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Beyond the Timeline: Constructing time and age identities on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Human actions and activities take place on some timescale (Lemke, 2000). Within the context of Facebook, all kinds of material posted on one's profile, be that photos, stories and experiences, are organised in the form of a Timeline with time-stamps being appended automatically. Yet, the sense of identity linked to time is actively constructed in the posts, and is done in interaction with other people. Viewing time as a polysemous entity (Evans, 2005) and as a significant orientation device for the self (Georgakopoulou, 2003), this paper examines the ways in which Facebook users position themselves in time as well as the different ways in which they conceive and value age. Drawing on insights from discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), the frameworks of age-categorisation and temporal framing on identity marking (Coupland et al., 1991) and research on small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Page, 2010), I present and discuss empirical data from a Greek female user's Timeline. Focusing on instances of explicit and implicit references to age and ageing, I argue that age identity is an interactive and collaborative process both facilitated and hindered by certain Facebook configurations. The findings also show that Facebook can be divorced from its orientation to the present as participants utilise the medium to evoke certain periods of life, recycle memories, appeal to experiences and recall past tastes.

1. Introduction

Facebook, like any type of social media, is essentially time-bound. At the bottom of every Facebook post there is always a date and a time. Users' content (status updates, photos, videos, links) is categorised according to the period of time in which it was posted or created in the form of a Timeline. Nevertheless, there is more to the time of a post than its time-stamp. Facebook participants employ intricate ways to talk about how they integrate and accumulate identity, experience and meaning across different timescales, namely across who they are in this event and that, at this moment or the other, with this person or another, in one role and situation or another (cf. Lemke, 2000).

Viewing time as a significant orientation device for the self (Georgakopoulou, 2003), this paper considersthe following questions: How do Facebook users discursively construct themselves as "chronological beings" (Jenkins, 2002)? How do they position themselves vis-à-vis time? What are their relevant conceptions of time? The decision to focus on the topic of time was reached within the context of a larger online ethnographic study on the discursive construction of identity on Facebook (Georgalou, 2014; see also Section 5). While rereading, recoding and reprocessing the data I had garnered, I was surprised to discover that time referencing was so permeating, both explicitly and implicitly (e.g. by dint of birthday wishes, narrations, and recycling of memories), in my informants' discourse activities that it would definitely merit further exploration and unpacking.

To address these questions, I begin by untangling the notion of time, its pivotal role in our lives and its implications for our identity (Section 2). I next look at how a particular sense of time identity, that of age identity, is constructed in discourse (Section 3). Then I talk about the mediated nature of temporality in Facebook (Section 4). After charting my methodological course for data collection and analysis (Section 5), I present and discuss a Greek case study from Facebook (Sections 6 and 7). I close the paper by recapitulating and reflecting upon my key findings (Section 8).

2. Time and identity

Time is an abstract notion, what Jenkins (2002: 269) has appositely called an "abstraction of human construction", with manifold and complex meanings. Starting with its semantics, time is a polysemous lexical category between units, periods and events, which, according to Evans (2005: 49–70) and Evans (2007: 748), bears eight distinct senses: duration, moment, instance, event, matrix, agentive, measurement-system, and commodity. Table 1 summarises these senses

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Table 1
Senses of time (categories and examples from Evans (2005: 49–70) and Evans (2007: 748)).

Senses of time	Time as…	Examples
Duration	Assessment of magnitude of duration.	*It was a long time ago that they met.*
Moment	A discrete or punctual point or moment without reference to its duration.	*The time for a decision has arrived.*
Instance	A particular instance (i.e. occurrence) of an event or activity, rather than an interval or a moment.	*The horse managed to clear the jump 5 times in a row.*
Event	A boundary event.	*The barman called time.*
Matrix	An unbounded elapse conceived as the event subsuming all others.	*Time has no end.*
Agentive	A causal force responsible for change regarding humans and animals.	*Time has aged me.*
Measurement-system	A means of measuring change, duration and other behaviours, events etc.	*Eastern Standard Time is five hours behind Greenwich Mean Time.*
Commodity	An entity which is valuable, and hence can be exchanged, traded, acquired etc.	*They bought more advertising time.*

providing representative examples from Evans's work (2005, 2007). I shall return to some of these meanings to discuss how they fare in terms of experienced and lived time at the end of this paper.

From a philosophical perspective,[1] time is conceived in a "tensed" way, that is to say, in terms of past, present, and future, as well as in a "tenseless" way, namely as clock times and relations of succession and simultaneity (Baker, 2009). On the same wavelength, for Chafe (1994: 205), tense linguistically marks the relationship between "the time of an extroverted consciousness and the time of a representing (not represented) consciousness". To substantiate this point, Chafe (1994: 205–206) says that in the example "I was there for about six years" the time of the extroverted consciousness preceded the time of the representing consciousness. Conversely, in the example "then I'll go my own way" the time of the extroverted consciousness is expected to follow the time of the representing consciousness. Heidegger (1962), on the other hand, proposes a radical departure from the traditional conception of time as a linear series of now-points. On this understanding of time, "[t]he 'now' is not pregnant with the 'not-yet-now', but the Present arises from the future" (Heidegger, 1962: 427). Heidegger even goes further to argue that time finds its meaning in our awareness of our own mortality, and hence finitude, and not in eternity.

In anthropological parlance, an influential definition of time comes from Jenkins (2002: 277), who places weight upon human activity[2]:

> Time is something that humans do, naturally, and human life without time is unthinkable. What we call "time" is, in fact, perhaps best understood as an inevitable consequence of our need to have a working sense of the here-and-now if we are to go about the business of everyday life, in a universe of perpetual, and in a very real sense timeless, transformation.

