interaction: a) speakers and hearers in the factual or fictional dialogues of the videos; b) speakers and hearers of comments; and c) senders (uploaders) and recipients (viewers) of YouTube videos. Part of this last level is a tripartite classification of YouTube videos in terms of authorship: ‘authorial videos’ by private YouTube users, which Dynel calls ‘vlogging’ (from ‘video blogging’); videos that ‘do not differ from televised programmes’; and those based on ‘programmes and films released earlier but purposely modified by YouTube users’ (Dynel 2014: 7). These three categories are common in the research literature, albeit with different terms, including amateur videos, corporate content and pirated material, respectively. With regard to reception roles, Dynel suggests that YouTube viewers ‘resemble traditional media viewers in many ways’ – apart, that is, from their capacity to comment on the videos and interact with other commenters. As a result, Dynel claims, the participation framework of YouTube is much more complex than traditional broadcasting.

Another important dimension of YouTube content is its detachability and potential for inter-media circulation. By default, YouTube videos can be embedded on other websites and are thus commonly found in social media timelines, online journalism, or personal blogs, where they are combined with new textual elements and recontextualized. Detachability and recontextualization afford YouTube videos a high potential for circulation and ‘virality’ (Georgakopoulou 2013; Shifman 2012), a process by which even low-budget, amateur videos can become very popular in one particular country or even world-wide, sometimes sparking off a series of imitations or remixes. Shifman (2012) examines such a remix series of one scene from the movie *Downfall*. Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012) analyse how the practice of Buffalaxed videos is adopted in Finland by a local YouTube user who subtitles clips from a Bollywood movie and a Kurdish wedding band with mock translations that acoustically resemble the original lyrics. The authors point out the tension between the sexist and racist content of the mock translations, on the one hand, and the unexpected popularity that the parody offered to the Kurdish wedding singer among Finnish audiences. The boundaries between online and offline practices are

particularly permeable on YouTube, and one avenue for future research could be to complement the analysis of online discourse with ethnographic explorations of how people 'read', view and interact with YouTube spectacles, including practices such as visiting a page, playing and replaying a video, commenting, browsing through and rating others' comments, forwarding and sharing, downloading and remixing, and so on.

### Remixing and embedding: multimodal recontextualization practices

In a discourse environment that is characterized by diversity and collaborative authorship, one important question is how participants engage with material that is produced by others and does not legally belong to them. On YouTube, this concerns video material produced 'outside YouTube', in particular by mass media and multinational corporations, as well as material from 'within YouTube', i.e. produced and/or provided by other users. Engagement with others' video material is one of the most common and characteristic, even defining, practices of YouTube's participatory culture (see Shifman 2012: 188).

Such an engagement materializes in remixing and embedding as practices of recontextualization (Bauman & Briggs 1990). We understand embedding and remixing to refer to a range of semiotic modification procedures which are closely linked to conceptual transformations in the frame of a particular discourse. More specifically, remix 'means to take cultural artifacts and combine and manipulate them into new kinds of creative blends' (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 22); embedding means using an existing artefact without changing it – as in quoting, for example. In the YouTube context, a common form of embedding is to upload an existing video, which has been produced by others, and to recontextualize it by assigning it a new title, short description and set of tags.

Unlike the notions of parody or piracy, the concepts of remixing and embedding do not entail semantic or evaluating aspects; however, the digital literacy practices of embedding and remixing are closely linked to modifications of meaning. We illustrate this with examples taken from Tereick's research on representations of climate change on YouTube (Tereick 2012; see below). For example, think of a YouTube user who takes an extract from a television programme on climate change produced by a public service broadcaster, then adds the new caption, 'The climate change hoax', and a fitting video description. This is an instance of embedding that is likely to influence the interpretation of the resulting artefact. To bring in an example of remixing, think of a user who collates snapshots of mass media coverage on climate change into a collage and adds a voice-over that characterizes this coverage as 'media hysteria' (Tereick 2012). The original bits of mass media content have now become part of a new proposition. Such remixing of mass media material can take the form of a (pseudo-) dialogue between the original material and the producer – for example, by adding subtitles or captions which pose questions that are apparently 'answered' by excerpts from the broadcast content (Tereick 2012: 242).

