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7. YouTube

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Abstract

In this chapter, first, I will give an overview of the timeline of YouTube and its predecessors in the film and media history. In addition, I will look into popular phenomena on YouTube as well as its technological affordances in order to pave the way to studies of pragmatics on YouTube. Then, I will discuss videos from the following perspectives: categorization of videos as communicative genres, YouTube micro-celebrity and fame, and representations of the cultural other on YouTube. Finally, I will consider YouTube videos from the perspectives of networked audience, participation frameworks, comment discussions, conflicts, and commentary videos.

1. Introduction

YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms in contemporary digital culture. Although it is usually associated with user-generated content, it carries professionally produced content as well, such as music, news, and commercial videos. Its vast and ever-growing collection provides a rich source of material for linguists, as many of the videos portray ordinary communication situations. These can be studied from a great variety of perspectives, from spoken language and interaction to multilingual uses and language variation in everyday life. YouTube offers instant access to new phenomena in popular culture, in professional media, and user-generated content. Many of these phenomena, such as bullying and hate speech, are important research topics in pragmatics.

Many social media platforms have been studied in pragmatics and related fields, but YouTube videos, user discussions, and debates in video comment sections have been rather rare objects of study. Several studies have focused on the written forms and text-based interaction of social media, such as blogs, chat rooms, Twitter, wikis, and Facebook (Giltrow and Stein 2009; Myers 2010; Yus 2011; Page 2012; Eisenlauer 2013; Marcoccia 2016). Online spoken interaction has been considered, for instance, in research on videoconferencing and Skype calls (Develotte, Kern, and Lamy 2011; Jenks and Firth 2013). YouTube videos and videos in general have received little attention or have been mentioned in passing in

review articles or in articles intended to describe the field of social media research in pragmatics (Jucker and Dürscheid 2012; Herring, Stein, and Virtanen 2013a). A couple of handbook articles consider YouTube participation framework, discourse structure, multimodal recontextualization practices (Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015) and identity performance (Leppänen et al. 2014). In addition, research on various other domains, such as digital literacy and video games, multimodality, visual analysis, and analysis of news videos (Gee 2014; O'Halloran 2004; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Jewitt 2009; Kress 2010; Johansson 2012), has paved the way for a growing interest in research on videos.

Studies that have focused on YouTube and videos in general represent the broad fields of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics. These include, among others, computer-mediated communication (CMC), multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA), and digital discourse analysis (DDA). Researchers are interested in interactivity, multimodality, videos as communicative genres and texts, online identities, speakers of different languages, and the activity of commenting on videos. In the following sections, YouTube is considered from different pragmatic perspectives in which different theoretical notions are described, along with the studies that have used them, such as communicative settings, genre, representations, and ideological discourse.

Digital culture has transformed our everyday lives and continues to do so (Gere 2002). Media convergence (Jenkins 2006) has affected communication practices in such a way that they are intertwined with technological practices (Cardoso 2008; Lievrouw 2009; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). The logic of social media has been widely examined in media and digital culture studies, particularly as regards its ability to change contemporary communication and social interaction (Cardoso 2008; Lievrouw 2009; Livingstone 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Couldry 2012; Couldry and Hepp 2013; van Dijck and Poell 2013). One could consider YouTube—as well as many other forms of social media and other digital forms of communication—as a complex, hybrid combination of mass communication on the one hand, and interpersonal and personal social interaction on the other (Helasvuo, Johansson, and Tanskanen 2014).

This chapter focuses mainly on presenting communication, interaction, and discourse on YouTube from the broad perspective of pragmatics. These topics are approached from three different perspectives.

The first perspective is that of sociocultural context. For pragmatic studies, it is important to understand not only the history and publishing logic of this social media platform, but also the most common trends in YouTube's popular content world-wide. These factors affect the video productions of both professional and amateur users. Ordinary users' reflect currently popular material—they adapt, imitate, and comment on what they have recently watched. (Section 2).

The second perspective concentrates on the videos, as communicative genres. Pragmatic research has not fully addressed YouTube videos from this viewpoint, even though genre is one of the central notions in pragmatic studies on computer-mediated communication (for example, Giltrow and Stein 2009a; Herring, Stein and Virtanen 2013b). This perspective helps to understand video content, as video genres may be familiar, emergent or reconfigured (Herring 2013) when they appear on YouTube. When videos are studied, their interaction, storytelling, and multimodal features are as important as the way in which they are composed. This section pays attention to online identities, self-representations, and discourses on the other, as well as to micro-celebrities and famous YouTubers (Section 3).

The third perspective is commenting YouTube videos. YouTube commenting can form networks of audiences and create different kinds of communities, depending on the topics covered by videos. Commenting will be discussed as sequential and I discuss the ways in which discussions turn into debates. (Section 4).

2. YouTube: from “broadcast yourself” to entertaining yourself

2.1. Timeline

The timeline is well-known: The three big social media platforms were founded over a short period, with YouTube starting in 2005 and Facebook and Twitter in 2006 (cf. boyd and Ellison 2007: 212). Since YouTube was purchased by Google in 2006, this social media platform, which started as an alternative to television, has grown to be part of the global media entertainment industry (van Dijck 2013: 127–130). YouTube’s novelty, its unique selling point, was user-generated multimodal content. New and easy access to the Internet enabled individuals and groups to upload content in private spaces, and online video-sharing spread very fast (van Dijck 2013: 110–113). This was displayed in the company’s early logo: *Broadcast yourself* (2006–2012). Today, the logo simply contains the company name *YouTube*.

Almost from the start, however, users did not confine themselves to their own productions. Very early on, users copied material from television and were accused of uploading content originating from media companies, which led to ethical and legal controversies about this type of practice (Burgess and Green 2009: 31–32; van Dijck 2013: 118; Suominen 2013: 89). Apparently unable to prevent such piracy, media companies and television channels simply adopted YouTube as one of their means of distribution and promotion of commercial material (van Dijck 2013: 127; Suominen 2013). In a similar vein, other institutional actors adopted YouTube and other social media sites to promote their products, whether

political, religious, educational, or commercial (Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015: 342).

