Enhancing social presence through textual action

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Enhancing social presence through textual action: Virtual performatives as a relatability strategy

Abstract
The chapter examines 'virtual performatives' in publicly visible original tweets that are not explicitly directed to particular others. The focus is on self-referential third-person predications functioning in the service of simulated textual action or emotion, as in *jumps up and down* and *feels happy*. The investigation of their uses as well as enactment of virtual silence is related to the environment of connectedness and possible context collapse. Coreferential shifts in grammatical person are accounted for, and the notion of 'digital logophoricity' is proposed for some of the systematic peculiarities manifest in the data. Virtual performatives function as a strategy for relatability, contributing to a general sense of conviviality, not least through their inherent playfulness and the benevolent humour conveyed by the tweets including them.

Keywords: virtual performatives, self-communication, virtual silence, digital logophoricity, humour, Twitter

1. *Introduction*

Despite easy access to multimodal resources in today's digital media, users continue to type in verbal messages, in combination or not, with visuals. This chapter is concerned with textual action realized through a relatively autonomous fragment, which carries traces of internet history: the common or garden 'virtual performative'. The focus is on self-referential third-person predications in English functioning in the service of simulated textual action or emotion, as in *jumps up and down with excitement* and *feels happy*. Often typographically marked, such textual fragments are (semi)performative in the sense of the particular virtual action or emotion being instantaneously executed through the typing, solely by the power of the technology user's words; hence, it cannot be subsequently cancelled, only commented upon (see e.g. Cherny 1995; Herring 2001; Kolko 1995; Lyons 2018; Virtanen 2015). The aim is to investigate ways in which users employ this textual resource in publicly visible original tweets that are not explicitly directed to particular others, to enhance their social presence on the microblogging platform Twitter. As the opening tweets selected for analysis do

not constitute responses to other tweets, they can be studied as self-contained pieces of discourse.

The present focus on connectedness in mass communication is warranted by the discussion of the extent to which users may be assumed to encounter problems of audience design in such environments, reflecting some degree of 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd 2010; Wesch 2009; see also the discussion in Johansson 2017). Hence, the pragmatic affordances of Twitter will affect users' communicative strategies in accordance with their tacit assumptions of possible audiences: they may have a variety of real or imagined audiences in mind, fluctuate between these, and still also be aware of the public nature of the posts and the existence of large, general audiences, abstract and invisible (for discussions, see Costa 2018; Litt and Hargittai 2016; Zappavigna 2017). Users' have, however, been shown to strive for interaction even in environments where reciprocity is not expected or encouraged (see e.g. Honeycutt and Herring 2009). To increase the sense of connectedness, the mere act of (re)posting a message or leaving a like may provide users with a feeling of 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna 2011) or 'conviviality' (Varis and Blommaert 2015), akin to Malinowski's (1923) 'phatic communion'. Vásquez and Creel (2017) demonstrate the importance of the notion of 'relatability' for the creation of (a sense of) interaction. Many users thus show proof of benevolence in their online behaviour. The present examination of original tweets which do not manifest 'addressivity' (Werry 1996) serves to disclose uses of virtual performatives in the service of relatability, as networked participants set to negotiate contact with real or imagined audiences. Such convergence practices are highly likely to be characterized by playfulness and humour (Danet 2001; Vásquez 2019).

In what follows, virtual performatives are approached from three angles: (i) by examining how users employ them to enact virtual action and emotion through text; (ii) by exploring virtual silence performed as 'non-speech' in instances where users choose to include it as a salient component of their messages; and (iii) by examining how users go about externalizing and reassuming the self in such textual action, as they set out to construct disembodied, networked, public social personae. I propose the notion of 'digital logophoricity' to account for some of the ways in which users attribute point of view and index responsibility to the various facets of the self that they choose to stage through textual action. First, however, an overview of previous scholarship as well as a presentation of methods and materials are in order.

2. *Previous studies*

Cherny (1995) investigated the complex use of virtual performatives in text-based multi-player virtual reality chat environments, such as social MUDs (multi-user dungeons/dimensions/domains) and MOOs (object-oriented MUDs). These text-

only environments provided users with a standard command for third-person simulated action or emotion. What was typed in was preceded on screen by the username, and the 'emote' mode was indicated differently from the 'say' mode, e.g. *lynn waves* vs *lynn says, "hi"* (Cherny 1995: n.p.). Early studies commonly explored Internet Relay Chat (IRC), where users were found to rely on stereotyped frames and schemata for gendering (Herring 2003) while they also put the commands and emerging conventions of simulated action to creative use (see e.g. Danet 2001; Werry 1996). Some of the typographic elements still in use can be retraced to these early programs.