Remixing can involve the modification of a single video or collaging and montaging excerpts from several pre-existing videos into a new artefact. An example from Tereick's ongoing research is the remix of a promotional video clip produced by RWE, a large German electric utilities company. The original clip, called 'Der Energieriese' ('The Energy Giant') features an animated benevolent giant who plants windmills and fermentation plants. The giant here stands for the company; through this metaphor, the clip aims to enhance the perceived value of RWE's activities in the renewable energy sector. However, a number of NGOs and individual users deployed various remix techniques in order to subvert the clip's promotional message. An analysis of such remixes uploaded to YouTube in July and August 2009 identified procedures of commenting, blending and transformation.



Figure 22.1 Remixed YouTube video frame.

More specifically, *commenting* refers to the practice of using the original material and adding a second layer to it, such as overlay captions which challenge the discourse of the original video with counterfactual propositions. The resulting remix is reminiscent of the practices of marginal comments and overwriting in medieval manuscript culture; it is, so to speak, a *palimpsest* of competing meanings. In the video 'Energieriesen-Lüge' (which can be translated as 'energy giant lie' or 'giant energy lie'),<sup>6</sup> counter-facts are inserted at the clip's relevant points, such as the statement 'Windmill plants make up only 0.1 % of RWE's power plants' (0:16, see Figure 22.1). The producers also point at aspects that are missing from the promotional clip, for example by asking 'Where are RWE's five nuclear power plants in this video?' (1:35), thereby exposing RWE's implicature that the power sources represented in their clip are the only ones they use.

*Transformation* refers to remix practices that modify, instead of just overlaying, the original video. An example from Tereick's study is the remix video 'Atom-Energieriese' ('nuclear energy giant') in which several parts of the original clip are reversed in order to represent the giant as actually removing windmills instead of planting them; here, the reversal of the semiotic material corresponds to a reversal of meaning. This technique is also used in the remix 'RWE Energieriese – Director's Cut', which in addition repeats a short sequence with the giant extracting coal. Here, the reiteration of the sequence metaphorically indexes RWE's prolific use of coal.

*Blending* refers to a set of elaborate and technically challenging techniques by which new material is added to the original video. For example, a remix video by the NGO Greenpeace begins with the unmodified RWE clip, and the camera then zooms out to reveal that the clip is shown on a TV set standing on the site of a nuclear power plant after a nuclear hazard (0:28, see Figure 22.2). A set of decapitated windmills completes this post-apocalyptic scenario. This video demonstrates a complex blend of embedding, 'quoting' the original material and literally adding a new frame to change its meaning. The resulting blend follows the composition structure termed 'ideal/real' by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 186–192), in that it first shows RWE's 'ideal' untouched and then slowly reveals the 'real' scenario, which adds to the dramatic effect. However, blending does not necessarily have to follow this structure. For example, the remix video 'Atom-Energieriese' ('nuclear energy giant') just adds a nuclear power plant to the original clip's idyllic panorama.



Figure 22.2 Frame from remix video by Greenpeace.

As these examples suggest, remixing can be used to re-key (Goffman 1986) a video, i.e. to change its original tone and message by modifying its formal structure. It is also noteworthy that all these remix techniques entail orientational metaphors in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (2003). The formal structure of remix – overlay, reversal, counterpart – is reproduced at the content level, while the propositional structure of the original video is modified in analogy to the images. While in these examples remix techniques are used for the purpose of adjusting or culture jamming (Firat & Kuryel 2011), they can also serve other purposes of subversion in other contexts.

### Audience comments: on-line polylogues and YouTube discussion culture

Research on YouTube comments is of two kinds, broadly speaking. The first approaches YouTube comments as a site of computer-mediated interaction and aims to describe their sequential structure and coherence-building devices. The second views YouTube comments as a resource for discourse participation and examines the attitudes they express towards the reference video and/or their contribution to an on-going discourse. Both lines of inquiry will be discussed in this section. Apart from these, hardly anything is known about how YouTube users actually read comments. Jones and Schieffelin (2009) suggest that most users only read the most recent comments, but this needs to be further researched (see Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2012). It is worth noting that in non-linguistic scholarship, the number of comments a video receives has been viewed as an index of audience attention.