The main YouTube categories are related to entertainment and news: *Music*, *Sports*, *Gaming*, *Movies*, *News*, *Live*, and the latest addition, *360° Video* (launched in 2015) are all offered on the YouTube home page. More targeted sections are *Home*, *Trending*, and *History*, in which the content is proposed to users (*YouTube Statistics*). The technology is “steered by search engines and ranking algorithms” that filter and promote content based on its popularity on YouTube, as well as on the user’s viewing experience (van Dijck 2013: 113). Users may also refer to their viewer *History*, which lists the videos that they have watched previously as long as they were signed in at the time of watching.

YouTube user activities and user-generated content are part of *produsage*, a term Bruns (2008) proposed to refer to collaborative work and the sharing of knowledge through social media sites. Even though YouTube is part of its users’ daily life all over the world, most users are no more than consumers of the video content, and YouTube has aimed new targeted services at these users. YouTube Red, a subscription-based United States service, started in 2014 to allow users to watch videos, including reality TV and YouTube celebrities, without advertisements (*YouTube Red*). Other services, launched in 2015, are YouTube Gaming and YouTube Kids, which allows parents to control and restrict content.

The huge popularity of YouTube is overwhelming, with more than a billion users. Most are in the 18–34 age group but many are in the older age groups as well. YouTube is present in 88 countries in 76 languages (*YouTube Statistics*). Its popularity is based on its flexibility and the many videos of diverse content created by ordinary users for other users to share and follow. Its professionally-produced content makes it even more popular.

In the next section, the history and predecessors of YouTube are explored. To understand why the main features of YouTube are popular today, it is necessary to understand the timeline, as much of the current content is deeply rooted in film and television history. In other words, its video genres have migrated to social media from other media spaces (cf. Giltrow and Stein 2009b: 9).

2.2. YouTube predecessors, professional and user-generated content

YouTube is an online video-sharing platform that contains all types of video formats ranging from clips, trailers, and mash-ups to live feeds, entire films, and many others. Short videos are not novel, but have had several predecessors (see Burgess and Green 2009). Short forms that portray everyday life and funny incidents have been popular in TV and film since the dawn of the moving picture. When Louis and Auguste Lumière first showed a train arriving at a station and workers leaving a factory (Lumière 1895a, 1895b), the audience was shocked, because moving images resembling real life appeared for the first time on the screen. The Lumière

brothers also filmed the first pranks, such as *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (1896). These resemble scenes of everyday life, have the impression of not being staged productions.

Several different kinds of developments paved the way for YouTube videos. The first is linked to humor, which has a long media history. For example, *Candid Camera* has been on and off the air in the United States since the early years of television. Humorous videos moved online and became popular on YouTube: babies, animals, weddings, pranks, and *fails*, videos of somebody failing to do something and creating a humorous situation.

The second development arose from the first. The TV format of compilations of home movies and videos, although extant from an earlier date, became hugely popular in the United States in the 1990s. These shows opened the door to ordinary people, as their privately-shot media portrayals could now be seen by a public audience. The success of TV shows based on “ordinariness” and the presence of ordinary people in reality TV programs, confessional talk shows, and so on, have produced the shift that Turner (2010: 12–13) calls the *demotic turn*. In addition, the celebrity culture of ordinary people in television talent and reality TV programs such as *American Idol* gave rise to the social media celebrity culture that has created competitions of its own (van Dijck 2013: 117).

The third development, which created one of YouTube’s most popular features, came from professionally produced music videos, which also have a long history. They had their roots in early cinema musicals as well as in the pop music that emerged in the 1960s and was in need of promotion. Filming music scenes and promoting pop singles were the precursors. television, especially the video channel MTV. The first music video was *Video Killed the Radio Star* by The Buggles (1979), followed by several videos that were firsts in their genre, both musically and visually: *Ashes to Ashes* by David Bowie (1980), *Thriller* by Michael Jackson (1982), and *Sledgehammer* by Peter Gabriel (1986). Music videos opened up different ways to combine performance and storytelling with new types of visual expression. Their addition to visual culture paved the way for the ordinary user. These developments have underpinned the numerous ways in which the ordinary and professional users construct their video blogs and other types of videos, such as parodies and imitations.

The next section describes the first videos and discusses the most popular videos, as well as the popularity ranking that is at the core of YouTube. Knowledge of these factors will help us to understand audience choices and the way in which YouTube videos and channels develop.

2.3. Popular videos and popularity ranking on YouTube

The first video ever uploaded on YouTube was *Me at the Zoo* (April 23, 2005). In its 18-second run time, a young man stands in front of the fence at the elephant exhibit and says that the cool thing about these

animals is their very long trunks. This very short clip shows one of the reasons that users upload videos: to tell about things and events in their life. In pragmatic terms, this is a mediated digital interaction. The young man faces the camera directly, turning his head from the camera to the elephant as he speaks. He creates in these couple of utterances a fragment of a narrative in which he situates himself in a place (a zoo) and expresses an evaluative stance (DuBois 2009; Page 2015: 331, 338).

One of YouTube's most popular features is its *viral videos*, pieces that gain instant success worldwide, supported by stories in newspapers, magazines, and other media. The first, a rap song called *Lazy Sunday*, was viewed by more than one million people in 2005 before it was removed due to copyright issues, as the material came from a TV show (Burgess and Green 2009: 2–3). Among the most popular viral videos are the *Evolution of Dance*, *Sneezing Panda*, *David after Dentist*, and parodies of the film *Hitler's Downfall* (Time Magazine). These videos represent some of the most popular topics on YouTube, such as talented performances, cute animals, incidents in daily life, and parodies of films used to comment on all types of issues.

