

THE HYPERBOLIZATION OF 'ME'. A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO SELF-PORTRAYAL IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE

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Abstract: *With the advent of social media, a recurrent theme in literature and psychology has turned into a major concern for psychologists and social scientists due to its blatant mismatch between a person's real way of being and the one served as real in the social media. 'Grandiose narcissism', because this is the topic taken into consideration, has been defined as 'a means of online self-promotion' or 'a way to showcase ourselves in our best light' (McCain & Campbell, 2016) and it has been researched upon in complex studies carried out by researchers in universities (e.g. 'Narcissism on Facebook: Self-promotional and Anti-social Behavior,' Carpenter, 2012). The efforts of psychologists and social scientists can be sustained by investigations in other connected fields that might help better understand the phenomenon and maybe find explanations for it. That is why this paper aim at analyzing the linguistic aspects which help build the grandiose portrayal to be composed in the social media. Vocabulary choices, preferred grammatical structures, pragmatic aspects related to media interaction, face-saving or face-threatening acts, etc.*

Key words: *self-portrayal; online; narcissism; communication; social media;*

I. Introduction and goal

Besides their informative contents which is an undeniable contribution to the spread of news and beyond their being defined as 'a form of collective wisdom' (Sitaram, Palo, 2010), social media have swiftly transformed into a place where people openly manifested or, better, displayed their features of personality in a more or less aware manner. Among these, narcissism has been identified by researchers (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, Campbell, 2012) as a personality feature that becomes an intrinsic feature of social media (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, Robins, 2015). Similarly, research claims that people with narcissist features 'overestimate their intelligence and attractiveness', 'fantasize about power, (Horvath, Morf, 2010), or they are believed to have 'an insatiable and bottomless need for self-aggrandizement.' Thus, the existence of social media has led to an explosion of exhibitionism seen as an exacerbated self-disclosure and self-promotion. Consequently, this paper aims at referring to narcissism from a linguistic perspective, less exploited than the other approaches to it, which presupposes to identify the discursive strategies that people with narcissistic features retort to when promoting themselves in the social media (Dewall & Buffardi & Bonser & Campbell, 2011). In fact, it's not so much about what linguistic means these persons use in order to promote themselves, but rather how they use them in order to reach their purpose.

II. Terminology clarifications

The first clarification that needs to be made is the term of narcissism. Narcissism, officially considered a mental disability (Raskin & Hall, 1979), cannot be established in the absence of a medical diagnosis. That is why, ethically, I cannot claim that the person participating in my study is a narcissist and, anyway, that is not the purpose of this paper.

That is why in this paper I will use the term ‘person with narcissist features’ which correspond to the definitions offered by clinicians. Thus, I analyze the public Facebook messages of the person participating in my study with a view to identifying the existence or non-existence of discursive and/ or pragmatic elements that might illustrate one’s narcissist vision of oneself. Secondly, I need to clarify upon the provenance of the data I analyze. Thus, it is taken from the public profile of the person whose social media I analyze. By using data from the public profile I do not disclose any personal data that the subject would like to keep undisclosed. By making some data public, each social media user exposes his/ her discourse and images to public access. Thirdly, all measures have been taken to anonymize the names of the participants in the social media interaction in order to preserve the intimacy of the subjects.

III. Social media, features, trends

Though recent creations (Facebook was founded in 2004, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010), these media have made a fortunate takeoff and an important breakthrough in instant online communication. Social media have been construed as ‘a category of online discourse where people create content, share it, bookmark it and network in a prodigious way’ (Sitaram & Huberman, 2010). Furthermore, Correa et. all (2009) postulates the idea that social media is ‘participatory media’, some media where all participants can become contributors, and content creators. Their fast spreading and the obvious appetite of users for this kind of communication stands proof for the change in expectations of users who disavow the traditional, long-lasting, time-consuming and pricey correspondence. Furthermore, it enhances aspects that were unconceivable in traditional correspondence and that are highly valued in the new media: images and sounds. It may yet be claimed that photos endorsed to a letter may have the same value as the images posted on modern social media, but there are certain differences that aren’t negligible: the quality and the quantity of images. If quality is indisputable, given the technologic advancements, but that does not mean that older photos were not expressive, quantity does make a difference in the sense that uploading images is uncostly, effective (it immediately transmits the message that is meant by the sender) and manipulator (it suggests to the viewer a reality which might be far away from what actually happens).

