Lukas Eibensteiner & Robert Hesselbach

Introduction

1   Relevance of Social Media for Linguistics and Foreign Language Education

Due to the ongoing digitalization of society, social media have become an integral part of everyday private and public communication. In this changing society, where even traditional print media like newspapers are increasingly being digitized,[1] platforms such as *Twitter*,[2] *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, and *TikTok* are driving the flow of information. Users can receive and disseminate the latest status updates from their friends, video clips and news reports on their smartphones in a matter of seconds. Activities associated with these platforms have already been integrated into the lexicon as internationalisms, whether as a direct loan-word from English, as in *to like*, *to post*, *follower* > German *liken*, *posten*, *Followerin/Follower*, or with some modification: the same English words are translated as *me gusta*, *seguidor/a* in Spanish. In addition, platforms like *YouTube* facilitate the emergence of completely new professions such as *YouTuber*, which have already been the focus of recent linguistic research (Prohl 2019a; 2019b).

The way in which members of modern societies communicate and debate has now largely moved to the digital space. As Marx, Lobin and Schmidt (2020, XI) point out, '[t]he focus has thus shifted away from the fascination that devices and their affordances exert on language users towards the use of language on platforms, which have now become a constitutive element of our communication' ("Der Fokus hat sich also

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[1]   For example, in many cases, news media use social media to link a short news report to the actual story on their homepage (sometimes for a fee), thereby creating a kind of digital intertextuality (Hesselbach 2020a).

[2]   *Twitter* changed its name to *X* during the publication process. As it was not clear at the time of publication whether this change would be permanent, we decided to keep the name (*Twitter*), which was used until mid-2023.

verschoben weg von der Faszination, die Geräte und deren Affordanzen auf Sprachbenutzer/innen ausüben, hin zum Sprachgebrauch auf Plattformen, die inzwischen ein konstitutives Element unserer Kommunikation geworden sind").

The technical aspect of communication on platforms, which the authors implicitly refer to, is a central theme echoed in most definitions of *social media*: For instance, Reinhardt (2019, 3) describes social media as "any application of technology through which users participate in, create, and share media resources and practices with other users by means of digital networking". Kaplan and Hänlein (2010, 61) further elaborate on this, defining social media as "Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Finally, Schmidt and Taddicken (2017, 9) define social media as 'offerings built upon digitally networked technologies, facilitating access to diverse information and the establishment and maintenance of social relationships' ("Angebote auf Grundlage digital vernetzter Technologien, die es Menschen ermöglichen, Informationen aller Art zugänglich zu machen und davon ausgehend soziale Beziehungen zu knüpfen und/ oder zu pflegen").

In addition to maintaining digital social contacts, one of the key features of the definition of social media is the possibility for users to participate in a creative way. Users are not only passive recipients of a wide variety of content, but are also empowered to generate multimodal content themselves, comprising images, videos, texts, memes, and more, for direct dissemination. This aspect forms the central interest of this publication: how is linguistic content created in social media and how can social media be used in foreign language education? The eight contributions within this volume focus on Romance languages, examining different regions where these languages are spoken and various social media platforms.

2 Social Media as a Research Topic in Linguistics

Based on computer-mediated communication (CMC), social media offer people the opportunity to interact and communicate digitally with friends, relatives, acquaintances, colleagues and even complete strangers synchronously, quasi-synchronously or asynchronously. Digital platforms such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *TikTok*, and *Telegram* provide an opportunity for fast, direct, multimodal and multilingual communication. These opportunities are further enhanced by simple, intuitive software applications on devices which have become an integral part of everyday life: computers, tablets, and smartphones. These are the reasons why – as already mentioned – the communication behavior of the linguistic community is changing drastically, leading to transformations in communicative practices (cf. Eckkrammer 2018).

