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'How Blogging about La Chanson des gueux reinforces friendships as well as allowing for new connections'

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Abstract

In this 'new media age' the screen has replaced the book as the dominant medium of communication. In digital environments, different modes of expression come together in ways that reshape the relationship between printed word and image or sound (Jewitt, 2006). This change in the materiality of the text—that is, the media that are used to create the text—inevitably changes the way we use language as a social practice. In this paper, I seek to explore how new media change, through their affordances, the potentials for communicational action by their users. The case study I am presenting focuses on how readers of French poetry engage in social interaction by using the medium of weblogging to communicate to an online community. Virtual ethnography was used to generate the blog texts for this paper. The examples show how this medium has the potential to change the flow of communication from being unidirectional to bidirectional.

Keywords : weblogging, affordances, hypertext links, reader engagement, French poetry.

1 Introduction

In this 'new media age' the screen has replaced the book as the dominant medium of communication. Kress (2003) argues that very soon the screen will govern all of our communication practices. As Pahl & Rowsell (2005) point out, 'Language is not, and clearly will not be, printed texts with incident images, but instead texts of all kinds with colour, different fonts, on monitors or mobile phones with sound, gesture and movement' (p.4). The shift from text-based communication to multimodal communication is not simply a quantitative change. It is not just a case of having more communication modes. Gadanidis et al. (2008) see it 'as a qualitative shift, analogous to the change that occurred when we moved from an oral to a print culture' (p.119). In digital environments, different modes of expression —aural, visual, spatial and linguistic—come together in ways that reshape the relationship between printed word and image or sound (Jewitt, 2006). This change in the materiality of the text—that is, the media that are used to create the text—inevitably changes the way we use language as a social practice. In this paper, I seek to explore how new media change, through their affordances, the potentials for communicational action by their users. The case study I am presenting focuses on how readers of French poetry engage in social interaction by using the medium of weblogging to communicate to an online community. In this regard, I find Kress's (2003) twofold functional definition of interactivity as both interpersonal and hypertextual useful when considering the extent to which weblogs have changed the flow of communication from being unidirectional to bidirectional.

2 Halliday's social semiotic theory of communication

Conceptualising language as a social phenomenon dates back to Halliday's theory of social semiotics. Language is the way it is because of the social function it has come to serve in people's lives (Halliday, 1978). In this seminal work, he espoused the notion that 'three modes of meaning are present in every use of language in every social context' (1978: 112). The ideational function represents the speaker's meaning potential as an observer. It is the content function of language, language as 'about something'. This is the component through which the language encodes the cultural experience. The interpersonal component represents

the speaker's meaning potential as an intruder. It is the participatory function of language, language as doing something. This is the component through which the speaker intrudes himself into the context of situation, both expressing his own attitudes and judgements and seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of others. The textual component represents the speaker's text-forming potential; it is that which makes language relevant. This is the component which provides the texture; that which makes the difference between language that is suspended *in vacuo* and language that is operational in a context of situation. It expresses the relation of the language to its environment, including both the verbal environment—what has been said or written before—and the nonverbal, situational environment.

2.1 Multimodality

Multimodality takes up the concept of Halliday's metafunctions and applies them to all modes. Multimodality offers an approach that can be applied to the prominent role of visual and other semiotic resources on the computer screen such as image, colour, writing, sound-effect, and speech. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) suggest that in a digital environment 'meaning is made in many different ways, always, in the many different modes and media which are co-present in a communicational ensemble' (p.111). Jewitt (2003) argues that metafunctions are helpful when asking what kind of communicational work different modes on the computer screen do and have. The medium of weblogging offers bloggers a wide range of possibilities for inclusion of writing, pictures, sound and video. The term modal affordance has often been cited as an alternative way of looking at these tools, aspects of the environment that we see in terms of their use (Jewitt, 2006; Myers, 2010).[i] Someone coming to a web page expects it to be organised in a certain way, and to do certain things.

Figure 1 shows an example of the interaction of the user and a complex technology. The reader points, gestures, gazes at the screen, moves the mouse, clicks on icons and presses keys. Multimodal texts on the web offer different filters of understanding. They offer the reader different potentials for engagement with a text: the point of entry and the possible paths through a text. Reader interest determines where to enter the page. The same applies to the reading path which the reader wishes to construct: it too is determined by the reader's interest.