An analysis of YouTube comments as computer-mediated interaction begins with their sequential structure and coherence. As in other public modes of CMC, interaction is prompted by an initiating contribution, in this case the uploaded video. It is constrained by the technological conditions of the platform, which include the limitation to verbal signs, the linear mode of a single thread of comments, and the recently introduced format in which direct replies to a comment are subordinated to it. Finally, interaction varies according to factors such as the discourse framing of the respective video and the socio-demographic characteristics of its viewership. In

this largely unregulated space of discourse, and in view of the massive amounts of comments that popular videos receive, one might expect comments to be haphazard and incoherent. However, this is not validated by research, which attests to thematically coherent threads of comments and sustained interpersonal interaction among commenters (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2013; Bou-Franch *et al.* 2012; Jones & Schieffelin 2009; Pihlaja 2014; Sharma 2014).

Bou-Franch *et al.* (2012) propose a framework for the analysis of YouTube comment threads in terms of discourse reference, turn-taking management and cohesion establishment. Their empirical data are two discussion threads on two thematically different YouTube videos. The analysis is limited to the first 150 comments from each thread, so that the question of whether coherence can ever be maintained over long threads of comments remains unanswered. In terms of participation structure, they calculate the number of participants, the mean number of turns per participant, the number of one-turn contributors and of multiple contributors, these figures providing an index of interactional engagement. This study includes two coding schemes. The first is concerned with discourse reference; each individual comment (or, in conversation-analytic terminology, each author's 'turn') is coded in terms of the contribution it refers to. Five turn types are distinguished (Bou-Franch *et al.* 2012):

- 1 Adjacent Turn: Turn referring to immediately prior turn.
- 2 Non-adjacent Turn: Turn that refers to a turn other than the immediately adjacent turn.
- 3 Video Turn: Turn referring to triggering video clip.
- 4 Multiple Turn: Turn referring to multiple prior turns.
- 5 Mixed Turn: Turn combining two or more of the above turn-types.

Their findings show that adjacent turns have the largest share (more than 60 per cent of both sample threads), followed by video turns (19 per cent) and those referring to a non-adjacent turn (12 per cent). These figures suggest a considerable degree of adjacency in these two threads. The pattern of adjacent turns indexes on-going interaction among commenters, while that of video turns indexes audience responsiveness to the 'game', i.e. the uploaded video. The study distinguishes between two patterns of video turns, serial and 'sprinkled' ones. The first is a series of references to the video, a pattern typical for the early phase of a thread; the second consists of references that appear in-between turns and have no coherent connection to their adjacent turns.

The authors propose a second coding scheme concerned with turn-management devices. It identifies eight categories in terms of how a contribution ties into the on-going discussion, the most frequent in the sample being the following:

- 1 Turn-entry devices, which link the contribution to a prior turn (e.g., *by the way, you see*).
- 2 Turn-exit devices, which close the turn and link it to a next turn (e.g., *That's all, full-stop*, question tags and aphorisms like *sad but true*).
- 3 Cross-turn addressivity, when a turn selects an addressee by their screen name.
- 4 Indirect addressivity, when a contribution addresses another user only indirectly.

A sequential analysis of this kind mainly focuses on relations among comments in a thread. By contrast, other approaches pay more attention to discourse relations between comments and reference video – focusing, in other words, on relations of intertextuality within a specific YouTube spectacle. Comments are viewed as sites of audience engagement and discourse participation, and they represent a multi-authored 'negotiation' (Androutsopoulos 2013; Chun & Walters 2011) of the reference video and its discourse context. In this vein, Jones and Schieffelin (2009) examine audience responses to commercial clips posted on YouTube in terms of how

commenters recontextualize advertising slogans. Both this study and Androutsopoulos (2013) show how comments (or, more precisely, video turns) echo scenes and voices from the reference video in a manner reminiscent of audience practices during television reception. Pihlaja (2011) compares video responses and comments as two modalities of responsiveness and finds that video responses are longer, more elaborate and more interactively oriented than text comments to the same reference video.

Research has also established that YouTube offers a site for language-ideological discourse. Sharma (2014) examines how transnational speakers of Nepalese respond to a speech in English by a Nepalese politician at an international meeting. His analysis of the comments shows how the minister is mocked and ridiculed for her heavily accented English. Sharma argues that digital spaces such as YouTube offer channels for (oppositional) political involvement and engagement with the nation of origin for diasporic populations. Androutsopoulos (2013) examines the negotiation of German dialects on YouTube (see also next section) and finds that comments on (and often in) dialect are prompted by the video's reflexive orientation to dialect. This study also found that comments have different ways of engaging in the negotiation of dialect. Some users focus on dialect performance (often in terms of authenticity) in the reference video, whereas others employ the video as a mere occasion to discuss a dialect. Comments may also use certain linguistic features of the dialect staged in the video. In the analysis of two videos referring to the Berlin city dialect, Berlin dialect features occur in 40 per cent and 63 per cent of the comments, respectively (Androutsopoulos 2013). Commenters may use dialect features in their own voice or in quotations from the video, and dialect often serves as a resource for identity work in the process of discussing the performance of dialect in the reference video.