Researchers have shown their interest in the new communication media and they have analyzed them and their use from various perspectives ranging from psychological approaches to social approaches and even linguistic ones. The psychological approaches focused mostly on the excessive ‘hyperbolization of me’ seen as exaggerated status changes, image uploading, and self-promotion. Social approaches have aimed mostly at aspects related to age groups, social strata and sometimes gender with a view to identifying the categories that are attracted to using these media more than other categories. The researchers are equally interested in identifying the reasons that lie at the back of excessive media use. Last, but not least, linguistics has tried, though timidly, to identify and spot out the common, largely pervasive linguistic structures and means that are preferred by the social media users.

With the exception of the situations when social media is used as a source of news and besides the situations when they are used by the propaganda of whatever origin in order to influence people’s choices, social media have also become a world show where the stage is taken by people who are mostly interested in promoting their actions, their house, their belongings in general, in order to demonstrate their achievements, their success, their making a difference in their working field or simply in their family environment. By way of consequence, the intrinsic nature of social media transformed an easy and cheap way of

communication into a stage where such elements as: likes, adores, number of visualizations gained excessive importance.

III. New media, old problems

The traditional by now discussion that mass-media has tried to sort out, but they have rather failed in the attempt of defining what reality is, or when faced to the challenge of discriminating something real from something fake, has been transferred to social media that have been hitherto struggling for a balance. If in the traditional mass-media an editorialist could easily add certain elements that would transform an event s/he accounts of into his/ her version of what had really happened there, social media have transformed all users into editorialists that serve their audience, the more, the better, romanticized versions of a reality that could easily be put behind. The border between reality that can be accounted for and imagination has been blurred; the information has gained the unique sidedness, the un-confrontational account of whatever story that turns reality into a personal fiction that goes unchallenged in the virtual space.

In this way, each holder of a social media page, confronted with his/ her consistency with truthfulness, will adopt a stricter or laxer version of it. In social media, reality is not what happens, but what is shown or told. Unlike before the advent of new social media when the self, constructed by the owner, was challenged by the co-participants in the social direct interaction, in this new type of social media, the task of building the self is entirely on the owner who is rarely challenged for what s/he claims s/he actually is.

IV. The fictionalization of reality

The fictionalization of reality, its transformation into a directed scenario is but a new challenge for all of us. Discussions which problematize ‘the true-to-reality news have emphasized their worked-on and constructed character.’ (Vâlcea, 2016: 55) This distinction is vital for this piece of research because it demonstrates that the audience, in our case the other owners of social media pages, is given the perspective of the one who publicly shares a particular story. That is why, I deem, we need to differentiate between ‘reality as facts’ (Searle, 1995, 15) and ‘reality as someone’s perspective on facts’ (Vâlcea, 2016: 56) and at the same time we need to be aware that the difference between the two types of reality is given by ideology and language. In fact, the reality has brought about heated debates about its slippery character, just as it results from the following quote: ‘The concept of ‘reality’ has attracted much attention on the part of sociologists, sociolinguists and linguists who have come to the conclusion that ‘reality’ is a construct which lasts as long as the news is viable (attracting interest, responses, reactions) on the part of the audience. Reality begins and ends with the report and stays within the limits imposed by the news. Previous or consecutive events are either ignored or considered irrelevant to audiences that should permanently be attracted to current affairs.’ (Vâlcea, 2016: 55)

V. Case study

Of the many analyzable aspects of social media, I have decided to focus on the hyperbolization of ‘me’ understood as an exaggerated importance that some social media users give to themselves. Some studies have been written on ‘grandiose narcissists’ (Horvath & Morf, 2010; DeWall & Buffardi& Bonser& Campbell, 2011; Panek & Nardis& Konrath, 2013; Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016) where attempts have been made firstly at describing the

social media behavior of such persons, but also at offering psychological explanations for their acting in such a way.

Yet, I embark on a different type of study where I try to find patterns that are used when creating a hyperbolized vision of 'me', but not by means of photos or others statuses. It is language that I will take into consideration, either as repeating patterns or as unique elements that someone uses in order to create an alternating reality.

5.1. Approaches

In my analysis and for the purpose of my research I consider appropriate the use of the following two approaches: Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics. Discourse Analysis is the analysis of the linguistic structure beyond the level of words within a context and depending on the opinions and beliefs of the emitter (Schröder, 1998; Simpson, 1994). This approach is appropriate for my type of text because it isn't meant to analyze the linguistic structure of the social media messages, but it is meant to reveal the portrayal of one social media user by analyzing her messages. At the same time, I chose some pragmatics concepts to demonstrate that one's message is not meant to be read by everyone. There are at least two direct communicators and hundreds, at times, thousands of silent watchers, the followers/ friends, and the message needs to be negotiated, concern needs to be paid to save your own face (Goffman, 1974) and your interlocutor's.