Figure1: screenshot showing multiple entry points for the reader

2.2 Hypertextuality

In print-based reading, a reader can change the text, can read the text in an order different from that intended but cannot change the structure of the text itself. Web pages are different

because they have a permanent structure of links and webs and connectivity (Jewitt, 2006). Through their engagement with the structure of a text the reader produces and restructures the text. This facility of the medium and the screen can be clearly seen in Figure 2 where the reader has the option of turning communication into interactive dialogue using social media tools including blogs, emails and social bookmarking. The reader can also choose from social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Bebo to share their experience.
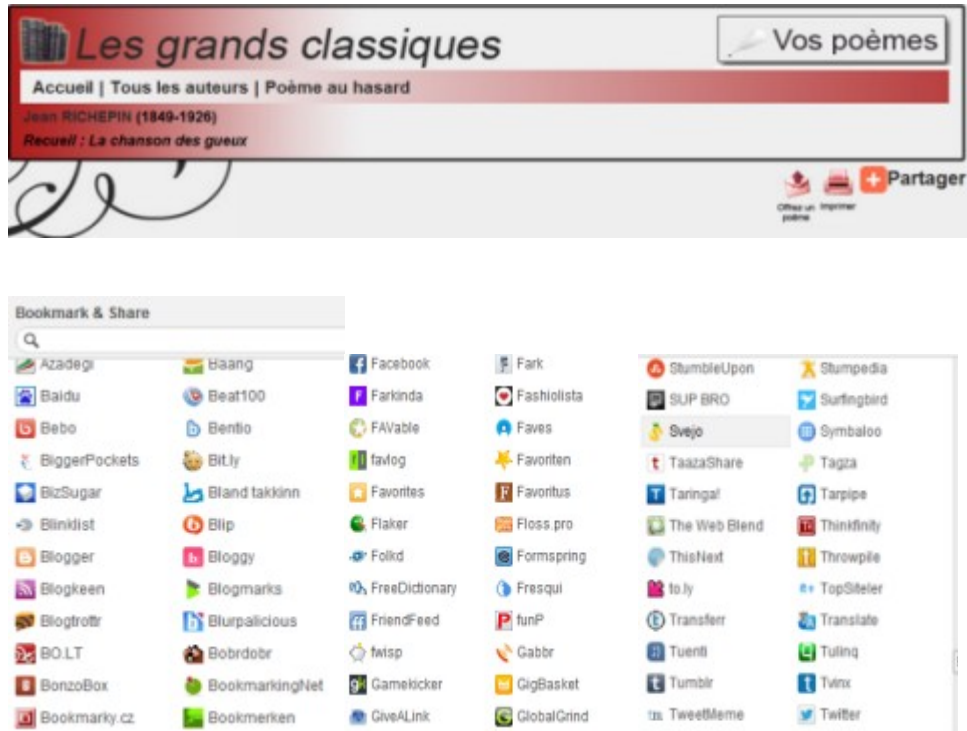

Figure 2: screenshot showing modes of interaction available to the reader

The remainder of this paper will focus on how readers of La Chanson des gueux (Song of the Poor) chose the medium of weblogging to engage in social interaction with an online community. Every individual who takes part is connected to all other others through the social ties of readership (Marlow, 2002, cited in Marlow, 2004).

3 Research Design and Data
The blog texts for this paper were generated using virtual ethnographic methods (Hine, 2000). Virtual ethnography involves "deep looking" in online environments, in my case paying careful attention to language content and interaction between users. I assumed the role of a "lurker", observing the many-to-many interactions prompted by bloggers, wanting to share their experience of reading La Chanson des gueux, and their social world in a non-participatory manner.

4 Using Blogs in Social Interaction
The authors of weblogs use a range of devices that can make readers feel that they are being talked to, included in a group, and involved in the blog, namely pronouns, questions and directives, and interactive language.

4.1 Use of Pronouns and Directives

In the texts I studied, the pronoun **you** is frequently used with different meanings. In first example it is used to refer to all the readers of the blog who share the author's interests in reading literature. The use of a directive **follow me** in the last line shows that the blogger hopes that the community of readers will carry out the action directed.

A découvrir le fil fervent qui me tient lieu d'équilibre **vous** êtes invités…**Vous** funambules du lire et du délire…Suivez-moi avec les élans du coeur et de l'esprit… {*Le Fil d'Archal*}

[In order to discover the tightrope which keeps me balanced **you** are invited…**You** funambulists of reading and madness…**Follow me** with enthusiasm]

In the second example, **you** is used to refer to a large group within the readership:

Si, après ça, **vous** hésitez encore à acheter ce livre, c'est que **vous** êtes une gniolle {*Richepin au turbin, c'est divin*}

[If, after this, **you** are still reluctant to buy this book, **you** are a fool]

4.2 Use of Questions

Asking a question suggests an audience by projecting somebody out there to answer. The blogger in this example asks a rhetorical question calling on the reader to remember Jean Richepin and the collection of poems he published in 1888.

Jean Richepin? C'est La Chanson des gueux qui vient à la mémoire, guère plus {*Gueux et nomades*}

[**Jean Richepin?** The Song of the Poor comes to mind]

4.3 Use of Interactive language

In using questions and directives, the blogger is interacting with the reader. Blogs give a strong sense of a personal voice. The examples below show some traces of interactive language often found in computer-mediated texts: conversational particles, the ubiquitous exclamation marks and use of colloquialisms.