Today, the most popular user-generated video that is not a music video is *Charlie Bit Me* (2009), with more than 840 million views (September 2016). Despite this huge popularity, it is not even in the top 30 most-viewed videos of all time. Two small boys, Harry and Charlie, sit in a chair, Charlie in Harry's lap. The baby brother Charlie bites Harry's finger twice, the second time on purpose as Harry pushes his finger into Charlie's mouth. Charlie giggles in a rascally manner, while Harry complains "Charlie bit me and that really hurts Charlie and it's still hurting." Sindoni (2013: 182) points out the multimodal interaction that takes place: Harry makes eye contact with their father who is filming the scene, while Charlie switches his focus between his brother, the camera, and an unspecified target. Sindoni (2013: 182) discusses the video through comments that doubt the video's authenticity.

Home and family are major themes in YouTube user-generated videos. Among other subjects, family members, teenagers, babies, cats, and dogs are popular (Strangelove 2010: 40–63) and users often post footage for their families and friends to watch (Lange 2007: 365–376). YouTube videos represent all aspects of human life, ranging from hobbies such as archery to comments on video games, from health-related videos of surgical operations to tips for a healthy lifestyle. They can also depict the dark side, such as terrorism and war. Participation on YouTube and similar networking sites has generated a vernacular creativity and do-it-yourself (DIY) culture that has several predecessors in sociocultural life in general, not just in broadcast media (Burgess and Green 2009: 3, 23, 26). YouTube is a site for communities of all sizes and for participatory culture of all kinds (Jenkins 2008: 3; Burgess and Green 2009: 10).

Today, the popularity of YouTube is measured by several ratings and rankings. Popularity lists abound, including *Most responded* and *Most*

discussed as well as *What is trending* on YouTube at this very moment (see Burgess and Green 2009). The list of *Most viewed videos of all time* consists mostly of professionally-produced music and children's music videos from 2010 onward. At the top of the list is the music video *Gangnam Style* by Korean singer Psy, with 2.70 billion views since its upload in December 2012 (December 2016). On YouTube, the content of a particular video can be viewed and discussed across diverse periods—from a week or less, to several years (Burgess and Green 2009: 39). Comments can keep on building long after a video's original upload.

The *List of the most subscribed users on YouTube* differs somewhat, as it lists smaller scale independent producers as well as the professionals in the media and music industries. This list of 25 users currently includes nine video game commentators, vloggers, and sketch comedy producers among the professional pop stars and other entertainment-related producers. These may have started as ordinary amateur users, but successful videos and growing audience members have turned them into professional video-makers. Video gamer PewDiePie tops the list with more than 49 million subscribers (December 2016). Originally from Sweden, this YouTube celebrity talks in English, as do almost all the top-ranked vloggers, though the Chilean Germán Garmendia, who has two channels on the list—one vlog, one commentary on video games—broadcasts in Spanish.

The next section describes users' main YouTube activities, all catered for on the site. These include language-related and other semiotic activities undertaken when viewing or producing videos, posting and reading comments, and interacting in other ways with the site.

2.4. YouTube site activities and technological affordances

YouTube offers users several simultaneous activities. They can engage in language-related and other semiotic activities: viewing videos, commenting, and interaction (Gibson 1979; Hutchby 2001; Eisenlauer 2013; Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015).

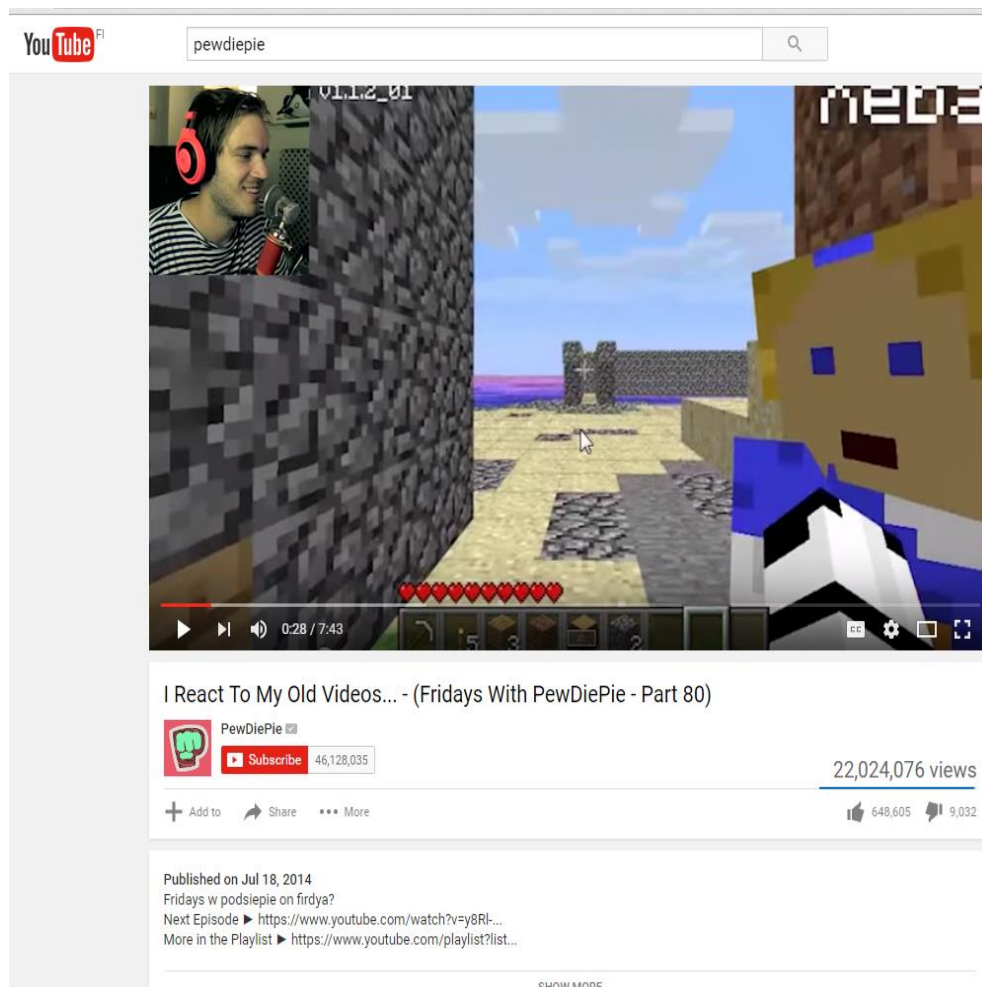
YouTube's main activity consists of *viewing* and *producing* videos that can contain multisemiotic material: visual, audio, and written (cf. Dynel 2014: 39; Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015: 342). A smaller number of users *produce*, on their own or with others. Dynel (2014: 40) points out that a video may document real life or create a fictional world. As videos are the results of various productive activities, such as scriptwriting, acting, directing, camerawork and editing, they usually contain several layers of cinematic storytelling (Dynel 2014: 43). This is especially true if the videos are produced professionally, but ordinary users are quite capable of filming very carefully scripted videos; they can also edit, mix, or create mash-ups.