In the field of linguistics, a wealth of research has been carried out on the topic of *social media* for several languages, particularly in the last decade, as evidenced by large volumes such as the one by Marx/Lobin/Schmidt (2020). According to Page et al. (2014, 1), this research focus is due to social media's particular attractiveness for linguistic research projects:

> Researching the language used in these social media contexts is a growing area of interest. There are many reasons why this field is particularly attractive for researchers. The sheer amount of interaction which takes place within social media contexts means there is a wealth of material that can be considered, and that material is often available in forms that are (relatively) easy to access. The fast-paced and rapidly evolving nature of these interactions mean that there is often something new to be observed, whether that be about the seemingly 'routine' interactions that interweave social media with people's day-to-day activities, or about the variously creative ways people adapt and innovate in their communication with each other. Given the scope of what might be included in a research project about the 'language in social media' it can be hard to know exactly where to start.

The very broad research paradigm described by the authors, which has also expanded significantly since 2014, offers numerous opportunities for studies with very different linguistic interests. Recent studies in the field of Romance linguistics show that researchers address very different aspects when analyzing communication in social media, and thus also address topics relevant to different languages. These topics are presented in the list below, which is far from exhaustive. In addition to general

media linguistic issues (cf. Thaler 2003; Baechler et al. 2016), the follow-
ing topics are discussed:

- the creation of new, digital text types (cf. Rentel et al. 2014; Wenz 2017)
- multilingualism in computer-mediated communication (cf. Ueber-wasser/Stark 2017)
- media-specific variation (cf. Jakob 2018)
- the phenomenon of code-switching (cf. Franko 2019)
- grammatical structures, e.g. on the syntactic complexity of *Twitter* messages (cf. e.g. Recio Diego/Tomé Cornejo 2017)
- the use of graphic elements (cf. in particular the studies on German by Dürscheid/Meletis 2019; Dürscheid 2020a; 2020b; 2020c)
- the language of journalism in social media (cf. Alizadeh Afrouzi 2021)
- the language of politics in social media (cf. Suray Ventura 2016; Mencke 2018; Visser 2018; Hesselbach 2020b; Leschzyk 2020; Eibensteiner 2021; Slimovich 2021 etc.)

The 2020 US presidential election campaign has made the importance
of social media in political discourse clear to a wide audience. Politi-
cians use social media to get their unfiltered messages out to the public
directly. Social media has become the most important communication
tool used by politicians nowadays.

The reach that can be gained through social media is enormous.[3] The
majority of linguistic studies on social media therefore focus on ana-
lyzing political discourse in the digital space, as can be seen from the
studies listed above. Their aim is to uncover and describe strategies of
political language usage with the help of discourse-analytical methods.
Several essays in this volume can also be assigned to this field:

In their article "Scapegoating in Telegram Groups: A Contrastive
Analysis of Topoi and Rhetorical Strategies of Anti-Semitism in Ger-
man and French Messages", **Eva Martha Eckkrammer** (Mannheim)

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[3] Donald Trump has around 87 million people following his *Twitter* account (@realDonaldTrump), while Joe Biden has around 32 million people followers on his account as US President (@POTUS) and around 37 million on his private account (@JoeBiden) (figures from August 30, 2023).

and **Sandra Steidel** (Mannheim) analyze a bilingual corpus consisting of German and French messages from *Telegram* groups. The authors trace topoi and rhetorical strategies in these messages aimed at fueling anti-Semitic scapegoating narratives during the coronavirus pandemic. The authors conclude, among other things, that many of the cases described must be treated as anti-Semitic hate speech based primarily on false facts.

In his article "Analyzing Linguistic Patterns in the Social Media Discourse of Juan Guaidó and Nicolás Maduro during the 2019 Political Conflict in Venezuela", **Robert Hesselbach** (Erlangen-Nürnberg) presents an analysis of the battle for digital sovereignty of opinion in Venezuela's political conflict in 2019. In this corpus-based study, Hesselbach analyzes linguistic patterns in the tweets of the two political opponents Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó. On the one hand, the results of the study show a change in the use of linguistic patterns by both politicians after Guaidó proclaimed himself the legitimate interim president of Venezuela on January 23, 2019. In addition, the discourse analysis reveals that Guaidó depicts himself more as the democratically legitimized representative of the Venezuelan people, while Maduro presents himself linguistically as the guarantor of state order and as the country's defender against threats from both home and abroad.