### Doing YouTube research: two case studies

The two studies presented in this section illustrate two research approaches to YouTube as a site of language and discourse practices. The first study focuses on dialect performance and metalinguistic discourse, the second on the negotiation of knowledge and participation norms. Different as they may be in their empirical objects and disciplinary points of reference, they both converge on advocating a mixed-methods research design based on social semiotics, (critical) discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics. Both case studies tackle a number of methodological challenges that arise in YouTube research and show how such issues can be dealt with in empirical practice.

#### *Performing and negotiating dialect: a social semiotic and sociolinguistic perspective*

The first case study examines the representation of German dialects on YouTube (Androutsopoulos 2010, 2013). Data collection started by doing YouTube searches for around 20 German dialect labels, including *Schwäbisch* (Swabian, 6,870 results in June 2011); *Kölsch* (Cologne dialect, 6,600); *Bayerisch* (Bavarian, 5,390) and *Sächsisch* (Saxonian, 1,330). Southern German dialects are featured more frequently on YouTube than northern and eastern ones, a distribution that presumably reflects their higher vitality and stronger presence in popular culture. Some of these dialect-tagged videos had reached more than two million views and a few thousand comments at the time of research. These figures clearly suggest a keen interest in the representation of German dialects on YouTube. The analysis proceeded in two parts. The first was an analysis of metalinguistic discourse based on a sample of 310 dialect-tagged videos which were coded for type of authorship, genre, dialect use, metalinguistic discourse on dialect, and

orientation to the region where the dialect in question is spoken. The second part was a micro-analysis of selected videos that feature *Berlinerisch*, the Berlin city dialect. It examined the use of six dialect features in video characters' performances of the Berlin dialect. All comments on these videos were coded for their use of dialect features, overt metalinguistic attitudes to dialect, and reference to their authors' own dialect usage. Qualitative analysis then identified common themes of dialect discourse.

The framework developed for this study centres on the notions of dialect performance, stylization and negotiation. Dialect-tagged videos share characteristics of performance, defined as a mode of speaking that is characterized by orientation to an audience, attention to the form and materiality of speaking, and heightened metalinguistic reflexivity (Bauman 1992; Bell & Gibson 2011). Many dialect videos on YouTube explicitly orient to a dialect and put it on display for an imagined or assumed audience. Even when the subject matter of a video is not explicitly reflexive (as in the case of, say, a stretch of everyday social interaction that is video-recorded and then uploaded), its display on YouTube frames it as a moment of performance. In addition, the study took into account the visual dimension of YouTube videos and the ways in which remix practices create new conditions for dialect performance. In engaging with a dialect, YouTube users appropriate semiotic resources and assemble them anew by means of techniques such as separating and recombining video and audio tracks, layering footage with a new audio track, and so on. They remix different materials, creating patterns of contrast or incongruence, which can for example generate humour or challenge dialect stereotypes. In order to account for the multimodal and multimedia aspects of this material, the analysis drew on the four levels of the social semiotics framework proposed by van Leeuwen (2005), i.e. discourse, genre, style, and mode. We briefly outline these here.

At the level of *discourse*, the analysis focused on the metalinguistic knowledge that producers and audiences of YouTube dialect videos engage with. Questions for analysis include: What are the topics of these videos in word and image? What stances towards a dialect and its typical speakers do they communicate? The analysis identified comments that discuss the geographical reach of a dialect, its distinctive features, its history and status, and issues of dialect decline and maintenance. Many of these comments reproduce social, cultural and political differences, which historically shape dialect discourse in the German-speaking area. For example, comments that debate dialect boundaries or emphasize the superiority of one's own dialect to neighbouring dialects occur in some regions (e.g., Bavarian and Franconian, Alemannic and Badian) but not in others (e.g., Berlin), for reasons that are historical in nature. Discourses of dialect maintenance and decline are characteristic for Low German, an endangered regional language, which was also the subject of a few dialect-learning videos. Comments that voice tensions between newcomers and residents occurred in response to videos from Berlin, a city that has experienced a massive influx of German and international newcomers in recent years.