Time, thus, apart from a chronometric or categorical measure, conventionally segmented by the members of a culture into seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, centuries and millennia, is also a social, interactional and irreducibly subjective construct related to one's personal history, experience, self and episodic memories, or put it differently, to one's personal identity (van Dijk, 2009: 61, 129).

Identity is a temporal process (Mead, 1932). Every human action, process, social practice, or activity takes place on some timescale (Lemke, 2000: 275). Humans cannot live without time: they need to have a past so as to situate who they are in a biography and history (memory); they need a future to envision what they are in the process of becoming (anticipation); and they need to build a sense of the present, of where they are now (perception) (Flaherty and Fine, 2001: 151; Jenkins, 2002: 268). Memory, perception and anticipation can come together in narrative action (i.e. "telling stories, recounting happenings, commenting on events, and putting together explanations and plans"; Jenkins, 2002: 270) and emplotment (i.e. the process of weaving events together, viewing them as a coherent whole; Ricoeur, 1984). As Ricoeur (1984: 52) has insightfully explained, "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence".

3. Age identity and discourse

Harking back to Evans's (2005: 63) agentive sense of time above, time appears to bring about certain effects, one of which is age. Age identity is a product "of the evaluative component of our life narratives, the cumulative assessment of where we stand, developmentally—as individuals and in relation to our social environments" (Coupland, 2001: 203). Thus, apart from a chronological matter, age is also a developmental, psychological and social process best understood in terms of cultural definition (e.g. through features attributed to age identity by the cultural context in which people live) and interactional accomplishment (e.g. through processes of negotiation in turn-by-turn talk with other interlocutors) (Boden and Bielby, 1986: 73). Age categorisation as baby, toddler, adolescent, young man/woman, middle aged man/woman, old man/woman (Sacks, 1992) is something we do in discourse. Put it another way, age "identities are ascribed by and for us largely as speakers affirm, reject, avow, allude to, and display their own or other people's characteristics, and thereby, membership in specific categories" (Nikander, 2002: 44). So the analysis of this discourse can disclose how cultural meanings of age are enacted, experienced and reproduced in interaction, that is, how age acquires meaning through discourse (see articles in Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003), Coupland and Coupland (1995), and Poulios (2011)).[3]

According to Coupland et al. (1991), older age identities in discourse are constructed in terms of two fundamental processes: age-categorisation processes and temporal framing processes. The former include disclosing chronological age, age-related categories/role references, and age-related experiences of illness and decline. Temporal framing deals with adding time-past perspective to current or recent events and topics, associating the self with the past, and recognising historical, cultural and social change. Their model is summarised along with some of their original examples in Table 2.

With respect to age identity and online discourse, exemplary discussions can be found in Lin et al. (2004), who studied online discussion forums for older adults and showed that age identity can be bound up in negative themes such as physical decline, loss,

[1] For more insightful discussions within the realms of philosophy and sociology, see O'Rourke et al. (2009) and Adam (2004) respectively.

[2] However, there are still some traditional cultures, as is the case of Pirahã in the Amazon Rainforest, for which time is not that essential (see, for example, the work by Everett (2005)).

[3] For an interesting analysis on the multiple discourses of age (as chronological, physical, experiential, and symbolic), see Aapola (2002). For a meticulous overview of young age and old age identities in language and discourse studies, see Georgakopoulou and Charalambidou (2011).

Table 2
Dimensions of old age identity-marking (adapted from Coupland et al. (1991: 91–96)).

AGE CATEGORISATION PROCESSES	• **Disclosure of chronological age** (e.g. I'm not very well these days too. I'm seventy last October.) • **Age-related category/role reference** (e.g. I'll have to pay for that myself and I'm a pensioner.) • **Age identity in relation to health, decrement, and death** (e.g. I pray I'll keep my faculties until I go.)
TEMPORAL FRAMING PROCESSES	• **Adding time-past perspective to current or recent-past states/topics** (e.g. I've been going there for eleven years.) • **Self-association with the past** (e.g. I wouldn't recognise the place (.) it's years since I've been up this part of the city... years ago I used to come up here scrubbing floors.) • **Recognising historical/cultural/social change** (e.g. But times are so different aren't they? ... everything's fast isn't. You've got to sort of run with it.)

and resistance to ageing, as well as in positive ones like mind-over-body attitude, active engagement, wisdom and maturity, and the freedom of age. Turning to other social media outlets, such as MySpace and Facebook, the huge bulk of literature has concentrated on the sophisticated (and often playful) ways in which teens and undergraduate students create and manage separate, narrow contexts tailoring their self-presentations in accordance with these contexts (e.g. a teenager filling out in the "About" section of her profile that she is ninety-five years old) (boyd, 2014). Research, however, on any specific and self-conscious generational cohort, other than the 13–17 and 18–22 age groups, still remains relatively scarce with the exception of Page (2012) and Page et al. (2013), who have studied Facebook participants over 50 years of age, as well as Kern et al. (2013), who consider Facebook as a site for collective memory suggesting in this way longer timescales at work. This paper will show that while the Coupland et al. (1991) taxonomy is grounded in the talk of the elderly, it can be easily transposed to other age categories, i.e. mid-thirties, as well as to different and more contemporary online realms such as Facebook.

Fig. 1. Automatic indication of time in post and comments.

4. Facebook and temporality

As of its launch in 2004, Facebook has become an immensely popular social network site worldwide, namely a networked communication platform in which participants

> (1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; (2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and (3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site (Ellison and boyd, 2013: 158).

Facebook participants can post status updates, that is to say, short messages in which they report what they are doing, thinking or feeling, share photos, photo albums and links, create groups of connected individuals, as well as comment on the material they or other users, the so-called "friends", post. Moreover, they can like status updates, comments and other postings by clicking the "Like" button (an image displaying a thumbs-up symbol) at the bottom of the content. In juxtaposition to other social network sites, Facebook has been found to deal in the main with physical friendships and acquaintances that are initiated offline and then transferred to the virtual scenario (Miller, 2011: 217).