Miriam Zapf (Erlangen-Nürnberg) addresses the discussion on *Twitter* about gender-inclusive language use in the French context with her study "'Stop à cette ineptie d'écriture inclusive. Stop à la dictature des idéologies stupides!' – A Critical Analysis of Twitter Comments against Gender-Inclusive Language". Based on a multilingual corpus of *Twitter* comments, the author uses critical discourse analysis to identify the typical arguments against gender-inclusive language use and the underlying ideologies. Zapf claims that the language in her corpus is strongly ideological and that advocates of gender-inclusive language use are constructed as an out-group. She concludes that it is not primarily about gender-inclusive language use, but rather about the negotiation of social power relations.

However, social media are not only used by politicians to influence public opinion; they also offer speakers of a regional and/or minority language the opportunity to use them actively (cf. Tölke 2015; Erhart 2020). The article "'One does not simply bstell e Flammküeche ohne Ziwwle': Sociolinguistic Issues of Multilingual Computer Mediated Communica-

tion in Alsace" by **Pascale Erhart** (Strasbourg) can be located in this the-
matic area. The author deals with the question of how a language such as
Alsatian, which was historically mainly used for oral communication, is
increasingly used in written form in computer-mediated communication.
After describing the sociolinguistic status of Alsatian, Erhart presents a
typology of strategies for the written use of Alsatian in CMC contexts. In
addition, she analyzes memes to discuss how a regional identity can be
represented in social media characterized by a global media culture.

3 Social Media in Foreign Language Education

Recent studies on media use confirm that digital and social media have
become an integral part of children's and young people's daily lives. For
example, the JIM study shows that students aged 12–19 years spend an
average of more than 200 minutes online every day. Most of this time
is spent on messenger services and social media platforms such as
WhatsApp, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, or *TikTok* (mpfs 2021, 66). Such find-
ings highlight the importance of providing educational-institutional
support for students in developing media literacy. An influential defini-
tion of media literacy has been offered by Aufderheide, who defines it
as the ability to "decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and
electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is *critical
autonomy* in relationship to all media" (Aufderheide 1993, 1; emphasis
added). Another prominent definition – at least in the German-speaking
countries – goes back to Baacke's (1996) model of media competence,
which distinguishes four different dimensions: the concept of media
studies refers to knowledge about media (*Medienkunde*); media use con-
cerns the ability to use different media (*Mediennutzung*); media design
makes reference to innovative and creative design of media (*Medien-
gestaltung*); and finally, media critique concerns the ability to critically
reflect on media and media use (*Medienkritik*).

   Both Aufderheide and Baacke emphasize the importance of critical
reflection on media and media use and the need to develop critical litera-
cies, an aspect that has also been highlighted in the pedagogy of multilit-
eracies (New London Group 1996). In this framework, it is argued that
in order to address societal challenges such as digitization, heterogeneity,

cultural and linguistic diversity, a merely text-based literacy that primarily focuses on monolingual individuals and interaction in purely physical spaces is no longer sufficient. Instead, a pedagogy of multiliteracies "focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (New London Group 1996, 64). It is emphasized that learners therefore need to be able to analyze, reflect and produce different kinds of multimodal and multilingual media. In addition, the pedagogy of multiliteracies asserts an emancipatory goal of empowering individuals to participate in diverse forms of social practice. This, in turn, requires critical literacy, which emphasizes that learners need to be trained to engage in societal discourses both online and offline (Küster 2014), including communication and interaction on social media platforms (Nagle 2018). Students should be empowered to analyze media, media use and media content from a critical perspective and become aware of how these can be potentially discriminatory or manipulative. In this sense, Vasquez, Janks and Comber (2019, 307) highlight that individuals should be encouraged to think critically about "social issues, including inequities of race, class, gender, or disability and the ways in which we use language and other semiotic resources to shape our understanding of these issues".