At the level of *genre*, the analytical focus shifts to the social activities in dialect-tagged videos and their comments. Questions for analysis include: What genres do dialect-tagged videos draw on, and how do these genres frame the representation of dialect in the video? What genres do comments draw on in engaging with a reference video? Common genre orientations of German dialect-tagged videos are: music, theatre and comedy, poetry, sermons, story- and joke-telling, media reports on dialect, documenting dialect, learning dialect, and dialect dubbing, to which we return below.

At the level of *style*, the focus turns to the social identities that video actors and commenters associate with dialect and the semiotic resources that are deployed to stylize these identities. In stylization, performers bring up images of socially typified dialect speakers, thereby relying on the cultural and sociolinguistic knowledge they assume they are sharing with their audiences



(Coupland 2001). We can ask how video characters are stylized, what dialect features are used for this purpose, and how commenters engage with dialect identities – for instance by identifying themselves as speakers of a particular dialect. For example, a video tagged as *Berlinerisch* shows a tourist-bus driver who talks about Berlin while driving by some of Berlin's iconic monuments. The driver's use of heavy Berlin dialect is part of his stylization as working-class Berliner, to which his visual appearance also contributes. YouTube videos feature both traditional and innovative stylizations of Berlin dialect speakers, the latter including characters such as nightclub girls and a computer tutor.

Finally, the analysis of *mode* examines the semiotic modes and technological resources that shape the representation of dialect in the videos. One genre of dialect videos that makes heavy use of remix techniques is the so-called 'synchros' (a clipping of *Synchronisation*, the German term for dubbing), i.e. videos that appropriate pre-existing video material and (re)dub it in a German dialect. Synchros typically appropriate excerpts of movies, pop music or broadcast shows and substitute their audio track with a dialect voice that may or may not be semantically equivalent to the original. Hollywood movie excerpts and American pop music are particularly popular targets for synchros. Hollywood movies are by default dubbed in Standard German, and YouTubers re-dub them in dialect. For example, clips from the movie *Star Wars* are re-dubbed again and again in several German dialects, taking the form of a viral series (Shifman 2012). The propositional content of synchros is sometimes nonsensical or takes up local issues whose contrast to the original content generates humor or parody. In the dialect remix of a clip from the movie *Full Metal Jacket*, the re-dubbed movie dialogue is made to voice the old-standing conflict between the neighbouring regions of Baden and Swabia. This is a good example of how the analysis levels of discourse, mode and genre interact. Another example for such interaction is a remix of *Umbrella*, a pop hit by Rihanna, in the Bavarian dialect. The new audio and visual collage celebrates practices of binge-drinking in Bavaria, Germany (Androutsopoulos 2010). Such remixes that appropriate global material in order to comment on local practices are often applauded by commenters.

### **Participatory discourse on climate change: a corpus-assisted multimodal discourse analysis**

The second case study takes its cues from discourse theory and critical discourse analysis, whose research interests are epitomized by Foucault's question: How are 'truth-effects produced inside discourses?' (Foucault 1980: 118). In the case of climate change, a discourse-analytic approach asks how knowledge about climate change is produced and reproduced, how different discourse positions are negotiated, which structures of power are reproduced, and which linguistic and semiotic means – including lexis, metaphors and argumentation patterns – are being used by discourse actors in order to make sense of climate change. As we aim to show below, YouTube offers the possibility of studying such negotiations in depth, because its participatory culture allows for a broad range of opinions to be articulated.

Traditional discourse analysis was developed for quite small samples of texts, which most commonly came from print media. However, discourses in the digital age are far-reaching, multi-layered and profoundly visual, leading to a need for new methods. One such methodological innovation has been the addition of corpus linguistic methods to discourse-analytic frameworks, thus enabling researchers to analyse large amounts of data (see Abdullah, this volume; Baker 2006; Hardt-Mautner 1995). These approaches, however, are generally limited to written (mostly printed) texts. The analysis of discourse in a complex multimodal environment such as YouTube is therefore still in need of adequate methodologies. This section therefore presents several methodological considerations.