5.2. Case study analysis

- Ellipsis/ suspension points

Traditional grammar deals with suspension points as a marker that indicates the omission of words: 'one of a group of dots, usually three, used in written material to indicate the omission of a word or words' (Collins). Yet, pragmatics, which is interested in the function of linguistic structures, refers to suspension points in terms of the reasons they were used for and the purpose they were aimed at and all this in virtue of the consideration that suspension points are meaning without form. As for the reasons of using suspension points, there are basically two reasons for that:

1. There is more to say, but the speaker doesn't say it, s/he lets the reader think about it
2. The speaker creates/ increases expectation/ curiosity before s/he says something important

D.L. Hahaha ... viața te răzbuna singura, eu nu trebuie decât să pășesc hotărât mai departe! Mereu mi-ai fost arături ... iar eu asta nu uit, A! 🤔🙄 Oamenii puternici și inteligenți nu invidiază, asta apreciez la tine!!

D. L. Hahaha ... life itself avenges you, I only have to step forward! You have always been there for me ... and I do not forget that, A! 🤔🙄 Strong and intelligent people do not envy, that's what I appreciate in you! (my translation)

In this particular case, the speaker does not say as much as she implies there is to be said. She only creates the expectation, the ideas that should be inferred by the reader, but the ideas are not there.

- Flouting the maxims of relation and of manner

Grice (1975) developed the theory of the cooperative principle. On the basis that a speaker and listener are cooperating, and aiming to be relevant, a speaker can imply a meaning implicitly, confident that the listener will understand.

Grice's maxims of relation (try to be relevant) and manner (avoid obscurity of expression and avoid ambiguity) are flouted at least in the second part of the answer. At the beginning she addresses the issue raised by her interlocutor, but then she changes the topic due maybe to the fact that she feels threatened by the fact that one of her weaknesses is vengefulness.

A. Pupicei !Zi minunata iti doresc 😊;) Cand am vazut textul ... fix la tine m-a dus gândul 😊
😊😊😊

'Dacă o femeie este plină de viață, are succes, este irezistibilă și fericită, înseamnă că se răzbună pe cineva.'

A. Kisses! I wish you a lovely day 😊;) When I saw the text ... I thought about you 😊😊😊
😊

'If a woman is lively, successful, irresistible and happy, it means that she takes revenge on someone.'(my translation)

Causes for flouting the maxim of relation is that A. was too direct, which is interpreted as a face-threatening act by D.L. In order to change focus, D.L. attributes authority to the destiny, thus escaping the accusation of vengeance and saving one's face. Strategically, she uses flattery in order to diminish the impact of self-exposure as a vengeful person. The implicature is that there is something to be envious about.

- Leveling-off strategy

D. L. Mulțumesc mult !😊☑.forța e in fiecare dintre noi ... tot ce fac este sa reapind flacăra din fiecare ființă ce îmi iese în cale, nu pentru a recapătă ceva ce a pierdut ... ci pentru a ii arata cat de strălucitoare este de fapt flacăra sa interioară ... doar că de durere, suferința nu o mai vede ... dar eu o vad!

D. L. Thank you so much! 😊☑ the force is in each of us... all I do is to rekindle the fire in every being that comes my way, not to regain something that s/he has lost ... but to show how bright his/her inner fire is ... it's just that due to pain, sufferance s/he does not see it ... but I see it! (my translation)

She uses a leveling off strategy between herself and her interlocutor. Considering herself situated higher in terms of professional success/ knowledge she shows her generosity in lifting her interlocutor and others to the same level as hers, practicing inclusion which is an empowering strategy for the one that uses it. She explicitly shows awareness of her advantages 'she has got the fire' and moreover she sees the fire in the others. She also plays the role of the 'good Samaritan' who willingly helps the others as she rekindles the fire in the others. Her discourse is highly metaphorical 'inner fire' is someone's call for a particular job

To rekindle the fire in each of those I come across – that demonstrates that she has a very high opinion of herself and she disregards the opinion of the others (do they want to be rekindled?).Moreover, she enacts the role of the savior (with all the positive connotations that issue from here) for the others that do not see their fire anymore. It takes her being here and

helping them in order for them to regain their lost fire. She also claims having some super powers that allow her to see the fire in the others when they themselves cannot see it any more. She actually creates herself a self-portrayal with a two-fold purpose: to convince herself of the qualities she thinks she has and secondly, to let/ help the others see how good she is.

She uses the same strategy in the example below:

D.L. Acesta e unul din visele mele ... sa continuam impreuna ... toate sucursalele din tara ... doar impreuna construim durabil si de calitate!!