In order to respond appropriately to the challenges of an increasingly digital world in which social discourses are often shifted to digital or hybrid spaces, the KMK (Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the *Länder* in the Federal Republic of Germany) published a strategy paper entitled 'Education in the Digital World' ("Bildung in der digitalen Welt", KMK 2017), emphasizing the importance of promoting digital competences. In summary, they propose a model of digital competence with six dimensions:

- Searching, processing, and storing
- Communicating and cooperating
- Producing and presenting
- Protecting and safely acting
- Problem-solving and acting
- Analyzing and reflecting (KMK 2017, 10–13)

The KMK upholds that digital competence should be fostered in all school subjects, which means that foreign language education is also expected to contribute to its development. As highlighted in the new

Educational Standards for the First Foreign Language in Germany (KMK 2023), foreign language education should facilitate the development of a so-called foreign language-specific digital competence in its students. This includes 'competences for receptive, productive, and interactive participation in multimodal communication and interaction' and 'competences for critical and reflective use of opportunities to support one's own foreign language learning both inside and outside school' ("Kompetenzen zur rezeptiven, produktiven und interaktiven Teilhabe an multimodalen Kommunikations- und Interaktionsformen (mündlich, schriftlich, visuell, Mischformen)" as well as "Kompetenzen zur kritisch-reflektierenden Nutzung von Möglichkeiten der Unterstützung des eigenen Fremdsprachenlernens sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb von Schule und Unterricht", KMK 2023, 25–26; translated by the authors).

While virtually all forms of digital media hold potential for enhancing digital competences, this volume focusses on the possibilities of integrating social media into foreign language education (Beißwenger/Knopp 2019; Brocca 2020; Reinhardt 2019 & 2020; Würffel 2020). To elucidate the manifold advantages of leveraging social media within the foreign language classroom, Reinhardt (2020) employs four metaphors:

1. **Social media as *windows* into the target language/culture:** The first metaphor refers to the possibility of learners' observing how native speakers use the target language on social media platforms to interact and socialize in authentic communicative situations. Like through a window, students can gain access to authentic language input and cultural practices. These can be analyzed and discussed in the foreign language classroom, for example by focusing on linguistic, sociolinguistic or pragmatic aspects of language use. In addition, social media provide insights into different types and genres of discourse (Reinhardt 2020, 237). For example, micro-messenger services like *Twitter* contain mainly news and political discourse, while social networks such as *Facebook* or *Instagram* offer glimpses into (semi-)private everyday interactions. All these aspects can be used in foreign language education to gain authentic access to the target language/culture. This can have positive effects on the students' target language or inter-/transcultural competence.

2. **Social media as *mirrors* of the self:** Social media allow users to carefully construct and present their identity to the outside word (albeit often in an idealized and therefore not unproblematic form). The possibilities for self-presentation range from descriptions and comments written in personal blogs or published in a *Facebook* group, to image- or video-based posts on *Instagram* or *YouTube*. Activities that use social media as mirrors should encourage learners to reflect critically on how and why media content has been shared and how cultural factors may influence such self-presentation (ib., 237–238).

3. **Social media as *doorways* into a foreign discourse community:** Another benefit of social media is that they enable participation in a foreign language community as well as in inter-/transcultural discourses. In Reinhardt's words, they "serve as not just windows to look through, but as portals to traverse" (ib., 238). In this sense, learners can not only gain insights into the daily lives of target language speakers, e.g., by subscribing to famous influencers, but can also interact with them by sharing and contributing content (ib., 238–239). Moreover, social media provide an ideal way for heritage speakers to maintain contact with friends and family in their countries of origin, serving as an authentic reason for teachers to incorporate the respective heritage languages in the foreign language classroom.

4. **Social media as *playgrounds*:** Finally, social media can be seen as platforms on which students can learn and play in an informal and autonomous way, thereby discovering new languages and cultures. This involves using social media as a means for simulation pedagogy or situated learning. For instance, social media accounts can be used to create avatars the class controls, which can then be employed to interact with other users on the platforms (ib., 239–240).