The second activity concerns the *posting and reading of comments*. A YouTube discussion is a written, text-based activity that depends on the participant having viewed the video (cf. Johansson *forthcoming*). For

example, Adami (2009) considers a video to be a *prompt* to which users react when posting comments. The comments are organized either in sequential order according to the newest or the oldest comment or according to the *Top comments*, those most frequently viewed.

There are several other activities, grouped as various *technologically based affordances*, “functional and relational aspects which frame” the possibilities for activities and actions on the platform (Hutchby 2001: 444). Technological affordances allow users to enhance their experience and to express their opinions. For instance, when they click the *like* or *dislike* buttons, they are commenting by algorithm-based means and sharing the material with other users. An example of this form of commenting appears below, using PewDiePie’s YouTube site.

Screen capture 1 is a still from a video produced by PewDiePie, *I React to My Old Videos*, posted in July 2014. On this page, users can see the video channel and subscribe to it. They can also see the basic presentation: publishing date, title, link to the next video, and playlist. This information and the *Subscribe* button enhance the viewer’s experience.



YouTube

0:28 / 7:43

I React To My Old Videos... - (Fridays With PewDiePie - Part 80)

PewDiePie 46,128,035

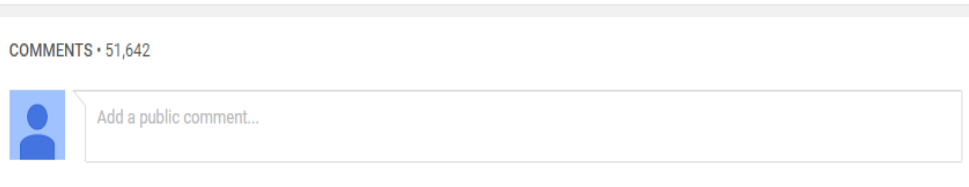
22,024,076 views

+ Add to

648,605 9,032

Published on Jul 18, 2014
Fridays w podsiepie on firdya?
Next Episode ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8RF...>
More in the Playlist ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list...>

SHOW MORE



Screen capture 1. PewDiePie video and associated information (June 2016)

Screen capture 1 also shows user activity in regard to this particular video. The total numbers of views, likes, and dislikes are listed below the still image of the video. PewDiePie has more than 46 million subscribers. The video has been viewed more than 22 million times, liked more than 600,000 times, and disliked by more than 9,000 viewers (June 2016). The comment section is still active two years after the publication of the video, and holds more than 51,000 comments. Although these figures are very high, only 27% of all viewers have chosen to click the *like* button, and only 2.3% have posted a comment to the video. Thus, it appears that the majority of viewers have done no more than watch the video.

When users upload a video, YouTube proposes a preset category for them to choose to designate the subject of the video. This will depend on the basic information about the downloaded video. They are *Music, Entertainment, Gaming, People and Blogs, Sports, Comedy, Film and Animation, How to and Style, News and Politics, Cars and Vehicles, Science and Technology, Education, Pets, and Animals*. This particular PewDiePie video is categorized as *People and Blogs*. PewDiePie uses several other categories as well and he will be discussed as a YouTuber later on (Section 3.2)

The next section looks at YouTube videos as communicative genres; several video genres are described in terms of their particular features. The section also covers self-presentation, other forms of presentation, the popularity phenomenon, micro-celebrity, and fame on YouTube.

3. Videos

3.1. Videos as a digital communicative genre

Video is a technical format that does not represent a particular communicative genre—there is no unique video genre. There are many video genres, although none has been much studied from the perspective of communicative genre. I propose below that it is possible to consider video game commentaries, battles, parodies, Q-A, and clickbait videos as communicative genres.

In many different theoretical approaches, *genre* has been understood as a form of social action (e.g., Miller 1984) and it is one of the basic approaches in pragmatics and in CMC. Giltrow and Stein (2009b)

present different conceptions about genre, from corpus-based linguistics to rhetorical and literary theories on genre. They address the issues of genre change and the effect on genres when the Internet becomes their communicative setting (Giltrow and Stein 2009b: 8–9). In Herring, Stein and Virtanen (2013a, 2013b:4), CMC genres—or modes—form part of the basic questioning of the language on the Internet. Both these edited volumes consider mainly written or text-based CMC genres or modes and their characteristics (cf. Meyers 2010).

In this chapter, the notion of genre is understood as a basic analytic construct of an activity type. A *communicative genre* is defined, first, as a situated activity type that contains spoken and written language use (e.g., Levinson 1992: 69, 71; Bergmann and Luckmann 1995; Linell 2009, 198–203). According to Gumperz (1992: 43–45), activities organize discourse in a specific way and can be described in relational and indexical terms. Second, the communicative genre informs us about the situation, participants, and frames of social interaction. The social interaction in a situation depends on the communicative goals, contributions and the type of verbal and other semiotic means of expression (Linell 2009, 198–203). The notion of a *digital genre* refers to the context in which a genre is situated. Digital genres are realized in digital texts that are mediated, multimodal, and contain technological affordances. Within a specific genre, there can be variation in the way it is realized, and a genre can have several sub-genres. It is possible to consider this variation as a generic feature.

