

BAAL Language and New Media SIG seminar

Language, New Media and Alt.Realities

University of Reading, 21st April 2017

This year's BAAL Language and New Media SIG event, hosted by Rodney Jones (University of Reading), took up the important issue of how the semiotic affordances, information architectures and communicative practices associated with digital media are affecting people's constructions and interpretations of 'reality' and 'truth'. The event included two plenaries, by Caroline Tagg and Philip Seargeant (Open University) and by Colleen Cotter (Queen Marys London) and eight other speakers, both applied linguists and journalism scholars. Three important themes emerged: firstly, the need to understand 'news' if we are to understand fake news; secondly, the importance of the social over the epistemic in people's interactions with fake news on social media; and, thirdly, the important empirical work that applied linguists can contribute as we attempt to make sense of 'alt.realities'.

The need to understand news values and practices in tackling these issues was a point raised by Cotter's plenary talk on news and the social media ecosystem. Cotter, a former-journalist-turned-linguist, provided a historical and wide ranging analysis of the ways in which news has been shaped by technologies as well as highlighting continuities in the newsroom, such as journalists' belief in balance and accuracy and their adherence to truth. This historical depth is a crucial first step in understanding the impact that social media use may be having on how news is produced and received. In relation to this, it is also necessary to take into account the continued importance of journalists in the social media environment. As Korina Giaxoglou (Open University) showed in her discussion of the online 'ecstatic' sharing of critical moments in the Greek crisis, it is journalists rather than ordinary users who are able to exploit the affordances of Twitter to leak information and challenge mainstream narratives. A response to fake news must therefore take traditional media practices as well as online news-sharing sites into account.

The importance of social processes in shaping people's online engagement with news was evident across talks. Reporting on a survey of Facebook users, Tagg and Seargeant showed how the principle of 'online conviviality' – the desire to avoid conflict – encouraged users not to engage with posts they found offensive (that is, with posts expressing views with which they disagreed) but instead to block offensive users or unfriend them. These attempts to attend to the diverse relationships maintained through the site thus had the effect of creating 'filter bubbles', rather than (or alongside) Facebook's personalisation algorithm. The need to understand users' own stances and social purposes is crucial if technological-based solutions to fake news is to work, with research – such as Patrick Kiernan's (University of Birmingham) work on trolling in a cycling forum – highlighting the fact that playfulness and subversion, rather than an interest in the truth, can often guide users' online decisions. The importance of taking user behaviour on board was also prompted by Abdulmalik Yusuf Ofemile's (University of Nottingham) talk on how users interact with smart agents. As well as training robots to recognise and respond to linguistic and non-linguistic cues from their human interactants, consideration should also be given to the ways in which users may modify their behaviour to accommodate to the robot. Despite the importance of recognising the intersection of the social and the epistemic, however, it is also necessary to bear in mind the way in which site affordances and technological design decisions (and the companies that

design them) shape what it is possible for users to do online; for example, as Giaxoglou showed, the ways in which Twitter is now used for the ecstatic sharing of news is shaped by its original design as an ego-centred micro-blogging site.

Given the importance of the social to understanding alt.realities online, applied linguistics research can make an important empirical contribution. Many of the talks showed how existing linguistic and related concepts and theories can be applied to digital media data. Dolors Palau Sampio (Universitat de València) showed how linguistic analysis of conversational and rhetorical features such as vocatives and modal deixis can be used to understand how clickbait is shaping news headlines. Teresa Spilioti (Cardiff University) showed how metaphor – specifically Musolff’s ‘metaphor scenarios’ – can be used to understand how online news explainers render financial news accessible to a lay audience. Diana Ben-Aaron (University of Suffolk) showed how research into traditional ‘hard news’ interviews can be used to analyse interviews conducted in cars, part of a wider infotainment genre which may be seen as substituting for real news in the social media environment. Finally, Ruth Page (University of Birmingham) showed how social semiotic theory and subjectification can be used to explain news stories on Snap Chat, shedding light on the new ways in which mobile affordances enable citizen journalists and photographers to represent themselves and relate to their audiences. What also emerged as important is interdisciplinary collaboration between applied linguists and journalism and media scholars – collaborations which were already behind a number of the research projects discussed at the seminar and which can be facilitated by events like these.

We did not, as Rodney Jones pointed out in his introduction, solve the world’s problems as they relate to political and civic debate online and the dissemination of fake news; but we did begin to bring together ways in which we might contribute.