While social media offers several advantages, it also poses numerous risks, which can be described by a fifth, more negative metaphor:

5. **Social media as a *precipice*:** This metaphor highlights dangers such as the significant potential for addiction, the perceived reduction in attention span due to excessive consumption of short videos (*shorts*, *reels*), exposure to illegal, discriminatory, and/or offensive content, and the thoughtless sharing or misuse of personal data. Activities

concerning this metaphor should develop students' critical literacy as mentioned above and help them to critically reflect on their own use of social media.

Against this background, Nagle (2018) argues that students should develop a social media-specific competence, referred to as *critical social media literacy*. She maintains that students should not only examine and evaluate social media as a tool, but should also critically reflect on issues of access and power, including questions of inclusion and exclusion (e.g., who is active on a social platform and in what way). Additionally, they should be made fully aware of the risks and be equipped with strategies to deal with possible cases of witnessing and experiencing cyberviolence, discrimination, etc.

In conclusion, the use of social media in foreign language education offers many opportunities, but also involves some challenges and risks. In the educational part of this volume, four contributions concentrate on such issues, focusing on the video platform *YouTube* and the social network *Instagram*.

YouTube is considered to be the most popular video platform among young people. Foreign language teachers can take advantage of its popularity by including video clips into the classroom in order to match the students' interests and preferences. One way of doing this is to deal with videos uploaded by well-known influencers (Höfler 2017). However, as **Elke Höfler** (Graz) argues in the first article of this section ("Learning Romance Languages with Influencers. Mission (im)possible?"), it is not sufficient to adopt a purely passive attitude of reception when watching *YouTube* videos. Instead, students must learn to actively and critically analyze and question them. She argues that a monolingual and written literacy is not enough in order to cope with the challenges of the 21st century and advocates for additional training of multimodal and multiliterate skills. To this end, she claims that *YouTube* videos of influencers are a fruitful medium and should therefore be considered more often in foreign language education.

The following two contributions also concentrate on *YouTube*, with an emphasis on the analysis of learner/explainer videos. Typically, such video clips are used to explain complex content in a pedagogically simplified way. Students often use them to learn new things autonomously,

to revisit misunderstood concepts, or to delve deeper into topics that have only been superficially covered in class (Eibensteiner 2024; Lachmund 2022). Since *YouTube* videos are widely used in both formal and informal learning, it is important to note that they are often not subject to any quality assessments (Zeyer 2023, 105). In their article "Exploring Multimedia Learning Principles in Explainer Videos for Foreign Language Instruction", **Diana Vesga**, **Felix Röhricht** and **Lukas Eibensteiner** (Jena) concentrate on explainer videos on *YouTube*. They focus on French past tenses (*passé composé* and *imparfait*) and investigate whether the videos meet general quality criteria of multimedia learning (Mayer 2001). Their results, based on a corpus of five videos, show that although the producers try to consider Mayer's multimedia design principles, there is still room for improvement.

In the third paper of this section ("Potential of *YouTube* Explainer Videos in Learning and Teaching Portuguese as a Foreign Language"), **Lukas Fiedler** and **Benjamin Meisnitzer** (Leipzig) focus on the potential of learner videos on *YouTube* for teaching Portuguese as a tertiary language. They show that such videos can be used as an authentic source of input. Additionally, they provide some practical ideas and worksheets to demonstrate how such videos can be employed not only to develop listening and audio-visual comprehension, but also to promote intercomprehension and receptive variety competence.

In the final contribution of the volume ("*Grande Littérature* meets Social Media: Transmedial and Transcultural Approaches to Fostering Sustainable Reading Motivation and Digital Discourse Literacies"), **Anne-Marie Lachmund** (Potsdam) describes how literary classics can be rediscovered through the use of the social media platform *Instagram*. The main part of her paper focuses on a hashtag analysis of Marcel Proust's novel collection *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Lachmund shows how the images resulting from the hashtag analysis can be utilized for an initial exploration of Proust's work, and how such a student-oriented approach "may arouse curiosity and increase reading motivation, paving the way for future consistent readers of literary classics" (p. 240).

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