The challenges of YouTube are apparent at the very start of data collection. There are thousands of videos on climate change on YouTube, and due to the site's dynamic character, videos and comments are added and/or deleted all the time. Using YouTube's web interface for data collection necessitates the problem that the research object is constantly changing, and no clear segmentation of the discourse is possible. Collecting large quantities of YouTube data by hand is hardly feasible, and the process of doing so leads to the researcher constantly influencing the data set, because clicking on a video always leads to a change of the view count. A comprehensive and representative study of discourse on YouTube creates a serious challenge that can be broken down into two components. The first is a technical one: how can comprehensive and representative data be collected from YouTube? Can it be collected at all? How can that chaos be converted into data? The second is a methodological one: how can the data be analysed? Integrating quantitative methods in order to study a large data set is limited by the fact that corpus-linguistic analysis is not yet capable of accommodating audio-visual material.

Fortunately, there is a technical solution to this technical challenge: with the aid of YouTube's *Application Programming Interface*, downloading the 1,000 most-viewed German-language videos on climate change together with meta-data such as video duration and description was an easy task. As in the first case study, a set of search terms was used to contextualize the selection in the first place. Saving this meta-data into a database creates a 'snapshot' of the discourse under consideration (Tereick 2012).

Regarding the methodological issue, the most common solution regarding the discourse analysis of the videos would be to transcribe the spoken language data in order to make it accessible to a corpus-linguistic analysis. But this is time-consuming and raises a number of problems associated with transcription. However, an alternative solution that is tailored to the specific discourse context of YouTube is to access the videos through their comments. Comments can also be downloaded via Google's YouTube *Application Programming Interface*; in Tereick's study, all comments – about 45,000 in total – that were posted to the 1,000 most-viewed videos on climate change were downloaded and made accessible to corpus-linguistic analysis. The two corpora, i.e. videos and comments, allow for a combination of two methodological approaches: a qualitative analysis of videos and comment threads, and a quantitative, corpus-linguistic analysis of comments. The analysis then oscillates between videos and comments in a circular manner, taking either a particular video or the entire corpus of comments as starting points. In the following, we will give examples for both directions.

An example of taking a video as the starting point is the second most-popular video in the corpus, called 'Climate change from an optimistic point of view'.<sup>7</sup> This video draws on an argument that is quite popular in climate change discourse and can be formalized like this:

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| (Premise 1)  | As a consequence of climate change, the average temperature in Germany is rising. |
| (Premise 2)  | It is desirable that the average temperature in Germany rises.                    |
| (Conclusion) | Therefore: Climate change is desirable.   |

This argument can be deployed in both an ironic and non-ironic way (Tereick 2011: 65). At 0:49, the video celebrates the future imaginary 'vibrant sea resort of Osnabrück' (a provincial North-German town far away from the sea), showing a set of palm trees (see Figure 22.3). Starting from this observation, a concordance search of 'palm' in the comment corpus turns up a number of results, which deploy palm trees as a metonym for the supposedly positive aspects of climate change. From these comments, the analysis can go back to the respective videos, thus tracking an argumentative pattern and its metonymic illustrations across different contributions and semiotic modes.

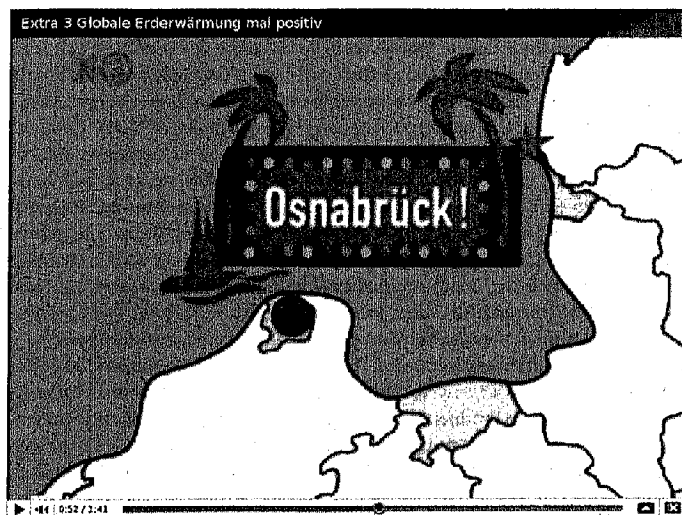


Figure 22.3 Frame from the 'Climate change from an optimistic point of view' video.

