

Chapter Introduction

About this book

This book is about how to study the language that occurs in social media contexts. The platforms that have become associated with the umbrella term *social media* include sites and services that are now well known and have been adopted on an international scale. Examples include the social network site Facebook, the micro-blogging sites Sina Weibo and Twitter, the video-sharing site YouTube and super apps like WeChat, whilst social media genres like blogs, discussion forums and chat continue to evolve across many different apps and platforms. These (and other) forms of social media provide contexts where people communicate with each other by posting messages, sharing information, uploading images and video. Our focus in this book is specifically on how you might go about exploring the language that people use when they communicate (rather than focusing on the sites and services in a more general sense). Researching the language used in these social media contexts is a growing area of interest. There are many reasons why this field is particularly attractive for researchers. The sheer amount of interaction which takes place within social media contexts means there is a wealth of material that can be considered, and that material is often available in forms that are (relatively) easy to access. The fast-paced and rapidly evolving nature of these interactions mean that there is often something new to be observed, whether that be about the seemingly ‘routine’ interactions that interweave social media with people’s day-to-day activities, or about the variously creative ways people adapt and innovate in their communication with each other.

Given the scope of what might be included in a research project about the “language in social media” it can be hard to know exactly where to start.

Our aim in this book is to provide both beginning and more advanced researchers with an introduction to the topics, methods and frameworks that will enable them to design and carry out a project about language and social media. We hope that this book will be useful to a wide range of researchers: students who might be studying in different departments and for different degree programmes in different countries; researchers who might be planning a small or perhaps rather larger project; readers who might pick up this book with a clear idea of what kind of research they want to do and readers who just want to find out more about how you could research language in social media contexts but don't yet have a project in mind. Our reason for writing this book came from our experience that often the students we have taught in recent years were very enthusiastic about carrying out research projects with a social media focus, but often had a lot of questions about how they should go about planning and carrying out their projects. While this book cannot address every issue or possible way you could start to explore the language in social media, we have tried both to include a broad range of approaches and to include more elementary and advanced topics and guidance.

We published the first edition of this book in 2014. In the years that followed, the use of social media has evolved and diversified. Some of the well-established social media sites that formed the focus of the first edition (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) have changed, integrating new features and being used in different ways by different groups of people. New apps and platforms have become available (like Tiktok or dating apps like Tinder). The international range of scholarship has increased, with attention to social media use in Asia (for example in relation to Sina Weibo and WeChat) and Arabic speaking regions. New areas of discussion have emerged as areas of interest, such as ‘fake news’ and the ethics of studying controversial topics like hate speech. Alongside this, although our first edition acknowledged

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the multimodal nature of communication, this aspect of social media use has come to the fore with the rise of apps that prioritize images (such as Snapchat and Instagram) and the evolution of emoji, stickers and other forms of visual annotation. In the second edition of this book we have taken account of these changes, updating the scholarship and case studies to reflect the international and multimodal diversity of social media use.

About the chapters

We have organised the chapters of the book in the following way:

Chapters 1 and 2: introducing ‘social media’ and ‘language’

The first two chapters provide an introduction to the areas which are brought together as the focus for potential research projects: social media (Chapter 1) and language (Chapter 2). Although both *social media* and *language* are familiar terms, they cover varied phenomena and have been used in different ways by researchers. In these two chapters we set out definitions for each term and outline some of the most well-known approaches that have been used to analyse different types of social media and different kinds of language and language use.

Chapters 3 and 4: introducing research

Chapter 3 explains what we mean by *research*, and introduces some of the basic choices that you might need to make at the outset of thinking about a research project: identifying a focus and research questions, and outlining the different methods and approaches that might be available for collecting and then analysing material. Chapter 4 turns to the ethical dimensions of a research project. The responsibilities that a researcher has to the other people involved in their project are an important factor to consider from the outset to the completion of the research

process. But in social media contexts some of the established guidelines for ethical research used in linguistics can be tricky to apply or need to be negotiated in slightly different ways.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7: qualitative approaches

One distinction that is often made is between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Although throughout this book we emphasise the value of combining different approaches, for ease of reference, we have separated the approaches most usually associated with qualitative and quantitative research. We begin with three chapters focused on different kinds of qualitative research. Chapter 5 introduces different frameworks used to carry out the analysis of the ‘talk’ in social media contexts (discourse analysis, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis). Chapter 6 provides an introduction to the principles of ethnographic research and how it might be applied to social media interactions, followed by a more specific focus in Chapter 7 on how to use technobiographies as a tool for examining how language practices are evolving in social media contexts.

Chapters 8 and 9: quantitative approaches

In the last two chapters, we turn to the frameworks associated with quantitative research. Chapter 8 focuses on the principles, tools and software that you might use to gather materials for a quantitative project, including both small-scale projects and larger collection strategies needed to build a corpus. Chapter 9 covers how you might analyse social media materials from a quantitative perspective, including the use of concordancing software for corpus linguistics projects. We conclude with an introduction to the visualisation tools that can be useful for representing the quantitative analysis of the language used in social media contexts.

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In some of these chapters there is a greater emphasis on providing information about the principles and methods used to do research (describing existing examples and providing background knowledge). Other chapters are framed more directly as advice and steps to follow when carrying out a research project. Depending on your reason for reading this book, you might find it useful to read all of the chapters, but if you have a specific project in mind, then certain parts may be more helpful than others. Chapters 3 and 4 are relevant whatever the focus of the research project, whilst the chapters in the ‘Qualitative’ and ‘Quantitative’ sections could be read separately. Along with the discussions, in each chapter you will find:

- An introductory section outlining the content of the chapter.
- Illustrative case studies from other researchers.
- Reflection points to apply the material to your own research project.
- A list of the resources we refer to in the chapter.

Format conventions

The following format conventions are used in the chapters. *Italics* are used for emphasis and for mentioning rather than using words (*here* means I am talking about that word, not using it to refer to the present location). Underlines are retained in quotations to indicate hyperlinks. Bold is used in examples to indicate added emphasis or to highlight a linguistic feature. Unless otherwise indicated, it was not added in the original. Where we use quoted excerpts from data, we have kept the exact spelling and punctuation used by the original authors of the material quoted from the data, not using sic to indicate unconventional spelling or usage. Sometimes, although not always, that unconventionality is part of the style used by the person first writing the quoted material.

A note about the authors

One of the key characteristics of social media is its collaborative nature. In keeping with that, this book has also been a collaborative venture. As authors, we work in different departments (English, Language and Linguistics, and Media), in different universities and in different countries. We also have different approaches to researching the language of social media, and special interests in different social media sites. We have learnt a lot about each other's work and research approaches through the process of writing this book; we hope that you will benefit similarly from the variety of perspectives that we bring. Most of the time, we write using the plural pronoun, but from time to time you will find that one or the other of us refers to our own particular projects too, and then we move to use the first person pronoun and then include our individual names. The first edition of the book was a joint project between Ruth, Michele, Johnny and David. In the period of time between the first and second edition, David retired. In his place, Carmen Lee joined the authorial team and helped revise Chapters six and seven in particular. From the outset, we also recognised that our combined expertise as authors was limited and we wanted to include a wider range of examples, voices and perspectives from researchers at different stages in their careers. These examples are included as case studies in the different chapters, and we are very grateful to the case study authors for their contributions. We asked the case study authors to close their contribution with a 280-character piece of advice for other researchers. You'll find these at the end of many of the case studies prefaced with the hashtag #advice.