The resources for temporality on Facebook are of two kinds: 1) date- and time-stamps which articulate the "here and now" of telling (cf. *telling world*, Georgakopoulou, 2007), and 2) the content produced by Facebook members, which constructs the time relative to the reported events in their lived experience (cf. *taleworld*, Georgakopoulou, 2007). Starting with the time of telling, this is indicated by means of time-stamps appended automatically by the system to both posts and follow-up comments (Fig. 1). If we hover the mouse over the date of a specific post (or comment), we can get the precise time of posting, with day of the week and exact time, as shown in Fig. 2. A poster's content is organised in the form of a Timeline (Fig. 3), which replaced Facebook profile as a new and more interactive virtual space where participants can collect their stories and experiences, add landmarks along with their dates, go back to stories from their past by clicking on particular years and months, as well as see highlights from each month. On 24 March 2015, Facebook launched the feature "On This Day", which

shows users content from that particular day in their Facebook history (e.g. statuses and photos from one year ago, two years ago, and so on) enabling them to share it anew if they wish.

Frobenius and Harper (2015) have suggested that the time-stamps of updates and comments constitute resources for and obstacles to the production of meaning and sense on Facebook on account of the medium's asynchronous nature of interaction. More precisely, they contend that the relationship between time and commenting turns (a relationship presumed to bear similar characteristics to the temporal patterning of face-to-face turn-taking) has a different nuance on Facebook since not all users are participating all the time or at the same time. A comment may appear after a status or another comment hours or even days later. Frobenius and Harper conclude that users need to accommodate different affordances (e.g. employ name mentioning/tagging to address a particular individual) to make their comments conditionally relevant.

Statuses are archived in reverse chronological order, so that the most recently added content appears always at the top of a user's profile. Conversely, a sequence of comments has a different spatial configuration with older text appearing uppermost and newer text underneath. Recent evidence (e.g. Frobenius and Harper, 2015; Georgakopoulou, 2013a, 2013b; Page, 2010, 2012; Page et al., 2013) highlights that this kind of chronological and spatial sequencing in Facebook posting bears consequences for how status update stories evolve and are interpreted. As different Facebook participants weigh in to an ongoing story at different times and points of ongoing-ness, their modes of engagement can be instrumental in shaping the tale and telling (Georgakopoulou, 2013b: 218).

Fig. 2. Automatic indication of time after hovering the mouse over the date.

Let us now turn to the relative construction of time on Facebook through content which is the subject matter of this paper. Since its conception, Facebook has been present-oriented: its initial prompt was "What are you doing right now?" and users had to start their post with the verb "is" appearing automatically (e.g. *Carla is listening to Sarah Vaughan and almost forgets she's still at the office. Almost…*). Despite major changes in the social network's infrastructure since 2010, the "pre-eminence of the present moment" (Page, 2010: 429) remains at the heart of all Facebook use. Narrativity in Facebook status updates is characterised by the present tense of announcing and sharing breaking news, namely the reporting of very recent events (e.g. "this morning", "just now") or events as unfolding near-simultaneously with the act of narration (Georgakopoulou, 2007).

Adding an interesting addendum to Georgakopoulou (2007), Page (2010) has approached Facebook status updates as belonging to the genre of *small stories*. Small stories are non-canonical stories (i.e. they do not necessarily fulfil prototypical definitional criteria of the narrative enquiry such as event-sequencing), normally small in length, typified by fluidity, plasticity and open-endedness, occurring in the small moments of discourse, rather than constituting distinct, fully-fledged units (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Notably, in the case of Facebook, small stories are influenced by the given online discourse situation (Page, 2010): they are afforded and constrained by certain temporal and spatial specificities, as mentioned earlier, and are circulated amongst a multidimensional network of Facebook friends. Within the framework of small stories, narrative is seen as a social practice which is "sequentially embedded into and occasioned by a single event and presents a trajectory and history beyond it" (Georgakopoulou, 2014: 520).

Taking these features together, it could be plausibly asserted that time on Facebook is multifaceted and multilayered. On the one hand, Facebook's automatic time-stamps along with the Timeline metaphor imply an objective representation of life created out of uniform divisions (years, months, days, hours, minutes). On the other hand, the sense of identity linked to time and age is actively constructed, and is done in interaction with other Facebook friends. In what follows, I will endeavour to cast light upon how users feel, live and experience time and age capitalising on and/or circumventing different Facebook properties.

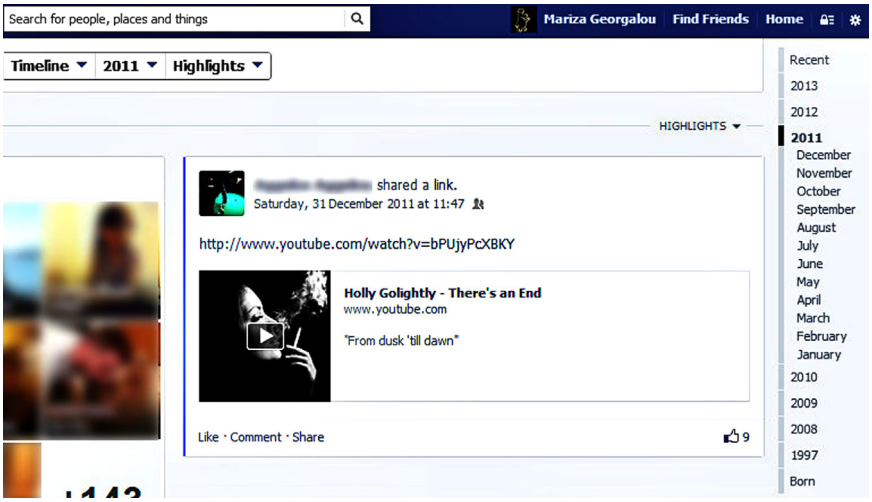

Fig. 3. The menu of dates on the right side of a user's Timeline.