Uses of virtual performatives in the third person have since been identified in early instant messaging environments (Baron 2013), text-messaging (texting, or SMS, i.e. Short Message Service) on mobile phones (Lyons 2018), as well as the more recent mobile Interactive Multimodal Platforms (IMP; Herring 2018) such as WhatsApp on smart phones. Other modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC) featuring them include discussion boards (Virtanen 2015), social networking sites such as Facebook (Herring 2012, 2013; Lee 2011), microblogging platforms, in particular Twitter (Virtanen 2015, 2018), but also Tumblr, which affords both social networking and microblogging through user-generated content (Vásquez and Creel 2017; Vásquez 2019). A recent observation is from online conference platforms, where participants sometimes type *claps* in response to a presentation. It should be noted that in these and other environments, users type in virtual performatives in their messages, optionally singling them out by typographic elements of their choice.

3. *Methods and materials*

The data consist of some 500 publicly visible general tweets that include virtual performatives. Around 300 are from 2014-2015, when the character limit was 140, and the rest are from 2018, when it was 280. They were identified using the search tool of Twitter to detect instances of common short verbs in the third person simple present as well as basic adjectives of emotion. Only one tweet was included per user, and the data were not designed for quantification. The focus on mass practices motivated a selection of original posts, in the sense that they do not explicitly link to other messages on Twitter or elsewhere, constitute replies to other users, or include names of people. Initiating discourse, they thus displayed no immediately preceding context. Such messages may, however, be part of users' social media feeds and they may be followed by an interactional thread. Still, manifest popularity was not a criterion as it appears through post-hoc reactions. The tweets selected for analysis were considered to be relatively independent pieces of discourse at the stage of their posting. They were submitted to a close discourse-linguistic analysis focusing on the functions of the virtual performatives contained in them. The enactment of virtual action or emotion was examined in relation to the environment of connectedness and possible context collapse.

4. *Enacting virtual action through text*

The underspecified semantics of the textual fragments under investigation invites users to draw on stereotypes and simulated shared contexts, thus facilitating the construction and maintenance of a sense of connectedness. Virtual performatives may be used to activate frames and schemata (Tannen 1993) that users tacitly assume to be commonly shared. In terms of grounding in discourse (Wårvik 2011), they may provide crucial background information, while, importantly, they will still allow for multiple conceptualisations. For instance, in (1) the virtual shrugging is discursively backgrounded despite its weighty position at the end of the message; it functions as a booster to the assumingly nonchalant 'verbal' reaction *Okay* to the ending of the particular American TV sitcom, which is foregrounded. The shrugging may be interpreted as taking place simultaneously with the verbal response, or right after it as it is typed on a line of its own. Shrugging one's shoulders is, in fact, a central virtual gesture indicating lack of knowledge or care, for which there is also an emoji.

(1) The Big Bang Theory's ending.
Okay.
shrugs

Unlike the tweet-final shrug reinforcing the response in (1), the virtual act of blowing smoke rings in (2) is foregrounded as the attention-calling opening of the tweet. Immediately after, however, it becomes part of the background and the target of the subsequent metadiscursive comment by the user, *They call me Trouble*. The staging is vaguely reminiscent of an opening of a film or play.

(2) *blows smoke rings
They call me Trouble

It is also common for a particular virtual enactment to convey the essence of a post, as in (3), where the accidental taking of the 6hr nap constitutes the entire content of the tweet. The textual action is here prefaced by an indication of the *dramatis persona*, as in written plays or film scripts. Even without the specification *me:*, such a textual fragment would be readily associated with the user, as represented on screen immediately above the message by their username and Twitter handle as well as other information such as an optional photo or a picture of some kind. Twitter invites responses to the question, "what's happening?", and tweets by personal users may be expected to provide self-referential information about a user's doings and whereabouts, as well as their feelings, thoughts and opinions.