How can video genres be recognized? In YouTube, several videos align with the TV genres. In this sense, they have migrated from the other media context to this social media platform (Giltrow and Stein 2009: 8–9; Herring 2013). This is particularly true for very many professionally produced news videos: they are same as or similar to television news genres, such as news interviews, but they can be shorter clips, presenting sound bites of press conferences (Johansson 2012). Slightly reconfigured video genres are based on the ideas presented in TV programs, such as *Mythbusters*. In the video channel *Smarter Every Day*, the presenter, Destin, introduces everyday physical phenomena and tests them in ordinary settings. His videos range from *The Backwards Brain Bicycle* to *Poop Splash Elimination*. The bicycle video starts with a personal narrative of riding a bike as a youngster and continues with a challenge to ride a bike with reversed steering. In the poop video he drops playdough “poops” into water, explains the physics of splash formation and offering a way to prevent it.

One popular genre on YouTube is a video blog, or *vlog*, that compares to text-based blogs (Giltrow and Stein 2009). There are several ways of presenting them. The communication is organized according to the main topic, which includes preset categories, for example lifestyle, beauty, and travel. When users reify these categories by producing video clips, their outputs depend on the type of self-presentation they adopt, the way they address their viewers, and their position toward the objects they are

discussing. Bloggers and vloggers can topicalize their private life and be oriented toward a restricted audience of friends and family. Presenters of this “Dear Diary” type concentrate on personal and identity construction (Griffith and Papacharissi 2009).

Frobenius (2011) conducted one of the rare analyses of ordinary vlogs. She studied the opening sequences of monologic vlogs, examining 41 vlogs, all filmed indoors and presented with an opening sequence (Frobenius 2011: 818). She focused on interactional activities and recorded the vloggers’ way of addressing their audiences in a conversational analytical framework. She investigated greetings, terms of address, self-identification, and linguistic markers of discourse particles that draw attention to the opening (Frobenius 2011: 819–820).

Vlogs can be produced professionally by vloggers trying to earn a living. These vlogs tend to relate exciting travels or contain promotional material aimed at consumers. In *Driving a Chevy Caprice Police Car* in the video channel *Regular Cars*, a group of young men test a car, discussing its model history and functionalities while driving it. Their interaction provides consumer information as they review the car and talk about their personal experiences with it. This contrasts with the focus on driving featured in Haddington’s (2010) study on turn-taking and embodied action while driving and arriving at a junction where the object of talk is which way to take or turn. In another vlog, *3 Years of Travel in 3 Minutes (Lessons and Adventures)*, the vlogger presents amazing travel scenes from all over the world. He interrupts its background music to give advice on living: “You can choose to be in a place of attraction and of abundance”. This video also uses the presenter’s personal experience to promote tourist sites to potential consumers with a mash-up type visual narrative.

Social media has also affected news videos, which often use production techniques that are typical of digital culture, such as mash-ups and remixes (see Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015). The French so called *télézapping* videos are built on short digital clips from different video news and put together into a new video. One such a video is based on a TV interview of the president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy (*Télézapping* 2011). A remix like this has at least two frames of interpretation (see Johansson 2013). First, it resembles a traditional news genre by showing and informing the viewer about the political comments that have been made on the president Sarkozy’s interview. It involves the ordering of clips to build up a new story in which the political opponents of the president express their opinion forming a constructed dialogue between parties who have not discussed together. This mash-up video is an example of the *bricolage* of digital texts using copy-paste techniques (cf. Deuze 2006; Adami 2012: 28; Johansson 2013). It is part of the popular video culture of recontextualization.

In linguistics and pragmatics, the notion of recontextualization is based on the notions of context and contextualization. The *context* has been a central concept in pragmatics (Levinson 1983: 5, 9; Goodwin and Duranti

1992). Fetzer (2004: 4) considers context to include not only linguistic, but cognitive, social, and sociocultural contexts. As for the *contextualization*, it is a dynamic process by which the participants make relevant or otherwise show the meaning of the context in their actions and situated interactions (Gumperz 1982: 130–152; Gumperz 1992; Auer 1992: 4). In his definition, Linell (1998: 154) considers *recontextualization* as “a dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context (the context being in reality a matrix or field of contexts) to another. Recontextualization involves the extrication of some part or aspect from a text or discourse, or from a genre of texts and discourses, and the fitting of this part or aspect into another context (...)”. In recontextualization, the meaning of the recontextualized item or discourse inevitably changes as it is placed in another context. This has been referred to as *resemiotization* (Iedema 2003). In other words, the process gives the video a multi-layered new meaning. The process of recontextualization and resemiotization is similar in several other cases, as will be shown. (See Leppänen and al. 2014; Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015: 344–346).

Humor videos are familiar from their TV and film history. Their dominant features, in addition to humor, are playfulness and parody. These core factors create the success of viral videos, such as *Charlie Bit Me*, *Hitler’s Downfall* or *David after Dentist* (See Section 2.3). Very often, the humor in YouTube videos is derived from an unexpected incident, caught on camera, caused by the subject’s failure to achieve a goal (Shifman 2011: 196). Where the event is caused by a deliberate practical joke or prank, the victim’s reaction provides the source of laughter.

Microphone gaffes also provide humor, but in a slightly different way. These media situations occur when someone is next to a live microphone but believes that it is off and makes a private comment. Chovanec (2016) analyzed cases in which sports commentators committed such gaffes. In his paper, Chovanec (2016: 99) explained that the humor derives from the fact that the media audience, normally a ratified listener, has become an eavesdropper. He based his explanation on Goffman’s (1981) participation framework and on the way a media situation is organized. The speakers’ footing changes from public frontstage performance to private, backstage talk in which the audience is neither addressed nor ratified (Chovanec 2016: 99). The humor is a result of talk that deviates from the norm of a public media situation (Chovanec 2016: 99).

In a series of different parodies of the film *Hitler’s Downfall* (2004), the basic scene is the one in which Hitler realizes his defeat when the Russian army closes in on Berlin. The parodies are a result of combining the film scene, depicting Hitler’s extreme emotional reaction, with a description of a recent social or other event, creating a remix. In the video channel *Hitler Rant Parodies*, the topics range from political parodies, for example imagining Hitler’s reaction to Donald Trump’s election victory (2016), to parodies of hit songs.