5. Data and methods

The data for this paper come from a larger online ethnographic study on the construction of identities on Facebook, conducted during May 2010–April 2013 (Georgalou, 2014). Drawing on empirical evidence from five Greek Facebook users, the study explored 1) how they constructed themselves, 2) how they were co-constructed by their Facebook friends, 3) the role of multimodality in these identity constructions, and 4) the kinds of textual practices they adopted to construct their identities. By dint of close discourse analysis of both verbal and visual modalities, I identified the ways in which the particular users located themselves in terms of place and time; shared their expertise and buttressed solidarity among colleagues and fellow students; communicated emotions, tastes, thoughts, opinions and assessments; and controlled the flow of information on their walls to secure their privacy.

Methodologically, my study was situated within the discourse-centred online ethnographic paradigm (Androutsopoulos, 2008), which coalesces online ethnography with discourse analysis of log data. Such an approach takes on two dimensions: a screen-based and a participant-based one. The former centres on systematic, longitudinal and repeated observation of online discourse (Facebook profiles in my study) while the latter draws upon direct (face-to-face and/or mediated) engagement with the producers of this online discourse (Facebook profile owners here).

My five participants (two female and three male Greek users; mean age = 28) were recruited via convenience sampling (i.e. they were friends of friends). Initially, they were sent a message in which I explained the purposes of my study,[4] asking them to fill in a "warm up" online questionnaire, which would help me to formulate a first inkling of how they experience the mechanics of social media. The survey covered questions pertaining to the reasons for creating online profiles, the types of shared and shareable content as well as a mini-assessment of the users' presence in social media venues. Following this, the participants were invited to have their Facebook Timelines painstakingly observed[5] and to participate in a series of semi-structured online interviews (via email, instant messaging and/or Facebook messages) on the basis of my observation. Conducting these interviews enabled me to acquire an emic, more holistic and solidified understanding of my participants' discourse practices. My data tapestry was woven by Facebook profile information, status updates, comments, video and article links, photos my informants have taken themselves or have found elsewhere in the internet, interview excerpts, survey and field notes as well my informants' comments on drafts of my analysis. My interviewees were asked to sign a consent form, prior to data collection, in which they were assured that their material (information they added about themselves, status updates, their comments, their friends' comments, images, other multimedia) would remain confidential and would be used for academic purposes solely.[6] Concerning the use of third-party comments in the study, I either asked for their posters' permission or asked my subjects to do so on my behalf. Throughout my dataset I have preserved pseudonymity for my informants and anonymity for other Facebook users.

In the next section I look at a single episode from the data. This is chosen to highlight some interpretative issues pertinent to time and age identity construction in the context of Facebook and in so doing it brings into sharp focus crucial questions for further work (see Section 8). The episode is comprised of a status update, a video link and 11 comments, from one of my five informants, Carla. Carla was born in 1975 and lives in Athens, Greece. She has a BA in Translation and Interpreting from the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting of the Ionian University in Corfu, Greece. She has been working as a translator, principally of Latin American literature. She speaks Greek (native), English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. She was recruited for my study in October 2010. She has been monitoring two Facebook profiles: a personal one (since 5 November 2007) and a professional (since 20 January 2009). Her main motives for setting them up were interpersonal, that is, to keep in touch with friends, colleagues and acquaintances, as well as entertainment and learning, i.e. to express and share information, interests, views and ideas (cf. Cha, 2010). She visits her personal profile almost every day posting once or twice per week. Her professional profile is updated less often, 3–4 times per month. On the day of her recruitment (26 October 2010), Carla had 109 friends in her personal profile and 92 in her professional one. Two years later (23 September 2012), she counted 142 and 128 friends respectively.

6. "Mom, I'm growing old": talking about time and age on Facebook

Loosely based upon the Coupland et al. taxonomy described above, I will examine time and age identity marking in a thread excerpted from Carla's personal profile.[7]

Carla
22 March 2011 at 23:55
έκλεισα 19 χρόνια από το πρώτο ταξίδι στο Λονδίνο και το πρώτο κόλλημα με τους smiths. μαμά, γερνάω.
it's been 19 years since my first trip to London and my first obsession with the Smiths. mom, I'm growing old.
[Smith's song *Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me* is embedded, URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDiEiXFaQF4]
8 people like this

1. FBU1 [male]: Το like πάει στο Λονδίνο και τους Smiths:-)
The 'Like' is for London and the Smiths:-)
23 March 2011 at 00:03 · Like · 1 [by FBU4, female]

2. Carla: θες να πεις ότι δε γερνάω όμορφα; χαχαχαχαχα!:p
do you mean you don't like the way i'm getting old? hahahahaha!:p
23 March 2011 at 00:04

3. FBU1:

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[4] What my participants knew at first about the research was that I was studying the function of language on Facebook as a fundamental code of users' self-presentation in their Timelines. Full access to my four research questions and the identity categories I came up with after multiple and close readings of the data (place, time and age, education and profession, stance, and privacy) was given to them in due course, after data processing and initial analyses.

[5] The hours spent browsing their Facebook Timelines varied according to their frequency of posting and the wealth of interactions unfolded.