Alors, quelle bonne idée d'avoir exhumé cet ensemble de récits dans lesquels les «gens de voyage », les saltimbanques, les brigands et les miséreux occupant les premières places, dans une succession de bons et mauvais coups, de malheurs, de générosités et de violences, avec leur language direct et imagé **!** {*Gueux et nomades*}

[So, what a good idea to have exhumed this collection of stories in which travellers, travelling entertainers, thieves and poor people are to the forefront, in a succession of good and bad deeds, misfortunes, kindness and violence, with their direct and colourful language!]

Les excellentes editions du Vampire Actif ont eut la **bath** idée de rééditer un recueil de nouvelles écrit par un académicien français, **euh non**, **pardon**, par un chansonnier, ou plutôt par un joueur de grosse caisse…Jean Richepin {*Richepin au turbin, c'est divin*}

[The excellent publishers Vampire Actif had the great idea to republish a collection of short stories written by a member of the French Academy, oh no, sorry, by a songwriter, or rather by a bass drum player…Jean Richepin]

5 Conveying Social Information through Links

Blogs started from weblogs, list of links to interesting sites on the web, so it is not surprising that links are the social currency of this social interaction on the web. Among the subtypes of links identified by Marlow (2004), the most basic form of weblog interaction is the comment. It is a reader-contributed reply to a specific post within a site. The two comments taken from the blog *Richepin au turbin, c'est divin* show how they are a chronologically ordered set of responses. The underlined words of Dominique Hasselman opens to the commenter's own blog *Le Tourne-à-gauche*.

> Dominique Hasselmann 21 mai 2012 10:18
> Oui, Richepin dans la figure {*Richepin au turbin, c'est divin*}
> [Yes, Richepin up close and personal]

> Anonyme 21 mai 2012 22:19
> une girolle? {*Richepin au turbin, c'est divin*}
> [a chanterelle?]

In the second example, the addressed audience is the blogger with the commenter using a question to seek clarification on the spelling of the non-standard French word 'gniolle' in the original blog.

In the final example, it can be suggested that the commenter takes the initiative by enacting conversational interaction by finishing her comment with a smiley. This smiley could be interpreted 'as marking an ironic or self-mocking comment directed at oneself' (Myers, 2010:99). The underlined words of Nounou bordeaux opens to the commenter's own website advertising her services as a child minder in Bordeaux. The hypertext link is used in this instance to make further connections of a professional nature.

> Excellent critique, ça me donne vraiment envie de découvrir ce livre! :)
> Marie.
> Écrit par : Nounou bordeaux 04/07/2012 {*Gueux et nomades*}
> [Excellent critique, I really want to discover this book]

The nature of weblog interaction is quite conducive to study. The argument has been made that bloggers' hypertext links are a concrete example of affordances. Myers (2010) describes the interaction between bloggers and users:

> Blogging software allows bloggers to insert links easily, to update easily, to use all sorts of texts and images for the links, and to embed them in formatted text. Bloggers have picked up these affordances and put them to new uses, embedding videos and pictures, using all sorts of features for link text, and attaching links to almost every word or even every syllable. And the users of blogs orient to these affordances, developing a reading style that may involve moving to another text, and maybe back again, to try to figure out what the blogger is trying to say, and what stance the blogger is trying to take on this new text (pp.45-46).

6 Using Stance to Interact with Readers

I will conclude this paper by taking a cursory look at stance, defined by Biber and Finegan (1989) as "lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message". In the example from the blog *Gueux et nomades*, the blogger is careful about the way in which he marks his opinion on the duties associated with being a poet. The use of the phrase 'me semble' gives a carefully graded stance on this new opinion while marking it just as his perspective.

«Être libre, et vivre, et créer, et sans savoir pourquoi ni comment, telle me semble devoir être la function du poète et sa joie» {*Gueux et nomades*}

[To be free, and live, and creative, and not knowing why or how, this seems to me must be the duty of a poet and his joy]

7 Conclusion

This paper has shown the inherently social nature of the medium of weblogging. Particular attention was paid to how authors of blogs use a range of linguistic features such as pronouns, questions and directives, and interactive language to make the community of readers feel that they are being conversed with, have group affiliation, and are involved in the blog. Examples were also used to illustrate how comments are the most basic form of weblog interaction. The affordances of this medium allows for hyperlinks to be inserted within comments which encourage the readers to move back and forth allowing them to make further connections. It is perfectly reasonable to interact with a total stranger or a friend by commenting or linking. The final example showed the extent to which bloggers are aware that their audience is always at least potentially present and consequently how they need to be careful in the way they mark their opinions.

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Blog Texts

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