The last genre that I cover in this section is the hoax, familiar from text-based genres: Heyd (2009: 247) mentions virus hoaxes, giveaway hoaxes, charity hoaxes, urban legends, and hoaxed hoaxes. This last sub-genre is a parody of hoaxes (Heyd 2009: 247). The video example of *The Hoax Hotel* belongs to none of these categories, but is a hoax of the hoaxers. In these videos, one Peter Green calls persons who themselves are trying to cheat others. Visually, the videos are lively, very carefully constructed stories, usually illustrating the parties on the telephone and providing subtitles to enhance the audio. In the telephone interaction, the caller plays along with the scam up to the point at which the cheat realizes that they have been exposed. The verbal interaction and visual presentation are cut by written comments that recontextualize the thoughts of the caller or show how the tentative scam is progressing. The video *Finally Baiting a Ridiculous Electric Bill Scammer!* ends with the advice “If you receive a sketchy phone call demanding an immediate payment over the phone to avoid a power disconnection within the hour, it’s a scam.”

The next section considers videos that have built “ordinary” people into star presenters. Researchers have used the terms *authenticity* and *micro-celebrity* to describe the rise of individual performers on YouTube.

3.2. From micro-celebrity to “Internet famous”

Discussing one’s life and personal thoughts about private and current societal matters in video blogs is one of the main ways in which the self-presentation of ordinary persons is performed on YouTube. According to Turner (2004: 8), ordinary people and their lifeworlds have become a main topic of interest in the last decade because of the influence of reality TV, a format that made the “private self” the “privileged object of revelation.” Turner (2010: 3) coined the term *demotic turn* to describe the rise in fame of such users on social media, reality TV, talk radio, and websites. In this light, common people emerged as the center of public interest in television shows, becoming active performers and presenters of their everyday lives in more or less staged, scripted, and edited scenes.

In media studies, *authenticity* refers to publicizing a private life, providing an apparently truthful disclosure of oneself while doing so (cf. Marwick 2013: 248). This type of performance includes the creation of an interesting persona, one that appeals to the public and potential fans (Marwick 2013: 114). When ordinary individuals post videos, they keep their presentation close to their everyday personalities and create videos that are different from professionally-produced videos (Marwick 2013: 119).

Users’ identities on social media have been one of the main topics of research on videos and YouTube. In one of the first media studies analyses, Senft (2008) examined the home webcams of women who opened up their private lives to make friends. They adopted a very intimate tone and confessional practices about their ordinary life stories that would usually remain in the private sphere (Senft 2008). A famous example was

Lonelygirl15's vlog with its confessional and authentic style. It was followed by a large audience, but was later revealed to be a performance by actors (Senft 2008: 28–31). However, this particular vlog demonstrates the use of videos for any user desirous of fame (Senft 2008; Burgess and Green 2009: 28–29).

The rise in popularity of YouTubers, or YouTube celebrities, is the basis of *Internet famous* or becoming a *micro-celebrity*. According to Marwick (2013: 115), micro-celebrity is “a way of thinking of oneself as a celebrity, and treating others accordingly.” She considered professional video gamers, wannabe pop stars, beauty bloggers, and political activists as current examples of micro-celebrities (Marwick 2013: 115). However, gaining fame on social media is not necessarily the result of a conscious act; it can even be unwanted (Marwick 2013: 115).

One example of a micro-celebrity is Saara, formerly known as Smokahontas, who has so far produced 59 videos mainly in English on her video channel. She is a young Finnish YouTuber who started posting in 2014, and one of her very first videos, *What Languages Sound Like to Foreigners*, went instantly viral. In this video, she imitates 14 different languages in a mash-up type video. Her other videos include first, professional type of funny and talented performances of *role play*, and since she has tried to pursue a musical career, she has music videos as well. Second, she has *confessional videos* where she tells about her health issues and weight loss. Third, she has interactional *Q-A videos*, in which she replies to snap chat messages sent by her fans. She builds up her public identity through these different types of videos. In addition, the micro-celebrity is built through polymedia presence (Madianou and Miller 2013) as she tries to reach her audience through other accounts—Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—and in a broadcast media context, such as her appearance as a talent-show judge (Östman and Johansson 2016).

The game vlogger PewDiePie has gained the highest level of popularity on YouTube (see Section 2.3). Why is he so popular? There are several reasons. His main productions are *video games commentaries*; he makes his comments while playing. In addition, he produces several types of videos that represent different popular video genres. Their topics can be categorized into commentary, humor and parody, explanations of social media phenomena, responses to fans, and vlogs about his daily life. His commentary videos document his reactions to a variety of subjects, including hate videos and his own previous videos. When he explains social media phenomena in his *Clickbait videos*, he reveals the hidden strategies by which YouTubers attract users to click on their videos. In *fan videos*, he addresses his followers and fans directly, reads their comments, performs IQ tests, etc. When he vlogs about his personal life, he describes how he was kicked out of his apartment and talks with his girlfriend. His wide range of different types of videos enables him to speak to many different audiences. He has created an offline community, mostly young boys and gamers, that he calls his “Broarmy.” While presenting, he can be humorous, parodic,

aggressive, and satirical. In other words, his style-switching performance recalls many comedy shows that rely on vernacular humor. He frequently crosses lines of appropriateness, and often curses. This creates a kind of public “off-stage” talk, using vernacular language in public (cf. Johansson *forthcoming*). The huge Internet fame has brought about a lot of video commentaries and parodies about PewDiePie himself.

The next section presents two studies on the representation of the other. They adopt the double frames of presentation in portraying persons in a transcultural world.

3.3. Representations of the *other*

One type of work presented in video performances is based on the discursive construction of the transcultural representation of the *other*, especially in work by Chun and Walters (2011) and Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012). In this type of video, humor and parody are the main means of representing “a distant other” as stereotypical or in a simplified version. These presentations bring out an essentialist representation of the other, but through the use of polyphonic voices, the videos can force the audience to reflect on their own conceptions of the performer or of the other put on the stage.