[6] According to Facebook Pages Terms: "If you collect content and information directly from users, you will make it clear that you (and not Facebook) are collecting it, and you will provide notice about and obtain user consent for your use of the content and information that you collect. Regardless of how you obtain content and information from users, you are responsible for securing all necessary permissions to reuse their content and information. You will not collect users' content or information, or otherwise access Facebook, using automated means (such as harvesting bots, robots, spiders, or scrapers) without our permission" (https://www.facebook.com/page_guidelines.php; accessed 24 June 2015).

[7] Italics are used for English translations of the data, interview excerpts, and for mentioning extracts from the data. Underlines have been added to examples to indicate the feature I am discussing. The acronym FBU is used for my informants' Facebook friends and stands for Facebook User. Different Facebook participants are enumerated for ease of reference (e.g. FBU1, FBU2, FBU3…). All textual data are rendered intact including the use of Greeklish, i.e. romanised version of the Greek alphabet, stress omissions (in Greek), spelling and typos mistakes, multiple punctuation, absence of spacing between words, incomplete meanings and unconventional usages.

Έχω μάθει να μην κάνω σχόλια στις κυρίες για θέματα ηλικίας;-)
I have learnt not to comment on ladies' age issues;-)
23 March 2011 at 00:04

4. FBU1: Thanx for the post, είχα καιρό να το ακούσω.
Thanx for the post, it's been a long time since I listened to it..
23 March 2011 at 00:05

5. Carla: την πρώτη φορά που πήγα αγγλία, σε summer school και καλά, βγάλαμε τους στίχους σε listening exercise. άμα λέμε ότι είναι πολύ μπροστά στην εκπαίδευση…:-)
the first time I went to england, in a summer school let's say, we wrote the lyrics in a listening exercise. they are miles ahead in education…:-)
23 March 2011 at 00:07 · Like · 1 [by FBU1]

6. FBU1: Η τέχνη στην υπηρεσία της μάθησης!
Art in the service of learning!
23 March 2011 at 00:08 · Like · 1 [by Carla]

7. Carla: όσο για την ηλικία, έκανες σχόλιο, στην προσπάθειά σου να το αποφύγεις (προσδιορίζοντας πού πάει το like). αλλά εγώ δεν έχω θέμα με την ηλικία μου, απλώς διαπιστώνω ότι γερνάω κι εγώ όπως όλοι…
concerning the age issue, you made a comment, while trying to avoid it (by specifying what your 'Like' indicates). but I don't have a problem with my age, I'm just realising that I'm growing old as everyone else…
23 March 2011 at 00:09 · Like · 1 [by FBU4]

8. FBU1: Ο προσδιορισμός του like έχει να κάνει ότι δεν με ενδιαφέρει το θέμα "ηλικία", τονίζοντας ότι επιβραβεύω έναν όμορφο προορισμό και ένα σπουδαίο μουσικό σύνολο! Νομίζω πως το έσωσα…
Specifying 'Like' means that I'm not interested in the 'age' issue, pointing out that I praise a beautiful destination and a great music band! I think I've saved it…
23 March 2011 at 00:13

9. Carla: μια χαρά! και πολύ το ζαλίσαμε το θέμα
fine! we have dealt so much with the issue
23 March 2011 at 00:15

10. FBU2 [male]: Τι να πει κι ο Morrissey…
What can Morrissey say…
23 March 2011 at 00:55 · Like · 2 [by Carla and FBU5]

11. FBU3 [female]: ASE MAS RE POU GERNAS, ORISTE MAS, SE LIGO THA MAS PEIS OTI GERASAME K EMEIS. AKOU EKEI!
COME ON. YOU'RE NOT GROWING OLD, COME ON, ARE YOU GONNA TELL US NOW THAT WE TOO HAVE GROWN OLD. PLEASE!
23 March 2011 at 01:37 · Like · 1 [by FBU4]

Carla starts with a status update in which she recalls London and the English rock band, The Smiths (active during 1982–1987), posting their song *Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me*. Its lyrics are quite depressing talking about the difficulties of finding true and lasting love. But Carla does not choose the song to identify with the content of the lyrics. The particular song provides a key temporal benchmark that allows her to intermingle the past with the present. As can be seen, she adds a specific past time perspective to her first visit to London and the outset of her enchantment with the Smiths (*it's been 19 years*). In discourse management, the past can be reshaped, discovered, rediscovered, remembered, forgotten, and invented by virtue of such temporal framing processes (cf. Coupland et al., 1991; Jenkins, 2002: 269). This kind of chronological shifting into the past constitutes for Carla an essential and conscious ingredient of her self-identification across time, the "active focusing on a small part of the conscious being's self-centered model of the surrounding world" (Chafe, 1994: 28). Carla goes on to assign herself the category label (cf. Coupland et al., 1991: 92) of *getting old* through the allusion to a well-known Greek ballad song entitled *Μαμά, Γερνάω* (*Mom, I* m growing old).[8] The chorus lyrics below give us a taste of what this song is about:

> *Μαμά, πεινάω μαμά, φοβάμαι μαμά, γερνάω, μαμά.*
> *Και τρέμω να 'μαι αυτό που χρόνια ανησυχείς: ωραία, νέα κι ατυχής.*
> *Mom, I'm hungry mom, I'm afraid mom, I'm growing old, mom.*
> *And I'm very worried to become the person you always dreaded: nice, young and unlucky.*

By forging this intertextual link, Carla either makes a poignant self-awareness claim or overperforms in an attempt to elicit from her audience the exactly opposite answer (e.g. "no, you're not growing old" as is the case with FBU3's comment).

Before proceeding to look at the comments underneath the video post, it is useful to clarify that FBU1 is one of the 8 people who liked Carla's post. He goes on to specify in comment 1 what exactly he liked: London and the Smiths. Carla teases him (comment 2) with the rhetorical question *do you mean you don't like the way i'm getting old?* along with paralanguage in the same tone (*hahahahaha!:p*) owing to the fact that he passed by her remark on ageing. Here Carla takes for granted the category "old" for herself settling for asking about its quality.