In the opposite direction, taking the comments as a starting point into the analysis can precede either a 'corpus-based' concordance search or a 'corpus-driven' calculation (Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 84). For example, an analysis of tri-grams (i.e., three-word combinations) in the comment corpus yields the pattern 'is not responsible', which is part of an argument in support of the discourse position that 'humankind is *not responsible* for climate change'. This indexes one of the most important debates in the German climate change discourse on YouTube, i.e. the 'climate change hoax' debate, which divides YouTube users sharply into two parties: one that thinks climate change is man-made and another that contests this view. Similar to other cases of conflict among YouTube commenters reported in the literature (see Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Bou-Franch *et al.* 2012; Pihlaja 2014), each party in this debate challenges the other's concepts. For example, both parties conceptualize each other as 'conspiracy theorists' (Tereick 2011), and tracking the term 'conspiracy' across the entire corpus helps the analyst to reconstruct a struggle over discourse hegemony whose diversity and depth is quite unique to YouTube.

The participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) that shapes YouTube allows for the expression of very different opinions while also confronting proponents of different 'regimes of truth' (Jenkins 2009: 122) with each other and facilitating collective norm-building. While German mass media display a de facto consensus in that man-made climate change exists (Weingart, Engels, & Pansegrau 2000), this is still heavily debated among YouTube users. Thus, YouTube offers the unique opportunity to study (counter)-hegemonic discourse positions, the process of their negotiation, and practices of creative discourse subversion (see Jones 2010).

### Recommendations for practice

Among the various challenges that research on language and discourse practices in YouTube is likely to face, we limit our recommendations to issues of data collection and tailoring a research question.

As far as data collection is concerned, our survey clearly shows the importance of defining the snapshot of the discourse under consideration as precisely as possible. If you want to use a large corpus, we recommend data collection via the *Application Programming Interface (API)* through which YouTube data can be accessed via third-party programmes<sup>8</sup> (similar interfaces are available for Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and other social media platforms). A Google Developer Account and basic programming skills are required. Based on the API, you can write a short script in order to download a defined section of YouTube data, e.g., a set of videos whose title and/or tags contain certain search terms, or all comments for a specific video. You can also download meta-information of all videos relating to a set of search terms and then use, e.g., the Firefox-Add-on 'VideoDownloadHelper' to batch download the videos. To avoid scripting, a web data scraper might be of use as well. An important caveat to these techniques is the need to be aware of country-specific copyright laws. Usually, saving data on your local computer for a short period of time for academic purposes should be legal. However, you must not make these data available to others (even research colleagues or fellow students).

In terms of tailoring a research question, the literature survey in this chapter shows that it is common practice not to separate videos and comments as objects of inquiry, but to examine sets of videos and associated comments (Androutsopoulos 2013; Chun & Walters 2011; Sharma 2014; Tereick 2012). This is particularly the case for projects in discourse analysis which seek to examine how participants engage with an array of discourses on politics, culture, arts, language and so on. More specific questions for analysis can also be nested within this combined focus on videos and comments, dealing with linguistic and visual/multimodal resources in both modes. If your interests are specifically geared towards multimodality and visual semiotics, then focusing on videos only is a justified choice, and the opposite holds true for research interested in digitally mediated interaction or in linguistic issues appearing across a corpus.

### Future directions

As our discussion suggests, there are manifold opportunities for future research on YouTube, including comment interaction, remix and multimodality, discourse participation, performance and stylization of linguistic variability, and others. A promising area of future research concerns the interrelation of YouTube to traditional mass media. On the one hand, mass media material is appropriated and remixed by YouTube users. On the other hand, media corporations themselves become increasingly active on YouTube, and at the same time YouTube videos are increasingly reproduced and discussed in traditional mass media, ranging from funny viral videos shown on entertainment programmes to war footage by amateur filmmakers that finds its way into prime time news. Determining the authenticity of such material is likely to become an increasingly important issue, as is the way in which YouTube footage is recontextualized in mainstream media programmes.

One of the discourses that has been and will remain central to YouTube concerns issues of piracy. Since part of YouTube's appeal has always consisted of the uploading of copyrighted material – a tolerated but nevertheless 'illegal' practice – the site owners and copyright holders have had to navigate a grey legal area. Whether something is considered 'piracy', 'creative adaptation', or 'positive PR' is more often a question of power than of clear legal definitions. This discourse practice, too, can be studied, particularly in cases where users debate the removal of videos; in addition, a whole range of editing practices that try to avoid copyright charges (such as switching videos left to right) has emerged.