A representation of the other is given in Chun and Walters’ (2011) article on Arab Orientalism in stand-up comedian Wonho Chung’s videos. The videos are recordings of live performances by a comedian who plays with complex indexical positionings. His background is Korean and Vietnamese, he has perfect knowledge of the local Arab culture, and he presents himself as a Filipino (he says he is constantly mistaken for one). One of these videos is *Wonho Chung Performs at Friday Night Live*, in which he constructs his complex identity. This allows him to present humorously ideological alignments with what these researchers call an *Oriental figure* (Chun and Walters 2011: 251, 261). When explaining the parody, Chun and Walters refer to Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis and Bakhtin’s (1984) polyphony. According to them, the video parody is based on a *play frame* of a double voice, in which the performer puts himself and the parodied figure on the stage while acknowledging the ideological alignment of the Arab audience (Chun and Walters 2011: 251, 254). The humor results from two figures that do not coincide, as the expressed stances are close to racist discourse (Chun and Walters 2011: 254–255, 261). However, the play frame also includes a satirical stance, and the performer’s stylized performance reduces the risk of his being judged as racist (Chun and Walters 2011: 261). Some of the comments that this video performance has received raise the issue of the problematic nature of stereotypical representation; in others, the users react positively to the act (Chun and Walters 2011: 262). In the user comments, the affective stance is very strong, and they convey their surprise based on the imbalance between their own knowledge of Arab culture and the performer’s physical

appearance, which differs from the “typical” appearance (Chun and Walters 2011: 264–266).

Another type of analysis was conducted by Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012) on “buffalaxed videos.” The latter are defined as “parody versions of snippets of motion pictures, TV broadcasts or musical performances which are originally broadcast in a language incomprehensible to most westerners and which feature such Others as Bollywood characters or oriental pop singers” (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 17). One example of this type of video is a song, *Kalluri Vaanil*, presented in Tamil by an Indian actor and performer named Prabhu Deva and remixed into a video parody. It was renamed *Benny Lava*, and contained subtitles in a completely different language, English. The subtitles do not portray the original meaning, but ‘translate’ the phonetic meaning heard in the lyrics, thus creating a parodic effect. They are imitations of the original words but are spelled out in the video’s subtitles in the language of the target audience, thus producing a new meaning (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 17–18). In their analysis, the authors pointed out that these types of videos focus on social and cultural groups to create humor based on hierarchies of value and humor that is not politically correct (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 20). These scholars considered that the videos represent stereotypes containing features that can be culturally racist, but are confusing because they can be interpreted in multiple ways (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 20). This explanation is similar to the one given by Chun and Walters (2011) about the polyphonic play frame.

The next section examines commenting on videos in the light of several research studies. The examination covers networked audience and participation framework, as well as the methods of text-based and video-based comment production.

4. Commenting on YouTube videos

4.1. Networked audiences and participation frameworks

Different social media platforms construct interaction between users in different ways, and even an individual platform has to cater for different audiences, as Marwick and boyd (2011) and Page (2012) have shown with Twitter. Twitter forms a networked audience that can be conceptualized as a fan base, but audience members can participate in promoting users’ (professional) identities and marketing goods in celebrity- or company-related Twitter accounts (Page 2012). Between these kinds of audience members, there is a simulated dialogue instead of a true participatory discussion (cf. Page 2012: 194). However, audiences might turn into counter-audiences that dislike or attack the video in comment posts. They also remain unfamiliar to each other and engage in discussions without knowing each other. This is called *context collapse* by Marwick and

boyd (2011: 124), who point out that “[s]ocial media collapse diverse social contexts into one, making it difficult for people to engage in the complex negotiations needed to vary identity presentation, manage impressions, and save face.” In sum, the audiences are situated. They can respond to the content, communication acts, and other users’ comments, but also to all the contextual information that the situation carries with it.

When studying participation frameworks, Dynel (2014) and Boyd (2014) both separated production and reception into different levels based on Goffman’s participation framework. They considered viewers to be ratified participants. Dynel (2014: 42) acknowledged some of the problems of applying different participation roles, such as the inadaptability of eavesdroppers within YouTube communication. However, Chovanec (2016) demonstrated that participants can be assigned an eavesdropper’s role this in his case of microphone gaffes, where the users are put in the position of eavesdroppers (See Section 3.1). YouTubers can assume a writer’s role if they post a comment in the video comment section (Dynel 2016: 46). However, if they post a video, they would instead adopt a speaking role—video comments were possible until recently (see Section 4.3). In his article, Boyd (2014) expanded the description of participation roles according to the comment’s function in the interaction. He distinguished, among others, disruptive roles such as *spammer* and *troll*.

The next section examines YouTube comment discussions and their threads. They will be considered as debates and conflicts—research in pragmatics has shown the issues that give rise to the evolution and development of conflicts. The section also describes the sequentiality of video comments.

4.2. Comment discussions and conflict as a sequential phenomenon

YouTube comment discussions are online multiparty discussions (cf. Marcoccia 2004). They are determined by the video’s genre, its topic, and its social interaction. They have been studied as text-based comments and massive polylogues (Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2012). They can have different types of referential targets: the video itself, other users’ comments, or a target that is neither of these, but is outside of the situation (cf. Johansson *forthcoming*; Section 4.3). These kinds of comments can be about the vloggers’ former videos, video culture, or the commenter’s own videos. Comment discussions also vary in their scope: they can concentrate on local issues or more global ones. Pihlaja (2014a) analyzed one comment discussion within a community of users and their membership categorization that turned into a conflict.

Benson (2015: 85) considered YouTube interaction in the framework of multimodal discourse analysis. His analysis is based on the model of analysis of spoken interaction developed in the Birmingham school by John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard (1975). Benson investigated turns, response moves, and patterns of interactions in data on the *Cantonese*

Word of the Week YouTube series, which presents discussions around the use of this language (Benson 2016: 87).

Several studies have focused on controversial interactions, impoliteness, incoherence, and conflict management (Lorenzo-Dus Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, and Bou-Franch 2011; Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2012; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014) or on metaphor use in antagonism (Pihlaja 2014b). What these studies have in common is that they focused on digital interaction based on the kinds of topics that deal with questions of sociocultural values, morals, and ethics, such as homosexuality, politics, and religion.