(3) me: *accidentally takes a 6hr nap*

The majority of the tweets in the data convey playfulness and humour. This is so in one-liners such as (3), as well as tweets consisting of a two-part structure. These tend to comprise some kind of a trigger and an unexpected or incongruous response to it, as in (1). The user's easy-going attitude might appear as incongruous if they are a fan of the series; if not, the issue of tweeting about it might be interpreted as pragmatically marked in the sense of a user highlighting an event that is of no consequence to them. Other two-part structures consist of the user's metacomment on a virtual action (or a series of them) that they have just enacted, as in (2). The humour displayed in the data is highly benevolent. It is typically self-oriented and commonly self-deprecating in an accepting manner where users are showing that they are not taking themselves too seriously.

Further, posts featuring textual action or emotion may be realized as simulated interaction instantaneously taking place between different characters or facets of the self. In (4), the unexpected action of the user stopping cleaning is the most foregrounded portion at the peak of the humorous 'microplay' (Virtanen 2018) featuring the user 'me' and their four-year old child. Other users may be expected to find this kind of humour 'relatable' (Vásquez and Creel 2017; Vásquez 2019), which, in turn, might increase the chances of the tweeter coming across as likeable.

(4) Me: Clean up.
4-year-old: I can't.
Me: Why not?
4: Sharks.
Me: *stops cleaning, too*

Consider the two microplays in (5) and (6), each consisting of a temporally organized sequence of virtual performatives. Both are self-referential, but in (6) the user has still chosen to add *me:* in front of every action, redundantly from the perspective of identifying the character in question.

(5) *posts tweet*
sees typo
deletes tweet
writes the exact same tweet again and corrects the typo
pretends nothing happened

(6) me: *burps really loud*
me: *whispers* wow
me: *realizes I'm alone*
me: *tries to tweet about it but it really isnt actually that funny*

Instead of including other characters or props in their microplays, users commonly engage in a dialogue with themselves. Hence, in (7), the user exchanges views with *Brain*, a repeatedly occurring phenomenon in the data. The exchange is introduced by *Me to me:*, where the second 'me' is 'brain'. The peak of the microplay is realized by a virtual performative, this time playfully enacted by 'Brain'.

(7) Me to me: Don't overthink it
Brain: But what if...
Me: No
Brain: *doesn't listen and overthinks it anyways*

Vásquez and Creel (2017) investigate Tumblr chats for short imagined interactions between one or several characters, who are different versions of the user 'me', stylized others (such as teenager, teacher, employee and so forth), and/or well-known historical or contemporary persons. Such microplays create affective situations that other users in an environment of connectedness may be expected to be able to relate to. Self-deprecation is common, and so is some type of internal contradiction as a source of humour (Vásquez 2019). These two characteristics are predominant also in the present data. Hence, in (8), the user enacts two subsequent virtual actions contradicting one another, and then provides the audience with a self-oriented metacomment preceded by virtual laughter. Unlike in the earlier data from 2014-2015, users in the data sample from 2018 commonly preface such virtual action by *me*, followed by *also me*, and where necessary, playfully extending the indication to *also also (also) me*.

(8) me: *tweets*
also me 2 seconds later: *deletes tweet*
lol why am i like this

The tweets conform to expectations of a high degree of self-referentiality. While addressivity is minimal in the data, users' constructions of a relational self can be discerned, for instance, in metacomments such the one in (8), where the user indicates the point of the tweet and its humorous tone indirectly to their relatable audiences while being projected as laughing and 'thinking (out loud)' to themself.

5. *Enacting silence*

The data exhibit strategic manipulation of silence when users enact virtual 'non-speech' as a salient component of their message. Posts are assumed to carry meaning verbally and visually, and including in text-based messages passages that are empty of words therefore consists of a highly marked phenomenon in the environment. Consider the following tweet: after the virtual action of looking at

their bank account, the user performs virtual silence, explicitly attributing the implicit response to what they are witnessing to the *dramatis persona* 'me'. The reading might, for instance, be one of surprise, confusion or disappointment, and the silent response to the performed action is highly foregrounded through an invitation to the readership to fill in some appropriate and relatable meaning.