## Related topics

- Chapter 4 Multimodal analysis (Jewitt)
- Chapter 7 Multilingual resources and practices in digital communication (Lee)
- Chapter 15 Twitter: design, discourse, and the implications of public text (Squiers)
- Chapter 21 Facebook and the discursive construction of the social network (Tagg & Seargeant)

## Notes

The video IDs referenced below must be added to the URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=>

- 1 Ranking based on Alexa Traffic Rank, URL: <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/youtube.com>.
- 2 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube#Localization>.
- 3 See <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html>.
- 4 'Do the Harlem shake (original)', Video ID: 8vjSSAMNWw. 'Rewind YouTube Style 2012' Video ID: iCkYw3cRwLo. Both view counts on 13 October 2014.
- 5 Video ID: eIfzgBmcFIU.
- 6 The examples discussed here are: 'Energieriesen-Lüge' (translatable as 'energy giant lie' or 'giant energy lie', YouTube video ID: aTjHASBVA0Y; 'Atom-Energieriese' ('nuclear energy giant', video ID: 1kXE1672i1s); and 'RWE Energieriese – Director's Cut' (video ID: eQfr\_ZH\_Pj0).
- 7 Video ID: d1CRv-qghZg.
- 8 See <http://code.google.com/apis/youtube/overview.html>.

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## Further reading

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The book offers insightful observations on YouTube as a space of activism, subculture and fan culture, and social norm-building in participatory culture. It offers in-depth analyses of many video examples.

Jones, R. H. & Hafner, C. A. 2012, *Understanding digital literacies: a practical introduction*, Routledge: London.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the book gives an overview of digital language practices on a general level.

Lovink, G. & Niederer, S. (eds.) 2008, *Video vortex reader: responses to YouTube*, Institute of Network Cultures: Amsterdam.

An edited volume with articles by media studies scholars.

Snickars, P. & Vonderau, P. (eds.) 2009, *The YouTube reader*, National Library of Sweden: Stockholm.

This edited volume looks at YouTube from different angles: mediality, aesthetics, usage, economic issues and its function as a cultural archive. Available for free under a Creative Commons license ([http://pellesnickars.se/index.php?s=file\\_download&id=34](http://pellesnickars.se/index.php?s=file_download&id=34)).

### Introduction

Translocality is a key concept in the investigation of the complex forms of interplay of the local and the global in multi-semiotic digital communication. The goal of this chapter<sup>1</sup> is to discuss the notion of translocality from the point of view of language in digital communication. To this end, I will review the history and current usages of translocality *vis-à-vis* related concepts that have arisen from the need to describe the complex tensions between the local and the global in an era of growing globalization. After a more general review, the discussion turns to the relevance of translocality to today's digital communication in particular. Finally, I will outline certain future directions for research and practice.

Translocality can be defined, first, as a sense of *connectedness* between locales where both the local and the global are meaningful parameters for social and cultural activities and, second, as a fluid understanding of *culture* as outward-looking or exogenous, characterized by hybridity, translation, and identification (Hepp 2009a, 2009b; Nederveen Pieterse 1995). In the domain of digital communication, translocality is manifest in the enhanced connectivity afforded by burgeoning digital technologies and the semiotic (often linguistic, multilingual) choices that people make to identify themselves and to orient to their audiences ranging in the continuum between local and global (Leppänen, Pitkänen-Huhta, Piirainen-Marsh, Nikula, & Peuronen 2009).

Current applications of translocality in digital communication are discussed and illustrated below with an emphasis on contributions from sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and cultural studies. An overarching theme in this discussion is the dynamic and dialectical interplay of the local and global, as translocality is a bidirectional process in which local and global discourses impact and shape each other. Methodologically, the study of translocality points to a multidisciplinary approach, in which insights provided by ethnography, linguistics, discourse studies, cultural studies and social semiotics can be combined for detailed investigations of the forms, functions and meanings of translocal processes and practices in digital communication (Leppänen 2012). As an example of a recommendation for practice, I suggest the potential of translocality as a parameter in teaching language(s), (digital) literacy and communication. As future directions in this field, I briefly outline the growing importance of multimediality and resemiotization in translocal communication, and the need to look holistically into digitally mediated practices in relation to other (offline, face-to-face) practices.