In comment 3, FBU1 reproduces the cultural stereotype of men being supposed not to evaluate women's age. What seems to underlie his comment is the implicit cultural valuation of youth over age. When someone talks about women's age, the only polite thing is to say they seem younger – especially within the Greek context this is taken to be a highly-valued compliment (cf. Sifianou, 2001: 426). One can imagine a view in which age is better (e.g. through references to maturity and wisdom) but it is entirely missing from FBU1's proposition.

In comment 4, we observe that aside from her own age identity, Carla's song choice awakens FBU1's past musical tastes (*Thanx for the post, it's been a long time since i listened to it..*). Such kind of awakening can be seen as "renewing" in some way senses of identity that he had experienced in the past (cf. Buchanan and Middleton, 1995: 458).

Carla then associates herself with the past producing a small story of how she got acquainted with Smiths and the particular song (comment 5), which complements her initial post. Her story does not belong to the genre of breaking news but acquires the integrity of a narrative post-factum (Dayter, 2015). This type of narrating events and actions is integral to Carla's self-discovery and the process of storying herself, allowing her to integrate herself in time (McAdams, 1997 in Georgakopoulou, 2006: 236). The distance between storying (the time of the reported event of going to the summer school 19 years ago) and the temporality of the timestamp appearing underneath her comment enables Carla to retrospectively reflect upon and evaluate her musical, travelling and educational experiences.

London, the Smiths and the passing of time constitute key ingredients in other Carla's stories across her Facebook profile

[8] Written by Lina Nikolakopoulou and released in 1988.

Fig. 4. Carla's London photo album.

Fig. 5. Carla posts a Morrissey song.

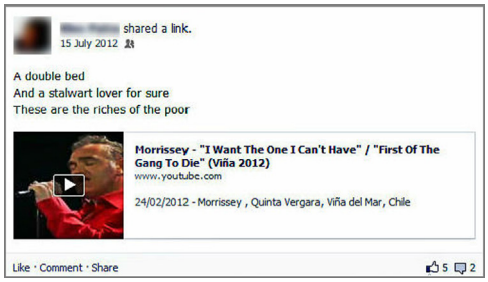

Fig. 6. Carla posts a Morrissey song II.

Fig. 7. Carla takes a stance on her age (Translation: male friend: *What's going on, have we turned to rock?* Carla: *you see what happens to people in old age?*).

endowing her with a sense of continuity. In my data archive I have several other instances of Carla visually narrating a more recent visit to London (in 2011) – Fig. 4 shows a case in point. Note that the title of the photo album creates intertextual links to another Smiths' song, *Panic in the Streets of London*. Her Timeline is replete with even more Morrissey (the Smiths vocalist and lyricist, who later followed a solo career) song links through which she indicates her fondness of his work, displays her cultural capital, expresses her moods or implies a situation she is into (e.g. Fig. 5 from 2010 and Fig. 6 from 2012). With respect to the issue of time passing, she is too elsewhere found to communicate stances towards her age. By way of exemplification, in Fig. 7, she humorously self-selects the category *old* to justify her sudden veering towards a different music style. Verbal, visual and aural recounting of that ilk suggests that Carla is part of a story but also an agent with a story, who is not just focusing on experiencing a narrative—she is equally eager to sense, explain, share, explore and modify who she is (Friedlander, 2008: 187).

Returning to the thread, Carla in comment 7 brings back the subject of age, endorsing the category old, to acknowledge change in herself, which according to Nikander (2009: 870) constitutes a common fact of human ageing. By stating that she does not face a problem with her age, Carla seems to view ageing not as some kind of estrangement from earlier parts of herself or decline (be that bodily, psychological, mental) but as a self-continuity process. In so doing, she employs the device of attribution, that is, she presents her personal perception and experience of ageing as shared, or potentially shared, by a whole group of people (cf. Myers, 2004: 152). In comment 8, FBU1 repeats his explanation on "Like", clarifying he is not interested in age, distancing thus himself from the particular identity category and avoiding to affiliate himself with Carla's words. He wittily finishes off by writing *I think I've saved it…* tacitly acknowledging that, although he did not make any direct appeals to Carla's age, he inadvertently contextualised it in a fairly unfavourable way.

In his study of the BBC series *Naked* (1998) (a patchwork of recruited individuals' interviews from four different age-groups: the middle-aged; young adults; teenagers; and the elderly), Jaworski (2003: 105) remarks that music stars such as Madonna, Tina Turner and Mick Jagger—albeit admittedly ageing—remain "young for their age" and thus establish desirable points of reference in their fans' age self-identification (especially for fans of 40 and over). However, this is not the case in comment 10 of the thread, where FBU2 draws humorous parallels with the age of Morrissey (born in 1959) to suggest that the one who has actually grown old and seems weak—and therefore should complain—is Morrissey[9] and not Carla. Argumentatively, FBU2 shifts the category of old to a third party pointing to the negative implications of the category.

FBU3's reaction in comment 11 is interesting, focalised using semiotic means (capitalisation), in that she rejects Carla's ageing (*YOU'RE NOT GETTING OLD, COME ON*), and concomitantly her own, wishing not to be included in the "we-group" of all those realising that they grow old (*THAT WE TOO HAVE GROWN OLD*).[10] In fact, as Carla clarified in a follow-up interview, FBU3 was 65 years old when writing this comment (in March 2011). So the sense that FBU3 conveys here towards Carla's comment on growing old is something like "Give us a break; if you're complaining at your 36, then what should I do?".