(9) *looks at bank account*
Me:

Significant silence is a basic interactional resource in everyday discourse (see e.g. Kurzon 2015; Levinson 1983: 299-300; Sacks et al. 1974). Unsurprisingly, therefore, users have throughout CMC history taken the trouble of intentionally including significant silence in their messages; witness, for instance, the empty 'null emote' in Cherny's (1995) MOO data and the mere question mark in Lee's (2011) Facebook status update data. Herring (2013) argues that such uses are pragmatically ill-formed because of the default expectation that users provide information about what they are doing and thinking. Further, Simpson (2013) illustrates the availability in chat of representations of non-vocalized communication through a 'thinks' bubble. There are also various emoji for thinking and speechlessness. When neither a user's words nor their thoughts are given, the meaning that the enacted silence is assumed to carry may, in fact, be all the more compelling for the readership.

In the following examples, users perform discursively salient silence. In (10), the literary convention of three dots functions in the service of 'rhetorical underlining' (Longacre 1983: 39ff). At this point, silence contributes to a change in the pace of narration, to indicate a pre-peak development of growing intensity (*me: …; me: don't do it-*). This leads to the very 'loud' peak of the user virtually smashing the preorder button, as the performative is typed entirely in capital letters. This virtual action conveys the forcefulness of the outcome of the microplay and forms a contrast to the initial situation depicted by the user's (inner) words of not needing the edition; note the typographic elements used to add emphasis on *~need~*. Purchasing what one feels is not strictly necessary may be assumed to resonate with very many users, and the user is explicitly seeking to affiliate with fans of the particular fantasy novel.

(10) me: I don't ~need~ the six of crows collector's edi-
me: *sees it's listed on book depo*
me: ...
me: don't do it-
me: *SMASHES PREORDER BUTTON*

In (11), the performance of virtual silence is related to the peak. After the pre-peak series of actions leading to the user wondering why the storage capacity of their device is continually full, their virtual action of scrolling through millions of pictures of one and the same American TV-series cast is followed by the enactment of highly salient silence. Interpretations of this silence stem from other users recognizing the recording *in extremis* of these entertainment characters, especially one of the actors, jointly with their ability to relate to the self-deprecating humour conveyed by the microplay. The coda …*oh that's why* brings the microplay to a close, tying the silent resolution to the series of attempts to use the device and the bewildered question why there is no storage space.

(11) Me: *tries to take pic*
Phone: Storage Full
Me: *tries to download song*
Phone: Storage Full
Me: *tries to save video*
Phone: Storage Full
Me: ughhh why?!
scrolls through 10384849 pics of Misha and the SPN cast
Me:
Me: ...oh that's why

It is clear from these and other examples that the 'empty' lines are not omissions or typing errors. Instead, they are highly salient components of the particular piece of discourse: they may help readers to construct the peak of a microplay or to appreciate an emotionally strong response in a two-part message. Users also opt for the convention of adding three dots to indicate significant silence. Virtual silence is an effective rhetorical resource which can facilitate users' efforts to create involvement, in the text and with possible audiences, in an opaque and noisy environment. The use of self-deprecating humour may be affiliative in nature if it helps construct an environment of enjoyment which may be expected to add to a sense, and possibly establishment, of relatedness; as such, the accepting kind of self-deprecating humour may be hypothesized to increase users' sense of benevolent connectedness.

6. *Externalizing and reassuming self*

Users externalize the digital self to the third person through the morphological marker attached to the short verb in the simple present tense. Even when this construction-initial verb is immediately preceded by an indication of the *dramatis persona* of the user's online self (*me:*), it will still be in the third person, as shown by the above examples. This is so also when the verb is *be* (me: *is annoyed*). Further, as shown in (6), above (me: *realizes I'm alone*), users may occasionally reassume the self by subsequently employing first-person references within the

same construction. Coreferential shifts from the third person to the first person take place in a systematic fashion, as shown by Virtanen (2018). The most common self-reassuming pronoun is *my*, where the alternatives are a zero or definite determiner, or the third-person genitive *her* or *his*; witness possible rewritings of (12) as *dances around my/the/Ø/her/his room with my/the/Ø/her/his cat*. I have not so far encountered self-referential uses of singular *they* in virtual performatives.

(12) *dances around the room with my cat*

The subject position in embedded clauses of various kinds may trigger the use of a first-person pronoun, as in (6), above, and (13), below. Other pronouns serving the function of reassuming the user's online self include *myself* and *me*, in that order; consider (14) and (15).