D.L. This is one of my dreams ... to continue together ... all the branches in the country ... it's only together that we build durably and qualitatively!! (my translation)

The sequence 'This is one of my dreams' is used to indicate the ideals the subject of the research. The grandiosity of the plan results from the involvement of all the branches in the country. The same inclusive approach, everybody is welcome, she does not claim to do everything alone, but she is an important pawn in the architecture of the new approach.

- Compensatory strategies

When there is nothing to post about, when there are no photos to upload, you can take one of the quizzes that will certainly say something positive about you. She does the quizzes posted by Facebook in which presumably certain character or moral features will be revealed about her. By posting then, it is a facile way of offering a portrayal to all your friends which is flattering for the one posting. Though they may be similar for the people belonging to the same sign, the post may help one's perception by the others.

Ce creatura mitica esti?

Zana – esti o persoana foarte buna. Luminezi viata celor din jurul tau cu dragostea ta. Esti mereu acolo cand oamenii au nevoie de tine si reusesti sa creezi cu adevarat minuni.

What a mythical creature are you?

Fairy - you are a very good person. You enlighten the lives of those around you with your love. You are always there when people need you and you can really create miracles. (my translation)

This kind of portrayal is taken over and the persons want so much to believe that what is there is true that they actually come to believe that about themselves. The same image of a savior for the others is reiterated here and it is in line with the image of the person about herself. As for the vocabulary in these quizzes, though they do not contain the words of my subject, my subject identified with the message and with her views about herself. 'fairy' and 'miracles' belong to the realm of the surreal and they are largely accepted and treasured by people (it's as if she transcends this world into a superior world). On the other hand, 'enlighten the lives' and 'you are always there' is a confirmation of the opinions she holds about herself.

One of the elements that have been investigated in relation to 'grandiose narcissism' has been the extended use of 'I' and 'me', claiming that the more 'I' and 'me' are used, the more it is likely that that person is a narcissist. Thus, Horvath and Morf (2010) have discovered that these persons use some compensatory strategies which consist of an exaggerated use of photos, images and quotes.

D.L. Voi face mereu cu drag ... multumesc mult ... e pasiunea sufletului meu ... va iubesc si eu ... pe toti!!

D.L. I will always do it dearly ... thank you very much ... it's the passion of my soul ... I love you too ... all of you!! (my translation)

She shows gratitude, she openly acknowledges her passion for what she's doing, she is pro-active volunteering for more work in the future and she expresses her feelings. Apparently, it's not so much about what she does, whom she does it for, it's more about her and about the way in which she advertizes her skills, concerns, preoccupations.

- An exaggerated sense of self-importance

D.L. Excelenta la nivel inalt!!Prietenie și profesionalism!!M. M. și D. L. Servicii Sociale – la Ateneul Român.

D.L. High level excellence!! Friendship and professionalism!! M. M. and D. L. Social Services – at the Romanian Athenaeum. (my translation)

Speaking of herself and of a friend, the subject of my research claims that she has reached excellence in her domain and that her work is characterized by professionalism. She is equally fond of associating her name to personalities, brands or buildings as it is possible that the celebrity of either persons or buildings extends over her in the minds of her social media friends and followers.

- The chance of controlling and influencing the way the others perceive them

R. G. B. S. Felicitări, sunteți un om deosebit!

D.L. R ... tu ești o persoană minunată pentru că vezi și simți deosebitul din mine ... deci eu îți multumesc!!

R. G. B. S. Congratulations, you are a great person!

D.L. R ... you are a wonderful person because you see and feel the special in me ... so I thank you!! (my translation)

This short dialogue is revelatory for how my subject understands to relate to other people. Thus, the interlocutor states that D.L. is a special person. D.L. claims that R.G.B.S. is herself a special person for she sees the special in my subject. The implicature of this statement is that the interlocutor wouldn't be a special person if she didn't see the special in my subject. The conditionality that is placed on the interlocutor's being deemed as special consists of the interlocutor's ability of seeing the special in my subject. Secondly, my subject is aware that she is special and she claims that publicly.

VI. Conclusions

My subject uses a variety of means (linguistic and non-linguistic) to create a positive self-referential representation. Linguistically, she builds a discourse based on self-appraisal where all the other participants are used as means to an end, that of self-promotion. Furthermore, she builds on the appreciations of her virtual friends and followers that she needs in order to confirm the image she has built for herself. In terms of discourse, she uses an inclusive approach (everybody's contribution), but she stands out of the group as an initiator, leader, manager (thus, superior). When challenged, she reacts by denying self-authority and autonomy and then she strengthens position by claiming social and/ or professional superiority. In the end, I could claim that the subject in my research has got some narcissist features as she is the center of all her concerns though she claims she works for the others. She hyperbolizes herself as there is no other person doing so much for her profession as if the domain had been inexistent or doomed before her joining it.

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