Overall, we see that age identity is malleable and fluid. Even though Carla's chronological age would in no way classify her as old person, the identity old person actually becomes significant for the participants (Poulios, 2009), who discursively construct it as

[9] Morrissey has been reported to have battled bouts of poor health in recent years, including pneumonia, stomach ulcers, the throat condition Barrett's oesophagus and anaemia. In October 2014, he revealed he has received treatment for cancer. As he stated: "I know I look quite bad on recent photographs, but I am afraid this is what illness does to the overall countenance. I will save relaxation for when I'm dead" (BBC, 2014).

[10] Schwartz et al. (2013) have found that for both male and female Facebook participants the use of first-person-singular pronouns ("I," "me," "my," "mine") declines with age, while simultaneously, the use of first-person-plural pronouns ("we," "us," "our," "ours") is increased.

relative and relational (something that has been reported about identities in interaction by and large; see, e.g., Georgakopoulou, 2007). As the boundaries of the category old seem to be rather fuzzy, the participants draw on different features of the category to endorse them, to spurn them, to alienate themselves from them and others or attribute them to others.

7. Interrelations of time and age identity with Facebook functionalities

What we witnessed in the thread that opened Section 6 was the activation of four different time and age identities: Carla's, FBU1's, Morrissey's, and FBU3's. Interestingly, the (co)construction of these identities is afforded and constrained to a great extent by certain Facebook particularities: linking, commenting, and liking.

Carla commences by sharing a bipartite post: the first part consisted of purely verbal material (with references to London, the Smiths, and the passing of time and ageing) while the second part linked to audiovisual material (the Smiths music video). The ability to embed and share music links (principally via the video-sharing site of YouTube) is one of the most significant affordances of personal expression on Facebook. Details of a given song like title, name of the artist(s) and visuals (e.g. still images of the artist(s) or the album cover, snapshots of the video clip and so on) are usually manifest in the thumbnail of the post, enabling other users to get the general gist of the link before following it up. Music, in addition to indicating individual dispositions, and facilitating in attaining and maintaining certain states of feeling, can be used for retrieving memories and therefore "remembering/constructing who one is" (DeNora, 2000: 63). To narrate her autobiographical episode, Carla opts for the ad hoc posting of a music link that brings to her memory particular past events and incidents (i.e. her first trip to London and attendance at a summer school), constructing in this manner an individualised time and age identity. Yet, her link functions as a fuel to recycle memories, and awaken past tastes amongst members of her audience, conducing to an unintentional crafting of FBU1's time and age identity (see comment 4).

Another Facebook facility that promotes a good sense of social connection among users is commenting (cf. Page, 2012: 73). Comments constitute indicators of engagement with a post as well as a way to provide background information and engage in identity debates triggered by the given post (Androutsopoulos, 2010: 210). As shown in Fig. 8, the comments that follow Carla's post are "tied" (cf. Frobenius and Harper, 2015) to 1) either of the three topics in the verbal part of the post, 2) the audiovisual part of the post, 3) both the verbal and the audiovisual part of the post, or 4) to a previous comment. The time and age identities that emerge here are the unique products of this successive commenting and intricate tying, irrespective of Carla's original aim of posting.

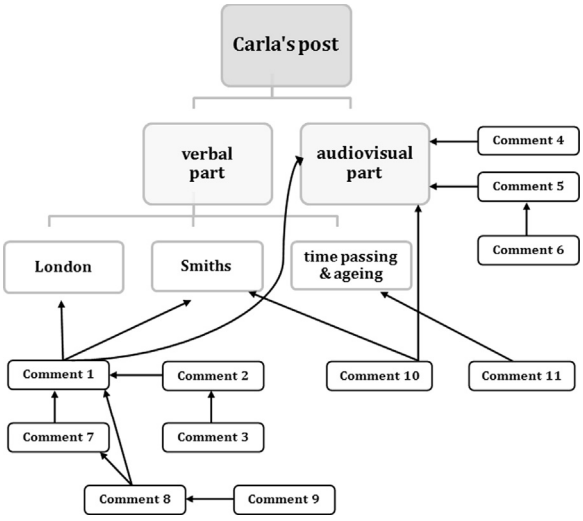

Fig. 8. The tying of comments underneath Carla's post.

This whole commentary was sparked off by and structured around FBU1's reference to the "Like" button. As Barton and Lee (2013: 88–89) note, the action of clicking "Like" is packed with diverse social meanings and pragmatic functions, such as communicate a positive stance (i.e. literally like something); show interest in the post or its content; give support to the content poster; align with the stance of the status poster; answer "yes" to a question posed in the post; and indicate that the post has been read. Peyton (2014: 115) observes that the "Like" button has a temporal status too:

> To be known as a "liker" requires a waiting period that occurs between the act of clicking the "like" button and the reading by others of that "liking" action. In that liminal period between clicking the like button and being perceived as a liker, the button exteriorizes the necessity of the anxiety of waiting to the liking user. "Will people be happy that I like this thing? How will my friends react?" are the kinds of things that happen internally in the liker while they wait for the reaction to their reaction.

The composite nature of Carla's post poses several dilemmas to her Facebook friends. If they click "Like" on her post, what exactly do they indicate? That they enjoy the song? That they subscribe to Carla's point of view that she is growing old? That they like London? That they approve of Carla's fondness for the Smiths (and Morrissey)? Given this conglomerate of the "Like" button's blurred and unfixed meanings as well as temporal strains, FBU1 feels that the action of clicking the button alone does not signal his intended stance. The resolution to this liminality occurs with him spelling out in words the meaning of his liking. FBU1's action points to a distinction between the timescales of the interaction, namely the actual time at which "liking" took place in Facebook's asynchronous context, and the temporality constructed by the content of his comment, which here is generated as he attempts to clarify what he liked and in so doing made references that implied age identities (see Section 4 on the resources for temporality in Facebook). Had it not been for the clarification of this "Like", the discussion in all likelihood would have taken a totally different twist with different comment patterning than the one outlined above and concomitantly different (if any at all) age identity constructions.