(13) *is sad because I missed lunch*

(14) *stares at myself for 10 minutes*

(15) Wishes someone would bring me food

Coordination involves a return to the zero-subject verb in the third person; witness *but ends* in (16), as well as *and turns* in (17). This is also true of juxtaposition, illustrated in (17).

(16) **goes** to maceys wearing my pj's thinking I won't see anyone I know but **ends** up seeing everyone I've ever encountered just to buy some eggs*

(17) ***puts** the phone on charge, **covers** myself with the duvet, **switches** off the lights and **turns** to the left hand side* #night

The domain of coreferential shifts in grammatical person is the virtual performative. This is so also in sequences of virtual performatives; consider (5) and (6), above. Importantly, repetition of the preface *me:*, even without the variants *also me:*, seems called for. Sentence boundaries, as well as discourse markers and prefabricated expressions (e.g. *then* in (20), below; *I guess*; *no matter how*; *hate to say it but*) trigger a first-person reference in tweets consisting of verbal material beyond the enacted virtual action or emotion. Because of their systematicity, self-referential shifts of grammatical person within the performative construction do not appear to be typing errors. Yet, it should be noted that consistent third-person performativity is the norm, with or without the preface *me:*. In other words, users appear to value the possibility of externalizing

their online selves when enacting virtual action or emotion, irrespective of whether they intend the action to be understood as playful.

7. *Digital logophoricity*

The special and yet systematic fashion of referring to the user raises the issue of shifts in point of view. Users are ultimately responsible for their tweets. Yet, their many voices have bearing on constructions of responsibility for the social self: even though virtual performatives are non-deniable (see e.g. Kolko 1995), it may serve users well to try to limit 'responsibility indexing' (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990) explicitly to cyberspace through a distanced reference to the self. Let us consider perspective and responsibility taking in light of the attested self-referential shifts in grammatical person. Inspired by Hagège (1974), I propose the notion of 'digital logophoricity' to account for some of the peculiar, yet systematic ways in which virtual performatives have been put to use to refer to the discourse of the user.

Logophoric pronouns and other markers serve to signal a shift from the default point of view of the main discourse participant to the discourse of a third-person referent who is, explicitly or implicitly, reported as saying, thinking, feeling or perceiving what is conveyed. Such a discourse-deictic shift serves to distance the actual interlocutor from what they are thus referencing, freeing them from the implications of responsibility as they place the perspective with a secondary interlocutor (Hagège 1974). Some languages offer distinct pronouns for this purpose. Hence, in Finnish, a shift to the third-person pronoun *hän* ('s/he') or *he* ('they') in lieu of *se/ne* when both refer to human beings, would trigger a logophoric interpretation (Hakulinen et al. 2004: §§717, 1428, 1469-1470). In English, reflexive pronouns have been argued to serve logophoricity in similar contexts, in contrast to non-reflexives, which would be anaphoric (within or beyond the sentence) and thus not convey such a shift in point of view. For instance, *June heard some strange gossip about herself* conveys June's evaluation of the gossip as strange (Levinson 2000: 319ff).

Virtanen (2018) argues that self-referential first-person reflexives in virtual performatives carry logophoric notes. Consider, in this light, the tweet in (18).

(18) *sees other teenagers* *literally wants to throw myself off of a building*

In contrast to a logophoric third-person reflexive, coreferent with the externalized self of the matrix clause of volition (e.g. *literally wants to throw herself off of a building*), the shift to the coreferential first-person reflexive *myself* serves to reassume the online self whose discourse is being referred to. The logophoric function of the reflexive in this context of reported feeling and the shift to the first person jointly convey a highly marked self-referential point of view, rather than

multiple points of view. Such a highly marked structure can serve as a neo-Gricean 'interactional heuristic' as posited by Levinson's M-principle of Generalized Conversational Implicature (2000: 38, 136-137): "what is said in an abnormal way isn't normal". The markedness (M) of the second performative predication in (18) is argued to have two related and desirable effects. The logophoricity of the self-referential, externalized third-person reflexive would in itself allow the user to avoid the full implications of responsibility indexing, which would thus be limited to cyberspace. The first-person reflexive has the advantage of reassuming the online self while keeping the locus of responsibility intact: it still lies with the self-referential 'performer', as established by the perspectival distance of the initial third-person morphology. Yet, the thus reassumed first-person self may come across as a more genuine and personal 'performer' while the structure will allow technology users to distance themselves from the attitudes or emotions of the mirrored bona-fide or non-bona-fide online self.