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014) examined the unfolding of a conflict in an online discussion on YouTube. They studied the conflict as a sequential phenomenon, paying attention to how the conflict began, developed, and ended in a discussion that centered on teen homosexuality portrayed in a public announcement by a Spanish LGBT association. The scholars' objective was to develop a new method of analysis that would be based on this type of material, replacing the methods originating in studies of face-to-face models and previous CMC-based analyses on flaming. The authors' decision to focus on conflict was based on research into CMC, discourse analysis, and politeness theory. Here, conflict is related to social practices and individuals with differing worldviews on certain topics. Anonymity and deindividuation are the key factors leading to polarization in online discussions (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014: 20–21). According to this study, a conflict arose in a second move that opposed an initial argument (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014: 24). Conflicts contain views, stated aggressively, that support or deny the ideological positions presented in the video and in its comments (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014: 24–26). Multifunctional utterances in the posting contributed to the analysis; the three stages, beginning, middle, and end, were shown as reified constructs in which the conflict remained unresolved (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014: 33). The researchers proposed, therefore, that the conflict did not unfold as in face-to-face situations but was concentrated in the ongoing struggle of the “middle” (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014: 33).

The next section describes comment threads posted in video format. The practice is no longer available, but does provide information about the types of replies that users post to an initial video.

4.3. Video blogs and their video threads

Since YouTube's launch, users have been able to respond to videos by uploading another video, a practice called video interaction that recently ended. When commenting in this way, a series of videos builds up, forming video threads. A number of studies investigated this particular phenomenon, among them Adami (2009, 2014, 2015). Her approach to video interaction

is based on Kress's (2010: 33) view of multimodal communication, in which a prompt, in this case the video, catches the attention of a participant, who frames and interprets the prompt in his or her response. Adami's data consisted of videos called *Where Do YouTube?* by ChangeDaChannel and *The Best Video EVER* by Chris Crocker. Both have been among the most downloaded videos of all time. In *Where Do YouTube?*, video blogger ChangeDaChannel invited users to share information about their location. He showed a written note about his own location in California, thus providing an example of the kind of reply he anticipated (Adami 2009: 386). He received 550 responses in one month, and those responses were followed by their own responses (Adami 2009: 381). According to Adami (2009: 383), the video thread that followed consisted of responses directed at the initial video, because the users did not engage in interactions. The answers came from 59 countries, most from the United States (Adami 2009: 387). In the responses, the users oriented themselves to the prompt (the initial video) but displayed their distinctiveness in different multimodal ways, by creating a themed performance or giving a playful answer to the prompt (Adami 2009: 388–392). In her 2014 and 2015 articles, Adami studied the relatedness of the video responses to Chris Crocker's *The Best video EVER*. In this extremely short video, the only thing Crocker does is blink twice. Adami distinguished several types of relatedness (or its absence). She asserted that the main way in which a video response is related to the initial video is adjacency. In these cases, the response video followed the same action as in the initial video: the users blinked, as Crocker did in the initial video. They did it in either a positive or negative manner, and some added other non-verbal actions, such as drinking or eating (Adami 2015: 240–241). In this sense, the response videos are related to the original one.

Video responses can also show a deviation from the initial video action. Here, Adami (2015: 242–243) considered videos in which users commented on the action they witnessed in the initial video. For example, they might comment on the video's "bestness" by speaking to camera. However, the video responses could deviate from the main topic of the initial video by adopting another topic without any explanation (Adami 2015: 245). According to Adami (2015: 246–249), the initial video can be used for creative responses or for transformative remixes and parodies. Responsiveness can be implicit, for example, when a video response does not have an explicit link to the initial video but refers to a background element or a character or has no connection whatsoever to the initial video (Adami 2015: 250–254).

5. Conclusion

For linguists, YouTube is an extremely important and largely unexplored terrain, interesting for several reasons and offering a variety of possible research subjects. First, videos are digital multimodal texts that are

interesting from the perspective of visual and verbal expression. The monological expression or interactional situations in video blogs open up new ways in which to look at language use from the pragmatic perspective. Indeed, vloggers also present exciting material for study: for instance, how they talk about the world and how they address audiences. The video channels of different YouTubers reflect different domains of everyday life, too. The channels may be professionally produced, aiming at a specific field in entertainment, such as in the case of comedy-based YouTubers. Common phenomena on YouTube, such as micro-celebrity and viral videos, can be approached in pragmatic terms. In addition, videos merit study from the perspective of communicative genre: identifying genres could help in identifying genre ecology and other social media-related phenomena.

Today, the video culture is spreading far beyond YouTube. Several sites, such as *Vimeo*, *Ted Talks*, are devoted to videos. Videos are important in online news sites, and they gain ground as important means of professional communication. For example, researcher nights and company events are streamed for larger audiences. After the events videos give access to them. For example, *EU Science and Innovation* is a video channel that presents science news and gives information about research funding. *Slush* is yearly international event for start-up companies and their investors: in its videos it uses all kinds of contemporary video genres and narration in promoting its business.

Videos are rather independent forms on YouTube, where they form video channels and are commented on. On other social media sites, videos are integrated with other content. They are integrated into tweets and Facebook posts or into digital news texts (Johansson 2012). The material that is remediated or shared with other social media means of expression can be studied from the perspective of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013). The line between professional and other ordinary users' videos could be also looked at as well as the relation between online and offline language situations. Overall, both theoretically and methodologically, research should cross more borders and adopt interdisciplinary perspectives that have the potential to open up new research objects and new explanatory models in digital communication studies.

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Saara. <https://www.youtube.com/user/SmoukahontasOfficial>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/SmoukahontasOfficial>

Slush. <https://www.youtube.com/user/KickNetwork>

Sneezing Panda 2006. <https://www.google.fi/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=Sneezing+panda>

Smarter Every Day

<https://www.youtube.com/user/destinws2/videos?sort=p&view=0&flow=grid>

Télezapping 2011. Sarkozy attaque, ses adversaires répliquent [Sarkozy attacks, his adversaries reply].

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