As I found in my extended study of identity on Facebook (Georgalou, 2014), additionally to performing an emotive action, clicking the "Like" button turned out to have another functionality as well. My informants clicked "Like" to comments on their postings made by their friends to accept and espouse other constructions of themselves. Now if we take a closer look at the comments in the previous section, we will notice that the interaction is further complemented, enhanced and consolidated by the action of liking comments. As we can see, Carla aligns with comment 10, on Morrissey's ageing and physical decline, but not with any of FBU1's equivocations on the issue of her age (comments 3 and 8). There is also another user, FBU4, who—anchoring in my ethnographic observation and knowledge—is one of Carla's closest offline female friends. Although FBU4 does not offer any verbal comments to the discussion, she actively contributes to and ratifies the collaborative construal of Carla's and FBU3's age identities by means of liking comments 7 and 11. In this fashion, likewise Carla, she includes herself to the collective of everyone else who realises the passing of time, rejecting though the label of having grown old for both Carla and FBU3.

8. Concluding remarks

The present paper embarked on investigating how Facebook users construct themselves in time, namely how they think and talk about time and age. Drawing on data from a Greek female user's Timeline and informed by the frameworks of discourse-centred online ethnography, age-categorisation and temporal framing processes as well as small stories, the analysis evinced a multifaceted take on time, temporality and identity on Facebook. Returning to Evans's (2005) senses of time, as delineated in the beginning of the paper, the participants in the data at hand principally constructed time as duration (maintaining same song preferences), as instance (listening exercise based on a Smiths song), as event (summer school), as agentive (recognising change and ageing), and as measurement-system (using numerical markers of time, i.e. 19 years since first trip to London). Being involved in processes such as sharing songs, copying lyrics, liking, writing and receiving comments, the participants evoked certain periods of life; recollected memories; appealed to experiences; recalled past tastes; generated past and present individual and collective identities; argued about time's impact on appearance; evaluated and expressed humorous attitudes to ageing.

The focus of this contribution could be seen as limiting since it has not delved further into a comparative analysis inclusive of examples from my other Facebook informants, which would undoubtedly proffer a more holistic view of age identity. This would be the next logical step, and in fact some closer discourse analysis has been carried out on postings from different users that demonstrate identities in relation to time as part of my larger study (Georgalou, 2014, Chapter 6). The decision to single out the particular episode for this paper was taken for purposes of conducting a more systematic and fine-grained analysis that would aptly illustrate certain nuances and details germane to age identity construction within Facebook. In this light, the perspective adopted herein yielded some useful insights.

To commence with, one notable aspect that the analysis brought to the fore was the interactional character of time and age identities, building in this way on existing work on language and (age) identities in different settings including everyday conversations, (TV) interviews and reality shows (e.g. articles in Antaki and Widdicombe (1998), Deppermann and Günthner (2015), Nikander (2002), and Poulios (2011)). Time and age identities in the current data were projected, credited, challenged, endorsed, resisted, and collaboratively negotiated in front of a—more or less acquainted—selected viewing Facebook audience. As such, they were not considered as mere chronological facts (e.g. being 36 or 65 years old) but as socially established processes, as contextualised interactional accomplishments (Boden and Bielby, 1986: 73; Poulios, 2009: 206). The participants worked together on these identities picking up certain aspects (e.g. attaching age labels such as "old", associating the self with the past, recognising the passage of time, framing particular life stages, drawing parallels with the age of a music idol) and playing with them.

Significantly, this collaborative task of age identity construction was both facilitated and hindered by Facebook's particular architecture. Owing to its facility of link embedding and sharing, Facebook became a space to remember and remind: Carla posted a song link which pointed to a cornucopia of memories, feelings, preferences, conceptions, and trains of thought – not only hers but also those of her audience. Identities aroused impromptu as the participants actively engaged in and contributed to the interaction via successive commenting. The "Like" button, on the other hand, appeared to encode different meanings for different users. For FBU1, the action of liking per se seemed insufficient and perhaps offending as it would suggest that he accepted and aligned with Carla's assertion of growing old. For him, clarification of liking was warranted to dissolve any ambiguities. For FBU4, the "Like" button functioned as a tacit yet powerful validating marker in the relative and relational construction of Carla's and FBU3's age identities. Indisputably, the true value of these affordances lies in the offline, pre-existing ties between Facebook participants, be they strong, weak or peripheral (e.g. current and past intimate friends, relatives, colleagues, occasional acquaintances). None of these effects would be the same on Twitter, for example, in which users do not necessarily know who is "following" them.

Another interesting observation to emerge from the analysis was the dismissal of Facebook's tendency "to concertina time into a relentless fixation with the present" (Miller, 2011: 191). Previous scholarship (Georgakopoulou, 2013a, 2013b; Page, 2010, 2012) has explored the ways in which "recency is prized over retrospection" (Page, 2010: 440) in Facebook posts, for example via announcing and sharing breaking news. This study has gone some way towards showing the vitality of reminiscing (with or without age references) in identity (co)construction. Revitalising the past together with other Facebook friends, through comments and songs, turns out to be a valuable resource for situating and reseeing the self in both personal and collective history as well as for cultivating and enforcing participation, sociality and membership amongst friends that have known each other from the past and perhaps "meet" more regularly on Facebook rather than offline.

In sum, this paper has shown that Facebook can serve as an interactive, co-authored digital memory bank, an online self-continuum which enables users to temporally position themselves taking up certain orientations to time that have social meanings to them (cf. van Dijk, 2009: 126). Further work needs to be done to establish whether reminiscing is a salient practice amongst users along with how it works with or defies Facebook tendencies.

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