Consider, in this light, (19), where the subject slot of the projected result clause has been left empty for the reader to fill in a reference to the volitional self.

(19) Is feeling sorry for myself feeling ill so will mainly be in a bear dressing gown today!

Let us contrast instances of first-person reflexive and non-reflexive pronouns appearing in the data, asking what the effect, if any, would be if *myself* in (19) were to be exchanged into the distanced object form *me*. In this context of virtual performativity, the expected interpretation may be assumed to differ from a reading where another person is feeling sorry for the user 'me'. Even so, however, the use of *myself* has the additional effect of changing the perspective to that of the thus reassumed self, in the same way as *herself* would do for the externalized self (*is feeling sorry for herself feeling ill so will mainly be…)*. There are, however, instances of both *her*/*him*, *me* and *my* in self-referential use.

In (20), *wishes* activates an expectation of a logophoric context being set up, but the genitive *her* keeps the camera angle on the externalized self. The wish is treated as one of the distanced online self, and the user is understood as agreeing with the externalized self. This interpretation is confirmed by the shift to the first person in the following sentence, conveying the user's (written) speech or thought, which starts with the inferential discourse marker *then* 'in that case' and ends with an emoji displaying an unhappy face (not shown below).

(20) Wishes her life was more like the movies. Then I'd know I'd be getting my happy ever after

In (21), there is no explicit logophoric frame. The unmarked reference to the online self would be in the third person. Unlike *opens a photo of herself*, however, the non-reflexive *opens a photo of her* might run the risk of being interpreted as referring to a photo of another person, rather than the user's externalized self. Instead, the message features *me* in the first virtual action of a succession of two. As is generally the case in the data, a reassumed first-person self stays activated until there is a boundary in the performative construction made up of another juxtaposed or coordinated clause, and first-person references are likely to be kept across embedded clauses (see (16) above). In Section 6, it was pointed out that *my* is the most common first-person pronoun in the sample of virtual performatives. Like the third-person genitive, shifts to the first-person genitive *my* should be contrasted with the options of including a determiner, zero or definite.

(21) *opens a photo of me on my laptop and smashes the screen* performance art

It can be hypothesized that the effect of *me*, rather than *myself*, as the complement of preposition here reinforces the distance of the reassumed 'performer' from the user, who may be understood as subsequently stepping in to put the metapragmatic label *performance art* on the self-referential series of virtual actions. In another microplay featuring the virtual performative *looks at old photos of myself*, the user is first explicitly wondering what they would look like if they lost weight. This virtual performative is followed by the comment, *Oh yeah, that*, leaving the evaluation open to interpretation. In this context, there is no need for the highly marked, distanced *me* (*looks at old photos of me*).

In the earlier data set, there are virtual performatives such as *says to myself* and *thinks to myself*. In the newer data, these have largely been replaced by *me:* as the explicit indication of the *dramatis persona*, preceding what is thought, uttered or enacted virtually. What is of particular interest here is the difference between *me to myself:* and *me to me:*, as illustrated in (22) and (7), repeated below as (23).

(22) *Enters a bookstore*
me to myself: be calm

(23) Me to me: Don't overthink it
Brain: But what if...
Me: No
Brain: *doesn't listen and overthinks it anyways*

In (22), the unmarked option *me to myself:* prefaces the foregrounded directive *be calm*. In (23), again, *me to me:* prefaces the enactment of a backgrounded move, staging a facet of the self as a discourse participant in the form of a distanced

'me'. The expectation raised by this highly marked structure is met when this particular part of 'me', *brain*, appears on scene as an interlocutor, volitional and resistant.

Like the processes of externalizing and reassuming the online self, digital logophoricity allows users to grapple with environments where on top of their real or imagined audiences of various kinds, they may feel a compelling presence of a large, invisible and abstract audience, independent of time and place. To a higher degree than mere shifts to the reassumed first-person self, logophoric references serve to stage the user's social self as true and personal in the midst of the third-person distancing of the online 'performer' from the (a)nonymous technology user. Users' many voices are also manifest in their metadiscursive activities such as the final performative of the microplay in (6), *tries to tweet about it but it really isnt actually that funny*, as well as their more indirect metadiscursive evaluation which is included in virtual performatives through adverbials (for instance, the initially placed *casually, accidentally* and *literally*, as well as non-initial adverbs such as *really, actually, anyway(s)* and *too*). And virtual action or emotion is commonly followed by a metacomment, as in (2) and (21). In (24), the metapragmatics of *Seems fake but OK* serves to emphasize the wilfully enacted emotion as confined to the virtual world.

(24) *feels happy*
Seems fake but OK

8. *Benevolent humour*

Virtual performatives are inherently playful. As such, they come in handy when users wish to signal the onset of a play mode: the initial verb carrying third-person morphology may then act as a 'discourse transformer'. The present data manifest plenty of humour of the benign kind. Users posting witty jokes and amusing microplays engage in affiliative, instead of aggressive, humour. As the tweets under investigation are original, rather than responses making part of an interactional chain, their self-reliance may be expected to foster both self-enhancing and self-defeating humour (for a discussion of humour styles, see e.g. Martin et al. 2003). What is predominant in the data, however, is the use of self-deprecating humour to serve affiliative and/or self-enhancing purposes. This kind of humour is benevolent in the sense of users showing that they adopt a positive, amused outlook on the incongruities of life, and importantly, that they are tolerant and accepting of themselves and others while not taking themselves too seriously. Self-deprecating humour may, however, be interpreted as self-defeating, in the negative sense of being detrimental to users of emotional neediness who invite approval of others by ridiculing themselves excessively. In contrast, self-deprecating humour would appear to be a good candidate for enhanced social presence and successful bonding as long as other users recognize its tolerant and

self-accepting nature and find it relatable. Future studies might thus do well to focus on manifest (dis)alignment as evidenced by comments posted by other users as well as the retweets and numbers of likes that self-deprecating tweets give rise to.

9. *Conclusion*

Enhancement of social presence through textual action points to a balance users strike between the rapid conventionalization of such constructions (for instance, through repeated or slightly modified uses as well as access to an emoji) and the everyday creativity that they wish to display to attract the attention of real and imagined audiences. This chapter examined a sample of original tweets, which ranged from one-liners consisting of a lone virtual performative to two-part structures and somewhat longer microplays that were realized entirely or partly through virtual performatives. The constructions under investigation serve various discourse functions, such as backgrounding or foregrounding elements in a post, conveying its playfulness and humour, as well as striving for added visibility through their (semi)performative nature as networked participants set to negotiate contact with real and/or imagined audiences. Strategic use of silence was examined as an intentional act that users perform virtually, in an environment that is based on expectations of words and images.

The discussion of users externalizing and reassuming the online self within the domain of one and the same virtual performative was tied to ongoing constructions of public social personae. Externalizing the self to the third-person distances the 'performer' of the virtual action or emotion from the technology user view, but the self can be subsequently reassumed, within the same structure, without the user running the risk of heightened responsibility beyond the virtual world. The notion of 'digital logophoricity' was proposed to account for some of the peculiar, yet systematic ways in which virtual performatives were seen to refer to the discourse of the user. Logophoric marking was argued to add to the perspectival effects of self-referential shifts in grammatical person by staging the 'performer' as genuinely disclosing their personal feelings and thoughts.

Virtual performatives of the kind under investigation rely on self-reference and allow users to playfully stage different facets of themselves as amusing mismatches. The orientation of the present sample of tweets on the online self is also manifest in self-deprecating humour, common in the data. This kind of humour is benign, tolerant and accepting of the self and others. At the same time, it has the benefit of showing that users are not taking themselves too seriously. As such, self-deprecating humour can be both affiliative and self-enhancing, and it may be assumed to increase relatability among audiences and thus the likeability of the particular tweeter.

All in all, the kind of text-based virtual action and emotion investigated in this study appears to add to a general sense of conviviality through the inherent playfulness involved in such (semi)performatives. The tweets containing virtual performatives commonly convey benevolent humour, which may be assumed to increase users' chances of bonding with their online acquaintances and other audiences. Despite the limitations of the study, which include the effects of data selection and sampling as well as the lack of digital ethnography, the present examination of such small and relatively autonomous textual fragments may give valuable insight into the discourse functions served by typed-in textual action in environments of mass practices, where users have to come to grips with several audiences, real and/or imagined. Amidst myriad pictures, moving or not, the common or garden virtual performative proves to serve users well.

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